

IMPERIALISM AND THE CROSS-CULTURAL TEXT: REAPPROPRIATION, REHISTORICISATION AND RENARRATIVISATION IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S *GRAVEL HEART*

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Abstract

The novel has been subject to varied interpretative precepts as postulated by diverse critics and scholars. One such critic is Edward Said, who argues that the novel, as a European literary form, is inseparable from the ideological logic of imperialism. Africa, which has been on the receiving end of imperial aggression meted out by Europe, has witnessed its writers adopt the novel as a mode of expressing Africa's historical and cultural reality. Consequently, Said identifies filiation and affiliation as two interpretative approaches for reading the novel. On the one hand, the filiative approach demands that a text should be treated as an extension of other texts that have preceded it based on English-cum-European literary canons, while, on the other, the affiliative approach proposes that literary texts should be read as products of the society that births them, and whose consequent interpretation should be devoid of literary, canonical and traditional leanings. Based on these, Said proposes Contrapuntality as a framework for reading the novel. This essay therefore applies this framework to the critical textual analysis of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart*. The essay reveals that the African novel is a cross-cultural or postcolonial text that reappropriates, rehistoricises, and renarrativises Africa's historical and cultural experiences hitherto denigrated and disappeared by European and Arab coloniality, and it advocates for a wider patronage of the contrapuntal framework due to its penchant for relegating universality and accentuating cultural particularity.

Keywords: Imperialism; Cross-cultural text; Contrapuntality; Filiation; Affiliation

Introduction

Edward Said asserts that a novel is a cultural artefact and it is impossible for it to exist in isolation outside the society that produces it (120). That is, the novel is a cultural product and it embodies and reflects the temperament of the society that produces it. In describing the interplay between literary texts, their interpretative viability, and their cultural impetus, Said brings to the fore two concepts which are filiation and affiliation (20, 106). Filiation refers to "lines of descent in nature," while affiliation refers to "a process of identification through culture" (Said 20, Ashcroft, et al. 96). These concepts are premised on the fact that the world is an evolving global-cultural village and that the "cohering force" in society is shifting from heritage or descent (filiation) to dynamic "patterns" of culture (affiliation) (Said 20, Ashcroft, et al. 96).

In literary studies, the filiative approach treats a text as an extension of earlier works grounded in English and European literary canons. That is, the interpretation of a literary text cannot break free from the literary traditions that produced it and so must be streamlined into the path of other texts that have gone before it (Said 20, Ashcroft, et al. 96). Affiliation, therefore, challenges this restrictive mode of literary interpretation. It proposes that literary texts should be read as products or phenomena of the society that creates them and the society they portray, whose consequent interpretation should be devoid of literary, canonical and traditional leanings (Said 20, Ashcroft, et al. 96).

Colonialism's overwhelming impact on Africa cannot be overstated. The novel, which is a European invention, is a colonial import that has, through colonial education, been adopted by

African writers. By virtue of filiation, the African novel or cross-cultural text is a descendant of the European novel, which has been proved to have imperial roots. Hence, based on Said's argument, the African novel should naturally be like the European novel, and held to the same standard (20). But as the case is, the functionality of the cross-cultural text is predicated on its potency to counter Eurocentric worldviews; hence, it is reborn through affiliation.

Further, on the one hand, filiation proffers "a Utopian domain of texts connected serially, homologously and seamlessly with other texts," while, on the other, affiliation ties a text to the "status of the author, historical moment, conditions of publication, diffusion and reception, values drawn upon, values and ideas assumed, a framework of consensually held tacit assumptions, presumed background, and so on" (Said 174-175, Ashcroft, et al. 97). The affiliative approach therefore does not permit a literary text to be severed from its society, author and culture (Said 175). Consequently, the cross-cultural text is signified through reappropriation, rehistoricisation, and renarrativisation (Said 331).

According to Said, what gives the novel its force is the appropriation of history, the historicisation of the past, and the narrativisation of society, which include the accumulation and differentiation of social space, that is, space to be used for social purposes (120). Reappropriation, therefore, is how a text treats underlying social space such as territories, lands, geographical domains, the actual geographical underpinnings of the imperial, and the cultural contest (Said 120). It deals with the interplay between Westerners taking possession of land and indigenes resisting and reclaiming it, as captured within the decolonial framework (Said 120).

In addition, Said asserts that, "Imperialism and the culture associated with it affirm both the primacy of geography and an ideology about control of territory" (Said 120). Based on this, Said posits that the novel should reflect apparent spatial differentiations (between the Westerners and indigenes), spatial "hereness" imparted to the hierarchy (of family, property, and nation) through narrative exploration, movement, and endowment

of these places with confirmatory positive and/or negative values, and the interplay between narrative and domestic space premised on the recording, ordering, and observing powers of the central authorising subject, or ego (120-122). In light of this, rehistoricisation is a phenomenon whereby a text is situated within its own overlapping experiences and interdependent histories of conflict of the geographical region it represents (Said 107). That is, the text prioritises the particularity of history over historical narratives of imperial sovereignty (Said 107).

In sum, Said posits that every text is a cultural version, with its own inflections, pleasures, and formal characteristics (153). Hence, the aim of this essay is to analyse Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* from a contrapuntal standpoint.

Objective

The objective of the essay is to examine how affiliation affords cross-cultural texts or postcolonial fictions the vista to counter cultural stripping, dislocation, and derision, through reappropriation, rehistoricisation, and renarrativisation (Said 331).

