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Writing Space and Decolonising History in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Fiction

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Research Article

Keywords: alternative archives, agency, historical memory, postcolonial historiography, spatial politics

Posted Date: November 16th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10832378/v1

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction marks a significant landmark in the domain of contemporary postcolonial literature because of its critical engagement with the histories, geographies, and lived experiences of East Africa. They serve as alternative archives that recover marginalized histories omitted from colonial and nationalist historiographies while challenging colonial systems of knowledge production embedded in European cartography, travel writing, and imperial historiography. By foregrounding local memories, oral traditions, and everyday experiences; Gurnah reconstructs historical consciousness from the perspective of the marginalized. This paper examines how Gurnah's fiction becomes a site of historical recovery and spatial reimagination by rewriting colonial histories, interrogating the politics of space, and documenting displacement, migration, and cultural encounter. Through a reading of *Paradise*, *By the Sea, Desertion, Memory of Departure*, and *Afterlives*; the paper argues that Gurnah functions simultaneously as novelist, historian, and archivist; producing an alternative literary history of Tanzania and Zanzibar that decolonises imperial epistemologies and restores agency to suppressed voices.

Introduction

Situated twenty kilometres off the coast of east Africa, Zanzibar owns a position of strategic importance which has made it a chief centre for trade and commerce on the Indian ocean from as early as 2nd and 3rd century AD. It is the centre of thousands of years of exchange of dialogues with different parts of the Indian Ocean. The S.W monsoon winds blowing from the Bay of Bengal to the coast of Zanzibar in the month of November, announces the beginning of the *musim* or trading season. It brings thousands of *dhows* laden with rich goods for trade from faraway lands of Persia, India, Arabia, gulf countries, Malay, China, Somalia, Seychelles etc. bringing traders and merchants from all round the world with their stories, cuisines, cultures, religions and languages; commingling together to give rise to culture of great cosmopolitanism in the island of Zanzibar.

Many Persians and people from Arabian Peninsula lived in Zanzibar and adjacent coastal Tanganyika from as early as the 7th and 8th century AD, they built the port of Kilwa and gave rise to a mixed Swahili-Muslim culture. Omani and Yemeni Arabs, Somalis also came to settle. Later many Indian Muslim and Sikh merchants from Gujarat and Punjab settled. The Europeans started creeping up the coast of East Africa after the Portuguese colonised the island in 1505. The Omani Arabs took control in the 17th century and Zanzibar became the chief centre for Indian Ocean African slave trade. Unguja boasted the only and last open slave market in the world. In 1890 Zanzibar became a British protectorate whereas Tanganyika became a German colony as a result of the Berlin Conference 1884.

The history of Zanzibar's commerce and cosmopolitanism is the history of multiple brief colonisations. Its multi- ethnic, multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-religious history sets it different from the other African countries. Post-independent Tanzania is still fragmented into more than a hundred ethnic groups; not one of which makes 13% of its population.

Abdulrazak Gurnah, a Tanzanian-born British novelist; plays the role of a chronicler, an archivist; charting the uncharted history of Tanzania; its geography, its cosmopolitanism, slave trade, ethnic and racial conflicts, diversity of languages, lived experiences of people, colonial horrors, precolonial, colonial and postcolonial concerns, condition of women, education, healthcare systems, reorganization of Tanganyika and Zanzibar into Tanzania, post-Zanzibari revolution scenario, chaos and corruption, legal and illegal migrations, refugee crises, experiences of a deracinated stranger in a foreign land, its hostilities, its resistance, dislocation and relocation, nostalgia, trauma and displacement, acculturation as well as the wide array of opportunities it provides.

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels become significant as they compel us to know more about Tanzania and the history of the birth of modern Zanzibar. It is not to say that these are not studied elsewhere but not everybody reads scholarships. Gurnah says in his interview with Nana Oforiata Ayim:

I think fiction has an important part to play in the way that we understand history…it provides popular understanding in popular imagination of historical events and episodes…areas known by the historians of the War or East Africa but does not have a popular purchase… (Gurnah and Ayim).

