Imagining Flight in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *By the Sea*

**Abstract:** Against the background of Abdulrazak Gurnah’s novel *By the Sea* (2001) this article takes issue with the politics of representation and the common labelling practices of refugees and asylum seekers in media in general and literature in particular. Through a thorough examination of the representation of flight, it is argued that Gurnah’s novel confronts the reader with a highly heterogeneous picture of refugee predicaments which counteracts with ‘easy’ stereotypical conceptions. Thus the novel manages to draw a more complex panorama of refugee stories that stirs the fine line between well known refugee imagery (with themes of loss and expatriation) and representations of modern identity in a multicultural nation-state.

At the beginning of the new millennium, we are accustomed to seeing the wretched faces of refugees and asylum seekers on television, in cinema and on the internet (s. Helff 2008a). We read in newspapers about their dramatic flight in freight containers or leaky boats, and hear on the radio updated immigration statistics. Although forced migration is certainly not a modern phenomenon, it has without doubt new, global dimensions to it (s. Castles / Davidson 2000). Not only war and ethnic cleansing but also natural disasters and environmental catastrophes cause the global dispersal of people. Thus local disasters are increasingly global in their consequences and effects (s. Beck 1999 and Mbembe 2003). Scholars agree that this local-global nexus directly shapes the contours of what is often referred to as ‘refugee problem’ or ‘refugee crisis’ in political and cultural discourse. The insistence on the validity of these terms and discourses props further labelling which, then, also has repercussions on a more individual level in the daily life of the refugee (s. Cohen 2001).

The ‘refugee’ label is powerful and complex, both in its use to define human experience and a category of people, but also in terms of the identity and subjectivity of those who bear the label. At one and the same time one can be proud of being a ‘refugee’ and having survived unspeakable horrors; but also it marks a lack of homeland and of previous social status and identity and self worth, a lack reinforced by racist abuse in all its guises. (O’Neill / Spybey 2003, 8)

In his pilot study of media images of refugees, especially in broadsheet newspapers, and their relationship to the policy process the British sociologist Ronald Kaye states “that stereotyping of refugee and asylum seekers is occurring in many parts of the European media” (Kaye 1998, 180). And he is certainly correct to suggest:

while the issue of refugees and asylum seekers remains contestable in the political arena, and therefore susceptible to the vagaries of political competition, the scapegoat of refugees
and asylum seekers by politicians, aided and abetted either consciously or unconsciously by parts of the media, will continue. The probable outcome is likely to be devalued and undermined, unless governments can be persuaded of the potentially positive contribution that refugees and asylum seekers can make. (Kaye 1998, 180)

Against the backdrop of this political predicament, it becomes clear that public discourse dealing with refugees often strives to propel actively a process of ‘othering’ in the sense of circumscribing the limits of an imagined national identity. L. H. Malikki comes to a similar conclusion and states that media-spread stereotypes often depict refugees as ‘speechless’ (Malikki 1996, 377). They are the epitome of ‘helplessness and loss’ (Kumar Rajaram 2002, 247). This representation strategy deprives refugees of their individuality and personality and consequently reduces displaced persons “to a mute and faceless physical mass [who] are denied the right to present narratives that are of consequence institutionally and politically” (Kumar Rajaram 2002, 247). This observation is to some degree also true for a great deal of the utilized refugee imagery in contemporary literature.

Readers find the image of the Fortress Europe taking various shapes in plays, novels, auto/biographies and children’s books (s. Nyman 2008 and Helff 2007). In a nutshell, especially from the 20th century onwards, the clandestine protagonist has been rediscovered as a valuable literary subject bringing to life both individual histories and socio-historical surveys about modern flows of refugees in an increasingly globalised world (Eckstein 2007 and Helff 2008c). While this literary development as such is urgently needed because it potentially offers a space for negotiation and reconciliation of painful memory and unspeakable anguish, it can also be easily turned into another commodity, a product displaying and selling compassion and benevolence:

What is clear is that ‘refugee literature’ can easily be turned into another marketable form of cultural voyeurism, capitalizing on the endangered, the impoverished, and the needy, and manipulating the vicarious experiences of suffering as a means towards establishing a false solidarity with the oppressed. As with other kinds of multicultural writing, there is exoticist mystification at work here. The liberal championing of refugees suggests the violence, not just of overt radical protectionism, but also of covert ideologies of benevolence – ideologies in which kindness towards foreigners doesn’t necessarily make them any less foreign, and insufficiently differentiated narratives of survival and resistance mystify the condition, even as they advertise the suffering, of the oppressed. (Huggan 2007, 130-1)

In the light of these observations this essay seeks to challenge the reductive imagery of the African refugee as an epitome of helplessness and loss, an imagery which projects or resurrects stereotypical conceptions of the African refugee as a victimized and wounded subject only.¹ My secondary aim, therefore, is to excavate and

¹ In his lucid article “African Modes of Self-Writing,” Achille Mbembe reflects on the post-colonial paradigm of victimisation in the African context by addressing the unfortunate criticism of benevolence: “The possibility of a properly philosophical reflection on the African condition having been set aside, only the question of raw power remained: Who could capture it? How was its enjoyment legitimated? In justifying the right to sovereignty and self-determination and in struggling to wrest power from the colonial regime, two central categories were mobilized:
to point to a more complex description of the African refugee in recent literature. I believe that Abdulrazak Gurnah’s novel By the Sea (2001) is a fine example of a confrontation of readers with a highly complex picture of the predicament of refugees in the wake of movement and migration. To me the text manages to draw a panorama of refugee stories that stirs the fine line between well known refugee imagery (with themes of loss and expatriation) and representations of modern identity in a multicultural nation-state. In By the Sea, Gurnah tells the story of his two male Zanzibari protagonists Saleh and Latif who both flee the terrifying and bleak African realities in search of a better life in Europe. While Latif travelled as a student on a student visa from Africa via Eastern Germany and some other Eastern European countries to Britain, Saleh, many years later, takes the direct route to the island and arrives as a refugee with fake papers and an ‘invented’ name. When, by chance, both men eventually meet in Britain and start talking about their families by sharing their disturbingly knotted memories, it soon becomes clear that both men have far more in common than their Zanzibari heritage.

1. Border Crossing

Journeys and borders are central motifs in Gurnah’s novel By the Sea, since the author tells the stories of the two Zanzibari men fleeing from Africa to Europe. While both eventually arrive in Britain the two protagonist-narrators have travelled on different routes and experienced different political climates. Their differing experiences illuminate in addition to individual adventures the changing geopolitical connection between an African state and European countries. Thus the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, which symbolises the end of the Cold War era, has lasting effects on the lives of Zanzibari refugees for example, because this historical moment exemplifies a cut in an escape route. Accordingly, Saleh, even if he wanted to, is no longer able to follow in Latif’s footsteps, because political change has left its imprint on the world map.

On a more abstract level one might even feel inclined to say the men’s journeys represent the protagonists’ lifelines, and the borders are thresholds which both of them have to cross in order to achieve reconciliation. In this way the journeys represent an intricate tale of time travelling in the narrative, hence it could be argued that the very motif of the journey seeks some kind of significance in terms of projecting an ostensibly better future and return to the protagonists’ past. Consequently, the motifs of journeys and borders should be read on a spatial, temporal and psychological level. By revisiting their early childhood both protagonist-narrators describe their gradual transformations from family members into strangers and eventually refugees. For Saleh, a key moment or threshold situation in this respect is the death of his mother. Like in Albert Camus’s famous novel The Stranger,
the death of the mother also serves here as catalyst for Gurnah’s protagonist Saleh:

While my mother was alive, the front door was open all day, and women visitors came and went, or sent their children on neighbourly errands. After she died, my father kept the front door padlocked or bolted on the inside, and when I came home I had to go and find him or knock on the door to have him let me in. (BS, 185)

