Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*: A Paradigmatic Novel on the Contemporary Diasporic Condition

Nicoletta Brazzelli

Abstract

Abdulrazak Gurnah's postcolonial counter narratives show a wider world, whose multiple identities and overlapping landscapes reveal the hybrid subjects and complex geographies of globalisation. In his novels Gurnah represents the diasporic conditions of modernity, exploring the issues of belonging and unbelonging and the anxiety of alienation and loss. *By the Sea* (2001) portrays migrant characters revealing both rootlessness and nostalgia for their homeland, Zanzibar, and effectively investigates the motifs of displacement and memory. It is a paradigmatic novel dealing with the contemporary postcolonial condition, representing transnational movements as well as the double consciousness of diasporic subjects. Ethnic solidarity as well as storytelling provide the means to overcome loneliness and fear.

Keywords: *By the Sea*, diaspora, Gurnah, migration

1. Postcolonial modernity and diasporic identities

Migration constitutes an emblematic expression of modernity[1]. The recent global mobility has increased the contingency of identities and the collapse of a binary vision of the world previously conventionally divided into opposite geographical and cultural areas, West and East as well as North and South. In the face of changing global conditions, which have given way to transnational connections and cross-cultural networks, diaspora is a term that has widened its original meaning, switching from the narrow sense of Jewish dispersion to an all-encompassing conceptual sphere that includes different

---

[1] The term modernity encapsulates the cultural predicament of societies facing the issues of capitalism and industrialisation and heading towards the state of globalisation, which shapes the contemporary world (Giddens 2002).

experiences, such as those of the immigrant, expatriate, refugee and exile[2]. Diaspora involves crossing boundaries, deterritorialisation and living in in-between spaces.

These widespread transformations have created a wealth of textual representations which portray migrant and diasporic characters and problematise significant features of postcolonial modernity. In his novel *By the Sea* (2001), but also in the previous *Admiring Silence* (1996) and the more recent *Desertion* (2005) and *The Last Gift* (2011), Abdulrazak Gurnah represents displaced individuals alienated both by the host community and the homeland and living in a permanent diasporic state[3]. Gurnah's characters are marked by a deep sense of non-belonging. On the other hand, the very sense of belonging to their original abodes is an ambiguous concept in itself. In fact, their place of origin seems to generate stronger hostility than the place of re-settlement.

In *By the Sea* the two main characters Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud experience forms of displacement such as longing, memory and disidentification, which lead them to develop survival instincts[4]. They seek each other's company and resort to personal narrations of their Zanzibari past to react to the harsh realities of their condition. These two characters are clearly the representatives of hybridised identities[5]. The forces of globalisation and the resulting diasporic existences reveal that identities are not one-dimensional anymore; rather, individuals are tangled up in webs of multiple connections and multi-layered perspectives.

Gurnah emphasises the uniqueness of each individual story and stresses the crucial role of memory in making sense of one's disrupted

---

[2] Mostly rooted in the violent history of colonialism, diasporic movements are at the centre of contemporary cultural debate especially in postcolonial studies; in their manifold configurations, they significantly shape the postcolonial globalised world (Král 2009: 11-4).

[3] Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in Zanzibar in 1948 and migrated to Britain in 1968, where he became an academic and a novelist.

[4] Disidentification implies physical and psychic survival. It is a response to apparatuses that employ systems of racial, sexual and national subjugation. See Muños 1999: 161.

[5] In *The Location of Culture* (1994) Homi Bhabha dismisses a definition of identity as one-dimensional and shows how categories (gender, ethnicity, class, but also national belonging and cultural traditions) interact on a vertical axis.

past. *By the Sea* constructs a polyphonic narration by employing the parallel voices of the two protagonists. Histories – both personal and national – are no more than constructs. As Saleh and Latif recollect their past, the two differing versions of the same story convey the impossibility of a one-sided narrative. Both stories are true, yet neither of them is true, as Saleh acknowledges:

It is difficult to know with precision how things became as they have, to be able to say with some assurance that first it was this and it then led to that and the other, and now here we are. The moments slip through my fingers. Even as I recount them to myself, I can hear echoes of what I am suppressing, of something I've forgotten to remember, which then makes the telling so difficult when I don't wish it to be. (Gurnah 2002: 2)

Remembering is a selective process and a gloomy search. Latif's voice seems to replicate Saleh's, when he says that "It's a dour place, the land of memory, a dim gutted warehouse with rotting planks and rusted ladders where you sometimes spend time rifling through abandoned goods" (Gurnah 2002: 86). The metaphor of memory as a warehouse containing forgotten and neglected goods connects the recollection of past experiences to the materiality of everyday life.

