ZANZIBARI WORLDS: A RELATIONAL READING OF ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S *BY THE SEA* AND ADAM SHAFI ADAM'S *VUTA N'KUVUTE*

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Abstract

My aim is to bring into conversation two novels, each by a renowned author from Zanzibar: Abdulrazak Gurnah's By the Sea *(published in 2001) and Shafi Adam Shafi's* Vuta n'kuvute *("Tug of War," published in 1999), which offer literary imaginings of Zanzibari worlds in the turbulent 1960s. The two novels—written in English and Swahili, respectively—have never been brought into relation with each other, since they belong to two different literary worlds. Questioning this dichotomy, however, I will show moments where the novels overlap, situate Gurnah's* By the Sea *in a local Zanzibari context, and sketch out the more global panorama and multitude of narratives in Shafi's* Vuta n'kuvute*, while also drawing attention to the novels' differences. Lastly, instead of ceaselessly confirming its own (Western-dominated) paradigms of analysis, I argue that Indian Ocean literary studies needs to take into account greater literary diversity in terms of language, narrative, and historical perspective in order to gain a more diverse perspective on Indian Ocean worlds.*

Keywords: Indian Ocean Literary Studies, Multilingual Literary Spaces, World Literature, *Taarab*, (Trans)Nationalism

Introduction: Abdulrazak Gurnah and Shafi Adam Shafi - Two Zanzibari Writers

In this contribution, I am bringing together two novels of these Zanzibari writers, who write in two different languages and whose novels have, to my knowledge, never been compared. Thus, I am deliberately crossing a border that is not merely a linguistic one: the novels belong to different worlds, attract different readerships, are published by different publishers, distributed according to different market logics, and discussed by different academic disciplines, which also means that they have been analyzed with different questions in mind. This holds for most East African novels in Swahili and English: though both languages serve as the dominant written literary languages of East Africa, scholarship on East African

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literature has largely been divided along language lines (for a pioneering critical discussion, see Diegner & Schulze-Englert, 2006).[2]

Both Abdulrazak Gurnah and Shafi Adam Shafi are acclaimed writers who were born in Zanzibar town during the time of late British colonialism and the Omani sultanate in the 1940s. Both experienced the upheavals of the 1960s in their youth, when, driven not only by politics but also by wanderlust, they made their way to Europe, like many other Zanzibari writers. While Abdulrazak Gurnah took a flight to the UK, Shafi Adam Shafi, originally also with the intention of going to the UK, embarked on a long, adventurous journey, crossing the African continent from Kenya to Uganda, the DRC, Sudan, and Egypt to study in the GDR, Czechoslovakia, and later Sweden and the US before coming back to Zanzibar as a journalist in the late 1970s.[3] While Abdurazak Gurnah lived through poverty and uncertainty as a displaced migrant, all the while carving out a successful existence in the world of literature and becoming a prominent English-language writer, Shafi Adam Shafi, who spent two years in prison after the assassination of Zanzibar's president Abeidi Karume in 1972,[4] became renowned as a Swahili journalist, writer, and activist.

Both of them began writing when they were young. Shafi Adam Shafi started publishing his novels in the late 1970s: after *Karsi ya mwinyi Fuad* ("Overlord Fuad's Palace," 1978), depicting the Zanzibar revolution, and *Kuli* ("Docker," 1979), focusing on the anticolonial strike of 1948, *Vuta n'kuvute* ("Tug of War," 2001) is his third novel.[5] Before *By the Sea*, Abdurazak Gurnah had published six other novels starting from the late 1980s; besides *By the Sea*, his novel *Paradise* (1994), focusing on the caravan trade of Tanganyika before World War I, has been the most acclaimed and discussed for its subtle, but elegantly intertwined narrative of shifting maps.

Worlds Apart? Reading Across Worlds

The two novels here in focus seem to belong to two different worlds. Gurnah's English novel *By the Sea* published by a British publisher and meant for an international, English-speaking audience, has been widely interpreted in Anglophone studies as speaking to postcolonial paradigms of "writing back," discussions of diaspora identities as well as to Indian Ocean

[2] This largely holds both for East African academia as well as beyond; in the former case, this might be even more surprising, given that not only many authors but also the scholars are minimally bilingual.

[3] In his memoirs, *Mbali na nyumbani* ("Far Away from Home"), Shafi Adam Shafi gives a vivid account of his journey. As for his intellectual career, see the informative interview in Shafi & Diegner, 2011 as well as the YouTube clip "Adam Shafi juu ya Maisha yake na kazi zake" ("Adam Shafi on His Life and Works"): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xKTJCBertXQ. For an interview with Abdulrazak Gurnah about his life and works, see for instance Steiner, 2013.

[4] Many intellectuals were imprisoned without trial at that time—an experience that informed his novel *Haini* ("The Traitor," 2013).

[5] See also Bertoncini Zúbková et al., 2009, p. 151 and Garnier, 2006, pp. 122ff. Later literary works, besides the already mentioned *Haini* ("Traitor," 2003), include *Mbali na nyumbani* ("Far Away from Home," 2013) and *Mtoto wa mama* ("Mother's Child," 2018). *Kasri ya mwinyi Fuad* has been translated into French, German, and Russian; *Kuli* has also been translated into Russian.

studies with its outlook on narratives of transcontinental trajectories decentering the West. For Hofmeyr (2010, p. 723) for instance, Gurnah is one of the "three prominent writers on the Indian Ocean" next to Amitav Ghosh and Engseng Hong, since their literary narratives challenge the maps drawn by empires and nation-states. Writing "from a position of weakness" (Steiner, 2013, p. 161) against a "dominant narrative, obviously a European and an imperial one" (Steiner, 2013, p. 160), as Gurnah himself describes his work as a writer, entails sharing his perspective on the displaced diaspora subject "from a poor place" (Steiner, 2013, p. 161). His literature comprises a performative act: his postcolonial novel challenges the constraints of the Western novel, so deeply rooted in the narrow epoch of Europe's national and imperial projects. Its own literary project is necessarily one of world-making, adding the Indian Ocean to postcolonial narratives of "Entgrenzung" (Moser & Simonis, 2014, p. 14), literally "un-bordering" (i.e., "dissolving borders"), meaning to question the cartographic and epistemic confines of the Western world. It makes the "periphery" part of a newly conceived globality that decenters the West.

