

### **'It Worked in a Different Way': Male Same-Sex Desire in the Novels of Abdulrazak Gurnah**

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels, *Paradise* (1994) and *By the Sea* (2001), make a number of references to male same-sex desire. Many of these propagate an image of older, more experienced men preying on innocent young boys, with negative consequences ensuing. This stereotypical portrayal of a predatory homosexuality is undercut, however, by a number of other thematic strands and, ultimately, Gurnah deploys sexual stereotypes in order to unpack and problematize them. He emphasizes the corrosive effects of trade and colonialism on the sexual economies of East Africa, implicating colonial powers in those same predatory behaviours that are held up for scrutiny in homosexual men. Racial as well as sexual stereotypes are endemic in the corrupt society Gurnah evokes and his subversive use of gossip raises questions about reader complicity in such reductive characterizations. There are also suggestions of a more loving and private enjoyment of male homosexual and homosocial behaviours occurring behind the scenes, which correspond to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1985) emphasis on male sexuality as a continuum. The seemingly negative portrayal of homosexuality offered in these novels is therefore mobilized precisely to illustrate those quieter forms of same-sex intimacy that it appears to occlude. Finally, just as Gurnah makes clear the losses resulting from the colonial experience, his depiction of same-sex desire can be understood in terms of failure and hidden histories. Accordingly, Heather Love's (2007) work on the pains of queer history can also be applied to these texts.

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#### **'A merciless sodomizer' (*Paradise* 47)**

Across both *Paradise* (1994) and *By the Sea* (2001) are a number of references to male same-sex desire. For the most part, these depict older, more experienced men preying on innocent young boys, to negative effect. As a result, a pattern of representation emerges which, on the surface at least, appears to stereotype those actively pursuing homosexual encounters as both predatory and abusive. At the same time, such figures also work to shore up gendered stereotypes, as Gurnah's maligned homosexuals operate from a position of power, in contrast to those 'passive' women and men over whom they exert control. The novels therefore illustrate the complex interplay between gendered and sexual norms within colonial East African society.

*Paradise* focuses on the travels and travails of young Yusuf, a boy placed in slavery with an Arab merchant he knows as Uncle Aziz. A strikingly beautiful young man, Yusuf's pleasing appearance serves, as David Callahan puts it, 'only to bring problems' (67). Chief amongst these – or so it initially appears – is his Uncle's *mnyapara*, Mohammed Abdalla, a man charged with managing the porters and guards during their long trading journey into the interior. Abdalla is first described as 'the demon', a man who strikes fear into his men, with 'scowling, snarling looks' and a 'pitiless light in his eyes' which 'promised nothing but pain to any who crossed him' (46). The pleasure he takes in asserting his authority over others proves the *mnyapara's* most distinctive characteristic, so that: 'his simplest and most ordinary gestures were performed with the knowledge and relish of this power' (46).

Abdalla also has 'a reputation as a merciless sodomizer' who 'could often be seen absent-mindedly stroking his loins. It was said, often by those Mohammed Abdalla had refused to employ, that he picked porters who would be willing to get down on all fours for him during the journey' (47). For much of the novel, Yusuf fears precisely this degradation. Abdalla looks at him 'with a frightening smile, shaking his head in small delight' and releasing 'heavy sighs of lust' (47). When Abdalla tells Yusuf that he will be traveling with the impending trading mission, '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' (52). This linkage of Abdalla with the nightmarish dogs which haunt Yusuf's dreams throughout the book – terrifying animals with eyes that reveal a 'hardened calculating patience whose object was the emptying out of his life' (26) – emphasizes the underlying and ongoing threat of homosexual assault. A surface reading of the *mnyapara's* characterization suggests few positives to same-sex loving.

At the same time, it is this homosexual figure that embodies many stereotypically masculine qualities, with Abdalla's power and the active nature of his desire being emphasized. His illicit longings are also placed within an existing heteronormative frame, as, during their journey:

The porters told Yusuf that the *mnyapara* would be tugging him before the journey was much advanced. 'He likes you, but who wouldn't like such a beautiful boy? Your mother must have been visited by an angel'. 'You've found yourself a husband, pretty one!' Simba Mwene said, laughter rolling out of him (117).

