

## How private memory intersects with and informs public history in selected works of Abdulrazak Gurnah

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Private Memory intersects with the Public History of the Zanzibari Arab Community and employs the tropes of: Reverse Chronology and History as a way of using Fiction to represent and contextualize how they inform the discourse of identity formations and/or constructions of the Zanzibari Arab Community, especially in relation to the trauma that accompanies the latter's migration. It is important to mention that the identities of the diasporic Zanzibari Arabs has suffered from the disruptions caused by colonialism and the coming of independence, both of which have left individual members of this community, as well as its entirety, with a traumatized memory of who they are.

**Keywords:** *History, public history, Zanzibari Arab*



## From Private Memory to Public History

This section begins with a definition of what private memory and public history are, then proceeds to discuss how it informs public history. We argue that Private memory as having a way of subverting the already written history that has been transmitted as ‘a record of truth’. However, there are other critics who have given different interpretations. For instance, de Certeau (1984) defines private memory as involving those acts of memory that are introduced into the ordered space of the present other times and other forms of know-how. Johnson (1982), on the other hand, argues that private memory is instrumental in installing a mobile sense of post-colonial identity. In their view, the present can only acquire its meaning with reference to the disjointed and conflicted narratives of the past in which references to official narratives about colonization and a historical memory are tangled up with personal memories and private recollections of past experience.

According to Foucault (1980), memory has a demystifying effect that works in a number of ways. For example, it can be treated as a counter-hegemonic chronicle in which an imagined ‘other’s’ history is narrated, therefore destabilizing dominant histories (Foucault, 1980). He further argues that ethnic literature, in particular, often re-inscribes memory as history. For Foucault (1980), there is a way in which personal memory shapes and is woven into group memory [public history] through what is selected. In Foucault’s (1980) opinion, memory, despite its attendant problems, is often construed as a basis for an authentic self that can be liberated from the silence and suppression brought upon it by history.

In this paper, therefore, private memory is taken to mean those recollections of one’s past that counter the already presented views or ideas about a specific event or occurrence. Private memory works by subverting certain ‘false’ generalizations that have been regarded as the ‘official’ history and are manifested in the use of figures and metaphors that transcend the boundaries of fact. This is because memory sediments together the narratives of the various characters’ deeds, encounters and recollections and, in the process, redirects the chronology and flow of history. It is through the private recollections of the characters that we are introduced to the traumas that trigger this community’s adventures.

This paper’s definition of private memory is in tandem with what Le Goff (1992) says about memory: “Memory vies with, and undermines the linearity of conventional history” (p. xx). The researcher’s analysis of selected works of Gurnah’s fiction reveal that characters subvert the already known ‘history’ of the Zanzibari Arabs and what they recollect about their pasts becomes fodder for discourse that legitimizes and informs how the political, social and cultural factors contributed to their diasporic identities. This is further affirmed by Woods’ (2007) assertion that memory and history form part of a literary politics of identity which plays dynamically upon a palimpsestual tension. Simatei (2001), on the other hand,

argues that “Personal histories, reclaimed through memory, are juxtaposed with the contemporary, reminding us that ...remembering is something done now not then” (pp. 393-97).

This paper, borrows Redfield’s (1985) definition as a basis for understanding what public history is by arguing that it is:

...how various versions of the past are communicated in society through a multiplicity of institutions and media, including schools, government ceremonies, popular amusements, art and literary stories told by families and friends and landscape features designated as historical, either by government or by popular practice” (p. 324).

I define public history as the many different ways in which societies think about their pasts and how these pasts get institutionalized and disseminated to a public audience. It is only through public history that communities are able to dialogue in order to ensure that the various voices that bear recollections of various ideas about the relations of their past and future are heard.

An analysis of Gurnah’s novelistic imaginaries reveal how the characters’ recollections of past occurrences serve as a spring board for the re-writing of a different version of history of the Zanzibari Arab community. One realizes that the already normalized status of the Arab as ‘slave traders’ whose interest was to exploit their African hosts, and later subjects, for the sake of profit is subverted in the way we perceive them in these texts. I read a humane side to this community that is capable of failure, love and even marrying their African hosts/subjects. This is given credence by Le Cour (1989) who argues that, “Islam legitimized the practice of slavery that relied more on the consent of the slave than on the coercion by the master” (p. 93-94). This paper also found that that the slavery to which the Zanzibari Africans got subjected, in some instances, had something to do with their inability to honour the debts they owed their Arab creditors and, in part, the African subjects were to blame for their own enslavement.

In one way or the other, Gurnah attempts to voice a re-envisioned version of history that not only paradoxically sanitizes the coming into being of slavery in East Africa but, at the same time, does not legitimize the practice of slave trade. According to Basil (1980),

“The concept of domestic slavery is sanctioned by the writings of the prophet and by the law of Islam” (p. 20).

I argue that Gurnah has used these narratives to subvert the ‘history’ already written down by the European scholars who voice an imperialist version of the

history of this community in order to offer us alternative possibilities beyond the historical representations offered to the public readership. For the characters in Gurnah's fiction, the remembrance of their past and present situations of victimhood substantiates the trauma that accompanies their identity as a diasporic community and a reading of these narratives reveals that the recollections of the characters offer alternative ways of dealing with the pains and pleasures that accompany memory.

In order to subvert the generalizations offered by what could be regarded as the 'official' history, Gurnah employs specific narrative strategies that include reverse chronology of history and selective amnesia, as well silences, to enable us glean an understanding of how the recollections of individual characters influence what becomes the public history of the diasporic Zanzibari Arab community. These narrative strategies are realized in the way characters deal with their pasts, rather than revolt against it, and, as such, we are able to 'unpack' the various ways in which the working of memory and history inform the trauma associated with adventure. Secondly, these narrative strategies enable us to comprehend how particular events inform and re-inscribe memory as history (Palumbo-Liu, 1996)

### **The deployment of reverse chronology and its influence on public history**

Reverse chronology is a narrative strategy in which the temporal order of the narrative begins in the present and moves to the past so that the narration of events is inverted and the causal explanation of the events move from effect to cause (Young, 1995). It derives its strength from its capacity to stimulate the recall of fragments of past memory while characters are able to "move from the familiar present back to the forgotten past with the aid of the logical causal explanation" (Ortner, 1990, p. 342). It works by enabling characters to accept the inevitability of their situation as a people burdened with the responsibility of carrying the historical memory and maladjusted identity, which later helps them undergo a process of self-liberation and healing.

This strategy catalyzes memory retrieval by allowing characters to narrate and revisit their distant pasts. In essence, it acts as a bridge between the various separate incidences, which had remained silenced and repressed in the memories of this community and which, if pieced together, will have a bearing on their present. Thus, the reverse chronology of events, in my view, forms an organizing frame for the reconstruction of narrative "by piecing together what is known and unknown" (Muller, 1995, p. 323). As a narrative strategy, it forms a converging point in the narratives of the many characters who are all perpetrators and/or victims and/or products of the said diasporic experiences.

### FICTIONAL REPRESENTATION OF REVERSE CHRONOLOGY AND HISTORY

The texts analysed speak to the complexity of migration within East Africa and to Britain by the Zanzibari Arabs and yet, they glosses over their reasons for not going back to Oman in Arabia. This paradox motivated the attempt to unravel the reasons that triggered the trauma accompanying their adventurous journeying. The narratives in these texts have an aspect of being retold. By using reverse chronology as a strategy, will provide insights into the multivalent ways through which the author reorganizes the Zanzibari Arabs' history without obliterating the accompanying social injustices that it conveys.

This strategy uses the history of the Omani Arabs' occupation of Zanzibar as a basis for rendering the past. It is worth noting that a major part of the history of how the Arab community came into the East African coast is re-narrated and Saleh Omar in *By the Sea* (Gurnah, 2001) uses the ud-al-qamari as a pivot around which he weaves together the trading exploits of his family in the Indian Ocean world. Only when Kelvin Edelman takes the casket away do we realize the history of the extent and nature of the diasporic trading adventure of the Omani Arabs:

The man I obtained the ud-al qamari from was a Persian trader from Bahrain who had come to our part of the world with the musim, the winds of the monsoons, he and thousands of other traders from Arabia, the Gulf, India and Sind and the Horn of Africa. They had been doing this every year for at least a thousand years. (Gurnah, 2001, p. 14)

From his family's trading adventure, which is a microcosm of the wider Omani Arab community, we learn that they travelled as far as Bangkok in the year before the war in 1904 and this is still directing the lives of this Arab community in the twentieth century (1960s).

