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Diaspora and displacement in the fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This research report aims to take a critical look at Abdulrazak Gurnah's treatment of issues of diaspora and displacement in his novels, *Paradise, Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea*. In these texts, set on the East African coastal region, and also in Western countries such as England, Gurnah deals with ideas of reconstruction of the self and cultural identity in the middle of forces of displacement and ideas of otherness. The study is interested in how Gurnah positions his characters to interrogate various political experiences in the East African coast and the mainland in the period immediately preceding the advent of colonialism up to the mid-twentieth century after independence. The report also looks at the significant processes that come into being as Gurnah's characters experience displacement precipitated by forces superior to them and how they react to these processes. In this I explore the possible link between economic and political superiority and domination. In the final analysis, I see Gurnah questioning the role of colonialism in the fragmentation of the African society especially mainland East Africa, the islands and the coastal region whose history he narrates.

Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in the East African Island of Zanzibar in 1948. He left Zanzibar at the age of eighteen, a few years after the country gained independence to continue with his education in England. His main reason for leaving was to escape political instability: "It was a time of hardship and anxiety, of state terror and calculated humiliations, and at eighteen all I wanted was to find safety and

fulfillment somewhere else".[1] In 1980-82 he taught at the University of Kano in Nigeria and in 1982, received his PhD from the University of Kent, Canterbury, where he has been teaching English literature since 1985. Now a professor of English and postcolonial studies, Gurnah has published seven novels.[2] His main academic interest is in colonial and post-colonial discourses as they relate to African, Caribbean and Indian writing. He is the editor of two volumes of *Essays on African Writing* and has also published extensively on writers VS Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and Wole Soyinka. A prolific and highly respected academic, Gurnah has contributed to numerous journals, such the *Times Literary Supplement, Research in African Literatures* and *World Literature Today,* and participated in a wide range of radio and television broadcasts, including the highly-rated BBC programme *Hardtalk*. His conference papers have included '*Writing Back',* University of Surrey Annual Literature Lecture, Guildford, Surrey, June 12 1995, `*Imagining the Postcolonial Writer*` *Enigmas* and *Arrival*, keynote address at Commonwealth Writers Conference, London, April 30 1997, and `*Africa Writing Europe*`, Vaxjo University, Sweden, June 12 2003. Among his numerous portfolios, Gurnah was associate editor of *Wasafiri* and is a member of its advisory board, and was Chair of the panel of judges for the 2003 Caine Prize.

Gurnah's fictional writing, both novels and short stories, have drawn widespread acclaim. His writings are dominated by issues of identity and displacement, and he addresses these from the perspective of personalized, human histories. Gurnah describes his motivation as the search for 'something unsaid, something that has

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[1]SeeAbdulrazak Gurnah, "Writing and Place", *World Literature Today*, 78.2 May – August (2004) 26-28.

[2] The novels are *Memory of Departure* Bloomsbury, London, 1987; *Pilgrims Way*, Bloomsbury, London, 1988; *Dottie*, Bloomsbury, London, 1990; *Paradise*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1994 and Penguin Books, London, New York and Victoria, 1995 (all references made will be to this edition). *Admiring Silence,* Hamish Hamilton, London, 1996; *By the Sea,* Bloomsbury, London, 2001; and *Desertion*, Bloomsbury, London, 2005.

never been heard before'[3] and his stories reflect a profound concern with human stories that are rarely heard and explored.

Gurnah's fiction can be classified as evaluative postcolonial writing. Evaluative because though set in the periods before, during and after independence, the books' publication period, three or four decades after independence, puts them in such a position as to play a contemplative role, assessing what has gone on before and passing judgment. Gurnah, having studied earlier African texts against emergent critical criticism, comes up with texts that take a dissenting stance from that taken by the earlier (post)colonial writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Gurnah seems to have evaluated earlier African writings, realized their folly of defining Africa as a unified entity with a holistic and unified culture and selves and therefore seeks to redefine the African literary terrain. Whereas the earlier writers wrote instinctively out of a need to counter the repressive colonial regime, Gurnah draws attention to the effaced colonial subjects. In his own words, the African writer in narrating the postcolonial African situation, unknowingly sees colonial history as presented through the lenses of the colonist. In the process, they fail to pay attention to the, "particularities of fragmentation within colonized culture".[4] The danger is that nuanced details of the workings of such cultures are homogenized and/or ignored. The texts are seen as postcolonial, as viewed within Achille Mbembe's definition of the same, that is: "[S]ocieties recently emerging from the experience of colonization and the violence that colonial relationship per excellence involved."[5] Whereas this is not an all encompassing definition for all Gurnah's fiction, it is befitting for the majority, as

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[3] This quotation and all the biographical information is sourced from the website *http://www.nu.ac.za/cca/images/to/TOW2005/bios/gurnah.htm* on 31/3/2006

[4] See Abdulrazak Gurnah in 'Imagining the Postcolonial Writer', in Susheila Nasta (ed), *Reading the New Literatures in the Postcolonial Era*, D.S. Brewer, London 2000, p85.

[5] See, Achille Mbembe in 'Provisional notes on the Postcolony', *Africa*, 62 (1), 1992.

they originate from the colonized world and are concerned with and narrate (post)colonial experiences. Much as Gurnah's texts are of a postcolonial nature, they differ from the earlier forms in their leaning and outlook. To me they belong to the generation of African writers coming after what Gikandi refers to as the 'literature of disillusionment' when he says:

> In the texts of the 1960's narrative strategies are propelled by the belief that African countries had entered a neo-colonial phase, one which colonial structures continued their gigantic hold on the new states wearing ideological masks of blackness and modernity.[6]

Gikandi's idea is that writings of the early independence period are overdetermined by their author's disillusionment with the ideals of the nation invoked in the earlier African texts. He sees an emergence of African literature that views notions of betrayal and failures of nationalism as inadequate for representing the postcolonial situation: "Writers who still believe that the postcolonial situation is simply the continuation of colonialism under the guise of independence or that narratives of decolonization can be projected into the postcolonial world seem to be trapped in an ideological cul-de-sac".[7] Gikandi here advocates for a move from literature of disillusionment and Gurnah's works seem to resonate with his proposal for a more adequate representation of the postcolonial situation as going beyond the notions of failure and betrayal. Gurnah does not valorize the nation state, neither does he present the postcolonial situation as a continuation of colonialism, but he takes a critical look at the postcolonial space without painting the 'angel-demon' binary of

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[6] See Simon Gikandi in 'The Politics and Poetics of National Formation: Recent African Writing', in Anna Rutherford (ed), *From Commonwealth to Postcolonial* , Dangaroo Press, London, 1992 p379.

[7] Ibid

the colonizer and the colonized. He is critical of post-independence Zanzibar and Tanzania as much as the colonial powers.

In his essays, Gurnah is critical of earlier African writers, seeing Ngugi's works as assumptive, homogenizing and non-representative of the realities of Kenya's (post)colonial experience. For Gurnah, Ngugi treats the Gikuyu land experience (alienation, squattering, forced labour) erroneously as representative of national persecutions under which everyone suffered, for: "[L]and expropriation was not a universal experience in colonial Kenya and where it occurred, it was not on the scale on which it befell the Gikuyu and their neighbours."[8] Gurnah is critical of the way Ngugi collapses boundaries, erroneously presenting a uniformity of experience in all Kenyan people. In his works he seems to make a conscious effort to counter this kind of (mis)representation by focusing on individual characters and highlighting their unique experiences.

That Gurnah is critical of the presentation of the European as a monster is indicative of his negative view on a Manichean approach to the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. He says:

> There are a number of representations of Europeans as demons: their eyes redden in moments of anger, marking their excessive anger and cruelty and their unnatural appearance: Their voices are cold, their wives are bored and beat their servants, perhaps as a result of perverted and jaded appetites.[9]

[8] See Abdulrazak Gurnah in 'Transformative Strategies in the Fiction of Ngugi wa Thiong'o', in Abdulrazak Gurnah, (ed), *Essays on African Writing*, Volume 1, Heinemann, London, Portmouth, Ibadan, 1993, p143.

