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Research Article

Oceanic Cartographies of Displacement: Blue Humanities and Postcolonial Memory in Gurnah's Fiction

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Abstract: This paper examines the oceanic dimensions of Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels *Paradise* (1994) and *By the Sea* (2001) through the interpretive framework of the Blue Humanities, an interdisciplinary field that repositions water—and the ocean in particular—as a critical lens for literary and cultural analysis. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Steve Mentz, Isabel Hofmeyr, and Hester Blum, the paper argues that Gurnah's fiction reconfigures postcolonial memory by foregrounding the Indian Ocean as a space of historical entanglement, displacement, and epistemological contestation. Rather than treating the sea as a passive backdrop, Gurnah inscribes it as an active archive—a medium through which colonial trade, forced migration, and cultural hybridity are narrated and interrogated. The analysis demonstrates how littoral consciousness in Gurnah's work disrupts terrestrial models of nation and belonging, offering instead an amphibious poetics that complicates received narratives of African postcolonial identity. The paper contributes to emerging conversations at the intersection of oceanic criticism and postcolonial literary studies.

Keywords: Blue Humanities; Indian Ocean; Postcolonial Literature; Littoral Consciousness

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Introduction

The awarding of the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature to Abdulrazak Gurnah, celebrated for what the Swedish Academy termed his "uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee," brought renewed global attention to a body of work that had long resisted the gravitational pull of nation-centered literary criticism. Gurnah's fiction, rooted in the layered histories of Zanzibar and the East African coast, operates within a fundamentally oceanic cartography. His narratives do not merely describe coastal settings; they think through the sea, deploying maritime space as a medium of historical reckoning and cultural memory. The Blue Humanities, a field that gained conceptual coherence through the work of Steve Mentz, who coined the term "blue cultural studies" in 2009, offers a productive theoretical apparatus for reading Gurnah's oceanic imagination. As Mentz has argued, the Blue Humanities challenge the cultural primacy of terrestrial thinking by repositioning water as a central agent in human history, ecology, and literary expression (Mentz, *An Introduction* 14). This shift from land-centric epistemologies to what Hester Blum has called "oceanic feeling" provides a frame capable of accommodating the fluidity that characterizes Gurnah's narrative worlds—worlds shaped by the monsoon trade routes, Omani imperialism, Swahili cosmopolitanism, and European colonial imposition (Blum 670).

This paper undertakes a reading of two of Gurnah's most critically acclaimed novels, *Paradise* (1994) and *By the Sea* (2001), through the analytical lens of the Blue Humanities. It argues that Gurnah's fiction reconfigures postcolonial memory by inscribing the Indian Ocean not as an inert geographic referent but as a dynamic archive—a material and imaginative space where colonial violence, trade networks, displacement, and cultural hybridity are simultaneously recorded and contested. The paper contends that the littoral consciousness pervading Gurnah's work disrupts the territorial logic of postcolonial nationhood, articulating instead an amphibious poetics of belonging and unbelonging that resonates with the emergent concerns of oceanic criticism. The choice of Gurnah as the site of inquiry is not incidental. His oeuvre occupies a distinctive position within postcolonial literary studies precisely because it refuses the binary of colony and metropole, opting instead for the relational, transversal geographies of the Indian Ocean littoral. As Charne Lavery has observed, Gurnah's fiction belongs to a "coastal and transoceanic" strand of postcolonial writing whose geography disrupts the convention of reading postcolonial literatures as national allegories (Lavery, *Writing Ocean Worlds* 3). By attending to the oceanic in Gurnah, this paper seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarship that reads postcolonial fiction through maritime and hydrological frameworks.

Literature Review

The Blue Humanities, though a relatively recent disciplinary formation, draws upon a deep intellectual genealogy. Mentz's foundational essay "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature" (2009) called for a reorientation of literary criticism away from land-based metaphors and toward the

material reality of the ocean. Subsequent works—including *Ocean* (2020), *Shipwreck Modernity* (2015), and *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* (2023)—have consolidated the field's theoretical vocabulary, positioning the ocean as a space that demands plural poetics rather than a singular theory (Mentz, *An Introduction* 14). Dan Brayton, Steve Mentz, and Hester Blum use the ocean as a lens to advocate a shift away from the frequent use of watery metaphors and toward focusing on the ocean as a material and social entity.

Isabel Hofmeyr's scholarship has been instrumental in extending the Blue Humanities into postcolonial territory. Her essay "The Complicating Sea: The Indian Ocean as Method" (2012) proposed the Indian Ocean not merely as a geographic area but as a methodological framework—one that foregrounds south-south connections, multi-directional circulations, and the relational entanglements that precede and survive European imperialism (Hofmeyr, "Complicating Sea" 584). Hofmeyr's concept of "hydrocolonialism," developed in *Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism and the Custom House* (2022), links colonial governance to the control of coastal waters and port infrastructures, providing a materialist complement to the culturalist orientations of Mentz and Blum. As Hofmeyr contends, hydrocolonialism moves postcolonial theory away from colony/metropole binaries toward the tracing of multi-directional, empire-wide interactions.