Gurnah makes use of postmodern conventions and techniques while articulating a postcolonial vision: his novel is located at the intersection between the fictional and the factual, involving personal and individual stories as well as collective and national histories. The employment of two narrators to unravel the same story demonstrates how subjective perspective can determine one's interpretation of events.

In Gurnah's novel, Omar is an asylum seeker. The representation of the refugee poses peculiar challenges: being forced to leave one's own homeland to seek asylum elsewhere constitutes one of the most extreme forms of displacement. Saleh Omar begins his account of his arrival in Britain by stating: "I am a refugee, an asylum seeker". Situating himself within this shifting discourse, at the point of fracture between legitimate and illegitimate presence, Saleh emphasises his absolute otherness.

The refugee leads a "contrapuntal" existence[6], with the past

---

[6] The term "contrapuntal" is taken from Edward Said (1993).

and the present coexisting simultaneously and yet separately. The image of a life split in two by the moment of departure is reiterated several times in the novel. For example, Saleh remarks: "I had slipped the chains of my life and now roamed in another" (Gurnah 2001: 63).

In the contemporary world, dislocation becomes a permanent condition: Said (2000) argues that exile is characterised by a deep anxiety that becomes part of contemporary identities; the solitude of the exiles is both deprivation and privilege, because of their awareness of being suspended between different locations and cultures. An existential anxiety arises from such insecurity embedded in modernity. Both Anthony Giddens (1991) in his analysis of global mobility (63-78) and Arjun Appadurai (1996) who focuses on cultural interchange and the work of the imagination in the construction of modern identities, remark that, as a consequence of movements of people across contemporary spaces and borders, cultural groups become less tied to particular geographic places.

Contemporary diasporas can be considered both in terms of historical experience and of the existential conditions that metaphorise modernity: the precarious homes of diasporic subjects imply a perpetual, though controversial, longing for one's homeland and a feeling of estrangement towards the host country. New forms of "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983) are thus created that transgress the borders of national states. The idea of "dissemiNation" proposed by Bhabha (1990) implies that nations are liminal, hybrid and interstitial spaces[7].

By the Sea sheds new light on the multiple articulations of life in exile, contributing to the understanding of diasporic communities in Europe. Against the hegemonic narrative of ethnic hierarchy, Gurnah places the backdrop of colonial exploitation to give voice to the plight of the refugee. As a member of a postcolonial diaspora, the writer blurs the borders of the modern Western nation and locates himself in transcultural and transnational spaces, where the multiple worlds of other modernities coexist and overlap.

In Britain diasporic people of the former empire have disrupted the dominant cultural narrative of a seemingly homogeneous nation.

---

[7] The notion of liquidity conceived by Bauman (2000) as representing modernity as a perpetually floating condition is another useful reference.

Gurnah's work provides a literary engagement with Eastern African diaspora; modern migrations involving East Africans are inscribed in a texture of ancient migrations and passages. We understand postcolonial movements if we look back to previous shifts of population in the Eastern area. The history of Zanzibar, Gurnah's native island, in particular reveals a world of departures and arrivals of people, cultural encounters and trading goods.

Gurnah's concern with the connection between past and present histories and his emphasis on storytelling focus his narration on the importance of familiar relationships as well as on the role of objects anchoring migrants to cultural traditions. The focus on the interaction between old and new experiences foregrounds the process of cross-cultural exchange.

2. Past and present: shared stories

By the Sea concentrates on the connected past of two Zanzibari exiles in Britain. Shaping themselves as narrators, they come to terms with their family stories together with their experiences as exiles and unravel a unique history of migration from different viewpoints. Saleh Omar is a sixty-five-year-old refugee, who lives the "half-life of a stranger" (Gurnah 2001: 2) in a British town by the sea; the first-person narrative of Saleh is juxtaposed to another first-person narrative, that of the younger Latif Mahmud, apparently a different sort of refugee, a lecturer at a London university and a poet.

