

Historical, Cultural and Religious Aspects of Abdulrazak Gurnah's Novels

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Abstract

Investigating literature and its interconnection with culture, history and religion is a crucial part of the discussion in contemporary world literature studies. The present research focuses on historical, religious and cultural specificity in “Paradise” (1994) by Nobel prize winner Tanzanian-born English writer Abdulrazak Gurnah. The main focus of the novels concentrates on searching for an ideal place and time for the protagonists concerning social and political issues. Literary scholars and critics have carried out several research on Gurnah’s fictions, including topics as itinerant narratives (Ruberto, 2009), migrant texture (Kaigai, 2014), migrations and diaspora (Moudouma, 2013), narrating power and human relationships (Okungu, 2016), subject and history (Falk, 2007). In the present analysis, the research problem is to investigate how historical, cultural and religious perspectives can reveal the author’s message to his readers. The data was collected from the detailed textual, contextual and conceptual analysis of Gurnah’s novel “Paradise” to figure out the artistic originality of the writer’s works in terms of diaspora literature. Historical, psychological, biographical and comparative methods are applied to achieve the purpose of the research.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Literary Analysis, Culture-History-Religion Interconnections, Bildungsroman, Post-colonial Literature

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Introduction

There are reasonable changes in how literary studies have been practiced over the last century regarding interconnections between literature and other fields. Analysis and interpretations of fictional literature are mostly linked to various aspects of life and science. These connections might be observed as literature and history, literature and language, literature and culture, literature and psychology, literature and philosophy, literature and science, etc. This list needs to be completed in its sense, and even it is a limitation of the studies carried out in literary studies today. If literature is a subject about life and people, it appears an unquestionable issue whether it is necessary to compare or contrast the connections with other subject fields.

Tanzanian-born British novelist and academic **Abdulrazak Gurnah** (born in 1948) was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 2017 *for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fates of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents.* While his first language is Swahili, he has used English as his literary language and integrates Swahili, Arabic, and German into most of his writings.

He has said that he had to push back against publishers to continue this practice, and they would have preferred to "italicize or Anglicize Swahili and Arabic references and phrases in his books." He criticizes British and American publishing practices, pointing out that they want to "make the alien seem alien" by marking "foreign" terms and phrases with italics or by putting them in a glossary.

Academic Hamid Dabashi confirms that:

[Gurnah] is integral to the manner in which Asian and African migratory and diasporic experiences have enriched and altered English language and literature ... Calling authors like Gurnah diasporic, exilic, or any other such self-alienating term conceals the fact that English was native to him even before he set foot in England. English colonial officers had brought it home to him.

The consistent themes in Gurnah's works are:

- exile;
- displacement;
- belonging;
- colonialism;
- broken promises by the state;
- memories;
- cosmopolitanism.

The most common setting for Gurnah's works is the coast of East Africa, and many of his protagonists were born in Zanzibar. Although he has not returned to live in Tanzania since he left at 18, he has said that his homeland "*always asserts himself in his imagination, even when he deliberately tries to set his stories elsewhere.*"

Literary critic Bruce King posits, "*Africans have always been part of the larger, changing world.*" His characters are often rooted, alienated, and unwanted and, therefore are, or feel, resentful victims.

The first translator of Gurnah's novels into Swahili, Dr. Ida Hadjivayanis of the School of Oriental and African Studies, has said, "I think, if his work could be read in East Africa it would have such an impact ... We can't change our reading culture overnight, so for him to be read the first steps would be to include "Paradise," "After Lives" in the school curriculum."

As the research question states, the cultural aspect of fictional literature on the examples of British Nobel Prize Abdulrazak Gurnah, and his works, through the thematic processes the following fictions have been selected to study as "Paradise," "By the Sea" and "The Last Gift."

The primary criteria that could help to reveal the language-culture-literature interconnections in Gurnah's works suggested in this research include the following points:

1. Folklore
2. Chronotope
3. East penetration into West culture/literature
4. Diaspora characteristics
5. Role of Colours
6. Specificity of Numbers
7. Gender issues
8. National identity
9. Social Class distinctions
10. Anti/Humanism struggles
11. Reading challenges
12. Religious intertextuality

"Admiring Silence," "By the Sea," and "Desertion" by A. Gurnah concern the alienation and loneliness through the immigrant points of view concerning the very meaning of "home" in real modern societies. Hence, the enumerated fictions above by Gurnah have plenty of common issues that could allow exploring the cultural aspect of fictional literature in a global context.

Gurnah's fiction depicts the intricate meshwork of social codes, emotions, and narratives that shape subjectivity in a precarious and cosmopolitan social reality. His novels repeatedly thematise cultural disorientation, migration, and the efforts of establishing a minimum of social and narrative stability in the form of a home. The chapter reads Gurnah's fiction against a background of Zanzibari history and diaspora. It suggests that various forms of "entanglements" paradoxically provide the means to pull the subject out of states of anxiety and alienation into more viable states of being.

"Paradise" by Abdulrazak Gurnah

"Paradise" is a novel written by Abdulrazak Gurnah, published in 1994. The novel is set in the context of German East Africa during World War I, exploring the impact of colonialism on the region and the complex relationships between different communities. The story centers around a character named Yusuf, a young man from the African mainland, who is captured and sent to work on the plantations of the island of Pate, part of present-day Kenya. The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of historical events, such as the German occupation of East Africa during the war. The characters grapple with issues of power, exploitation, and cultural clash. "Paradise" is praised for its rich prose and its exploration of the human

consequences of colonialism. It delves into the lives of individuals caught in the web of historical forces, providing a nuanced portrayal of the social and political dynamics of the time. The novel received critical acclaim for its depth, historical insight, and Gurnah's skillful storytelling.

Historical Aspects of “Paradise”

"Paradise" by Abdulrazak Gurnah is set against the backdrop of historical events, particularly the German occupation of East Africa during World War I. The novel explores several historical aspects:

German Colonialism: The novel is situated in German East Africa, a region that corresponds to present-day Burundi, Rwanda, and part of Tanzania. German colonial rule is a significant historical backdrop, and the narrative captures the impact of European colonialism on the lives of the indigenous people.

Yusuf had heard the boys say that the Germans hanged people if they did not work hard enough. If they were too young to hang, they cut their stones off. The Germans were afraid of nothing. They did whatever they wanted and no one could stop them. One of the boys said that his father had seen a German put his hand in the heart of a blazing fire without being burnt, as if he were a phantom. (Paradise: 16)

World War I: The story takes place during World War I when the region was a theatre for conflict between European powers. The Germans, who had colonial interests in East Africa, were in conflict with the British, who sought to gain control of the German colonies in the region.

“It’s a dangerous road,” Simba Mwene said, smiling and taking Khalil’s mockery in his stride. “Especially along the border. Even more so now that there’s talk of war between the English and the Germans.” (Paradise: 199)

Impact on Local Communities: The novel delves into the consequences of war and colonialism on the local communities, particularly through the character of Yusuf. Yusuf's experiences, as well as those of other characters, illustrate the disruption, displacement, and cultural clashes that occurred during this tumultuous period.

Yusuf saw that this was the seyyid again, the man who had so casually taken him away from his parents and his home, and who had strolled the hard lands to the lakes with smiling equanimity. (Paradise: 191)

Economic Exploitation: The novel explores themes of economic exploitation and the harsh conditions faced by those who worked as “rehani.” Rehani means a child given by parents instead of their debts to rich people. The characters grapple with power dynamics, exploitation, and how colonial structures influenced their lives.

For Yusuf it was an unwelcome interruption to the equanimity his life of captivity had acquired over the years. Despite everything, he had not been unhappy in Uncle Aziz’s shop. He had come to understand fully that he was there as rehani, pawned to Uncle Aziz to secure his father’s debts to the merchant. (Paradise: 56)

Rihani children in the novel Yusuf, Khalil and Amina are depicted with psychological traumas, suffering from uncertainty in their lives.

“Paradise” provides a historical lens through which readers can understand the social, political, and economic dynamics of German East Africa during a crucial period in its history. The novel weaves together personal stories with broader historical events, offering a nuanced exploration of the impact of colonialism on individuals and communities.

Cultural Aspects of “Paradise”

In "Paradise" by Abdulrazak Gurnah, the narrative delves into various cultural aspects, exploring the rich tapestry of identities, beliefs, and traditions of the characters within the context of colonialism. Here are some cultural aspects present in the novel:

Cultural Diversity: The novel portrays the diversity of cultures and ethnicities within the East African setting. Different communities with distinct languages, customs, and ways of life are depicted, highlighting the richness and complexity of the cultural landscape. The interactions between different communities and the cultural clashes that result from colonial rule are central to the novel. Gurnah examines the complexities of relationships among Asians, Africans and Europeans, as well as tensions within African communities.

He went to the station often, to watch the trains come noisily and gracefully in, and then to wait for them to haul themselves out again, marshalled by the scowling Indian signalman with his pennants and whistle. Often Yusuf waited hours for a train to arrive. The two Europeans were also waiting, standing under a canvas awning with their luggage and important-looking goods neatly piled a few feet away. (Paradise: 10)

Traditional Beliefs and Practices: The novel explores the impact of colonialism on traditional African beliefs and practices. The characters grapple with the changes brought about by external forces, and traditional customs often come into conflict with the values imposed by the colonizers.

They visited the town every Friday to say prayers at the Juma'a mosque, and play kipande and football in the streets. Passers-by shouted remarks at Khalil, telling him he was almost a father and should not be playing with children. (Paradise: 49)

Oral Tradition and Storytelling: Gurnah incorporates elements of oral tradition and storytelling within the narrative.

He told the story of the beautiful woman who, after complicated stratagems on his part, agrees to take him home, then turns out to be a man. Or the old lady he negotiates with, taking her to be a pimp, but who turns out to be the prostitute he was paying for. (Paradise: 95)

The characters share stories that are passed down through generations, reflecting the importance of storytelling in preserving cultural heritage and conveying wisdom.

Social Hierarchies: The novel delves into the social hierarchies within the indigenous communities, examining issues of power, authority, and social roles. These structures are influenced both by traditional cultural norms and the disruptive forces of colonialism. From

the simple life of rural Africa, Yusuf is thrown into the complexities of precolonial urban East Africa – a fascinating world in which Muslim black Africans, Christian missionaries, and Indians from the subcontinent coexist in a fragile, subtle social hierarchy.

Language: Language is a crucial element in conveying cultural nuances. The novel may incorporate different languages spoken by the characters, emphasising the linguistic diversity present in the region and the challenges of communication across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

Table 1: Language Term and Definition

No	Term	Definition	Extract from book
1.	tamburis ¹ , siwa ²	¹ drum [2] ² horn (of wood or ivory that is the emblem of a chief) [1; p.453]	<i>His expeditions were often accompanied by drums and tamburis and horns and siwa, and when his train marched into town animals stampeded and evacuated themselves, and children ran out of control. [3; p. 3]</i>
2.	kanzu	garment (long robe worn by men) [1; p. 397]	<i>His habitual dress was a thin, flowing kanzu of fine cotton and a small crocheted cap pushed back on his head. [3; p. 3]</i>
3.	tajiri mkubwa	wholesale merchant [1; p. 568]	<i>His father said they brought honour on them because he was such a rich and renowned merchant - tajiri mkubwa - but that was not all, welcome though honour always was. [3; p. 3]</i>
4.	washenzi	uncivilized person [1; p. 970]	<i>'We are surrounded by savages,' he said. 'Washenzi, who have no faith in God and who worship spirits and demons which live in trees and rocks. [3; p. 6]</i>
5.	vibarua	temporary employment [1; p. 313]	<i>Their parents worked as vibarua, labouring for the Germans on the line-construction gangs, doing piece-work at the railhead, or portering for travellers and traders. [3; p. 6]</i>
6.	bismillah	in the name of Allah [1; 27]	<i>His uncle unwrapped the food with practised care, muttering bismillah and smiling slightly, then with his palm half open in a gesture of welcome he invited Yusuf to the food. [3; p. 19]</i>
7.	seyyid ¹ , waungwana ²	¹ title of the Sultan of Zanzibar [1; p. 900] ² well-bred person [1; p. 1010]	<i>The porter shouted for people to make way - 'Let the seyyid pass, waungwana' - and even though he was such a ragged and ill-looking man, no one contested with him. [3; p. 20]</i>
8.	kifa urongo	Rhinoceros [2]	<i>Hey, kifa urongo! [3; p. 22]</i>
9.	marehemu	the dead [1; p. 236]	<i>But he can't be as bad as marehemu my father, God's mercy on his soul,' Khalil continued, unperturbed by Yusuf's outcry. 'Nobody can be.' [3; p. 24]</i>
10.	malai ¹ , mofa	¹ originally an Indian dish, heavy whipped cream obtained by heating milk [2] ² bread [2]	<i>Your Ba would've paid him, so you could stay at home and eat malai and mofa every morning, heh? [3; p. 25]</i>
11.	maluun	accursed person [1; p. 9]	<i>'You want them to bite you? Do you think they have come here to play with you? You are worse than a kifa urongo, you're a feeble-minded child without any spirit. What were you waiting for? Speak, you maluun.' [3; p. 27]</i>
12.	kiyama	judgement day [1; p. 506]	<i>After kiyama, after the day the world ends and God calls everyone to Him ... after kiyama the wolf-men will live in the first layer of Hell, thousands and thousands of them, and they'll eat the sinful people who don't obey Allah. [3; p. 29]</i>
13.	buibui	veil (long black worn by Muslim women) [1; 987]	<i>Women visitors came, draped from head to toe black buibui. [3; p. 36]</i>

