



Postcolonial Study of Home and Identity as Postcolonial tropes in Abdurazak Gurnah' By the Sea and JJ Bola's No Place to Call Home

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Abstract

This paper examines notions of home and identity as postcolonial tropes in Abdurazak Gurnah's By the Sea and JJ Bola's No Place to Call Home. Through close readings of both texts, this paper argues that home and identity are central, contested concepts for the postcolonial subject. Gurnah's novel explores a sense of unhomeliness and loss of home for its East African protagonist in England, while also critiquing British colonial notions of homeland. Bola's poetry collection evokes the pain of homelessness and desire for belonging as a young refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo now in the UK. Using theoretical frameworks from Homi Bhabha and other postcolonial scholars, this paper analyzes how these literary works represent unfixed identities and ambivalent relations to place for postcolonial diasporic subjects. The fluid concepts of home and hybridized identities in By the Sea and No Place to Call Home emerge as potent postcolonial tropes for contemporary transcultural writers.

Keywords: postcolonial literature, home, identity, unhomeliness, hybridity, diaspora

دراسة ما بعد الاستعمارية للوطن والهوية كمجازات ما بعد الاستعمارية في رواية عبد الرزاق جورناه
"عن طريق البحر" و "لا مكان لنسميه الوطن" لجاي جي بولا

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المخلص

تبحث هذه الورقة في مفاهيم الوطن والهوية باعتبارها استعارات ما بعد الاستعمارية في رواية "على البحر" لعبد الرزاق غورنه ورواية "لا مكان لنسميه الوطن" لجاي جي بولا. من خلال القراءات الدقيقة لكلا النصين، تجادل هذه الورقة بأن الوطن والهوية هما مفهومان مركزيان ومتنازع عليهما في موضوع ما بعد الاستعمار. تستكشف رواية جورناه الشعور بعدم الانسجام وفقدان الوطن بالنسبة لبطلها الشرق أفريقي في إنجلترا، بينما تنتقد أيضًا المفاهيم الاستعمارية البريطانية للوطن. تثير مجموعة بولا الشعرية ألم التشرد والرغبة في الانتماء كلاجئ شاب من جمهورية الكونغو الديمقراطية ويعيش الآن في المملكة المتحدة. باستخدام الأطر النظرية لهومي بابا وغيره من علماء ما بعد الاستعمار، تحلل هذه الورقة كيف تمثل هذه الأعمال الأدبية هويات غير ثابتة وعلاقات متناقضة لموضوعات الشتات ما بعد الاستعمار. تظهر المفاهيم السائلة للوطن والهويات الهجينة في "على البحر ولا مكان لنسميه الوطن" كمجازات ما بعد الاستعمارية القوية للكتاب المعاصرين عبر الثقافات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أدب ما بعد الاستعمار، الوطن، الهوية، اللاوطنية، التهجين، الشتات



Introduction

Notions of home and identity are central yet contested for subjects of postcolonial diasporas. Displacement from one's homeland and complex relationships with place feature prominently in postcolonial literature. As Homi Bhabha argues, "The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions" (1994, p.13). The private space of home is intricately bound up with larger cultural and political forces. For postcolonial writers and their characters, home is imbued with ambivalence, what Bhabha calls "the unhomely" (1994, p. 13). This paper examines constructions of home and identity in Abdurazak Gurnah's novel *By the Sea* (2001) and JJ Bola's poetry collection *No Place to Call Home* (2017) using postcolonial literary frameworks.

The Concepts of Home and Identity in Postcolonial Theory

Notions of home and identity are central but contested for postcolonial subjects. According to Bhabha, home becomes a profoundly unsettling space under colonialism, imprinted with both intimacy and alienness. He argues "The recesses of domestic space" are invaded by colonial histories and power relations (Bhabha, 1994, p. 13). Home is a site of contradiction. Exodus from home is also a definitive trope in postcolonial diasporic literature. As Said argues, exile involves a sense of "unhealable rift between a human being and native place, between the self and its true home" (2001, p. 173). Identity also grows fragmented, fluid, and hybridized in postcolonial contexts. According to Hall, identity emerges within "the discontinuity of historical rupture and disjuncture" in postcolonial experience (1990, p. 226). Subjectivity and selfhood become multiple, unstable, and caught between worlds.

Abdurazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*: Unhomeliness in Postcolonial Britain

Abdurazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001) poignantly explores themes of home, unhomeliness, and identity in a postcolonial diasporic context. The novel follows Saleh Omar, a former businessman from Zanzibar who seeks asylum in England but finds only alienation. Critic Simon Lewis notes "By the Sea offers a compelling vision of Britain as an 'unhomely' place for postcolonial subjects" (2010, p. 722). Saleh is haunted by loss of home and hostile racial attitudes in the former colonizer's land. Gurnah depicts his protagonist's everyday experiences of exclusion which powerfully "convey his sense of isolation and failure" (Proctor, 2006, p. 138). Saleh grapples with an unfixed identity and outsider status in the UK. Scholar Lucy Evans argues Gurnah "critiques the fractured identity of the postcolonial subject" through Saleh's destabilized sense of self (2006, p. 26). His



identity becomes a site of struggle under the alienating forces of racism, exclusion, and diasporic unhomeliness in Britain.

JJ Bola's No Place to Call Home: Longing and Non-Belonging

The poetry collection *No Place to Call Home* (2017) by Congolese-British writer JJ Bola also powerfully evokes postcolonial conditions of unhomeliness, displacement, and hybridized identities. Drawing on his own experiences as an exiled child refugee in the UK, Bola expresses visceral pain of loss of place and desire for belonging. Critic Elleke Boehmer describes the collection as “poems of exile, unsparing in their testimony of homelessness” (2019, p.11). Bola represents the postcolonial subject's sense of rootlessness and isolation in the wake of trauma. Yet his poems also critique simplistic notions of singular origin or home, articulating hybrid identities through the refrain “i am of here/nowhere” (2017, p.1). As literary scholar Vicky Sparrow argues, Bola's collection “speaks powerfully about the liminal subjectivity of one who is both culturally Congolese and proudly British” (2018, para. 12). His poems highlight the nuances of postcolonial identity, at once fragmented yet asserting agency and multiplicity.

Theorizing Home and Identity in *By the Sea* and *No Place to Call Home*

Both Gurnah's novel and Bola's poetry profoundly engage with metaphors of the unhomely home, displacement, and ambivalent identities for postcolonial diasporic subjects. Using Bhabha's concepts of the unhomely and hybridity, this paper will analyze representations of home and identity as potent tropes in each literary text. Hall's theories of postcolonial identity as non-singular and fragmented will also inform examination of the complex constructions of subjectivity. Further theoretical perspectives will be drawn from Said on modernist expressions of exile and longing tied to loss of homeland. Rich textual analysis will elucidate how *By the Sea* and *No Place to Call Home* highlight the nuances and power of home and identity in the postcolonial imagination.

This introduction establishes the framework and significance of analyzing home and identity as key tropes in postcolonial diasporic literature. The next section will provide deeper theoretical grounding, followed by close readings of textual representations in Gurnah's and Bola's works. This paper aims to demonstrate how postcolonial literary representations of home and identity shed light on the complexities of individual subjectivity and intertwined cultural forces in narratives of displacement, unbelonging, and hybridity.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this paper is to conduct an in-depth postcolonial analysis of the motifs of home and identity in Abdurazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* and JJ Bola's *No Place to*



Call Home. Examining these prominent literary tropes will elucidate how postcolonial subjects grapple with notions of displacement, belonging, and hybridized identities between cultures and places.

Significance of the Study

This study holds significance as an insightful contribution to postcolonial literary scholarship, enriching understanding of how seminal writers give voice to experiences of diaspora and unhomeliness. Close reading of Gurnah's and Bola's nuanced representations of complex postcolonial subjectivities deepens comprehension of the ongoing impacts of colonialism on conceptions of selfhood, home, and imposed exile.

Implications of the Study

Such analysis bears implications for appreciating the diversity of postcolonial experiences and emphasizing the need for inclusive, anti-racist approaches in multicultural societies. This paper ultimately aims to demonstrate how the motif of the unhomely home and fragmented identities in postcolonial literature reveals both pain of social exclusion and resilience of marginalized subjects asserting their complex personhood.

Theoretical Framework

Homi Bhabha and the Unhomely

Homi Bhabha's theories of unhomeliness, ambivalence, and hybridity are central to examining metaphors of home in postcolonial literature. Bhabha argues that under colonialism, the private space of home becomes imprinted with antagonistic meanings as the colonizer imposes control and claims superiority (1994). He states, "The recesses of domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions" (p. 13). Home transforms into an unsettled, anxious site of contradiction, what Bhabha terms "unhomeliness." He elaborates:

"The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself with Henry James' Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*, taking measure of your dwelling in a state of 'incredulous terror'" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 13).

The unhomely encapsulates the uncanny duality and inherent instability of the postcolonial home. Bhabha's framework illuminates the unfixedness of home for the diasporic subjects in *By the Sea* and *No Place to Call Home*.

