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Diaspora and displacement in the fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah

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CHAPTER THREE

SELF, OTHER AND COMMUNITY

The novels *Paradise, Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea* are involved in a presentation of inequities of power within communities where power is defined by hierarchies of domination between groups as well as within families. This helps to place the economically and politically empowered at the top; women children and the economically weak are dominated and relegated to the bottom rung of the social ladder. Violations against the self are rife and are perpetuated through the idea of an imagined inferiority of the same against a superior other. While trade represents the individualistic enterprise which signals power, the capacity to trade is marked by distinct differences underpinned by colour and religion. In this chapter I explore the idea of the self and other that helps to define the said inequities. My argument in this chapter is that the idea of otherness as presented by Gurnah, transcends the time frame within which it has hitherto been defined to operate even within intra-racial settings. Further, it can and is effectively used as a reason for the violence meted out against the individual. I also seek to interrogate the connection that Gurnah makes between the pre-colonial communities that he narrates and the nascent imperialism. I try to draw a relationship between the foregoing and the idea of otherness as posited in Edward Said's *Orientalism.*[1]

[1] In *Orientalism:* Edward Said's notion of 'othering' was directly aimed at the understanding the colonizer's representation of the colonized, specifically the West 's(the Occident's) understanding of the Orient, but its broad principles are applicable to most relationships defined by the twin matrices of the insider versus the outsider; relationships which are often rooted in prejudices and stereotypes, imaginary rather than the real knowledge; relationships rooted in the negativity of the outsider against which the insider's true worth must be measured.

In looking at the idea of 'otherness', I focus on how Gurnah uses character construction to present the same, and the voice and narrative perspectives he employs. *Paradise* is presented through a limited omniscient narrator whose focus is on Yusuf, the protagonist, following him through his journeys of growth. Even though he does not speak directly, his voice comes through the narrator in the process of his interaction with other characters. Through the use of the first person narrator in *Admiring Silence*, Gurnah speaks through the subjugated other, presenting his woes and his way of grappling with the predicament he finds himself in. The unnamed protagonist narrator is an 'other' at the family level, just as he also suffers some subtle forms of violence as a result of his race. In the kitchen where he works part-time, he is told, "Thousands can just walk off the plane and live off us, but you are not doing that in my kitchen, young man" (p 58). Though not overtly subjected to violence, he is perpetually reminded of his difference, denigrated for his dependence and generally excluded. That is why he says the following in relation to his search for a job: "I saw a sign in the restaurant window advertising a vacancy: Staff Required. My suspicion was that it didn't mean me. I had lost confidence in my desirability, and I could not conceive myself as staff" (p55). Because of his difference (read: race), he does not see this notice as inclusive of him, it must be meant for those of a more desirable race than his.

By the Sea presents a dual vocal narrative technique whereby the two speakers are involved in a dialogue with each other. The two narrators are in exile in England from Zanzibar. Latif is a migrant, living and working in England with no intention whatsoever of going back to Zanzibar while Rajab is forced to flee from his country and seek asylum due to threats to his life from political forces back at home. Both suffer exclusion due to their race and/or religion. The reader is able to glimpse into the lives of the two characters, past and present, through their own accounts of the same through narrations. Once again they are lent voice, which enables them to present their sentiments and experiences.

In all three texts, Gurnah gives voice to the subjugated self even though the voices come out as 'passive' and oppressed. Some of the superior characters are shrouded in an 'active silence'. I say active because even in their silence, their oppressive presence is still felt. Aziz in *Paradise* is silent in the background but actively perpetrates violence against the other characters. His slaves and his wives feel his presence even in his absence because of the structures within which he confines them. The two boys Khalil and Yusuf, are slaves and they are confined to a space that helps to define their servitude. The same applies to the wives who are confined to the house. Although they are able to speak about their condition, they do so through a subdued, passive voice, a voice that does not get them out of the oppressive situation. If anything, it is easier to see them as whining about their subjugated station as opposed to actively speaking against it. Many times the attempts made to move out of such conditions are half-hearted and feeble and are doomed to failure. Yusuf is one such example: his talk about moving on, having no foolproof strategy, simply crumbles and comes to naught as he follows the German soldiers at the end of the novel into another life of servitude. The subjugated are not involved in an active answering back to the subjugating forces.

In some instances superior voices are heard as they describe and confine the 'others' to their 'subalternity'. They speak for their races, religion or economic class. The porters in Aziz's trading caravan define the inland tribes they come across by their supposed savagery and/orbarnarism. The 'savages' in this case are denied voice; they are seen and described, but offer no defense against the stereotypes leveled against them. Rajab Shaaban in *By the Sea,* breaks his self-imposed silence to come to defend himself against discriminatory treatment, but this does not change the fact of the existing racial difference. He is dubbed 'Mr. Showboat' for the simple reason that he is different, inferior and therefore any kind of identity can be fixed on him by the

speaker, who looks at him not as an individual, but as a member of a group. He is an 'other' because he comes from an inferior group.