In his interviews; Gurnah constantly makes it a point to emphasize the importance of rewriting of history; the importance of sharing the stories that goes missing in the simplified versions of history by the colonial and elite nationalist historiographers which Gurnah decolonises by providing his literary history through his fictional world. Traditional sources of knowledge; folk tales, stories from thousands of years of exchange of dialogues with different parts of the Indian ocean; a tradition of knowledge of other cultures, geography and space totally unrelated to the western knowledge and in a way preceding it; play a significant role in recording, spreading and accounting for the uncharted history of the people of Tanzania.

His novels are a trenchant critic of European knowledge system like the European cartography. He records the ideas of cultures encountering each other; how they cope with that encounter; how they narrate that encounter and how that passes on as it were into the other generations. His novels challenge our understanding or received conventional way of looking at things. He takes us to the niches of a people's lived experiences; the ethnic, the religious, even into the racial conflicts they encounter.

Valentin-Yves Mudimbe's concept of the "colonial library" demonstrates how Africa has historically been produced through Western systems of classification and knowledge that determine what counts as legitimate history (xii). Gurnah's fiction intentionally intervenes into the politics of the production of this historical knowledge itself. Dipesh Chakraborty in his seminal postcolonial work *Provincializing Europe* (2000); argues that modern historiography universalizes European historical experience as the normative model through which all societies are interpreted. He says that "Historicism enabled European domination of the world in the nineteenth century." (7). Historicism according to him is not mere writing of history but the dominant colonial assumptions that determine what counts as history. He asserts that "In the colonies, it legitimated the idea of civilization." (7). Gurnah's entire oeuvre sets out to resist this epistemic hierarchy and instead reconstruct East Africa through indigenous memories, oral traditions,

stories of maritime exchanges, and everyday experiences of the people inhabiting the land preceding and exceeding colonial modernity. His fiction offers an alternative archive that contests imperial historiography by recovering histories that the colonial epistemologies rendered invisible.

Colonial Cartographies and the Politics of Production of Space

In 1498, with Vasco da Gama's ships entering the Indian Ocean and creeping towards the coast of East Africa leads to the inauguration of the modern era. The narration of history for the next five centuries is to focus on the activities and increased control of the European empires and their civilising mission. Following the Evangelical movement in Europe and the growing exploration mania; the writing conventions for representing the Indian ocean littoral was established which represented the region through European eyes and turned it into passive object of knowledge; orientalising of the western Indian Ocean as Arab, backward, despotic, addicted to slaves and harems. The European Evangelists, explorers and later the government officials positioned themselves as bearers of civilization, responsible for restraining the despotic tendencies of the Arabs and succouring the Africans.

These representations circulated through European travel narratives, memoirs, official reports and fiction. Their representations reduced complicated stories to eloquent captions to fit a worldview that is polarised- usurping other people's cultures in the process of creating a narrative suiting the imperial interests. Edward Said, in his seminal postcolonial work, *Orientalism*, argues that the colonial discourse did not merely discover and describe the Orient but actively produced the Orient via a discourse that enabled Europe "to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively"(3) as the inferior Other. This was engineered by a calculated system of representation that claimed authority over knowledge and geography.

As Saleh Omar recalls in *By the Sea*:

In their books, I read unflattering accounts of my history…It was as if they remade us…the stories we knew about ourselves before they took charge…a different category of knowledge…could not contest with theirs…I think how fortunate I was in having had my eyes opened to a different way of looking at the world and to see how we looked from that angle. Puny and ragged. (18–19)

Saleh Omar's reflection captures the epistemic violence of colonialism. What is displaced is not merely political authority but also the authority to narrate one's own past as in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon similarly observes that colonialism "distorts, disfigures and destroys" the history of the colonised (210). By exposing the Enlightenment enterprise of history making, Gurnah not only reveals how the colonial knowledge reshaped the external image of East Africa, but also how it conditioned the self-perception of the indigenous societies.