Gurnah disagrees with the version of history that the only mode of trade for the Omani Arabs was slavery and slave trade and, instead, argues that, even before the advent of slavery, the Omani Arabs traded in merchandise such as ud-al-quamari and even exchanged goods and services on credit. In *By the Sea* (Gurnah, 2001), the author is able to refute the version of history as captured by Randall (1978) who argues that the Omani Arab merchants who were involved in East African activities were mainly motivated by slave trade.

This is central to the deconstruction of history because the texts speak to the paradox that both Islam as a religion and the culture of the Omani Arabs sanctioned slavery but the mode of enslavement was consensual rather than coercive (Cooper, 1977). Cooper (1977) argues that the Arab slave owners lacked the coercive potential and had to combine punishment and rewards in different ways and made less demands on the slaves. Gurnah, however, does not buy this idea of consensual

slave/master relationship.

According to Gurnah, the East African coast served as a point of cultural and religious contact and dispersion and tends to project a forceful capture and eviction of persons for the sake of exploitation of their human capital as slaves in Arabia:

For centuries, intrepid traders and sailors, most of them barbarous and poor no doubt, made the annual journey to the stretch of the coast on the eastern side of the country...They brought with them their goods and their God and the way of looking at the world... And they brought their hungers and greeds, their fantasies and lies and hatreds, taking what they could buy, trade or snatch away, including people they bought or kidnapped and sold into labour and degradation in their own lands. (Gurnah, 2001, p. 15)

Gurnah also seems to argue that the Arab traders negotiated and offered loans to their African counterparts for them to engage in trade and had to give ransoms as security for their money, hence the resultant enslavement of their debtors' kin. In *Paradise* (Gurnah, 1994), we are introduced to the lives of Khalil, Yusuf and Mzee Hamdani whose narratives about their distant pasts have all along been shrouded in silences and who are domestic slaves in Seyyid Aziz's household. For Khalil, his present situation one of helplessness and is blamed on Seyyid Aziz and his father, who, he argues, had "...taken everything else from me. If it was not they who made me into the useless coward you see here, then who did?" (Gurnah, 1994, p. 232). Khalil, the older narrator, informs Yusuf that the reasons for his being brought into the household of Seyyid Aziz is because, like Khalil, his father owed Seyyid Aziz a lot of money and that they would not leave until they had successfully paid for their parents' debts.

Yusuf fails to understand why his 'uncle' subjects him to a torturous life where he sleeps outside his 'uncle's' shop at night (Gurnah, 1994, p. 23) and is subjected to heavy labour (p. 69); he is made aware of his unique identity as a slave to Seyyid Aziz. All the while, he had known Seyyid Aziz as his uncle:

"You're here because your Ba owes the Seyyid money. I'm here because my Ba owes the Seyyid money ... Your Ba must be a bad businessman ..." Yusuf did not understand all the details, but he could not see that it was wrong to work for Uncle Aziz in order to pay off his father's debt. When he had paid it all off he could then go home. (Gurnah, 1994, p. 24)

It is from the afore-mentioned explanation that Yusuf is able to make a causal connection between what Khalil, his fellow slave and shop attendant, had told him about their status as 'pawned-out' slaves (Gurnah, 1994, p. 22) and the reason why



he should stop calling Seyyid Aziz ‘uncle’. The cases of Khalil and Yusuf present another view of slavery that is unique but is in tandem with what Wright (1993) says about the financing of the Indian Ocean trade: “Credit for the trade was advanced for untypically long periods and that the link between creditors and debtors was often reinforced over generations by marriage and the choice of god parents

... This form of slavery becomes, for them, the more general circumstance that enables each one of them to travel back in memory to recollect the fragments of their past” (p. 248).

While Khalil and Yusuf were ransoms for unpaid loans owed by their families, Mzee Hamdani’s case is peculiar because he was a ransom for a debt that his poor family had not paid to Zulehka’s father (Gurnah, 1994, p. 222) and is, therefore, a gift slave to the Seyyid’s wife.

Mzee Hamdani’s status of being a gift slave is within the provisions of a decree signed by Seyyid Ali bin Said in 1890 which outlawed the exchange and sale of slaves but still allowed the inheriting of slaves by the lawful children of slave owners (Basil, 1990, p. 28). Mzee Hamdani uses his present status of servitude to give Yusuf a causal explanation of why he no longer values his freedom:

“They offered me freedom as a gift ... who told her she had it to offer? I know the freedom you are talking about. I had that freedom the moment I was born. When these people say you belong to me, I own you; it is like the passing of the rain, or the setting of the sun at the end of the day. The following morning the sun will rise again whether they like it or not. The same with freedom. They can lock you up, put you in chains, abuse all your small longings, but freedom is not something they can take away. When they have finished with you, they are still as far away from owning you as they were on the day you were born.” (Gurnah, 1994, pp. 223-4)

For Mzee Hamdani, too much humiliation (as a gift slave) traumatized him into a dissident. He realizes that the question of slavery and freedom are relative and that freedom could be had for the asking but his value as a human being could not be fully compensated by being set free from his former master because he is a spent force and has to hold on to the ‘comfort’ and security offered by his former master. The example of Mzee Hamdani validates Gurnah’s contestation that, despite the historical presentation of the British abolition of slave trade, the reality is that Arab slave owners had an upper hand on matters appertaining to the treatment of current slaves and/or former slaves. Hence, Gurnah’s view diverges and strongly contests the truth around the abolition of slavery and the slave trade.

The presence of Amina in Seyyid Aziz’s household is yet another version of

slavery. Though she was brought in as a ransom, Amina's slavery can be understood in terms of her gender role. She becomes a 'gift' slave whose future role as a source of 'pleasure' to the slave owner is non-negotiable and has no moral questioning associated with it. She has recently been turned into the Seyyid's younger 'wife' and this echoes with what Basil(1909) says about the 1897 Decree signed by Seyyid Hamid bin Mahomed declaring:

“...all slaves could obtain their freedom, except for the women who were concubines, and/or younger wives and were regarded as inmates of the harem” (p. 20).

The politics of slave trade that, in one way or the other, defined the Omani Arabs' interaction with Zanzibar, and East Africa in general, is blamed partly on the Africans who were willing sellers and, partly, on the Arabs who were willing buyers:

You'll be thinking: how did so many of these Arabs come to be here in such a short time? When they started to come here, buying slaves from these parts was like picking fruits off a tree. They didn't even have to capture their victims themselves, although some of them did so for the pleasure of it. There were enough people eager to sell their cousins and neighbours for trinkets. And the markets were open everywhere, down in the south and on the ocean islands where the Europeans were farming for sugar, in Arabia and Persia, and on the sultan's new clove plantations in Zanzibar. (Gurnah, 1994, pp. 131-132)

From this excerpt, we see that Gurnah refutes the assumption that the British came to East Africa in order to help end the slave trade. For Gurnah, as well as Mwulia (1975), Britain conspired with the Zanzibari Arab slave traders against the Africans. In fact, Britain depended on the African slaves to work on their sugar plantations.

Hence, Britain was hypocritical and selfish in the way she championed against slavery and slave trade. This hypocritical stance by the British encouraged the Arab traders to adventure into the East African interior and gave impetus to the trading adventures of Yusuf and Seyyid Aziz.

We get to understand that other than engaging in slave trade, the Arabs also traded in ivory and other goods as demonstrated in the household of Hamid Suleiman. It also provides a site for the reader to understand how the communal context of group memory of slavery works through fiction and informs trauma that has accompanied the present circumstances of this community as a diasporic people. Yusuf gets to understand that Seyyid Aziz is an astute trader who takes advantage of the hospitality of their African hosts to engage in the sale of counterfeit goods to the Africans in the interior:



He was full of smiles and groans of admiration as he supervised the stowage of the goods. The sacks of corn which Uncle Aziz had acquired at a give-away price were to be left with Hamid, but the gum, ivory and gold were to travel on the train to the coast. (Gurnah, 1994, p. 91)

In Gurnah's *By The Sea* (2001), the role of the British in ending the Arab business domination in the Indian Ocean worlds is told in a reverse order. Saleh Omar narrates to Latif Mahmud from the comfort of his house in Britain that "Jafar Musa, his grandfather (Saleh Omar's), who was a merchant of no mean repute, owned a shipping liner that traded and spread Islam in Malaya, India and China" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 23). For Saleh Omar, their trading can be traced back to 1904, during which time his grandfather was exploring new markets in Bangkok but, later, Jafar Musa became the embodiment of the loss that the Omani Arabs suffer when they allowed the British to run their business affairs:

For years he [Reza] had fretted at his father's subterfuge of having Europeans appear to be running his business, at the high-handed disregard with which he thought these employees were treating both his father and him...They should dispense with the arrogant dogs and employ Malays and Indians and Arabs and then do as cut-throat trade as they could...These are not village sultans we are talking about, but the rulers of the world. He cajoled him, talked to him about the hard-headed realities of their circumstances...In the year 1899 Jaafar Musa suffered a stroke. (Gurnah, 2001, p. 25)

Using the metaphor of the death of Jaafar Musa to represent the end of the Omani Arab dominance of the Indian Ocean trade, we learn that the trading empire of the Omani Arabs collapses because of the mismanagement of their trade by the British; a way of forcefully disabling the economic strength of the Omani Arabs in order to subjugate them.

