The Placelessness of Place-Bound Identity: A Postmodern Reading of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* (2017)

Suraj Soni and Vipan Pal Singh

Abstract

The British novelist of Tanzanian origin, Abdulrazak Gurnah, attempts to recreate the place of a place-bound community, using characters who, for one or another, are either placeless or in search of some kind of grounding. The concept of 'placeless' existence in a geographical context is intertwined with an existence that cannot be structured, assigned values, or connected to certain purposes. Focusing on Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia as a heuristic, this article offers a close reading of Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* (2017), delving not only into the loss of a place-bound community, but also the disappearance of the community itself during and after the 1964 Zanzibar revolution. From this perspective, we reveal the way in which Gurnah's work can be interpreted as worlds within worlds, placelessness, and non-homes. The revolution has turned single-place constructs, or utopia, into the proliferation of multiple incompatible spaces, or heterotopia. By considering the interpretations generated by the characters rooted in Zanzibar, this study explores the differentiation between the sense of placelessness vis-à-vis the 1964 post-independence revolution that legitimises its counterproductive nature in shaping the sociocultural landscapes. This analysis incorporates various juxtapositions, such as the interplay between materialism and productive/non-productive characters.

Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah, Michel Foucault, placelessness, heterotopia, postmodern, *Gravel Heart*

Introduction

The concept of place implies a geographical space on Earth, filled with the communities and the individuals in it. It is often perceived as the sphere of geographical imagination, being both locatable and facilitating quantitative assessments of actual places. Places are not just limited in the sense of geographical pinpointing on the map, but also deep-rooted in physical, mental, and social relations, these construct a place as a continuous production of sociological interaction.[1] A place is a social construction, and subjective experience often alters the place through association. Yet, in premodern times, the community or group of people belonging to a particular class, gender, race, or sex were 'placed' in the sense of being rooted in a town or region that was in some way associated with their identity. Due to the local or place-bound identity not being exposed to other places in ancient societies, the culture created binary oppositions, always privileging one half: white/black, male/female, oppressor/oppressed,

Dr Suraj Soni is an assistant professor of English in the School of Languages at the Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dharamshala (Himachal Pradesh), India. Email ID: surajsonie@gmail.com. Dr Vipan Pal Singh is working as an Associate Professor in the Department of English, School of Languages, Literature & Culture, Central University of Punjab, Bathinda (Punjab), India. Email ID: vipanpal@cup.edu.in.
[1] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Hoboken: Blackwell, 1991 [1974]).

objectivity/subjectivity, self/other, west/east, and so on. The dominant culture discursively produces these binaries in a geographical sense that contributes to the structure of society and widespread change in the actual landscape.

To suggest, as Michel Foucault does, that in the late twentieth century there has been a move from an epoch of history into an epoch of geography is surely to overstate the case, if only because history is often used to relate this 'move' to developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so giving these spatial issues a historical context.[2] During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, society witnessed a large-scale transformation in the physical landscapes of Europe and North America, as well as in their cultural landscapes. This societal transformation — denoted by the modernisation of housing, cities, transport, and workplaces — is commonly believed to have transformed once and for all the spatial and temporal dimensions of the Western world and begun the eclipse of traditional place-bound communities. In this history of the eclipse of the place-bound community, "the scale of human existence becomes less local and more global,"[3] and the function of place and local community is "transformed from a protective and mutually supportive construct to a much regressive one in which local variance might resist progress and development."[4] In this sense, place gives way to 'placelessness' as the diverse cities and towns of Europe are increasingly replaced by placeless and monotonous environments. This reconstruction of landscapes can be understood as the imposition of straight lines and grids symbolising 'modern' economic development, characterised by mass consumption and production and linked to the capitalist organisation of economic and social forces. Indeed, the notion of place extends beyond geographical attributes; it incorporates representational space linked to the literary, artistic, and aesthetic aspects.

In this way, as Henri Lefebvre argues, "every society - and hence every mode of production … produces a space, its own space."[5] The construction of social space in postmodern society is not always materially present in cities and towns, and its traces are not always evident. The history of space "must account for both representational spaces and representations of space but above all for their interrelationships and their links with social practice."[6] Lefebvre suggests that space is not just a physical or conceptual entity but is deeply intertwined with societal dynamics, cultural perceptions, and human behaviours. To fully grasp the complexities of space throughout history, one must analyse how spaces are represented and how these representations influence social interactions and practices. The main force here is global capitalism, which has its own spatial dynamics but operates through social space, affecting it as well as being affected by it. This brings the problem of space and place, which Yu-Fun Tuan contends, "space is more abstract than a place. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value."[7] Space and place require each other to define themselves based on the "security and stability of place, we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space."[8] The relationship between place and

---

[2] Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1 (1986), pp. 22-27.

