

## POST-COLONIAL HEGEMONIC INDICES IN ADULRAZAK GURNAH'S *GRAVEL HEART*

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### **Abstract**

Many post-colonies are faced with bad systems of governance which are invariably giving rise to dysfunctional societies. These are often blamed or attributed to colonial rule. Due to the abrasive interference and influence of these western cultures on the colonies/colonized; the oppression and subjugation from the colonialists; class discrimination, corruption and injustice have engulfed these postcolonies till date hence are all perceived to be consequences of colonization. The 2021 Nobel Laureate for Literature, Abdulrazak Gurnah, in his novel, *Gravel Heart*, highlights these hegemonic indices as he transverses the influences and effects of colonialism and the poor leadership systems in the post colonies as after-effects of the abrasive nature of colonial rule by the imperialists. Postcolonial literary theory investigated these issues as it interrogates the historical antecedents of colonialism.

### **Introduction**

It is a common view that post-colonial literature is about a people who have been colonized, a people whose culture and identity are grossly altered, and a people who are regarded as the lower class, primitive and uncivilized in the present system of things. Thus, the colonialists' business thrived in this self-delusional opinion they succeeded in creating about the colonized by also making them to accept themselves on such terms. Thus, the coming of the term *Third World* by Alfred Sauvy in the 1950s to refer to developing countries or nations actually spurred the attentions of writers from these developing nations to start investigating and interrogating what actually happened to them and why they are being viewed from such perspective. Hence, Bill Ashcroft et al assert that;

postcolonial theory involves discussion of various kinds of migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, differences, race, gender, place and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial cultures such as history, philosophy and linguistics. (1-2)

Some proponents of this theory are; Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Bill Aschcroft, Homi K. Bhabba, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Frantz Fanon. As for Said, postcolonial criticism is fashioned by the socio-cultural, political and economic powers as he coined the word *Orientalism*, a term he uses to portray the hierarchical binary structure between the 'orient' and the 'occident'. This, can also be referred as the "East" and "West" binary structure. A main concept in the postcolonial theory is 'interdependence' as he further argues that the 'occident' possibly will not exist without the 'orients' or vice-versa. According to N. Krishnaswamy;

Edward Said's *Orientalism* enlarged the scope of the postcolonial approach by exposing the Eurocentric universalism which establishes Western superiority over East, identified as the 'other'. The Orient, a colony, according to Said, features in the Western mind as a sort of surrogate and underground self. In other words, the Orient is represented in terms of the qualities that the Westerners do wish to attribute to themselves, qualities like decadence, laziness, stupidity, sensuality, effeminacy, etc. The people in the East are seen as 'masses and not individuals. (91)

Worthy of note is that, the 'West' were the ones who started the idea of calling the 'East' Orient a people who cannot express themselves and this western depiction of the 'orients', portray them as an inferior world, wild, and backward. It is on this established premise by the West (Occident) about the East (Orient) that "orients" are relegated and see themselves as the 'other' as opposed to the 'self' who regards themselves as progressives, rational and competent.

Also, John Lye, while lending his voice towards the study of postcolonial literature, from historical perspective, sees postcolonial theory as a discourse that is concerned with literary works that were and are still being written by the colonized thereby limiting the study as a focus on people who were once under colonial rule. He portrays this as he submits that, “Postcolonial theory deals with the reading and writing of literature written by previously or currently colonized countries or literature written in colonizing countries, which deals with colonization or colonized people”. (1)

As for Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle, “the term postcolonial should be seen as covering all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (214). So, they see postcolonial theory as an approach that came into existence at the end of colonial domination and the hegemonic controls over the third world countries. Postcolonial theory therefore seeks to study the displacement and abuse of peoples’ culture and literatures by the colonialists. Hence, this paper interrogates the hegemonic effect of colonialism in the 2021 Nobel Laureate for Literature, Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Gravel Heart*.

Gurnah, in his novel depicts the destructive effects of colonial and postcolonial rule, the gross abusive display of power by African leaders upon citizens in the post colony. He portrays the drastic paradigm shift of government and governance, culture and tradition, resistance and rebellious attitude of some religious faithful during and after colonialization. According to Chinyere Nwahunanya;

The issues raised in postcolonial criticism includes the dilemmas of developing a national identity in the wake of colonial rule, the ways in which writers from colonized countries attempt to articulate and celebrate their culture identities and reclaim them from colonizers; how knowledge of subordinate people is produced and used to justify colonialism through the perpetuation of the images of the colonized as inferior. (33)

It is evident that the domineering nature of the colonialists is ever present in their different colonies irrespective of their years of flag independence. Thus, colonialism could be seen as a domination of a people or a geographical region by foreign superior nation. It is a practice of expanding and maintaining a nation’s economic and political control over another. It is seen that the process of colonialization is a process of subjugation, oppression and suppression of a peoples’ beliefs, mindsets and views.