Being locked out of his father’s house marks an ultimate experience of being excluded for young Saleh. The padlocked and bolted front door becomes the crucial border for the boy. In fact, it reduces him to being a guest in his own home. Consequently, the boy is only allowed to enter his home if his father, the master of the house, asks him in. Bereft of his agency, Saleh has lost his status as son; and when his father remarries and moves the family to a new place, Saleh eventually concludes that “in a sense he moved me as well even before I knew about dislocation” (BS, 185). Indeed, this point in life turns Saleh into a wanderer, a stranger and eventually an asylum seeker. A psychological reading of such feelings of unbelonging can be found in Julia Kristeva’s insightful chapter “Aloofness,” where she writes:

Not belonging to any place, any time, any love. A lost origin, the possibility to take root, a rummaging memory, the present in abeyance. The space of the foreigner is a moving train, a plane in flight, the very transition that precludes stopping. As to landmarks, there are none. His time? The time of a resurrection that remembers death and what happened before, but misses the glory of being beyond: merely the feeling of a reprieve, of having gotten away. (Kristeva 1991, 7-8)

Kristeva’s brief description of the stranger can be easily used as a chart to read and understand Saleh and his ambitions for travelling. However, the quoted passage suggests far more. It indirectly emphasises the ‘traveller’s silent longing for arrival while allowing us to see his compulsion for movement. No wonder the moment of arrival is emotionally loaded, especially if the traveller, like Saleh, journeys on forbidden paths and illegally crosses national borders in order to reach his destination:

I am a refugee, an asylum seeker. These are not simple words, even if habit of hearing them makes them seem so. I arrived at Gatwick Airport in the late afternoon of 23 November last year. It is a familiar climax in our stories, leaving what we know and arriving in strange places, carrying little bits of jumbled luggage and suppressing secret and garbled ambitions. (BS, 4)

In the case of Saleh, Gatwick Airport turns into the crucial border. Reading Saleh’s arrival at the airport in light of Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the ‘contact zone’ is it certainly right to state that in Gurnah’s novel Gatwick Airport symbolises a modern, social space “where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (Pratt 1992, 4). For Saleh, the airport is a gate into his new life. Furthermore, the immigration office at the airport is the space of a first cultural encounter between him and the British authorities, the host and the guest, where conditions of hospitality are negotiated. The elderly refugee is aware that his appearance at the border will determine his future. In order to overcome his trauma of arrival, Saleh silently revisits and relives the crucial moment of his arrival in Britain over and
over again throughout the novel. Thus the following scene is but an overture to many similar scenes to come:

So I knew that Kevin Edelman [the immigration officer] would return in a few minutes with a different stamp in his hand and that I would then be on my way to detention or some other place to stay. Unless the British government had changed its mind while I was airborne, had decided that the joke had gone on for too long. Which it hadn’t, because Kevin Edelman returned after a few minutes looking wry and amused, also defeated. I could see that he would not after all be putting me back on the plane to where I had come from, that other place where the oppressed manage to survive. For that I was relieved. (BS, 10-1)

This repetitive act of storytelling dominates the primary narrative and functions as a narrative circle of retrieval of refugee identities. It becomes clear that in this passage Saleh at the same time reaffirms and deconstructs the power asymmetry which ties him to his refugee identity. Interestingly enough, on a narrative level, the novel combines, here as elsewhere, a highly realistic imagery with an intense homodiegetic narrative situation. Such a narrative combination reflects and plays with the fashionable genre of ethnic auto/biographical life writing of refugees (s. Helff 2008b). This playfulness with styles and genre becomes even more intensified in passages like the following: “I was an asylum-seeker, in Europe for the first time, in an airport for the first time, though not for the first time under interrogation. I knew the meaning of silence, the danger of words” (BS, 12). This last sentence is very significant because it refers to information which might harm a refugee and weaken his argument to be granted asylum while addressing the rugged terrain of truth in official refugee narratives. By pointing to the performative and extratextual relevance of refugee narratives in the social world, the novel engages in an act of critical reflection not only about fictional writing generally but also about storytelling as a strategy to fabricate and in a way perform refugee realities beyond narration.