Scholarship on Gurnah has expanded considerably following the Nobel Prize. Keyvan Allahyari's concept of "oceanic border thinking" in *By the Sea* reads the border as a "moving and permeable formation" conditioned by water's elemental properties, challenging overdetermined readings that attach borders primarily to land (Allahyari 2). Sreya M. Datta's analysis of Swahili transmodernity in Gurnah's oeuvre positions the Indian Ocean as a simultaneous embodiment of place, space, and the Swahili concept of *mahali*—a term denoting the temporal dimension inhabited by a spatial location (Datta 4). Lavery's *Writing Ocean Worlds* (2021) offers the most sustained engagement with Gurnah, Ghosh, and Lindsey Collen as writers who produce the Indian Ocean as a literary region (Lavery, *Writing Ocean Worlds* 3). Mustapha Kharoua's reading of displacement trauma in *By the Sea* supplements Michael Rothberg's "traumatic realism" with Paul Gilroy's "camp mentality" to address the imprisonment dimensions of postcolonial dislocation (Kharoua 1). What remains underexplored in existing scholarship is a systematic reading of Gurnah's fiction through the specific conceptual architecture of the Blue Humanities. While individual studies have addressed oceanic themes, maritime imagery, or Indian Ocean geographies, none has fully deployed the Blue Humanities' distinctive emphasis on water as a material agent, an ecological medium, and an epistemological challenge. This paper addresses that lacuna by bringing the Blue Humanities' tripartite concern with materiality, method, and poetics into sustained dialogue with Gurnah's postcolonial imagination.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative, hermeneutic methodology grounded in close textual analysis and interdisciplinary theoretical synthesis. The primary texts—Gurnah's *Paradise* and *By the Sea*—are read through a tripartite conceptual framework drawn from

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the Blue Humanities: (a) the ocean as method, following Hofmeyr's proposition that the Indian Ocean can serve as an analytical lens rather than merely a geographic referent; (b) littoral consciousness, adapted from Lavery's work on the amphibian aesthetics of coastal fiction; and (c) oceanic materiality, informed by Mentz's insistence on water's physical properties—its fluidity, opacity, and capacity for both connection and dissolution—as generative of literary meaning.

The analysis situates these texts within the broader discursive field of postcolonial literary studies, drawing selectively on Edward Said's theorization of imaginative geography, Paul Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic (as a comparativist foil to Indian Ocean frameworks), and Walter Mignolo's notion of border thinking (Mignolo 129). The methodology follows the Fish Model of research design, proceeding from contextual framing through analytical engagement to a discussion of scholarly implications and directions for further inquiry.

Analysis and Discussion: I. The Indian Ocean as Archive: Paradise and the Cartography of Trade

Paradise, shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1994 and later identified by the Swedish Academy as Gurnah's breakthrough work, is set on the East African coast and its interior during the closing years of the nineteenth century—the period of German colonial consolidation in Tanganyika. The novel traces the trajectory of Yusuf, a boy sold by his father to the merchant Aziz in settlement of a debt, whose passage from the Swahili coast into the continental interior follows the routes of the last great Arab-African trading caravans. At its core, *Paradise* is a novel about the oceanic infrastructure of trade: the Indian Ocean networks linking Arabs, Persians, Indians, and Swahili communities that had sustained coastal East African society for centuries before European intervention (Gurnah, *Paradise* 3).

Reading *Paradise* through the Blue Humanities foregrounds the Indian Ocean as an archive of entangled histories rather than a mere route of passage. Gurnah constructs the Swahili coast as a space of profound cultural sedimentation, where Arabic, Indian, and African layers of civilization are compressed into the social fabric of the trading towns. The littoral setting is not decorative; it is constitutive. Michael Pearson's concept of "littoral society"—a formation shaped by the rhythms and exchanges of the sea rather than by the administrative logic of the hinterland—finds vivid fictional expression in Gurnah's coastal towns (Pearson 37). The coast functions as what Hofmeyr has called a "complicating sea"—a zone where the neat binaries of postcolonial criticism (colonizer/colonized, center/periphery, land/sea) collapse under the pressure of historical multiplicity (Hofmeyr, "Complicating Sea" 585).

Gurnah's depiction of the caravan trade illuminates what Blue Humanities scholars describe as the materiality of oceanic exchange. The commodities that animate the novel's economy—ivory, gum copal, Manchester cloth, brass wire, glass beads—are artifacts of the Indian Ocean's *longue durée*, remnants of commercial networks that predate European arrival by centuries. The ocean, in this reading, is not merely the medium through which goods travel; it is the generative condition of the social order

that *Paradise* anatomizes. The hierarchies between Arabs and Africans, the institution of debt peonage that binds Yusuf to Aziz, the cosmopolitan veneer of the coastal towns—all are products of an oceanic world-system (Göttsche 320).

