

Metaphors of Colonial Trauma in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*

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Abstract: *By the Sea* is one of the masterpieces of Tanzanian writer Abdulrazak Gurnah, winner of the 2021 Nobel Prize for Literature. Gurnah tells the story of past events from the standpoint of Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud respectively, methodically advancing the story as if it were a jigsaw puzzle gradually assembling a complete truth. The novel uses a large number of metaphors in its implicit narrative, and through the dialectical tension between characters, events and objects with symbolic metaphorical meanings, it accurately grasps the destructive impact of colonialism on the colonized people and the plight of the refugee community after fleeing from their own country, triggering thoughts on post-colonialism, and calling attention to the colonial issue as well as to the colonial trauma of the alienated community.

Keywords: Metaphor; Colonial Trauma; Refugee; Identity.

1. Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah (1948-) is an immigrant British writer of African descent. Born in Zanzibar on the east coast of Africa in 1948, Gurnah, a native speaker of Swahili, travelled to the United Kingdom at the age of 20 to pursue his studies, and now teaches at the University of Kent in the United Kingdom. He also serves as associate editor of *Wasafiri*, a leading British literary journal. Based on his own experiences, Gurnah has written a series of novels set in pre-colonial and postcolonial East Africa and Britain. He puts his focus mainly on the themes of identity, social disintegration, racial conflict, gender oppression and history. His works depict the current situation of people's lives in the post-colonial era, which is of great social relevance.

Gurnah's work focuses both on issues related to racial conflict and colonial trauma in pre-colonial societies, as well as the cultural discomfort and identity of black immigrants in the post-colonial era. What is impressive about Gurnah is not only the subject matter, but also the way he surmises and captures human nature. Gurnah's immigrant status gives him a special lens to magnify these human problems. In his works, he focuses on the dilemmas of identity, the experience of separation, the memory of history and other conflicts between different races that arose during the colorization process. Although Gurnah is living in England, his works always focus on the switching between his homeland and England, telling African stories and reflecting African problems, such as colonial trauma and the physical and psychological sufferings of the African people, but his writing language is English. Gurnah's own dispersal background distinguishes him from both traditional African and British writers. Gurnah reveals that human society and social civilization have developed to the present day, but still cannot renounce war, discrimination and harm, cannot renounce inter-racial and inter-ethnic stereotypes, and cannot renounce the attitude of standing on the "top of civilization" and looking down proudly.

2. Metaphors of Colonial Trauma in *By the Sea*

By the Sea is a foretelling of the destiny of refugees in the

shadow of colonialism, focusing on colonialism through a variety of metaphors, and indirectly showing the violence of the colonizers and the psychology of colonized people as a means of discussing the historical trauma, identity and spiritual belonging of the African people who have suffered from colonial and post-colonial oppression, and showing great sympathy for their sufferings [1]. Omar, the protagonist of *By the Sea*, flees to England as a refugee to escape persecution in his homeland, and on the way, the ad-al-qamari was taken away, and Omar loses the only and deepest connection with his homeland, thus being cut off from his homeland, resulting in unbearable historical trauma. The experience of fleeing his own country to England keeps Omar on the edge of two different cultures. Thus, Omar experienced an identity dilemma, which reflects the difficult situation of third world blacks inhabiting the white world. With separation comes psychological trauma and identity problems, how to deal with the conflict between local and British cultures, how to find his own place in the white society, how to find identity in a racially discriminatory environment are all issues that Omar needs to consider. In Celia's dirty and chaotic house, Omar ultimately achieves healing of his wounds through Alfonso's towel and ultimately reinvents himself.

