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The Literary Cartography of East Africa in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Paradise: A Study through Critical Cartography and Postcolonial Spatial Theory

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Abstract
The relationship of literature and geography has emerged as an important area for understanding how colonial powers mapped and controlled territories, yet limited research examines how postcolonial literature functions as counter-cartography, challenging imperial spatial epistemologies. Gurnah's *Paradise* offers a compelling analysis of literary cartography, reconstructing late nineteenth-century East African trade networks that European colonialism systematically erased. This study employs qualitative literary analysis grounded in critical cartography, postcolonial spatial theory, and literary cartography to examine how the novel maps pre-colonial caravan routes, documents German railway infrastructure as spatial violence, and preserves indigenous geographic knowledge through placenames, stopping stations, and merchant navigation strategies. These frameworks interrogate maps as instruments of power, analyse colonial spatial restructuring, and examine how literary texts preserve and contest geographic knowledge. Close textual reading identifies explicit cartographic elements, including route descriptions, directional movements, and geographic terminology. Findings reveal that *Paradise* functions as a modern counter-mapping preserving African spatial agency. Future research should examine other postcolonial literary cartographies recovering marginalised geographic epistemologies across diverse colonial contexts.
Keywords: Literary Cartography, Postcolonial Spatial Theory, East African Trade Routes, Counter-Mapping, German Colonialism.

INTRODUCTION

Literary cartography has opened revolutionary possibilities for postcolonial investigation, especially in how geographical discourses deconstruct and remake colonial geographies. This study examines the literary cartography of East Africa in Abdulrazak Gurnah's 1994 novel, *Paradise*, drawing on theories of critical cartography and postcolonial spatial theory. The novel is set in East Africa in the late nineteenth century, as the world was undergoing a significant shift toward imperialism, and this serves as a counter-narrative to European cartographic descriptions of the continent. This study explores the role of the geographic narrative, the role of a work titled as an alternative geographic text that reconstitutes indigenous trade networks, challenges colonial spatial practices,

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and maintains the marginalised system of geographical knowledge that has remained alienated in the formal colonisation process of the area.

Tally (2013) described Literary Cartography as the mapping of the literary space and the spatial practice inherent in narrative forms, which can provide readers with alternative perspectives on the knowledge production of geography. Gurnah plays with the East African space within the framework of the specious location of culture, as defined by Bhabha (1994), in which the territory becomes a place of negotiation, hybridity, and resistance. Set in the 1890s, when the scramble for Africa and the creation of German East Africa took place, the novel is set at a crossroads where native trade systems met European colonial cartography (Iliffe, 1979; Rabi et al., 2025). It was during this time that centuries-old Arab-Swahili trade routes were transformed into forces defined by European treaties. This had a far-reaching impact on the region's social, economic, and spatial structure (Sheriff, 1987).

The caravan trade routes that organise the narrative geography of Paradise are what Sheriff (1987) refers to as an advanced pre-colonial system that links coastal entrepots such as Bagamoyo and Zanzibar with interior kingdoms through systems of credit, kinship and commerce. These paths supported the transportation of ivory, slaves, cloth and other goods and established cosmopolitan zones of cultural interaction that make it difficult to simplify the story of African isolation (Gilbert, 2009). Gurnah has recreated the representation of old trade routes in his works. Mbemba (2001) defined an African agency in which Africans recreate their own geographic knowledge, after colonial maps destroyed indigenous spatial epistemologies. The literary cartography of the novel is therefore a counter-mapping exercise, making the inherent power relations visible in the cartographic practice, the conscious inclusions and omissions that were in the interests of imperialism.

Recent academic research in postcolonial spatial literature has been more inclined to acknowledge narrative geographies as a site of opposition to imperial cartographies. Upstone (2016) illustrates, in her concept of the postcolonial spatial imagination, how spatial strategies in postcolonial literature challenge colonial territoriality and reclaim native geographic epistemologies. Lefebvre (1991) proposed that the concept of representational space is significant for making sense of how literary writings would be in opposition to the abstract, rationalised space of colonial rule and military domination. Berman (2013) goes further to state that literary representations of East African agency in the era of German colonialism complicate the narratives of African passivity before European imperialism and expose complicated modes of negotiation, resistance, and cultural survival.

The critical analysis of colonial mapping activities demonstrates the significant role of cartography in the conquest of the empire and the taking of territories. Bassett and Porter (1991) also show that the European mapping of Africa in the late nineteenth century was a systematic process that turned intricate human geographies into administrative units that could be governed under colonial rule. According to Gregory (1994), this process can be understood within the concept of imaginative geographies, which shows how the violence of colonisation is coded and naturalised through the spatial ordering of cartographic depiction. This study discusses the role of *Paradise* as literary cartography, exploring how the novel marks out trade routes and questions colonial mapping as a practice. It restores East African geographic knowledge

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systems overwritten by European imperialism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Frameworks of Literary Cartography in Postcolonial Contexts

The theoretical background of literary cartography lies in the relationships among spatial theory, critical geography, and postcolonial studies, which offer the necessary frameworks for analysing how narratives chart, challenge, and reconfigure colonial geographies. Tally (2013) notes that, despite its metaphorical applications, literary cartography has a broader scope that includes a systematic investigation of how literary texts are used as mapping procedures that structure spatial experience and generate geographic knowledge. The researcher positions literature as an actor in the process of creating spatial consciousness, where authors serve as cartographers who must mediate between subjective experience and objective representation.

Cooper (2011) develops a methodology of critical literary cartography that distinguishes between authorial mappings internal to literary texts and reader-produced mappings created through geocritical analysis. This two-fold method is beneficial for analysing Paradise, as it considers both Gurnah's textual descriptions of the East African trade routes and the theoretical reconstruction of colonial spatial practices. Cooper has worked on the critical cartography of Harley (1988), which underlines the idea that no map is neutral but somewhat rhetorical. That cartography applies its words in a way that produces an orderly social inequality. This acknowledgement that maps are not transparent images but instruments of power directly guides the analysis of how colonial mapping justified European dominance over trade routes in Africa. Harley's point that class and power differences are produced, reproduced, and legitimised in the map through cartographic signs provides insight into how colonial cartographers transformed lived geographies, full of complexity, into administrative zones that the imperial government could govern.

Caquard and Cartwright (2014) define literary cartography in postcolonial contexts as informed by the tension between the traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples and the cartographic practices of the West. Their narrative cartography framework discloses that maps are narratives that contain power relations and illustrate how narratives can be used to intervene against the cartography. The idea of spacetime events, i.e. the narratives have to be imagined as combinations of space and time; as spatio-temporal events, translates directly into the portrayal of trade routes by Gurnah, in which seasonal cycles, the time spent on a journey, the time of arrival of the colonialists, etc, determine the spatial imagination of the story. The visualisation of spatial uncertainty in fiction, as presented by Reuschel and Hurni (2011), examines the depiction of fragmentary, vague, or disputed spaces through five uncertainty sources: artistic freedom, linguistic ambiguity, geographical vagueness, reader interpretation, and cartographic representation. This mapping of literary uncertainty is especially applicable to the study of how *Paradise* strategically uses spatial indeterminacy to challenge colonial cartographic accuracy, situating literary cartography as an epistemological practice that exposes how spatial knowledge is produced, contested, and transformed by narrative modes.

The cartographic study of *Paradise* helps to understand how the novel traces the trading routes of the pre-colonial world and the spatial changes in the colonial

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world. Jacobs (2009) illustrates that *Paradise* is a postcolonial cartographic intervention that narratively remaps Conrad's colonial path to an African heart of darkness, but this time on the east coast of Africa, to the west. This spatial inversion is essential, since the story Gurnah tells follows the historic Arab-Swahili trade routes of caravans moving westward along the Indian Ocean and southward to Lake Tanganyika, inverting the direction of movement Conrad took in his narration. Drawing on J. Hillis Miller's concept of topotropography, the research contends that topography becomes virtual text through processes of naming and narrative representation. That place names are power relations encoded in place. His discussion singles out particular places, the Tanga-Kilimanjaro railway line, the Maasai steppe, trading posts such as Mkata village and Tayari town, in which Gurnah focalises the historical geography but changes it through focalization of the narrative.

Göttsche (2023) places the location of the *Paradise* in the German colonial memory discourse, as the novel recreates the German imperial rule through the African views that do not exist in the German literature. His discussion shows how Gurnah portrays German colonial infrastructure, especially the railway between Tanga and Moshi by 1912, as physical colonial cartography inscribed upon the land, heralding the end of the caravan trade. The study argues that three overlapping narrative strata exist: a coming-of-age narrative, a historical account of the decline of trading networks, and a metafictional interest in literary traditions. Most importantly, the study notes that Gurnah demonstrates that corruption of trade into subjection and enslavement existed long before European colonisation, which makes anti-colonial discourses more complex by exposing cartographies of power that overlap with Arab trade, Indian moneylenders, African carriers and German armies.

Berman (2013) offers a critical contextualization of history by discussing East African agency within colonial and pre-colonial spatial systems. Her reading pre-empts the caravan trade as the key institution that organises the novel's space, showing how Gurnah is right to depict the complex mechanisms of debt, dependency, and exchange that led up to and conditioned colonial capitalism. Based on Deutsch (2006) and Rockel (2006), Berman demonstrates that the relationships between wage labour, indenture, and slavery were dynamic prior to European colonisation, and that the idea of peaceful pre-colonial coexistence is romanticised. Her discussion of how various groups use a language of othering to trace spatial hierarchies demonstrates that each group has its own cartographic consciousness and territoriality.

Furthermore, Mustafa (2015) highlights interest in pre-colonial East African literary traditions. The fact that she identifies specific Swahili sources, especially Salim bin Abakari's Safari Yangu ya Urusi na ya Siberia and Chande's Safari Yangu ya Bara Afrika, shows that Gurnah is reaching out to indigenous systems of cartographic knowledge operating in parallel to European mapping. This intertextual aspect illustrates what Cooper (2011) refers to as cartographic intertextuality, in which literary geographies interact with colonial, Arab, and indigenous mapping practices.

Umadevi and Madhavi (2024) expound on the cultural cartography of the novel by discussing how the concept of *Paradise* propagates the idea of a geographical area with a high level of cultural diversification, comprising of African, Arab, Indian, and European influences, with trade routes serving as a

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cultural exchange medium that creates related landscapes and complex geographies as a result of globalization. According to their analysis, the novel's spatial imagination encompasses both visible and invisible political, sociological, and economic issues, which function as archaeological cartography, exposing the geographies of hidden violence beneath colonial discourses. All these scholars together make *Paradise* that reclaims the spatial epistemologies of the pre-colonial, reveals the violence of colonial mapping, and illustrates how African geographic consciousness can remain active during the imperial transition. Existing scholarship lacks integrated critical cartography and postcolonial analysis of Gurnah's counter-cartographic strategies and the novel's competing spatial epistemologies in *Paradise*.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study follows a qualitative textual analysis approach based on literary cartography, exploring Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*. The study is descriptive and interpretive, focusing on close reading and spatial analysis of how the novel depicts trade routes, placenames, and geographic movements to unravel the latent cartographic imagination that organises the narrative. Tally (2013) confirms that the methodological approach of literary cartography enables the researcher to analyse how literary texts structure spatial experience and generate systematic geographic knowledge. Thus, it is the most appropriate method for studying postcolonial novels that address colonial mapping practices. Qualitative research is validated by the fact that literary cartography involves interpretive engagement with textual representations of space; as Cooper (2011) shows, the authorial mappings entrenched in texts, as well as those produced by readers, are both legitimate forms of space-knowledge generation.

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* (1994) is the primary source and the textual data for the spatial analysis. The novel directly engages with historical trade routes, caravan journeys, and the changes in East African geography during the late nineteenth-century colonial era. Thus, it is best suited to the analysis of cartography in literature. The secondary sources comprise articles and books on literary cartography, postcolonial spatial theory, East African history, and critical reviews of Gurnah's texts, which provide theoretical background, historical context, and comparative perspectives that inform the spatial reading of the primary text.

The method of data analysis is close textual reading, which aims to identify and analyse three main cartographic elements: placenames, routes, and spatial relationships. The methodology used in this technique is based on the approach of Reuschel and Hurni (2011) to the literature-mapping methodology, which classifies spatial entities in fiction into settings, projected spaces, zones of action, markers, and routes, and the systematic coding of textual geography into analyzable spatial data. The analysis begins with the identification of all explicit place-names in the novel, both real and fictional, such as Zanzibar and Kawa, and with the ways these names create geographic location. Secondly, the textual paths are followed in the analysis, especially the caravan adventures of Yusuf between the Swahili coast and the African interior, and the paths are traced to show how the narrative draws counter-cartography against colonial spatial order. Third, the review of the spatial relations between places, such as hierarchies of centre and periphery, is conducted to understand how the novel recreates or disrupts colonial spatial imaginaries.

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The conceptual framework is based on critical cartography and postcolonial spatial theory, drawing on the ideas of Harley (1988), Lefebvre (1991), and Tally (2013). The critical cartography developed by Harley posits that cartography is a coded power relation through cartographic signs, not an objective representation. The idea of representative national space developed by Lefebvre provides a complementary approach to the analysis of the way the novel articulates the lived space opposing the abstract colonial cartography. This theoretical approach to the analysis of *Paradise* entails reading the novel through this theoretical prism to determine instances in which the text itself participates in cartographic practice and how it operates within the novel's larger spatial imagination to recreate, challenge, or suggest other geographical arrangements.

DATA ANALYSIS

Mapping Trade Routes and Commercial Geography

The novel serves as an elaborate literary cartography that traces the complex networks of trade routes in the East African region before and after colonisation, and makes narrative a form of knowledge production. The novel re-creates the spatial epistemologies of caravan trade which linked the coastal entrepots and the interior kingdoms and overcame colonial cartographies which displaced the native geographic knowledge systems. This discussion examines how Gurnah uses explicit geographic terms, route descriptions, place naming, and spatial movements to establish counter-mapping that illustrates African agency in shaping the region's geography prior to and during European colonisation.

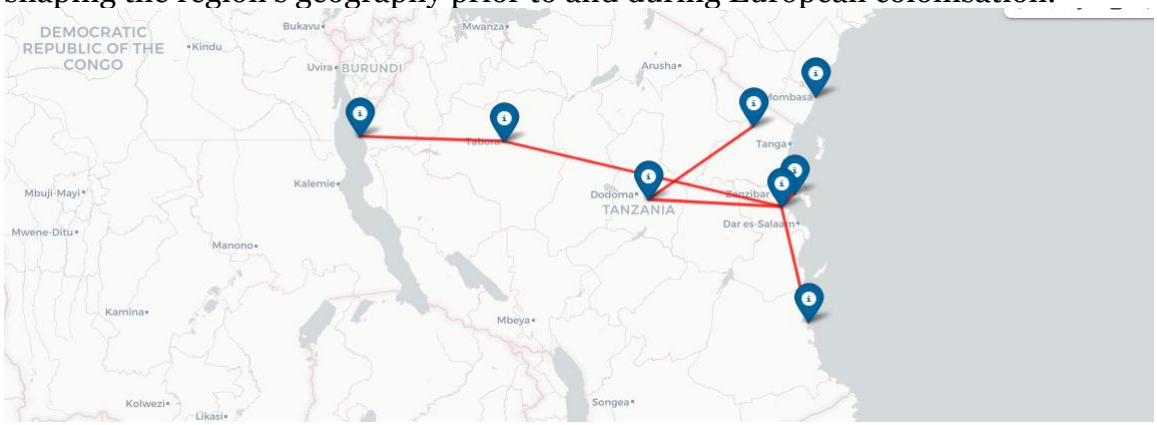

Figure 1: Pre-colonial East African Caravan Trade Routes in Paradise

This map depicts caravan routes between Zanzibar, Bagamoyo, and the interior, recreating Gurnah's literary cartography that maintains indigenous geographical knowledge and pre-colonial commercial relations lost in colonial mapping.

Uncle Aziz's Trade Routes

The novel defines Uncle Aziz as a merchant-cartographer whose actions literally follow the lines of geography in East Africa. His commerce voyages chart the various ecological regions linking sea to inland, forming what Sheriff (1987) describes as advanced pre-colonial trading networks. The novel gives an in-depth geographical account of his journeys:

> *"His Uncle Aziz also came to visit them at that time. His visits were brief and far between, usually accompanied by a crowd of travelers, porters and musicians...he bare rocky hills of the*

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interior" (Gurnah, 1994).

The passage is oral cartography: a listing of the topographical features of East Africa oceans, mountains, lakes, forests, plains, and hills compiled by merchants. The development of coastal-to-interior routes is a historical path of Arab-Swahili caravan routes that existed long before European colonial boundaries and charted the indigenous commercial geography, which was later used by European cartographers and redrawn.

Railway Infrastructure and Colonial Cartography

The novel records how German colonial structures, specifically the construction of railroads, map European geography onto African space, turning the mobile systems of trade into streamlined systems of imperial conquest. The example of this spatial transformation is described in the hometown of Yusuf, Kawa:

> *"They came to Kawa because it had become a boom town when the Germans had used it as a depot for the railway line they ...passed quickly, and the trains now only stopped to take on wood and water" (Gurnah, 1994).*

The railway is a form of colonial mapping that Bassett and Porter (1991) term as territorial appropriation, which transforms a native place into an administrative centre in the imperial transport system. The sudden boom indicates the precarity of spaces defined by European geographic schemes and reliant on ongoing imperial investment.

The example of the strategic adjustment of Uncle Aziz to the changes in the railway infrastructure illustrates the way native traders can cope with the colonial spatial transformation:

> *"On his last journey, Uncle Aziz had used the line to Kawa before cutting to the west on foot ... he would go as far as he could up the line before taking a north-western or north-eastern route" (Gurnah, 1994).*

This passage reveals a hybrid cartographic practice where merchants incorporate European infrastructure into existing trade networks while maintaining alternative routes "on foot." The directional specificity "cutting to the west," "north-western or north-eastern route" demonstrates precise geographic knowledge that supplements rather than replaces indigenous spatial epistemologies. The merchant's flexible routing strategy exemplifies what Bhabha (1994) terms colonial hybridity, where colonised subjects appropriate imperial technologies while preserving autonomous geographic knowledge.

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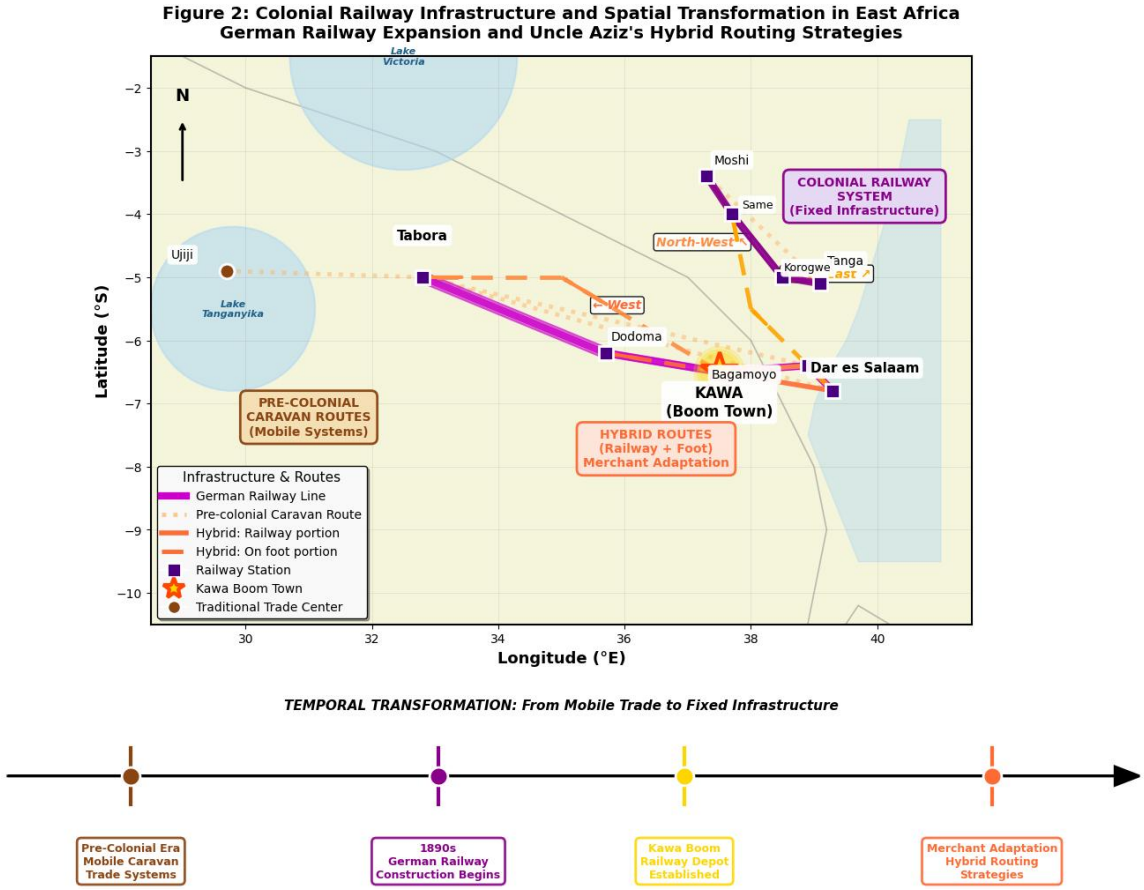

Figure 2: Colonial Railway Infrastructure and Spatial Transformation in East Africa

The spatial shift of indigenous caravan routes into the colonial infrastructure is visualised in Figure 2, which depicts the German colonial railway expansion throughout East Africa and major nodes such as Tanga, Moshi, Bagamoyo, and Dar es Salaam.

