

Shame as Recognition of the Self:

Critical Inversion of the Postcolonial shame through Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*

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ABSTRACT

The postcolonial interpretation of shame largely focuses on it as a fractured residue of colonial domination which is closely aligned with inferiority, humiliation, and inadequacy. While most of the recent research on Gurnah's fiction focuses on the themes of exile, trauma, memory and hybridity, this research paper narrows down into the theme of shame as one's footsteps into the recognition of the self. Shame tests the man's ability to withstand the flashing colonial trials forced onto them. By doing so, shame becomes an activator of resistance, even when an individual is reduced to an object of ridicule. Predominant approaches of existing research treat shame as a psychological wound and a symptom of fractured subjectivity. This research paper aims to reveal the idea of shame as a tool for recognition of the self through the dissection of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*. Rather than viewing shame as a symbol of victim-hood, it strives to uncover shame as a rejuvenating tool for recognizing the true self of an individual. By situating within the framework of Shame Resilience Theory (SRT), this paper views shame as a potential site for self-awareness, and as an activator for resistance.

Keywords: Shame, Recognition of the self, Activator of resistance, Ontological shame, Linguistic shame.

Postcolonial survival denotes the mere existence of the refugees despite the dehumanising encounters of the colonial regime. Survival does not guarantee a victorious life in the postcolonial context. As the descendants of once-a-colonial subjects, most of the races move within their postcolonial existence by internalising the shame of being the 'inferior' counterparts of their superior colonisers. Shame deprives the organic course of living by planting the seeds of the colonial landscape within the postcolonial people even after the long dead colonialism.

Shame tests the man's ability to withstand the flashing colonial trials forced onto them. By doing so, shame becomes an agent of resistance even when an individual is reduced to an object of ridicule. This research paper strives to assert the idea of shame as a tool for recognition of the self through the dissection of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*. While most of the recent research on Gurnah's fiction focus on themes of exile, trauma, memory and hybridity, this research paper narrows down into the theme of shame as one's footsteps into the recognition of the self.

Abdulrazak Gurnah is an eminent postcolonial writer who fiercely portrays the unending saga of colonialism in the postcolonial realm through his life experience as a migrant. His internal forces flourished throughout his fiction reflecting the shared experience of the brothers of various races transcending the geographical and cultural division among themselves. *By the Sea* is a fictional work which narrates the tale of two refugees - Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud, by unwrapping the trajectory of their lives from being Zanzibar commoners to refugees in the lands of their former colonisers where they internalise their inferior status through the continuous encounters of shame.

By situating within the lens of Shame Resilience Theory (SRT) developed by Dr. Brene Brown, this research paper illustrates the psychological dismantling of shame within the mental realm of Omar and

Latif. Brown's theory posits shame as an epidemic which in silence diseases the uncorrupted mental wellbeing of people. The paper discusses the kinds of shames that Omar and Latif have encountered, which are: Ontological shame and Linguistic shame. Ontological shame is rooted in Sartre's philosophy where shame arises in the gaze of the Other which transforms the self into a flawed perception of oneself. Linguistic shame emerges when language acts as an agent of oppression dividing the worldly languages into the sections of superior and inferior languages. Gurnah's *By the Sea* depicts the various events where the migrants and refugees encounter these Ontological and Linguistic shames.

The shame of one's existence in postcolonial context is majorly constructed through the colonial perception of the offsprings of the colonisers. The continuous colonial gaze tremendously disrupts the functioning of one's subjectivity however strong the mental regime of the individual be. In *By the Sea*, Saleh Omar is faced with numerous actions of surveillance which brings out the Ontological shame of the refugee who is seeking asylum in the lands of his colonisers, thereby mirroring the inferior image of the refugees.

Omar's memory in the interrogation cell where he is fired with numerous questions destabilises his personal image and easily gives in to the actions of the officers. This act serves as a marker of persisting Ontological shame where Omar is "not sure why, but I knew I would do as I was told" (*By the Sea* 5). Here, Ontological shame is cultivated as a result of centuries long histories of oppression of his ancestors through which he is still under the colonial gaze of the London airport authorities by doing whatever he is told.

Omar reflects on the authoritative gesture of the officers during the interrogation where he feels shameful for tiring them because of his inadequate knowledge of the airport culture. He feels shameful not because he lacks the basic knowledge pertaining to the airport but of his actions of tiring the officers who are the projectors of the colonial gaze. He realises the officer's manner which "made me feel that I was a

tiresome and stupid prisoner he was interrogating" (9). He reduces his image of a refugee to a prisoner because of the colonial gaze imposed on him triggering him to realise the drafted ontological status of colonial history.

Such incidents prove Fanon's view where "the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man" (Atwell 8). The postcolonial present refuses to withdraw the colonial past thereby instilling the sense of Ontological shame within the minds of the refugees. Ontological shame disrupts the formation of one's identity within the postcolonial regime where Omar attaches the notion of "beggars like me" to his status as a refugee (*By the Sea* 52). This shame of one's existence damages the innate thoughts and humane attributes that are seeded within the individual.

