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Postcolonial Ekphrasis in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion*

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ABSTRACT

Although intriguing ekphrases – literary descriptions of a visual element – feature in numerous works by postcolonial authors and are sometimes a recurring trademark of their literary production, these rhetorical devices are seldom analysed as a way of accessing new layers of meaning, furthering the understanding of the texts and exploring characters' opinions and identities. This paper aims to examine two examples of postcolonial ekphrasis in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion*. In Ondaatje's novel, there are two compelling ekphrases which deconstruct the canonical conception of art and levy criticisms against colonial logic. Further challenging colonial systems, Gurnah's novel presents an ekphrasis which accurately depicts Füssli's painting *The Nightmare* and could broaden the interpretations of European art to convey a message of universality.

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Although intriguing ekphrases – literary descriptions of a visual element – feature in numerous works by postcolonial authors and are sometimes a recurring trademark of their literary production, these rhetorical devices are seldom analysed as a way of accessing new layers of meaning, furthering the understanding of the texts and exploring characters' opinions and identities. This paper aims to examine two examples of postcolonial ekphrasis in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion*. In Ondaatje's novel, there are two compelling ekphrases which deconstruct the canonical conception of art and levy criticisms against colonial logic. Further challenging colonial systems, Gurnah's novel presents an ekphrasis which accurately depicts Füssli's painting *The Nightmare* and could re-frame the conception of that artwork while broadening the interpretations of European art to convey a message of universality.

KEYWORDS: postcolonial ekphrasis, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Michael Ondaatje, postcolonial literature, identity.

1. Introduction

Ekphrasis is generally considered a verbal description of a visual element, mainly but not exclusively of a work of art. The connection between ekphrasis and aesthetic is evidenced not only by the verbal rendition of an artwork – since the range of objects eligible to ekphrastic description has widened to include also photographs, comics pictures and film stills (Neumann and Rippl 2020, 17) – but also by the importance of the emotional sphere, insomuch as this rhetorical device evokes an emotional response and is often deployed in order to arrest readers' attention (Zeitlin 2013, 17, 20). Aside from ekphrases embedded within European literary traditions, postcolonial ekphrasis too is a compelling terrain of research for its originality, innovations and critiques. Employed by postcolonial writers as a way of questioning the hegemony of visual perception (Neumann and Rippl 2020, 21), ekphrasis also adopts a verbal means of expression, whose primacy can be considered as hegemonic as that of the visual sphere. As a matter of fact, in the 18th century, the paramount importance attributed to words resulted in a highly logocentric culture.

In its potential to levy criticisms against expressive and cultural forms of hegemony, ekphrasis has been effectively deployed by postcolonial writers, whose ekphrases have been fertile ground of analysis for academic attention. For instance, analyses have been conducted on ekphrasis in David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* (Phillips Casteel 2016) and an unusual form of ekphrasis has been identified in Huichol yarn paintings (Grady 2004). Verbal descriptions of land art in Marlene Creates, Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* and Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* have been examined by Carmen Concilio (2019) and present an interesting kind of land-based ekphrasis which intertwines words, images and landscape. In terms of critical methodology, Richard Brock fostered the convergence between postcolonial theory and ekphrasis by applying this rhetorical device to postcolonial discourse-based theory and putting forward the image of the frame as a paradigm of critical theory resting on three elements, namely author, text and culture (2011, 134, 125). Nonetheless, as Birgit Neumann pointed out in her analysis of Derek Walcott's *Tiepolo's Hound*, a few academic investigations linking ekphrasis to postcolonial and transcultural studies have been carried out (2016, 450) and such connections can be used to shed further light on the works in which ekphrastic references feature.

Another reason to thoroughly investigate postcolonial ekphrases lies in the ways in which they present art, both European and belonging to other traditions.

