

Translation in *Paradise*:

The Intersection of Languages and their Impact in Gurnah's East Africa

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Details of linguistic translation are not an obvious source of intrigue for a novel. In theory, translation should add no content to a conversation; it is merely the literal rendering of a message in a different language. However, in his novel *Paradise*, Abdulrazak Gurnah places considerable emphasis upon the act of translation between cultures. Dispersed through the novel are scenes of multilinguistic encounters in which the attitude of the translator shapes the outcome of the exchange, in which Gurnah bends the trajectory of his storytelling to incorporate the perspectives of those who find themselves between languages. In stressing these moments of translation, Gurnah adds depth to the dynamics between communicating parties, intentionally using these episodes of multilinguistic contact to characterize the complexity of intercultural relations in colonial-era East Africa

To understand Gurnah's use of translation, it is first necessary to comprehend the need for translation in his novel. *Paradise* is set in colonial-era East Africa, a space defined by great ethnic diversity. The majority of East African society at the time was Swahili, but as John Middleton emphasizes in his book, *African Merchants in the Indian Ocean*, Swahili culture itself was far from homogenous. Its members were divided into ethnic groups based loosely on place of origin, a system quite different from traditional European ideas of race based on skin tone. However, Swahili society was by no means egalitarian, as it was divided into a number of distinct subgroups: slaves and their descendants versus their patrician counterparts, interior versus coastal peoples, and indigenous Africans versus immigrants. Arriving from Arabia and the Indian subcontinent in a fairly consistent stream since the twelfth and sixteenth centuries

respectively, this final group, the immigrants and their descendants, added another layer of complexity to Swahili culture as a well-established and influential minority (17-25). Also involved in Swahili society from 1889 onward was a contingent of German imperialists whose rule was largely defined by violence that existed in “many forms and to varying degrees of intensity throughout the entire period of German colonial rule” (Moyd 6). Threaded through all of these groups was a contingent of merchants, who in their role “mediating between traders of many cultures, languages, and expectations in both Asian countries and the African interior” acted as “international cultural brokers” (Middleton 79). In *Paradise*, the protagonist Yusuf’s Uncle Aziz falls precisely into this category, so as the story follows his travels, it weaves through contact with a multitude of cultural groups.

With each of these cultural groups comes a linguistic identity. The majority of Swahili people speak Kiswahili, but as the trading party in *Paradise* travels further into the African interior, they happen upon communities speaking local dialects. Also present is Arabic, as the language of both the Quran and the Arab-descended merchant elite, and German, the language of the European colonizers. When writing about two of Gurnah’s other novels in her article “Measuring Silence – Dialogic Contact Zones in Abulrazak Gurnah’s *By the Sea* and *Desertion*,” Sissy Helff says that in these works, “cultural encounters inevitably take place in multilingual, culturally diverse contexts, and monolingual perspectives tied to one-dimensional perceptions of culture become a liability rather than an asset” (1). This holds true for *Paradise* as well. As Yusuf travels and encounters new segments of East Africa, particularly those he experiences at the side of his merchant uncle, different languages form a palpable presence and ignorance of new cultural groups often leads to conflict.

Generations of scholars have devoted significant discourse to studying the dynamics of this type of multilingual encounter. In 1911, approximately the time that Yusuf's story in *Paradise* takes place, British literature scholar D. S. Margoliouth published an article entitled "Language as a Consolidating and Separating Influence" in which he argues that the role of languages in situations of power balance is often overestimated. To him, language is simply a byproduct of cultural identity, not an essential component of it. Attempts to either unify a group with a shared language or suppress it by limiting its language are misdirected, as language is merely a utility. He even goes so far as to suggest that the world should adopt a single shared language, arguing that the only significant question in the field of linguistics is "whether it is desirable that the world should continue or should cease to be a Babel" (57-61). However, other Europeans of the age had more interest in linguistic diversity. Sharon Turkington Burke describes the German colonial study of African languages in her review of *Africa in Translation: A History of Colonial Linguistics in Germany and Beyond, 1814-1945*. German colonialists used their studies of African linguistics to strengthen their imperial ideology, as the ideas they developed about African languages like Swahili "served to harden stereotypes... construct[ing] ethnic boundaries and ultimately a racial hierarchy" (433). European research into African languages influenced colonizers' views of African society to the extent that the ideas it produced "supported colonial transformation, imagination, and even formation of ethnic groups and corresponding borders in Africa" (433) whether or not the European scholars were correct in their analysis of African linguistic ties.