The essay "The Imperial Unconscious? Representations of Imperial Discourse" introduces the concept of 'imperial self-representation' where the postcolonial individual views himself through the lens of colonial history (Chrisman 500). Even in the absence of a predatory coloniser, colonial ontological consciousness tends to trigger the imperialist subjugation of Omar, thereby producing Ontological shame within the mental sphere of Omar. Ontological shame is doubly bound where Omar feels shameful because of his imbibed ontological shame. This doubly charged sword of shame discourages him to pursue his life as he feels strangled by the pain of being shameful of his own existence.

Linguistic shame emerges when the individual is faced with indifferent treatments where his non-English language poses as an emblem of uncivilisation. Even as a literate man in London, Latif faces numerous discriminating events where his African ancestry proceeds his educational history. His English accent distinguishes him within the English circle and creates in him a sense of shame because of his inadequate literacy. Language demands linguistic precision as per the unwritten laws of the postcolonial

era and the failure to meet the set standards puts Latif and Omar into the colonisers gaze. By doing so, the colonial language becomes the language of the world.

According to Ngugi, in “Decolonising the Mind”, English became more than a language: it was the language, and all the others had to bow before it (386). Linguistic supremacy in the western world creates a hierarchy of language through which colonialism perpetuates in the postcolonial discourse. This hierarchical disruption destabilises the built-in individualised psychological makeup where the non-native speakers of English are subjugated for their impotency to learn the English language.

In a particular episode where Omar is in the interrogation cell, the officer comments at him as Omar “don't even speak the language, and you probably never will” (*By the Sea* 11). Here, Omar determines his linguistic status through the colonial statement uttered by the officer where he detects his Linguistic shame. On the other hand, Hussein, Latif's uncle, glorifies himself as he “learnt the language of our conquerors” (33). This knowledge of the language of the colonisers is not an act of civilisation instead, as “Crosscurrents, Crosstalk: Race, Postcoloniality and the Politics of Location” explains it as a “return to the position of the Other as resource for rethinking the Western Self” (Frankenberg et al 355). Thus, shame operates in a camouflaged persona in Hussein and directly as Linguistic shame in Omar and Latif.

Shame acts as a tool for recognition of the self for Omar and Latif. As a result of the numerous encounters, the colonial rage of the postcolonial world is depicted through the lives Omar and Latif as the refugee and migrant from Zanzibar in London. These encounters create a space of self-reflection and awareness of their true selves despite the imperial treatments they faced. The introspection of shame and the feeling of shame is a way through which an individual understands and responds to shame. By

acknowledging shame and speaking about shame, Omar takes his first step towards the recognition of the self.

Omar reveals how through the colonial gaze he looks like “someone with a secret and burdensome history” but he defies this ontological projection of shame and reassert how he “sought to expiate it with silence” (*By the Sea* 198). Also he states how he has “neither strength nor desire for a fight” and he “smiled to these well-wishers and let the matter pass” (237). This reveals the resistance to the ontological subjugation towards Omar. He further resists the linguistic shame where he finds and acknowledges the “ignorance of English as “strategic” (45). These assertions reveal how Omar is aware of the projectors notion of colonial power and how he exercises within him. The consecutive interrogations force Omar to absorb the shame imposed on him but conscience self refuses to internalise it. The absorption of colonial shame withers away as the introspective recognition of the self takes charge.

Shame acts not directly as resistance but as an activator for resistance. By providing a space for recognition of the self, shame directs the path to cultivate the complete form of resistance. Shame proves to be the agent for realising and embracing as in Omar’s life. Through shame Omar dismantled the colonial gaze and constructed the gaze of one’s own as a journey towards liberation.

This paper has attempted to rethink shame not merely as a psychological wound but as a constructing tool for self-recognition by counter analysis of postcolonial shame through Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *By the Sea*. Instead of framing shame as an internalised colonial self, this study argues that Ontological shame and Linguistic shame do not simply reduce Omar and Latif to imperial objects but trigger them to generate

moments of awareness in recognising their true selves. Here, shame refuses to dissolve the self, instead urges for introspection.

By reframing shame as recognition, this research paper challenges the dominant thrust areas of postcolonial literature which regards shame as a colonial wound in the postcolonial world. Instead, it reveals how in Gurnah's fiction shame operates as a liberating agent within the psychological makeup of Omar and Latif. This paper reveals how in the moment of humiliation, the human mind thrives itself to break free the strangling ideologies and by doing so shame acts not as resistance but the activator for resistance.

While this study provides a new dimension to analyse Gurnah's *By the Sea*, it is limited to a single text and focuses on the Ontological shame and Linguistic shame by sidelining other affective and cultural dimensions of shame. While this study foregrounds shame as a positive endeavor, there are other sides of shame such as violence and discrimination which might emerge as a result of the recognition of one's self. Despite these limitations, this paper contributes to the postcolonial arena where shame ought to be acknowledged as the threshold of positive thoughts and actions.

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