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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Migrant writing against mangling narratives: On Abdulrazak Gurnah's use of humour

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Abstract

Abdulrazak Gurnah has dedicated much of his oeuvre – consisting of eleven political novels – to ruminations on the nature of migration and spotlighting the travails of the refugees, as well as to grappling with what it means to move in the latter half of the 20th century from the until-recently colonised periphery into the once-colonial centre. In his novels, the concept of the model minority, exemplified by a migrant who strives to fit in and excel in the prosperous Global North, is repeatedly subverted. Even those characters who have supposedly made it are riven by homesickness and racked with guilt for fleeing in the first place, in addition to having to constantly deal with the not-so-subtle instances of racism in their adopted country. His narratives are also not given to unreflected nostalgia or essentialising discourse about Africa. Gurnah delights in the mixture of different cultures and the beauty that can come of it – as evidenced, among other things, in his intertextual uses of Eastern and Western literature – but is acutely aware that what, at least in part, lay behind these aesthetic wonders were deeply violent and iniquitous endeavours like the spread of religions and colonialisation. Special attention will be drawn to how Gurnah's use of humour enables his writings to have such dexterity and lightness of touch when dealing with such heavy topics.

Keywords

Abdulrazak Gurnah, migrant writing, race, colonialism, Orientalism, universalism, Paul Gilroy, humour

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.



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I. Three Layers of Migration

Abdulrazak Gurnah's entire body of work revolves, dervish-like, around the vertiginous chasm cleaved open by going through the process of relocation. In his consistently stunning novels, he deals repeatedly with "this condition of being from one place and living in another", treating it – as he says in his essay "Writing and Place"– "not as a unique experience which I have undergone, but as one of the stories of our times" (Gurnah 2004, 59).

When we proceed from this definition of migration as one of the paradigmatic narratives of modern times, whose urgent contemporaneity only grows in importance, just two works of Gurnah, his historical novels – *Paradise* (1994), which takes place at the turn of the 20th century, and *Afterlives* (2020), which spans the time from shortly before the First World War until the early 1960s and Tanzania's independence – appear not to tell this larger story. But that seems the case only at first glance and from a myopic and blinkered Eurocentric position. In fact, they very much do tell this story, providing us with powerful insights into colonialism which are indispensable if we attempt to understand the entrenched structural reasons behind migration from the Global South to the West, as well as featuring many migrants of their own. The migrants in question, though, just happen to be Europeans coming to Africa, making them settlers, adventurers, explorers, missionaries and colonial officers, in modern parlance – expats: anything other than something as lowly and non-white as out-and-out immigrants.[1]

Before we take stock of moving from East Africa to Europe, the first direction we might associate with Gurnah's work, we must bear in mind two other older layers of migration: first and foremost, the just-mentioned colonial migration, but also migration stemming from the travel, trade and journeys that intertwined faraway places on the coasts of the Indian Ocean for centuries due to favourable natural conditions caused by the seasonal monsoon winds, and was completely unrelated to, and long proceeded, the Europeans.

Gurnah's cultural background is littoral (Moorthy 2010; Gurnah 2019, 2), which is to say completely suffused with the sea and the experiences of seafaring, and since "seas are not to be regarded as disjoining, but as uniting" (Hegel 2001, 105), littoral cultures naturally tend to be cosmopolitan. Such was the state of affairs with Zanzibar, which had a kind of "casual cosmopolitanism" for many centuries and whose population consisted of Africans, as well as Arabs and Indians. (Oluoch-Olunya 2022).

The main character in *By the Sea* (Gurnah 2001), the refugee Saleh Omar, who as an old man seeks asylum in England, narrates in the first person: "In the last months of the year, the winds blow steadily across the Indian Ocean towards the coast of Africa, where the currents obligingly provide a channel to harbour. Then in the early months of the new year, the winds turn around and blow in the opposite direction, ready to speed the traders home." (14).

The traders come from India and Sindh, Persia, and all the Gulf states, and it was the latter that could travel the longest and with the most ease (Gurnah 2022a). As a consequence, the coast of East Africa became Muslim very early on, with a strong attendant Arab influence, and in the cities along the coast and the Zanzibar Archipelago, multi-ethnic communities sprang up. So when it comes to multilingualism, Kiswahili, Arabic and Gujarati were spoken there long before English and German imperially inserted themselves into the picture.[2]

Entering Gurnah's novels, it quickly and forcefully becomes clear to what degree the Indian Ocean was a "world of traffic, merchandise and stories", closely connected and intermixed, and standing next to "the Mediterranean" (to which it was also linked) as one of the "paradigms for the inter-penetrability of cultures" (ibid). Saleh Omar, in the state of exile himself, thinks back on these migrations, which formed the intricate backdrop of his own homeland, from which he was forced to flee late in life. He thinks how "[f] or centuries, intrepid traders and sailors, most of them barbarous and poor no doubt made the annual journey" to the coast of East Africa and the Zanzibar islands (Unguja and Pemba) and how they "brought with them their goods and their God and their way of looking at the world, their stories and their songs and prayers." But besides those material and spiritual riches, there also inevitably came rot:

> And they brought their hungers and greeds, their fantasies and lies and hatreds, leaving some among their numbers behind for whole life-times and taking what they could buy, trade or snatch away with them, including people they bought or kidnapped and sold into labour and degradation in their own lands. After all that time, the people who lived on that coast hardly knew who they were, but knew enough to cling to what made them different from those they despised, among themselves as well as among the outlying progeny of the human race in the interior of the continent. (Gurnah 2001, 15).

This passage already presents *in nuce* the main source of conflict that erupted in Zanzibar shortly after its independence at the end of 1963, but first, we need to take a better look at the second layer of migration, and that varied forms of the

[1] On anything but race-blind application of the term expat, as opposed to immigrant, see Koutonin 2017 and Kunz 2019.
[2] On the complex ways Gurnah expresses this multilingualism in his novels, see Helgesson 2023.

so-called "Civilising Mission" (Gurnah 2005, 150) that descended upon East Africa and Zanzibar with the Germans and British at the end of the 19th century.[3]

II. The British "Succouring" Zanzibar, or *Orientalism*

Gurnah (2022a) writes in an essay, "Indian Ocean Journey," how it took:

> the evangelical movements in Europe and the exploration mania to reach a peak before writing conventions for representing the African Indian Ocean littoral were established. These included the orientalising of the western Indian Ocean littoral as Arab, backward and addicted to slaves and the harem. The European evangelist and explorer and later government official had come both to restrain the despotic tendencies of the Arabs and also to succour the Africans.

This most telling and remarkable use of the word "succour" already appears in the same context and with the same exquisitely elegant effect in *Admiring Silence* (Gurnah 1996), where an unnamed autodiegetic narrator observes tongue in cheek how:

> the lads and ladies had to have jobs, or what was the point of having an Empire? Their salaries were levied on the colony, of course. So the Colonial Office despatched scores of genial (so they thought themselves), mostly Oxbridge graduates to the far corners of the globe, to awe and succour the natives with simultaneous equations, Shakespeare and Romans in Britain. (ibid, 64).

