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A STUDY ON ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S *ADMIRING SILENCE* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE
OF EDWARD SOJA'S THE THIRDSPACE THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Admiring Silence is Abdulrazak Gurnah's fifth novel, presenting the despair of being torn from one's roots and the failures of constructing cultural identity. In this novel, Gurnah's unnamed narrator flees to England when he was a teenager to escape the violent political prosecution of his hometown Zanzibar and makes an attempt at immersing himself into white culture, only to find that he fails to integrate into the white society even after "marrying" a white woman. This paper applies Edward Soja's the Thirdspace Theory to the study of *Admiring Silence* and through analyzing the uneven and hierarchical distribution of the Firstspace in London, the futile counterattack of the Secondspace, and the openness and unknowns of the Thirdspace to point out the narrator's struggles and failures on his journey to find cultural identity both in the whites' society and his motherland.

Key words: *Admiring Silence*; The Thirdspace Theory; Cultural identity.

1. Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah (1948-) is a Tanzanian-born British novelist and academic, and he moved to the United Kingdom in the 1960s as a refugee during the Zanzibar Revolution. Gurnah was awarded the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature "for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fates of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents" (Swedish Academy 2021).

Admiring Silence, first published in 1996, is Gurnah's fifth novel. The plot follows an unnamed Zanzibari man living in England after fleeing there in the early 1960s. After many years of lonely and marginalized life, finally he fell in love with an English woman, Emma, and lived happily for nearly twenty years. When he came to revisit his hometown, he only found that the images of the childhood paradise he had preserved in his mind had been destroyed, and now his hometown is not his home any longer. At the same time, Emma fell in love with another man, so the narrator lost both his home in England and Zanzibar and returned to desperation and loneliness again. It is a beautifully calibrated story of a wrenching search for a home for the heart and soul in an age of immigrants and exiles.

Research on Gurnah is mainly focusing on refugee themes (Farrier 2008; Helff 2009; Shay 2012), cultural identity (Steiner 2006 & 2010; Hand 2012; Hunsu 2014), narrative strategies (Steiner & Olausson 2013), thematic

research on colonial history (Brezzelli 2011), and space writing (Seel 2004; Samuelson 2012; Lavery 2013 & 2017; Datta 2019). *Admiring Silence* contains wealthy spatial elements, and the elements are related to the background of the specific events, reflecting different social relationships. Therefore, based on the existing achievement of the research on space in *Admiring Silence*, this paper attempts to interpret the novel by applying Soja's The Thirdspace Theory, thus exploring the new possibility that Abdulrazak Gurnah provides for Zanzibar British to construct their living space and cultural identity, hoping to get a supplement to the research on space of this novel.

Edward Soja is a famous post-modern geographer in the United States. Based on Lefebvre's idea of the "Other" and the ternary dialectics of space, Soja started from geography and constructed his own theoretical framework. He proposes that there exists a Thirdspace, which "arising from the sympathetic deconstruction and heuristic reconstruction of the Firstspace-Secondspace duality, is an existence of thirding-as-Othering" (Soja 81). This is also the main connotation and significance of Soja's space theory, dedicated to finding a new way of thinking about space.

Soja points out that Firstspace "can be defined as...a material and materialized 'physical' spatiality that is directly comprehended in empirically measurable configurations: in the absolute and relative locations of things and activities...and in the concrete and maple geographies of our lifeworlds" (Soja 74). Regarding Secondspace, Soja believes that "Secondspace is the interpretative locale of the creative artist and artful architect, visually or literally representing the world in the image of their subjective imagination" (Soja 79). "Secondspace, conceived in ideas about space, in thoughtful re-presentations of human spatiality in mental or cognitive forms" (Soja 10).

If Firstspace can be understood as the "real place" and Secondspace as the "imagined place", Thirdspace is a combination of reality and imagination but also out of the two. It is a space of "disparity" or "otherization", full of power, symbolism and ideology in people's daily life. As a conflicting or contradictory space, it is characterized by uncertainty, dynamics and fluidity. It is an open radical space full of mystery, class, patriarchy, order, racism, gender, power, politics, etc.

This paper applies Edward Soja's the Thirdspace Theory to analyze the three spaces in *Admiring Silence*: the physical urban space represented by London, the alienated mental space characterized by different cognitive states, and the multivariate open space represented by the new predicament beyond firstspace and secondspace, pointing out the narrator's struggles and failures on his journey to find and construct his cultural identity.