However, Gurnah's *Paradise* must not be analyzed only within the context of European linguistic study. In his article "Imagining Unmediated Early Swahili Narratives in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*," James Hodapp proposes that *Paradise* is actually specifically meant to

convey traditional Swahili narratives in the deliberate rejection of traditional European colonialist literature. Hodapp cites allusions to Swahili legends within the texts, like the episode when a man from Mombasa tells Yusuf of his uncle's travels to Russia, where he found that "the Rusi people were not civilized," living in an extreme climate and drinking heavily (Gurnah 105). Not only does this story reverse the traditional imperialist narrative, in which a European travels to a non-western land and finds appalling savagery, it also directly references a traditional Swahili legend. Hodapp says that this salute to Swahili storytelling is a "corrective gesture" that "imagines an unmediated Swahili literature preceding European colonialism" (92). With that in mind, *Paradise* should be read within a non-European-centered linguistic context.

With this broad frame of reference, Gurnah's use of translation in *Paradise* can be studied more intimately. The instances of translation in the novel can be grouped into two general categories: those in which the act of translating is a source of power and those in which it generates vulnerability. These characterizations may seem at first antithetical, but their contrast reflects the complexity of intercultural contact in *Paradise*.

Historically, in colonial systems, translation is often a manifestation of power dynamics. In their article "Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters with the Indigenous: The Case of Religious Translation in Africa," Jacobus A. Naudé and Cynthia L. Miller-Naudé write that "translation has often served as an important channel for empire" (318). They say that generally, the dominated culture translates their language for the colonial power, and that when the colonial power does do the translating, they only translate works that fit into their preconceived ideas of the conquered group. One especially common form of colonial translation is religious translation. In Africa, the Quran and the Bible were both widely translated in the effort to spread Islam and Christianity through the continent; Naudé and Miller-Naudé even go so far as to claim that

“translation in the African context is mainly associated with religious translation” (313).

Religious translation is a clear attempt to harness the power of translation by gaining access to indigenous spiritual life through native-language contact. Though religious translation of this type is not an emphasis in *Paradise*, it is worth noting that when Yusuf talks about religion with Hamid, Hussein, and Kalasinga, Kalasinga mentions wanting to translate the Quran into Kiswahili “to make you stupid natives hear the ranting God your worship” (Gurnah 84). This scene is a prime example of language differences representing cultural dynamics. Kalasinga’s desire to translate the Quran is a linguistically complex proposition: he cannot read Arabic, so he insists that he would use the existing English translation to write a Kiswahili version. These languages represent a collection of cultures with stark religious differences. Kalasinga is a Sikh who finds Islam brutal, while the English translation of the Quran was most likely made by British Christians studying Islam from afar. It is also evident here how translation can be used to assert power, as Kalasinga’s clear goal in this circumstance is to write a translation of the Quran that would shift Swahili Muslims’ view of their religion.

This powerful quality of translation is certainly not lost on the translators in *Paradise*. Nyundo, who translates between Kiswahili and the tribal languages of the African interior for the trading party, seems to relish the importance his role gives him, especially at the beginning of the journey. He uses his position to tease his comrades. In the first village they visit, he jokes about Uncle Aziz’s refusal of the sultan’s offered beer: ““He asks why?’ Nyundo said, grinning. ‘It’s good beer. Is it because you think there’s poison in it?’” (Gurnah 139). As the journey continues and tensions arise in Chatu’s village, Nyundo’s role becomes even more important and he holds a vital position as gatekeeper of communication passing between the two negotiating groups. Gurnah specifically states that “the words they spoke were impenetrable, unless Nyundo was

available and willing,” and that Nyundo’s “good humour was on the mend with his new importance” (154-5).