Gurnah's repeated use of the word is no accident because *to succour* someone sounds virtually indistinguishable from *to sucker* someone, that is, to deceive and trick a person into doing something, making the word a sharp and spot-on *bon mot* for describing the faux-humanitarian face the colonial powers began to put on to justify their worldwide rule. The main intellectual ploy for justifying something so bare-facedly cruel as colonialism was the construction of a much more vicious Orient, a perfect foil against which any of the regrettably but surely unavoidable missteps of the Occident could appear as being worth it, in so far as they served to emancipate vast regions of the world from the back-breaking burden of the brutal backwardness to which they had hitherto been consigned.

As Edward W. Said has shown in his epochal work *Orientalism* (Said 1978, 40), this discourse was undergirded by an assumption that "the Orient and everything in it was, if not patently inferior to, then in need of corrective study by the West." That left the knowledge of the places southeast of Western Europe to be framed "by the classroom, the criminal court, the prison," and to serve as a "manual for scrutiny, study, judgment, discipline, or governing." No wonder then that "[t] he period of immense advance in the institutions and content of Orientalism coincides exactly with the period of unparalleled European expansion; from 1815 to 1914 European direct colonial dominion expanded from about 35 percent of the earth's surface to about 85 percent of it." (ibid, 41) Importantly, the Orient was not just associated with "despotism" and "cruelty" but equally so with "splendor" and "sensuality." (ibid, 4).

Seeing the East as some wayward ne'er-do-well child, the British, French, German, Belgians, Dutch, and Portuguese, among others, felt obliged in their magnanimous historical missions to discipline the Orient, which proved to be a ceaseless fount of fascination and served "as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" for the West. (ibid, 3) The "Oriental cliches" of "harems, princesses, princes, slaves, veils, dancing girls and boys, sherbets, ointments," and the rest of the rousing repertoire showed how, by the 19th century, the lascivious link "between the Orient and the freedom of licentious sex" was firmly established. Since Europe at that time was in the throes of "increasing embourgeoisement" and "sex had been institutionalized to a very considerable degree," there was no chance it could be attained for free or without serious entanglements; therefore, the famed and storied East became "a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe." As a result, "[v] irtually no European writer who wrote on or traveled to the Orient in the period after 1800 exempted himself or herself from this quest." Said notes how they were seeking and finding there – correctly, according to him – "a different type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden."[4] (ibid, 190).

In *Admiring Silence*, Gurnah treats us to an uproarious send-up of orientalising discourse and a very literal example of the Orient being the Occident's underground self in the form of a supposed hidden tunnel. The unnamed protagonist, after spending decades in England, is finally able to return to Zanzibar for a visit to his family because a change in government policy made it possible for those who left illegally – as he did in the wake of the revolution – to return without fear of persecution. After landing, he takes a taxi and has to drive through what "had been a European enclave before

[3]Germany had occupied the mainland of the present-day Tanzania, and in tracking a few appearances of the term in its German variant – 'Zivilisierungmission' – in *Afterlives* one can see entire story in miniature (Gurnah 2022b 70; 131). On multilanguage memory this entails and reframing of the German colonial amnesia in *Afterlives*, see Maricocchi (2024).

[4]How Gurnah deals with these different types of sexuality, like homosexuality in the Islamic world of Zanzibar, see Mwangi 2009, 210–213.

independence", which was strategically "on the airport side of town", and there, "[r]ight next door to the ruins of Ali bin Humud's modern palace were Bishop Weston's church and hostel." (Gurnah 1996, 107).

Frank Weston was the Evangelical bishop of Zanzibar from 1907 to 1924, whose first few years in office overlapped with the short rule of Sultan Humud. Weston "had been a hero of his time, a righteous Victorian churchman who had scoured the countryside, both on the island and across the waters, for slaves he could rescue and convert. He sheltered [in a hostel next to the church] those who chose to escape, preached to them the words of the God he so loved, and taught them to read so they could study the Good Book." When the narrator, as a young man, used to "wander around the ruined palace", he would also visit the church.

> The warden of the church grounds told me once that there was a tunnel running from under the palace to the port, so that Sultan Ali bin Humud could bring in slaves for his pleasure, even though the traffic was illegal by 1910. If there really was a tunnel, and the warden became understandably evasive when I asked for its whereabouts, then it was more likely that the Sultan had had it built so he could make his escape back to Europe one dark night. (ibid, 108).

The narrator drily undercuts the ludicrousness of this bit of orientalising, which becomes even funnier considering we were already informed that the sultan in question had gone to school and grown up in England, and was reluctant to return to his island kingdom "to reign over his puritanical Omani barons and their black vassals" because it meant:

> no more parties, no booze, no Ascot, no excruciating dalliances, just flowing robes and family intrigues and prayers and prohibitions. After two years of this, during which the Sultan built himself a modern palace by the sea, he returned to Europe to attend the celebrations of his suzerain and protector, and refused to come back. It was fitting in some curious way that the district around his abandoned palace should become home to a colony of the people he had chosen as his own. (ibid, 107).

Gurnah depicts with impeccable irony how, for Sultan Humud, the Orient of opulence and sexual liberation was in England, not in his palace on the tropical island thronged with judgmental, religious relatives. In the novel, which is full of scathing and abrasive humour, this is one of the quietly hilarious highlights.[5]

III. Maps to the Revolution

In addition to fixing the orientalising frame through which the coast of East Africa was viewed, the arrival of the British brought something else of great significance to this littoral world: accurate and comprehensive maps. It is not surprising that precisely maps in Gurnah's novels carry great narrative weight. In *Desertion* (Gurnah 2005, 148–9), there is a vivid and highly humorous semiotic reading of the colours of the British maps, and in *By the Sea*, their importance and transformational character is laid bare by Saleh Omar, a self-professed lover of "beautiful, intricate things" (Gurnah 2001,17) like furniture and maps. It was due to the latter type of *objet d'art* that:

> scattered little towns by the sea along the African coast found themselves part of huge territories stretching for hundreds of miles into the interior, teeming with people they had thought beneath them, and who when the time came promptly returned the favour. Among the many deprivations inflicted on those towns by the sea was the prohibition of the musim trade. (ibid, 15–16).

Saleh Omar immediately acknowledges how the musim, i.e. monsoon, trade would in all likelihood have soon stopped of its own accord – "[w] ho would choose to come hundreds of miles across the sea to sell us cloth and tobacco when they could live a life of luxury in the rich states of the Gulf?" (ibid) – given that right about then, large oil reserves found in the Gulf States began to irrevocably change them.

