

## THE MIGRANT OUTLOOK IN COLONIZED AFRICA THROUGH THE NARRATIVE OF ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

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### ABSTRACT

As a representation of the currents of change in the world, the migrant inhabits a dialogic space created on the clash of cultures. They are in constant movement as they assemble their own narratives outside well-established national identities. The present study aims to analyse the construction of such character in *Paradise* (1994) and *Afterlives* (2020), published by Abdulrazak Gurnah, a writer recognised by his portrayal of the refugee and the migrants in-between the African and European continents. Both novels were set during the period of the German colonization of Africa (end of the 19th and beginning of 20th century) and depict the relationship between the German colonial troops (the so called *schutztruppe*) and their native recruits. The relations of power and the contradictory nature of the *schutztruppe* reflect on the search for belonging in which Yusuf and Hamza, main characters of above-mentioned novels, find themselves.

**KEYWORDS:** migration, Abdulrazak Gurnah, literature without fixed abode, colonial narrative, Africa, English Literature.

### LA PERSPECTIVA MIGRANT A L'AFRICA COLONITZADA A TRAVÉS DE LA NARRATIVA D'ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

#### RESUM

Com a representació dels corrents de canvi en el món, l'emigrant habita un espai dialògic creat sobre el xoc de cultures. Estan en constant moviment mentre munten les seves pròpies narratives fora de les identitats nacionals ben establertes. El present estudi té com a objectiu analitzar la construcció d'aquest personatge a *Paradise* (1994) i *Afterlives* (2020), publicats per Abdulrazak Gurnah, un escriptor reconegut pel seu retrat del refugiat i els migrants entre els continents africà i europeu. Ambdues novel·les es van ambientar durant el període de la colonització alemanya d'Àfrica (finals del segle XIX i principis del segle XX) i descriuen la relació entre les tropes colonials alemanyes (les denominades *schutztruppe*) i els seus reclutes nadius. Les relacions de poder i la naturalesa contradictòria de les *schutztruppe* reflexionen sobre la recerca de pertinença en la qual es troben Yusuf i Hamza, personatges principals de les novel·les esmentades anteriorment.

**PARAULES CLAU:** migració, Abdulrazak Gurnah, literatura sense llar fixa, narrativa colonial, Àfrica, literatura anglesa.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a period in History, colonization can be commonly traced within the 16th and the 20th century as the years in which nations across the globe were put under the control of European rule.<sup>1</sup> There might not be a consensus on the precise dates in which such an event took place, especially as one understands that such an overwhelming force does not simply emerge out of thin air—it requires historic materiality on which to take shape and form and to settle comfortably before purging foreign goods. Although colonization had often been approached as a uniform, continuous historical force which faded out after the wave of victories for national independence, when seen as an ideology that took over the minds of the colonizers—and, thus, their culture and epistemology—it allows for the particularities of individual narratives to integrate the whole of human experience.

Each sovereign state will have its own narrative of struggles for or against colonization, and that will be riddled with icons and symbols: national heroes and their tragic battles; languages lost or discarded; lands devastated by civil war; religions reduced to paganism or mere folklore; peoples submitted to slavery, racial segregation, and direct extermination. There is similarity and crossover to be found among the colonized countries, especially as a way of underlining the overwhelming violence put in motion by colonization; but those exist along the particularities of individualized experiences.

This is clear once we take into consideration how empty it is to talk about ‘the Americas’ as a whole, as the northern and southern countries are well known to have occupied wildly different seats in the handlings of global economy. Even when comparing nations colonized by the same empire and later labelled as underdeveloped or ‘Third World’ countries by those who set up the guidelines for what Development stands for, claiming their histories mirror each other can be dangerously depreciative, as much is erased or ignored in order to establish commonness. For example, while both Brazil and Angola were Portuguese colonies, the latter was used as an exit gate through which millions of enslaved Africans were sent to Western lands, and Brazil had its own people hunted and executed while repopulated by foreigners.<sup>2</sup> Both territories were swept by the colonizers and were forcibly introduced to their economic logic—the experiences the population went through, however, take place into different scenarios, within transitory regimes.

Put under such perspective, the process of colonization is undressed from its mysticism. It was not a looming nightmare, like a disease eventually eradicated, nor was it a static structure. Postcolonial theory approaches it as a

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<sup>1</sup> Guyanese historian Walter Rodney calls it the underdevelopment by European rule (Rodney 1975: 9-10).

<sup>2</sup> Nei Lopes goes into more detail on the connections between African peoples and Brazil, as well as Islamism and black identity, in his book *Bantos, Malês e Identidade Negra* (2022).

complex process of the invention of borders and intervals as well as the production of subalternity (Mbembe 2019: 125). As such, the colonial narrative created an illusion of polarized individuals, of “us versus them” spread over race (the blacks and the whites), class (the haves and the have nots), space (the European and the natives), epistemology (the literate and the illiterate), and culture (the civilized and the uncivilized).