The garden motif in *Paradise* acquires particular resonance within a Blue Humanities reading. Aziz's opulent garden in the coastal city, with its symmetrical quarters, central pool, and imported flora, represents the terrestrial domestication of oceanic wealth. It is a manufactured *hortus conclusus* that aestheticizes the violence of the trade and sustains it. The contrasting garden at the interior outpost—rough, snake-infested, exhaling what the novel describes as fumes of putrefaction—registers the dissolution of this oceanic order as it moves inland, away from the coast's regulatory influence. The spatial grammar of the novel thus operates along a coast-interior axis that is simultaneously a gradient of oceanic power.

Gurnah's engagement with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is well documented in scholarship (Mustafa 14; Lavery, "Fictions" 408), but a Blue Humanities perspective reframes this intertextual dialogue. Where Conrad's novella treats the African interior as an epistemological void—the unnavigable upstream into primordial darkness—Gurnah reverses the vector of unknowability. In *Paradise*, the European presence appears as an alien intrusion into an already intricate oceanic civilization. The Germans arrive not into a vacuum but into a densely networked world of trade, obligation, and cultural exchange. The Indian Ocean, in Gurnah's counter-narrative, is the generative epistemic space; Europe is the disruption.

II. Littoral Consciousness and the Poetics of Displacement: By the Sea

If *Paradise* anatomizes the Indian Ocean as a historical system, *By the Sea* (2001) performs a more intimate, phenomenological engagement with the ocean as a medium of memory and displacement. The novel narrates the stories of Saleh Omar, an elderly Zanzibari asylum seeker arriving in England with nothing but a small box of incense, and Latif Mahmud, a Zanzibari academic already settled in Britain, whose family history is entangled with Saleh's through a bitter property dispute rooted in colonial-era machinations. The two men's stories converge in an English seaside town, and through their competing narratives, the novel unfolds a layered archaeology of Zanzibari history from the Omani sultanate through British colonial rule, the 1964 revolution, and the violence of post-independence nationalism (Gurnah, *By the Sea*).

The title itself—*By the Sea*—announces the novel's littoral orientation. Mentz's insistence on attending to the physical properties of water finds a powerful correlative in Gurnah's treatment of the sea as both connector and barrier, a medium of arrival and a site of loss. Saleh Omar's passage from Zanzibar to England replicates in miniature the oceanic crossings that have defined the Indian Ocean world for millennia. However, his arrival is marked not by the cosmopolitan exchanges of the old maritime order but by the bureaucratic apparatus of the modern border regime—immigration officers, asylum interviews, and the juridical production of the refugee as a legal category (Newns 507).

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Allahyari's concept of "oceanic border thinking" illuminates this dimension with particular precision. The border in *By the Sea* is not a fixed line on land but a permeable, liquid formation conditioned by water's elemental properties. Gurnah's narrative structure enacts this fluidity: the novel shifts between Saleh's and Latif's perspectives, between present-day England and remembered Zanzibar, between the personal and the political, in a movement that mirrors the tidal rhythm of the ocean itself (Allahyari 5). The border's liquidity captures how Gurnah refuses to fix identity, memory, or belonging to any single territorial ground. The incense box that Saleh Omar carries across the ocean functions as what one might term an *oceanic object*—a material condensation of Indian Ocean trade routes, Zanzibari cultural practice, and personal memory. The fragrance of *ud al qamari* (aloeswood) emanating from the box is a sensory trace of the Indian Ocean's olfactory geography, linking Zanzibar to the Arabian Peninsula, India, and the broader Swahili world. Within a Blue Humanities framework, such objects are not merely symbolic; they are material instantiations of the ocean's connective power, portable archives of a world-system that persists in displaced form even after the political structures sustaining it have been dismantled.

Gurnah's treatment of storytelling in *By the Sea* further extends the novel's oceanic poetics. Both Saleh and Latif are narrators whose stories are shaped by the tidal dynamics of concealment and revelation, silence and speech. Saleh initially refuses to speak English upon arrival in England—a strategic silence that mirrors the ocean's opacity, its resistance to full transparency. As the two men's narratives gradually converge, the act of storytelling becomes a form of oceanic navigation—a way of charting the currents of shared history that connect them across time and displacement. The reconciliation that the novel tentatively achieves is not terrestrial settlement but oceanic relation: a mutual acknowledgment of the entangled histories that the Indian Ocean has both generated and scattered (Kharoua 8).

