



Ostracism and Slavery: An Analysis of Sufferings in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*

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Abstract

Slavery has been a part of human history from the very beginning. Sometimes, it was direct slavery, and sometimes, it was indirect. Slavery also makes a person migrate, and the migration that comes with slavery is forced migration. Sometimes a person is ostracized even without his knowledge which leads to the trauma of being separated from his loved ones and made him suffer. The displacement is not only from one place to another but also from the geography, culture, language, eating habits, friends, relations, and the environment in which one is brought up. The migration that comes because of direct or indirect slavery is sometimes permanent, and the person who is ostracized, many a time, never gets the opportunity to go back to his place or to meet his people. In Abdulrazak Gurnah's writings, the characters are displaced because of one reason or the other. *Paradise* (1994) is the fourth novel of Abdulrazak Gurnah in which Yusuf, the main character of the novel is ostracized by his family when he was just twelve years old. Yusuf, the protagonist of *Paradise*, was forced to migrate without his knowledge. This displacement was permanent for Yusuf, who never met his family again. This paper describes the suffering Yusuf faces because of the forced migration. Migration makes a person experience nostalgia, and this paper also explores the mental trauma of displacement.

Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah, forced migration, nostalgia, slavery, mental trauma, sufferings.

Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in Zanzibar, on the Eastern Coast of Africa. The language of Zanzibar is Swahili, which is also the language of many other parts of the East Coast of Africa. Arabians from Oman ruled Zanzibar for around four centuries; hence, a large population of Zanzibar also speaks Arabic. Hence, most of the characters of the different novels of Abdulrazak Gurnah speak the Swahili language, and they connect with the Eastern Coast of Africa in some way or another. Many of Abdulrazak Gurnah's characters are also Arabs and speak the Arabic language.



Islam is the religion of Zanzibar, and Abdulrazak Gurnah himself is a Muslim of Arab descent. Hence, most of the characters in his novels have Islamic backgrounds. It is correct that most of the characters of Abdulrazak Gurnah's works speak Swahili and Arabic, are Muslims, and come from the same background, yet all his novels are different. Abdulrazak Gurnah, while talking to Nisha Jones, states, "One book doesn't necessarily follow the last one logically, although it does come out of the same pool where all the books have come from. There are several different starting points for the novel. On the one hand, it was a way of taking a more extended look at why things are the way they are now. Most of what I have written about has not only been concerned with Zanzibar but with other small places along that coast" (37).

Zanzibar came under the control of the British in 1890 and got its freedom from British rule in 1963. A month later, after the British left, the Zanzibar Revolution started, which forced many, especially of Arabian lineage, to migrate from Zanzibar as Zanzibar was no longer a safe place for those not from the majority Black African population. Abdulrazak Gurnah's migration to England from Zanzibar was also the result of the Zanzibar Revolution. Debyan Banerjee, in his research paper, states the reason for Gurnah's migration, "He fled to England in early 1968 because, after the Revolution (1964), Zanzibar became a place of terror and unrest" (874). Abdulrazak Gurnah came to England as a refugee and "knows the pain of leaving one's homeland and adjusting to a new society" (Rana and Sharma 6545). The situation back home and the lawlessness in society had pushed Gurnah to migrate. Because of migration, Gurnah saw extreme poverty and lived a lonely life. The struggle and isolation that Gurnah faced in England made him speak through his writings. Along with the trauma of migration, the racial discrimination that he faced in England and the identity crisis are also the themes of many of his works. Felicity Hand describes Abdulrazak Gurnah and his works, stating, "Gurnah's work deliver into the experience



of less fortunate migrants, of those who have migrated for economic, political or emotional reasons” (39).

Paradise, the fourth novel of Abdulrazak Gurnah, was published in 1994. This novel is about displacement and slavery and the sufferings which were the product of immigration and slavery. Slavery in Zanzibar had been abolished by the European colonists before Abdulrazak Gurnah was born. However, the upper and ruling class, which consisted of Arabian rulers and businessmen of Indian and Arabian origin, had racist views. Hence, Abdulrazak Gurnah knew what slavery was, though he had seen only the camouflaged slavery. In *Paradise*, Abdulrazak Gurnah described camouflaged slavery through two of his characters, Yusuf and Khalil. Yusuf and Khalil were given to a merchant by their parents because they could not pay the money they had taken from the merchant. *Paradise* is considered one of Gurnah's most important works, as this novel has recognized him worldwide. *Paradise* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and the Whitbread Prize for Fiction and selected for the Big Jubilee Read. This paper aims to explore the traumatic experience of migration that comes with debt bondage, which is slavery in disguise. It also explores the mental state of a person who gets to know that he has been ostracized by his family and may not meet his family again.

