

Nation as Setback: Re-reading Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure*

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ABSTRACT

*It is often said that to see a place whole, one has to look at it from outside. The Anglophone Zanzibari novelist, Abdulrazak Gurnah, limns his remembered Zanzibar from the subject position of a diasporic writer who was once mesmerized by the immense hope of 'independence' and later on disillusioned by the cannibalism of civil unrest and ethnic conflict. In the proposed paper, I seek to re-read Gurnah's *Memory of Departure* with the objective of laying bare the subtle dichotomy between what Hans Kohn differentiates as civic and ethnic nationalism. Attempts will be made to utilize both historiography and memoir in order to chart the trajectory of the growth of the novel's protagonist- Hassan from innocence and ignorance to experience and egress. Gurnah's novel as will be shown, traces the life of Hassan, an Arab teenager, is caught in the vortex of post independence glow up between the privileged Arab and the indigenous Africans. How the defensive bulwarks of family, race and nation fail to provide effective safety to Hassan and how his feelings of anxiety and insecurity lead him to migrate abroad, provide Gurnah with the narrative pivots of his novel. I try to show how Hassan's parting promise of return coupled with his private resolution of non-return actually present the idea of a postcolonial nation as 'setback'.*

Keywords: Zanzibar, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Nation, Society, Memory.

Main Paper: Perhaps it would not be extraneous to ponder at first on the very title of Gurnah's debut venture; *Memory of Departure*, as the two words 'memory' and 'departure' structure the thematic and contextual axis of the novel. This novel initiates the novelist's recurrent theme of revisiting the past by a compelling process of self search through the vehicle of remembering and re-creating. Gurnah's novels offer a sense of emotional void which is characterized by bereavement of loss, lament for up rootedness and impossibility of alliance. Recent critical thesis on memory study denies monolithic, simplistic and comprehensible link between memory and the process of remembering, as Grade- Hansen states, "memory, remembering and recording are the very key to existence, becoming and belonging" (Grade- Hansen7). The issue of becoming and belonging is utterly pertinent in diasporic narrative, as Avtar Brah notes in *Cartographies of Diaspora*, "The concept of diaspora places the discourse of 'home' and 'dispersion' in creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origin" (Brah189). Though cognitive psychologists like Margaret W. Matlin defines memory as the "process of retaining information overtime", this 'store house' metaphor has now been replaced by the notion that memory is a dynamic process. In the novel under discussion, the departure of Hassan from Zanzibar better not to be restricted on geographical level. It is a psychological departure from the quotidian experiences (however degrading or monotonous). The departure does not connote in this case an opportunist escape but desperation of leaving. More than relief it meets crisis. The memory automatically acts more than a connector and becomes an experience itself. Nation works in this tethering as a space of simultaneous longing and loathing.

Gurnah in this novel revisits his homeland, Zanzibar, almost twenty years after his migration to England, by creating an authorial self to challenge the existing histories and beliefs through a concomitant process of recalling and retelling the past. He fled to England in the early 1968 because after the Revolution (1964), Zanzibar became a place of terror and unrest, where the rule of autocratic leaders results political betrayal after the country's independence from the British (1890-1963). However his 'new country' refuted cordiality and fellow feeling. His 'otherness' was always pointed at by look, sneer, words and gesture. The departure, however, intensifies the attachment. He is haunted by the guilt of leaving the countrymen in the infuriating situation of Zanzibar. Out of this estrangement originates his identity which narrates the past simultaneously with a failure of proper remembering. In an interview he himself confesses, "My writing then was about lived experience and the notion of people trying to remember is a recurring theme for me" (Chambers122). However, Dennis Walder insists that to escape exclusion, recalling must come to terms with "the past in an ethical as well as heuristic sense" (Walder 17). Subscribing to the categorization of Trinh Minha-ha, Gurnah too writes not about the self but from the self and his voluntary return to the past mutilates the margin of past and present- the present forms not just the sequence but an opportunity of

epiphanic experience by which the novelist verbalizes and justifies the history behind his present diasporic status. Therefore in his narrative, the problematic of remembering, and/or forgetting becomes quintessential. Gurnah ventures to reclaim history through fiction. He does not imagine Zanzibar but recollects it. Gurnah tends to have reflections on those 'broken mirrors'- not from a hope for recuperation, but an obligation of speaking the truth. The homeland is portrayed faulty, hegemonic and brutal- as the diasporic identify here, expects him to be critical and evaluative. In this novel, he positions Hassan, the central focalizer, in the midst of the ethno-centric conflict between the Arab and the indigenous Africans, aroused just after the very country matures to the status of independent nation. In his narrative the liberal and inextricably entwined relationship between history and memory facilitates Hassan, a critic of both pre independent and post independent Zanzibar's nationalist discourse.

