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Tales of Migration: Biopolitics and Human Geography in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By The Sea*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the biopolitical and human geography through the immigrant novel. There are lot of various sufferings of the central character and confusions in the country, that he faced in their own country and in the new land he arrived. This paper also discusses the sufferings by migration and it also seeks to find the behavior, law, politics, government and culture of the country he migrated to. Thus, in short biopolitics and human geography, the postcolonial theories will be studied in the light of displacement/migration.

Keywords: biopolitics, human geography, displacement, migration, power and control.

Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah's faultlessly titled novel *By The Sea* looks into the association between the migrant and the unwelcoming host nation. The novel calls attention to the corrective measures, which shows the modern immigratory processes in Britain, the high inflow of individuals through Europe and the probability of displaced, migratory journeys to reconstruct dominant spaces. Potentially in monetarized and neo-conservative states like Britain, idea of home and belonging are often challenged when there is a supposed threat to their national borders with the ingress of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers. The perceived "authentic" culture of the host country runs within the states with a racist biopolitical as its prototype and ostracizes the migrants, refugees and the asylum seekers and keeps them out from the mainstream population. For instance the asylum seekers are lodged in a detention centres, away from the crowd in an isolated areas far from the population, they are also prohibited to take any occupations and should remain unemployed. They are stripped of from their rights and social services that are accessible to the general population of the country. They are also labeled as the refugees or asylum seekers for a quite a generous amount of time by keeping this indeterminate status the host country claims that this segregation is formulated to safekeep the cultural identity of the mainstream citizens. This situation is clearly seen in the

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first pages of the novel, “So I knew that Kevin Edelman would return in a few minutes with a different stamp in his hand and that I would then be on my way to detention or some other place to stay (Gurnah 10,11)”.

Historically speaking spaces and races are interconnected they in the era of colonial expansion of Europe has brought about a fears of racial impurity and miscegenation or intermarriage which will dents the purity of European identity. In twentieth and twenty-first century Europe, the migrated population of the former colonies of Europe now occupy its spaces. The constant legal and illegal waves of the migrants undermines the very concepts of national borders and territory. The spaces occupied by the migrants in Europe have created the today’s social and material landscape.

Likewise when taken into this context the novel *By The Sea* gives us the diverse cultural tradition produced by the refugees and migrants. The plight of their migration have made them to reconfigure themselves within the space they have acquired from their experiences and made them to create and establish their own literary and black geographical spaces.

The novel *By The Sea* is about the difficulty faced by Saleh Omar, a Zanzibari asylum seeker who arrives with false identification papers after a lengthy detention in various internment camps in Zanzibar which was a former German and British colony. Zanzibar is an island in the Indian ocean on the coast of East Africa. He pretends to not understand or speak English as per the advice he gets while purchasing his airline tickets. He then adopts another name, a pseudonym Mr. Shaaban. He finds himself a translator, who his legal adviser at the detention camp recommended, has a deep connection with Saleh’s past, Latif Mahmud his countryman and a poet who works as a professor at the nearby university. The narration is back and forth between the journeys of two migrants with thirty years of difference. Latif was once in Germany to learn dentistry but left it behind and came to Europe as a migrant and settled in Britain. The families of both men of Zanzibar were well accustomed and had feuded over for years for the control over the deeds to the house. Long before Saleh Omar has loaned some money to a merchant Hussein and acquires the deeds to a house, owned by Latif’s father Rajab Shaaban Mahmud as his security property. When the merchant flees away and defaults the loan amount Saleh claims the property of security, the house of Shaaban Mahmud thus again prompting a feud between the both families. Rajab’s wife schemes against Saleh to avenge her family with the help of her lover a government minister, and imprisons Omar for eleven years. During his imprisonment his wife and daughter dies. After eleven years Saleh returns and lives in peace as a trader, but not for long because of the return of Rajab’s eldest son who tried to claim Saleh’s house as his own. Being felt endangered he decides to flee to Britain and uses the name Shaaban with Rajab Shaaban’s birth certificate. In due course of time we could see the reconciliation of Latif and Saleh as they reminisce and reconcile through their pasts. They talks about the family feud and the challenges faced in the while adjusting to the new place, Britain which grants them only a quasi- legitimate status.

