GURNAH'S MEN

Rethinking Muslim Masculinities in the Indian Ocean World

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Abstract

This article explores how Abdulrazak Gurnah illustrates the varieties of Muslim masculinity in the Indian Ocean world through an analysis of two of his youthful characters, Hassan Omar, from his debut novel *Memory of Departure* and Salim Yahya, from his more recent *Gravel Heart*. Both young men find themselves pitted against a more traditional male role which stifles them while, at the same time, encourages them to envisage a more fluid understanding of what it means to be a man in a predominantly Muslim society like Zanzibar. The fissures in the relationship that Hassan and Salim have with their fathers and uncles point to a questioning of an established hegemonic masculinity and its socially rigid facade in Muslim East Africa. Social constraints such as honor and shame drive both young men to seek a better future overseas. I claim that through his novels, Gurnah offers a new script for Muslim men to follow in the twenty-first century.

Keywords

Abdulrazak Gurnah, hegemonic masculinity, Indian Ocean, Muslim masculinities, Muslim values, transgression, Zanzibar

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INTRODUCTION

And no bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another.
Qur'an, 35:18

In her ground-breaking study of masculinities, first published in 1995, R.W. Connell acknowledged that the term *hegemonic masculinity* fails to cover all aspects of gender politics within masculinity as "we must also recognize the relations between the different kinds of masculinity, relations of alliance, dominance and subordination (Connell 37). Mike Donaldson argues that, following Gramsci, hegemony is about how the ruling class establishes and maintains its domination. The majority of the population is made to accept this domination and is aware of the possibility of punishment or ostracism should they stray from the path of conformity. Included in this understanding of hegemonic masculinity as regards male domination over women and homophobia, he claims that "[a] fundamental element [...] is that women exist as potential sexual objects for men while men are negated as sexual objects for men" (Donaldson 645). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri clarify that "[t]he hegemonic figure is not [necessarily] dominant in quantitative terms but rather in the way it exerts a power of transformation over others. Hegemony here designates a tendency" (Hardt and Negri 107). While Western critics focus specifically on gender politics in their own part of the [Christian] world, I find the notion of hegemonic masculinities applicable to Islamic societies as the rules and regulations of societies framed by monolithic religions, such as Islam and Christianity, share a hierarchical understanding of how these societies should function. Hegemonic patterns of masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality are embedded in dominant cultural practices in Muslim families.

However, if we consider the concept of *umma*, the world-wide Muslim community which prescribes loyalty to other Muslims regardless of their national origin, it becomes more complex to think in terms of hegemony as clan or national affiliations may work differently in various parts of the globe. In this respect, thinking in rhizomatic terms as regards East African Muslims needs to be qualified as these terms presume that these communities celebrate horizontal—that is, non-hierarchical—relationships and actually shy away from establishing and accepting inherent privileges based on class and power.

Gurnah's Zanzibar, once the hub of a great Indoceanic empire, became the site of a bloody revolution in 1964 following its independence from Britain. Although it was intended to "wrest power from the Omani sultanate and institute a new national order, [it] indiscriminately persecuted all people of Omani descent irrespective of their presence on the coast for generations" (Datta 25). Considering how Zanzibari Africans had been relegated to an inferior position for so many years (Sheriff, "The Peasantry" 112–26), the revolution would, in principle, have paved the way for a

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truly rhizomatic, that is socially inclusive society, lacking a "beginning or end; […] always in the middle, between things, interbeing" (Deleuze and Guattari 25). Thus, I claim that what Datta calls "a failure of transmodern politics" (Datta 25) actually embodies the tragedy of Zanzibar as a rhizomatic community, as social, political and class hierarchies continue to flourish, which Gurnah's oeuvre so expertly shows.

In the last thirty years studies on Muslim masculinities have burgeoned, many of which have aimed to dismantle the proliferation of negative stereotypes of Muslim men in the diaspora (see for example Britton, Mirza, and Silvestri). The Western media offers a monolithic picture of Muslim men as bearded, fanatic terrorists, which "easily extends to singular ideas about Islam" (De Sondy 53). De Sondy stresses the importance of representations of all kinds of Muslim men as they do not all look the same nor do they all wear the same clothes (56).