Thus Gurnah concurs with Alpers (1975) who argues that the mercantile community of the Zanzibari Arabs provided impetus for Zanzibar to experience economic, social and political transformation. However, Gurnah contests the notions propounded by Alpers (1975) by showing that the mercantile community, whose trade thrived many centuries before the coming of colonialism, was not defined just by slavery and slave trade; it was also defined in other forms of trade in goods and services and used their trading exploits as an avenue for the spread of Islam as narrated using the strategy of reverse chronology. Gurnah, however, agrees with Alpers (1975) on the fact that the coming of colonialism resulted in dwindling fortunes and, thus, they had to find ways of adjusting to these changes.

Desertion (Gurnah, 2005) contests the version of history as presented by Pratt (1992), disputing the assertion that the trade that the Omani Arab community engaged had manifold and profound social, economic and cultural implications because it offered itself as a frontier for a cultural clash that resulted in the spread of Islam into East Africa via Zanzibar and the opening up of the East African world for colonialism. Instead, the reverse occurs when Tinkle-Smith, a British farm manager, is hired by the Sultan of Zanzibar:

... He (The sultan), whichever one it was, looked to benefit from British methods and science, and so asked the company ... to send one of its managers to run the plantations here. A bad mistake. The company sent a gentleman called Tinkle-Smith...which immediately freed all the slaves on the plantation and then re-employed as many as were willing as waged labour...This set the slaves on the other plantations off, and most of them ran away, not wanting to work at all...By this time even the slaves knew that the Sultan's theoretical sovereignty was only ten miles deep...So all they had to do was bolt ten miles into the interior and they were safe...The result...impoverished Arabs. (Gurnah, 2005, p. 46)

This ensured that the economic power of the Omani Arabs that was derived from clove farming was disrupted and, hence, British colonialism thrived. In *Paradise* (Gurnah, 1994), the forceful ending of the Omani Arab dominance in trade in the interior of East Africa by the Germans is narrated to Yusuf by Seyyid Aziz as follows. At this point, Gurnah's representation of fiction aligns with what Akinola (1972) says about the ending of the Arab dominance in East Africa: “

... from 1884, the Sultanate of Zanzibar was experiencing pressure from the European imperialists and this resulted in the partitioning of the coastal territories of the sultanate between Germany and Britain” (p. 216):

...When the German Amir Pasha came to these parts, he went to see the sultan of Tayari ... Amir Pasha treated the sultan with utter contempt, deliberately, to provoke him to war. This was their method. He demanded that the sultan fly the flag of the Germans, that he swear loyalty to the German sultan and that he hand over all the arms and cannon he possessed, because he was sure to have stolen them from the Germans in the first place. The sultan of Tayari did everything he could to avoid a fight...The sultan of Tayari flew the flag of the German sultan and sent gifts and food to the camp of Amir Pasha...After Amir Pasha came Prinzi, the German commander, and he made war at once and killed the sultan and his children...He placed the

Arabs under his heel at first and then chased them away. The foreigner ground them down so thoroughly that they could not even force their slaves to work on their farms any more. The slaves just hid or ran away. The Arabs were left without food or comforts and had no choice but to leave. (Gurnah, 1994, pp. 132-3)

Based on the aforementioned explanations, the researcher argued that the use of reverse chronology works by challenging the single history of the role of the Indian Ocean trade and the effect of colonialism on the East African world (Zanzibar) by presenting an alternative but contesting voice on the impact of the Arabs in the victimization as well as empowerment of the African subjects.

Gurnah's fiction contests the view that the Zanzibari Africans had no control over their Arab oppressors. This is captured in *Paradise* (Gurnah, 1994), where the Sultan of Mkalikali informs Seyyid Aziz that the German authorities had warned them against accepting gifts from the Arab merchants. In this context, power and authority begins to form a constellation around the German colonialists at the expense of the Arabs but even with the end of Arab dominance and the coming of colonialism, the advent of independence had its share of challenges for the Zanzibari Arab community.

Through reverse chronology, we learn that as much as the Arabs and the African citizens of Zanzibar had lived in mutual peace, the coming of independence brought to the fore the long-repressed ethnic hatred harboured over a long time against the Arab community. This is in agreement with what Lofchie (1965) says about the 1964 revolution in Zanzibar, arguing that the overthrowing of the Arab-led government by the African majority resulted in the massacre and expulsion of the Arabs and the nationalization and redistribution of resources. These opened up socio-political fissures that manifested in greed for political power and control by the Zanzibari African elites resulting in the expulsion of the Arabs, ethnic hate, and self-aggrandizement by the ruling elite as spoken about by the unnamed narrator in Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* (1996):

There was hardly time to get used to the flag before the uprising, a matter of weeks. All the lurid promises of an accounting suddenly came true: murder, expulsion, detention, rape, you name it. The bits of paper with their protection clauses and their defence agreements and their assurances on pensions and other civilized paraphernalia were as quickly forgotten as the anthem and the flag. Instead, the radio blared mocking, gloating speeches, issuing detailed prohibition after detailed prohibition-like demented bully: six-o'clock curfew until further notice, public gatherings of more than three people are illegal, all land is nationalized. Gangsters roamed the streets with

gleaming guns they had liberated from the riot-police arsenal, plundering where they chose, demanding a display of timid submission from everyone ...  
(p. 69)

Reverse chronology of history, in this context, has been used to enlighten the reader about the 'erased' bit of the political happenings that led to the change of political governance in Zanzibar. Records of history about the magnitude and manifestations of this political unrest are not captured. For example, Mrina and Mattoke (1996), discussing the revolution, capture the situation in post-revolution Zanzibar that was characterized by recurrences of political unrest and a persistence of deep political divisions. For the narrator, every citizen, be it Arab or African, was disenfranchised by the many coups.

They wanted to glory in grievance, in promises of vengeance, in the past oppression, in their present poverty and in the nobility of their darker skins. To the nationalist rhetoric of their opponents they proclaimed a satirical reprise of their despised 'Africanness', mocked the nationalists for their new-found conscience, and promised them an accounting in the very near future. All of which came to pass with incredible promptness. (Gurnah, 1996, p. 67)

In Gurnah's *By The Sea* (2001), the history of ethnic hatred that resulted in the persecution of the Arab citizens of Zanzibar saw a number of them seek asylum in Britain because they feared for their lives, as is the case with Saleh Omar:

...our government ... rigged an election, falsifying the figures in front of international observers, whereas before it had gaoled, raped, killed or otherwise degraded its citizens. For this delinquent behavior, the British government granted asylum to anyone who claimed their lives were in danger.  
(p. 10)

We are also introduced to the acts of revenge against the Arab community: A community that is accused of enjoying the privileges of insularity provided by the colonialists. In Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* (1996), these acts of revenge degenerate into imprisonment without trial:

... after the ministers and the deputy ministers had been taken in and humiliated before being summarily sentenced ... Three men dressed in plain clothes and carrying guns ... took him [Hashim] away to detention. (p. 70)

The narrator uses the example of his uncle Hashim as one of those who suffered a stint of eighteen months in detention for engaging in illegal trade (Gurnah, 1996).

