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Diaspora and displacement in the fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah

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CHAPTER FOUR

"HE AINT YOUR UNCLE": FAMILY, BELONGING AND NON-BELONGING

A reading of Gurnah's works reveals an incredible level of violence within families, carried out as if to satisfy whims. The family and the domestic space form the starting point of major transactions including debt settlement, which often come in form of bonded slaves as in the case of Khalil Amina and Yusuf in *Paradise*. Within the family, there are inequities and domination; patriarchy and dictatorship are synonymous, as fathers rule over their wives and children, often ignoring their interests. Invasion of the family by external forces puts a strain on family ties posing a threat to the very sense of belonging. The accepted norms within family set-ups such as security, love and belonging are perverted as the "family" becomes the starting point of violation of basic rights. In this chapter I interrogate the sources of these perversions with a view of establishing the link, if any, with the attendant pessimism that runs all through Gurnah's texts. I seek to explore his usage of the components in the family structure, especially the figure of the 'uncle', slavery as a social structure and the characters' use of memory retrieval or creative amnesia as a way of creating a sense of belonging.

The family unit that Gurnah presents is rife with instability and a shifting sense of belonging. Violence within and against the family manifests at unbelievably high levels. The family relationships presented in the three texts under study show an incredible lack of coherence and survival. Where there is no physical scattering of family members, there is a clear lack of cohesiveness and commitment. Again the level of hopelessness that Gurnah depicts here, as I have mentioned in the previous chapter, points towards the elusiveness of paradise that runs right through his texts. This serves to highlight his pessimism. The source of this pessimism can be traced to

his own personal experience as an exile; an indicator of the hardships, anxiety and terror that he had gone through. He explains this in an interview:

> I began to write casually, in some anguish, without any sense of plan, but pressed by the desire to say more […] it was that lost life that I wrote about, the lost place and what I remembered of it. And as I wrote, I found myself overcome for the first time by the bitterness and futility of the recent time we had lived through.[1]

Much as Gurnah admits to drawing from personal experience of his personal life, this to me does not provide enough justification for the level of pessimism he displays. Gareth Griffiths defines Gurnah as transcultural writer.[2] His works fit into this definition because of the way he presents the transcultural nature of East Africa and its islands, as opposed to earlier narratives that focused on a uniform culture. His work then qualifies to fit into what Kwame Anthony Appiah defines as, "postrealist", "postnativist", transnational writings, which take a pessimistic stance as they narrate postcolonialism in order to counter earlier optimistic writings of the nationalists.[3] Gurnah, looked at within Appiah's reasoning, is involved in challenging the nationalist novels, proposing a new way of looking at the postcolonial situation, "based in an appeal to a certain simple respect for human suffering". Since human suffering can never be totally alleviated, there is no better way to look at it than to be pessimistic.

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[1] From, "Writing and Place", *World Literature Today*, May – August 2004 p26

[2] Griffiths p308.

[3] See K. A. Appiah, "Is the Post in Postmoderism the Post- in Postcolonial?", *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Winter 1991), p353.

The alienation of characters is presented at different levels: temporary alienation where there is a faint hope of re-uniting with the family, and a more permanent one where there is no hope of ever re-uniting with the family. Slavery, exile (forced or self-imposed), external forces like the 'uncle' factor, all contribute to the different levels of alienation.

The basic connotation of 'family' is of a biological grouping where two adults of the opposite sex come together under certain legal requirements, for the major purpose of procreation and propagation of offspring. Family is also a social construct where members' belonging is not only defined within the confines of biological connections. Cases like adoptions, step parenting and fostering still fall within the definitions of 'family' but are more of social than biological. The dividing line between 'family' and 'home' often becomes blurred as families are generally defined by a shared residence, also referred to as 'household' or 'home'. But according to D.W. Ball, "The household is a spatial concept and refers to a group of persons (or a person) bound to a place whereas families are groups of persons bound together by ties of blood and marriage."[4] The kind of definition that links the family to a household therefore tends to give the family a kind of boundless quality, as people sharing a space may not necessarily be family members and family members do not always have to share a space. For instance, children may be away in boarding school.

In defining the family within the confines of modern Western societies, Faith Robert Elliot sees the family as a unit consisting of a husband a wife and their children.[5] This unit is widely thought of as a group based on marriage and biological parenthood, as

[4] See D.W. Ball, "The Family as a Sociological Problem", in Skolnick, A. and Skolnick, J.H. (eds) *Intimacy, Family and Society*, Boston 1974.