I have argued that Abdulrazak Gurnah's work needs to be read with its Muslim heritage in view, as Islamic cultural modes form the framework of his novels as they are written *through* but not *about* Islam, (Hand, "Untangling Stories" 76). Few scholars have dealt with the theme of masculinity in Gurnah's oeuvre while nine of his ten novels to date all feature a male protagonist and several secondary male characters who display different traits and often transgressive conduct. Gurnah scholars have explored a variety of pertinent issues that permeate his work including diaspora and displacement (Helff), colonial history and the deconstruction of whiteness (Pujolràs-Noguer), irony and humor (Steiner) and so forth, while attaching less importance to the role of Islam in the construction of his male and female protagonists. With the notable exception of *Dottie*, his third novel, all of his major characters are male and it is revealing to trace his views of what it means to be male and Muslim in Indian Ocean culture.

Gurnah's characters range from the adolescents Yusuf (*Paradise*), Hassan Omar (*Memory of Departure*) and Salim Yahya (*Gravel Heart*), to the elderly Saleh Omar (*By the Sea*) and Abbas (*The Last Gift*). In this article I aim to tease out how Gurnah rewrites a script for East African Muslims as he portrays diverse ways of being Muslim in Indian Ocean—especially Zanzibari—society. This article is divided into three sections. First, I outline what Muslim masculinity might signify in Zanzibar where, it should be remembered, 98% of the population are followers of Islam.[1] Secondly, I analyze the three male characters in his debut novel *Memory of Departure*, Hassan, his father Omar, and his uncle Ahmed. In the third section, I look at Gurnah's ninth novel *Gravel Heart*, and explore how masculinity has evolved in the Gurnahian oeuvre through the characters of Salim, his father Masud and, again, his uncle Amir.

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MASCULINITY IN ZANZIBAR

All of Gurnah's oeuvre is underpinned by Muslim cultural codes, which demands that the production of meaning be unraveled from this starting point. Scholars of Islamic cultures stress the wide gulf between received notions of masculine behavior in Euroamerica and the Muslim world, both with their internal variations, although the term "performance" is not used (Jones, Ouzgane). The Muslim male patriarch tends to be portrayed as one who prioritizes the collective interests of the wider family, kinship group, or community over the well-being of individual family members—both the younger males and all the females.

Should Muslim men be viewed as autonomous individuals who are free to exercise agency and patriarchal authority, and are at ease with operating within the constraints of rigid cultural forms? Gurnah seems to willfully refuse to perpetuate this stereotype in his fiction as his male characters reveal transgressive forms of being male within a Muslim cultural context.[2] Gurnah highlights the ambiguity of social constructions of gender that sexualize relations of domination through the portraits of many of his male characters, themselves the victims of patriarchy which "limits women's equality and spirituality but also compromises men's well-being and leads to the social ills of authoritarianism" (Kugle 38). Thus, I propose to explore Muslim masculinity in *Memory of Departure* and *Gravel Heart* from the perspective of honor, as it is played out against an East African Muslim cultural background.

Honor is the other side of the coin to shame, and it is closely linked in Muslim cultures to conformity. An individual's failure to conform is deeply frowned upon and singles him or her out as an object of shame. Still that who is shamed does not bear the stigma alone as their whole family suffers from this loss of honor. I place betrayal within the scope of this large category of honor, as any betrayal can involve a severe loss of social status the more humiliating the vision of betrayal might be. Gurnah's novels highlight both the fear of public disgrace and the power of allegiance to Islamic codes of honor, which can be observed by delving into his characters' betrayals of their families and of themselves.

