



## COMPLEXITY OF HOMELESSNESS IN THE NOVELS OF ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

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### Abstract

This paper reveals that homelessness is complex, manifold and interlinked with historical, social, and cultural factors. The strength of complexity increases with the situation of life and age of the individual during their experience as a migrant. Gurnah's *Memory of Departure* is set in the years immediately after Tanzania's independence in 1961. The novel insists how the human body tries to follow the soul as body is far from the place where soul wanted to wander. As Anthony Synnott in this regard proposes that "The body social is many things: the prime symbol of the self, but also of the society; it is something we have, yet also what we are; it is both the subject and object at the same time; it is individual and personal, as unique as a fingerprint or odour plume, yet it is also common to all humanity...The body is both an individual creation, physically and phenomenological, and a cultural product; it is personal and also state property" (Synnott 2002, 4).

**Key Words:** culture, geopolitical, historical, home, identity, independence, individual

### Introduction

One can separate geographically but not intellectually from one's root. The surface meaning of the term *Homelessness* is being out of home or the person who has no home to leave. But when we try to find the critical meaning of the term on the basis of postcolonial literary theory, we can quote Caplow as "a condition of detachment from society characterised by the absence or attenuation of the affiliated bonds that link settled persons to a network of interconnected social structures" (Caplow et al. 1968, 494). In the light of the above definition, homelessness is about disintegration of identity from the society.

According to Gurnah, *Memory of Departure* is "the novel where [he] learnt the difference between writing things down and *writing*, the process of constructing ideas in fiction" (Nasta, Abdulrazak Gurnah with Susheila Nasta 2004, 354). The setting of this novel is not prolonged outside East African and Indian Ocean coastal towns but the novel narrates Gurnah's complete historical, geopolitical, and economic legacy through imagination. It depicts how the influence of external regimes of trade culture encouraged movement of the people. *Memory of Departure* engages with cynicism, disillusionment, and the violent socio-political situation just after independence in Tanzania. This unfavourable violent situation left many natives just like an immigrant in their own country because they have to relocate by leaving their own place. *Memory of Departure* reconnoitres the different areas in post-independence Tanzania's political system. The novel creates plain allusion of the second President Abeid Amani Karume's political initiative in Zanzibar that is namely instituted as "ethnic cleansing" (Askew 2006, 26). It enforces on Asian-descended people to reject their own heritage and identify themselves with Africans descendants. Askew in his study found that Abeid Karume's officials "forced young Persians, Indians and Arab women to marry members of his Revolutionary Council as part of the project to 'end' racial discrimination and produce new Zanzibaris" (Ibid, 27).



The novel shows how characters participate in these socio-political activities to establish their personal autonomy within the community without losing their previous identity. It tells the story of Hassan Omar, a character which is claimed to be based on Gurnah's own life in Zanzibar. Through the character of Omar, it narrates about the sense of frustration, identity crisis and homelessness Gurnah experienced as teenager in his life.

The text engages with the self-wandering through the first-person voice of Hassan. He navigates the emotional conflicts throughout his life when he leaves his home. After leaving home at the age of 16, his second phase of life starts which recounts his self-wandering and homelessness. A teenage boy of Arab descent is born in a poor family in a coastal town in Tanzania during the period when "independence was just around the corner" (Ibid, 28). He is the second child of his four siblings. Said was the eldest boy who died at very young age because of his father's brutal treatment. Zakiya is the third born child and Saida is the youngest in this poor family. Omar bin Hassan is the father of Omar Hassan who is very much disgraced, brutal, and violent by nature. He was jailed so many times for his violent temper. Omar, the young narrator observes that "when he was younger, my father was a troublemaker. When he came home at night, his stick was covered with blood and hair, and there was never a mark on him" (15). The marriage between "their father in his twenties and their mother, aged sixteen, comes about as a strategic corrective necessity, in the view of their grandmother who arranges it to cure him of his interest"(21-22). But as a husband he was "unfaithful from the start" (21). He becomes a violent person who causes Said's death at six years of age. It is this family's situation and cruelty in which Hassan is grown up until he leaves home at sixteen.

Omar's life became worse due to current politics and current government's decision of not to release examination results to students. Omar's desire to improve his life after result is not fulfilled. He wants to go abroad after result to escape from of these pathetic conditions. On the other hand, his father's imprisonment legally made him unable to get a passport. But finally he obtains his passport by the help of his sister's lover. But problem not yet solved as he has no financial support for his studies in Europe. His mother sends him to Nairobi to take the help of his maternal uncle Bwana Ahmed. Bwana Ahmed had disinherited her mother. But her mother is still hopeful that her brother may help Hassan.