Review of Related Literature

Since the publication of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* in 2017, quite a number of criticisms of the text have flooded the literary ecosystem. Rashad Mohammed Moqbel Al Areqi reads the text psychoanalytically, highlighting Salim's different stages of life and tracing the troubles he encounters (264). Al Areqi's study reveals that Salim's traumatic experiences at an early age influence his future choices and behaviours, particularly when he moves to the UK and meets friends of different races from all over the world, with varying perspectives and life experiences. Similarly, Umadevi and Madhavi analyse the text from a psychodynamic perspective, which deals with human behaviour at different stages of life and uncovering unconscious anxieties, desires, and problems (33). Their study focuses on the concept of inter-relationships within a family, childhood experiences, and defence mechanisms adopted by the characters. It brings to the fore how fear of abandonment, inferiority in the community, low self-esteem, fear

of intimacy, and death have created a psychological scar on Salim, the protagonist of the novel, and his family. Further, Muhammad Sabboor Hussain and Sitara Tariq interrogate Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* by deploying a psychoanalytic lens rooted in the theoretical underpinnings of Cathy Caruth's traumatic neurosis, which interprets the psychic state of the protagonist, Salim (50). Their study finds that Salim's psychological trauma, painful circumstances, regret, and shame over past wrongdoings are tied to the worst impacts of colonialism.

Unlike the aforementioned studies, which are predominantly psychoanalytical in scope, Abhay Singh Rana's study focuses on the novel's portrayal of the impact of the politics that emerges after colonial departure and how it has led to the sufferings of the common Zanzibaris (23). The study unearths that *Gravel Heart* reflects the postcolonial political predicament and upheaval bedevilling the newly independent Zanzibar, and the rise of a vile and corrupt political class who do not care for the masses. Postindependence Zanzibar is fraught with a barrage of political crises which disrupt Salim's life and push him to migrate to England in furtherance of his educational pursuit.

Likewise, Shalini and Ajoy Batta subject *Gravel Heart* to a postcolonial reading, incorporating Homi Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness (5262). Their study finds that the uncertainties engendered by colonialism have displaced indigenous peoples to the West, where, consequently, their cultural identities are distorted. Hence, indigenes do not only suffer physical displacement but also cultural dislocation. In a similar light, Uzma Shakoor et al. interrogate the novel by deploying Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and Third Space to emphasise the way cultural meaning is produced through ambivalence and contestation by disrupting binary categories and the prevailing ideas of cultural purity (795-800). Their study reveals how Salim negotiates between the cultural norms of his Zanzibarian roots and the expectations imposed by Westernisation, and how difficult it is for him to create a coherent identity in the context of

displacement.

Furthermore, Suraj Soni and Vipin Pal Singh deploy Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia to analyse *Gravel Heart* from a postmodern perspective. They posit that, in *Gravel Heart*, Gurnah "attempts to recreate the place of a place-bound community, using characters who, for one or another, are either placeless or in search of some kind of grounding" (1). That is, these characters are bound by a "'placeless' existence" that "cannot be structured, assigned values, or connected to certain purposes" (1). Hence, the novel can be "interpreted as worlds within worlds, placelessness, and non-homes" (1). Soni and Singh assert that the 1964 Zanzibar revolution engenders the loss of a place-bound community and the disappearance of the community itself (11-12).

Chen is another critic who has studied Gurnah's *Gravel Heart*. Chen's thesis examines the novel using an intertextual lens. Chen postulates that *Gravel Heart* is a conscious intertextual adaptation of Shakespeare's classic 17th century English play, *Measure for Measure*. The study focuses on "the adaptation, dialogue, and reconstruction of *Gravel Heart* based on the study of generalised intertextuality and supplemented by the study of narrow intertextuality" (Chen). It takes into cognisance "the referential relationship between the two works and... the intratextuality of the novel, the writer, the readers, and the social and historical background" (Chen). The thesis argues that *Gravel Heart* pays tribute to *Measure for Measure*, a literary classic, by subverting it, wherein it deconstructs "Britishness" and brings to the readers the real situation of marginalised immigrants and refugees (Chen).

In addition, Osieka Osinimu Alao investigates the postcolonial signposts of abrogation and appropriation in *Gravel Heart* from a language vantage point (128). The study finds that *Gravel Heart* makes capital of what is autochthonous by projecting East Africa's historical and cultural realities disrupted by European and Arab coloniality. Also, the novel abrogates (rejects) the standard use of the English language through appropriative textual strategies

such as untranslated expressions, code-mixing and code-switching, and subversion. These appropriative textual strategies are linguistic ingredients of the cross-cultural text (Ashcroft, et al. 37). Suffice it to say that Gurnah is in alignment with Achebe's assertion that African writers should write using the English language but should be subjected to "carry the weight of [the] African experience" and "altered to suit its new African surroundings" (103).

The aforementioned studies have immensely contributed to the corpus of critical materials on *Gravel Heart*. However, this essay subjects *Gravel Heart* to the contrapuntal framework as postulated by Edward Said (106). Contrapuntality has been adopted for this study because of the uniqueness it poses as a framework with a broad traction for interwoven cultural and historical experiences. Since coming to light in 1993, contrapuntality has been subject to a cornucopia of varying critical views. Some critics have argued in favour of the theory, while others have argued against it.

