

**UNDERMINING THE CONCEPT OF PARADISE:  
INTERTEXTUALITY AND STORYTELLING IN  
ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S PARADISE**

**SOCAVANDO EL CONCEPTO DEL PARAÍSO:  
INTERTEXTUALIDAD Y NARRACIÓN  
EN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH PARADISE**

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169

**Abstract**

Storytelling and intertextuality feature frequently in Abdulrazak Gurnah's literary works. This paper investigates the role intertextuality and storytelling play in his novel *Paradise*, published in 1994, and shows how they ultimately undermine the very concept of paradise itself. The first section of the paper analyses two intertextual references to Milton that cast doubt on the idea of East Africa as a paradise through their contradictory nature. The second part focuses on the theme of storytelling in the novel at large and, more specifically, in the main character's life, demonstrating that both clashes and correspondences between life and storytelling eventually undercut the main character's idea of paradise.

**Keywords:** intertextuality, storytelling, Abdulrazak Gurnah, paradise, Milton.

**Resumen**

Tanto la narración como la intertextualidad aparecen con frecuencia en las obras literarias de Abdulrazak Gurnah. Este artículo investiga el papel que juegan la intertextualidad y la narración en su novela *Paradise*, publicada en 1994, y muestra cómo en última instancia socavan el concepto mismo del paraíso. La primera sección del artículo analiza dos referencias intertextuales con referencia a Milton

que ponen en duda la idea de África Oriental como un paraíso a través de su naturaleza contradictoria. La segunda parte se centra en el tema de narrativa de la novela tanto en general como más específicamente en la vida del personaje principal, demostrando que los choques y las correspondencias entre la vida y la narración eventualmente comprometen la principal idea del paraíso que tiene el personaje.

**Palabras clave:** intertextualidad, narración, Abdulrazak Gurnah, paraíso, Milton.

## 1. Introduction

170 Intertextuality and the theme of storytelling are interesting features of Abdulrazak Gurnah's literary production. Born in Zanzibar and awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2021, Gurnah has written several novels; some of the most renowned are *Paradise*, *Desertion* and *By the Sea*. For example, *By the Sea* (2001) hinges on the story of two characters and how they sort through past events in order to be finally able to make sense of their present and future. At the beginning of the novel, Saleh Omar, one of the main characters, reveals to the reader the story of how he came into possession of a casket of *ud al qamari*, an expensive perfume: "This is the story of the trader I obtained the ud from. I'll tell it this way, because I no longer know who may be listening" (Gurnah 2022: 16). Aside from characters, stories are also embedded within objects. The casket of *ud* has been justly termed a "narrative object", since it "contains the stories that issue from it" (Newns 2020: 127, emphasis in original). In addition, in *By the Sea*, there are references to *One Thousand and One Nights* and Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener", which frame the narrative (Steiner 2014: 121). Therefore, storytelling and intertextuality are connected and not only influence the characters' lives by being ways of perceiving the world, but also influence how those lives are recounted.

However, in *Paradise*, published in 1994, intertextuality and storytelling are more intertwined and also more problematic than in other works by this author. Indeed, I claim that both intertextuality and storytelling contribute to questioning the concept of paradise in the novel. To be more precise, intertextuality affects the portrayal of East Africa as a paradise—such as the "colonial fair land/black coast dichotomy" (Deckard 2009: 2794)—whereas storytelling undercuts the main character's paradise—represented by Aziz's house, freedom and love for Amina. Fittingly, storytelling also plays an important role in the ending of the novel.

In the first section of this paper, I will analyse an interesting intertextual reference in *Paradise* by drawing on Jessica Mason's terms and concepts to define intertextuality as outlined in her work *Intertextuality in Practice* (2019).

## Undermining the Concept of Paradise

Intertextuality can be defined as an “(allusive) relationship” between literary texts; it involves reading a text on the basis of its allusions to and differences from the content and structure of other texts (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Aside from ways to determine whether potential intertextual references were wilfully inserted by authors in their works or are merely imagined by readers, Mason presents four kinds of intertextual references: generic unmarked, generic marked, specific unmarked and specific marked (2019: 80). The intertextual reference that will be examined in the first section of this paper is a specific unmarked reference, whose meaning will be explained later. The second part will revolve around storytelling and the ways in which it shapes and sways not only the main character’s conception of paradise, but also the denouement of the novel. After briefly underlining the main roles of storytelling in Gurnah’s novel, the presence of stories and story-like elements will be brought to the foreground, together with the implications of stories for the main character and his decisions.