The idea of otherness has been in existence since antiquity between and among communities where there are marked ethnic, religious and gender distinctions. In the Biblical times, there existed the superior Jew against the inferior Gentile. Ancient Romans spoke of non-Romans as 'barbarians' thus confining them to a position of 'other'. As Said explains: "[T]he division goes back to Greek thought about barbarians, but, whoever originated this kind of identity thought, by the nineteenth century it had become a hallmark of imperialist cultures as well as those cultures trying to resist the encroachments of Europe."[2] So therefore, the modern version of 'otherness' finds its genesis from the mid-nineteenth and twentieth century when the emergence of the industrial revolution changed the lives of the people living in Europe, North America and indirectly most of the world. The conditions of life changed, making traditional wisdom and religion less relevant to everyday life. With the advent of such features of modernity, the development of new communications and military technologies, emerged categories such as 'primitive', 'savage' and a motley of other such derogatory terms to describe those who still practiced the traditional wisdom, in essence those who were different from the modern (western) world:

> During the Modernist period, Western anthropologist, despite admirable attempts at objectivity, tended to represent the world through Western conventions, as if the latter were normative, natural or given. Western culture taking its paradigm from its sciences, was to be the universal *self*: non-Western culture was to be entirely *Other*.[3] [emphasis added]

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[2] See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, London, 1994, p xxviii.

[3] See T. McEvilly, *Art and Otherness: Crisis in Cultural Identity*, McPherson and Company, New York, 1992.

More explicitly put, white men considered themselves superior to black men; the standard measure of being or non-being is the white for 'not only must the black man be black, he must be black in relation to the white man.'[4]

Gurnah's treatment of 'the self' against an 'other' is not entirely based on what (for instance) Homi Bhabha talks about when he says that, "[D]espite the play in the colonial system which is crucial to its exercise of power, colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other'";[5] his idea of othering is based on factors that go beyond the colonizer-colonized paradigm, to operate with religious difference, economic differentiation and imaginary geographical spaces. This is overtly evident in *Paradise* and appears more covertly in *Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea*. *Paradise* is set in the period just before the advent of colonialism, therefore 'otherness' as it appears here is not entirely emergent from the colonial exercise of power. The latter two texts however display substantial elements of Bhabha and Said's brand of otherness.

A superior self defines the position of the other in Gurnah's works. The experiences of the individual are used as pointers to the experiences of the wider community. He deviates from the usual East African writers' (re)presentation whereby focus is fixed on the larger community, effectively shifting focus from the individual. Gurnah chooses to take an approach that is different from his predecessors who have earlier narrated the East African political situation. Pioneer East African writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, wrote confrontational narratives that depicted the African as a victim of atrocities committed against him by the colonizer. Presenting the African as a

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[4] See Fanon Franz, *Black Skins, White Masks*, Grove Press, New York, 1952, p110.

[5] See H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London 1994, p70.

monolith, they collapsed boundaries paying little or no attention to the cellular units that form the nation states that they narrated.[6] Gurnah differs by focusing first on the individual and then placing him in the wider community.

The self is a minute unit forming the larger community. The same is constructed through comparative positioning against an inferior or superior other. Even then, the self does not exist in a vacuum; the meaning of the reality of the self is viewed within the larger community. The self belongs to a family and the family forms the larger community. The self is assertive, striving to convince of its existence. Jessica Benjamin in taking a psychoanalytic stance advances the Freudian theory of identification which states that the apparent boundaries of the self are actually permeable; an apparently isolated subject constantly assimilates what is outside of itself. Looking at the 'self' as the 'ego', she goes on to explain: "The ego is not really independent and self-constituting, but is actually made up of objects it assimilates; the ego cannot leave the other to be an independent outside entity, separate from itself, because it is always incorporating the other, or demanding that the other be like itself."[7] Benjamin's reasoning here is that the self is not complete within itself, for it needs the other outside of itself for this completion. She goes further to look at the relationship between the self and other within the theory of intersubjectivity: "An intersubjective theory of the self is one that poses the question of how and whether the self can

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[6] In his article in which he critiques Ngugi's later novels, Gurnah claims that Ngugi tends to treat complexity as if it had "manageable parts". By particularizing the parts, Ngugi is able to undertake transformative strategies which turn his narratives into "national allegories" which are inflexible and construct a polemic which is bluntly authoritarian. In essence therefore, the focus is moved away from the individual as the 'nation' takes center stage. "Transformative Strategies in the Fiction of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o", *Essays on African Writing, (Volume 1: Re-evaluation*) Abdulrazak Gurnah, (ed), Heinemann, Johannesburg, 1995.