Such words illustrate the novel's prevailing focus on the boy's youth and beauty, with feminized terms like 'pretty' and 'angel' frequently being applied. These contrast sharply with the imagery of masculinity and power associated with Abdalla. Across the book,

passivity is consistently equated with femininity, so that Diane Schwerdt describes *Paradise* as portraying 'a world dominated by men from which women and slaves (as feminized men) are virtually excluded' (91). The *mnyapara*, for example, later warns Yusuf against being moulded into an obsequious shop-keeper like his friend, Khalil with the words: 'that little woman over there [...] Don't let them make you into something like him' (187). 'Woman' is clearly framed as an insult, with the fact that it is Abdalla who delivered Khalil into bondage emphasizing the shop-keeper's lower, or 'feminized' position in relation to the older man. Rather than challenging the existing gendered order, Abdalla's desires instead highlight the linkages between misogyny and homophobia. Women and vulnerable men are aligned in a spectrum of passivity, against which a dominant model of masculinity is defined.

At the same time, Abdalla, with his preference for sodomizing men, problematizes any straightforward understanding of homophobia. Writing in a North American context, Michael Kimmel, in his essay 'Masculinity as Homophobia' has argued that 'manhood is equated with power – over women, over other men' (106), words in accordance with Gurnah's portrayal of the *mnyapara*. However, Kimmel also views homophobia as key to shoring up hegemonic masculinity, framing it as a 'central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood' (104). It is by distinguishing between acts and identity that Abdalla's uneasy relation to this claim can be conceptualized, for the passivity of those in his service connects with Brian Whitaker's description of how, in many Arab societies:

If a man assumes the active role in anal intercourse with another man, his action is not necessarily regarded as shameful or as indicating sexual orientation. He is merely performing the role that men normally perform in intercourse with women. The fact that he does this with a man rather than a woman may even be interpreted as a sign of heightened masculinity, since sex with another man is popularly thought to require greater strength or sexual prowess. Assuming the passive position, on the other hand, is considered demeaning and a betrayal of manhood (115).

Despite Abdalla's seemingly negative character traits, he does serve to highlight the difference between various cultural definitions of manhood. Rather than conforming to the Westernized model proposed by Kimmel, Gurnah's character is revealing of the complex interplay between gendered and sexual norms within colonial East African society.

Similarly predatory male figures also populate the later novel, *By the Sea* (2001). In this text, two first-person narratives – those of Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud – intertwine. Once a prosperous shop-keeper in Zanzibar, the older man, Saleh, relates the story of Hussein, an itinerant trader who seduced Latif's older brother, Hassan, bringing shame on the boys' family and setting in motion a chain of events, which would lead both

the Mahmuds and Saleh himself to near-ruin. As Saleh recalls, 'I knew, everyone knew' that Hussein 'was wooing the beautiful son of Rajab Shaaban Mahmud [...] For all I knew he had already corrupted that glowing youth' (30). The younger Latif confirms this story, when he remembers the taunting he endured at school:

They said our guest had eaten Hassan, had eaten honey there. It was a way of saying something cruder, and they said it crudely too [...] When I passed a group of adults lounging at street corners [...] I thought they smirked behind me, I feared they did. They never left Hassan alone after that, the plunderers of flesh. There was nothing gay in what they did or sought to do. They coveted his grace and his effortless, supple beauty, and muttered to him as he strolled by, offering him money and gifts and transparent predatory smiles [...] They never left him alone, the looks, the comments, the casual touch, all were suggestive, something between a cruel game and a calculated stalking exercise. And Hassan suffered. The brashness and the chatter disappeared as now he learnt to avert his face (95).

As was the case with Yusuf, Hassan's beauty is emphasized, while Gurnah's repetition of the term 'predatory' clearly echoes his earlier portrayal of Mohammed Abdalla. The ironic redeployment of the term 'gay' brings to life the full force of Hassan's suffering as a result of his own passivity, highlighted by the fact that he averts his face. As this narrative strand reaches its denouement and Hassan disappears with Hussein, a heteronormative model is again the main referent, as Latif describes his astonishment that his brother 'was able to collect himself like that and follow a man as if he were a young bride' (96).

This linkage of femininity and homosexual behaviour is continued as we discover that Hussein corrupted not only Hassan, but the boys' mother too, with Saleh acknowledging 'I had no idea of the disruption Hussein would cause in that house, that he would spirit that young man away and force the mother into such humiliation' (160). As he recalls: 'Hussein was pursuing the young man to great effect when he was staying with the family, and because the mother suspected something like this, she offered herself to him if he would leave her son alone' (160). Willing to abase herself in order to protect both her son and the family's honour, we read that 'there were even details of what he made her do, and any details in such matters can only dishonour' (161). The very fact that specific acts have been named and entered into local folklore suggests that she, like her son, may also have been sodomized. Both the act of sodomy itself and the positioning of Hassan and his mother in this 'passive' role, serve to underscore the shame inflicted on the family.

