GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies
Volume 24(1), February 2024 http://doi.org/10.17576/gema-2024-2401-11

Destabilized Identities and the Question of London in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*

Abdullah F. Al-Badarneh [a]
abadarneh@hu.edu.jo
Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts,
The Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan

Carly J. Wassel
cwassel@georgeschool.org
George School, PA, United States

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the intricacies and possibilities of home to refugees in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *By the Sea* (2001). It explores the role of the city—London—in the novel in (de)stabilizing diasporic identities, providing a counter-discursive argument against John Clement Ball's claim that the city can empower migrants. The two protagonists of the novel, Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud, migrate from Zanzibar, once a protectorate of the British empire in the East African Indian Ocean, to England. They never romanticize their imagined home, Zanzibar, recalled in memory, or cherish their adopted home, England. Gurnah offers a view of the postcolonial experience in the metropolis of London and makes it much more open to interpretation. He reverses the potential the city can offer to refugees and migrants. Gurnah demonstrates that London fails to offer a home, in the full sense of the word, for the protagonists in *By the Sea*. Through shedding light on Omar's and Latif's restless identities in the host country, particularly in London, their past bitter memories, and the resulting sentiments of fear and instability, this study concludes that diasporic identities never fulfill a complete sense of contentment in the host country. Contrary to Ball's belief, the study further asserts that London—as an adopted city home—provides a space for refugees' self-fulfillment, but this space is devoid of their peace of mind and attachment. London, then, does not transcend from space to place or from place to home.

Keywords: Post-colonial; migrant; John Ball; London; Gurnah's *By the Sea*

INTRODUCTION

> One thing that can be said of all postcolonial narratives set wholly or partly in London is that their characters . . . appropriate and imaginatively reinvent the city as a function of their individual and communal experiences of arriving, dwelling, walking, working, interacting, observing, responding, and describing. Moreover, their responses and reinventions are conditioned by images of home: the colony or ex-colony from which they arrived and which they continue to remember and imaginatively inhabit.
>
> (John Clement Ball, 2004, p. 10)

Tim Cresswell distinguishes between space and place. He defines place as a "meaningful location" and refers to three aspects that make place meaningful: location, locale, and the sense of place (2004, p. 7). In his definition, space means "a realm without meaning—as a 'fact of life' which, like time, produces the basic coordinates for human life" (Cresswell, 2004, p. 10). According to

[a] *Main and corresponding author*

eISSN: 2550-2131
ISSN: 1675-8021

Cresswell's definition, if an individual manages to develop an emotional attachment to a certain space, it turns into a place, and, in this sense, the abstract will turn into a concrete meaning. In a narrower sense, a place acquires a spiritual meaning that makes one's life harmonious and contented. The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, in his book, *The Poetics of Space* (1958), introduces the spiritual dimension of one's place: "In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human being's first world" (Bachelard, 1958, p. 7). The current study raises the question of the refugee's, migrant's, or exile's capability to turn the city, London in this case, from space into a place or to continue living in a space of nowhere as a torn individual of body and soul. It problematizes place attachment when an individual is a migrant or a refugee in a postcolonial context. Such a connection will not seem natural even though the migrant might achieve material success, not simply because he/she is emotionally detached from his indigenous home country. The failure of the adopted home (the host country) to provide emotional nourishment to migrants or refugees strongly contributes to essentializing this sense of detachment and alienation.

According to Bill Ashcroft, under the effect of colonization, place acquires new meanings, including "displacement" of colonizers who arrive in the new colonies and of the colonized who are alienated through "forced migration, slavery or indenture" (2001, p. 125). Ashcroft maintains that place, for the diasporic peoples, "might not refer to a location at all, since the formative link between identity and an actual location might have been irredeemably severed" (2001, p. 125). The fear of this disruption between identity and place is a state of instability and un-belongingness. Place, for the diasporic people, acquires an abstract meaning. It is more associated with the "symbolic features which constitute a shared culture, a shared ethnicity or system of belief, including nostalgia for a distant homeland" (p. 125). This nostalgia is experienced through memory. The past here is intertwined with the present, and the migrant's or the refugee's consciousness becomes blurred. Though sometimes "cultural memory can be romanticized" (McParland, 2021, p. 8), the past, in *By the Sea*, is associated with traumatic memories and does not allow such romanticizing. The cultural critic Jopi Nyman contends that "memory plays a particularly strong role in migration and migrant writing, as it provides continuity to the individual and the group by linking the past with present" (2017, p. 91). We usually expect these memories that have driven the refugees out of their indigenous home to be violent and painful: they "address the violence, trauma, and racism that have led towards migration, or which have been encountered during the process of migration" (p. 91).