[7] See J. Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, New York and London, 1998, p 79.

actually achieve a relationship to an outside other without, through identification, assimilating or being assimilated by it."[8] The core issue of this question is the idea of difference. The factor of assimilating and being assimilated is marked by a difference between the assimilating/assimilated other and the self.

This same difference is at work in Gurnah's fiction. The binary presentation of 'the self' and 'the other' in Gurnah's works presents an interaction between two 'subjects', therefore relating to the concept of intersubjectivity. He does this by focusing on individuals and highlighting the differences between them and how they interact with their 'others'. In so doing, the binary and dialectal positioning of subjects is clearly brought out. His style of narration lays further emphasis on the self. The limited omniscient narrative technique applied in *Paradise* serves to highlight Yusuf the protagonist as the narration hardly moves away from him. As a subject Yusuf is involved in an intersubjective interaction with other subjects like Uncle Aziz and Khalil, where their experiences are judged as qualitatively superior to his.

The dual vocal narration of Omar and Latif in *By the Sea* presents a juxtaposition whose significance is not lost to the reader as the two let us into their complex intertwined past lives through their narrations. Both characters operate at the level of protagonists, representing past power struggles, domination and exploitation, which lay a foundation to violation within families. The starting point of the woes suffered by Latif's family is traceable to the economically superior 'Uncle' Hussein, who takes advantage of the different forms of vulnerability in the family to wreak havoc in the same. He knows the business deal he strikes with Latif's father is bound to fail owing to the latter's ineptitude as a trader. He sexually exploits Hassan, Latif's brother, because of the influence he has over the boy, who is easily overawed by the trader's affluence and apparent interest in his intellectual welfare. He crowns these malicious activities by taking advantage of the already promiscuous mother of the family.

[8] Benjamin, p. 80.

The unnamed protagonist-narrator in *Admiring Silence* is presented as a muddled displaced self, whose situation is made more poignant by his anonymity. His hopelessness and illness, the extent of which we cannot fathom, viewed against malfunctioning systems which we get to see in his country on his brief return to Zanzibar from England, can only be symbolic of the latter; the poverty and decay evident in private and public places, is a pointer to the decay in the political administration, the extent of which is not immediately apparent. On the surface, the situation looks calm with the Prime Minister asserting his authority through television appearances, but beneath the surface, wild rumours do the rounds about the very stability of the same Prime Minister, indicating the presence of a moral 'sickness' the extent of which is hard to discern just like the protagonist's sickness. As he delves into an initially obscure past, the protagonist's position in the family as the displaced, disadvantaged 'other' emerges. He seems to occupy a liminal position both at home and in England. Much as he would like to stop and merge with the crowds, find a foothold in Zanzibar, he is convinced that his place is with Emma (his live-in partner for the last twenty years) back 'home' in England. "It was the only life I knew how to live now, and that more than anything in the world I wanted to go back to her and put right what could still be put right" (p182). Unfortunately, Emma has since changed her mind about the relationship as the narrative that has been their life in the last twenty years has "refused closure" (p 210). But the loss the protagonist experiences does not start with Emma; it had started much earlier in his childhood when he lost his mother's love to a stepfather and half-siblings. Violation does not start with an external agent, it starts from the inside.

In *Orientalism*, one of Edward Said's crucial points is the idea that otherness is in fact hinged on the relationship between knowledge and geography. He argues that the mind seems to persistently formulate a science of the concrete. The mind requires order and order is achieved by discriminating and taking note of everything, placing

everything of which the mind is aware in a secure refindable place, therefore giving things some role to play in the economy of objects and identities that make an environment. This logic, Said argues, is neither predictably rational nor universal. There is always a measure of the purely arbitrary in the way the distinctions between things are seen. He writes:

> It is perfectly possible to argue that some distinctive objects are made by the mind, and that these objects, while appearing to exist objectively, have only a fictional reality. A group of people living on a few acres of land will set up boundaries between their land and its immediate surroundings and the territory beyond which they call 'the land of the barbarians'. [9]

In other words, Said writes, 'the universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space beyond 'ours' which is 'theirs' is a way of making geographical boundaries which is arbitrary' (ibid). Said refers to this process of designating 'them' as opposed to 'us', 'theirs' as opposed to 'ours', as 'othering'. He makes the significant point that the process of othering is arbitrary precisely because imaginative geography of 'our land vs barbarian land' variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is not enough to set up these boundaries in our own minds; 'they' become 'they' accordingly and both their territory and mentality are designated as being different from 'ours'. Said's point then is that most societies tend to derive their identities negatively and geographic boundaries accompany the social, ethnic and cultural ones in predictable ways. Often the sense in which someone feels himself to be non-foreign is based on a very unrigorous idea of what is 'out there' beyond our own territory.