The casual cosmopolitanism of Zanzibar sadly did not run deep, and when a wave of liberation and anti-colonial struggles swept across Africa in the 1960s, they brought to the surface the duplicity, insincerity, iniquity and ineffectuality of the status quo. In *Admiring Silence* (Gurnah 1996), the narrator directly challenges the supposed civilised relations between different ethnic groups in Zanzibar:

> We liked to think of ourselves as a moderate and mild people. Arab African Indian Comorian: we lived alongside each other, quarrelled and sometimes intermarried. Civilised, that's what we were. We liked to be described like

[5]Of course, this reversal is ironic only from the Orientalist perspective from the beginning of the 20th century. Nowadays, the situation is completely reversed, which is to say, in keeping with the Sultan's flight path. Evan Mwangi (2009, 189) is therefore forced to argue that "homosexuality is not as rare in African societies as might be suggested by the West/African dichotomy, which claims the West as the site of sexual experimentation and decadence and Africa as a space of Edenic heterosexual purity."

> that, and we described ourselves like that. In reality, we were nowhere near we, but us in our separate yards, locked in our historical ghettoes, self-forgiving and seething with intolerances, with racisms, and with resentments. And politics brought all that into the open. (ibid, 66–67).

It is important to note that in the novel's first chapter, the narrator is taken by an English GP to be "Afro-Caribbean" (ibid, 9), i.e. he is unambiguously racialised as black.[6] But in the complex context of Zanzibar's independence, that did not mean he simply belonged with the majority population. Rather, through his family, he was among those who "persuaded ourselves that the objects of this abuse had not noticed what had happened to them, or had forgiven and would now like to embrace a new rhetoric of unity and nationalism." They did not, however, want instead:

> to glory in grievance, in promises of vengeance, in their past oppression, in their present poverty and in the nobility of their darker skins. (To the nationalist rhetoric of their opponents they proclaimed a satirical reprise of their despised Africanness, mocked the nationalists for their newfound conscience, and promised them an accounting in the very near future. All of which came to pass with incredible promptness.) (ibid, 67).

In 1964, during the Zanzibar Revolution, between 10,000 and 20,000 Arabs were killed, and many more fled, making it "the most lethal outbreak of anti-Arab violence in Africa's postcolonial history" (Burgess 2018), with Indians also being targeted. A few months later, mainland Tanganyika united with Zanzibar, and Tanzania was created. By the year's end, a quarter of the Zanzibari Arab population was gone; Gurnah and his brother left in 1967, when he was eighteen years old.

IV. "Not African Enough" and Afropolitanism

East Africans of Asian and Arab descent were customarily viewed as not being "African" enough and were forced to emigrate in large numbers from the newly independent states (Joseph 1999), even if outbreaks of violence were not as flagrant and far-reaching as in Zanzibar or later in the 1970s under Idi Amin in Uganda. This pernicious and politically and morally bankrupt stigma of insufficient Africanness was, in a way, levelled again against Gurnah's fourth, breakthrough novel, *Paradise*, when it was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1994 by some of that year's judges, including Germaine Greer and Tom Paulin.

They faulted the novel for, in the words of Paulin, not really facing "the fact of the German colonists" and for failing to be a classical African tale of "a traditional society disintegrating under the impact of colonialism." (quoted in Nasta 2005, 335) For Greer, the story was guilty of exoticising and shirking responsibility towards its subject matter because it only sporadically gestured "to German East Africa, to Tanganyika, or whatever it was called in those days" and what that colonial rule was like. (ibid, 334) Accusing Gurnah of exoticisation while nonchalantly dismissing the importance of the exact name of the place she talks about in a span of a few sentences is the type of racist remark that Gurnah often skewers in his novels. Greer, who complained about "clutching at shadows" and not having anything firm to hold fast to while reading, was, nonetheless, unwittingly onto something when she said she was "being mocked by this book."

The Booker winner from 1990, A.S. Byatt, was another judge on the panel, and she highly praised the novel and defended it by saying, "we, as westerners, think that African novels ought to be about the arrival of the Germans just as Germaine has said." Paulin sided with Greer and felt that *Paradise*, while undoubtedly "very well written", did not bring anything new to the table or go beyond "Chinua Achebe's great seminal founding novel *Things Fall Apart.*" When Byatt pointed out that the opposite was the case – while novels about the disruptive arrival of the Europeans were becoming common, "a novel about the enslavement of a black man by a black man" truly broke new narrative grounds – Paulin came back with a true gem. Given that *Paradise* is written "in a western literary form" – presumably, because it is a novel – "so by definition it has got to be about it [colonialism]." (ibid, 335) And all of this was not said in private but on the air, on *The Late Show*, the BBC's arts magazine TV programme from the nineties.

Greer and Paulin's inexcusably ignorant takes do point, however, to an important issue Gurnah himself acknowledged. In the essay "An Idea of Past" (Gurnah 2003), he focuses on how the key African novels from the 1950s onwards deliberately presented the reader with "archetypal African experiences" through "the foregrounding of the encounter with Europe. There is little or no sign of African rivalries to obscure this encounter, and there is no possibility in these texts of confusing where our sympathies should lie." This crudeness and Manichean polarities of "representing pre-colonial society as only troubled in minor ways but largely working fine" were completely understandable, Gurnah grants, considering they were written "just before or just after independence" and "in the face of a colonial onslaught which lasted for centuries; in the aftermath of that onslaught of ridicule, of contempt." But these useful fictions could morph into

[6]The narrator observes: "He didn't mean *Afro-Caribbean people* anyway. He meant darkies, hubshis, abids, bongo-bongos, say-it-loud-I'm-black-and-I'm proud victims of starvation and tyranny and disease and unregulated lusts and history, etc. You know, my race." (ibid., 10).

something much more dangerous – in the political sphere – or simply into something distorting on a personal level in terms of interactions with literature.

> When I first read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) as a schoolboy, it was a million miles away from my experience, but I understood that I was to read it as if it was part of my experience. It is still very often read that away, particularly by schoolchildren, as a narrative about first encounter and its consequences. Similarly, when I read Ngũgĩ [wa Thiong'o][7] at about the same time, I was required and did not resist, to see the rural environment of those early novels as familiar and 'natural', when it was not. I remember we were encouraged to submit a short story for a regional Short story competition, and several of us wrote stories about village life and stealing chickens when our reality was as urban as could be imagined. Decolonisation had heightened our idea of solidarity with 'Africa', and we understood that the appropriate way of reading such texts was as Africans who had that sense of progressive solidarity. (ibid).

But Gurnah lived somewhere very complex and cosmopolitan, where the idea of pre-colonial homogeneity was especially obviously false, and familiar Pan-African narratives ended up being used by the Zanzibari and many other new and finally independent governments on the continent as a way to threaten and browbeat those citizens who did not look like the majority.

It is no wonder that Carmen Zamorano Llena (2020) took Gurnah's fiction writing to be a novelistic form of, as well as a prefigurement and precursor to, Achille Mbembe's famous concept of Afropolitanism. She based her thesis on two novels, *By the Sea* and *Gravel Heart* (2017), that, alongside the latest *Theft* (2025), deal most extensively with the realities of post-independence Zanzibar. But any of Gurnah's novels – including the powerful passage from *Admiring Silence* we have already cited, written more than a decade before Mbembe's influential essay "Afropolitanism" first appeared in 2007 – could be read as its lyrical encapsulation.