Gurnah has argued that his interest is not solely in Islam as a religion but "in the crucial role it plays in the culture of the coast of East Africa" (Chambers 125). One of the major strands of East African culture is Islam but people are not necessarily "pious, law-abiding, believing, practising Muslims" (125); they are simply brought up in a Muslim cultural context. As far as definitions are concerned, Maleeha Aslam claims that "Islamic masculinities serve as alternatives to the 'dominant/hegemonic "aggressive" Muslim masculinity'" (Aslam 91). In this respect, I will use the term Muslim rather than Islamic, not to suggest that Gurnah's men act

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aggressively but to emphasize their socio-economic and political context rather than the ideal exemplary understanding of how Muslim men should act and what they should aspire to. Arat and Hassan likewise query the notion of a hegemonic Muslim masculinity. They argue that:

> the Qur'an promotes multiple masculinities and none can be labelled as hegemonic. It reveals at least five salient character traits that may be taken as prescriptions for the believing men. These traits, which we classify as submissiveness, altruism, righteousness, steadfastness and combativeness, show a complex relationship. They are not only interrelated and overlapping but may also appear contradictory, depending on the individual's religious status, institutional context, and the overall emphasis placed on moderation and restraint. (789)

Michal G. Peletz, however, suggests that a certain number of shared values do exist within the Islamic world that affect and guide the conduct and value system of Muslim men. He writes:

> Muslims in many parts of the world draw upon a similar (but variable) corpus of symbols, idioms, norms, ideals, and understandings grounded partly in Islamic texts (including but not limited to the Qur'an) to organize, make sense of, legitimize, and represent key features of personhood, gender, and their private/domestic and public lives. (535–36)

Both novels under scrutiny in this article are set at the time of Zanzibar's independence, while *Gravel Heart* moves on to the twenty-first century. The violent uprising of 1964 in Zanzibar forms the backbone of many of Gurnah's novels revealing the immense hatred that the rest of the country felt toward people of Arab descent, unleashed by the removal of the common enemy, the British. His fiction underscores the disastrous upheaval caused by the persecutions, imprisonments, murders, and regime of terror that followed the revolution (Sheriff, "Conclusion" 249–50) and Uncle Amir's imprisonment in *Gravel Heart* can be attributed to his unwelcome ancestry.

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MEMORY OF DEPARTURE: REHEARSING A FLUID MASCULINITY

Memory of Departure (MoD)[3] narrates a young man's growth to maturity in a small East African town around the time of the Zanzibari Revolution. Hassan Omar's memoir commences when he reaches the age of fifteen and "becomes accountable to God" (*Memory* 7) and then traces his school years, his frustrated attempts to study abroad, his visit to his mother's affluent brother in Nairobi in search of support, his budding romance with his cousin Salma, his betrayal of his uncle's trust, and his return home. The narrative ends with the letter he writes to his cousin Salma while on board a ship en route to Madras, where he has found work as a medical orderly—the same profession as Daud, the protagonist of Gurnah's second novel, *Pilgrim's Way*. The young man abandons the Gurnahian oeuvre as Hassan Omar but resurfaces in fragmentary form in the author's subsequent novels. Daud, Yusuf, the narrator of *Admiring Silence*, Saleh Omar, Rashid, and even the elderly Abbas all carry traces of Gurnah's reckless teenager. Through the character of Hassan, the protagonist-narrator of his debut novel, Gurnah provides a range of alternative ways of performing a more fluid understanding of gender roles, although departure from home and its socially rigid facade seems to be a necessary prerequisite (Hand, "Searching for New" 223). In *Memory of Departure,* Gurnah's male characters fall into diverse categories, ranging from the perverse sodomite to the aloof autocrat, with his main character occupying a middle road and performing his masculinity according to the situation required rather than to an already established fixed set of norms.[4]

Gurnah's debut novel portrays a heterogenous society in terms of religious affiliation but as Michael G. Peletz reminds us:

> there is much more to Muslim men's lives than daily prayer and conventionally construed submission to God [...] [so we] need to range beyond impoverished views of Muslim men that reduce their aspirational projects to concerns with piety, patriarchy, purdah, and punishment. (560)

However, the weight of Muslim codes of practice dies hard and in the words of Islamic scholar Waïl S. Hassan:

> patriarchy consolidates itself by taking on the task of cultural resistance to imperialism, and misogyny is sedimented into a coercive set of social norms, transactions, and institutions that latch onto an immensely powerful religious tradition. (322)

An integral part of family honor is respect for the figure of the patriarch. He is the nucleus around which the remaining family members revolve. Given that unity and cohesion are values that are paramount to family life regardless of the individual

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action of any one member, even if a father is deficient in his role as breadwinner or in his behavior, the family unit is to be protected and the father's authority upheld. However, this case may not necessarily include affection, as is Hassan's case:

> For as long as I had known him he had spent his nights whoring and drinking, and we acted as if we did not know where he went while he was out. [...] Perhaps we were all as pathetic as he thought we were, but I was afraid to shame my mother. [...] During the day, our father was the wrathful master, whose word had the authority of the sanction of God. I think our fear of him, and the pretence of respect, only made him loathe us more. (*Memory* 33)

Family honor is, thus, a permanent means of blackmail used to shame children into obedience as a matter of routine. In this way, Gurnah deftly shows how religious imagery is interwoven into the coercive fabric of family control (Kugle 30). The father's hypermasculinity, as evidenced by the statements "[h]e was a man in those days, a man as men are supposed to be" (*Memory* 15), is a compensatory configuration for his failing masculine identity—one that frames him as respectable and as a respected member of the public universe of male society.

The father seeks to compensate for his own shortcomings through the aggressive assertion of his power over his immediate family as he constantly abuses his wife and terrorizes Hassan. The construction of this aggressive, violent masculinity compensates for his social and political disempowerment in the community, where he and the rest of the family are marginalized by their neighbors for the time the father spent in prison for allegedly sodomizing a young boy. A cloud of suspicion perpetually hovers over the family as the offense is neither openly acknowledged nor adamantly denied by either parent, so Hassan lives in a state of ambiguous guilt. His search for a masculine role model is conditioned by this ambivalence. His father's "abandoned" masculinity (Newell 248) leaves Hassan relatively few choices as either extreme on the gender performance continuum—unwarranted physical force or a caring empathetic attitude—become determining categories. "They [his mother and his sister] were afraid of any affection I attempted to show because it made me seem soft and suspect" (*Memory* 35). Thus, in order to perform as a Muslim man, Hassan is obliged to reject any show of emotion, especially toward women:

> Masculinities are formed and inhabited not just through other men but also crucially through the occlusion of femininity and emotionality, that is, otherness in its diverse forms. The price of masculinity is high as it is built on the repression of softness and emotionality; embedded in it is loss and what has to be excluded. (Kabesh 347)

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Thanks to the portraits of Hassan's father, Omar, who is accused of pederasty, his refined Uncle, Ahmed, ultimately responsible for his wife's suicide, and his elder brother, Said, are launched on a precocious career of lies and sexual exploitation. Caught in this circumstance, Gurnah provides a variety of scripts for the young Muslim male to rehearse. Does Hassan betray his family or his community or is he is guilty of betrayal at all? Is his longing for escape overseas a symbolic cleansing of his or his community's past sins, or can this longing be interpreted as a rejection of rigid gender roles and a desire to embrace a more fluid understanding of Muslim masculinity? Hassan's failure to conform to the received notion of honorable conduct—referred to as *sharaf* in Arabic—regarding his cousin Salma hints at his questioning the boundary between discretion and hypocrisy in male behavior. The affront on his cousin's honor is carried out in public, and it is the *appearance*—not necessarily the reality—of unchastity that can stain an entire family's honor. Thus, Hassan's rejection of Islam is grounded not so much on a real loss of faith, but rather on his dislike of double standards. His father drummed into him that "God has divided hell into seven depths. The deepest is for the liars and hypocrites, those who pretend to be devout when there is doubt in their hearts" (*Memory* 7), and the novel reveals the conflicting behavior of the outwardly pious male characters. As Hassan reflects, "In the end I gave up God and stopped listening to lying old scholars who could emphasise a point with one tensely outstretched forefinger while the other searched for a little boy's anus" (22).

The young man violates Muslim codes of honor as regards the figure of the guest by arriving home late with his cousin, his actions being "wrong by any understanding of how a guest should act" (125). The Qur'an (15:68–71) relates the story of Lot's guests and the importance of good behavior, verses that Hassan would be all too familiar with as he attended Koran school from the age of five. However, his father's response to his discourtesy and his transgression of the accepted behavior of a guest as seen in the statement, "[I]t was wrong what you did [...] but it served the fucking miser right" (148), supports the need for honesty and integrity above all other virtues. Ahmed's pretense to provide a job and guarantee a future for his nephew is revealed to be a hollow promise that neither exonerates Hassan nor absolves his uncle for the breach in his duty as host.