[9] Said p 54.

Closely related to Said's argument, is Johannes Fabian's,[10] which considers the way in which colonial anthropology routinely depicted self and otherness through metaphors of distance and time. The genesis of anthropology was the rise of capitalism and its colonialist-imperialist expansions into societies, which became targets of inquiry. "[T]he West needed space to occupy and time to accommodate the schemes of a one-way history: progress, development, modernity (and their negative mirror images: stagnation, underdevelopment, tradition)".[11] Anthropology emerged and established itself as an allochronic discourse, a science of other men in another time. In a way, Fabian's notion of "allochrony" reiterates Said's idea of "imaginative geographies".

Paradise grapples with a notion of 'difference', which seems to be the dividing feature between the enterprising Arab merchants and the native people of East Africa. The interior of East Africa looms large in the text as an imagined geographic space that is inexplicable and empty; hostile and yet inviting; barbaric yet holding the promise of paradise. Indeed the interior of East Africa alternates in the mind of the Arab traders between being an old world to which one returned, as Eden or Paradise, or being a whole new world to which one came to set up a new version of the old. This 'difference' forms the foundation of the definition of 'other' operating at different levels in the texts: within and between families, between individuals and between communities. At family level, patriarchal powers help to define otherness through gender and age. Women and children are relegated to an inferior position. This is more evident in *Paradise* and *Admiring Silence*, although the situation changes in *By the Sea*, where patriarchal power becomes impotent, and Latif's mother exercises her sexual power coupled with political maneuvering to remove Omar Shabaan from a superior position to an 'other' position as a prisoner, pauper, then an exile.

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[10] See J. Fabian, *Time and Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1983, p 144.

[11] Fabian p 144.

Between one family and another, 'otherness' is manifested through religion, race and economic power. Islam and an Arabic descent denote '*uunguana/ustaarabu*' (civilization), non-Muslim Africans are savages or barbarians. In *Paradise* Kalasinga and Hamid engage in a verbal duel which is representative of the stance taken by the religious communities they represent. Gurnah uses the dialogue between the two men to juxtapose the dissenting ideas held by the two men concerning religion:

> 'I will translate the Koran,' Kalasinga said firmly, because I care for my fellow human beings, even if they are only ignorant Allah-Wallahs. Is this a religion for grown-up people? Maybe I don't know what God is, or remember all his thousand names and his million promises, but I know that he can't be the big bully you worship.' (p 85)

Even as Kalasinga derides Islam, presenting the belief as childish, he lusts after a native woman and in the same breath refers to her as 'savage'. Hamid immediately points out the underlying hypocrisy: "You mock us for the intolerance of our God and for our stupidity in bearing with Him, and then you call people savages" (p 85). Gurnah uses situational irony here to point out the baselessness and fluidity of 'otherness'. Muslims view themselves as 'clean' compared to others, more so the Europeans. Rajab Shaaban in *By the Sea* views the physical filth in Celia's bed and breakfast facility as a pointer towards the spiritual impurity inherent there. Surrounded by all the dirt and filth that seems to engulf every square inch of the house, Shaaban feels like he is on the verge of being polluted spiritually: "the bed had the same smell as the upholstery downstairs: old vomit, semen and spilt tea. I daren't even sit on it out of an irrational fear of contamination, not just fear of disease but of some inner pollution" (p 56).

Christianity and Islam, presented through the Koranic 'scented garden' and the Christian garden of Eden, alongside Yusuf/Joseph the dreamer of the Koran and the Bible respectively, links different religious faiths, effectively targeting a diversity in readership. The coastal people acknowledge the existence of inlanders out there who are, however, inferior to them, savages. The inlanders (in *Paradise*) lump the coastal people under one banner; corrupt traders, ready to steal from them and capture their kin to sell into slavery. That is why Chatu is suspicious of the merchant and dispossesses him of his goods, killing some of his porters in the process. The inter-cultural relationship presented in *Admiring Silence* further signals a wider scope of multi-culturality. In the texts, Gurnah presents a multi-cultural scenery that encompasses both Christian and Muslim mythology. He presents different East African tribes in *Paradise* and widens his scope to include an even wider community beyond the seas in *Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea*.

