

SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES IN GURNAH'S NOVEL PARADISE

¹Mohammed Sami, Dr. Umed Singh

¹Phd Scholar, Department of English & Foreign Languages, Chaudhary Devi Lal University
Sirsa, Haryana (India)

²Professor, Department of English & Foreign Languages, Chaudhary Devi Lal University Sirsa,
Haryana (India)

Abstract:

This paper explores the intricate socio-political dimensions in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*, a novel that delves into the complexities of colonial East Africa. Through a critical examination, the study highlights the intersection of power, identity, and cultural transformation during the period of European colonization. Gurnah's narrative not only portrays the tumultuous impact of colonial rule on indigenous societies but also underscores the nuanced relationships between different ethnic and social groups. The analysis focuses on the depiction of trade, slavery, and migration, illustrating how these elements shape the characters' lives and reflect broader socio-political realities. By situating *Paradise* within its historical and cultural context, this paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of Gurnah's critique of colonialism and its enduring legacy in contemporary African literature.

Key-words: Identity, Social Interaction, Self-Awareness, Violence, Colonialism, complexities of human life

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* has received considerable critical acclaim for its in-depth exploration of themes within the context of colonial East Africa. Set in the early 20th century, the novel offers a nuanced depiction of the intricate interactions between indigenous cultures and European colonial powers. Scholars have extensively examined the major thematic concerns and analytical approaches in Gurnah's work. For instance, Neil Lazarus (1999) argues that *Paradise* critically addresses the exploitative nature of colonial rule and its dehumanizing impact on the colonized, highlighting the erosion of traditional structures and the imposition of disruptive power dynamics on East African societies. Similarly, J.U. Jacobs (2001) explores the themes of economic exploitation and the commodification of African lands and people, drawing parallels between Gurnah's narrative and historical colonial accounts. Therefore, it is imperative to explore *Paradise* within the socio-political context, considering the advancements in contemporary theory.

Published in 1994, the novel *Paradise* is the fourth and most celebrated novel of Abdulrazak Gurnah. The novel received widespread recognition through its shortlisting for the esteemed Booker Prize in the same year. It delves into an earlier epoch of African history and is composed of six distinct segments with a narrative intricately weaving together the tales of a youthful slave

named Yusuf and his master, Aziz. The narrative also weaves a complex interplay of the social and political conditions prevailing in the Islamic Indian Ocean community with the non-Islamic frontiers of East Africa and the newly arrived European conquerors.

Gurnah adroitly engineers a satirical narrative that he, provocatively, christens Paradise. The inception of this paradisiacal sojourn unfolds as Yusuf assumes the role of a pawn, or, in the Arabic vernacular, a rehani, within the guardianship of Uncle Aziz. Yusuf's previous existence had transpired in the rural confines of his parental home for a dozen formative years. Yet, the advent of Uncle Aziz, who arrived ostensibly for a visit, marks an unanticipated departure from this native sanctuary. The profound realization that he exists as a pawn, leveraged by Uncle Aziz to ameliorate his father's financial obligations to a merchant, dawned upon Yusuf. Consequently, he embarks on a transformative trajectory under the auspices of Uncle Aziz, serving his familial connections hearth.

Upon arrival at this enigmatic realm, poetically christened Paradise by Gurnah, Yusuf assumes labor alongside another enslaved soul, Khalil, within Aziz's commercial establishment. It is within this crucible that he experiences a burgeoning awareness of his own identity, a revelation that had hitherto eluded him. Aziz, nurturing aspirations of an expedition to the paramount Eastern African dominion with his newfound charge, has his dreams unravel when he abruptly departs, leaving Yusuf ensconced in a diminutive mountain hamlet under the custodianship of his kinsman, Hamid, and Hamid's spouse, Maimuna. Yusuf's nascent journey, however, persists as he encounters a cadre of itinerant merchants, who take respite at Hamid's dwelling. It is within this milieu that Yusuf commences his quest for narratives, assimilating stories of their ventures into the heartlands of East Africa. Meanwhile, Yusuf remains blissfully oblivious to the revelation that Uncle Aziz is, in fact, not of true kinship to him.