Oftentimes, renowned works by Western artists are read under a new light and their paradigms questioned, much as happens with postcolonial rewritings of canonical texts and especially the intertextual, double-voiced writing of 'othered' subjects (Allen 2022, 160). Dominant Eurocentric conceptions about art could be to postcolonial ekphrases what the paradigmatic literary canon was for numerous Anglophone authors, who despised it but were prodded to write by it in the first place (Bhattacharya 2020, 14). In *Tiepolo's Hound*, Derek Walcott's words at the sight of the marble statues in the Parthenon and their "invented Whiteness that has been central to imaginations of European identity" (Neumann 2016, 457) could echo Johann Joachim Winckelmann's extensive praise of the noble simplicity and quiet greatness of Greek art (2008, 33) and offer a new perspective on it. Aside from critiquing canonical conceptions of art, postcolonial authors have succeeded in bringing other artistic gestures and forms of art to the fore. Just to make an example, Achebe's careful description of Igbo ritual masks in *Arrow of God* presents pieces of artwork which are rooted in a long-standing tradition and stem from professional mastery. This artistic form is particularly evidenced by Edogo, one of Ezeulu's sons, who skilfully carves masks: "Most of the masks were for fierce, aggressive spirits with horns and teeth the size of fingers. But four of them belonged to maiden-spirits and were delicately beautiful" (Achebe 2010, 52).

Let us take the following brief extract from *Americanah* (2013) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as an example of postcolonial ekphrasis which ought to be reflected upon: "his bedroom [was] bare but for a bed and a large painting of a tomato soup can on the wall" (Adichie 2014, 189). Perfectly exemplifying the fact that the length of ekphrases can vary to embrace both long and short descriptions (Neumann and Rippl 2020, 16), Adichie's is a fully-fledged ekphrasis presumably referring to Warhol's series of Campbell's tomato soup cans. If duly contextualised, this ekphrastic reference can complete the meaning of the scene and add a new layer of meaning through what may seem just a casual reference to a well-known and serialised artwork. In the passage in question, Ifemelu – a Nigerian girl who goes to America in order to study but experiences a period of poverty at the beginning – is entering the bedroom of her 'employer,' a tennis coach who has taken advantage of her desperation and hired her to 'help him relax.' The reference to Warhol's series of soup cans is not coincidental, but could rather frame the girl's commodification. An object of consumerism which is produced in series and was used by Warhol to reflect on the process of serialisation through serigraphy, the tomato soup can may imply

that Ifemelu too is reduced to a commercial product which can be shamelessly bought. The same loss of meaning associated with the serialised artwork could point to her loss of individuality and dignity. This example connects the concept of consumption with the analysis of ekphrases, which Zoe Roth laments seldom happens notwithstanding the close relationship between images and capitalist commodity traffic (2013, 143).

Adichie's ekphrasis is only one of the many productive examples which deserve to be analysed and interpreted. Following ekphrastic references, this paper aims to consider two ekphrases in contemporary postcolonial novels, *Anil's Ghost* (2000) by Michael Ondaatje and *Desertion* (2005) by Abdulrazak Gurnah. The interdisciplinary interpretative framework adopted combines W.J.T. Mitchell's reflections on ekphrases and his concept of 'metapicture' with Nigerian-American writer, photographer and art critic Teju Cole's insights into the political implications of visuality and the reflexivity of the sense of touch. Centred on visuality and the visual arts, these sources build a methodology whose flexibility caters to the literary and visual contexts of ekphrases and enables enquiries into the spirality of meaning-making in ekphrastic representations. While 'metapictures' are images within other images that well represent embedded meanings, Cole's reflections on the senses of sight and touch can be used to reveal ecocritical aspects and problematise sensory means of relation to the outside world. Additionally, the methodology is grounded in Neil Ten Kortenaar's (1997) analysis of ekphrasis in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as it illustrates a particularly fruitful method of enquiry into the innovations and perceptive shifts introduced by postcolonial perspectives on Western artworks.

The goals of the analysis will be the exploration of the layers of meaning made accessible by the ekphrases under scrutiny, which deepen our understanding of the implications of the stories in which they feature and can offer new perspectives on the artworks themselves. In Ondaatje's novel, the way art is represented and freed from Western colonial conceptions of eternity will be explored by emphasising the theme of de-contextualisation of artworks in colonial times as a fil rouge connecting art, the victims of the Sri Lankan civil war and the end of the novel. In this process, the sense of touch is given prominence and furthers connections between humans and the surrounding environment in a holistic movement that opposes the human-nonhuman distinction embedded in European Cartesian rationalism. As far as *Desertion* is concerned, its ekphrasis of Johann Füssli's *The Nightmare* becomes a key to reading the theme of shared humanity in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel and unlocks other perspectives on that artwork than those

immediately conveyed by Western cultural literacy.