The power of the translator extends beyond simply the ability to pass messages between groups; Gurnah includes multiple scenes in *Paradise* in which the translator personally affects the message conveyed. One of the more passive methods Gurnah’s translators use to alter the conversations they facilitate is simple omission. Nyundo employs this device at times, like later in the conversation in the first village mentioned above, when Gurnah describes that “his gesture was ambiguous, as though he had not understood or thought it best not to translate” (139) when asked about a joke the sultan makes after the merchant’s refusal of the offered beer. In her article “Measuring Silence – Dialogic Contact Zones in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *By the Sea* and *Desertion*,” Sissy Helff describes the power at play in such a situation. She insists that silence in multilingual conversations is a “zone of cultural encounter in its own right,” quoting a classic Swahili poem that includes the line “Silence makes a mighty thump” (1). According to the article, this “mighty thump,” the impact of silence, is not unknown to Gurnah’s characters. It is used for a function and is not to be confused with absence or powerlessness. In Nyundo’s previously-mentioned case, it is quite possible that he refrains from explaining the sultan’s joke because it was vulgar or crude; perhaps he did not wish to offend Uncle Aziz and create conflict in the exchange. However, the text does specify that his lack of translation could be simply because “he had not understood.” This supports another of Helff’s major points, that “the complex task of understanding an uttered silence is further complicated in a situation in which people from different cultural backgrounds and languages communicate” (154). Because none of the other traders in the situation understand what the sultan said, it is difficult to gauge how

intentional Nyundo's silence was, but intentional or not, omissions on the part of the translator in multilingual conversations can certainly impact the result of an exchange.

In addition to the ability to filter conversations through pragmatic silence, the role of translator offers the opportunity to directly editorialize upon and twist the content of messages being conveyed. Later on in *Paradise*, when the Mistress calls Yusuf into the merchant's house in an effort to seduce him, this power is used by Khalil and Amina as a buffer between the two communicating parties to prevent emotional and physical intimacy. Khalil especially slants messages as he passes them between Kiswahili and Arabic. He is very protective of Yusuf, framing the words he conveys with phrases like "Now we begin, little brother" (208) and offering his advice for Yusuf as the conversation progresses. He even sometimes speaks for Yusuf before the latter has the chance to form his own responses. Amina is less direct with her opinions in translating, but her reactions still shape the conversation. Her discomfort with the situation is clear as Gurnah describes Amina's translations for Yusuf and the Mistress, repeating that "her eyes [were] dull with distance" and "her voice was small and distant" (222). As the sole intermediary between the parties in the conversation, the only point through which information can pass, Khalil and Amina can shape the messages they transmit to promote the outcome they favor for each situation.

Clearly, the position of translator offers a unique type of power at several instances in the novel. Translation is an opportunity to push colonial and religious perspectives on other cultures, a moment when one individual can be vital to the conveyance of negotiations between whole groups, and a chance to filter what gets transmitted or act as a buffer in an emotionally-charged conversation. However, as much as Gurnah depicts it as an empowering role, acting as a translator is just as often a position of great vulnerability in *Paradise*.

This vulnerability takes several forms, one of which is simply emotional vulnerability; the role of translator automatically puts an individual into a position of deeper connection with both parties involved in dialogue. According to Naudé and Miller-Naudé, from a macro perspective, translation functions as “cultural mediation” (313). Without it, cultures would be “isolated [and] localized,” with “clannish ethnic groups unable to cross language and ethnic borders and ignorant of the knowledge, wisdom, and faith of other cultures” (313). Translation offers connection on a more personal level, too. The very effort to speak someone’s native language automatically strikes down certain defenses. Sissy Helff writes about an instance of shared language breaking down cultural barriers in another of Gurnah’s novels, *Desertion*. In it, the African protagonist becomes friends with an Englishman, a friendship made possible by the latter man’s knowledge of Arabic, which “deconstructs the idiom of his own colonizing culture” (163-4). Likewise, in *Paradise*, Nyundo’s language abilities deconstruct some of the cultural divide between him and the interior tribes he meets. At the very least, addressing them in their native language is a polite gesture: even when a sultan speaks Kiswahili, Uncle Aziz and Nyundo agree that “it would be more courteous to address him in his own language” (Gurnah 137). At its most profound impact, shared language can even prompt loyalty across generally antagonistic lines. When the journey to Chatu’s village becomes especially difficult and Mohammed Abdalla blames the group’s indigenous guide for the struggle, Nyundo takes on a protective role. When Abdalla begins to beat the guide, Nyundo, the only person who can communicate with him, abandons his characteristic levity in an attempt to protect the guide, suffering a beating himself for his efforts. The act of connecting with the guide in a shared language over the course of the journey has created a bond between the two that supersedes Nyundo’s loyalty to Abdalla. By

promoting empathy through shared language, translation has the potential to create a sense of emotional vulnerability between parties.