2.1. Ud-al-qamari: Trauma Caused by Plundering

In a harsh political environment, Omar chooses to leave his home and become a refugee and a voluntary exile because the safety of his life and the dignity of his existence is not guaranteed. After Omar arrived at Gatwick Airport as a "refugee", Kevin Edelman, a customs and immigration officer, checked Omar's luggage. "One kanzu, two sarunis, a towel and a small wooden casket" (8), these are some of the items in Omar's luggage. In this process, Kevin Edelman opened the casket, the fragrance of the ud-al-qamari came out and reminded Omar of his home. Omar reminisced about his life in his homeland, including "Every Idd I used to prepare an incense-burner and walk around my house with it" and "pacing the labours it had taken me to possess such beautiful things, rejoicing in the pleasure they brought to me and to my loved ones" (14). The glorious scent of ud-al-qamari often makes Omar feel loved and warm, "ud-al-qamari: its

fragrance comes back to me at odd times, unexpectedly, like a fragment of a voice or the memory of my beloved's arm on my neck (14)."Gurnah uses ud-al-qamari as metaphor for the good old days, but before fleeing his country, Omar experienced all sorts of trials and tribulations, being cheated out of a huge amount of money, the failure of his home shop business, the disaster of 11 years in prison, being stigmatized, the death of his wife and daughter one after another. So, when the fragrance of ud-al-qamari appeared, Omar recalled the peaceful past, which formed a strong contrast with the tragic encounter before his departure. With his once cozy and peaceful life and family destroyed, Omar had to leave his homeland. All these catastrophic events caused Omar's unbearable psychological trauma. Omar's experience reflects that the social violence has generated into the everyday life of the colonized people and made the lives of those people turbulent and disturbing.

Additionally, for Omar, ud-al-qamari is a priceless object that Omar carried with him when he came to England with the imprint of his home, which is the carrier, the clue, and the symbol of his memories [2]. Ud-al-qamari symbolizes fond memories of the past, the warmth of a life once lived with a loved one, and a connection to the homeland. But Kevin Edelman ruthlessly steals the ud-al-qamari, which is of great significance to Omar. The encounter of the ud-al-qamari used as a metaphor for the scrutiny, reproach, and rejection that the refugees have endured, as well as the shadows that colonial history has cast over the colonized people, the refugees' tragic fate, and the heavy historical trauma [3].

Ud-al-qamari is a referent that is closely related to the fate of the refugees and the trauma of history. Omar left his homeland as a refugee, and ud-al-qamari in his luggage became his only connection to his homeland. The ruthless looting of the ud-al-qamari had broken Omar's connection with his once warm home and his native land, and it is also a metaphor for the psychological and historical trauma caused by colonialism to a certain extent.

2.2. The Silence of Bartleby: Identity Dilemma

Bartleby the Scrivener is a novel by Herman Melville. Bartleby, a former clerk in the dead letter section of the Washington Post Office, and then worked as a scrivener at a Wall Street law firm. At the beginning of the work, Bartleby was particularly diligent and conscientious. But not long after, the old lawyer asked him and other colleagues to proofread the paperwork, he refused, and then he began to refuse to do any work, every day just staring at the wall. He refused to give in no matter how much he was coerced by the old lawyer, who wanted to fire him, but he stayed in the office and refused to move out. In the end, Bartleby was sent to prison as a vagrant by the owner of the building, where he ended his life by going on a hunger strike.

In Bartleby's time, capitalists were busy creating surplus value and building their empire of wealth, and the people at the bottom of the society were treated as tools, tired of survival, becoming more and more numb, and gradually became slaves of the society. Bartleby's life was as uninspiring as his work, like a puddle of stagnant water, and in the course of his work, he was constantly exploited and enslaved by capitalists, and himself was completely instrumented, and his dignity and value as a human being were completely eroded [4]. Additionally, Bartleby experiences only indifference, hostility and bullying among the upper class and their equals, rather than true sympathy and

understanding. Silence is Bartleby's approach to the world, and is also a silent revolt against an indifferent society. His refusal to make any contact with the outside world and to make any choices accelerates his self-disintegration, and he eventually becomes mentally dislocated and marginalized [5].