> [There is] a relationship of mutual reinforcement between hospitality and truthfulness in Islam. As a matter of fact, the duty of hospitality is fulfilled only in truthfulness. Lying may protect the guest but it is violative of honor and there is no dignity in the protection of the cowardly. (Achrati 503)

Uncle Ahmed, Hassan's mother's brother, is mean and cowardly. He fails both as a father figure and as a host. He never intends to provide for his nephew—in fact, he appears to have cheated his own sister out of her inheritance—and, instead, uses

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Hassan as a means to frighten his own workers into subservience and guarantee his own position of authority and power. Uncle Ahmed's shame—that of the unproved rumor that he kept his wife locked up as a punishment for her alleged adultery—forces him into a paradoxical position where he fails to protect his own daughter from dishonor precisely because he cannot face the thought of revealing to her the truth about her mother. Uncle Ahmed and Hassan's father both struggle to live up to the demands of Muslim masculinity which, ironically, only serves to highlight their vulnerability (Nash 61).

In turn, the greater the pressure to preserve family honor and reputation within the community, the weaker the men's behavior becomes. The physical violence that both Hassan's uncle and father resort to in order to assert their control actually undermines their role as authority figures.

> He [Uncle Ahmed] growled and stepped forward. 'If you had not been my sister's son I would've killed you and faced the consequences.'
>
> 'Kill me. Don't let your sister stop you from doing what is right. There is not one thing about you that frightens me. I haven't dishonored you. You've dishonored yourself.' (*Memory* 134)

Hassan's calm, self-assured uncle and his troublemaker father seem to be diametrically opposed models of masculinity who, in fact, share much in common. Once the surface of piousness and the assiduous weekly attendance at the mosque are scratched, both men expose their violent natures--the poor man's substitute for respect. The father's sexual abuse of his mother is linked inexorably with his uncle's psychological cruelty of his wife, who takes her own life to free herself from a living death.

Hassan's elder brother, Said, who openly rebels against his father's authority as well as engages in homosexual activities with boys from school, is burnt to death in a bedroom fire. His horrendous death by fire satisfies the punishment of both sodomy and disobedience. Moreover, since fire never constitutes an act of purification in Muslim thought, the choice of Said's death and Hassan's apparent inaction, most evident when he says "I stood and watched him burn" (*Memory* 14), sets the younger brother up as a scapegoat (Hand, "Searching for New" 228).[5] Hassan's final realization that he need not shoulder the blame for his brother's untimely death clarifies his choice of masculine roles as any honor that needs to be upheld is now his own. Honor becomes a matter of personal responsibility rather than a community value which, again, undermines the concept of a rhizomatic community in post-Revolutionary Zanzibar. Honor takes on a new meaning for him as appearances cease to matter if one's personal integrity is at fault. He, therefore,

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casts himself in the role of the sacrificial victim for too long as his parents appeared to wreak their anger and powerlessness onto him for his brother's tragic death. Hassan discovers that the talk of his father's sexual scandals has worked to distance his parents from him. Assuming the burden of the misdeeds of others resurfaces in the character of Salim Yahya in *Gravel Heart*, the subject of the following section.

***GRAVEL HEART*: THE DEBRIS OF DISORDERED LIVES**

The novel *Gravel Heart* (GH) opens with the fond memories of the narrator's, Salim Yahya's, childhood when his father was still a part of his life. At the age of seven, Salim learns that his father, Masud, has left home for good. He is unable to understand both the reason for this drastic turn of events and his mother's daily food delivery to the room where Masud now lives, puzzling him even further. He is tormented by the idea that his father no longer wants him and a slow-growing feeling of guilt and abandonment engulfs the young child.

Sponsored by his Uncle Amir, his mother's brother, Salim is then sent to England but he gradually discovers the covetous reality behind Amir and his wife Asha's sophisticated facade. Salim learns that Amir's generosity springs only from his debt to his sister and Salim's mother, Saida. It is not until the last two chapters, when Masud takes over the narrative voice, that Salim learns the truth of his mother's sacrifice and his father's self-isolation. Saida dies while Salim is still in England and he is unable to attend her funeral as he cannot be reached. Neither can Salim perform the last rites for his father as the latter dies when his son is stranded in Addis Ababa airport on his way back to England.

