

AN ANALYSIS OF ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S *BY THE SEA* IN THE CONTEXT OF POLITICS AND CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

*Culture and politics are deeply connected to each other. It has been noticed that the politics of a place is affected by the culture of a place, and the culture of a place is affected by the politics of that place. The set beliefs and traditions by which a society is moved is called the culture of a place. According to Lyotard (qtd. in Bhabha), "Tradition is that which concerns time" (81). It takes a lot of time to build the culture of a society as "a society's culture evolves over a long period, deeply rooted in shared experiences and values" (Rana 8). The culture of the colonized world was greatly affected by the politics that came into the limelight after the colonial powers left. Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By The Sea* (2001) analyzes the impact of postcolonial politics on the culture of newly independent countries. The political leaders of freshly formed countries started copying their former colonial masters in everything. They forgot that the motto of European powers was to rule and not to give good governance. As a result, they started exploiting their countrymen, and now the political system was running according to the whims and fancies of the new political leaders. In mimicking the European powers, the new political leaders did all wrong things, which ultimately disturbed the culture of native lands.*

Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah, colonial powers, politics, culture, exploiting, mimicking.

Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah, the Nobel Laureate in Literature for 2021, was born in Zanzibar, present-day Tanzania, on 20th December 1948. When Abdulrazak was born, Zanzibar was a British protectorate. The British could establish their rule in Zanzibar because Zanzibar didn't have a proper political system. Because of the lack of central authority, it was easy for the advanced British forces to come and take control of Zanzibar. Since the British were powerful and strong, the natives of Zanzibar couldn't do anything and remained silent. "It is the silence that turns imperial triumphalism" (Bhabha 176). The English were better in everything. British forces were rich, had better resources, had sophisticated weapons, and advanced military force. As a result, the Zanzibaris were left with no option but to accept the rule of British troops. Since Zanzibar was under British rule, the administration ran according to British ways. The power was in the hands of the British. Hence, they imposed their values and traditions on the local population. They imposed their traditions and culture on the natives of Zanzibar because they wanted to rule and to rule, it was important to run the system according to their ways. The local population had no option other than following what was imposed by the colonial powers.

In 1963, when Abdulrazak Gurnah was still a teenager, the British left, and Zanzibar became an independent country. Within one month after the British left, the society of Zanzibar faced political unrest due to the struggle to gain power. This political unrest took thousands of lives and forced thousands to migrate. "Migration also occurs because of unrest in societies to escape conflicts, human violations, and compulsions of circumstances" (Rana and Sharma 6545). This political unrest also forced Abdulrazak Gurnah to migrate. "Gurnah was forced to migrate to England when he was only a teenager because of the unrest in Zanzibar due to the Zanzibar revolution" (Rana and Sharma 421). Abdulrazak Gurnah "fled to England in early 1968 because, after the Revolution (1964), Zanzibar became a place of terror and unrest" (Banerjee 874).

All the events that took place after the political unrest in Zanzibar are visible in Abdulrazak Gurnah's writings. Abdulrazak Gurnah has written extensively about how colonial powers were victorious in establishing their rule, how the political unrest, the political mismanagement and the political upheaval that took place in newly independent countries impacted the culture of new countries, and how this unrest forced people to migrate. Most of the characters in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels speak the Swahili language, "and they connect with the Eastern Coast of Africa in some way or another" (Rana and Sharma 2409). Still, the themes of all his novels are different. In an interview with Nisha Jones, Gurnah states, "One book doesn't necessarily follow the last one logically, although it does come out of the same pool where all the books have come from. There are several different starting points for the novel." (37).

By The Sea (2001), the sixth novel of Abdulrazak Gurnah, speaks about colonial diffusion, the political structure of Zanzibar after the European powers left, and how it impacted the culture of Zanzibar. This novel also talks about the political mismanagement and mimicry of colonial powers by the new political leaders after the British left and its impact on the lives of the people of Zanzibar. The new politics of Zanzibar affected the culture of Zanzibar as “Politics and culture has always been an interdisciplinary” (Berezin 376). The latest political leaders were least interested in the country's development, and their only motto was to make money. Moreover, the government was running according to the whims and fancies of the new political leaders and they did everything that suited them. This attitude of the political leaders of the newly independent Zanzibar was new and was against the culture of the traditional society of Zanzibar.

Analyzing the Political Structure of Zanzibar

By The Sea, the sixth novel by Abdulrazak Gurnah, portrays how the Western countries established their rule on the Eastern Coast of Africa and how colonialism changed the politics and culture of Zanzibar. Many things that took place in Zanzibar for centuries suddenly changed with the arrival of European powers. Traditionally, traders and merchants from different countries come to Zanzibar with the arrival of monsoons. “They had been doing this every year for at least a thousand years. In the last months of the year, the winds blow steadily across the Indian Ocean towards the coast of Africa, where the currents obligingly provide a channel to harbor. Then in the early months of the new year, the winds turn around and blow in the opposite direction, ready to speed the traders home” (Gurnah 14). Zanzibaris used to wait and prepare for the arrival of businessmen from different parts of Gulf, Africa and South Asia, but with the arrival of the foreign powers, the business trips of traders stopped with time.

With the arrival of European powers, many other significant changes occurred in Africa and its culture. The European powers fought to control different areas, and as a result, new maps emerged, significantly changing Africa's culture. The new territories and maps also significantly restricted people's movement.

The European powers also changed the educational system to create a group of people who could work for them. Frantz Fanon, in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, says, “The European elite undertook to manufacture a native elite. They picked out promising adolescents; they branded them, as with a red-hot iron, with the principles of western culture; they stuffed their mouths full with high-sounding phrases, grand glutinous words that stuck to the teeth. After a short stay in the mother country they were sent home, white-washed” (7). A prominent character of *By The Sea*, Saleh Omar, was also chosen to get modern education by the imperial government. Saleh Omar while talking about modern education says:

Years before, the British authorities had been good enough to pick me out of the ruck of native school boys eager for more of their kind of education, though I don't think we all knew what it was we were eager for. It was learning, something we revered and were instructed to revere by the teaching of the Prophet, but there was glamour in this kind of learning, something to do with being alive to the modern world. I think also we secretly admired the British, for their audacity in being there, such a long way from home, calling the shots with such an appearance of assurance, and for knowing so much about how to do the things that mattered: curing diseases, flying aeroplanes, making movies. Perhaps admired is too uncomplicated a way of describing what I think we felt, for it was closer to conceding to their command over our material lives, conceding in the mind as well as in the concrete, succumbing to their blazing self-assurance. (17-18)

Before getting a European education, Saleh Omar was getting a traditional education, which mostly talked about the teachings of Islam. The new education system helped people get jobs in the imperial government, a new development for Zanzibar's culture and system.

Rana, while discussing the new leaders and the politics of newly independent countries, states that “the political parties and their leaders had no experience in running a government” (25). As a result, the responsibility of governing the country fell on leaders who had little knowledge of administration after the British departed. “The political power came into the hands of people having no experience of running a system which moves a country” (Rana 44). The new political bosses started mimicking the British and behaved like dictators. Homi Bhabha states, “The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing” (123). The new political

leaders started running the government the way it suited them. Frantz Fanon says, “Decolonization is quite simply the replacing of a certain ‘species’ of men by another ‘species’ of men” (27).

One of the main characters of *By The Sea*, Latif went to East Germany to study dentistry on scholarship because his mother was having an affair with one of the most important ministers in the government. Latif didn't get the scholarship to study abroad because he deserved it, but because of political connections:

My mother was the Minister's lover. For all I know she may have been one of two or three or perhaps more women at his service. He was a rising figure in the government, and would have been happy to demonstrate the authority of his pizzle in the numbers who display their availability at his building. No, I speak too harshly of her and I know so little of what took her that way. In any case, the Minister's official car came for her and waited at the end of the lane from the little house we moved to after my father lost our first house. Then my mother, unhurried and unafraid, almost fastidious in her refusal to be secretive, came strolling out, looking like a beautiful women going to meet with her lover. It was no doubt this connection that had got me on the scholarship list in the first place and now had mw switched to ma medical degree. (108)

It was important for the new political leaders to put fear in the hearts and minds of the people to have their influence. Hence, they ordered the security agencies to arrest people with a doubtful history. As a result, the political leaders became very powerful as no one raised any voice against them. Latif's mother, who was the lover of a powerful minister, wanted to take revenge on Saleh Omar because of a property dispute. As a result, Saleh Omar got into an economic crisis as the bank from which he had taken a loan to uplift his business ordered him to repay the loan. The minister, who was having an affair with Latif's mother, had told the bank to punish Salah Omar, and as expected, the bank asked him for “a full settlement of the loan” (212). Also, the house that Saleh Omar had given to the bank as security was also given to Latif's family. The political leaders had started behaving like pure dictators and the government was running according to the wishes of political leaders. Latif's father, Rajab Shaaban Mahmud, was also given a prominent promotion as a gift from the minister who was having an illicit affair with Latif's mother.