While putting forth a favourable argument, the critic Lindsay Ferriter asserts that contrapuntal reading "is not only helpful but also necessary in making important connections in a novel," and that, "If one does not read with the right background, one may miss the weight behind the presence of Antigua in *Mansfield Park*, Australia in *Great Expectations*, or India in *Vanity Fair*." Ferriter further adds that, "Interpreting [a text] contrapuntally is interpreting different perspectives simultaneously and seeing how the text interacts with itself as well as with historical and biographical contexts." In tandem with Ferriter's stance, Nawsher Oan et al. posit that, "the contrapuntal refers to the oppositional, often not immediately visible or easily perceptible, in a text or book... the inner contradiction between the two opposite forces which shows some obvious result... the psychological and metaphysical presupposition which we can guess and assume" (69).

Further, contrapuntal reading, Leo Ching suggests "is useful in understanding the constituting and co-figuring of metropolitan and colonial relations that while addressing the

minoritarian position of the colonized, does not normalize the status of the colonizer" (1). Ching also implies that "contrapuntal reading can be extended to analyze the transition and translation between empires," a phenomenon he refers to as "transimperial contextualisation," which shows, for instance, "a shift from Japanese to American empire in postwar East Asia" (1). Hence, contrapuntal reading is not simply descriptive in pointing out the presence and traces of empire in metropolitan and colonial texts; it requires imagination in juxtaposing and associating texts that are normally taught separately in different contexts to illuminate their contrapuntal relations (Ching 1).

Contrastively, George Wilson is one such critic who has vehemently opposed the contrapuntal framework. According to Wilson, the contrapuntal framework lacks coherence and adequate methodological detail (267). Thus, it is herculean to state precisely what a contrapuntal analysis demands in a text, which is "symptomatic of deficiencies or lacunae in his (Said's) overall account" (267). Wilson further asserts that contrapuntal reading is "thin and arbitrary" (269), and that, "the constraints he appears to recognize upon acceptable analyses are far too weak" (272). In addition, he opines that contrapuntality is not reader-friendly because it restricts the reader's "normal perceptions concerning the relative weight and importance of various elements in the text" by imposing "an adamantly insisted upon outside agenda" (272-273).

Another critic who toes the antagonistic line is Jonathan Arac. Arac posits that contrapuntal criticism "considerably complicates the notion of oppositional commitment" (57). He argues that critical opposition should be "adversarial" and not "loving" in nature (57). That is, it should possess the ability to cut, sever, or set apart, and not join or blend together as contrapuntality seems to propose.

While Wilson's and Arac's vitriolic standpoints are acknowledged, they are, to say the least, distractions to what contrapuntality holistically entails and represents in the domain of literary discourse. The strength of contrapuntality lies in its fluidity to glide and sift through a

narrative pile of cross-cultural perceptions, experiences, and realities, from the colonial to the contemporary. To sum it up, a contrapuntal approach, in the words of Kathryn Lachman, “does not seek an overarching resolution, teleology, or synthesis, but instead focuses on the dynamic interplay of contradictions” (62).

Theoretical Framework

Contrapuntality, as proposed by Said in *Culture and Imperialism*, is a mode of reading a literary text “contrapuntally,” that is, with “an understanding of what is involved when an author shows, for instance, that a colonial sugar plantation is seen as important to the process of maintaining a particular style of life in England” (106). Said opines that the European novel cannot be sundered from the ideological impulses of imperialism that have given rise to it (110). The evolution of the European novel is fundamentally tied to bourgeois society, and the institutional character of the Western bourgeois society is imperialism; hence, it is impossible to read the novel without in some way dealing with imperialism (Said 110).

One of the focal points of contrapuntality is that the reader must “connect the structures of a narrative to the ideas, concepts, experiences from which it draws support” (Said 107). Since a literary work is not created in a void, it must be assessed as a summative whole of all the ingredients that constitute it. The literary text is more than just an assemblage of words and stylistic elements but a culmination of patterns of thought, feelings, sentiments, and character. Another major thrust of contrapuntality is that it “must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded” (Said 106-107). That is, a contrapuntal reading must “draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented in such works” (Said 106). This implies that a text must be assessed based on what went into it and what the author excluded because every text (cultural product) is a vision of a moment, and moment (history, place, societal character) influences a writer’s artistic vision (Said 107).

Said also asserts that there is “no such

thing as a direct experience, or reflection, of the world in the language of a text” because a text is a yield of the writer’s perception and worldview (108). Said cites Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and the stance of Eurocentric history as an example. Said argues that Conrad, a European, has been exposed to a history of stereotypical and biased knowledge and misrepresentations of Africa even before writing *Heart of Darkness*, hence what Conrad portrays in *Heart of Darkness* is a construct of his Eurocentric worldview.

Furthermore, a contrapuntal analysis proposes a critical look at the cultural archive, to commence rereading it not univocally but contrapuntally, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts (Said 89). What this implies, importantly, is that contrapuntality deals with the formation of cultural identities as contrapuntal ensembles and not as essentialisations, because no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, and oppositions (Said 90). Historically, the contrapuntal orientation sees Western and non-Western experiences as belonging together because they are connected by imperialism (Said 354). Contrapuntality, as a systematic theoretical school, argues that there are linkages between texts and worldly institutions, wherein writers’ historical experiences are informed by colonial enterprises and postcolonial literatures are involved in the literatures of the world (Said 401).

