ECO-CRITICAL READINGS OF DISPLACEMENT IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S *BY THE SEA*

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Abstract :

This paper explores the eco-critical dimensions of displacement in Abdulrazak Gurnah's By the Sea, arguing that the novel constructs displacement not as a singular traumatic event but as an ongoing ecological relationship. Through close analysis of the text, the study reveals how Gurnah positions the sea and coastal environments as active agents that fundamentally shape the migrant experience. The research identifies three interconnected thematic strands: first, the sea functions simultaneously as barrier and connector, embodying what Timo Müller calls "a liquid continent" that historically linked communities across the Indian Ocean world yet now represents separation under restrictive immigration policies. Second, the novel demonstrates how displaced persons develop "ecological memory" and "ecological resilience," carrying sensory connections to specific environments that provide psychological continuity despite physical dislocation. Third, Gurnah illustrates how environmental change parallels political disruption, creating what Rob Nixon terms "slow violence" as coastal communities experience gradual degradation following the prohibition of traditional trade routes. The paper contends that Gurnah's eco-critical framework challenges conventional narratives of exile by revealing how ecological awareness offers alternative pathways to understanding belonging, demonstrating that displacement constitutes an ecological relationship extending beyond political or psychological frameworks. This perspective positions environmental consciousness as central to comprehending the complex realities of migration and dislocation in the contemporary world.

Keywords : Abdulrazak Gurnah, *By the Sea*, Eco-criticism, Displacement, Ecological dislocation, Slow violence, Trans-corporeal, Eco-cosmopolitanism, Coastal environments.

Introduction :

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* presents a profound meditation on displacement that extends beyond conventional political and psychological frameworks to engage deeply with ecological dimensions of migration. As a Nobel Prize-winning author whose work consistently examines the complex legacies of colonialism and migration, Gurnah offers in this novel a nuanced portrayal of how environmental contexts shape the experience of displacement. Eco-criticism, which examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment, provides a vital lens through which to understand Gurnah's work—not merely as a story of human movement but as an exploration of how ecological consciousness intertwines with the

migrant experience. The sea, which gives the novel its title, functions not as a passive backdrop but as an active agent that shapes characters' identities, memories, and possibilities for connection. This paper argues that Gurnah constructs an eco-critical framework where the natural environment—particularly the sea and coastal landscapes—becomes integral to understanding displacement not as a singular traumatic event but as an ongoing ecological relationship. Through meticulous attention to how characters navigate both physical and psychological landscapes, Gurnah challenges conventional narratives of exile by demonstrating how ecological awareness can provide alternative frameworks for understanding belonging and dislocation. As one character reflects while contemplating his lifelong connection to coastal environments, "I live in a small town by the sea, as I have all my life, though for most of it it was by a warm green ocean a long way from here. Now I live the half-life of a stranger, glimpsing interiors through the television screen and guessing at the tireless alarms which afflict people I see in my strolls" (229). This passage establishes the central tension of the novel: the persistent connection to a specific ecological environment even amidst profound dislocation.

The Sea as Both Barrier and Connector :

In *By the Sea*, Gurnah presents the Indian Ocean not merely as a geographical feature but as a complex historical and ecological space that simultaneously connects and divides communities across centuries. The novel reveals how the sea functions as what Timo Müller calls "a liquid continent" (112), facilitating both connection and separation in ways that shape the characters' understanding of their displacement. Gurnah meticulously documents the historical trade routes that once connected East African coastal communities to the wider Indian Ocean world: "the Red Sea coast to Suez, the Arabian peninsula, the Persian Gulf, India, the Malay Peninsula and then all the way to China" (225). This historical connectivity stands in stark contrast to the contemporary reality of the characters, for whom the same sea represents a barrier to safe passage and belonging.

The novel's protagonist, Saleh Omar, embodies this duality. When he arrives in England as an asylum-seeker, he is promised placement "in a small town by the sea. Yes, I'll like that, I thought. In a few days" (218). This seemingly simple statement reveals the profound psychological significance of coastal environments for displaced persons. The sea, which once facilitated the movement of his ancestors as traders and travelers, now represents both a connection to his past and a reminder of his displacement. As he settles into his new environment, Saleh seeks out the sea repeatedly: "I went out, to see where I was and to see if I could find the sea" (174). This impulse demonstrates what Ursula K. Heise describes as "eco-cosmopolitanism"—the understanding that environmental connections can transcend national boundaries (23).