## 2. Contradictory Intertextuality and the Questionable Representation of East Africa as Paradise

171

The theme of intertextuality in *Paradise* has already been hinted at by Sharae Deckard. Discussing the chapter titles of Gurnah’s novel, Deckard states that they evoke the tropes of “*Arabian Nights* and the travel narratives of Burton, Stanley, and Speke” (2009: 2884). In addition, she stresses the fact that in the novel the author interweaves together several intertextual allusions to the *Arabian Nights*, the Alexander Romances, European imperialist travel narratives, Swahili oral chronicles and Islamic marvels literature (Deckard 2009: 2806-2811). However, it is my contention that one of the most striking intertextual references that the author embeds within the plot refers to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. In book IV of this famous poem, the description of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden focuses on their physical appearance: “Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,/ Godlike erect, with native honour clad/ In naked majesty seemed lords of all” (Milton 2000: 81). Then, the description zooms in on their differences, which are not merely anatomical, but most importantly moral: “Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed;/ For *contemplation* he and *valour* formed,/ For *softness* she and sweet attractive grace” (Milton 2000: 81, my emphasis). What Eve lacks in contemplation, she makes up for in beauty. On the other hand, Adam seems stronger and more skilful at withstanding temptation than she is.

Let us now consider a passage from *Paradise*. Interestingly and maybe not coincidentally, the following excerpt can be found at the very beginning of the novel and is the first image with which readers are presented; hence its importance.

The main character—a young boy called Yusuf—observes two Europeans at the station:

The man was large, so tall that he had to lower his head to avoid touching the canvas under which he sheltered from the sun. The woman stood further back in the shade, her glistening face partly obscured by two hats. [...] She was tall and large too, but differently. (Gurnah 2021: 1)

After the description of their outward appearance and garments—which in *Paradise Lost* are understandably lacking and replaced by ‘naked majesty’—the young boy goes on to explain the substantial differences he spots between them, exactly as occurs in Milton’s poem: “Where she looked lumpy and malleable, as if capable of taking another shape, he appeared carved out of a single piece of wood” (Gurnah 2021: 1). The similarity between the portrayals is not limited to the fact that both descriptions—from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Gurnah’s *Paradise*—begin with the accounts of external traits and then zoom in on the peculiar differences between the man and the woman. In a reversal from the description in *Paradise Lost*, Yusuf outlines their differences by starting from the European ‘Eve’. In Milton’s account, Eve’s depiction is characterised by ‘softness’, which seems to be echoed both by Yusuf’s adjective ‘malleable’ and the woman’s seeming ability to take another shape. On the other hand, Yusuf identifies the man as possibly more unyielding, as suggested by the fact that he seems cut out of a single piece of wood. Similarly, Adam’s description conveys a sense of stability and strength in the face of temptation.

172

One of the trickiest conundrums of intertextuality is concerned with the extent to which intertextual references are imagined by readers or purposefully disseminated by writers. Knowing for certain whether or not an author had a specific intertextual reference in mind can be a daunting task, as Mason maintains:

Sometimes it is impossible to know definitively whether an intertextual reference is truly present in a Base [namely the text under scrutiny, in this case Gurnah’s], or whether a reader has simply perceived something to be a reference to another text which was never intended (by the author) to be so. (2019: 43)

In her work on intertextuality entitled *Intertextuality in Practice*, Jessica Mason identifies four kinds of intertextual references that manifest in practice, namely generic unmarked, generic marked, specific unmarked and specific marked (2019: 80). While generic unmarked intertextual references clearly refer to other narratives without specifying an established group or genre of texts, generic marked intertextual references indicate a generic group of narratives that is an established genre or category of texts (80, 81). In contrast, specific marked intertextual references refer to one narrative in particular and use an established title (85). Adopting Mason’s terminology, I would contend that the intertextual reference

### Undermining the Concept of Paradise

linking together *Paradise* and *Paradise Lost* is a specific unmarked reference — markedness being the attachment of a title or a genre label to the intertextual reference (79). Indeed, specific unmarked references “indicate one narrative in particular, however, it is not marked by title and must therefore be recognised as an intertextual reference” (82-83). Although the description of the two Europeans seems to hint at Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, no specific title or genre label of the hypotext features in the Base. Of course, it could certainly be that Gurnah had in mind the biblical episode rather than Milton’s poem. In that case, the hypotext would be the Bible itself or, to be more precise, the Book of Genesis. Nevertheless, I am more inclined to think that the reference dovetails with Milton’s poem for a series of reasons which will be presented below.

As Mason acknowledges, it is extremely difficult to discern intertextual references for which it is possible that the author has a narrative schema (2019: 120) — namely “a reader’s version of a narrative” stored in the so-called “*mental archive*” (69, 72, emphasis in original). The knowledge of an author can be enlightening when determining hypothetical intertextual references in his or her works (124). The fact that Abdulrazak Gurnah is aware of the existence of *Paradise Lost* can be said to be certain, not only because it is a cornerstone of English literature, but also because the writer was Professor of English and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Kent (“Nobel Literature Prize 2021”). In order to try to ascertain whether an intertextual reference is purposefully woven in by the author or merely made by the reader, Mason puts forward two solutions. One consists of identifying a high or specific level of points of contact between the features in the Base —in this case *Paradise*— and those in the potential hypotext (Mason 2019: 121), which has been outlined above. Similarity of features and structure of description bring together the two Europeans and Milton’s characters. Not to mention the fact that, being the first image with which readers are presented, the depictions of the Europeans are brought to the foreground and emphasised, thus strengthening the hypothesis of an important intertextual reference to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* purposefully embedded within them.