Gurnah's ninth novel foregrounds one of his characteristic literary motifs: displacement and its resulting alienation. This is mind, Salim is obliged to follow a course in business as his uncle demands deference and compliance from his nephew as this is a profession that will provide him, Salim, with an economically safe career. The boy's real wish is to study literature and, after two years, he finally confesses his secret desire to his uncle who scorns his decision and accuses him of repaying his kindness and generosity with "vileness and ignorance" (*Gravel Heart* 76). Amir clearly feels no real affection for his sister's son; he is merely repaying an old debt and, in return, requires "obedience and a ready smile [… in] a manner calculated to intimidate (39–40). Salim acknowledges his failure to play the part of a "cringing dependent nephew" (103)—a statement that has him resemble Hassan Omar all the more and who, just like Salim, is not able to keep to the accepted role that Muslim patriarchs would expect from their subordinates.

Salim's experiences in England away from his uncle's dictatorial rules propel him into a new independent life even though he still experiences "the anxieties of living

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in an alien and hostile city" (67). Despite his new friendships with other overseas students and his sporadic affairs with women, what invariably creeps up on him are the visions of his father's "lonely decrepitude" and his mother's "self-hurt [that she] would inflict on herself" (119). An immense feeling of guilt and shame overcomes him; in one of his letters to his father that he never sends, he talks about "the feeling of loss that is with me at all times, the sense of wrong-doing" (121).

Julie Fitness analyzed the causes and consequences of the feeling of betrayal and argues that shame features as one of the major responses that victims of betrayal may succumb to. She claims that "[s]hame [...] is a profoundly painful, self-focused emotion that typically motivates attempts to hide or escape from the situation" (Fitness 88). Appropriately then, Salim is found tormented by shame ever since his father abandoned the home as he interprets the Masud's departure as a rejection of his own son. *Gravel Heart* features Salim as the main character but the novel actually delves into the meaning of betrayal from the perspective of his parents. The son merely plays the part of "the debris of their disordered lives" (*Gravel Heart* 95). In this respect, Fitness defines betrayal as

> devastating because it disrupts an ongoing, meaningful relationship in which partners have invested material and emotional resources. [...] betrayal may be conceived as a profound form of interpersonal rejection with potentially serious consequences for the healthy functioning of the betrayed individual. (73)

Masud and Saida had been happily married until her brother Amir came to live with them. Saida and Amir's father was executed by the new government and their mother reduced to abject poverty, becoming a victim of an early death, resulting in Saida's enormous obligation toward her younger brother. Such was their predicament given that "the tragedy of their lives brought them closer in an urgent way, made her obsessively protective of him, and made his demands on her absolute and undeniable" (*Gravel Heart* 208).

In turn, Amir freely exerts a powerful influence over his young nephew through his seemingly glamorous lifestyle. However, his indiscretion with Asha, the daughter of the Vice-President, eventually brings about the breakdown of his sister's marriage. Asha's brother's demand that Saida submit to his sexual demands in exchange for her brother's freedom places her in a doubly unenviable position.

Whether or not an act of betrayal involves lies, deception, or infidelity, an important aspect of the experience that intensifies its severity and pain is humiliation or the perception that one has been shamed and treated with disrespect, especially in public (Fitness 79) . Masud responds to the humiliation of having his wife whisked away to the palace in order to gratify the Vice-President's son's sexual

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appetite by hiding away from society. He leaves the marital home and seeks refuge in a room behind the shop owned by a friend. Masud's perceived loss of social status is derived from his understanding that he has been exposed as a ridiculously contemptible man, incapable of controlling his wife and, by extension, maintaining his family's honor.

Given that humiliation inflicts such a deep and painful injury to a person's self-esteem and social status, "taking revenge might well be regarded as a powerful means of restoring dignity and regaining some control over the situation" (Fitness 86). Oddly though, Masud seeks no revenge as he takes it out on himself, nor does he appear to demand an apology from his wife. According to Fitness (84), apologizing does not necessarily mean that one justifies one's behavior but, on the contrary apologizing can serve to admit that one has no excuse for hurting or wronging another. Clearly, Saida was defenseless because her brother's life was at stake. Gurnah appears to be reticent on what their friends and neighbors thought about Saida's conduct. Only one schoolboy taunts Salim (*Gravel Heart* 40), so are we to understand that Saida's decision was generally understood? Was Hakim's power so overwhelming that she had no choice and did her immediate society accepted this? Still, Sreya Mallika Datta pertinently asks:

> What is perhaps most perplexing about the novel is that it never truly makes clear why, even after Amir's release, Saida keeps going back to Hakim and ultimately marries him, tearing apart her family, and causing Salim's father to leave the house in pain and shame. (Datta 24)

Saida cultivates her own gravel heart—as does her brother, Amir who dismisses Masud's feelings saying that "No one needs to know. People do these things all the time" (*Gravel Heart* 244)—when she tells Salim that his father "chose to ruin his life" (43) without seeming to understand the root cause of her husband's "detachment and defeat" (36).

We may ask whether Masud's self-alienation borders on excessive. Is his case one of maximizing his own suffering? (Fitness 87). Does he not realize, possibly even unconsciously, that he passes the burden of his shame onto Salim? The Qur'an says: And no bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another (35:18). Given this extract, Masud is in fact disobeying the holy book.

From an anthropological perspective, Michael G. Peletz explains that, according to Muslim traditional values, males have more reason and less passion than females (540), which begs the question as to whether or not Saida acts out of reason (her brother's life is at stake, after all) rather than passion (given her love and loyalty to her husband.) A further characteristic of male reason superseding female passion

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is, according to Peletz, the legitimization of violence and even such violence's cultural desirability in defence of honor and dignity (552). In contrast, humility, reticence, and a non-confrontational demeanour may be construed as acting in a feminine way (554). If Saida in *Gravel Heart* assumes a masculine role governed by logic, since there is no other means of saving her errant brother, her husband, Masud, performs a female role in the novel after his failure to fight and subsequent abandonment of the household. Needless to say, the frontier between reason and passion is a fuzzy one as masculinity studies tend to see violence as a significant component of masculinity and Orientalism also has no scruples in associating Islam with violence (Arat and Hasan 788). Despite the enormous influence that the Qur'an has in Muslim households, it is clear that this text should also be construed as one of the many informing sources in the formation and configuration of accepted masculine behavior.

Gurnah's choice of a title borrowed from a Shakespearean play, *Measure for Measure*,[6] opens up a new avenue of analysis regarding masculinity. The use of the intertextual frame that resonates with Salim, who explains the plot of the play to his father during their last meeting, is a frequent narrative device employed by Gurnah.[7] In this way Gurnah provides the reader with an external (i.e., non-Muslim) commentary on the events that unfurl throughout the novel. Sean James Bosman argues that this device highlights "the need for correctives to the framing tendencies of the literary canon" and that "refugees and other marginalised migrants [can] create their own frames or adapt those of others" (Bosman 32). In the context of this present article, I prefer to acknowledge Gurnah's use of the Shakespearean play—curiously labelled a "problem play" as it fails to fit into any of the traditional categories (Bawcutt 42)—to be his way of highlighting the differences between the Western and predominantly Christian world with its own value system and the Islamic world, where the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith guide Muslims in their everyday lives. Salim clearly sees certain similarities with the early 17th century play but recognizes that:

> There was no Duke to put things right for this Isabella, no one to restrain the man of appetite who, once he had her in his grip, never let her slip away. Nor was there any role for you in the play, Baba, because Shakespeare had already reserved the heroine for the Duke. (*Gravel Heart* 256)

While Shakespeare's work ends with all parties reconciled and justice restored to the body politic, *Gravel Heart* only very tentatively approaches reconciliation (Bosman 38). Gurnah may be pointing to the misuse of justice in Islamic societies as both Angelo (in *Measure for Measure*) and Hakim abuse their power but, while Angelo is punished, Hakim and Amir Ahmed Musa, Salim's uncle, continue to live

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their lives with impunity. The novel suggests that justice and mercy in a Muslim context is still an ongoing project.

