

An Analysis of Migratory Slavery in the Novel ‘Paradise’ by Abdulrazak Gurnah

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Abstract

This study involves with the works of the Zanzibari-born author Abdulrazak Gurnah, whose fiction is devoted to the narrative of exile, migration and issues of identity. Gurnah uses inventive structures as an investigative frame to involve with his emotional topic. Gurnah depicts child slavery and identity crisis through his narratives. Each of his works creates a diverse aesthetic appeal through historical contexts. This lets him employs a variety of narrative that challenge the reader in the task of understanding his multifaceted works which also allow the desire of carrying out this difficult but interesting task. In short, this study explores the theme of child slavery in the novel Paradise. The theoretical framework of this paper is to explore slavery from a cultural and historical point of view of the Booker nominated novel Paradise.

Keywords: Slavery, slave-trade, migration, East Africans culture, Pawn

Abdulrazak Gurnah, UK-based writer was born in the East African Island of Zanzibar in 1948. At the age of eighteen, he left his native place Zanzibar in September 1967 just after a few years the country got freedom from Britain in December 1963 as a constitutional monarchy. Gurnah's fourth novel, Paradise, published in 1994 and shortlisted for the Booker Prize in the same year. Paradise depicts an earlier period in African history. This novel is divided into six segments which moving around the stories of the young slave Yusuf and his master Aziz. We must note that the type of slavery that is most evident in this book is not what generally people associate with but in Paradise it is the slavery of 'pawning'. Pawning is a way of having someone's child to be used for debt. Pawning system was very much prevalent in the East African countries. Gurnah creates a satirical narrative and that is he calls it 'Paradise'. Gurnah's paradise begins when Yusuf becomes a pawn, or "rehani"(Arabic), to

Uncle Aziz. Through this new journey of life with Uncle Aziz Yusuf is driven into a new world that was entirely different. Yusuf used to live in a rural area with his parents up to twelve years. When Uncle Aziz came for a visit to his house, he was ignorant about his departure from his native place. Yusuf was used as compensation for his father's debt, "He had come to understand fully that he was there as rehani, pawned to Uncle Aziz to secure his father's debts to the merchant." After leaving his parental, he travels with his new master to his household. When Yusuf arrived at this new place which is called 'Paradise' by Gurnah, he started working along with another slave Khalil in Aziz's shop. Here first time he gets conscious about his own identity. Aziz started dreaming to visit the East African dominant place with his new master but his desire is devastated when Aziz goes away by leaving him in a small mountain town in the custody of his relative Hamid and his wife Maimuna. But it was not the end of Yusuf's dream. Several merchants take halt at Hamid's house and from here Yusuf starts to collect stories about their explorations in the interior part of the East Africa. Still Yusuf was unaware that Uncle Aziz was not his real uncle.

In the custody of Hamid, he found new companion Khalil who was also a pawn 'pawn' (Rehani) to Aziz. He was also working in the shop to pay his fathers' debts to Aziz. They both worked in a shop, but did not get any wages for it. However they were not kept in fully captivity so they had some free time to visit nearby villages simply as they wished. This type of slavery was not the similar as what the Europeans were taking Africans to the America. Although it was different from Europeans mode of slavery, it does not mean that humiliations were not committed to it. Africans did not want to be seen as being as cruel as the Europeans. Even though there were a number of forms of slavery that existed in Africa before the arrival of Europeans, it was very unusual to find the type of chattel slavery. It was also not moral to take children as payment for debts.

Here in the novel we find the development of a soft relationship between Yusuf and Aziz. When Aziz came back from his journey, Yusuf started spending more time with Aziz. After sometimes, he went on trade expeditions with him. They used to talk with each other in a way that reader of the novel would not expect slave and master with each other. By the time Aziz begins to see Yusuf as part of the family. He let his home opened to him, "You have a home here with me. You know that, I think. Make it your home and we will talk when I get back." (Gurnah, 195)

The wide collections of critical study are based on Gurnah's Paradise. These studies analyses the inter-discursive bond that the story creates with nineteenth-century travel writing on East Africa. Jacqueline Bardolph argues that 'the safari to the interior resembles the well-known

account by Tippu Tip, first published in 1903'. Tippu Tip was an eminent Arab slaver of the same time when *Paradise* is set. He played an important part in some of the nineteenth-century British explorations. Bardolph highlights the cruelty of the societies depicted in Gurnah's novel which give the impression to be set in compare to the analysis given by some travel the books of that period. Bardolph advocates that Gurnah's description is set in the contrast with European travel narratives:

'The society described can be harsh, with abject poverty like that of Yusuf's parents, submission like that of the semi-slaves, or the permanent threat of violence in the midst of adventure. In contrast, the travel accounts by Speke or Krapf appear aseptic.' (Wright, 81)

Displacement is an important theme we can notice throughout the storyline. Slavery is depicted as the biggest factor which displaces characters in the novel. Gurnah advocates that we are as alienated as we are connected, particularly in a culture that deals with pawn kind of slavery and trade. This theme of displacement is continued through the post-colonial analysis that the novel proceeds. The novel reconsiders texts on colonization and transcribes back to them. As Julie Newman proposes, "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." (Newman 4)

Both Khalil and Yusuf are emigrants, and both have emotional impact. Though they are not physically much tortured by Aziz, but reaction towards the situation reflects their mental agony. They express their feelings in different ways. In 'The Mountain Town', the subject of displacement becomes clear. As far as Khalil is concerned, he has acknowledged his destiny of being 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. He instructs Yusuf:

"He ain't your uncle; you'd better learn that quickly. It's important for you. He doesn't like little beggars like you calling him Uncle, Uncle, Uncle. He likes you to kiss his hand and call him Seyyid. And in case you don't know what that means, it means master. Do you hear me, kipumbu, we, you little testicle? Seyyid, you call him that. Seyyid!" (Gurnah,52).