Coastal Trade Networks: Mapping Maritime Geography

The novel reinvents the coastal marine geography by detailing the Indian Ocean trade networks. The tale of Yusuf is a revelation of the topography of the coastlines and the sea paths:

> *"The nahodha, who knew all the landfalls on the coast from Faza in the far north to Mtwara in the south, spirited them away to Bagamoyo on the mainland" (Gurnah, 1994).*

This text traces the coastline of East Africa between Faza (modern-day Kenya, along the Somali border) and Mtwara (modern-day Tanzania) in the south, showing that dhow captains were aware of the area's geography. Even the name of the ship's captain, Nahodha, is a Swahili maritime term and cannot be easily translated away to eliminate native seafaring language. Bagamoyo, which was traditionally the mainland end of trade routes controlled by Zanzibar, serves as the cartographic pivot between caravan networks in the interior of the country and the island's commercial centre.

The passage continues with tragic geographic detail:

> *"Yusuf's father found work in an ivory warehouse belonging to an Indian merchant, first as a watchman, then as a clerk and a*

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jobbing trader" (Gurnah, 1994).

The ivory warehouse is located in Bagamoyo, in the networks of commerce that take African resources, including ivory, from inland elephant populations to be exported through coastal ports. The reference to an Indian merchant indicates that there was a multilayered commercial cartography in which Arab, Indian, and African traders entered intricate networks that European colonial discourses systematically simplified. The family's attempted return trip thereafter yields heart-wrenching cartographic writing:

"The dhow they travelled in was called Jicho, the Eye. It was never seen again after it left Bagamoyo" (Gurnah, 1994).

The dhow's disappearance between Bagamoyo and Kilwa maps the dangerous geography of maritime travel, where political conflicts, storms, and piracy created zones of risk along supposedly known routes.

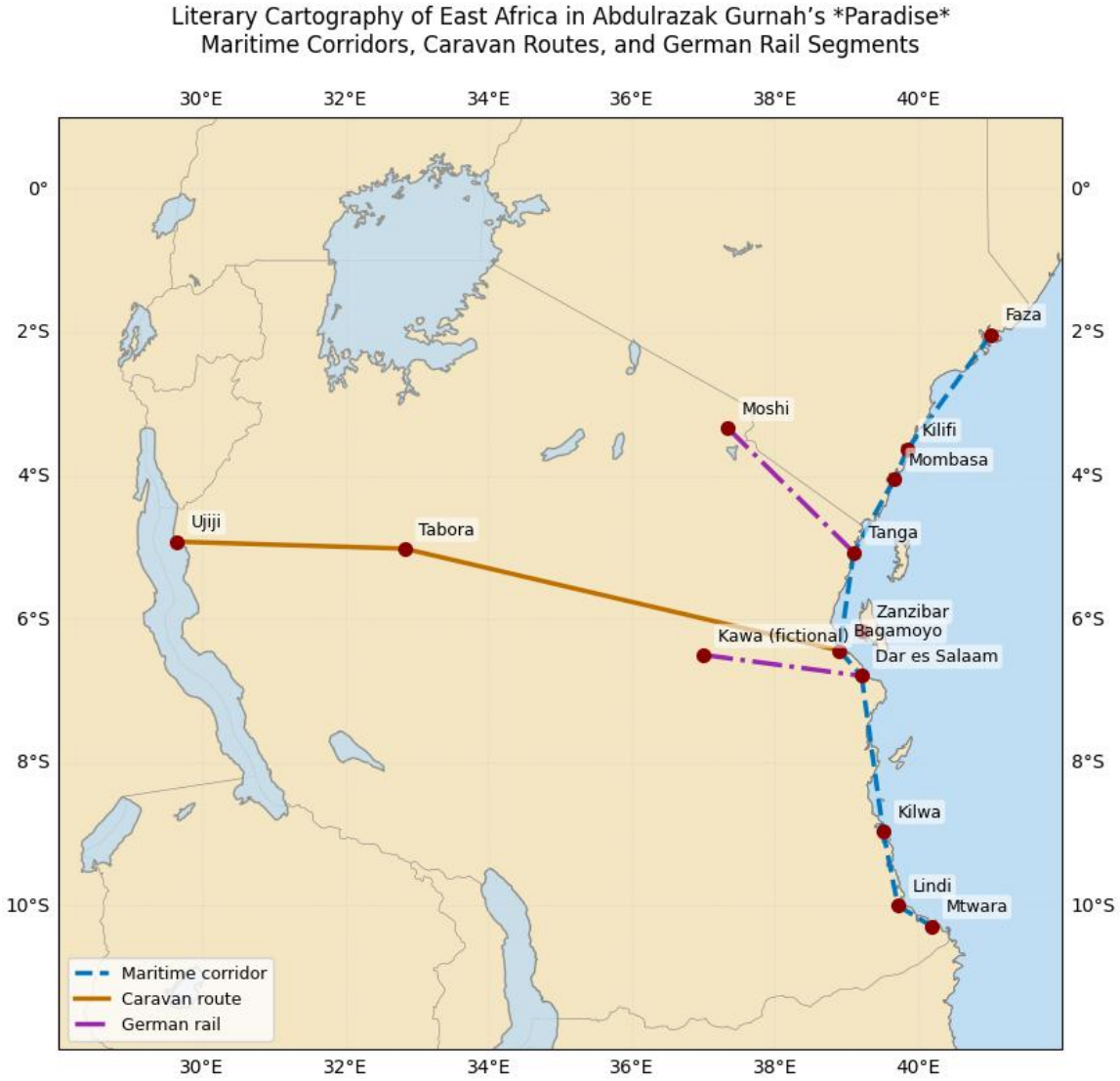

Figure 3: Literary Cartography of East Africa in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Paradise

This map shows the connective geographies of East Africa, maritime routes, caravans, and German colonial railways, and how Gurnah Paradise rebuilds regional trade relations and the colonial spatial change of the Indian Ocean world.