However, Nyundo and the guide's situation also highlights a different type of vulnerability that the role of translator often brings: physical vulnerability, the danger of being the middleman in a situation of conflict. Though officially affiliated with the trading party, Nyundo is responsible for delivering the messages of both the party and the guide, so he assumes a position of relative neutrality. When conflict arises, that role makes him a target. Even when situations are not overtly violent like that episode, Nyundo becomes a source of suspicion as tensions grow within the party. Abdulla approaches his translator with "unconcealed disgust" (151), questioning the validity of his words. This distrust of the narrator becomes even more dangerous as Nyundo is forced to play the intermediary in important negotiations. When the trading party is held hostage by Chatu, Nyundo's presence is necessary to every word of negotiation that occurs. The translator's job is a daunting task, and the subtleties of language are no help. At times, reliable translation is impossible, as certain words have no equivalent in the other language. For example, Chatu uses the term "khoikhoi," which Nyundo can only describe as someone who "will let strangers steal from him while he dances under the moon" (165). Naudé and Miller-Naudé describe the sensitivity of such a situation, saying that sometimes translation can "bridge the cultural gap," yet other times the translator must simply leave the disconnect in place and try to act as a link across it to help others "understand the otherness" (314). The translator's central position forces him or her to consider and adapt to the conflicting needs of both the source and the target of a translation, sometimes subjecting him or her to substantial physical vulnerability (Naudé 314).

The fact that Gurnah so clearly emphasizes moments of translation in *Paradise* but gives conflicting meaning to the impact of the translator and their impact on the translator is striking. The act of translating is at once empowering and endangering, individualistically influential and collectively empathetic. Translation is fickle, and Gurnah leans into that reality for a reason. He focuses so closely on these moments of translation because they have the unique ability to capture the exact point of contact between ethnic groups and societies. In multilinguistic interactions, the translator is the intersection between groups, and with such a central position, the experience of the translator can represent the dynamic of the entire interaction. With that in mind, the power assertion and the vulnerability that Gurnah weaves into his descriptions of the translation process echo similarly interconnected power struggles, pain, and empathy within the interactions of the communicating cultures themselves.

In emphasizing these cultural interactions through moments of translation, Gurnah comments on the ethnic makeup of colonial-era East Africa. In his article “Exchange, Bullies, and Abuse in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Paradise*,” David Callahan says that the novel is set in an environment where “a fascinating mixture of peoples seems incapable of living in fruitful harmony, where a rich and complex legacy of historical, mercantile, religious, and linguistic factors has regrettably given rise to frequent suspicions, inequalities, and lack of generosity” (56). The conflicting depictions of translation in *Paradise* support that idea; though sometimes different cultural groups find common ground and empathy in moments of shared language, the exchanges are often ultimately dominated by either assertion of power on the part of the translator or subjugation of the translator to another’s power. Just like the groups of people the translators connect, the existence of the translators themselves is defined by struggles for power.

These power-defined interactions comment on colonialism itself. By depicting such a varied array of cultural groups at odds with each other in these moments of translation, Gurnah rejects the archetypal western literary view of African imperialism. Rather than a simple, uncivilized paradise conquered by Europeans, Gurnah's Africa is a place where complex and often tempestuous intercultural relations have always existed, a zone where sophisticated ethnic groups are perpetually reevaluating their relations. In Callahan's words, "all ethnic posturing, including the threatening and autocratic colonial presence, [is] merely part of the continuum of the hierarchy- and power-driven human relations" (55). For Gurnah, conflict is a human quality, not simply an imperialist one. By depicting situations of translation, the purest samples of intercultural contact, with such an emphasis on power struggles and vulnerability, Gurnah describes an Africa defined by complicated societal interaction.

As Yusuf's travels progress through *Paradise*, Gurnah periodically pauses his narrative to include the experiences of a translator who would be otherwise relatively insignificant to the story. These translators considerably shape the outcome of the dialogues they transmit, and they themselves are often also substantially impacted by those conversations, pulled into either a situation of changing power dynamics or one of emotional or physical vulnerability. Gurnah does so intentionally, using these encounters to represent the complexity of intercultural relations in East Africa in the early twentieth century and thus rejects traditional colonial narratives about the continent. In *Paradise*, the act of translation is far more than the repetition of a message in two languages; it is the definition of the connection and disconnect between cultural groups.

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