

# Fragmented Lives: The Complexities of Displacement in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Novels *By The Sea* and *Paradise*

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## Abstract:

Displacement is a ubiquitous phenomenon which refers to the forced movement of individuals or groups from their homes, communities or countries due to various factors such as conflict, persecution, natural disasters, or economic hardships. Displacement is a crucial theme in postcolonial literature, as it reflects the experiences of individuals and communities forced to migrate, flee or relocate due to colonialism, political turmoil or economic necessity. The physical or territorial displacement compels the people to move to the alien land and it results in psychological alienation or displacement. Displacement can also have far-reaching consequences including social, economic, and political instability both for the individuals and communities. Abdulrazak Gurnah a prominent Tanzanian born British writer, whose novels are a powerful testament to the complexities of displacement, identity and belonging. His characters often face forced or voluntary displacement, highlighting the emotional and psychological toll of leaving one's homeland. Abdulrazak Gurnah explores the complex history of African colonization and

decolonization phenomena addressing the outcomes of displacement in his writings. The present paper is intended to explore the theme of displacement in the novels *By the Sea* and *Paradise* by Abdulrazak Gurnah, by exploring how Gurnah's characters navigate the tensions between cultural heritage and assimilation, identity and belonging, and the impact of displacement on their lives. Through an analysis of Gurnah's novels *By the Sea* and *Paradise*, this study reveals how displacement serves as a recurring motif, reflecting the complexities of displacement and identity. This paper emphasizes how Gurnah's fiction challenges dominant narratives of colonialism and imperialism, offering alternative perspectives on experiences of displaced individuals and communities. Through his nuanced storytelling, Gurnah offers profound insights into the human condition, challenging readers to reflect on the broader implications of displacement in the globalized world.

## Keywords:

Displacement, persecution, postcolonial, colonialism, alienation, identity, colonization, decolonization, complexities, assimilation.

## Introduction:

A Tanzanian born British author Abdulrazak Gurnah, is known for his writings on the effects of colonialism, the experience of refugees, displacement and migration in a colonized world. Gurnah received the prestigious Nobel Prize for literature in 2021. While awarding the prize the Swedish Academy cited “for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugees in the gulf between cultures and continents.”<sup>[1]</sup> Being a post-colonial author and survivor, Gurnah powerfully portrays the plight of refugees and their homesickness using a fierce narrative technique. His investigative research focuses on post-colonialism and colonialism in African continent, the Caribbean and as well as India. He carefully highlights the difficulties of the colonial and post-colonial world and gives way to questions such as exile, identity of the colonized, and rooting. His writings show the effects of the colonization of East Africa and the sufferings of the native inhabitants. Abdulrazak Gurnah’s novels are a powerful exploration of the human experience, delving into the complexities of identity, belonging, and displacement. Through his works, Gurnah masterfully captures the struggles of individuals uprooted from their homelands, grappling with the consequences of migration, exile, and displacement. This is viewed as a reflection of his immigrant experience, which is a distinctive aspect that sets him apart from other African diasporic writers residing in western countries. Gurnah’s fiction has been widely praised for its lyrical prose, nuanced characterization, and unflinching exploration of complex themes. In addition to his creative writing, Gurnah is also a respected scholar and essayist. He has taught at several universities, including the University of London and Princeton University, and has published numerous papers on literature, culture, and politics.