The borders onto which many people held as a way of asserting their belonging to the ‘higher culture’ are more than mere lines crossed across territories. They are an idea, a yearning, of concretely defining identities, simultaneously pushing away the otherness and protecting the self. Thus, that border that represents my limits are my defence against what I have established about all that stands ahead.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, that implies I, as a colonial subject, create an obligation for my sense of self to represent this opposition. Colonizers often argued that the ‘natives’ were naïve, too violent, lazy, illiterate people.<sup>4</sup> Non-natives, by that logic, would forcefully be experienced, peaceful, industrious, and educated. Along with the claim that these natives would be useless without them, too childlike in their naivety and illiterateness to reach the stage of development of the Europeans on their own, we easily see the contradictions of the civilizing mission they assured was their main goal: how would the Europeans define themselves without the otherness of the natives? How could such a thing as us versus them exist in a context where such differences seize to be? Bhabha (2013: 110) calls it the “paranoid identification” of the European, once they are caught between their own megalomaniacal sense of self and a fear of persecution from those they have colonized. What follows is a need to continually assert oneself as the saviour, the one whose presence allowed for economic and cultural prosperity (Said 2011: 44).

It is in Literature where individual experiences take shape and illustrate the data shown by History from the perspective of the subject as a sentient human being. In *Heart of Darkness*, the Polish-British novelist Joseph Conrad works with the colonizer’s anxieties in getting into the deep of the unknown forests and their dangers. The natives are loyal in their blind adoration to the white man, whose mental and moral abilities seem to deteriorate so far away from civilization. Even when appearing to demonstrate some empathy regarding the poor conditions of the Africans, the novella from 1899 reinforces those same ideals of the naïve locals craving the natural leadership of the European, as a moth going to a flame.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> One of the most acknowledged names to have written about this was Edward Said, author of *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, works where he directly approaches how the East created by the West was more of a mirror to the Western civilization than a representation of Eastern nations.

<sup>4</sup> The philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe goes over the foundation of such narrative in his book, *The Invention of Africa*.

<sup>5</sup> *Heart of Darkness* has also been studied by Homi Bhabha in his most well-known work, *The location of culture*.

Let us use a more contemporary (and non-European) example: the play *Death and the King's Horsemen*, first published by the Nigerian writer, Wole Soyinka, in 1975. Set during the colonial era in the town of Oyo, in Nigeria, the story is based on historical events. The king's horseman, Elesin, goes through the preparations of his own ritual suicide upon the death of the king. Said custom, a tradition in Yoruba beliefs, instils a sense of apprehension among the British authorities, most notably Mr. Pilkings and his wife. Olunde, the eldest son of Elesin, returns from England to say goodbye to his father, as he is aware of the duties of the elder after the king's passing.

As a young native, Olunde is held in high esteem by Mr. and Mrs. Pilkings for his intellectual abilities —hence their incentive that he would have a European education. The young man is greeted warmly by the couple, who soon discover that the contact Olunde has had with their own culture has taught him more than Medicine.

OLUNDE: Don't make it so simple, Mrs. Pilkings. You make it sound as if when I left, I took nothing at all with me.

JANE: Yes... and to tell the truth, only this evening, Simon and I agreed that we never really knew what you left with.

OLUNDE: Neither did I. But I found out over there. I am grateful to your country for that. And I will never give it up. (Soyinka 1987: 54)

The fact that Olunde was the one to take the role of his father in their local rituals, despite the attempts of Mr. Pilkings to eliminate what he saw as a savage tradition, has a lot to say about the boundaries set by the colonizers. Firstly, that in contact with our others there is much to be learned about our own selves (as individuals and as locals to a certain culture). What Olunde found “over there” was what he brought with him once he left, as in a mirror to himself. More importantly, the contact between the colonized and the colonial culture does not imply assimilation, but hybridization (a concept formulated by Bhabha 2013). In other words, there is a third space where these contacts take place and allow for the clash of ideas from which newness can emerge, bringing unmoving images into the flow of human existence and the knowledge produced by it. Olunde does not ‘go back to his roots’ by following the tradition of his people; he is true to himself, strengthened by his migratory condition.

This play was published a little over a decade before Soyinka was awarded the Nobel Prize of Literature, the first of the five writers born in Africa to be granted such recognition. He was followed by the Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz, in 1988; the South Africans Nadine Gordimer, in 1991, and J.M. Coetzee, in 2003; and, most recently, by Abdulrazak Gurnah, in 2021. Having experienced the life of a refugee himself, Gurnah's work depicts the underlying struggles of living within the borders of the colonized narratives. Migration is a constant element throughout his novels. And what Olunde summarized in “Neither did I” is lived by Gurnah's protagonists as they find their own place in society. These characters

are both agents of a large-scale phenomenon of relocation and individuals in need of emotional and human connection, making a network for themselves as a way to create a sense of belonging. They are both linked to their ancestry and in search of a possible future. They experience the 'here' and the 'over there' of geographic borders and the identities derived from this polarization. Thus, in-between, they represent what it means to be a migrant.

While most of Gurnah's writing seems to witness the transition from colonial regime through the struggles of independence, his fourth, *Paradise* (1994), and last novels, *Afterlives* (2020), take place during the German colonization in eastern Africa (Deutsch-Ostafrika). On *Paradise*, Yusuf grows up in the house of a merchant with the knowledge that he was sold by his father to pay off his debts. He watches the transformations around him due to colonial rule as he comes of age up to the end, when he runs away to enlist in the German army —the *schutztruppe*.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, *Afterlives* tells the stories of Hamza since his first moments as a recruit in the *schutztruppe* to his fatal injury and eventual settling down. As two halves of a story put together, these novels depict the colonized wanderer and their role as a vector of disturbance to the polarized narrative.

