

A Study on Colonial Intrusion, Displacement and Migratory Slavery in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Novel *Paradise*

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Abstract: Colonialism is the establishment, exploitation, maintenance and expansion of colonies in the territory by people from another territory. The East African coastal region comprising of islands like Zanzibar, Mozambique, Mafia, Malindi and Pemba has been very important for European colonisers during the 19th century especially Britain. Abdulrazak Gurnah is one of the most emerging writers in East Africa for the last two decades. He is an author who has chronicled the refugee experience and colonialism's harsh impact in all his books. *Paradise* written by Gurnah depicts an earlier period in African history. The novel narrates the story of Yusuf, a 12 year old boy who is sold (becomes a pawn "rehani") to a wealthy merchant Uncle Aziz, because his father can no longer pay his debts. In the Tanzania of this novel, parents routinely use their children as security in business, slave traders kidnap five year old girls in broad daylight, actual cases of child abuse are openly discussed while drinking tea on the street. Gurnah creates a satirical narrative and he calls it 'Paradise'. The slavery which is portrayed in the novel is the system of pawning which was prevalent in the East African countries. Pawning is a type of slavery in which someone's child is used for paying off debt. Yusuf used to live in a rural area with his parents up to twelve years. When Uncle Aziz came for a visit to his house, he was ignorant about his departure from his native place. But soon he realized he was there as rehani. When Yusuf arrived at this new place he started working in the shop to pay his father's debts to Uncle Aziz. Yusuf and his new companion Khalil, who was also a pawn worked in a shop but did not get any wages for it. However they were not kept in full captivity. They were free to explore the nearby villages as they wished. The only way for Yusuf to return home is when his father pays off the loans- a possibility so unlikely that he resigns himself to a life of physical drudgery. Displacement is an important theme noticed throughout the novel. Slavery is depicted as the biggest factor which displaces characters in the novel. The article tries to analyse how Yusuf's illusion of *Paradise* shatters soon and how he takes control of his own fate.

Keywords: Colonialism, slavery, pawning, displacement

INTRODUCTION

Abdul Razak Gurnah was born in Zanzibar, Tanzania in 1948. He is a reputed novelist and academician. Like most of the protagonists in his novels, he made England his home when he migrated in 1968. He came to England to pursue a university education. Gurnah was also driven out of Zanzibar to escape the civil unrest, whereby the sustained violence against the Arab population in the country made it an unwelcoming and uncomfortable home space for them. He received his PhD from the University of Kent, where he was later a professor in postcolonial literature. Gurnah documents the British migrant experience, the troubled experiences of individuals living in post-colonial Zanzibar and how individuals residing in the two cultural spaces find routes into their subjectives by undertaking philosophical and

subjective journeys. Gurnah has written nine novels and his career as an author spans over three decades, with his earliest book being *Memory of Departure* (1987) and the latest one being *Gravel Heart* (2017). His most acclaimed novels are *Paradise* (1994) and *By the Sea* (2001), which were shortlisted and long listed for the Booker Prize respectively. *Desertion* (2005) was shortlisted for 2006 Commonwealth Writes Prize.

Paradise set in East Africa in the period immediately preceding the advent of German colonization in Tanganyika, focuses on pre-colonial trade expeditions carried out between the coastal Arabs/Swahili and the inland communities. This novel is the most engaged with of Gurnah's novels, (Schwerdt 1997, Bardolph 1997) and is often seen as writing back to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (J. U Jacobs: 2009). Published in 1994, *Paradise* is about Yusuf a young boy who is forced to grow through the numerous journeys he is compelled to make at the bidding of his master, 'Uncle Aziz'. Yusuf's double displacement and lack of rootedness; his whole diasporic condition presented all within East Africa, present a local idea of displacement and bring to fore the fact of domination that predates colonization. Diversity of culture and multiple levels of domination come to being in this text.