[5] See F. R. Elliot, *The Family: Change or Continuity?* Macmillan Education Limited, Hampshire and London, 1991, p 23.

sharing a common residence and as united by ties of affection, obligations of care and support and a sense of common identity. This definition clearly reflects traditional beliefs as to the way in which sexual and parental relationships ought to be ordered. It is likely to have arisen from some early social science definition of the family, which however is limiting and does not encompass contemporary situations like unmarried co-habitation. Marriage itself is a fluid concept, which carries different connotations within various communities. The question that arises out of reading such definitions is whether paid residential house-helps should be considered as part of the family. If not then the idea of a common residence fails to apply, if yes then the position of such a servant negates the idea of 'biological parenthood'. Either way, providing a fitting definition of 'family' becomes problematic, as each definition seems limiting.

According to Michael Drake, the changing nature of the family as an institution has made providing a fitting definition increasingly difficult. "'Family' has had a somewhat rougher ride in recent years with some people pointing out its restrictive, even oppressive role; an arena of conflict as much as consensus."[6] The increase in illegitimate births (leading to single parenthood), divorces, "paperless marriages"[7] and same-sex pairings, have all contributed to this changing nature of 'family'. The family appears to be a restrictive site for women and children, the latter who are always left unstable both emotionally and often physically in the event of a divorce and the former lorded over and oppressed by their husbands. Elliot in a conclusive view says,

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[6] See M. Drake, 'Introduction' in *Time Family and Community: Perspectives on Family and Community History*, (ed) Michael Drake, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford and Cambridge, 1995 p1.

[7] A term used by the Scandinavians to describe relatively stable and relatively traditional unions that exist without the benefit of a marriage ceremony. See Drake, p 5.

> '[T]he family' is what a particular group views it to be. [T]he attempt to define the family in a specific way is misconceived because it obscures the diversity of family arrangements. Thus it has been argued that we are all engaged in 'defining "the family" by ways in which we think and act in relation to whom we label as family and non-family', that these definitions vary over time, between cultures and even within cultures, and that we should be wary of giving the idea of "the" family some fixed "thing-like quality, thereby perhaps smuggling some notion of a universal or unchanging family.[8]

This justifies the fact that diversity does not allow a universal definition of 'family'. Therefore, definition is solely dependent on the prevailing circumstances. Even then, in my view, the family should foster a sense of belonging for the members whether biological or social. Unity by ties of affection, obligations of care and support among family members as mentioned by Elliot above, form the basis of cohesiveness of the family. Non-belongingness is therefore informed by insensitivity to the feelings of the members especially the vulnerable like children, lack of acceptance and love, all leading to a sense of insecurity. Whatever form of family we are considering, its ability to reconstitute or reconstruct itself is largely dependent on a healing process based on a loving as opposed to a hostile atmosphere. Even in the event of fragmentation brought about by violations of individual rights like the case of the dehumanizing effects of slavery, the family presents dramatic resilience and resistance to decimation, all made possible through a healing process premised on love and understanding.

The family presented by Gurnah in his texts is reflective of the dilemma faced by theorists in finding a foolproof definition of the term. The households here are composed of groups living in quasi-kinship groupings that defy fitting definitions.

[8] See Elliot p 5.

The biological set-up in Yusuf's family in *Paradise* gives way to an adoptive family of uncle Aziz where Yusuf and Khalil appear to take the place of sons in the family, which Khalil sardonically refers to as 'one happy family in the garden of paradise' (p207). Ironically to Amina, Aziz's younger wife, the home is her idea of hell, 'if there is hell on earth, then it is here' (p229). The two boys occupy an ambivalent space between belonging and non-belonging. Aziz is only a surrogate father, playing the role of a social father, even planning to acquire wives for them. On the other hand they are forbidden access to the center of the household; they must occupy the periphery, like the servants they really are.