By The Sea is a novel discussing the idea of home and mixed identity caused by the change occurred within the place of origins. This itself is an unstable idea and through this

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Gurnah tries to accentuate the lives of migrants who lives without roots and emphasizes how they come to accept the concept of home in a place where they do not belong and are not definitely set on based on as a state, religion and other ethnic affiliations. Gurnah writes in English embracing Swahili and Arabic into his narration to emphasize the the cultural and verbal complexity of Africa against the essentiality of Europe in its cultural and literary production. The themes we can find in this novel are the importance of concept of home and belongingness are stressed. In *By The Sea* its originality lies in the nomadic nature that derives from various and multiple socio-cultural interactions. It also tries to show how the border security and surveillance was increased in the Western societies due to the influx of large scale migrant population. Thus the novel concentrates on spatial politics which itself is a reconstruction and supplement to Foucauldian biopolitical discussion voiced out by other theorists like Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Considering the thanatopolitical structure of modern biopolitics the migrants are going through this treatment in their potential host country.

Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, uncovers the sixteenth century, to trace down the development of the racism in the form of a society of blood, which strived to maintain white Christian identity during that times, then transformed as the biopolitics of sexuality in the nineteenth and twentieth century, which mainly focused on achieving a healthy nation. Foucault's finding is that with the advent of industrial capitalism body was considered to be like machines which could be controlled economically, socially and physically in-order to enhance the capabilities:

The body [was] imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was conducted through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population. (139)

For Foucault, biopower concept revolves around the idea of biological state racism that has the power to regulate the bodies and population to take out any possible defects and promote "health, life expectancy and longevity". Thus from the biopolitics of population, caused the rise of the dogma of "superior blood" (150). The ideology of "pure blood" were at threat during the times of colonialism as miscegenation abounded so increasing the number of "mixed blood". As colonies expanded so did the idea of pure blood which Foucault terms as the "triumph of the race" (149) in a mythological context. Foucault understands that the regulation of sexuality, is concerned over physical and mental health of the population who are excluded from the biological character of society. Foucault does not fully assess this biodegeneration of non-European population because he later abandoned his studies on racism and biopolitics to concentrate on Governmentality. Contrastingly when looked into the novel *By The Sea* it clearly criticizes the relationship of cliquish principles of biopolitics and migration. Moreover the novel describes how the migrants are managed and segregated through the immigration control. As Foucault pointed out the European racial superiority through the colonialism, this feature could be seen in *By The Sea* as the migrant population are administered

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with regulations for economic globalization as it was the time of colonialism incorporated with Nazism.

In biopolitical perspective the protagonist Saleh could be viewed in Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* he is an asylum seeker at the mercy of British state with identity still undeterminate. Considering *Homo Sacer* the novel analyzes the relation between the rights and national citizenship. Agamben argues that rights are always linked to the nation, thus keeping this in mind he views the increased number of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants of the war-torn countries as the ones who disrupts the mythical link between man and nativity, nationality and citizenship:

Refugees represent such a disquieting element in the order of the modern nation state; that is, above all because by breaking the continuity between man and citizen, nativity and nationality, they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis. (Agamben 131)

And so this novel the undetermined unlabeled migrants are denied their basic rights because they are in a host nation rather than being in their own political community thus they are stripped off their rights and could not uphold them. Gurnah has included the narrations of two generations to trace out the link between birth and the rights that comes with it which now considered to be an important part in the immigration policy in the Europe as they started to implement these policies from the colonial period and tested the waters for the modern day biopolitics. To produce a biopolitical or thanatopolitical state is what a sovereign/ monarchy would do in order to gain the supreme control. An example of executing sovereign power in the novel is when the immigration officer interacts with Saleh. When Saleh first arrives in Britain he is kept back at the airport for questioning as he had no Visa. The immigration officer Kevin Edelman interviews him and plays the role of arbiter in Saleh's fate, this here is important when reading in a biopolitical aspect. For Edelman, Saleh could not be considered as an asylum seeker as he is not a European and he is not accommodating towards Saleh and warns him that Europe will not be safe for him and quotes, "My parents were refugees from Romania...I know all about being alien and poor, because that is what they went through when they came here, and I know about the rewards. But my parents are European, they have a right, they're part of the family" (12).