Furthermore, it ought to be pointed out that there is evidence underlining the author’s appreciation of intertextuality and, therefore, the likelihood of an intertextual reference further takes shape. Indeed, in an interview, Gurnah admitted his fondness for intertextuality: “That recognition of intertextualities to some extent reintroduces us to each other as readers. We are reading the same thing, and this gives a sense of a shared textuality, and I think that’s pleasing, just in itself” (in Steiner 2013: 166). This supports the idea that intertextual references can be expected to punctuate, or at least to be present in, his novels.

Another solution recommended by Mason to ascertain the purposefulness of an intertextual reference “is historiographical exploration: is there any evidence in the author’s other textual traces that confirm the presence of the reference?” (2019: 120). In Gurnah’s novel there are indeed other interesting references which are likely to hark back to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. According to Deckard, the very title of the novel echoes “Milton’s epic of loss and expulsion” (2009: 2797). While this is certainly true, an important passage could be quoted in order to provide further supporting evidence for this claim. Whilst some merchants are talking about Europeans, one of them makes a striking observation: “One of the traders swore that he had seen a European fall down dead once and another one come and breathe life back into him. He had seen *snakes* do that too” (Gurnah 2021: 72, emphasis added). Unlike the previous intertextual reference to Adam and Eve’s description, in this case the reference is first alluded to in this excerpt and then clearly made more explicit by another character who wonders: “What was he trying to say? That Europeans are really snakes in disguise?” (Gurnah 2021: 73). The connection between *Paradise Lost* and snakes seems far too obvious and further buttresses the presence of a connection between the description of the Europeans and the portrayal of Adam and Eve. Yet, it may appear puzzling that the Europeans are simultaneously depicted as Adam and Eve and as snakes. One might say that this is a matter of perspective: young Yusuf’s experience of Europeans is understandably different from that of a trader who hears about their arrival and the mysterious stories connected to them.

Nevertheless, I would argue that the two representations of the Europeans are conflicting for a reason. Abdulrazak Gurnah stated that, “Because there is this shared textuality, it means you can gesture towards another text and it enriches this one, but also, I think, enriches the reader’s understanding of what’s going on there” (in Steiner 2013: 166). Intertextuality enriches the Base but can also open up powerful reflections that are centred around the connection between the two texts. As a result, the contradictory representations of Europeans connected to *Paradise Lost* could have a meaning exceeding mere intertextuality. Deckard has highlighted that the novel employs the theme of paradise so as to disrupt East Africa’s function as a “gold-land” in both European and Swahili imaginaries (2009: 2794). Yet, I claim that the undermining of that conception is especially brought about by the two above-mentioned intertextual references to *Paradise Lost* and their contradiction.

In his ground-breaking work *Intertextuality*, Graham Allen discusses Harold Bloom and his interest in Romantic poems and their imitation of Milton:

To be ‘strong poets’, to employ Bloom’s combative terminology, new poets must do two things: they must rewrite the precursor’s poems, and in that very act they must

## Undermining the Concept of Paradise

defend themselves against the knowledge that they are merely involved in the process of rewriting, or what Bloom calls misreading. (2006: 135)

Using intertextuality in a new way in order to highlight contradictions or voice the perceptions and conditions of previously voiceless characters has been an extremely eye-opening tenet of postcolonial literature. Works such as *Jack Maggs* by Peter Carey, *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys and *Foe* by J.M. Coetzee are perfect examples of how intertextuality can be used to creatively express new themes, points of view and radically alter the perspective of the original text. In a similar vein, *Paradise* problematises the canonical idea of paradise imbued in East Africa. In Gurnah's novel, paradise is both directly and indirectly evoked. Direct mentions of it are made by Aziz, who muses that the lands they are travelling through have paradise-like traits. This assumption is quickly undermined by the tragic and hostile events befalling the caravan while venturing into the tropical interior, which turns the paradisiac landscape into an "infernalized" one (Deckard 2009: 2865).

In terms of indirect references, it can be observed that many characters have left behind an idyllic condition that they regret and keep nostalgically cultivating in their minds. Commenting on the Omani plantation economy, the Arab mercantile empire and colonial capitalism, Deckard insightfully states that the different visions of paradise sought by characters are revealed as "destructive" and "mystifying the violence of exploitative commerce" (2009: 2874). Added to these examples, there are other disrupted paradises linked to characters that are brought to the foreground throughout the development of the plot. A good example thereof is the story of Mohammed, a beggar who tells Yusuf about his past:

He had once been well off, he said, with watered land and some animals, and a mother who loved him. During the day he worked his sweet land to the utmost of his strength and endurance, and in the evening he sat with his mother while she sang God's praises and told him fabulous stories of the great world. (Gurnah 2021: 10)