2. Re-Contextualisation, Recognition and Truth: Ekphrases in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

> "So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
> That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
> Wasting of old Time—with a billowy main—
> A sun—a shadow of a magnitude."
> (Keats, "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" 2006, 100)

At the beginning of *The Winter Vault* (2009), the Canadian novelist and poet Anne Michaels portrays a scene which, at first, tricks readers into believing that its depiction is one of utter destruction where human bodies lie gorily scattered:

> A scene of ghastly devastation. Bodies lay exposed, limbs strewn at hideous angles. Each king was decapitated, each privileged neck sliced by diamond-edged handsaws, their proud torsos dismembered by chainsaws, line-drilling, and wire-cutting. The wide stone foreheads were reinforced by steel bars and a mortar of epoxy resin. (Michaels 2010, 3)

It is most relieving to discover that the author is making reference to the statues of the Egyptian Temple of Abu Simbel, which were sawn off in the 1960s in order to reconstruct the temple at a higher location, after the creation of the Aswan dam whose waters would have submerged it otherwise. Yet, the atmosphere of violence is still in the air, intact: the sense of desecration in the brisk action of the stonecutters can be traced back to the Greek concept of hubris, which sounds more and more laden with meaning in the Anthropocene, an era in which humankind has become comparable to geological forces in the shaping of the planet. Surprisingly, Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* describes another temple in a similar condition, whose blithe pillaging is carried out under the colonial aegis:

> *The panorama of Bodhisattvas – their twenty-four rebirths – were cut out of the walls with axes and saws, the edges red, suggesting the wound's incision.* […] *This was the place of a complete crime. Heads separated from bodies. Hands broken off.* […] *Three torsos in a museum in California. A head lost in a river south of the Sind desert, adjacent to the pilgrim routes. The Royal*

Afterlife. (Ondaatje 2011, 8; italics in the original)

Precisely like the Elgin marbles of the Parthenon which were brought to England by Lord Elgin and left Keats awe-struck, the statues of the Shanxi temple in Sri Lanka are sawn off and sent to faraway museums in other countries.

Anil's Ghost is a novel which thematises the civil war in Sri Lanka through the double perspective of Anil, a forensic anthropologist who returns to her country of birth after 15 years abroad as part of a UN project, and Sarath, a local archaeologist. The two begin a quest to discover the identity of a skeleton who is a recent victim of government violence, since it was found in a government-protected area.

Although it may appear as an episode of little significance if compared to the main plotline (Scott 2019, 139), the description of the statues of the cave temple is interesting for a decolonial reading of art and the undermining of canonical artistic paradigms, such as that of eternity. In his analysis of an ekphrasis in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Kortenaar observes that "It is the frame that makes the view meaningful" (1997, 239). Although no frame as such is provided in the description of the Shanxi statues, one of the characters, a famous archaeologist called Palipana, soon after makes a statement that guides the interpretation of that ekphrasis, thus becoming akin to a verbal frame. He claims curtly that "'*Art burns, dissolves. And to be loved with the irony of history – that isn't much*'" (Ondaatje 2011, 8; italics in the original). This view seems to forcefully challenge the idea of the timelessness of art, expressed nowhere better than in John Keats's ethereal vision of the "unravished bride of quietness" and his cumulative anaphoras of "For ever" in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (2006, 344–345). Yet, it is the enigmatic idea of the worthlessness of loving something or someone with the 'irony of history' that opens up other meanings, which will be teased out by following Kortenaar's interpretive approach.