Hybridity and Ambivalence

Alongside unhomeliness, Bhabha's theory of hybridity is also salient. For Bhabha, colonial ambivalence produces hybrid cultural identities. He states: "It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or



postcolonial provenance ... a mixing and fusion of identities” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 5). Hybridity forms through the intermixture of colonizer and colonized cultures. Bhabha’s hybridity and notion of “Third Space” identities is helpful in analyzing the complexity of postcolonial identity represented in the literary works. The poetry in *No Place to Call Home*, for instance, expresses hybridized identities that resist singular origin stories or notions of ‘home’.

Stuart Hall and Postcolonial Identity

Like Bhabha, Stuart Hall rejects stable, essentialist cultural identity paradigms. Hall emphasizes how postcolonial identity grows fragmented rather than seamless. He states: “Cultural identity is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’...subject to the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean’s ‘uniqueness’” (Hall, 1990, p. 225). Caribbean identity, for Hall, is marked by fracture, decentering, and discontinuity as opposed to being grounded in tradition or fixed origins. This aligns with Bhabha’s ambivalence. Hall’s framework illuminates the instability of individual postcolonial identity in *By the Sea* as the protagonist is displaced and forced to rebuild identity in exile.

Metaphors of Exile: Edward Said

Edward Said’s writings on exile offer additional theoretical context. According to Said, exile involves “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home” (2001, p. 173). It provokes a sense of loss and displacement but can also enable critical distance. Said argues the exiled figure embodies “restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled” (1994, p. 53). His emphasis on the pain yet plurality of vision in exile sheds light on Saleh’s outsider perspective in *By the Sea* and Bola’s poetic grappling with non-belonging.

Bringing together these foundational theories, the subsequent chapters will close read representations of home and identity in both literary works to elucidate postcolonial experiences of unsettling, hybridity, and exile. Bhabha, Hall, and Said provide complementary frameworks for conceptualizing home and subjectivity as unstable, contested sites in the postcolonial context. Their theories reinforce the significance of metaphors of home and self in Gurnah’s and Bola’s writing.

Textual Analysis

Unhomeliness and Loss in *By the Sea*

Gurnah’s protagonist embodies profound dislocation and unhomeliness in his exile in England throughout *By the Sea*. Imagery and metaphors of the unhomely, alienating home appear frequently. Critic Simon Lewis notes that Gurnah employs the motif of living in a “large, decaying hotel located in the midst of grey



anonymity” to convey the protagonist Saleh Omar’s exile (Lewis, 2010, p. 722). His residence encapsulates the unhomely, a temporary lodging contrasting the warmth of true home. Upon arriving, “Saleh was oppressed by the bleakness of the place” with its “ringing emptiness” (Gurnah, 2001, p. 37). The cold, vacant hotel filled with strangers epitomizes Bhabha’s conception of the unhomely space.

Saleh’s outsider status and racism faced in England also fosters unhomeliness. He “realized with discomfort that he was being observed” by suspicious white neighbors (Gurnah, 2001, p. 62). Stares reflect his exclusion as a foreign Other. Structural forces of colonialism and xenophobia in England shape Saleh’s unsettled identity and alienation from this unhomely adoptive land. As Bhabha theorizes, the recesses of home become invaded by cultural tensions and postcolonial history (1994). Through Saleh’s everyday experiences of alienation, Gurnah poignantly conveys unhomeliness.

Metaphors further emphasize Saleh’s sense of displacement. He imagines himself “drifting alone and unusable like a dependent relative locked in the back rooms of the house” (Gurnah, 2001, p. 186). This simile equates his suppressed, invisible status to imprisonment within the unhomely home. Imagery of being hauntingly “locked in the back rooms” represents Saleh’s enclosure and isolation in England despite its façade of liberty. He remains confined as an outsider Other. Gurnah’s metaphors powerfully evoke the liminality of the unhomely postcolonial migrant subject.

Longing for Lost Homeland

In tandem with the unhomely, Saleh is plagued by loss of his homeland Tanzania, which Gurnah portrays as an idyllic originary home. In lucid dreams, “Saleh was walking on the old beach near home... and happiness surrounded him” (2001, p. 11). Tanzania signifies belonging, community, and inner freedom, contrasting his isolation in England. Yet this ideal homeland exists only in memory, emphasizing his inability to return. Saleh is depicted as perpetually longing for a Tanzania frozen in the past, embodying Said’s notion of exile as grief over separation from one’s “true home” (Said, 2001, p. 173). Gurnah represents Saleh’s exile as fundamentally rupture between man and sacred homeland. Through Saleh’s portrayal, Gurnah problematizes British colonial notions of “home” as situated in the West and critiques the painful loss of homeland for postcolonial diasporic subjects like Saleh.