## 2. DECOLONIZATION, *DISENCLOSURE* – THE RUPTURE WITH COLONIAL FENCES AND A CHANCE FOR RENEWED PERSPECTIVES

Instead of discussing where Abdulrazak Gurnah is from, there is more to be learned from understanding why that would matter. He was born in 1948 in the Sultanate of Zanzibar, a sovereign state deposed in 1964 whose territory now integrates the United Republic of Tanzania. The region where he grew up in and spent his forming years is, technically, under another identity: a new flag, a new government, a new telling of history. To the West, that might still be simply incorporated into the empty, yet applauded, privilege of being 'African Literature'. According to what writer Taiye Selasi (2016) states, however, such broad terminology can be frustrating, both for the forceful imagery associated with the continent (regarding climate, religion, wilderness, among others) and for the imprisonment of art, 'African art', into political themes (hunger, poverty, corruption) and of the 'African writer' into a representative of a whole continent.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The noun "schutztruppe", according to German grammar, should be capitalized. Gurnah, however, writes it in lower case. Seen as his protagonists will not simply 'adopt' the German language nor culture, inserting themselves into the narrative of the foreign ruler, but grow into the foreignness surrounding them and make it their own, one should note such adaptation as another element of hybridization lived by these characters.

<sup>7</sup> As she points out, when it comes to a writer identified as being African: "The problem isn't that we're so often asked to speak about politics, identity, immigration – but that we're so much less often asked to speak about our art" (Selasi 2016: 11). That is not to take away the importance—and the need— of the representation of these issues and of the debates derived from them, but

We are still left with the idea of nationality. What would it mean for a writer like Gurnah to be introduced as coming from Zanzibar? From Tanzania? Or being Tanzanian-British? On a speech given in 2014, Selasi talks about her own issue with being summarized into the concept of a nation. When she realizes she does the same to one of her friends:

In my mind, she came from Lebanon, despite the patent fact that all her formative experience took place in suburban Accra. I, like my critics, was imagining some Ghana where all Ghanaians had brown skin or none held U.K. passports. I'd fallen into the limiting trap that the language of coming from countries sets – the privileging of a fiction, the singular country, over reality: human experience. Speaking with Colum McCann that day, the penny finally dropped. “All experience is local,” he said. “All identity is experience,” I thought. “I’m not a national,” I proclaimed onstage. “I’m a local. I’m multi-local.” (Selasi 2014: 3:40)

Indeed, there are limitations in what can be achieved when stating someone's origins (i.e., where they come from). It might imply a context and historical events surrounding that individual, but the way in which one interacts with these elements and experiences their own sense of self within their community—that is their own story, marked by their individuality and belonging. Literature itself has an important role in sharing experiences.

On that account, Ottmar Ette (2018) developed the concept of “literatures without a fixed abode” as a way to escape from the static delimitations of both national and world literatures, which reinforce geographical and/or linguistic restrictions. Literatures without a fixed abode refer to the natural mobility of human experience, be it regarding the various waves of migrations that have mingled communities or the new ways through which the era of communication has facilitated cultural hybridization. They bring out the emerging transcendence of life in its new transareal, translingual, and transcultural movement patterns (Ette 2018: 17). The novels of writers such as Taiye Selasi and Abdulrazak Gurnah (and many others, like Nana Oforiatta Ayim, Aminatta Forna, and Yoko Tawada) are not simply put into a national literature, as that would mean denying their crossing of cultural and linguistic borders; nor a world literature, as it would also deny their local experiences.

Another important concept to the present study can be described by what Homi Bhabha calls “unhomeliness” (Bhabha 2013). The notion of ‘home’ is often associated to family roots, to fixed and unmoving spaces. Once the individual is relocated, the foreignness they experience entails the discomfort of the unknown. The lack of surrounding bonds allows for a sense of weightlessness, of misplacement; but it also permits more fluidity regarding the moving tides. Not being home refers to distance, to being ‘beyond the borders’, a space in-between cultural differences. And that, according to Bhabha, is a way to bring a futuristic

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to bring awareness to these vices we fall into, when working with artists from the global South, which reinforce restricting stereotypes and prevent debates from branching out.

notion of reality (as in a wished utopia) to act on the present. On that account, the migrant characters, in their unhomeliness, breach space and time as an element of possible change.

In dialogue with the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, Achille Mbembe works on the decolonization of Africa through the “dis-enclosure of the world”. The colonization period can be seen as a necessary stage in the development of the current economic system where the human existence is arranged into racial, cultural, and social labels, thus allowing for a cascading order of exploitation—therefore, due to the many mechanisms used by colonizers to categorise and subdue the colonized, borders were set. Borders between geographical localities, but also between the imperial notions of ‘citizen’ and ‘native’. Not only were the colonizers set into their fictional role as what it meant to be at the developed end of Progress, the colonized were forced into the base of an alien scale, created by people foreign to their own way of life.<sup>8</sup> When it comes to the narrative established by colonization, both identities have been paralyzed into a static collection of characteristics put within a frame: one being the cultured, the knowledgeable, the ethical, the well-mannered, the experienced, the one to be followed; the other being its opposite.

