

# Identity Construction in the Post-colonial Period: Hybridity and Third Space in Abdulrazak Gurnah

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**Abstract:** British-Tanzanian expert Abdulrazak Gurnah is the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2021. His works focus on the theme of refugees and describe the living conditions of colonial people, showing his compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of refugees in the gulf between cultures and continents. This is of great social significance for the study of the living conditions of refugees in the post-colonial era and the reflection on immigration issues. As his first novel in a first-person view, *By the Sea* is one of the works reflecting Gurnah's concern for the identity crisis of refugees, which cannot be ignored. In the novel, Gurnah depicts Zanzibar as a place of hybridity, and the refugees in the novel also reflect ambivalence and hybridity. Their reconciliation with their hybrid identity at the end of the story demonstrates the author's positive attitude towards eliminating the binary opposition and achieving cultural integration in the post-colonial period. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space and Hybridity theory, this article analyzes the contribution of hybridity in power spaces and cultural spaces to the production of two hybrids—the two refugees in the novel, and also explores their identity reconstruction through storytelling.

**Keywords:** Abdulrazak Gurnah; *By the Sea*; Hybridity; Third Space

## 1. Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah, (born 1948- ), a Tanzanian-born British author, is known for his novels about the effects of colonialism, the refugee experience, and displacement in the world. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2021. Written in 2001, the first part of *By the Sea* mainly tells a series of problems the East African refugee Saleh Omar encounters when seeking asylum in Britain and his hardships during his homeland Zanzibar's post-independent turmoil. The second part focuses on the traumatic memories of Saleh Omar and his enemy Latif Mahmud in their hometown Zanzibar. They meet in Britain, and through storytelling, they finally reconcile with each other and also negotiate their refugee identity. In *By the Sea*, post-independence Zanzibar is still a place full of hybridity: different descents, different cultures, different powers, and different languages. The author depicts many aspects of hybridity to show that hybridity, instead of the binary opposition, is the trend in the post-colonial period and it needs to be recognized. The intention is echoed with Homi K. Bhabha's theory of Third Space and hybridity, which challenges the traditional binary.

The previous studies about the book are mainly from the perspectives of the theme of refugees, identity issues, and memory writing, but few focus on the hybridity reflected in the novel, which is significant for solving refugee issues in the post-colonial period. Therefore, this article intends to employ Homi K. Bhabha's theory of Third Space and hybridity to analyze how the hybridity in Zanzibar leads to the hybridity of the two refugees in the book, and how the two hybrids negotiate their complex identity in the third space they construct[1-2].

## 2. Hybridity Theory

"Hybridity" was originally a biological term, and then became an important term in the post-colonial theory after Homi K. Bhabha employed this concept in the field of cultural research. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha defines hybridity as "a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effect of the colonist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledge enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition" (114). In his view, hybridity breaks the binary between the colonizer and the colonized, self and the "other", mainstream and weak cultures because it symbolizes a mixture of different races, different cultures, and different identities. The Third Space is formed based on hybridity. Bhabha points out that "in the

process of cultural translation, there opens up a 'space-in-between', an international temporality, that stands in contention with both the return to an originary 'essentialist' self-consciousness as well as a release into an endlessly fragmented subject in 'process' (37). The "space-in-between" refers to the Third Space which features ambivalence, thus providing the possibility for the existence of hybridity. Through third space, Bhabha tries to break the absolute binary, making the colonial discourse "become mixed and impure, and thus dissolving its inherent authority", and finally "destroying the fortress of Eurocentrism" (Wangning 64). In *By the Sea*, the complicated hybridity in the hometown puts the two refugees who hover among multi-cultures into a "space-in-between" (Huangxia and Jianghui 70). In the end, they manage to construct a third space where they negotiate their hybridity.

### 3. Hybridity in Power Spaces

In *By the Sea*, Zanzibar is under the influence of a complicated and mixed network of power relations. Michael Foucault argues that as power is ubiquitous, it penetrates every corner of society, and inevitably intertwines into power networks covering all fields, influencing the attitudes and behaviors of the people in it (90).

Before the independence, Zanzibar is under the rule of the British whose power penetrates every corner of the place. On the one hand, the colonizers force the local people to receive their colonial education, use their language, and accept the "remade" history. On the other hand, these invaders resort to violence to serve their interests and to consolidate their power. The furniture business managed by Saleh is an example of the colonizer's oppression (Zhu Zhenwu 64). When a British official comes to buy a mirror, Saleh says "he would have taken the mirror at his price or no price at all, as a right of conquest" (21). And the British colonizers promote their kind behaviors during the day but cruelly oppress revolts at night. Besides the British colonizers, Zanzibar also faces the oppression and damage of other outside invaders such as the Persian merchant Hussein who directly leads to Latif's family tragedy and Saleh's prison experience, and then their departure from the hometown. The cunning Hussein deceives Rajab Shaaban, Latif's father, into mortgaging his house to invest in the business. He also obtains a loan from Saleh and lets Saleh hold the mortgage document as security. When Hussein fails in his business and seduces Latif's brother, Hassan, to elope with him, Saleh has no choice but to confiscate Rajab's house, destroying Rajab's family. Suffering from a family breakdown, Latif departs from Zanzibar and then arrives in Britain as a refugee. Later, Saleh is framed by Latif's mother and is put in jail. After the torture of eleven years in prison, Saleh is back to the normal life. However, Hassan suddenly returns to Zanzibar and plans to set him up again to win back the house. Having lost the confidence in the local justice system, Saleh flees to Britain for asylum. The root of the two characters' ordeals and departure is Hussein's invasion. Their woeful stories are miniatures of the whole tragedy of the Zanzibaris facing those invasive behaviors.