Hassan goes to Nairobi but here he falls in love with his cousin Salma. He is so many times accused of doing socially disgraceful and dishonourable activities with Salma. In the result, he is thrown out of the house of his maternal uncle Bwana Ahmed. After that he comes back to his own village in Tanzania. After one year, the government declared the examination results and because of his good performance in exam, he qualified for "direct entry into the University" (152). But his family does "not have the fees and a government scholarship was as much out of question as it had ever been [sic]" (152). Thus Hassan finds his first ever work "on a ship, the *S. S. Alice*, as a medical orderly [...] three weeks away from home, between Bombay and Madras" (157). He was first time away from his native country. During these three weeks out of his native country on the ship, he writes the letter to his sister Salma that is framed as the last chapter of the novel.

Gurnah's apprehension of teenage experience in this novel establishes a holistic approach



by observing internal migration. The protagonist starts narrating his experiences as a child through hostile, violence and poverty. There are different factors within the family as well as outside the family that affect childhood and create new path of struggle on which he travels to attain maturity as the protagonist in the novel. During the journey of life from childhood to adulthood, Omar as a protagonist involves in the search for self-identity with the feeling of homelessness within own country during childhood and after migrating to other country, he lives his life with same feeling. The novel represents the genre of *bildungsroman* which captures eighteenth century British bourgeois faith to emerge with self-identity. As Moretti explains:

It is necessary that, as a ‘free individual’ not as a fearful subject but as a convinced citizen, one perceives the social norms as *one’s own*. [...] If the Bildungsroman appears to us still today as an essential pivotal point of our history, this is because it has succeeded in representing this fusion with a force of conviction and optimistic clarity that will never be equalled again(2000,16).

The integration of an individual like Omar in the novel within the society or family needs to be studied on the basis of *bildungsroman* approach. The desired identity within society involves in the diverse path from childhood to maturity which ends with intellectual wisdom in the character. Marianne Hirsch in this regard suggests that “since the integration into society is only earned through suffering, the pain of renunciation [...] constitutes an essential part of maturation (1979, 301)”. Here in the novel we find that the male protagonist Omar Hassan shows disintegration from his family and his society as well. During the twentieth century, this genre of novel has been written by migrated authors who have used it as narrative tools to express physical as well as psychological displacement from the society they are living in. On this basis, we can place Gurnah with the postcolonial novelists like V S Naipaul, Moyez G. Vassanji, and Jamal Mahjoub whose novel proposes a migrant texture. These writers’ prototype of human trail is thoroughly associated with an image of European imperialism. Wallace highlights how this imaginative gesture of human development within multicultural society was an important factor in the politics of British imperialism:

An idea of the “child” is a necessary condition of imperialism –that is, that the West had to invent for itself ‘the child’ before it could think a specifically colonial imperialism [...] it was an idea of ‘the child’ – of the not yet fully evolved or consequential subject – which made thinkable a colonial apparatus dedicated to, in Macaulay’s words, “the improvement of colonized peoples” (1994, 179).

The fundamental function of the bildungsroman narrative is to educate its readers by creating identification with the protagonist of the novel. Through this course of identification process, this group of novelists keep readers engaged with current situation and also reflects historical details of the place where the novel is set. With the opening of the novel we can trace that it offers us a profound explanation of some events of Omar’s life. The very first sentence of the novel is used to evoke such events: “My mother was in the backyard, starting the fire. [...] She was then in her early thirties but seemed older (MOD, 1).” Roger Bromley finds this first person narrative as a bildungsroman tone of narrative which has a specific purpose in the novel: “it recalls almost lyrically the details of loss which departure meant, but it also caricatures those characteristics which motivated it in the first place (2000, 34).” From the beginning, the readers go on a journey with a teenage protagonist Omar across East Africa. The readers first come to know about the legacy of inherited imperialist society. The journey is therefore recounted by Hassan’s adolescent life with some specific historical



moments of East African society. Hassan's description of his town throws light from present to past:

This was Kenge, where the toilers and failures lived, where wizened prostitutes and painted homosexuals traded, where drunks came for cheap *tende*, where anonymous voices howled with pain in the streets at night [...] Kenge was very near the sea. The taste was always in the air. On muggy days, a smear of salt would line the nostrils and the ears. On soft mornings, a sea breeze came to chill the heart at the start of a new day. In years gone by, the slavers had walked these streets. Their toes chilled by the dew, their hearts darkened with malice, they came with columns of prime flesh, herding their prize to the sea (*Memory of Departure*, pp.5-6).

The East African coastal town is depicted by Gurnah seems to be a place of deprivation and loss. Through the eyes of marginalised individual, it represents a critique of social decay. Omar lives at a small place by the sea which is symbolically situated between the legacy of slavery and imperialism.