Gurnah's novels challenge colonial systems of knowledge production by exposing and critiquing the ideological role played by cartography and geography in the imperial project. In *By the Sea*, he writes:

Before maps, the world was limitless, the maps gave it shape and made it seem like a territory…that could be possessed… Maps made places on the edges of the imagination seem graspable and placable. And later when it became necessary, geography became biology in order to construct a hierarchy in which to place the people who lived in their inaccessibility and primitiveness in other places on the map. (35)

Through such mini narratives; Gurnah demonstrates mapping as a mechanism of possession, domination and control; rather than being a neutral act of representation. J. B. Harley in his *Deconstructing the Map* (2001); argues that maps should be understood as "a form of knowledge and a form of power" (12) rather than mere objective reflections of geographical reality. Here, geography becomes intertwined with racial thinking and colonial governance. Saleh Omar's observation that "geography became biology" exposes how spatial difference was converted into racial hierarchy through colonial map making. The map thus became an instrument through which territorial possession and racial ideology reinforced one another in East Africa. Gurnah's *By the Sea* thus becomes a trenchant critique via which Gurnah reveals how imperial power transforms spaces into objects of control while simultaneously producing narratives that justified domination.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1995); Michel Foucault observes that "power and knowledge directly imply one another" (27). In the East African situation; these colonial maps, surveys and administrative records did not merely describe East Africa; they actively produced an administrative reality through which the territory could be regulated, populations classified and movements controlled. Henri Lefebvre argues that "(social) space is a (social) product…" and the space thus produced is also a means of control and hence an instrument of domination and exertion of power (The Production of Space 26); suggesting that space itself is created through political and ideological practices rather than existing as a neutral physical entity. Colonial cartography exemplifies this process by transforming lived landscapes into governable colonial territories. Gurnah's fiction repeatedly exposes the distance between these official representations and the lived realities of those whose histories cannot be contained within imperial maps.

His fiction therefore becomes a site where alternative spatial histories emerge. Gurnah foregrounds individual and community memories, oral histories, local knowledge systems, and lived experiences against colonial maps and official archives. The result is a literary cartography that reimagines Zanzibar and Tanzania; not as barbaric and primitive colonies in need of civilization and progress but as dynamic spaces shaped by centuries of cultural encounters, trade networks, migrations, and internal tensions among settlers from Africa, Arabia, Persia and South Asia. Such representations pose a fundamental challenge to the fixed binaries through which colonial discourse understands identity and geography. Homi Bhabha argues that cultural identity emerges within a "Third Space of enunciation" (The Location of Culture 54); where meanings remain fluid and are in a continually process of negotiation rather than fixed and frozen within colonial categories. Gurnah's Indian Ocean world resists watertight compartmentalization of African and Arab, coloniser and colonised, native and foreign, etc. Identity in Gurnah; emerges as relational, layered and historically mobile; reflecting the cosmopolitan character of the Swahili coast.

Gurnah’s Literary Historiography: Rewriting History and Recovering Colonial Violence

Ann Laura Stoler in her *Along the Archival Grain* argues that colonial archives aren’t repositories of historical facts; rather they are “technologies of rule” that stratify and organize knowledge according to the priorities of the imperial rule (Stoler 20). What is intentionally left outside these archives or erased in the process of archiving becomes very crucial. Abdulrazak Gurnah’s fiction recovers the pluralities of histories marginalized by colonial archives and elite nationalist historiographies by precisely focusing on lives of the natives, settlers, merchants etc. His novels evoke popular understanding of historical events and humanize those events. Rather than treating history as a fixed sequence of political events, he restores it as a lived experience remembered through the experiences of ordinary individual lives, fractured memories, and everyday struggles.

Gurnah’s literary historiography exposes the gap between historical truth and official documentation. In The Content of the Form; Hayden White argues that historical narratives are never transparent records of the past but are shaped through acts of selection, arrangement and interpretation. She says;

…the narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form that may or may not be used to represent real events in their aspect as developmental processes but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications. (White ix)

Gurnah’s fiction repeatedly draw attention to these processes by juxtaposing personal memory and official memory and at times pitting them against one another. Memory; both individual and community; becomes a legitimate historical source in Gurnah’s archival evidence.