Khalil frequently prompts Yusuf of his place. He wants Yusuf and himself to recognize each other as slave. On a trip to the mountain town, Yusuf comes to be aware of the true meaning of displacement when Mohammed Abdalla shouts that he has to trade with them and "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..." (Gurnah,53). On the journey Yusuf acquires the temperaments of the civilized. He is told relentlessly that the savages do not get familiar with God and that is why the civilized will always conquest the savage. He learns that:

'This is what on this earth we do To trade we go to the driest deserts and the darkest forests, and care nothing whether we trade with a king or a savage, or whether we live or die. It's all the same to us. You'll see some of the places we pass, where people have not yet been brought to life by trade, and they live like paralyzed insects. There are no people more clever than traders, no calling more noble. It is what gives us life.' (Gurnah, 119).

On the journey with the purpose of trade, Yusuf is introduced to the viciousness of trade. Even though he experiences the splendor of the places he visits and the people he comes across. He learns to read the Quran and discovers an intellect of identity within it. The Quran in the novel is used to depict how trade and religion have a special relationship. Yusuf, unlike Mohammed and Khalil, still tries to accept and adjust with his own paradise despite the situations of his enslavement. Displacement is also generally originated by how a person is seen. But Yusuf escapes from this feeling after reading Quran. In the novel we do not come across any moment where he deliberately calls 'others' another person.

The slavery experience in realistic detail is implemented in Gurnah's text. Many of the characters in the novel Yusuf come across while he is at Aziz's household. The form of suppression which is articulated by Gurnah is about the slave trade in the interior part of East Africa. The subject formation and intervention in *Paradise* offers a relationship with the African American slave narratives of nineteenth century. One of the most famous slave narrative *Uncle Tom's Cabin* written by Stowe as a reaction to the Slave Act of 1850 finds a thematic association with *Paradise*. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* depicts the brutality of slavery in diverse form. This novel was written during the time of debate on slavery that whether it should continue or be stopped. Stowe's commitment to establish political dispute is very much impressive which we can also find in Gurnah's text. Both of them explain characters' state of mind as a moral intellect in relation to tradition and religion. The relationship between the Arab society and slavery becomes stronger by the time when Omani Arabs had extended their economic control over coastal East Africa. The very first decades of the nineteenth century after the decision made by Seyyid Said, the Omani ruler, moved his residence to Zanzibar during first decades of nineteenth century. The trade activity had increased between the coastal area and the interior part of East Africa undertaken by Swahili

and Arab merchants. It opened new trade routes and cultural interaction between coastal area and internal East African culture.

In his fictitious representation of colonial East Africa and its history Gurnah invites the reader to compare the different stories of slavery, trade and colonization told by an exceptionally variegated characters used in the novel. The perspective of a young slave as a narrative method brings Gurnah's text into the mark with some other contemporary postcolonial African novels such as Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) and Mia Couto's *Terra Sonāmbula* (1992). Meenakshi argues that 'In keeping with the common feature of a 'disintegrative postmodern subjectivity', the decentered child protagonist helps in maintaining the characteristic of fluidity and apparent incoherence'. Yusuf's consciousness acceptance laid emphasis on the vastness of psychological violence to which slaves were subject in colonial times. Yusuf's life is negotiated by his parents in order to compensate their debts. We can notice how his sole nature make him an object for both male and female of sexual desires. Aziz's wife Zulekha, Mohammed Abdalla and the henchman Simba Mwene attempt to take sexual advantage of Yusuf. While on his journey to self-cognizance, he never reveals it fully in the text. At the end of the novel Yusuf realizes that it is impossible to escape slavery because of the laws of trade. He realizes that he does have any choice except 'acceptance'. What we can analyze in the final section of *Paradise* that slavery and pawning are not purely the result of European colonization. They have been inseparably woven on the ground of the social, ethnical fabric. In spite of his slavery, he is able to escape spiritually, emotionally and physically as well.

Conclusion:

So, we can say on the basis of the above analysis that Gurnah is clever to present a sequence of juxtaposed locations to signify the diverse landscape of the folks living in the interior. The effect of recreation is the description of a space that Yusuf passes through his journeys. Gurnah also stresses:

'I felt it was necessary in books like *Paradise* to complicate the vision. I thought it was necessary to try and write and see how it might have worked if you portrayed a society that was actually fragmented.'

The main goal of this article is to analyze child slavery and situation from historical and cultural point of view point of view on basis of Gurnah's novel *Paradise*. *Paradise* offers a classic model for understanding pre-colonial history. It is an effort to reestablish the diversity encompassing people in the tradition of some other African writers such as Ngugiwa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe. The theoretical portion of this article is first analysis of the text and then comparison with other contemporary novels. It also presents some archetypal characteristics

of postcolonial slave narratives. Master-slave relations are the basis on which characters like Yusuf and Khalil grows. We also find the concept of loyalty towards the master on religious and moral ground. Finally, this paper justifies the objective to analyze the slave text by one of the most talented postcolonial authors who is not yet much discussed.

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