2. Mapping Territories: Narrating Life Stories

Such realities beyond narration are also addressed by the motif of the map, which is a recurrent theme in the whole novel. Already at the beginning Saleh states: “I have always had an interest in furniture. Furniture and maps” (BS, 19). But it is less the prettiness of things which occupies Saleh’s imagination than the story which comes with artefacts. Thus it is no great surprise that in the novel each object has its story, a story which often has travelled many continents and centuries. A fine example of such an object-related story is exemplified in Saleh’s incense casket with the finest quality of a rare incense, ud-al-qamari. Saleh received the incense thirty years earlier from his friend Hussein, a Persian trader from Bahrain. Quite fittingly, the incense has become so valuable to Saleh that he takes the incense casket even on his journey to England. The ud, however, is confiscated by the immigration officer Edelman when Saleh arrives in Britain. Through this story, the incense casket directly connects the Middle East, Africa
and Great Britain and the life stories and journeys of Hussein, Saleh and Edelman. In his attempt to follow stories like the previous one through space and time and to make the narrated realities visible and more credible Saleh develops a special interest in maps:

I speak to maps. And sometimes they say something back to me. This is not as strange as it sounds, nor is it an unheard of thing. Before maps the world was limitless. It was maps that gave it shape and made it seem like territory, like something that could be possessed, not just laid waste and plundered. Maps made places on the edge of the imagination seem graspable and placeable. And later when it became necessary, geography became biology in order to construct a hierarchy in which to place the people who lived in their inaccessibility and primitiveness in other places on the map. (BS, 35)

There are a number of important points in this passage. First, Saleh’s almost intimate connection with maps challenges the imperial mythology of ownership. Seen in this light, it is somewhat ironic that a refugee, a homeless man, should have this great ability to communicate with the very tool of power. This unresolved tension, however, provides a benign playground for further narrative investigation. It becomes clear that maps and mapping techniques reflect desire and imagination while they are material reality. Yet, according to the beholder’s motivation and intention the meaning and significance of various regional aspects change. A map thus offers not only a spatial interpretation of a place; its mimetic interpretation provides a basis for multiple new readings. This is to say that there have always been various readings of maps and each of them pictures the world slightly differently. Additionally, there has always been circulation of a number of different maps. Edward Said aptly points to the importance of interpretation when he criticises reading strategies which are based on an inherent Orientalism:

We should begin by acknowledging that the map of the world has no divinely or dogmatically sanctioned spaces, essences or privileges […]. What matters a great deal more than the stable identity kept current in official discourse is the contestatory force of an interpretative method whose material is the disparate, but intertwined and interdependent, and above all the overlapping streams of historical experience. (Said 1993, 311-2)

There is a whole range of different mapping strategies which might be of importance in this context. In short, the novel utilizes mimetic as well as diegetic mapping strategies. By addressing famous intertexts, Gurnah consciously inscribes his work in literary traditions as diverse as Homer’s Odyssey and the stories of The Arabian Nights, Anton Chekov’s Selected Stories and Herman Melville’s Bartleby the Scrivener. While locating the novel in the contemporary era of globalisation and modernity, Gurnah’s narrative vividly reflects transcultural dimensions such as intertextuality and intertwined histories. By weaving intertextual references into the main body of text, the novel fabricates a transcultural meta-narrative. The emerging “literary cartography” (Huggan 1994, 31) serves to deconstruct imperial power claims while pointing out far reaching cultural connections. By representing the chequered history of global trade relations between Europe, Africa and the Middle East, the novel calls for a complex analysis which considers colonial and post-independence times equally important. As mentioned previously, for Gurnah,
the danger of a reductive reading of refugee stories is more than obvious. While there is no doubt that Europe is anything but a paradise for African immigrants, many of the post-independent African countries have turned into deadly disaster zones. This is probably why Gurnah’s novel rejects easy characterisations and avoids depicting Africans arriving in Europe as victims per se (s. Mbembe 2002, 251). However, this differentiating is similarly true for Gurnah’s construction of Europeans. Consequently, they also come in different guises, reflecting a scale from the evil-doer and thief (Edelman) to the rescuer and lover (Rachel).