[9] Ibid, p148

Gurnah sees Ngugi as demonizing Europeans, marking them with excesses such as greed, and generally producing images of white brutishness and grotesqueness. All this goes to show Gurnah's derision for the depiction of an angelic colonized African vis-à-vis a demonic European colonizer. In his works, Gurnah shies away from showing a permanent superiority of one side over another; if anything, in *By the Sea*, he presents the brutality of the colonized against the accommodating kindness of the colonizer in offering refuge to the politically exploited Omar Shabaan. Gurnah advocates for a hybrid transnational (as opposed to national) sense of belonging in the postcolonial situation, as evidenced by his presentation of a diversity of cultures. in the East African coast, the mainland and the islands. His writings can be framed within the writings that Kwame Anthony Appiah refers to as the writings of the second stage and which he describes when he says: "Far from being a celebration of the nation, then, the novels of the second, postcolonial, stage are novels of deligitimation: they reject not only the western imperium but also the nationalist project of the postcolonial national bourgeoisie."[10] Gurnah is not involved in the wholesome rejection of Western imperium, just as he does not advocate for the postcolonial bourgeoisie, rather he presents a compromising stance between the two. In presenting a shifting status of otherness in his texts, Gurnah echoes Appiah's sentiment when the latter says:

> If there is a lesson in this broad circulation of cultures, it is surely that we are all already contaminated by each other, that there is no longer a fully autochthonous *etch*-African culture awaiting salvage by our artists (just as there is, of course, no American culture without African roots).[11]

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[10] See Kwame Appiah in 'Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?', *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (Winter 1991) p 353.

[11] Appiah, p 354.

Interactions have diluted culture, compromising its purity, inevitably giving way to hybridity, a fact that is irreversible.

The focus of Gurnah's writing has been exodus, for most of his novels feature a man displaced from Zanzibar for political or personal reasons. This bears a close resemblance to his own migrant condition, but he is quick to say:

> I know I came to writing in England in estrangement, and I realize now that it is a condition of being from one place and living in another that has been my subject over the years, not as a unique experience which I have undergone, but as one of the stories of our times.[12]

The condition of being from one place and living in another (migration) which Gurnah mentions here is the main focus of this study. It is a theme that takes different forms throughout the novels under study here. Gurnah's *Paradise* was published in 1994, and short-listed for the Booker Prize, England's highest honour for works of fiction. Set before the First World War, the novel presents Yusuf, a twelve-year-old boy given by his father to a rich trader, Aziz, to clear some debts. Yusuf is a classic example of a person from one place and living in another. Through the six different chapters Gurnah presents a young man suffering the displacement of having to leave his biological family never to see them again, as he relocates to a new environment. Yusuf's search for the 'self' is elusive; his enslavement limits his potential and capacity to express his feelings, especially of love, and he is only valued in terms of being used as a pawn to secure freedom for his superiors. The relationship between Yusuf and the opulent merchant Aziz helps us to understand the workings of nascent imperial processes in Africa that set the pace for grand imperialism. The text also implies that the capacity to trade is marked by a distinct difference

[12] From an interview in *Guardian* 2004, quoted in *The Nation,* sourced from the web at *http://www.thenation.com/doc/20050926/lalamini* on 26/9/2005

underpinned by the Islamic religion. This is clearly brought out through the elevation of Aziz the merchant as the epitome of "*unguana/ustaarabu*" (refinement or civilization). His business associates, though junior, are adherents of the Islamic faith. On the whole, the Arabs come out as the uprooted tribe, hated by the Africans they enslaved and overpowered by the Europeans with superior weapons and skills. The multi-layered type of colonialism that Gurnah presents is evident here as Arabs colonise the Africans and the Germans come in as powers more superior to the Arabs.

In *Admiring Silence* Gurnah presents another case of the not-so-successful attempt at reconstruction of the self. The unnamed protagonist, now resident in England, is at pains to reorganize experience by telling stories that narrate childhood experiences back home in Zanzibar. His sentimental accounts in the first part, followed closely by true accounts, leave the reader bewildered. Here is a man forced by conditions of an unpleasant past and an insecure present to spin stories that will hopefully fill blanks in his life and endear him to his wife and parents-in-law. Through the shattering of this make-believe world that the man has lived in for approximately twenty years, Gurnah shows just how difficult it is to bridge the gap between the self and the other, here defined by differences in race. The dominant message here is that turning one's back on the past does not rub it out. The fact that Gurnah does not romanticize life in exile may just be a way of echoing Cohen's idea that the community is constructed by the individual, the community does not construct the individual.[13] The protagonist's desire to see himself as complete with a family in England makes him view himself as an outsider in his home in Zanzibar. In the absence of the security and homeliness offered by his live-in partner Emma, he is rootless and solutions to his life lie in getting into another make-believe world. That is why at his brother Akbar's bidding

