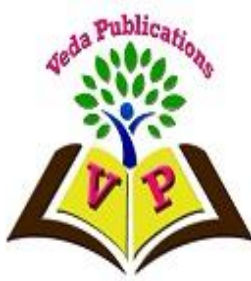




RESEARCH ARTICLE

**SILENCE AS A TOOL OF VOICE: TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE IN
ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S *BY THE SEA***Dr. Mangayarkkarasi K.S¹, Anitha G^{2*}¹(Assistant Professor, Kongunadu Arts and Science College, Coimbatore.)²(Ph.D. Research Scholar, Kongunadu Arts and Science College, Coimbatore.)Doi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2024.11203>**ABSTRACT****Article history:**

Received on : 28-03-2024

Accepted on : 08-04-2024

Available online: 30-04-2024

Abdulrazak Gurnah is a Tanzanian-born British writer. Even though he is a British writer his works are highly noted in his background of native people. Moreover, his themes are silence, identity crisis, post-colonialism, treachery, memory, loss, self-deception, and regret. This paper explores the idea of silence as becoming the voice of traumatic characters in his fiction. It examines the value of silence and enhances the ability of a traumatic character. Silence is an unspeaking language of inner thoughts and emotions. Saleh Omar is a figurative person who arrives at the airport using a fake passport. After he is caught by the customs officer, he tries to explain the purpose of arriving but he is ignored as he does not speak English. Meanwhile, his silence represents the inability to express his inner thoughts and feelings. But in most of the places Saleh Omar's silence voices for him. It shows the sufferings of the man who is forced to dwell in the new place with the hope of survival. It focuses on the protagonist Saleh Omar and the antagonist Latif Mahumud. Thus, the paper illustrates that silence is a beautiful tool used by the characters of *By the Sea*.

Keywords: *Silence, Trauma, Psychological, Sufferings, Cultural.*



INTRODUCTION

Abdulrazak Gurnah is a Tanzanian-born British writer. His mother tongue is Kiswahili. In its 120 years of African history, Gurnah is the fourth black writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was born in Zanzibar, off the coast of Tanzania. His childhood is filled with a mixture of happiness, suffering, love, and loss. Due to some political strife, Gurnah is forced to move from Zanzibar to the United Kingdom and settle there. Despite working as a professor at the University of Kent, he started writing fiction. Initially, no one recognized him as a writer, but his determination and hard work brought him laurel and popularity. His works have created more impact among critics, researchers, and readers. He has ten novels to his credit: *Paradise*, *Memory of Departure*, *Pilgrims Way By the Sea*, *Admiring Silence*, *Gravel Heart*, *Dottie*, *The Last Gift*, *Desertion*, and *Afterlives*. The themes in Gurnah's works are guilt, identity crisis, longing for the homeland, and treachery. This research evaluates silence as a tool of voice in *By the Sea*. The dimension of his silence has various aspects in this novel. Abdulrazak Gurnah's writing skill of switching the plot from present to past is outstanding. This paper tries to explore the traumatic experience of Saleh Omar and how he fixes that with silence.

TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE

Trauma studies is a term used for psychological wounds. Trauma studies have gained popularity and expanded beyond its traditional boundaries in literature. It emerges through psychology, law, cognitive science, and literary and cultural studies. It stands as one of the main theory of literary criticism. Since then, trauma theory has laid a strong

foundation in post-colonial literary criticism. The current discussion draws insights on the trauma of Saleh Omar in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*. It pictures the exploitation of socioeconomic and political aspects of Zanzibar and it shows the relations and corruption of the locals. The sufferings of physical and psychological aspects can be seen in the lives of Gurnah's characters.

The novel *By the Sea* (2001) is the sixth novel of Gurnah. It revolves around the narrative of an elderly refugee who, after arriving in England with a fake passport, finds himself in an unexpected encounter with the son of the individual whose identity he has taken. The protagonists of the novel namely Saleh Omar and Latif in *By the Sea* are those who are frequently searching for their identities. It has been observed that within the context of his novels, there is a profound trace of colonialism, which is frequently accompanied by the incorporation of postcolonial themes that are intertwined with the author's personal experiences. He talks about the fact that the silence or loss of voice brought by the search for identity that he has committed in the characters of the novel during his long and tiring journey is a kind of ignorance.

To elucidate the relevance of trauma theory to Gurnah's literary work, this article seeks to establish a distinct distinction between experiences that can be classified as traumatic and those that cannot. Additionally, one must possess a comprehensive understanding of the conceptual framework of trauma, as well as its manifestations and various functions, to fully appreciate its utility in Gurnah's work. According to Cathy Caruth, "in its most general description, trauma describes an overwhelming



experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, the uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (1996a, p. 11).

