

# The Fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah



# The Fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah:

*Journeys through Subalternity  
and Agency*

By

Mohineet Kaur Boparai

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*For Papa and Daddy  
for pointing me towards thinking critically*



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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ON ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in Zanzibar, Tanzania, in 1948. He is a reputed novelist and academic. Like most of the protagonists in his novels, he made England his home when he migrated in 1968. He came to England to pursue a university education. Gurnah was also, in part, driven out of Zanzibar to escape the civil unrest, whereby the sustained violence against the Arab population in the country made it an unwelcoming and uncomfortable home space for them. He received his PhD from the University of Kent, where he was later a Professor in postcolonial literature. Gurnah documents the British migrant experience, the troubled experiences of individuals living in postcolonial Zanzibar, and how individuals residing in the two cultural spaces find routes into their subjectivities by undertaking philosophical and subjective journeys. Gurnah has written nine novels, and his career as an author spans over three decades, with his earliest book being *Memory of Departure* (1987) and the latest one being *Gravel Heart* (2017). His most acclaimed novels are *Paradise* (1994) and *By the Sea* (2001), which were shortlisted and longlisted for the Booker Prize, respectively. *Desertion* (2005) was shortlisted for a 2006 Commonwealth Writers Prize.

## INTRODUCTION

### ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S ART OF WRITING

Before embarking on a full-length study of Gurnah's novels, it is viable to state his position as an artist *vis a vis* society, world literature, and art itself. Gurnah's function as an artist, and as an originator playing with meaning in his literary universe must be understood. He is aware that his role as a writer is not that of an originator of sense but as a seeker of meaning. He understands that his art of writing helps him decipher a complex world where a few people wield power and oppress others.

The current study seeks to understand Gurnah's work beyond the labels of postcolonial writing or world literature. Though he is generally described using such terms, Gurnah is aware of the reductionism of such terminology. He considers these terms useful, only in so much as they are helpful for organizational purposes. He says in this regard, in an interview with Fabienne Roth et al.:

I would not use any of those words. I wouldn't call myself a something writer of any kind. In fact, I am not sure that I would call myself anything apart from my name. I guess, if somebody challenges me, that would be another way of saying Are you a [...] one of these...?" I would probably say "no". Precisely, I don't want that part of me having a reductive name. On the other hand, it depends on how this question would be asked; for example, if a journalist asks in an interview, "Are you a world literature writer", what is he going to put down when he goes away from here? But I am not that. I'm a complicated something of that (Roth et al. 2016, 1).

The present study helps one understand how the subject traverses the rugged terrain of oppression that is operative in the hotspots of postcolonial societies, in the lives of women, lower classes, and children, in Gurnah's novels. Subalternity and non-representation are operative far and wide in several forms, and encumber the individual psyche. Such a study of Gurnah's novels is called for, since it examines the operations of power and how individuals and communities find ways to counter it, through resistance, revolt, assimilation, articulation, and recording and passing on stories and histories, through various dimensions like morality, archiving, space, etc.

At the core of the theory of subalternity lies the desire for subjecthood and its expression. Subjectivity is a much-talked-about notion in literary and cultural theory. The subject is at the core of most human endeavours. Subjectivity as an issue and a concept cannot be pinned down to a singular meaning; we must grapple with it and understand ourselves to find meaning in our lives. There are four ways in which the word subject, which is not interchangeable with the self, can be employed: as the subject of grammar, the politico-legal subject, the philosophical subject, and the human subject.

This book studies how the characters in Gurnah's novels come to terms with their subject positions and subjectivity. Subjectivity must subsume some agency. Conditions of oppression are such that they either ultimately subdue the subject, or reinforce in them a will to become an agent.

Subalternity includes agency as its practical, proactive component. Agency exists, not in individuals alone, but in communities too, because no individual has a solitary existence or identity, typically. Agency comes from the realization that we can change something about our world and can be conscious contributors to our life. Our experiences have an essential role to play in the extent to which we can be agents. Agency, like subjectivity, is not already existent, but is nurtured. Moreover, agency does not merely mean overcoming situations, because that would again suggest that those very situations are driving us. Agency, in its real sense, comes about when a subject acts beyond a prevailing situation or the environmental constraints.

The concepts of subalternity, subjectivity, and agency are dialectically related. The boundaries of these categories overlap. This study delves into subjectivity, how it becomes problematic for the subaltern, and how the subaltern relocates himself/herself in the dominant discourse, thereby becoming an agent.

Gurnah seeks to unearth several dimensions of existence, ranging from the historical to the innermost psychological lives of his characters. He traverses the emotional lives of his characters while history presides from a far-off horizon in the background. He does what history does not, which is to reach into the recesses of lived experience. He brings forth into consciousness what is either never published in historical accounts, or enters oblivion as a small-column news story in a newspaper. Gurnah has a passion for recording these stories. He fights against the forgetfulness that is a characteristic of human life, whereby stories pass into the night. The human mind has an intuitive way in which tales of survival are inscribed on the mind - that is, the collective unconscious, as well as remembering their mythical pasts - that is, the cultural memory.

Nevertheless, historical events find little space in his novels. The fact that history is very sparingly included in his novels tends to draw attention

to the difference between historiography and novel writing. The novel tries to do what the social sciences cannot. Gurnah uses historical references only to shed light on the characters' situation in society and to define their social struggles. While history is limited to a specific space and time, the novel works to unearth being, and therefore transcends space/time.