Adam Shafi's *Vuta n'kuvute* is an award-winning Swahili novel that has never been translated into English. It is part of the national school curriculum in Tanzania, widely read in Kenya as well, and discussed by scholars of Swahili studies in both East Africa and the West. In Swahili literary studies, which has developed mostly in parallel to a growing literary production in modern Swahili prose from the 1960s onward, writing literature has also been considered primarily a performative act of bringing new sociopolitical worlds into being. However, *Vuta n'kuvute*, whose main protagonist, Yasmin, belongs to the Indian diaspora, has generally not been discussed with regard to its postcolonial position or in terms of the Indian Ocean, constructing larger, transcontinental maps; rather, *ukombozi*—"liberation" through class struggle from the shackles of the dark past of oppression by colonial powers, feudalist structures of slavery, or backward, imprisoning customs—has provided a common framework for reading the novel (see Adam, 2014 and Mlacha & Madumulla, 1991). The initiative of writing modern literature in Swahili—even the term *fasihi* "literature" was introduced only in the 1960s—has been closely linked with imagining the nation-state in East Africa, and thus more profoundly with drawing an imaginary cartography of the territory, i.e. the land, and not the sea. Rooted in a colonial program of border-drawing, after Tanzania's independence in 1961, the triad of a) modern literary writing as opposed to a multitude of written and oral literary practices, b) the creation of a (primarily written!) standard Swahili taken from the continuum of spoken varieties, and c) the creation of a state was tied to the modern myth of a new beginning of progress and development (see Diegner & Schulze-Engler, 2015 and Whiteley, 1969).

Accordingly, *Vuta n'kuvute* has also been read in terms of *literature engagée*, prominent in East African literary criticism after the inception of the socialist state, nurtured by a more global Marxist-realist understanding of literature (see Garnier, 2006). The novel is viewed as *kioo cha jamii*, a "mirror of society," a major notion in Swahili literary criticism (see also Garnier, 2006 and Vierke, 2017). Its aim is not merely to "mirror" a status quo, but the novel

is supposed to have what Barber and Furniss (2006, p. 6) call the "purposive dimension" of many African-language literatures, i.e. the intention to bear impact on the specific social realities in Africa, "to create a new society in accordance with how people see the difficulties their societies have to face. Therefore, literature is like a mirror and the novel like the shadows or our image in that mirror" ("kuiumba jamii mpya, kufuatana na jinsi wanavyoyaona matatizo ambayo yanazikabili jamii zao. Kwa vile fasihi ni kama kioo na riwaya kama vivuli au picha yetu kwenye kioo hicho […]") (Mlacha, 1984, p. 4).

If the literary worlds to which the two novels belong seem to be fundamentally different, how does each imagine Zanzibar? Both novels depict the late colonialism of the 1960s, an era of fundamental social change with the subsequent independence of Tanganyika (1961), Zanzibar's revolution (1963), and its joining into a republic with Tanganyika (1964): how do they differ in their narrative of this decade, a decisive turning point in the island's history?

Zanzibar, the most important East African entrepot in the Indian Ocean network since the nineteenth century, has received much attention from Indian Ocean scholars. For literary scholars, Abdulrazak Gurnah's narratives have provided a crucial lens for zooming in on these entangled histories, while the discipline mostly has ignored the significant tradition and ongoing production of Swahili prose—and poetry—on Zanzibar, which features many prominent authors, like Shafi Adam Shafi but also Said Ahmed Mohamed, Mohamed Suleiman Mohamed, and Zeinab Alwi Bahroon, also narrating Zanzibar's changing history (for an overview, see Bertoncini et al., 2009). Zanzibari novelists from the 1960s to the 1980s, who wrote in the aftermath of the revolution, are preoccupied with "the possibility of a radical reversal of social hierarchies" (Garnier, 2006, p. 17, my translation; see also Aiello, 2002, p. 35 and Mlacha, 1984, pp. 4ff.). The revolution, depicted in Shafi Adam Shafi's *Kasri ya mwinyi Fuad*, and the liberation from a feudal society under British rule, starting with the strike of the workers' union in 1948—the backdrop of both Said Ahmed Mohamed's *Dunia mti mkavu* ("The World Is a Dry Tree," 1980) and Shafi Adam Shafi's *Kuli*—became important topics, as did the lingering forms of exploitation and greed.

My main argument is that the multilingual literary production of and about most East African and Indian Ocean literary contexts requires greater attention, reflecting on the simultaneity and layered nature of linguistic influences and narratives.[6] Much like the sometimes too inward-looking reading of national Swahili literature, postcolonialism has hardly helped to broaden perspectives in recent decades. Although postcolonialism has celebrated fluid, transnational identities and multicultural and multilingual spaces, comparisons between literary imaginations across languages have rarely been made. Rather, in a paradoxical way, it largely follows the logic of the monolingual, national philologies of the West, concentrated on former colonial languages, with an overemphasis on one genre: the novel (Vierke, 2019). But even the view of the novel, as I show here, is a restricted one. Rather than becoming more

[6] There have been a few attempts to bring English- and Swahili-language East African literature together, such as, for instance, Mwangi's critical interrogation of postcolonial discourses in East Africa (2009) and the edited volume by Diegner and Schulze-Englert (2015), which sets out to address the rift in scholarship.

diverse, with a broader view of literary diversity and overlapping repertoires of language and narrative in a world where the West is supposed to lose its position as the only center, the world seems to shrink in the era of postcolonial probing into world literature, which only now is being called into question for its spatially narrow and temporally shallow maps (see e.g. Schüttpelz, 2014).