14.	hakim ¹ , mganga ²	¹ leader [1; p. 522] ² rec.doctor [1; p. 287]	<i>For many years doctors have come, learned hakim with long grey beards have read prayers for her, and mganga from over the hills have brought medicine, but it's no good. [3; p. 38]</i>
15.	Juma'a	week [1; p. 1008]	<i>Every Idd he went with the seyyid to the Juma'a mosque for prayers, and once he had been taker1 to a funeral, but he did not know whose it was. [3; p. 39]</i>
16.	shabab	young man [1; p. 1031]	<i>'Shabab! What a brave little brother you are,' Khalil said, slapping Yusuf on the back. 'You'll look after me, eh.' [3; p. 39]</i>
17.	Magendo	Contra band for the border [3; p. 45]	<i>They were awkwardly shaped and covered with hessian. Magendo, Khalil whispered. Contra band for the border. Big money. [3; p. 45]</i>
18.	rehani	Loan [1; p. 539]	<i>He had come to understand fully that he was there as rehani, pawned to Uncle Aziz to secure his father's debts to the merchant. [3; p. 47]</i>
19.	kisirani	bad luck	<i>This is not your business and you must not ask useless questions. rou'll bring ... kisirani ... bad luck. rou want to bring evil on us. [3; p. 49]</i>
20.	'Kijana mzuri	Beautiful boy	<i>'Kijana mzuri.' Beautiful boy, Mohammed Abdalla had said, stopping beside Yusuf and taking his chin in a hand that felt as if it was mottled and scaled. [3; p. 52]</i>

Despite the challenges posed by colonialism, the novel may also depict instances of cultural resilience and survival. Characters may seek ways to preserve and adapt their cultural identity in the face of external pressures. "Paradise" provides a nuanced exploration of the cultural dimensions of East African societies during a time of significant historical and social change. The novel captures the complexities of cultural interactions, adaptations, and struggles within the context of colonial rule.

Religious Aspects of "Paradise"

In "Paradise" by Abdulrazak Gurnah, religious aspects play a significant role in shaping the characters' lives and interactions.

Islam: The majority of the characters in "Paradise" are likely to be Muslims, considering the historical and cultural context of East Africa. The novel explores how characters practice and express their faith in the midst of colonial challenges. Islam is portrayed as a source of comfort, identity, and resistance for some characters.

You should read the Book whenever you can, especially now that Ramadhan has started. During this holy month, every good act earns you double the blessing you'd receive at other times. The Prophet was told this by the Almighty himself on the night of Miraj. On that night our Prophet was taken from Makka to Jerusalem on the winged horse Borakh, and from there to the presence of the Almighty, who decreed the laws of Islam. (Paradise: 95)

The interactions between characters from different religious backgrounds, particularly in a diverse East African setting, could be explored. The novel examines how individuals of different faiths relate to each other, whether through tolerance, understanding, or conflict. The word "paradise" is also interpreted differently by different religious holders in the novel.

Did you know that is where all earthly waters have their source? The four rivers of Paradise. They run in different directions, north south east west, dividing God's garden into quarters. ... 'Where is this garden? Kalasinga asked. 'In India' I have seen many gardens with waterfalls in India. Is this your Paradise? Is this where the Aga Khan lives?' 'God has made seven Heavens,' Hamid said, ignoring Kalasinga and turning his head aside as if to address Yusuf alone. His voice was slowly softening. 'Paradise is the seventh level, itself divided into seven levels. The highest is the Jennet al And, the Garden of Eden.' (Paradise: 89)

The main protagonist of the novel Yusuf is blessed with beauty as prophet Yusuf A.S., and it demonstrates the intertextuality referring to the Holy books.

- *You'll drive young women insane with your beautiful looks one day. (p. 92)*
- *He likes you, but who wouldn't like such a beautiful boy? Your mother must have been visited by an angel. (p.117)*
- *With your beautiful looks you can have the whole world. (p.199)*
- *One touch from that beautiful boy will cure this wound in my heart. (p. 214)*

Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels, including "Paradise," are characterized by their exploration of complex themes such as colonialism, cultural identity, displacement, and the human consequences of historical and political upheaval. His works often provide nuanced portrayals of characters navigating the challenges imposed by external forces while grappling with their own internal conflicts. His writing is known for its rich and evocative language, vivid imagery, and a deep understanding of the historical and cultural contexts in which his stories unfold. The narratives often unfold against the backdrop of East Africa, where Gurnah himself was born, and his novels contribute to a broader understanding of the region's history and its intersection with global events. Through his storytelling, Gurnah sheds light on the intricacies of relationships, the impact of power dynamics, and the resilience of individuals and communities facing adversity. Themes of cultural clash, the coexistence of diverse traditions, and the consequences of colonialism are recurrent in his works.

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