In sum, the force of postcolonial fictions or cross-cultural texts lies in their reappropriation of indigenous history, their rehistoricisation of Africa’s past, and their renarrativisation of indigenous spaces both home and abroad. Therefore, a contrapuntal reading urges the critic to pay attention to both dominant narratives and marginalised counternarratives, to go beneath the superficiality of colonial myths, to unearth indigenous sublimities that may not be obvious or conspicuous, to not just follow the trends but delineate the subtrends or countertrends, to go against what is the common normative, to go against the roaring tides of Westernisation, to seek the truth, because every narrative, in this

hegemonic and imperialistic world, is multifaceted, multidimensional, and multicultural.

Methodology

This study adopts critical textual analysis as its method. Critical textual analysis involves the in-depth analysis of the primary text, *Gravel Heart*. It involves a close and critical reading of *Gravel Heart* to uncover implicit meanings relevant to the study's objectives. This method constitutes the descriptive stage which is the thorough reading and summarisation of the selected novel geared towards identifying and highlighting potential focal points and elements, and understanding the broader postcolonial context and Gurnah's perspective. The second stage, which is the analytical stage, entails drawing inferences and interpreting meanings derived from the primary text. It borders on the examination of imperialism and the cross-cultural text, reappropriation, rehistoricisation, and renarrativisation, and their recurrence in *Gravel Heart*. The third stage, which is the interpretative stage, deals with unravelling the underlying meanings and implicit authorial messages in the tenets and what they represent. The evaluative stage, which is the final stage, comprises assessing the primary text in tandem with the aim and objective of the essay to see if they have been achieved.

In sum, critical textual analysis consists of subjecting the primary text to the contrapuntal lens in order to examine how affiliation affords cross-cultural texts or postcolonial fictions the vista to counter cultural stripping, dislocation, and derision, through reappropriation, rehistoricisation, and renarrativisation. Additionally, the study deploys qualitative research which includes drawing from secondary texts such as books, journals, articles, and so on, in libraries and online.

Synopsis of *Gravel Heart*

Gravel Heart unfurls through the perspective of the main character Salim who grows up with his mother and Uncle Amir. His father deserts them to live with his friend, and Salim cannot understand why. Their homeland Zanzibar is trapped in political turmoil that climaxes in a revolution. Salim migrates to England with the

help of Uncle Amir who is now an envoy. In London Salim experiences alienation and hostility. He later discovers a family secret that makes him realise that things are not as they appear to be.

Textual Analysis

Reappropriation

Spatial Differentiations in the Colony

In the colony there is spatial segregation earmarked by the distinct locations where the colonialists live. This is orchestrated to entrench a class divide between the colonialists and indigenes, so when indigenes wander through those areas they are reminded of their subservience. The grandees, the people connected to the sultan's government, live apart from the indigenes. On the one hand, the Arabs (Omanis) live in the seclusion of their walled gardens, while, on the other, the European colonial officials live in huge old Arab houses by the sea. The Europeans occupy huge old Arab houses as a testament to their domineering grip over the Arabs, and the eclipse of the Arab slave trade.

The colonialists often indulge in the ceremonialisation of imperialism. They mark their ceremonial imperial rituals with white linen uniforms adorned with fantasy medals and wear cork helmets festooned with feathers and carry swords in gilt-edged scabbards, like conquerors. They give themselves tin-god titles and pretend that they are aristocrats. There is a constant urge by the colonialists to display their illusions of grandeur, to look the part, as overlords in charge. The appearance of grandeur, larger-than-life showy attributes, serve a psychological purpose—to project themselves as dominant and more sophisticated than the indigenes. Both varieties of grandees (the Arabs and Europeans) think “themselves gifted by nature, which had created them noble and granted them the right to rule as well as the burden (the white man's burden of civilising the indigene) that it brought” (Gurnah 15). The colonialists are footsoldiers whose presence is to secure Africa as an imperial stronghold tailored to the service of colonial empires.

The Social Space of Resistance and Self-Determination

Reappropriation deals with how indigenes

resist the colonial domination of their land and reclaim it. Ahmed Musa Ibrahim, Salim's grandfather, is an anticolonial intellectual passionate about justice and liberty and the right to self-fulfilment. He is a product of colonial education, well-read and well-travelled, and holds a Diploma in Public Health from Edinburgh University in Scotland. He represents what colonialists will refer to as an "enlightened" and "modern" man. But Ahmed Musa Ibrahim does not just acquire this Euro-sophistication to be a puppet. He weaponizes his experiential sophistication against the colonialists, more like fighting them with their own weapon.

Subsequently, he associates with a group of anticolonial intellectuals who want "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 restraint" (Gurnah 17). The anticolonialists are bent on self-determinism and the autonomy of African nation-states. Ahmed Musa Ibrahim is unequivocal about his perception of the British. He says: "No one bid the British to come here... They came because they are covetous and cannot help wanting to fill the world with their presence" (Gurnah 17). The invasion of Africa by the colonialists became more pronounced in the nineteenth century climaxing after the 1884 Berlin Conference where the fate and future of Africa was decided and truncated.