However, such a blissful life was destroyed by Mohammed's pursuit of the weed. Other stories similar to this soon abound. Yusuf's father had married his first wife for love and eventually eloped with her despite her family's fierce objection to the marriage. After eight years, the woman decided to leave with her children for her birthplace with the aim of visiting her family and reconciling with them: "The dhow they travelled in was called *Jicho*, the Eye. It was never seen again after it left Bagamoyo [...] He [Yusuf] knew that the memories caused his father pain and stirred him into great rages" (Gurnah 2021: 14-15, emphasis in original). To this list of marred or regretted paradises we could add Hamid's wife and her love for her birthplace, Lamu —"little short of perfection in her eyes" (Gurnah 2021: 63)— and the merchant Hussein's love for his country of origin, Zanzibar. Before getting married to Aziz, even Amina had been happy in her childhood. Despite the

harrowing fact that she was kidnapped from her parents, the young girl was rescued by Khalil's father. She found a caring foster family and an attentive adoptive brother in Khalil. Yet, this bliss was brought to a halt by the arrival of Mohammed Abdalla, who took the two siblings away from their family as *rehani* (indentured slave) for Aziz.

176

Presented with this series of collapsed paradises, readers quickly dismiss the simplistic conception of East Africa as an idyllic paradise. As Deckard states, contemporary uses of paradise and anti-paradise motifs by postcolonial African writers have been mainly “ironic, melancholy, or calumniatory” (2009: 2758). In this case, the very use of the paradise theme undermines it. The two clashing Miltonian references —Europeans simultaneously as Adam and Eve and as the snake— further show the insubstantiality and meaninglessness of such superficial representation. Rather than buttressing and one-sidedly embracing the idea of European colonisers as inherently evil —like corrupting snakes in a wonderful garden— Gurnah problematises the relationship between locals and Europeans. When Aziz and his caravan are unjustly deprived of their goods by the sultan Chatu, the intervention of a group of *askaris* and their European officer proves decisive for their release and the return of their goods. However, in so doing, the European actively interferes and “suppresses the negotiations between the traders and chief” (Deckard 2009: 2931); hence the perception of the officer as an “uninvited outsider” (Hodapp 2015: 97). At the same time, though, the arrival of a group of *askaris* will prove paramount for the ending of the novel and liberating for Yusuf's life.

In conclusion, Europeans are neither Adam and Eve nor snakes, exactly like East Africa is neither paradise nor hell in Gurnah's novel. The clashing intertextual references to Milton's *Paradise Lost* dispel simplistic and idyllic visions of East Africa. Having analysed the questioning of the idea of East Africa as a paradise in the locals' and colonisers' view, the second section of this paper will attempt to outline the undermining of Yusuf's idea of paradise.

### 3. Storytelling, Stories and Yusuf's Paradise

*Paradise* has been shown to have ties with the genre of the Bildungsroman (Deckard 2009: 2806; Berman 2023: 52), just as happens to a certain extent in Gurnah's novel *Gravel Heart* (Woods 2021). When Yusuf starts a new life because Aziz takes him away from his family as *rehani* (indentured slave), an image of birth is described, which is connected to his new life and changed condition, since “he dreamt that he saw his cowardice glimmering in moonlight, covered in the slime of its afterbirth. He knew it was his cowardice because someone standing in the



### Undermining the Concept of Paradise

shadows told him so, and he himself saw it breathing” (Gurnah 2021: 19). Rather than a promising beginning foreshadowing his moral formation and improvement, Yusuf’s changed condition as *rebani* throws forth references to cowardice which also feature at the very ending of the novel, thus creating circularity. Possibly introduced by the image of his newly-born cowardice, Yusuf’s idea of paradise — intended not only as Aziz’s house with its verdant garden, but also future happiness with Amina and the chance of living a free life— is undermined by his tendency to rely on storytelling to understand the surrounding world and his own life.

In Deckard’s words, *Paradise* is infused with “the polyphonous literary forms of the pre-colonial Swahili coast” (2009: 2806) and storytelling certainly plays a crucial role in the novel. As a matter of fact, references to proverbs, the choice of a narrator who coincides with the narrating voice and the presence of magic within reality characterise African literature in English, in that it is influenced by the oral tradition (Bertinetti 2010: 314). Further ties between oral narratives and African literature are present, as Tanure Ojaide’s words suggest: “Traditionally, African literature is an informal evening fire-side school in which elders and parents teach the young ones ethics, morality, and the culture of the community” (1992: 44). As such, it is dotted with folktales, myths and legends which enrich it with motifs and themes (Ojaide 1992: 50). As far as the presence of storytelling is concerned, *Paradise* is no exception; what is extraordinary, though, is how storytelling and stories are used in the novel. Deckard maintains that: “Fantasy becomes the medium through which the characters attempt to assimilate the unknown, with disastrous consequences for the protagonist” (2009: 2820). While this is true, I believe that stories undermine Yusuf’s idea of paradise specifically by showing the marked contrast between narrative and stark reality. However, as will be shown, even when stories can be connected to life, they are of no avail for the main character, but rather worsen the perception of his condition.