However, for Saleh all spatial and territorial strategies are figments of imagination, he is well aware of their terrifying global outcome. Yet, while this narrative move appreciates the power of imagination in general, it prepares the ground for a thoroughly critical discussion. Hence, By the Sea invites the reader to deconstruct the given realities mapped out by cartography. Whereas cartography serves as an appropriate tool for mapping the world according to a hegemonic vision, maps demonstrate superiority by circumscribing the framework of discussion. Saleh leaves no doubt about the impact cartography and maps have on successful territorial expansions: both built the basis on which emperors conquered huge parts of the world and some hundred years later imperial nations gambled for continents like Africa.

New maps were made, so that every inch was accounted for, and everyone now knew who they were or at least who they belonged to. Those maps, how they transformed everything. And so it came to pass that in time those scattered little towns by the sea along the African coast found themselves part of huge territories stretching for hundreds of miles into the interior, teeming with people they had thought beneath them, and who when the time came promptly returned the favour. (BS, 15-6)

Saleh offers his own version of the multiple functions maps had throughout history. He describes the transformative power of maps and their lasting effects on the viewer. Nonetheless, Saleh also makes clear that the various perspectives are always socially and culturally constructed – and thus might change at any time. The same holds true for the imagination and construction of nations. By highlighting the fact that categories such as the nation are constantly invented and reinvented and therefore not stable but rather in process, the novel brings home to its reader that the mapping strategy deployed here is a verbal and imaginative one. Yet, the narrative mapping of well known places such as Gatwick Airport demands of the reader immediate visualization. It is this mimetic concoction of ‘real locations’ and ‘far away places’ that ignites the reader’s imagination. As Graham Huggan argues, “the process of matching map to text, or text to map, involves the reader in a comparative that may bring to the surface flaws or discrepancies in the process of mimetic representation” (1994, 22). This unavoidable assessment is extremely powerful and confronts readers with their own concepts of space as well as with “the relativity of modes of spatial perception” (Huggan 2008, 30), for it is the story of the two protagonists, their tales linked to their journeys and to the places they had travelled through on their way to Britain that eventually create a more complete picture. Places and locations thus only gain meaning in the framework of the
complete story. This narrative principle fully unfolds when Latif starts telling his story of flight.

3. The Refugee as Cosmopolitan Traveller

In contrast to Saleh, Latif’s escape seems almost accidental. After his arrival in East Germany in order to complete his studies Latif seems to travel with ease with his German friend Jan. While criss-crossing Eastern Europe, the two young students do not experience any hassle. Consequently, Latif recalls his journey more in terms of a trip than a perilous flight:

We took a bus to Most and then just kept going, to Prague, Bratislava, Budapest, an endless beautiful journey to Zagreb, and an anxious rail trip to Graz in Austria. I knew before we set out that Jan planned to escape, and I joined him because he was my friend and because I was young and did not know better, and did not care where I went or what happened to me. We travelled on money he and Elleke [his mother] had saved, until we reached the German border when we announced ourselves as refugees from GDR. (BS, 137)

Latif’s narrative introduces Europe as an exciting and beautiful travel destination. His somewhat enjoyable journey, which results in his escape to Britain stands in stark contrast to Saleh’s experience of flight. For Latif fleeing from East German reality means leaving a period of economic alienation behind and welcoming a more comfortable future in Britain. This explains why he describes himself more in the manner of a cosmopolitan traveller than a refugee. By utilising poetic language and picture-postcard aesthetics this narrative mood is intensified:

I had travelled all over Central Europe in a huge circle, and was sorry that I had missed Bulgaria. I arrived in England at Plymouth, feeling as if I had circumnavigated the world’s oceans. I disembarked with the crew and strolled through the gates with them. No one molested me or asked me to name myself. (BS, 137)

This distinctively different mapping of Europe and its borders by the two Zanzibari refugee protagonist-narrators reflects Gurnah’s mission to illuminate various perspectives on flight. The emerging multiple imaginary topographies depict miniatures of European and British life. Similar to drawings the act of imagination plays a crucial part in the creation of the full picture. The idea of a fictualisation of real experiences, which in principle underlies all recollections, is particularly well developed in a scene in which Latif reflects on his own act of storytelling:

He [a German police officer] asked me to tell him the story of my time in GDR and the journey across Central Europe. It sounded grand to my ears as I told it, and I found that as I recalled the journey for him, I remembered sights and details that I had not noticed at the time. Or perhaps I was adding them in because that was what I would have seen had I been more alert. He interrupted me now and then to ask for elaborations but otherwise he let me talk, prompting me with leading questions while he leaned back in his huge swivel chair (BS, 139)

By putting all these stories together in one main frame-narrative, Gurnah follows a two-fold project: first, he dismisses one-dimensional accounts of escape and flight,
and second, he attempts to deconstruct stereotypical imagery that is deeply rooted in xenophobic thought and racism. In an interview Gurnah elaborates on this perspective when he points out the century-old history of Anglo-Saxon racism:

The debate over asylum is twinned with a paranoid narrative of race, disguised and smuggled in as euphemisms about foreign lands and cultural integrity. The Anglo-Saxon species is once again rumoured to be on the verge of extinction, when a glance around the world shows how successfully it has invaded and displaced others. (Gurnah 2001b)

By the Sea’s literary focus on the political system of asylum in Britain, most powerfully depicted in the first chapter of the book, sheds light on the socio-cultural living conditions many refugees face in their search for a more secure and better life. In this respect, Saleh’s story serves as a quasi case history exemplifying the many untold life stories of refugees in Britain; Latif’s account however, is the exception that disproves the rule. Nevertheless, when the reader follows Saleh to his new, temporary home, a detention centre somewhere in the British countryside, and eventually shares Saleh’s brief, reserved memory, he or she might experience unfathomable loneliness and an impression of refused hospitality:

To call it a detention centre is to be melodramatic. There were no locked gates or armed guards, not even a uniform in sight. It was an encampment in the countryside, which was run by a private company. There were three large structures that looked like sheds or warehouses, where they gave us a place to sleep and fed us. It was cold. (BS, 42)

In these lines, the narrator connects the discourse on asylum with conditions of hospitality in his host country. In fact, Saleh’s situation is little better than miserable; he describes himself as a stranger who is only half alive (BS, 2). This rather pessimistic perspective may be rooted in his uncertain status of home on the one hand, and in his attainment of only a limited freedom on the other. In this dramatisation of a refugee predicament, Gurnah demonstrates that, to use Derrida’s words, “the stakes of immigration do not in all rigour coincide with those of hospitality which reach beyond the civic or properly political space” (Derrida 2005, 6).

Conclusion

What are we to make of Gurnah’s portrayals of refugee predicament in light of the earlier mapped out discourse of labelling? Does Gurnah’s novel as a matter of fact offer new representational alternatives to wide-spread stereotypes? I believe it does. To me By the Sea achieves a rare quality of ‘credibility’ when the fragmented plot illuminates the two protagonists’ intertwined pasts. In this way the narrative generates a socio-historical framework of migrancy which illustrates the men’s present interpersonal relationship in Britain and their different approaches to asylum. Through exchanging memories both protagonists confront their excruciatingly knotted histories and generate an atmosphere of forgiveness. Moreover, the novel’s grounding in various settings of the British imperial enterprise makes By the Sea a critique of colonialism and its legacy while illustrating the different lives
and fates emerging from these painful past experiences. By combining the different life- and story-lines, the novel creates a transcultural space where the past comes alive in the present. The emerging primary narrative, then, offers a space of understanding and reconciliation. When both men finally discover their intimate connection and common family ties, the reader realises that the presented stories transport a profound criticism on presupposed refugee imagery. This criticism is well reflected in the fates of our two protagonists. Because, although both characters are allied and connected through their common experience of growing up in Zanzibar, losing all family and leading a life of estrangement in Britain, their different social status in British society and their distinctive habitus provide dissimilar outlooks on what it means to be a stranger and refugee in Europe in general and in Britain in particular.

Works Cited:


