THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Gurnah's Fiction at the "End of Religion"

EMAD MIRMOTAHARI

Early in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* (1994), the novel that brought its author widespread international attention and plaudits, it is revealed that the main character, an adolescent boy named Yusuf who grows up on the Swahili coast in the early twentieth century, cannot read the Qur'an. While most people on the coast speak Kiswahili, Nyamwezi, and many other local and regional languages, Arabic is the language of commerce, of communal authority, and of faith. The label "savage" is summarily affixed to anyone who cannot read and speak it. As the narrative goes on, the adults in Yusuf's world become increasingly suspicious of his inability to read Arabic and of his disinclination toward reading scripture. This suspicion is eventually confirmed, as the novel's narrator shares that Yusuf's "attention wandered during the longer prayers, and he was forced to hum meaninglessly over the noise of other readers when he was required to address the unfamiliar sections of the Book" (97). At one point, Yusuf is probingly asked to locate the all-important Ya-Sin *surah* in the Qur'an but is unable to do so.[1] Yusuf does not know the Qur'an and does not make much effort to conceal that fact; for this reason, he finds himself on the outskirts of the Islamic society to which he nominally belongs.

Salim, the narrator of Gurnah's 2017 novel, *Gravel Heart*, relates the following about his own schooling in Zanzibar, a plot point that takes place more than half a century after the events in *Paradise*:

> I had made good progress with the Koran compared to many other boys in my class, and by the time I wrote the story of the cycle ride to the country, I had finished with Koran school. I had escaped, which is to say I had completed reading the Koran twice, from beginning to end, to the satisfaction of my teacher, who had listened to me read every single line of every page over the years, correcting my pronunciation and making me repeat a verse until I could read it without stumbling. By the time I stopped attending Koran school I could read the Koran

EMAD MIRMOTAHARI is associate professor of English at Duquesne University, where he teaches courses in world and postcolonial literatures.

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PMLA 138.2 (2023), doi:10.1632/S0030812923000214

> fluently and with the appropriate intonation without understanding anything much of what I read. I knew the stories, I loved the stories. (12)

This second textual moment differs from the first, from Yusuf's inability to read Arabic, because Salim not only reads Arabic but learns to read it fluently. He even reads the Qur'an in Arabic from beginning to end twice. Salim perfects the proper pronunciations of the words in the Qur'an, illustrating the materiality and performativity of the profession of faith in Islam and the importance that is placed on the words themselves, their textures and sounds, including the enunciation of phonemes and the most spiritually generative way to intone, elongate, or shorten them. However, he also relates that he read the text "without understanding anything much," except for the "stories" in the Qur'an. He is referring to the stories about the Prophet Mohammad and other holy figures. "I loved the story of the angel who came to the young orphan boy herding sheep on the hills of Makka, split open his chest and washed his heart with driven snow" (12).

Despite the differing historical contexts and linguistic capabilities of Yusuf in *Paradise* and Salim in *Gravel Heart*, the two novels evince a common alienation from the spiritual content of Islam, its sacredness, its putatively divine truth—which is to say, the eternal truths that it purports to offer the *ummah*, its community of faithful. This is one of the keenest, if furtive, threads that runs through much of Gurnah's fictional corpus. Besides its thick and idiosyncratic engagement with Africa, the postcolonial condition, exile, and encountering modernity's requisite undercurrent of racist violence and prejudice in the colonies and in the metropoles, Gurnah's fiction grapples with the changing place of Islam and Islamic worldviews in the modern postcolonial world. In doing so, it goes beyond the faulty "subtraction thesis" of secularity, which is the generally understood definition of the term *secularity*, the proposition that modernity has simply shed religion and religiosity.[2] In Gurnah's fiction Islam is evacuated of its spiritual substance for many characters and narrators, and not just for the wandering intellectual in exile who "hates all systems with equal distaste" (Said 55). But Gurnah's fiction also exhibits the ubiquity of Islam as a structuring social and symbolic reality, a source of cultural legitimacy, intertext, and rhetorical capital for his narrators. This tension is consequential.

