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## EXPLORING THE THEME OF IDENTITY CRISIS IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S BY THE SEA

*A saga of the displaced refugees*

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### Abstract:

Abdulrazak Gurnah is a celebrated name in the field of contemporary literature. *By the Sea* is his sixth novel based on the repercussions of human being in the hands of fate, which strings are pulled by the colonizers. Imperialism has a grave concern in history as it carries many abominable issues. It crushes the identity of indigenous people and their culture through its pathetic atrocities. The eventual control of British in the island of Zanzibar, its far flung impacts on the indigenous locals is the crux of the novel. The reasons of the chaotic life that Omer, Latif and many others had to endure are a byproduct of Postcolonialism. The novel is narrated in first person, both by Omer and Latif individually. Uprooted from their motherland, the character Saleh Omer is a refugee, an asylum seeker in the United States in his later age. The novel begins with Omer after his landing in the airport and investigation by the security officer in-charge. Rest of the storyline deals with Omer's situation in the new place and his state of acceptance and denouncement. A huge chunk of the novel's plot deals with Latif Mahmud and his life. Latif is a professor who settled in United Kingdom before Omer did. Later on, both the characters get mingle and weave a new relationship between them. Both seek companionship and warmth in each other. Author has given glimpses of their lives back in Zanzibar. Both of them had their predicaments which resulted issues such as identity crisis, existential dilemma and lack of both physical and mental protection. The sense of existentialism occurred to them from the moment they started drifting away from their own people. The way they lived with a fragmented identity, constantly trying to adjust with the surrounded matrix makes the novel remarkable.

**Keyword:** Postcolonial, Identity crisis, Refugee, Existentialism, Imperialism

## **I.Introduction:**

'Identity Crisis' is a term coined by the German-American psychologist Erik Homburger Erikson. It is defined as a psychological condition that occurs due to socio-cultural elements and a person's failure to perceive him as a self-fulfilling entity. It is a state of self-doubt and insecurity topped with perplexity. In the novel, identity crisis is apparent in two of the major characters Omer and Latif basically due to their positions as refugees. The term Refugee can be defined as is a person who is not able to or not willing to return to his/her home country because of lack of protection of their lives, excessive social, political or economic turmoil or due to various other reasons. Here, in the novel, Saleh Omer is termed and treated as a refugee. The entire novel is a fine documentation of an uprooted and devastated refugee Omer in his prime age and a Latif who had settled himself in the place but unable to absorb the circumstances fully. Both are settlers in a place, away from their motherland. Latif Mahmud, a distinguished poet and a professor of a university in London was also in the grasp of destiny that made him linked to Saleh Omer. Omer was the owner of a furniture shop that dealt with vintage items in Zanzibar. Through the linkage of Rachel Howard, the lawyer, once again they crossed each other's path in the new place. The story behind Omer's escape from his motherland as described in the novel is of some extremely painful and dark events. Omer lost his family and his reputation in his own land, a place where in the name of government a complete mess of lawlessness prevails. Devastated by all the events he had to overcome, Omer decided to leave his home in Zanzibar and bought tickets for United Kingdom with the little money he had. He landed on the airport of Gatwick as a refugee, an asylum seeker and rest of the plot of the novel is followed by Omer's contemplation of life, thinking and rethinking. On the other hand, Latif Mahmud, who has already settled in the land many years before Omer did, too, has many things to tell. The novel is not a monolith, but a mosaic of tales of people compelled by circumstances to leave their very own countries.

## **II.Discussion**

According to Stephen Fros, in today's society under the modern conditions, the proper construction of a full fledged self is a continuous struggle. There are many underlying elements that knits the web of both identity and existential crisis in people. The characters of Omer and Latif both suffered the shades of existential crisis in different way. For a man in his last years of life, where generally other people goes back to comfort of their home and family doing what they love, Omer was struggling to find a place to live in. When Omer initially encountered the security officer, 'refugee' and 'asylum' were the only words uttered from the scared old man. Omer was told to pretend as he didn't know how to speak English. Distressed by the torments and humiliation he had tolerated in his own land, he could not think of any good in this new one. Omer's life consists of many events that ultimately turned him to a weak, fragile and isolated person. He was owner of a furniture shop and traded the antics and vintage furniture that he acquired from the British residents and officials. It was after the election of Zanzibar in 1961 that the misfortune befell on his shop.