Consequently, decolonization “means to remove the fences so that what was enclosed can emerge and blossom” (Mbembe 2019: 70) —a disenclosure where the world’s, along with all its peoples’, potential would be set free. That requires the acknowledgment of the ever-evolving societies and networks inhabiting the planet, especially the ones that have long been kept aside either as victims or as survivors. These can present themselves to be unyielding labels, leaving little room for individuality to come through its opaque nature. The notion of ‘removing fences’ leads us towards a collective struggle for connection while avoiding falling into the same issues of past movements where the margins were looked at, yet never allowed to speak.

Not having a fixed abode takes us to a plural imagery: it is not in lacking, but in its multitude that a character finds a way to belong. The protagonists in Gurnah will move from different abodes, find various homes throughout their journey, never being able to completely return, as there is no going back to the past, only (re)finding spaces once occupied as a transformed individual. The quantity of inhabited houses would not represent much by itself, though. It is the links, the connections created by these subjects with their surroundings which take their being local to their transcending locality.

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<sup>8</sup> The nations and communities across the world have been commonly divided into ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’ economies. The way in which we understand these categories has stemmed from a European perspective of what progress is, along with disregard for the knowledge and organization structures found among colonized peoples, and it does not allow room for such groups to take back their own narratives and create their own futures. Further reading on *Afrotopia*, by Felwine Sarr.

As it will be shown below, what the characters of Yusuf, from *Paradise*, and Hamza, from *Afterlives*, represent is the natural vector a migrant embodies once they cross borders. They carry the potential for disenclosure within themselves and, in their wanderings, that triggers others into change. That can be especially noted when put in contrast with other characters who, despite their geographical relocation, cannot be read as migrants due to their rejection towards the other.

### 3. OUT OF SPACE – THE MIGRANT THROUGH THE NARRATIVE OF ABDULRAZAK GURNAH IN *PARADISE* AND *AFTERLIVES*

As claimed above, *Paradise* (1994) and *Afterlives* (2020) could be read as two halves of a story, a story in which a 12-year-old boy living in the coast of eastern Africa is taken from his parents to serve a merchant, runs away to join the German *schutztruppe* and, wounded, wanders back to the region he remembers from his childhood to (re)build a life. The stories echo each other.

*Paradise* narrates the journey of Yusuf as he comes of age, learns about love and finds his own voice amidst the humiliating living conditions of being owned by another. The ending ties his destiny to the large movements of History and the Great War, as the German troops—the infamous and terrorizing *schutztruppe*—reach the house of the merchant and invade the little garden which was his little paradise. Yusuf sees himself in the scavenging dogs who were feasting in the refuse left by the soldiers, and in his rebellion against becoming the coward he saw and despised in others, he runs away after the *schutztruppe*. In *Afterlives*, Hamza is introduced as a young recruit who seems to be running away from something. Like Yusuf, Hamza draws attention for his beauty and unordinary behaviour. Once he returns to the place where he spent his boyhood working for a merchant, he discovers that the house and everyone he used to know is gone. Hamza finds a job, meets new people and, after falling in love, puts down his roots and forms a family.

Despite this apparent continuation, these are separate works, written by an author at different stages of his career. As *Paradise* was Gurnah's fourth published book (also his first to be shortlisted for a number of awards, such as the Booker),<sup>9</sup> *Afterlives* was his tenth novel; the gap of 26 years between them is loaded with his short stories and essays. This study focuses on these stories due to their historical colonial context and on how the role of the migrant is depicted.

Taking place in the beginning of the 20th century, the narrator takes the perspective of Muslim communities in the East African coast. Through the experience of different characters, the colonizer's narrative is shifted: there is no European saviour guiding the souls of African natives. The colonizer, in his otherness, takes the mythological role of a magical entity. In *Paradise*, Yusuf has his first encounter with a white couple at a train station. Fascinated by their large

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<sup>9</sup> Available at: <<https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/books/paradise>>.



presence, the boy watches them intently until the man notices him and reacts angrily to his not looking away:

Suddenly the man bared his teeth in an involuntary snarl, curling his fingers in an inexplicable way. Yusuf heeded the warning and fled, muttering the words he had been taught to say when he required sudden and unexpected help from God. (Gurnah 1994: 2)

Beastilized, the European is not only a source of danger, but a possible receiver of God's justice. The binary 'savage-civilized' disseminated through colonialism is drawn in the way Yusuf perceives his other and the differences take a reptilian aspect with the woman's shedding of skin ("casually rubbing flakes of dry skin") and the man's wooden stance along with his slow eye movements ("he appeared carved out of a single piece of wood", "his eyes moved slowly over the cramped landscape of the station") (Gurnah 1994: 2).