[3] Paul Smethurst, *Space, Time and Place in the Postmodern Novel* (London: University of London, 1996), p. 6.

[4] Smethurst, *Space, Time and Place in the Postmodern Novel*, p. 6.

[5] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 31.

[6] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 119.

[7] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 6.

[8] Tuan, *Space and Place*, p. 6.

space is often conceptualised as place being present and space being absent. Nevertheless, the place cannot be identified as an object simply because it, like space, is continuously produced but also because its presence is often representational. The place serves as the focal point for various human, material and social activities, and any change of place in the geographical or material context inevitably impacts the representational spaces or lived experience.

This raises the subject of power to examine the ideological substance and the social, communal, and political consequences of historical trajectories. *Gravel Heart* (2017) aims to capture the impact of the 1964 Zanzibar revolution on the lives of ordinary people. Abdulrazak Gurnah (b. 1948) is a postcolonial cosmopolitan Zanzibarian writer born and raised in Zanzibar, Tanzania, but who lives and writes in London.[9] He migrated to the United Kingdom from Zanzibar as a refugee during the 1964 Zanzibar revolution. This displacement becomes one of the major themes in *Gravel Heart*, not only creating the alienation or disruption of place-bound identity but also depicting the psychological stress of a foreign land. He is ready to "confront issues such as patriarchy and racism which, according to him, had been evaded in the earlier fiction by African writers such as Ngugi, Achebe and Soyinka."[10] Most of Gurnah's works, such as *Paradise* (1994), *Admiring Silence* (1996), *By the Sea* (2001), *The Last Gift* (2011), and *Afterlives* (2020), revolve around the historical setback, creating migration and displacement, "a yearning for home, financial and psychological problems, whether from East Africa to Europe or inside Africa, and the culture clash they create."[11] Counter-narratives often lay out ruptures and discontinuities in the dominant ruling class, as their version of the truth does not justify the social and cultural practices of all places. Additionally, such issues are evident in the concept of heterotopia, marking the space as socially constructed, and in which certain dominant ideology legitimise their suppressive sociopolitical imperatives. This article primarily focuses on contextualising the spatial tension as resistance to a prevailing and logocentric homogeneity, transforming place-bound constructs or utopias into a proliferation of numerous incompatible interpretations or heterotopias. In this way, the article will analyse, in detail in the following sections, the concept of place, whose power shapes the more significant understanding of the culture in which space operates, of which *Gravel Heart* presents a phenomenon of postmodern placelessness via the idea of heterotopia.

The Concept of Heterotopia

Michel Foucault argues that the present epoch will "perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near-far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed."[12] This illustrates a rupture in the dominance of time, marking space as a significant concern in the analysis of contemporary society. Foucault's aim here is to critique modern utopian spaces, referring to them as "sites with no real place … sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society. They

---

[9] Nureni Oyewole Fadare, 'Post-Revolution Crisis, Migration, and the Quest for Self-Identity in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart*', *Anafora*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2022), pp. 101-118.
[10] J. A. Kearney, 'Abdulrazak Gurnah and the "Disabling Complexities of Parochial Realities"', *English in Africa*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2006), pp. 47-58.
[11] S. Moorthi et al., 'Going to the Bittersweet Roots vs. New World Blues in Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* - A Psychological Analysis', *World Journal of English Language*, vol. 14, no. 1, (Dec. 2023), pp. 431-439.
[12] Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 22.

present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces."[13] The idea of utopia identifies a state where everything is perceived as perfect, particularly in terms of law and governance; some believe this state is achievable when it is actually a non-place. According to Foucault:

> There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.[14]