Hussein is not the only such figure in *By the Sea*, as Faru, an employee of Saleh's is also described as a 'sexual menace' (152) by Latif many years later, when he remembers this servant:

I knew this man, had seen his eyes in the streets, had seen the way they looked at Hassan years ago, and had even taken a letter from him to deliver to my brother. And if it wasn't him I had taken the letter from, then it was a man very like him. And if those weren't his eyes from years ago, then they were very like them. That secret smile made me shudder (100).

Clearly traumatized by the events that led to the downturn in his family's fortunes, Latif denies the individuality of any man who desires another of the same sex. He merges Faru, Hussein and those who harassed Hassan together, as an amorphous group of sinister aggressors. Latif then presses his point with Saleh, saying:

You must have known that he was a notorious predator on young boys, tormenting them week after week with offers of coins and packets of halwa until they succumbed, or until his interest forced someone else to make them succumb, after which in their shame they submitted to others. Him and others like him, who thought themselves strong and manly because they could stalk and torment and intimidate young boys until they forced them to submit in shame (155-6).

Repeating the language of power and masculinity associated with Mohammed Abdalla, the emphasis on these pursuers being 'strong and manly' suggests that the young boys who succumb are, again, feminized or less 'manly'. A clear pattern of representation emerges across these two texts, one that appears, on a surface reading at least, to stereotype those actively pursuing homosexual encounters as both predatory and abusive.<sup>i</sup> Their conformity to dominant models of masculinity allows their behaviours to go unchallenged and, although sexually deviant, they nevertheless shore up patriarchal forms of gendered behaviour. As a result, such figures also reveal the culturally specific relations between gendered and sexual norms in a non-Western context.

#### **'All you want is stories' (*Paradise* 42)**

A number of other narrative threads both mitigate this apparently negative portrayal and offer alternative models of homosexual desire. Gurnah's emphasis on the corrosive effects of trade lends a new inflection to the novels' negative stereotyping of same-sex desire. As representatives of various nations are shown squabbling over commercial opportunities, their predatory behaviour mirrors that being held up for scrutiny in homosexual men. Racial stereotypes, meanwhile, are shown to be as prevalent as sexual ones, with both proving crucial tools in maintaining the divisions of an already fractured society. There are those, Gurnah makes clear, who have a vested interest in perpetuating such reductive characterizations. Finally, his subversive use of gossip raises questions about reader complicity in accepting the stereotypes that have been deployed.

The above reference to 'coins and packets of halwa' (155) points to the importance of trade, both to colonial East African society more generally and to the interactions between the men and boys shown. Regardless of ethnic, religious or linguistic group, virtually everyone in the two books – whether victim or oppressor – appears caught in a continual struggle for power and material domination. In this world, sexual acts and human affection become commodities, with Schwerdt describing how Gurnah illustrates that: 'trade corrupts: it commodifies everything and everyone' (95). In *Paradise*, Yusuf has himself been gifted to Uncle Aziz and, as the merchant wryly notes during their trading mission, when yet another local leader is taken with the boy's beauty, 'everyone wants Yusuf' (154) – with the possessive 'wants' suggesting a logical continuation from the goods already being exchanged. Similarly, in *By the Sea*, Saleh is first introduced to the mysterious trader, Hussein, when the stranger buys a beautiful ebony table from him. Saleh wonders whether this is for Hassan before concluding that 'the rumoured gifts of money and silk cloth' would be more 'appropriate to the seduction of the vanity of such a youth' (30). As he continues to reflect on the situation, however, Saleh then wonders whether:

The table was a gift to Rajab Shaaban Mahmud himself, a token of courtesy to him as a way of saying that because he wished to seduce the son, this did not mean that he did not esteem the father (31).

Later, this transactional framing is echoed by Latif himself, when he recollects the local men who 'coveted' his brother, 'offering him money and gifts' (95). Whether viewed as coercive or incentivizing, I suggest that the tactics used by Mohammed Abdalla, Hussein, Faru and others, reflect the wider corruptions of colonial society. Uncle Aziz might be gifted his female bride, while Hussein buys gifts for his 'young bride' Hassan (96), but the end result, Gurnah appears to be suggesting, is the same.