Any nation is conceptualized as the concretization of the hopes and aspirations of the nationalist community. As such the citizen expects of it to fulfill his/ her aspiration. However with its denial and failure the citizen may lead to migration on the individual plume and unrest and revolution on the collective plume. Post colonial third world nations because of their respective colonial past and multi- ethnic social form, differ from the Eurocentric tactics and concept of nation. Discussion on nation axiomatically raises the question of nationalism, national identity, and the enigmatic relation between the citizen and the given nation. Roughly speaking nation is a geo-political territory having borders, nationalism is the consciousness and commitment shared among the denizens of a nation, national identity is the official sign or approval of citizenship and lastly the 'enigmatic relation' confirms that despite the consciousness and the approval the nation often fails to be a welfare state. Recent insights on the issues like globalization, migration, exile, diaspora , despite offering complicity, indeed resurrect, transform and augment these nation- centric arguments more than ever before. The inclusive paradigm of globalization though aims to abate the socio-political- religious difference among the nations, tacitly ratifies the innate virtual hierarchy. The migrated and diasporic individual's intrinsic estrangement between 'past' and 'present', 'us' and 'other' is constantly reminded by the racism and chromatism, they experience in the 'host' lands. As the nations seldom provide them assurance and comfort, they compromise and live even more pathetically a life of 'doubleness'(Hall 228). Perhaps all these prompt Benedict Anderson to say, "Nation, nationality, nationalism, -all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyze" (Anderson3).

National identity presupposes the existence of independent nation. Whereas the western nations are formed out of an urgency of capitalistic ideology of imperialism, the colonized states seek the formation in the political struggle with the colonizers in one level and in the cultural- linguistic-territorial uniformity in another level. Therefore it is rooted both in the anti imperialist politics and the myth of potential ethno-cultural solidarity despite their visible diversity. Ironically in some cases, especially in the African continents, the political rulers follow and manifest the doctrine of colonial ideology: one nation, one state, in multi-ethnic social constructions. This calculative strategy and political bias is aimed to privilege the quantitative majority than those who do not share a sense of common heritage. The first thing the independent nation witnesses is a hegemonic outcry on behalf of a particular race, religion or language. The nation again gets torn between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', and becomes "the ideology of the banal."

Hans Kohn in his book *The Idea of Nationalism*, with his polarization between civic and ethnic nationalism splits the European civilization into two opposite continents by saying, "nationalism struggled to redraw the political boundaries in conformity with ethnographic demands" (Kohn 329). Stephen Shulman notes, "Kohn contrasted a highly rationalistic voluntaristic and democratic Western nationalism to an irrational, deterministic and undemocratic Eastern nationalism." (Shulman36). However the classification between the civic and ethnic is subject to a country's law, literature and official statements (Wright et al 470). Interestingly, validity of this distinction on the ground of 'generosity' can be devalued as these two are actually exclusionary in nature and silhouette of one another.

In the context of Zanzibar, presently a semi-autonomous part of Tanzania, East Africa, the ploy of civic and ethnic nationalism gets at once more vibrant and complicated. Historically an oasis of cross cultural trade over centuries, Zanzibar is a land of spice, a vile centre of slave trade, and most importantly a locale of heterogeneous and composite cultural heritage. The Bantu speaking immigrants from west-central Africa are counted as its first inhabitants. For the land's geographical location as a connector of Asia, Africa and Arabian peninsula, people from these lands throng here either for commercial success or for agricultural profit – among whom the Arabs are majority (Pettersen 4-6). Since 1698 Zanzibar is controlled by the Sultans of Oman and even in 1832 Said bin Sultan makes Zanzibar City his capital. The Arab rule then continues with the aid of colonial powers like German and Britain. In 1963, 10th December, the British strategically allows its independence under the constitutional monarchy of Sultan Jamshid bin Abdullah

aiming to practise protracted control over the land. However, leaders like Abdulrahman Mohamed Babu, Abeid Karume form Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP) which votes for Pan-Africanism, as opposed to the Arab supported party Zanzibar Nationalist Party (ZNP). The clash between the Arab ideology and the indigenous African culture reaches a flash point on 12th January, 1964 when under the leadership of John Okello the infamous Zanzibari Revolution takes place and officially 20,000 Arabs and Asians are mercilessly slaughtered in this massacre. After that on April 1964 the country surprisingly merges to Tanganyika and gains a semi-autonomous status under the vice- presidency of Karume. Till Today the political status remains unchanged.