Gurnah thinks about literature as a field of artistic expression that seeks to develop the community as a totality in some way. At the same time, he is aware that different kinds of literary works impact individuals with varying life experiences in different ways. Literature challenges specific ideas and practices by recording their impact on the lives of subjects. In an interview with Roth et al., he asserts:

The role of literature in the world is to progress the community, but it might vary, dependent on the specific community. One might say writers need to challenge ideas within the community. This challenge can be to the ideas of respectability, to the ideas of family or appropriateness, sexual morality, and so on. On the other hand, people might also see that as indiscipline, unnecessary, and destructive. The role of writers can be judged only by their readers. It is difficult. You need to leave it to the writer before you can make your assessments (Roth et al. 2016, 3).

Gurnah iterates in the above interview that he writes about things that are of concern to him, and which he is grappling to understand. Writing for him is a way of understanding situations that typically defy understanding. Through the space of the novel, Gurnah analyzes life situations and grasps social structures. Reading Gurnah is like making a series of discoveries in Africa and the West. He leads the reader into journeys with his characters. The journeys they make are overt, as well as inherent. The outside journeys of his characters are always a passage into the self. Thus, it seems as if the postcolonial novel is ultimately a tale of the subjects' route inwards into subjectivity. In the current globalized, postcolonial world order, the themes of fictional works are usually political struggles between the oppressor and the oppressed. Gurnah's novels, however, explore these struggles in manifold ways through their implications in class, space/place, morality, control, memory, solidarity, archiving and memory, and resistance. His broad canvas throws the postcolonial world into perspective, while also understanding inner drives, instincts, personal relationships, and motivations.

His various novels take the reader into starkly distant realities, whereby they seem like time travel. The reader traverses through full channels of imagination between the East and the West, yet these regions seem to be only superficially distant. In Gurnah's texts, one usually finds characters which Gurnah represents as being divided into different social categories.

On looking carefully into the text, the reader realizes that Gurnah's fictional world is peopled by humans who are alike in their drives and struggle to actualize their dreams. One is aware of connectedness between different places and times. In an interview with Shane Creevy, Gurnah states, "Well sure. The past is present. The past is present because we live in our imaginations as well as in real life, so the past that is part of our imaginative landscape is still alive for us. It's never over, in that sense, I think" (Creevy 2010, 3). Gurnah tends to thin the already fine line that distinguishes between different times. For him, the past is always at hand, not just as memories but as a reality that makes people themselves. Individuals must accommodate their personal histories to their subjectivities to be agents.

Gurnah brings a supple intelligence to the revelations of the essence of human lives. He seeks to understand the very being of humans, which one tends to forget in novels that are social commentaries, where the narrative seems to be thinned and reduced to history. The spirit of the time is with him, as is the understanding of being. Gurnah complicates things that would otherwise seem simple. It is not to say that Gurnah provides easy-to-grasp answers as the reader explores situations and people in his novels. The spirit of his narratives lies in their traversal of time. They oscillate between the past and the present. Gurnah, in his fiction, explores the enigma of subjectivity, meanings of life, and the depths of the psyche.

There are several dimensions of seeking in his novels. One finds characters trying to forge deep, inner ties to the soul, while also maintaining links to society. There are several ways in which characters seek subjectivity in Gurnah's texts, beginning from Hassan and Dottie, siblings who want to exit their life in crime-infested neighbourhoods, to Daud, who seeks acceptance from whites, Salim, who seeks deliverance from the dead weight of his family history, Yusuf, who tries to be educated and actualize his dreams, Rehana, who seeks a partner, and Abbas, who seeks respite from his memory. All these ways of finding identity are curiously related to the inner subjective world and social life of his protagonists. Gurnah seems to reveal that seclusion and exclusivity are rarely possible. Even when individuals seek to reach subjectivity through inward journeys, they can only find it through social interaction.

Gurnah's protagonists are not invincible heroes, but characters who have their share of weaknesses. They struggle to overcome these weaknesses throughout the novel. In *Pilgrims Way*, for instance, Daud's seeming weakness ultimately comes about as his strength. His silence and non-violent attitude are assertions of the power of his subjectivity in the face of racism. The characters in Gurnah's novels grapple with their pasts or dilemmas related to identity. Thus, all struggles, including those between

the oppressed and an oppressive system, are struggles of identity, and operate personally.

The antagonists in Gurnah come about as hard characters who are usually devoid of feelings and empathy. In *Paradise*, the will of the colonizer seems to be pure irrationality. Aziz, who is a relation of Yusuf's, appears to the world to be a genuine and generous being. Only those people he oppresses know his inner, brutal dimension. This brutality does not thrive on economic or emotional fulfilment, but is driven by his irrational urge to wield power over others. Such motivations are why an individual becomes a "gravel heart", synonymous with the title of Gurnah's 2017 novel. In *Gravel Heart*, he reveals power structures, and explores the connectedness of different kinds of such systems, and how this integration seeks to silence and subalternize people. The novel records the corrosion of individualities and the eroding of faith in life and family, as the subject finds himself/herself caught within binaric social configurations. The assertion, "I think therefore I am", which has been made defunct given the developments in philosophical thought in the past century, seems to have been further challenged by Gurnah's texts, as unconscious and ideological forces take sway in his fictional world. Gurnah's texts are rife with battles between discourses and counter-discourses.