There has frequently been discussion of Swahili scholarship and writing lagging behind "literary studies proper," which, being underdeveloped, is not (yet) able to leave the topic of nation-building and its small, regional perspective behind in favor of more "transnational, transcultural and diasporic dimensions" (Diegner & Schulze-Englert, 2015, p. 7)—a discourse suggesting a unilineal literary development, which has also been imposed on other literatures outside the West.[7] Criticism has so far mostly come from scholars working on the so-called "literatures in minor languages" in the postcolonies (see, for instance, Arenberg, 2016 and Marzagora, 2015): the postcolonial paradigm, as Karin Barber so eloquently outlined for African-language literature more generally speaking, relegated African-language writing to the background, forgoing the lively literary production of many languages of the continent with their distinctively individual concerns and their own repertoires of imagery and narratives, so essential in imaging worlds.

In this contribution, I would like to attempt a relational approach by exploring the coexistence of the two novels' narratives of Zanzibar—both of which portray a multicultural and multilingual island, drawing on different, but probably also overlapping repertoires—in an effort to multiply perspectives, which might not only add to and confirm, but also contradict, ignore, or question each other. My aim is not to find the more authentic construction of a Zanzibari world (authenticity and constructiveness are mutually exclusive in this sense): I am by no means trying to argue for one "genuine" Zanzibari novel, weighing the biographies and languages of the authors against each other to decide who is allowed to speak (as is so often done at the moment); nor do I wish to suggest sticking rigidly to biographies, but to the novels and texts themselves. Under the influence of Roland Barthes (1977)—who declared the author dead, not as a means of deeming individual trajectories irrelevant, but to highlight the author's way of drawing from literary imaginaries and narratives—my aim is to work out which repertories of imaginaries and narratives the novels draw from and how they create their worlds, since "the way literature relates to the world has a deliberately constructive and performative character," as Moser and Simonis (2014, p. 13) highlight.

In the following, I will first give summaries of both novels.

[7] For instance, Werberger (2020) traces similar patterns in discourses on Yiddish and Eastern European languages.

Vuta n'kuvute

Vuta n'kuvute ("A Tug of War") is set in Zanzibar town at the time of the political awakening of the 1950s and 1960s, right before Tanganyika's independence. The protagonist is the young Yasmin, a Zanzibari Indian from an Ithna-Ashari Muslim family of Gujarati descent, who flees her unhappy arranged marriage with the much older Bwana Reza. Expelled by her strict family, she crosses a racial border, taking refuge with her only "African" friend, Mwajuma, in the former slave quarter of Zanzibar town, Ng'ambo (spelled "Ng'ambu" in the novel). Mwajuma, a *taarab* singer who struggles to make ends meet, shows Yasmin what it means to enjoy life: she takes Yasmin to *taarab* concerts, which Yasmin grows increasingly enthusiastic about. Eventually, she meets Denge, a young, rebellious Zanzibari who studied in Russia and is now part of the struggle for independence against British rule, translating and smuggling pamphlets of Soviet propaganda illegally from Dar es Salaam to the island. Yasmin falls passionately in love with him and gives birth to a son, whom his relatives raise in the village, since Denge is so dedicated to the political struggle that he cannot marry her: his responsibility toward society is bigger. Denge, the prototypical intellectual activist, is a chaotic but also a clever character, unable to take care of his daily needs and appearance, and who often disappears—for instance, on a meandering journey to Europe—only to reappear after some time. With the help of his friends, he is always one step ahead of the British police inspector Wright, hilariously portrayed through his Anglicized Swahili, who sends his assistant Kopla Matata, the "caricature" (Aiello, 2002, p. 40) of a fat-bellied, sweating fool in uniform, to monitor him—resulting in a number of slapstick scenes. When Denge is finally arrested, he struggles under the harsh conditions in prison. But Yasmin and his friends hatch a scheme to allow him to escape on a dhow, which takes him to the northern part of the coast. The novel ends with Yasmin getting married to Bukheti, an earlier acquaintance and Swahili merchant, while Denge writes a postcard from China.

By the Sea

In *By the Sea*, the main protagonist, Saleh Omar, an elderly Zanzibari man in his mid-sixties, arrives as a refugee in the UK. Like Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," to whom he makes repeated reference, he remains passive and silent, "preferring rather not" to act nor to speak on his arrival. He is at first a mystery to his minders, who move him from a detention center for illegal refugees, to an interim accommodation at a suffocating pension, to a small flat in a town "by the sea." An air of tragic secrecy surrounds Saleh, the cause of which lies in the past, and is only gradually revealed—mostly in conversations with Latif, a university lecturer who left Zanzibar in the 1960s and is surprised to be called on to interpret for a refugee who uses his father's name, Rajab Shabaan.

Little by little, the reader learns from flashbacks that build increasing suspense about the interlinked fates of their families, dating back to the 1960s and 1970s—approximately the same period as in *Vuta n'kuvute*. Saleh Omar had owned a furniture shop in Zanzibar town in the 1960s. When Hussein, a Persian merchant with the impressive air of a wider world, arrives from across the Indian Ocean, he set a series of disastrous events in motion: he takes a loan from Saleh and, after seducing Latif's brother Hassan, disappears with him. The growing misery and shame of Latif's family is fatally connected with that of Saleh Omar, as Hussein

had offered the house of Rajab Shabaan, Hassan and Latif's father, as security for the loan, which he did not pay back to Saleh. Hatred, mistrust, and the continuation of an old conflict over inheritance marks the relationship between the two sides, which are even distantly related through marriage. For Latif and his family, Saleh is the villain who takes over their house. In search of a new future, Latif leaves to study in the GDR before escaping to the UK, gradually finding his path to a mediocre existence as a university lecturer who has left behind one world without fully arriving in the new one.

On meeting Saleh, Latif has to confront himself not only with the past that was suppressed in his memory, but also learns to see his troubled family from a different perspective. Saleh was not merely the malicious thief of their house, as his family portrayed him: not only did he strive for compromise with Rajab, but his own life was also less fortunate than Latif had imagined. Hardship and misery befell him in the aftermath of the revolution, and in the new context of the socialist state, he lost Rajab's house and fell victim to personal revenge: Rajab, climbing the ladder of the new system, moved back into his house, while Saleh was imprisoned, suffering in a series of detention camps until his release in 1979. His wife and daughter have passed away in the meantime, and the Zanzibar he finds upon his return has changed drastically, as so "many people had left or been expelled or died" (p. 235). He retreats into his store, leading a quiet life, regarded by others as a "man destroyed by prison and personal tragedy" (p. 235). When the long-lost Hassan returns and threatens to take him to court, Saleh, full of panic, decides to escape to the UK with a false passport issued on Rajab Shaaban's birth certificate.