Through these words of Edelman, Saleh is informed that he can never be a part of the European family as he is an African Muslim, an uninvited guest and gives us the idea of Kevin being a racist and introducing this racial hierarchy in the immigration system and proving that every white European is considered "part of the family", while others are not. This conversation of an immigrant officer to an asylum speaker is a complete reversal of life saving biopolitics to a threat to life- thanatopolitics. The ruling of the body and segregating deserving/undeserving of life is the first and most important function of a biopolitical state. Here in this novel we could find that the European identity, or the distinctiveness of the raciality of Europe was always unstable because they were established through the commerce, colonial and capitalist expansion and through war and relocation. In addition we can add that the

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instance between Saleh and Edelman is what Agamben calls in *Homo Sacer* the “bare life” a state of reduction in an individual’s life, by executing sovereign ban the individual.

The life caught in the sovereign ban is life that is originally sacred—that is, that may be killed but not sacrificed— and, in this sense, the production of bare life is the originary activity of sovereignty. The sacredness of life, which is invoked today as an absolutely fundamental right in opposition to sovereign power, in fact originally expresses precisely both life’s subjection to a power over death and life’s irreparable exposure in the relation of abandonment (83).

Being a biopolitical population management state Edelman transfers the Saleh to a refugee camp with an unlabeled status. Saleh narrates that the camp as an encampment in the countryside, which was run by a private company” (42) that manages every aspects o his life. These detention centres are like a series of storehouse. Description made by Saleh is, these “sheds that accommodated us could once just as easily have contained sacks of cereal or bags of cement or some other valuable commodity that needed to be kept secure and out of the rain” (43). The detention camps in the novel is an element of modern state. Saleh was once imprisoned in Zanzibar and was again incarcerated on his arrival to Britain. In Agamben’s concept this detention camp remains outside the legal community and order. Thus we can find that in a biopolitical state a ruling power could impose the rules on an unwelcomed member of the population like the ethnic minorities, migrants and other backward communities.

Saleh always maintained silence when asked about his English speaking skills and answered “preferred not to” (65) as an allusion to Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener*. This allusion is made to have an account of problematics turns for the readers. Saleh’s silence put Edelman in a difficult situation to deport him to the internment camp immediately as he was questioned and granted leniency from the immigration office as he ws unable to speak and understand English, and he considers Bartleby’s refusal as a novella for biopolitical society, it is as follows:

Perhaps you have lost tolerance for that desire for isolation which faith in a spirit’s ambition made heroic. So the kind of self-mortifying retreat Bartleby undertakes only has a meaning as a dangerous unpredictability. Especially since the story does not allow us to know what has brought Bartleby to this condition, does not allow us to have sympathy for him. It does not allow us to say yes, yes in the case we understand the meaning of such behaviour and we forgive it. The story only gives us this man, who says nothing about himself or about his past, appears to make no judgement or analysis, desires no reprieve or forgiveness from us, and only wishes to be left alone. (199)

This silence of militancy could be considered as a resistance against biopolitics in a state by refusing to confess anything. Saleh is using his silence to expose the fallacies that surrounds Europe’s management towards the migrants. *By The Sea* clearly depicts the promotion of an alternative universe that is transcending the racial, religious and national identities. The novel explains the biopolitical norms put forward to them by the sovereign power of a mutated socio-economic and political conditions. As mentioned earlier novel focuses on the sovereignty in the immigration policies, the forms of a detention camps, the surveillance and security during the airport detainment and modern agenda of manifestation of

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camps for refugees. Thus this novel is like an eyeopener for the modern government and NGOs for them to never echo the ideas of Giorgio Agamben and Buaman and asks them to reform the modern political and ethnical approach of the host country towards the asylum seekers. These all accounts to the postcolonial theme of biopolitics in the novel.

