

Negotiating Identity and Belonging in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Paradise

Dr. E. Lenin¹, Dr. C. Shola Fernando²

1&2. Assistant Professor of English, Aditanar College of Arts and Science, Tiruchendur-628216, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli- 627012, Tamil Nadu, India...

Cite this paper as: Dr. E. Lenin, Dr. C. Shola Fernando (2025) Negotiating Identity and Belonging in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Paradise. Journal of Neonatal Surgery, 14, (5s) 444-447

Received: 07.03.2025

Accepted: 27.04.2025

Published: 09.05.2025

ABSTRACT

Abdulrazak Gurnah's Paradise (1994) presents a complex exploration of identity and belonging within the socio-cultural and political landscape of East Africa on the eve of European colonial expansion. This paper examines the ways in which individual identity is shaped and continually negotiated through displacement, commercial bondage, spatial confinement, cultural hierarchy, and emerging colonial power structures. The study focuses on Yusuf's transformation from a young boy surrendered into rehani (pawns) to an alienated young man confronted with the uncertainties of a rapidly changing social and political order. Drawing upon Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the 'Third Space', Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, Frantz Fanon's analysis of psychological alienation, and Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, the paper investigates the intersection of identity, power, space, and belonging in the novel. Particular attention is given to Uncle Aziz's garden as a symbolic space of confinement and to the trading expedition as a site where cultural hierarchies and processes of 'othering' are reproduced. The study further considers the arrival of German colonial forces and Yusuf's final decision to follow the colonial army as a manifestation of constrained agency rather than genuine liberation. The paper argues that Gurnah destabilizes idealized notions of pre-colonial Africa by revealing the internal structures of exploitation that preceded and intersected with European imperialism. Ultimately, Paradise portrays identity and belonging as precarious, contested, and continuously negotiated within overlapping systems of economic, cultural, and political domination.

Keywords: Paradise, Identity, Belonging, Hybridity, Displacement, Colonialism, Postcolonial Literature.....

LITERATURE

Abdulrazak Gurnah's 1994 novel Paradise provides a critical re-examination of East African history on the eve of European colonial encroachment. Set in Swahili-coastal East Africa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the narrative interrogates how identity and belonging are negotiated within complex, pre-existing socio-economic hierarchies. Rather than presenting a simplistic dichotomy between European colonizers and African subjects, Gurnah constructs a multi-layered world defined by Indian Ocean trade networks, indigenous indentured servitude, Islamic cultural hegemony, and local ethnic rivalries.

Through the coming-of-age journey of Yusuf, a young boy sold into bondage by his father to settle a debt with a wealthy Arab trader named Uncle Aziz, the novel explores how individuals maneuver through shifting spaces of displacement, powerlessness, and institutionalized servitude. By framing Gurnah's narrative alongside Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the 'third space', Edward Said's theoretical framework of Orientalism, and Frantz Fanon's analysis of psychological alienation, this paper demonstrates that identity in Paradise is not a fixed, innate essence, but a continuously negotiated, precarious construct shaped by commercial bondage, spatial boundaries, and the looming shadow of European imperialism.

At the structural center of Paradise lies the institution of rehani (pawns), which problematizes Eurocentric, binary understandings of freedom and slavery. Yusuf's identity is fundamentally altered the moment he is uprooted from his childhood home. He is not stolen by foreign invaders; rather, he is surrendered by his own father to Uncle Aziz to pay off an outstanding commercial debt. This transaction immediately positions Yusuf's body as currency, stripping him of familial belonging and reclassifying him within the socio-economic hierarchy of the Swahili coast....

Gurnah underscores the psychological fragmentation accompanying this transition early in the novel. When Yusuf arrives at Uncle Aziz's establishment, he struggles to process the loss of his autonomous selfhood: "He did not know who he was or where he belonged. Uncle Aziz was not his uncle, and the shop was not a home, yet it was the only space where he was permitted to exist" (Paradise 15).

Yusuf's displacement forces him to negotiate an identity within a space of severe restriction. The familiar kinship title 'Uncle' functions as a euphemism that masks absolute ownership under the guise of familial care.

This condition directly mirrors what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha identifies in *The Location of Culture* as 'hybridity', a state of being 'in-between' established cultural, social, and political markers (Bhabha 38). Bhabha asserts that identity formed within spaces of subordination is never monolithic; instead, it is negotiated in a liminal 'Third Space' where the subject is neither fully one thing nor another (Bhabha 55). Yusuf is neither a recognized family member nor a simple chattel slave; he occupies a liminal position where his survival depends on performing obedience while constantly renegotiating his internal self-understanding.