Combining Africa and cosmopolitanism, the term stands for "a way of being in the world" that "reject[s] on principle any identity based on victimhood" – glorying *in grievance* and *past oppression*, as Gurnah precisely and beautifully describes that kind of politics – while not being blind to the past injustices that have been perpetrated by and against many different identity groups. It also warns that while African nationalism founded upon black identity and racial solidarity constituted "a powerful utopian" moment that was essential for self-recognition, as soon as it was "turned into the official ideology of a predatory state, it lost any ethical heart, becoming a demon", leading Mbembe (2017, 105–106) to reject any "nativistic reflex" and division between "autochthons" and "non-natives" as an acceptable starting point for politics.

V. Third-Worldism in London, or *Against Race* and *After Empire*

These political issues regarding racial solidarity in Africa, anti-imperial internationalism, and the de- and post-colonial state of things play prominent roles in Gurnah's fiction, not just through recounting events on the ground, but also through the dislocating experience of migrants living in London, the heart of the waning – and soon thereafter formally extinguished – Empire.

In *Desertion*, Rashid from Zanzibar, after having done brilliantly on his examinations during the last year of British colonial rule, is awarded a scholarship to go study at the University of London. Immediately upon arrival, Rashid is struck by how "chilling and belittling blue eyes can be" (2005, 212) and, like so many in similar circumstances, he begins to see himself "through their eyes", to look "with increasing dislike and dissatisfaction" at himself, and starts to think he was "someone who deserved to be disliked." The "earliest lesson" he therefore received was "how to live with disregard" (ibid, 214). His honest, warm attempts to befriend English students are met with scoffs and resistance. He does not understand this at first, but given that this chapter is told from his perspective, in the first person and past tense, we instantly get to the crux of the matter. Rashid is forced as an immigrant to learn through personal experience "about imperialism and how deeply the narratives of our inferiority and the aptness of European overlordship had bedded down in what passed for knowledge of the world." It is only by acquiring this knowledge that he "could have an inkling of the meaning of the dislike and embarrassment I encountered and could not at first withstand" (ibid, 215).

One of Rashid's teachers notices him cringing because of this and instructs him that "British people like to think of themselves as cold and unfriendly" because it "makes them feel tough and hard to fool. If you tell them they are welcoming, they'll start whimpering with self-pity, assuming you mean they are credulous. Be cold and unfriendly and you'll soon make friends." Rashid has already made friends, though; he instantly fell in with other foreign students like him who were from Ghana, Egypt and India – all former British colonies – with whom he could talk at length about the

[7]On Abdulrazak Gurnah's critical engagement with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, see Kearney 2006.

racist slights they all had to face daily. However, he began to fear that "we simplified the complex sense of hurt and diminishing that we felt, […] the sense of injustice and incomprehension at being both misused and despised. What were they so upset about, when it was they who went overbearing over the world and filled our heads with our unworthiness?" (ibid).

The genuine shock he felt about this was different from the emotions expressed and indulged in when "we talked about these things, at which times we came up with our own summary defences and were abusive and condescending in return" (ibid, 215–216). This simplifying tendency of stories which are comfortable for sharing among fellow former colonial subjects and obliging to the need for hurling back abuse, even if they proved somewhat dissimulating and deadening to one's deeper feelings, became even more indispensable to Rashid, despite all his misgivings, while revolution and mass slaughter take place back home. He becomes filled with guilt about what is going on in his country, fearing for his family and feeling deep shame. At first, there is no word from his family. When they finally can write to him, a month after he learns about what was going on from the news, his father informs him that he can under no condition return.

It is only then that he starts to think of himself "as expelled, an exile" (ibid, 221) and "an alien." (ibid, 222) Before, he weathered British racist hostility without the drowning, sinking feeling of homelessness; before, he did not think that this hostile place would soon become the only one where he could go on living, having no secure one to return to. "I realised I had been thinking of myself as someone in the middle part of a journey, between coming and going, fulfilling an undertaking before returning home, but I began to fear that my journey was over, that I would live all my life in England, a stranger in the middle of nowhere." In due course in England, he "drifted into a tolerable alienness" and began:

> to say black people and white people, like everyone else, uttering the lie with increasing ease, conceding the sameness of our difference, deferring to a deadening vision of a racialised world. For by agreeing to be black and white, we also agree to limit the complexity of possibility, we agree to mendacities that for centuries served and will continue to serve crude hungers for power and pathological self-affirmations. (ibid.)

This line of thought echoes Paul Gilroy's profound reasoning from *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (2000, 12), where he displays full awareness that not only "the beneficiaries of racial hierarchy" who "do not want to give up their privileges", but likewise plenty of "people who have been subordinated by race-thinking and its distinctive social structures (not all of which come tidily colour-coded)", would be dead-set against relinquishing race. This is because, for the latter, those imposed ideas of race, "far beyond merely affording protection," were marshalled in to reverse "the polarities of insult, brutality, and contempt," and were turned "into important sources of solidarity, joy, and collective strength."

In spite of being oppositional to the dominant discourse and positively valenced, racial thinking – as Gilroy argues in *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004, 70), and Gurnah approvingly quotes in his excellent essay "The Urge to Nowhere: [Zoë] Wicomb and Cosmopolitanism" (2011a, 265) – "obstructs empathy and makes ethnocentrism inescapable." Gilroy's universalism, which he calls "pragmatic, planetary humanism", makes "no concessions to the flight from embodiment that has been associated with the consolidation of abstract, modern individuality," and as such was in league with colonialism and capitalism. It not only does not erase differences between individuals and "constraints of bodily existence" but is actively founded upon the "predicament of fundamentally fragile" corporeality we all share. Gilroy recasts "the recurrence of pain, disease, humiliation and loss of dignity," intimately known by each person, into a strong bond of "a human similarity powerful enough to make solidarities based on cultural particularity appear suddenly trivial" (Gilroy 2000, 17).

Gurnah (2011a, 267) reminds us how Gilroy, in his striving for genuine universalism and supersession of race, is walking directly in the footsteps of the great Frantz Fanon, who in his seminal *Black Skins, White Masks* from 1952 pointedly stated in a legendary aphorism: "My black skin is not the wrapping of specific values" (2008, 177). He refused to be pinned down by the past achievements or traumas of his ancestors, and spiritedly claimed, "I find myself in the world and I recognize that I have one right alone: That of demanding human behavior from the other." (ibid, 179).

Another champion of "planetary humanism", which he calls "left universalism" is Ato Sekyi-Otu (2019, 78), who judiciously concludes, how "no one has a stronger partisan interest than the oppressed and the excluded in what Fanon, in a provisional mood of strategic skepticism and sardonic demurral, sneeringly called 'a discourse on the universal' [*The Wretched of the Earth* (1968, 41)]." Collating these two quotes from Fanon may seem contradictory at first, but they, in fact, best describe the paradoxical and bitter experience where the universalism, which logically should be of most avail to the dominated, turns out in the present conditions to be the ultimate insult to the prevailing injury of their unfair conditions. All four of these thinkers, from Fanon to Gilroy, Gurnah, and Sekyi-Otu, win back the language and ideas of

universalism and humanism from their customary role of justifying and sugarcoating the most inhumane treatment of most of humanity in the name of very particular, and mostly fiduciary, interests.