At the centre of every novel by Gurnah is the enigma of the self. From one perspective, Gurnah tries to explore the self and identities, and the struggles of the protagonists as they exist in corrupt or racist societies, their romances, and relationships, and most of all, their efforts to reach authentic subjectivities. Despite the similarities in their struggles, each protagonist in his fiction is unique. It is each protagonist unto his universe. It must be emphasized, however, that Gurnah understands that the quest for subjectivity is an ongoing process. Subjectivity is forever being sought, made, and remade.

Gurnah breaks certain long-standing pacts between writers and their art of characterization. He does not describe his protagonists' physical being. His revelation of characters' lives happens through a description of the places that they inhabit. His characters, as it were, derive their identities from geographical sites. There appears to be a dialectical relationship between person and place, whereby people make spaces into places by giving them a distinctly human character, but these also define human lives. In some of Gurnah's novels, such as *By the Sea*, the geographical place itself becomes a living and breathing unit. In his texts, one comes to fathom places and people as a singular formation.

Gurnah is aware of the fact that existence is an unlimited possibility. His characters are enigmas that the reader cannot grasp entirely. Their futures

remain uncertain, and the novels do not have definite closure. Gurnah seems to iterate, through the endings of his novels, that the seeking and formation of subjectivity are ongoing processes. The characters in his books see in the end what they want, but not what they are. He explores existence more than personality. Gurnah's narratives are replete with a constant inquiry. Gurnah's novels are not certainly conclusive, and the reader, as well as the characters, continue to discover realities. Even when his characters act with surety, there exists for them the element of an uncertain future.

In Gurnah's descriptions of situations, one sometimes sees a cause-effect equation that describes these events. There remains, however, in parts of his novels, a disjuncture between an exact cause and effect. In novels like *By the Sea* and *Paradise*, evil and corrupt forces exist without reason. They simply are. There are times when logic goes silent, and things just are as they are, and this in itself, is the high logic in Gurnah's fiction.

# CHAPTER 1

## CLASS AND CULTURE GOVERNING SUBJECTIVITIES IN *GRAVEL HEART* (2017)

### **Introduction**

Within the context of postcolonial societies, Gurnah, in *Gravel Heart*, chalks out the lives of various characters *vis-à-vis* the dimension of their class differences. Reading the text from this perspective helps the reader to understand how complex social structures exist in societies with corrupt political systems, and how they warp subjectivities. In the current novel, there exist the elite class, the middle class, and the lower class, each being a complicated category and further divided into subclasses. For instance, two types of elites in the text are the wealthy and the intellectual. In this chapter, it will be studied how these classes interact, who wields power, which group of individuals is more severely subalternized, and how class is a category that can be transcended by working within power structures and eventually modifying them. Gurnah is explicitly aware of the class system in both Britain and Zanzibar. In the present text, he compares and contrasts the policies of social stratification in the two countries, and explores the complicated relationship between class and culture.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Class as a concept has been extensively theorized. Peter Brooker defines class as, “At its simplest, Marxism presents an economic definition of class, whereby class identity is established in ‘objective’ terms by the individual’s position in the economic structure of society and its attended social relations” (Brooker 2002, 32). For the current study, the focus will be on how classes differ concerning their cultures, and how specific classes exert power over others. It is viable to elaborate on the concepts of class and class struggle, as given by Karl Marx. Marx understood what class relations and structures are like, and how one can reach social equality by changing these

structures. As Marx and Engels assert, “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Bottomore 1983, 75).

The primary classes that inform the dynamics of capitalism are the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. There also exist some other economic categories, which, for Marx, are of secondary importance only. These are landlords, petty bourgeoisie, peasants, and the lumpenproletariat. The bourgeoisie or capitalist is the ruling class. They use and exploit labour-power to expand their capital. Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* describes them as the “owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labor” (12). The proletariat, unlike the capitalist, only have labour-power. They do not possess property or other sources of income. Their only source of income can come from their bodies or minds, so they use these to work for the capitalist, thereby entering an exploitative relationship. Marx and Engels point out that the proletariat is “the class of modern wage-laborers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labor-power in order to live” (Marx and Engels 1945, 12). Lower wages are given to the proletariat so that they continue to be weak, and the capitalist can continue to dominate social relations and make a profit. Marx explains the bases of class in *Grundrisse: Introduction*: “The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed. These classes, in turn, are an empty phrase if I am not familiar with the elements on which they rest, e.g., wage labour, capital, etc. The latter, in turn, presupposes exchange, division of labour, prices, etc. For example, capital is nothing without wage labour, without value, money, price, etc.” (Marx 1987, 33).

Capitalism cannot create a resolution between capital and labour, which are the two aspects necessary for production. Class struggles, therefore, continue to happen, and manifest as strikes and political efforts to overthrow the bourgeoisie. The opposition of classes comes about due to the uneven distribution of resources between them. Anthony Giddens observes, “Classes are constituted by the relationship of groupings of individuals to the ownership of private property in the means of production. This yields a model of class relations which is dichotomous [since some own and others do not, some work and others live off the fruits of those who labour]: all class societies are built around a primary line of division between two antagonistic classes, one dominant and the other subordinate. (Giddens 1971, 37). The different kinds of antagonisms happening between various oppressors and the oppressed are related to the uneven distribution of capital.