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick claims, 'sexuality functions as a signifier for power relations' (7). She also recognizes, however, that sex intersects with other 'historically variable power asymmetries, such as those of class and race, as well as gender' (7). Just as sexuality reflects the power relations of colonial society in the examples above, so too, racial stereotyping is employed in the service of trade. Across the books, characters regularly employ abusive racial terms when coming into contact with others, a tendency most in evidence during the long trading mission in *Paradise*. Here, Belgians are described as 'envious good-for-nothing paupers, with no understanding for business' and the Germans and English are 'vicious businessmen' (91). The Africans of the interior are viewed as uncivilized by the group and we are told dismissively that 'the savage did not trade for money' (119), although they are warned that local leader, Chatu – who derails the success of

their journey – is ‘a difficult man. I hope you mean business’ (149). Examining this use of derogatory racial assumptions, Schwerdt has claimed that *Paradise* ‘makes use of a mélange of racial stereotypes to state unequivocally that it does not matter on which side one stands: the colonial experience corrupted and brutalized everyone’ (95).

It is not just indigenous elites and colonial powers that accept and employ racial and sexual stereotypes; Gurnah’s subversive use of gossip also raises questions about reader complicity in such ideas. Returning to the opening description of Abdalla as having a ‘reputation as a merciless sodomizer’, some doubt as to the reliability of this is created with the words: ‘it was said, often by those Mohammed Abdalla had refused to employ, that he picked porters who would be willing to get down on all fours’ (*Paradise* 47). Abdalla’s alleged crimes are both ‘reputed’ and, are chiefly broadcast by those refused employment by him. Similar ambiguities are evident later, when Khalil questions Yusuf after their return. It is again the ‘terrible stories’ and ‘reputation with the men’ (181) which are emphasized in relation to Abdalla, yet the reader, having followed the journey – unlike Khalil – has little reason to believe that the *mnyapara*’s behaviour warrants such rumour. Whereas Khalil dismisses Yusuf’s testament to the older man having treated him kindly with the words ‘you shouldn’t be so trusting’ (181), the reader might well question whether it is, instead, Khalil who needs to pay less heed to ‘stories’.

Throughout *By the Sea*, it is striking how often identical references to gossip are repeated. Although Saleh’s account of events opens with the words ‘I knew, everyone knew, that he was wooing the beautiful son of Rajab Shaaban Mahmud’, it is quickly established later on the same page that, instead, it was ‘the *rumour* [...] [my italics] that Hussein was wooing’ the boy (30). The narrative that opened with such certainty is undercut, being based on ‘rumour’ rather than ‘knowledge’ as first claimed. Likewise, Latif’s reminiscence of events also begins with the words ‘the rumours started very quickly’ (95). The existence of such gossip might itself engender real-life consequences, but doubt as to the veracity of the original claims is nevertheless introduced. Consequently, Latif’s denunciation of Faru takes on a very different cast when looking again at the words: ‘and if it wasn’t him I had taken the letter from, then it was a man very like him [...] if those weren’t his eyes from years ago, then they were very like them’ (100). Little in this statement of ‘if’s and ‘very’s appears reliable and the stereotypes the book appears to have perpetuated are gradually undermined.

Gurnah goes on to address such questions directly through Saleh’s memories of the Mahmud family, when he reflects:

These are difficult things to know, and miserable matters to talk about, but they are the currency of daily commerce in a small town and it would be false not to speak about them. Nevertheless, it makes me uncomfortable to do so. And now I feel foolish and dissembling for protesting too much [...] None of it was my affair, though in such a small place it was impossible not to know about such things (31).

With Saleh himself having been brought down by the rumours spread by Latif's own father, there is a certain irony in his belated recognition of the power of local gossip. Just as in the case of Faru, private sexual behaviour is a 'difficult thing' to have any real knowledge of, with Saleh later acknowledging that some of the rumours he recalls were 'perhaps [...] only inventions' (160). Gurnah seems to be suggesting that his characters – and his readers too – ought to have exercised greater caution, perhaps even felt 'uncomfortable' when countenancing such speculation.