Since Palipana's comment comes soon after the description of the dismembered Shanxi statues, it seems to point to a seeming form of love – art conservation as an attempt at preserving history – which ironically amounts to the brutal de-contextualisation of the manufacts, removed from the place in which they were carved to enrich the colonisers' museums. The very idea of de-contextualisation resonates with the unidentified skeleton that lies at the centre of the novel; shorn of a name and buried in a sixth-century sacred grave, the nameless victim of the recent Sri Lankan civil war becomes a dislocated element in the fabric of Sri Lankan history. It is the skeleton's re-contextualisation – the discovery of his

identity, cause of death and death circumstances – that engages the two main characters, a forensic anthropologist and an archaeologist. The idea of providing missing context as a trait circularly connecting the Shanxi statues, the unnamed skeleton and the ending of *Anil's Ghost* will be explored later in the analysis of the eye-painting ceremony at the end of the novel. Loving with the irony of history further evokes Keats's Ode, in which the poet expresses admiration for the Grecian urn because of the eternity it confers on the figures that decorate it, even though that eternity has forever frozen their movements in the 'irony of history.' Instead of those Greek decorations, the Sri Lankan statues are forced out of their stillness and shipped to foreign museums where they will always be out of context; it is as if Keats's illustrations had been removed from the urn.

At the same time, the wider irony of history is that the colonial metaphorical violence to which the statues have been subjected echoes with the ethnic violence unleashed in postcolonial Sri Lanka. As a matter of fact, in the portrayal of the Shanxi statues, it is difficult not to glimpse a reference to another kind of violence than the colonial one, namely the atrocity of the Sri Lankan civil war, which led to the coarse disposal of bodies in swamps and scattered over the territory – a situation of chaos and horror echoed by the description of the dismembered statues of the temple, whose cut stones seem to ooze blood. The Shanxi temple is one of the "vignettes of violence" to which Victoria Burrows makes reference and which punctuate the novel (2008, 170). Comparing statues to humans and juxtaposing stone to flesh, Michaels's and Ondaatje's ekphrases mingle together images, words and the sense of touch, in a way that goes beyond a strictly anthropic conception of the world and introduces the primacy of a reflexive sensory experience. Discussing photography, Teju Cole stated that among the five senses "touch is the only one that is reflexive: one can look without being seen, and hear without being heard, but to touch is to be touched" (2016, 174) – and, one could add, to be moved.

The complex situation in Sri Lanka and the civil war which afflicted the country from the second half of the 1980s to the early 1990s has been dealt with more or less incidentally by numerous recent novels such as Aravind Adiga's *Amnesty* (2020), Christy Lefteri's *Songbirds* (2021) and particularly by 2022 Booker Prize winning Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2022). In Karunatilaka's novel, the main character clearly explains with ebullient and pithy satire what the main parties involved in generalised violence are to puzzled outsiders: "To an outsider, the Sri Lankan tragedy will appear confusing and irreparable. It needn't be either. Here are the main players" (Karunatilaka

2023, 23). It then follows a bullet-pointed list of the names of the parties involved – among them the government forces, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and JVP – and their goals, which are highlighted in their contradictions by Karunatilaka's biting but bitter satire.

While *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* is extremely precise to the point of being schematic, in the author's note to *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje blurs out sharp details and names by generally referring to the insurgents in the South, the government forces and the separatist guerrillas in the North. In his overview, he omits ethnic, political and religious labels (Scanlan 2004, 303). In the novel, generalised violence is so widespread that it threatens to obliterate people's individuality and uniqueness which are brought to the fore in numerous passages. For instance, Anil wishes to find a name for the unidentified skeleton, nicknamed Sailor, and to learn the name of Sarath's deceased wife, as she believes that a name is a truth that distinguishes the living from the dead (ibid., 307). At the same time, she strives to subject local events and the cruelty of the particular – Sailor's murder – to the justice of the universal (Babcock 2014, 62). Michael Barry highlighted that human similarity and similarity between characters is stressed in the novel more than once (2015, 144–145) and the stereotype of the insignificance of the individual in the postcolony has been investigated precisely by making reference to this novel (Chakravorty 2013, 543).