Of course, these types of great theoretical achievements are exceptionally hard to come by of one's own accord, and Gurnah's characters, like Rashid, arrive at them only through painful processes that make up the main narrative, and we get them to hear these emancipatory thoughts fully expressed only in the proleptic manner and as wisdom after the events, while the events that are recounted show their slow and toilsome fruition.

VI. Touching Humour, or on the Ironical Source of "There's Much to be Said About Kindness" in *Desertion*

At the time, Rashid found a modicum of self-affirmation in broader anti-colonial struggles, especially in the fight against Apartheid, in part because it drew him away "from the complicated cruelties that were happening at home" as "they could not be inserted into this conversation, with its pared down polarities and uncluttered certainties," leaving him to suffer them in secret, silently, ashamed and with an unquenchable sense of guilt (2005, 222).

With dreams of Pan-African unity, true sovereignty, and Third Worldism slowly slipping away from former colonies and Non-Aligned countries from the peripheries, leaving few uncluttered certainties or real hopes for a better future, it is interesting to look more closely at what happens to one of Rashid's former student friends. Sundeep was a suave and dashing Indian who liked to be called cosmopolitan and who made good fun of the British and generally sneered at everyone but those in their group of friends; his arrogance was therefore uplifting for them. In time, he became a famous writer who "found a subject in Africa, and in his books he returns there again and again, but what he writes about the people there is intolerant and needlessly scornful, something of an exhibition, something like his youthful self." For Rashid, these novels, "despite their zest and fluency" in time become "increasingly certain of their judgements, and to be too certain of anything is the beginning of bigotry. It is a liberal dogma, a paradox in itself, which if taken too far leads us to the idea that frivolity is the only authentic seriousness" (ibid, 225).

This great critique against the unspoken mores of the Western liberal literary establishment can be found in a similar form in Arundhati Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017, 283): "I would like to write one of those sophisticated stories in which even though nothing much happens there's lots to write about. That can't be done in Kashmir. It's not sophisticated, what happens here. There's too much blood for good literature." Gurnah (2004, 59) wrote in "Writing and Place" how he always guarded himself against becoming "an embittered émigré, mocking those left behind, cheered on by publishers and readers who have not abandoned an unacknowledged hostility to the colonised peoples, and who are only too happy to reward and praise any severity on the non-European world." He also had to continually fight against the prevailing notion that one had "to write harshly to achieve credibility, to adopt self-contempt as a register of truth, or otherwise to be dismissed as a sentimental optimist."

In connection with this, there is a very telling difference between brothers: Rashid, who goes to England on scholarship and Amin, who, while also being very intelligent and well-read, stays behind in Zanzibar and becomes a teacher. Rashid is singled out by his British colonial professors, "the ones with the clout," for being "equally stern with Macauley, or Shakespeare, or Islam," and being "precociously witty about it too, a real Oxbridge material" (2005, 155). Not every British professor loves him, and one who does not dismissed his "jokey and excessive verses in the style of *Hyperion* or *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*," written mostly to amuse his friends, as "confused and meaningless, as attempts by Africans to write evocatively in English usually are" (ibid, 147). Most professors do like him and help him prepare for his exams, giving him additional material and tutoring him after school hours.

Unlike his precociously witty brother Rashid, who knew how to handle heavy subjects and make it seem easy with appropriate quips, Amin, on the other hand, was famous for reacting to customary gossip by dismissing it as malice and always responding with the reply: "There's much to be said for kindness." His friends "took his lament as a kind of naïvety" and would share with him "tales of everyday brutality to hear him say his sorrowful words. (Then when he did, they chortled convulsively and swallowed their laughter, or if they were good enough friends, they laughed openly and teased him for his impossible kindness.) You're too good for this world, they said" (ibid, 167).

This type of humour directed against others – as well as the self-deprecatory joking often used by the British to preempt criticism, which then serves as a sly way of elevating oneself above the fray of those deigned too emotional, the ones who can be embarrassingly-easily goaded into disgraceful disclosures – is crucially different from another type of humour, much less common and more elusive, which Gurnah makes excellent use of throughout his fiction.

Rather than making light of the subject, this humour proves to be a vehicle for driving home points otherwise too difficult and painful to get across; instead of creating a distance between what you are laughing at and yourself, it collapses it. This is not a form of punching up or down; it is not a form of punching at all, rather, it is like picking at a wound, gently. Gurnah's writing is a remarkable combination of scathing humour interlaced with a touching kindness that comes from knowledge, not naivety – knowledge which does not curdle into cynicism, does not become solid and stolid, but remains liquid and fluid, capable of coming to terms with both the serrated and smooth edges of multifaceted existence.

It has not gone unnoticed how Gurnah's novels are steeped in irony. In an interview about *Paradise*, Gurnah said that the novel was not "an attempt to rewrite *Heart of Darkness*," but that he did find Joseph Conrad's "ironical view of the whole enterprise of imperialism" to be useful "to resonate against" insofar as "[t] his activity that Conrad saw as destructive to the European mind also destroyed the African mind and landscape" (quoted in Nasta 2005, 320). For Susheila Nasta, Gurnah, like Conrad, "was keen to employ a double-edged and highly ironical narrative mode that would offer ambiguous and shifting perspectives on the dubious moral pieties of the imperial mission" (ibid). Gurnah fearlessly uses racist language, stereotypes and characters to better demonstrate how those forces, just like colonialism, have degrading effects across firmly and laboriously erected colour lines and divides.

Fanon diagnosed this type of mutually disabling and crippling practice as "the Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation" (2008, 42–43). Gilroy quotes this, saying that despite Fanon's clinical psychiatrist background, he did not fall into the trap of "psychologism" (2004, 58), but understood how it was the social factors which first set in motion "Black and white" as "bonded together by the mechanisms of 'race' that estrange them from each other and amputate their common humanity" (2000, 15).

Gurnah's irony exposes this state of things, but crucially, he does so without revealing in advance everything and everyone for what and who they truly are. In this sense, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's important distinction between paranoid and reparative reading can be productively applied to Gurnah's writing and especially to his use of humour. A propos of the paranoid approach, Sedgwick says how "[w] e think we know that the miracle is a lie and we always look for the hidden or suppressed explanation. We would rather have greed and lust as motive than love" (2005, 110–111).

The consequences and mode of this practice are made clear by Rashid when he learns that his mother, whom he had not seen for twenty-two years, has died. He thinks about everything she, his father, the whole family, and he himself had to go through for him "to arrive at this life of small apathy that I could have arrived at with no effort. Irony is the unforgiving register which gives everything back to us" (ibid, 230).

