

STORY-TELLING AS AN ANTIDOTE TO DISEMPOWERMENT

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The novels of British-Zanzibari author, Abdulrazak Gurnah, deal with the alienation and loneliness that emigration can produce and, at the same time, they pose questions about identity and the use of memory to reconstruct history. I believe that Gurnah's novels have something new to say about the migrant and, perhaps more importantly, **on behalf of** the migrant. It may be because Gurnah himself is an example of the more successful African migrants in the Western world, or simply because he is a very gifted creative writer, that his work draws attention to those cases that affluent societies would prefer to ignore, the hundreds, maybe thousands, of failed migrants struggling to survive in hostile or simply indifferent environments. In this paper I will look at Gurnah's three most recent novels, *Admiring Silence* (1996), *By the Sea* (2001) and *Desertion* (2005), in which he presents stories of despair and failure, deceit, disappointment and wish-fulfilment as told by the migrants themselves. These men become story-tellers, both in the literal sense and in the sense of lying, which becomes essentially an enabling device. Their story-telling allows them to rewrite their own pasts and, perhaps more importantly, it becomes a therapeutic remedy against the displacement and alienation they experience in their country of adoption. Although they often overlap, the three novels illustrate the three different interpretations I make of the story-teller, namely, the liar

(*Admiring Silence*), the rewriter of history (*By the Sea*) and the traditional performer in oral culture (*Desertion*).

Admiring Silence is the laboured confession of a forty-two year old man from Zanzibar who left his country to study in Britain even though his sudden and irregular departure meant at the time permanent exile. He has lived in Britain for twenty years when the story begins, having fled his country in strained circumstances and with the burden of his family's high expectations of success in the West. He meets and sets up home with a middle-class, radical English woman with whom he has a daughter. He never tells her the truth about his childhood, or his family and he never tells his own family in Zanzibar that he is living with an English woman. He lives in this world of deceit and lies for twenty years until a letter comes announcing a general amnesty for all those citizens of Zanzibar who had left the country illegally over the years. These new circumstances turn out to be fraught with problems for the nameless narrator as he had not told his family about Emma and Amelia, his seventeen year old daughter. To make matters worse, his mother, anxious about her son's lonely state in the far away land, has busied herself with arranging a marriage for him to a young medical student who would happily continue her degree in England. So not only has the narrator failed to confess the truth of his family situation to his relatives in Zanzibar, he has not been honest to Emma, his partner, either. The novel focuses on his fabrications about his past and his present life, the tales and tall stories he has told his partner and their daughter in England and to his family in Africa. It is only at the end of the novel that the reader discovers the narrator's own understanding of himself.

By the Sea defies a simple plot summary as it contains a multilayered series of flashbacks provided by two narrators, both Zanzibari men, who will finally meet again in England after a thirty-five year gap of misunderstandings and dramatic changes of fortune. Gurnah unravels for us a tale of greed and hatred, envy and distrust set against the violent uprising of 1964 in Zanzibar and the disastrous upheaval caused by the persecutions, imprisonments, murders and regime of terror that followed. The main characters, Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud, divided by a rift of seemingly unbreachable hostility while in Zanzibar, drift into an unexpected friendship inspired by a kind of ethnic solidarity. The tables have turned, Mahmud is a relatively successful migrant,

now established as a poet and a professor at the University of London, Omar, on the other hand, has sunk from being a prosperous businessman to a petty trader with a long spell in gaol as a prisoner of the state in between.

Desertion is divided into three parts: part I opens with the sensational arrival of the *mzungu*, Martin Pearce, in a small East African town in 1899. He has been heartlessly abandoned by his Somali guides on the way to the coast. Fate has it that he is found by a *dukawallah*, Hassanali, who takes him in as common humanity requires. Pearce turns out to be an amateur historian and linguist, who, rescued from the hospitality of the shopkeeper, and safely installed in the house of the District Officer, Frederick Turner, can charm the locals with his courtesy and ability to converse in Arabic. Having recovered from his harrowing experience, Pearce returns to the shop to thank his benefactors for their kindness and to make amends for the District Officer's haughty behaviour. Over lunch with Hassanali, the Englishman is captivated by his sister, Rehana and the first part of the novel ends with a socially frowned upon love affair, that of a European and a "native woman."