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Labor Migration and Railroad Geography

The novel records how German colonial infrastructure generates new migration patterns and labour geographies that alter the region's demographics. The people who built the railway are of different geographical backgrounds, tracing their paths of forced migration during colonialism:

> *"The vibarua who were their parents came from all over, from the Usambara highlands north of Kawa ... lakes to the west of the highlands, from the war-torn savannahs to the south and many from the coast" (Gurnah, 1994).*

This passage creates a comprehensive regional map through labour migration patterns. The Usambara highlands locate specific mountainous terrain; "fabulous lakes to the west" likely reference the Great Lakes region (Victoria, Tanganyika); "war-torn savannahs to the south" map zones of conflict possibly including areas affected by Maji rebellion or slave raiding; workers "from the coast" represent displaced populations from Swahili commercial centers losing economic power to German colonial administration.

The term "vibarua" day labourers preserve Swahili terminology for precarious workers, mapping the social geography of colonial capitalism. The passage continues documenting their exploitation:

> *"They laughed about their parents, mocking their work-songs and comparing stories of the disgusting and sour smells they brought home... from, funny and unpleasant names which they used to abuse and insult each other" (Gurnah, 1994).*

Children's invented placenames represent counter-cartography from below, where marginalised populations create alternative geographic nomenclature that resists both indigenous and colonial naming authorities. This practice exemplifies what Harley (1988) identifies as cartographic subversion, subordinated groups producing unofficial maps that contest dominant spatial representations.

Caravan Organisation and Expedition Geography

The novel gives a careful account of the organisation of caravan expeditions, exposing the high degree of sophistication of the logistics that supported the geography of trade routes. Italics Preparations of Uncle Aziz on his way to organise commercial networks that organise labour, supplies, and capital:

> *"Several months after Yusuf's arrival he had taught himself to lose count, and his perverse success made him understand that ... preparations were being made for a journey to the interior" (Gurnah, 1994).*

The term' journey to the interior' itself serves as a geographical shortcut to known trade routes inland from the coast to the lakes and kingdoms of central Africa, tracing the space-course that organises the whole novel.

The role of the mnyapara (caravan leader) reveals specialised geographic knowledge essential to successful expeditions: "The mnyapara wa safari, the foreman of the journey, would be waiting for the expedition somewhere in the interior, Khalil told him. The seyyid was too rich a merchant to organise and run the expedition himself. Normally, the mnyapara would have been at the journey's beginning, hiring porters and gathering supplies, but he had some business to finish" (Gurnah, 1994). The location of the mnyapara at least once in the interior implies that he has a greater understanding of the inland areas where he is in

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business--a debt-collection business, a contraband trade, or a negotiator with local leaders--and that he must stay in strategic places rather than return to the coast. This separation of geographic skills merchants of the coastal points, mnyapara of the interior lands- traces hierarchical structure of trade systems.

Porter Geography and Trade Route Labor

The location of the mnyapara at least once in the interior implies that he has a greater understanding of the inland areas where he is in business--a debt-collection business, a contraband trade, or a negotiator with local leaders--and that he must stay in strategic places rather than return to the coast. This separation of geographic skills merchants of the coastal points, mnyapara of the interior lands- traces hierarchical structure of trade systems.

> *"It was Mohammed Abdalla who hired the porters and the guards, and agreed with them their share of the profit ... Most of them were people of the coast, from as far as Kilifi and Lindi and Mrima" (Gurnah, 1994).*

This passage maps specific coastal locations: Kilifi, north of Mombasa; Lindi in southern Tanzania; and Mrima, representing the northern Swahili coast. Porter's geography reveals that coastal populations possessed mobility and commercial knowledge, enabling them to navigate interior routes and challenging colonial representations of Africans as territorially fixed populations.

The caravan's departure performs spatial claiming through sonic and visual spectacle:

> *"Then one morning, ... a horn and a tamburi, all played with joyful and irresistible zest, led the men off. Behind the musicians a line of porters carried the packs and sacks, shouting cheerful abuse. " (Gurnah, 1994).*

Musical accompaniment announces territorial passage, marking caravan movement as a public geographic event. The porters' "cheerful abuse" and bystanders' observations demonstrate how expeditions function as community rituals that acknowledge the geographic knowledge and courage required for interior journeys.

The expedition's formal departure crystallises its cartographic significance:

> *"In the end the expedition left in an atmosphere of serenity ... that this procession to the interior was what they were there for, and they knew the form of words which could make such journeys seem necessary" (Gurnah, 1994).*

The phrase "this procession to the interior was what they were there for" reveals that trade expeditions constitute the community's geographic purpose coastal towns exist as departure points for interior commerce, defining their spatial identity through outward movement rather than static territorial occupation.