It would be tempting to think that in Ondaatje's novel the role of art is to provide a kind of permanence in the midst of precariousness and danger, that artworks might give back to people the uniqueness of which generalised violence has robbed them. After all, when admiring the Stone Book of Polonnaruwa – a rectangular boulder chiselled with ducks – Palipana fondly whispers: "Ducks for eternity" (Ondaatje 2011, 79). Yet, it is not only Palipana's aforementioned comment on the transience of art or its fragility as depicted by a blown-up statue in the novel (Scanlan 2004, 302) that undercut this interpretation, but also the very use Ondaatje has made of ekphrasis in previous works. The author is not new to ekphrasis, which conspicuously features in *The English Patient* and has been investigated in its multi-layered meanings by Birgit Neumann and Gabriele Rippl. In the 1992 novel, the ekphrastic description of Caravaggio's *David and Goliath* intricately points to a recognition of the self in the 'other' and paves the way for the acknowledgement of Europe's dependency on the colonial world, as well as disrupting the antithesis of self and otherness (Neumann and Rippl 2020, 46–47, 49). In the same novel, Piero della Francesca's fresco of the Queen of Sheba similarly alludes to a sense of cross-cultural recognition and is placed

within a dense network of references (ibid., 51). In both examples, Ondaatje uses ekphrasis in a complex way as a device to create recognition and a common ground for characters to explore and meet. The ekphrasis with which *Anil's Ghost* ends, namely the Nētra Mangala ceremony, can follow a similar pattern and, while it denies the eternity of art, it nonetheless seems to foreground a continuation between the re-contextualisation of artworks and the necessity of discovering the identities of the victims of the Sri Lankan civil war, thus rehearsing them into their proper context.

In this long ekphrastic description, the author relates the eye-painting ceremony in which a statue transforms from a mere piece of stone into a God and a living being. More precisely, Ananda – descending from a family of eye-painters – paints the eyes of a new statue of the Buddha, which has been built after another was blown up by thieves. Before working on the eyes of the new statue, Ananda pieces together the fragments of the other and reassembles its face, which has been seen as echoing the significance of the surgeon's hand (Shetty 2016, 246–247). This final image of preservation seems to conclude what the previous description of the Shanxi temple had begun, namely a comparison between stone and humans which then becomes a fully-fledged metamorphic union in a religious ritual ceremony, where the re-contextualisation denied to the nameless victims of state violence is granted to the statue of the Buddha. The recognition offered by the ekphrasis could be precisely the wider connection of humans and artworks, as well as humans and the environment, almost in an ecocritical twist which is not unconnected to Anne Michaels's use of ekphrasis.

Yet, the emphasis placed on the eyes and sight could point to another meaning at the core of Ondaatje's dense ekphrasis. When analysing other ekphrases in *The English Patient*, Neumann and Rippl observe that "ekphrases […] continuously explore the boundaries between the sayable and the seeable" (2020, 57) which could be a powerful key to reading the Nētra Mangala ceremony. In *Anil's Ghost*, what is seeable is not necessarily sayable or easy to articulate. While it seems clear that Sailor was killed by government forces, this and the investigations related to it must be kept secret by Anil and Sarath. With its empty eye-sockets, the skull of Sailor – reminiscent of the skull held by Hamlet while ruminating on life and death – cannot see, yet it speaks of a history of violence which is concentrated in an emblematic victim, who represents many others.

Truth cannot be looked at directly, but is accessible only through hedging and reflections, as evidenced by the fact that Ananda cannot look directly in the eyes of the statue but has to paint facing a mirror, in line with tradition. This perspective

is double, though: the eyes of the statue too can only look at Ananda indirectly. Thus, the final eye-painting ceremony could widen its import to include not only the relationship between words and images, but wider considerations on truth and the possibility or impossibility to articulate and glimpse it through different sensory experiences. What the skeleton called Sailor clearly lacks – the eyes and therefore sight – is symbolically given to the statue of the Buddha, although prominence is given to another sense. After the eye-painting, Ananda lets his gaze roll over the landscape, in a scene in which visual perception is prominent: "And now with human sight he was seeing all the fibres of natural history around him" (Ondaatje 2011, 303). Yet, he is suddenly brought back to reality and to the discrepancy between seeable and sayable through the material and reflexive sense of touch – which was evoked by the Shanxi temple, too: "He felt the boy's concerned hand on his. This sweet touch from the world" (ibid.). Precisely like the statue of the Buddha – which becomes inserted into a precise religious context through the eye-painting and could foreground a vicarious re-contextualisation of the Shanxi statues – the artist too is brought back to the world of the living and to the linear reciprocity of touch, in place of the disjointed act of gazing at the eyes of the statue through a mirror.