Part II leaps forward to the momentous events leading up to Zanzibar's independence and is centred on the ambitions and frustrations of Amin, Rashid and Farida, the children of two former radical school-teachers. Rashid, who turns out to be the narrator of the novel, busily swots for the entrance examination which will allow him to leave the island and study in a British university. Amin, the perfect son who excels in everything, opts to stay in Zanzibar and train to be a teacher. Fate, in the shape of his dressmaker sister, Farida, brings him in contact with Jamila, a wordly divorcée. Like Martin Pearce some sixty years before, Amin throws caution to the winds and embarks on a torrid love affair that sooner or later is doomed to be discovered. History repeats itself as Jamila, the granddaughter of Pearce and Rehana, will also be deserted by her lover. Parental pressure acts as ruthlessly on Amin as social approval had on Pearce. Part III focuses on Rashid's life in England far away from the violence and mass slaughters following the overthrow of the new government in Zanzibar. He carves out a new, successful niche for himself, having completed his studies and settled down to academic life with an English wife. It is only when Grace, his wife, finally leaves him that he is drawn to confide in his older

brother. Amin, in turn, makes Rashid repository of his most guarded secret, the unravelling of his love affair with Jamila, the beautiful one.

Story-telling, the quintessential ingredient in the oral tradition, is used by Gurnah to empower his characters with a voice and therefore the means to reconstruct their own histories. He also uses the story-teller as a kind of cultural mediator, building a bridge to allow the listener/reader to cross from one culturescape to another. One of Gurnah's projects in his work is the examination of how history and memory intertwine and interfere with each other.¹ In *By the Sea* Gurnah's use of two narrators, Latif Mahmud and Saleh Omar, to unravel the same story demonstrates how perspective can colour one's interpretation of events. Omar had been cast into the role of villain, of man of malice, by the family of Rajab Shaaban, who were forced to abandon their house and all their belongings as Shaaban had rashly signed away ownership of the house years earlier. The following quotation illustrates Gurnah's point:

(Latif) "I have a memory of you picking out some of the pieces and then sending the rest for auction. I have a picture of that," he said. "I followed the cart from our house, and I have a memory of you walking among the pieces and selecting things which you wanted."

(Saleh) I stared at him in astonishment. "No, it's not possible," I said ...

"Let's say for the moment that I imagined it ... But it seems so strange to have a picture." (Gurnah 2001, 242-3)

Madan Sarup has suggested that the concept of home is closely linked with the notion of identity, the latter being "the story we tell of ourselves and which is also the story others tell of us" (Sarup 95). He goes on to argue that the search for roots may often reflect the difficulties newcomers encounter in their countries of adoption rather than a sacralization of a certain place. Of course through the recuperation and perhaps fetishization of the homeland, the migrant may renew his/her pride in his/her identity. The question then arises, what happens in the case of those migrants for whom flight from their country is clearly a one-way trip? Those people who, like Gurnah's character Saleh Omar, cannot return to their roots? Saleh Omar knows that a return to Zanzibar would end in a biased trial and renewed imprisonment. However, at the beginning of

By the Sea, he seems to be a bogus asylum-seeker. He is sixty-five years old, well over the average age of the majority of people fleeing political persecution and, as he pretends to the authorities, cannot speak any English. Omar fails to fit the profile of a prospective asylum-seeker as understood by the immigration officer, Kevin Edelman, himself the son of former Rumanian refugees.