Gurnah's novel questions both the category of refugee and the conditions by which an exiled subject is eligible for asylum. It soon becomes evident that not possessing a Western family name restricts hospitality. The term "hospitality" is located within a discourse of British/European national identity versus African identity; the contest between host and stranger resides in language[8]. The role of language in the UK asylum system is challenged in *By the Sea*, which employs a shifting vocabulary revealing otherness, unbelonging and illegitimacy. Gurnah balances Omar's initial silence and Latif's

---

[8] On "hospitality", see Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000. See also Farrier 2008, where "hospitality" in Gurnah's novel is investigated following Derrida's theoretical perspective. Hospitality is located within a discourse of national identity where the provision of security remains on behalf of Britain as a former colonial power.

affirmation that "without English you are even more a stranger, a refugee" and that "you're just a condition, without even a story" (Gurnah 2001: 143). Omar's choice of silence is linked to the behaviour of Bartleby in Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* (1853), which functions as a subtext (Olaussen 2008). The emblem of an impenetrable passivity, Bartleby provides a model for postcolonial resistance through the denial of his master's voice (Cooper 2008: 91).

The general disregard of the personal needs of refugees who are reduced to abstractions without a history is metaphorically conveyed by the figure of Bartleby. Saleh's reluctance to speak English parallels the refusal to work of Melville's protagonist. Saleh and Bartleby share a history of abuse, which the people surrounding them are not aware of. Both make use of Bartleby's mantra "I would prefer not to" in the attempt to preserve their integrity. The only possible answer to the master's voice is passive resistance, silence. In the end, "the impassive authority of that man's defeat, the noble futility of his life" (Gurnah 2001: 156) comes to represent the fate of the uprooted.

Omar is familiar with the English language, because he was educated within the British colonial system and used to be a property owner in his own country, but in order to escape and be granted asylum he must change his name. He decides to conceal his ability to speak English in the belief that this may save him from being sent back. He arrives in England with fake documents and under the name of Rajab Shabaan, the (dead) father of Latif, with the conviction that he should feign ignorance of English: "I knew the meaning of silence, the danger of words" (Gurnah 2001: 12). In this sense, he must fit a stereotype; once recognised as a refugee, his legal adviser Rachel contacts Latif as a translator, because he comes from the same geographical area.

The novel thus articulates an important concern of refugee narratives, the protagonist's coming to terms with the loss of his true identity and, at the same time, the danger of being divested of his false one. However, the newly-chosen name marks the beginning of a new life.

In the unfolding of the narrative the dialectic between storytelling and silence is sharply defined (Olaussen 2009). They are both means of communication reflecting strategic decisions on the

side of the refugees. Latif the translator seems a successful migrant, he is a "mimic man", who occupies what Bhabha defines a "third space" (Bhabha 1994). However, his racial otherness prevents him from being recognised as English. Latif is rudely reminded of his blackness when, hurrying to work, "someone called [him] a grinning blackamoor in the street, speaking out of a different time" (Gurnah 2001: 71). He tries to understand the meaning of that strange and archaic term visiting a library and looking up "blackamoor" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. He discovers that the word meaning negro had been in print since 1501 and was used by Sydney, Shakespeare and Pepys. In this episode, Latif Mahmud's position is reminiscent of Franz Fanon's shocking experience of becoming aware of his own blackness through the eyes of the white other[9].

The theme of translation is linked with the efforts of the migrant who, by narrating his journey and his difference, constructs a new identity. It highlights the negotiation of migrants between languages in order to create transnational identities. Latif speaks perfect English, but he feels alienated by the racist features of the English language. He thinks: "This is the house I live in, […] a language which barks and scorns at me behind every third corner" (Gurnah 2001: 73). The English language does not provide security for black immigrants. This means that episodes of racism and instances of oppression and exclusion influence cultural encounters.