The petite bourgeoisie, or the middle class, “those who stand between the workman on the one hand and the capitalist and landlord on the other”,

are essential in understanding the text (Marx 1863, 573). This group constitutes “the small manufacturer, the shopkeeper, the artisan, the peasant” (Giddens and Held 1982, 24). The petite bourgeoisie owns some capital, but not enough to employ labour to work for them. They can be both conservative or reformist, and radical. They can try to undo the monopoly of the capitalist by leading revolution. Marx predicted that the middle class would eventually vanish. The successful individuals among them will join the bourgeoisie, and the unsuccessful will enter the proletariat class. This polarization of classes is apparent in the globalized world, given the uneven development and the growing economic gap between classes. The middle class, however, continues to evolve and exist in new forms. Marx writes in *The Capital*, “a foreboding is dawning, that the present society is no solid crystal, but an organism capable of change, and is constantly changing” (Marx 1863, 8). Thus, class structures continue to change. However, they continue to impact the identities of individuals belonging to different classes based on the power that they wield in social relations and the resources and wealth they have at their disposal.

Individuals form identities as members of social classes. Identity is not something that individuals are born with, but they acquire it by observing their position in society *vis-à-vis* others belonging to different economic categories. Marx writes:

In a sort of way, it is with man as with commodities. Since he comes into the world neither with a looking glass in his hand, nor as a Fichtian philosopher, to whom “I am I” is sufficient, man first sees and recognizes himself in other men. Peter only establishes his own identity as a man by first comparing himself with Paul as being of like kind. And thereby Paul, just as he stands in his Pauline personality, becomes to Peter the type of the genus homo [...] or instance, one man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the contrary, imagine that they are subjects because he is king” (Marx 1863, 57).

Thus, individual identities depend on, and are formed by, their economic possessions. Michael W. Kraus et al. point out:

Wealth, education, and occupational prestige are together, the objective substance of social class [...]. These objective elements of social class give rise to patterned distinctions in the material lives of lower- and upper-class individuals — living in different neighbourhoods, belonging to different social clubs, attending different educational institutions, eating different kinds of foods, enjoying different forms of recreation [...]. Observable symbols of wealth, education, and occupation are the most direct signals to others of a person’s social class (Kraus et al. 2011, 246).

Kraus points out that people tend to associate social class with material possessions and culture, but non-verbal behavioural cues signal an individual's social level. Society considers certain behaviours as being 'classy'. Also, humans place themselves in hierarchies, based on "numerous dimensions, including physical stature, respect in one's important social groups, and the capacity for power" (Kraus et al. 2011, 247). Thus, status gets ascribed into one's sense of self, based on these criteria.

Another social critic, David Byrne, contends, "the key characteristic of class is that it is mutable. Class is achieved – not ascribed like the usual comparator — caste. Now, of course, this relies on class being essentially determined by economic position — whether defined in Marxist or Weberian formal terms" (Byrne 2005, 811). Thus, class as a category is always under construction, and people can change their position from one class to another.

Richard Hoggart's descriptions of working-class culture and the link between the working and elite classes can be incorporated into this study to understand better the connection between class and culture, and how these define the individual lives of characters in *Gravel Heart*. In his book, *The Uses of Literacy*, Hoggart speaks of the working class as a collective sharing a particular identity. On the other hand, he also uses the term to suggest a clear difference from elite classes, and shows the reader the predicament of the working classes as against the other, more privileged, classes.

He asserts that popular cultural forms can be read as texts to understand working-class identity and agency. The working class has a closely tied relationship with tradition, the home space, and the local culture. The mass media are threatening these working-class cultures and ties. To use Hoggart's term, the working class is 'yielding' to Americanization and Massification, which are happening through media. They are giving in to the pressures of adhering to the dominant culture. Hoggart, through examples of different media texts, paints a picture of the 1950s, when traditional and local values started to decline in the face of hegemonic bourgeois culture. For instance, he studies the forms that advertising has taken. Advertising rests on the foundations of individual insecurities, and suggests that working-class viewers can change their lives for the better by buying certain products. They paint perfect, flawless images of life that are not usually possible. Hoggart writes about media, "Most mass-entertainments are in the end what D.H. Lawrence described as 'anti-life'. They are full of a corrupt brightness, of improper appeals and moral evasions [...] they tend towards a view of the world in which progress is conceived as a seeking of material possessions, equality as a moral levelling, and freedom as the ground for endless irresponsible pleasure [...] they offer nothing which can really grip the brain or heart" (Hoggart 1957, 277). Media numbs the mind

and senses so that individuals get conditioned to a particular way of life without analyzing their options. It tends to normalize individual attitudes. The working class begins to desire material objects because possessing them gives them the notion of being relatively better off than they are. Ownership of these helps them get a notch closer to the elite culture.