A number of critics have emphasized the importance of storytelling to Gurnah's fictional world. Callahan, for example, has outlined how, in *Paradise*: 'everyone has stories to tell [...] everyone needs to invent or speculate about others whom they do not know. This opaqueness and richness of others is what the stories communicate' (63). Echoing Callahan's emphasis on the unknowability of others, Bardolph has highlighted the extent to which Gurnah's novels often 'underline the relative, functional quality of all accounts' (84). It is this provisionality, I suggest, which the novels show to have hazards. In a fractured society, stories can just as easily encourage lazy stereotyping and perpetuate fear of the other as promote unity. In *By the Sea*, therefore, Hussein's crime might lie not in his seduction of Hassan but, rather, in his casual exploitation of stories for his own ends. Towards the novel's close, Saleh reframes its beginning, acknowledging that Hussein 'told me his stories with such intimate fellowship [...] I was seduced' (159-60). It is precisely this alternative seduction by Hussein, which, as much as his conquest of Hassan, sets in motion the train of events constituting the narrative.

It is not just Saleh, however, who was seduced by Hussein's stories. Coming as they do in the opening scenes of the book, the reader, too, must have been seduced in order to read on. Gurnah therefore raises questions as to what extent the belief in Hussein's stories of adventure, and the acceptance of gossip about Abdalla, Hussein and Faru, reflects on the reader's own comfort and familiarity with stereotypes of predatory male homosexuality. As Herman et al emphasise, gossip is 'highly ambivalent'; it 'both conforms to social norms and subverts them through its vicarious enjoyment of transgressions' (207). It is precisely this ambivalence, which characterizes the experience of reading, and becoming complicit in, the stereotypes perpetuated by these novels. What first reads as the



demonization of homosexual men in fact serves as a tool to unpack and problematize such stereotypes. Khalil's rebuke to Yusuf, that 'all you want is stories' (42) could also, perhaps, apply to us.

Such a claim is supported by Gurnah's 1994 essay on the work of fellow-author, Wole Soyinka, which emphasizes the damaging effects of colonialism on local forms of sexuality. Gurnah criticizes Soyinka for perpetuating the 'predictable tropes [...] generated by "orientalist" discourses of colonialism' (77). Specifically, he describes how, in the novel, *Season of Anomy* (1973): 'Zaki Amuri, the Cross-river strong-man, is a monster surrounded by languid, sprawled shapes among whom is a "young boy" – to signify that Amuri is a sodomiser' (77). Notable here is Gurnah's use of the word 'sodomizer', which he applies to Mohammed Abdalla in *Paradise*, published the same year as this essay. Such repetition suggests that the author used the word advisedly, being well aware of the wider colonial discourse in which it could be situated. Of course, there is the hazard that, in offering an apparent demonization of homosexuality, Gurnah simply perpetuates precisely those stereotypes that he criticizes here. On balance, however, I argue that these two novels undercut precisely that easy stereotyping to which they, at first, appear to have fallen prey. A key factor in this claim, is the alternative homosexual and homosocial encounters that operate to one side of their central narratives.

#### **'Furtive caresses' (*Paradise* 59)**

When reading around the sexual stereotypes Gurnah deploys, far greater nuance and ambiguity is visible in the novels' same-sex relations. Abdalla, Hussein and Faru are gradually humanized, while Gurnah also highlights those quieter and undramatic forms of same-sex desire happening day to day. As Yusuf makes his journey into the interior, for example, Mohammed Abdalla panics when fearing that a guide is leading them off track; he carefully ensures the dead are treated with respect; and, after being savagely beaten, is viewed as having behaved valiantly by his peers. During the journey, he 'took Yusuf under his wing', summoning the boy 'whenever he came across something that he thought Yusuf should see' (117). Abdalla later acknowledges that the boy has 'grown on this journey' and, although Yusuf notices that the older man 'had an erection under his cloth' (174) while offering this praise, he simply leaves and this is relayed as a minor incident. Equally, towards the conclusion, when Khalil asks 'How was that devil Mohammed Abdalla? [...] After every journey people come back with terrible stories. You know his reputation with the men, don't you?', Yusuf simply replies in understated fashion: 'he treated me kindly' (181).

Abdalla's behaviour is also contextualized by the fact that he is far from being the only person affected by Yusuf's appearance. The insistent harassment that the boy faces from men and women alike therefore serves to normalize Abdalla's desire. Simba Mwene may goad Yusuf about Mohammed Abdalla being the boy's 'husband', but he himself then goes on to offer: 'You're too beautiful for that ugly monster. Come and give me a massage later tonight and I'll show you what love is' (117). Later, Yusuf recounts how:

The men still teased him but with increasing friendliness. When he sat with them in the evening, they made room for him and included him in their talk. Sometimes a hand stroked his thigh, but he knew to avoid sitting next to it after that (134-5).