These non-human entities are angered by the curious observer, a native, natural to the occupied space, and involuntarily—as an out-of-control and instinctive reaction—take a predatory role. Further into the novel, when Yusuf is deep into the forests with the merchant and his delegation, another European appears. This time, as a judge to the conflict between the merchant and a local chief, Chatu, the European is not bothered by the many eyes watching him as he eats and cleans himself. Unhurried by the anxiety caused by recent altercations and the overall tension of the people he is there to judge, his presence evokes the legends created around the image of the colonizer:

The merchant and Chatu waited in the clearing for the European to wake. The big man is here now, Uncle Aziz's men taunted Chatu. He'll make you eat shit, you thief. Chatu asked Nyundo if he had ever seen Europeans before. He had heard that they could eat metal. Was that true? (Gurnah 1994: 169-170)

At this time, he is not simply another officer from the northern continent, he is a European in his full capacity as a superior force. His powers were above the knowledge, experience, money, and even gunpower represented in the figures of the chief and the merchant. His very presence subdues their strong-willed tempers and quietens any form of objection against his decisions. As a representative of the colonizing apparatus, he is, therefore, meant to be watched and serve as an example. The previous encounter between Yusuf and the European happened outside of such situational bubble. In the open, seen without the layers of official service, the man feels unprotected, as an animal caught unguarded—hence such an instinctive response.

This presence, mostly felt rather than seen, is disseminated by the physical body of the European, but it is not restricted by it. It allows progress to occur. It moves the people in hopes of the blessings it seems to grant few of those who bent towards its will. Yusuf's father is the example of someone who, intent on achieving great profits, moves his family and puts his own son as collateral for loans from the merchant. Yusuf is aware that the financial struggles his father

experiences are mostly derived from the low profile of their town, a region with little room for moneymaking:

They came to Kawa because it had become a boom town when the Germans had used it as a depot for the railway line they were building to the highlands of the interior. But the boom passed quickly, and the trains now only stopped to take on wood and water. (Gurnah 1994: 5)

Their passage fades out quickly, while the changes they triggered carry on in waves. This disruption reaches the lives of the locals, most of whom had not had direct interactions with the colonizer, yet listened to the murmurs, the rumours raised about these individuals.

In *Afterlives*, Hamza follows the rowdiness of fellow recruits with some reservations. His silent output gives him space to reflect on his own destiny at the leadership of such mythological idealization:

Everyone knew about the askari army, the *schutztruppe*, and their ferocity against the people. Everyone knew about their stone-hearted German officers. He had chosen to be one of their soldiers, to get away, and as he sweated and tired, and they marched along the dirt road in the heat of the day, his anxiety about what he had done surged so powerfully at times that he grew short of breath. (Gurnah 2021: 52-53)

At this point, Hamza had not yet had extensive contact with Europeans. What he had lived was a world in which the colonizers threaded the outskirts of his reality. As he sees it, there is an “everyone” —the whole of human life, present and seen—, and a “they” —the Germans, their army, and their soldiers (even if African in roots and appearance, the askari here incorporate the linguistic foreignness of the *schutztruppe*). Hamza’s decision is a complete crossing of borders or jumping of fences, to use the same symbols explored on the previous section. On a more evident level: he is about to go to the front line of armed conflict, his reality is about to become that of a soldier. But there is also the narrative which is speaking through his anxiety. The non-human entity capable of taking over the land, overpowering local rulers, moving masses of people into battle —that is in a much larger scale of power than anything known before.

Moreover, Hamza feels short of breath as the physical presence of a legend approaches. The myths told and spread about the Europeans, as with the Germans and their military forces, were an explanation for the force of their influence. They are believed to eat metal and to lack the emotional range (“stone-hearted”) of the locals not simply due to their novelty, it is the magnitude of their weaponry and their laws which they speak for that make these seemingly inhuman bodies part of the whole, part of the “government”.

In *Paradise*, as the European gives his verdict to the matters between the merchant and Chatu, through the voices of interpreters, he confronts the chief about his actions:

“How is it you’re robbing people of their possessions? Aren’t you afraid of the law of the government?”

“What government? What are you talking about?” Chatu said, raising his voice at the interpreter.

“What government? Do you want to see what government? And you’d better not shout when you speak to me, my friend. Have you not heard of other big-mouthed people like you that the government has silenced and put into chains?” the interpreter asked sharply. (Gurnah 1994: 170)

There are two points to be made from this short extract. The first concludes what has been shown so far, that is, the ‘European’ in both novels is a construct reinforced by the empires who employ them and execute their power through these men. They are less human than an embodiment of their government, which means they are—or, at least, intend to be—extensions of the Europe they know.

Even through the harshest moments of the *schutztruppe*, having fought and lost many battles, having exhausted the land and the surrounding villages of food and other resources, the German officers were adamant in keeping their etiquette, their order, their status: “They kept their distance, eating separately, demanding deference wherever they could” (Gurnah 2021: 92). Without those rituals, what would be left to differentiate them from the Africans who fought next to them, side by side? Seen as their position is protected by the labels created through the imperialist narrative, their hierarchy would lose its foundation without the fences set between the image of the powerful colonizer against the powerless colonized.

