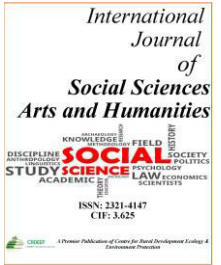


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Full Length Research Paper

Immigration and Postcolonial Political Mismanagement in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*

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ABSTRACT

This research paper focuses on immigration and the repercussions of political mismanagement in the fifth novel of Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Admiring Silence*. The movement of a person or a group of people from one place to another because of social or political developments is called migration. Migration "refers to the journey of people across international borders or within their own country. Such journeys arise from varied ecological, social, political, religious, and economic factors" (Bose and Satapathy 473). It has been observed that migration mostly takes place to look for better opportunities, to get higher education, or to join a family. Most of the immigrants suffer from cultural differences and identity crisis in a new land. Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* (1996) analyzes the reasons a person is forced to migrate and the differences he faces in a new land. *Admiring Silence* also explores the postcolonial mismanagement because of the political inabilities of inefficient political leaders. This political mismanagement also leads to unrest in the political scenario. The instability in the political system after the imperial forces left led to widespread corruption, which made the general masses suffer. The daily suffering because of corruption and mismanagement makes a person believe that migrating to a better place is the only way out. Still, this migration leads to cultural differences and racial discrimination.

1. Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah, the Nobel Prize winner for 2021, was born in Zanzibar, present-day part of Tanzania, on the 20th of December in 1948. Abdulrazak was born in a Muslim family of Arab descent when Zanzibar was still a British protectorate. In 1963, Zanzibar received independence from the United Kingdom, and just a month after gaining independence, a revolution called the Zanzibar Revolution started. Because of the Zanzibar Revolution, many people, especially Wealthy Arabs and Indian merchants, were forced to leave Zanzibar and migrate to other places as they were the targets of the black African population, which was in the majority. Since Abdulrazak Gurnah had Arabian ancestry, he was also forced to migrate. Abdulrazak Gurnah "fled to England in early 1968 because, after the Revolution (1964), Zanzibar became a place of terror and unrest" (Banerjee 874). Gurnah came to England and lived the life of a refugee and "knows the pain of leaving one's homeland and adjusting to a new society" (Rana and Sharma 6545). The life of an immigrant is never easy, and immigrants face a lot of hardships. In England, Abdulrazak Gurnah lived the life of a poor man and faced a lot of discrimination because of his color. All that he faced in England made him a writer, as it was a way for him to speak what he faced. Gurnah has written substantially on migration, racial discrimination, politics, and mismanagement of the governments of newly formed countries. While mentioning

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Abdulrazak Gurnah and his works and writing style, Felicity Hand says, "Gurnah's works deliver into the experience of less fortunate migrants, of those who have migrated for economic, political or emotional reasons" (39).

Abdulrazak Gurnah had an Islamic upbringing and was initially raised in Zanzibar, where the main religion is Islam. Hence, we see that all the main characters of the novels of Abdulrazak Gurnah are Muslims. The primary language of Zanzibar and the surrounding areas of the East Coast of Africa is Swahili, so we see the characters of Gurnah's novels speaking Swahili. Arabic is also spoken by some of the characters of Gurnah's novels, as Arabians of Omani origin were the rulers of Zanzibar for a longer period of time, and Abdulrazak Gurnah himself is of Arab descent. It is true that most of the characters migrated from one place to another and spoke Swahili, but still, all his novels are different from each other in some way or another. Abdulrazak Gurnah, in an interview with Nisha Jones, clarifies, "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. On the one hand, it was a way of taking a more extended look at why things are the way they are now. Most of what I have written about has not only been concerned with Zanzibar but with other small places along that coast" (37).

Admiring Silence (1996) is the fifth novel of Abdulrazak Gurnah. This novel talks about the reasons and the price a person pays to migrate. This novel is also about the struggles an immigrant faces and talks about the cultural and racial differences that an immigrant witnesses in a new land. *Admiring Silence* is also about the political mismanagement that took place after the colonial powers left. The ruling class was least concerned about the development of the country and had only one ambition, how to increase their own wealth. Because of greed and widespread corruption, the common man suffers, and even the basic things that are needed to live a life are not available.