This internal negotiation is further complicated by the character of Khalil, another young man pawned to Uncle Aziz years earlier. Unlike Yusuf, who clings to faint memories of liberty, Khalil has fully integrated the psychological mechanics of bondage into his identity. Khalil attempts to mentor Yusuf on navigating their master's power: "They can lock you up, put you in chains, abuse all your small longings, but freedom is not something they can take away. When they have finished with you, they are still as far away from owning you as they were on the day you were born" (Paradise 142).

Khalil's stoic philosophy aligns closely with Frantz Fanon's psychological framework in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon analyzes how individuals subjected to systemic, inescapable domination often internalize their confinement, recasting spatial captivity as external to an untouchable inner spirit (Fanon 52). Yet, as Gurnah illustrates, this psychological defense mechanism is a double-edged sword: while it grants Khalil a degree of mental fortitude, it paralyzes his agency, preventing him from ever seeking physical liberation or real belonging outside Uncle Aziz's compound.

The physical architecture in *Paradise* serves as a powerful metaphor for the ideological boundaries that construct identity and regulate belonging. Throughout the novel, Gurnah contrasts two primary spatial environments: the enclosed, manicured garden of Uncle Aziz's estate and the wild, unpredictable terrain encountered during commercial trade expeditions into the African interior.

Uncle Aziz's private garden is initially presented as a place of aesthetic harmony—a physical manifestation of the Islamic concept of *Jannah* (paradise). With its flowing water channels, fragrant trees, and protective stone walls, the garden offers a stark contrast to the dust and noise of the trading town. However, as Yusuf matures, he discovers that this 'paradise' is fundamentally an illusion constructed upon exclusion and captivity. The garden is surrounded by high, impenetrable walls designed as much to keep its inhabitants enclosed as to keep the outside world out.

This spatial structure functions as what philosopher Michel Foucault terms a 'heterotopia', a real, enacted space that mirrors, reverses, and neutralizes the power relations of the society surrounding it (Foucault 24). The physical boundaries of the estate reinforce the social barriers separating the merchant class from their indentured servants, trapping Yusuf in a state of permanent architectural and social alienation.

Within this space resides Zuleikha, Uncle Aziz's reclusive, disfigured senior wife. Infatuated with Yusuf's remarkable physical beauty, Zuleikha attempts to entice him into an affair, offering him privileges in exchange for affection. When Yusuf resists, Zuleikha offers him a nominal freedom, which Yusuf rejects by questioning the very structure of her authority: "They offered me freedom as a gift. She did. Who told her she had it to offer? I know the freedom you are talking about. I had that freedom the moment I was born" (Paradise 210).

Yusuf's refusal highlights the paradox of belonging within an unequal space. True belonging cannot be granted as a favour by a master within a walled enclosure; any 'freedom' extended within the confines of the garden remains an extension of domestic captivity.

The middle section of the novel shifts spatially from the coastal urban center to the interior of the East African mainland as Uncle Aziz leads a massive trading caravan into the hinterlands. This journey functions as a key site for examining how Swahili and Arab traders construct their own identities by 'othering' the indigenous African populations of the interior.

During the expedition, Yusuf observes how coastal traders view the inland societies not as equal human partners, but through a lens of cultural and religious superiority. The coastal merchants rely on Islamic idioms and commercial wealth to distance themselves from the interior communities, whom they dismiss as uncivilized. During a night surrounding the campfire, the veteran trader Hussein articulates this hierarchical worldview to the young men: "There are no people cleverer than traders, no calling more noble. It is what gives us life. You'll see some of the places we pass, where people have not yet been brought to life by trade, and they live like paralysed insects" (Paradise 88).

Hussein's discourse exemplifies Edward Said's theoretical framework of 'Orientalism'. Said demonstrates how a dominant group constructs an exaggerated, degraded image of an 'Other' to justify economic exploitation and cultural dominance (Said 45). The coastal Swahili-Arab traders view trade not merely as a commercial activity, but as a civilizing mission that bestows value upon 'raw' landscapes and people.

However, Gurnah subverts this civilizing narrative by exposing the vulnerability and brutality of the caravan. As the expedition penetrates deeper into the interior, the illusion of coastal mastery begins to fracture. The caravan encounters fierce resistance from local rulers, such as the formidable leader Chatu, who confiscates Uncle Aziz's trade goods and takes the merchants captive. The journey, intended to assert commercial dominance, instead reveals the precariousness of coastal identity.