The civil war, from the history discussed and analyzed above, can be termed as a clash between the ‘civic’ Arab and the ‘ethnic’ Africans. But the determinative and justificatory factors get shadowy as the Arabs too tried to hegemonize their culture, marginalizing the Africans from their legitimate ethnographic demands and economic privileges over decades. Though Wilson accuses colonial ‘divide and rule strategy’ for this rive in the Zanzibari society, the Sultanate regime cannot shirk the responsibility. The African revolts in order to change the oppressive social order with a progressive urge. But soon the euphoria of revolution and enfranchisement vanishes by the disappointing and anticlimactic terror, unrest, corruption and dictatorship it produces. The new power mongers with their blindly practised exclusivist strategy and nepotism repeat the vileness of autocracy. In a recent interview Khamis Ameir admits that the pursuit of Africanization left a deep scar in the progressive dream as the country was then governed by unskilled, undisciplined, unprincipled administration which bothered less about the collective welfare than personal benefit (Wilson 56). Gurnah tries to project Zanzibar in particular and east Africa in general as a multiethnic cross cultural heterogeneous hub which undermines ‘authenticity’ and ‘purity’ of nation. Gurnah contours nation as a ‘location of culture’, a vision, intentionally veiled by ‘the racialized language’ which “tried to scientifically encode race (blackness or Africanness) in a way that was incongruous with east Africa’s historical development (Mirmotahari59).

In the radar of diaspoic literature the issue of nostalgia has recently been revitalized from a sense of at once innate but impossible desire for return to a geographical home to an eagerness to recapture that ‘lost’ experience. History with its determining and deceptive nature becomes subject to interrogation as the ‘experience’ alludes to both collective memory and cultural heritage. Dennis Walder with acuity perceives, “Not only is nostalgia deeply implicated in the political life of people, it is a part of their historical sense of themselves” (Walder 3). He also deduces memory as a regulatory and decisive factor behind a diasporic novel. It centers round experience(s) and becomes as a whole an experience itself- barring the ideological hegemony the nationalized version of history indents to thrust upon. In *Memory of Departure*, a de facto prequel to his *Pilgrims Way*, Gurnah counter questions post independent Zanzibar’s ideological and cultural structure that homogenizes and hegemonizes monolithic ‘Africanness’ excluding the influence of either Islam or Arab. The narrative centers on Hassan, an Arab teenager from Kenge, steeping to manhood. The thematic trajectory is woven the way he perceives the virulent socio-political changes in Zanzibar. He becomes a voice, a self, a mirror and an individual to interpret the recent nationalist discourse. His equally critical stance to the manipulative stratagem manouevoured both by the Arab and the colonial forces makes him veracious. His maturation is an intentional ploy by Gurnah to show how the common people perceive, judge and become victim of the nation-state’s whimsical strategy. Hassan belongs to a lower middle class mixed Arab family, hectorated by his inebriated and licentious father who strangulates other voices to propel autocracy within the family. With his growing the narrative becomes thematically critical. To escape the monotonous and degrading surrounding, the protagonist gets anxious to leave the country to study in abroad. The financial help is expected to be provided by the time-worn maternal uncle, currently an affluent entrepreneur in Nairobi. In his journey to Nairobi, he meets the specious Moses who harangues the so-called Africanness and provides an alternative, even more tantalizing view instead. In the uncle’s house he gets involved in an amorous affair with his niece, Salma, a situation which confirms his banishment from that ‘paradisal home.’ The dereliction ultimately ends in his departure with a quandary of return.

Emad Mirotohari in his discussion on the novel comments, “Race and racial consciousness saturate *Memory of Departure*, and both are related to Islam and its history on the east African coast” (Mirotohari 77). The first person Hassan encounters is a Yemeni shopkeeper who exposes racial hatred to him. Throughout the novel he undertakes voluntary or involuntary physical journeys which are ramified by his internal monologues. In one of such monologues he continues, “Independence was just round the corner, and we spoke of the opportunities that it would bring to us. That was not the way it turned out... With our history of the misuse and oppression of Africans by an alliance of Arabs, Indians and Europeans, it was naïve to that things would turned out differently” (*Memory* 28). The consciousness regarding history makes Hassan’s situation problematic. That the veil of racial congruity would be hard to maintain, that the country would