Secondly, the power relations derived from colonialism move the very fabric of the structures which had already been established. The interpreter, an askari who would otherwise not defy the figure of Chatu in such terms, when speaking in lieu of the German officer, borrows the authority given from the government to its employee. In lending him his voice, the interpreter becomes part of that colonizing presence while, simultaneously, adapting it to him. Once the language of the European transforms to communicate with the locals, it ceases to be a simple matter of European order; it becomes part of that space, that culture, those people. To Chatu, the idea of the ‘government’ will then undertake an oppressive principle where he is forced to give away what he sees as rightfully his. That is the process through which colonization perpetuates its narrative through the peoples they subdue. That can only take place through the incorporation of power among the natives themselves. Edward Said has explored how imperialist regimes were able to vastly conquer spaces by other than violent means. According to him, culture and education were fundamental in bringing the natives closer to the colonial narrative.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “The various colonial schools in the Far East, in India, in the Arab world, in East and West Africa, for example, taught historical, scientific, and cultural truths to several generations of the native bourgeoisie. And in this learning process, millions of natives assimilated the fundamentals

When we take a look at the middlemen in *Afterlives*, such phenomenon becomes clear. They navigate between the European and their own cultures and languages, making use of the semblance of power they are allowed to borrow, while reinforcing their servitude when facing their leaders. Initially, the ombasha is the first liaison Hamza will encounter:

He explained in detail how each item was to be worn and cared for. He spoke harshly in different languages, Kiswahili, Arabic and some German, his utterances broken and incomplete. He added to them with signs and gestures that were impossible to misunderstand and repeated himself until they all nodded to show they understood. Ndio bwana. "Shabash. This is the language of the camp, unafahamu," the ombasha said, waving his cane in the air at them. "If you don't understand something, this will explain." (Gurnah 2021: 58-59)

Once again, there is a native of the colonized regions who will work as a translator between the will of the colonizer and the people under his supervision. His ability to make use of different languages, verbal and non-verbal, points to his constant cultural transcendency. Kiswahili being the widespread language used by the majority of peoples inhabiting the region; Arabic, the one brought by Muslims to Africa; and German, the one of the colonizers. The ombasha's words work as a bridge between these 3 nuclear entities, while he himself completes them with his body. He, as a human being filled with his own experiences, cannot be reduced to a decoder of messages. What he transmits comes from the European officers, but the manner in which he communicates them is his own.

Moreover, no matter his level of fluency in the various languages he uses, the ombasha has mastery over the means of communication of his position: the etiquette and the violence to tame the new recruits. Those are granted to him as the extension of imperial power. When compared to another character put in seniority over Hamza, Julius, some similar traits are found. Like the ombasha, Julius possesses some linguistic knowledge of German, but, more importantly, he can also read and write. That allows Julius to access the provisions store, as he could make use of the book logs put there to control the supplies. These abilities put these two characters closer to the civilized identity to which the Germans hold themselves.

These characters who have supervision over the protagonist are well-travelled. Julius had been with the *schutztruppe* for 3 years by the time Hamza was put to work alongside him as an orderly. In *Paradise*, Yusuf is taken by the merchant to work at his store, where Khalil (another case of a boy taken from his family after his father was not able to pay off his debts to the merchant) takes responsibility for taking care of him and teaching him the ropes.

Both Julius and Khalil had been brought to that space and taken over important roles on the maintenance of an establishment. They took pride in their

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of modern life, but remained subordinate dependents to a foreign imperial authority." (Said 2011: 406). Translated into English from the Portuguese version.

work and the trust set upon them. They also see themselves somehow more privileged than the protagonists:

“This is my little brother, who has come to work for us,” Khalil told the customers. “He looks so small and feeble because he’s just come from the wild lands, back there behind the hills. They only have cassava and weeds to eat there. That’s why he looks like living death. Hey, kifa urongo! Look at the poor boy. Look at his feeble arms and his long looks. But we’ll fill him up with fish and sweetmeats and honey, and in no time he’ll be plump enough for one of your daughters. Greet the customers, little boy. Give them a big smile.” (Gurnah 1994: 22)

Between Hamza and Julius, there is a distinction in charge, as Hamza is put in the service of the highest ranked German officer in the camp.

Julius looked pityingly at him. He considered Hamza unfortunate in many ways and told him so, not least because of his lack of a mission education and his backward religion. Hamza guessed that Julius thought himself better suited to serve the commanding officer instead of having to look after those of lesser rank, especially the bad-tempered Feldwebel, a disgraceful class of man in Julius’s often-repeated opinion. (Gurnah 2021: 83)

Be it physically or spiritually, these characters are kept at bay. They are hardly ever considered to integrate a group, a community. That does not mean they are treated badly. What can be shown is that both Hamza and Yusuf are often in the middle, between being pushed away and attracting the interest of people around them.

When Hamza was first introduced to the harshness of military training, it all seemed worth his being accepted. The exhaustion of his body, the strong odour of bodies huddled together to sleep, the harsh banter, the realization that their presence terrorized the villagers; he learned to deal with these aspects of his new life:

Unexpectedly, he began to feel pride at being part of the group, not rejected and mocked as he had feared, but there to share in the punishing routines and the exhaustion and the grumbling. (Gurnah 2021: 61)

That feeling, however, is short-lived, as the Oberleutnant soon discovers the uniqueness of the boy and takes him as his personal servant.