### **The Setting and Overview of the Novel**

The novel is set in Zanzibar. Geographically, Zanzibar is an archipelago off the Western Indian Ocean, adjacent to the East Coast of Africa. But it is now a semi-autonomous region inside the country of Tanzania. It has its own form of government that is mostly referred to as the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar (RGZ), hence it fights to operate independently from all its neighbouring countries. However, the composition of their House of Representative is similar to that of the larger Tanzania.

The novel generally revolves around Salim, the protagonist, whose parents got separated since he was seven. His father lives with a relation down the street while he and his mother live in his father’s old house. The cause of his parents’ separation is as a result of his mother’s infidelity, as she slept with the vice president’s son in order to get her younger brother, Amir, out of jail. At first, the young Salim thought his father does not want them around him, that is why he left the house, but he is confused as his mother still sends him lunch every day. The young Salim adores Uncle Armin, because of his playful nature and smartness. Uncle Amir, later relocated to London as a diplomat and helps Salim to further his studies in London. He did this, as a reward for the protagonist’s mother sacrifice for him.

The protagonist’s parents had their personal narrations and experiences, from both the colonial and post-colonial rules in Zanzibar. His maternal grand-father once worked for the British colonialists during colonization, while his father narrates to him, his ordeal in the post-colonial government. Hence, through these narratives and Salim’s personal experiences, the author vividly captured all that had transpired in Zanzibar’s government. The text is written in first personal pronoun, as the narrative traces the growth of the protagonist, from his infancy years in Zanzibar to adulthood in London.

### Colonial Rule in the Text

Zanzibar, in the novel, is a post colony that encounters a drastic change in government, culture, norms and religion. At the beginning of the text, the writer focuses attention on issues affecting lives in the diaspora but towards the end, the cause of the overwhelming migration of natives from their homelands is seen. And the major reason from the text, is the harsh interruption of a peoples' way of life, which usually occur during colonization. Unfortunately, in the text, the educated natives are seen by the colonialists as anti-colonialists and are placed on high sanctions. So, in order to survive the colonial rule, these set of intellectuals escape to meet nationalists in other countries while those who could not, would become subservient and praise singers to their colonial masters. According to the narrator;

These anti-colonial intellectuals that Saida's father associated with wanted to become modern too, like the nationalist they admired. They wanted to be able to determine the outcome of their lives without the overbearing presence of the British and their self-righteous and sanctimonious display of self-congratulatory restraints. Those who had dealings with them, like Saida's father, knew that that self-deprecatory mannerism really disguised a smug and condescending arrogance towards everyone, and especially towards *over-educated natives* like him, whose fate was subservient and ignorance. (17)

It is evident that the British rule in Zanzibar was sustained by fear, punishment, torture and death. This is because, the natives are in constant in fear of an alien form of government that does not spare any offender. So those who could tell the difference between a tyranny and a proper form of governance are faced with highest form of threats. Hence they become subservient and feign ignorance of all that was happening to their country and people. In the text, Gurnah portrays the British rule in Zanzibar, as masters ruling over their slaves while their helpless intellectuals were quiet. According to Saida

What else could the do? When they were confronted with their manipulative and intimidating method... well, there were times, inevitably, when one had to be cruel to be kind. No one bid the British to come here,' my father said. 'They came because they are covetous and cannot help wanting to fill the world with their presence'. The British authorities preferred to forget that they were conquerors who ruled by coercion and punishment, and considered any outspoken comment on this as sedition (17)

The British and their high handed rule are felt in all their colonies, as they introduce words that incite fear in the mind of the people. Words like "sedition and legitimate government and constituted authority" (17) which the natives could not help with but to succumb to are invoked. However, when the natives were tired of the damage that the British chauvinistic rule has brought upon them, they decide that "it was time for them to go" (17). This was when the revolution started. This revolution, invariably ushered in post-colonial government and the post-colonial leaders where more domineering than their predecessors.

Worthy of note is that, post-colonial discuss in African Literature is usually centered on corruption, negligence and complicity of African leaders without looking at the domineering and overbearing attitude of these leaders. The poor citizens are persistently subdued and coarse to remain poor by their leaders. Yet, they keep striving for acceptance and validations from the same leaders. Gurnah, in this text, portrays this attitude as an inherited style of governance from the British rule. And some leaders, especially in Africa, still governs their fellow citizens on this insensitive trajectory till date.