To shed light on the importance given to different kinds of culture, it is viable in the current context to introduce Raymond Williams's concepts of high and popular culture. Williams points out that there is an ongoing debate regarding the high and popular culture that tends to either assert that, "high culture — 'the best that has been thought and written in the world' — is in danger, or is indeed already 'lost', because of widespread popular education, popular communications systems, and what is often called 'mass society'. Secondly, that high culture — 'the tradition' — is, in the main, the product of past stages of society, that it is ineradicably associated with ruling classes and with elites, and that it is accordingly being replaced in modern democratic conditions by a popular culture" (William 1974, 1).

He gives a historical overview of the development of the term 'culture'. Culture has etymological roots in the cultivation or development of natural entities that are plants and animals. Later, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the term was applied to advancing mental or spiritual faculties. In the modern world, culture represents intellectual and artistic practices, and the products of such practices. Williams goes on to say, "It implies also both the whole way of life of a people and the practices and products of intellectual work and the arts" (Williams 1974, 1). Thus, culture also refers to lifestyle and social practices and institutions like religion, law, traditions, etc. A critic, Irene Tavis Thomson, writes about the differential development of culture over time, "The reigning image of culture in the 1950s was that of a set of basic values internalized early in life and shaping one's very being. By the end of the 20th century, culture was more likely to be viewed as a 'toolkit' (Swidler 1986), a repertoire of skills and styles, 'a pastiche of mediated representations' (DiMaggio 1997, 276)" (Thomson 2010, 13).

High culture is "the great body of cultural skills and the great works which embody and represent them. There would be an argument about which skills to include or exclude, but in common usage, the skills of organized thought, writing, music, the visual arts, and architecture would certainly be included" (1). The classics of arts and literature define what is considered high culture by different societies in different historical periods. Therefore, there is no single high culture, and "it is only in abstraction can it be seen as a 'body' of work at all" (Williams 1974, 1). When different societies come into contact with one another, they tend to exchange their cultures mutually. In such interactions, the dominant oppressive groups

often impose, either through coercion or hegemonically, their culture over the dominated, or subalternized, societies. In the process, the native cultures of the subaltern groups tend to be suppressed, and sometimes even pass into oblivion. Classic examples of this exertion of power over cultures are imperialism and neo-colonization, which entail westernization.

Williams goes on to assert that high culture must be critically understood, since certain intellectual and economic authorities determine it. He writes, “Within societies, it is necessary to become conscious of the selective character of the ‘high culture’ or ‘cultural tradition’ that is currently active, and to explore the relations between the selection and contemporary social structures (including such directly relevant social formations as universities)” (Williams 1974, 2). One must be aware that high culture becomes prominent through a usually-biased selection process.

Counter to high culture is popular culture. Williams defines popular culture as:

...there can be no simple contrast between ‘high culture’ (universal) and ‘popular culture’ (local). This is because every available version of high culture is always, in the senses described, local and selective, and because, in the process of being made available in a real society, it includes (whether these are noticed or not) elements of the popular culture, in the widest sense, of its own society [...]. The culture of a people, in the sense of its whole way of life, inevitably shapes and colors our explicitly ‘cultural’ institutions (Williams 1974, 2).

One cannot contrast high and popular culture because they often flow into, and interact with, one another. The elites and working classes often have multiple cultural affiliations, therefore, both high or popular culture and hybrids. Another pair of critics, Kroeber and Kluckhohn, do not believe in a singular unified culture but observed that culture was pluralistic, and that several subcultures made up the larger culture. They write, “‘each individual selects from, and to greater or lesser degree systematized, what he experiences of the total culture’ (1952, 157)” (qtd. in Thomson 2010, 13). Thus, many sub-cultures inform each cultural form. Williams also asserts that there is no single popular culture and writes about the different kinds of popular culture:

This brings us to the most crucial distinction between different senses of ‘popular’ culture. There is a kind of culture that has been developed by a people or by the majority of a people to express their own meanings and values, over a range from customs to works. There is also a different kind of culture that has been developed for a people by an internal or external social

group, and embedded in them by a range of processes from repressive imposition to commercial saturation (Williams 1974, 3).

He asserts that considering popular culture as inferior to high culture is always limiting to a holistic understanding of culture. As theorist Roger Rolin points out, “popular culture is not only legitimately a ‘humanity’ but an essential humanity, one whose study is vital [...] (popular culture) seeks the patronage of the many, whereas elite and folk culture receive the patronage of the relatively few” (Rolin 1989, 99-100). Popular culture has made itself heard, being the culture of the majority of people in a society. One cannot ignore it. People find ways to be heard, and visible, by freely articulating what makes up their subjectivities. In the text, the popular culture of the English working class is a culture to reckon with. It is an expression of their humanity. One comes to realize by reading *Gravel Heart* that the spheres of popular and elite culture overlap and change over space and time.

Thus, it is wrong to analyze cultures based on their level of superiority. One should rather understand the value that cultures have in the functioning of different societies and identities of their members. It, therefore, becomes all the more important to study marginalized cultures.

It is viable to study Bourdieu to study different kinds of economic stratifications. Bourdieu, in his book *Distinction* (1984), illuminates important connections between culture and class. Bourdieu contends that there are three types of capital: social, economic, and intellectual. He argues that culture is a form of capital. The elites have more cultural capital, since their culture is central and holds prestige value. He defines cultural capital as “instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed” (Bourdieu 1977, 488). Cultural capital comprises education and skills which place an individual in a socially advantageous place and give him/her high status in society. Individuals gain these skills and knowledge through education or experience, or families and other social groups pass them down. Bourdieu also wrote about social capital, and made the concept of social capital current. He defines it as:

The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word [...]. The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital

(economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected [...] [this network thus] exerts a multiplier effect on the capital he possesses in his own right" (Bourdieu 1986, 21).