The bloodshed and riots caused by the election diminished people's urge to buy luxurious furniture. Once a man of business, became a refugee at a foreign land where he can merely afford a good meal.

A safe and secure place of residence serves as one of the fundamental elements to the formation of identity and existence. During his previous life, Omer was not blessed with a home, not a concrete one, but the one with his own people. Salha, Omer's beloved wife and his daughter, both passed away during his confinement. He even lost his father many years ago. The house he acquired from Rajah Shaaban came with many disputes. Even though he was comparatively safer in his new place, his mind was always followed by a sense of terror caused by the traumatic past. "the streets make me tense and nervous, and sometimes even in my locked-in flat I find myself unable to sleep or sit at ease because of the rustlings and whisperings that agitate the lower air."(3)

Though not everywhere he feels the agitation, still the sense of being an alien in this city made him feel shrunk to his own shell. One of the prime examples of him being mocked happened at his first legal abode in the city, the dark old house of Celia. It was a house which offered shelter to some other refugees too. There, Omer was the laughing stock of two young refugees named Georgy, a Roma from Czech Republic and Ibrahim from Kosovo. After the detention centre, it was Omer's first confrontation with reality of the new place. He was being called as by the term 'black man' by the boys. A man who has already been through so much was tagged as black man, apparently indicating something inferior. The rage, humiliation Omer felt inside him was enough to fuel the blaze helping the destruction of his identity. Omer puts these behaviors with the one person named Alfonso; he met at the detention centre earlier and his treatment to dark skinned fellow refugees. It made him think of the kind of perception Alfonso had '...a black man, a lesser son of Adam than them, capable only of a subservient rage and unreflecting resilience'.(61)

The mesmerizing resemblance of the characters with the title of the book is apparent throughout the novel. Interestingly, wherever Omer resided, it always had some connections with the sea. Author has used the sea as a symbol to let everyone know about the idea of a person's existence beside the island surrounded by the sea, an island that once acted as a trajectory or the so called colonizers such as the Portuguese, or British or many other invaders, situated by the sea, and people left with crashing identity by the sea. After coming out from Celia's dark house, ironically, the place Omer got to live in USA was too a tiny apartment facing the sea. The sea acts a comfort for Omer, as he says he feels safe in it. In his previous residence where Latif happened to visit a long time back, Latif thoughtfully recalls Omer sitting in a chair by the window with a view of the Sea. The sheer pleasure Omer bequeathed by the sea, helps the sea to emerge as a solacious entity. Still trying to squeeze into his new life in this new place, Omer sometimes feels out of the place in his lonely apartment while contemplating his life. He himself asserts that he feels like an 'involuntary instrument of another's design, a figure in a story told by someone else'.(69) His extreme loneliness and destituteness serves more to it.

In order to get a passport, Omer changed his name. He took up the name Rajah Shaaban in the place of his actual name Saleh Omer. He renounced his old name but could not get rid of his past and the traumatic memories. The name Rajah Shaaban actually belonged to Latif Mahmud's father. The coincidence brought Latif and Omer closer in a place where both of them suffered from existential crisis. It gave a solid foundation to the optimistic relationship that was about to start between both of them. Latif was serving as a professor in a university in London and also a poet. He was called for help by Rachel to interpret the language of Omer when he pretended ignorant of speaking English. By the time the disclosure made by Omer as a fully capable man of English speaking, Rachel turned off Latif's due intervention. But it was the sole afford that Latif made on his part to search for who the pseudonymous person actually was and the curiosity to know why his father's name was used. All these reasons dragged Latif towards Omer and he finally reached out to him. Latif's face off with Omer in his small apartment signifies their new relationship, the relationship of seeking home in each other in a foreign land. Little did they know that it is their similar sense of fragmented identity dwelled underneath their minds which is acting as the agent to bind them together?

Latif was indeed a man of literature. During the entire novel, there were umpteen numbers of times he made allusions to Shakespeare and other prominent English authors. Latif too is a victim of existential crisis, a sufferer of torments and atrocities. The first instance of his jeopardized identity can be seen in the incident of him being called as a 'blackamoor'. When Latif was walking to his work he encountered with an old man seemed to be a perfect tucked –in English gentleman, called him a 'grinning blackamoor'. It triggered Latif to the extent that once he reached his office; he searched for the etymology of the word. The entries associated with the one particular prefix 'black' made in the dictionary troubled Latif as he perceived everything related to black must be something evil, weak or unpleasant. The word shook the core of Latif instantly though it was not a new thing for him to be humiliated this way. 'It made me feel hated, suddenly weak with a kind of terror at such associations. This is the house I live in, I thought, a language which barks and scorns at me behind every third corner'. (72) He even looked up further and was left overwhelmed by the fact that, the word has been in existence since 1501, and many other writers like Sidney, Shakespeare, Pepys and others. But it brought him some sense of relief that whether it truly has a negative use or not, but it was there since a long time, left unforgotten. From centuries before the word has a solid existence proudly describing its meaning without any humiliation.