Emma, the protagonist-narrator's live-in partner, and his daughter Amelia in *Admiring Silence*, are not acceptable to his parents because their race and religion makes them different from the protagonist and his family. His stepfather's friend says: "You've lost yourself and you've lost your people, a man is nothing without his people" (p193). Between individuals, othering goes beyond race and religion to encompass one's social status (whether slave or free) and origin, based on Said's idea of 'imagined geography'.

Yusuf, the allegorical figure of redemption in *Paradise*, is defined on arrival at Uncle Aziz's place solely in terms of an imagined geographical space, the wild lands beyond: "He looks so small and feeble because he has just come from the wild lands, back there behind the hills" (p. 21). He is readily inserted into an othering discourse which seeks to fix his identity based on imagined geography and knowledge of the world beyond the coastal town. Ironically, in his home town, dismissed here by Khalil as wild lands, Yusuf has to play alone because his father is protecting him

from the bad influence of the irreligious savages, '[W]e are surrounded by savages,' his father warns him, 'Washenzi who have no faith in God and who worship spirits and demons which live in trees and rocks' (p.6). The father prefers that he plays with the children of Indian shopkeepers than with infidels. The twinning of religion and economic status would seem to play a major role here in defining difference in Gurnah's view, although this difference remains irrational, an attitude based on prejudices rather than realistic knowledge. Yusuf's mother is readily dismissed as a 'tribeswoman' whose most striking achievement is to have had the privilege of living on the coast among civilized people (p. 13). Unlike her, the first wife of Yusuf's father had been of 'honourable descent' (p.14).

Within the Aziz household, both Yusuf and Khalil are 'other', first, because of their slave status and secondly because of their family background. Both are sons of paupers who lack business acumen and as such cannot succeed as traders and service their debts the same way Aziz does. Their helplessness as children leads them to be used as pawns in deals in whose failures they had no hand. They are forced to pay for their fathers' failures. Yusuf's otherness is further compounded by the fact that he cannot speak Arabic; he is just a "Mswahili boy from the wilderness".[12] Amina's position of inferiority does not diminish even when she becomes a wife in the merchant's household. Hers is a marriage of convenience and subsequently results in

[12] The inferior status of the Swahili speakers at the East African coast and the Islands stems from Omani Arab occupation of the coastal region and the slave activities that went with it. The Omani Sultans conquered Zanzibar in the nineteenth century, marginalizing the indigenous chiefs. The Waswahili were a result of intermarriages between slaves, Arabs and other mainland tribes. Kiswahili, the language they spoke was a creolization of the cocktail of languages spoken at the coast and the islands. In the resulting ethnic hierarchy, Omani Arabs occupied the topmost rung, while at the bottom were people of African and slave origins who undoubtedly included the Swahili. See Jonathan Glassman, "Sorting Out the Tribes: The Creation of Racial Identities in Colonial Zanzibar's Newspaper Wars" in *Journal of African History*, 41, 2000 (395-428)

further bondage. The poignancy of the violence against her is that over the years she has been moved from one hand to another so that she no longer has a sense of rootedness. Her otherness is defined by gender, which makes her into easy prey for pawnship for she would not require redemption, but would be married in lieu of payment.

The attitude of the *mnyapara* (the overseer), Mohamed Abdalla, towards the natives they meet in their trading expedition is however one of ambivalence; there is a note of a grudging admiration in his voice as well as contempt, displaying the brand of 'otherness' that Bhabha talks about.[13] Abdalla says, '[t]hey are not made of the same cowardly mud as you. They'll steal anything, including your manhood if you don't keep your clothes well tied around you.' […] 'Savages, worth ten of any of you' (p 59). A series of constructions are offered of these 'savages': they look so red because they drink blood, they attack people and hunt all the time, they eat lions' penises because the more they eat, the greater they become among their people, and the reason for all this bizarre behaviour is: 'because he is a savage, that's what for. He is what he is. You don't ask a shark or a snake why it attacks' (p 60). So the other is defined within the behavioural codes of the animal world because the speaker is not familiar with the other's culture. He is uncivilized and therefore animal-like not only in his behavour, but in his lack of intelligence as well, for 'a civilized man can always defeat a savage even if the savage eats a thousand lion penises […] he can outwit him with knowledge and guile' (p 60). The implication here based on ignorance and an erroneous assumption of the superiority of the speaker, is that the 'savages' have a limited mental ability and therefore operate on instinct: All this is also hinged on the imagined geographical space, which is beyond the speaker's comprehension. This resonates with Said's views on the relationship between the West and the Orient:

[13] Homi Bhabha talks about "that 'otherness' which is at once an object of desire and derision an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity", *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994 (p67).

