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Diaspora and displacement in the fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters, I have discussed the effect of historical experiences on the people of the East African coast and the adjacent islands. I have tried to relate the unique historical experiences of the coastal people with the experiences they have had arising out of the historical background. This is a history that is markedly different from that experienced in the inland Africa, the reason being that the coast has been exposed to exploration, trade and migrations for much longer and with greater intensity than the hinterland, thanks to voyages across the sea from Arabia, Eastern and Western countries in search of trading opportunities. These movements make the coastal region and the islands unique from the interior having been exposed to these movements from as early as the first century or even earlier. There is a distinct difference even in the pattern of colonialism that has characterized the coastal region. The economic activities that have informed the coastal region also differ from that of the hinterland. This therefore means that a representation of the coast even within the postcolonial archive, must be different from representations by writers narrating the hinterland like Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

I have looked at diaspora and displacement as some of the effects of the above mentioned historical background. I have also looked at different conceptions that Gurnah posits of diaspora and the varied ideas of displacement. The transformation that a society goes through due to invasions by external forces such as colonization, slavery, trading activities, lead to a realignment of communities and ultimately families. This leads to scattering of members of a family as they seek better opportunities for a better livelihood or even as victims in slave trafficking or political maneuvering. Earlier ways of doing things within communities are redefined, and in the same way, identities are constructed in different ways. The displaced, scattered

people strive to find new roots and resort to formulating ideas of home away from their original abodes. The characters in Gurnah's texts suffer emotional violence even as they strive to cope with the forces that help to scatter them. Even then, in the physical homes that they join and the imaginary homes they construct through narration, a sense of unbelonging still persists. Much as violence and scattering is triggered by external forces, certain instances occur whereby violence and displacement is engineered from within (even) family structures. For exiles in European countries, home tends to be as elusive back home in Africa just as it can be abroad.

I have also looked at how characters construct their identities against otherness. The self is presented as superior and the other inferior. The position of the self is defined by religion, race, gender, economic success or even political power. The more powerful 'other' the weak and confine them to an inferior position. I have argued here tha,t in presenting a shifting sense of 'otherness', Gurnah questions the traditional ideas of 'otherness', where otherness was defined by race, with the position of the white race being superior to the black race. He posits 'othering' as it appears even within the domestic sphere and even between members of the same religion. I have argued that, according to Gurnah, there are no fixed boundaries between the self and the other as these positions change with prevailing circumstances.

In presenting a family that is clearly struggling for survival amidst forces that are bent on disrupting it, I see a high level of pessimism in Gurnah. This is closely related to the idea of an elusive home earlier mentioned within the research and in this chapter. Pessimism is used in considering the postcolonial space, so that it is indicative of a lack of bliss in the same; a negation of nationalist celebration of the nation-state and nationalism in earlier postcolonial discourses. Ironically, Gurnah's

pessimism seems to be a product of his universalism, his desire to privilege a subject position from whose point of view nativist inclinations are negated.

Gurnah's pessimism about family is indicative of his exploration of senses of belonging that exceed kinship networks. This is perhaps, in line with his privileging of a universalistic subjectivity unhinged from the dictates of particularism and group identity. This in a sense could be the sign of an exilic imagination, ever looking in from the outside.

On the whole, I see Gurnah making a conscious departure from earlier postcolonial works by showing the precolonial Africa, not as a peaceful united place whose idyllic life is only disrupted by the colonial master. Instead, he presents the reality of Africa before colonialism, with diaspora and displacement brought about by Africans against Africans. This is a clear departure from presentations by earlier writers who depicted Africa in a romantic way, peaceful and orderly before European interference.

It is my hope that this study on Gurnah will serve as a starting point towards opening up his work to greater understanding and research.