He paints the brutalities of colonial oppression and the true toll of the Al Bushiri, Wahehe and Maji-Maji rebellions. In *Afterlives*, he writes:

They (Germans) burned villages and trampled fields and plundered food stores. African bodies were left hanging on roadside gibbets in a landscape that was scorched and terrorised. (21)

Frantz Fanon observes that colonialism "is violence in its natural state" and can only sustain itself through the continuous exercise of force (The Wretched of the Earth 61). We can understand this from Gurnah's montages of burnt villages and mutilated landscapes in *Afterlives*. He shows that this violence not as an exceptional moment during rebellion but as the condition through which colonial authority maintained itself; be it the suppression of rebellions or simple everyday work as plantation workers. The lived space itself bears the marks of imperial conquest; transforming space into a permanent reminder of domination and terror. The violence of colonial rule extends beyond military conquest. Gurnah gives us a tour of the wretched and debilitated estates and plantations managed by the Germans where the natives had to work for meagre pay against backbreaking work with no health facilities. In *Afterlives*, Khalifa’s father Qasim and mother Mariamu are estate workers who die of malaria and the want of

medical aid. The narrator comments that “The estate-work was heavy and the workers’ pay was meagre. They were often struggle against fever, aches and squalor…” (13)

Achille Mbembe argues that colonial sovereignty rests upon "the generalized instrumentalization of human existence" (Necropolitics 14); reducing colonised populations to expendable labour in the service of the imperial capital. Gurnah's estate workers embody this condition. Their labour sustains the colonial economy; yet their lives remain disposable; their deaths unrecorded except within individual memory which Gurnah records in his fiction. Such depictions expose the truth behind the colonial narrative of bringing civilization and progress. The colonial enterprise emerges not as a system of economic exploitation, violence, and dispossession; rather than a benevolent mission of bringing light to the darkness. In *Paradise*, Gurnah records;

Everything is in turmoil, these Europeans are very determined…they will crush us all…It isn’t trade they’re after, but the land itself. And everything in it…us…they divided up the best lands on the mountain…driven off even the fiercest people…as if they were children…they want the whole world… (86–87)

Similarly, an anonymous character remarks;

…they (Germans) take the best land without paying a bead, force the people to work for them…the first thing they built is a lock-up, then a church, then a market-shed…and then tax it. (*Paradise* 76)

Through these excerpts Gurnah reveals that colonial expansion was fundamentally a project of territorial possession rather than commercial exchange. The progression from prison to church, market and taxation illustrates the institutional machinery through which empire consolidated its authority. Edward Said argues that imperialism was sustained not only through military conquest but also through cultural and administrative structures that made domination appear natural and inevitable (Culture and Imperialism 8–9). Gurnah's characters recognise this logic long before historians articulate it. They understand that roads, churches, markets and taxation are not signs of development but instruments through which colonial rule extends its control over land, labour and everyday life.

Gurnah’s novels repeatedly foreground the intimate consequences of larger political events. A unique feature of his narrative style is that he situates the life events of his characters against the backdrop of larger colonial or political schemes. In *Afterlives*, the time frame of Khalifa and Asha’s is laid by locating the atrocities of the last phase of the Maji-Maji rebellion (21). In *Paradise*, Yusuf’s journey to the interior with Bwana Aziz unfolds against increasing German encroachment and apprehensions of an upcoming war. this narrative strategy reflects Walter Benjamin's insistence on reading history "against the grain" (Illuminations 257); attending not to the triumphs of empire but to the experiences of those who bear the burden of the historical catastrophe. Rather than presenting colonial conquest through the perspectives of administrators or generals, Gurnah reconstructs history from below, allowing ordinary lives to illuminate the larger structures of imperial violence.

