

Dynamics of Power Relations and Sexuality: A Narrative Discourse in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart*

Saroj Kanta Bhuyan

Abstract

Within societal dynamics, power relations manifest between disparate parties, each driven by distinct objectives. These entities engage in strategic manoeuvres to assert dominance, employing various means to achieve their ends. Central to this dynamic is the utilisation of sexuality as a potent instrument, particularly by men, to establish control and ascendancy over women. Concurrently, women navigate their agency within this power paradigm, leveraging their sexuality to negotiate privileges while contending with vulnerability and marginalisation. Against this backdrop, this research offers a critical examination of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* (2017), illuminating the intricacies of asymmetric power dynamics through the prism of repressive sexuality. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's conceptual framework of power relations, the study delves into the nuanced interplay of power dynamics across gender lines, contextualised within the tapestry of prevailing cultural norms and practices.

Keywords: Gender relations; Hegemony; Marginalisation; Power dynamics; Sexuality.

Introduction

The power relationship is perceived between two or more parties, each of which strives to conquer the other. They will go to any extent to defeat the other side. In other words, power is always associated with how a person or one party reacts towards one or more people/parties who practise the notion of power by employing the values that are used as the foundation for their actions, which are also backed by their capacity to demonstrate their power. In terms of dynamics of power relations and sexuality be-

tween opposite genders, it has been interpreted in various ways by different critiques and scholars. Michel Foucault is a well-known thinker of

the concepts of power, knowledge and discourse. According to him, "power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future" (789). In his view, "power is productive," "it cannot be achieved rather it is exercised," and "it is involved in every social relation" (790). He claims that knowledge creates power, and power creates knowledge by reciprocating. There is a constant interaction between the two. He goes on to say that "knowledge is a form of power, and knowledge can be gained from power." Power, according to Foucault, is the origin of sovereignty. Power is employed as a repressive tool to control and dominate people, with an individual's body and mind being targeted for punishment.

Gramsci's definition of "hegemony" shares many similarities with Foucault's concept of power. Gramsci's theory of hegemony is "based simply on the two moments of power relations- coercion and consensus" (Ramos Jr.). According to Gramsci "Hegemonic rule" is "characterized by the predominance of consensus over coercion" as it is influenced by consent. Foucault challenges the idea that "power is wielded by people or groups by way of 'episodic' or 'sovereign' acts of domination or coercion, seeing it instead as dispersed and pervasive. Power is immanent in all social relations and that all social relations are relations of power, whether in the family or in the hierarchies of government and other social institutions. Power is merely a conception of the overall effects of these types of relationships that exist at all levels of society and within discourses." He claims "'Power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere'" (Foucault 1998). It exists on its own, but it will quickly arise when there is an activity between people. Writers across disciplines contend that power relationships have their source in sexual relationships. The inequalities prevalent at familial and social levels in terms of dominance, suppression, resistance, etc. reflect this intertwining relationship between power and sexuality.

The discourse of power relations maintains dominance over edges through sexuality, disease, crime, lunacy, and so forth. Sexuality is a tool for administering individuals; the goal is not to eliminate or repress sexuality but to understand and control it. Foucault calls it "'Bio- Power"; a power that focuses on the regulation of populations and the control of bodies." He distinguishes between sex and sexuality. Sex is both a bodily act and a familial affair. Sexuality is a personal affair including personal

wants, fantasies, and pleasures. People were not sexually repressed in the seventeenth century, but sexuality became public property and a potential resource that might be threatened or exploited in the nineteenth century. Sexuality is the result of a new type of restriction being imposed on certain actions. Marandi, Ramin, and Shabanirad investigate how discourse maintains power in society, where social injustice based solely on race, class, sexuality, and gender is continually legitimised through discourse in "Discourse, Power, and Resistance in Nadin Gordimer's *Occasion for Loving*: A Foucaultian Reading."

Discussion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* uses the instrument of sexuality to explore the subject of power relations. The book depicts its masculine character by manipulating power relations within the boundaries of body and sexuality. Asymmetrical power dynamics reshape the protagonist, Salim's family, culminating in tensions that force Saida's capitulation to Hakim, a prominent political personality, Masud's departure, and Salim's self-exile to London. Men have power in the text, but women must choose between favour and exploitation. According to Shiundu, the sexual act in Gurnah's writings leads to humiliation. According to him, Gurnah's writing shows depravity via the characters' bodies, the environments they inhabit, and the interactions between other characters' bodies. Okungu claims that Gurnah employs "sex and sexuality as agents of betrayal" in practically all of his works (127). In *Gravel Heart*, sexuality is used to justify injustice.