It goes without saying that this irony stands for the opposite of the reparative reading that Sedgwick celebrates. Irony, which gives everything back, can do so because we have already preemptively discounted the outside world from being able to provide anything good to us, and so, closed off from it, we get back everything we previously diminished and dismissed, in a feedback loop of exhaustion of possibilities, instead of replenishment.

But there's another mode of irony which can be read as a part of the reparative effort which seeks "to assemble and confer plenitude on an object" (Sedgwick 2003, 149) – the irony that works in the opposite direction of bringing someone down a peg and unmasking their hidden and ugly side – and this type is deep at work in Gurnah's fiction.

The best example of this can be found in the first occurrence of the *there's much to be said about kindness* phrase. *Desertion* is divided into three parts. The first and longest is set in turn-of-the-century East Africa under British colonial rule and tells the story of an English traveller and an Orientalist, Martin Pearce, and his unlikely love affair with Rehana, a woman of mixed Indian and African descent. Then, brilliantly, through its formal structure, the novel does to readers what happens to the characters inside it. The story in which we become so invested is ultimately deserted – just like Martin eventually deserts Rehana – and we jump in time to several decades later, where we meet Rashid and Amin in Zanzibar.

While the phrase about kindness becomes synonymous with Amin and the second half of the book, it inconspicuously pops up much earlier in a conversation between Pearce and the colonial district officer, Frederick Turner. Pearce appears out of the wilderness nearly dead from exhaustion, and Rehana's brother takes him into his home and saves him. When Turner hears about the white man nearly dying on the streets of his town, he bursts into the home of Pearce's saviours and takes him away while he is still out of it. When Pearce recovers, he wants to go back there and thank them for their kindness.

> Frederick looked doubtful, but nodded none the less. "I'm not sure about kindness. They probably hoped for a bit of reward."
>
> "I would reward them if I could, although I would prefer to think it was kindness," Martin said.
>
> "There's a lot to be said for kindness," Frederick said amiably. (Gurnah 2005, 98).

The version of the phrase about kindness was first uttered by a colonial officer, Frederick, who speaks with amiability towards his fellow white man, but is also unmistakably ironic about the real intentions of the non-Europeans. The last thing Frederick talked about before this exchange was to maintain, against the message of the perishability of all empires, espoused in Shelley's "Ozymandias" (the final lines of which he quotes), that he could not "see much knocking our little edifice down". By this, he meant that the sun would not set any time soon on the empire on which the sun never sets, even though that is precisely what happened in a few more decades.

The phrase about kindness is a piece of amiable irony within a larger passage of the great historical irony. Later, when Amin seriously uses this phrase, additional irony comes into view: it is never stories of kindness that get talked about; it is the other types – salacious, scandalous, scurrilous – that set tongues wagging.

Ultimately though, the most ironic thing about *there is much to be said about kindness* is that Gurnah manages to take a trite phrase spoken ironically – in a passage heavily laden with additional historical irony, and with the phrase itself being strongly ironical in another context in which it is later used by Amin – and make it unironically and literally true and even profound through the course of the novel, and more broadly, as a kind of motto for Gurnah's entire oeuvre. This is a testament to the subtle but quietly shattering power of his touching and humorous kindness with which all of the disparate parts of his multilayered narratives are permeated. This is why it might be appropriate to refer to Gurnah's use of irony as a reparative writing.

VII. Two Opposed Attempts to Deal with the Second-Generation Immigrant Experience in *The Last Gift*

It has to be said, though, that Rashid as a character does not fall into the trap of adopting a scoffing attitude in a quest for respectability, recognition and seamless assimilation in the UK, as might be suggested by the contrast we have drawn between him and his brother, Amin. But a different protagonist, Anna, from Gurnah's next novel, *The Last Gift* (2011b), doubtlessly does fall into such a trap very late in the story, when she receives an eponymous gift.

The novel takes place in the early 2000s, against the backdrop of 9/11 and the illegal U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, and is told from the perspective of a family that was British Muslim, though they were not observant. The novel is for the most part written in the third person (only 23 pages out of 279 are in the first person), yet the narrator is never omniscient, but always bound up with – that is focalised on – one of the four family members: the father, mother or siblings. Despite being split into five parts, shifts in focalisation are not marked by a new chapter but only with a new paragraph within a given chapter, and they happen quite frequently. Different perspectives are thrown together and forced into close proximity.

Somewhat unusually for Gurnah's oeuvre, rather than focusing on the direct migrant experience of the father, it places more emphasis on the lives of the second-generation immigrants in England, the brother Jamal and sister Hannah, with the latter changing her name to Anna to fit in better and mark her difference from the rest of her outsider, "vagabond family," (2011b, 47), which is perennially at odds with the only country she has ever lived in.

Their father, Abbas, comes from somewhere in East Africa but has always refused to say anything more specific because of the terrible secret he carries with him. Only after he suffers a diabetic crisis and a debilitating stroke early in the book does he slowly begin to open up and admit that he came from Zanzibar and that as a nineteen-year-old in 1959, he fled the country, leaving behind his wife, who was a rich merchant's daughter, after he began to suspect that they married her off to him just because she was already pregnant.

The situation by itself would not have been intolerable, but the thought of the constant mockery he would have to live with from others, who, he was certain, were already counting the days, as they "had nothing better to do," was unbearable. After only six months of marriage (about as long as the newlyweds had known each other), "his wife looked as if she would deliver any day." Abbas grew certain that many other people were well aware of "what had happened and were getting ready to have a good laugh at the skinny cuckold. The place he lived in was like that. They would laugh at him for the rest of his life, pointing him out as he walked past and tell the story of his stupidity." So he fled as a stowaway on a ship, running away "from her and from his country and from everything and everyone he knew." (ibid, 142–143).

Their mother, Maryam, on the other hand, was herself abandoned as a newborn baby and knew nothing of her heritage, though the fact that she was a black baby in Britain meant that police did not go to any real trouble to find out what happened to her or where she came from. Though she had only ever lived in the UK, going through foster homes as a black orphan made her feel like a stranger, a feeling which she did not shake off even in her mature age; "now she feels like an old servant in a large household, allowed to go about her business so long as she is not a nuisance" (ibid, 242).

Jamal and Anna deal with this legacy of radical deracination in diametrically opposed ways. Anna just wants to belong where she is and is delighted with her English boyfriend Nick and their way of being together, meaning "laughing at each other whenever one of them became solemn about *life's tragedies*" and keeping "things light between them", which gave Anna "a mature sense of proportion that she could refuse to see her pain as exceptional. She laughed at *life's tragedies* to avoid the lure of solemn self importance, which is what she thought a sense of the tragic implied" (ibid, 90).

And the apogee of her derisive attitude employed in her attempts to adopt a stiff upper lip as a manner best suited for successful navigation through emotional maelstroms was when she called her family history a "shitty, vile immigrant tragedy" (ibid.,194) upon learning her father's secret and telling her brother "I just wish their stories were not so pathetic and sordid," and going on to bitterly conclude: "My dad is a bigamist and my mum is a foundling. Can you imagine telling anybody that and not sounding like a character out of a comic melodrama?" (ibid, 196).