The government was based on political leaders' dictates, and everything the party leaders decided became law. No rule of law existed, and the party leaders were above courts and justice. Latif's mother's hatred for Saleh Omar was so high that she wanted to see Saleh Omar behind bars. Saleh Omar was asked to come to the party office and was arrested. Saleh Omar had no court trial, and there was no provision to appeal in some higher court. Anything decided by the political leaders was the law. He was insulted and was even slapped by the police in front of everyone. It was a big blow to the honor of Saleh Omar. Saleh Omar remained in jail for eleven years without knowing what crime he had done. He “was released under amnesty” (233). By the time he returned, the political system that had taken over Zanzibar after the British left had taken everything away from him. His wife and his only daughter had died, and he was a hopeless man. There was no change in the political situation, and the country was still running according to the whims and fancies of the political leaders.

Examining the Impact of Politics on Culture

Colonial powers came to the Orient lands to rule and exploit. They established their rule by making fun of Orient traditions and by making the Orient population feel inferior. The new leaders who took over after colonial powers left started doing what Europeans did to the natives. “The colonialists wanted to rule and to exploit, and the same was the culture of new governments” (Rana and Sharma 146). The old colonialists had left, and the new imperialists in the form of political leaders had come. According to Said (qtd. in Klikauer), “Although the “age of empire” ended mainly after the Second World War, when most colonies gained independence, imperialism continues to exert considerable cultural influence” (151). Colonial powers had left, but their influence on the system remained. As a result, the “Political turmoil did not end with independence” (Escosura 2).

With the arrival of new political leaders, the centuries-old traditions and culture of the natives of Zanzibar were changed. The political leaders became corrupt and even started taking advantage of needy women for their pleasure. Such a situation was new to the society and culture of Zanzibar. Zanzibar was a traditional society that followed the religion of Islam, and a man and a woman having an illicit affair was unimaginable. However, the

new political leaders of a newly independent country forgot the culture and traditions of Zanzibar. Talking about the illicit affair of his mother, which was the result of cultural change, the cultural shift was the result of the new political situation in Zanzibar; Latif says that his mother was one of the lovers of an important minister. The political leaders had started looking at women as objects which they could use for their pleasure. Women, too, started sleeping with influential people because it was beneficial for them. The life of women who were ready to compromise their dignity and honour was easy in a new country which was struggling financially. The women who used to stay at the house doing household activities started going out to sleep with influential people, a new tradition in the culture of Zanzibar. All this cultural change was because of the political situation that took place after the colonial powers left.

The new politics also established a culture of favoritism. Many people got preferential treatment because they had connections with the higher-ups and influential people in the government. Many students even got scholarships to study abroad because they had links with political leaders, and many deserving students couldn't go for higher studies because they didn't have any connection with the political leaders. Many undeserving people also got higher positions because of political contacts. Latif's father, Rajab Shaban Mahmud, "Had now risen in the administration" (213). Rajab Shaban Mahmud got a higher position because of his wife's strong political links.

Such a political scenario also became an obstacle in the country's development path as the political leaders, instead of concentrating on the country's development, were busy misusing their political power. The new political leaders were not qualified to run a country properly as they did not know the administration. Moreover, they also inherited a weak administrative system. Olsson, while mentioning the negative impact of colonialism, states, "The fundamental reason for persistent underdevelopment and stagnant economic growth back to weak institutions that countries inherited from colonial times" (534). Because of the weak system that the new and inefficient political leaders inherited, the country moved backward instead of making progress as the new system was "corrupt and burdened by lazy officials" (Kaigai 130). Moreover, it was not a democratic government, it was a one party government. The society of Zanzibar, which was based on respect and values, lost its culture because of a one-party government.

The one-party government made political leaders think they were supreme and could do anything. Everything was taking place according to the wishes of political leaders, and there was no equality before the law. Party headquarters had become courts, and party officials decided everything. Saleh Omar Says, "We knew about the hearings at the Party headquarters, which were really summary courts that made laws as they wished. They were chaired by Party Secretary General and were constituted with whoever had time on his or her hands, sometimes the President of the Republic himself, if he was in the mood to play among his subjects, sometimes it was his driver or the Chief of police" (214). Such a political system was polluting the culture of Zanzibar, which believed in treating human beings with respect and dignity.