Paradise tells the story of a young boy Yusuf, who is pawned by his father to Uncle Aziz, a rich merchant, to cover for his father's debt. At the age of twelve, Yusuf leaves his hometown of Kawa and travels with the merchant to his coastal home. While the merchant travels to trade in the interior, Yusuf is let in the charge of Khalil, another rehani (Pawn) who runs the merchant's shop. It is from Khalil that Yusuf learns that the man he calls 'Uncle Aziz' is not his real uncle and that his relationship with the merchant is not kinship defined but a business matter. On the second journey, the merchant takes Yusuf with him. He leaves him in the mountains with a trade associate, Hamid. In this household, Yusuf acquires knowledge of the Koran and goes on trading trips further into the interior with Hamid and Kalasinga, a Punjabi truck driver who teaches him the skills of a motor vehicle mechanic. At Hamid's house, Yusuf is erotically drawn to Asha, Hamid's eldest daughter. During his stay at Hamid's, Yusuf matures from an innocent boy, "completely uninterested in his looks" (102). Due to the shameful potential of Yusuf's relationship with Asha – a young and unmarried Muslim girl, Hamid asks the merchant, who happens to pass by regularly to take Yusuf away with him. Yusuf is now part of a caravan trading expedition into the interior of Tanzania and he is tutored by the merchant and his men in the ways of trade. Though this trading expedition turns out a failure as a result of the hostility of tribes in the interior, Yusuf survives and learns the real meaning of trade and the power of network that drives it. After returning to the coast, the merchant leaves Yusuf with Khalil. However things take a different turn because of the merchant's wife, who is only indentified to the reader throughout the novel as 'the Mistress'. Disfigured by a wound on her face and lonely because of her husband's long periods of absence, the Mistress become sexually besotted with young Yusuf. She believed that Yusuf has been sent by God to cure her. Initially the merchant's wife only needs Yusuf's prayers. However the quick pace of events is revealed to the naïve Yusuf by Khalil, who suggests that she longs for an erotic encounter with Yusuf. Unable to restrain her yearning for Yusuf's body, the wife confesses to her husband: "One touch from that beautiful boy will cure this wound in my heart" (205). At this juncture, Yusuf is not aware of the wife's craziness as he is himself very inexperienced in sexual matters. Later, when the merchant is away, the Mistress tries to sexually force herself on Yusuf, but he runs away with a torn shirt. Yusuf explains what happened and the merchant is satisfied with his

explanation and asks Yusuf not to worry about it. However, instead of staying with the merchant, Yusuf deserts and joins the Germans colonial army to become a porter. By doing so, Yusuf abandons his dream of eloping with Khalil's sister, Amina, a former rehani but now married to the merchant.

Displacement

Displacement is an important theme we can notice throughout the storyline. Slavery is depicted as the biggest factor which displaces characters in the novel. Gurnah advocates that we are as alienated as we are connected, particularly in a culture that deals with pawn kind of slavery and trade. This theme of displacement is continued through the post-colonial analysis that the novel proceeds. The novel reconsiders texts on colonization and transcribes back to them. As Julie Newman proposes, "postcolonial novelists reposition the novel in relation to its point of origin, or historical position so that they can „repossess their own stories“ and „take control of their own reality“, are, through their self-consciousness, politically more effective than representational or nationalistic works." (Newman 4). Both Khalil and Yusuf are emigrants, and both have emotional impact. Though they are not physically much tortured by Aziz, but reaction towards the situation reflects their mental agony. They express their feelings in different ways. In *The Mountain Town*, the subject of displacement becomes clear. As far as Khalil is concerned, he has acknowledged his destiny of being a pawn. He knows all the terms and conditions of his slavery and mentally negotiates and accepts them. He is faithful to his master and expects Yusuf to be like him.

He instructs Yusuf: "He ain't your uncle; you'd better learn that quickly. It's important for you. He doesn't like little beggars like you calling him Uncle, Uncle, Uncle. He likes you to kiss his hand and call him Seyyid. And in case you don't know what that means, it means master. Do you hear me, kipumbu, we, you little testicle? Seyyid, you call him that. Seyyid!" (Gurnah,52).

Khalil frequently prompts Yusuf of his place. He wants Yusuf and himself to recognize each other as slave. On a trip to the mountain town, Yusuf comes to be aware of the true meaning of displacement when Mohammed Abdalla shouts that he has to trade with them and the ways of the savage. It's time you grew up and saw what the world is like..." (Gurnah,53). On the journey Yusuf acquires the temperaments of the civilized. He is told relentlessly that the savages do not get familiar with God and that is why the civilized will always conquest the savage. He learns that: "This is what on this earth we do To trade we go to the driest deserts and the darkest forests, and care nothing whether we trade with a king or a savage, or whether we live or die. It's all the same to us. You'll see some of the places we pass, where people have not yet been brought to life by trade, and they live like paralyzed insects. There are no people more clever than traders, no calling more noble. It is what gives us life." (Gurnah, 119). On the journey with the purpose of trade, Yusuf is introduced to the viciousness of trade. Even though he experiences the splendor of the places he visits and the people he comes across. He learns to read the Quran and discovers an intellect of identity within it. The Quran in the novel is used to depict how trade and religion have a special relationship. Yusuf, unlike Mohammed and Khalil, still tries to accept and adjust with his own paradise despite the situations of his enslavement. Displacement is also generally originated by how a person is seen. But Yusuf escapes from this feeling after reading Quran. In the novel we do not come across any moment where he deliberately calls "others""another person.