But once she becomes familiar with her boyfriend's family, who came from the officer class, she realises that to become a so-called model minority and to fit in perfectly, she would have to not only behave like them but also allow them, once in a while, to be racist just for a lark. During a meal with Nick's extended family, she gets asked what she was before she was British. "They were all looking at her, waiting for her to speak, to tell them what her real nation was. She wished she could get up and leave, and walk quickly to the train station and travel to wherever her real nation was." (ibid, 116) When she admits she does not know, the uncle who is pursuing this line of questioning is shocked and goes on a tirade about "host and stranger" and how they need to know each other and where they come from, not simply allow anyone to say "*I am British*", when Nick's sister's husband interjects, saying "You are about to make our jungle bunny cry" with "mockery in his eyes" (ibid, 117–118).

Some months later, her prospective father-in-law, Ralph, walks with her a few steps behind Nick and his mother. He and Anna were bonding, as usual, through their shared passion for literature, of which she was a student. After reciting Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper" out loud, he pats Anna on her belly and expresses his joy that one day she will give them "a little jungle bunny" (ibid, 227) of their own.

Her boyfriend, despite being liberal and taking part with her and the rest of her family in big anti-war protests on the eve of the disastrous and criminal Iraq war led by the USA and Great Britain, does not see anything truly problematic in his parents' behaviour, and instead blames Anna for making them "feel ashamed" and her family for what befell them. He says in a break-up row, "I feel sorry for people like you because you don't know how to look after yourselves." Nick describes her father as "a whingeing tyrant," who "only had diabetes, a thoroughly treatable disease, that's all." And as for her mother, who was "an abandoned baby and doesn't know who she is", he says, "Well, it doesn't take a genius to find out that kind of information. Why couldn't she just pay an agency to check it out for her?" He finishes it off with "the whole crowd of you in the grip of a hopeless melodrama, acting like immigrants." Anna did not respond to that, reflecting instead that those were her thoughts as well, only "[i] t jolted her the way he said that word, immigrants, exactly as she would have said it, with the same degree of disdain" (ibid, 235).

Jamal, Anna's brother, opted, on the other hand, for a completely different approach; instead of disdain, he is devoted to exploring and understanding it, doing his PhD on migration movements to Europe, and gaining, through academic research, a detailed and a very meaningful understanding of migration as "a clutter of ambition and fear and desperation and incomprehension that brought people so far and enabled them to put up with so much. And that they could no more resist the coming than they could the tide or the electric storm. So much had to be given up for life to go on" (ibid, 87).

Even though Gurnah (2013, 162) said in an interview that the emphatic approach of Jamal and the outraged one of Anna were "the two ways" of approaching their father's story, and that he "could have swapped them around", there is a very good, feminist reason why it made much more sense for Anna, rather than Jamal, to feel the need to throw the baggage of her immigrant background overboard and be defined solely by her actions. As is directly stated in the novel:

> She loved sex, had loved it since she went to university and discovered its absorbing pleasure and its easy availability. The experience liberated her from the fears she had absorbed from her parents, from her Ba and his immigrant anxieties, his obsessive desire to escape notice, his secretiveness. Her pleasure in sex made her feel sophisticated and worldly, and somehow that she belonged here. (ibid, 170–171).

Her father could not help but pass down to her the trauma hailing from the parochial, close-knit society to which he belonged and which obsessively monitored sexuality, especially women's. Men can experience first-hand what it means to be a woman in such a society if they are suspected of being a cuckold because it is a similar type of ridicule and a nauseating feeling of being "an object of public surveillance" (Bosman 2021, 5).[8]

This was what made him run away but he could not escape its effects on his own conduct and it cost him a lot, damaging almost irreparably the relationship he had with his daughter,[9] but the last gift of the title is a tape he made just before dying in which he recounted his life with "unforgiving honesty," (Gurnah 2011b, 262) – and this is the only part of the novel where the narration switches to the first person (ibid, 239–262), following Abbas's stream of consciousness as he is recording his voice and recounting stories of his life, urged on by his caring and persistent wife, who wanted for him to leave behind to his children something he had hidden for so long. Anna listens to the tape and is overcome with grief, realising her father "had lived so long with such a feeling of wrong and such an expectation of disgrace" (ibid, 263).

When Abbas is thinking before his death about what he would have said to his children about his Zanzibar homeland, he admits to himself that he would have gone with a simplified version of peaceful coexistence between "people of many religions and race" living "in a forbearing society built as only Muslims know how" because he would have no other way to deal with or know how to speak about:

> the rage that lay just under the surface waiting to break, or the rough justice the children of the enslaved planned to inflict on their sultan and on everyone else who mocked and despised them. I would not have told them about our hatreds, or about the way women were treated like merchandise, how they were traded and inherited by their uncles and brothers and brothers-in-law. I would not have told them how enthusiastically the women themselves performed their worthlessness. (ibid, 243).

In the atmosphere of the rabid Islamophobia which swept the West in the early aughts, and which demonised the Muslim countries and erased their incredible cultural achievements, it would have taken a great way with words and deep insightfulness to be able to respond – as Gurnah (2013, 164) himself did, when asked about Islamic world of East African Coast – that it was "a profoundly patriarchal culture" which, while "not unforgiving" and full of "courtesies and humanities" was, nonetheless, "fairly inflexible about its patriarchy."

VIII. How to Speak about Migrant Experience Without Venom, or on the *Pharmakon* of Stories

But even without the additional complications of criticising and not romanticising traditional Muslim society during the peak years of Islamophobia, it is no surprise that Anna's father kept silent for as long as he did and did not know how to tell his story. As we have already seen, in recounting the migrant story one needs to thread a needle and be vigilant against sliding into self-serving lies and unreflective nostalgia about where one came from, but also not to become embittered and superior, throwing the country you came from and people who stayed behind under the bus so that you get an easier ride through life in the Global North.

"I have no means to describe the deep poison that runs through the experience of flight and homelessness," says Rashid in *Desertion* (Gurnah 2005, 200), but Gurnah's writings represent the exceptional means to do just that, and while one reads his astounding stories it becomes clear that the poison in question is very much like "a drug (*pharmakon*)" in Ancient Greek which can stand for "both remedy and poison". (Derrida 1981, 70).

Let us take the problem of stories in and of themselves: back in Zanzibar, as in any other small, non-metropolitan place to this day, gossiping and rumourmongering are the most effective ways of policing and controlling others, especially women and especially in matters of sex. "[S] tories that capture us and entangle us for all time" (Gurnah 2005, 120) is how they are aptly described by Rashid, whose brother Amin was the victim of one such ensnaring set of stories because he fell in love and was in a clandestine relationship with a girl, Jamila. She was a few years older than him, already divorced, and most crucially, her grandmother was Rehana, who was known even in Zanzibar, where she moved from the mainland coast of East Africa, as a European man's (Martin Pearce's) mistress, which made her entire family pariahs even half a century later. Amin had to stop seeing her because of his parents' pleading and threats, and that decision destroyed his life.