Why didn't you stay in your own country, where you could grow old in peace? This is a young man's game, this asylum business, because it is really just looking for jobs and prosperity in Europe and all that, isn't it? There is nothing moral in it, just greed. No fear of life and safety, just greed. Mr. Shaaban, a man of your age should know better. (Gurnah 2001, 11)

Omar is travelling under a false name. The name Rajab Shaaban is a name he has appropriated in order to obtain a passport and leave his country on "this life-saving trip" (Gurnah 2001, 41) as he calls it. His credentials are shaky, he has lied about not understanding English, about his own identity, yet through this seemingly unreliable character Gurnah builds up a portrait of what forced emigration actually entails. Omar must lie in order to be safe from persecution, he must pretend in order to achieve something resembling a respectable, peaceful old age. Omar is indeed a victim, a victim of his own greed, his own lack of foresight, and, above all, his vanity. The price he has to pay is a harsh one, forced emigration to a land that will only nominally acknowledge the vestige of a colonial debt to a citizen of a former colony, but that will, in practice, despise him as the immigration officer, Kevin Edelman, warns him,

People like you come pouring in here without any thought of the damage they cause. 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. We'll make life hard for you, make you suffer indignities, perhaps even commit violence on you. Mr. Shaaban, why do you want to do this? (Gurnah 2001, 12)

Saleh Omar and the son of the man whose identity he has appropriated in order to leave Zanzibar, Latif Mahmud, meet again after thirty-five years in England. Neither of them, the former having spent eleven years in gaol without ever having been properly tried and the latter, voluntarily abandoning his

homeland in the early sixties, cherishes any love for his homeland. Mahmud has severed all links with his country of origin and his family, even adopting a new name. Despite the knowledge that his long lost brother Hassan has returned to Zanzibar from the Gulf and has claimed their father's house, he himself is not tempted to return and demand his share of the inheritance. Zanzibar is now too remote, too distant, too foreign for him to desire. Latif's bitterness surprises even Omar,

I marvelled at Latif Mahmud's sternness about his parents, not because it was inconceivable from so far away, where the insistent demands of intimacy can be deflected with silence, but because I wondered about the price he would have had to pay for his perverse triumph, and how much those looks of pain owed to the inevitable distress and guilt he would feel. I marvelled less at the gaunt unhappiness in his face after the misery he had inflicted on himself with his daring. (Gurnah 2001, 239)

In Zanzibar, Omar was living “poor and frightened like everyone else, ears cocked for the latest malice and vindictiveness by our rulers” (Gurnah 2001, 236) but when Hassan returns, successful and politically powerful, and threatens to sue Omar and recuperate his father's house and the money that Omar supposedly owed him, the latter despairs of ever being left in peace. Omar has nothing to lose, his wife and child are long dead, he is poor, friendless and without connections, his only escape route is to flee Zanzibar and his troubled memories but in order to find a haven, he is forced to lie, to become a convincing story-teller.

There are many sorts of migrants, some live on the borderline, the border between two states, or a more figurative kind of borderline, between two cultures or two families, two ways of life. The borderline is always ambivalent; it can be an inherent part of the inside or the chaotic wilderness outside. It is fascinating to leave one's homeland in order to enter the culture of others but this move is undertaken only to return to oneself and one's home, to judge or laugh at one's peculiarities and limitations. Julia Kristeva points out that the stranger is neither friend nor enemy, s/he is one member of the family of undecidables. They are unclassifiable. A stranger is someone who refuses to remain confined to the far away land or go away from our own. S/he is physically close while remaining culturally remote. Strangers often seem to be

suspended in the empty space between a tradition which they have already left and the mode of life which stubbornly denies them the right of entry. The stranger is an anomaly, s/he blurs a boundary line, standing between the inside and the outside, order and chaos, friend and enemy.

The narrator of *Admiring Silence* remains in this cultural limbo, forever hovering between Britain and Tanzania, inside and outside, one of us and so distinctly one of “them.” He seems to have opted out of either camp and has chosen to be an outsider and enemy to all. He incarnates the paradox of the contemporary world in which people are reclaiming a cultural territory of their own, while also wanting to be part of the global nation. He is caught between the nebulous frontiers of the dream land and the home land, belonging to both while at the same time feeling a misfit everywhere. He is what can be called a melancholic migrant, in love with a no longer existing space. The Zanzibar that he was obliged to forsake has evolved on its own terms and in no way resembles the country that he has cherished in his imagination over the years. The childhood memories have been romanticised and exaggerated to such an extent that the migrant can no longer distinguish between what really happened and what he was told had happened. Home for him must remain a kind of tantalising category, forever just out of reach but almost thankfully so. The narrator longs for home because of racism and hostility, but this longing is often counteracted by the **fear** of home because home means recognition of failed expectations and disappointment in oneself.

