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A Study Of Servitude In Gurnah's Narratives

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Abstract

This paper studies Precarious labour conditions in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* and *Gravel Heart* through a critical engagement with Marxist and postcolonial theory. It analyzes how both novels portray the commodification of human labour under colonial and neoliberal systems, highlighting the emotional and existential toll on individuals subjected to invisible and systemic forms of servitude. Yusuf's role as a rehani in *Paradise* reveals how debt bondage functions within pre-capitalist yet structurally exploitative economies, while Salim's experiences as a racialized migrant in *Gravel Heart* expose the quiet violence of low-status labour in postcolonial Britain. The analysis draws on Karl Marx, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to elucidate the ideological mechanisms that normalize such labour exploitation and marginalization. Ultimately, the paper argues that Gurnah presents labour not merely as economic toil, but as a deeply embodied and identity-defining experience shaped by historical displacement, colonial legacy, and global capitalist systems.

Key words: Abdulrazak Gurnah, labour, rehani, working class, migrant.

Introduction

Labor exploitation is a recurring and central concern in Abdulrazak Gurnah's narrative, particularly in *Paradise* and *Gravel Heart*, where characters are subjected to systems of domination that reduce them to economic instruments. These narratives voice colonialism, postcolonial migration, and global capitalism converge to produce forms of labour that are extractive, invisible, and psychologically corrosive. Using a theoretical framework rooted in Marxism and postcolonial criticism, this paper explores the ideological and material forces that shape Yusuf's and Salim's lived realities. In *Paradise*, Yusuf's conscription as a rehani exposes the persistent structures of bondage and commodification disguised by social custom and

paternalistic obligation. In *Gravel Heart*, Salim's disillusionment in the UK reflects the structural marginalization of migrant labour within a racialized neoliberal order. Both novels critique the intersection of economic survival, racial hierarchy, and emotional alienation, illustrating that the global order exploits the subaltern not only through work but through the slow erasure of agency, memory, and selfhood. Abdulrazak Gurnah powerfully conveys Yusuf's internal evaluation with his status as a rehani, a child pawned into indentured servitude to repay his father's debts. The line, "For Yusuf it was an unwelcome interruption to the equanimity his life of captivity had acquired over the years," (Gurnah 140). reveals how Yusuf has emotionally adapted to his condition. Though not free, he has developed a routine and attained a fragile psychological balance. The word "captivity" explicitly acknowledges the involuntary nature of his status; despite the absence of overt violence, his life remains shaped by a profound denial of autonomy. Yusuf's evolving awareness of his bondage is evident in the line: "He had come to understand fully that he was there as rehani, pawned to Uncle Aziz to secure his father's debts..." (Gurnah 21). The term rehani is here defined unambiguously as a form of debt bondage, an arrangement in which a human being is collateral in a financial transaction. This realization dawns slowly, as Yusuf comes to recognize the socio-economic machinery that has dictated his fate. Khalil, another rehani, further explains this mechanism "If the seyyid was desperate for money, he sacrificed a handful of his creditors to raise it." (Gurnah 103). This comment illustrates a Marxist critique of capitalist power, wherein Aziz (the seyyid) commodifies lives to maintain financial stability. Khalil's clinical, detached tone highlights how deeply normalized this transactional view of human beings has become. This mirrors Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' observation "The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" (qtd. in Wallerstein 15). Just as the state exists to protect bourgeois interests, Aziz functions as a representative of elite capitalist logic, reducing people like Yusuf to movable assets under the guise of customary practice. Wallerstein furthers this critique by writing "Liberal ideology was thus the belief that, in order for history to follow its natural course, it was necessary to engage in conscious, continual, intelligent reformism" (Wood 6). Such reformism masks exploitation beneath an illusion of progress, just as Yusuf's servitude is concealed by the façade of familial obligation or business custom. Liberalism, Wallerstein adds, "proclaimed itself universalist... seeking to propagate their views and intrude the logic of their views within all social institutions" (Wallerstein 6), a dynamic clearly seen in the way indigenous identities and systems are marginalized. Yusuf is forced to navigate a foreign, imposed order that strips him of agency and belonging, emblematic of how liberal-capitalist structures erode local autonomy and selfhood. Yusuf's emotional life is also deeply scarred by his separation from family. In one of the most moving passages, Gurnah writes: "He wept for his mother and father when he could... he panicked at the thought that their images were turning faint in his recollection." (Gurnah 48). His fading memory is not a result of deliberate forgetting but of forced estrangement and the slow erosion wrought by time, distance, and survival. The dimming of his mother's laughter or his father's reluctant grin speaks to the psychological violence inherent in servitude. Gurnah notes further: "It was not that he pined for them... rather that his separation from them was the most memorable event of his existence." (48) Here, Yusuf's identity is increasingly shaped not by presence or love, but by absence and rupture. His unvoiced questions and lost connections underscore his profound dislocation—a feeling of being, as he describes, "dangerously adrift from everything." (48) In the vacuum left by his family, Yusuf finds emotional refuge in Khalil, whom he grows to depend on as a surrogate brother: "He came to depend on his 'brother'." (48) Their bond is born not of affection alone, but of survival under shared captivity. Yusuf's response to his condition is one of quiet endurance rather than rebellion. He performs his labour without complaint, not out of consent but out of resignation. Even in the garden a potentially tranquil space he works only "when he was allowed to," (48) reinforcing that even his most peaceful activity is controlled by others. The garden becomes a powerful metaphor: a place of cultivation and beauty, yet one that Yusuf can never truly claim. It symbolizes a constrained agency a momentary solace within a structure of control. This experience aligns with Wallerstein's analysis "This was the construction of a capitalist world-economy... with different modes of labour control for different zones" (Wallerstein xiv). Yusuf's condition as a rehani reflects a form of