He calls these places heterotopias and contrasts them with the idea of utopia, depicting heterotopias as 'real' places produced by society as part of its continuous coming into being. The heterotopia can juxtapose several incompatible spaces in a single real place; Angela Maye-Banbury notes, "heterotopia evokes an ultimate place of otherness."[15] This produces a setting where people can engage (voluntarily or involuntarily) in counter-mainstream experiences. It scrutinises distinct sites in a particular society where certain spaces operate to constitute a culturally based ambience of a place, person, or group. Such places exist outside 'known' and, by implication, "conventional worlds (*de dehors*) whilst remaining intact as 'worlds within worlds' in their own right."[16] Nevertheless, Foucault does not conceptualise the tension between social space and place, nor does he analyse the shift in significance from temporal constraints to spatial relations. He attempts to reconceptualise space, sites, and place by marking a clear-cut demarcation between heterotopias and utopias — a perpetual tension persists between the two, and in the postmodern theoretical frameworks, this manifests itself as an uncertainty between real and unreal space — akin to the uncertainty between fiction and fact, history and story, text and the world in the postmodern novel.

The 1964 Revolution in Zanzibar as Heterotopic Spaces

The 1964 post-independence revolution united an imagined community of Black indigenes in Zanzibar who had long been marginalised by a conglomeration of foreign powers at various times, including the Portuguese, Indians, the Omani Arabs (assisted by the Europeans), the United States, and the British.[17] This exploitation of Blacks led to the emergence of class solidarity, which became the backdrop for the 1964 Zanzibar revolution, leading to high-handedness, genocide, ethnic cleansing, incarceration of opposition political parties, sexual promiscuity among the new ruling elites, power drunkenness and corruption.[18] Revolutions — out of necessity — create visions of interconnected, disconnected, and reconnected places with

---

[13] Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 24.
[14] Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 24.
[15] Angela Maye-Banbury, 'Strangers in the Shadows – An Exploration of the "Irish Boarding Houses" in 1950s Leicester as Heterotopic Spaces', *Irish Geography*, vol. 51, no. 1, (2018), pp. 115-136.
[16] Maye-Banbury, 'Strangers in the Shadows', p. 117. Emphasis in original.
[17] Nadra O. Hashim, *Language and Collective Mobilization: The Story of Zanzibar* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), p. 165.
[18] Fadare, 'Post-Revolution Crisis, Migration, and the Quest for Self-Identity', p. 102.

a specific relationship to everyday life. These are the sites which Foucault offers as heterotopic spaces. Foucault postulates a contrast between utopias and heterotopias, suggesting some of the most perplexing relations. An "effectively enacted utopia"[19] is a paradox, an imagined place in the world. A heterotopia can contain such a contradiction because, as Foucault notes:

> [T]hey destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together'. This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the fabula; heterotopias (such as those to be found so often in Borges) desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences.[20]

The heterotopic spaces also challenge the idea that revolutions are only confined within certain limits and borders. It is not just about 'Where is revolution?' but also about understanding the significance of the place in revolution. Foucault is interested in sites that possess the unique characteristic of being interconnected with all other sites — in effect, they "suspect, neutralise, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect."[21] By contrast, Lefebvre saw heterotopias as a prerequisite in servicing modern industrial society and the inevitable creation of spatial inequalities. In the words of Lefebvre, heterotopias create environments of "contrasts, opposition, superpositions and juxtapositions [that] replace separation, spatio-temporal distances. The theory goes something like this: space (and space-time) changes with the period, sphere, field, and dominant activity".[22] Subsequent accounts have argued that heterotopias are more pluralist and holistic in nature.[23]

In this way, *Gravel Heart* depicts the 1964 post-independence revolution in Zanzibar, examining the "mass exodus of people of other ethnic backgrounds"[24] and the challenges they encounter in the diaspora, such as unemployment, accommodation problems, and identity crises. The novel begins with the narrator, Salim, who has a strange relationship with his father, Masud. Salim reminisces about the house he was born in, "the house [he] spent all of [his] childhood in, the house [he] abandoned because [he] was left with little choice."[25] This is a time when many Zanzibarians would have preferred to stay back. Zanzibar is a place of diverse ethnic groups, exemplifying cosmopolitanism and a multiracial society. As Salim reminisces about his house, the actual 'landscape' of Zanzibar can be defined in the following way:

---

[19] Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 24

[20] Michel Foucault, *Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 19.

[21] Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 24.

[22] Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003 [1970]), p. 125.

[23] Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Hoboken: Blackwell, 1996); Arun Saldanha, 'Heterotopia and Structuralism', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, vol. 40, no. 9 (2008), pp. 2080-2096.

[24] Fadare, 'Post-Revolution Crisis, Migration, and the Quest for Self-Identity', p. 101.

[25] Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Gravel Heart* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 6.