The significance of this study is that it reverses the colonial setting. The story starts with Saleh Omar in England, the center of colonialism, coming from the periphery, Zanzibar, which gained its independence from the British colonization in 1963. He is living in a coastal town, one hour away from London, where the young narrator and protagonist, Latif Mahmud, lives and works as a literature professor at the University of London. The protagonists of the novel can evaluate their exilic experiences and heartfelt contentment with what London has offered them. The authors contend that this theme of London's role as a metropolitan city in satisfactorily shaping the dreams of migrants or exiles of freedom and equality has not been accounted for in Gurnah's novel, *By the Sea*. Claire Chambers, in her book, *Britain Through Muslim Eyes*, mentions the name of the Zanzibari British novelist, Abdulrazak Gurnah, among other Asian and African writers, as "still less work has been done to analyze these travel writers together as part of a group of early Muslims in Britain" (2015, p. 10). In her other book entitled *British Muslim Fiction: Interviews with Contemporary Writers* (2011), Chambers asserts that she includes Abdulrazak Gurnah in her book

eISSN: 2550-2131
ISSN: 1675-8021

and justifies that his novels are "relatively neglected but excellent" (2011, p.12). In reality, this excellence in his novels has accounted for his universal recognition by winning the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature "for his 'uncompromising and compassionate' writing about refugees, making him the first African to win it since J. M. Coetzee won in 2003" (Chambers, 2011, p. 8). Based on that, Gurnah, as an African-British minority author, and his novels, as minority texts, have been canonized. This valorization breaks the hegemonic ideology of the dominant culture. In their "Introduction: Minority Discourse: What is to be Done?", Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd refer to a hegemonic practice that purports at repressing the minorities' texts or authors and relegating them to marginality in the name of universalism. They call this practice "institutional forgetting" (1987, p. 8). They argue that "one of the first tasks of a re-emergent minority culture is to break out from such ideological encirclement" (p. 8). Bringing to attention the destabilized identity of migrant minorities, Gurnah wins the struggle between the dominant culture and that of the dominated minorities.

The opening statement that is asserted in the introduction to John Clement Ball's *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (2004) suggests two assumptions. First, it assumes that the characters, migrants and exiles, in these "postcolonial narratives set wholly or partly in London" (Ball, 2004, p. 10), will choose to dwell on their experiences of arriving and so forth with a new layer of meaning based on the past experiences they had in their native countries. They have a true home "to remember and imaginatively inhabit" (p. 10). Second, this statement assumes that London is functional in the lives of the diasporic postcolonial migrants and would empower them to overcome their traumatic past experiences before immigration. Ball much celebrates the role of London in this concern as he points out: "To walk through a city is individually to reinscribe it. It is to 'transform' the city as a function of time and narrative, and thus to de-emphasize its qualities of planned and static and organizing 'place' in favor of active and spontaneously reorganized 'space'" (2004, p. 9). Therefore, Ball believes in the transformational role of the city in changing the attitudes of migrants and refugees.

Given these two assumptions, Ball suggests that the city, that is, London, will successfully empower the characters of such postcolonial narratives, for, in his exact words, "The London that once imposed its power and self-constructions *on* them can now be reinvented *by* them" (2004, p. 9). Here, Ball's italicizing of "on" and "by" prepositions is meant to emphasize his insertion that the city gives migrants more power and agency. But what happens when those migrants and exiles lack a true sense of home and do not focus on their experiences of arriving, dwelling, etc.? They rather choose to embrace the memories of their past that may be blurred by time and emotion, unlike the more recent memories of arrival. Abdulrazak Gurnah speaks to these problematic assumptions of assertions like Ball's when he asks: "Who imagined the postcolonial writer? How did he or she come to be? I do not ask this because I expect an answer, though it is nonetheless a real question" (Gurnah, 2000, p. 73). Aware that there is no simple, blanket-statement answer to his questions, Gurnah nonetheless sets out to explore these questions of memory, home, exile, and the city of London in his sixth novel, *By the Sea*.