peripheral labour control, distinct from the wage labour of capitalist cores, but still deeply enmeshed within global structures of economic exploitation.

In *Gravel Heart*, Abdulrazak Gurnah presents Salim's journey from Zanzibar to the UK as a sobering narrative of postcolonial labour exploitation. Through Salim's experiences, Gurnah exposes how economic survival, racial marginalization, and emotional dislocation converge in the migrant experience. Although Salim arrives under the guise of educational opportunity, this promise of advancement quickly disintegrates under the pressure of survival. What initially appears to be privilege access to the West soon reveals itself as a trap. The dream of upward mobility is silently thwarted by a system in which the Western meritocratic ideal proves hollow for racialized outsiders like Salim. Despite his literacy and competence, he becomes overeducated yet underemployed, his labour and intellect devalued not because of incompetence, but due to entrenched imperial and racial hierarchies.

In England, Salim is pushed into low-status, precarious employment, taking up menial jobs in cafés and hospitals roles far beneath his qualifications. These forms of exploitative labour are commonly assigned to migrants, shaped by the intersections of race, nationality, and class. From a Marxist perspective, Salim's labour is commodified within a capitalist system that extracts essential work from racialized bodies while rendering them invisible and underpaid. A postcolonial lens further emphasizes how, as a migrant, he is pushed to the margins of the imperial centre: needed for labour yet never permitted to fully belong. This dynamic is powerfully encapsulated in Salim's reflection: "I was offered the Lambeth job and had not the strength to resist." (Gurnah 125) Rather than conveying ambition or agency, the line reflects fatigue and resignation. Salim does not pursue the job out of desire but accepts it out of necessity—a reluctant surrender to circumstance rather than a step toward empowerment. This sense of reluctant submission extends to his living conditions, which further reflect the marginalization of working-class migrants. He describes his home as "a small studio flat off Brixton Hill above a motorcycle shop... neighbours... bickerers who argued deep into the night." (127) The cramped, noisy, and unstable housing typifies the environments that many low-income migrants endure—spaces devoid of privacy, peace, or rest.

As Salim settles into bureaucratic work, his alienation deepens. He observes: "I had become reconciled to many things, but in particular to the salary that went silently into my bank account in return for my lackadaisical efforts in the office." (127) His labour is now merely a financial exchange, devoid of emotional or intellectual investment. The word "reconciliation" signals a psychological surrender, a quiet numbness that has replaced any sense of ambition or meaning. Previously, while working at Café Galileo in food service a sector notorious for exploiting migrant labour Salim recalled how the job "tired me... assaulted some part of my senses..." (127) This description reveals the physical and emotional strain of service work. Though his current job is less exhausting, it is equally unfulfilling; monotony has simply replaced fatigue.

This aligns with *The Communist Manifesto*, which observes: "The proletariat... are a class of labourers who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital." (Marx and Engels 17). Here, Marx and Engels highlight how capitalism treats labour as a tool for accumulation by the bourgeoisie, not as a pathway to worker dignity. Salim's experience reflects this cycle of disposability his labour sustains the system but offers him neither recognition nor growth. The conditions mirror those of *rehani* in colonial systems: forced labourers whose humanity is subordinated to their economic function.