Gurnah use the silence of Bartleby as a metaphor for psychological trauma. Because the nature and ego need of people like Bartleby are completely ignored and it is difficult for them to even survive. So, when Omar came to England, he chose to remain silent, not wanting to answer any questions, not wanting to bring up his tragic memories of persecution, not wanting to reveal his bloody scars. And after he arrives in England, he always thinks of the silence of Bartleby, and of his own painful past.

Then he found himself caught in a dilemma between different cultures, rejected and despised by European culture. When Omar first arrived in England, custom immigration officer Kevin Edelman humiliated, threatened, and despised him, "You don't belong here, you don't value any of the things we value, you haven't paid for them through generations, and we don't want you here." (12) Kevin's words are a stark reflection of the general unwelcoming attitude of Europeans towards African immigrants, including refugees. These words likewise reflect the problem of the rejection of the other's culture that is prevalent in Europe, as represented by the United Kingdom. Omar thought, "I knew the meaning of silence, the danger of words." (12) So, he chose to remain silent to protect himself and resist discrimination. And when Rachel questioned why he was pretending he didn't know English, Omar replied, "I preferred not to." (65) This is the only language Bartleby used to reply to his employer; otherwise, Bartleby remained silent. *By the Sea* depicts silence not merely as the refugee's non-ability to communicate in the host's language, but as a consciously chosen speech act [6]. When Rachel invited Omar to dinner at her house, Omar's response is also "I'd prefer not to".(198) While Omar's strategy of silence makes his asylum claim more credible, it also prevents him from telling the truth, and he is equally unsure of how his silence is perceived by others, a situation of uncertainty that further exacerbates his identity dilemma by making him feel alienated and disconnected.

Omar and Bartleby are essentially the same; they block their hearts with silence, trapped in their own little inner world, in a life in which they suffer indifference and contempt. They refused to communicate with anyone, and those walls gradually closed in on him, isolating him from the world and society. Others cannot penetrate those walls to enter his heart, just as he cannot understand the world surrounded by them. Silence prevents the refugees from interacting with the outside world, thus, trust and identity cannot be created. When identity cannot be realized, the refugee or immigrant community is plunged into identity anxiety and identity crisis.

Omar's imitation of Bartleby's silence in *By the Sea* not only reflects the superimposition, entanglement and contradiction of Omar's concepts, but also metaphorically represents his inner conflicts and dilemmas about his own identity, the silence that demonstrates a sense of dual alienation from both his homeland and the country of his immigrants due to his prolonged exile, where he was forced to leave his home, face unfamiliar surroundings, and search for a new life. This transformation not only changes their living environment, but also their identity. They are no longer their original selves, but have become the new, not yet fully adapted "other". As in the book, "as someone with a secret

and burdensome history who sought to expiate it with silence.” (198) Silence makes the trauma caused by long-term exile stay with the refugees for the rest of their lives, making it impossible for them to get out of the past and embrace the real reality, and they struggle with the dilemma of identity.

2.3. The Towel of Alfonso: Trauma Healing

Omar was placed in a guest house by the refugee agency in poor hygienic conditions, always accompanied by an unpleasant odour. At the same time, the people around Omar, given his black status, thought that he did not know how to take care of his personal hygiene and demanded that he keep himself clean. In such an environment, Omar could not get the respect of the people around him, no food and preserved fruit, only bystanders mercilessly cold and ridicule [7]. Omar does not want to sleep on a dirty bed, he thought “I daren’t even sit on it out of an irrational fear of contamination, not just fear of disease but of some inner pollution.” (56) So, Omar sleeps or prays on a towel he gets from a stranger in the camp whose name is Alfonso.