In his essay, "Reflections on Exile," Edward Said defines exile as an "unhealable rift" between an individual and one's native home (1984, p. 49). He comments on the exiles' attempts to "reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people" (p. 51). However, these attempts would be impossible as their attachment to the ideology of the host country would fail through racializing against them and constantly reminding them, once and again, of their "broken lives" (p.51). Gurnah's two main characters/exiles/migrants, Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud, embody the problems that can arise

eISSN: 2550-2131
ISSN: 1675-8021

when a home does not exist, memories regularly mix with imagination, and the city, London, fails to provide empowerment and home to these newly settled migrants and exiles. In problematizing London's role in the new lives of exiles and migrants, this article also asserts that home and memory as aspects of one's identity, when unstable and unreliable because of exile, will disrupt the possibilities that London might offer to refugees. It would fail to stabilize their identities and make them feel happy. Latif, a well-educated university professor, has become the target of racial discrimination, and Omar feels neglected in England, similar to his situation in Zanzibar.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001), similar to Gurnah himself, has been a fertile narrative open to multiplicities of interpretations and meanings. It is a mixture of all reality, fantasy, indigeneity, modernity, East, West, colonialism, post-colonialism, geography, politics, identity, etc. The migrant identity, with its pursuit of refuge in Europe, serves as both the cause and outcome of the profound intensity found in Gurnah's fiction. Through his own experiences and those of fellow migrants, Gurnah weaves a narrative that resonates with the challenges and stories they have to share. Felicity Hand analyzes the role of Islam in the novel. She argues that the novel is set in an Islamic context, and Islam is the shaping backdrop of the identities of the two protagonists of the novel. According to her, Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud are brought together by the end of the novel despite their family feuds that have lasted for a long time and caused Saleh Omar a lot of pain and suffering: "Islam in East Africa has shaped cultural practices and beliefs and has come to form an essential part of private and public manifestations of identity, possibly nowhere more so than in Zanzibar, where the population is almost one hundred percent Muslim" (Hand, 2010, p. 76). Sissy Helff studies the contact zone in the novel, generating a cultural encounter between Zanzibar and England. She maintains that "the author directly experienced what it means to live in a dialogic contact zone when he left his home country on a student visa to complete his PhD at the University of Kent, where he still teaches as a professor of postcolonial literature" (2015, p. 157). Silence, according to Helff, is paradoxically employed by the author as "a form of utterance and an important tool for communication" (2015, p. 156), consciously enabling the migrant to pass through the cultural encounter and get admittance to the host country.

Sean James Bosman argues that Gurnah uses intertextuality to empower the migrant characters in the novel. He recalls Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" as an example. By emphasizing the weakness and silence of Bartley that led to his demise, Omar and Latif would have "a liminal space between two different discourses. One of these discourses belongs to the intertext ["Bartleby, the Scrivener"]. It guides readers' interpretations of Gurnah's work through their recollections of the canonised story" (Bosman, 2001, p. 31). The other discourse also leads to this space liminality as it predominates migrants and interpellates them into the new culture. James Ocita speaks of a common experience of the marginalized in Gurnah's novels. He points out that "Saleh's *New World* experience emerges as a continuation of his ordeals in the *Old World* in which inclusion is racially determined (2017, p. 302). It is a double effect of capitalism and colonialism on migrants or expatriates who "navigate these same routes as voluntary or forced migrants, expatriates, asylum-seekers, exiles, etc." (Ocita, 2017, p. 298).

The terms 'migrant' and 'exile' are both concurrently used because of the complexities and multi-layers of Gurnah's novel that make it difficult to categorize. Carine M. Mardorossian distinguishes the interrelated but metaphorically different concepts of 'exile' and 'migrant'. Though the two concepts imply alienation and displacement, Mardorossian points out that the

concept of exile suggests "an unwilled expulsion from a nation, such that no return is possible unless it be under the shadow of imprisonment, execution, or some other coercive physical response" (2002, p. 17). In the exile stage, writers in exile "are ascribed the status of neutral observers," "in-betweens", and "mediators between two cultures" (p.16). Thus, the term 'migrant' can be seen as a later stage of exile. In this later stage, "the migrant's identity undergoes radical shifts that alter her self-perception and often result in her ambivalence towards both her old and new existence" (p. 16). Much has been written about exile literature, migrant literature, and the most recent category, diasporic literature. Those protagonists are very similar to Gurnah himself. He is a migrant and writes about migrants' concerns. In his "Writing and Place," he draws attention to his reasons for leaving home: "At the time I left home, my ambitions were simple. It was a time of hardship and anxiety, of state terror and calculated humiliations." (Gurnah, 2008, p. 58). All he wanted was to find safety and fulfillment somewhere else" (Gurnah, 2008, p. 8). The question of finding real "safety and fulfillment" in London is left for Gurnah himself and the protagonists in his novels to decide.