3. Exploring the Ekphrastic Layers of Nightmare: Gurnah's *Desertion*

> "Mahler's music is not white, or black, not old or young, and whether it is even specifically human, rather in accord with more universal vibrations, is open to question."
> (Cole, *Open City* 2012, 252)

Partly set in Zanzibar in the 1960s, Gurnah's *Desertion* relates a series of ill-fated love stories, which are recounted by one of the characters, Rashid. After the separation of his brother Amin from his beloved Jamila and the end of their romantic relationship, Rashid decides to write about them. His storytelling includes the story of Jamila's family as well, in that her relationship with Amin was seriously hindered by her genealogy, which was frowned upon by his parents and society at large:

> 'Do you know her people? Do you know what kind of people they are?

> Her grandmother was a chotara, a child of sin by an Indian man, a bastard. When she grew into a woman, she was the mistress of an Englishman for many years, and before that another mzungu gave her a child of sin too, her own bastard.' (Gurnah 2005, 204)

As Amin meets Jamila and begins to fall in love with her, an ekphrasis of a renowned European painting unexpectedly surfaces in his nightmare:

> The night after he heard Jamila's story, he dreamed about her. […] Later he saw her in a dimly lit room, perhaps underground or in a cave, lying on her back, fully dressed on a mat. A long-haired beast squatted on her belly, looking guilty but unmoving, paralysed by obsession. (ibid., 167)

This verbal description of Johann Füssli's *The Nightmare* is startling in its accuracy. Much more striking is that this ekphrasis is inserted not as a description of a physical work of art that Amin sees in a museum or elsewhere, but is rather embedded in the evanescent realm of a nightmare. It seems an intertextually contaminated form of ekphrasis in which the precise description of the work of art is appropriated to describe Amin's dream. Before and after the quotation, nothing lets readers guess that it is an ekphrasis to the point that, if unfamiliar with the painting, they might keep reading and completely skip the reference. Hence, the connections of Gurnah's ekphrasis with intertextuality, where it often happens that unmarked intertextual references are missed (Mason 2019, 104) and their layers of meaning become inaccessible.

Aside from being unnamed and immaterial, Füssli's painting is not used as a simile for an event happening in Amin's real life: it is rather within a nightmare. With ekphrases, there usually is a description of the visual embedded within the verbal sphere, be it poetic or in prose; whereas here the situation is more complex, insomuch as the description of a painting is placed within Amin's dream which is in turn inserted in a prose narrative. In this multi-tiered structure of mirrors and reflections, Mitchell's concept of "metapicture" looms large, by which the scholar means an image in a medium that contains the image in another medium (2018, 30). This ekphrasis could be considered a metapicture because it moves from the medium of literature to that of visual art through the transitional sphere of the dreamworld.

Leaving aside the original characteristics of Gurnah's ekphrasis for a moment, let us turn to the painting to which the text seems to make precise reference. Dating back to 1781, Füssli's masterpiece struck the viewers of 18th-century

Europe. Analysing Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress*, Sarah Phillips Casteel contends that "Somewhat paradoxically, Hogarth's sequential, realist art helps to inspire Dabydeen's departure from realism and the linear emplotment favored by the slave narrative" (2016, 123). In *Desertion*, the opposite seems to happen and Gurnah's ekphrastic reference to the dreamlike painting by Füssli could point to a transition from an immaterial dimension to a real and historical one, embodied by the 1964 Revolution of Zanzibar, which happens after Amin and Jamila's love story has reached an end. Conversely, the danger of the revolution could be unimaginable and thus able to be expressed only as a phantasmatic image in a dream. After all, the Revolution of Zanzibar often features in other novels by Gurnah, such as *Gravel Heart*.

