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## Diaspora and Cultural Studies: A Study of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*

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### Abstract

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Paradise* looks at the tough questions around being away from home and what it means to have a cultural identity, especially after colonial rule and being forced to leave one's land. The story is set in German East Africa during World War I and follows Yusuf, a young boy who is unexpectedly taken from his family and sent to live with German colonists. This sudden change uproots him from his cultural background and throws him into a completely new and unfamiliar world. The book explores ideas like being displaced, losing one's cultural roots, and trying to find a sense of belonging in a strange place. Yusuf struggles with the pull of his African heritage and the new German culture he is now part of. *Paradise* also talks about the idea of diaspora, showing how Yusuf's story is similar to many others who have been forced to leave their homes and adjust to new cultures. The novel shows the difficulties that people in diaspora face when trying to keep their cultural identity while living in a different country. Through these themes, *Paradise* gives a thoughtful and deep look at how people deal with being displaced and the lasting effects of historical trauma.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Cultural Studies, Cultural Identities, Displacement, Colonialism.

### Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah, a famous Tanzanian writer and Nobel Prize winner, has greatly influenced postcolonial literature with his stories about identity, being displaced, and mixing of cultures. His writing is shaped by the history of colonial rule in East Africa and focuses on the human cost of migration, cultural mixing, and past trauma. Among his works, *Paradise* stands out as a strong story that shows the complex mix of cultures and the struggle to form a sense of self during the time of German colonial rule in East Africa.

One of the central challenges in understanding postcolonial societies is unravelling the effects of colonialism on cultural identities. Colonial rule often forced disparate cultural groups into close proximity, creating complex multicultural spaces marked by both interaction and tension. In such environments, individuals struggled to navigate the competing demands of their cultural heritage and

the pressures of assimilation into dominant colonial structures. In *Paradise*, Gurnah dramatizes these tensions through the story of Yusuf, a young boy sold into servitude as a means of settling his father's debt. Yusuf's journey into a world shaped by African traditions, Islamic faith, Indian mercantile influence, and European colonial power reveals several key issues:

**Cultural Fragmentation:** Homi K Bhabha describes cultural fragmentation as part of the post colonial experience, where colonized subjects exist in a "liminal space", caught between their native traditions and the dominant colonial culture.

In this, we try to find how does forced displacement disrupt an individual's sense of belonging and cultural continuity?

**Hybrid Identities:** It reflects Homi K Bhabha's concept of hybridity, describes how cultural identities in colonial societies are fluid and constantly negotiated rather than fixed. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that hybridity is both a site of innovative and tension, where colonial subjects exist in a "third space". In this we try to find what are the psychological and emotional consequences of living in a space where cultures blend but also clash?

**Unequal Multiculturalism:** Multiculturalism does not erase inequality but reinforces it through racial, economic, and social hierarchies. Homi K Bhabha's concept of liminality provides useful frameworks for understanding how colonial subjects in *Paradise* experience cultural interaction not as mutual respect, but as subjugation and exclusion. This explore how do power imbalance in colonial systems affect the coexistence of diverse cultural groups?

These problems resonate beyond Yusuf's personal story, reflecting the broader realities of colonized societies. Gurnah's depiction of multiculturalism is far from idyllic; instead, he exposes its fraught nature shaped by exploitation, social hierarchies, and unresolved tensions.

**Addressing the Problem** The paper seeks to address these issues by critically analysing the themes of cultural hybridity and multiculturalism in *Paradise*. Through close textual analysis and engagement with postcolonial theory, the study will focus on the following objectives:

**Contextual Analysis:** Situating *Paradise* within the historical realities of German East Africa to uncover the colonial forces that shape its narrative.

**Exploration of Hybridity:** Applying Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space" to understand how Yusuf's identity is formed and negotiated in a hybrid cultural environment.

**Multicultural Tensions:** Examining the interactions between African, Indian, and European cultures in the novel, with a focus on the economic, social, and racial dynamics that underlie these relationships.

**Comparative Perspectives:** Drawing insights from Gurnah's other works, such as *By the Sea* and *Desertion*, to situate *Paradise* within a broader critique of colonialism and its impact on cultural identities.

By addressing these dimensions, the paper aims to illuminate the ways in which Gurnah portrays the complexities of living in multicultural and hybrid spaces. The study will argue that *Paradise* not only critiques the exploitative structures of colonialism but also celebrates the resilience and adaptability of individuals navigating cultural intersections.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

To understand the cultural and identity dynamics in *Paradise*, it is crucial to engage with key theoretical perspectives.

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**Cultural Hybridity** Homi K Bhabha's concept of hybridity emphasizes the creation of new cultural identities in the "in between spaces" where different cultures meet. These spaces, through marked by tension, allow for innovative cultural expressions that transcend binary oppositions.

### **Multiculturalism**

Multiculturalism explores the coexistence and interaction of diverse cultures within a shared space. Stuart Hall's discussions on cultural identity emphasizes the fluid and dynamic nature of identity in a multicultural context, shaped by history and power dynamics.

### **Diaspora and postcolonial identity**

Diaspora studies informed by thinkers like Edward Said and Paul Gilroy, focuses on the experiences of displacement, loss and adaptation. Gurnah's novel often explores the personal and collective struggles of diasporic communities in preserving their cultural roots while engaging with new environment. These frameworks provide the lens through which Gurnah's *Paradise* and other works are analysed in this paper.

