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Homelessness And Identity In Gurnah's *Gravel Heart*

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Abstract: In a world of globalization, people often need to leave their homeland to live in a completely different culture, away from home, family, and community. Such individuals usually develop a sense of rootlessness and become ambiguous about their self-identity. They try to align themselves with the new culture; however, they are generally not able to adopt it completely, becoming *containers* for a hybrid culture, different from both the native and the new culture. They are always filled with a sense of emptiness and are doubtful about their true identity and place in this ever-changing world. The various phases of such expatriates can be understood through Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity. This article explores the relationship between homelessness and identity as depicted in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Gravel Heart. The protagonist of the novel, Salim, is a young boy who reluctantly migrates to London because he finds his postcolonial home and homeland chaotic. However, he faces profound alienation and a persistent sense of homelessness in his new environment. This study employs Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity to conduct a close reading of Salim's experiences, examining how these challenges disrupt his life and studies and reshape his quest for belonging. By analyzing key moments of Salim's life abroad, this article reveals the nuances and complications of identity formation in a diasporic context. Gravel Heart not only reflects the personal struggles of its characters but also offers a deeper understanding of the universal search for home in a world of globalization marked by migration and cultural hybridity. This thematic analysis contributes to academic discourse on postcolonial identity, delineating the impact of homelessness on the sense of self-identity and belonging.

Index Terms **-** Homelessness, Identity, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Gravel Heart, Postcolonial, Migration, Hybridity

I. INTRODUCTION

"I felt as if the city despised me, as if I were a tiresome and timorous child who had wandered unwelcome out of the dust and rubble of his puny Island shanty into this place where boldness and greed and swagger were required for survival."

—Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*

It is a paradox that in a globalised world of unprecedented connectedness, we experience unprecedented sense of isolation and alienation. It is because of our ambiguous sense of identity, of who we are, that we literally scream on social media platforms to assert our existence, to reinforce our identity. As the borders dissolve and cultures overlap, individuals are confronted with the challenge of consistently recreating their identity—an attempt to achieve stability in a world of flux. There are people who *choose* to leave their homeland in search of a better lifestyle, because they want a new upgraded home. There are others who are *forced* to leave their home, and homeland because they yearn for social and political peace; peace which is the prerequisite for growth

and prosperity. It is, of course, difficult to adjust according to a new culture and reconcile one's identity. But it becomes even more difficult when you are forced to do it, when you move out of your home because it is no more a cradle of safety and security; because your home is in a postcolony left, by the colonizers, amidst chaos and disparity. Migration—a ramification of social, political and economic disparity created largely due to European colonialism—is a truism of our age. The displacement inherent in migration often leads to a profound sense of homelessness and identity crisis. Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* offers a soul-touching representation of this phenomenon, which reinforces our imagination on what it means being an immigrant in a metropolis. The novel can be taken as a quintessence that reveals the complexities of belonging, (a consequent of homelessness) and alienation, (a consequent of identity crisis) in a postcolonial world. Novel's protagonist, Salim moves from a chaotic Zanzibar to London in search of peace. However, he goes through an overwhelming sense of homelessness and experiences issues concerning his identity. By analysing Salim's journey through the lens of Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity, this study seeks to understand the impact of displacement on the formation of identity and how displacement impacts the psyche of an immigrant engaged in a perpetual search for home afar homeland.

II. Background and Context

The Postcolonial Studies Dictionary defines globalization as "the flow of capital, labour and cultural productions across national borders, unifying the world within these flows, although the profits and decision-making processes are very often located in the First World nations" (Nayar 85). However, for Postcolonial studies it is "a version of imperialism" and is often seen as "the antithesis of decolonisation" that curb "the autonomy of the nation-states and its culture" (Nayar 85). Of course, there could be different perspectives of looking at the phenomenon, I want to assert that globalisation has resulted in dislocation i.e. migration—willing or forced. With migration comes the challenges associated with it, particularly concerned with the migrant's identity and their sense of belonging.