Most of his novels narrate the experiences of individuals in the emerging economies who are impacted by war and may lack the means to share their stories. Most of the novels of Abdulrazak Gurnah are interwoven with a common thread, namely the alienation and loneliness the consequences of emigration which can produce the

soul-searching questions about fragmented identities and the very meaning of ‘home’. It maybe because he is one of the more successful African emigrants in the Western world, or perhaps he is an exceptionally talented and creative writer, that his work highlights the situations that wealthy societies would rather ignore: the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of unsuccessful migrants who are struggling to survive in unfriendly or uncaring environments. Gurnah’s work explores the lives of marginalized migrants who have moved for economic, political, or emotional reasons but fall short of the expectations they and their families had envisioned. Most of the narratives of Gurnah are portrayed as displaced individual who feel estranged both from their host community and their homeland. Gao Xing summarizes the themes of Gurnah’s novels in a pertinent way, “The state of migratory mobility and the imagined life in other lands become his interest. Migration, displacement, loss, frustration, and loneliness became constant themes in his writing.”<sup>[2]</sup> The protagonist’s displacement in Gurnah’s novel “can refer not only to physical dispersion, but also to psychological displacement, or both. Moreover, the dispersion may be both linear and circular.”<sup>[3]</sup>

The theme of displacement occupies a significant place in postcolonial literature as it is a powerful and poignant exploration of the human experience. It reflects the historical conditions of colonized people, forced to leave their homelands, cultures and identities behind, and challenges dominant narratives that erased or marginalized their stories. Displacement also serves as a catalyst for exploring identity and belonging in postcolonial literature. Through the lens of displacement, postcolonial literature examines complex questions of identity, belonging and cultural heritage, revealing the intricate web of power dynamics between colonizers and colonized. Moreover, the theme of displacement in postcolonial literature illuminates the complexities of different types of displacement showing how it is shaped by cultural heritage, adaptation, and innovation. It contributes to the ongoing process of decolonization, challenging dominant structures and promoting social justice. Ultimately the theme of displacement in postcolonial writings offers a profound and powerful exploration of the human condition, one that underscores the importance of

empathy, understanding, and social justice. Gurnah's own experiences in his life as a refugee, often explore the tensions between cultural heritage and external influences, echoing his own episodes of navigating multiple cultural identities in his works. Through his characters' struggles, Gurnah masterfully captures the disorienting effects of displacement, revealing its profound impact on individual and collective identities. Gurnah's fiction about expatriates is deeply intertwined with discussion on racial boundaries. The constant theme in his works is the failure of freedom, which significantly impacts the narratives about the forces of displacement that affect one's sense of identity and isolation.

### **Depiction of complexities of Displacement in the novels of Abdulrazak Gurnah**

A displaced person who has crossed national boundaries and who cannot return home due to fear of death is considered as a Refugee. Such person is also called as asylum seeker until he is granted as a refugee status by the contracting state. Globally the displacement of person is reaching record numbers including millions of refugees trying to seek safety outside of their native country. In literature we don't find sufficient literary work on successful refugee settlement and the cultural information of refugees is also very limited. Displacement is a postcolonial theory that expounds the issue of identity as a product of Colonialism. It is essential here to throw the light on the definition of Displacement, and to what extent it is used as a synonym for Diaspora. Moreover, it is important to explore its economic and political causes and effects. Displacement and Diaspora have equivalent meanings. Wanni W. Anderson and Robert G. Lee argue that "Displacement shares with Diaspora the notions of physical dislocation, banishment, and exile, but emphatically draws attention to the cultural dimension; that is, how one's ancestral culture or the culture of the birthplace has been dislocated, transformed, rejected, or replaced by a new one".<sup>[4]</sup> A harmonious relationship is often developed between individuals and their surroundings, but displacement disrupts this peace. This disruption can cause psychological turmoil, and it also pushes individuals into a violent world filled with war, killings, bloodshed, rape, and insanity. In postcolonial writings, displacement is often depicted

as a liminal state, where individuals find themselves captured between cultures, identities, and belongings. This liminality can lead to a sense of dislocation and disorientation, but also to new forms of creativity, resistance, and resilience. Displacement can also be a perplexing experience, leaving individuals feeling lost, disconnected, and ungrounded. It can be challenging to adapt to new cultures, identities, or environment, leading to feelings of confusion, uncertainty, and ambiguity.