Mardorossian explains that there has been a "paradigmatic shift from exile to migrant literature" that challenges the binary of "an alienating 'here' and a romanticized 'homeland'" (Mardorossian, 2002, pp. 15-16). In other words, the experience of leaving one's homeland and settling in a new country is no longer taken for granted as the grounds for understanding a text. Mardorossian goes on to explain that "migrant literature emphasizes the [. . .] *impossibility of return* whereas the discourse of exile tends to focus on what was left behind and the possibility of return (independently of how improbable that return is)" (p. 17). Migrant literature is further characterized by a focus on the newly adopted homeland, rather than the home country left behind (Ramraj, 1984, p. 228). This shift toward migrant literature and the definitions of exile versus migrant literature seems clear enough. Reversing these concepts of exiles and migrants, Gurnah, again, poses his question: "Who imagined the postcolonial writer?" (2000, p.73). His concern about the dynamic association of migrants and exiles reflects the destabilized identity of the displaced and that of the postcolonial writer.

ENGLAND AND ZANZIBAR: IMAGINED COMMUNITIES AND (DE)STABILIZED IDENTITIES

In *By the Sea*, Omar's situation is set forth from the beginning as one of exile. He defines himself early in the novel, "I am a refugee, an asylum-seeker" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 4). Omar arrives at Gatwick Airport, carrying the last tangible thing that would remind him of Zanzibar, that is, a sack of incense, symbolic of a "repository of stories about another time and place" (Lavery, 2023, p. 117), and, after much deliberation from the British officials, he is granted asylum in England. According to Mardorossian, as part of the discourse of exile literature, Omar should be secure in the possibility of returning to his home country, Zanzibar, and what he left behind there.

As Omar's story unfolds, however, it becomes clear that he has nothing to return to in Zanzibar, and, as he is ostracized in his own "home" village. Therefore, he does not live with the possibility of return. Omar has no true home, in that he is not welcome back in his village, and he is nothing but a refugee, reduced to a social worker's case in England. He suffers double racism in England because he is black and an immigrant at the same time. Upon his arrival at the airport, he is humiliated by Kevin Edelman, the immigration officer, who says patronizingly:

> 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, and 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 Shabaan, why do you want to do this?
>
> (Gurnah, 2001, p. 12)

In another instance, Celia's treatment of Saleh Omar, in his unnamed seaside accommodation, run by Celia, the landlady, shows a huge discrepancy between such masked hospitality and racism as she treats the East European migrants with more kindness because they are white. She "outlines a myth of national hospitality that she believes derives from Britain 'helping' other countries during the Second World War" (Chambers, 2011, p. 117).

Later in the novel, Latif enters the story, and he has also left Zanzibar and is living in England. Latif is not a refugee; he is not in exile. He lives in England by choice; he is, therefore, a migrant. In Latif, Gurnah again reverses the notion of the migrant, for Latif *can* return to Zanzibar, but he chooses not to. He does not face the "impossibility of return," nor does he focus on his newly adopted "homeland." Living in a sort of in-between-ness, where he is detached from his home country and yet not fully a part of his new "home," Latif confirms his failure to adhere to the role of the migrant as he states, "I want to look forward, but I always find myself looking back, poking about in times so long ago and so diminished by other events since then . . ." (Gurnah, 2001, p. 86). By creating characters that blur the definitions of exile and migrant literature, and who cannot seem to find a true home, Gurnah asserts himself as a postcolonial writer who cannot be "imagined" and who does not meet Ball's expectation of the empowering effect of "all postcolonial narratives" set in the host countries like England. The London that is reinscribed against the backgrounds of Omar and Latif fails to function as a resistance model that helps them overcome their traumatic pre-colonial and post-colonial experiences.

Although Omar and Latif do not fit nicely into the roles of exile and migrant, they do share a common history, and their shared past links them to the mode of diasporic literature. According to Ball, "As diasporic peoples negotiate their identities and affiliations through what [Paul] Gilroy calls 'the tension between roots and routes,' old ideas of home, nation, and homeland must be perpetually revisited" (2004, p. 25). For Omar and Latif, however, there is no true "home" to revisit. Both attempt to define themselves through imaginative trips to their past, through the bitter layers of history that divide them. However, their memories do not agree, and they are unable to negotiate their identities. Latif, for example, shares a memory with Omar:

> I have a memory of you picking out some of the pieces and sending the rest for auction. I have a picture of that… I followed the cart from our house, and I have a memory of you walking among the pieces and selecting things which you wanted.
>
> (Gurnah, 2001, p. 242)

This "memory" is apparently imagined, for Omar replies: "No, it is not possible." Omar explains how he wanted nothing to do with the pieces of furniture, and how he got rid of everything, save one table and a box of papers that his servant took the liberty of bringing them back to him. He never walked among the pieces, as Latif vividly remembers. Latif again insists that he remembers the scene, and neither man knows who possesses the correct memory. Omar wonders if he "had secreted away the memory in guilt," and Latif admits the possibility that "for the moment [he] imagined it" (p. 243).