Social capital, therefore, comprises the volume of connections that an individual has with other members of society, particularly with those persons or groups that wield money and power.

Bonnie H Erickson points out, however, "*Distinction* neglects two important aspects of social structure: personal networks and work relationships" (Erickson 1996, 217). Erickson goes on to say, "The higher the class, the more economic and cultural capital people tend to have [...]. Fields vary in the relative importance of economic versus cultural capital, but people always get ranked by some combination of these [...]. The higher ranks have more prestigious culture, and the culture helps them both to dominate and legitimate their domination" (218). Thus, elites can also be categorized on the bases of money and culture. Individuals who may not be economically elite, but are intellectuals, are elites because of the qualities of their minds.

With the advances in various kinds of media, knowledge of different cultures and their practices is readily available. People can benefit from this knowledge in moulding their behaviour and adapt to different situations. Erickson points out, "Sheer familiarity with culture is enough here. One need not like a genre, or own any related artifacts, to join a conversation about it, and familiarity is the most portable and controllable form of culture, always available if needed or suppressible if inappropriate" (Erickson 1996, 219). Thus, people today are cultural omnivores since they draw on different forms of culture. It becomes clear that culture is a way one relates to one's world. It lends individuals a point of view or a window to the world. It is a meaning-making utility of sorts.

One understands that the dominant culture ascribes norms. What is considered normal in a society depends on what the ruling class considers appropriate. In several communities, rapid modernization often changes the social standards, and the transition into these causes a state of anomie or normlessness, as new ones challenge old ideas. William A. Rushing writes in this regard:

There are two general conceptions of normlessness. One is the absence of consensus or a low degree of agreement on the dominant norms of society, such that we speak of a 'normless' culture or society; in this sense, normlessness is a *societal state*. The other conception focuses on individual attitudes so that persons who are psychologically alienated (i.e., rejected) from the dominant normative order are viewed as normless (Rushing 1971, 859-860).

Rushing contends that the idea of social class is significant in anomie theory, and “a higher level of normlessness and rate of deviance is anticipated for the lower strata because of the limited opportunity available to members of that strata” (Rushing 1971, 861). He concludes that though lower social class makes individuals more susceptible to committing crimes to raise their station, the theory does not always hold. There are people from the upper-class too, who go on to commit crimes and are normless.

## Textual Analysis

Written at a time when globalization has consolidated its hold on the globe, and when neo-colonial practices have found a new lease of life through military conquests around the world, *Gravel Heart* comes about a text that subsumes a rich understanding of this era. The time frame covered in the book is of a few decades in the past. Gurnah has had the time and experience to intellectually ponder this world from different contemporary perspectives, thereby enriching his understanding of it. Gurnah, as a creative voice from Africa, foregrounds a political understanding of the place through his novel. He creates worlds that are original in their exposition, yet leads the reader to the knowledge that they have been there. His stories are at once creative and rooted in realities that we have all known.

In *Gravel Heart*, he explores such a world through incident, character, and theme. Different characters in the text belong to different classes, and the reader comes across a plethora of cultures ranging from the colonial to anglophile, diasporic, and native African. Economic class becomes apparent in the novel in descriptions of people and places. Class comes about as a visible category that manifests in social relations and behaviour as much as in material possessions. Different characters in the novel carry different kinds of capital. Salim, being an intellectual, epitomizes cultural capital. Hakim, on the other hand, is defined by economic capital and social capital, since he is wealthy and a politician. Amir, on the other hand, is a diplomat and is characterized by social capital. Salim’s friends belong to the working class, and they occupy what is considered the lowest rung of society. Also, they have little or no command over economic resources. They are dispossessed people of the community and are socially and historically invisible.

One cannot study culture without understanding its context. There is a difference between the low classes in England and Africa. Also, as Salim’s story makes clear, individuals can undergo a transition of classes. He is born into a lower-middle-class family in Africa, and becomes a rebel in his teens. In the early years of his adulthood, he becomes relatively superior to the ordinary African young men in his home country when he migrates to

England as a student. He finally enters a group of the culturally elite when he adopts the study of English literature. Thus, class, as a category, is continually being constructed. One can use the gaps in the social structure to ascend in class. Therefore, one belongs to an economic level only temporarily. One may be born into the lower or middle class, but through achievement, one can transcend it.

Class, again, is not the same for different subaltern groups. People belonging to different genders are subalternized differently, even though they may belong to the same economic class. Salim's mother is doubly oppressed as a woman from a lower-class. She is forced into a relationship with Hakim, the president's son, to save her brother Amir's life. Over time, this very relationship with Hakim offers her and Salim social mobility to improve their social status with Hakim's help. It is, however, clear that Salim does not desire any kind of support from his mother's lover. When Salim's mother does give in to Hakim and accepts her position as his concubine, she cannot reverse her oppression. Her heart, which is symbolically the seat of moral energy, turns to stone, and she becomes a 'gravel heart'. Her subjectivity has been injured beyond repair.