*Memory of Departure* contains two epitomes through its title. The first epitome is concerned with the memory of exile represented through individual as well as collective experiences and the second epitome is concerned with the memory of being a child of an Arab migrant. Gurnah's text therefore reflects multiple level of displacement, sometime within the society and sometime out of the society. Gurnah through his narrative art retrieves the historical account by using fragmented narrative techniques through the memories of Hassan's youth which connects contemporary society of the protagonist's time and the time of colonialism. The word 'departure' from the title of the novel thus can be interpreted in many ways. First, it seems to emphasise the historical departure or migration from Arab and second it reflects the self-departure from the violent family atmosphere to search self-identity. It also recounts the transitional moment of the Hassan's life. Thus Hassan's journey for realization of manhood allegorically signifies a transitional moment in which he finds himself homeless in his own society on the basis of political discrimination with the people of Arab and Asian descendants. It becomes very tough for Hassan to identify himself as an East African or as an Arab. Gurnah's portrayal of Hassan's itinerary on the way to achieve self-consciousness provides a structural assessment of the difficult situation of the protagonist's life. As Hassan describes it clearly to the reader about his father's nature so many times and how this difficult family situation keeps him haunting even when his eyes are close:

At first she had cried and accepted it as the way of the world, and kept her shame to herself. Then he started to beat her because of her hurt silences. [...] He beat us too, and then my mother only looked stern, reluctant to challenge him in front of us. [...] She did not teach us to hate him (MOD, p. 21).

Hassan tries to escape from this family situation and ultimately he escapes but still he is unable to escape from difficulties related to his ethnic and self-identity. The fictional port in the novel is historically symbolised colonisations throughout the centuries where ships would carry 'Greek sailors and Thai rice' (MOD, p. 10). Hassan's narrative gives a painful picture of slavery in the history of East African:

The beach behind me was drying out in the sun, raising the stench of ages. In the old days, slaves who had refused conversion had gone to that beach to die. They had floated with the flotsam and dead leaves, weary of the fight, their black skins wrinkled with age, their hearts broken. My poor fathers and grandfathers, my poor mothers and grandmothers, chained to



rings in a stone wall (*MOD*, pp.18-19).

Most of the coastal towns in Africa are historically associated to the practice of human trade. On the Eastern coast of Africa, the fictional town Kenge is located on the Eastern coast of Africa. Dhows are used to carry slaves across the Indian Ocean until the first decade of the twentieth century. The young Hassan started to share a sense of homelessness with these slaves. This sense of identification with slaves in the novel is set with the background of his family history. The relevance of this legacy is fully reconnoitred through plain narrative.

Along with its unending sense of being alienated from his own family, Hassan also feels hostility of social exile as a direct result of the colonial history of this region. As a narrative of self-transformation from childhood to adulthood, it offers an anti-climax to the novel: "Manhood arrived largely unremarked: no slaying of a ram, no staff and scroll and the command to go seek God and fortune" (*MOD*, p. 28). Hassan's growing social discomfort has doubled the spirit of separation from his family.

The native population used to think that Arabs were responsible for depriving and enslaving them. The narrator Hassan thus realises that meaning of freedom from colonial rules for Arab minorities is very complex in his country due to this particular history of slavery:

Independence was just round the corner, and we spoke about the opportunity it would bring to us. That was not the way it turned out, and I think we knew that even as we deluded ourselves with visions of unity and racial harmony. With our history of the misuse and oppression of Africans by an alliance of Arabs, Indians and Europeans, it was naïve to expect that things would turn out differently. And even when distinctions were no longer visible to the naked eye, remnants of blood were always reflected in the divisions of the spoils of privilege. (*MOD*, p. 28)

The political chaos by the approaching of independence is described here by the narrator. The narrator perceives that the ethnic polarisation is occurring in Zanzibar against Arab origin on the basis of the historical fact. Here we can find the twofold perception of present and past by recalling the facts through memory. After the independence the young man struggles to obtain a job as the government limited the opportunity for the Arab minority:

'So ... where will you get the money?' he asked. 'This government won't give it to you, be you as clever as the devil. They don't waste their money on *Arab rangirangi*. Unless you want to go to Cuba to learn to be a freedom fighter or you want to go to Bulgaria to learn Esperanto. How will you get there?' (*MOD*, p. 29)

To apply for a scholarship, Hassan needs a passport as proof of his national identity. But Hassan has denied passport on the basis that his father was in jail. Hassan's father was actually convicted of sexually exploiting a young boy and had spent a part of his early adulthood in prison. The denial of passport metaphorically signifies that Hassan needs to struggle more for his own national identity even after freedom of the country. Hassan's student life further gets complicated and it creates total disintegration from society. Vazquez in this regard remarks how "the protagonists of African *Bildungsroman* often find themselves incapable of choosing between two sets of values, an internal conflict which remains unsolved at the end of the narrative...(2002, 87)." Gurnah through highly individual tone of the narration depicts the desire Hassan of getting the colonial education by going Britain. But his literature teacher who was native African offered a less idealized vision of colonial education. The feeling to escape from current system, as Robert Lee remarks: "catches perfectly at





Hassan's own doubly felt need, the deepening sense of self- incarceration on the one hand, the will to self-extrication on the other (1996, 57).”