When Yusuf observes the violence and disease that decimate the caravan's porters, he realizes that the hierarchy he believed in is fragile and dependent on physical force. His sense of belonging to the trade network deteriorates: "He saw the suffering of the men who carried the loads on their heads, their feet raw and swollen, and he realized that they were all driven by a fear they could not name, moving through a land that hated them" (Paradise 124).

This encounter with the interior forces Yusuf to confront his double alienation. To the inland indigenous communities, Yusuf is an instrument of the coastal merchant elite; to the coastal merchants, he remains an indentured servant. Rejoining Bhabha's framework, Yusuf is trapped in an uncomfortable, unmapped margin where identity cannot rely on established categories of ethnicity, class, or geography (Bhabha 55).

While the internal dynamics of East African society form the primary focus of *Paradise*, the novel is framed by the subtle, steady advance of European colonialism—specifically the arrival of German imperial forces (Schutztruppe). Gurnah masterfully keeps the European presence off-stage for much of the novel, allowing their influence to manifest as a distant, terrifying rumor that slowly destabilizes local power structures.

Throughout the trading expedition, characters express anxiety over the changing political landscape. The traders recognize that the arrival of the *Wadachi* (Germans) signifies an unprecedented shift that will render their traditional networks obsolete. Hussein warns the caravan of this impending transformation: "Everything is in turmoil. These Europeans are very determined, and as they fight over the prosperity of the earth they will crush all of us. You'd be a fool to think they're here to do anything that is good. It isn't trade they're after, but the land itself. And everything in it ... us" (Paradise 131).

Hussein's premonition captures the existential threat posed by high imperialism. Unlike the regional trade networks, which operated through complex negotiations of credit, debt, alliance, and religious affiliation, European imperialism seeks absolute territorial possession and economic restructuring.

The climax of the novel marks the explicit collision between these competing systems of power. Returning to the coast, Yusuf witnesses the physical presence of the German officers, who march into the town to conscript young African men into their colonial military units. The arrival of the German army dismantles the traditional authority of figures like Uncle Aziz. The wealth and social standing that allowed Aziz to claim ownership over Yusuf and Khalil mean nothing in the face of European military machinery.

In the final scene of the novel, Yusuf makes a sudden decision. Observing a line of young men being marched away by a German officer, Yusuf runs out of Uncle Aziz's compound and follows the colonial column: "Yusuf ran after them, his heart beating fast in his chest, not knowing where he was going or what would become of him, only that he could not stay behind in that house any longer" (Paradise 247).

This ambiguous ending has generated significant critical debate regarding Yusuf's agency and identity. By running toward the German military column, Yusuf appears to flee one form of servitude (*rehani* under Uncle Aziz) only to deliver himself into another—conscription into a brutal colonial army that will eventually fight in World War I.

Viewed through Fanon's analysis of colonial dynamics, Yusuf's desperate act is not a triumphant attainment of freedom, but a tragic manifestation of limited choice within a colonial crisis (Fanon 87). Unable to return to his long-lost family, unwilling to remain a domestic servant in a walled garden, and incapable of carving out an independent life within a collapsing economic order, Yusuf chooses the unknown danger of the colonial army over the familiar stagnation of his master's house. His movement toward the soldiers underscores the core tragedy of the novel: in a world being reshaped by imperial conquest, options for authentic self-determination and belonging are systematically erased.

Gurnah's narrative strategy relies on structural irony. The title *Paradise* operates on multiple levels: it references the Islamic garden of spiritual reward, the artificial sanctuary of Uncle Aziz's estate, and the romanticized pre-colonial Africa often constructed by nostalgic histories. By systematically dismantling each of these "paradises," Gurnah reveals that human relationships in this historical moment were thoroughly mediated by debt, power, and vulnerability.

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* provides a profound exploration of identity and belonging in pre-colonial East Africa. By refusing to offer simplified narratives of pre-colonial innocence or unmediated imperial conquest, Gurnah presents a nuanced portrait of a society characterized by its own internal hierarchies, commercial networks, and forms of servitude.

Through Yusuf's trajectory from an innocent child sold into pawnship to an alienated young man fleeing into the arms of an advancing colonial army, *Paradise* demonstrates that identity under systems of economic and imperial domination is rarely a matter of free choice. Instead, belonging must be continuously negotiated within constrained, often hostile spaces. Yusuf's final run after the German soldiers does not signify the attainment of ultimate freedom, but rather the ongoing, precarious search for selfhood in a world where every sanctuary is bound by walls, and every paradise carries its own price...

REFERENCES

1. Gurnah, Abdulrazak. *Paradise*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 1994.

2. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
3. Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2004.
4. Foucault, Michel. *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*. Translated by Jay Miskowiec, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, pp. 22–27.
5. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books, 1978...