In fact, Yusuf's beauty is such that the boy is 'rarely free of the gaze of others for his beauty makes him the object of both heterosexual and homosexual desire' (Schwerdt 99). Despite many of the women in the novel having themselves been traded in marriage, all Yusuf's amorous encounters with women show females 'as predators' (Schwerdt 99), terms distinctly similar to those employed by Gurnah in relation to homosexual men. We are told, for example, that Ma Ajuza 'emitted joyous ululations and came after him [...] She captured him and dragged him as far as the sufi tree, shuddering with passion' (41). Similarly, the more perilous desires of Zulehka – wife of Uncle Aziz – are described by Khalil:

Now she has a new madness and it's very dangerous. Dangerous for you. Listen, she says that you are now a man and the way to cure her wound is to take her whole heart in your hands. Do you understand? I can't utter what is in her mind, but I hope you understand the direction she is heading (206).

While Yusuf quietly avoids unwanted homosexual approaches, Hassan, in *By the Sea* is far more receptive to Hussein's overtures. He returns from English lessons with the older man 'looking both excited and miserable at the same time' (93). When sleeping temporarily in Hussein's room because Latif is ill, Hassan begs to continue with the arrangement and, when Hussein first leaves, this constitutes 'an abandonment, a bereavement' for the younger man (94). Finally, when returning many years later, Hassan appears to have profited greatly from his disappearance:

He looked a well-travelled man, Hassan, a man who had travelled well, and returned after a generation blessed with prosperity and honour and knowledge. When he walked he swung his arms freely, like someone ready to embrace the world. He was quite transformed from the secretive youth who had slid away with Hussein (238)

Undercutting the presentation of Abdalla and Hussein as predators, Gurnah gradually reveals the former man's more estimable qualities, as well as the complicity of Hassan in his own seduction. Again, the stereotypes that the reader has perhaps too easily accepted are undermined.

Even the sinister Faru, alleged by Latif to have been 'a notorious predator on young boys' (155) is reframed when Saleh silently accuses the younger man of having 'judged badly' (153) in making this allegation. Saleh explains that Faru joined the household as a young boy and, in time, 'liked to think himself part of the family' (155). Following the sudden death of Saleh's father, 'there was nothing for him to do', yet Saleh 'could not just tell him to go', so 'every morning he turned up for work and he found himself something to do, whether I asked him to or not' (155). Although Latif challenges this version of Faru's life – arguing 'you make him sound so completely a victim' (155) – no resolution is reached. Neither man's first-person narration can provide certainty as to Faru's character and actions. Instead, the unreliability of memory and personal perception is emphasized, as shown by Saleh's own confession that 'I too had judged badly before' (153).

Crucial to this argument are those quieter moments of homosocial or homosexual contact, which Gurnah intimates are happening to one side of the central narrative – outside of both colonial constructions and local gossip. Early on in *Paradise*, the sexual play of Yusuf's childhood is mentioned in an understated fashion, when we are told that it was with neighbourhood boys:

That Yusuf first heard that babies lived in penises. When a man wanted a child, he put the baby inside a woman's stomach where there is more room for it to grow. He was not the only one to find the story incredible, and penises were pulled out and measured as the debate heated up. Soon enough the babies were forgotten and the penises became interesting in their own right. The older boys were proud to display themselves and forced the younger ones to expose their little abdallas for a laugh (7).

In this naïve play, we see an easy slide from an interest in heterosexual procreation to a form of homosocial bonding, with 'soon enough' signaling the naturalness with which this shift occurs. In the use of 'abdallas', a connection is perhaps drawn with that alleged 'merciless sodomizer' (47), Mohammed Abdalla. If this is the case, then the linkage of the older man's desires with such childish play suggests that his mature behaviour is a logical continuation of juvenile homosocial interaction. Similarly, the older boys' pride and the younger ones' embarrassment, serve as a precursor to the kinds of power relations inflecting the adult world of the novel.

As Yusuf joins Aziz's journey to the interior, he is crammed in a railway carriage with the porters and guards of his uncle's entourage. At first:

They bickered over their sleeping space, which they saw being encroached on. With oaths and grunts, they pushed at each other for room. As they became more passionate, their bodies gave off a pungent musk of urine-scented sweat and stale tobacco. Before long, fights had started (56).

