



Hybrid Identities In Colonial East Africa: A Critical Analysis Of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the representation of hybrid identities in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* (1994) through the lens of Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybrid identity. Set in colonial East Africa, *Paradise* explores the liminal spaces where cultural, historical, and social forces intersect, shaping the identities of individuals caught between multiple influences. The protagonist, Yusuf, embodies the fractured subjectivity that arises from displacement, colonial encounters, and economic dependencies. Through an analysis of key themes, such as cultural hybridity, linguistic plurality, gendered identity, and historical memory, this study highlights how Gurnah's novel destabilises rigid binaries of self and other, colonizer, and colonized. By applying Bhabha's theoretical framework, this paper argues that *Paradise* not only reflects the cultural confluence of colonial East Africa, but also critiques the instability and ambivalence of hybrid identity in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Hybrid identity, post-colonialism, Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Paradise*, Homi K. Bhabha, third space, mimicry, colonial East Africa.

Introduction: Abdulrazak Gurnah is a Tanzanian-born British writer and academic, widely recognized for his contributions to post-colonial literature. Born in Zanzibar in 1948, he migrated to the United Kingdom in the 1960s following the Zanzibar Revolution, an experience that deeply influenced his writing. His works explore the themes of displacement, migration, colonial legacies, and identity, often focusing on the intersections of personal and historical trauma. Gurnah's literary style is characterized by rich storytelling, intricate character development, and a nuanced portrayal of exile and belonging. In 2021, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for his "uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents" (Nobel Prize Committee). Through his work, Gurnah continues to challenge dominant historical narratives and provides a voice to marginalised histories and identities.

Paradise (1994) is a novel set in early 20th-century East Africa against the backdrop of colonial expansion and cultural hybridity. The novel follows the journey of Yusuf, a twelve-year-old boy who is pawned by his father to a wealthy merchant, Aziz, as collateral for unpaid debt. Initially naive to his fate, Yusuf soon realises that he is trapped in servitude. As he moves between different settings, including Aziz's coastal estate, a small trading post, and a perilous caravan journey into the interior, Yusuf's understanding of identity, power, and selfhood evolves. Throughout the novel, Gurnah intertwines historical and cultural elements, portraying the diverse influences of African, Arab, Indian, and European traditions on East Africa. Yusuf's journey is marked by encounters with various figures, including Khalil, a fellow rehani (pawn), and Amina, a young woman similarly caught in a web of obligation and limited choices. As Yusuf navigates the marketplace, the caravan route, and colonial conflicts, he understands the precarious position of those who exist in liminal spaces between power and subjugation. A pivotal moment in the novel occurs when Yusuf, during a conversation

with Khalil, finally understands his status: “You’re here because your Ba owes the Seyyid money. I’m here because my Ba owes him money” (Gurnah 24) . This revelation forces Yusuf to confront his lack of autonomy and the shattering illusions of a privileged life under Aziz’s care. Later, when the caravan is captured by Chatu, a local ruler, and a German officer intervenes, Gurnah illustrates the fraught intersections of African, Arab, and European power struggles: “Aren't you afraid of the law of the government?” the officer demands, imposing colonial authority over existing local systems (Gurnah 244) . The novel concludes ambiguously with Yusuf standing before the German Schutztruppe, suggesting an uncertain future in which he may be drawn into colonial military service. This final image underscores Gurnah’s broader themes of displacement, historical entanglement, and the fragility of personal agency in colonial East Africa.

Hybrid Identity

Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of ‘hybrid identity’ emerges from his broader framework of ‘postcolonial theory’, particularly his critique of rigid binaries such as colonizer/colonized and self/other. Bhabha argues that colonial encounters create a “third space”, a liminal zone where cultural interaction leads to hybridity. This hybridity, characterised by the blending and transformation of cultural elements, destabilises fixed identities and reveals the fluid and performative nature of subjectivity. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha wrote:

“It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures are untenable” (Bhabha 37).

This suggests that hybridity disrupts conventional notions of cultural identity, undermining the essentialist ideas of national or racial belonging. Instead of a clear distinction between colonizer and colonized, Bhabha posits that colonial discourse itself is inherently unstable, producing identities that are neither fully one nor the other, but exist in a constant state of negotiation. He elaborates that hybridity “intervenes in the exercise of authority not merely to indicate the impossibility of its identity but to represent the unpredictability of its presence” (Bhabha 114)

The idea of the “third space” is crucial for understanding this hybridity. It is a space where cultural meaning is constantly negotiated and where dominant narratives are challenged and reinterpreted. Bhabha describes this as a space that “destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code” (Bhabha 37). This implies that the third space not only disrupts established cultural hierarchies, but also creates new possibilities for identity formation, allowing for the emergence of hybrid subjectivities that resist totalising definitions.