The word displacement is frequently used by postcolonial writers in their works. They have examined and evaluated this aspect of displacement from the important perspectives and forecasted its endless outcomes. By exploring the theme of displacement, postcolonial writers aim to give voice to the silenced, to reclaim the past, and to reimagine the future. Abdulrazak Gurnah is the one among them who defines the concepts of displacement in his writings thoroughly. Aleksander Hemon, a Bosnian-American author and critic claims that displacement creates an unstable connection with one's past and former self, who lived and functioned in a different environment where their defining traits didn't require any adjustment. Gurnah's numerous fiction works include a variety of dislocated characters are all interwoven with the predicaments of displacement regarding religion, culture, education, morality and geography. In essence, relocation is the relentless result of colonialism. Present day individuals are estranged from their societies and conventions which they have been amassing for centuries. Colonial uprooting happens due to social investigation and misuse. Colonial displacement occurs due to cultural exploration and exploitation. In particular, migration and dispossession are the primary causes of the displacement experienced by the colonized. The theme of displacement is also a critique of colonialism and imperialism. By portraying the displacement of people from their lands and cultures, authors critique the destructive impact of colonialism and its legacy of erasure and marginalization. Displacement serves as a powerful indictment of colonialism and brutal effects on indigenous cultures and communities. The tormented and uprooted individuals consider themselves as estranged and annihilated socially, existentially and insightfully. Hence, advanced African compositions donate an

unmistakable frame of their excruciating stories. The characters are portrayed by Gurnah are the most ordinary, smallest people in society who have the least sense of existence and live like mean creatures in a colonial and economically depressed society. Most of Gurnah's works bring the theme of displacement to the forefront by showing the tragic fate of the small characters. Gurnah once said, "The notion of people trying to remember is a recurring theme for me."<sup>[5]</sup> His postcolonial counter-narratives depict a broader world where diverse identities and interconnected landscapes illustrate the hybrid individuals and intricate geographies shaped by globalization.

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 one of the novels, he writes, "In the darkness, I lose a sense of space, and in this nowhere, I feel myself more solidly."<sup>[6]</sup> Displacement has a close connection with a psychological disorder. A displaced person cannot stay away from the stigma of "homelessness". Thus, a person's cultural displacement chastises him and forces him to be considered as a psychological refugee. For instance, the British Empire made people culturally displaced. They also assured the spread of English. As it is depicted in the novel *By the Sea*- "Without English you are even more a stranger, a refugee, I suppose, more convincing," he guessed. "You're just a condition, without even a story"<sup>[7]</sup>. 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"<sup>[8]</sup>. 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 struggles of identity and displacement are recurring themes in Gurnah's fiction, as his narratives navigate the ongoing outcomes of colonialism and its enduring influence in the postcolonial world. In their quest to belong Gurnah's characters strive to create a hybrid identity, vacillating between the familiarity of their past and the uncertainty of their present, as they lead the complexities of cultural transition. Kumar, an Indian scholar stated that, "Gurnah's use of language

and narrative structure in the novel '*By the Sea*' reflects the fragmented nature of the protagonist's identity."<sup>[9]</sup> The novel *By the Sea* is constructed around Saleh's experiences and provokes the reader to contemplate 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, the novel creates an unconventional aesthetic that challenges conventional portrayals of migration. Like many of Gurnah's novels, *By the Sea* explores the themes of flight and exile, alienation, and the psychological impact of being a colonial subject and later a citizen of a new, unstable post-colonial nation.

