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EXPLORING THE INTRICACIES OF DISPLACEMENT IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S  
NOVEL *BY THE SEA*

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ABSTRACT

This study enquires into Abdulrazak Gurnah's "*By The Sea*," which unearths the profound impact of post-colonial displacement on human life. Gurnah is a well-respected contemporary author, and his sixth novel portrays the devastating effects of colonialism on native people. The story is set in Zanzibar Island, where the British exerted their dominance, leading to conflicts with the local inhabitants. Through the first-person narratives of Saleh Omer and Latif Mahmud, two characters who were forced to leave their homeland and settle in new countries, the novel depicts their struggles with identity crisis, lack of physical and mental security, and existentialism. Despite their different backgrounds, Omer and Latif form a new relationship and seek friendship and camaraderie with each other. This novel serves as a powerful reminder of the brutalities of imperialism and the struggles faced by those who have been displaced from their homes.

**Keywords:** conflict, colonialism, displacement, home, language.

The depiction of inner conflict in literary works is a complex interweaving of various elements. Inner conflict is a universal human concern that cannot be ignored. As Robert Frost said, "Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back" (Frost, 93), which shows how Frost was uncertain about the right path to choose. Similarly, Gurnah's characters demonstrate a central conflict in their actions. Displacement is a central issue in postcolonial literature, and Gurnah's depiction of these concerns and his realistic portrayal of his fiction are highly commendable. In his novels, he writes, "In the darkness, I lose a sense of space, and in this nowhere, I feel myself more solidly" (*By the Sea*, 1).

The concept of 'home' seems simple at first glance. It represents a sense of security and familiarity that is important to humans. This idea has been reinforced by humanitarian efforts emphasizing the importance of having a stable home for individuals. However, in postcolonial theory, the idea of 'home' has problematic implications because it has become associated with exclusionary nationalism. This is evident in the rhetoric surrounding anti-immigration sentiments and postcolonial nation-building. The use of the idea of home in such contexts can be hegemonic or essentializing. Partha Chatterjee asserts in *Scripting The Nation and its Fragments*, that home is "not a complimentary but rather the original site on which the hegemonic project of nationalism

was launched" (Chatterjee,147). Bidy Martin and Chandra Mohanty (1986) argue that the concept of home is often based on a false sense of unity and security, which is actually built upon a history of struggle and oppression. This has led to the exclusion of diverse communities through various means over generations, in order to maintain a sense of familiarity for those who already live there. They suggest that the idea of home is inherently exclusionary and serves only to benefit those in power. Therefore, the limited nature of the concept of home should be acknowledged and challenged.

Caren Kaplan's book "Questions of Travel" (1996) critiques the postmodern idea of movement, showing how it inadvertently rehashes many of the imperialist conventions that underpin European modernism. She specifically calls out the work of post-structuralist critics Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who valorized displacement and what they called "nomadic modes." Despite their intention to critique power relations in Euro-American humanism, Kaplan argues that these ideas rely on "an opposition between a central site of subjectivity and zones of marginality," and fail to account for the "transnational power relations that construct postmodern subjectivities" (Kaplan, 86). In other words, she believes that their focus on marginal attitudes and "becoming minor" serves to liberate the "at home" subject at the expense of real experiences of homelessness and displacement, such as those faced by refugees and asylum seekers. Instead, she argues that we need to recognize the Third World as a location of theoretical production in its own right, rather than simply as a metaphorical margin for European oppositional strategies.

Deleuze and Guattari's concepts have gained immense popularity among postcolonial literary critics and authors, especially concerning the interpretation of migrant and diasporic narratives, despite some flaws in their development. However, their critical frameworks have been misused or mishandled, leading to what Revathi Krishnaswamy refers to as the "mythology of migrancy." This mythology perceives displacement as a liberating and artistically productive experience, ignoring the harsh realities and historical contexts of refugees who are forcibly uprooted from their homes. Despite the metaphorical associations of displacement or "homelessness" with creativity and innovation, it is imperative to recognize the need for re-evaluating the notion of home for those who have been forcefully displaced. This will help us to develop a more nuanced understanding of displacement and its impact on individuals who have experienced it.