The narrative gesture of Gurnah in this novel is to evoke the two worlds, first a transnational culture of Indian Ocean and second British world through which he tries to determine social identity of migrants from Asian and Arabs in East African soil. As Benedict Anderson analyses the establishment of an emerging nationality in the context of colonialism. He argues “The Nation”, is an “imagined community” of unspecified and mysterious individuals (Anderson 37- 46). In contrast Bhabha argues that nobody can be excluded on the basis of cultural identity, the fact is culture –“even national culture” constantly differs from itself (1994, 162). Through the enlightened views of Hassan and in the form of fictional memory, the novel reveals the real historical memory of the Colonial rule. Gurnah uses the absence of parental love in the novel symbolically to evoke a sense of loss. We can point out through the childhood experiences of Hassan's conditional displacement from own home to migrant cosmoses of his maternal uncle where he feels great separation from his mother. It is metaphorically a literary reflection of failure of human relations as well as to show failure of nationhood and its essence. In my view, Gurnah's successfully tries to capture the feelings of children when they taste sense of separation from their parent. Gurnah thus depicts metaphor of dislocation in the lives of his characters in the novel caused by migrations in many ways.

The role of the parent has been explored in different way with great emphasis in stories of African writings. When we compare Gurnah's with Chinua Achebe and Mongo Beti in context of dealing with childhood, we can find great similarities on the basis of destructive role played by the father figures in their novels. For instance, in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo is a symbol of a cruel parent. The child who lives under the cruelty of father may perhaps develop a negative perception towards the life as well as society. In Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*, (1964) the protagonist recalls a childhood same in the way as Hassan:

My father, the words provoked almost twenty years of almost continued terror... he was like a bloody policeman – no, worse: a private dictator, a domestic tyrant. There was never any peace or sense of security; nothing but rows, reproaches and fear (MOD, p.164).

Jack Kearney (2012) in a study of childhood in novels by Chimamanda Adichie, Abdulrazak Gurnah and Henrietta Rose-Innes, focuses on how parental factors are responsible for forming individual as well as social and ethnic identity. In the case of *Memory of Departure*, parents are presented physically most of the time but emotionally they are absent. The father figure is depicted as a violent drunkard who does not care about his son's education and about the future after he finishes secondary education. And when he comes to know about his son's idea of leaving the country to seek a better life and education for himself, he considers his son Hassan as a traitor:

‘They know about you,’ he said quietly. ‘I’ve told everybody that you want to run away.’ He held onto my arm while I pulled him up. ‘You dirty bloody traitor!’ he screamed at me... ‘This is the best place for you,’ he whispered. ‘I told everybody that you want to run away (MOD, p.55).

This conversation on the day before of a national exam for scholarship reveals the great tussle between the father and son. Hassan's reply on this statement can be considered as a sense of rivalry: “it doesn't matter, I said, meaning that the authorities knew I wanted to leave, I had



applied for a passport” (MOD, p.55).

Hassan wants to leave the country at any cost to improve his life but his father never bothers about his son’s desire. Gurnah in his writings keeps some distance from common belief that all unpleasant situations in the society have its origin in colonialism. In this regard, his positioning is somewhat different from Achebe and Beti. *Memory of Departure* is set just before the achievement of independence. The implication of this kind of narrative gesture of placing history in context is related with the fact that the parents’ desertion for their children existed before as well as after colonialism. Thus it would not be authentic to relate it with the effect of colonialism as Achebe and Beti have speculated in their novels.

### Conclusion

It is worth to compare Gurnah’s narrative with contemporary Nobel laureate Kazuo Ishiguro whose depiction of political situation during the Second World War is defined by ordinary human being in his novel rather than by a political authority. Ishiguro’s novels portrayed the feelings of individuals who live with multiple identities due to migration and the psychological impacts of wars on those people whose life is uncertain. As Liz James says that, “identities are actively constructed instead of being discovered” (Quoted from King Nicola, 2000). Ishiguro’s and Gurnah’s narrators create their self-identities through recalling their past which give them power to adjust with the new political changes.

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