III. Toward an Amphibious Poetics: Theoretical Implications

Reading Gurnah through the Blue Humanities yields several implications for postcolonial literary theory. The foremost pertains to the question of method. Hofmeyr's proposition of the Indian Ocean as method—rather than merely as area—suggests that oceanic frameworks can generate comparative literary histories that cut across the conventional boundaries of national literary traditions (Hofmeyr, "Complicating Sea" 586). Gurnah's fiction, which moves between Zanzibar, mainland Tanzania, and England, between Arabic, Swahili, and English linguistic registers, and between precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial temporalities, resists assimilation into any single national canon. It demands, instead, what Datta has called a "transmodern" reading practice—one that honors the cross-cutting, multidirectional flows of the Indian Ocean world (Datta 6).

The second implication concerns the politics of spatial imagination. Postcolonial criticism has long been attentive to the construction of space, from Said's "imaginative geography" to Homi Bhabha's "third space." However, these formulations have tended to privilege terrestrial metaphors—borders, thresholds, margins, peripheries. The Blue Humanities, as deployed through Gurnah's fiction, offer a corrective by foregrounding

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the ocean as a fundamentally different kind of space: one that is volumetric rather than planar, dynamic rather than static, connective rather than divisive. The Swahili concept of *mahali*—place as simultaneously spatial and temporal—aligns with this oceanic understanding, suggesting that the Indian Ocean littoral operates according to a spatial logic that is irreducible to Western cartographic conventions (Datta 4).

The third implication touches upon the relationship between postcolonial memory and environmental materiality. The Blue Humanities insist on the ocean's materiality—its physical behavior, its ecological systems, its capacity to both preserve and destroy. Gurnah's fiction honors this materiality: the sea in his novels is never purely metaphorical. It is the medium through which people, goods, languages, and diseases travel. It is the element that shapes the architecture and the cuisine, the economies and the cosmologies, of the Swahili coast (Moorthy 75). By attending to this materiality, a Blue Humanities reading of Gurnah resists the tendency in postcolonial criticism to treat space as a discursive construction, insisting instead on the co-constitution of discourse and environment, of narrative and ecology.

These observations open several avenues for future inquiry. The Blue Humanities framework could be productively extended to Gurnah's later novels, particularly *Afterlives* (2020), which addresses the aftermath of German colonialism and the First World War in East Africa—events deeply conditioned by Indian Ocean geopolitics (Göttsche 317). Comparative studies linking Gurnah's oceanic poetics with those of other Indian Ocean writers—Amitav Ghosh, Lindsey Collen, Khadija Abdalla Bajaber—would further consolidate the Indian Ocean as a literary-critical region. Moreover, the intersection of the Blue Humanities with Hofmeyr's hydrocolonialism offers a promising framework for examining how maritime infrastructure—ports, customs houses, shipping routes—shapes literary culture in postcolonial contexts.

It must be acknowledged, however, that the Blue Humanities, as a field that originated primarily in Euro-American academic contexts and early modern literary studies, carries its own epistemological limitations. The application of this framework to non-Western literatures demands critical self-reflexivity about the risk of reproducing metropolitan theoretical hegemonies even in the act of challenging them. Gurnah's fiction, with its insistence on the irreducible specificity of Swahili coastal experience and its refusal of easy transcendence, provides a salutary check against such universalizing tendencies.

Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* and *By the Sea* articulate a postcolonial imagination that is fundamentally oceanic in its orientations. Through the interpretive framework of the Blue Humanities, this paper demonstrates how Gurnah's fiction inscribes the Indian Ocean as an active archive of colonial entanglement, displacement, and cultural negotiation—rather than a passive geographic backdrop. The analysis of *Paradise* revealed how the novel's cartography of trade configures the Indian Ocean as the generative condition of East African social order, while the reading of *By the Sea*

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foregrounded the ocean's role as a medium of memory, displacement, and precarious reconciliation.

The paper has argued that a Blue Humanities approach to Gurnah disrupts terrestrial models of postcolonial identity and nationhood, offering instead an amphibious poetics that moves between land and sea, between the littoral and the interior, between the material and the imaginative. This reading contributes to the growing recognition that the ocean—and the Indian Ocean in particular—constitutes not merely a thematic interest within postcolonial literary studies but a methodological challenge: a call to rethink the spatial, temporal, and epistemological categories through which we read postcolonial texts. Gurnah's oceanic consciousness, shaped by the layered histories of Zanzibar and the Swahili coast, refuses both the nostalgia of a lost maritime cosmopolitanism and the teleology of national belonging. What his fiction offers instead is a vision of postcolonial selfhood as irreducibly relational—formed in and through the crossings, exchanges, and displacements that the Indian Ocean has sustained over centuries. It is this vision that makes Gurnah's work not only a significant contribution to African and postcolonial literature but a vital interlocutor for the Blue Humanities as they extend their reach beyond the Euro-American literary traditions in which they first took shape.

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