Salim belongs to the organized, working, academic class. He is a part of the revolution and questions the very structures that subalternize his mother. Salim understands elite and oppressive organizations and refuses to accept their dictatorial demands. When he goes to England, he begins to reject the elite culture and overtly refined mannerisms of his uncle's family and turns to friends who belong to the lower class.

The culture of the elite classes is the most distinguished; it is the central culture. Various characters recommend it at different places in the text. That is not to say that there are no counter cultures. The novel makes several references to a popular culture that develops alongside elite culture. Amir's mansion, for instance, stands in contrast to the house where Salim lives with his lower-class friends. This home, though existing in the social margins, is a place that nevertheless makes a statement about the lives of its inhabitants. It represents their lives and culture. They may be low on economic capital, but their cultural capital cannot be denied. When Amir legitimates Salim's domination being his guardian and benefactor, Salim refuses to be intimidated by Amir's social capital and instead chooses to live away from his commanding presence.

Salim comes about as a 'cultural omnivore' since he indulges in many forms of culture. While he is intellectually elite, he also draws on the culture of his lower-class friends. Also, since he is familiar with Amir's culture, he can more readily portray himself as sophisticated, which again makes his position *vis-à-vis* cultures ambivalent. He represents cultural variety, which

is closely related to the type of his social network. In describing Salim in the light of Bourdieu's ideas, one can deduce that his cultural "orientations learned early in life are unconscious, taken for granted, hard to change, and powerful in shaping responses to later experiences" (Erickson, 1996, 222). One cannot help but observe that Salim's resistance to Amir's elitist ideology and move towards studying literature comes from an ingrained hatred of everything that tends to control and belittle people. The knowledge of his mother's position as a lower-class woman shapes his responses to life. He, however, becomes an agent when he molds his life consciously to tackle oppressive forces. As Erickson says, "Culturally speaking, family is destiny" (Erickson 1996, 223). It sums up that the primary influences shaping Salim's subjectivity are those related to his family history. Erickson goes on to state, "Within a single field there will always be more than one kind of culture that matters in the dynamics of inequality" (Erickson 1996, 224). It becomes clear as one reads the text that a systematically organized social structure where oppression happens through interactions of different social institutions oppresses the subaltern. For instance, Salim's mother is oppressed by patriarchy, the upper-class, and the control exerted by corrupt political systems.

Salim becomes increasingly conscious of how he does not fit into the elite culture. The idea of counter-culture takes root in his mind firmly when he migrates to England. Salim has a new self-consciousness about his class-induced cultural struggles, his lifestyle, and the values he has been taught. He seems to be treading a cultural war field inside his mind. At once made and undone by elite culture, he finds himself on a middle ground. He also evolves in his understanding of good and evil.

Salim's ambivalent cultural position defines his reality. When he becomes a student of literature and an intellectual, he tries to create meaning of his life experiences. Since he traverses multiple cultures, he understands that no single form of culture is the only way to make sense of the world. Being born into a modern world where there are many complex cultures coexisting in the same world, he understands that there is no mainstream culture. Instead, cultures compete for prominence, and different people adhere to different cultural values. Also, since culture is multifaceted, for Salim, it is difficult to assimilate any particular culture into his life. He experiments with culture and does not accept cultural realities at face value. He comes about as a character who grapples with different realities and analyzes them to make a unified sense of life. Culture shapes the subject subservient to different kinds of authority, like parents, peers, teachers, government officials, elders, etc. Salim rejects such authority. He challenges all sectors, including Hakim, Amir, his mother, and the academia, that

demand him to be obedient. Salim questions Amir's power, even though he lives with him and is dependent upon him. He equips himself with an understanding of his past but, at the same time, endeavors to distance himself from it. He enters the academic elite circles because he is an ardent and intelligent reader and learns to question everything. Salim renegotiates culture and understands the importance of criticizing it.

On the other hand, his father accepts the cultural values as being tied to his self-worth. Culture dictates to him what is permissible and what is not. His suffering, in part, stems from these cultural dictates. Salim's father, Masud, capitulated to the demands of culture, which aggravates his pain at his wife's infidelity. Even Salim, who is a liberal, cannot accept his mother's betrayal because there is extreme personal hurt associated with it. He sees his mother as being notoriously individualistic and lacking all idealism. His father's religiosity and morality are opposed to her wistfulness. Masud being economically backward, cannot retaliate when the president takes his wife for a concubine. He must resign from simple life and retreat into shame. In his eyes, Salim sees the "detachment and defeat" of a helpless man (Gurnah 2017, 36). Masud has no control over his life. Hakim, who is a prominent politician, destroys his already dull life with a single blow. He leads a lonely life after that.

In stark contrast to this, is the luxurious life of Amir and Asha, who are responsible for Masud's degradation. Salim observes, "Auntie Asha and him in front of the Eiffel Tower, both of them standing by stone lions in a park in Madrid, strolling around Regent's Park Zoo, leaning against a parapet by the Thames" (Gurnah 2017, 38). After a life in poverty, their subsequent rise into elite society comes about as a respite to Amir and Saida. Their change of fortune is welcomed by them even though it is at the cost of dignity.