The reflection of the response is traumatic rather than incidental. Trauma theory can be used for the interpretation of traumatic conditions of war veterans, the survivors of physical abuse, and sexual, psychological, and other events, to observe how these incidents affect the psychology of an individual, and also to determine how this information can be helpful to the victims in the healing process. History shows that Psychologists, psychiatrists, and therapists used trauma theory as a treatment in clinics but in recent times, has become a paradigm in the field of literature.

Trauma theory helps us understand the psychological wounds that the main characters, Saleh Omer and Latif. It also looks at how the character's social, economic, cultural, and political situations affect them and how these things make them act in strange ways in the chosen text. Herman is an expert on how stressful events can affect people. In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, "to study psychological trauma is to come face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature to study psychological trauma means bearing witness and horrible events" (p. 7). In the case of Saleh Omer, for example, the trauma paradigm offers a few reasons to learn more about his life choices and set up safety, racial, and Western biases.

The concealed identities of Gurnah's characters can be seen in the memories of Latif Mahmud while

remembering the traumatic wounds through storytelling. Uncle Hussein stays at her home as a guest and teaches English to Hassan. Latif Mahmud discloses the shameful act of his younger brother because he becomes the sexual partner of Uncle Hussein "you are a child of sin, she said" (p. 92). Speaking to Hassan in an offensive tone, her mother jerks and scolds him, forbidding him to sleep in any place except his room alongside his brother. Consequently, a rumor spreads in the vicinity that "our guest had eaten Hassan" (p. 95). Later on, her mother sacrifices her virginity "do you want to come in? (p. 94)" to save the skin of her son, Hassan, and offers her body to Hussein. The whole of Latif's family presents a gloomy picture of Zanzibar society during colonialism.

Gurnah uses storytelling as a tool to present both the concealed identities of the characters and the dark aspects of Zanzibari society, where Latif's family indulges in the shameless activities of child abuse prostitution, and familial conflicts. Her mother enjoys the company of many others except her husband, Hassan, whose brother has become the sexual partner of his father's guest, Uncle Hussein, and his father spends nights outside his home and enjoys the company of other women and is often found senseless with them. Latif is offered a scholarship as a dentist by the education department, but due to the interference of her beautiful mother, as she "is a minister's lover" (p. 108) the education department calls and thereafter, restores the nature of the course. At the beginning of the novel, Latif feels agony to welcome Saleh Omer as the image of Saleh Omer symbolizes the traumatic incidents such as the auctions of Latif's home and even his belongings



particularly, the refusal of Saleh Omer not to return the ebony table to Latif's family which is associated with Hassan. Upon it, Latif Mahmud assumes him as the worst enemy and wants to take revenge for valuable belongings. It seems that familial conflicts are reflected in the East Zanzibar society.

SILENCE AS A TOOL OF VOICE

The novel *By the Sea* explores the theme of trauma, which is linked to silence and can be interpreted in several ways. Silence is used as a means to conceal the individual's identity and to create a sense of resistance against the European narrative. Occasionally, it is employed to express feelings of humiliation, deceit, and grief. It is frequently employed to convey feelings of guilt, subjugation, fear, and dissent. In literature, silence can have several connotations and interpretations. In his conversation with Nisha Jones, Gurnah emphasizes the significance of silence during an interview.

"When migrants come to Europe, they're diffident about their language if they're on their own and they're also diffident about English, say, because they're not sure if they can speak it properly. So, remaining silent is a way of preserving dignity and at the same time not putting yourself in harm's way. Silence is ambivalent. It is also powerful and can be far more eloquent". (2005, pp. 37–38)

Anne Ajulu Okungu emphasizes the significance of silence as a narrative technique in depicting the migrant experience, specifically in conveying what cannot be expressed through words (2016, p. 105). Furthermore, according to Sissy Helff's analysis, the

depiction of silence in *By the Sea* goes beyond the refugee's linguistic barrier with the host country. Instead, it is seen as a purposeful decision to maintain silence. To fully understand the impact of trauma and the profound effects of the silence forced upon Saleh Omer regarding his traumatic past, it is crucial to delve into his life as a displaced person in the UK and as a native of East Zanzibar.

Sometimes, Saleh Omer feels the burden of his past experiences, does not reveal his native (Zanzibari) identity by enveloping it with different layers, and ultimately succeeds in covering it with a refugee identity at the beginning of the novel. Where, Saleh Omer, claims "I am a refugee, an asylum-seeker" (4). By doing so, he looks to subsume his identity that may be the part of his past. So, Gurnah teaches the reader to think about the stimulus of such a kind of displacement within and beyond the territory of the novel structure. One should think about what kind of particular identities are constructed in the selected novels.