The danger of an approaching conflict lurks in many of his novels. This concern culminates in *Afterlives*, where Gurnah narrates the horrors, futilities, and inhumanities of the Great War. Hamza becomes symbolic of the countless African Askaris who fought the coloniser's war and were repaid with humiliation, violence, and neglect. The experiences of these soldiers challenge the glorious triumphalist narratives of imperial warfare and reveal the profound human cost of colonial ambitions.

Gurnah restores historical visibility to those who remain absent from official records through his craftsmanship, narrativization and literary montages. His fiction functions as a literary archive of resistance, suffering, endurance, and survival. He narrates history through the stories of the estate workers, traders, women, refugees, bonded servants, and soldiers of Zanzibar. In doing so; he produces an alternative historiography that exposes the violence concealed beneath colonial narratives of progress and civilization.

Zanzibar, Revolution, and Postcolonial Disillusionment

If Gurnah's fiction critiques colonial domination, it is equally attentive to the failures and contradictions of postcolonial nationhood. His novels record the horrors of the 1964 Zanzibari Revolution, which otherwise forms a glorious event in the national history of Zanzibar. He documents the mayhem and chaos that followed, including curfews, arbitrary arrests, mass expulsions, and the persecution of Arabs and Indians. His fiction problematises nationalist histories that celebrates the Zanzibar revolution as a moment of unanimous success in the process of nation-building. Homi Bhabha argues that the nation should be understood not as a finished historical achievement but as a "narrative strategy" through which competing histories and identities struggle for recognition (Nation and Narration 3). In Gurnah; we see attempts at exposing these very tensions; where the revolution never passes for a singular historical triumph but as a contested historical experience remembered differently by different communities. Memory becomes the most important tool of deconstructing both colonial and nationalist historiographies in Gurnah. The entire revolution becomes a repertoire of individual and community memory; of displacement, imprisonment, bereavement and exile; etc.; competing memories of Africans, Arabs, Indians and refugees without privileging one as the definitive historical truth.

In *By the Sea*, he writes:

We were all fleeing places where authority required full submission and grovelling fear, and since this was not enforceable without daily floggings and public beheadings… (46)

In The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon warns that unless political independence is accompanied by a fundamental transformation of social and political institutions; "The national bourgeoisie steps into the shoes of the former European settlement… The national middle class discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary… today puts on the mask of neo-colonialism." (Fanon 152). This passage from Gurnah; reflects the same reproduction of the structures of domination by the new political leadership. The novel contains a detailed account of arbitrary arrests and imprisonment and of how the island of Changu was used as a detention centre by the Nyerere government to incarcerate, torture, and maim Arab prisoners

before their liberation through Arabian intervention. Violence and hopelessness became defining realities of the period and led many people to seek escape through migration. Achille Mbembe argues that modern sovereignty increasingly manifests itself through the capacity to determine "who may live and who must die" ("Necropolitics" 11). Although Mbembe develops this argument in relation to late modern forms of state violence, it provides a useful framework for understanding the atmosphere of fear that permeates Gurnah's Zanzibar. Imprisonment, disappearance and forced displacement become instruments through which political authority defines the limits of citizenship and belonging.

Saleh Omar reflects upon the treatment of Arab communities after the revolution:

In truth they were no more Omani than I was, except that they had an ancestor who was born there…their crime was the ignoble history of Oman in these parts…In other respects, they were indigenes, citizens, raiiya… (*By the Sea* 225)

Saleh's reflection reveals the unstable relationship between ancestry, nationality and citizenship in the aftermath of revolution. Communities that had long considered themselves indigenous suddenly became strangers within the nation they inhabited. Benedict Anderson famously describes the nation as an "imagined political community" (Imagined Communities 6), yet Gurnah demonstrates that the boundaries of this community remain politically contested.

Gurnah’s novels are equally significant in understanding the reorganization of Zanzibar and mainland Tanganyika into Tanzania. He records how the post-revolution Zanzibar and the post-independence Tanzanian state became engulfed in corruption and failed to provide secure futures for its citizens.