Examining Ostracism and its Trauma in *Paradise*

Paradise, the fourth novel of Abdulrazak Gurnah, is about a young boy, Yusuf, who was given to a merchant named Aziz “to secure his father’s debts (Jacobs 82). Yusuf’s father couldn’t repay the debt he had taken from the merchant. Yusuf was given to the merchant when he was only twelve years old, the age he enjoyed the company of his friends. “He liked being with the boys because they were always telling jokes and laughing” (Gurnah 6). Moreover, he didn’t even



know that he was being ostracized by his parents and that he would never meet them again. He thought he was going with merchant Aziz, whom he called Uncle Aziz, for only a couple of days. "It never occurred to him, not even for a brief moment, that he might be gone from his parents for a long time, or that he might never see them again" (Gurnah 17).

Going away and leaving family is never easy. During his train journey with Uncle Aziz, though Yusuf was under the impression that he would come back soon, the thoughts of his family still made Yusuf dejected and miserable. "He thought of his mother's easy laughter, and began to cry" (Gurnah 18). At the place of Uncle Aziz, Yusuf was made to work in a shop under the supervision of Khalil, where Khalil taught him the ways of his new life. "Yusuf's new teacher wasted no time in putting him right on a number of matters. The day began at dawn and didn't finish until Khalil said so" (Gurnah 23). It is difficult to adjust to a new place, and for twelve-year-old Yusuf, it was even more difficult as he was only a child. At his home, he used to play with children his age, but here, he was working for a merchant who was "driven by his irrational urge to wield power over others" (Mogili 465). Yusuf was an immigrant, especially the one who had been ostracized; hence, all the adjustments had to be made by him only. While talking about the immigrants and their struggles, Robert Ferguson states, "The receiving world has no reason to make room, and its rhythms remain indifferent to the latest perceiver of them. All of the struggle to understand, all of the adjustments to belong, all of the effort to be understood must be made by the new arrival" (258). An immigrant tries to make adjustments according to the situation at a new place. Still, these adjustments make him "feel at a loss" (Du and Cui 8).

It is here working for Uncle Aziz; Yusuf gets to know from Khalil that he is here to pay his father's debt. "You're here because your Ba owes the seyyid money" (Gurnah 24). Yusuf was shocked, as no one had told him about the debts. But Yusuf hoped to return to his family when the



money was fully paid. The story of Khalil's migration from his family was also similar to Yusuf's. Khalil was also abandoned by his family because his family couldn't pay the money to merchant Aziz, who liked to be called Seyyid by the people. People migrate, but they never forget their families, and they often think of their families, making them cry. In the case of Yusuf and Khalil, they were forced to leave their place because of their families, which pained them. Khalil's situation is miserable when Yusuf asks Khalil about his family, as Khalil has been abandoned by his family. Yusuf also "felt homesick and abandoned, but struggled to keep himself from crying" (Gurnah 39). Yusuf had known the reality of his migration, and this "reality proves traumatic" (Mondo 184) for him, and he had understood "that he was there as rehani, pawned to Uncle Aziz to secure his father's debts to the merchant" (Gurnah 47). Yusuf had also understood that it would not be easy to go back to his family, and it made him downhearted, and "he wept for his mother and father when he could. At times he panicked at the thought that their images were turning faint in his recollection" (Gurnah 48).

Khalil and Yusuf faced the same situations and had almost the same story. Vinaya Naik, while talking about Khalil and Yusuf, states, "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" (Naik 334). The similarities made them closer to each other, and with time, they started calling each other brothers. But this was the time for Yusuf and Khalil to be separated. Another migration, or ostracism, in reality, was waiting for Yusuf. Yusuf was told by Mohammed Abdalla, one of the men of merchant Aziz, that Yusuf would join them on a trade journey. Yusuf didn't want to go as he had built a strong relationship with Khalil, but Khalil told him to go as this would give him the opportunity to learn new things. Deep inside his heart, Khalil didn't want the separation from Yusuf. While together at the same place they had been sleeping



since Yusuf came, “Khalil pulled him near and held him in a long embrace” (Gurnah 53). Yusuf went with the caravan of merchant Aziz. The journey reminded him of his first train journey, and “he thought of Kawa and his parents” (Gurnah 57). The family of a migrant is never out of mind.