As interesting as these historical explanations could be, one should keep reading the novel until Amin epiphanically realises the meaning of his dream and the identity of the beast:

> That night he dreamed about her again, and dreamed about the beast squatting on her. He was that beast, he thought when he woke up. He had been the beast all along, but had refused to recognise himself, an ugly obsessive creature trembling with feelings and desires that he would do better to suppress and deny. (Gurnah 2005, 174)

After Amin's affair with Jamila is discovered by his family, his father berates him with words that bring back the image in the painting: "You ruin your life, as if you have no head to think with. […] As if you're nothing more than a beast, without feeling, without respect for yourself or for anyone else" (Gurnah 2005, 202). In light of Amin's interpretation of his dream, one should circumscribe the meaning of the ekphrasis to his doomed love story. While framing the dreamlike description as exemplifying the transience of their ill-fated love seems too immediate, considering the key aspect of Amin's subjectivity and emotions could prove a more rewarding path of analysis.

Transposing a famous European painting into a novel partly set in Zanzibar around the 1960s could link Gurnah's ekphrasis to a series of postcolonial ekphrastic descriptions which show European art from the perspective of postcolonial subjects. In Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, the main character's ekphrastic description of the picture on a calendar engenders reflections on the fact that "Globally prevalent images […] seem to cater predominantly to the west's need for recognition and their sense of normalcy" (Neumann and Rippl 2020, 175), thereby becoming a visual counterpart to the conceptual sphere of

Adichie's "danger of a single story" (Adichie 2009). Though not in an ekphrasis, reflections on light and visuality that cater to Western subjects are to be found in Adiga's *Amnesty* too, where the Sri Lankan main character waiting in a pub for his date observes that "Light settings designed to optimize the sex appeal of a fairer-skinned people garishly illuminated […] the cuticles of his dark fingers and the whites of his eyes" (Adiga 2021, 23). More directly, when discussing DeCarava's photographs of black people, Teju Cole highlighted that cameras and other tools of photography "have rarely made it easy to photograph black skin" (2016, 146) because they were calibrated for white skin.

Drawing on Mitchell on the competition between words and images (1987, 43), Kortenaar maintains that ekphrases are always political (1997, 236). Although postcolonial ekphrases can be used to underline how Western art mainly addresses and sometimes is exclusively designed for white people, a syncretic form of postcolonial ekphrasis could link together European art to subjects of different cultures. Precisely like Gurnah, in his novel *Open City* Cole intertwines different artistic traditions and shows their similarities in a syncretic approach, such as when he compares the "archaic smile" (Cole 2012, 191) of Buddha statues with the ancient Greek kouroi. Taking one step further, in his essay "Black Body," the American writer maintains that he feels affinity both to European and African art:

> Bach, so *profoundly human*, is my heritage. I am not an interloper when I look at a Rembrandt portrait. I care for them more than some white people do, just as some white people care more for aspects of African art than I do. I can oppose white supremacy and still rejoice in Gothic architecture. (Cole 2016, 11; emphasis mine)

I have particularly touched upon Teju Cole's works because, in my opinion, the key to understanding the ekphrasis from *Desertion* features in the above-quoted passage, more precisely in the phrase "profoundly human" (ibid.) referring to Bach. One of the reasons Cole readily connects with Bach and European artists could be the common layer of humanity to which he can relate as a human being. When Gurnah transposes Füssli's *The Nightmare* without giving its title or relating it to a physical painting in the text, he shows that human feelings can be incorporated in the same images, thus arguing the universality of human emotions, be they to be found in 18th-century Europe or 1960s Zanzibar.

By inserting the image of Füssli's *The Nightmare* in his novel, Gurnah deconstructs the colonial logic which extolled European art and considered it

wholly apart from colonial subjects. In the 19th century, Thomas Babington Macaulay asserted that no orientalist "could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (1835, [10]). In his nasty and untrue opinion, there is not only a blatant sense of European superiority but also, as a corollary, the assumption that other cultures could not produce works of narrative like the European ones because they lacked skill and the same degree of humanity, thus being portrayed as the "brutes" (Conrad 2007, 62) Mr Kurtz was eager to exterminate. Therefore, the 'other' was ossified around the category of otherness to the point that it could share neither the skills nor the same feelings and emotions of Europeans. What Gurnah shows here is that artistic traditions can be different but they all rest on the same human feelings, which are so universal that a young boy in Africa in the 20th century inadvertently conjures up the same haunting image which Füssli painted centuries before. In a review of a work by Erasmus Darwin, William Cowper wrote that many people "suffered at times by the distressing incubations of the Night-Mare" and then quotes a passage referring to Füssli's painting (1789); in a way akin to this Amin too is haunted by that image and interprets it as the expression of his desire for Jamila. Thus, European art broadens its horizons and in its transposition expresses a common layer binding together the whole humanity, in spite of geography or colonial prejudices.