By using reverse chronology in these historical narratives, Gurnah draws, in a non-linear way, the temporal sequence of the past that constructs a sense of diaspora as seen in the way the characters seem to lose their sense of belonging in Zanzibar due to their constant travels that were caused by the negative impact of ethnic hatred after independence, for example as alluded to by Omar Saleh who is seeking asylum in Britain. He tells Kelvin Edelman:

Think of me as one of those objects that Europe took away with her ... Do you remember the endless catalogue of objects that were taken away to Europe because they were too fragile and delicate to be left in the clumsy and careless hands of natives? I am fragile and precious too, a sacred work, too delicate to be left in the hands of natives, so now you'd better take me too. (Gurnah, 2001, p. 12)

In *By the Sea* (Gurnah, 2001), the presence of Latif Mahmud in Germany can be explained by the strained relationships between the newly elected government of Zanzibar and Britain that saw the government sending a young crop of the elite to study in East Germany, and who would later return to Zanzibar to work:

Leaving... I've had years to think about that, leaving and arriving, until the moments acquired a crust and a gnarled disfigurement that gives them a kind of nobility. I left when I was seventeen to go to East Germany to study. If that seems far-fetched now it is partly because East Germany has been transformed ... into a fantasy bad lands of the imagination, a TV-land of obstinate crooked government and now disgruntled unemployed neo-fascists ... To us it seemed like a gleaming new order intimidating in its earnest and brutal self-assurance. (p. 104)

The use of reverse chronology of history also works by presenting the narrative in three conflicting voices that accentuate the place of Zanzibari Arabs while at the same time undermining the narrative of the British/Arab nexus in the civilization of East Africa, as seen in this excerpt:

The Arabs themselves do not amount to much. They are mostly bluster, not capable of a day's work unless their lives depended on it or there is a bit of loot and pillage in it. Before we came this way, this was pirate country. When the winds were right, the Arabs came raiding all along the coast, kidnapping and looting at will, making slaves. When the winds turned they sped back to their caves to play with their booty ... Despite the pretence of order that the Sultan of Zanzibar represents, without our presence here this would return to

his pirate country in one season. (Gurnah, 2005, pp. 83-4)

In Gurnah's *Desertion* (2005), the role of the British in making Zanzibar a better society is alluded to in the discussion between Mr. Burton and Fredrick Turner with Martin Pearce acting as a passive audience. However, Gurnah contests the notion that all the imperialists had a condescending attitude towards their African subjects. This is manifested in the way Martin Pearce, Mr. Burton and Fredrick Turner put forward their arguments. For example, Martin Pearce speaks in a skeptical voice that reminds us of the gap in his attitude towards both the Zanzibari Arabs and the Africans. This attitude is informed by the hospitality accorded him by Hassanali. His argument is sourced from first-hand experiences and encounters with the Africans (colonial subjects). Martin Pearce becomes the foreign traveller who is ready to embrace the local influences of the supposed 'subjects' of colonialism rather than assert the imperial power. For him, Africa has honoured him with the opportunity to learn a language for the interpretation and recording of his historical exploits. He perceives the Arabs and the Africans as humans potent with kindness. While Mr. Burton's own representation of events is driven by an attitude inculcated from a more theoretical dimension and by the imperialists:

His talk was all about the Uganda Protectorate ... and all the estates that were going to be created up there when the railway was finished. According to Burton, that was the whole point of the Protectorate ... To Burton, and according to him ... it was to open up the beautiful high country in the highlands, always intended for European occupation, and currently squatted on by stone-age vagrants and blood-thirsty pastoralists. (p. 31).

This argument is premised on a 'racialized' frontier.

The technique of reverse chronology works by suspending the continuity of the history of colonialism and Martin Pearce serves as an example of the British who look at humanity as one species, as demonstrated in his desire to learn and speak local languages. For these narratives to convey historical facts, Gurnah uses the character of Martin Pearce whose actions and arguments present relative truths that are just as plausible and convincing as they are contesting. Martin Pearce thinks that the idea of human oppression is uncalled for, saying:

I think we'll come to see what we're doing in places like these less heroically ... I think we'll come to be ashamed of some of the things we have done. We owe them care for the way we have intruded in their ways of life. (p. 85)

This same attitude is held by Fredrick's wife, Christabell, who would not stand the



oppression to which the British subjected their colonial subjects, thus she goes back to Britain and never comes back to Africa (Gurnah, 2005).

This technique has also been used to capture the nature of the relationship between the younger generation of characters who were born and/or found themselves as migrants and their older informants who are perceived as more knowledgeable about the history that informs their present diasporic conditions and identities. In Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001), this strategy works by exploiting the views of Saleh Omar to correct the (mis)representation of the sour relationship that existed between him (Saleh Omar) and Latif Mahmud's father. Saleh Omar gives a detailed history of the issues that led to the conflict:

... Rajab Shaaban Mahmud came to the house in my absence, at the specific request of Bi Maryam herself because...[he] was speaking scandal, saying that my father had fooled, had tricked Bi Maryam into signing her house over to him. As a result of this cleverness on my father's part, I had inherited the house and would inherit everything else that belonged to Bi Maryam when she died. (Gurnah, 2001, p. 189)

Hence, Saleh Omar provides a more 'objective' view by virtue of the fact that, as an 'older' narrator, he (Saleh Omar) does not exploit the innocence/ignorance of the 'younger' interlocutor (Latif Mahmud). This re-representation of reality, offers us an elliptical exploration of their life at an earlier time in Zanzibar. In other instances, the younger narrator triggers the memory of an older narrator by referring to a situation that had been told to him by someone else. In *Admiring Silence* (Gurnah, 1996), for example, the narrator uses the information from Bi Nuru to interrogate his mother about his father's true identity:

"Bi Nuru told me about him," I said, and I saw from her face that she had not known that ... She said his name was Abbas and that he had died, but I heard people say different things outside, especially when I was older. (p. 129)

Thus, the narrator's mother uses this reverse chronology of events to give a more nuanced and informed explanation to the narrator about the physical appearance of his father and the narrator in a way that can better assist to reconstruct an imaginary picture of how his father would have looked like by looking backwards to the past that is now beyond his childhood:

Usually he was quiet with people, you know, polite and retiring-kimya kimya... But when no one was around, he was full of it, stories and jokes and mischief ... He was slim, in the way young men are and not very tall. His hair

was short and curly, almost glossy, not tangled and ropy like yours. His face was slim, with a small round chin ...(Gurnah, 1996, p. 129)

The more the narrator travels, the more he becomes a stranger to himself and the more he realizes that the history about his past can only be alluded to through what his mother and Bi Nuru choose to remember.

### **Use of Selective Amnesia as a Counter-Historical Trope**

Selective amnesia can be understood as a situation in which a character chooses what to remember, and what to forget, so that what has been 'sifted' becomes what the character brings to bear on the conscious mind and, hence, becomes active memory. According to Caruth (1996): "The experience of trauma, the fact of latency...seems to consist...in an inherent latency within the experience itself, the historical power of the trauma is not just that it is only in and through its forgetting, that it is first experienced at all" (p. 465). From this statement, we can infer that it is only when memory is converted into experience that amnesia becomes a precondition for one to recover the truth from a past with some degree of immediacy that cannot be obtained from ordinary remembering.

Selective amnesia works by invoking a past encounter as experienced by characters and resituates it in a context that can enable a reader visualize and relate it to a situation that are easily identifiable. It therefore serves as a precondition to recovering the 'truth' from a past. For amnesic memory to convey historical reality of an unimaginable occurrence, the author has to employ figures and metaphors that transcend the boundaries of fact.

In Gurnah's *The Last Gift* (2011), the metaphor of the disintegrating house that seems to be hiding something is one persistent nightmare that haunts Anna:

The dream came back to Anna... She had not had it for a while, not for two or three weeks... The dream was of a house. She lived in part of the house and the rest was derelict, with sagging roof beams and creaking half-rotten wooden windows. There was someone else in the house, not someone she saw but who was there in the vicinity, just out of the frame. It was not Nick, or it wasn't most of the time. Sometimes after she woke up, she thought it must have been Nick, and at other times that it was one or other of the several men she had known. It was not a house she recognized, even as a picture. Everything about it was unfamiliar. The ruined part was barnlike and empty, and visible from every part of the rest of the house. In a strange way, she felt she was always visible to the dereliction as well, as it was something living. That part of the house was brown, not a real colour but more like a colour of exhaustion. The paintwork was peeling, and its beams and banisters

leaned slightly from age and fatigue. Its dereliction was malign, watchful, accusing. (pp. 88-9)

Anna's life seems haunted by her unassimilated past in which, rather than utilizing the past or memories to rewrite the present, she allows others to victimize her and her life is pulled back by certain bad memories which are occasionally triggered by words or phrases that take her back to forgotten scenes in her family history (Gurnah, 2011). She is, seemingly, suffering from failures of memory that, in the researcher's view, are manifestations of a traumatic past that makes her want to inflect and distort these memories of their family as one of migrants who have no attachment to their roots. She comes to the realization that this nightmare resonates with something in her past that she had glossed over for a long time. She remembered how her father talked to her about the importance of self-respect, something she constantly ignored:

When she wore anything tight or short or revealing, he disapproved ... "What will anybody think if they see you like that?" he said. "That we have not brought you up to have self-respect." In the end he got tired of the bad feeling these encounters aroused and he tried to ignore her, looking hurt that she took no notice of his instruction (Gurnah, 2011, p. 94)

From what Abbas chooses to remind Anna, we can see a symbolic return of their repressed and ineffable past as a people whose identity as black migrants does not enjoy the privileges of being British and this informs the present circumstances of Anna's life which, with the passing of time, become trauma-inducing and leads her into moments of self-exploration.