The infrastructure of trade route geography is recorded in the novel through stopping stations that form archipelagos of settlement in otherwise underpopulated lands. According to the hosts to Yusuf, local history is described based on caravan geography:

> *"The place had been a stopping-station for the caravans from the interior, Hamid explained ... The breadfruit was to feed the porters and the slaves, who would eat anything after their long walk in the wilderness" (Gurnah, 1994).*

This passage maps the economic geography of trade routes, where stations

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prospered by provisioning passing caravans. The breadfruit trees represent agricultural cartography, deliberate cultivation of specific crops to support human traffic along established routes, transforming "wilderness" into a managed landscape.

The passage reveals how stopping stations declined with German colonial transformation: the station "was prosperous" in earlier times, implying current economic marginalization. This time, a geographic comparison shows that the colonial infrastructure, such as railways that replaced caravan routes, formed new commercial centres, leaving previously important nodes behind. The violent geography of forced labour mobility, where agricultural production sustained both the commercial porters and enslaved captives as they travelled along the same routes, is charted by Hamid as he recalls that the breadfruit was to feed the porters and the slaves.

Figure 4: Porter Geography and Trade Route Labor in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*
Coastal recruitment, caravan labor flows, and colonial transformation of trade infrastructure

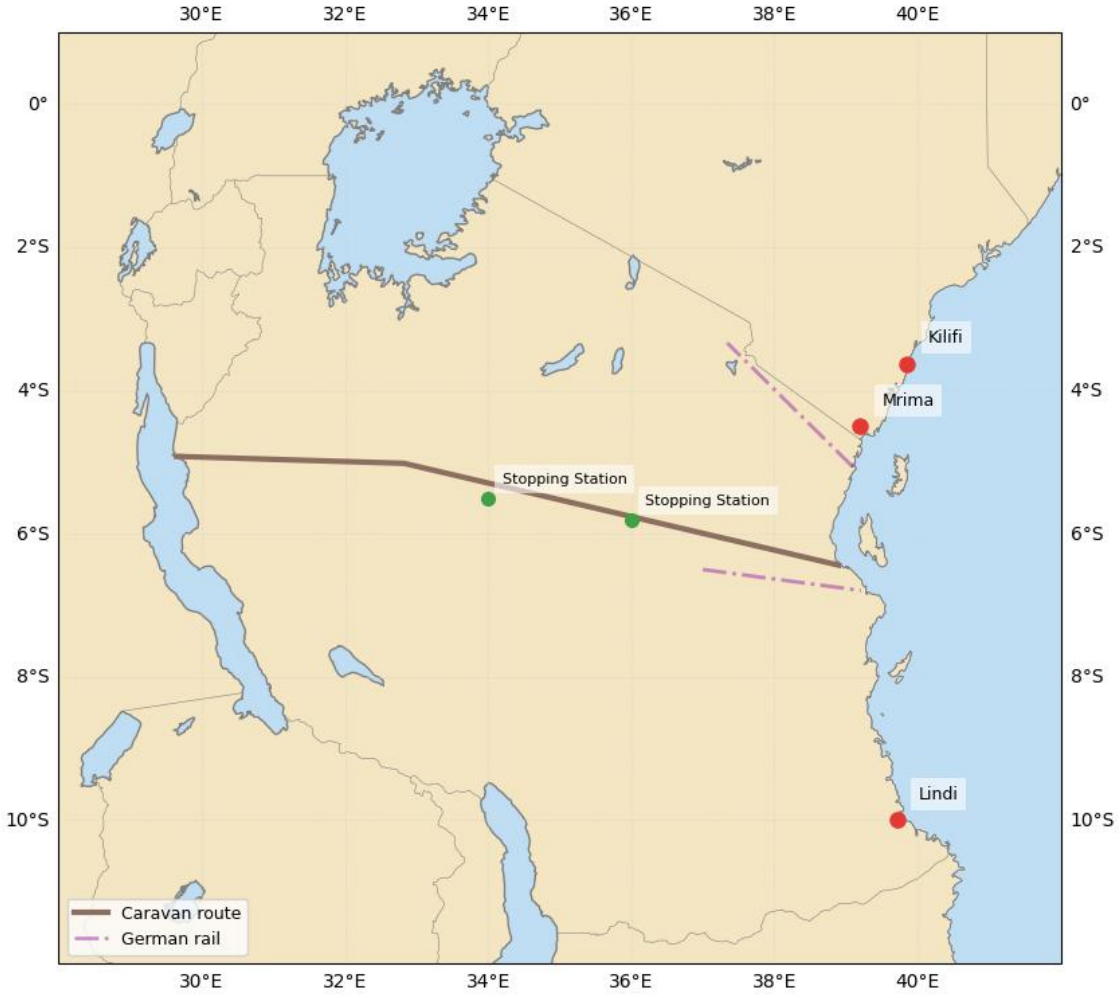

Figure 4: Porter Geography and Trade Route Labor

Figure 4 is a map of Porter's geography and trade-route labour in Paradise, depicting coastal recruitment centres, interior caravan routes, and stopping stations that supported East Africa's precolonial networks of commercial and cultural mobility.

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Geographic Comparison and Environmental Knowledge

The characters exhibit advanced geographic expertise in comparing environments across the territories they have covered. When Yusuf talks of landscapes, his hosts refute his spatial expectations: when he speaks of the dry land they had passed to reach the town, they are annoyed, and he thinks he has done something rude or challenging, that he has made them see an inevitable limitation within which they are obliged to live.

> *'Why did that surprise you? It's dry everywhere in these parts. Perhaps you expected lush terraces and little streams. Well, it isn't like that,' Hamid said. 'Here so close to the mountain it's cool, at least ... as on the slopes'" (Gurnah, 1994).*

This exchange projects environmental gradients between ecological regions —dry plains, mountain slopes that receive higher rainfall, and coastal regions with varied hydrology. Hamid's localised reaction is a sign of how geographic knowledge becomes an identity marker; the rejection of the local environment as parched is an offence to the adaptive knowledge of the residents.