As Shiundu and Okungu claim that sexuality is a tool for males to obtain dominance and total authority over women in society, women too employ the same tactic to acquire favour while putting others in disgrace. Sexuality is a weapon used to support patriarchal institutions. Men make use of their leadership positions, especially with women increasingly desiring the services of leaders, to sexually exploit them. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), Julia Kristeva argues that characters tend to bury painful memories in response to the abject. She states that "the theory of unconscious, as is well known presupposes a repression of contents" (7). Abject characters are not allowed to feel the full depth of their debasement, push away painful memories, and do not realise how much their inability to deal with these negative emotions contributes to their state of depression.

Kristeva's theory of abjection that was formed in the book *Powers of Horror* could be

used to read Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* concerning its gothic features of crossing boundaries, identity and the grotesque. The Marquis's obsession with the deaths of his wives is consistent with Kristeva's conception of the abject; a place whereby the body is dehumanised to 'filth' or 'waste' and thus, expelled from the symbolic realm. The protagonist's role as a victim in waiting savours the moment of death while also surrendering her femininity to the male gaze. It further reinforces the gothic monstrosity of femininity as a source of seduction and destruction.

The Marquis's abject mentality is represented through his violent power, as well as through his abided societal relations. He devouringly has an insatiable need to dominate, kill and keep his wives making him both an authoritarian figure and an anarchist of moral reasons which exemplifies Kristeva's understanding of abjection, as that which alters the set societal standards or the symbolic frequency. The protagonist is saved from the humiliating cycle by her mother. Brought back to life through a heroic deed during the climax of the story, she manages to rescue her daughter from the shameful space of Marquis's world. This maternal practice also speaks of Kristeva who mentions how one enduring abjection can also transform identity since it is a terrifying experience.

Similarly, Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* is also applicable to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. Kerewin, Joe, and Simon are the characters in the novel who due to their exclusion and fragmented selves are placed in a state of abjection. Kerewin speaks less and is an artist who has a rather orthogonal association with her Maori culture and hence will relate to the existential crisis of self as per Kristeva. The fact that she has no relation and is culturally ambivalent reflects the important borders of abjection receding. So does the Simons's inability to express himself and Joe's remorse for abuse making them both abject people situated outside the order.

The extremely violent acts depicted in the fiction, more specifically the sustained violence from Joe against Simon, come straight to the readers as an assault on the body. The physical injuries and scars that Simon suffers are the physical representation of the abject, they are both the dreaded and the integral reminders of pain.

The silent Simon, who is not capable of being language integrated fully and opting for language and society, recalls Kristeva's abjection as "the void." He is rendered silent and is thus cut off from the symbolic universe, in this case, the existence of the community of Kerewin and Joe, and is positioned as an abject person. The outcast John's engagement with the lost

Simon embodies the whole complexity interlaced with abjection; at once loving and loathing.

It is this psychological conflict which motivates John's aggressive behaviour towards Simon and this is a perfect illustration of how Kristeva views the object; it is something that you love and yet at the same time repulses you. In *Gravel Heart*, Salim, Masud, and Saida are victims of repressive sexuality, and as a result, they end their lives in denial, rejection, and repressing unpleasant memories, while others want to live far away from their sadness. The suffering due to abjection that consistently haunts them, leads Salim and Masud to flee their homes and live in exile. Hakim, the vice president's son, utilises sexuality to establish legitimacy among civilians. When Saida requests forgiveness for her brother Amir, who is accused of raping Asha, he gets attracted and demands her for his desire. In this context, Gurnah says:

'The authorities in this case is me,' he said, 'and in my hands he will suffer for what he has done and he will deserve it. [...] Do you understand what I'm saying?' [...] Only you can save him,' said Hakim. [...] I mean for you to be clear what I am saying, plainly understand that I want you. [...] I thirst with desire for you (239-240).