I was astonished by the sudden surge of loneliness and terror I felt when I realized how stranded I was in this hostile place, that I did not know how to speak to people and win them over to me, that the bank, the canteen, the supermarket, the dark streets seemed so intimidating, and that I could not return from where I came - that, as I then thought, I had lost everything. (Gurnah 1996, 83-4)

The past helps to accept the ambiguity of the present. When the real past does not fulfil this condition, it simply has to be invented. According to Keya Ganguly “the past is an absolutely vital element in the negotiation of identity but it comprises a ‘renovated’ and selectively appropriated set of memories and discourses” (Ganguly 30; emphasis in original). She claims that

individual history is rather a **leaky** category, where the past and present blend into each other. “The authority of the past depends on people’s present subjectivity and vice versa. The stories people tell about their pasts have more to do with the continuing shoring up of self-understanding than with historical **truths**” (ibid; emphasis in original). Consequently, people’s identities are little more than their own personal inventions, the “calloused and stiffened memories” that attach the narrator of *Admiring Silence* to his unwelcome past (Gurnah 1996, 32). With postcolonial subjectivity, one cannot disregard the ways in which colonial experience is interiorized, as well as with the fragmentation imposed by conditions of migrant marginality. History is, in so many ways, a fabricated text. The past can, indeed must, become fixed, because “disambiguating the past permits people to make sense of uncertainties in the present” (Ganguly 31). The narrator’s plea that “I had embellished my story to make it less messy” (Gurnah 1996, 33) is really an excuse for him to ignore his present cowardice. Nobody can be certain of the present as it is always an ongoing process but this uncertainty is heightened for migrant subjects who also troubled by questions of difference and/or marginality. One way to ignore the trials and tribulations of the present is by romanticising (that is, lying about) the past. Emigration is supposed to liberate people although nostalgia about the past reveals repressed fantasies of identity and belongingness. Immigration is associated with an improvement of social status and financial security but material freedom is often opposed to experiences of marginality and alienation. The reconstitution of traditions and of cultural boundaries is common to most cultures and one of the strategies employed is through deception and lying. Masking reality conceals the gap between form and substance, even though it is a false solution to the problem. The reinvention of the past may downplay the pre-immigrant circumstances and bolster up a flagging self-image.

I did not mean to lie to Emma, dupe her out of contempt or disregard while I exploited her for her affection. I don’t exactly know why I began to suppress things, change other things, fabricate to such an extent. Perhaps it was to straighten out my record to myself, to live up to her account of me, to construct a history closer to my choice than the one I have been lumbered with, to cling to her affection, to tell a story which would not bore her. (Gurnah 1996, 62-3)

When he does return home and discovers that Emma is leaving him for another man, he reflects that "I made up the whole pack of lies which was my life with her because I could. I don't even know if that is true, or if there are more complicated reasons for what I did which I do not have the wit or energy to analyse" (Gurnah 1996, 215). The ties of blood and culture make his family ask him to return home when they find out about Emma's abandonment, "But it wasn't home any more, and I had no way of retrieving that seductive idea except through more lies." (Gurnah 1996, 217). His cultural identity has undergone so many reconstructions that he is left literally floating in a space beyond either before or now.