2. Analyzing Migration in *Admiring Silence*

Admiring Silence is the story of a person from Zanzibar who moves to England, never to come back to Zanzibar. The newly formed government in Zanzibar had devised a policy that anyone who leaves the country will not be able to return. Still, the protagonist of *Admiring Silence* decides to go to England. It has been noticed that most of the immigrants move to the countries of their former colonial masters as they think that the Western countries who ruled them are superior and their lives in those countries would be better.

People migrate to the countries, but life after migration is difficult as "the receiving world has no reason to make room" (Ferguson 258). The life of a migrant becomes more complicated when he realizes he is alone. "I was astonished by the sudden surge of loneliness and terror I felt when I realized how stranded I was in this hostile place, that I did not know how to speak to people and win them over to me, that the bank, the canteen, the supermarket, the dark streets seemed so intimidating, and that could not return from where I came – that, as I then thought, I had lost everything" (Gurnah 94). The protagonist of this novel is going through even worse as he isn't able to return to his country because of the government's policies. Immigrants come out of their places, but their hearts remain at the places they belong to, and they keep on missing their families. Emma reminds him of how he missed his mother, "How many times have I seen you sitting here in tears while you talked about her" (105). Settling in a new place is a struggle, and in the process of this struggle, contact with his family also fades, and writing to his family back home becomes a rare ritual. The same things were happening with the protagonist of *Admiring Silence*. "Over the years, the exchanges between us had turned into a rare ritual: every several months she would send me a few words about everyone's health and regards and best wishes, and some months later I would send something back. The weather has been very cold recently, my job is fine, and recently I moved to a house in a place called Battersea" (100).

The struggle that immigrants go through makes them lose their confidence. The protagonist of this novel, too, loses his confidence and isn't sure whether to get a job as a restaurant worker, which is necessary for his survival. "I saw a sign in the restaurant window advertising a vacancy: Staff Required. My suspicion was that it didn't mean me. I had lost confidence in my desirability, and I just could not conceive of myself as staff" (Gurnah 62). It is here, working in the restaurant, where he meets Emma, his future partner. Emma was a university student and had a good family background. When Emma takes him to meet her parents, he speaks all the good things about the Empire and how the Empire was good for them, to please and to have a good impression on Emma's family. He talked about the favors they got from colonial powers when he was a student. "The milk was flavoured with cardamom and cinnamon, and generously sugared. The first mouthful was like sipping nectar. Then we were offered a choice of fruit in season: oranges, melons, mangoes, jackfruit, lychees and, of course bananas. Then we strode to our well-lit classrooms to break the chains of ignorance and disease which had kept us in darkness for so long, and which the Empire had come to bring us respite from" (28).

Emma had come into his life, and they started living together after some time. They also had a daughter called Amelia because of this relationship. Still, they had differences based on "race, ethnicity, skin colour and geographical locations" (Banerjee 871). Because of his ethnicity and religion, Emma used to insult him. "The general drift of these conversations was that I

usually finished up being called intolerant, ungrateful, a fundamentalist, a raging mujahedin, a pig and a bastard" (15-16). "White people think themselves the most superior race, so the status of black people is naturally low" (Du and Cui 10). Emma, who was white, used to think that Europeans were superior to Africans and all the good things that happened in Africa were because of European presence in Africa only. "But just think of all the things we gave you, that you might not have got otherwise. At least admit that" (Gurnah 18).

As the number of immigrants increases, natives start feeling insecure. "At that time newspapers and televisions were full of stories and pictures of queues of Indian matrons and toddlers descending aeroplane steps loaded with toys and presents, of airport lounges crowded with saris and turbans, of lean young Pakistanis with downy moustaches who had been discovered in crates consigned from Rouen to Darlington (or it could be Boulogne to Deal), of passport frauds, of overcrowded tenements, rising crime and drug overdoses, of bogus fiancées, and of reports of congenitally low IQ-ratings of people from coloured lands and predictions of the end of civilization as we know it" (Gurnah 65). The natives feel that their culture and environment will be destroyed by the immigrants as many of the immigrants do all the fraudulence to come to the place of their dreams. Moreover, it has been observed that immigrants are involved in many of the anti-social activities. This fear and insecurity is visible in *Admiring Silence* when Emma's father remarks, "I expect there are thousands of darkies in universities these days. It wasn't like that in my day. Perhaps the add maharaja's son, or a young chief. The rest were too backward, I suppose. Now you see them everywhere" (22). This fear and insecurity leads to discrimination based on ethnicity. Discrimination based on race is a bitter truth that almost every migrant experiences. "Racial discrimination happens daily worldwide, and it is an act that has persisted throughout history" (Sadeeq and Mohammed 1141).