In order to release her brother, Saida must "yield to him" (Hakim) (243). If it means saving him from a difficult guy Hakim, Saida's brother Amir urges her to take the drastic measure; to capitulate herself to Hakim. Hakim's egocentrism causes the existential anguish that Masud and Salim eventually acknowledge. Both of them spend most of their lives in exile. Since Hakim is the "Chief Protocol Officer" (Gurnah 232) and son to "His Excellency" (232) the "Vice President" (229), he acts in such oppressive behaviour that he remarks regarding Amir's justification for the arrest, that "that's the kind of thing people like him have been doing to us for decades, degrading our sisters with impunity" (234).

However, it is through such activities that Hakim is able to induce terror in Masud by cajoling Saida into surrendering to him to the extent of having a kid and then marrying him. This conduct is reminiscent of political persecution from the colonial era. Similarly, Hakim's actions are reminiscent of those of African dictators and colonial powers as they took power away from their people, looted their wealth and resources, and then abandoned them to fend for themselves in deplorable conditions. Masud chooses to spend the rest of his life as banishment away from his house, as a result of

Saida and Hakim's infidelity. Gurnah exhibits

the proper utilisation of defence mechanisms through his characters. Masud utilises silence to distance himself from the anxiety. In this context, Okungu in her thesis on *Admiring Silence*, contends that "silence therefore becomes the subject's way of repudiating the undesirable" (112). Masud lives quietly and tells his son Salim all about Saida after his mother has died. The reason Salim's father left them is something Saida also doesn't reveal to him. He eventually learns to stay quiet about it to maintain his family's reputation, but it continues to torment him.

According to Okungu, many of Gurnah's characters in his works go through unpleasant situations that "give rise to experiences the subject would prefer to delete or repress and thus they are reserved in the unconscious" (112). Saida's deception had a devastating effect on Masud, and as a result, he gives up hope and would rather like to be alone. Masud expresses Salim about his feelings for and devotion to his wife: "'I loved your mother,' 'I loved her even before she became your mother'" (Gurnah 185). And he claims Saida is a major factor in his decision to not shift his family to Kuala Lumpur (185). When Masud was at his home, he was also treated like an outsider by Saida and Amir, her brother, and he had to put up with all of their abuse. Since he could no longer stand Saida's treachery, he "retrieved" (245) his valued things from home and fled. Moreover, the emotions of forsaking his one true love had him cycling "aimlessly for an hour" (245) before he finally returned to his home, and a while later, he left. In the end, he could not take it anymore when Saida left for Hakim for the third time (245). He walked to Khamis' shop in a state of perplexity for the sake of shelter, but no amount of effort was effective in retrieving him.

It was a big mystery to Salim about his father's forsaken his family. Salim was always "ashamed" (30) of his father and disliked being associated with him since he could not bear the people's tattling and staring at his father, and his father's "disappointment" (52). Salim states: "I was ashamed of his abjectness and lethargy (...), I was awed by his misery by, his lethargy, by his self-neglect" (30, 52). However, Saida's brother Amir inspires this family to distance

Salim from his father, whom he calls to as a "feeble-minded man" (48). And, with the support of his sister, Amir intends to move Salim to London, so that he may begin a new life there as a legal immigrant.

The impact of knowledge on power is observed in the exploitation of Saida

by Hakim, who is exercising his elite position to serve his personal interest. The government is likewise hesitant to confront the sexual oppression of women since officials utilise it to support their personal agendas. Masud explains that "in those years the rules of sexual decorum people had lived by for generations were set aside. The new owners of the government and its offices did so contemptuously pursuing women they desired without fear of causing offence or they did so with such indiscretion deliberately to cause offence" (203).

Parents are concerned about their daughters' vulnerability to sex trafficking as they develop into physically attractive young women. However, Saida's young life was preserved safely, but she is doomed to a life of marriage that is a heartbreaker for her husband and son. Saida's betrayal is also a power that she wields via sexuality, as she proceeds to surrender her body to Hakim despite Masud's opposition to her use of power. Saida's and notably Hakim's actions generate consternation in Masud's family. Masud permanently abandons the family home, while Salim grows unruly and disrespectful to his mother as he learns more of the reality. Salim blames Hakim for his father abandoning the family, and because Hakim is the father of his mother's unborn child, Salim has a deep and abiding hate for Hakim that does not abate even in the face of Hakim's death. He becomes openly rebellious to his mother. As Salim gets maturity, he becomes "disobedient and difficult" (43). Despite his mother's reprimands, he avoids responding to his mother and walks away whenever she calls. Whenever he was sent on a task, he would either go out of his way to take the most circuitous path possible or would deliberately buy the incorrect thing (43). When he loses his temper, he destroys everything at home and barely stops short of destroying the expensive toys Hakim had bought for Munira