The sudden interest of the Oberleutnant seems arbitrary at first, as if he could not control his need to pass on European knowledge to such a young boy: “‘This is our Zivilisierungsmission,’ [...] ‘This is our cunning plot, which only a child could misunderstand. We have come here to civilise you. Unafahamu?’” (Gurnah 2021: 65). The officer dives into his mission to teach German to Hamza with such obstinacy that it causes discomfort among the other Germans. Unbothered by them, he convinces himself and others that he could get Hamza to read Schiller.

As soon as the Oberleutnant shows interest for the young recruit, Hamza feels the loss of his status among his fellow askari. Based on ingrained

homophobic mentalities typical —not limited— to the early 20th century, they mock the position in which Hamza will serve the Oberleutnant, thus driving a wedge between them:

He had felt himself one of them, had shared their privations and punishments, and no one among them had spoken to him in such a slighting way before. It was as if they were forcibly expelling him from their midst. (Gurnah 2021: 66)

The bonds between the European and the African disrupt the seemingly mandatory need for segregation. Yet, as the one in the highest position of command, the Oberleutnant does not have to deal with the same reproach as Hamza. The latter is the one persecuted by both groups and, in his isolation, made to feel dislocated.

There is no question whether the German officer is put under the same pressure to fit in as Hamza. The overreaching presence of his government guarantees a sense of identity onto which the Oberleutnant can lean. That is a stronghold for the officers, as they fight for the roots they have inwardly established in their home country and whose image they constantly summon through their rituals and codes of conduct. They might be travelling through a large region of eastern Africa, but they have not left their Europe. His breaching of an unspoken agreement by showing serious interest in a native, therefore, will make that distance shorter. A personal bond would allow for a connection between the humanity in these colonizers and the space they do not allow themselves to feel. This is to say that the Oberleutnant is indeed subject to changes from his relationship with Hamza, even though he is expected to go without crossing the fences between us and them.

After the nearly fatal attack on Hamza, the Oberleutnant reveals the similarities he perceives between the askari and his own brother.

“My younger brother was that age when he died. In a fire in the barracks. I was in there too. Eighteen ... a beautiful boy, and I think of him often.” He stroked the stretched skin on his temple and then sat stiffly for a few minutes as if he would not say any more. His hand reached out towards the bed but then he pulled it back. “It was a terrible fierce fire. He did not want to be in the army. He was not suited to it. My father wanted it. It was a family tradition ... all soldiers ... and my young brother did not want to disappoint him ... a dreamer. It was very clever of you to learn German ... quickly and so well. He loved Schiller, my brother Hermann.” (Gurnah 2021: 118-119)

Both Yusuf and Hamza attract the eyes of men and women for being ‘beautiful’ boys. Yusuf is harassed by an old woman who does her shopping at the store of the merchant, as well as by the merchant’s first wife, who sees in Yusuf an angel sent by God to take away the blemish on her face and neck that gives her great agony. He also deals with the predatory figure of the men working for the merchant who, during their travels into the wildness, insinuate themselves to him, and are only deterred by his closeness to their leader. Hamza experiences similar advances from officers in the *schutztruppe*.

What the Oberleutnant clarifies in this scene with Hamza is that his interest stemmed from his own sense of home. The askari boy he saw among the other soldiers triggered his initial breach, as he could not help seeing his own long-lost brother in the tenderness noted in Hamza. Moreover, as 'beauty' is such a broad term, it can be understood that physical appearance is not the only aspect that makes Hamza stand out—he emits an inner pull to people's sensibilities. There was no initiative from him to establish a deeper connection with the Oberleutnant, yet his existence, his simple act of being, led to the start of the current which has been described above. From his introduction to the language of his colonizer to a confession by a German officer to an askari soldier, as well as the gears put into place to prioritize his recovery, there is Hamza's constant unhomeliness. Until his arrival at the city where he meets his future wife, Afiya, he is a loose element among his peers.

Briefly returning to *Paradise*, Yusuf expresses this feeling in his last moments living under the regime of the merchant. He craved freedom from the oppressive circumstances of his arrangement in the store, prevented from pursuing the girl he fell in love with and abused by people who wanted him to cave to their wishes. But he knew there was no escaping his past. He could go live in the mountains or in the countryside, visit people he had met during his travels:

And everywhere he would be asked about his father and his mother, and his sister and his brother, and what he had brought and what he hoped to take away. To none of the questions would he have anything but evasive answers. The seyyid could travel deep into strange lands in a cloud of perfume, armed only with bags of trinkets and a sure knowledge of his superiority. The white man in the forest feared nothing as he sat under his flag, ringed by armed soldiers. But Yusuf had neither a flag nor righteous knowledge with which to claim superior honour, and he thought he understood that the small world he knew was the only one available to him. (Gurnah 1994: 237)

As we can see, that European omnipresence provides the certainty—even the comfort—of feeling home. The lack thereof causes Yusuf to experiment loneliness. Moreover, he foretells the arrival of Hamza at the village where he used to serve his own seyyid, as the ex-askari is mistrusted by his inability to answer questions about his family history and his time at the army. In the text, the reader is the one aware that this flag and the armed forces can also restrict and lead to conflicting loyalties.