On the one hand, these lines emphasise the stereotypically masculine qualities of the group. Their 'oaths and grunts' and 'pushing' when afraid of being 'encroached on' reveal a degree of territoriality and the importance of holding one's own against other men. 'Fights' emphasizes physical strength, while 'before long' signals the inevitability of such physical display. These men are far removed from those 'feminized' creatures we were led to believe Mohammed Abdalla would be exploiting during the expedition. A number of elements strike a discordant note, however, with 'passionate', in particular, introducing a sexual inflection to what seems a scene with little such potential. The sensory emphases of the sweat and tobacco also highlight a further level of physical interaction than that signaled by 'fights' alone. These suggestive notes come to fruition as the night draws to a close:

In the depths of the night he [Yusuf] heard mutterings, and then small movements. After a while he recognized the sound of furtive caresses, and later heard soft laughter and muted whispers of pleasure (57).

Described in the same restrained manner as Yusuf's childish sexual play, these words are striking in their lack of explanation or qualification. Vocabulary such as 'mutterings' and 'muted' reflects the nature of the scene's exposition, while 'soft' and 'pleasure' bring to life a realm far removed from the rough, masculine world of the men's day-to-day work. The earlier fighting is reconfigured as excuse for physical play, supporting Sedgwick's argument for the 'unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual' behaviours (1). Notable too, is the fact that the power relations between the men here are equal, suggesting that, without the corrupting influence of trade and colonialism, quieter and more fulfilling interactions are possible.

The tentative relationship between Yusuf and Khalil in the same novel also has a homoerotic charge. When Yusuf first arrives at the Aziz compound as a scared young boy, Khalil is tasked with looking after him. When sleeping, the two share an awkward intimacy: 'their heads were close together and their bodies far apart, so they could talk softly' (23). After Yusuf is terrified by the local, wild dogs, soiling himself with fear, we are told, in language echoing the interactions between the porters, that:

Khalil hushed him with a finger across his lips and gentle pats on the head, and when Yusuf still could not stop, he stroked his hair and wiped the tears from his face. He helped him undress and stood nearby while Yusuf did what he could to clean himself at the standpipe (27)

Later, when on his long journey, Yusuf, 'thought fondly of Khalil and the time they had spent together' (107), feelings with are reciprocated by Khalil.

In *By the Sea*, a similarly tentative acknowledgement of same-sex desire is also evident. Saleh has arrived in England as an asylum seeker and is placed in a boarding house run by Celia and Mick, in which a number of other, younger male migrants also dwell. From his room, Saleh 'heard the unmistakable thumping rhythm of love-making and wondered whether it was Celia mounting Mick or whether it was the boys in the midst of high-spirited japes' (57). Noticeable about this ambiguous statement is Saleh's easy assumption that either Celia and Mick, or 'the boys' are equally likely sources of the noise. While 'japes' arguably diminishes the desires – if that is what they are – of his fellow refugees, the undramatic nature in which Saleh's inference is relayed is both striking and, I argue, symptomatic of Gurnah's wider project in these novels.

Tina Steiner has usefully highlighted the extent to which 'Gurnah's narratives insist on moments of relation' (125), offering 'rare gestures of intimate, affective moments between characters who manage to build relation where it is least expected' (127). Extending this into the sexual realm, I suggest that, in tandem with those much-talked about (alleged) homosexual encounters populating his books, Gurnah also offers provisional moments of sexual contact between men, which bring warmth, comfort and companionship. Just like the men on the train, and Khalil and Yusuf, the refugees of *By the Sea* inhabit a shared social position, corresponding to Steiner's point that 'moments of freedom occur in Gurnah's texts when individual characters through the experience of rapport, empathy or love recognize their links to each other' (127). A case can be made that such 'quiet' encounters simply reinforce those 'conventions of discretion and covertness' which 'keep even acted-upon illicit desires from challenging public norms' in the Islamic world (Murray and Roscoe 302). However, I suggest that it is in this empathy between those of similar social standing that Gurnah provides hope, in the context of the oppressive power dynamics corrupting much of his fictional universe. The losses engendered by colonialism, meanwhile, find their echo in the lost or hidden homosexual histories of the region.