After the independence, the situation of local people does not get improved. Destroyed by the colonizers, the national order and governance system is in fact a continuation of the colonial rule due to a lack of civilization and the right education across the culture. Gurnah criticizes the binary opposition between evil European colonizers and angelic African colonists in many literary works because it ignores the complicated situation in post-colonial society (142). The years after independence is the time of "austerity, years of cruelty and uncertainty" and "our rulers built very little, mostly they took away from those who did and then they stuffed their guilty bodies full" (150), which manifests the political issues in the post-colonial place. The modern politics of post-independence Africa (decolonization, nationalism, socialism, class divisions, autocratic rule, civil wars, religious contradictions) have brought no less disaster to the African people than the Western colonial rule in Africa (Jianghui 32). During the British rule, their policy of racial polarization gives part of the power to Arabs who are outsiders in Zanzibar. Their expanded power directly threatens the lives of black people (Huangxia 68). Therefore, the new independent government in Zanzibar overthrows Arabic power. As an Arab, Saleh becomes a victim of political struggle, which explains his hardship in post-independence Zanzibar and his motivation to escape[3-6].

### 4. Hybridity in Cultural Spaces

The Zanzibaris in the novel still retain the characteristics of the Muslim culture under the mainstream culture's dominance.

According to Michael Foucault, "power produces knowledge"(27). Dominators with discourse

power use education to make truth. The advancement and profound knowledge of the colonizers in Zanzibar make their stories and Western values more compelling and authoritative. Saleh admits that they “secretly admired the British” and “I read unflattering accounts of my history, and because they were flattering, they seemed truer than the stories we told ourselves” (18), which shows Africans’ inferiority during the process of “being othered”. As Said defines Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient”, people in Zanzibar are “remade” by British colonizers.

However, Zanzibar is not westernized, which still retains the characteristics of Muslim culture. In their own local schools, everyone in Zanzibar learns the Koran and “listens to the miraculous events which befell the Prophet ” (36) despite the schools organized by the British to serve the colonial education. With his multicultural background, Gurnah often uses Swahili in this English novel, creating a kind of “hybrid literature”(Zhangfeng10). For example, “Sallallahu-wa-ale”(May God bless him) reflects the inheritance of the Muslim culture. Throughout the novel, Saleh never abandons his tradition of praying. Whenever he is in prison, in the detention center, or in his house in Britain, he still performs the prayer by using Swahili. Apart from carrying forward part of their own culture, the native people gradually realize “gaping holes” and “too many spaces” (20) in the stories told by the dominant power. They begin to see through the so-called mythical status of Western culture and want to resist their hypocrisy and greed by selectively accepting the knowledge they impart.

In addition, the negative sides of the two cultures poison people’s minds. For one thing, many people still rigidly follow inappropriate customs. Most women are still required to wear a black veil to “preserve their modesty”(147) and they are restrained in their home before marriage. For another, some corrupt Western values permeate the local region. Rajab Shabban Mahmud’s wife who has many lovers, is an example of being westernized. In Zanzibar where drinking alcohol is considered sinful, Rajab Shabban Mahmud is an alcoholic.

Overall, Zanzibaris are “othered” and eroded by the colonial culture while trying to retain their beliefs and customs. They are inspired by the knowledge of the world from colonial education while struggling to discard the dark sides of their own culture. In the “in-between space” of the advanced culture and the primitive culture, Zanzibar is seen as a Third Space, whose hybridity should be respected[7-9].

## 5. Hybrids and Their Identity Construction in the Third Space

Bhabha believes that “the new hybrid identity will be produced by the fusion of characteristics of the colonizer and the colonized, and this new identity will threaten and challenge the authority and the validity of any original identity” (Bhabha 47). Because of the hybridity in power spaces and cultural spaces, the two main characters Saleh and Latif become hybrids who have the characteristics of the colonizer and the colonized. Their manners, identities, and knowledge reflect ambivalence but they later negotiate their hybrid identity through storytelling in the inclusive Third Space they constructed.

The hybridity of cultural spaces contributes to Saleh’s cultural hybridity that is reflected throughout his life. At first, when Saleh is a student in school, he receives the British education which shows the backwardness of his native culture. Influenced by such education, he denies his own culture that has been othered and shows a sense of admiration for advanced Western culture. As he grows older and does his own furniture business, Saleh seizes every opportunity to obtain books from any channel because he wants to acquire knowledge of the world to get rid of his nation’s innocence. However, during his lifetime, Saleh doesn’t totally abandon his mother’s culture and is not westernized. He still performs the prayer and sometimes uses Swahili. Admiring the advancement of the colonizer’s culture, he also knows their hypocrisy, arrogance, and malicious behaviors, which are the roots of East Africans’ suffering.

