



Colonialism and its Impact on Coming-of-age of Hassan in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure*

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Abstract: The coming-of-age is a crucial turning point in everyone's life which signifies the passage from adolescence to maturity. This phase of development and growth shapes a person's personality, character, and values. If such determining phase of an individual is exposed to the issues of colonialism, his future could be wretched. A fifteen-year-old boy was haunted by memory and loss, and was seeking liberation from an exceptionally violent father - a god by day and a drunken reprobate by night. The boy's self-incompatibility, exile, search for self-identity and the feeling of homelessness which are the ultimate outcomes of colonialism are the objectives of this paper. Hence this article reveals the impact of colonialism on coming-of-age of the protagonist in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure*. Abdulrazak Gurnah is one of the most dignified authors in East Africa, who depicts the scenario of refugees in the backdrop of colonialism, exile, migration, and issues of self-identity.

Key words: Colonialism, Exile, Migration, Memory, Self-identity, Self-incompatibility, Coming-of-age

I. Introduction:

Abdulrazak Gurnah is a Tanzanian-born British novelist and academician whose writings are centrally focused on the long-reaching and destructive impacts of colonialism, upheaval experienced by immigrants and refugees, exile, and displacement in the world. Gurnah was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 2021, during which the prize committee cited "for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents."^[1]

Many countries in the world have gone through and faced the impacts of colonialism. Colonialism has affected the social, political, economic, psychological, educational as well as

geographical conditions of the postcolonial world. Abdulrazak Gurnah is well known for his writings on the effects of colonialism, the agony of refugees, and displacement in the colonized world. His novels are semi-autobiographical which recall Tanzania's struggle for independence. The characters in Gurnah's novels portray the sense of frustration, identity crisis, and homelessness that probably the novelist himself might have experienced as a teenager in his life. Gurnah establishes numerous African, Arabian, and Indian characters to emphasize the repulsive and dark aspects of colonial legacies. The characters in his writings experience the complexities of migration and feel internally conflicted and displaced as they simultaneously belong to two cultures.

"Colonialism is a historical phenomenon that involves the temporally prolonged dominance of one group of people over another, and as such, it belongs to the historical spectrum of intergroup dominance, subjugation, oppression, and exploitation."^[2] The fundamental concept of colonialism is to establish a peripheral rule to control the colonized nation politically, and then economically exploit it. According to Franz Fanon, "Colonialism is not satisfied simply with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content, It looks to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it using distorted logic. Today, the activity of a pre-colonial history devaluer assumes a dialectical relevance."^[3]

Gurnah, like many other post-colonial writers, aims at making himself heard and pass on the oppression and tyranny in Zanzibar to future generations everywhere in the world. "Post-colonial criticism is the term used to describe formally colonized nations that have been economically, politically, culturally, or socially subjugated by more powerful nations. The colonizers' notion that they were the only superior,



advanced race and that all other races in the periphery were primitive, barbaric, outmoded, and undeveloped was aligned with the colonialist ideology that was presented to the African population.”^[4] The present paper examines the effects of colonialism on coming of age of an individual, the plight of refugees and their struggle for their native land, and their terror for the post-colonial effacement of self-identity, in the novel ‘*Memory of Departure*’.

The Depiction of the Impact of Colonialism:

The basic foundation of human existence is childhood which is accorded prominence in Gurnah’s writings where the children play key roles of protagonists and narrators. As children, they attempt to gain a foothold in their society and assert themselves to acquire a sense of selfhood and agency. Gurnah constructs the child characters in such a way that their childhood is often interrupted and disrupted by violence and poverty. They are depicted as slaves, commodities, workers, and dependents, and as a whole, childhood is regarded as a ‘burdensome entity’ and as a ‘source of shame’.