In Gurnah's novel, *By the Sea*, the main character Saleh Omar is introduced as an aging protagonist who boldly declares, "I am a refugee, an asylum-seeker" (Gurnah, 4). This statement establishes Saleh's identity as a person who has been displaced from his original home and has been forced to seek refuge in a foreign land. The novel is constructed around Saleh's experiences and provokes the reader to reflect on the unique challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers. By highlighting the struggles of a displaced person, Gurnah emphasizes the need for society to recognize the plight of these individuals and assist them where possible. The novel goes beyond just telling stories of homelessness and marginalization and instead, portrays displacement as a material issue that requires real-world solutions.

Through its use of vivid storytelling and exploration of the physical spaces that refugees inhabit, *By the Sea* creates an unconventional aesthetic that challenges conventional portrayals of migration. This unique approach is rooted in an understanding of the internal struggles and emotional toll that displacement can have on individuals, rather than simply focusing on the external factors that contribute to the problem. Gurnah's novel offers a thought-provoking exploration of the impact of displacement on individuals, and challenges readers to rethink their assumptions about what it means to be a refugee or asylum seeker.

Saleh Omar's primary place of residence following his arrival was a refugee detention center, a crucial component of the process of accommodating asylum seekers. Omar characterizes the center by stating, "The sheds that housed us could have just as easily contained sacks of cereal or bags of cement or any other valuable commodity that needed to be protected from the elements. Now they contained us, a casual and valueless nuisance that had to be restrained" (Gurnah, 43). Omar's description of his and his fellow asylum seekers' "accommodation" as analogous to the storage of inanimate objects reinforces the perception of refugees as "non-persons" and the detention center as a "non-home." Furthermore, the gradual shift from "valuable commodity" to "valueless nuisance" and the semantic progression from "accommodation" to "containment"

and ultimately "restraint" suggests a historical shift from post-war economic migration during the Commonwealth era to contemporary EU-era refugee migration. While Commonwealth asylum seekers were once viewed as valuable assets capable of contributing to an economy in need of support, the current language surrounding asylum-seeking portrays recent migrants as inherently "valueless."

Despite his challenging background, Omar finds the detention centre to be a more comfortable place than the lodging house he is moved to later. However, even though the latter has the potential to be more homely, it still remains a disturbing non-home for him. This is mostly due to the presence of Celia, the owner's, personal burdens, which are potentially harmful both physically and mentally. As the text states, "The rug on the bed puffed up in a fine cloud of dust when I pulled it back. The bed sheets looked and smelled as if they had been slept in before. There were spots of blood in the pillowcase. The bed had the same smell as the upholstery downstairs: old vomit and semen and spilled tea." Furthermore, Omar is conflicted about his displacement, stating, "I daren't even sit on it out of an irrational fear of contamination, not just fear of disease but of some inner pollution." (Gurnah, 56)

According to Celia, the landowner, all the items in her room "all have meaning for me, every one of them" (Gurnah, 55), for Omar, they represent only horror and humiliation in an unfamiliar place. He expends the evening "going through Celia's valuable memories ..., appraising and assessing them as if they were part of a house lot I had acquired at auction", emphasizing that he "had felt no interest in these objects, even in my own mind, that I did not even speculate on how they were favourite to Celia, never even thought to suppose her life with them" (Gurnah, 56). This behavior of objectifying Celia's memories presents a challenge for Saleh, who believes that these objects hold corrupt power and should only be valued for their economic worth.