### **3. The context of *Paradise***

*Paradise* is set in German East Africa, a region characterized by cultural diversity and colonial exploitation. The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the rise of European colonial powers, with Germany establishing control over parts of modern-day Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi. The colonial economy relied heavily on trade and forced labour, disrupting indigenous cultures and creating new hierarchies. Gurnah's novel reflects this historical context through the experiences of Yusuf, whose displacement mirrors the broader disruptions caused by colonial rule. The character Yusuf encounters African labourers, Indian traders and German officers represent the diverse and often conflicting cultural forces shaping the region.

### **4. Cultural hybridity in *Paradise***

#### **Yusuf's journey of hybridity**

Yusuf's journey in *Paradise* is profound exploration of cultural hybridity. Born into a Swahili-speaking Muslim community, Yusuf's cultural identity is embedded in African traditions and Islamic faith. However, his forced servitude introduces him to new cultural influences, including the mercantile Indian community and German colonial authorities. Gurnah portrays Yusuf's navigation of these cultural intersections with sensitivity, pressing the tension between his cultural heritage and the demands of his new environment. Yusuf's exposure to diverse languages, religions, and social hierarchies reflect the complexities of hybrid identities in colonial societies. Gurnah portrays Yusuf's displacement as a moment of cultural rapture, where he is forced into a new social order that challenges his sense of belonging. At one point Yusuf realizes that "he could not say when he first realized that he belonged to him, that he was owned".(pp.4). This moment signifies a loss of agency and the imposition of a new identity shaped by servitude. His transition from a free child in his family home to an indentured servant reflects the way colonial economies extract individuals, compelling them to negotiate unfamiliar cultural landscapes. Bhabha's concept of hybridity is useful in understanding Yusuf's shifting identity.

#### **Trade and cultural exchange**

The mercantile economy in *Paradise* serves as a microcosm of cultural hybridity. Indian traders, enwrapping an intermediary position between African communities and European colonizers, illustrate the blending of cultural practices. "They talked in a mixture of Kiswahili and Gujrati, with the occasional Portuguese and Arabic words thrown in, a strange tongue that had no home."(pp.73) Gurnah's depiction of trade network emphasizes the role of commerce in easing cultural exchange while also exposing the inequalities inherent in colonial economies.

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## Interpersonal Dynamics

Yusuf's relationship with characters like Khalil, Amina, and Aziz illustrate the personal dimensions of hybridity. These interactions reveal the emotional and psychological toll of living in a hybrid cultural space, where loyalty and identity are constantly negotiated. According to Bhabha, "Hybridity is the sign of productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities." This highlights how colonialism does not merely put one rigid system but creates fluid, hybrid identities. Yusuf, rather than fully assimilating or defying, exists in a liminal space- conforming, learning, and surviving in the world where societies cross.

## 5. Multiculturalism and Identity formation

### Inter-ethnic relation in *Paradise*

Gurnah's portrayal of East Africa as a multicultural space underscores the coexistence of diverse ethnic and cultural groups.

"The town was full of Indians and Arabs, all of them traders of one sort or another, and all of them looking down on the local people with condescension which was sometimes merely contemptuous but sometimes openly hostile".(pp 41)

The novel's depiction of Indian, Arab and African communities highlights the richness of cultural interactions but also exposes the tensions arising from unequal power dynamics. This concept supports the idea that cultural hybridity is not always a site of harmony, instead, it is often shaped by power imbalances and economic control.

### Yusuf's internal conflict

Yusuf's identity journey is marked by internal conflict as he grapples with the loss of his family and cultural roots. His attempts to attune his African heritage with the influences of Indian and European cultures reflect the broader challenges of identity formation in a multicultural world.

### Assimilation and resistance

Yusuf's story exemplifies the tension between assimilation and resistance. While he adapts to his new environment, he also seeks to save rudiments of his cultural identity. This duality captures the struggles of diasporic individuals navigating complex cultural landscapes. At one point Yusuf tried to fled-away,

"He thought about running away but knew he would have nowhere to go, no one to help him, no way of returning home".(pp.76).

Yusuf exists in a liminal space, unable to fully integrate yet unable to reject his circumstances entirely.

Resistance:

Yusuf's resistance is passive-rather than openly defying his captors, he withdraws into silence and observation. His restraint is a survival mechanism, reflecting the psychological burden of colonial subjects who must navigate systems of oppression without openly defying them. Despite external pressures, some characters continue practicing their religious traditions, resisting complete assimilation into colonial or mercantile culture.

"Even among them, some still clung to their prayers and their old ways, whispering the words their grandfathers had taught them".(pp.154)

The key moment where Yusuf acknowledges that resistance may no longer be an option he has involuntarily assimilated into the system that initially enslaved him.

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"He had spent years thinking he would find a way out, but now he understood that he had already become part of this world."(pp.196)

This reflects how cultural identity is preserved in the face of displacement and foreign domination.

## 6. Critique of colonialism

Across his works, Gurnah critiques the exploitative structures of colonialism and their moping goods on cultural identities. His narratives challenge simplistic binaries of coloniser and settled, offering a nuanced understanding of cultural resilience and transformation.

## 7. Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* provides a rich exploration of cultural hybridity and multiculturalism, reflecting the complexities of identity formation in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Through Yusuf's journey, Gurnah captures the tensions of possibilities of hybrid identities, offering a nuanced critique of colonial legacies.

By sticking his narratives within multicultural spaces, Gurnah illuminates the enduring struggles and resistance of diasporic communities. His works remind us of the transformative potential of cultural hybridity in a connected world, making a significant contribution to postcolonial literature.

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