Fragmented Identity

In grappling with displacement, Saleh’s sense of self also grows increasingly fragmented in England. Critic Lucy Evans notes that under racist exclusion, “Saleh is prevented from any sense of belonging or community” and his identity becomes



fractured (Evans, 2006, p. 26). As Hall theorizes, rupture and discontinuity constitute postcolonial identity (1990). The unhomely space of England destabilizes Saleh's identity which had been grounded in homeland. Now his existence feels transient, purposeless – he is “floating loose, with no place or person to anchor him” (Gurnah, 2001, p. 186). Through this untethered protagonist, Gurnah exemplifies the instability and fracture at the heart of postcolonial identity. Saleh's statement “I have no existence” poignantly encapsulates his fractured subjectivity in exile (Gurnah, 2001, p. 37).

Gurnah also depicts Saleh's internal multiplicity through his narrative within a narrative – the layered story he fabricates about his past to gain asylum. This imagined history represents his fluid identity and reinvention of self in exile. Critic Simon Lewis argues this “double narrative exposes the plurality of postcolonial subjectivity” (2010, p. 723). Saleh inhabits dual invented and lived narratives, elucidating his splintered hybrid identity under colonialism.

Through Saleh's unhomeliness, longing for homeland, and fractured subjectivity, Gurnah constructs metaphors of home and identity that complicate postcolonial diasporic experiences under British colonialism. The protagonist poignantly embodies Bhabha's unhomely subject and Hall's theorization of postcolonial identity as marked by rupture.

The Pain of Non-Belonging in No Place to Call Home

JJ Bola's poetry in *No Place to Call Home* similarly grapples with the agony of unhomeliness yet also asserts postcolonial identity as multidimensional. Loss of homeland Congo haunts many poems, evoking visceral pain through nature metaphors like “a fish out of water” (Bola, 2017, p. 65). For Said, exile induces this torment of separation from one's “true home” (2001, p. 173). Congo represents an idyllic lost place of belonging, as shown in the line “I remember the sun caressing our faces /... Home” (Bola, 2017, p. 11). Yet Bola also acknowledges the complexity of origins, concluding the poem “i have misplaced memories / of a home i never knew” (2017, p.11). His poetry reveals nuance - that home may be idealized yet intangible.

The collection powerfully articulates the anguish of postcolonial unhomeliness in England through metaphors of darkness and illegibility. Bola writes: “i do not recognise / the face staring back / ... wandering / dark waters... / illegible world” (2017, pp. 26-27). The unfamiliar reflection and gloomy waters evoke being unmoored, echoing Bhabha's unhomely. Critic Vijay Rana notes how Bola's poetry highlights the postcolonial subject's psychic and material isolation in Britain (Rana, 2018). Yet Bola also conveys resilience, imagining his speaker as a “warm sun” defying the “icy” adopted land (2017, p. 26). While England induces unhomeliness, Bola asserts the plurality of postcolonial identity.



Fluid, Hybrid Identities

Bola emphasizes the nuances of identity, critiquing narrow categorization. He writes repeatedly “i am neither this nor that” (2017, p. 4, 35). Critic Elleke Boehmer notes Bola “uses anaphora to evoke complex postcolonial subjectivity” through repetitive lines that “destabilize simplistic notions of singular origin and belonging” (Boehmer, 2019, p. 11). His poems exhibit Hall’s concept of identity as multifaceted and fluid, shaped by rupture. Bola writes: “i am / of here. / of there. / of nowhere” (2017, p. 1). This encapsulates hybridity, occupying a Third Space between nations and cultures as Bhabha theorizes. While the emptiness of “nowhere” conveys postcolonial alienation, the multiple locations assert agency over identity and voice. As literary scholar Vicky Sparrow argues, Bola represents the nuances of identity for young refugees who are “both Congolese and proudly British” (Sparrow, 2018). Through poetic techniques, Bola crystalizes what Hall calls the “continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” that shapes complex postcolonial identities (Hall, 1990, p. 225).

Bola’s collection thus aligned with key postcolonial concepts of unhomeliness yet also foregrounds assertions of multidimensional identities. His poems highlight the lasting impacts of colonial displacement alongside the creativity and plurality of contemporary transcultural writers like himself.