In fact, Anna presents herself as a person who is struggling to forget her black migrant identity and wants to hold onto the dream of being 'British' and to the adventure of her youthful escapades:

Perhaps she did not tell Nick [about the nightmare] at once because she wanted to have a better understanding of all these feelings before she recounted it...It was her feeling of guilt that most troubled him...She had wanted to go on to say something about the uncanniness of the dream, its extreme unlikelihood and how disturbing its menace was...(Gurnah, 2011, p. 90-91).

When she is invited to visit Nick's family for the Easter weekend, she realizes that Nick's family was utterly racist as captured in the conversation between Anna and Uncle Digby especially when he interrogates her about her origins:

“And where do you come from?”

“Anna’s British,” Nick said curtly, answering for her.

“Yes, of course. Anna’s British...but what was she before she was British?”  
(Gurnah, 2011, p. 116)

These racial epithets that keep sneaking into the conversation between Anna and Nick’s family reminds Anna that she is less British and her definition of being British is done in spite of her race.

Anna struggles to remember certain aspects of her past and erase others while, at the same time, she tries to weave the more appealing narratives into the history of their diasporic adventure.

Hence, what she presents to Nick about her family is an identity that is ambiguous and full of certain historical implications about migrants and migrancy as captured in Nick’s preconceived conclusions in relation to Anna’s family:

... I feel sorry for people like you because you don’t know how to look after yourselves. Your father was a whinnying tyrant, bullying everyone with one misery or another, in the grip of a psychic crisis, so it seemed. But he only had diabetes, a thoroughly treatable disease, that’s all. Your mother was an abandoned baby and doesn’t know who she is ... And then it turns out your father is an absconder and a bigamist but he couldn’t just talk about this, the whole crowd of you in the grip of a hopeless melodrama, acting like immigrants ... (Gurnah, 2011, pp. 235-6)

In Gurnah’s studied works, the researcher identified several instances in which he has allowed historical skepticism to haunt the life of the novels and that of the characters. This works by transforming the problem of historical representation into a problem of individual memory as is the case with Anna in *Desertion* (Gurnah, 2005) and Yusuf in *Paradise* (Gurnah, 1994), whose lives suffer a traumatic anxiety, and unspoken crises in their pasts which manifest in nightmares.

Like Anna, Yusuf, in *Paradise* (Gurnah, 1994), suffers from persistent selective amnesia which presents itself in nightmares that occur in the form of a pack of dogs that have come to maul them up:

The dogs roamed in packs, loping and alert as they scuffle in shadows and thickets. They filled Yusuf’s mind with nightmares ... In his dreams they stood two-legged over him, their long mouths half open and slavering, their pitiless eyes passing over his stiff, prone body (Gurnah, 1994, p. 26)

The dogs are a metaphor for the material greed that accompanies the Omani Arabs' trade and Yusuf's incontinence demonstrates his molestation by the threat of being subjected to slavery and, since this material greed has refused to be tamed, it has inflicted terror and fear beyond Yusuf's ability to withstand it. The phrases used by Mohammed Abdalla to inform Yusuf of his new adventure into the interior where he is to be initiated into the trading expeditions of Seyyid Aziz, trigger memories which traumatize Yusuf:

"You'll come and trade with us, and learn the difference between the ways of civilization and the ways of the savage..." A smile grew on his face as he spoke, a predatory grimace which made Yusuf think of the dogs that prowled the lanes of his nightmares (Gurnah, 1994, p. 26)

Yusuf's life is dogged by past experiences about the slavery that he is a victim of hence he desires to wipe out such memories in order to organize his present into an ordered space where he is in control and in charge of his affairs.

In *Admiring Silence* (Gurnah, 1996), the narrator's personal selective memories of his arrival and treatment in Britain are instrumental in providing a mobile sense of identity as a 'diasporic'. The narrated circumstances only provide impetus for the reader to reflect on certain disjointed narratives of the past with regard to the narrator's life; both before leaving for Britain as a tourist (using a tourist visa) and having gone to study under the guardianship of Ahmed Hussein (Gurnah, 1996).

The narrator learns to fend for himself by ignoring certain rules that define the conduct of foreign students:

... I was desperate for money and was not allowed to work - itsaid so in my student visa. So I circled the street for half an hour, approaching the restaurant from different angles to make it look less alien and unwelcoming, and trying to talk myself out of feebleness. Then on one of my sorties I saw a scrawny thin man walk up to the restaurant door and begin to fiddle with a bunch of keys ... I stepped up to him. "Is that job still going then?" I asked. "Washing-up," he said. "Starting right away. Six till eleven." ...my excitement with the job had long vanished. Now it was just dirty, greasy water, recalcitrant crockery and feeding on crumbs (yes, I used to pick at the leftovers if they had not been messed up too much). My corner of the kitchen was powerfully lit ... At times the lights made me feel as if I was a prisoner in a camp, surrounded by a mob of irritable, yelping mockers. (Gurnah, 1996, p. 56)

The narrator weaves the traumas of having left home in Zanzibar with the reality of the wider historical traumas that manifest as racist attacks on the black immigrants in Britain. Taking cue from the above quote, the researcher realized that racist attacks on the black immigrants in Britain questions the capacity of the world to learn to coexist peacefully and whether the 'reality' of equality among humanity will ever be achieved.

In *The Last Gift* (Gurnah, 2011), Abbas' recollection of his past in Zanzibar captures a traumatic repression because Abbas does not talk about his family or his childhood. He attempts to redefine himself in terms of his roles as a sea farer, and a migrant who is out to reconstruct his life and family. In a similar way, his wife Maryam, also has a trauma associated with her identity: "Her sense of self is at odds because she is dropped off at the steps of a hospital" (Gurnah, 2011, pp. 19-20) and speculators believe she is Asiatic and a daughter of a teenage mother. This traumatic history haunts the lives of both the parents and their children and becomes the provocative template for the search for their identity as a migrant family. Jamal and Anna realize that their situation could only be explained as worse than an immigrant family: "For Jamal, he could not quite make himself say home when he meant England or think of foreigners without fellow feeling" (Gurnah, 2011, p. 47).

Maryam also makes a deliberate figurative journey into her 'strangeness' by selecting what to tell Anna and Jamal concerning her past. The trauma of her past drives her to unlock those things that should have remained as secret to her psyche and which present her as a victim of gender oppression while at the same time highlighting the role of women in bringing into perspective the need for their narratives to be included in the bigger picture of history:

"I did not tell you about the cousin before," Maryam said ... "It is only a man forcing himself on me ... I should have forgotten about it, like an old scar that fades. But I still feel the humiliation of it, the injustice ... I feel it is important to tell you. It did not feel right to tell you those things when you were younger ... But now I want you to know, so that you don't think there is a dirty secret I am keeping from you. I wanted to explain to you fully why I ran away from Ferooz and Vijay, and why for so long, I could not bear the thought of getting in touch with them." (Gurnah, 2011, p.193)

Maryam's life is haunted by a sense of historical uncertainty. She seems to have, and still is, suffering from profound traumatic amnesia about the ills perpetuated against her by her benefactors. While she may not wish to tell her children everything, she can remember the intensity of the humiliating, traumatic events. This troubled memory recurs repeatedly despite her intense efforts to erase them from her mind. "She narrates her past experiences, firstly as a child born and abandoned at the steps



of a hospital then as a child adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Riggs” (Gurnah, 2011, p. 21). Maryam uses these confessions about her past, as a mirror that reflects to her children their own identity and pasts as immigrants.

In the text analysed, characters manifest an intricate relationship between trauma and forgetting that is characterized in the acts of running away. In *The Last Gift* (Gurnah, 2011), and *Admiring Silence* (1996), the socio-economic hierarchies among the rich Arabs of Zanzibar that underpinned the cultural hierarchies of order and disorder are used to oppress the less economically-endowed Arabs in an attempt to cover up certain immoralities in the society. In *The Last Gift* (Gurnah, 2011), Abbas’ life is characterized by several escapades that are, in most instances, due to circumstances beyond him. For Abbas, his leaving home for the first time is because he had to study at a teachers’ college many miles from home (Gurnah, 2011) and had to put up with the relatives of his sister’s husband.