The ambivalence of identity is also attributed to the hybridity of power spaces. Saleh is caught between the post-independence oppression of his homeland rulers and the exclusion of the superior white groups in Britain where he lives as a refugee. In Zanzibar, Saleh’s business is oppressed by British rulers. After independence, he is still not recognized as a citizen by the new authority because East Africans of Asian and Arab descent are not regarded as “African” enough ( Joseph 5). When he is in danger of being prosecuted by the local government, he has no hesitation to escape and go to Britain as a refugee. Saleh puts bright hopes on Britain and hopes to start a new life with a new identity. However, when he arrives at the British airport, he is refused by the “gatekeeper” Kevin Edlman who says Saleh does not belong to the big European family and has different faiths with them, thus putting Saleh into

an identity crisis. When Saleh is finally admitted by Britain as a refugee, he is still troubled by the ridicule and discrimination from surrounding people.

The ambivalence of cultural spaces and power spaces puts Saleh into an identity crisis. In Zanzibar, Saleh has commercial contact with British people, and he claims that he learns a lot from British people and is crazy about reading their books to know more about the colorful world. However, he does not get acceptance and integrate into the British group because of his inferior racial identity. He also continues interactions with the local people and respects the conventional culture. But he is despised and excluded by the townspeople who consider him “a colonial stooge” (156). Facing the danger of being prosecuted by the local authority in Zanzibar, Saleh flees to Britain for asylum, but his later life in Britain as a refugee is still about reconciling with his inferior African identity and struggling with becoming English due to the exclusion by British people. Saleh’s life in Britain highlights how marginal subjects are trapped between assimilationism and reification of cultural differences (Ocita 305). Failing to change the racial discrimination and resist the influence of the colonizer’s culture, he is denied by both the opposite sides and is thus destined to become a hybrid to negotiate his ambiguous identity.

The other main character Latif lives as a hybrid in Britain. His parents are affected by western values of self-indulgence, leading to his lack of parental love during childhood. The Person merchant Hussein plays an invasive role in the novel. As an outsider, he seduces Latif’s brother to elope with him, causes the total loss of the Latif family’s property, and even humiliates the family. Therefore, Latif hates his hometown and leaves Zanzibar for East Germany and then Britain. Despite his identity as an English Literature professor, Latif is still dominated by discourse power. Foucault combines power with discourse because contemporary disciplinary power controls individuals through imperceptible infiltration (93). Latif is once called “a grinning blackamoor” in the street. When he looks it up in the Oxford Dictionary, he finds so many humiliating words about black that he feels “despicable and disheartened” (72). Moreover, Latif endures the torture of his unfixed cultural identity. Having lived in London for over 30 years, Latif is an expert in English and English literature, but he claims he hates poetry. He also says he is afraid of being criticized by native people for his Englishness because he is alienated and “no longer myself but a self-treacherous pretense of myself, a processed stooge” (73). He recognizes Swahili and his own culture, but he has to hide them and use English. While he struggles to become a real member of London, he is guilty of betraying his local identity (Zhu Zhenwu 64).

Bhabha opposes the binary between being assimilated by the colonizer’s culture and being stubborn on the local culture and thus stresses the “ambivalent process of splitting and hybridity”(1994). As hybrids, the ambivalence of Englishness and Africaness puts Saleh and Latif in a sense of loss. For these subjects, they need to negotiate their subjecthood within a multicultural paradigm (Mishra 13). In the end, through storytelling, they manage to construct the inclusive third Space where past events are partly remade to make sense of their ambiguity and hybridity and to break the binary opposition[10-13].

The character Rachel in the novel also shows her humanitarian care for refugees, which provides a good example of solving refugee issues in the post-colonial period. She overcomes difficulties and secures Saleh a house by the sea to give him a feeling of home. Rachel not only brings Saleh his favorite European books but also is willing to let Saleh tell her something about Swahili and his Muslim culture. Saleh’s friendship with Rachel also conveys the hope of negotiation and acceptance of the refugee’s hybrid identity in the post-colonial period.

## 6. Conclusions

*By the Sea* reveals the ambivalence of the post-colonial regions and the ambiguous identity of the transnational refugees who flee from the post-independence turmoil of their hometown. Gurnah vividly depicts the obstacles and discrimination facing those Africans, highlighting the urgency of solving their identity issues. The hybridity of Zanzibar and the two hybrids in the novel picture the new situations in the post-colonial period. In the end, through storytelling Saleh and Latif get over their traumatic past and reconstruct their third space where they recognize their hybrid identity and are prepared for the future. Therefore, the novel is crucial in the literature because it shows a new peaceful way for refugees to get rid of the binary opposition and negotiate their hybridity, and also because its representation of Rachel conveys a bright future of overcoming the refugee’s identity crisis in the post-colonial period.

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