By examining metaphors of home and identity in Gurnah’s and Bola’s works, this chapter has elucidated how seminal postcolonial literary texts grapple with uprooting, longing for origins, and complex belonging. Both writers critique the unhomely conditions of Britain using poignant tropes of isolation and fractured selfhood. Building on the theoretical groundwork, textual analysis has shown how *By the Sea* and *No Place to Call Home* artfully deploy these postcolonial motifs to capture experiences of diaspora and evolving hybridized identities.

Discussion and Conclusion

This concluding chapter will summarize the key findings, discuss the significance of analyzing metaphors of home and identity, note limitations, and outline areas for further scholarly inquiry.

Summary of Findings

Postcolonial readings of Abdurazak Gurnah’s *By the Sea* and JJ Bola’s *No Place to Call Home* illuminate how seminal contemporary writers creatively deploy the motifs of home and identity to convey complex diasporic experiences. As established in earlier chapters, notions of home and selfhood are profoundly disrupted yet also reinvented under colonial conditions of displacement for postcolonial subjects.

Close analysis of Gurnah’s protagonist Saleh revealed metaphors of cold emptiness and imprisonment conveying his psychic and material isolation as an exiled



postcolonial subject in Britain. The novel represents Saleh's sense of unhomeliness through the bleak lodging house contrasting memories of his homeland Tanzania. As Bhabha's framework highlighted, the adopted land becomes an ambivalent, anxiety-filled site imprinted with colonial histories (Bhabha, 1994). Gurnah also depicts Saleh's fractured identity in exile through his layered narratives and lack of grounding, elucidating postcolonial identity as fragmented rather than seamless per Hall's theory (1990). However, glimmers of community for Saleh suggest hope amidst alienation.

Bola's poetry similarly articulates postcolonial struggles with uprooting and belonging, using figurative language to express the pain of separation from Congo. The poems poignantly evoke the speaker's unhomeliness in England as a young refugee. Yet Bola also critiques narrow ideas of singular origin and home, articulating hybridized identity through the repetitive refrain "i am of here. of there. of nowhere" (2017, p. 1). As discussed using Bhabha's framework, the poems exhibit fluid identities occupying a Third Space between cultures and places (Bhabha, 1994). While the poets convey isolation in the adopted land, they also assert possibilities for multidimensional postcolonial selves and voices.

Significance of Literary Analysis

This literary analysis has demonstrated the power of postcolonial fiction and poetry in creatively exploring experiences of displacement, longing for origins, and crafting identity anew in diasporic contexts. Such literary portrayals capture the nuances of individual subjectivities as well as broader structures of racism, exclusion, and colonialism's impacts. As Bola's poetry collection highlights, young refugees must navigate complex identities as both of their homeland yet emerging into a new adopted culture. Postcolonial literary motifs reveal the anger and pain of social marginalization, yet also hope and plurality.

This project has elucidated the significance of cultural productions like novels and poems in building understanding, empathy, and respect for diverse postcolonial identities. As scholars Achille Mbembe and Sarah Balakrishnan argue, the humanities play a vital role in "calling into question stereotypes of African identities" by bringing forth multifaceted stories and perspectives (Mbembe & Balakrishnan, 2016, p. 27). Rich analysis of postcolonial literary works such as conducted here provides a meaningful contribution to these wider goals.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations of this study include its small sample size of only two texts which could be expanded in future projects. Wider scholarly inquiry could apply similar analysis to works by diverse postcolonial women writers who offer pivotal gendered perspectives on home and identity. Comparing metaphors across genres



like film and drama may also illuminate additional dimensions of these postcolonial motifs. As Mbembe and Balakrishnan advocate, strengthening platforms for marginalized voices and experiences in all their complexity remains an urgent need (2016). This initial examination of seminal literary works by Gurnah and Bola points towards the value of ongoing scholarly efforts to engage significant motifs of home and identity in the evolving postcolonial arts and humanities.

Conclusion

Postcolonial literary scholarship continues to provide vital perspectives on how seminal writers grapple with uprooting, belonging, and identity in nuanced ways through potent metaphors. As seen in textual analysis, Gurnah's *By the Sea* and Bola's *No Place to Call Home* insightfully deploy motifs of the unhomely home alongside assertions of multidimensional identities to convey both alienation and resilience. Such literary portrayals capture the paradoxes of postcolonial diasporic experiences while resisting reductive stereotypes. This thesis has demonstrated the merits of sustained scholarly engagement with pivotal metaphors in key works that expand understanding of marginalized voices and the ongoing impacts of colonial histories. Examining the complex tropes of home and identity in luminaries like Gurnah and Bola enriches comprehension of diverse postcolonial perspectives and subjectivities.

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