Saleh Omar saw no change in Zanzibar's political system after he returned after spending eleven years in jail. By that time, he had lost his wife and his only daughter. He was left with no desire and started a small business selling fruits and vegetables. People showed kindness towards him, but no one asked about his life in jail as people were living under the grip of fear. The political system made people fearful, and no one wanted unnecessary attention from party officials. Then comes a time when Hassan, the brother of Latif, who had left Zanzibar decades back, returns to Zanzibar and threatens Saleh Omar with another jail term. Saleh Omar had seen enough of jail and didn't want to be in jail again. Saleh Omar, at this juncture of time, decides to leave Zanzibar and go to England. "Going to an unknown place and making it home is not easy" (Rana 22). Saleh Omar didn't want to leave his country as "Going to a new land and geography is always painful" (Rana and Sharma 150). He had to leave his country because he had no option but to migrate. Kanake and Choukade observe that the wrong policies of the new governments "led to the displacement of people" (128).

The same was the case with Saleh Omar. He had to leave his home country because he didn't see a future in Zanzibar. It has been observed that "People leave their homelands to seek welfare, pleasure, and peace of mind" (Farooqi and Jamil 1044). Migration was never the culture of Zanzibar, but because of wrong policies and

revengeful politics, Saleh Omar had to migrate for peace and welfare as there was no hope of a respectful life in Zanzibar. Saleh Omar says, “We were all fleeing places where authority required full submission and groveling fear, and since this was not enforceable without daily floggings and public beheadings, its servants, its police and army and security apparatus carried out repeated acts of petty malice to demonstrate the jeopardy of reckless insurrection” (46).

Discussion and Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By The Sea* concentrates on the political mismanagement of political leaders who gained power after the European imperialists left. The new leaders had no formal education about how to run a government. Moreover, the European rule made them realize that Europeans were better and everything done by Europeans was good. Europeans had also made them know that the natives of Zanzibar were inferior. The colonists also made them realize that all the good things happening in Zanzibar were because of the presence of English. Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism*, states, “Oriental belonged to the system of rule whose principle was simply to make sure that no Oriental was ever allowed to be independent and rule himself” (228). The colonial powers also created weak institutions so that the orientals never learned how to govern. Hence, the new political leaders had no option but to follow the system and the ways of government established by the Europeans. In the process of mimicking the colonial ways of administration, they forgot that it was their own country and they needed to work for the development of their country. Instead of working for the upliftment of their country, they started behaving like dictators and did many things that ultimately changed the culture of Zanzibar to a greater extent.

Zanzibar was a peaceful place where people respected each other. It was unimaginable to expect people to use other humans for their self-interest. However, the politics after the British left changed everything, and it was a blow to Zanzibar's centuries-old culture and traditions. The new political leaders misused their power and even exploited women for their physical pleasure. The influential political figures had relations with many women at the same time. After the colonial powers left, the political system became so corrupt that only those close to political leaders got preference for promotions and everything else. The students who had political links got scholarships to study abroad, and others suffered. There was no merit, and everything was at the mercy of political leaders. This type of atmosphere was new to the culture of Zanzibar, but the ordinary people had no option but to accept what was happening.

Such a political system also made people suffer in their married lives. Saleh Omar had married the love of his life and had a loving daughter. Latif's mother used her political contacts to take revenge on Saleh Omar. Saleh Omar was sent to Jail by the undemocratic government, which was running on the whims and fancies of political leaders. As a result, his wife and litter daughter were left on their own and died just a year after he was sent to jail.

Zanzibaris were people who loved their place and never thought of migrating to some other country. The lawlessness and the dictatorship of the political leaders forced people to leave their motherland. Saleh Omar, even after spending eleven years in jail for no fault of his, had decided to live in Zanzibar for the rest of his life, but he chose to leave Zanzibar because he was afraid to get a threat of another jail term. The experience in jail had shown him hell, and he didn't want to be in jail again, so he decided to migrate. He and many others also migrated because they saw no future in Zanzibar. Migration was never the culture of Zanzibar, but the politics after the colonial powers left forced people to relocate for a peaceful life.

By The Sea is a story that tells how a rotten political system destroys a country. The newly formed country inherited a weak system from colonial masters, which led to corruption and inefficiency. The political leader of the newly independent Zanzibar knew nothing about administration, so the country suffered. The political leaders also didn't have a vision for their country, and as a result, the country went in a backward direction instead of moving forward. The common masses suffered because of the inefficiency of governments and because of the dictatorship on behalf of the political leaders, which ultimately forced people to migrate.

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