[13] See, A. P. Cohen in *Self Consciousness: An Alternative Anthropology of Identity*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, p 130.

to go back home in Zanzibar, he says, "but it wasn't home anymore, and I had no way of retrieving that seductive idea except through more lies" (p217). This then is a rejected character, displaced at home by a stepfamily more interested in themselves than his emotional needs. His flight to England is his way of trying to construct his own identity independent of his family. The spinning of tales offers a temporary reprieve, which inevitably falls apart, revealing its weakness and futility.

In *By the Sea*, when Saleh Omar takes the name Rajab Shabaan as a security measure as he leaves Zanzibar to seek asylum in Britain, the last person he expects to meet is Latif Mahmud, whose father's name he has taken. Hiding behind silence as his weapon of safety, the person called in as "the expert in his area" (p65) to help him in translating his language is none other than Latif Mahmud. They each look forward to the meeting with apprehension, for each recalls cumbersome baggage connected with the other. The two men meet for the first time in thirty-two years as lonely men in a foreign land grudgingly seeking the solace of each other's company. The meetings serve to unravel their past lives, which are characterized by deception, betrayal, love, possession and dispossession. From the old wounds of past bitterness, there seems to spring new relationships, which may just bridge gaps and delete grudges created by the old deceptions and injustices. The position of the self and other here constituted by economic imbalance, shifts and is finally dissolved when the two men realize that in this new terrain they are together on the 'other' side. "The Grinning Blackamoor" and "Mr. Showboat" realize that with hostile forces around them, they cannot afford to be on opposing sides. Again it is important to note that Gurnah paints a very gloomy picture of exile, showing that real comfort only comes through associating with one's own kith and kin, and much as exile offers refuge to the scattered, it carries no bliss. Predominant here again is the presentation of superior external forces as agents of dislocation.

In order to place Gurnah's works within the context of their setting, it is important to look at the recent history of Zanzibar. Jonathan Glassman[14] has presented a history that helps to bring out the origins of the social and racial class structures which inform the works of Gurnah. He looks at the roles of different newspapers in Zanzibar during the mid-nineteenth century in marking out different race or class identities within the island and even the Tanzanian mainland. *Africa Kwetu*, a newspaper run by one of the political parties existing then, Zanzibar Africa Association, sought to have Zanzibaris define their interests and political identities by descent, that is, clearly look at themselves in terms of ethnicity or race. They argued that "God and nature had fashioned humankind into irreducibly separate races and nations and that it was foolish and even blasphemous to mix them."[15] The Arab Association newspaper, *Al-Falaq*, later *Mwongozi*, edited by one Ali Muhsin al-Barwani, a member of one of Zanzibar's wealthiest families, led the way in espousing a notion of Zanzibar nationalism, aiming to forge an identity which subsumed all division of race and community and focused instead on common loyalty to the Sultan and Islam. Even as he advocated for a non-racial nationalist stance, Muhsin looked to creating a Zanzibar that was 'civilized', that is, free from non-Islamic elements. National identity meant Islam, respect for Middle Eastern culture, and loyalty to the Sultan.

Apart from looking at the way Zanzibari intellectuals used newspapers to craft local concepts of racial nationalism, Glassman presents concepts that foreground arguments on identity in the region such as barbarism and civilization, Arabization and *Ustaarabu*. The main idea was that civilization (*ustaarabu*) was characterized by Islam and an Arabic descent. Barbarians were non-Muslim Africans from the

[14] See J. Glassman, " Sorting Out the Tribes: The Creation of Racial Identities in Colonial Zanzibar's Newspaper Wars", *Journal of African History*, 41 (2000): 395-428.

[15] Glassman, p 395.

mainland. In the face of these sentiments, the mainland African was the best of example of the "other".