His second journey is an attempt to run away from an arranged marriage that had, seemingly, been forged by the family of a rich Arab merchant that wanted to use Abbas to cover up for their having impregnated a slave girl (Sharifa) whom they had housed. Abbas realizes that the child she was carrying wasn’t his and that he had been set up.

It is this sense of deep betrayal by both his sister and the in-laws that triggers his running away:

He tried to persuade himself that he would cope with the meaning of all these thoughts when it was necessary... He began to hear things in what his wife said and thought she had been forced to marry him to hide her shame when she had known another. He was convinced that something vile had happened in this house ... that many people knew about what had happened and were getting ready to have a good laugh at the skinny cuckold ... After six months of marriage his wife looked as if she would deliver any day. (Gurnah, 2011, pp. 142-3)

The case of Abbas leaving his ‘pregnant wife’ and stowing away, and his unwillingness to confront the past and re-examine the painful reality of subjugation by the rich Arab families, leads to the perpetuation of a trauma that is unconsciously passed down from himself to his wife and to the children:

Quite quickly, his eyes and his voice told her that they were approaching the reason for his silence for all these years ... When he had finished telling her about the woman he had married and abandoned pregnant, they sat without speaking for a while ... It must have been more complicated than the way he told it but that is what he was keeping to himself for all those years, that he

ran away and abandoned a wife and a child ... She was not sure exactly why it caused her such pain ... Should we tell the children? ... Should they just keep quiet for an easy life? ... He would have been nineteen years old when he did that, abandoned his wife and unborn child. He never sent word to anyone afterwards, and never ever met anyone who knew him before. That was what he said. He did not have a photograph or a single scrap or anything that connected him to that place; he made sure of that ... (Gurnah, 2011, pp. 150-151).

From this excerpt, it can be argued that selective amnesia works by bringing Abbas to a close confrontation with his past and we can appreciate the fact that an individual's traumatic experience has a bearing on a wider circle of the community's history. In contextualizing the historical events of his Zanzibari Arab community, Abbas is ambivalent as to whether to avenge or forgive his oppressors. This leaves him with a sense of grief and amnesia that is unresolved and this becomes a metaphor for the transformative power that alters one's vision of the world. In the audio recording of Abbas' experiences, he allows both his wife and children to partake of his private memory and this opens up their knowledge of Abbas' past in Zanzibar:

... Maryam told them how Abbas ran away because he thought the child was not his, and since then had not spoken of his flight to anyone. For forty years he has lived with his shame ... unable to speak about it to anyone. Now he wants to talk about it because he thinks he's dying (Gurnah, 2011, p. 194).

But as much as Abbas relays some historical reality, his selective memory is not reliable enough because he has to embellish his historical 'facts' so that what he brings into the hearing of his family has been misrepresented to suit them.

In *Admiring Silence* (Gurnah, 1996), the narrator's father also runs away from his pregnant wife because of the mistreatment and spite from Uncle Hashim: [who,] "Felt only scorn for him ... he found him quelling" (p. 51).

This act is counter-posed to the illiberal, traditional Zanzibari Arab culture and focuses on the liberal, transgressive instincts of an individual who senses that the culture of his community has oppressed him. The running away motif offers the reader another perspective through which one can break away from the trauma generated by stereotypes that otherwise enhance injustice.

### **Silence as a Counter Historical Trope**

Silence, as a counter historical strategy, plays a socio-political role by conveying the personal paralysis and helplessness that discriminated groups suffer in their attempt

at evoking the truths about their traumatic pasts and propels them into adventuring. In the context of this paper, silence is examined as it manifests in the form of distortion, marginalization, exclusion from the public domain, voicing (and lack of it), trivialization, racism, 'ethnicization', and other forms of discrimination that speak to the traumas that accompany the identity of the Zanzibari Arab community. Silences, therefore, foreground those identities that result from the interaction between the Zanzibari Arabs and the world. Hence, by using silence as a counter historical trope, we could precisely track the traumas that are responsible for the characters' adventures.

This study was guided by Macherey's (1978) ideas on silence in a work of fiction. He argues that [the silence of a work of fiction] "is not the sole meaning, but that which endows meaning with a meaning: It is this silence ... which informs us of the precise conditions for the appearance of an utterance and thus its limits, giving it real significance" (p. 86). On the other hand, Trouillot (1995) argues that "silence [is] an active and transitive process...and active dialectical counterparts of which history is the synthesis" (p. 48).

In the texts scrutinized, there is a paradoxical silencing of the women, racism, religious discrimination, ethnicity as well as homosexuality, and these compelled the researcher to discern a deeper meaning into their traumatic experiences that have resulted in their silences. These traumas generate gaps in the history of the successes and failures of the Indian Ocean trade and those of colonialism. They also attend to the negative impacts of the aforementioned factors in the oppression of men and women and speak to the muting of their voices. By using silence, Gurnah's selected works bolster up such memories by addressing some truth about the double marginalization that such gendered reading offers which would otherwise have been irrecoverable.

Whether migration is triggered by a search for education, trade or asylum, the Zanzibari Arabs are often isolated and tend to suffer a limited interaction with their hosts. The African migrant, though in the company of other migrants, is reduced to an anonymous entity. This is demonstrated in the way Rashid and his fellow foreign student friends, who were immigrants in the midst of white society, are treated as invisible:

It was not easy to get near the English students, even ones in the same class. The feeling of resistance was there from the beginning, a feeling I sensed but was not sure of ... I sensed it in the slightness of the smiles I was given in return to my beaming ones. So at first I sensed this feeling of resistance, then I heard the embarrassed sniggers and saw the looks of surprise and irritation in anonymous faces in the corridors and in the streets and in time I came to hear their vexation and dislike (Gurnah, 2005, pp. 213-14).

For Rashid, in *Desertion* (Gurnah, 2005), his imagination of Britain, before he leaves Zanzibar, is shown as a “place full of niceties, courtesies, but on arrival he realizes that it is full of deception and immigrants are perceived as an exotic curiosity and an intruder” (p. 123). Rashid’s self-perception changes accordingly. The disillusionment with the dreams of departure and the oddities of being rejected by the host society leads him to sink into loneliness and helplessness.

Silences also occur in situations where information on certain aspects of a character privileges certain events over others. Latif Mahmud, for example, is a scholar of no mean repute but has been ‘objectified’ by his host society. He is called a ‘black amoor’ (Gurnah, 2001, p. 97) in the street and his positive potential as a university professor are literally negated and his immigrant status silences his being a university professor. In *By the Sea* (Gurnah, 2001), Omar Saleh arrives in Britain as an asylum seeker but chooses not to speak in English to the immigration officers his reasons being that he had been instructed not to speak by whoever sold him the air ticket:

I had been told not to say anything, to pretend I could not speak any English. I was not sure why, but I knew I would do as I was told because the advice had a crafty ring to it, the kind of resourceful ruse the powerless would know. (Gurnah, 2001, p. 6)

Saleh Omar’s refugee status is complicated by his deliberate refusal to speak in English and this hinders any progress for both Saleh Omar and Rachel, the representative at the social security department because the two cannot communicate meaningfully:

“Anyway, I thought we would get further if we had an interpreter”... “But I am afraid ... It’s not hopeless, because someone I approached returned my call this morning. He seems willing to do it, but I’ll confirm and let you know how we’re going to get anything done” ... “I don’t think I need an interpreter,” I said. I was silently gleeful as I said this, of course. Even when you get to my age you can’t resist such petty triumphs and, at that moment, my glee was no different from that I had felt as a child or the hundreds of other times later when I had been sensationally and unexpectedly knowledgeable. I no longer cared what injury the ticket-seller had been trying to save me from with his canny advice, and I was beginning to think that his canniness was something to do with the paranoia of the powerless (Gurnah, 2001, p. 64).

This poses an exceptional challenge to the host society and the question of the authority of the refugee in getting his way through. Silence is amplified in the way the social security department works to ensure that they get an interpreter from the university who is said to speak 'that language'.