Love and belonging are elusive as parents shirk their core responsibilities of providing security and stability to the children. In a sense, parents tend to perpetuate violence against their children. Yusuf's father in *Paradise* fails in his responsibility as a protective father when he gives up the son into bondage. In *By the Sea,* both parents are perpetually absent from their children's lives. While the mother is preoccupied with her promiscuous escapades, the father is equally steeped in his alcoholic indulgences. As an adult, all Latif can remember of the childhood days he spent with his parents are their weaknesses. He says of his father:

> Later in the afternoon he went out and sometimes returned late at night, the worst for wear and shamed by drink. […] I wonder whether he walked with his head lowered because he knew that his father would not have esteemed him, or because he feared that we did not reverence him and would never think to mention him to our children, or because he knew he had lost our mother's love. (86)

Here is a father who is not only emotionally distant from his family, but has also lost his self-confidence. It does not come as a surprise therefore that this family soon after suffers disintegration, which the narrator describes thus:

> My parents barely tolerated each other, and Hassan had found new friends much older than himself. My mother went out most afternoons and did not return until the middle of the evening. My father came home later smelling of drink. (p96)

This family no longer operates as a single cohesive unit, but rather as discrete units lacking in familial ties, thanks to parents who are too preoccupied with personal past-times at the expense of the children's emotional welfare.

The narrator in *Admiring Silence* moves from one semi-biological family to another. In his own family in Zanzibar, he is a stepchild, the biological link only existing between him and his mother. In England, the biological link is created by Amelia, but within an unmarried co-habitation set up. No sense of belonging is forged here as dissatisfaction with this informal arrangement soon casts the different parties asunder and there is no family anymore. When Rajab Shaaban loses his family in *By the Sea*, he seeks to create one composed of Latif Mahmud and Rachel the social worker, who is a constant reminder of his long dead daughter. Family here is more defined by a shared residence and loose kinship than biological ties.

Gurnah presents us with different facets of slavery, in the process drawing attention to the significance of the activity in the historical milieu of the texts under narration, and even within the families presented. Slavery here takes three forms, the first of which is the traditional form which involved the forceful capture and sale of human beings. Only subtle mention is made of this form. More overtly presented are pawnship and domestic slavery. Mzee Hamdani the slave gardener in *Paradise* falls within the definition of domestic slavery, while Amina, Khalil and Yusuf are pawns, just as the mother of the narrator in *Admiring Silence*.

Pawnship, even though grouped within the tenets of slavery, operates quite differently. It is a system where individuals are held in debt-bondage as collateral for loans. Pawns are exchanged in formal agreements and are redeemable after payment of the debt or after labouring to redeem themselves.[9] While slaves lived with masters they hardly knew and were handled like chattels, pawns were taken in by people well known to the pawns' families and could at times be remotely related to them. Pawnship depended upon recognition of kinship, while slavery denied the existence of kinship. The use of pawns is indicative of disparate economic abilities between the families involved. The prevalence of this practice appeared to be related to poverty and inability of individuals to meet their basic needs. The decision to pawn off a family member arose out of utmost despair and pointed to people having reached the end of their economic tether.

The uncle figure presents another form of family dis-membering. He represents domination and oppression by superior forces, yet the victims feel bound to these forces and are powerless to resist the encroachment into their privacy. At the heart of this domination is the inequity of power and wealth admired and yearned for by the oppressed. It is this desire for wealth, often held by the uncle that drives every activity in the novels, leading parents to pawn their children as collateral for debts, ultimately creating dislocation and displacement from the family. Uncle Hashim in *Admiring Silence* is described as "[A] merchant of means and reputation, with interests and contracts all over the world" (p 115). Uncle Hussein in *By the Sea*, is "[A] tall man dressed in a kanzu… embroidered in silver thread in the style of the merchants from the gulf" (p 82). And Uncle Aziz in *Paradise,*

[9] For an in depth discussion on different forms of slavery and pawnship see, E.P. Lovejoy and T Fanlola, (eds), *Pawnship, Slavery and Colonialism in Africa*, Africa World Press, Trenton and Asmara, 2003 and Fisher and Fisher, *Slavery and Muslim Society in Africa: The Institution in Saharan and Sudanic Africa and the Trans-Saharan Trade*, C. Hurst and Company, London, 1970.

> With his refined airs and his polite, impassive manner, […] looked more like a man on a late afternoon stroll or a worshipper on the way to evening prayers than a merchant who had picked his way past bushes of thorn and nests of vipers spitting poison. (p 3)

All the three uncles are rich and stylish in their dressing with manners that are characteristic of a certain higher class. They carry an aura of confidence which points to their superiority over the other members of the family.