Imagined Zanzibari Worlds: How do the Two Novels Construct their Worlds?

Both *Vuta n'kuvute* and *By the Sea* are anything but chamber pieces. Zanzibar is the gravitational center of a much wider world changing in the 1960s. The Zanzibar constructed in *By the Sea* and *Vuta n'kuvute* exists under the broader influences of the waning colonial empire and grumbling sultanate, Indian Ocean networks, and a changing world order increasingly shaped by Cold War dynamics:[8] while in *By the Sea*, Latif studies in the GDR because there is no other viable option, Denge's studies in Russia and his connections with European socialists have made him a committed activist in the struggle for independence. Moreover, the map in which the novels construct Zanzibar's position is a broad one: Zanzibari relations are projected onto the UK and the Indian Ocean in *By the Sea*, whereas notions of Russian communism and Pan-Africanism, Indian diaspora communities, and *taarab* music also situate Zanzibar in a broader world in *Vuta n'kuvute*. In both novels, the epic breadth is not only echoed by the huge arena sketched out, but is also part of the narrative structure: digressions, flashbacks, and stories within the story are typical of both (see Aiello, 2002 and Samuelson, 2013). Both novels also construct huge worlds of human drama: there are determining forces in these worlds, too strong for an average human being to easily cope with

[8] On Indian Ocean cartographies and the importance of maps in *By the Sea,* see Samuelson, 2013 and Schulze-Engler, 2014.

and decisive to their lives, like love, passion, greed, shame, and honor, which befall the protagonists in a similar way as in Greek tragedy, so that they can hardly act—like Saleh in *By the Sea*—or become heroes in venturing the impossible, like in *Vuta n'kuvute*, where Yasmin gains her freedom as a woman and Denge sacrifices everything for a larger-than-life political cause.

Yet the worlds in the two novels also differ decisively in narrative perspective and tone, as I will explore in the following.

"It's All History Anyway": Festering Debts and Lost Houses

Melancholy emanates from *By the Sea*, where the worlds of the UK and Zanzibar are constructed in painful parallel. Saleh, the elderly migrant, frequently draws comparisons between his new "home," a distorted mirror image of Zanzibar, and the old town of Zanzibar, where he spent most of his life: "I live in a small town by the sea, as I have all my life, though for most of it, it was by a warm green ocean a long way from here" (p. 2). There is a sense of alienation in his comparisons: while the ocean in front of his new door is cold and "murky" (p. 2) and obstructs his view of anything else—like the brick wall in front of Bartleby's office—the "warm green" Indian Ocean of his memories opened up onto the larger, seamless horizon that Zanzibar had been part of for centuries, a passage for "intrepid traders and sailors" who brought "goods and their God and their way of looking at the world, their stories and their songs and prayers," as well as their "hungers and greeds, their fantasies, lies and hatred" (p. 15). Lost and displaced, living the "half-life of a stranger" (p. 2), he seeks comfort walking through the huge furniture shops in the new "town by the sea," only to be driven away by the "tiny particles of artificial fibres which fill the air and which corrode the lining of my nostrils and bronchials" (p. 3): the new environment seems toxic. He longs for his shop in Zanzibar Old Town, where he sold "beautiful, intricate things" (p. 19), mostly antiques bought at auction or ones that came with the monsoon winds of the ocean (*musim*), which brought in "traders from Arabia, the Gulf, India and Sind, and the Horn of Africa" (p. 14).

Later, the European empires forced the coast into new "complete maps, so that every inch was accounted for, and everyone knew who they were, or at least whom they belonged to" (p. 15). And still, in the shadow of the empire and the Omani sultanate, the older cartography persists on the eve of the political disruptions to follow: Hussein, "a Persian from Bahrain, as he was quick to remind anyone who mistook him for an Arab or an Indian" (p. 16) with stories of his forefathers sketching out a network spanning the ocean, who comes to his shop to converse with him in English while buying an ebony table as a present for Hassan, conjures the broader world of the Indian Ocean, on the verge of coming to an end. In an allegorical way, Hussein appears in the "blessed musim" (p. 19) of 1960 before independence and disappears with Hassan beyond the horizon, right before the revolution and, later, the formation of the new socialist state, "when Zanzibar cedes its position as terminus of the dhow trade" (Samuelson, 2013, p. 10).

Likewise, the fate of the disintegrating families and that of Saleh, who loses everything, become a potent metaphor for the profound, earth-shattering changes, recalling Fredric

Jameson's dictum (1986) about the necessarily allegorical relationship between the nation and the individual in the postcolonial world.[9] Here, we witness the shrinking of the previously much wider world of the Indian Ocean, and the cosmopolitan air of Zanzibar in the 1950s and 1960s, with its own version of modernism, where elegant cinemas (Fair, 2018), a colonial education incorporating the works of Shakespeare, and the debates of a modern Islam seeking to combine science and Quranic teaching as well as an older archive of stories and recitational practices—like that of the Miʿraj, the Prophet's night journey to heaven, so adored by Saleh in his youth (see p. 42)—did not contradict each other, but seemed, as Gurnah (2015, p. 29) underlines elsewhere, "negotiable." It is first the revolution and later the intrusion of the national state that mark the end of this epoch—and coincide with the beginning of Saleh's suffering (he takes over Rajab Shabaan's house in the year of the revolution). His efforts to integrate into the new nation—he wants to call his daughter Raia, "citizen," in opposition to his wife, who insists on Ruqiya, after the Prophet's wife—fail.