Uprooted from their familiar environment, the migrants often find themselves involved in a struggle to negotiate between their home culture and the host culture. Besides, the uniform culture imposed by globalisation through the multinational media, consumer goods, and lifestyles exacerbate their sense of cultural displacement. The familiar means and markers of associations and identity, through which they used to identify themselves, such as the language, customs, and social networks seem vanishing in the new environment. They are overwhelmed by the cultural collision that they experience, which in turn, makes it even more difficult for them to reconcile their past with their present, reinforcing their sense of rootlessness even further. This constant struggle towards reconciliation between their old and new identities could be psychologically taxing that naturally leads to the feelings of alienation, isolation, and marginalization. Although, globalisation might have created opportunities, for some, of better homes, for most it contributes to a profound sense of homelessness, disconnection and loss. For those, who are *forced* to migrate, the consequences are extreme. The behaviour, psychology and the resistance of such immigrants can be understood with Homi K. Bhabha's explanation on the concept of *Hybridity.*

Homi K. Bhabha is an Indian scholar and critical theorist. A Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University, he is one of the most important theorists in the contemporary postcolonial studies who proposed some key concepts like mimicry, ambivalence and hybridity, around colonial discourse analysis. His theory sought to explain how colonized people resist the colonial discourse, subverting colonizers dominant position. His theory, particularly related to the concept of hybridity, can also help understand the impact of conflicting cultural influences on individual's sense of identity.

In *The Location of Culture,* Bhabha asserts that identity in the colonial encounter is never stable or fixed. The encounters between the colonizer and the colonized are like transactions, a two-way process. The colonizer creates his identity based on its difference from that of the native. He positions himself against and in opposition to the native—a situation such that the native is the *Other* whose identity asserts and maintains the superior identity of the colonizer. So, the colonizer needs an inferior Other, in relation to which he maintains his identity. Thus, the colonizer always needs the *different* native to validate his identity. "Identity, therefore, is constantly shifting, liminal and displaced" (Nayar 168-9).

Bhabha puts forward the proposition that the colonial discourse that asserts the superiority of the colonizer and the relative inferiority of the native, "is actually conflictual and ambivalent" (Nayar 169) because the colonizers "seeks and desires the Other, while at the same time wishes to erase the difference" (Nayar 169). Colonizer's conflicting psyche, one fetish and the other phobia, then, proposes two classifications, or categories or stereotypes of the native— "the inscrutable native" i.e. an *unknowable,* radically different Other;

and the "vulnerable, innocent or childlike native" that *can* be understood and controlled. (Nayar 169). The colonizer's repetition of the stereotypes proves the ambivalence and instability of the colonial discourse; stereotypes are repeated not because they are stable but because if they are not repeatedly reinforced, they would lose their "power and validity *as* signs" (Nayar 169). This ambivalence makes the colonial discourse subject to subversion. Whenever colonialism imposes its authority over the colony, by repetition of the sign, (the English book i.e., the Bible, that functioned as the criteria for the authority), the natives translate the Book into their own contexts. Thus, the native's repetition (with a difference) of the sign dismantles it by adding or subtracting meaning depending on his need (Nayar 169). Thus, the changed sign, i.e. the Book "loses it authority as a colonial sign" (Nayar 170). The sign is now rewritten by the native which is actually a manifestation of his resistance through mimicry.

Bhabha continues by proposing the idea of 'mimicry'. "Mimicry is the disciplined imitation of the white man by the native" (Nayar 170). The idea is repeatedly reinforced into the native's mind that he needs to be like the white man and adopt his culture. It is by means of Western education, religion and structures that the native is trained to think and act like the white man. While identifying with his native culture, he learns the ways and methods of the white man, but appropriates them to his cause. He is "Anglicized but is never fully or truly white" (Nayar 170). Mimicry i.e., the attempt to be like colonizers, contrary to colonizers' expectations, becomes a means to dismantle the colonial discourse. The native learns to become the *subject* of his discourse, and "represents him/herself rather than be represented" (Nayar 170). Besides, this mimicry also fails because of colonizers' *ambivalence;* while the colonial master wants the native to be as much like himself as possible, he also wishes to maintain the difference between him and the native.