Aside from affirming the universality of human feelings, it is my contention that an effect of this ekphrasis is to make readers adopt another perspective on Füssli's painting and look at it with new eyes.

Kortenaar demonstrated how the ekphrasis of Millais's painting in *Midnight's Children* provides a new interpretation of that artwork that transcends that usually perceived by Western viewers embedded in a specific culture, thus "standing outside the implied community of viewers who always already know what the painting is about" (1997, 251-152). A similar process related to cultural literacy seems to be at work in *Desertion*.

After his family forces Amin to renounce his relationship with Jamila, he is shaken by nightmares that keep intact the same atmosphere in Füssli's painting but enrich it with the pain of longing and grief: "I ponder craving in the dark, and dream of wastelands littered with bits of bone and rocks and dead insects. […] I dream of a bed littered with dead cicadas and I hear a sound like the sighing of the wind through casuarina trees" (Gurnah 2005, 236). This passage features in a section of the novel recounted from Amin's perspective and placed later on in the story, well after *The Nightmare* has been ekphrastically described.

In its images of death and sorrow, Amin's recollection of his tormented dreams re-frames the former perception of Füssli's painting as disquieting and alluding to monstruous feelings, for the real monstrosity lies not in having had a relationship with Jamila, but rather having been obliged to put an end to it. For Amin, the real nightmare is not the vision of his beloved and the acknowledgement of his desire, but rather the deprivation of that sincere feeling and the separation from his lover, which finds expression in sombre images of death. The dead insects and cicadas strewn on the bed point to its barrenness and dryness – thereby turning it into a wasteland riven with bits of bone and rocks – as well as deny the blooming life usually represented by singing cicadas.

Thus, Gurnah's ekphrasis both affirms the universality of human feelings and re-frames the common perception of a famous artwork, thus undermining colonial divisions and challenging the semantic immediacy of cultural literacy.

4. Conclusions

This paper has examined two compelling examples of postcolonial ekphrasis which encompass different meanings and deconstruct colonial logics. In Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, ekphrasis not only underscores the violence of colonial gestures and undermines canonical perceptions of the immortality of art, but it also highlights a layer of affinity between humans and statues, flesh and stone. The themes of re-contextualisation and diverging sensory experiences (sight and touch) bind together the two ekphrases referring to statues in Ondaatje's novel and create a continuity between the unnamed victims of state violence and Sri Lankan artworks, in a way that undermines the Western primacy of sight and draws attention to the removal of local works of art. This inclusive perspective is picked up by *Desertion* too, which does not point to the similarity between the animate and the inanimate world, though. By opening Füssli's *The Nightmare* to an African context, Gurnah subtracts it from a merely Eurocentric perspective and opens it to universality which includes postcolonial subjects as well as European viewers, united in the common layer of emotions and feelings which necessarily recur in virtue of their belonging to humanity. Thus, in Gurnah's novel the verbal description of the visual ultimately stresses the belonging of all people to humankind, which colonial logics denied. In addition, I have tried to demonstrate how Kortenaar's discussion of cultural literacy and its undermining through ekphrasis can apply also to Gurnah's novel, thereby changing readers'

perception of Füssli's painting and re-assessing the meaning of its gloominess and sombreness.

The analysis of ekphrases in literary texts appears important so as to further the understanding of the stories, catch their implications over characters' identities and access new layers of meaning, which would otherwise go unnoticed. This exploration is much more engaging in postcolonial works, which are seldom enquired into from the perspective of ekphrasis, although they provide alternative views on European art, struggle to broaden its horizons and counter it with other compelling artworks or artistic gestures.

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