Born in Zanzibar in 1948, Gurnah grew up in a world that was by economic and geographic necessity polyglot, multiethnic, and multiconfessional. Gurnah's development as a writer owes as much to India, to Iran, and to Arab civilization as it does to the Kiswahili language, literature (including the *utenzi*), mythography, and lore.[3] It also owes much to German, Portuguese, and, ultimately, British cultural influences.[4] His work is a palimpsest of languages, human collectivities, and histories, all of which vie for supremacy. It is in this capacity that Gurnah's fiction negotiates the troubled place of Islam. Besides the question of secularity and Islam's ebbing epistemological authority, Islam is also troubled in Gurnah's fiction historically, meaning that its place as an African religion, a native religion, is unsettled. The frequent comparisons—incomplete and unsatisfactory, though not without validity—of *Paradise* to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and its rejoinder, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, aside, *Paradise* and a number of other novels by Gurnah situate Islam as a sort of preamble to western European colonialism in eastern Africa, an Abrahamic religion and culture that was imbricated in colonial discourses of difference that trafficked in ascriptions of "civilization" and "barbarity," a community that was engaged in material extraction and maintaining large international commercial networks long before Europeans arrived on the scene.[5] This is partly why the anticolonial rhetoric of governments in the 1960s in eastern Africa and elsewhere in Muslim sub-Saharan Africa disclaimed Islam as alien and harmful to an "original" African essence that had to be recovered and restored. The repudiation of Islam also assumed racial overtones, as "Muslim" came to mean "Arab," for instance, and, by extension, "not African." "Arabs" and other "non-Africans" were then often marked for detention, deportation, or death as a result. Despite this, Islam remains a crucial factor in the way Gurnah's narrators and characters make sense of the social transformations and renamings occasioned by the postcolonial moment, even the most irreligious and impious of them. The renegotiation of the past in Gurnah's fiction embraces a deep reimagining of Islam's place in precolonial African societies as a form of spirituality and culture. This renegotiation asks whether there was a precolonial indigenous social order (given how embedded Islam is), what the "pre-" signifies, what and when indigeneity was, and what role Islam played in making and remaking Africa.

It is not my contention that Gurnah is an Islamic writer, or that his fiction is underpinned by a commitment to Islam as a faith. Nor do I mean to suggest that every reader must read Gurnah's fiction with an eye to Islam as the most important site of meaning, and that not to do so would be to read deficiently. Rather, I am suggesting that Gurnah's fiction poses pivotal questions about what Saleh Omar, the narrator of *By the Sea*, worries is coming to constitute "legitimate" knowledge about Africa. And certainly, Gurnah's novels invite their readers to be conscious about what is "legitimate" knowledge about Africa by considering what is legible in Europhone African fiction—namely, the literary and cultural inheritances that this work draws from and gives back to. One of those inheritances in Gurnah's fiction is Islam, Islamic doctrine, and Islamic histories. This inheritance necessitates a reckoning with the divestment of epistemic and cultural authority from Islam and Islamic worldviews, even as postcolonial modernity has also produced some of the most fervid, blustery, and convulsive expressions of religion, especially since the 1970s.

Salim, the narrator of *Gravel Heart*, himself attempts an exposition of modernity and secularity as he recollects his maternal grandfather, Ahmed Musa Ibrahim. He ponders his grandfather's attire in an old photograph, as well as his understanding of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's transformation of Turkish society after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and Arab socialist nationalism in the 1950s. A "cosmopolitan traveller" who visited some of the world's "great metropolises"—meaning Cairo, Istanbul, and Beirut, on his way to London and Edinburgh—Salim's grandfather wore his tarbush as a sign of a "sophisticated Islamic modernity, secular and practical in place of the medieval turban" (16). The successive employment of the terms "sophisticated," "Islamic," "modern," and "secular" by Salim is free of any irony. This is because Islam's "sophistication" and its "modernity"—the definition of both terms appearing self-evident to Salim—rest precisely on its restraint as religious faith and practice, on its diminishing authority to make universal truth claims and prescribe how its adherents should live their lives in historical time. The "medieval" turban—a term that is also used without any irony—is, alternatively, a supposed artifact of the past, a natural, ontological past that is unmediated by human knowledge and power regimes, which is to say unmediated by the ideo-temporality that has been produced by the colonial, imperial, and capitalist West after 1500. Indeed, Salim's father recalls his own father, Maalim Yahya, Salim's paternal grandfather, as one of the "privileged remnants of *another* era" (179; my emphasis). If *Paradise* represents Islam as conflicted and contended, *Gravel Heart* portrays it as not only removed and relocated but also no more, no longer, a souvenir of another time.

Maalim Yahya was never formally schooled, but he knew the Qur'an and the *hadith* by heart. Salim's father—himself disaffected from his Islamic faith—recounts to Salim that Maalim Yahya was given what ultimately amounted to a token role in colonial schools in Zanzibar to assuage the concern of locals that their children were going to be turned into "unbelievers" by British education (178). Salim's father concludes his recollection by pointing out what he perceives to be a historical irony. "It is religious scholars like my father who made colonial education possible" (178). But this observation is not ironic at all; what Salim's father describes is integral to secularity. It constitutes not only Islam's unknowing historical facilitation of western European colonial domination but also the sublimation of religion into the modern state and its apparatuses.[6] But even the wistful narration of this sweeping away of the old order remains estranged from Islam as faith, as spirituality, as a vessel of the sacred. The people who lived through revolution, independence, and nation building in the 1960s and after—processes and projects couched largely in secular and socialist nationalist language—had no choice "but to sit silently while history was narrated anew" and people were reminded "that they were Arabs or Indians or Iranians," even if no such distinctions were inferable from people's physical appearances or customs. Revolution and independence also entailed the "mocking dismantling of our old stories" (180). The reconfiguring of Zanzibari society into ethnic brackets that would preclude being "African" is notable, but equally notable is the oblique reference to Islam as "stories," a recurrent and intentional signifier. "Stories" signifies something apart and different from the Qur'an's spiritual substance throughout *Gravel Heart*, a shorthand for the altered ways in which Islam exists for Gurnah's narrators and characters.

For Salim, Islam's value is its literary value, its value as stories, as a source of stories, and as a framework for storytelling. As a reader, he is moved by western and British writers, but crucially also by many Islamic writers, poets, and philosophers. The epigraph of the novel testifies to the importance of that literary heritage—"The beginning of love is the recollection of blessings," which is the first verse of a poem by the ninth-century poet Abu Said Ahmad ibn Isa-al-Kharraz, from his *Kitab al Sidq* (*The Book of Truthfulness*). Even the authorial choice to use "Makka" instead of "Mecca" in *Gravel Heart*, while seemingly inconspicuous or incidental, is a subtle but important move that signals to the reader the narrative's immersion in an Islamic world and frame of reference. What Gurnah's fiction points to is the way in which Islam "haunts"—to use Charles Taylor's term—the historical world without acting on it directly, and how it animates the literary imagination. This intertexuality is more than "echoes" of other texts or simply their "influence," and it exceeds the act of accumulating symbols and references. It is the means through which Gurnah's fiction highlights another way in which secularity works, another arena in which religion's energies are caught and released, part of the transmutation—not reduction—of Islam from the metaphysical to the historical, the sacred to the literary, a change that illustrates the increasing priority of what Seyyed Hossein Nasr calls the "*this*-worldly" (5).

The knife attack on Salman Rushdie in western New York in August of 2022 is a reminder of Vincent Pecora's cautioning words in *Secularization and Cultural Criticism*—addressing the fatwa on Rushdie resulting from his still-explosive novel *The Satanic Verses*—that despite what intellectuals and a relatively small group of cultural elites may think, religion matters, and it matters a great deal. This sensibility is one of the reasons Gurnah's fictional corpus inhabits nuanced figurative, cultural, and ideological spaces in the formation that we might loosely call anglophone postcolonial literature. Gurnah's fiction is undissembling in its attack on parochialisms of all sorts, including religious ones. It also bears witness to the ways in which identities are as much imposed as they are claimed. But Gurnah's fiction also shows that religion, while it matters, has undergone a shift that—regardless of the large numbers of followers many organized religions continue to have around the world, and the continuing influence of religion in human social and political affairs—has resulted in the eviction of Islam from its previous historical and epistemological place.

If some readers unfamiliar or hostile to Islam welcome what they perceive to be a categorical attack on the religion in *The Satanic Verses*, they are joined in their perception by some persons and groups in the Islamic world who claim to profess the deepest and most unadulterated iteration of Islam. While it is not particularly gainful to characterize either group as "misreading" Rushdie's novel (though the book burners and fatwa issuers most probably do not read literature), I do believe that neither group is particularly troubled by the way Rushdie's novel engages with the tension between Islam as a metaphysical truth and Islam as an instrument of the literary imagination, and how that imagination navigates this very tension. The titular "satanic verses" connect the religious and the literary, the metaphysical and the historical. They tell the story of Allah, a pre-Islamic deity in the Arabian Peninsula who had three daughters, Lat, Uzzat, and Menat, daughters whom the Prophet Mohammad originally recognized as divine but later renounced, claiming that he had been under the spell of Satan. These verses, later excised from the canonical text of the Qur'an, interest Rushdie not because they are assaults on Islam but because they represent the dangers of eliding those histories that are not congruous with the homogenizing projects of certain nationalisms, with the unyieldingly hermetic logic of religious dogmatism, or with the racist-nativist notions of belonging that South Asian immigrants have had to confront in Britain.