In postcolonial Zanzibar; educational opportunities remained scarce. There were no universities in Zanzibar; and educational resources were severely limited. The Ugandan anthropologist and political commentator, Mahmood Mamdani argues that many postcolonial African states inherited the colonial administrative institutions rather than transforming them in accordance with indigenous needs; resulting in systems that continued to regulate populations through unequal forms of authority (Citizen and Subject 17–18). In *Memory of Departure*, Gurnah demonstrates how the government withheld examination results to prevent students from applying for scholarships abroad. Hassan’s frustrations become representative of an entire generation whose aspirations were smothered by political and bureaucratic structures.

Similarly, through Farida; *Desertion* portrays the desperate competition among girls attempting to gain admission into the only state secondary school for girls in the country. Access to higher education frequently depended upon connections with political elites rather than merit. The pervasive nature of corruption within the school classroom is illustrated in *Desertion*:

As he called the names out of the class register, each child had to walk up to the teacher’s desk and put a five-cent piece on the plate there. He was then marked present. (110)

The effects of such corruption extended into every small aspect of quotidian life. The promise of independence failed to translate into social mobility, educational opportunity, or economic security for many citizens. The state increasingly relied upon and favoured systems of patronage, favouritism, and coercion. Political Scientist and a revered member of the Subaltern Studies Collective, Partha Chatterjee, observes that in many postcolonial societies; citizenship is experienced less through universal democratic rights than through unequal negotiations with state institutions (The Politics of the Governed 38). Gurnah's fiction captures this everyday experience of governance; where access to education, employment and opportunity frequently depends upon informal networks rather than institutional fairness. Corruption is therefore presented as a structural condition embedded within the functioning of the postcolonial state.

Gurnah's fiction challenges the celebratory narratives of postcolonial nationalism. Independence does not appear as a definitive moment of liberation but as the beginning of new forms of inequality, exclusion, and state violence. His novels reveal how the structures of domination often survived political transition and continued to shape the everyday lives of ordinary people. Gurnah records multitudes of these personal histories in a way that complicates and further problematises the simplistic distinctions between colonial oppression and postcolonial freedom.

Migration, Exile, and the Search for Home

As established earlier in this paper that colonial cartography transformed East Africa into an object of imperial control and postcolonial nationhood failed to provide it with security and belonging; migration emerged not as an individual choice but as a historical necessity. Exile becomes the inevitable consequence of colonial violence, political upheaval and the fractured geographies produced by both the empire and the postcolonial state. Gurnah's Nobel Prize citation recognises precisely this dimension of his work; "…for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents.". For centuries, Zanzibar has accommodated the various Arabian, Indian, Persian, Malay, Somali and Chinese communities because of its cosmopolitan maritime culture. Yet the post-revolutionary state transformed this historically connected, culturally rich and linguistically diverse space into one marked by fear, exclusion, surveillance and displacement. The Sultan was deposed by a communist uprising headed by Abeid Amani Karume; after which the Arabs and Indians were attacked, mutilated, butchered and expelled; their women kidnapped, raped and sold. Curfews, arbitrary arrests and detention without trial became defining features of everyday life.

The Indian merchants who had settled in large numbers during British rule fled to Britain in search of safe haven. For others migration became an escape from war, political persecution, economic deprivation and the absence of educational opportunities. Under the Nyerere government; the state further restricted the movement of its youth by requiring those above the age of sixteen to remain for compulsory national service as an idealistic nation-building process. Gurnah exposes this imposition as a mechanism of state control over youth movement and restricting them from availing higher and better

education. Migration; to be more specific; illegal migrations thus became inseparable from the changing political geography of Zanzibar and Tanzania. It represented not merely movement across borders but the loss of home itself in search of freedom.

Another element that accompanies migration, that too illegal ones is the sense of loss and the apprehension of never returning. Edward Said observes that "exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience" because it creates "an unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place" (Reflections on Exile 173). Gurnah's fiction repeatedly returns to this rupture, portraying displacement not simply as geographical separation but as an enduring condition that reshapes memory, identity and belonging.