Saleh Omar illegally arrives at Gatwick airport in November 1995 and immediately experiences the dehumanising and racist practices of British border authorities. The behaviour of the immigration officer Kevin Edelman reassesses European history as a history of imperial power: Edelman, the son of Romanian parents now perfectly integrated in British society, is portrayed as the "owner of Europe", the gatekeeper of a country now striving to keep its borders sealed. Omar foresees the hardship of being an African, a stranger and a penniless individual, living in Britain:

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

---

[9] I refer to Fanon's often cited traumatic experience of being abused by a little boy: "Look, Mama, a Negro!". (Fanon 1967: 112)

commit violence on you. Mr Shaaban, why do you want to do this? (Gurnah 2002: 12)

Thus Gurnah portrays the experiences of refugees and both legal and illegal conditions (Helff 2000). The motif of the illegal migrant is connected with the trope of diasporic life in a host country. Nation-state mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion are deployed. Although the two main characters have much in common, their different social status produces dissimilar outlooks of what it means to be a migrant in Britain.

The historical perspective is employed by Gurnah to trace the fragmentation of modern subjectivities. With its multi-layered series of flashbacks, *By the Sea* illuminates the extent to which colonialism has itself been a form of globalisation that opened the African continent to the world (Seel 2004). The multiple layers of culture and history of the Eastern world are revealed especially through the character of the Persian trader Hussein, whom both Omar and Latif met in the past and whose unscrupulous behaviour caused the enmity between their two families. On the one hand, Hussein embodies the globalised world of travels and trade in the Indian Ocean (and Malaysia), regulated by the cyclical winds of the monsoon; on the other, he is at the centre of an intricate business deal that ends for Latif and Omar in dispossession and loss. Through the portrayal of Hussein a part of the world where globalisation has functioned for millennia comes to light; with Hussein and his travels both goods and stories have been inscribed over time.

In fact, the East African coast is a place in-between, which illustrates an alternative modernity, belonging to the past; in the ancient Indian Ocean world, globalisation did not rest on Western models and conceptions, but came from trade and colonisation bringing together different communities, Persians, Arabs, Africans, Indians and Europeans (Portuguese, Germans, British). A form of modernity can be found in areas thought to be pre-modern or non-modern (Hewley 2008), and this suggests the need to take into consideration non Western experiences of the past as well in order to understand the ongoing postcolonial world. Saleh's arrival in Britain can be read as part of a much older history of departures and arrivals. If the Black Atlantic is a crucial part of Western modernity

(Gilroy 1992), the East African coast with its global context offers another model of modernity (Larson 1999).

Gurnah's fiction deconstructs the widespread image of Zanzibar as "postcolonial exotic" (Muños Valdivieso 2011: 128). The "island of the spices"[10] is not portrayed as a paradise (although an idealised vision of the Zanzibari landscape sometimes emerges from Omar's memories). A positive view of home is undermined, especially because of the family enmities (Steiner 2006: 314) but also because of the political turmoil and the legacy of colonialism. On the other hand, the friendship developing between Omar and Latif suggests that friendship and the sense of belonging are not strictly connected with home. It is in a safe place that they can find relief. From old wounds and past bitterness there seems to spring a new understanding which may bridge gaps and delete grudges created by old deceptions and injustices.

Living in Britain in a marginal location, an unnamed seaside town, Saleh views the centre from the periphery, through migrant eyes. Moreover, his double consciousness allows him to see his self through the eyes of the others[11]. Diaspora is at the same time a state of physical dislocation and a cultural condition implying a double belonging. It provides both marginalisation and empowerment. According to Stuart Hall (1996), the diasporic subject is aware of the connections between ethnicities and cultures and develops forms of solidarity within the community he lives in. However, the experience of diaspora is deeply distressing and painful. Gilroy (1992) connects the double positioning and double consciousness of modernity to the cultural exchanges on the Black Atlantic, to the historical experiences of slavery, marginality and transnationalism[12].

---

[10] On the representation of Zanzibar in literature see Garth 1996.

[11] Gilroy writes: "The contemporary black English, like the Anglo-Africans of earlier generations and perhaps, like all blacks in the West, stand between (at least) two great cultural assemblages, both of which have mutated through the course of the modern world that formed them and assumed new configurations" (1992: 1).