Their imaginative trips to their pasts bring to mind Benedict Anderson's theory of the imagined community, in that their knowledge of one another "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). Indeed, Latif and Omar had only truly known one another in their minds as reminiscent of an old memory. This state of uncertainty could be attributed to the great generational gap between the aging Omar and the young Latif. Nevertheless, Gurnah seems to be pointing towards the failure of their connection, not to the "communion," of imagination. Indeed, imagination does not lead to, as Anderson suggests, a "fraternity" between Omar and Latif, but hostility. Furthermore, the "imagined community" that is both Omar's and Latif's "homeland" in Zanzibar is again anything but a place of "communion" and "fraternity." Zanzibar, in reality and imagination, is a place of bitterness, pain, lawlessness, civil war, and poverty. It represents such byproducts of colonialism and postcolonialism.

Kenneth Parker, in his essay "Home is Where the Heart . . . Lies," discusses the role of imagination in postcolonial writings. He concludes that the notion of the present is situated "in some notion of a past that pre-dates the colonial movement, in some notion of blood, or heredity, or overarching ethnicity" (1993, p. 69). Although Parker refers to writings that take place in post-independent African nation-states, his conclusions are still valid, and he points out that writers living outside of their homeland "perceived one of their tasks as telling not only the old story of disconnection, but also the new one of how to reestablish a connectedness with that imperial past" (Parker, 1993, p. 59). Gurnah reveals the complexities of this task in *By the Sea*, for the "old story of disconnection" relies on the often-unreliable memories of Omar and Latif, and the two cannot "reestablish a connectedness with that imperial past" (p.59) until they understand how their histories are exactly intertwined.

Their histories, as they turn out, have been shaped by the Islamic laws of heredity, laws that pre-date imperial times, yet are transported into the post-imperial present. Omar, through no malice of his own, acquired ownership of two houses that Latif's father believed, based on Islamic law, should be rightfully his own. Omar secured the first house through a promissory note, and his stepmother bequeathed the second to him. Latif was raised to believe that Omar maliciously took possession of the homes, promptly evicted Latif and his family, and then picked through their furniture, taking the pieces he wanted. What Latif does not know is that after independence in Zanzibar, his mother and his Uncle Hussein "used the new post-independence regime for their benefit, and to conduct a campaign of vengeance against Omar, ensuring for him a prolonged period –no less than eleven years– of prison and detention" (Kearney, 2006, p. 54). Omar's identity has effectively been imagined and invented by Latif's family, and the invention relies primarily on notions of heredity that pre-date the imperial movement. Latif's anger towards Omar thus rests on pre-imperial traditions that are transported to a post-imperial present, the same post-imperial present that found Omar in a court of "law" facing an eleven-year prison sentence. After Omar is released from his eleven years of prison, he has no family and no home to return to. He cannot, therefore, "reestablish a connectedness with [his] imperial past," for that life is gone. Neither can Latif, for the memories that constitute his past are based on the same inventions that led to Omar's arrest. Omar instead enters England as an asylum seeker, asylum from the pre-imperial past, the post-imperial present, and the identity that has been invented for him. Latif leaves Zanzibar before he is eighteen years old, never to return.

Identity is indeed a primary concern of the novel, and in his introduction, Ball points to Stuart Hall's statement regarding cultural identities: "Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power" (Ball, 2004, p. 14). Hall goes on to state that the past "is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth," and that cultural identities are actually "unstable points of identification" (p. 14). Gurnah indeed supports this idea of identity being an oscillating mixture of "history, culture, and power." Omar, at one time, was a respected furniture dealer, and through a series of events that sprang from his family history and Islamic hereditary culture, he gains possession of Latif's father's two houses. Then, through the power that Latif's mother can wield in the post-independent government, he becomes a prisoner and an ostracized exile. Gurnah, however, attempts to stabilize the unstable identities of Omar and Latif by allowing each to tell his own story and come to terms with his own past. By discussing their memories and their histories, Omar and Latif try to work through that "continuous play" of identity. In *By the Sea*, Gurnah switches narrators several times. For a reader, the shifting points of view can cause confusion, but for Gurnah, it is imperative that each character is allowed to construct his own identity. In his essay, Parker refers to the postcolonial writers' "crisis of representation," but Gurnah is determined to overcome this "crisis" much like, as Parker explains, Bessie Head overcame in her writing: "All her attention is forced on preventing herself from becoming the invention of someone else, whether in the text or in everyday life" (Parker, 1993, p. 59). Unfortunately for Omar, he already has become the invention of someone else, but Gurnah is determined to allow him to clear his name, and Latif is given the same opportunity to explain the roots of his hatred for Omar. The majority of the novel occurs through flashbacks, as Omar and Latif negotiate through their memories, toward an identity that each can call his own.