In the novel, Alfonso’s towel serves as more than just a physical object; it becomes a metaphor of spiritual solace and refuge for Omar throughout the narrative. This towel not only appears at key occasions in the plot but also plays a significant role in the psychological development of the characters. When Omar was leaving the guest house, Alfonso advised Omar that “you must always keep yourself clean” and “baba, do you hear me? Whatever they do to you, keep yourself clean.” (48) Alfonso’s reminder to stay true to oneself and maintain dignity despite any hardships or mistreatment, resonates deeply with Omar. For those living in exile like him, staying clean goes beyond mere hygiene; it means remaining awake and authentic amidst challenging circumstances. The towel becomes a tangible representation of this concept. Within the chaotic environment of the refugee hostel, Omar finds solace on Alfonso’s towel. It becomes his sanctuary where he can rest, pray and even meditate. In this invisible place that exists within himself while physically situated on the towel, he is able to resist being overwhelmed by the outside world.

The significance of this towel extends beyond its materiality; The towel is not only a piece of fabric, but also a psychological space for Omar to resist the encroachment of the outside world, and to draw a boundary between him and the numbness of his existence [8]. By retreating into this corner created by Alfonso’s towel within the confines of the hotel, Omar seeks moments of peace away from all uncertainties and insecurities brought about by his external environment: “I would wait for Rachel on Alfonso’s magic carpet, safe from disregard.” (57) and “I ran away to Alfonso’s towel, and once on it I felt as if I was in an invisible place.” (59) For Omar, Alfonso’s towel was like a magic carpet in Arabian mythology, giving him shelter. The towel represents an oasis where he can temporarily put aside his worries and find respite from life’s challenges. Ultimately, through its metaphorical power as both a physical object and psychological space, Alfonso’s towel serves as an anchor for Omar throughout his journey in healing trauma and maintaining emotional well-being amidst displacement. This towel is the middle ground that Omar opened up to satisfy his spiritual needs, a corner that Omar opened up in the refugee hotel to put his spiritual world to rest, in order to get a moment of peace in his own corner and eliminate all the uncertainties and insecurities brought by the external environment.

At the end of the novel, Omar was invited to Latif’s place in London, and even though Omar and Latif achieved a spiritual reconciliation and established a friendship in a foreign land, Omar remains vigilant in Latif’s house. “And while I was about it, researching the possibility of clean sheets and warm bedding” and “my subtle and courteous investigations had failed to raise even a sniff of clean sheets. The place just did not smell as if there were clean sheets anywhere.” (245) both reveal that Omar’s living environment in England is always characterized by chaos, yet Omar still says to himself, “anyway, and I had Alfonso’s towel with me if the worst came to the worst.” (245) Omar always uses Alfonso’s towel to ward off chaos, emphasizing that the sense of peace that the towel brings to him can stay with him throughout. Thus, Alfonso’s towel is a metaphor for the traumatized Omar, who is in the midst of a transnational struggle, finding the strength to maintain his inner stability and ultimately achieving trauma healing, after which Omar finds refuge in his soul and is able to face the crisis with equanimity.

3. Literature References

Gurnah, a British immigrant writer of African descent, integrates three continents and timelines before and after the era of colonialism in his works. His writing not only describes the living conditions of colonial people, but also highlights the journey of African immigrants who seek a sense of belonging after arriving in the UK, focusing on the themes of social disintegration, identity dilemma and colonial trauma, and showcasing the survival of the “sandwich class” in the post-colonial era, which is of great significance in reality.

David Farrier argues that *By the Sea* is littered with metaphors [9]. One of these metaphors, silence, represents not just the inability of the refugees to communicate in the language of their hosts, but a conscious choice of linguistic behavior, a strategic decision on the side of the refugees. But silence also creates a sense of distance, and in this way responds to the identity dilemmas of the refugees.

In *Illegal Diasporas and African Refugees in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s By the Sea* Helff Sissy pointed out that silence is the central theme of *By the Sea* [6](Sissy, 2009: 72). While on the one hand silence is a conscious linguistic choice and a powerful tool against humiliation, on the other hand silence creates disconnection and distance, which can lead into a series of tragic consequences.