Another element in the last quote from *Afterlives* is the grip of tradition over the dreamer, past over future. Neither Hamza nor Yusuf can be said to have a family heritage to adhere to, as their distancing from their hometown at an early age did not allow them the memories or purpose to do so. That is not to say they have nothing left from their parents, but that what the Oberleutnant talks about regarding his brother refers to is a present imposition of legacy. The way through which their pasts act over them involves knowledge and shame. Hamza's contentment with the simple things, his enjoyment of family life and rejection of

the ambition and greed he saw all around him, those are his weapons against the disgrace in which his father fell. He avoids losing all that is important to him by his natural disinterest in going into schemes and businesses to accumulate wealth.

Yusuf had been told about the mistakes made by his father, and he is aware of the lack of initiative from Khalil whose inability to save himself and his sister from the merchant is a source of frustration for Yusuf. That awareness acts on his last impulse to set off as a way to escape from having his destiny determined by the path taken by Khalil. And he does that after having experimented being in the wild, away from known civilization, in the midst of people from different cultures and customs:

The terror he had felt was not the same as fear, he said. It was as if he had no real existence, as if he was living in a dream, over the edge of extinction. It made him wonder what it was that people wanted so much that they could overcome that terror in search of trade. It was not all terror, not at all, he said, but it was the terror which gave everything shape. (Gurnah 1994: 180)

His is the terror of unhomeliness. This horrifying feeling that shakes his sense of self, as if he were surrounded by nothingness, is the unrecognition of the migrant in a new land, in the middle of a new culture and people. His existence is put under questioning, as there is no way of proving he belongs to that space. The vastness he explored with the merchant and his people might well be the exact freedom he would chase towards the end of the novel. Devoid of significance, that space had no borders to offer. No fences where one could find some anchorage in seeing the limits between oneself and the world.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Achille Mbembe, on the book previously mentioned, states: “The world is under construction, and so are we”<sup>11</sup> (Mbembe 2019: 73). Nothing is, but is in the process of being. The recent tendencies in postcolonial studies have been rebuilding and reconstructing much of our accumulated knowledge as a way to be more inclusive. New voices put what has been long established into new perspective and move certainties into the wild horror of the unknown. As we become aware of the gaps in our field, the ones who are not comprehended within our circles, we work towards expansion instead of refusing to acknowledge the movement taking place over the textures of society. It is a rewarding process that allows growth. Therefore, development can only be reached through this openness, through the mobility of borders.

While limits between cultures and nations cannot suddenly cease to exist, fixed fences set with the intention of restricting or prohibiting passage —like the

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<sup>11</sup> Translated from the work in Portuguese: “O mundo está em criação, e nós também”.



ones forced onto humanity during colonization— integrate a backward technique of holding on to an imagined collective past, which inherently leads to segregation. Decolonization movements have been struggling to dismantle the heritage left by centuries of colonial narrative being sown into societies. Concepts of what it means to be a ‘developed’ nation, of how the current understanding of race has changed, of the determinism in how much of the global South is seen; these are just a few examples of the many topics raised and debated by writers, lecturers, and other voices in decolonial and postcolonial movements.<sup>12</sup>

Once the decolonization can be seen as the disenclosure of the world, moving between borders and getting to learn about the many ways in which cultures can interact with each other take part in understanding the new potentials we have for the future. The migrant is one of its main elements. People have been wandering across territories since the beginning of time. Ethnicity, social class, language, and religion among others have always played an important role on the destinations and the welcoming available to the individual. However, despite attempts to deny access and impose immobility over certain communities, there is no denying that cultural hybridization is a natural effect of every encounter between different groups. The migrant, therefore, symbolizes this rebellion against immutability. Not only that, but they also motivate miscegenation.

The present study has tried to show these elements in the characters of Yusuf and Hamza on the novels *Paradise* (1994) and *Afterlives* (2020), written by Abdulrazak Gurnah. Both novels depict an isolated migrant who experiences unhomeliness and wanders through life in search of a sense of belonging. They go through an abrupt uprooting at an early age and, since then, transition between conflicting scenarios where their powerlessness is counterbalanced by their inherent ability to adapt and to draw people’s sensitivity in their favour. Seen as the overbearing presence of Europeans and other groups imposed fixed identities over the natives of that land, Yusuf and Hamza reach past these stereotypes and towards the humanity of others.

Their decision to join the *schutztruppe*, while an escape from an oppressive future, is a rebellion of the heart. Their fighting for the people taking the land from Africans did not pose an issue —what was craved was freedom and belonging. As migrants, they often influence other people around them to break the rigidity of rules and traditional laws. The Oberleutnant will be the most evident symbol of such phenomenon, as he starts an emotional bond with Hamza. In *Paradise*, the first wife of the merchant, in her desire for the boy, transgressed a number of norms of conduct in order to get him closer to her. These, among other examples, depict Gurnah’s migrant as a vector of change and

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<sup>12</sup> Despite utilizing the post-colonial framework as the theoretical scaffold of this article, I also believe that decolonial studies —which constitute a different body of theory— offer valid critical and political contributions to the topic, which is why I mention them in these closing remarks.

adaptability in large and small scale. Lives impacted by the violence of wars and colonization, surely; but also people in need of a sense of community and emotional ties.

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