Before analysing how storytelling questions the idea of paradise for the main character, it is necessary to briefly outline the main functions of storytelling in the novel. While discussing Celati and storytelling, Patrick Ryan points out that the storyteller must be rooted in a socio-cultural physical reality, rather than transported into a reality especially built for storytelling (2008: 68). This is the kind of storytelling taking place between the porters of Aziz’s caravan and the traders who gather at Hamid’s house, who all share the same situation and are not distinct from the reality they experience while performing storytelling. Interestingly, many of their stories revolve around Europeans and their unbelievable characteristics: they are said to have poisonous spit, wear metal clothes, apparently they can be killed only by being stabbed under their left armpits and can go without sleep or water for days. This use of storytelling is a means by which people can reach an

understanding of changes—in this case the arrival of the Europeans— or at least approach what they do not know or what scares them. As a matter of fact, according to Ryan, storytelling affects how people think of and experience physical, cultural and social environments (2008: 66). An Indian friend of Hamid’s criticises these representations of Europeans grounded in impressionistic stories: “Learn who they are, then. What do you know about them apart from these stories about snakes and men eating metal? Do you know their language, their stories? So then how can you learn to cope with them?” (Gurnah 2021: 87). His words might foreshadow an important episode in the novel where it is precisely the hyperbolic stories about the Europeans that spur Chatu to obey the European officer and return the goods he has stolen from Aziz: “Chatu looked round the encampment, undecided what to do. Suddenly the European stood up and stretched. ‘Can he eat metal?’ Chatu asked” (Gurnah 2021: 171).

178

Forging and cementing communities is another meaningful role of storytelling. As a matter of fact, stories are entwined with values and customs that can be transmitted to future generations. In line with this, Jack Zipes states: “As a group of people survives in a particular region, they continually cultivate their own relevant customs through different modes of storytelling to stabilize their lives and to transmit their values to the young so the belief system will continue” (2005: 7). Hinging upon Zanzibar and its beauty, Hussein’s use of storytelling cannot be said to forge communities, but it certainly cements afresh the sense of belonging and connection to his birthplace. As Ryan points out, storytelling also arises from the emotional needs of participants and their contexts (2008: 69). In tune with this, Hussein’s stories about Zanzibar are defined as a need: “When he had relieved himself of his need, they talked business” (Gurnah 2021: 82).

The very beginning of the novel is intriguing if observed from a storytelling perspective. Indeed, it opens with the words “The boy first” (Gurnah 2021: 1). This opening expression seems a peculiar way of beginning a novel and it undoubtedly puts the emphasis on ‘the boy’. These words may be used to evoke the beginning of a story, as if Gurnah were relating the story of Yusuf and his life to the readers as a storyteller. Such interpretation gains more support if one considers that the author’s name figures in the plot. Abdulrazak is indeed a traveller who recounted and praised the beauty of Herat and its stunning gardens. James Hodapp put forward the idea that, in *Paradise*, Gurnah pursues the project of “reimaging and redeploying Swahili texts [...] by adding the dimension of interiority” (2015: 98). Given the attention paid to Yusuf’s thoughts and development in the novel—emphasised through the use of a third-person omniscient narrator (Berman 2023: 53)— this perspective is extremely interesting and can be applied to the representation of the main character. Indeed, it is as if

### Undermining the Concept of Paradise

Gurnah were recounting the boy's story by adding the introspection lacking in more canonical tales. It can be said, then, that Yusuf's life becomes 'storytold'.

However, it is not only the beginning of the novel that hints at a possible 'storytold' reading of Yusuf's life. As a matter of fact, references to fairy tale motifs and myths pepper the plot and contribute to embellishing the life of the character by magnificent or ironic comparison. Upon leaving with Aziz for a journey, Yusuf is told by Khalil: "You're part of that savage country up there. What are you afraid of? You'll enjoy yourself. Just tell them you're one of their princes coming home to find a wife" (Gurnah 2021: 52). Interestingly, the reference to princes is again brought up by Hamid, who wonders about the life Khalil and Yusuf have been leading until then in the merchant's house: "You and Khalil must have been like young princes, spoiled like anything" (70). After returning in possession of their stolen goods through the intervention of the officer of a group of *askaris*, Aziz's men "made up a song about Chatu the python which had been swallowed by a European jinn with hair growing out of his ears" (172). In keeping with stories and their characteristics, references to princesses are not wanting: Khalil mockingly tells Yusuf that it is highly unlikely that he will ever marry a princess and that therefore he should put up with the women he meets at the shop: "Perhaps one day a slim and beautiful princess from Persia will come to the shop and invite you to her palace" (32).

