

Indian Ocean Cosmopolitanism(s) in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001)

Abstract [paper]:

The recent Nobel Prize winner for literature, Abdulrazak Gurnah, is considered one of the most distinguished chroniclers of the Indian Ocean. Indeed, much of the fiction of the Tanzanian-born author narrates Indian Ocean exchanges as well as the migratory flows between Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. That is the case of *By the Sea* (2001), an epic narrative criss-crossing three continents in which Persians, Zanzibaris and other East Africans interact with each other in Arabic, English and Swahili. As can be observed, Gurnah is constructing a markedly cosmopolitan and polycultural vision of the East African littoral in which multilingualism and transculturation are the norm rather than the exception. *By the Sea* certainly paints Zanzibari society as a multicultural hub articulating the connections between African, Middle East, and Asian cultures via the Indian Ocean sea-lanes. Nevertheless, as Shanti Moorthy has keenly stated, Gurnah “contests depictions by Indian Ocean scholars of apparently idyllic premodern East African societies. His writings lend themselves to more nuanced and problematic readings of these societies as cosmopolitan” (2010: 73). In light of this, the purpose of my paper is to test the concept of cosmopolitanism as applied to the characters in the aforementioned novel by Gurnah. My main contention is that the characters in the novel, as they try to make sense of their identities in an unfolding globalization, unmoor silenced cosmopolitan visions of the globe. In this sense, I read *By the Sea* as an example of contemporary maritime fiction that seeks to record the changing notions of cosmopolitanism that have been put forward in global studies. In particular, I intend to validate Bruce Robbins’s claim in his introduction to *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (1998) that “the term [cosmopolitanism] should be extended to transnational experiences that are particular rather than universal and that are unprivileged – indeed, often coerced (1998: 1). In other words, I argue that the characters populating Gurnah’s novel forge and configure their identities as cosmopolitan in an emerging global world, even if their cosmopolitanisms can be said to be *coerced, unprivileged* and against their will. Ultimately, my paper seeks to demonstrate that the transoceanic connections represented in the novel feature the Indian Ocean as an arena in which new world orders and new patterns of globalization are emerging, patterns that illustrate “a set of transnational relations *alternative* to hegemonic northern globalisation” (Ghosh and Muecke 2007: 2) and therefore reveal that oceanic basin as a testing ground to analyse the shape-shifting contours of contemporary globalization.

(414 words)

References (maximum 150 words) (Chicago style)

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Keywords (maximum 5):

Abdulrazak Gurnah; Cosmopolitanism; Indian Ocean; Maritime fiction