The conversation continues mapping seasonal environmental variation:

> *'"Except for a few weeks in the year after the rains, and on high ground like here, it's like that everywhere. But you should see those parched plains after the rains. You should see them!'" (Gurnah, 1994).*

Such time-space knowledge, such as the seasonal changes in landscapes, is a sophisticated form of environmental cartography necessary to successful trade expeditions. The awareness of when paths could be traversed by rain, when water could be accessed, and when certain areas offered the best trading opportunities formed the most important geographic information that merchants and mnyapara would gather during frequent travels.

Yusuf's contrasting description reveals coastal environmental geography:

> *"But it was lush by the sea,' Yusuf said after a moment. 'The house we lived in had a beautiful garden, ... trees, and even pomegranates, and water channels with a pool, and scented shrubs'" (Gurnah, 1994).*

This text traces the privileged geography of coastal merchant families who had access to irrigation systems (water channels with a pool), which allowed them to grow a wide variety of species, including palms (native), orange trees (brought by the Indian Ocean trade), and pomegranates (origins of Middle Eastern horticultural culture). The walled garden is a symbol of enclosed cartography, a closed space insulated from the surrounding environment by economic power.

Towns and Villages Along Trade Routes

The novel records many towns and villages encountered on the trading journeys, providing a detailed map of the formation of interior settlements. One of the passages that discuss caravan travel gives typical geographic notation:

> *"Later on in their journey, the merchant said, they crossed a wild sea with enormous waves called Kaspia ... ground, and metal towers that stood in the water like sentinels of Satan's kingdom" (Gurnah, 1994).*

While this passage describes territories outside East Africa (the Caspian Sea region), its inclusion demonstrates how East African merchants possessed global geographic knowledge extending far beyond their immediate trading territories,

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participating in trans-regional commercial networks that connected the East African coast to Central Asia and the Middle East.

Another passage explicitly maps towns along travel routes:

> *"In their travels across these lands they entered a small town to find every human being in it— man, woman and child—blind drunk. Sikufanyieni maskhara, dead to the world" (Gurnah, 1994).*

The Swahili phrase "sikufanyieni maskhara" (literally "they made you a laughingstock") preserves indigenous linguistic commentary on this encounter, demonstrating how travellers narrate geographic experiences in their own languages before translation. The passage continues geographic cataloguing:

> *"So many of the people who lived in Rusi were Muslims! In every town! Tartari, Kirgisi, Uzbeki! Who had heard of these names?" (Gurnah, 1994).*

These ethnic-geographic designations Tatar, Kyrgyz, Uzbek map Central Asian populations, revealing East African merchants' cosmopolitan geographic consciousness encompassing multiple continents.

Railway Journeys and Spatial Transformation

The novel provides detailed descriptions of railway travel that map the geographic transformation of East African landscapes under German colonization. Yusuf's train journey to the coast documents this spatial experience:

> *"The train to the coast left in the early evening, and Yusuf thought Uncle Aziz would be on it ... he would take the up-train to the mountains, which left in mid-afternoon" (Gurnah, 1994).*

The geographic specificity “train to the coast," "up-train to the mountains"—maps the railway's spatial organisation, dividing territory into directional routes. The temporal precision (early evening, mid-afternoon) reveals how mechanised transportation imposes new temporal-spatial regimes, replacing caravan travel's flexible timing with fixed schedules. The journey itself maps changing landscapes:

> *"On their right, the land they travelled across was dotted ... train made no haste, lurching and grumbling as it struggled to the coast. At times it slowed nearly to a walking pace" (Gurnah, 1994).*

This passage maps the geography between Kawa and the coast, documenting the thorn tree savannah on one side and the mountain ranges on the other. The train's slow pace "nearly to a walking pace" reveals that early colonial railways did not dramatically accelerate travel compared to caravans, suggesting their primary cartographic function was political (demonstrating German territorial control) rather than economic efficiency.

Conclusion

The novel has analysed an advanced literary cartography that recreates the pre-colonial trade networks of East Africa alongside their violent restructuring under German colonialism. The novel is a repository of indigenous geographic knowledge that the European colonial cartography systematically destroyed through careful mapping of the routes followed by caravans linking coastal entrepots such as Bagamoyo with interior kingdoms. The voyages of Uncle Aziz across the ocean, mountains, lakes, forests, and the interior plains are the paths of the advanced commercial geography that Sheriff (1987) describes as the centuries-old Arab-Swahili spatial networks that existed before colonization. The cartographic strength of the novel is since it records definite place-names,

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halting-places, porter networks, mnyapara knowledge that formed the background of local trade. Gurnah develops counter-mapping by retaining Swahili geographic terms and documenting the route-planning tactics of specific routes, which criticises the Eurocentric depiction of African space as unmanaged wilderness that needed to be organised by the Europeans. The fact that the railway imposed itself on the caravan routes proves that colonial cartography did work through infrastructural violence, literally marking imperial borders on landscapes previously structured according to indigenous spatial epistemologies. The final revelation of the cartography in paradise is that there is no such thing as a neutral representation of the cartography, but always a representation of power relations, who has the power to name, map, and claim land. The literary geography of Gurnah reclaims African geographical agency, and, as such, the novel is crucial to understanding how literature can maintain the geographic knowledge regimes that imperial mapping practices attempted to erase.

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