CONCLUSION: UNDERSTANDING MUSLIM MASCULINITY

Gurnah's novels are about diverse and often opposing characters whose stories are, in a sense, branches of the same tree—one that has grown so tall and so wide that the common root is too deeply buried to be perceived. This common root refers to the rhizomatic essence of Zanzibari society, expressed through a shared cultural heritage and an allegiance to Islam. Such a metaphor is an apt one as, in the aftermath of the Zanzibar revolution, many branches were cut and a serious and drastic pruning process took place. The revolution implied that these actions were called for, but Gurnah's novels suggest that such drastic pruning has not smoothened the way for real ethnic solidarity. I argue that masculinity—in particular, a Muslim understanding of masculinity (Lodhi 92)—plays an important role in the new configuration of Zanzibari society.

In *Memory of Departure,* both Hassan's father and uncle make him feel guilty for his brother's death or for infringing the laws concerning honor. Guilt stands out as a strong literary motif in both novels as Salim blames his father for his own misery. Still, is this his life penance or his recipe for survival? Likewise the themes of betrayal and one's alienation from family and culture form a thread that sows both texts together. In both novels, the two protagonists struggle to find their way in life and as Muslim men. Gurnah's fiction suggests that violence is a feature of Muslim masculinity that needs to be erased or at least tempered. Hakim and Amir in *Gravel Heart* and Uncle Ahmed in *Memory of Departure* act violently, despite the fact that they do not resort to physical violence but rather emotional blackmail via the weight of honor or public shame.

Hassan Omar's final destination is elusive but Salim—like so many of Gurnah's men—migrates to the former metropolis. Hassan Omar is written out of the Gurnahian oeuvre as he never returns, unlike some of his creator's characters[8], but Salim Yahya's seemingly reluctant return to England after his mother's death and the revelation of his father's ultimate humiliation seem to be reflected in Gurnah's own words:

> That strangeness intensified the sense of a life left behind, of people casually and thoughtlessly abandoned, a place and a way of being lost to me forever, as it seemed at the time. When I began to write, it was that lost life that I wrote about, the lost place and what I remembered of it. ("Writing Place" 26)

Gurnah's men are portrayed in their diverse guises, so his fiction clearly contributes to a more inclusive understanding of how masculinity plays out in Islamic countries. The case of Zanzibar, while by no means representative of the wider Muslim world, highlights the centrality of certain values in people's lives and Gurnah's fictional characters act out their gender roles in accordance with these values or by willfully transgressing them, which actually substantiates the need to read his work with the Muslim heritage in view.

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Notes

1. See "Islam in Zanzibar – History, Denominations Institutions", UnitedRepublicofTanzania.com, 11 Oct.2022. https://unitedrepublicoftanzania.com/tanzania-culture/major-main-religion-in-tanzania/islam-in-zanzibar-history-denominations-institutions-muslims-history-of-islamic-education-wedding-origin/.
2. I am fully aware of the many varied voices in Islam such as Shia, Sunni, Ismaili, Sufi, and other esoteric currents, but I have not attempted to deal with them as it is beyond the scope of this article. My argument is that, in his novels, Gurnah describes a general, popular, lived-in sense of Muslim conduct. I am grateful to the late Farhad Khoyratty for his advice on this point.
3. Henceforth, the following abbreviations will be used: MoD for *Memory of Departure* and GH for *Gravel Heart*.
4. In *Paradise*, Mohammed Abdalla and "Uncle" Aziz, respectively, fit these roles while the boy Yusuf occupies a more fluid gender role like Hassan Omar.
5. Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle (138) describes how an allegedly homosexual man was punished with death by fire. He argues that the man, Fuja'a, was not executed for doing "the acts of the Tribe of Lot," but rather that it was the rebellion against the Prophet Muhammed's authority that sealed the man's fate. Thus, apostasy and rebellion—not homosexual acts—were his crimes.
6. See Act IV, Scene 3, where Duke Vincentio exclaims, "Unfit to live or die: O gravel heart!"
7. One of the more obvious examples of this technique is Saleh Omar in *By the Sea*, when he echoes the protagonist's invariable response in the Melville story, "Bartleby the Scrivener."
8. In Gurnah's latest novel to date, *Afterlives* (2020), Hamza is clearly a mature version of *Paradise*'s Yusuf.

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