[12] According to James Clifford (1993), diaspora is connected to African forced migration, predominantly in relation to the Atlantic Ocean slave trade, while the term is now used to describe a variety of dislocation and relocation experiences. On black diaspora see Segal 1995 and Koser 2003.

There is a continuity in Saleh's life by the English sea. The Channel with its "metallic water" (Gurnah 2001: 153) reminds him of the "warm green" Indian Ocean (2). Both Saleh and Mahmud come from the cosmopolitan setting of a port town of Zanzibar. The protagonists' connection with different seas and oceans is obviously linked to the title of Gurnah's novel. The sea implies voyages and movements in the past as well as in the present. The sea is also a characteristically modernist theme, as Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *Waste Land* reveal; its symbolic and paradigmatic role refers to transformation and new life.

The relationship established between identity and space implies that space is endowed with meaning and in a sense transformed into home. Referring to the English town he lives in, Saleh remarks that "except that the streets were so silent and so straight, it could have been a part of the other town I once lived in" (Gurnah 2001: 4). The correspondence between the two places is a sort of inner discovery, maybe the first step towards a healing process. The sense of exclusion at first perceived by Saleh seems to be gradually exorcised. From the narrator's viewpoint, Britain no longer lives up to its imperial grandeur. First the airport, then the detention camp, then Celia's boarding house and finally Saleh's small flat are filthy, squalid and desolate places. They are sites of exclusion and not of inclusion (Masterson 2010: 413-4).

The events leading Omar towards exile and an uncertain future in a foreign country are traumatic. They entail a forced emigration to a land that only nominally acknowledges its colonial debt to the citizen of a former colony, and in practice despises him. On the other hand, Mahmud's position is ambivalent: he is a black Briton, whose exile seems voluntary. Yet, he has severed all his links with his country of origin and family, and Latif is not his real name. Since their first encounter, the two characters are gradually linked by ethnic solidarity. Each of them becomes entangled in the other's different version of the past. Their relationship effectively conveys the intricate entanglements of a contradictory modernity (Falk 2007: 44-7), where pain generates stories and digressions serve to avoid central and difficult issues. A new and alternative form of family is created where two previously antagonistic men enter a deep mutual understanding.

In *By the Sea* tension arises between personal perception of history and collective consciousness. When Latif realises that Omar

took his father's name, he reflects on the burden of history on individuals:

You still haven't told me about that, why you took his name. It's all history, anyway. None of it matters, really. I'm not saying that *history* does not matter, knowing about what happened so we understand what we are about, and how we came to be as we are, and what stories we tell about it all. (Gurnah 2001: 195)

Gurnah combines chronological history and personal sensations, feelings and memories to comment on the history of Zanzibar (Hand 2010: 78ff). Moreover, colonial and postcolonial histories are clearly connected. The past, both familiar and national, resurfaces in the present through Omar's encounter with Latif. This meeting acts as a balm, by putting difficult situations and deep anxieties in a soothing perspective. The family in Gurnah becomes the allegory of the nation[13]. The failings and inadequacies of Rajab Shaaban, Latif's father, run parallel with the shortcomings of the new nation.

3. Memories and relics

In *By the Sea*, a tangled plot developing through encounters, silences and memories gradually unfolds, moving beyond Zanzibar and Britain, to include Malaysia and a wider Eastern world. The incense Saleh Omar packs in his green bag before his departure from Zanzibar, and which is confiscated by customs authorities at Gatwick Airport, is the most powerful link between him and his homeland as its fragrance brings back the recollection of remote stories from the past, such as that of Hussein, who gave him the "*ud-al-qamari*" originating from Cambodia. The incense casket is a relic of the past as well as the metaphor for the divided condition of contemporary diasporic experience. The casket carries the significance of Omar's identity into the new place more than the passport and the language. As he is obliged to leave the casket at the customs, this object represents both a gift and a sign; its value derives from the fantasies associated with the trader's stories. Yet, it

---

[13] Islam cultural modes and family codes form the framework of Gurnah's novel. See Emad Mirmotahari 2011: 51-72.

is Hussein who has created great enmity between the families of the two protagonists.