The dominant theme in the novel 'Paradise' is that of displacement, of characters constructing new ideas of home and belonging in migration, and whose lives are controlled by legacies of colonialism and Indian Ocean histories of trade and slavery. Even then, Gurnah's focus is on relationships, the details of how different encounters create relationships across barriers and how the characters surmount the barriers in the process. He presents characters grappling with various ideas of belonging, unstable relationships within families, and the power play that comes into being in the relationships. As the characters attempt to chart new relational territories for themselves using a variety of strategies, their past remains a constant reminder of something that has gone awry. It is a past that they are constantly trying to patch up through the formation of other relationships. The East African coastal region that Gurnah narrates has for several centuries been a point of early encounters between Africans, Arabs, South Asians and Chinese. These encounters have given rise to unequal trading and economic relations which have served in shaping the history of this region in the process unearthing the repressed story of slavery, forced removals and tragedies that shaped the history of the region in diverse ways.

Migratory Slavery

This novel is divided into six segments which moving around the stories of the young slave Yusuf and his master Aziz. We must note that the type of slavery that is most evident in this book is not what generally people associate with but in Paradise it is the slavery of „pawning“. Pawning is a way of having someone's child to be used for debt. Pawning system was very much prevalent in the East African countries. Gurnah creates a satirical narrative and that is he calls it "Paradise". Gurnah's paradise begins when Yusuf becomes a pawn, or "rehani"(Arabic), to Uncle Aziz. Through this new journey of life with Uncle Aziz Yusuf is drive into a new world that was entirely different. Yusuf used to live in a rural area with his parents up to twelve years. When Uncle Aziz came for a visit to his house, he was ignorant about his departure from his native place. Yusuf was used as compensation for his father's debt, "He had come to understand fully that he was there as rehani, pawned to Uncle Aziz to secure his father's debts to the merchant." After leaving his parental home, he travels with his new master to his household. When Yusuf arrived at this new place which is called "Paradise" by Gurnah, he started working along with another slave Khalil in Aziz's shop. Here first time he gets conscious about his own identity. Aziz started dreaming to visit the East African dominant place with his new master but his desire is devastated when Aziz go away by leaving him in a small mountain town in the custody of his relative Hamid and his wife Maimuna. But it was not the end of Yusuf's dream. Several merchants take halt at Hamid's house and from here Yusuf starts to collect stories about their explorations in the interior part of the East Africa. Still Yusuf was unaware that Uncle Aziz was not his real uncle. In the custody of Hamid, he found new companion Khalil who was also a pawn to Aziz. He was also working in the shop to pay his father's debts to Aziz. They both worked in a shop, but did not get any wages for it. However they were not kept in fully captivity so they had some free time to visit nearby villages simply as they wished. This type of slavery was not the similar as what the Europeans were taking Africans to the America. Although it was different from Europeans mode of slavery, it does not mean that humiliations were not committed to it. Africans did not want to be seen as being as cruel as the Europeans. Even though there were a number of forms of slavery that existed in Africa before the arrival of Europeans, it was very unusual to find the type of chattel slavery. It was also not moral to take children as payment for debts. Here in

the novel we find the development of a soft relationship between Yusuf and Aziz. When Aziz came back from his journey, Yusuf started spending more time with Aziz. After sometimes, he went on trade expeditions with him. They used to talk with each other in a way that reader of the novel would not expect slave and master with each other. By the time Aziz begins to see Yusuf as part of the family. He let his home opened to him, "You have a home here with me. You know that, I think. Make it your home and we will talk when I get back." (Gurnah, 195)

Paradise, is Gurnah's fourth novel. The protagonist is Yusuf, a beautiful boy, sold into slavery by an inept father at the age of twelve. The story lasts for five years of his life thus ending just after he turns seventeen, not quite an adult. The narration starts shortly before young Yusuf leaves home in the company of a rich Uncle Aziz to start a life of servitude. His hope for a better life, away from poverty in his parents' home is soon scuttled with the information that Uncle Aziz was actually a rich merchant and not remotely related to him.

"As for Uncle Aziz, for a start, he ain't your uncle" (23), is the piece of information he gets on arrival at the merchant's residence. He is quickly enlightened on the fact that he was a slave. "You are here because your Ba owes the Seyyid some money. I'm here because my Ba owes him money" (24).

This comes from Khalil who was pawned earlier and is now assigned to be Yusuf's mentor. Reality dawns on Yusuf when they are thereafter made to operate outside of the merchant's main family house where his two wives reside,

"They slept on the earth terrace in front of the shop, shopkeepers by day and watchmen by night, and covered themselves with rough calico sheets" (23).