Herman (1992) posits that the primary objective of the second stage is to engage in the simultaneous processes of recollecting the traumatic experience and engaging in the grieving process. In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, the author proposes that it is essential to alleviate past experiences by sharing them in a secure and supportive connection. According to her, "this act of storytelling can bring about a transformation in the way painful memories are processed, leading to a positive shift" (p.183). The selected text portrays a strong theme of remembrance and mourning. This is evident when Saleh Omer arrives at Gatwick airport and Latif Mahmud attempts to convey his past traumatic



experiences through flashbacks. Mahmud expresses that if he were to see and recognize Omer, "if I greeted him, that would be treachery to my father and mother"(p.100). The presence of Saleh Omer incites Latif to seek retribution on him, as this recollection brings calamity to the existence of Latif Mahmud. Trauma robs the survivor of both the faculties of control and authority.

Latif's experience of trauma allows him to regain a sense of power and control, as he vividly recounts his distressing emotions to the reader. He is a professor of English at the University of London, but his specific psychological traumas remain unknown. Both protagonists expose their psychological traumas through the act of storytelling, as verbal communication serves as the crucial catalyst for their healing process. Currently, storytelling exposes the psychological traumas of Latif Mahmud and Saleh Omar, so revealing the hidden scars they carry. The hidden personas of Gurnah's characters are revealed in the memories of Latif Mahmud as he recounts the distressing injuries through narration. Uncle Hussein stays at her home as a guest and teaches English to Hassan. Latif Mahmud exposes the abhorrent behaviour of his younger brother, who became the sexual partner of Uncle Hussein. "You are a product of immorality," she stated (p. 92). Speaking to Hassan with aggression, her mother abruptly scolds and reprimands him, forbidding him from resting elsewhere but in his room next to his brother. Later on, rumours circulate in the area that "our visitor had consumed Hassan" (p. 95). Subsequently, the mother willingly surrenders her virginity to protect her son, Hassan, and offers herself to Hussein. The complete composition of Latif's family portrays a sombre

depiction of Zanzibar society during the era of colonialism.

CONCLUSION

The present study has effectively demonstrated the existence of characters within a hybrid cultural context of a post-colonial governmental system through the application of trauma theory. Moreover, the literary work *By the Sea* extensively explores the profound ramifications of trauma on the various characters within its narrative. The present investigation has undertaken an examination of the attributes of Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud, with a particular emphasis on their latent qualities, the ramifications of corruption on the indigenous populace, and the more extensive conflicts existing within their respective familial units. The aforementioned individuals have encountered a substantial amount of adversity within the Zanzibari community. The focus of this study is on instances of child abuse, prostitution, the illegal occupation of inherited property, and the systematic exploitation of virginity for personal gain. Additionally, it examines the unjust confiscation of possessions, such as an ebony table. The purpose behind the concealment of characters' identities is to establish a protective refuge or shield them from the challenges posed by a particular circumstance.

The impact of trauma on individuals is significant, encompassing various aspects of their well-being, including psychological, financial, and cultural dimensions. When individuals experience significant distress and suffering, they frequently encounter challenges in articulating the profound impact of their psychological injuries, leading to a state of silence. Concerning Saleh Omer, it is worth noting



that he experienced a significant level of stress while at Gatwick Airport. The individual purposefully made the deliberate choice to solely engage in communication utilizing the specific vocabulary of 'asylum' and 'refugee' in the English language. By engaging in the practice of conveying his recollections to Latif via the medium of storytelling, this investigation posits that oral communication assumes a crucial function in the journey of recuperation from psychological trauma. Aligned with the aforementioned theme, Latif Mahmud, the secondary protagonist, discovered solace within a nurturing milieu as he endeavored to recuperate from his psychological traumas.

WORKS CITED

- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. JHU Press, 2016.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience*. JHU Press, 2016, books.google.ie/books?id=aPYODQAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Unclaimed+Experience&hl=&cd=1&source=gbs_api.
- Cooper, B. *Returning the Jinns to the Jar: Material culture, stories and migration in Abdulrazak Gurnah's By the Sea*, *Kunapipi*, 30(1), (79-95), 2008
- Gurnah, A. *By the Sea*. In *Angewandte Chemie International Edition*, 6(11), 951–952. 2001.
- Helff, S. *Illegal diasporas and African refugees in Abdulrazak Gurnah's By the Sea*. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 44(1), 67–80, 2009.
- Herman, Judith Lewis, et al. *The Trauma Recovery Group: A Guide for Practitioners*. Guilford Press, 2011.
- Jones, N. *Abdulrazak Gurnah in conversation*. *Wasafiri*, 20(46), 37–42, 2005.
- Okungu, A. A. (2016). *Reading Abdulrazak Gurnah: Narrating Power and Human Relationships* 2016.
- Steiner, Tina, and Maria Olausson. "Introduction: Critical Perspectives on Abdulrazak Gurnah." *Routledge*, pp. 1–3, 2022. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781003285250-1>.