2. The Firstspace: The Predicament of Social Space in London

Space is hierarchical, and it is usually divided into different areas because of social classes and nations. "And yet everything ('public facilities', blocks of flats, 'environments for living') is separated, assigned in isolated fashion to unconnected 'sites' and 'tracts'; the spaces themselves are specialized just as operations are in the social and technical division of labour" (Lefebvre 97-98). Therefore, in *Admiring Silence*, as a nominally open space, London is still divided into different exclusive spaces by different classes and hierarchy.

As a typical public space, the hospital was supposed to be a place to heal the patients. However, the white doctor recklessly attributed the reason of the narrator's heart problem to his race without doing any routine examination (the white doctor mistakenly thought the narrator was Afro-Caribbean people that the British Empire had ruled). In addition, based on the narrator's skin color and appearance, the doctor biasedly listed a series of high-risk diseases that this race is prone to. "High blood pressure, hypertension, sickle-cell anaemia, dementia, dengue fever, sleeping sickness, diabetes, amnesia, cholera, phlegm, melancholy and hysteria" (Gurnah 10). Such kind of racial discrimination makes the narrator resistant to all public space "dominated" by white people.

Apart from some places like hospitals, there are also many other places he had passed with only a sideways look of misgiving: specialist second-hand bookshops, vegetarian cafés, jewellers, and jazz clubs. "Places I expected to be evicted from with guffaws of derision" (Gurnah 68). In principle, these places are public space, and everyone is eligible to enter. But after living in London for so many years, the narrator never officially set

foot in these places. While London is such an inclusive and open cosmopolitan city, there seems to be an invisible wall between the whites and the others, which is difficult to cross.

His lover Emma came from a middle-class British family and was a liberal with a strong sense of rebellion. She opposed the prevailing ideas and social norms of the time, disliked the decent life of the middle class, hated neatness and order, resisted marriage, and criticized her parents' "racist filth" and "obscene complacencies" (Gurnah 81). Therefore, Emma's presence provides him with a passport to cross this invisible wall and enter the whites' space decently, which made the narrator gain an unprecedented sense of belonging and security in Emma. "At times I forgot myself, and I imagined that I looked as they did, and talked as they did, and had lived the same life that they had lived, and that I had always been like this and would go on unhindered way beyond the sunset" (Gurnah 68).

The space has strange effects, "for one thing, it unleashes desire. It presents desire with a 'transparency' which encourages it to surge forth in an attempt to lay claim to an apparently clear field" (Lefebvre 97). However, relying on Emma's identity to obtain a pass to the space where the whites belong is not a long-term solution, and after breaking up with Emma, the narrator loses this pass and is once again isolated from the space of the white people by the invisible wall.

The totally different social spaces of the narrator and Emma reveal the uneven geographical distribution of power and capital. The predicament of social space in London has always existed and did not disappear completely because of Emma's appearance. Consequently, the narrator is never really accepted into a white space either.

3. The Secondspace: the Counterattack in Vain

The Secondspace has a cognitive mode of intrinsic causes, which is generally mastered by a certain domain arbiter who is too conceited and forcibly controls the production of spatial knowledge. In the Secondspace, the imaginary space is always trying to become the real space, and the actual material form takes a back seat, and is only indirectly understood through human rational or irrational activities.

For the former colonists and colonized, they often had very different understandings and imaginations of what was happening in a colony. As for the narrator, the British colonists brought them disaster, disease and war, which he and his families have personally experienced. The countless exhibits in the British Museum and colonial education are parts of the best evidences of their colonial misdeeds. The narrator believes "History (the colonization) turns out to be a bundle of lies that covers up centuries of murderous rampage around the globe" (Gurnah 7).

But for those British civilians represented by Emma and Emma's father, Mr Willoughby, they firmly believe that they gave the colonized individualism, the Frigidaire, Holy Matrimony, as well as civilization and that their ancestors' colonial activities were glorious. After all, that is what their country preached and taught as the winning side.