Jacqueline Bardolph looks at the uncle figure as a replacement for the absent and ineffective father figure to the young men with whom he (the uncle) interacts. She sees the young men as seeking to forge a patriarchal identity with the uncle figure to fill the gap in their lives.[10] While this reasoning carries a lot of logic (even physically present fathers are emotionally absent from their sons, like in the case of Hassan and Latif), the success of the relationship between the young men and the uncle remains tentative and in some instances disruptive. While Aziz and Yusuf in *Paradise* enjoy a fairly cordial relationship, despite the racial difference, the same does not apply to Uncle Hashim in *Admiring Silence*. His appearance in the family provides economic relief alongside emotional turbulence to the protagonist-narrator. His inclusion in the family is disruptive to the young man and the subsequent instability and exclusion he suffers lays a foundation to his future failures in life.

Gurnah's introduction of an affluent figure in a quasi-kinship relationship in the family arena, complicates the whole idea of economic exploitation and domination. The dealings between the family and the uncle are not coerced or informed by intimidation, but are mutual and arise out of the said family's desire to identify with

[10] 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 85.

the aura of success that surrounds the uncle. The uncle figure comes in, not as an exploiter, but as a senior partner and friend whose interaction with the family is cordial, and there are no hostilities displayed:

> He generally brought something everyday: some fish we would have for supper, fine fruit or vegetable which caught his eye, coffee beans and sweet dates, a pot of honey which he bought from a Somali sailor, covered in tight fitting hessian sleeve, another time aromatic gum and myrrh and sometimes whimsical objects which he handed over without comment, a Chinese phrase book for me, a rosary for Hassan.(p88)

> I remember how happy my father was in that month or so that Uncle Hussein stayed with us, how fulfilled he seemed in the discovery of a new friend and how he seemed more like a father then he had ever been before: assured and opinionated, peremtory with his affection and his demands, busily brushing us aside to get on with his own consuming business, coming and going with male self-importance in the company of his worldly men friends. (p90)

The scenario that Gurnah presents here is indicative of family compliance, even benefit from the intruder. The failure of the business transaction is therefore not a result of an express intent to exploit and dominate, but rather a show of ineptitude and a lack of business acumen on the part of the 'exploited'.

Uncle Aziz starts the process of the disintegration of Yusuf's family when he takes Yusuf away as *rehani* (bond-servant). When the father dies while Yusuf is away, nobody gets to know what becomes of the now lonely mother. The fragmented family can never be put together again. On the whole Aziz comes out more as the wronged than the perpetrator. Although he does not get to be paid his debt following the death of the debt holder, he prepares to elevate Yusuf to the position of a partner:

> 'We'll discuss the plans later, to see what work you can best do for me,' Uncle Aziz said pleasantly. 'I'm getting tired of all this travelling. You can do that for me…' (p241)

He seems to genuinely care for the boys' welfare and warns them against the ruthless Germans who were out to kidnap people and make them porters for their army: 'If you see them coming shut up the shop at once and get out of sight. You've heard what the Germans can do, haven't you?' (p242)

Gurnah's presentation of slavery here to me is not limited to providing an insider's expose of the ills of the practice as Griffiths suggests,[11] but rather to present the diversity of economic activities in the East African littoral and the mainland. Even as he talks about slavery, Gurnah does not dwell on the real brutal version as presented by Segal[12] or Fisher and Fisher, but presents the system of slavery that Watson describes as the open system whereby slaves were accorded the same rights as illegitimate sons and eventually incorporated into the family. In the closed system, slaves were never under any circumstances absorbed into their masters' kinship groups.[13]

Much as the 'family' Gurnah presents is largely depicted as suffering dispersal in the hands of external forces like slavery and the figure of the 'Uncle', the internal force–

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[11] Gareth Griffiths says Gurnah, "contextualises the more unsavoury and brutal accounts of slavery, recorded by missionaries and others in earlier times, without denying the essentially dehumanizing nature of this unhappy form of human trafficking. The novel shows an insider view of the involvement of Arab coastal dwellers and the peoples of the inland tribes in the slave trade." *Africa Literatures in English: East and West*, Longman, Harlow, 2000, p 313.

[12] See R. Segal, *Islam's Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora*, Farar, Straux and Giroux, New York 2001.

[13] Watson J.L. (ed) "Introduction", *Asian and African Systems of Slavery*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1980

parts of the family structure—are not innocent either. The 'father' in Gurnah's fiction has been defined by his absence or weakness, moral or otherwise. He is characterized by emotional and sometimes even physical absence. He is a weak character and this helps to facilitate family dispersal. In a community where economic superiority signals power, most fathers here are known by their economic inferiority. In *Paradise*, Yusuf's father, a failure as far as trading is concerned, can only tell stories of all that he had tried his hands at and failed: "Yusuf heard him complain of how his life had gone wrong, and everything he had tried had failed" (p5). This trend of failure extends further when he pawns off Yusuf and fails to redeem him, effectively scattering the family. The same evasive economic success deprived him of his first family. His first wife's proud parents described him as "not blessed with prosperity" (p14), and went ahead to abduct the wife and two sons.