Ahmed Musa Ibrahim is a personification of the social space of resistance and self-determination, which is not necessarily a physical space, but rather, a mental space of cultural contest. It is the 1950s and Ahmed Musa Ibrahim poses as a fearless figure in a colonised territory where British authorities rule by coercion and punishment and regard the anticolonial movement as sedition. This does not deter the anticolonialists who have come to the resolution that it is high time for the departure of the colonialists. Despite the repression of the anticolonialists, the revolutionary temperament is unshaken:

There were heated debates late into the night; shouted conversations in cafes, rallies where activists spoke with hatred and derision; friends fell out and turned

secretive as political lines were redrawn. They were heady times, exulting times, watching British police officers scowl powerlessly on the fringes of rallies as the crowds roared, knowing that the departure of the mabeberu and their lackeys and stooges was unavoidable. (Gurnah 17)

It is often said that an idea whose time has come cannot be tramped, so is the revolution which swings into full velocity. As part of Ahmed Musa Ibrahim's protest against colonial authority, he abandons his government job and retires to his land to be a farmer and employer of labour.

In view of the anticipated independence, political parties are crystallising, albeit along fragile lines. In 1963, eventually, the British forcibly depart Zanzibar, which is met with widespread festivities. But beyond the façade of independence lie some inherent fissures. African territories were run as businesses founded on capitalist-exploitative ideologies. These territories were not run as nation-states; in fact, they were not viewed as potential, autonomous nation-states. The idea of amalgamation, integration, and demarcation of these African territories as potential countries by the colonialists was birthed by the clamour for independence. Hence, the colonialists drew up maps, decrees, constitutions, flags, and anthems, to usher in their own Eurocentric construct of African territories with no attention given to the uniqueness and peculiarities of African tribes, ethnicities, and cultures.

African countries are European constructs and as a result are hostage to imperial machineries. About two years after the revolution in Zanzibar and an autonomous government has taken the reins, foreign countries still hover like vultures: "That was how matters seemed to the new rulers and their fraternal socialist advisers from the German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia, who had allocated themselves the education portfolio in our affairs (while the Chinese took over the hospitals and the Soviets advised on security and the armed forces)" (Gurnah 179). Although independence is widely regarded as an emancipative drive by Afrocentrists, its valency is a colonial imposition

orchestrated for failure. Modern-day Africa is a glaring justification.

Ahmed Musa Ibrahim becomes more active politically and takes up an informal adviser role of one of the political parties. He participates in voter-registration drive, literacy-classes movement, fund-raisers, and rallies. The political parties that come into being are streamlined along ethnic, religious, tribal, and class divides. Most of the parties do not bear any nationalistic affinity towards the growth and development of the newly minted nation-state. In fact, their underlying goal is to inherit the vacant authority left by the British and continue plundering the resources of the nation. That is why, till today, many African leaders are regarded as imperial puppets and neocolonial masquerades.

After colonial departure in Zanzibar, the nation slips into a revolution, often described as one of the most brutal in postcolonial history. The Zanzibar Revolution is a yield of the fragile lines of colonial imposition. After the exit of the British, elections are conducted for a new government, and unsurprisingly, majority of the elected government is controlled by the Arabs and their Asian cohorts like the Indians. This propels indigenous youths to instigate a revolution which is hijacked by criminal elements and spirals into unprecedented carnage and destruction claiming thousands of lives. Ahmed Musa Ibrahim is “killed during the revolution because he did all that he did for the wrong political party” (Gurnah 18). The death of Ahmed Musa Ibrahim symbolises the death of the cultural spirit of unity and nationhood.

The Social Space of Nationhood

Reappropriation transcends resistance and reclamation of indigenous lands; it also deals with establishing sociopolitical and economic structures. Postindependence Africa is a carnival of political anarchy. The political elite prefer a one-party state in order to ward off any scintilla of opposition. They do not want to be challenged so they can have a free run at mismanagement and manic thievery. In Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* there are only two parties: Party of the Rich and Party of the Poor (179-180). As expected, the Party of the Rich lord it over the Party of the Poor which is more nominal than it is functional. In Nigeria,

for instance, there are two major political parties which are birds of a feather, and in turn foreground the question of an emergent third force party to challenge this duopoly of madness.

In Zanzibar, only one party is allowed to function, terribly so that there is no distinction between the Party and the State: “Only one political party 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” (Gurnah 186). Zanzibar is agog with political violence and instability and the President is assassinated in the early 1970s. There are vengeful exiles, show trials, and absolute disorderliness characteristic of postindependence Africa's political landscape.

Independence in Africa has engendered a vile and corrupt political class. Self-aggrandisement is the order of the day at the expense of the masses who are denied access to basic social infrastructures like well-equipped and well-staffed hospitals, electricity, pipe-borne water, tarred roads, et cetera. Saida's mother suffers a heart attack as a result of a health complication because she cannot access a decent hospital for proper care. When she is taken to the hospital by Bibi, Saida and Amir, they are told to go away by an imperious male orderly who asks them to come back tomorrow when the doctor will be available. Unfortunately, she passes away due to neglect.

The Social Space of Familial Disintegration

Reappropriation deals with the family as a social space, which is the smallest unit of the society. Salim's family suffers disintegration due to the atrocity and impunity of the political elite. Amir, Saida's brother, is abducted by the security service on the orders of Hakim, the Vice President's son and Chief Protocol Officer. Amir is accused of raping Asha, the Vice President's daughter, an underage schoolgirl. Amir, although accused, is innocent until proven otherwise by the court of law. But the power-drunk Hakim takes the law into his hands and locks up Amir. Saida and Masud, her husband, with whom Amir lives, learn of his abduction through a young man, a co-worker

of Amir at the Coral Reef hotel. They become panicky and begin to trace the root of this sudden commotion which leads them to the Vice President's office. Hakim tells them of the heinous accusation hanging over Amir's head which will not be treated with levity. Saida and Masud plead with Hakim to let the law take its course but Hakim is having none of it. Saida is not oblivious of Hakim's propensity towards violence characteristic of those in power, and the possibility of Amir not making it to any fair trial.