Within the novel, an intriguing evolution of a tender rapport unfurls between Yusuf and Aziz. Upon Aziz's return from his sojourn, a palpable shift occurs in their interactions. As days turned into weeks, Yusuf found himself increasingly in Aziz's company, culminating in their shared participation in trade ventures. Their dialogues and exchanges, marked by an unexpected depth, challenge the reader's preconceived notions of the traditional dynamics between master and slave. As the narrative progresses, Aziz's perspective toward Yusuf undergoes a profound transformation. Gradually, Yusuf transcends the confines of a mere slave or a rehani and comes to be regarded as an integral member of Aziz's familial realm. Aziz extends a heartfelt invitation, affirming, "You have a home here with me. You know that, I think. Make it your home, and we will talk when I get back" (Paradise 195). This gesture symbolizes the metamorphosis of their relationship, wherein Yusuf transcends his status as a slave to become an indispensable component of Aziz's domestic sphere.

Khalil persistently endeavours to instill a sense of self-awareness in Yusuf, urging both himself and his young companion to acknowledge their shared plight as slaves. During a fateful expedition to the mountain town, Yusuf's comprehension of the profound implications of

displacement is irrevocably transformed. The catalyst for this epiphany comes in the form of a vociferous proclamation from Mohammed Abdalla, who sternly decrees that Yusuf must engage in trade with the locals to “learn the difference between the ways of civilization and the ways of the savage. It's time you grew up and saw what the world is like...” (53). This journey becomes a crucible in which Yusuf undergoes a metamorphosis, gradually assimilating the temperaments of civilized society. Repeatedly, he is reminded that those deemed as “savages” fail to establish a profound connection with the divine, and this perceived separation from God is believed to underpin the enduring supremacy of the civilized over the savage.

In this novel, the Quran assumes a pivotal role, serving as a lens through which the intricate relationship between trade and religion is explored. Contrasting with Mohammed and Khalil, Yusuf's experience takes on a unique trajectory as he strives to embrace and adapt to his own interpretation of paradise, despite the inescapable hardships intrinsic to his enslavement. The overarching theme of displacement, which hinges on how individuals perceive one another, transforms in Yusuf's psyche as he immerses himself in the Quran. This transformation is exemplified by his refusal to deliberately categorize others as mere "others" throughout the narrative.

Within his fictional portrayal of colonial East Africa and its historical context, Gurnah prompts engagement in a comparative analysis of the diverse narratives encompassing slavery, trade, and colonization, as conveyed through an array of remarkably diverse characters inhabiting the story's landscape. Yusuf's gradual acknowledgment of his circumstances underscores the profound psychological violence to which slaves were subjected during the colonial era. His existence is essentially commodified by his parents as a means to ameliorate their indebtedness, a situation exacerbated by the inherent objectification of his being, subjected to the desires of both male and female figures such as Aziz's wife Zulekha, Mohammed Abdalla, and the enforcer Simba Mwene who exploit Yusuf's vulnerability for their own sexual gratification.

As the novel draws to a close, Yusuf arrives at a poignant realization – that escape from the clutches of slavery is a futile endeavour due to the immutable laws of trade. He comprehends that he lacks any genuine agency and that there is no way out except for the option of “acceptance.” The final section of *Paradise* offers a compelling analysis, underscoring that slavery and pawning are not merely the byproducts of European colonization; rather, they are intricately interwoven into the very fabric of societal and ethnic structures even before the East African society was colonized. The novel is often construed as a prime illustration of a generational counterpoint to a specific strain of post-colonialism that reconfigures the established historical framework, encompassing the frequently marginalized non-European colonial history that unfurled during the twilight of European imperialism. Notwithstanding the shackles and emotional toll of slavery, Yusuf's transcendence occurs on spiritual, emotional, and physical dimensions, signifying his ability to escape, albeit in a manner not bound by conventional norms.