witness a complete turn in the hierarchical pattern is expected to him. But the real disillusionment occurs when the new nation fails to maintain harmony and contaminates the nation's inclusive structure and welfare policy by exclusivist political propaganda. The disillusionment counts acute with description of the worn out, decrepit, dimly lighted party house, currently reduced to a club, becomes pathetic mockery of the words engraved above the doorway: "FREEDOM NOW" (*Memory* 41). Hassan as well as Gurnah critics and questions the nature of freedom and the future of the state. The surprising alliance between the present leader (supposedly Abeid Karume though the name remains unmentioned just as the name of the nation) and the Queen of England, destabilizes the rhetoric of freedom. Hassan's painful recollection on the very auspicious day invokes grim satire when he remembers, "And at school we were asked to write an essay entitled: *What Independence Means To Me*. A jamboree!" (*Memory* 43). In the context of independence, freedom connotes dream of fulfillment in every spheres of existence. Colonialist bondage has so far thwarted individual and collective pursuit. The independence incarnates possibility of achievement. But the hegemonic political polities disown the responsibility and act exactly opposite. The country's dream of better future gets frustrated by dominating interpolative forces. The suffocated waiting after the examination and its farcical outcome cajole the students to be either agents of ideological apparatus or act as a soldier positioned at the infuriating border areas. Hassan distastefully observes, "They were part of the heady atmosphere of intrigue and politics and revenge that independence had brought" (*Memory* 57). The definite racial binary works to blunt the traditionally privileged Arabs and Indians. It creates a vacuum in the resource as the hitherto anti-African strategies have so far denied the native's chance of progress. The current policy not only drastically imbalances the social paradigm but makes it vulnerable. With his double perspective, based on historical memory (regarding the exploitative Arabs as harbinger of slave trade) and on the 'present living' (regarding the recent racial atrocity directed at people of genuine or mixed Arab heritage), Hassan finds departure as a soul means of respite. Hassan recollects, "After three years of independence, it was clear that the future had to be sought elsewhere" (*Memory* 28). Khamis Ameir's confession that only the wretched Arabs and Indians were failed to escape that turmoil gives this utterance sound historical confirmation (Wilson 56). The nation turns into a state of panoptic surveillance, empowered to interrogate, punish and victimize any person: "Soldiers don't have to knock any more before they enter a house" (*Memory* 43). Hassan's success in the immigration office is rooted in the illicit affair the officer continues with his sister, an instance which proves Arab female only a means to appease carnal appetite. Hassan's intentional mistake in the bio-data amplifies again the trajectory of belonging he presently suffers. His mixed origin problematizes his 'authentic' belonging. He is neither fully Arab, because of his black skin, nor a pure African because of his tainted Arab ancestry. With his crisis he represents the multiethnic structure of the nation.

In his journey he meets Moses, a double-dealer, an ardent student with rudimentary progressive spirit of Africanness in disguise and an agent of corruption in reality. Moses criticizes Peter Abrahams who he thinks, is "too self conscious, that's the problem. He doesn't write like an African" (*Memory* 73). As later found out, he is an agent who arranges menial pleasures for the Western tourists and thus becomes a subject to neocolonialist ideology. His uncle Ahmed represents the mercantile class, emerged after the independence. His arid hospitality corners Hassan to such an extent that even the servant Ali begins to harangue the land he belongs to: "There are many Arabs there.' He hesitated again, revulsion rising on his face. 'He said men and men have sex. You know, they enter each other through the back, like dogs'" (*Memory* 102). The Arab populated coastal areas become subject to sheer polarization by the in-land Africans. This reflects two pejorative common approaches towards the Arabs as lethargic arse fuckers, immersed only in sexual pleasure, in one hand and exploiter of African youths in another. The humiliation resists counter as historical memory again makes Hassan numb. But the prevalent racialist discourse makes Hassan equally suspect of the country's 'progress towards perfection.' Salma's reflection in this context is worth quoting: "I think it hurts everybody in the end. I think it's bad for everybody. We all end up being a little less human" (*Memory* 107).

After his humiliating return, he discovers more degradation in the family space which arguably serves miniature form of the bluster he confronts in the public domain. Despite his inclination to live in the country, his mother and sister pursue his immediate leaving. The novel ends with his letter to Salma, the fiancée, with a promise of return – a promise loaded with a possibility of non-return.

Conclusion: In his edifying article "Recharting the Geography of Genre", J.S.F. Vasquez notes, "the protagonist of African bildungsroman often find themselves incapable of choosing between two sets of values, an internal conflict which remains unresolved at the end of the narrative" (Vasquez 87). The present

narrative cartography revolves around Hassan's double perspective. Despite having a strong affinity with this insight, the narrative achieves a higher plume by dint of its truthfulness. The Memory of Hassan's departure is not diluted by any easy nostalgia for homeland either. The truth and reality of the historical heterogeneity of the east Africa with its racial conflict and cultural split is asserted despite the official and manipulative construction regarding its uniformity and idyllic setting. The novel stretches its paradigm by providing a re-visionist outlook to the dominant historiography of both pre and post colonial Zanzibar by questioning relevance of the articulations, 'Pan Africanness' and 'African Nationalism' in the multi-ethnic social structure of East Africa.

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