The Zanzibar of Saleh's memories is a Zanzibar of the past, lost forever. The only possible temporal perspective is that of looking back, which corresponds to the vision of the migrant—for whom the present is but an afterlife of the past, not a new beginning. In *By the Sea*, Zanzibar reappears in the protagonists' memories, but not simply as a paradise lost due to political upheavals that are part of the grand narratives of national history, too large to grasp. Rather, Zanzibar haunts the characters and forces them to look back, because they have been personally implicated in family feuds and intrigues and linked to each other by festering debts.[10] And though many years have passed since leaving Zanzibar, Latif too observes, "I want to look forward, but I always find myself looking back, poking about in times so long ago and so diminished by other events since then, tyrant events which loom large over me and dictate every ordinary action. Yet when I look back, I find some objects still gleam with a bright malevolence and every memory draws blood" (p. 86).

The changing fates of the families are echoed rather than caused by the larger drama of the revolution, the atrocities of the period, and the austere politics of nationalization. The political regimes and the revolution, as well as the colonial power and later the nation-state, do not just alter the flow of events, but become intertwined with the social relations of the smaller worlds. Like in *Paradise* (Gurnah, 1994), where Yusuf is given into the possession of Uncle Aziz to pay back an old debt, or in *Gravel Heart* (Gurnah, 2018), where Salim has to return to Zanzibar to unravel the secrets of poisonous family relations after years in the UK, time in *By the Sea* is also not strictly that of an individual's lifetime, but is defined by relations or

[9] Moreover, Samuelson (2013, p. 86) notes the temporal simultaneity, pointing out that 1960 is the "the year in which Hussein catalyses the personal and familial tragedies of Saleh," while it is also "presented as a watershed one in the history […] where it coincides with the steps towards self-rule that will culminate in independence in 1963."

[10] In the present, Saleh becomes Bartleby, whose passive resistance lies in his silence and inertia (see also Helff, 2015 on the importance of silence).

networks of kin that the individual cannot liberate himself or herself from—not even when far away from Zanzibar. An individual's fate is linked to that of family, extending into the past, and often also crossing the Indian Ocean to other distant family members.

While memoryscapes have been one of the key topics of Indian Ocean studies in general (see, for instance, Schulze-Engler, 2014) and Gurnah's novels in particular (see Hand, 2010), I would like to suggest a further reading connected with specific Zanzibari notions of family ties that outlast the individual and are projected onto houses. On Zanzibar, descent is ambivalent, creating forms of racial segregation (see *Vuta n'kuvute*), though it is also often not rigid, but flexibly constructed and negotiable (see also Kresse, 2012)—as we see in the integration of the dhow captain, Nahodha, another character who comes from across the ocean to settle on Zanzibar and marry Bi Maryam (who is also Latif's aunt), who herself is later married to Saleh's father. The flipside of this exchange and flexible integration are intrigues, which also drive the plot of Gurnah's novels, and can be brought into relation with the Swahili notion of *fitina* "intrigue," "conspiracy," bringing "discord" and mischief to others with long-lasting effect. It is a recurrent topos in everyday interactions on Zanzibar—one that, for Latif, also becomes a narrative template to interpret history in a passage that reads like a meta-comment on the novel: "It's all history, anyway. None of it matters, really. I am not saying that history does not matter, knowing what happened so we understand what we are all about, and how we came to be as we are, and what stories we tell about it all. I mean, I don't want recriminations, all this family business, all this muttering that stretches further back. Have you noticed the incredible consequences of family squabbles in the history of Islamic societies?" (p. 195). Hence, rather than ideological and religious differences, it is "family squabbles" and hence personal emotions and relations that are the drivers of history, as Latif seems to suggest.

The material and the social world are interconnected in the novel, "a story revolving around property and things" (Samuelson, 2013, p. 82): the relation between Saleh's and Latif's families materializes in the houses, they gain and lose. To add a specifically Swahili reading to the allegory of the house, I would like to refer to the Swahili term *nyumba*, which refers to the stone house (in contrast to the mud house) as well as its residents, the family, and signals a proud form of urbanity, essentially marked by Indian Ocean trade and Islamic networks, which "made them different from those they despised" (p. 15)—the former slaves, workers, and dependents living in the villages and the quarters outside of town, so prominently in focus in *Vuta n'kuvute*. On Zanzibar, like in many other coastal Swahili towns, urban space as defined by the architecture of the coral-stone houses and social relations are interlinked: "relations based upon space, are largely expressed and sanctioned in terms of genealogical links […]" (Horton & Middleton, 2000, p. 140).[11] Thus, the actual patrician's house is also more than a dwelling, and does not merely represent, but rather creates social standing, commercial trustworthiness, honor, and dignity (*heshima*). Drawing on Barber's notion of distributed personhood (which she explores in contrast to notions of individualism confined to the consciousness) (2007, p. 112), where the characteristics of objects extend to their

[11] On the flexible construction of genealogical categories, see Horton & Middleton, 2000, p. 140.

owners, the house is part of the inhabitants' social personas. This is why the loss of the house is not only economically catastrophic both to Rajab and later to Saleh, but also threatens their social existence: they become socially homeless and are written out of history and space. Saleh's only option is to escape, even borrowing the existence of someone else, Rajab, arriving in an apartment stripped of all indexical references.[12]

The Soundtrack of Ng'ambo: A Promising Future and Vital Present

To some extent, *Vuta n'kuvute* provides a complementary perspective to *By the Sea*, not only in terms of the map of Zanzibar it draws, but also in terms of its temporal scope. While the past weighs down the characters in *By the Sea*, in *Vuta n'kuvute*, the present prevails, the future is full of possibilities, and the past hardly figures, or merely in terms of references to ills like racism, feudalism, and colonialism that must be overcome. *Vuta n'kuvute* sketches out a time full of hope: although the persecution of political opponents like Denge increased in the late colonial regime, heated critical-ideological debates also took place, informed by wider changes and socialist discourse, and change was in the air. Rather than a gloomy atmosphere of oppression, misery, and hunger, it is light-heartedness—despite moments of despair—that emanates from the novel, whose tone is markedly different from the melancholy of *By the Sea*. In *Vuta n'kuvute*, the revolution and social change are not the cause of endless trauma and atrocities, but the goal for both Yasmin, looking for self-fulfillment, and Denge, eager to bring about political change.