HOME AND (DE)CENTERED IDENTITIES

As Omar and Latif are working to secure their identities, it becomes clear that neither have a true "home" in Zanzibar, but their respective "homes" in England, their newly adopted homeland, are also to be considered. Gurnah leaves the issue of the home open for interpretation. Latif left Zanzibar and had no intention to return, and he has no interest in whatever family he has left. He tells Omar, with "a look of scorn on his gaunt face," that he "wanted nothing to do with them, and their hatreds and demands" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 239). Admitting that he thought his parents died years ago, he adds, "Perhaps I dreamed it, fantasized it" (p. 238). For Latif, Zanzibar is not, and perhaps never has been, his home, for he was only a teenager when he left, and now only bitter memories remain. From Zanzibar, he traveled to the German Democratic Republic to receive training in dentistry. It is in Germany that Latif changes his name from Ishmail to Latif, dropping his final reminder of home. He "escapes" from his training program in East Germany and enters England, where he teaches at a university and has published poetry. On the surface, Latif appears to have finally found a place to call "home." As more is revealed about his current situation, however, his "home" in England becomes less complete. The first time Latif is given a voice, he states, "Someone called me a grinning blackamoor in the street, speaking out of a different time. A grinning blackamoor" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 71). Latif goes on to tell how it made him "feel hated, suddenly weak with a kind of terror at such associations" (p. 72). He wonders at the fact that he is living in a country, with a language, that "barks and scorns at [him] behind every third corner" (p. 73). Later that day, Latif looks "blackamoor" up in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and finds some comfort in the fact that the word has been used by literary "worthies" such as Sidney and

Shakespeare (p. 73). Regardless of this comfort, Latif's "home" is lacking a level of full acceptance. Latif also reveals a sense of unhappiness in his profession: "I abhor poems. I read them and teach them and abhor them…. They say nothing so elaborately, they reveal nothing, they lead to nothing. Worse than wall-paper or a notice outside the departmental secretary's office" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 74). Latif is a literature professor, yet he does not seem to enjoy his profession. Perhaps he is burnt out, or he is not given the proper respect at his university. He also mentions that he is "always eager to show off, to confirm [his] credentials as a teacher of literature" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 75). Latif does not elaborate but leaves the question open as to exactly what prompts his need to confirm his credentials to others.

Most importantly, in understanding Latif's sense of home, his flat in London stands out. It is only in the final scene of the novel that Latif's flat is visited, revealing a surprisingly squalid state. The room "reeked of loneliness and futility, of long silent occupation" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 244). Latif had lived with a girlfriend, but, as he describes, not happily: "We were not happy together. Her name was Margaret. We lived together and got by, and shared our pleasures but we were not happy. There were many irritations and I know that sometimes I quite disliked her, hated her" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 206). Now, his lonely apartment is bare, except for an ashtray filled with cigarette butts, a clutter of unread newspapers, dirty clothes, and dirty dishes. Considering the state of his flat in London, his unhappy relationship that ended, his hatred of the poetry he teaches, his need to "show off" his credentials, and his recent experience with racial slurs, one must wonder if Latif truly has a "home" here in London.

Gurnah leaves the question of Latif's home open for speculation, however, by leaving Latif with two emerging relationships at the end of the novel. As Latif comes to understand Omar's true history and realizes that Omar actually suffered more cruelties at the hands of Latif's family than they ever suffered from the supposed evil doings of Omar, he becomes quite fond of Omar. As J.A. Kearney notes that Omar takes on the role of the father "to replace the real one of whom Latif, like his mother, felt ashamed" (Kearney, 2006, p. 56). When Omar entered England as a refugee, he took Latif's father's name, for when Omar gained possession of Latif's father's house and goods, he also gained possession of his passport. Just as Latif changed his name and, thereby, dissolved any remaining ties to his home and family, Omar adopted Latif's father's name, thereby, beginning the process of reconciliation and "adoption" with Latif.