The way Omar disregards Celia's belongings creates an evident contrast with the sleek black table and the box of fragrant ud. These items possess a historical significance that goes beyond their mere material worth as household objects. Furthermore, Celia's declaration of her emotional attachment to these items amplifies Omar's sense of displacement. The only thing that accompanies the box of ud is a stolen towel that his fellow refugee Alfonso gave him. The "invisible space" that the box provides is the only refuge Omar has from the unclean environment around him (Gurnah, 59). This space is considered sacred to Omar as it is the only place that provides him with a sense of cleanliness and comfort.

Ultimately, Omar is shifted to his own home "*By the sea*" and, as observed above, it is here that permanence instigates to be re-established through the progression of storytelling. Michael Jackson stresses that, specifically for those who encounter the disturbance of brutality and displacement, storytelling becomes "To reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one's own imagination. ... Storytelling provides us a sense that though we do not exactly determine the course of our lives, we at least have a hand in defining their meaning" (Jackson, 15-16). In organizing to verbalize the language of the asylum-seeker, Omar's narratives turn out to be channelled in the state apparatus, whereas he befalls a mere recipient of the descriptions expressed by the spokespersons of the state. It is only through his confrontation with the novel's second central character, Latif, that Omar's intervention as a narrator can be refurbished and, through this progression, a sagacity of home re-formed.

The two protagonists in the story replace the original chronicles with a new version that imbues their narrative entities with additional layers of meaning, despite their lack of material possessions. Even though the valuable ebony table is no longer in their possession and has been replaced by a "low rectangular table of no refinement," (Gurnah,144) its significance in the account of their lives is heightened when Latif uncovers the enormous price that Omar has paid for not returning it. The storytelling in the narrative is interspersed with moments of generosity, such as when cups of coffee and tea are offered, and these domestic interludes help to connect the narrative and make the most painful moments more bearable for the protagonists. The casket is also brought out, with Omar burning "lavender and fragrant gum" before Latif's arrival, symbolizing the filling up of this new space with the narrative weight of the lost ud-al-Qamari. (Gurnah, 143).

Omar tells stories of displacement to Latif, which serve as an opportunity for him to fill the gaps in his life and give meaning to his family's departure. Omar feels relieved of his anger and resentment as he narrates the stories. However, for Omar, storytelling is an end in itself. He wants to be listened to and understood, and sharing his burden of untold stories and events helps him achieve that. Throughout his storytelling, Omar emphasizes his role as a storyteller. When narrating the associations surrounding Hussein's pursuit of Latif's brother, Omar asserts that it is not just his story, but one that has been told many times before. This highlights the difference between the responsibility of an author and that of a storyteller. Although the stories Omar must tell to gain asylum indicate a loss of agency to recount his life, the act of storytelling also allows him to construct new meaning from painful past events. Through this process, the rift between the two families is finally resolved, and a new bond of friendship is established between Latif and Saleh Omar.

In the novel "*By the Sea*" by Abdulrazak Gurnah, the primary storyteller is Saleh Omar, a refugee who serves as one of the two protagonist-narrators. Omar's narratives often highlight the updated nature of his accounts by informing his readers that he will "tell it this way" or make changes from the "original." From the opening pages of the text, Omar describes the familiar climax of leaving one's home and arriving in unfamiliar places with garbled ambitions and little bits of jumbled luggage. This description draws the reader's attention to the theme of displacement that permeates throughout the book.

The use of the word "our" in Omar's narrative also raises questions about who the collective pronoun refers to. Is it an allusion to traditional narrators, or more specifically, to narrators who tell stories of displacement, or perhaps to Gurnah himself as a writer who experienced migration? By framing Omar's voice-over in this way, Gurnah reveals the discomfort of writing about migration in fiction. However, by incorporating a figure of storytelling above one of authorship, Gurnah seems to be registering his displacement narrative in a more comprehensive view, which correlates significantly with the favored individual of the expatriate writer, as represented by Edward Said and Salman Rushdie. Overall, the detailed and nuanced narrative of "*By the Sea*" provides a powerful exploration of displacement and its impact on individuals and communities.

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