It is expected that after colonialisation, leaders of these post colonies will see their countries as their home and treat their citizens likewise. But unfortunately, issues on class difference, ethnic superiority, language and other forms of discriminating, domineering and condescending attitudes are the major preoccupations of African government. As greed and human ego have engulfed the system. The major issue in the novel, is centered on the effect of the domineering attitude of a government officer upon Masud's poor family.

Hakim, son of the vice president, who intimidates Masud's wife, Saida, into his bed, succeeds because of his influence as the vice president's son. And this particular act, shatters the protagonist's once close-knitted family throughout the novel. The young Salim, sees it as the turmoil that separates his parents, starting from the day his father left the house. According Salim "I had seen so little of him since he left us, and he was so silent and far away when I greeted him we passed in the street, that I was not sure he knew who I was any more.... I was afraid of him because he seemed like someone who was unpredictable, someone who had lost his mind. (35)" Masud is in pain, as he could not fight for his wife and young family that have been destroyed by the vice president's son. Instead he is depressed and laments in agony because he is helpless since he is just a junior staff at the state's water resources.

### **Post-colonial Hegemonic Indices**

In the novel, he portrays how the imperialists unleash their might and will on their poor and naïve colonies in order to extirpate the already existing culture while enthroning their alien tradition. A way or an act of dispossessing and destroying the norms and cultural ethics of the colonies, as they repossess, re-orientate and re-tame them. That is why Ann Dobie asserts that;

The subject matter of postcolonial literature is marked by its concern for ambiguity and loss of identity. Written by culturally displaced people, it investigates the clash of culture in which one culture deems itself to be the superior one and imposes its own practice on the lesser powerful one. Its writers examine their histories, question how they should respond to the changes they see around them, and wonder what their society will become (Ann Dobie, 208).

The protagonist's father, Masud popularly known as Baba, is a product of colonial and first phase of postcolonial rule, who has his fair share from the sordid experiences and sudden presence of the invaders, he recounts that: "There was no choice but to sit silently while history was narrated anew, no choice but to wait in a dumbly unenthusiastic silence for the mocking dismantling of our old stories, until later when we could whisperingly remind each other what plunderers had tried to steal from us (180)".

Gurnah raises many issues pertaining politics, economy and religion in Africa. Historically, Africa is known for monarchical and gerontocratic forms of government, as there are kings, chiefs and elders who govern the affairs of their societies. However, when they were introduced to formal politics, they were comfortable with one party system, a system that is similar to the former which happens to be in line with African tradition but it is now called authoritarian by the west, who collude with some African leaders as they sought for ways to make it an unacceptable system of government in this era of democracy. On the contrary, Africans are quite comfortable with it as it gives them a kind of familiar ambience towards understanding leadership. Baba narrates that;

Only one party system was permitted, a convenience many African states allowed themselves at the time so they could proceed about their affairs without any annoying questions or opposition from imperialist stooges, social malcontents and sexual perverts...[they] sought to argue that was authoritarian practice. Election were regularly held, which the President and his government always won. Why shouldn't they? Who did you expect to win if not President and his government? Some unemployed homosexual? A reformed house breaker? (186).

However, the revilers - those who are objects and tools of the colonialists perceive it as autocratic system of government as there is no opportunity to plunder the national cake through the establishment of multiparty system. Gurnah argues that "the obstinacy of these opinionated disparagers stemmed from their failure to understand the complexity of African culture: African citizens preferred the one party state with a powerful virile leader mounted on it (187)".

But colonial puppets see this as an outdated culture that should be done away with, as they betray their fellow citizens in order to gain favours and leadership positions over their people from the west. The

colonialists in their oppressive manner take charge of every aspect of governance, trampled and interfered in all their practices. Cultural interference is an important aspect to evaluate while discussing [post] colonial literature. In the text, Wahhabi Usurper is a traditional act or practice peculiar to the Omani culture. It is an expectation of any Omani prince to kill the present sultan at any given opportunity in order to replace him. Unfortunately, due to the British interference Barghash is exiled to Bombay in his attempt to displace his brother Majid, the present sultan. Baba being the voice of tradition laments that;

The British had no business interfering in the internecine mayhem – they had not yet taken our little territory in hand for its own good – but they did so anyway because they wanted the world to run as they liked it. Even if it was only a caprice on their part. Exile this one, replace that one, hang the malcontents, even bombard the whole town ... Why not? It was necessary in order to establish who was superior and had the power, and who should do precisely of what he was told (196).