In *Paradise*, Gurnah examines the relationship between a child and their immediate environment, including the micro-politics within the domestic space and their interactions with the broader human environment outside the home. The central argument suggests that Gurnah, by making childhood a focal point in his novels particularly *Paradise*, challenges the notion that foreign colonial powers are the main disruptors of African families and corruptors of traditionally raised children. While colonialism is recognized as an influencing factor, this novel underscores internal elements such as family dynamics and intergenerational trauma as having a more detrimental impact on a child, unrelated to colonial intrusion. He emphasizes the distinct nature of childhood, considering factors within the domestic space contributing to disruptions and examining the potential impact of these disruptions on the child's well-being. Childhood suffering and trauma have been recurrent themes in English literature, offering a lens through which authors explore the profound impact of early experiences on individuals. Gurnah has done the same in an adept manner in *Paradise*. This examination of childhood and its disruptions directly responds to Eldred Jones's concern that treatments of childhood often reveal harsh realities, including cruelty, paternal harshness, egocentrism, and significant emotional impact on vulnerable children. The focus of Gurnah's works has often been on the father figure as the sole perpetrator of cruelty. The child protagonists in *Paradise* find themselves ensconced within the shadows of formidable paternal figures, wielding oppressive authority and engendering a sense of diminished self-worth in the children. Yusuf, the main protagonist, grapples initially with the overbearing presence of his biological father and subsequently contends with the merchant who assumes a surrogate paternal role after Yusuf is thrust into servitude. These circumstances compel the youngsters to assert their own identity amidst adversities. It emphasizes the distinct nature of childhood, considering factors within the domestic space contributing to disruptions and examining the potential impact of these disruptions on the child's well-being.

In *Paradise*, Gurnah appears to challenge the commonly held belief that foreign powers are the primary disruptors of African families and their cultures and that the imperialist powers are the corruptors of traditionally raised children within moralizing African traditions. Without denying the impact of agents like colonialism on childhood, he suggests that the factors with a more significant negative impact are internal, rooted within the native cultures, and perhaps not always directly linked to colonial intrusion. In essence, Gurnah questions the narrative that external forces alone are responsible for the destabilization of African family structures and the perceived corruption of the inherently pure upbringing of children within traditional African moral frameworks.

The story becomes a poignant exploration of the complexities of human relationships and the collateral damage inflicted on an innocent young life caught in the web of familial decisions. Yusuf's odyssey in "*Paradise*" is not merely a physical journey but a profound exploration of the human spirit's resilience in the face of adversity. The narrative delves into the depths of his emotions, painting a vivid picture of a young soul navigating the tumultuous waters of betrayal and shattered dreams. As readers accompany Yusuf through his transformative adolescent years,

they witness the poignant intersections of personal aspirations and the harsh realities of a world that often remains indifferent to the innocence of youth.

The psychoanalytic examination of parental influences in *Paradise* extends beyond mere characterization, delving into how childhood trauma disrupts the normal developmental processes of the characters. A similar fate shared with Yusuf is the other character Khalil. He is also sold off to Aziz along with his foster sister Amina by their father. Khalil and Amina also experience the impact of their parent's absence in life. At one point, Khalil remarks, "My poor Ba, may God have mercy on him, and the Seyyid have taken everything away from me. If it was not they who made me into the useless coward you see here, then who did?" (232). In this novel, these child characters grapple with the legacies of neglect, abandonment, and emotional abuse inflicted by their parents and guardians. These experiences become the catalysts for internal conflicts, influencing how the characters navigate relationships, intimacy, and their own sense of self-worth. Gurnah skilfully weaves these psychological nuances into the narrative, underscoring how parental figures become instrumental in the development or disruption of a stable identity.

In essence, Gurnah's work becomes a mirror reflecting the intricate interplay between past wounds and present struggles, illustrating how the ghosts of parental neglect and trauma continue to haunt the lives of successive generations. Through this nuanced exploration, *Paradise* serves as a compelling testament to the enduring legacies of early experiences and the complex dynamics that shape the human psyche within the familial context.

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