Now moving to the Human Geography, in the novel we could see Saleh who speaks about his love for maps which we could read in biopolitical aspect of cartography and the historicity of Europe as a geographical space. From the maps we could analyse the Foucauldian discipline of space as they can determine socially constructed racial hierarchy:

I speak to maps. And sometimes they say something back to me...Before maps, the world was limitless. It was maps that gave the world shape and made it seem like territory, like something that could be possessed, not just laid waste and plundered. Maps made places on the edge of the imagination seem graspable and placable. And later when it became necessary, geography became biology in order to construct a hierarchy in which to place people who lived in their inaccessibility and primitiveness in other places on the map. (35)

From this passage we could recall the imaginative geography discussed in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. In this book Said draws out the mental way of delegating the known and unknown spaces as "a way of making geographic distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary" (54). Cartography is described as "limitless" by Saleh, a space with no shape and structure. By using the term "limitless" we could find that this word can invoke an awareness of equality and potentiality. And so Said says that the geographical and physical distinction created by the maps have also created another physical differentiation between humans and creates the terms "us" and "others". So it is clear that Gurnah draws the idea that when a cartography is placed within a biopolitical state, "geography be[comes] biology". Maps regulates the population with boundaries and border and feeds them with the idea of being racially inferior to the other that is to create the thought of "primitive" and pure blood ideas. The border and territories along with the "primitive" and "inaccessible" will definitely create the racial hierarchy in the minds of people.

An interesting intertextuality that could be found in the Saleh's talking of maps is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* based on author's personal travel experience in Congo. The postcolonial elements that are thoroughly seen throughout the novel is what pointed out in *By The Sea* by Gurnah, the European greed to possess and take the territorial control in their hands. Mirthfully Saleh is similar to Marlow an explorer with curiosity within him. Gurnah with this novel presents us the new biopolitical geographical landscape resultant of continuous movement and influx of different population unlike the reversed journey made by Marlow (in *By The Sea*) in which the biopolitics at the centre is questioned by the radical periphery of the state of Africa, as Gurnah did a reverse journey for Marlow from Africa to London instead of the original being the journey from London to Africa.

Abdulrazak Gurnah breaks some of the time-hallowed agreement the author and his style of characterization. He does not simply describe his protagonist's belonging but instead he discloses them by providing and letting them live through the spaces they take for living,

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they inhabit. It is as if his characters acquire their identities from the geographical spaces they consume, they are as lively as the greenery in the novel. There seems to be always a logical connection between the person and places in the novel thus humanizing the spaces but they somehow represents human life. Making the places living and breathing like the characters in it is what we could see in *By The Sea*. When we try to break down the novel we could see that person is closely entangled with geography and becomes a single formation. In *By The Sea* the places are not just a background element but they are the key points that emphasize the colonialism rather than the protagonists themselves. While configuring Human Geography, we must surely and completely understand the meaning between “space” and “places”. So what is a place? A place is everywhere one has the ownership, an idea of belongingness and home. Tim Cresswell in his essay “Defining Place” he puts forward that “Place is everywhere. This makes it different from other terms in geography like ‘territory’ which announces itself as a technical term or ‘landscape’ which is not a word that permeated through our everyday encounters”(Cresswell 2004, 2). So space is when place becomes soulful or meaningful by a human.

The title *By The Sea* itself is a clue to the spatiality that could be found in Gurnah’s works. Sea here tends to be a bundle of old memories that Saleh and Latif holds but when done a cross- section of the novel it is understood that it is a search to identify what is along the sea and then coming to the realization that it is just a blank space, that cannot hold humans as man only inhabits the land and not water. What is to be kept in mind is that Gurnah never has wrote a single place near the sea in this novel, but how they cross the borders and migrate to different places ‘by the sea’. Sea brings out the nostalgic and mnemonic connection to the sea back home when Saleh migrated to Britain. Being a refugee has never been easy for the protagonists they longed and yearned for some of their hometown’s memories to be relived and this is nostalgia for Saleh is completed by sea, he also finds comfort in the furniture shops which looked like the shops from his past. He feels at ease seeing a furniture shop because he was a furniture seller before coming to England. When Saleh talks about how he became a refugee for escaping Zanzibar, he says:

“It made me feel as if I was being taken to a place of hiding. Except that the streets were so silent and so straight, it could have been a part of other town that I once lived in. No, it couldn’t. It was too clean, bright and open. Too silent. The streets were too wide, the lamp-posts too regular, the road-side curbs still whole, everything in working order. Note that the town I lived in before was excessively filthy and dark, but its streets twisted in upon themselves, curling tightly on the corrupt detritus of fermented intimacies. No it couldn’t be part of that town, but there was something alike in it because it made me feel hemmed in and observed”. (Gurnah 2001, 4)

The land of England conceals its true nature and makes up new image of being clean, democratic and orderly state to primarily attract the refugees. The refugees are mentally exhausted even if they reach here as they feel estranged or stranded in an unfamiliar place. He even feels that he traded his luck to be in a more threatened place compared to his former place Zanzibar. Now when looking into the geographical elements it is better to look at the next

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prominent place, the Indian ocean. The Indian ocean studies has now emerged as a successful area in the most recent years. Pamila Gupta who introduced this area comments in an essay collection on Indian oceans that Ocean is “a theoretical terrain, a geographical space and a historical network of human connectivities” (4). Indian ocean is the traversed space that holds evidence for the human activities and its economics from a long time back. Nautical histories gives us the idea of development of human identity and their courses of action as “they have history”(Pearson,8) said in his essay The Idea of the Ocean.

The geography of both the lands of Zanzibar and Britain is described within the novel. In start we could find Saleh narrating the place he now stays “I live in a small town by the sea, as I have all my life, though most of it it was by a warm green ocean a long way from here”(2). The geographical elements always accompanies in the narration of Saleh, he always recounts the winds, the lands and the ocean. Gurnah with the help of Saleh, he is trying to bring out a brief history of the land and how the lands were owned by the nations of today. Gurnah a Tanzanian novelist and a migrant who writes in English and is English based, and so he takes into account of the both geographical spaces of the both countries. It should be noted that the pseudonym given to Saleh by Gurnah as Shaaban may be perhaps as a reference to the Tanzanian poet Robert Bin Shaaban who used traditional African verse and wrote in Swahili. This reference illuminates the Tanzanian literary tradition and its consideration towards each other.

Saleh has always considered that humans especially the Europeans, they tend to possess and acquire the world's most beautiful things and own them, rule them like a trophy they won, an example he gives is the agent the Britishers sent. He sees them as obsessed humans and quotes that:

they did not have the same obsessive need of them that my European customers had- to acquire the world's beautiful things, so they could take them home and possess them, as tokens of their cultivation and open- mindedness, as trophies of their worldliness and their conquest of the multitudinous parched savannahs. (20)

Now considering the multicultural elements that we could find in the novel are numerous some of them are Persian, African, Indian, Omanis and the British cultures that we could see. Starting of with Britain a land for refugees is what they are assumed as but in reality they are just a land who tends to control the migratory population with the biopolitical sovereignty in them, a great example is Kevin Edelman who is the gatekeeper of the land of England the immigratory officer who refuses to give entry for an asylum seeker. Saleh narrates him as :

Kevin Edelman, the bawab of Europe, and the gatekeeper to the orchard family courtyard, the same gate which had released the hordes that went out to consume the world and to which we have come slimming up to beg admittance. Refugee, Asylum – seeker. Mercy. (31)

Even if they have a land that fulfills everything they lack simple humanity which makes them heartless with their colonialism and slavery of the colonies and propagating the idea of “superior” and “the other” and creating a racial hierarchy with the lands. The governmentality

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the refugees received were much poor, they were reduced to a state of undetermined and unlabeled ones who are deprived of any civil and life rights unlike the citizen of that nation. This itself is the proof of how the politics and law works in the state of Europe. The law bends and turns for the family of Europe but never for the “uninvited” refugees who has lost everything due to endangering situations they faced. As Agamben states in his book *State of Exception* (2005) argues that “state of exception” or suspension of law, making a limit for the law arbitrarily by one is powered by the sovereign to do so.

There are several detailed description of places in the novel, when closely read we could find the how class collides with culture and how it makes them define their own lives. Description of Latif’s house gives us their economic conditions they are in. the culture they follows define them with the number of rooms, architecture and objects in the house. Zanzibari is a patriarchal Muslim community. Human and their places says a lot while understanding a novel. Thus we could find a close relation to culture, class, place and economy by analyzing the geography of novel.

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