When Saida gets pregnant with Hakim's child, she reveals this news to Salim with no regard for his feelings, "'His name is Hakim,' she said, with her hand on her belly. 'The baby's father. He is Asha's brother. Do you know who I mean? You see him on the television sometimes.' I did not speak. I could not bear the smile on her face as she said his name" (Gurnah 2017, 41). She fails to understand his position as a child from a broken family. Her initial poverty and desire for status make her life as a concubine bearable, and she trades her self-worth for wealth.

Nevertheless, Salim has no taste for the elite life like his mother's, despite his poverty. Unlike his mother and uncle, he abhors affectation and the trappings of elitism. He says, "Uncle Amir's and Auntie Asha's affectations about living in London made them seem silly to me, and the idea of going there to live with them was unattractive. *How unbearably hot*

*it is back here, is the water safe to drink, this chicken is so tough, I can't eat this bread, oh all these flies, we don't have flies like these in London"* (Gurnah 2017, 48; emphasis in original). They may be social and economic elites, but Salim is their intellectual superior. However, his encounters with the elitism of living in the West, when he goes to study in England and live with his uncle, make him uncomfortable. He is not used to such a life. It is a life where mannerisms and styles are considered more important than relationships. Using a knife and fork and speaking on the phone seem to be discomfiting tasks to him. He says, "For the first few months I had no choice but to dress as if I were on an expedition. The sweater was too hot, the coat was too big and made me feel as if I was wearing something discarded by one of the giant Englishmen I passed on the pavements" (61). He gives a detailed account of his life in the diaspora. It comes about as a discomfiting experience. Being new to the culture, knowing that he is a weak and needy relative, and living with the people responsible for his mother's degradation is too much for him to bear. The fact that he is unwelcome where he lives heightens his agony of living away from his homeland. He writes about his experience in London, "I learnt to live in London, to avoid being intimidated by crowds and by rudeness, to avoid curiosity, not to feel desolate at hostile stares and to walk purposefully wherever I went. I learnt to live with the cold and the dirt and to evade the angry students at college with their swagger and their sense of grievance and their expectations of failure [...] I tried but couldn't join the city's human carnival" (Gurnah 2017, 66).

Far from feeling uplifted in some way by migrating to England, he feels desolate, and his feelings of being let down by family accentuate. He is, moreover, made fun of in school by students coming from low-income families, because of living with his elite uncle. He writes, "My college friends teased me about that, saying that my father was an ambassador, and he lived in Holland Park, and would not allow me to play with the poor of the Third World [...]. Reshat clowned around as the self-important ambassador, stomping up and down, shouting obscenities about immigrant riff-raff in London slums (Gurnah 2017, 66). One way the lower classes come to grips with elite culture is by mocking it. It is a way of asserting their pride in their surroundings.

Another time when Salim questions authority is when he refuses to study business and instead goes on to study literature, against the wishes of Amir. He says to him, "'I won't pass the exams,' I said carefully, to disguise the quivering of my lips. Uncle Amir stiffened, restraining himself. 'I can't study this material,' I continued slowly. 'I've been missing classes all term. I haven't completed assignments for a long time. It's pointless.'" (Gurnah

2017, 71). When Salim musters up the courage to express himself and make his own decisions irrespective of his uncle, he has become an agent. It is an act of emancipation. Salim calls leaving Uncle Amir's home, a "gesture of independence" (80).

His new friends at the OAU House are far from elite, but they have their own culture. Their existence is a reiteration of the fact that, even though popular culture may not be the mainstream culture, or the norm in many ways, it certainly has its presence felt, it is the culture of the majority. Salim's friend Alex manifests pop culture. The narrator says of him, "Alex had personality in abundance, but I did not think Uncle Amir would approve of his style. He loved to wear jeans and leather jackets and shirts with two different blocks of colour, which made him look like an incompetent conman in a slum market, but he carried off this costume because he made it seem that he was doing it for fun and that he expected you to smile at the audacity of his taste" (Gurnah 2017, 85-86).

Alex is a reflection of popular culture. His dressing style is an exercise at self-expression, a mode through which he rejects elite ways of life and asserts his independence from it. Salim is aware that someone like Uncle Amir would dismiss them as being uncultured. He observes, "Uncle Amir would have described them as losers and paupers, people without talent, immigrants, none of them going anywhere" (Gurnah 2017, 86). People who do not give in to elite cultural practices seem unfavourable to the elite at the centre of society because pop culture negates their power over ordinary people. Even though society treats elite and popular forms of culture as separate entities, they do intersect. Opposed as they may seem, each of them draws on the other and have hybrid strains, as becomes clear from the description of a photograph of Alex's girlfriend. Salim observes:

Once Alex showed me a photograph of a woman looking over her shoulder at the camera in a familiar glamour pose. Her body was half turned away, and her head was bent slightly forward as if she had been looking down and had just lifted her eyes at the photographer's request. Strands of her auburn wig partly concealed her left eye. She was wearing a white running top, which was tight across her breasts, and the top six inches of her white track pants were visible in the half-body pose. (Gurnah 2017, 90)

This description reveals that the woman in the photo looks glamorous and elite due to the style of her posing, but her outfit exudes a casual fashionable aura. She seems to be in control of her life and confident in demeanor.

On another level, when one comes into control of one's income and expenditure, one becomes an agent. On migrating to England, he takes