The sense of alienation gradually produced a kind of anxiety in Latif's mind. He left his home and family back in Zanzibar many years ago and settled in the States. But whenever he got a call from the authority to serve as an interpreter for a refugee from Zanzibar or similar place of which language he knows, gives him a sense of terror. It might be due to the changes he made with the course of time, the adaptation of other people's culture, and way of life in order to protect his own identity. He tried to camouflage himself among them by acting as an English personage. But the self-doubt and insecurity he had in him made him think of this as an unusual act. 'Would they tell me, or think to themselves, how English I had become, how

different, how out of touch? As if it was either here or there whether I had or not, as if it proved something uncomplicated about alienation, as if I was no longer myself but a self-treacherous pretence of myself, a processed stooge.’(73)

In his initial days when Latif first came to Neustadt in Germany he met Ali, a boy from Guinea. The hostel they lived in only accommodated dark skinned boys; boys from all Africa, Egyptians, Ethiopians, Somali, Congolese, Algerians and South Africans. His friend Ali was also his guide and mentor in those days. His friend Ali held an attitude of aversion towards the natives because Ali knew the ugly classification of being in a foreign place and treated as excluded. The incident of mockery Ali and Latif faced across the street served a full bow to their self respect and identity. A group of German boys humiliated them by calling them ‘Afriker-nische’ followed by uproarious laughter. It was to be considered as a casual mockery but it did a deep destruction to young Latif’s mind and took him a great amount of time to overcome it.

In his life Latif was unable to establish a close relationship with his father. Latif’s father, Rajah Shaaban was a kind, religious person and was a man of few words. He was more affectionate towards his elder son Hassan than Latif. The unruly environment of his home, Drinking habit of his father and infidelity of his mother followed by the elopement of Hassan with a trader made Latif despise his own people. The emotional unavailability of his father left a feeling of detachment and emptiness in Latif’s life. The whole circumstances sabotaged Latif and he emerge as a man, thinking for his own; not willing to go back once he got the opportunity to leave Zanzibar. But all of these suppressed emotions and anxieties found a place once he met Omer again in a foreign land. It is not just because Omer was a man of his native place or because he stole his father’s name, but there lingered many reason behind all these which brought them closer to each other. After coming to know about all the tumultuous events of Omer’s past life, Latif soon realized that it is more than a mere recognition. The condition of Omer as a refugee living alone in a new place and Latif as a man, dragging his life alone without any companion brought both of them together like lost pieces of a puzzle. Latif himself confronted about his own fragmented psyche to Omer as he opens up for his anxiety and indecisiveness. ‘I feel worn out and raw, livid with sores. Do you know what I mean? You must know that feeling. I was thinking about that last week, how worn out I am after all these years of knowing and not knowing, of doing nothing about it and how it can’t be helped. So I was looking forward to coming here, to hear you talk, for both of us to find relief’.(207) Latif could fairly grasp the pain of Omer, and Omer too was able to understand how Latif must have felt. The ‘relief’ that Latif is talking about can be seen as an achievement where he found the gap he has been searching for. The lack of warmth predominantly acted as a major reason for Latif to find relief in the companionship of Omer, a man of his father’s age.

### III. Conclusion:

Life can be worthless or worth it, but it still matters. The existence of a person in a society, the importance to be seen, to be heard and to put an opinion of one's own are the matter of concern for each individual. Being a refugee is already a great deal in itself. Omer or Latif are just examples of thousands of refugees who suffer from severe identity and existential crisis. Even though they did find a few people who treated them right but most of the people were unpleasant and abusive to them. Both of them thrived for a home, a place of comfort with the warmth of a companion. It is a distinct irony that Latif was unable to establish any close relationship with his father, but at the end it is a Rajah Shaaban how makes a connection with him. The novel is, therefore, a wholesome account of the journey of one's distorted identity and process to regain that identity.

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