Vuta n'kuvute has been characterized as the modern, political Swahili novel par excellence: "Shafi Adam Shafi is without doubt a Swahili novelist who has best managed to directly transplant political discourse into the novel's discourse. His novel features militants involved in a fight, which leaves no uncertainties" (Garnier, 2006, p. 122; my translation). In some parts, *Vuta n'kuvute* is rather a *roman à thèse* than a novel, since the characters, most prominently Denge, are often (not but exclusively) made to embody a Marxist political agenda and ideology of liberation (see also Garnier, 2006, p. 124). Just as many Zanzibari novels of that time, "influenced by Marxist credo," explored "the proletariat as the 'new man'" (Khamis, 2005, p. 95), female characters like Yasmin also became main protagonists, struggling to find their way between oppressive family structures and the lures of modernity—like Bahati in the acclaimed novel *Kiu* ("Thirst," 1972), Rehema in Mohamed Suleiman Mohamed's *Nyota ya Rehema* ("Rehema's Star," 1976), Maimuna in Said Ahmed Mohammed's *Utengano* ("Separation," 1980), and Bi Khadija and Zahra in Zainab Alwi Baharoon's *Mungu hakopeshwi* ("God Does Not Give Loans," 2017).

[12] Not only the house, but also Indian Ocean objects in *By the Sea*, like the ebony table "on three delicately bowed legs" (p. 22)—an exquisite accessory of intimate leisure hours wiled away and an index of elegant cosmopolitanism that Saleh cannot part with—come with a vital power, and often an ambiguity, as Meg Samuelson (2013, p. 83) highlights.

In the following, I will attempt a more careful reading of *Vuta n'kuvute*, drawing attention to ambivalences and tensions rather than reducing the novel merely to its ideological narrative of class struggle. My starting point is Xavier Garnier's thoughtful literary consideration of the Swahili political novel. For him, the most important question—which emerges from the novel's literary agenda to construct a new social world—is to what extent the political is anchored in lived experience and a palpable literary depiction: "is it the writer's goal to construct an idea about society, or to provide an experience of it?" (Garnier, 2006, p. 18: "S'agit-it pour l'écrivain de se faire une idée sur la société ou d'en faire experience?"). Thus, to what extent do political ideas remain abstract convictions, and to what extent do they inscribe themselves into the "characters with their history, their body, their sentiments and their emotions"? (Garnier, 2006, p. 124; my translation). In fact, *Vuta n'kuvute* is many things: it is a pastiche in which high-flying ideological speeches, slapstick scenes of Kopla Matata sweating on his bike (also alluding to Zanzibar's tradition of detective stories), big-screen cinema scenes of plane crashes, Indian dances, and kitsch love scenes against a setting sun as well as vividly and colorfully depicted *taarab* concerts coexist. The English and Anglicized English Swahili of Inspector Wright (see also Aiello, 2002, p. 40), as much as the Indian Swahili of Yasmin's family, turns the novel into a multivocal (sometimes cacophonous) tapestry of voices.[13]

There are moments in the novel when grand ideas prevail, like in Denge's moving speech, in which he tells Yasmin that their love is less important than his social responsibility: "Everyone has a responsibility in society, and my big responsibility is to do everything I can to see this country become independent" ("kila mtu ana wajibu fulani katika jamii na mimi wajibu wangu mkubwa ni kufanya kila niwezalo […] ili kuona kwamba nchi hii inakuwa huru," p. 145). But there are also moments when the characters' emotions and practices are depicted with more subtle care, and scenes of Zanzibar speak to the imagination. The novel presents itself as hesitating between the two: political concerns and the everyday affairs of the individual (see also Garnier, 2006, p. 125).

A good example of the novel's lively imagination is its depiction of the quarter known as Ng'ambo, which literally means "beyond," "the place on the other side." In *Vuta n'kuvute*, it is not the urban context of Zanzibar—that of the patricians, merchants, and the educated employees of the administration—that is in focus, but the commoners' town, Ng'ambo, the quarters of former slaves, workers, and servants. Historically, Ng'ambo refers to the area outside of Stone Town, both architecturally and spatially differentiated from it, comprised of smaller "mud and thatch houses": "In these live non-patricians, ranging from families of ex-slaves, to high status masharifu of recent arrival, and those who have lived in the town for a very long time, but never gained patrician status" (Horton & Middleton, 2000, p. 125). As in his earlier novels, *Kuli* and *Kasri ya mwinyi Fuad*, which feature the liberation struggles of

[13] *Vuta n'kuvute* also draws on the "complex heritage" that Gurnah describes (2015, p. 29) as the roots of his own writings, where packed Zanzibari cinemas, *taarab*, Indian songs, and Elvis Presley would not contradict each other. For him, "the coexistence of contradictory cultural traditions felt negotiable" (Gurnah, 2015, p. 29).

the hard-working slaves and dockworkers exploited and despised by "Arab" overlords and British colonialists, Shafi Adam Shafi draws a picture of a part of society in the shadows of Stone Town.

The urban map is characterized by segregation based on race and social class, and Yasmin, from an Indian Ithna-Ashari background and thus belonging to Stone Town, is described as crossing this line, taking refuge in and becoming part of Ng'ambo, also recurrently referred to as "*Uswahilini*," "Swahili world" in the novel: "Yasmin is not a city person anymore. She is a Ng'ambu person. She is not of that place with wooden balconies and the mansions of the dignitaries. Now she lives in the huts of the Swahili world; she has immersed herself in the very foundations of this life here" ("[…] Yasmin si wa mjini tena. Ni wa Ng'ambu. Siye wa kule kwenye maroshani na majumba ya watukufu. Yeye sasa yumo ndani ya vibanda vya Uswahili, amezama katika mizizi katika maisha ya huko," p. 94; see also p. 42).