Yusuf, the main character of Gurnah's *Paradise*, is an analogue for the "satanic verses" in Rushdie's novel. Yusuf is a rewriting of Joseph from the Hebrew Bible and Yusuf from the Qur'an. He is sold into slavery to pay his father's debts on the Swahili coast on the eve of German (and then British) colonization. And despite his personal distance from Islamic scripture, piety, and practice, he embodies the qualities for which Joseph and Yusuf are known in the Hebrew Bible and in the Qur'an. His relation to the Qur'anic Yusuf sets him up in the narrative as a most revered figure, a paragon of Islamic virtue. The life and captivity of Gurnah's Yusuf closely resembles Joseph's and Yusuf's life and captivity in Egypt, and it is his actions and decisions in captivity that make him a holy figure. This is demonstrated, for instance, when he resists seduction by Uncle Aziz's wife and is able to prove his integrity through a shirt that was torn from behind, much as Joseph is able to do after Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce him. Yusuf is also driven by prophetic dreams throughout *Paradise*. These are dreams of fire, hellhounds, and idyllic gardens with bounteous and fragrant fruits and flowers. It was through dreams that the Prophet Mohammad received the Qur'an over a period of years. Despite these parallels, Gurnah's Yusuf is principally and finally historical; he is evicted from the sacred and he is exiled—willingly flees might be more accurate—from an earthly history to which he never fully belonged, a past whose future would always be in relation to Europe and the (post- and neo-) colonial condition. Lastly, it is important to recognize that the double allusion of Gurnah's Yusuf to Yusuf of the Qur'an and to Joseph in the Judeo-Christian tradition speaks to what Ali Mazrui calls Africa's "triple heritage"—meaning its indigenous and local histories and identities, Islam, and the Euro-imperial legacy.

Secularity is not nothing, as Talal Asad has argued in *Formations of the Secular*. While it is ancient, it is also new, it is a change, a shift. Secularity has existed as a principle since the inception of Christianity, and it is not foreign to Judaism either.[7] Nor is secularity merely the elimination of religion from public and civic life; it does not simply connote an age of "post" prefixes—postreligious, postsacred, post-Christian—the use of which, Stathis Gourgouris argues, is a "lazy" and "incapacitated response" to new historical terrains (66). Further, secularity is not the mere disguising and consolidation of Christian hegemony in the West, what Marcel Gauchet might call the "religion for the end of religion" (see 4–5).[8] Secularity is a transformation in religion's value, organization, and employment. Gurnah's fiction manifests the secular, above all else, as the migration of religion's energy from the spiritual to the literary and the rhetorical; it is a means through which many writers from the Islamic postcolony attempt to make sense of their historical conditions using materials from their own historical communities and memories; it is their way of reaching for some semblance of communion, experienced and discursive, with a spirituality and a history of spirituality that has become largely unavailable to them. This is one of the areas of inquiry that I believe can benefit from more sustained critical attention to Gurnah's corpus, not just from literary scholars but from all those who are interested in the continuities of religion in the world and the forms those continuities assume. Gurnah's fictional output poses some of the most troubling and edifying questions about the new places and spaces that religion and spirituality occupy in the modern world, just as it collapses clean distinctions between the religious, the irreligious, and the antireligious, as well as between secularists, antisecularists, and "secular antisecularists."

NOTES

1. Ya-Sin is the thirty-sixth *surah* (chapter) of the Qur'an, and it principally focuses on the divinity of the Qur'an and serves as a warning to those who doubt this truth. It is a crucially important *surah* because of its preoccupation with the profession of faith.

2. I use the term *secularity* as distinct from *secularization*, which refers to historical, political, and juridical processes that are meant to bring about secularity, mostly in Western Europe after the Enlightenment. *Secularism* is the belief in and the advocacy of secularity.

3. Hodapp engages the Swahili elements in *Paradise* that he believes are overlooked in scholarship that emphasizes the narrative's other literary conversations.

4. The title *Gravel Heart* comes from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (act 4, scene 3).

5. One trader in *Paradise* draws an explicit link between being Muslim, being civilized, and being a trader. See Kalliney. See Gurnah, *Paradise* 130–32 for passages that address these vast economic networks. See 119 for the equation between trade and earthly virtue and calling in the religious sense.

6. See Taylor, especially the chapter "Religion Today."

7. One can simultaneously be Jewish and not believe in a supreme being, and in Spain after the *reconquista*, one could even be Jewish *and* be Christian, like the Marranos, who practiced Jewish rituals in private while they were formally Catholic.

8. Gauchet's *The Disenchantment of the World* argues that the modern political state eroded the power of the sacred and refocused privilege onto humanity and human affairs. He also argues, however, that Christianity finds its best expression in and as the secular.

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