All these years, Khalil also became Yusuf's family, and the journey also made him think of Khalil. “Several times he thought of Khalil, and was made sad by the memory of their friendship” (Gurnah 57). Mid-journey on the coast where the caravan rested, Yusuf was again ostracized from the caravan by merchant Aziz with the promise of coming the following year. It has been observed that ostracism has a “detrimental effect” (Liu and Xia 198). However, the exclusion from the caravan made a positive impact on Yusuf. Here, Yusuf learned to read and write and learn some other valuable things. It is here where Yusuf fell in love for the first time. A year passed, and Uncle Aziz came; hence, it was the time for Yusuf for another migration.

Abdulrazak Gurnah has spoken about migration in all his novels, but the migration Yusuf faced is different from all other migrations. Yusuf migrated at a very young age and his migration was without his knowledge. He did not migrate because he wanted to, but he was ostracized from his family by his family and by the greedy, sadistic attitude of merchant Aziz. It's been five years since Yusuf saw his family last. He didn't know where his family was and in what condition his family members were. When merchant Aziz asked Yusuf about his family, “Yusuf was speechless” (Gurnah 117). Yusuf was under the influence of “guilt that he had been unable to keep the memory of his parents fresh in his life. He wondered if his parents still thought of him, if they still lived, and he knew that he would rather not find out” (Gurnah 174). Migrants fear losing their loved ones and “become full of sorrow and remorse for leaving their families.” (Rana and Sharma 6546). When Uncle Aziz gives the news of his father's death and that no one knows about the whereabouts



of his mother, Yusuf feels “a sudden sadness” (Gurnah 241). Even though he was ostracized and abandoned by his family, the pain and love for family is there.

Exploration of Slavery in *Paradise*

In the system of slavery, a person used to get the ownership of another person. An enslaved person used to have no rights, and the enslaved person used to work according to the wishes of his master. The slave used to work at the location dictated by his master and used to live at the location of his work only. Many a time, the slave never met or returned to his family again.

Nishanth Mogili while writing about the slavery in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*, writes, “In *Paradise* it is the slavery of ‘pawning’. Pawning is a way of having someone’s child to be used for debt” (517). Yusuf, the protagonist of *Paradise*, was not even a teenager when he was given to a rich merchant to work as a slave in exchange for the debt that Yusuf’s father had taken from merchant Aziz. The young Yusuf got to know that he was given to the Merchant whom he called Uncle Aziz after reaching Uncle Aziz’s place by his “new companion Khalil who was also a pawn ‘pawn’ (Rehani) to Aziz. He was also working in the shop to pay his father’s debts to Aziz.” (Mogili 517). Yusuf also got to know that Aziz is not his relative and should be treated with respect. Khalil tells Yusuf about what actually a slave means to his master and how a master should be treated by a slave. “He doesn’t like little beggars like you calling him Uncle, Uncle, Uncle. He like you to kiss his hand and call him seyyid. And in case you don’t know what that means, it means master” (Gurnah 25).

The accommodation and the place to live provided by merchant Aziz to Yusuf and Khalil were highly uncomfortable. “They slept on the earth terrace in front of the shop, shopkeepers by day and watchmen by night, and covered themselves with rough calico sheets. Their heads were



close together and their bodies far apart, so they could talk softly without getting too near each other. Whenever Yusuf rolled too close, Khalil kicked him away savagely. Mosquitoes wheeled around them, shrieking for blood with high-pitched wails. If the sheets slipped from their bodies the mosquitoes instantly gathered to their sinful feast” (Gurnah 24). Yusuf and Khalil were slaves and were working for Merchant Aziz because their families had taken money from Aziz, hence they couldn't raise their voice and lived in a miserable condition. A slave has no rights and is supposed to live in a condition his master wishes him to live.

Time passed, and a good relationship developed between Yusuf and Khalil. They considered each other brothers. It was the time when Yusuf was ordered by his master to go on a trade journey to the interior. Yusuf didn't want to go on the journey and leave Khalil, but since he couldn't go against the wishes of his master, he went. During the journey, when the train halted at his town 'Kawa', Yusuf “sat in tense silence on the floor of the carriage, in case someone should see him and embarrass his parents” (Gurnah 56). Yusuf was a slave to a wealthy merchant, and he didn't want to be the source of shame to his family. He was also thinking of his parents but couldn't go to meet them as he was a slave. In between his journeys, Yusuf was left to be with a man called Hamid, who was a friend of Aziz. Yusuf couldn't ask why he was left in between, as it was his master's decision. A slave can't ask any questions and has to follow his master blindly.