Ng'ambo entails a "Swahili lifestyle" ("Masha ya Uswahilini," p. 42) full of improvisation; sometimes poverty, but also music and joy; free from many conventions that trouble Stone Town: here, in Ng'ambo, women like Yasmin and Mwajuma can live alone, enjoying themselves at *taarab* concerts, dance halls, the cinema, and nights of passionate love, joking with (male) friends who come over with bottles of spirit under their arms.[14] Survival is not depicted as a struggle: some coins always find their way into the women's hands, sometimes from outsmarted suitors and the tricked police, who try to take advantage of their neediness—but in vain. The elements of honor, associated with property and purity, and shame, linked with alcohol, sexuality, and passion, so dominant in Yasmin's former life town but also *By the Sea*, do not play a role here.[15] As in many other Swahili novels, where "one often falls in love," as Garnier (2006, p. 95; my translation) notes, no moral judgment is imposed on passion—while plans of marriage are narratively suspended (see also Garnier, 2006, pp. 89, 90). The novel is in the "pure present" (Garnier, 2006, p. 92; my translation), like in the love scenes of Denge and Yasmin, taking them into a "world on its own, a world of endless love" ("dunia ya pekee, dunia ya mapenzi," p. 119).[16] Most captivating are the vivid depictions of the *taarab* concerts in Ng'ambo, where the novel is fully in the here-and-now of its characters. If *By the Sea* is a story of "powerful" things (Samuelson, 2013) and houses, *Vuta n'kuvute* is

[14] Mwajuma is, for instance, described as a "girl who did not like to torment herself and she made use of her freedom to live as she wished to. She was ready to do anything which she thought could bring her joy without caring about what the others would say" ("… ni msichana asiyependa kujikera nafsi yake na aliutumilia uhuru wake wa maisha kama alivyopenda. Alikuwa tayari kufanya lolote lile ambalo alihisi litamletea furaha bila ya kujali wengine watasema nini," p. 22).

[15] See for instance, the following passage from *By the Sea*: "To drink alcohol in that place, after God's edict against its consumption, was simply to have no fear of indignity, to be foolish beyond recklessness because of the mockery and persecution it invited" (p. 163).

[16] Moreover, the joking dialogues (*utani*), so much a part of everyday conversation, bring in an element of quotidian orality, turning the novel almost into a play. (On the importance of dialogue, see also Aiello, 2002, p. 39.)

a story of music, *taarab*, which comes with a force that changes Yasmin's self-perception. It epitomizes the spirit of *Uswahilini* in Ng'ambo, with which it is historically so closely linked.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, *taarab*, originally an orchestral music genre confined to the sultan's court and incorporating various musical influences, most prominently from Egypt, the Middle East, and sometimes India, had spread to the parts of town where the slaves and servants resided (Fair, 2001, p. 169ff.). For them, *taarab* became the most important music, taking its audiences, dancers, and musicians away from the plight of the everyday. Historically, the *taarab* of Ng'ambo is most associated with the legendary female *taarab* singer Siti Binti Saad (1880–1950), hailing from a humble background in a small Zanzibari village, the first artist credited with singing *taarab* in Ng'ambo and in Swahili instead of Arabic (Fair, 2001, p. 173). Her voice captivated Zanzibari society as a whole; she was the first female Swahili singer ever to be recorded in Bombay, in 1928. This new wave of *taarab* also entailed the tendency to replace large orchestras with drum-focused instrumentation, inviting listeners to dance (Topp Fargion, 1993) and providing a new and more interactive form of musical experience. The musical instruments that distinguish the *taarab* of Ng'ambo in the first part of the twentieth century are referred to in great detail in the novel: the fiddle lies on the musician's shoulder, "who strikes the cords so well, producing a music that would bring a snake out of the cave" ("kuzikwaruzakwaruza nyuzi zikitoa muziki wa kumtoa nyoka pangoni," p. 63), while the player of the *dumbak*, a newly introduced goblet drum, "gave the music its rhythm and choruses" ("akuupa ule muziki mizani na vibwagizo," p. 63).[17] The swaying women follow along by clapping, while the "rattle" ("kayamba," p. 63), adapted from the dance genres of the mainland, adds an exhilarating effect to the music—"the music rejoiced" ("muziki ukachangamka," p. 63)—which stirs yet more women to join in, who are "taken hostage by the joy and delights of that night" (waliotekwa na raha na starehe ya usiku ule," p. 63). In the novel, the sophistication of the singer, the renowned Bakari Shirizi, an important *taarab* singer of the early twentieth century, is depicted with an elegant appearance, wearing a suit, tie, and tarboosh (p. 63).

The *taarab* of Ng'ambo takes place in a female world. As depicted in the novel, concerts takes place in quickly improvised spaces, demarcated by the "textile of sails" ("kitambaa cha tanga," p. 62) and "canvas" ("maturubali," p. 62) used to shield the concert from the curious gaze of male "fans" ("mashabiki," p. 62) squatting outside, eager to catch at least a glimpse of the high-spirited women inside, "one more beautifully adorned than the other" ("kila mmoja kajipamba kuliko mwenzake," p. 63). Women are portrayed with turning and swinging bodies, where the singing "voices rise high" ("sauti zinapaa," p. 30), and men, who are reduced to their eyes, can merely watch and hear, but not intervene—a potent allegory. The female world of Ng'ambo, as Shafi sketches out in the novel, draws on memories of flourishing women's *taarab* clubs, host to musical groups with female singers playing for female audiences outside the palace and Stone Town (Fair, 2001, p. 169–223). Historically, Siti Binti Saad played an important role, firstly in encouraging the foundation of woman's *taarab* clubs, giving women

[17] The *taarab* of Ng'ambo is far more rhythmically pronounced than the more melodic older forms (see also Fair, 2001, pp. 169ff. on nightlife in the "African quarter").

the possibility to determine the kind of entertainment they wanted: an aspect that the novel sketches out in a palpable way.[18]

In the novel, the *taarab* scenes become a potent allegory of the women's search for liberation in a time of heavy change. Music accompanies Yasmin's own coming-of-age: she becomes a singer of a *taarab* group. It is the music, more than anything else, that makes her feel at home in Ng'ambo, and, taking hold of her body, makes her conscious of her own femininity and autonomy. The novel portrays what Fair (2001, p. 170ff.) considers the revolutionary potential of the music, since it not only overrides racial boundaries, but also becomes a means by which women are able to protest personal and sexual subordination. The *taarab* lyrics that Fair highlights as a form of protest do not play a role in the novel; rather, it is the bodily experience of music as such, an uplifting experience of joy and freedom in the music, that the novel underlines: Mwajuma "ululated and moved her body to the rhythm of the *taarab*, which she had begun to rejoice in even before arriving" ("akipiga vigelegele na kujinyonganyonga akifuatisha mdundo wa taarab ambayo alianza kuishangilia kabla hata kufika," p. 62). Both Mwajuma and Yasmin "join in the joy that at that time took possession of all everyone's mind and made them forget everything of this world" ("[…] walijiunga na furaha ile ambayo kwa wakati ule ilitawala vichwa vyao na kuwafanya wasahau kila kitu duniani," p. 63).