179

Most importantly, it is Yusuf himself who longs to hear stories and encase the reality he experiences within them. To him, stories may seem to provide a blueprint for numerous situations and he therefore draws on them to understand the surrounding world. In this regard, his reaction upon hearing from Khalil about the Mistress's madness is particularly illuminating:

The crazy old woman in the house did not surprise him at all. It was exactly as it would have been in the stories his mother used to tell him. In those stories the craziness would have been because of love gone wrong, or bewitchment in order to steal an inheritance, or unfulfilled revenge. Nothing could be done about the craziness until matters had been put right, until the curse had been lifted. He wanted to say that to Khalil. Don't worry about it so much, it will all be put right before the story ends. (Gurnah 2021: 38)

Not only does Yusuf associate reality with stories, he even intermingles and switches them, so that life becomes a story and has a fully-fledged denouement. Before the ending, things will necessarily fall into place and the madness will be healed. Although Yusuf keeps to himself his thoughts on the fairy-tale-like traits of the story of the mad Mistress, Khalil—who may be seen as Yusuf's foil—comes to understand his view of the world and, since he is worried about him, spells out that "This is not a fairy tale. There are still many things here you don't understand"

(215). The shopkeeper had already acknowledged Yusuf's eagerness to hear stories and rebuked him: "Can't I get any rest from you? All you want is stories" (42). Ever practical, Khalil is well aware that it is highly unlikely that, as a shopkeeper, he will end up marrying a beautiful princess. When he reveals to Yusuf that he has had a relationship with an older woman who is a habitual customer at the shop, Khalil justifies his behaviour by emphasising his situation and the limited prospects he has. Upon realising that Yusuf cannot understand because of his story-like frame of understanding, the shopkeeper gives up: "Never mind, keep yourself pure for your princess" (200). Added to this, Yusuf is "seduced by the stories of paradise he hears on his journey into the interior" (Deckard 2009: 2801). Yet, Deckard underlines that those tales prove to be mere artificial paradises (2801).

180

Aside from Yusuf's own tendency to rely on stories, the novel itself introduces a story that shares noticeable similarities with the boy's love for Amina, Aziz's younger wife and Khalil's sister. At the end of the journey to the interior, Simba Mwene—an overseer—relates the story of a jinn who kidnaps a princess, keeps her in the forest in an underground cellar supplied with every comfort and comes to visit her every ten days. After falling in love with a woodcutter who found her prison by chance, the princess starts a secret relationship with him and eventually her lover asks her to elope with him, which she refuses to do because the jinn would easily find them. Unfortunately, the two star-crossed lovers are discovered and the jinn's revenge is terrible: the princess is beheaded and the woodcutter is turned into an ape. Although it seems unlikely to have ties with Yusuf's life, the story might act as a blueprint for his impossible love story with Amina. After his frequent visits to the Mistress and Amina have been discovered, Yusuf soon wonders how Aziz will behave towards him: "Would he turn him into an ape and send him to the summit of a barren mountain as the jinn had treated the woodcutter?" (Gurnah 2021: 238). Again, his tendency to associate life and stories is evidenced by his remarks; however, this story shares numerous similarities with reality rather than being different from it. Like the imprisoned princess, Amina is kept in Aziz's house in luxury, while Yusuf becomes aware of Amina's existence completely by chance. In both accounts, a proposal of elopement is made and refused because of the disastrous consequences it would bring upon the lovers. It is clear that Yusuf is not turned into an ape by Aziz, yet his subordinate condition to the merchant is as frustrating as the woodcutter's animal transformation.

Other story-like elements are disseminated throughout the plot of the novel. A good example of this is Yusuf's mother's opinion of offering food to the destitute mendicants who visit their home. Although Yusuf cannot see the point in feeding the beggars, she is adamant about helping them, since "virtue was its own reward"

### Undermining the Concept of Paradise

(Gurnah 2021: 9) —which can be considered the moral of a story. Moreover, there is a recurring expression that sounds particularly story-like, especially because it is repeated three times by different characters and perspectives as the plot unfurls. When the beggar Mohammed wants to warn Yusuf to stay away from the weed, he pleads with him: “Learn from my terrible example, my little friend” (10). Further on in the novel, Mohammed’s words are echoed again, although in a different context. Upon discovering that Yusuf does not know how to read, Hamid and his wife Maimuna are consternated and point him out to their children: “Learn from the sight he presents to us” (100). Finally, Yusuf is advised by Mohammed Abdalla to learn from Aziz, because “he sees the world as it is. And it is a cruel bad place, you know that. Learn from him!” (186). Although the expression is used in different situations, the repeated imperative ‘learn’ might point to the boy’s inexperience. As a consequence, it may allude to the fact that things are not like Yusuf understands them, which will prove true as far as his subordinate condition as *rehani* and as far as Aziz and Amina are concerned.

As a matter of fact, underlining the fact that stories are extremely multi-layered and therefore a source of reading adventure, Gurnah stated in an interview that the adult version of a story is more complicated than how one understood it as a child (in “I Learned to Have Pleasure in Reading Simply because I Love Stories”). Little by little, Yusuf develops the awareness that reality and stories do not always dovetail. Life proves much harsher than fairy tales and undercuts idealised notions of paradise. Yusuf’s sojourn with Hamid is already an eye-opener for the young boy: used to Aziz’s lush garden, he is let down by the arid land where Hamid lives. Maimuna replies ironically that the boy can build them a beautiful garden replete with fountains and songbirds; then she adds: “I hope you’ll also hang mirrors on trees as in ancient gardens, to catch the light and see the birds faint as they catch sight of their beautiful reflections” (Gurnah 2021: 67). Needless to say, in Aziz’s garden mirrors are present and, according to Deckard, the merchant’s walled courtyard with fruit-laden trees and geometric design symbolises paradise (2009: 2801). Therefore, Maimuna’s description of a verdant garden introduces a peerless, unreachable “garden of paradise” (Gurnah 2021: 66) —further informed by a merchant’s story about the stunning gardens in Herat and Hamid’s reflections on paradise— which finds no correspondence in the dry landscape of the bush. As Hamid tells Yusuf: “You’ll have to get used to the bushes and snakes, and just keep dreaming about your garden of paradise, until your uncle comes back for you” (68).