As a typical middle-class worker, Emma's father Mr. Willoughby is obsessed with the glorious past of the British Empire and has a penchant for "imperial stories" and likes imagining himself as the savior of savage Africans. The narrator ostensibly catered for what Mr. Willoughby likes by "inventing those stories of orderly affairs and tragic failures" of his motherland (Gurnah 69). Through these stories, the narrator shaped the images of the backward, poor African victims to satisfy the huge vanity of the latter. The narrator appears to be pandering to Mr. Willoughby, but in reality he is subtly employing a strategy of counter-hegemonic politics, which "uses differences as a basis for community, identity, and struggle against the existing power relations at their source" (Soja 89).

As for the narrator, rather than aiming above all to erase differences or to even things out, he follows the tricks of the former colonists and continue the ridiculous game of fabricating lies and stories. As for the narrator, the distinct difference is that the narrator scoffs at the colonists' lies, while Mr. Willoughby believes those

ridiculous “inventing stories” deeply, which gives the narrator a sense of success. However, the “success” only pleased himself, without making any impact or change on the spiritual space of Mr. Willoughby.

4. The Thirdspace: New Predicament beyond Firstspace and Secondspace

The Thirdspace can be described as “a product of a ‘thirthing’ of the spatial imagination”, “the creation of another mode of thinking about space that draws upon the material and mental spaces of the traditional dualism but extends well beyond them in scope, substance, and meaning” (Soja 11). Therefore, compared with the other two spaces, the Thirdspace is more open and inclusive, but it is also full of challenges and unknowns.

On one hand, after returning to his motherland after more than 20 years of absence, the narrator witnessed or learned from his families the various dark sides of the newly independent country. Economically, the country heavily relies on the foreign aid and there is a huge shortage of living materials: “There was only electricity for a few hours each day, soap was short, as was pepper, sugar, tooth paste, rice, you name it” (Gurnah 134). Politically, the country is miring in extreme nationalism and is trying to glorify the pre-colonial era and blames the colonial history for all social problems. On the other hand, because of the historical and religious factors, when the narrator’s families learned he had fallen in love with an English woman and had kept it a secret for so long, they felt very ashamed and angry about that.

In short, all real and imaginary spaces in Zanzibar have become completely different from twenty years ago. Disappointment with the motherland and the huge conflict with the family made the narrator realize that the home here no longer belongs to him and the space with Emma is his real home.

However, what he did not expect was that Emma was falling in love with another man and chose to break up with him. In fact, Emma’s departure is not without signs. With the passage of time, her rebellious spirit was gradually overshadowed by the values of the mainstream white society. Therefore, when the passion receded, the ideal finally surrendered to reality. Emma likened her life to a narrative with no end, and now she has chosen for herself the beginning of another story, and abandoned the one she accidentally entered but had no way out. Emma’s departure hit the narrator hard and robbed him of his laboriously earned sense of belonging and cultural identity in England. “Now that she’s gone, I find myself living in England for reasons I no longer know” (Gurnah 237).

Both the spiritual and material spaces that the narrator has worked on for more than 40 years suddenly collapse, which makes the narrator quite at a loss. Finally, he thought of Ira, whom he had met on the plane back to England. She was born and raised in Kenya to Indian parents, and she also immigrated to England in the 1960s and married an English, but was later abandoned by her husband. She said to the narrator: “Even after all these years I can’t get over the feeling of being alien in England, of being a foreigner. Sometimes I think that what I feel for England is disappointed love” (Gurnah 226). The failure of love or marriage completely blocked the way to integrate into British society and to construct a cultural identity.

It is as if the narrator is on a plane in mid-air, he can return to the physical space of England or Zanzibar, but he can never return to the mental space of either place. The narrator tries in vain to find the direction of his future life from both the material space and the spiritual space of England and Zanzibar. Finally, he makes an effort to break away from the confines of these two spaces and set his sights on a wider space--the Thirdspace. He wants to contact Ira, the girl who has the same story with him, but he was afraid that this faint hope in the new space would eventually vanish away.

5. Conclusion

With the analysis of the three spaces, namely, the uneven and hierarchical distribution of the Firstspace, the futile counterattack in the Secondspace, and the openness and unknowns of the Thirdspace, this paper reveals the narrator’s struggles and failure on his journey to find cultural identity both in England and his motherland Zanzibar. This journey is accompanied by the way the narrator deals with racial discrimination and cultural identity issues from silence to non-silence then back to silence, as well as his transition from being afraid

of white people's social spaces to actively integrating into their social and spiritual space, and finally being ruthlessly expelled.

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