#### **'It worked in a different way' (Gurnah cited in Nasta 360)**

The muted exposition of these encounters can, finally, be related to Gurnah's views on the fragmented nature of East African society and the systemic provisionality of cross cultural encounters. Rather than the national unity so often associated with postcolonial African novels, Gurnah's fictional world emphasizes division and fracture. As the author himself puts it 'you couldn't get anything much more complicated than [...] where I grew up' (Nasta 360). A key aspect of this fragmentation – one that ties in to his subversive

manipulation of gossip and storytelling – is that of untranslatability. In an interview with Vijay Nair, the author stresses how, in *Paradise*, he wanted to illustrate:

The number of people who don't understand each other's language and the number of times these exchanges have to be translated between different groups of people. You have no idea how good these translations are. Because all we have is the translator's account of what that person said. And I am certain they weren't good translations. Because how learned you have to be to know two or three languages equally well? [sic] So there are all kinds of approximations and yet there is an exchange. People are tolerant, more tolerant than they seem, even though they shout at each other and use combative language.

Both the racial and sexual stereotyping and the use of gossip endemic to the books, appear symptomatic of precisely the fractured society described here. Although Gurnah may use combative language in certain of his racial and sexual depictions, this does not necessarily reflect a lack of tolerance on his, or his characters' part.

Instead, the intentions I ascribe to Gurnah's use of stereotyping connect with his wider critique of colonialism. As Sherae Deckard asserts:

The novels' ambiguity is not authorial vagueness, but rather a deliberate evocation of the atmosphere of intercultural encounters where subjects are unable to 'read' or 'translate' the Other, and therefore approach the Other through the haze of their own preconceptions (110).

It is precisely these 'preconceptions' that the author subverts, making the reader an active participant in a process of untranslatability. Equally, Gurnah's evocation of quieter homosocial and homosexual experiences can be framed in terms of his views on the role and function of postcolonial writing. In his essay, 'Imagining the Postcolonial Writer', Gurnah problematizes how, in much postcolonial fiction, the 'fragmentations of the colonized culture recede into unimportance, into a kind of necessary detail to the larger issue' (82). The tentative, furtive and unnamed encounters occurring across these works – operating outside both colonial framings of African sexuality and local gossip – can be seen as exactly the kind of 'necessary detail' frequently left out of postcolonial writing. As Gurnah himself puts it:

One of the ways fiction convinces is by suggesting that behind the surface lies an imaginatively more complex world which its construction in the narrative approaches but does not quite convey. Thus the narrative is able to hint at and release what it is not possible to reveal fully, and to liberate the reader into seeing affiliated networks of knowledge and meaning ('Transformative Strategies' 156-7).

Homosocial and homosexual experiences may be written out of many accounts of colonial society – or written in certain ways – but, in hinting at that which is occluded by orientalist stereotypes of radicalized sexuality, these novels demonstrate that: 'fragmented doesn't

mean that it doesn't work. It just means that it worked in a different way' (Nasta 360).

In recognizing the limitations imposed on the sexual lives of the colonized, Gurnah signals the losses and hidden histories of colonial society. In this, his seemingly negative portrayal of homosexuality can be re-conceived in light of Heather Love's discussion of the losses of queer history. Love underlines 'both the losses of queer modernity and the deeply ambivalent negotiation of these losses within the literature of the period' (5). Although written far more recently than those texts Love discusses, Gurnah's novels do address a similar time period and, questions of modernity are equally applicable to colonized societies, as Love herself acknowledges:

If modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century aimed to move humanity forward, it did so in part by perfecting techniques for mapping and disciplining subjects considered to be lagging behind – and so seriously compromised the ability of these others ever to catch up. Not only sexual and gender deviants but also women, colonized people, the nonwhite [...] were marked as inferior by means of the allegation of backwardness' (5-6).

Just as the losses of colonialism cannot be accurately measured, so too, the sexual stories that Gurnah cannot fully tell, must at least be acknowledged. On the evidence of these novels, he appears to suggest that recognizing colonial stereotypes of radicalized sexuality is one of the first steps necessary to do so.

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## **Notes**

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<sup>i</sup> A similar portrayal of male sexual behaviour can be found in *Dottie* (1990), where 16 year old Hudson recounts his descent into drug-taking and prostitution: 'eventually he was completely in the hands of his boss. He depended on him for everything [...] And he was too much in debt to be able to resist him. It took Hudson a long time to say so, pausing for several minutes with his head in his hands. His boss used him for sex. It was not the sex he said [...] It was that he had no choice but to submit. And that was only the beginning. The boss permitted other people to use him as well, and made them pay' (165-6).