Ira, the Indian girl traveling with the protagonist of *Admiring Silence*, had an English education at the best school in Nairobi. She thought she was like a European as her conversations with her family members used to be only in English. When her family moved to England, she felt she was going to a place she belonged to. But she forgot that she is an immigrant who has roots in India, and hence, she is bound to face racism. Many filthy words were used against her in the school she was admitted to in England. "Then there were names, of course. Most of them I'd never heard before: wog, coon, Paki bitch. I'd never heard bitch used like that before. The meanness was shocking, as was the casual violence and bullying" (Gurnah 225). It was shocking and unimaginable for Ira to get the treatment that she was getting in England as she had forgotten that the treatment an immigrant gets depends "on the host's discretion" (Farrier 122). Era's brother also had similar experiences of racism. Even after spending decades in England, Era couldn't consider England her home, and she always felt like a foreigner. Many people leave their home countries and come to the countries of their dreams, but the treatment they get in the land of their dreams makes them bitter people. These experiences of alienation and racism also affect their conduct, and they never remain the same person again. Al Araqi, while mentioning the state of mind of immigrants after facing racism, states, "Such experiences, particularly the traumatic ones, influence our future and impact our behavior without our realization" (268).

3. Examining Postcolonial Political Mismanagement in *Admiring Silence*

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). The influence of colonialism stayed with the new government, and the "Political turmoil did not end with independence" (Escosura 2). The colonialists wanted to rule and to exploit, and the same was the culture of new governments. The new leaders and new governments had no interest in giving the right kind of administration; hence, the governments failed to provide even the essential things to the public. Anyone who got power started misusing the power, which led to the exploitation of the public. The new governments and the political leaders who were at the helm of power, after the colonists left, were full of greed which led to rampant corruption. The protagonist of *Admiring Silence* experiences the corruption the moment he comes out of airport. The taxi driver had to pay money to the police personnel to go forward, "It must have been then that the money changed hands because he was back in a moment, shouting his farewells to the policeman as he started up his ancient Austin. 'Mal'uum. They are nothing but thieves,' he said. 'But what can you do? If you don't give the dogs something they take everything.'" (123). The Europeans had left, but the new exploiters had come. Frantz Fanon observes, "Decolonization is quite simply the replacing of a certain 'species' of men by another 'species' of men" (27).

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). Hence, the colonial powers created weak institutions so that the Orient never learned how to govern. After gaining independence and even after two decades of forming a government, the natives still didn't have the understanding of running a government in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*. As a result, the government couldn't provide the basic necessities. The protagonist of *Admiring Silence* when visiting his home after two decades faced a lot of struggle. "The toilet was blocked and nothing in that bathroom gleamed. I had already been warned that there was no running water anymore, so I washed up quickly as I could out of the bucket and ran

out, revolted to the pit of my stomach by that blocked, stinking toilet. Later, when I tackled Akbar about it, and asked him with a rage I had not felt since my arrival why it was that they did nothing about such squalor, he shrugged. "There is no water," he said. "The waste pipe itself is blocked, so are the sewers. Where do you want me to begin?" (134). In his research paper, Olsson states about the negative impact of colonialism, "The fundamental reason for persistent underdevelopment and stagnant economic growth back to weak institutions that countries inherited from colonial times" (Olsson 534).

The new government that was formed after the colonists left had failed. The reason for failure was that they had started copying the colonial rule. Homi Bhabha states, "The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing" (123). The colonial powers were here to rule and to loot. Hence, they exploited the natives, but the new governments were for the natives, and therefore, they shouldn't have copied the colonial powers, but they did, which led to the exploitation of the masses and corruption. When Europeans ruled, the society was "divided into two compartments" (Fanon 29). The new governments copied the Europeans on this thing as well. The area where ordinary people lived had many problems, but the place where government officials and political leaders lived had all the facilities. "The Other Bank had broad, well-lit streets, new blocks of flats, parks and so on" (Gurnah 124).