The main antidote to the progressive destruction of one's own ethnic identity and cultural traditions is the ability to remember, which is clearly connected to the power of storytelling (Muños Valdivieso 2011: 124). In *By the Sea* the need to tell is explicitly related to *A Thousand and One Nights*, whose stories of jinns rising out of jars are constantly cited and stress the oral qualities of Gurnah's discourse[14]. Orality is not only an aesthetic modality but also a subversive practice. It provides an oppositional discourse to colonial narratives. Storytelling acts as an antidote to disempowerment because it counteracts displacement and alienation. In this sense, memory is the most valuable possession a displaced person can carry around the world. It is a metaphorical piece of baggage.

In the case of Omar, the real suitcase is light, just a few shirts, a pair of trousers, three pairs of underpants, one kanzu and two sarunis (African tunics). The ideal piece of luggage he carries, instead, is rich with traditions and memories of the past. The luggage motif is recurrent in diasporic literature. According to Rosemary Marangoly George, there is a difference between the immigrants who travel unburdened, such as Oliver in Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), who leaves Jamaica and settles in London without any luggage, and those who come to Britain loaded with their belongings, such as Hortense in Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004), who arrives in London with a heavy trunk. The former are likely to integrate more easily into their new environment, while the latter generally find it difficult to integrate into British society (Marangoly George 1996: 171-5).

---

[14] Apart form the reference to the Arab tradition of *A Thousand and One Nights*, in *By the Sea* Gurnah develops many other intertextual links to the British and American literary tradition: Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *Julius Caesar* are cited as well as Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*. Many works belonging to the American, British and European tradition as well as colonial atlases and maps are mentioned. As for the connection with other contemporary novels, Robert Balfour (2006) finds a remarkable similarity between *By the Sea* and V.S. Naipaul's *Half a Life* (2001): Omar echoes Willy Chadran who moves to Britain from India to escape his father's failure and misery. The main character of Naipaul's novel, living a half-life, is divided between India, Britain and East Africa.

Edelman deprives Omar of the most precious material possession he carries with him, his scented wood. The refugee recollects that:

I didn't tell him that it was ud-al-qamari of the best quality, all that remained of a consignment I had acquired more than thirty years ago, and which I could not bear to leave behind when I set out on this journey into a new life. (Gurnah 2002: 13)

In *By the Sea* the stress on objects as relics and fragments of the past is remarkable (Cooper 2008): a similar emphasis on cultural items is developed in Moyez G. Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack* (1989), where the sack the narrator inherits represents the (Asian African) community's collective memory. However, incense is not the only element playing a crucial role in Gurnah's novel. Also a little ebony table, which fascinates Hussein and is given by the trader as a gift to his lover Hassan, Latif's brother, plays an important part. Although Omar could not carry this precious table in his suitcase, he brings with him an intriguing relationship with furniture. Moreover, Alfonso's towel, a gift to Omar by an Angolan migrant met at the detention centre, accompanies Omar everywhere as a neat piece of cloth, an antidote to Britain's dirtiness, representing a constant support and becoming almost a living part of his body. Material objects are deeply entwined with the history of the two families or with personal encounters and ties. Migrants like Omar survive by rooting themselves in material reality. Objects gain power from the stories attached to them[15].

Omar's and Latif's stories are part of an ancient drama of colonial trade and greed: colonialism is associated with the Western desire to acquire exotic goods. Omar, who used to run a furniture shop in Zanzibar, is obsessed by furniture: his daily visits to furniture stores in England reveal his desire for an anchor point: for him tables and wardrobes are not only solid objects. Latif confirms that survival is possible only by identifying himself with material reality: "When I look back, I find some objects still gleam with a bright malevolence and every memory draws blood" (Gurnah 2001: 86). On the other hand, the whole narrative revolves around complications surrounding the ownership and inheritance of a family house:

---

[15] Appadurai suggests that objects have "life histories". See Appadurai 1986.

Gurnah's novel develops a plot about property rights and heritage, therefore about material wealth.