However, during the second journey with Aziz, reality manifests itself even more harshly and traumatically. During the inland journey, the merchant muses on the paradise-like features of the lands they are crossing and stresses that “it fills you

with longing. So pure and bright. You may be tempted to think that its inhabitants know neither sickness nor ageing. And their days are filled with contentment and a search for wisdom” (Gurnah 2021: 114-115). Instead, as Deckard highlighted (2009: 2865), those lands prove to be deadly for many porters and nature is far from idyllic, but rather teeming with biting insects. Other disconcerting sights punctuate the journey and crush the association of the surrounding lands with paradise. Upon reaching a village that has been raided by a warrior people, the caravan comes across several unburied corpses. On the journey, fights soon break out between the porters. Up to this point, it could be said that the clash between stories about paradise and reality further casts doubt on the image of East Africa as a paradise, as the references to Milton do. Yet, the journeys in which Yusuf participates pave the way for his own understanding of his situation and its far from paradise-like features. Most interestingly, Yusuf’s vision of Aziz starts to change. While staying with Hamid, Yusuf witnesses a conversation between him and some of his friends who are outraged by Aziz’s reputation: ““Do you know what I’ve heard about him, your partner?” [...] ‘That if his partners cannot pay up, he takes their sons and daughters as *rehani*. This is like in the days of slavery. It is not the way honourable people should conduct themselves”” (Gurnah 2021: 88-89). The comparison with slavery is as striking as these remarks are stinging, since Yusuf himself was taken as *rehani* by the merchant.

In addition to this, another dark side of Aziz’s behaviour is revealed when Yusuf is struck by a sudden realisation regarding two porters who had been wounded in the previous journey and were therefore left to the care of some townspeople: “The straggling line of houses along the lakeside, and the sweet stench of rotting fish which reached them even at the town’s edges, gave that explanation a different meaning. [...] he knew with shamed certainty that the two men had been abandoned here” (Gurnah 2021: 136). Notwithstanding these mishaps, Yusuf keeps making reference to the paradise discourse while travelling, as evidenced by his comparison of the red cliffs encountered while drawing near to Chatu’s lands with the gates granting access to paradise. However, it soon becomes evident that the lands they are going to cross bear no resemblance to an idyllic place. Indeed, their inhabitants’ behaviour triggers powerful reflections on justice, another fundamental theme in the undermining of Yusuf’s idea of paradise. As Zipes pinpoints, fairy tales are more truthful than realistic stories because they are imbued with a sense of social justice that cannot be found in societies (2019: 248). As a matter of fact, the attack on the caravan by Chatu’s people and the mistreatment Aziz’s men are subjected to is an episode that primes thought-provoking reflections on justice. Having deprived the caravan of their goods because he had been cheated by another group of merchants before, the sultan says: “What has brought you here all the way from your home? A search for justice? [...] then you have

### Undermining the Concept of Paradise

found it. I am taking your goods so I can give justice to my people for the goods they lost to your brother” (Gurnah 2021: 165).

Another unsettling notion is paired with the shattered concept of justice. Because of the journey to the interior, *Paradise* may be compared to *Heart of Darkness* by Conrad. It has been stated that this reading of *Paradise* and other novels presenting the trope of the journey makes them “ossified around colonial texts of journeys to the interior” (Hodapp 2015: 90). While this is certainly a good and valid point, it should be noted that in this case a parallel between the two works could prove fruitful, up to a point. According to J. U. Jacobs, the section of *Paradise* entitled “The Grove of Desire” is a reference to both Uncle Aziz’s paradise-like garden and to the grove of death at the Company’s Outer Station in *Heart of Darkness* (2009: 86). Pietro Deandrea brought to the foreground other intriguing connections between the two works which also include Yusuf’s name; he is a “namesake of Conrad’s” (2009: 175). In his opinion, the “god-like aura” that hovers over the Germans—who are credited with supernatural powers—echoes Kurtz’s “supernatural reputation” among the natives in *Heart of Darkness* (Deandrea 2009: 175). Furthermore, *Paradise* shows a multi-layered and varied colonial society, which is redolent of a criticism that is often levelled at Conrad, namely that of describing the natives as an undifferentiated body of people (Deandrea 2009: 175). Indeed, *Paradise* has been defined as the reversal of *Heart of Darkness* from the perspective of East Africa (Concilio and Deandrea 2020: 666). In addition, in both works there is a terrible revelation awaiting the main characters. While Kurtz’s anguished cry “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad 2007: 86) is extremely renowned, Yusuf is presented with a strikingly similar revelation on human nature, which is put forward by Aziz. Upon discovering the aforementioned numerous dead, unburied bodies of locals, Aziz’s men decide to dig a grave for them: “Yusuf, go with them and see how base and foolish is the nature of men” (Gurnah 2021: 128). This expression is uttered again further on in the plot by the merchant, who has discovered that Yusuf has been paying visits to the Mistress and Amina: “Did I not tell you that our natures are base?” (Gurnah 2021: 239)—which can actually apply to many people: Yusuf’s potentially ill-intended visits, the Mistress’s calumny, and also Aziz’s behaviour towards Amina, Khalil and Yusuf. Therefore, during the journey, Yusuf comes to realise that human nature is base and vile, a discovery which clashes with his mother’s aforementioned opinion on virtue.