Through hybridity, Bhabha highlights the instability of colonial authority, arguing that the structures of imperial power are undermined by their contradictions. He explains that “hybridity represents that ambivalent ‘turn’ of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification—a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority” (Bhabha 113) . This demonstrates how the colonial subject, by mimicking yet altering the colonial discourse, disrupts the authority of the coloniser, exposing the fragility of imperial control.

Ultimately, Bhabha’s theory of hybridity reveals that cultural identities are not static or singular, but are continually shaped by historical, political, and social interactions. By dismantling fixed categories of identity, hybridity challenges dominant ideologies and opens new spaces for understanding the complexities of cultural exchange.

Colonial East Africa

Colonial East Africa, shaped by centuries of trade, migration, and imperial influence, emerges in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Paradise* as a dynamic space for cultural hybridity. The region’s historical entanglements between African, Arab, Indian, and European communities create a setting in which identity is constantly negotiated. Gurnah captures this fluidity through the novel’s depiction of trade networks, linguistic diversity, and shifting power dynamics. As the novel describes, “Zanzibar at this point was a major trading point for slaves and ivory from the interior of Africa, in exchange for cotton goods and spices” (Gurnah 42) . This economic exchange

fosters cultural interactions that blur rigid distinctions between self and others, colonizers, and colonized. However, the arrival of European colonial forces threatens to disrupt these ‘hybrid spaces’, as reflected in the looming presence of German *Schutztruppe*, who imposed new systems of authority on the existing social order.

Through characters such as Aziz, a merchant navigating both Arab-Islamic trade traditions and the encroaching influence of European capitalism, Gurnah illustrates the tensions of hybrid identity. The anxiety over colonial intervention is evident when a merchant warns, “The Europeans and the Indians will take everything now” (Gurnah 176). This statement underscores the shifting economic and cultural hierarchies brought about by imperial rule. By combining historical realism and personal narratives, *Paradise* presents colonial East Africa as a contested site of hybridity, where cultural and economic exchanges create complex fluid identities. The novel resists simplistic binaries, instead portraying a world in which individuals constantly negotiate their place within overlapping histories and traditions.

Yusuf and the Complexity of Hybrid Identity

Yusuf, the protagonist of *Paradise*, embodies the fragmented and hybrid identity that arises from his dislocated position within the colonial and cultural hierarchies of East Africa. As a young boy, Yusuf is unknowingly pawned by his father as collateral for unpaid debt to the wealthy merchant Aziz, an event that drastically alters his life. Upon arriving at Aziz’s estate, Yusuf is confronted with a reality that is far from what he imagined. Khalil, another pawned servant, bluntly reveals the truth: “You’re here because your Ba owes the Seyyid money. I’m here because my Ba owes him money” (Gurnah 24). This revelation dismantles Yusuf’s initial perception of his new home and forces him to navigate an unfamiliar hierarchical social structure.

Yusuf’s hybridity is evident in his interactions with various cultural influences. Raised in a Swahili Muslim household, he is deeply embedded in Islamic traditions, yet his new life in Aziz’s cosmopolitan world exposes him to a broader spectrum of Arab, Indian, and African influence. The encroachment of European colonialism further complicates his identity as he becomes entangled in the colonial economy and its power structures. Yusuf’s sense of self is neither wholly rooted in his indigenous African heritage nor fully assimilated into the dominant cultural framework of the colonial order. His journey into the interior of Aziz’s trading caravan reinforces his ambiguous status; as he moves through different landscapes, he observes the shifting power dynamics of trade, violence, and colonial intervention. When he asks about the caravan’s purpose, Khalil explains: “To trade with the savages. This is the seyyid’s life. This is what he is doing here. He goes to the wild people and sells them all this merchandise and then buys them. He buys anything except slaves, even before the government said it must stop. Trading in slaves is dangerous work, and not honourable’ (Gurnah 34). This conversation underscores the contradictions within colonial-era trade, where merchants such as Aziz reject the label of the slave trader while profiting from exploitative economic structures. Yusuf, caught in this system, experiences a loss of agency and growing awareness of his precarious position. As the novel progresses, Yusuf’s hybridity becomes increasingly evident in his relationships and personal conflict. The symbolic space in Aziz’s garden, often perceived as a site of desire and temptation, serves as a metaphor for Yusuf’s growing self-awareness and estrangement. His attraction to Amina, a young woman trapped in Aziz’s household, reflects his longing to belong and escape. However, just as he is drawn to the beauty of the garden, he is also aware of its restrictive nature, much like his own existence.