Until the revolution of January 1964, when its Sultan was deposed, Zanzibar was the only Arab-ruled country in Africa south of the Sahara. Before then, upto 1963 the domain the sultan of Zanzibar also included the coastal strip of Kenya, ten miles wide extending beyond the Tanganyika-Kenya border to Tana river, which was rented by the British Government and administered as part of Kenya.[16] At the end of the last century the sultans of Zanzibar claimed the overlordship of the coasts of Tanganyika and Kenya and their authority was recognized over much of the hinterland of Africa as far as Rhodesia and Congo, wherever Arab slave caravans penetrated.

The entire East African coast was subject for many centuries to trading ventures with some colonization, from Persia, Arabia, India and Somaliland and indirectly from China and the Mediterranean. By the tenth century A.D. there were many city states along the East African coast. These were predominantly Muslim and showed great influence from and undoubtedly traded with Arabia and Persia. Some of the former ruling groups were of Persian and Arabian origin, but they mixed with local families. Besides gold, the most important exports were slaves and ivory which were sent mainly to the Arabian Peninsula, Persia and India.

The Portuguese under Vasco da Gama first called at Zanzibar in early 1499. By 1525 the Portuguese had consolidated their rule over all coastal states and also over Oman, in southeastern Arabia. The East African ruling families then asked the Omanis for help in ridding themselves of the Portuguese. The Portuguese were driven from Pemba in 1695 and from Zanzibar in 1698. By 1729 they had lost all their East African

[16] See John Middleton and Jane Campbell, *Zanzibar: Its Society and its Politics*, Oxford University Press, London, New York, 1965.

possessions north of Mozambique and the coast was under the suzerainty of the Sultan Oman, although local Arab and other ruling families exercised effective power until the early nineteenth century. In 1745, the Yorubi dynasty in Oman was supplanted by the Busaidi dynasty. The change was recognized by the local rulers and Arab families of Zanzibar but not by those of Pemba, which had always been closely associated with the Mazrui family which ruled Mombasa. The Mazrui became increasingly unpopular and in 1821, a deputation consisting of two of the local rulers of Pemba, went to Muscat to ask for aid from Sultan Seyyid Said Bin Sultan in overthrowing the Mazrui ruler. In 1828, Seyyid Said himself led an expedition to Mombasa and subjected it in 1837.

Seyyid Said bin Sultan came not as a conqueror, but at the request of his blood brothers. During his reign, Seyyid Said established an impressive sphere of influence from the Persian Gulf well into the interior of eastern Africa, and Zanzibar became the paramount port of East Africa. The great wealth of the Sultanate was derived from the transshipment of slaves from the African mainland to Arabia, Persia, India and the islands of Mauritius and Reunion, and from the export of cloves, the planting of which had begun in about 1818 and greatly increased under Seyyid Said. Under Seyyid Said, the British interest in Zanzibar became paramount. In 1841, captain Hamerton arrived in Zanzibar as the first British representative and became British consul in 1834.

Germany began to make inroads into East Africa in 1884, and in 1885, they managed to annexe 60 000 square miles of the Sultan's mainland territories. In 1886, representatives of Germany and Great Britain met in the absence of the Sultan, sharing out the Sultan's former states, in the process starting off the decline of the Sultan's influence in the coastal region. Resulting from the meeting was the Delimitation Treaty, which enabled the British and German to appropriate the land

beyond the coastal strip to themselves. The British took the area between Unba and Tana rivers, while the Germans, the area between Unba and Rovuma rivers.

An important factor in the decline of Zanzibar was the gradual abolition of slave trade at the instigation of the British. This was a result of persistent pressure from missionaries and humanitarian interests.[17] The slave trade had been primarily in the hands of Arab and Indian slavers and traders with Zanzibar city as the main market for the transshipment of slaves. In addition the Arab-owned clove plantations in the islands were worked by slave labour. The abolition of slave trade therefore brought down the economy of the Sultanate.