Hakim capitalises on the situation to take advantage of Saida. He tells Saida that the only way he can free Amir is for her to get intimate with him. This underscores the extent of political impunity that Hakim can conjure such preposterousness knowing full well that Saida is a married woman. Saida is humiliated by Hakim's devilish advances. Hakim orders his driver to take Saida to the prison where Amir is kept. On getting there, Saida confirms that Amir has been unharmed as Hakim had said. She asks Amir if he is guilty of the accusation, and he says: "How can you believe such a thing? Of course I did not rape her. She came back to the hotel three times... it was her idea" (Gurnah 243). Even if it is her "idea" as Amir claims, he has the moral responsibility to refuse and tell her off. But it is a decadent society where there are no limitations to hideousness. Saida tells Amir of Hakim's humiliating offer and Amir selfishly pleads with her to yield so he would not be killed. Amir tells her she will be doing a "noble and courageous thing" to save his life (Gurnah 243).

Eventually, Saida gives in to the wishes of Hakim and something that is supposed to be once becomes a longtime affair which produces a baby girl, Munira. Masud cannot live with the consequences and shame of Saida's actions and so he moves out of the house to live an impoverished life with a friend. Salim also grows to despise his mother, but he eventually forgives her. This shows the disparity between the political class and the masses, wherein the political class wield ruthless authority which affects the lives of the masses in many an unthinkable way.

The Postcolony as a Space of Cultural Contestation

In African postcolonies cultural imperialism is rife. Europeans project their culture as the benchmark which every other culture must aspire to, mimic, and assimilate. Amir loves British and American pop songs. He even sings in a band with his teacher, Maalim Ahmed, and the band's name is Eddie. Amir is a representation of how indigenes desert the assertion of their culture and become Westernised. Indigenes want to associate with Western cultural artefacts, and even desire to migrate to the West. Amir is opportune to migrate to Ireland where he studies International Relations at University College Dublin. He is taught how to behave and present himself like a white man. Amir later settles with his family in London where he works as a diplomat, and they, at every opportunity, despise their roots.

The Metropolis as a Space of Postcolonial Subjectivities

Migration is a dynamic phenomenon of contemporary Africa. In fact, it is impossible to assess the history of postindependence Africa without acknowledging an ever-present migratory tendency and trend. Africans are displaced from their home countries due to social, political, and economic hardships ravaging the polity. A multitude of Africans are forced to leave the continent in search of paradisiacal spaces in the West. While some migrate legally, others do so illegally. Whichever angle one views it from, migration is a cumbersome and risky business. Although Western countries are constantly reviewing their immigration laws to curb the menace of migration, it does not change the fact that immigrants are a viable source of human capital needed to fortify the Western labour force. Migration plays a dynamic role in the West by assembling immigrants from former colonies who come together to form intercultural communities and infiltrate Western cultural spaces. To an extent, even though these immigrants are discriminated against and segregated, it nullifies the myth that whites and blacks cannot coexist and intermingle, and also shatters the barriers of racial purity as upheld by the whites. Hence, the West, as it seems, takes up the status of a postcolonial metropolis or

an immigrant postcolony.

Amir takes Salim to London as a gesture of goodwill for what Saida did for him when he was abducted by Hakim. Salim is thrust into a berth of Westernisation as he begins to assimilate foreign cultures, including how to use a knife and fork to eat. Amir and his wife Asha constantly, albeit directly or indirectly, remind Salim that he has moved from primitivity to modernity, and should start acting like it. Salim is overwhelmed by a sense of unbelonging and feels out of place in London:

I made my way there in fear and trembling. London terrified me so much. The streets confused me... The rush of people and vehicles muddled my sense of direction and panicked me... I recoiled with so much anxiety. 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 61)

Africans bear the illusion of Western grandeur but are plunged into a psychological reset once they have migrated to the West. Salim becomes a “migrant helot” resorting to menial jobs such as working in a supermarket stacking shelves and mopping floors, a warehouse, a laundrette, et cetera, in order to appease Uncle Amir and Auntie Asha (Gurnah 65). Salim has to “learn” how to live in London. He learns how “to avoid being intimidated by crowds and by rudeness” and “not to feel desolate at hostile stares and to walk purposefully wherever [he goes]” (Gurnah 66). He learns how to live in “an alien and hostile city” (Gurnah 67). To be an African immigrant is to be burdened by the scenario of illusion versus reality.

London can be described as a social space of postcolonial subjectivities, a postcolonial metropolis, or an immigrant postcolony due to the congregation and convergence of immigrants from around the world. Salim from Zanzibar meets Reshat whose parents are from Cyprus, Mahmood from Sierra Leone, Mr Mgeni from Kenya, Mr Mgeni’s wife, Marjorie, from Jamaica, et cetera. Salim has a falling out with Uncle Amir because

he does not want to study Business in school. Initially, Uncle Amir cajoles Salim to opt for Business Studies because he thinks the course offers employability dividends. In the long run, Salim abandons the course in favour of Literature which makes Uncle Amir to withdraw his support for him, and, consequently, Salim moves out of the embassy house in Holland Park to a room in Guinea Lane in Camberwell. Salim meets three other African men in the house which the landlord, Mr Mgeni, calls the OAU (Organisation of African Unity) house. The other Africans include: Alex from Nigeria, Mannie (Mahmood’s cousin) from Sierra Leone, and Peter from South Africa (Gurnah 85).