In *Desertion*, the narrative thread is woven together through hearsay and adaptation, the raw material of many oral tales. It is a novel about "how one story contains many and how they belong not to us but are part of the random currents of our time" (Gurnah 2005, 120). Gurnah works the oral elements into this novel as a means to investigate the worldview of the Zanzibaris and provide a snapshot of the social and historical context that has shaped and continues to shape this culture. I see this as part of his larger project of reassessing Zanzibari history by presenting divergent accounts of what really happened. Gurnah brings the first part of the novel to an abrupt end as the reader is robbed of the opportunity to witness the affair between the Englishman, Pearce, and the shopkeeper's sister, Rehana, through the eyes of the protagonists, and a first-person narrator, Rashid, leaps in to discuss the implausibility of the relationship and speculate on how it could have happened:

I don't know how it would have happened. The unlikeliness of it defeats me.... This was 1899, not the age of Pocahontas when a romantic fling with a savage princess could be described as an adventure.... Martin Pearce was not a naïve young sailor from a rural backwater or a swaggering urchin emboldened by imperial pride, who was overwhelmed by the strangeness of his surroundings or was touched into impetuosity by the beauty of an exotic jewel or a muscular amazon. What would have made an Englishman of his background --university, colonial official, a scholar-- begin something like that with the sister of a shopkeeper in a small town on the East African coast? (Gurnah 2005, 110; 116)

As Laila Lalami suggests, the question is far from being a rhetorical one. One would indeed like to know how these two managed to carry on a relationship, but Gurnah appears to be more interested in the **effect** of the affair on succeeding generations than in the affair itself (Gurnah 2005, 2). He prefers to explore how the story of Rehana and Pearce lived on in the collective memory, how it became part of history and how it was passed on, what was told and what was conveniently left out. The plot jumps forward in time to the 1950's, the years immediately preceding independence. Returning to the third-person narrative, Gurnah introduces us to a modern Zanzibari family whose three children, Amin, Farida and Rashid, are invested by their parents with all the hopes a young nation might have for its future. The family appears to have no relation to the characters we have met before, and we must wait until this second story unfolds in order to know what happened to the earlier lovers, and how the two narrative threads connect.

One of the most outstanding characteristics of oral literature, perhaps **the** defining characteristic, is “the performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion” (Finnegan 2). The contents of the stories are changed by oral transmission, which gives birth to “numerous versions of a tale, often very different from each other and sometimes hardly recognisable.” (Finnegan 9). The novelty arises from the artist’s skill in improvisation or his/her use of new stylistic devices e.g. asides, repetitions, new twists to familiar plots, the introduction of completely new ones, the ordering of episodes of verses (Finnegan 9). Abdulrazak Gurnah draws on the tradition of unravelling numerous versions of a tale to add different perspectives to the story. The somewhat disjointed, fragmentary style of his more recent work is his way of “performing” the story in a variety of hitherto unheard of ways. Thus Rashid is moved to delve into the past in order to reconstruct the story of his brother’s frustrated affair with Jamila and by doing so, he discovers some home truths about his own identity and rejection of Zanzibar. Rashid’s cultural alienation, despite his socioeconomic success in Britain, has transformed him into a shallow, almost lifeless creature. Story-telling has empowered him to wake up and take pride in his own personal history.

Rashid, the unexpected narrator of *Desertion* reconstructs a forbidden love story from scraps of gossip and scandal as a way to come to terms with his

own sensations of loss and failure. It is not until the very last section of the novel, 'A Continuation,' which acts as a kind of epilogue, that Rashid is able to piece all the jigsaw together and confront his own demons on a long overdue return to Zanzibar. He, like the narrator of *Admiring Silence* and Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud in *By the Sea*, only redeem themselves through story-telling, which acts as an antidote to their own disempowerment. Story-telling therefore can be seen as a kind of counter-history to those fictional colonial accounts of their homeland. It also becomes a therapy to rationalise and counteract the displacement and alienation they experience in their country of adoption. Gurnah's use of orality in these novels imbues his migrants with the power to create their own pasts, and in the case of Rashid, the secret past of others. In this way they become agents of their own subjectivity, unlike Rushdie's immigrants in *The Satanic Verses*, who "succumb to the pictures they construct [of them]" (Rushdie 168). Abdulrazak Gurnah's subjects resort to story-telling as a survival tactic not only amidst unwelcoming surroundings but, more importantly, to compensate for their own inadequacies and frustrations.

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¹ See the online interview with Abdulrazak Gurnah at

http://www.royalafricansociety.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=234&Itemid=233