The Zanzibar revolution of 1964 served to further undermine Arab control in Zanzibar. Fuelled by growing dissatisfaction with Arab rule, racial hatred leveled against islanders of non-Arab descent, the revolt led by one Field Marshall John Okello (a Ugandan), was aimed at freeing the island Africans from oppressive Arab rule. The period following the revolution marked a change in political power but political violence did not wane. Power wrangling continued for a number of years culminating in the murder in 1972 of Abeid Karume who had taken over leadership after the revolution. Karume's rule had been marked by dissatisfaction following increasing arrogance, a poor land policy among a myriad of other complaints. This led to mass movements of different cadres of people especially the educated. According to Clayton: "In despair, many Arabs took their children to the mainland or abroad, and young Africans saw little need to work."[18]

[17] See Anthony Clayton, *The Zanzibar Revolution and Its Aftermath*, C. Hurst and Company, London, 1981.

[18] Clayton, p 143.

The history of Zanzibar indicates different periods of slave activities, trading caravans from into the interior mainland and colonization from different forces. These are aptly represented by Gurnah's texts under study. *Paradise* narrates the historical period before colonialism dealing with trading caravans from the coast into the interior without omitting the racial and class differences that Glassman mentions in the historical account. *By the Sea* and *Admiring Silence* are representative of the period immediately after the revolution when thousands fled due to the turbulent period occasioned by Karume's misrule. This is also the period that Gurnah defines as, "a time of hardship and anxiety, and of state terror", when he also fled in search of safety and fulfilment. It is likely that this is also the period Rajab Shaaban, a character in *By the Sea* refers to when he says, "Those were the years after independence and soon after that the time of austerity, years of cruelty and uncertainty, hardly a time for bringing a baby into a blighted world" (p 150).

Jacqueline Bardolph sees East Africa before the First World War as forming a historical backdrop to the novels. To her, Gurnah uses the novels to retell history and sees him as giving "the past an immediacy through the narrow subjective vision of young Yusuf."[19] *Paradise* and *Admiring Silence* are presented through a series of stories that are in a sense, parodies of Africa and the West and the meaning of the relationship between Uncle and nephew remains blurred in this context. Away from parodies, she says,

> … the uncle figure exerts on a younger man an unquestionable fascination. The uncle dominates and is loved for it. *Paradise* in particular probes the many dimensions of this attraction, that of a man in a world where values of courage dignity and fairness are central to the culture… Gurnah does not describe the

[19] See J. Bardolph, "Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* and *Admiring Silence*: History, stories and the Figure of the Uncle", Derek White (ed), *Contemporary African Fiction*, Bayreuth University, Bayreuth, 1997, p 79.

> crush of a young man to the father figure … but explores how people in a dependant position may come to enjoy having a master.[20]

The domination and dependence that Bardolph talks about here forms the foundation of the activities that go on in the novels under study.

The main reason prompting this study is that, Abdulrazak Gurnah, despite having published seven books, one of which (*Paradise*) was short-listed for the Booker Prize, is still better known in the field of African literature for his work as a critic than as a creative writer.[21] His works based on the East African coast and the island of Zanzibar, remain in the backyard of critical attention, attracting paltry acknowledgement from critics and reviews. His first work appeared almost two decades ago, yet it took the short-listing of his fourth novel for the Booker Prize, to open critics' eyes to the quality of his work. So far only short essays covering negligible aspects of his works are available. Given that Gurnah's works are among the most substantive creative works done in English based on that region, this apathetic treatment to his works is suppressive to literary development in the region. It is my hope and belief that research of the nature that I am undertaking will serve to open up the works of Gurnah to consumption and further study, within East Africa and even further a field throughout Africa.

In Chapter two I look into the ways Gurnah positions his characters against ideas of diaspora and displacement against a backdrop of multiple ideas of home. I argue that Gurnah presents homes that are fluid and perishable, and which are rife with violence against the members. In Chapter 3, I explore Gurnah's use of the idea of otherness. In this chapter, I argue that Gurnah's idea of otherness operates outside the ancient ideas where the 'other' was defined purely by difference in race. In

[20] Bardolph, p 86-7.
[21] Bardolph, p 77.

Chapter 4, I explore Gurnah's presentation of the family and the level of violence that informs the families that he presents. Generally this chapter looks at the forces that expose families to violence and how the said families respond to these forces. The conclusion summarizes major findings about Gurnah's presentation of diaspora and displacement in the East African coast and the islands and how he uses different structures like the home, the self and the family to do this.