So, the native apparently obeys the colonial master, mimics him with subtle "variations and nuances", but actually disobeys and mocks him—a phenomenon Bhabha calls 'sly civility' (Nayar 170). This dual state of mimicry by the native is a direct result of the ambivalent colonial discourse. Bhabha calls this 'dual state of mimicry' as 'hybridity'. The 'hybridized native' refuses to be viewed as colonizer's subject of study and control, instead, challenges the colonizer's assumptions by occupying a liminal space, Bhabha calls a 'third space'. This space is neither fully within the colonial world nor completely outside of it. This is a site where: a) colonial identity and native identity meet and often contest; b) colonial discourse is both asserted and subverted at once; c) there is a deference and difference; d) there is a split and a negotiation within colonial discourse; and e) mimicry and mockery occur. In this 'third space' the split and resistant 'subject', according to Bhabha, "begins to articulate resistance" (Nayar 171).

Salim, the protagonist of Gurnah's *Gravel Heart,* is one such subject who was born in a postcolony, whose grandparents and parents, witnessed the colonial rule and its ramifications during and after the colonial rule. Salim belongs the third generation of the family who witnesses the long-term ramifications of colonialism. In a country, divided on ethnicity, where corruption is at high, where government takes decisions that are apparently only a façade of progress and welfare, a government whose primary concern is only maintaining its power and has no genuine desire to uplift its people, Salim grows up through a profound and secret conflict between his parents. As a 16-year-old he says "My father did not want me" (Gurnah 3).

III. Literature Review

Several researches have been done on Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* around different aspects of the text. Some of them are summarized as follows:

Margaret Jeanne M. Sönmez's thesis, *Hospitality, Multiculturalism and Narrative Agency in Abdulrazak Gurnah's By The Sea, The Last Gift and Gravel Heart,* explores how hospitality and multiculturalism influence identity and narrative agency in Gurnah's novels. The analysis highlights how inhospitality, expressed through sociopolitical and familial dynamics, obstructs characters' ability to resist dominant discourses and negotiate power within multicultural settings.

The article *Liminality and Cultural Identity in Gurnah's Gravel Heart* by Hifza Wasiq, Saddaf Rashid, and Tasawar Abbas Shah examines the protagonist Salim's immigrant experience using Homi Bhabha's concepts of liminality and cultural identity. It discusses how Salim's identity crisis and encounters with racial prejudice reflect the liminal state of immigrants, leading to the formation of a hybrid identity as they live across their native and new cultures.

Mehmet Recep Taş's article *Unhomeliness, Self-Estrangement, and Labefaction in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Gravel Heart* analyses the effects of colonialism on individuals in post-colonial societies as portrayed in *Gravel Heart.* The study focuses on the psychological and geographical estrangement of Salim, illustrating how the novel reflects the ongoing impact of cultural colonisation and social deterioration on the protagonist's sense of self.

Given the existing research on *Gravel Heart*, there remains a significant gap in understanding how homelessness, both literal and metaphorical, intersects with identity formation in the context of globalisation and postcolonial migration. While previous studies have explored themes such as multiculturalism, narrative agency, liminality, and the psychological effects of colonial legacies, they have not fully addressed how these factors contribute to a profound sense of homelessness and its impact on the protagonist's quest for self-identity and belonging. By focusing on this underexplored dimension, this article aims to dig deeper into the academic discourse on postcolonial identity, with an intention to provide a fresh perspective on the complex dynamics between homelessness, hybridity, and identity in a globalised world.

IV. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Bhabha's concept of hybridity, particularly the idea of the 'third space,' is deeply relevant to Salim's experiences in *Gravel Heart*. Salim's journey is marked by the tension between his native identity and the influence of colonialism, which manifests through his interactions and experiences in London.

Salim is in a state of hybridity where the *colonial identity and native identity meet and contest*. He embodies the clash between his native Zanzibari identity and the colonial influence represented by his uncle, Amir. Amir has fully embraced the culture and identity of the colonisers, adopting their mannerisms, language, and attitudes. In contrast, Salim, though exposed to this colonial identity, retains a strong sense of his Zanzibari roots. The contest between these identities is evident in his discomfort with his uncle's mimicry of the colonisers and his subsequent desire to distance himself from Amir. Salim's internal struggle reflects the broader contest between the residual effects of colonialism and his inherent connection to his native culture.