But stories can also be the sole means of escape from the power of small-town talk, that sprawling, suffocating and intoxicating grapevine. For Rashid, it was "the books he had read that gave him an idea of the world that was ampler than

[8]Bosman investigates how Gurnah reinvigorates the cliché figure of the cuckold in *By the Sea* and *Gravel Heart*, but he does not touch on *The Last Gift*, nor does he make a connection with the underlying misogyny and patriarchy in society.
[9]The crippling effects of misogyny on father-daughter relationship can be also traced in *Admiring Silence.*

anything he saw in the lives they lived. This place was stifling him, he said: the social obsequiousness, the medieval religiosity, the historical mendacities." (ibid,155) The same goes for maps; they are cherished objects that help us know the world and feel the magic of faraway places emanating already from their names, but they are also tools for territorial expansion and the solidification of borders, as well as aids in colonial and capitalist plunder.

Literature itself could be used as a cudgel to browbeat other cultures, as seen in the use of Shakespeare and the English canon during British colonialism: "There were English teachers everywhere in the subjected world, speaking about Shakespeare and Keats and the golden mean, and what mattered was not what the subjects thought about these writings, but that they were being told about them" (ibid, 215).

But this literature and the language it was written in could also be reappropriated, freed from the nefarious purposes they were put to, as Gurnah did, for example, by retelling *Measure for Measure* in the post-independence Zanzibar context in his *Gravel Heart.* In the essay "An Idea of Past", Gurnah (2003) endorses Derek Walcott's approach of admitting and accepting "the contradictory legacy of colonialism and slavery and the 'gift' of language and poetry. It is a history which he cannot renegotiate and which gave him, forced on him, a language of which he cannot be dispossessed."

One of the ways to tackle the Derridean irresolvable undecidability of *pharmakon* as both a poison and a cure, inherent in the migrant experience, as well as in writing in a hegemonic language like English, is by affirming, as Gurnah (2013, 166) does, the joys of intertextuality. "That recognition of intertextualities to some extent reintroduces us to each other as readers. We are reading the same thing, and this gives a sense of a shared textuality, and I think that's pleasing, just in itself." Intertextuality, from a reader's position, and when they understand the reference in question, is a form of creating a shared bond. But the way this community could be created is only if, from the standpoint of individual stories, they did not remain bound by their respective book covers, did not stay put and in their respective places. Only by freely travelling, migrating from story to story, can we come by these shared intertextual threads that then connect us. Without these migrant activities, there would arguably be no nourishing soil for the idea of home and belonging to grow on either.

As Gurnah beautifully observes in "Writing and Place" (Gurnah 2004, 59), "to write in the bosom of my culture and my history was not a possibility, and perhaps it is not a possibility for any writer in any profound sense." To write is to engage in the lacework of intertextuality that pulls us in so many directions; we cannot, even if we wanted, stay within some predefined bounds, and abide in one's own supposed place. Writing is going out on a limb, and it is in this way that there is no writing without at least a metaphysical and metaphorical migration. That is why Gurnah sees the usual trials and tribulations of immigration – estrangement in a new culture and context and a loss and lack of a fixed place one can call home – to be in a structural sense "characteristic to all writing," insofar as it "begins from this self-perception of marginality and difference" (ibid, 60).

Gurnah's migrant writing, both in its formal respects and at the level of its content, is thus best placed to counter, oppose and defang maligning and mangling narratives, discourses and practices – like colonialism; orientalism; an insistence on unanimity and political homogeneity; racial thinking; and xenophobia and anti-migrant sentiments in general – which, alongside and exacerbated by climate change, are the greatest threat to the survival of our planetary humanism. Precarious and puny though it may be, this universalism, born and borne in great part by the stories we tell, is the only worthwhile thing we have got going.

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This is an engaging article that brings migration, colonialism, race and humour into a reading of Gurnah's fiction. The strongest part is the discussion of *Desertion*, especially the recurring phrase "there's much to be said for kindness". The suggestion that Gurnah gradually turns an initially ironic phrase into something ethically serious is persuasive, and the idea of "reparative writing" could make a distinctive contribution. I nevertheless think some issues need attention.

The main problem is structural. The title and abstract foreground humour, but sustained discussion of humour arrives relatively late. Much of the first half concentrates on Indian Ocean migration, Orientalism, Zanzibar, Afropolitanism and universalism. These discussions are relevant, but the connection to humour is sometimes indirect. The article would be stronger if humour provided the organising argument from the beginning. The distinction that eventually emerges between humour which humiliates, or distances and humour associated with kindness and repair could provide that structure.
The article should also engage more directly with existing scholarship on humour in Gurnah. Tina Steiner's chapter "Keeping Alienation at Bay: Abdulrazak Gurnah's Convivial Wit" is particularly relevant, as it considers both reactionary and convivial forms of humour. Vanessa Guignery's recent work on laughter in *Paradise* should also be considered. The present article still has a potentially original argument, especially in its connection between irony, kindness and repair, but that contribution needs to be positioned more clearly within the existing criticism. Relatedly, the article sometimes moves too easily between "humour", "irony", "wit", "satire", "mockery" and "ridicule". These terms need greater differentiation. The move from Sedgwick's reparative reading to the author's idea of "reparative writing" is promising, but it needs further explanation. At present, one of the article's most interesting concepts appears quite late and receives relatively little theoretical development.

Some historical claims also need qualification. The statement that littoral cultures "naturally tend to be cosmopolitan" is too categorical, especially given the article's own later discussion of ethnic and racial conflict in Zanzibar. Likewise, describing earlier Indian Ocean mobility as "completely unrelated" to Europeans is unnecessarily absolute. More importantly, the figure of 10,000–20,000

Arabs killed during the Zanzibar Revolution is presented as settled, although estimates vary considerably. The article should acknowledge this uncertainty.
I also have reservations about the discussion of gender in *The Last Gift*. The claim that men suspected of being cuckolded can experience "first-hand what it means to be a woman" in a patriarchal society goes too far. Abbas's experience may reveal comparable mechanisms of surveillance, sexual shame and communal ridicule, but it cannot be equated with women's structural position within patriarchy. The distinction is important for the feminist argument being made here.
The prose could also be more restrained in places. Expressions such as "consistently stunning", "epochal", "profound", "astounding", and similar evaluative formulations occur frequently and sometimes replace critical demonstration. The conclusion likewise becomes broader than the analysis supports when colonialism, Orientalism, racial thinking, xenophobia and climate change are gathered together as threats to "planetary humanism". A more focused conclusion returning to humour, narrative complexity, kindness and the resistance to reductive narratives would be more effective.
Finally, the manuscript needs a careful bibliographical and copy-editing check.
Recommendation: Approved with Reservations.

Is the work original in terms of material and argument?
Partly

Does it sufficiently engage with relevant methodologies and secondary literature on the topic?
Partly

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Partly

Is the argument persuasive and supported by evidence?
Partly

If any, are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
No source data required

Does the research article contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Critical Refugee Studies; Postcolonial Theory

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.