“If there is Hell on earth, then it is here” (Gurnah 176). This realisation marks a turning point for Yusuf as he begins to grasp the full extent of his subjugation. His final decision to leave Aziz’s household and join the German *Schutztruppe* reflects the ultimate paradox of his hybrid identity. His escape from one form of servitude leads him into another, reinforcing the novel’s broader themes of displacement and historical entrapment. Through Yusuf’s experiences, *Paradise* presents hybridity not as a liberating force, but as a condition of constant negotiation and uncertainty. His journey illustrates how colonialism, trade, and cultural exchange shape identities in complex and often painful ways. In line with Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of hybridity, Yusuf occupies an “interstitial” space, where his identity is continuously reshaped by the forces around him, never settling into a fixed or stable form (Bhabha 37).

The Marketplace as a Third Space

One of the central motifs in *Paradise* is the marketplace, which functions as a metaphorical “third space” in Homi K. Bhabha’s sense. The marketplace serves as a site of cultural exchange and economic interaction where diverse communities converge, facilitating the blending of African, Arab, Indian, and European influences. Within this dynamic space, Yusuf’s hybrid identity is shaped and contested. The marketplace epitomises the coexistence of multiple cultural influences from African traders and Arab merchants to Indian shopkeepers and European colonial officials. As Yusuf navigates this space, he witnesses the fluid dynamics of power, commerce, and cultural negotiation. The novel describes how Aziz and other merchants engage in negotiations, sometimes benefiting from the presence of colonial rule while also lamenting its disruptions: “The Europeans and the Indians will take everything now” (Gurnah 176) . This statement underscores the anxieties surrounding shifting economic hierarchies and the erosion of established trading networks under the colonial influence.

Bhabha’s concept of mimicry is relevant in this context. The characters in the marketplace often adopt behaviours, languages, and practices from other cultures—not as acts of full assimilation, but as strategic responses to the demands of colonial modernity. Bhabha describes mimicry as “almost the same, but not quite”, signifying the ambivalence of hybrid identity, where imitation simultaneously reinforces and subverts colonial authority (Bhabha 90) . In *Paradise*, traders, such as Aziz, operate within a hybrid economic framework, adapting to the demands of colonial officials while maintaining their precolonial trading networks.

Moreover, the marketplace’s role as a third space is further emphasized when a German colonial officer intervenes in trade disputes, attempting to impose European legal authority over indigenous economic systems: "Aren't you afraid of the law of the government?" (Gurnah 244) . This moment highlights the tensions between colonial rule and local economic practices, illustrating how the marketplace has become a battleground for competing authorities. While it remains a space of cultural fusion, it is also an arena of conflict in which the power dynamics are constantly reconfigured. *Paradise* portrays the marketplace as a space in which hybridity is both necessary and fraught with tension. It represents the complexity of colonial interactions, where trade fosters cultural exchange but also exposes individuals to economic exploitation and colonial intervention. Through Yusuf’s experiences in this space, Gurnah explored the nuances of hybrid identity, showing how individuals navigate and negotiate their place within the colonial order.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the representation of hybrid identities in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Paradise* (1994) through the lens of Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of hybridity. By situating the novel within the colonial and cultural complexities of East Africa, Gurnah challenges rigid binaries of self and others, colonisers, and colonised. Through Yusuf’s journey, the novel illustrates how displacement, economic dependencies, and cultural entanglements shape fluid and often-fractured subjectivities. The marketplace emerges as a crucial third space where cultural exchanges and power struggles to redefine identity. Gurnah’s portrayal of Yusuf’s struggle with masculinity, subjugation, and personal agency highlights the intersections of gender and hybrid identity, reinforcing the instability of colonial hierarchies. Furthermore, *Paradise* critiques the exploitative nature of colonial economic structures and demonstrates how power is negotiated within a rapidly shifting landscape. By applying Bhabha’s theoretical framework, this study has argued that *Paradise* does more than reflect colonial hybridity; it exposes its contradictions, vulnerabilities, and enduring consequences. Ultimately, the novel offers a nuanced meditation on the nature of hybridity, power, and historical memory, revealing the tensions that define identity in colonial and post-colonial contexts.

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