> Orientals cannot walk either on a road or a pavement (their disordered minds fail to understand what the clever Europeans grasp immediately, that roads and pavements are made for walking); Orientals are inveterate liars, they are lethargic and in everything oppose the clarity directness and the nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race.[14]

Once again the orientals are here othered based on stereotypes that define them as having inferior intellectual ability and therefore lacking in adequate mental capacity to reason at the same level as the Europeans. They are bunched together and judged the same way one would judge non-human beings, for they are 'savages'.

Hamid and Kalasinga in the mountain town each struggle to assert their superiority over each other, but for Hamid, Kalasinga is an outsider, a blasphemer, for he does not belong to the religion of civilisation, Islam. Before Yusuf can read the Koran, he is no better than Kalasinga, and at his disclosure of this inability, Hamid reacts with awe and shock: "He rose to his feet and backed away from Yusuf, not fearfully, but as if from something catastrophic and vile" (p98). Yusuf is an 'other' because having an intimate knowledge of the 'Word' is the distinguishing feature between *'waunguana'* (the civilized) and the 'savages'. After completing his lessons in the Koran, Asha, Hamid's daughter asks him, "will you be a merchant?" (p 108) The implication is that he has now got the qualification to be a merchant – a real Muslim who is able to read the Koran.

In *By the Sea*, the elderly asylum seeker to the United Kingdom, who can but will not speak English, has to undergo the kind of treatment that Fabian defines within the ideas of time and other. He is definitely from a geographical space suffering negative

[14] Said, p38.

imaging by the West, that is stagnation, underdevelopment and tradition.[15] It is not a surprise that he cannot speak English, given the geographical space that is his origin: "You do not even speak the language and probably never will, it very rare for old people to learn a new language" (p 11). Because he cannot communicate his preferences, the assumption is that the barest in terms of accommodation and provisions more than suffices for him. During his detention, he also notices the casual hatred that a group of Algerians have for a fellow refugee who is an Angolan: "In their eyes, he was a black man, a lesser son of Adam than them, capable only of a subservient rage and an unrelenting resilience" (p 61). Again the Algerians are defining the Angolan within the confines of an imagined geographical space: Angola in Central Africa is in the heart of darkness; those issuing from there have to be inferior.

While the immigration official cannot and does not want to understand Omar Shabaan's need for refuge on the erroneous assumption that he is just seeking the kind of comfort that is missing in his homeland, Shabaan feels he really needs protection from politically empowered people in his government who have subjected him to political violence. He has had to suffer injustices because he is powerless politically; in the process he is also economically disempowered. Here is a case of a man suffering double hostility: his own country confines him to an artificial 'other' position and creates a hostile atmosphere for his well-being, and in the prospective adoptive country, he is viewed with suspicion stemming from reasoning based on his otherness. In both cases he suffers emotional violence.

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[15] Johannes Fabian, in considering the way in which colonial anthropology depicted self and otherness through metaphors of distance and time says: "The west needed space to occupy and time to accommodate the schemes of a one way history of progress development and modernity and their negative mirror images such as stagnation underdevelopment and tradition," so therefore, people from spaces other than the West must be underdeveloped and stagnated. *Time and Other, How Anthropology Makes its Object*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1983, p 144.

The protagonist-narrator in *Admiring Silence* offers an apt example of what I would call 'domestic othering': he suffers emotional violence at the hands of members of the immediate family. His marginalization stems from his being a child of an 'other' father. In his case domestic slavery rears its ugly head again. His mother is a *rehani,* (pawn) given to his father, Abbas, as payment for a debt owed to the father's uncle Hashim. This 'intimate' othering is a further pointer to Gurnah's interest in the minute details of the individual and the issues affecting him.

After spinning fantastic tales to his wife's family aimed at presenting his background as neat and orderly, the protagonist, on a brief return to his native Zanzibar, is struck by the painful reality of poverty and decay that has transformed the public and private spaces. In order to reconcile with this reality, he seeks a new narrative of his life, the true version and not the fictitious tale spun for convenience. Even then he remains in the periphery of the family as he has been 'polluted' through his marriage to an 'infidel'. Muslims generally attach physical cleanliness to moral and spiritual purity. That is why they perform the 'udhu'—ritual cleansing, (washing the arms, face, arms and feet)---before saying prayers. This is the process Shaaban goes through before he says his prayer (p 59).

Interestingly violations against the self do not get worse for the blacks in the hands of the white when they cross the sea. Rajab Shaaban's mistreatment on arrival in England is on a lesser scale compared to what he has had to go through in the hands of his countrymen. His former position as an affluent merchant attracts the sly scheming fellow trader, Hussein, whose interaction with him sets in motion the chain of events that precipitate his downfall.