History and memory are central tropes in *By the Sea*. They are two sides of the same narrative. In order to construct the present, Gurnah's characters must travel back into the past (Hand 2012: 47). In this process, Britain is both colonising country and new family, Zanzibar both native homeland and destructive prison. The past is a vital element in the negotiation of identity, but it needs to be reinvented to achieve a deeper meaning. Omar and Latif struggle to find a footing in a land of exile by seeking solace in each other, recurring to narratives that "explain" their respective pasts. They attempt to form an emotional alliance beyond the borders of their community, as a response to their displacement and as a way of countering the hardship of exile. Their way of dealing with diaspora relates closely to Keya Ganguly's idea that memories of the past provide a crucial discursive terrain on which selfhood and identity are rebuilt. Ganguly's (1992) major argument is that the construction of any identity is incomplete without the frame constituted by past history.

Diasporic literature, which challenges the issues of inclusion and exclusion in national spaces and conveys the emergence of contemporary transnationalism, is strongly based on the act of remembering, often pervaded by nostalgia, although such a feeling is sometimes counterbalanced by a sense of enrichment and empowerment deriving from the interaction of different cultural traditions. Re-membering unearths fragments of the past and pieces them together. Thus this crucial act creates "imaginary homelands". Rushdie has defined the diasporic writer as someone who recaptures his/her homeland from an external perspective[16]. The vision of the diasporic writer may be fragmentary, but fragmentation makes the process of recollection more intense. Uprootedness is associated with memory and creativity, though the unreliability of memory is what makes the works of displaced writers so captivating, as Rushdie (1991: 12) recognises.

In conclusion, Gurnah's *By the Sea* paradigmatically represents the diasporic identities of modernity, revealing, on the one hand,

---

[16] According to Salman Rushdie, "Writers in the position of exiles and immigrants create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands". (Rushdie 1991: 10)

that the histories connecting West and East, North and South are not homogeneous and are often contradictory; on the other hand, that the memory of the past helps heal disrupted identities. Storytelling is not only a way to compensate inadequacies and frustrations, but also a survival tool. Gurnah's novel focuses on alienation and loneliness engendered by migration and shows how postcolonial modernity is produced by colonial history and the dynamics of difference. As an imaginative construction employing postcolonial perspectives and postmodern narrative techniques bringing together different times and places, real and fictional events, *By the Sea* defines the multicultural tapestry of our own world.

References

ANDERSON, BENEDICT, 1983, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London.

APPADURAI, ARJUN, 1986, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value", in A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, C.U.P., Cambridge, pp. 3-63.

APPADURAI, ARJUN, 1996, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

BALFOUR, ROBERT, 2006, "Exiles to the Centre in Gurnah's and Naipaul's Recent Fiction", in S. Arndt and M. Spitzock von Brisinski (eds), *Africa, Europe and (Post) colonialism: Racism, Migration and Diaspora in African Literatures*, Bayreuth African Studies, Bayreuth, pp. 315-25.

BAUMAN, ZYGMUNT, 2000, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

BHABHA, HOMI, 1990, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation", in H. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, London, pp. 139-70.

BHABHA, HOMI, 1994, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London-New York.

CLIFFORD, JAMES, 1994, "Diasporas", *Cultural Anthropology* 9 (3), pp. 302-38.

COOPER, BRENDA, 2008, "Returning the Jinns to the Jar: Material Culture, Stories and Migration in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*", *Kunapipi* 20 (1), pp. 79-96.

DERRIDA, JACQUES and DUFOURMANTELLE, ANNE, 2000, *Of Hospitality*, Stanford U.P., Stanford.

FALK, ERIK, 2007, *Subject and History in Selected Works by Abdulrazak Gurnah, Yvonne Vera, and David Dabydeen*, Karlstad University Studies, Karlstad.

FANON, FRANTZ, [1952] 1967, *Black Skins, White Masks*, Grove Press, New York.

FARRIER, DAVID, 2008, "Terms of Hospitality. Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 43 (3), pp. 121-39.

GANGULY, KEYA, 1992, "Migrant Identities: Personal Memory and the Construction of Selfhood", *Cultural Studies* 6 (1), pp. 27-49.

GARTH, ANDREW MYERS, 1996, "Isle of Cloves, Sea of Discourses: Writing about Zanzibar", *Ecumene* 3 (4), pp. 408-26.

GIDDENS, ANTHONY, 2002, *Runaway World. How Globalisation is Reshaping Our Lives*, Profile Books, London.

GIDDENS, ANTHONY, 1991, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

GILROY, PAUL, 1993, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Verso, London.