Moreover, the new government and leaders needed a vision for improving and developing new countries. They still looked to the West for ideas on how to run the government. The protagonist of *Admiring Silence* had become a citizen of Britain when he visited his native place after two decades. The permanent secretary of the Ministry of Culture meets him and asks him to join the government. The secretary says, "What you do will have a meaning and a place in the world you know. You'll be with your family. You'll matter, and what you do will matter. Everything that you have learned there will be of benefit to us. It will make a difference here" (171). Instead of doing something for the betterment of their country, the governments and the political leaders looked for others to come and help them. The new governments could not do anything for the country's development as "The new regime is still corrupt and burdened by lazy officials" (Kaigai 130).

The inability to rule and the wrong policies of the new governments also "led to the displacement of people" (Kanake and Choukade 128). The Indian girl, Ira's father, had studied in England and was a knowledgeable person and businessman. He came back to Nairobi and ran his family business. By that time, the new government had come after the country was declared independent. This new government had no experience of running a country. They came with policies that were not suitable for business. Moreover, the rise in corruption also created hurdles to do business, and many of the businessmen left the country. Ira explains the corrupt system and the reason for her family to migrate, "There was a lot of restrictive legislation, that's true. But it was also difficult to get the stock, and every official, right up to the top, wanted a cut. Three years after independence my father developed a heart problem from stress. He was only forty-three. It was then that he and my mother felt it was time to get out" (198). Leaving a running business is not easy, but the policies and mismanagement of new governments forced people to leave everything and migrate.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Admiring Silence deals with migration, cultural differences that an immigrant faces, and the mismanagement of inefficient systems in newly formed countries that take over after the colonial powers leave. The inefficiency of the political leaders and the wrong policies of governments also forced people to migrate. No one wants to leave the place he was born and brought up. Ira and her family were forced to relocate to England as their family business failed because of the government's wrong policies, which was the government that had taken over after the country gained independence from colonial rule. It was not easy for them to make this decision as leaving their place was an emotional decision, but they decided to migrate because it became difficult to run the business under the new government. "He ran the business until after independence. It became much harder then" (Gurnah 198).

The inefficiency of the political system was such that even the airport which dealt with international flights was highly mismanaged. "The check-in was crowded and chaotic, everyone pushing and jostling from every direction, stumbling over luggage to reach the one official who sat calmly behind his podium, unhurriedly scrutinizing the documents which were presented to him, looking every inch a man contented with his work. Customs were awkward, wanting luggage unpacked" (Gurnah 196). The politicians were so free that even the country's Prime minister had the time to meet the protagonist, who was only a school teacher. The Prime minister had no time and vision to fix the problems of the country and instead requested the protagonist, who was just a school teacher, to come and help them fix the issues in the country. It made the protagonist feel that his country, which was supposed to improve, had worsened after they gained independence from the Europeans.

Most of the immigrants leave their families behind and hence "Family ties and deep friendships are frequently severed during immigration" (*Almutairi* 691). The same was the situation of the protagonist of *Admiring Silence*, and after some years since he

had left his home country, writing a letter to his mother also became a ritual that used to happen after a gap of many months. Life of an immigrant is never easy as there are a lot of cultural differences, and the immigrants are always mocked by the natives for their backgrounds. The protagonist was also made to feel inferior and mocked by his partner Emma. "If it wasn't for us, you'd have been marrying your third wife by now, a seventeen-year-old kid who should have been thinking of her homework instead of the tired penis that was coming to ruin her life,' she said. That's what you would've been up to by now. Admit it" (Gurnah 18).

Admiring Silence is a story that tells the pain of immigrants and the repercussions of gaining freedom from colonial powers. The newly formed countries inherited a weak system from colonial masters, which led to corruption and inefficiency. The political leaders of newly formed countries had no experience in running governments and lacked the vision to make their countries better, which affected the countries adversely. The common people suffered because of the inefficiency of the ruling class, which forced many to migrate.

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