Gurnah's novel *By the Sea* 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. In the novel *By the Sea* the theme of displacement is explored through the life of Saleh Omar, an elderly asylum seeker from Zanzibar who arrives in England. The novel delves into the physical, emotional, and psychological aspects of displacement. Saleh's journey from Zanzibar to England illustrates the forced migration resulting from political and social unrest. His arrival in a foreign land where he is stripped of his identity and reduced to a status of dependency highlights the dislocation and alienation faced by refugees. Despite his efforts to adapt to his new surroundings, Saleh struggles to come to terms with his present circumstances. He is haunted by the memories of his past and suffers with the loss of his cultural identity and sense of belonging. Saleh's emotional state is fragile, and he often finds himself disconnected from the world around him. The longing for the comfort and familiarity of his homeland were skillfully portrayed in the novel. The novel also examines the cultural displacement and internal dislocation experienced by the protagonist, marked by memories of his past life, the trauma of loss, and the ongoing search for meaning and belonging in exile. His

interactions with other characters, such as Latif Mahmud, reveal shared histories of displacement and the complexities of reconciling with the past. The theme of displacement is central to the narrative and is explored through the experiences of its main characters, Saleh Omar, Latif Mahmud. Both the characters grapple with their identities in a new cultural context. The relationship between Saleh and Latif reflects the complexities of displacement. Their interactions are shaped by their shared history and the different paths their lives have taken. The theme of displacement is situated within the larger context of colonial and postcolonial history. The experiences of narratives are linked to the political upheavals and colonial legacy of Zanzibar, illustrating how historical events shape individual lives and contribute to their displacement. The novel portrays the challenges they face in adjusting to different society while trying to preserve their cultural heritage and memories of home and delves into both physical and emotional displacement, highlighting the complexities and multifaceted nature of the condition. Hence Gurnah's fiction examines the themes of family separation, constant betrayals of fundamental family bonds, and the relentless attachment of earlier past.

Displacement is an important theme we can notice throughout the storyline of the other novel *Paradise* by Abdulrazak Gurnah. In this novel, slavery is portrayed as the primary force which displaces characters in the novel. Gurnah suggests that alienation and connection coexist, especially in a culture that involves pawn system and trade. This theme of displacement is further explored through the postcolonial analysis presented in novel. The novel reevaluates and responds texts on colonization. As Julie Newman states that, "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."<sup>[10]</sup> Edward wadie said a Palestinian-American philosopher, academic, and literary critic stated that, "Gurnah's '*Paradise*' is a novel about colonialism, identity, and search for belonging in a postcolonial world."<sup>[11]</sup> The novel *Paradise* set in East Africa in the early twentieth century, blending

cultural and historical elements with a coming-of-age narrative. The story revolves around Yusuf, a young boy sold by his father to a wealthy merchant, Aziz, to settle a debt. This novel describes the East African coast not as an ideal Utopia, but as a dystopian world. Gurnah's work evokes parallels with Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" which exemplifying dystopian fiction. Yusuf grows up in Aziz's household and travels with him on trading expeditions, exposing him to the diverse and often harsh realities of the region. The theme of displacement in the novel *Paradise* is multifaceted and deeply woven into the fabric of the narrative. The protagonist of the novel Yusuf's displacement from his cultural heritage and community leads to a sense of disconnection and disorientation. Hi struggles to reconcile Zanzibari identity when his new surroundings and circumstances, highlighting the complexities between tradition and modernity as European powers disrupt traditional ways of life and cultural practices.

Yusuf's personal journal is marked by displacement which manifests in several ways in the novel like physical and psychological displacement, cultural and economical displacement, and colonial displacement. Taken from his family and sold to settle a debt, Yusuf experiences a profound sense of loss and alienation. His journey from his village to the urban and rural environment with the merchant Aziz highlights his physical and emotional displacement. The novel portrays a region rich in cultural diversity, including African, Arab, Indian, and European influences. Characters like Yusuf and Aziz navigate these overlapping cultures, often feeling caught between different identities and loyalties. Homi K. Bhabha an Indian scholar and critical theorist asserted that "The novel explores the complexities of cultural identity and the tensions between cultural heritage and cultural adaptation."<sup>[12]</sup> This cultural hybridity reflects the broader displacement experienced by individuals and communities in a colonized society. The trading expeditions and the economic dynamics in the novel accentuate the displacement caused by economic exploitation and the capitalist ventures of the time. The struggles of the protagonist of the novel reflect a deeper psychological displacement. His sense of self is constantly challenged by his changing circumstances, the expectations placed upon him, and his own desires and aspirations. This inner turmoil is a significant aspect of his character. Both Khalil and Yusuf are emigrants, and both experience emotional impacts. Although they are not physically much tormented by Aziz, but reaction towards the situation reveal their inner anguish. They express their feelings in different ways. In *The Mountain Town*, the theme of displacement becomes evident, where Khalil has come to accept his fate as 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. Yusuf is first informed by Khalil that he is a slave upon his arrival: "As for Uncle Aziz, for a start, he ain't your uncle."<sup>[13]</sup>