Kevin Goddard and Sheena Goddard discuss in *Trauma and the Dialectics of Recuperation in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s By the Sea* that trauma resides in the loss of ownership but also of meaning and connection to others [10]. The only important physical baggage is the ud-al-qamari he brings as a memento of his previous life. The looting of ud-al-qamari symbolizes trauma caused by colonialism. As relics (the title of the first part of the novel) they represent both the history of ownership, and also of plunder.

Zhu Zhenwu and Chen Yajie, in their article *The Fate of Refugees under the Shadow of Colonialism - An Examination of the Themes of Nobel Prize Writer Gurnah’s By the Sea*, explore the issues of identity and racial discrimination of the African refugees after they fled to the host country, Britain [7]. They argue that *By the Sea* shows the real-life dilemmas encountered by refugees in a foreign land, including identity dilemmas in a foreign land, psychological trauma under colonialism, and refugee care in the international community. Finally, it is emphasized that Gurnah’s work reveals a call for

attention to the colonial trauma suffered by refugee groups around the world.

Zhou Bojia, in his article *Across the Deep Sea Gap - An Exploration of the Refugee Theme in Gurnah's Novels under the Threshold of Neorealism*, proposes that the spices in the ud-al-qamari in *By the Sea* are a metaphor for this period of East African history, and the narrative of the spices segues into the recollections of the protagonist, Omar, who remembers the eleven-year-long unjust imprisonment and the pain of losing his wife and daughter in Zanzibar, which contains the historical trauma of the protagonist [11]. At the same time, the article also points out that the silence in *By the Sea* reveals the protagonist's psychological dilemma, which is a deeper revelation of the colonial history that led to his exile.

In *Narrating Identity Across Refugees in Gurnah's By the Sea*, Gao Wenhui points out that the incense and the ebony table are the objects most closely associated with the protagonist's past homeland and richest in allegory, with multiple symbolic meanings, and that the loss of these objects also symbolizes a detachment from the past, propelling the protagonist's narration of the refugee's history and trauma [2].

To sum up, the colonial trauma suffered by African refugees is profoundly expressed through metaphors in Gurnah's *By the Sea*. Existing studies have analyzed the significance of the metaphors in *By the Sea* from different perspectives, as well as the refugee fate and identity dilemma of African refugees and colonial trauma from different angles. Future research can further focus on the colonial issue and the colonial trauma suffered by the foreign diaspora from the perspective of metaphor, reminding people to remember the history of suffering through the use of metaphors, giving voice to those who have experienced suffering and are trying to get rid of it, and providing a mirror for those who are searching for happiness in the present and a better future.

4. Conclusion

By the Sea is a work rich in metaphors. Through the use of metaphors, Gurnah exposes the colonial issue and the colonial trauma suffered by the diaspora in specific events and characters, revealing the plight and inner struggle of the diaspora in a transnational context, and writing about the experiences of some African refugees who choose to migrate overseas under the influence of political, religious, and family conflicts, to reshape their selves, transform their identities and adapt to themselves, and heal their colonial trauma. While at the same time, *By the Sea* also reflects the difficult living conditions of the colonized people in the process of Africa's integration into the global system, as well as the harms and impacts of social violence, colonialism, and post-colonialism on the local people.

Gurnah's writing is always concerned with the estimated immigrants struggling to survive in an environment full of neglect, hostility, and indifference, and the alienation and loneliness that arise in their hearts, and he is a witness to the

fate of the refugees. For Gurnah, the shadow of colonial history and the mental trauma of refugees are not only manifested in specific situations, but also permeate the life and mentality of the refugees. Therefore, Gurnah weaves a huge metaphorical web in *By the Sea*, revealing not only the fate and struggle of refugees under the attack of internal and external conflicts, but also the concern and acceptance of refugees' survival status, identity and social status in all parts of the world and under all circumstances. In *By the Sea*, the sense of alienation is embodied through metaphors, so that people can have a better understanding of the identity of this alienation, reminding people to remember the history of suffering, giving a voice to those who have experienced suffering and are trying to get rid of it, and providing a mirror for those who are searching for happiness and a better future at the present time.

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