Gurnah employs silence as a means of dealing with issues of gender and the paradox that is associated with Islam as a religion: while Islam preaches equality among humanity, it paradoxically suppresses the women. Gurnah's fiction counters the perception that the home front secludes and excludes the women from interacting and socializing with the outside world. Instead, the home front becomes a site for the women to demonstrate their dominance and the actualization of self-freedom. In *Paradise* (Gurnah, 1994), women take advantage of Yusuf's hostage status to make sexual propositions:

They (women) sent the younger girls over with small gifts and propositions ... come and see me this afternoon while my husband is taking his nap. Do you want a hand-bath? Have you got an itch you'd like me to scratch? Sometimes they shouted at him, and one of the old women blew kisses and wiggled her bottom whenever she passed by. (p.167)

They prove that they do not need to move into a public arena to exercise their 'power' of seduction: in fact, they need a semblance of complacency to flirt about with their guests. The voicing of seductive statements and bodily dispositions can be read as acts of empowerment which elicit new frameworks that are based on the countering of the cultural and social expectations on women.

Gurnah uses the female gender, with Rehana as an example, to act as a means of addressing the silenced role of women in shaping new identities that are both irksome, yet awed in the dominantly Muslim society. Rehana represents how female characters have appropriated the idea of submissive silence to question and refute the imposition of male-defined attitudes on matters of love and marriage that are common in a pre-dominantly patriarchal society. She engages intimately with Martin Pearce, an 'outsider' and even elopes with him to Mombasa. This is done in spite of her brother Hassanali who, earlier on, had compelled Rehana to marry Azad, the Indian merchant:

... Did the affair result in a quarrel between Rehana and Hassanali? It must have done. He must have berated her for losing all sense of what is proper or bearable. He must have ranted at her for the embarrassment she had brought upon him...What I know... is that it did happen, that Rehana Zakariya and Martin Pearce became lovers, that Martin Pearce left for Mombasa, and that a short while later, under pretext of going to visit relatives, Rehana followed

him there. She lived with him in an apartment he rented in the leafy district...Martin and Rehana lived openly together, for a while, until he left to return home (Gurnah, 2005, p. 119).

This is a kind of revenge on Hassanali; a way of venting Rehana's pain of being jilted by Azad, "a man she had little regard for but had been compelled to marry to save Hassanali any embarrassment" (Gurnah, 2005, p. 72). Rehana also demonstrates how women use their sexuality and energy to give prominence to their pain.

In *Desertion* (Gurnah, 2005), Jamila takes the initiative in seducing Amin (p. 159) while, at the same time, [she] maintains a romantic relationship with a politician (p. 185) yet she is also said to be a divorcee (p. 165) and no one understands her many travels between Zanzibar and Mombasa. Her actions are perceived as being extremely banal and daring and do not fit in well with her status as a woman in a conservative society. Hence Jamila's character becomes a kind of dissidence, a kind of marginality that diasporic identities attempt to resist by forcing its way into the limelight. Amin's silence is complicated by the nature of his crime: He loves Jamila, a half-caste that is so demonized that she does not evoke any sympathy and Amin's parents do not listen to his explanation.

Even when Jamila and Amin's relationship and actions are framed in terms of adventure and courtly romance, the 'ethnicist' in Amin's parents paints a picture laced with moral superiority and hatred. This silences Amin's desire for true affection and is, therefore, fixated for life. By literally demonizing Jamila, Amin's parents complicate the relationship between Jamila and Amin by fanning the society's pernicious, ethnic violence that resulted in migration.

Jamila, like Rehana Zakariya in *Desertion* (Gurnah, 2005), represents the non-complacent, independent-minded Muslim women who have broken ranks with their passive, lack luster women in the text who play second fiddle to their male folk.

Women seem determined to subvert the status quo in this male dominated community by following after their personal pleasures, at the expense of Muslim religious ethos on sexuality and morality. This is demonstrated in the way Latif Mhamud's mother in Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001) engages in an illicit love relationship with a government minister within the purview of her husband, children and society.

Indeed, their physical appeal empowers these women to negotiate for a better life for themselves and their families as is the case with Latif Mhamud whose scholarship to go to the German Democratic Republic to study dentistry is courtesy of the love relationship between his mother and the Government Minister. It also becomes a chance for Latif's mother to avenge herself on behalf of her family against Omar Saleh and the subsequent repossession of the house:

Four weeks later, the house I had fought Rajab Shaban Mahmud through the courts for was gazzeted as the property of the bank, and the tenants I had installed in it were given notice to quit with immediate effect. Rajab Shaban



Mahmud and his wife Asha moved back in as soon as the house was empty (Gurnah, 2001, p.213).

This can be contrasted with those women who end up with mental break-downs due to extreme oppression by their merchant husbands. The author employs the trope of madness to represent the extremity of misery and oppression that the women characters suffer in the homes of their rich merchant husbands in which they are locked up as is the case in *The Last Gift* (Gurnah, 2011) wherein Ibrahim's mother is said to have lost her mind:

His mother sometimes became strange. Her mind drifted from its moorings, and her eyes turned blank and depthless. She broke things and hurt herself ... There was a pattern to what she did when she became strange, but it was not predictable. Sometimes she broke things silently and stared with her unblinking gaze, at other times she talked without breaking a thing (p. 256).

Ibrahim's mother's situation (that breaks into occasional monologues due to madness) is symbolic of a woman whose silences have generated from extreme boredom and private exclusion. Despite her husband's absence, she feels suffocated by his 'perceived' domination and, for her, this madness is a statement that demands for freedom. For Zulekha, her marriage to Seyyid Aziz is "full of emptiness and bitterness and defeat" (Gurnah, 1994, p. 229). For these two women, silence is imaginatively situated in an empty space that resounds with tears and they are a disguise for the suppressed anger due to their marginalization and dehumanization.

The fact that Zulekha can unveil her head within the confines of their compound is a metaphor for the kind of resistance to self-effacement and this allows her a degree of social confidence that enables her negotiate her identity. By showing him the purple wound on her left cheek (Gurnah, 1994, p. 226), a metaphor for unfulfilled sexual life (p. 214), she is silently advancing an unarticulated cry that exceeds hearing and understanding. For Zulekha, it has generated a void which, if left unattended, deprives her of a definitive meaning of who she is and the value of existence is suspended.

In all these texts studied, there is an apparent refusal by the Zanzibari Arab Muslims to articulate a connection between their religion and practice vis-à-vis the treatment of their African hosts/subjects. In *Paradise* (Gurnah, 1994, p. 145), Yusuf is repulsed by the smell on Seyyid Aziz's hand when asked to greet him. This repulsion shows a silent hatred that Yusuf has suppressed over the years. His action becomes the 'eye' with which we read and see through the veiled humanity that has been suppressed in pursuit of material wealth. Yusuf fails to turn his emotional hurt into a version of reality that can be communicably understood in order to explain what

pain and humiliation he has had to bear as a slave. Instead, he chooses to walk away and follow the German's potters.

The silences as embodied by Yusuf highlight and, simultaneously, challenge the assumptions that we make about cultural differences between the Zanzibari Arabs and their African hosts/subjects. We realize that the humiliation that Seyyid Aziz and his caravan is subjected to in Chatu's kingdom is a kind of resistance to the oppression to which the Arabs had subjected the Africans and, hence, it becomes a subversion of the power positions and challenges the established norms by raising the Africans to the position of transparency, and transgresses the boundaries of the use of Islam as a marker of the civilized which is contrasted with the status of the 'un-Islamised' Africans in the interior who have been tagged as the shenzi (Akinola, 1972).

This becomes, for us, a necessary platform for the text to individualize and equalize the subjects. By making the silence speak, it becomes possible to illuminate the fears and concerns of these subjects whose narratives would otherwise have been unheard. Among the contesting histories evoked by these encounters are the moral uncertainties that Islam, as a religion, plays in the forging of trade as well as human relationships between the Zanzibari Arab traders and the rest of the world and the use of Islam as a tool for 'othering' the Zanzibari African as a lesser player in both trade and religion.

In *Paradise* (Gurnah, 1994), Seyyid Aziz epitomizes people that are socially and morally torn between historical systems of values and social structures that are evidenced in his practiced religious piety. Although he engages in the observation of Islamic prayers, he does not forgive his debtors; instead, he takes their children in as 'slaves' who are pawned away to work for him until the debt is settled.