Salim's psychological response to this reality surfaces when he confesses "I feared turning into one of England's helots, becoming accustomed to bondage." (Gurnah 151). The reference to "helots" state-owned serfs in ancient Sparta evokes a modern form of servitude where legality (in the form of residency) offers security but not freedom, dignity, or mobility. This fear encapsulates the psychological violence of invisible exploitation, where the cost is not just economic but existential a creeping sense of being erased within a system that rewards silent compliance. This erasure is compounded by capitalism's globalizing tendencies. Marx and Engels write: "National differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily more and more

vanishing... the supremacy of the proletariat will cause them to vanish still faster.” (Marx and Engels 25). This quote illustrates how capitalism dissolves national and cultural identities, homogenizing subjects into labouring participants in the global market. In postcolonial contexts, this leads to fractured identities, as colonized individuals like Salim are forced to serve systems that simultaneously need and exclude them.

Salim’s alienation is further expressed through his restlessness and indecision “Perhaps it was time to go... or maybe in a year or two... look for work in the Gulf or in South Africa...” (Gurnah 10). These drifting thoughts reveal not just economic uncertainty but a deep emotional fragmentation. Though he possesses legal residency, he remains existentially adrift. The idea of “waiting to return” reflects postcolonial nostalgia, but it is tainted by ambivalence and the lack of a stable sense of home. This inner fragmentation extends to his daily work as well: “I went to work... biting my lip and letting the moment pass... I no longer needed to suppress a feeling of uselessness...” (Gurnah 164). Over time, Salim ceases to resist or even feel the futility of his labour. He becomes emotionally dulled by routine, embodying how capitalist labour systems reward mechanical compliance while discouraging emotional presence, especially among racialized workers.

As Gayatri Spivak observes, “Colonial discourse sets up the colonized as the labouring body abstracted, commodified, and silenced” (Spivak 284). Salim’s position reflects this abstraction: he is not simply a worker but a racialized figure whose labour is stripped of individuality and voice. Colonialism, as Spivak critiques, does not merely dominate territory it reconfigures identities around economic utility, reducing the colonized to instruments of production. This emotional isolation is especially evident in Salim’s social interactions: “Some of my colleagues... I envied and pretended to share. I wondered if they were pretending, too.” (Gurnah 165). Even among peers, Salim feels like a performer, feigning contentment while questioning the authenticity of others. This moment captures the shared yet silent alienation that haunts workplaces prioritizing output over connection, where individuals coexist but do not connect. Ultimately, Gurnah’s portrayal of Salim becomes a powerful commentary on quiet labour exploitation within postcolonial and neoliberal contexts. Rather than emphasizing overt violence, *Gravel Heart* reveals how the slow erosion of spirit through meaningless labour, insecure housing, emotional numbness, and chronic uncertainty becomes the most insidious form of violence. Salim’s struggle is not only economic but existential, illustrating how postcolonial subjects are absorbed into global capitalist systems that exploit them while denying full inclusion.

As Spivak argues, “The subaltern is not just of labour, but labour that is not even seen as labour.” (Spivak 287). In this sense, subaltern labour becomes absorbed into domestic, cultural, or informal hierarchies, often unrecognized and depoliticized. This insight recalls Paradise, where Yusuf’s status as a rehani operates like slavery, though masked by custom and familial obligation. In *Gravel Heart*, too, labour is not merely economic it is emotional, cultural, and existential. Through Salim’s journey, Gurnah critiques not only the structural systems that exploit migrant labour but also the personal, internal cost of navigating postcolonial displacement. Labor becomes a means of survival but never a source of dignity, identity, or belonging.

Conclusion

Through Yusuf’s and Salim’s trajectories, Abdulrazak Gurnah lays bare the psychological, cultural, and existential costs of labour under coercive systems be it colonial debt bondage or neoliberal migrant precarity. The paper demonstrates that both *Paradise* and *Gravel Heart* articulate a shared narrative of dispossession, where the labouring body becomes a site of historical trauma and ongoing erasure. Drawing on Marxist critiques of capital and Spivak’s insights into the silencing of the subaltern, the study shows how labour, in Gurnah’s work, is never neutral it is racialized, invisible, and stripped of dignity. By centring voices that labour without recognition or reward, Gurnah not only indicts the exploitative systems that

sustain empire and capitalism but also restores a measure of visibility to those rendered invisible. His novels demand that we reckon with the enduring legacies of colonialism and the human cost embedded in the global structures of labour.

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