Gurnah not only suggests that Latif may find a father figure in England but also hints at a burgeoning romantic relationship for him. In the final scene of the novel, as Omar is busy trying to secure clean bedding at Latif's apartment, Rachel calls, and Omar cannot help but notice that "the two of them stayed on the phone for twenty minutes, laughing too hard like the way [he imagines] people do at the beginning of a friendship" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 245). Kearney remarks that this "romantic development" is another achievement of Omar's reconciliation with Latif (2006, p. 57). Despite the many shortcomings of Latif's "home" in England, he does gain, by the end of the novel, a quasi-father figure and a possible new romantic interest, and, thus, the question of his true "home" is left open for consideration. This indeterminate state "becomes a significant feature of Gurnah's work" (Steiner and Alaussen, 2023, p. 1) in which his migrant characters are left "with little room for choice" (p. 2).

The status of Omar's home is not as open for interpretation. Ostracized from his village in Zanzibar and having spent eleven years in prison, Omar enters England without a home to think back upon. In England, he finds a flat about an hour outside of London and develops a friendship with his social worker, Rachel. He feels that he is "a decrepit old father" that Rachel (Gurnah, 2001, p. 244), and later, Latif, share and must take care of. Omar refuses to get a telephone, and

after nine months in England, he has not traveled to London until he visits Latif's flat. At Latif's, the only person in England with whom he shares family or history, Omar is not able to even secure clean sheets. His final thought in the novel is that "if the worst came to the worst," he could use the towel given to him by a fellow refugee in the detention center (p. 245). Omar has never truly had a home. England, like Zanzibar, fails him in that respect.

In the introduction to his text, Ball quotes Jane M. Jacobs' statement regarding the healing role of cities like London in postcolonial narratives: "Precisely because cities are sites of 'meetings', they are also places which are saturated with possibilities for the destabilization of imperial arrangements" (Ball, 2004, p. 24). Ball also glorifies London as "the valorized destination for a migrant character seeking liberation from the restrictions of small-island societies," and he concludes that London provides a "horizon-broadening future" for these characters (Ball, 2004, p. 5). According to Jacobs and Ball, then, the novel should therefore end with Omar finally visiting London and finding the possibilities of home that he never found in his "small-island society" (2004, p.5) in Zanzibar. He instead finds none of the comforts that home should offer, and, as Kearney points out, he perhaps is faced with "the possibility of further loss and grief" in the potential relationship between Rachel and Latif (Kearney, 2006, p. 57). Should this relationship develop further, Omar could find himself in the position of the third wheel, and this door for pending disappointment is left open. Gurnah again asks his question: "Who imagined the postcolonial writer?" as he denies London the "typical" role of "horizon-broadening" and "destabilization of imperial arrangements" (p. 5). Latif is from London, but it is in Omar's flat, about one hour outside of London, that the two reconcile years of bitter history. In Omar's flat by the sea, the true "destabilization of imperial arrangements" occurs (p.5). Even the limited "horizons" that Latif finds, a substitute father figure and a romantic interest, are undermined by the disgusting state of his flat, the intimation of unhappiness with his career, and the experience of being the target of a racial slur.

CONCLUSION

In Abdulrazak Gurnah's 2001 novel *By the Sea* (2001), questions are more posed than answered. Gurnah refuses to conform to the normality of "all postcolonial narratives," and he offers a view of the postcolonial experience that is much more open to interpretation. What is Gurnah's motive for reversing the potential of London? Perhaps it is because Omar and Latif lack a true image of home to "remember and imaginatively inhabit" that they cannot utilize the possibilities that London would hold for migrants in other postcolonial narratives. Perhaps because their memories and imaginations are in, as Stuart Hall notes, "play" with each other, Omar and Latif cannot embrace the realities of a new life in a new world. To borrow Gurnah's statement, we do not ask this because we expect an answer, though it is nonetheless a real question. Neither Omar nor Latif is "made special: validated by London experience and education, ripe for elevation into a postcolonial (or neocolonial) elite" (Ball, 2004, p.5). Gurnah's exposition of the narrators of *By the Sea* with such perplexed minds places them in the periphery and in their past, rather than in the centrality of London and the huge possibilities it can offer to migrants.