The reader only gets acquainted with the other father in this text through recounting of stories. Khalil describes his father who also happens to be Amina's foster father as a perpetually poor man who "couldn't repay his debt in this world or the next" (p190). He is brave enough to save Amina from the hands of cruel slavers, but gives her up into servitude soon after. Khalil's father may not have had an express intention of using Amina as a pawn, for he even went into the trouble of adopting her legally, but he lacked business acumen, and could not service his debt, so the family had to bear the brunt of this weakness.

Admiring Silence abounds with emotionally and physically absent fathers. The protagonist's biological father's absence sets the stage for the protagonist's emotional exclusion and displacement. Uncle Hashim the stepfather is only accessible to his biological children, completely ignoring the narrator: "My stepfather, whom I was instructed to call Ba but could never manage to, all my life, treated me politely, like a relative who was staying with them. I don't think he worried much about me" (p116).

He describes his own failure as a father when his daughter Amelia abandons him as "a blundering through life" (p 217).

Aziz the merchant in *Paradise* may not be a biological father, for his two marriages have so far failed to yield offspring, but he is a surrogate father to the two bond-servants, Yusuf and Khalil. His relationship with them is marked by long periods of absence, when he traverses the hinterland in search of trading opportunities. Even then the master-servant position does not change. While Khalil acknowledges his servitude and keeps telling Yusuf "He ain't your uncle" (p 23, 191), Yusuf only realizes towards the end of the book he is not actually a son but a servant: " 'I am a servant,' said Yusuf, savoring the humiliation" (157).

By the Sea presents a father whose role and power are undermined by a promiscuous wife and a cruel and malicious 'Uncle' Hussein. His sons have long lost respect and love for him for his lack of control over the mother and the family affairs. The appearance of Hussein therefore provides the boys with the missing ideal father figure and the elder boy, Hassan, easily falls prey to the sly merchant's cruel schemes, accepts his seduction and runs away with him. When an opportunity presents itself for the younger son to leave the country to go to Europe for further studies, he takes off without any intention of ever coming back or getting in touch with his parents again:

> I wanted nothing to do with them, and their hatreds and demands. Their hatreds of each other, the hatred that made him rage and mumble and fall into that corrosive silence of his. I know you are not supposed to be able to say that about your parents, but it was a bit of luck being able to escape from GDR into a kind of anonymity, even to be able to change my name, to escape from them. (p239)

In all the three texts the father plays a major role in family alienation, either directly or indirectly, but mainly through his weaknesses or absence. In most instances it all stems from the father's economic inferiority, and in some a gross misjudgment, as is the case of Omar Shabaan in his dealings with Hussein the merchant in *By the Sea*.

Ironically, the economic success enjoyed by Aziz, does not translate to paternal success, for he has so far failed to become a biological father, seeing that none of his two wives has a child. Amina lives a life no different from that of a slave, confined to the Seyyid's house, as the elder wife shows tendencies of sexual starvation, hankering after Yusuf's attention. The charm and power Aziz seems to wield over his business partners and the young men he come in contact withs, does not measure in the same way in his household, for the wives only display dissatisfaction with their situation and in a subtle way; sexual starvation.

The protagonist narrator in *Admiring Silence* lives in the make-believe world of stories which, 'refuses closure' crumbles and he ceases to be a husband. But it had all started earlier when his father, Abbas, had walked out on the protagonist's mother son after his conception. Latif's father in *By the Sea*, lacks control over his wife who runs around with other men, leading to family disintegration.

In *Paradise* and *Admiring Silence*, wives and mothers are subdued and denied voice. Yusuf's mother has no say when her son is given away as *rehani;* moreover, she is constantly reminded of her inferior status against her husband's first wife who, being an Arab, was considered to be of noble descent. Yusuf's father never missed a chance to remind his wife of her inferiority: "[T]he daughter of a hill tribesman from the back of Taita, who lived in a smoking hut and wore a stinking goatskin, and thought five goats and two sacks of beans a good price for any woman" (p13). Wives and mothers here suffer emotional violence and displacement without moving from the domestic sphere. The protagonist's mother in *Admiring Silence*, is a bond-wife to her

first husband Abbas. This binds her so that when the husband runs away, she is taken over by his uncle Hashim. In both cases, she has no say, everything is decided and executed above her head.