While the lack of correspondence between reality and stories, or at least story patterns and the episodes befalling him, is brought into focus by the inland journey, Yusuf’s return to Aziz’s house proves decisive in his realisation of the inadequacy of stories. Paradoxically, his doomed love for Amina perfectly coincides with the story of the woodcutter and the princess. However, such a reading of

reality proves traumatic because it only enhances the sense of paralysis that Yusuf feels. As happens to the woodcutter, it is clear to him that he cannot marry Amina and that he is going to end up like Khalil and serve the merchant all his life, with no possibility of breaking his shackles. There is no escaping the subordinate condition deriving from his ties to Aziz; the merchant's dependants are "de facto trapped, with no realistic alternative for a different life" (Berman 2023: 53). As Amina strikingly reveals to Yusuf: "If there is Hell on earth, then it is here" (Gurnah 2021: 228). Therefore, what the boy considered paradise turns out to be rather hellish.

It is at this crucial moment of awakening and revelation that a group of *askaris* reaches the village. It has been asserted that "the Europeans make significant appearance only at the end" (Sarvan 1995: 209). While I am not totally of this opinion —the Miltonic intertextual parallel between Adam and Eve and the Europeans features at the very beginning of the novel— it can be said that the presence of Europeans intensifies as the plot progresses and culminates in the arrival of the *askaris*. Khalil and Yusuf quickly close the shop and spy the face of the officer of the *askaris* from the cracks between the boards. The following passage is particularly important for its implications: "The German officer rose to his feet and walked to the edge of the terrace, his hands clasped together behind his back. *Gog and Magog*, Khalil whispered in Yusuf's ear" (Gurnah 2021: 246, emphasis in original). *Gog and Magog* are highly meaningful. Indeed, they are said to be brutes living at the edges of the world, where they used to ravage the lands of their neighbours and who know no language. In order to keep them outside the world, a wall was built, which "marks the edge of the world. Beyond that live barbarians and demons" (42). In Yusuf's troubled, paralysed personal situation, the two creatures, and the officer to whom they are compared, may be seen as exemplifying the difference between what is and what could be, between what will happen and what may happen. The constant clash between stories and reality might spur the boy to change his mind and perspectives, to run away with the soldiers and overcome the wall between a paralysed story-like situation and a reality open to changes for him.

In this sense, it is indicative that he reflects on his cowardice before darting off towards the column of leaving *askaris*. As a matter of fact, in the novel the reference to his cowardice figures two times: at the beginning of his life as *rehani* with Aziz and at the end of the novel. The fact that he picks up on that thought again not only creates a circular structure, but may also announce the end of his life as Aziz's subordinate and, therefore, a re-birth: "He saw again his cowardice glimmering in its afterbirth in the moonlight [...]. Now [...] he thought he knew what it would grow into. [...]. He glanced round quickly and



## Undermining the Concept of Paradise

then ran after the column with smarting eyes” (Gurnah 2021: 247). Therefore, I agree with Nina Berman when she contends that Yusuf’s decision to join the *askaris* may have given him agency and led to a potential improvement of his condition (2023: 52).

### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, in *Paradise* both intertextual references to Milton and storytelling undermine the concept of paradise. The contradictory Miltonian representations of Europeans undercut the image of East Africa as a paradise because they contradictorily associate the Europeans with both Adam and Eve and the snake. In a similar vein, the contradiction ensuing from Yusuf’s tendency to encase his life within stories or story-like motifs leads to the questioning of his idea of paradise, involving Aziz’s house, personal freedom and Amina. While the journey to the interior and its harshness provide insights into human nature and the sense of justice, his encounter with Amina proves to be in tune with the story of the jinn and the princess.

However, such a story pattern, albeit being similar to reality, only results in a blocked condition which Yusuf can neither alter nor escape, until he takes the radical decision to abandon the merchant’s house and join the *askaris*. As a result, in Gurnah’s novel intertextuality and storytelling are intertwined and entail numerous effects, such as opening up new frames of thought, offering alternative perspectives and dispelling simplistic conceptions. Interestingly, both intertextuality and storytelling involve narratives whose creative power, in this case, undercuts assumptions rather than strengthening them. Aside from offering a potential reference to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the interesting use of intertextuality in *Paradise* contributes to spurring reflections on the meaning and traits of this literary device in postcolonial literature.

185

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186

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