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 away. It is a past that they are constantly trying to patch up through the formation of other relationships. The theme of displacement is dominant thread in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Paradise*. Yusuf, a young protagonist, whose journey is marked by emotional displacement, as he struggles to cope with the loss of his loved ones, cultural heritage, and sense of belonging. Yusuf's struggles to navigate this new cultural landscape serve as a powerful metaphor for the complexities of identity formation in the face of identity. 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 removal and tragedies that shaped the history of the region in diverse ways. Abdulrazak Gurnah tries to shed light on the visible and invisible political, sociological, and economic problems of the African Continent with the true and fictional story of Yusuf. As Yusuf navigates life in a foreign land struggles with the challenges of his situation, the story reveals the themes of identity, displacement and cultural conflict. The novel also delves into Zanzibar's intricate history and its connections with issues of race, class and gender. Both the novels *By the Sea* and *Paradise* explore the theme of displacement, delving into the lives of individuals who are uprooted from their native lands and thrust into unfamiliar environments. This experience of displacement triggers a sense of disconnection and confusion, as they confront the erosion of their cultural identities and struggle with the challenges of coping with a new world. Thus Abdulrazak Gurnah in his novels, masterfully captures the complexities

of displacement and sheds light on the intricate struggles of dislocation, including the delicate balance between preserving one's cultural roots and assimilating into a new society, and the complications of forming meaningful connections in a state of emotional and geographical flux.

#### Conclusion:

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels offer a profound and deeply moving exploration of displacement, shedding light on the multifaceted experiences of refugees those forced to leave their homes. Through his compelling characters and evocative storytelling, Gurnah provides a voice to the displaced, emphasizing the universal human quest for belonging and identity. Based on the above discussion, it is clear that Gurnah's literary fiction primarily exposes the complexities of displacement and its impact on the social lives of refugees. His works not only reflect the historical and cultural contexts of East Africa but also resonate with contemporary issues of migration and exile, making his contributions to literature both timeless and timely. Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels offer a profound and nuanced exploration of displacement, through his richly developed characters and intricate narratives. Gurnah's works vividly describe the sense of loss and alienation that accompanies forced migration, illustrating how the trauma of leaving one's homeland can haunt displaced individuals, often leaving an indelible mark. The exploration of the theme of displacement is enriched by the variety narrative techniques of Gurnah. His use of multiple perspectives allows readers to gain a comprehensive view of the migrant experience, capturing the diverse voices and stories within displaced communities. This polyphonic approach highlights the individuality of the each character's journey, emphasizing that displacement is not monolithic experience but one that varies greatly from person to person. Hence this paper discusses how the theme of displacement and its complexities are illuminated by Gurnah through his masterful use of narrative techniques. Being a deprived refugee Gurnah aimed at enduring struggles of displaced and marginalized people in their alien countries. Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels emphasize the

importance of considering others in relation to ourselves, acknowledging their right to reside somewhere even if they cannot claim national citizenship. Ultimately, Gurnah's exploration of displacement in his works is a powerful critique of colonialism and imperialism. His work explores and examines the devastated consequences of displacement on individuals, communities, and cultures, and serves as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

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