Slavery occurs in the Aziz household in many forms, Amina is Khalil's foster sister, with whom they had been pawned off but who was set free through her marriage to the merchant,

"[Y]our uncle Aziz married her last year. So now he is my brother as well as your uncle, and we are one happy family in a garden of Paradise" (207),

Khalil informs Yusuf of his sister's position in the family. The senior wife is enslaved by a debilitating skin condition for which a cure has eluded the best known doctors and medicine men. Hamdani the gardener is a freed slave who questions the whole idea of freedom as seen by the slave owners:

"They offered me freedom as a gift. She did. Who told her she had it to offer? I know the freedom you are talking about. I had the freedom the moment I was born. When these people say you belong to me, I own you, it is like the passing of the rain or the setting of the sun at the end of the day. The following morning the sun will rise again whether they like it or not. The same with freedom. They can lock you up, put you in chains, abuse all your small longings, but freedom is not something they can take away". (223-4)

Slavery in its different forms occupies a central place in the family in Gurnah's fiction. According to Gwyn Campbell (2004), slavery and slave trade is 4000 years old in the Indian Ocean world. But slavery as practiced here differed greatly with the way it was conducted in the Western tradition. Where in the Western tradition slaves were outsiders of foreign origin, in the Indian Ocean world they were internal, in some instances relatives to the slavers. Slavery in Gurnah's fiction is as expected, fashioned against the Indian Ocean World practices. The most common slave practice in this region was pawnship where mostly girls were given out for indebtedness, largely within the same cultural and linguistic community. In some instances, young women were pawned off to be married to redeem a family's debt. In such instances,

the women were not considered as slaves in the strict sense, but their basic freedoms were still limited.

Slavery occupies a crucial place in the lives of the children under narration in the novel under study here and also creates a kind of family that can only be described as layered if not paradoxical. The relationship between Aziz the merchant and Yusuf the protagonist in *Paradise* is more of foster father-foster son than master-slave. The situation presents a slave child belonging to that house with a dilemma as he cannot claim to be a part of the family, yet like in the case of Yusuf, is being groomed to assume a key role in the family business. The children operate within a limited agency owing to the interstitial space they occupy within the only family they can call theirs. The slave status gives them very little room to act independently as it is mapped in a way that limits their personhood. Yusuf the protagonist has to contend with journeys, discrimination and interaction with different people, free and bonded. He questions different ways in which the people he interacts with view issues. In this particular instance, he is puzzled by the fact that Hamdani the gardener made a choice of not taking the freedom offered by his mistress.

“No doubt there was wisdom in it but it was wisdom of endurance and impotence, admirable in its way perhaps, but not while the bullies are still sitting on you and releasing their foul gasses on you”. (224)

The impotence that he notices in the gardener exists in him too, not overtly, but leads him to exchange one form of servitude for another when he leaves the household of Aziz the merchant to join the German army at the end of the novel., there are elements of disruptions of the narrated childhoods. In the novel, it is quite apparent that the child characters presented suffer levels of upheaval which interrupt the flow of their lives.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the consistent themes running through Gurnah's writing include “exile, displacement, belonging, colonialism and broken promises by the state. We definitely see all of these themes in *Paradise*, set in Tanzania just before the start of World War I.

Our hero is Yusuf, indentured to a wealthy Arab businessman at age 12 to pay off a portion of his father’s debts. We watch Yusuf come of age as a thoughtful and remarkably beautiful boy. His master Aziz is brave, cunning, and cool-headed, delegating the cruelty required by his business to his employees. He uses the greed and gullibility of small-time merchants on his trading routes to risk their money in his business ventures, coming away with most of the profits when business is good, and an occasional slave when the business does not go well. Yusuf becomes an apprentice of sorts, where his innocence and beauty make him a compelling companion for Aziz, and an object of desire for Aziz’s enigmatic wife.

In the six years of Yusuf’s servitude he undergoes many adventures, with the most compelling being the journey into the heart of the Congo. This reverse trip is opposed in many ways to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, with colonialism and the African culture it aims to replace both exposed for their violence and cruelty, but not for their savagery. In the end, the 18-year-old Yusuf has lost his innocence and is banished from the Garden of Paradise. With nothing to tie him to a home, family, or culture he can call his own, he gives up any pretense to a self-directed future and joins the German colonial masters to fight in a war he has no stake in.

Yusuf represents many things in this novel: innocence and its loss, beauty as the impetus of desire, the cruel consequences of “vengeful acquisitiveness”, even Africa

as a whole, so easily succumbing to the bondage of colonialism when there is no foundation of respect for human freedom to combat it.

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