In narrating the East African space, Gurnah tends to conflate wifehood and motherhood. It is only in Emma in *Admiring Silence*, that we first meet a mother who is not at the same time a wife, for she is a live-in partner. She is in control of the situation and is able to walk out when she feels it is no longer suitable for her. Instead of being the one to suffer displacement, she unleashes instability on her live-in partner of twenty years leaving him emotionally displaced and depressed. In *By the Sea,* Asha, Latif's mother, uses her political connections to get even with Shabaan over long-standing family feuds finally landing him in exile.

The children in these texts are mostly as subdued as their mothers. They are reduced to the level of commodities and used to settle debts without a care for their feelings. Hassan in *By the Sea* and Amelia, the protagonist's daughter in *Admiring Silence*, break away from parental oppression and seek alternatives which they deem suitable for them. While Amelia moves from her father's house to live with a friend in the same locality, promising to keep in touch, Hassan sneaks off without telling anyone. He only comes back after thirty-two years when he is sure his parents are dead and his sole interest is to inherit their property. In both cases the parents lay the foundation for emotional instability which lead the children out of home, leading the parents to suffer the anxiety of not knowing their fate.

Different family members contribute towards family dispersal in varying ways. Within the family, the father plays the major role, while from outside of the family, "Uncle' steps in to wreak havoc in the family.

Politics also functions as agent of displacement. The narrator describes the effects of politics as follows:

> But politics also brought shocking things to the surface. We liked to think of ourselves as a moderate and mild people. Arab, African, Comorian: we lived alongside each other, quarreled and sometimes intermarried. Civilized, that's what we were. We liked to be described like that, and we described ourselves like that. In reality, we were nowhere near *we*, but us in our separate yards, locked in our historical ghettoes, self-forgiving and seething with intolerance, with racism and with resentments. And politics brought all that into the open. (p66-7)

The fact that politics brings out the intolerance between people in a community indicates the disruptive nature of politics. This clearly is another way in which displacement is carried out in community and even within families. The disruption of Rajab's family in *By the Sea*, is a result of direct activities related to politics of the day. Domestic rivalry between him and the family of Omar Shaaban, quickly degenerates into a political stand-off, which lands Rajab in jail. He becomes a victim of recent African leaders' most 'handy' tool of political oppression, detention without trial. His wife and daughter die while he is incarcerated. In the face of mounting hostility and insecurity, he is forced to flee from his country to go into exile in England. Political power is used as an agent of scattering in this family.

Displacement whether emotional or physical, creates a feeling of abandonment, that is why the protagonist in *Admiring Silence* in the absence of the father figure Ahmed, immediately feels the sense of unbelonging:

> But in no time at all after I moved, I was overcome by the enormity of my abandonment, like someone weeping in a crowd. I was astonished by the

> sudden surge of loneliness and terror I felt when I realized how stranded I was in this hostile place. (p83)

As shown in the above passage, the displaced feel stranded and may experience hostility. This is a situation that has been brought about by the withdrawal of support structures akin to the family set-up. To experience a sense of belonging, there is need for one to be within certain supportive structures, whether social or material which offer emotional buoyancy. Whenever a biological family fails to offer the same due to interferences whether external or internal, the sense of belonging is shattered leading to insecurity and a feeling of displacement even within the apparent safety of the family or community.

In this chapter I have looked how Gurnah presents the family in the face of diaspora and displacement. I have looked at how different components of the family serve to mete out violence, in the process creating insecurity and a sense of non-belonging and rootlessness. Gurnah presents a shifting sense of family, affected by travel, migration, economic activities, rivalry and quests for revenge. I see Gurnah as presenting the ideal family, not as a biological grouping, but as any grouping that provides a sense of belonging. I have argued that Gurnah's presentation of hopelessness in the family, the very depth of cruelty shown, can only be indicative of his pessimism about the current postcolonial society.

The uncle figure, as used here, represents a superior external power that steps in to dismember the family. But as presented in the foregoing argument, the interference does not start and end with the uncle, nor is alienation as perpetuated by the uncle more severe. Even from within the intimacy of the family, a sense of belonging is often in jeopardy.