Gurnah's narration and description of the British colonialist meddling attitude upon the native's affairs could be perceived as a case of bully and lack of a supposed exposure on the part of the British. This is because, despite their interference premised on the claim of perfection, little or no development is done, as power is only given to those who can act strictly on their instructions. The poor citizens suffer gross level of injustice meted on them by their corrupt leaders who are interested in amassing wealth for themselves at the detriment of the impoverished citizens. Baba recalls that: "there were so many other matters gone wrong in our lives and in our minds that to dwell on them was to despair (197)".

In order to ridicule the British colonialists, Barghash's exile to Bombay serves as an exhilarating ambience to explore the paradoxical nature of colonialism in most parts of Africa. It is evident in the text that Barghash is exposed to modern facilities like tap water and flushing toilets. These luxuries are what Barghash installed in his town on his return as the Sultan of Omani after Majid's death and it is believed that these luxuries were unheard of in most parts of Europe as at that time, but could probably be in San Francisco and New York City due to the American attitudes to convince the world about their high level of development.

Migration also becomes a pertinent issue in post-colonial discuss, as the natives find their immediate environment uncomfortable with the enforcement and introduction of new systems of government and governance which automatically affect and negate every aspect of their daily living. There is a search for safety in neighbouring towns and cities. However, "the politics of decolonialisation could not tolerate these divided loyalties, and required commitment to nation and continent. With the revolution, that politics turned violent and punitive and forced many people into flight because they feared for their lives and their futures (180)".

Thus, after the postcolonial revolution, the cost of living becomes unbearable as many suffer retrenchments of all sorts while others are assassinated. This is the case of Maalim Yahya, Baba's father, who is able to secure a job for himself in Dubai and he is given permission and passport to leave Zanzibar, an act which Baba says "was not easily done at that time, not for any good reason but because nothing was easily done at that time (180-1)". For the government, the interaction of the natives with those across the ocean could bring foreign influence. In order to cut them off from their land, they are stripped of all their belongings.

The natives are on rampage seeking for solace as they are overwhelmed with the new system of things associated with mental torture and deprivation. Baba narrates: "as times became harder and the humiliations and dangers mounted, the search for work and a place of safety made many people remember that they were Arabs or Indians or Iranians. And they resuscitated connections they had allowed to wither (180)".

Displacement and migration become a prevalent discourse in postcolonial literature as large number of citizens are directly affected by this hegemonic display of class and power by leaders who seek affluence and power at all cost. Their major interest is to plunder all available resources for themselves and their families as “all the children of the powerful were being groomed to be powerful too. That is what families do, if for no other reason than to ensure the security of their plunder (255)”. An example of this act is Baba’s friend and class mate, Yusuf, who lives in a wing of his father’s mansion. His father, a powerful man in the government, who is the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs while Yusuf is being groomed as a junior official the ministry.

There is also a conscious and arrogant display of class dichotomy between the leaders and the led, the rulers and the ruled, the high and mighty executives, and the low civil servants. This is the pattern and system of governance African leaders inherited from the colonialists as there were a constant display of class dichotomy between the colonizer and the colonized, occident and orient, white and black where white is always privileged over black. “They try to mystify themselves by projecting their actions as demi-gods before citizens, who would have no choice than to obey cowardly” (198).

Another aspect of postcolonial view is the issue of suppression. The foreign power, in a bid to establish its dominant and alien culture, suppresses the local and native traditional norms. However, oppression and suppression become the tools colonialists use to unleash their inhuman act of colonialism in Africa and a major trait African leaders inherit from them in their post colonies as they act above the law. According to Baba:

Everyone was fearful of authority because in recent times we had seen how stern it could be, especially with those it suspected to being reluctant in their submission to it. It went about it ugly business as if no one could see what was happening, or remember who was doing it or why. (195).

### **Conclusion**

Worthy of note is that Gurnah raises awareness on prevalent issues affecting postcolonial Africa. It is seen that the major issues in the novel are the issue of poor leadership, corruption, subjugation and gross abuse of power. And these are all traits inherited from the imperialists as they imposed their alien cultures on the colonies hence these colonies are now being described as a people who have been gruesomely displaced politically, culturally and economically. The “others” therefore only exist as continents in name; they exist on the margins.

Gurnah’s novel is thus a reaffirmation of Said, Rodney, Wa’Thiongo and Achebe among others who contended and still contend that imperialism did and is still doing incalculable damage to Africa and the third world in general. Mitigating these negative influences, require cultural and ethical revolutions that will see the colonized rediscovering themselves by relying on homegrown solutions to the problems of their daily living. At the end of the day, development can only be measured through the ability of cultures to solve the day to day problems of their daily living.

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