As issues of trauma, memory, fragmentation, and politics continue to inform the study of postcolonial literature, *By the Sea* stands out as a novel that depicts these complexities and explores the tensions that arise within migrants' identities and communities—both real and imagined—of the diaspora. The current study brings into the foreground this fragmentation and sense of confinement refugees can have. The long imperial tradition of racializing against them solidifies

their feelings of difference and imperial hegemony. The study further finds out that the memories of the past in conjunction with the persisting postcolonial tradition of stereotyping and labelling deprive refugees and migrants of stability and peace of mind.

REFERENCES

Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.

Ashcroft, B. (2001). *Post-colonial transformation*. Taylor & Francis Group.

Bachelard, G. (1958). *The poetics of space*. Beacon Press.

Ball, J. C. (2004). *Imagining London: Postcolonial fiction and the transnational metropolis*. University of Toronto Press.

Bosman, S. J. (2021). 'Nor was there any role for you': Unsettling canonical frames in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001) and *Gravel Heart* (2017). *English in Africa*, *48*(3), 29-45. http://doi.org/10.4314/eia.v48i3.2

Chambers, C. (2015). *Britain through Muslim eyes: Literary representations, 1780-1988*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Chambers, C. (2011). *British Muslim fictions: Interviews with contemporary writers*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Cresswell, T. (2004). *Place: A short introduction*. Blackwell Publishing.

Gurnah, A. (2001). *By the sea*. The New York Press.

Gurnah, A. (2000). Imagining the postcolonial writer. In S. Nasta (Ed.), *Reading the 'New' literatures in a postcolonial era: Essays and studies* (pp. 73-86). The English Association.

Gurnah, A. (2008). Writing and place. *Wasafiri*, *19*(42), 58–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/02690050408589910

Hand, F. (2010). Untangling stories and healing rifts: Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the sea*. *Research in African Literatures*, *41*(2), 75-92. https://doi.org/ 10.1353/ral.0.0246.

Helff, S. (2015). Measuring silence: Dialogic contact zones in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* and *Desertion*. *Matatu, 46*(1), 153-167. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004298071_010.

JanMohamed, A. R., Lloyd D. (1987). Introduction: Minority discourse: What is to be done? *Cultural Critique*, 7*,* 5–17. https://doi.org/ 10.2307/1354148.

Kearney, J. A. (2006). Abdulrazak Gurnah and the disabling complexities of parochial realities. *English in Africa*, *33*(1), 47–58. JSTOR https://www.jstor.org/stable/40399022

Lavery, C. (2023). White-washed minarets and slimy gutters: Abdulrazak Gurnah, narrative form and Indian Ocean space. In T. Steiner, M. Olaussen (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on Abdulrazak Gurnah* (pp. 117-127). Routledge.

Linehan, T. (2022). Who exactly is... Abdulrazak Gurnah? *Spotlight-Einfach Besser Englisch*, 2, Feb. p. 8. EBSCOhost. search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=154906881&site=ehost-live.

Mardorossian, C. M. (2002). From Literature of exile to migrant literature. *Modern Language Studies*, *32*(2),15-33. https://doi.org/10.2307/3252040.

McParland, R. (2021). *Cultural memory, consciousness, and the modernist novel*. Academica Press.

Nyman, J. (2017). *Displacement, memory, and travel in contemporary migrant writing*. Brill.

Ocita. J. (2017). Travel, marginality and migrant subjectivities in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* and Caryl Phillips's *The Atlantic Sound*. *Social Dynamics*, *43*(2), 298-311. https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2017.1364474.

Parker, K. (1993). Home is where the heart... lies. *Transition*, *59*, 65–77. https://doi.org/10.2307/2934872.

Ramraj, V. J. (1984). Diasporas and multiculturalism. In B. King (Ed.), *New National and Postcolonial Literatures: An introduction*. Bruce King, editor. Clarendon Press, 1996.

Said, E. W. (1984). The mind of winter: Reflections on life in exile." *Harper's Magazine, 45*(269), September. 49-55.

Steiner, T., Olaussen M. (2023). Introduction. In T. Steiner, M. Olaussen, *Critical Perspective on Abdulrazak Gurnah* (1-3). Routledge.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Abdullah F. Al-Badarneh (Ph.D.) is currently an Assistant Professor of English Literature and Criticism at the Department of English Language and Literature, The Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan. He earned his Ph.D. in English Literature from Indiana University of Pennsylvania in 2012. His research interests include Postcolonial Literature and Feminism.

Carly J. Wassel (Ph.D.) is working as an English Teacher and International Baccalaureate Extended Essay Coordinator at George School, United States. She earned her Ph.D. from Indiana University of Pennsylvania in 2014. Her research interests include Irish and Postcolonial Literature.