Gurnah further develops this theme through the character of Latif Mahmud, whose family history is intertwined with the maritime trade routes of the Indian Ocean. Latif recalls how his father taught him about "the musim trade" and the seasonal winds that once connected diverse communities: "Among the many deprivations inflicted on those towns by the sea was the prohibition of the musim trade. The last months of the year would no longer see crowds of

sailing ships lying plank to plank in the harbour, the sea between them glistening with slicks of their waste, or the streets thronged with Somalis or Suri Arabs or Sindhis, buying and selling and breaking into incomprehensible fights" (221). This passage reveals how political decisions have disrupted not just human communities but entire ecological systems of exchange. The prohibition of the musim trade represents an ecological disruption as much as a political one, severing connections between human communities and their maritime environment.

The novel's eco-critical perspective becomes particularly evident when Gurnah contrasts historical maritime connectivity with contemporary experiences of displacement. Where once the sea connected communities through trade and cultural exchange, it now separates them through restrictive immigration policies. This transformation reflects what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence"—the gradual, often invisible environmental and social damage caused by political decisions (2). When Saleh reflects that "I was put in one of the punishment cells and locked in the dark, smelling the damp distemper of chalk and lime on the walls. I saw a glimpse of the stars through the narrow barred slit high in the wall" (219), the contrast between the confined space and the vastness of the sea beyond becomes a powerful metaphor for the contemporary refugee experience. The sea remains constant, but human relationships to it have been transformed by political forces, creating what Stacy Alaimo describes as "trans-corporeal" connections between bodies and environments that are simultaneously enabling and constraining (19).

Coastal Environments and the Psychology of Displacement :

Gurnah's novel demonstrates how coastal environments shape the psychological experience of displacement in ways that conventional narratives of exile often overlook. The characters in *By the Sea* develop what might be called an "ecological memory"—a form of remembering that is tied not just to specific places but to the sensory experiences of particular environments. This ecological memory becomes a crucial resource for displaced persons seeking to maintain continuity with their past. When Saleh Omar first arrives at his new accommodation, he seeks out the sea not merely as a familiar sight but as a means of orienting himself in an alien landscape: "Saleh Omar sat in a chair by a window with a view of the sea. I think he was reading. When I entered he looked over the angle of his shoulder and turned back to the view for another moment, and then he rose to his feet and stood to await my approach" (175). This moment reveals how the sea functions as both a physical and psychological anchor for the displaced character.

The novel suggests that coastal environments provide displaced persons with what Tim Ingold calls "taskscape"—a dynamic understanding of place as constituted through ongoing engagement rather than fixed boundaries (142). This is particularly evident in the character of Latif Mahmud, who describes his childhood experiences along the coast: "In our own lives, everyone had been going to chuoni for generations. Chuoni, that was where we went to learn the aliph-be-te so we could read the Koran and listen to the miraculous events which befell the Prophet throughout his lifetime" (222). The coastal environment is not merely a setting for these activities but an active participant in the learning process, with the rhythms of the sea shaping the rhythms of daily life.

Gurnah further develops this theme through the character's relationship to the sounds of the sea. In one particularly evocative passage, a character initially mistakes urban noise for the sea: "because I thought they were the distant pounding of the sea but which I guessed only much later to have been the noise of traffic on a big road near by" (227). This moment of sensory confusion reveals how deeply the sound of the sea has become embedded in the character's psyche, to the point where urban noise is automatically interpreted through this ecological framework. As Kate Rigby argues, such sensory memories represent "embodied knowledge" that can persist even when physical connection to the environment is severed (78).

The novel also explores how displaced persons develop what might be called "ecological resilience"—the ability to draw psychological strength from environmental connections even in unfamiliar settings. When Saleh is told he will be placed "in a small town by the sea," his positive response ("Yes, I'll like that, I thought") reflects an understanding that proximity to the sea will facilitate his adaptation to a new environment. This reflects what Deborah Bird Rose describes as "ecological being"—the understanding that human identity is constituted through relationships with the more-than-human world (45). Gurnah shows how displaced persons carry their ecological knowledge with them, using it to navigate new environments and maintain psychological continuity.