In his state of hybridity, Salim both *simultaneously asserts and subverts the colonial discourse.* Salim's experience in London places him in a position where he must try to fulfil the expectations of the colonial discourse while also *subverting* them. His uncle represents the assertion of this discourse, adopting the coloniser's ways and presenting them as superior, "'Do you understand what it means to eat with a knife and fork?'… 'It's not about becoming a European stooge and giving up your culture. Some of the old folks used to think that using a spoon was a first step towards becoming a Christian. No, it's not about losing anything. It is to begin thinking about food as a pleasure, as a refinement.'" (Gurnah 59)

However, Salim, while initially influenced by this, ultimately subverts it by refusing to fully assimilate into the imposed identity. Instead, he seeks out connections with other Africans, finding comfort in his native culture even as he adapts to the new environment. For example, he had a great time with Mr. Mgeni, who loved sharing his stories with Salim and Salim enjoyed listening to them (Gurnah 87). Salim vents out the glee of being around someone from his home speaking his mother tongue, Kiswahili, "I had never met anyone with such openness" (Gurnah 87). This duality—assertion through getting education in London and learning to use their language, yet subversion through the maintenance of his cultural identity—illustrates the ambivalence of colonial discourse in Salim's life.

Salim's hybrid identity also reveals the traits of *deference and difference*. Uncle Amir demonstrates deference towards the colonial power, seen in his complete assimilation and his attempts to pass this on to Salim. He expected the same deference from Salim. Salim clearly mentions "I realised that I had anticipated something like it, but had not understood the deference and compliance that would be expected of me (Gurnah 61). However, Salim maintains a difference, a critical distance from this identity. He acknowledges the benefits of education and the opportunities available in London but refuses to let go of his cultural roots entirely. This balance of deference and difference is central to his hybrid identity that allows him to function within the colonial framework without fully losing his native identity.

Salim's hybridised identity is characterised by both the *split and negotiation* within colonial discourse. His identity is split between his Zanzibari heritage and the pressures of the colonial discourse he encounters in London. This split is not just a division but a space for negotiation, where Salim must reconcile his love for his homeland with the realities of his new life: "I learnt to live in London, to avoid being intimidated by crowds and by rudeness, to avoid curiosity, not to feel desolate at hostile stares and to walk purposefully wherever I went" (Gurnah 66). His decision to leave his uncle and live independently in another city signifies his negotiation with this split identity. He engages with the new culture, completes his education, and builds relationships, but on his own terms, indicating an ongoing negotiation rather than complete submission to colonial discourse.

There are also traces of *mimicry and mockery* in Salim's hybrid identity. Salim's uncle represents mimicry, who adopts the coloniser's ways to such an extent that he becomes a caricature, almost mocking the very identity he tries to embody. Salim, on the other hand, engages in a subtler form of mimicry, a mimicry with a difference, i.e. mockery. He learns the language, customs, and behaviours necessary to succeed in London but does so

without fully internalising them. His internal anger and frustration with his uncle's mimicry and the mockery embedded in it highlight the performative aspect of colonial mimicry. Salim's partial adoption of these behaviours can be seen as both a necessity for survival, an appropriation and a form of subtle resistance, mocking the notion that identity can be wholly transformed by colonial influence.

V. Conclusion

As Salim moves through these complexities, he begins to articulate resistance by asserting his hybrid identity. He embraces the educational and social opportunities in London, yet his heart remains with his native Zanzibar. His eventual confidence and self-assurance stem from his *ability* to occupy this third space, where he can challenge the assumptions of both his colonial and native identities. By maintaining his cultural ties and choosing to identify with his Zanzibari roots, Salim resists the full assimilation expected of him and instead defines his identity on his own terms. This articulation of resistance is not overt rebellion but a quiet, persistent affirmation of his place between two worlds, refusing to be wholly consumed by either.

Salim's struggle is a microcosm of the contemporary challenges of globalisation, where individuals are pressured to face to a dominant globalised American culture, often at the expense of their local identities. In today's globalised world, the tension between maintaining cultural roots and adapting to new environments is widespread. Salim's resistance—by holding onto his Zanzibari identity while living in London—reflects the broader issue of cultural homogenisation. His ability to occupy a 'third space' highlights individual's ongoing struggle to preserve cultural diversity and resist the pressures of globalisation that threaten to erase unique identities.

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