Gurnah himself left Zanzibar illegally in search of safety and fulfilment in Britain, only to encounter what he describes as the "overwhelming feeling of strangeness and difference" accompanied by "guilt and incomprehensible regrets" for having "casually and thoughtlessly abandoned a place and a way of being" that could never be recovered. As he remarks in an interview with the University of Kent; "...at the time I left home, my ambitions were simple…to leave and find safety and fulfilment somewhere else."

His own experience resonates throughout his entire oeuvre; where exile is never represented as liberation alone but as a condition of simultaneous loss and possibility. The journey away from home offers physical safety while producing emotional dislocation, cultural estrangement and an enduring attachment to places that can no longer be inhabited.

In Gurnah; this tension between the remembered homeland and the realities of life in Europe is artistically captured through the social, physical and psychological turmoil in his protagonists; Hassan, Saleh Omar, Rashid and Latif. These characters remain suspended between longing and belonging, memory and everyday existence, departure and return. They continually negotiate the demands of making a better life and livelihood in the host country while remaining emotionally attached to a homeland transformed by history. Their experiences resonate Avtar Brah's distinction between "home" and the "homing desire"; where the desire for home does not necessarily imply a wish to return but reflects an ongoing search for belonging (Cartographies of Diaspora 192). Gurnah's characters discover that exile is not resolved by crossing national borders; for the sense of displacement continues to inhabit memory itself. Rashid's observation captures this emotional condition; "I have no means to describe the deep poison that runs through the experience of flight and homelessness." (Desertion 166).

Yet Gurnah refuses to reduce exile to a narrative of negativity and perpetual victimhood. England appears as a space of racial hostility and cultural estrangement; but it also provides opportunities unavailable in post-revolutionary Tanzania. Reflecting on his own life; Gurnah acknowledges that "It was also in England that I had the chance to read widely. In Zanzibar books were expensive and bookshops were few and undernourished." (Interview with University of Kent). Exile therefore becomes a paradoxical condition; marked simultaneously by loss and intellectual possibility. Distance from home intensifies recollection, transforming memory into what Gurnah describes as the writer's "hinterland." Migration in Gurnah is therefore not merely geographical movement but a complex process through which colonial

and postcolonial histories continue to shape identity, memory, belonging and self-fashioning across national boundaries. His novels ultimately suggest that home is not simply a geographic location but an ethical and historical relationship continuously reconfigured through displacement.

Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction functions simultaneously as literature, history, archive, and counter-history. Through his novels, he deconstructs and decolonises the colonial and elite nationalist historiographies of Zanzibar and postcolonial Tanzania. His narratives offer a rich understanding of the complex cosmopolitanism of Zanzibar and the undercurrents of racial, ethnic, and religious conflicts that underline its social structure.

His fictional world records both the gradual and violent shifts in power dimensions in Zanzibar and its impact on the everyday lived experiences of people inhabiting a space marked by a history of multiple colonisations and a violent revolution. Through his representations of colonial violence, postcolonial disillusionment, migration and refugee consciousness; Gurnah restores visibility to marginalized voices frequently omitted from official histories. His novels also demonstrate how migration and alienation predate Western influences in Zanzibar through histories of slavery and trade relations, while simultaneously documenting the new waves of legal and illegal migrations produced by colonialism and its aftermath. The migrant space, refugee condition, trauma of displacement, processes of subject formation, race, body, and nationality become recurring concerns through which Gurnah interrogates identity and belonging.

As a literary historian, Gurnah provides an alternative archive of East Africa that challenges dominant systems of knowledge and representation. His novels compel readers to rethink conventional understandings of history, geography, migration, and nationhood while foregrounding the lived experiences of those who inhabit the margins of official narratives.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Sudeshna Mukherjee conducted fieldwork, researched and wrote the main manuscript. Dr. Vivek Singh supervised the manuscript.

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