The OAU house is more than just a residential building; it is a social space of belonging. Beyond its physicality, it is a mental space where the African immigrants feel relatively safe and at home. The men in the OAU house that Salim gets acquainted with are all struggling to survive far from their homelands. Alex is a security officer at the National Gallery, Mannie works in an office-cleaning firm, Peter works as a salesman for the local free newspaper. In order to make ends meet, Salim does illegal work in a clothes sweatshop in New Cross. Their interpersonal relationships are also limned. Peter’s girlfriend, Fran, is biracial, half-Rwandan half-English, and Peter always rudely mocks her about it, to Salim’s dismay. Mannie, a Muslim, is in a relationship with a Martinican Catholic lady who lives in Coventry. Mannie is a son of a Sunni imam in Sierra Leone and is wary of his father finding out about his relationship. In modern-day Africa religion is a springboard of unrests. Christians and Muslims are at loggerheads for superiority and control. Both religions are colonial residues whose differences should not be allowed to disrupt the collective progress of Africa.

In the OAU house, Alex also loves “talking about the huge appetites of Nigerian politicians for stolen wealth” (Gurnah 90). Africans migrate abroad because their home countries have been made unliveable and unliveable by a crop of corrupt and greedy politicians. Political corruption remains a significant challenge within Nigeria’s political

elite. Nigeria ranks as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Nigerian politicians are some of the highest paid political officeholders in the world and they vote for themselves all sorts of ridiculous allowances such as “travel allowance, community allowance, hardship allowance, constituency allowance, contingency fund, seedcorn fund,” and so on (Gurnah 90). This decadent character of the political class is not only peculiar to Nigeria but Africa at large.

Due to Salim’s fall out with Uncle Amir who withdraws his financial support for him, Mr Mgeni advises him to get papers so he can work legally and earn some money. The man for the job is the Sudanese lawyer Jafar Mustafa Hilal who promises to spin his magic. Jafar Mustafa Hilal proposes that for the papers to return successful, Salim’s age will be reduced and he is to be Mr Mgeni’s nephew, while Mr Mgeni will pose as his last remaining relative. There is an endlessness to immigrant insecurities, desperations and anxieties.

Salim’s second year at OAU house is greeted with new tenants. Alex returns to Nigeria to marry, and is replaced by another Nigerian, Amos, who is a “quarrelsome battler,” autocratic and Islamophobic (Gurnah 100). It is later revealed that Amos was a former child soldier in the Biafra war. This may account for his aggressiveness, having to live with the memory of extremely traumatic events. Unfortunately, Africa is plagued by civil wars whose embers are fanned by the disjointedness and disparities among peoples lumped together as nation-states by Eurocentric constructs.

At the beginning of term Salim starts to work at Café Galileo owned by Mark. Mark asks Salim where he is from and Salim says Zanzibar. Mark voices his prejudice about Salim’s origin: “That’s a long way away in Africa, isn’t it? Way down there below the equator, the other side of the world... Darkest darkest Africa” (Gurnah 109). The Myth of a Vast Wilderness, which projects Africa as a continent of listless disasters, innumerable diseases and infinite darkness, is quite popular and patronised (Alao 97). It is alarming the widespread stereotypical and racist views about Africa upheld by non-Africans. Mark is Lebanese and his real name is Mousa, but he

uses Mark because “customers feel more comfortable” (Gurnah 109). Mark anglicises his name to please his British customers, and probably his non-Muslim customers. This also applies to Salim’s Sierra Leonean friends, Mahmood and Mannie. Mannie sounds anglicised while Mahmood goes by Mood as an anglicised version. Immigrants are often riddled with identity rifts whereby they have to alter or adulterate their indigeneity as a form of acclimatisation.

Racism is an ever-present immigrant insecurity. African immigrants are relentlessly discriminated against and despised. Salim falls in love with Billie who is half-English half-Indian. In fact, Billie is the anglicised form of her name, Bindiya. Billie’s family is in opposition to her relationship with Salim because of his race and religion: “A Muslim from Africa” (Gurnah 146). Billie’s mother is Hindu and will not tolerate her daughter’s union with a Muslim man from Africa. Salim is racially abused when he is referred to as a “Muslim nigger” (Gurnah 147). Billie’s mother threatens to commit suicide if Billie continues with Salim. Billie bows to familial pressure and deserts Salim.

Oftentimes, immigrants are confronted with bouts of nostalgia, that is, the strong feeling of missing home. Salim has spent about two decades in England and yet he feels like a helot. Over time, Salim thinks he will outgrow that feeling of estrangement and unbelonging coursing through his veins but it stays stuck in his throat like a stubborn lump that refuses to disappear. He keeps in touch with his mother via letters and calls. In one of the letters, he learns that his father, Masud, has gone to Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. Sadly, Saida passes away on New Year’s Eve due to a blood clot in her brain. Salim is unable to attend the funeral which is handled by Uncle Amir and Hakim.

Eventually, Salim returns to Zanzibar to visit his father who has returned from Malaysia, and stepsister, Munira. After spending a couple of weeks in Zanzibar, he flies back to London after a twenty-six-hour stopover in Addis Ababa. Munira calls to tell Salim that his father has passed away due to a stroke, and that he died few minutes after he boarded his flight to Addis Ababa. Salim wishes

he could have stayed a bit longer, to be present when his father passed on, and bid him one final farewell at his funeral. It is safe to say that African immigrants are not only burdened by their physical distance away from home but also the emotional and psychological fissures engendered by their leaving home.