The music becomes an agent in the novel. It is the sensual experience of music that even frames the novel. While trapped in her marriage with the much older Bwana Reza at the beginning of the novel, Yasmin discovers dancing to Indian music, which increasingly takes on an aspect of seduction as she begins enjoying the gaze of her attractive neighbor (who marries her at the end of the book). Thus, it is her body that acquires sensual knowledge through the music—even before she acts and runs away from the coercive environment of her marriage. In its powerful quality of speaking to the senses, music has an existential and empowering dimension, since it nurtures fantasies of possible and alternative lifeworlds. In times of heavy social change, music gives people an opportunity to "define who they are, who they are not and who they wish to be" (Coplan, 1985, p. 232).

Coming back to Garnier's differentiation between social ideas, on the one hand, and narrated experiences grounded in lifeworlds, on the other, in Shafi's novel, music, similarly to love, provides Yasmin a heightened experience of alternative modes of being alive, which makes her question normative restrictions. In other words, the "political" does not necessarily mean only calling for social transformation with a well-defined message, as Denge does. In large part, the novel stages the conflicting options at stake for the individual—for instance, also in Yasmin's constant hesitation between marriage options or her experience of sexual fulfillment

[18] Laura Fair (2001, p. 170) also describes the women's search for "new definitions of femininity, definitions that enhance their autonomy," already echoed in the *taarab* music of the 1910s and 1920s, in which both the lyrics and music played an important role.

with Denge—which suggests a more existential perspective of the "political" as options of how to live, linked to the characters' experiences.

Conclusion

In his contribution, I have brought two novels into relation with each other, in both of which Zanzibar lies at the center of the narrative cartography. Though they belong to two different literary worlds, differ fundamentally with respect to their narrative of hope, on the one hand, and trauma and loss, on the other, as well as in the maps they sketch out, we cannot easily construct the novels along the lines of sheer dichotomy. *Vuta n'kuvute* is a polyphonous narrative, as I have tried to show, and can hardly be unequivocally defined as simply mapping out a narrower—or more narrow-minded—map of its world in dichotomous opposition to the "worldly" *By the Sea*. And Gurnah's novel, which has often been read for its narrative of migrant identities and translocal networks, is also steeped in the semantics and imagery of the Swahili coast, as the potent allegory of the house shows. I have been trying to show how Shafi's novel draws on local narratives and motifs as well as on narratives of class struggle—he highlights Maxim Gorky as a major influence on his writing—while Gurnah's text also imbues itself with Zanzibari narratives, drawing from culturally and linguistically specific semantics and patterns of narrating the world, as much as it also inscribes itself into English and other literatures. As Gurnah (2015, p. 39) himself points out, looking back on his childhood, "there were many more possibilities of making narrative available" than those found in just one literary tradition. A comparison between the two novels, both focusing on the late colonial period, introduces the possibility of changing, relativizing, and questioning perspectives and allowing them to interrogate each other.

I do think that these observations can have implications for the project of Indian Ocean literary studies at large, which has often favored a one-sided account of the Indian Ocean. This one-sidedness does not merely refer to the limited number of mostly European languages that have been taken into account; it also refers to the rigid perspective of histories beyond the nation and fluid transnational identities that a novel like *By the Sea* has most often been read for, and which *Vuta n'kuvute*, despite its depiction of the Indian diaspora and Cold War dynamics, does not only speak to, since it also carves out a national cartography. I suggest undertaking further close readings that unravel more subtle references to local narratives or practices, like music and houses, but that also pay attention to the multiple cartographies the narratives map out.[19]

We need to question the narrow frame of interpretation that excludes many of the literary works of contemporary authors in and around the Indian Ocean writing in "minor" languages, like Arabic, Hindi, Malay, or Swahili, which are affiliated with many worlds. And what about narratives in local languages and popular music emerging from the shadows of the

[19] *Vuta n'kuvute* is also—luckily—not as ideologically coherent as Swahili scholarship has often considered it to be. Particularly, the vivid scenes in Ng'ambo undermine or relegate politics, in the sense of ideology, to the background, while bringing in another—more subtle and sensual—"political" dimension in the form of imagining alternative ways of being.

unassuming entrepots Shafi explores in *Vuta n'kuvute*? Given the emphasis on historical perspectives in Indian Ocean studies, don't we need a more multivocal account of Indian Ocean narratives, which also highlights the paradoxes and the simultaneity of narratives beyond dichotomies like that of "local" and "cosmopolitan," "national" and "transnational"? What about narratives in which the nation is a genuine concern among others (see Marzagora, 2015): are they not part of Indian Ocean history as well? Do we not also need to acknowledge the difficulty of sometimes even incongruous narratives, like the rigid plot of the class struggle in *Vuta n'kuvute* and its praises of a new nation, which do not easily "fit," and hence question dominant, well-established frames, typologies, and expectations?

Thus, instead of reading a limited set of narratives insofar as they speak to established (Western-dominated) discourses on the Indian Ocean, I suggest heeding the variety of narratives and genres in the Indian Ocean and reading them for how they imagine larger worlds but sometimes also carve out smaller worlds, in intertextual relation to the specific repertoires at hand rooted in local semantics. It is an exploration of the multilayeredness of narratives, drawing on various repertoires, stories, and imageries, coming from multiple directions, including (but not favoring) the West, as well as their complicated relations, which seems to me the most promising project for a study of Indian Ocean literatures and their worlds. Needless to add that the translation of more Swahili novels into English and more English novels into Swahili would facilitate comparative readings.

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