For Seyyid Aziz, his self-representation is seen to perform an intersection of what it means to be an ardent Muslim as well as an astute trader. He ably interweaves patience and eminence in the face of adversity as captured in the way he responds to Chatu's mistreatment:

"... Take your men and leave" ... "Not without our goods," the merchant said. "Tell him that if it is our lives he wants he can have them. They are worthless. But if we are to have our lives we also demand our goods. How far would we get if we were unable to trade? Tell him we will not go without our goods." (Gurnah, 1994, p. 162)

Seyyid Aziz present Islam as multi-faceted, with challenges, ruptures, divergences and, sometimes, as a threat to self-preservation at another, it represents wealth and prosperity as presented in Seyyid Aziz's mode of dressing:

He smelt very fine ... his thin, flowing Kanzus and silk, embroidered caps [made his presence felt]. When he entered a room, his presence wafted in like something separate from the person, announcing excess and prosperity and daring ... His leather money pouches were belted round his groin ... looping over his hip-bones and meeting in a thonged buckle over the join of his thighs like a kind of armour. (Gurnah, 1994, p. 18).

This ironic and ambivalent embrace of Islam by Seyyid Aziz works in a way that seems natural to the text; as if it unravels the mystic and the social codes in his kind of a secular world that is marked by a trading adventure in the interior of Zanzibar.

When he is dispossessed of his material wares of trade and is sent away by Chatu, he invokes the role of God in punishing those who are evil:

“Mercy belongs to God,” the merchant said ... “Tell him carefully. Mercy belongs to God. It is not for him to withdraw. Tell him that carefully.” Chatu stared at the merchant in disbelief while the elders and those who were near enough to hear Nyundo’s softly spoken words laughed, (Gurnah, 1994, p. 162)

The presence of gays is a silent way of subverting the conventional codes of religion and morality as dictated by the pre-colonial African societies as well as the dictates of Islam as a religion yet it is permitted among the Ibadi community of the Omani Arabs. This is validated by Wilkinson’s (1981) argument that “the Ibadi community permitted licentious behavior, homosexuality among others” (p. 278). Hence, for Seyyid, this was not untoward but, among the African potters, their perversion was a salient statement of protestation against the merchant who has suppressed them and subjected them into inhumanity in pursuit of personal wealth:

[Mohammed Abdalla] had a reputation as a merciless sodomizer and could often be seen absent-mindedly stroking his loins. It was often said ... that he picked porters who would be willing to get down on all fours for him during the journey. (Gurnah, 1994, p. 47)

Their situation of social apathy has rendered them sexually powerless and this can be blamed on Seyyid who is financially superior and who has dominated the trade. At an individual level, these incidences represent the way materialism supersedes the spiritual so that even if Islam represented the moral and the ideal, those merchants with higher economic power take advantage of Islam as the faith that represents order and the Ideal to access and exploit their repressed sexual desires. At a more symbolic level, this sexual apathy represents the clash of values and a rebellion against the status quo. It dismantles the hegemony of the African culture and the

codes of religious uprightness that are sacrificed at the altar of economic self-aggrandizement.

Gurnah's fiction can be read as attempting to displace the ethnic boundaries between the Zanzibari Arabs and the Zanzibari Africans by enforcing Islam as a marker of equality. This works by silencing the social hierarchies but, in a counter-productive way, it makes the Zanzibari Arab community become more entrenched as the oppressive ethnic group while presenting the people of the East African coast as trusting. This is captured in the dialogue between Nyundo and Chatu when they are seeking entry into Chatu's kingdom in order to engage in trade:

"This is what he says," Nyundo began, pausing after every few words ... "We did not ask you to come, and we have no welcome for you. Your intentions are not generous, and by coming among us you only bring us evil and calamity. You have come here to do us harm. We have suffered from others like you who have preceded you, and have no intention of suffering again. They came among our neighbours and captured them and took them away...Unspeakable events have taken place since your presence among us. You have come and brought evil among us... This is what he says." ... "He says we will not wait until you have made slaves of us and swallowed up our world. When you're like first came to this land you were hungry and naked, and we fed you. Some of them were ill and we cared for them until they were well. Then you lied to us and cheated us ... All these goods you brought with you belong to us, because all the goods produced by the land are ours. So we are taking them away from you."(Gurnah, 1994, p.160)

Chatu points out the fact that the Arab merchants have abused their privileged status and, hence, the Africans cannot trust and are suspicious of the Arab merchants.

Silence is also employed as a communicative strategy against racial oppression. In *Admiring Silence* (Gurnah, 1996), Emma defies the racial boundaries and moves in with the narrator and end up bearing a child out of wedlock:

Her tight dissembling smile never wavered; if anything, it grew more assured as she worked herself into the part. Not a word about what was really making her unhappy with the new (informal) addition to the family. And because she was dissembling, Emma took up her challenge and confronted her on all her objections, even the ones she did not raise. No, I am not too young. You were already a mother when you were my age. Of course it won't interfere with our studies. Why are you making such a fuss? Is it because he is black? When Emma became pregnant (unplanned), Mrs. Willoughby launched an all-out assault, enlisting Mr. Willoughby, middle-class respectability, the future,

the welfare of the unborn child...in short, Holy Matrimony, adoption or abortion. And Emma on her part resisted with relish and zest, repelling attack after attack with contemptuous assurance. (Gurnah, 1996, p. 24)

For the narrator and Emma, their outlook on life enables them realize that their 'alienness' was something heroic because they face up to their actions and "provocations unperturbed and clear-headed rather than feeble and unnerved" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 61). The allusion to the narrator's difference can be read as a means of positioning him as a husband to Emma, a father to Amelia and, hence, an entrenched part of the normalcy of the British nation. In Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* (1996), the narrator's love story is an entrapment, exploitation and silent resistance. His personal story reveals a life full of cynicism and loss of direction in the urban landscape of the contemporary world in which interracial love and alienation disturbingly overlaps with Emma's own life.

In effect, the silencing of the racial difference, as seen in the way Mr. and Mrs. Willoughby react to this new couple and their child, speaks to the possibility of liberating humanity from the bondages of racism as a maker of identity and as such, it gives space for diasporic identities to prosper. As the narrator interacts with Emma's family, we are presented with a man whose sense of identity is constantly deformed by his inability to reconcile his present actions of "living in sin" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 85) with a white woman with his past as a child raised up to live by the Islamic rules of piety and moral uprightness:

... I did not know how I could write to her that I was living with an English woman to whom I was not married. To my mother, Emma would be something disreputable, a mistress, and such matters, if they would not be avoided, were best dealt with discretely ... I thought of lying, of writing to say that I was married to an English woman, but I never did, afraid of the havoc that would let loose, afraid of the litanies of blame that would follow. Now we have lost you, she has stolen you away from us ... As if I was not already lost and stolen and shipwrecked and mangled beyond recognition anyway. (Gurnah, 1996, p. 89)

For him, this silence is motivated by an inner ambivalence between a moral past and his present situation of indecisiveness which opens up a window into the narrator's mind enabling us to see a clear distinction between the experiencing self and the narrating self and this leads us to the conclusion that the narrator is suffering from a deep sense of 'otherness'.

## Conclusion

Gurnah's fiction has employed silence as a trope that works to individualize and equalize the characters in the texts analyzed. By making silence speak, it becomes possible to illuminate the fears and concerns of the characters whose narratives would have otherwise been. Among the contesting histories evoked by these encounters are the moral uncertainties that Islam (as a religion) plays in the forging of trade as well as human relationships between the Zanzibari Arab traders and the rest of the world and the use of Islam as a tool for 'othering' the Zanzibari African as a 'lesser player' in both trade and religion.

Silence has also been used as way of displacing the ethnic boundaries between the Zanzibari Arabs and the Zanzibari Africans by imploring Islam as a marker of equality. This works by silencing the social hierarchies but in a counter-productive way, it makes the Zanzibari Arab community become more conspicuous as the oppressive ethnic group while presenting the people of the East African coast as trusting.

Silence is also motivated by an inner ambivalence between a moral past and a present situation of indecisiveness in the life of a character and this opens a window into the character's mind, enabling us to see a clear distinction between the experiencing self and the narrating self. This has the effect of bringing out a sense of insufficiency in the characters that manifest as a form of 'otherness'.

Silence has been used to demonstrate the character's situation of social apathy that has rendered them sexually powerless. At an individual level, these incidences represent the way materialism supersedes the spiritual so that even if Islam represented the moral and the ideal, those merchants with higher economic power take advantage of Islam as the faith that represents order and 'the ideal' to access and exploit their repressed sexual desires. At a more symbolic level, this sexual apathy represents the clash of values and a rebellion against the status quo. It dismantles the hegemony of the African culture and the codes of religious uprightness that are sacrificed at the altar of economic self-aggrandizement.

Silence is also employed as a communicative strategy against racial oppression. The silencing of the racial difference, as seen in the way Mr. and Mrs. Willoughby react to this new couple and their child speaks to the possibility of liberating humanity from the bondages of racism as a maker of identity and, as such, it gives space for diasporic identities to prosper.



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