Rehistoricisation

Africa's history cannot be adequately contextualised without spotlighting the festering role of colonialism. In fact, prior to the Afrocentrist renaissance, the history of Africa has been commandeered by Europeans who, conspicuously, have not failed to etch their stereotype and prejudice. In the Eurocentric history of Africa, Africa is depicted as an object discovered by Europeans. That is to say, Africa was not in existence before the adventurous wanderings of the white men. This assertion is historically untenable and ideologically motivated because how does one then account for the centuries that Africans have lived, cultivated their lands, and practiced their cultures, norms and traditions? The unjustifiable claim that Africa was discovered by Europeans is a myth engineered to perpetrate hegemony. *Gravel Heart* aptly touches on this: "It was a conceit of the time that the existence of anything, a river, a lake, a mountain or a beast, could not be assured unless a European person had seen it and wherever possible named it" (Gurnah 195). For instance, Mungo Park is falsely credited to have discovered the River Niger. Does this mean the river and its environs and the people who patronised it did not exist before Mungo Park's first sighting?

Historically, the colonial conquest of Africa is one of the colossal occurrences witnessed by the human race. Colonial invasion was both a genocide and an ethnocide. On the one hand, it was genocidal because millions of Africans were killed and enslaved, and, on the other, it was ethnocidal because indigenous cultures, norms, traditions, artefacts, et cetera, were destroyed and even in some cases made extinct. The colonialists hijacked Africa's territory for their own good and ran it as they liked (Gurnah 196). Suffice it to say that the imperial vision of Europe has produced enduring sociopolitical consequences across colonised

regions.

One such sociopolitical consequence is the Zanzibar Revolution which *Gravel Heart* historicises. Salim is told the history of the Zanzibar Revolution by his mother, Saida. Through Saida's recounting of the revolution to Salim, she transfers not only the memory of the revolution but also the trauma. Saida is fourteen years old when the Zanzibar revolution takes place and so has vivid memories of the tragic circumstances. Heavily-armed soldiers, some of whom are familiar to Saida, barge into their house and whisk her father away. Her father is never seen again nor is his body returned. Their family land and house are confiscated and become state property to be given away to zealots and functionaries of the revolution and their cronies. There is an announcement on the radio that all confiscated houses should be evacuated with immediate effect. Saida's mother and her family move to her aunt's place. Her aunt eventually becomes like a grandmother (Bibi) to them. Saida sums up the revolution thus: "You cannot imagine the terror of it, the arrests, the deaths, the humiliations. People were driving each other mad with rumours of new outrages, new decrees, with news of further sorrows" (Gurnah 20).

The Zanzibar Revolution although unfolds in a space of months leaves in its wake a catastrophic effect felt by many generations to come. Maalim Yahya, Salim's grandfather, is persecuted during the revolution and consequently goes on exile to Dubai. He gets a job there and sneaks out of his own country like a fugitive. His wife, Mahfudha, follows suit, taking along their daughters, but their son, Masud, refuses to go with them partly because he falls in love with Saida. Masud, Salim's father, has always been a rebel of some sort. Maalim Yahaya is a pious Muslim and government school teacher. Masud rejects emulating the pious lifestyle of his father and his devotion to colonial education.

Renarrativisation

Gravel Heart renarrativises Africa's historical and cultural spaces. Most of the narrative unfurls through the perspective of Salim, who personifies the social space of fragmented histories, territories, identities, and cultures. Stylistically, the novel

deploys a fragmented narrative technique whereby the story constantly shifts between places, histories, memories, and cultural identities, which are all interwoven by postcolonial experiences and realities. The narrative brings to the fore how colonialism has engendered fragmented indigenous histories, cultures, and identities.

Conclusion

Gravel Heart foregrounds indigenous subjectivities shaped by colonial and postcolonial forces. From the harshness of colonial rule to the hardship of the postindependence era, Africans are perpetually unhomed. They are victims of physical and psychological displacement engendered by colonialism, imperialism, and neocolonialism. Sociopolitical and economic maladies force Africans to flee their countries to the West in search of better living conditions. Africans view the West as El Dorado, but, on getting there, they are thrust into immigrant insecurities such as diasporic disillusionment and alienation, racial hostility, adversity, identity rift, et cetera. Africans are riddled with an unstable sense of self. In their homelands, they are constantly dealing with one

postcolonial crisis or the other, which forces them to migrate to the West. In the West they suffer bouts of uprootedness and cultural displacement. Hence, *Gravel Heart* is a fictive narrative of how postcolonial subjects navigate a globalised world that has been fashioned to suppress them and project Western-Eurocentric-supremacist ideologies.

In addition, Gurnah, through *Gravel Heart*, shows that cross-cultural texts or postcolonial fictions cannot be severed from anticolonial and antiimperial impulses. *Gravel Heart* is founded on Gurnah's ideas and concepts framed by indigenous epistemologies. Consequently, the novel is shaped by Gurnah's experiences of life in the Sultanate of Zanzibar and as an African immigrant in England. Therefore, Gurnah's artistic vision in *Gravel Heart* is a reflection of his perception and worldview which he accentuates using language. In sum, *Gravel Heart* reappropriates, rehistoricises, and renarrativises Africa's historical and cultural reality.

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