Gurnah uses the narration of Rajab's situation not only to present Rajab's painful experiences, but also to show the shifting status of otherness. Ismael Rajab (alias Latif) in *By the Sea* comes in contact with the Germans, Elleke and her son Jan. The

former, having been a settler in Kenya, is apologetic about violence against the colonized. She says: "We were Europeans. We could go anywhere in the world we wanted. [W]e lived at a time when it seemed we had a right to do all that" in an apologetic tone, which indicates that this was done out of a basic assumption fuelled by the stereotypes held by the West against the rest of the 'inferior' world. "Well, because we lived at a time when it seemed we had a right to do all that, a right to places that were only occupied by people with dark skins and frizzy hair" (p 131). Interesting however, is the fact that her status has changed and she is now an 'other', sidelined for being a German, a community dreaded the world over for their leader (Hitler's) role in the holocaust.

The communities represented in these texts are to some extent fashioned against Benedict Anderson's idea of the imagined community, for they are large, lack in tangible, finite boundaries and are multi-cultural. These are also imagined communities, but in a different sense. While Anderson intertwines texts read in a society with the imagining of that community, the communities in Gurnah's works are imagined at the level of (mis)construction fashioned against certain stereotypes, mainly based on ignorance or misinformation. The coastal people can only imagine the inland communities and vice versa. One community fashions the other against itself, where the other must be the inferior. The members of the Muslim community view themselves as 'civilized', and non-Muslim as barbaric and savage.

In presenting the self, Gurnah gives prominence to human experience, showing how these experiences impact either negatively or positively on the individual. Yusuf's experiences in *Paradise* serve to highlight the violence meted out against the self. His commodification and change of 'ownership'[16] between his father and Aziz are just

[16] I use "property" here following the treatment he undergoes as he is reduced to a commodity, an 'object' given out as you would an animal or any other such property.

examples of these violations. He is treated like property, which has no say whatsoever as to what happens to it. In Aziz's household, he comes in contact with the naked reality of servitude. He is not even allowed into the center of the household, for he is not a son but a servant. Gurnah uses Yusuf, Khalil, Hamdani the gardener and Amina to paint the ugly face of domestic slavery practiced even before colonialism and aptly rendered by Griffiths:

> *Paradise* […] looks at the world of domestic slavery from the inside. It contextualizes the more unsavoury and brutal accounts of slavery […] without denying the essentially dehumanizing nature of this unhappy form of human trafficking. The novel shows an insider view of the involvement of Arab coast dwellers and the peoples of the inland tribes in the slave trade.[17]

The pre-colonial past is here not presented as idyllic or romantic, and Amina's brutal kidnapping suggests the inhumanity that informed the treatment meted out to "inferior" Africans by fellow Africans.

In these texts one encounters two broad types of selves, which Omar Shabaan in *By the Sea* refers to as the 'fortunate' and 'the supplicant' (p5), the superior and the inferior self. Even then, each of the two broad classes present varying levels of superiority and inferiority. Rajab Shaaban highlights his affluence and material comfort thus:

> I was thirty-one years old, recently bereaved of my father and soon after that my step-mother, living alone in a comfortable house and envied by many for the good fortune that had befallen me. Tongues were wagging mischievously about me, which in the kind of little place I lived in was an unmistakable sign of *growing power*, I thought. [emphasis added] (p17)

[17] See Gareth Griffiths, *African Literatures in English: East and West*, Longman, Harlow, 2000, p 313.

He is quick to acknowledge the presence of somebody more superior than him, that is the British colonialists:

> I think also we secretly admired the British, for their audacity in being there, such a long way from home, calling the shots with such an appearance of assurance, and for knowing how much to do things that mattered: curing disease, flying aeroplanes, making movies. Perhaps *admired* is too uncomplicated a way of describing what I think we felt, for it was closer to conceding to their command over our material lives, conceding in mind as well as in the concrete, succumbing to their blazing self assurance. (p 17-8)

In expressing what he felt towards the Europeans, Shaaban seems to be acknowledging his inadequacy in the face the self-sufficient white colonial masters. There is a sense of stereotyping here as there is a pervading belief in the intellectual supremacy of the white race and a surrender to their domination on the strength of the belief in their uncanny ability to get even the seemingly difficult things done. Shaaban is awe-struck by their power and admits to succumbing to the said power, mind and body. There is an indication of compliance with the very conditions that subjugate.

The inferiority of Khalil in *Paradise* is not at the same level as that of Yusuf. While both are slaves, Yusuf's condition compounded by the fact that he cannot speak Arabic, the language of civilization. This puts a barrier between him and the mistress of the house as he has to communicate with her through an interpreter, losing essential information in the process of translation. Amina, Aziz's younger wife receives her redemption through her marriage to the master, but conditions remain unchanged for her. She still views her life as hell saying: "I've got my life at least. But I only know I have it because of its emptiness, because of what I am denied" (228-9).