out of love for his daughter. Later in life, he grew to hate hearing that of the voice of Hakim and would hang up on his mother whenever he answered the phone call. In a cryptic voice, he addresses Hakim: "the destroyer of souls" (132). After the death of Salim's mother, he refuses Hakim's job offers and continues to live as an immigrant rather than return to Zanzibar because of his hatred for Hakim (258-259). As the one responsible for Salim's miserable life, Hakim evokes nothing but hatred in Salim's heart. We witness power play amongst various characters as Foucault mentions about the immanence of power dynamics "in every social relation."

Sexual oppression has resulted in marginalisation among the protagonists and their loved ones. Salim's mother passes away when he is out in Lon-

don having fun with various people. He regrets upon that of the fact of having missed out on the opportunity to hear about his mother's passing. On showing his (Salim) gloom, Gurnah writes: "I said all the abject words the moment required of me: my regret that I was not there to mourn her as a son should, the anxiety I had caused them all because I was not able to take the call" (158). Masud's bleak and wretched life is the result of Saida and Hakim's selfishness. Masud is described by Salim as "shameful, the owner of shameful useless body" (40). Saida and Hakim's egotism has a lasting impact on Salim, and he is dogged by an uncomfortable inferiority complex from an early age. He struggles to maintain meaningful connections, and when things go badly, he constantly blames himself. Salim adds about Billie: "She was ashamed of me, of the work I did, of my lack of ambition, of my strangeness, my ordinariness, my blackness, my poverty..." (140). As a result, he believes that he is to blame for every unsuccessful love affair. Writing to his father, Salim describes having an overwhelming terror and "feeling of loss" (121) that accompanied him at all times. His entire life has been shattered as a result of this incident.

Conclusion

Power relations are demonstrated in the narrative by both male and female characters, and each with their own aim. Hakim uses his power through sexuality to dominate the marginals, notably because of his hunger for Saida's body. Similarly, Saida employs power dynamics by rejecting; as Masud begs her not to appease Hakim in any situation. According to Foucault, where there is power, there is also resistance. Power and resistance coexist together. When Hakim asks Saida to sleep with him, she resists his proposal: "'You humiliate me. I am a married woman and a mother. I love my husband above any other person in this world, and I will not bring shame to his home and my son's home.'" (240). Similarly, when Saida agrees with Hakim's offer to submit herself to Hakim, Masud resists her bold decision: "Don't do it. You mustn't do it" (244). It is found that the African community exercises power through sexuality. In power dynamics, the subject is determined by the exertion of power. When power is exercised between two persons or groups, the subdued person or group is the subject of power. Hakim utilises his power to suppress Saida, as a result, Saida and her husband become the subject of exploitation by his authority. Salim also becomes the subject of Hakim's power as he is deprived of his parents' love and affection. Similarly, the reaction of resistance towards the hegemonic design of the powerful reflects the fluid nature of power politics. However, the person or group that has misused the power does not become the subject of power from the resistance of the

subdued person or group. Since Hakim is powerful, it does not mean he may also be the subject of power from the opponent.

The interaction of power becomes the primary issue in this research since it catches multiple textual pieces of evidence in the book depicting the exercise of power. People have no or little chance of evading power relations. However, it brings the results with complicated interrelationships if several parties are involved all together. It is the premise that the people without having power are unable to engage with one another. Since it is being discussed earlier, due to the inherent nature of the universe in which people exist as subjects, where power cannot be acquired, taken or distributed.

The novel exposes the impact of power machinery in perpetuating violence and shaping the lives of ordinary individuals. Louis Althusser's concepts of "state apparatus" exerting force in complex and subtle ways are evident in the narratives of the novel. Hakim's exploitation of Saida and her brother Amir is representative of the politics of power game and dominance, thereby disrupting multiple lives. The text dwells on the interplay of dominance and submission between different characters at various levels. The narrative in the novel brings out several acts of conflict that prevail in the lives of the different characters. The writer touches upon these dynamics of power relations at all levels of social behaviour and relationships. This extends to other aspects of the community, such as migration and social relations. Gurnah delineates the subtle and complex workings of these power relations and sexuality through his fictional characters that are representative of the reality that goes unnoticed.

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