The sea also functions as what Glen A. Love calls "a nonanthropocentric perspective" (112)—a vantage point from which human conflicts and displacements appear in a broader temporal and spatial context. When characters sit by the sea and contemplate their situation, they often gain a sense of perspective that helps them process their displacement: "From the veranda, the view was all sea and the stars. At night it was as if there was no sky, just a [sea]" (226). This perspective does not diminish the reality of their suffering but places it within a larger ecological framework that offers both comfort and challenge. The sea becomes what Timothy Morton calls "a hyperobject"—something so vast in time and space that it exceeds human comprehension yet remains intimately connected to human experience (1).

Environmental Change and Historical Disruption :

By the Sea demonstrates how environmental change parallels and amplifies the experience of displacement, creating what might be termed "ecological dislocation." Gurnah shows how political disruptions often manifest first as environmental changes, with coastal communities bearing the brunt of these transformations. When a character returns to his hometown after years away, he observes: "Houses had collapsed, shops were empty. As I walked nearer my old store I saw familiar faces, but I did not want to be delayed and still no one seemed to recognise me. I stopped in front of my old store, boarded up and padlocked, and stared in amazement at how familiar it looked, as if I had only last seen it a month or two ago" (220). This passage reveals how environmental degradation—manifested in decaying buildings and abandoned shops—mirrors the social and political disruptions that have caused displacement.

The novel particularly emphasizes how changes to coastal environments reflect broader historical disruptions. The prohibition of the musim trade, which once brought vibrant seasonal

commerce to coastal towns, has transformed these spaces from dynamic hubs of cultural exchange to sites of stagnation and decay. Gurnah writes: "In the first year or two [after the prohibition], the streets became quieter, the markets smaller, the faces more anxious" (221). This environmental transformation represents what Rob Nixon identifies as "slow violence"—the gradual, often invisible environmental damage that accumulates over time (2). The decline of the coastal towns is not the result of a single catastrophic event but of incremental political decisions that have severed communities from their ecological and economic lifelines.

Gurnah further develops this theme through the character of Latif Mahmud, whose family history is intertwined with the changing coastal environment. Latif recalls how his father became increasingly religious after their displacement: "He became a shaykh: sometimes leading the congregation in prayers, reading the Koran all day after he came back from work, spending all evening at the mosque studying and reading from books of law and doctrine" (224). This transformation reflects what Stacy Alaimo describes as "trans-corporeal vulnerability"—the way environmental and political disruptions affect not just physical spaces but human bodies and psyches (19). The father's turn to religion represents an attempt to find stability in the face of environmental and social disruption.

The novel also explores how environmental memory becomes a resource for displaced persons seeking to maintain connection to their homeland. When Saleh Omar describes his former life "by a warm green ocean a long way from here," he is not merely recalling a geographical location but an entire ecological sensibility (229). This ecological memory becomes a form of resistance against complete erasure, allowing displaced persons to maintain a connection to their homeland even when physical return is impossible. As Ursula K. Heise argues, such environmental memory can provide "affective mappings" that help displaced persons navigate their new environments while maintaining connection to their past (23).

Gurnah's eco-critical perspective is particularly evident in his treatment of the sea as both a constant and a changing entity. While the sea remains physically present in both the characters' homeland and their place of displacement, its meaning and significance have changed due to political interventions. This reflects what Timothy Morton calls "the ecological thought"—the understanding that everything is interconnected in ways that challenge conventional boundaries (1). When Saleh Omar sits by the sea in his new home, he is participating in the same ecological system that surrounded him in his homeland, but the political context has transformed his relationship to this environment.

Conclusion :

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* offers a profound eco-critical exploration of displacement, challenging conventional exile narratives by demonstrating how environmental relationships fundamentally shape the migrant experience. Through meticulous attention to the sea and coastal environments, Gurnah reveals displacement not as a singular event but as an ongoing ecological relationship connecting past and present, homeland and new location. Displaced individuals carry ecological sensibilities, not just memories, which shape their adaptation. This approach foregrounds environmental dimensions often overlooked in political

or psychological migration frameworks, suggesting effective responses must address the ecological relationships constituting human identity. The novel models "eco-cosmopolitan belonging"—a connection transcending national boundaries yet grounded in specific ecological contexts, where characters form new environmental connections incorporating past ones. Gurnah's work, increasingly relevant in the context of climate-driven displacement, underscores that displacement is an ecological phenomenon requiring interconnected responses, and invites future research on intersections with gender, religion, colonialism, and comparative diasporic literatures.

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