A year passed, and again, merchant Aziz came, and this time, he took Yusuf with his trading caravan. It was a difficult journey, and within a few days, everyone lost the enthusiasm. It also had negative effects on Yusuf's health. “Yusuf's stomach turned to water and his body ached with exhaustion and fever. Thorns tore into his ankles and arms, and his flesh was covered with insect bites. He wondered how anything could survive on a land so brutally severe. At night the cries of animals startled him from sleep into nightmare, so that often in the morning he could not



be sure if he had slept through the night or had lain cowering with fear” (Gurnah 116). It was the journey Yusuf never wanted to be a part of, but since he was a slave, he had to follow the orders of his master. He was suffering because he followed his master’s instructions.

Abdulrazak Gurnah has mentioned the slavery that was very much part of the East Coast of Africa during the times mentioned in *Paradise*. In *Paradise*, slavery happened through Aziz. Naik, in his research paper, states, “Slavery occurs in the Aziz household in many forms, Amina is Khalil’s foster sister, with whom they had been pawned off but who was set free through her marriage to the merchant” (336). The freedom of a slave depends on his/her master. But nothing on this planet comes for free, and there is a price for everything and everything for a price.

Khalil was not the only one given to Aziz; Aziz also had taken away Amina, Khalil’s sister. Amina grew up as a beautiful lady, and Aziz fell for her. Aziz was of her father’s age, but Amina had no choice but to marry her master as his second wife as she was a slave. Aziz was a cunning person. He knew that even if he married Amina as a repayment, Khalil wouldn’t go anywhere as Amina was his sister. All the other family members of Khalil had gone to Arabia. Hence, he had no place to go. This way, Aziz ensured that Khalil worked at the shop and lived as a slave. In his conversation with Yusuf, Khalil says, “She is the repayment of my Ba’s debt. When he took her he forgave the debt. ‘So you’re free to go,’ Yusuf said. ‘Go where? I have nowhere to go,’ Khalil said calmly. ‘And my sister is still here.’” (Gurnah 207).

Discussion and Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Paradise* concentrates on a world that has a slave system. It deals with the trauma of displacement that comes from ostracism. Slavery and migration also bring a lot of suffering as slaves are supposed to work according to the wishes of their masters. Migration



itself is not easy and brings a lot of hardships, but the migration that comes because somebody is supposed to be a slave brings the trauma of distress along with it.

Abdulrazak Gurnah depicted the slavery system of the East African Coast before the arrival of colonies or when the colonial powers had just started coming to the Swahili coast. Along with the system of slavery, the novel *Paradise* also presents the trading system of Eastern Africa when the European powers had just started coming and establishing their control in various parts of Africa through their military power. The arrival of colonial powers had also changed the maps, and “the “new maps” also divide the Swahili coast into discrete states extending into the interior, shattering the coastal continuum and yoking together groups that had maintained distinct orientations” (Samuelson 501).

Paradise gives the knowledge of the East Coast of Africa's culture and trading system by illustrating how Aziz moves from one place to another for his business. The journeys that Aziz carried out in connection to his business helped him to make contacts. He also gave loans to many people. The slavery of Yusuf, Khalil, and Amina was the result of Aziz's journeys as the parents of Yusuf, Khalil, and Amina couldn't repay the debt they had taken from Aziz.

Yusuf, Khalil, and Amina were forced to migrate because of their parents' inefficiency when they were only children. Migration brings a lot of sorrow, and a migrant never gets out of the thoughts of his/her family members. When Yusuf thought of his family, his “eyes watered” (Gurnah 39). A migrant, especially one who is ostracized, is always in inner conflicts and keeps on asking questions ‘why and how’. “Inner conflict happens when the characters undergo an emotional battle” (Ahmed and Jahan 54). In *Paradise*, Yusuf and Khalil also go through many emotional battles as they have been abandoned by their families. Thinking about his family, Khalil



says, "Ma and my brothers went back to Arabia and left us here. They just went and left us here" (Gurnah 203). Abandoning by family is a bitter experience for anyone, and the person, even after years, keeps on thinking about the trauma of being left out by family.

Paradise is a tale that portrays the emotional struggle of depression and misfortune through ostracism and slavery. Poverty forces the different characters of *Paradise* to leave their families and their homelands and to be slaves forever. Though Khalil's sister Amina got her freedom after her marriage to Aziz, but marrying an old man is never a pleasant experience for a young girl. Amina's marriage to Aziz was also the result of her slavery to Aziz.

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