Amina occupies an ambivalent position whose significance is hard to discern. But what is highlighted is her subjugated state and her response to the same. She is despondent, devoid of all hope of a better life, and is resigned to her fate. She does not seek and subsequently does not find an escape route out of the constricting situation. Much as she is set free from slavery, Amina presents the best example of the subjugated self in Gurnah's texts. Even when they seek a way out, they do not succeed. The protagonist-narrator in *Admiring Silence*, seeks a way out through the fictitious stories he spins about his background, but these only work for a period, then fall apart.

In presenting the shifting nature of 'otherness' Gurnah communicates the idea that fixed boundaries defining 'otherness' are artificial, unrealistic and non-representative of the realities of life. He uses intimate interactions between characters to stress this idea. In *Paradise*, Zulekha, the master's senior wife, is reaching out to Yusuf as a redeemer, to cross borders between slave status and freedom without the formality of manumission or redemption. Her status as a superior self offers her no relief from loneliness brought on by childlessness, widowhood (and re-marriage), and a disfiguring disease. In a sense, Gurnah seems not to be concerned with the suffering of particular social groups such as slaves, or colonized people, but with suffering as a general human condition. In this sense, therefore we could say that his allegiances are cosmopolitan and global as in the case with recent postcolonial theorists such as Kwame Anthony Appiah.[18]

In *By the Sea*, Gurnah employs the use of coincidence to set the stage for reconciliation between Latif Mahamud and Omar Shabaan. He does this through juggling of names and sets a meeting which is as much ironic as it is coincidental. That Latif Mahmud

[18] According to Kwame Appiah, the current postcolonial writers are involved in a project which is an intellectual response to oppression in Africa, which is an appeal to a respect to human suffering. (p353)

should be the only possible lifeline for the seemingly desperate Rajab Shaaban is not accidental, especially as they have earlier operated on opposing sides of a catastrophic family feud; it is Gurnah's way of setting the stage for collapsing the boundaries between the 'self' and the 'other'. But this is not the only instance where coincidence is used. Latif's meeting with Jan in Germany may look accidental, but it is definitely not. Gurnah cleverly sets up a coincidental meeting in order to aid Latif's flight from Germany in preparation for another 'coincidental' meeting several years later in England with Shaaban. All this serves to aid the development of the narrative. Rajab's accidental meeting with Hussein the merchant seems an innocent chance meeting at the onset, but quickly develops into an intimate interaction leading to a deceptively innocuous business deal, which unfortunately turns disastrous for Rajab. This interaction marks the starting point of his downward slide from grace to oblivion. From the onset, Gurnah seems bent on achieving a dénouement by resolving a longstanding family feud through reconciliation. At a literal level, this appears to be an ordinary family to family squabble, but underlying the literal is the symbolic which points towards internal political strife. In narrating the post-colonial space, Gurnah turns the gaze from the colonizer as the harbinger of strife and disorder, to the colonized as he abuses his own freedom. By setting the reconciliation in England which is the mother country, Gurnah seems to be suggesting in a subtle way that solutions to the political upheavals in the former colonies can only be sorted out through the intervention of the former colonizers. He may be of the view that the colonizers presence in the colonies was beneficial and their departure premature; they left in a hurry, thereby plunging the former colonies into chaos.[18]

[18] In *By the Sea*, Rajab Shaaban says, "I married in 1963. [A] year before the British departed in a huff and left us to the chaos and violence that attended the end of their empire." This comment raises the idea that it was a mistake for the British to leave when they did, for the subjects still needed them as they (the subjects) were ill equipped navigate the postcolonial space on their own, p 146.

In the foregoing, I have looked at how Gurnah constitutes the 'self' and 'other' based gender, age, religion, economic differenciation and political influence. Even then Gurnah presents this idea of othering as a fluid and collapsible construct able to shift from one character to anther. The scenario created here is one whereby the people on the margin in some instances change their status. In the process, the idea of an elusive paradise, rife through most of Gurnah's fiction, comes to the fore. This serves as a pointer to Gurnah's pessimistic stance. The fact that he gives a passive voice to the subjugated and presents them as being unable to speak against and counter their subjugation is suggestive of this pessimism. There are instances where the position of the superior self take a plunge to a lower status, for example in the case of Aziz's humiliation at the hand of the savage chief Chatu, but the inferior do not go up the social ladder. Despondency abounds in most of the characters, a pointer to a dystopic writerly vision. Gurnah paints a postcolonial space steeped in socio-political problems whose solutions are not easy to come by, a real pessimistic scenario.