Colonialism interferes with childhood effectively with a critical consideration of micro-politics occurring in the domestic space, the child’s interaction with the wider social environment, migration, and alienation. Gurnah, thus in the context of colonial incursion, questions the idea of foreign powers as destabilizers of African families and polluters of children bred within moralizing African traditions. The child’s socio-psychological maturity is blunted as he encounters certain impediments denting his self-image. *Memory of Departure*, the first novel of Gurnah is set in Kenge, a fictitious coastal town somewhere in East Africa. This novel foreshadows the novelist’s recurrent theme of revisiting the past through a compelling process of self-search through the vehicle of remembering and recreating. The child protagonist in the novel, Hassan Omar finishes his school in the early years of independence from the British and gets stuck in time because the results of the exam which will determine his future are held by the newly formed government in fear of exodus. The two keywords in the title ‘memory’ and ‘departure’ are interrelated in such a way that memory which is a dynamic process is used to narrate Hassan’s psychological departure from his homeland. The departure in his case is not a mere opportunistic escape but is the desperation for leaving. Hassan shares an unpleasant relationship with his mother who “was thirty years old but

looked older... the years had ruined her face, etching bitterness into it”.^[5] His family was outrageously dysfunctional led by a whoring, abusive, and drunkard father whose violence and scandalous habits began before his marriage and continued after. His elder brother, Said, dies in a fire accident at home. In an attempt to absolve themselves from responsibility, Hassan’s parents falsely blame him for the accident, a fact that created an invisible rift between them for years to come. Hassan Omar in the novel, being the only surviving son and the second of four siblings in the family sets a journey to Nairobi in search of alternative meaning to his selfhood, as well as for a better future in a new environment. For wanting to seek a better life for himself, the father considers him a traitor:

‘They know about you,’ he said quietly. ‘I’ve told everybody that you want to run away.’ He held into 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.’^[6]

In Nairobi, Hassan fails to deduce his uncle Ahmed’s true intentions and develops a fancy for his daughter, Salma. Hassan is constantly haunted by the guilt of leaving countrymen in the hopeless situation of Zanzibar. This reason for his departure has intensified his attachment to the homeland. Once Hassan becomes a refugee, he is destined to face a series of questions such as how to find a suitable identity to survive in the fate of leaving his country, how to find a collective identity in an environment of racial and cultural segregation, how to maintain his independence in an alien social environment and not be imprisoned by the ideology of the other. Knowing of Hassan and his daughter’s relationship, Ahmed went into a fit of rage, revealing how low he thought of Hassan and his poor family, and chases him away. Though Hassan promises to come back for Salma, owing to the unfortunate situation of his family, he chooses a government-funded teaching position which keeps him home.

“The postcolonial authors have mixed opinions regarding colonialism. Tao Jiajun argues that postcolonial theory correspondingly reflects and inspires constant resistance and criticism in the cultural and intellectual fields of Third World nations. Therefore, postcolonial theory is characterized by many features such as ponderousness, hybridity, uncertainty, and parasitism.”^[7] Gurnah argues that postcolonialism is “not part of an identity, but a convenient, tolerant expression that is so capacious that you can put it



almost anywhere these days.”^[8] The unfortunate history of Tanzania and Gurnah's torturous life experiences led to the development of Gurnah's new style in a post-colonial context. The dispersion of the protagonist in Gurnah's novel “can refer not only to physical dispersion, but also to psychological dispersion, or both. In addition, the dispersion can be linear or circular.”^[9] Gurnah's novels are mostly centralized on the identity and the spiritual belonging of the African people who were oppressed by colonialism and postcolonialism from the standpoint of intellectual writing, showing great sympathy for their sufferings. “On the other hand, the African refugee experience in Britain is full of humiliation, struggle, growth and self-discovery, and the helplessness to hide one's background and pretend one's past. The growth and self-awareness of the African-American protagonists are gained in retrospect in their homeland.”^[10]

II. Conclusion:

The novel *Memory of Departure* shares different nuances of the experiences of immigrants in Great Britain. The forbidden cross-cultural love affairs and personal and political consequences of colonialism are very well described and dramatized in his novels. Many critics and scholars have interpreted Abdulrazak Gurnah's work from their point of view. However, his creativity is so immense and pioneering that, much needs to be explored. He has interlinked his personal experiences of exile, displacement, and colonialism with the experiences of his protagonists. His concern is to tell beautiful and profound stories about shadows cast on characters whose live experiences is informed by those realities that existed years before all these issues became preoccupations of today's world.

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