GURNAH, ABDULRAZAK, 1996, *Admiring Silence*, Penguin, London.

GURNAH, ABDULRAZAK, 2001, *By the Sea*, Bloomsbury, London.

GURNAH, ABDULRAZAK, 2005, *Desertion*, Bloomsbury, London.

GURNAH, ABDULRAZAK, 2011, *The Last Gift*, Bloomsbury, London.

HALL, STUART, 1994, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", in P. Williams and L. Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: a Reader*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, pp. 392-401.

HAND, FELICITY, 2012, "Becoming Foreign: Tropes of Migrant Identity in Three Novels by Abdulrazak Gurnah", in J.P.A. Sell (ed.), *Metaphor and Diaspora in Contemporary Writing*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 39-58.

HAND, FELICITY, 2010, "Untangling Stories and Healing Rifts: Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*", *Research in African Literatures* 41 (2), pp. 74-92.

HELFF, SISSY, 2009, "Illegal Diasporas and African Refugees in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 44 (1), pp. 67-80.

HEWLEY, JOHN C., 2008, *India in Africa, Africa in India: Indian Ocean Cosmopolitanisms*, Indiana U. P., Bloomington.

KOSER, KHALID (ed.), 2003, *New African Diasporas*, Routledge, London-New York.

KRÁL, FRANÇOISE, 2009, *Critical Identities in Contemporary Anglophone Diasporic Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

LARSON, P.M, 1999, "Reconsidering Trauma, Identity, and the African Diaspora: Enslavement and Historical Memory in Nineteenth-Century Highland Madagascar", *William and Mary Quarterly* LVI (2), pp. 335-62.

LEVY, ANDREA, 2004, *Small Island*, Review, London.

MARANGOLY GEORGE, ROSEMARY, 1996, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction*, C.U.P., Cambridge.

MASTERSON, JOHN, 2010, "Travel and/as Travail: Diasporic Dislocations in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 45 (3), pp. 409-27.

MIRMOTAHARI, EMAD, 2011, *Islam in the Eastern African Novel*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

MUÑOS, JOSÉ ESTEFAN, 1999, *Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

MUÑOS VALDIVIESO, SOFÍA, 2011, "The Paradise Within. Displacement, Memory and Nostalgia in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*", in H. Ramsey-Kurz and G. Ganapathy-Doré (eds), *Projections of Paradise. Ideal Elsewheres in Postcolonial Migrant Literature*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-New York, pp. 123-44.

NAIPAUL, V.S., 2001, *Half a Life*, Picador, London.

NYMAN, JOPI, 2009, *Home, Identity, and Mobility in Contemporary Diasporic Fiction*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-New York.

OLAUSSEN, MARIA, 2009, "Refusing to Speak as a Victim. Agency and the Arrivant in Abdulrazak Gurnah'a Novel *By the Sea*", in M. Olaussen and C. Anglefors (eds), *Africa Writing Europe. Opposition, Juxtaposition, Entanglement*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-New York, pp. 217-44.

OLAUSSEN, MARIA, 2008, "Writing Europe: Gender in Narratives of Rescue", in T. Huttunen, K. Ilmonen, J. Korkka, E. Valovinta (eds), *Seeking the Self – Encountering the Other: Diasporic Narrative and the Ethics of Representation*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, pp. 39-51.

RUSHDIE, SALMAN, 1991, *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, Granta, London.

SAID, EDWARD, 1993, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, London.

SAID, EDWARD, 2000, "Reflections on Exile", in *Reflexions on Exile and Other Essays*, Harvard U. P., Cambridge (MA), pp. 173-86.

SEEL, AMANDA, 2004, "Displacement and Diaspora: New Locations in African Writing", *Wasafiri* 19 (41), pp. 21-4.

SEGAL, RONALD, 1995, *The Black Diaspora*, Faber and Faber, London.

SELVON, SAM, [1956] 2006, *The Lonely Londoners*, Penguin, London.

STEINER, TINA, 2006, "Mimicry or Translation? Storytelling and Migrant Identity in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Novels *Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea*", *The Translator* 12 (2), pp. 301-22.

VASSANJI, MOYEZ G., 1989, *The Gunny Sack*, Heinemann, London.