> These were streets built for the shuffle and slap of human feet, and for bodies to rub shoulders against each other, and for voices to murmur and reverberate their courtesies and curses and outcries. Any freighting that was necessary was done by handcarts and human muscles. Nor was the road straight like a proper road, though it was paved with old flagstones, worn by time and traffic and the water, which ran over them during the rains.[26]

This quotation indicates the sense of peace and harmony in the actual landscape of 1964 pre-revolution Zanzibar. Salim's perspective on his surroundings is pivotal in understanding the concept of heterotopia. A perpetual tension exists between the pre-revolution and post-revolution periods, highlighting the contrasting ideologies implemented by the government and the revolutionary drive to reshape established social, political and cultural structures. In this sense, Salim further outlines the transformation in the surroundings "when the lanes were quiet and empty, not as crowded and dirty as they became later."[27] This illustrates the shift in the physical landscape, undermining modest achievements made during the pre-independence era of Zanzibar. This insight reflects the counterproductive nature of the 1964 Zanzibar revolution. The chaotic change in the cultural landscape of Zanzibar makes Salim angry, struggling to reconcile with his place-bound identity. Salim views this inglorious shift in the history of Zanzibar from harmonious co-existence among the people to discordance and disorientation, leading to the postmodern placelessness faced by immigrants in the diaspora, such as joblessness, existential crises, cultural shock, social isolation, and political discrimination.

Salim calls his father "the silent man" who "did not want" him.[28] He believes his father is not aware of the horrific atmosphere that he experienced in childhood. The 1964 Zanzibar revolution created a sense of disorientation and uncertainty. The social upheaval in the form of revolution catalyses the destruction of place-bound identity. The destruction of identity is visible as Salim and his parents grapple with the loss of their family's ancestral home. Thus, the revolution creates a heterotopic space that disrupts identity and forces Salim to confront the perplexity of his cultural heritage and personal history, as shown in the subsequent passage:

> For several years, before things went wrong, my father Masud worked as a junior clerk for the Water Authority in Gulioni. His job there was respectable and secure, a government job. That was before I really remember and I only know that time of his life as a story. When I remember him clearly he worked at a market stall or he did nothing, just sat in his room. For a long time I did not know what had gone wrong and after a while I stopped asking. There was so much I did not know.[29]

This quotation reflects societal changes in Zanzibar wherein revolutionaries acquire the power to alter the existing social and political structure. The revolution creates an 'in-between' space where new norms emerge, often challenging existing law and order. This transformation in place is called heterotopia. Salim's father is the victim of this change, especially when his wife is snatched from him by one of the revolutionaries. His silence is caused by the revolution,

---

[26] Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*, p. 8.
[27] Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*, p. 8.
[28] Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*, p. 3.
[29] Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*, p. 10.

reflecting the profound impact of the societal transformations. A curtain of silence is "drawn over the assaults on women, perhaps because in Zanzibar, as in other deeply patriarchal, feudal societies, rape is taken to be a sign of collective dishonour."[30] Additionally, the revolution brings suffering and unemployment to the people, many of whom are later arrested or jailed. Salim, as well as his father, juxtapose the 1964 pre-revolution era — an age compared with tranquillity and bliss — with Zanzibar's turbulent and chaotic post-revolution period.

Following the 1964 post-independence revolution, Zanzibar transformed from a heterogeneous and cosmopolitan society into an institution of state terrorism and ethnic chauvinism. This period saw mass killings of Omani Arabs, Indians and people of other foreign nationalities, the sacking of opposition members, and the ultimate breakdown of its fragile multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan landscapes. African activists revolted against the Arab population and "overthrew the sultan in a violent rebellion against the colonial state."[31] This brought a significant shift in power dynamics as long-suffering African counter-elites entered a new phase of public life, creating a society that excluded "Arabs from the avenues of wealth and power."[32] The revolution was sparked because, as Nureni Oyewole Fadare notes "the black Zanzibarians saw the 1963 independence as more of the freedom of the Omani Arabs from the British while the Blacks saw themselves still under the hegemony of the Omani Arabs who enslaved the black people for ages."[33] Here, as Babu, leader of the Umma Party, writes, the people rose not simply to "overthrow a politically bankrupt government and a caricature monarchy. They revolted in order to change the social system which had oppressed them and for once to take the destiny of their history into their own hands."[34] The retaliation of Blacks in Zanzibar against the Omani Arabs and Indians was counterproductive, as it brought agony rather than relief to the Zanzibarians, marking the revolutionists' self-serving behaviour, recklessness, corruption and desire for revenge. These rebels, as the British chose to call them, "were mainly [Afro-Shirazi Party] Youth League members together with a large number of angry lumpen unemployed youth supported by disaffected ex-police officers."[35] That first night of the revolution, they witnessed chaos everywhere. One of the things the Umma Party did was to "explain the purpose of the revolution – it was not to kill, rape, or steal, but to change the country. Some people listened but obviously not everyone."[36] The actual landscapes of Zanzibar witnessed the subversion and tragic aftermath of the revolution, resulting in sexual and psychological violence. The floating nature of space-times — not limited to the border or culturally embedded location — is what Foucault offers as prototypical heterotopia, an object linked to Black Atlantic, a transnational phenomenon, not a fixed and unchangeable reality:

> The boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that
> is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and

---

[30] Amrit Wilson, *The Threat of Liberation: Imperialism and Revolution in Zanzibar* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), p. 49.
[31] Hashim, *Language and Collective Mobilization*, p. 166.
[32] Hashim, *Language and Collective Mobilization*, p. 166.
[33] Fadare, 'Post-Revolution Crisis, Migration, and the Quest for Self-Identity', p. 105.
[34] Wilson, *The Threat of Liberation*, p. 3.
[35] Wilson, *The Threat of Liberation*, p. 47.
[36] Amrit Wilson, *US Foreign Policy and Revolution: The Creation of Tanzania* (London: Pluto Press, 1989), p. 12.

> that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilisation, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development, but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*.[37]

The notion of heterotopia, as Micol Seigel and colleagues note, therefore, "standing as it does at the juncture of a series of important concepts—the transnational, the spatial, the potentially transformative or even revolutionary—deserves some generous attention."[38] These heterotopic spaces outside the nationalised boundaries suggest the worlds within worlds, placeless places and non-homes of human civilisation.

In this context, the 1964 Zanzibar revolution represents a significant disruption in the contemporary historical landscapes, leading to the most complex transformation of the socioeconomic and political narrative. The revolution offers insights into sociocultural theory, especially the theory of social space and place in contemporary society, challenging the sense of irrelevance or anachronism. Gurnah tries to demonstrate the tension between revolutionaries and the government as a significant catalyst among Zanzibarians, a political activity that reshapes the political landscape of Zanzibar. Following the aftermath of the 1964 Zanzibar revolution, Saida, Salim's mother, says, "You cannot imagine the terror of it, the arrests, the deaths, the humiliations. People were driving each other mad with rumours of new outrages, new decrees, with news of further sorrows."[39] Black atrocities during and after the revolution — especially in moments of intense social and political upheaval — did not bring any positive reforms concerning the existing socio-political structure. The indigenous Blacks indeed occupy most of the government positions formerly occupied by the Omani Arabs and the Indians, replacing the only political structure of Zanzibar.[40] The period of the 1964 revolution was a turbulent time for Zanzibarians, many of whom were forced to seek asylum in Europe, the United States, Asia, and other regions, as revealed in the following statements made by Saida:

> Thousands of people were forced to leave because they had no work or money, and had no choice but to throw themselves on the mercy of a brother or a cousin living in a more fortunate place, further up the coast or across the ocean. […] It was a time of turmoil, their lives torn apart like that, and they were forced into a kind of callousness in order to survive.[41]

This condition of Zanzibar worsens after the 1964 uprising by Blacks who have been long oppressed by Omani Arabs and Indians. The revolution tries to restructure and redefine the political contours of Zanzibar but fails due to existing ethnic tensions and social inequalities.

---

[37] Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 27.
[38] Micol Seigel, Lessie Jo Frazier, and David Sartorius, 'The Spatial Politics of Radical Change, an Introduction', *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2012), p. 2.
[39] Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*, p. 20.
[40] Fadare, 'Post-Revolution Crisis, Migration, and the Quest for Self-Identity', p. 114.
[41] Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*, p. 23-24.

In this process, Ahmed Musa Ibrahim, the maternal grandfather of Salim, an esteemed scholar who "preferred to speak about justice and liberty and the right to self-fulfilment,"[42] becomes another victim of the revolution conundrum. He is part of the anti-colonial intellectual movement, viewing himself as connected to leaders such as Gandhi, Nehru, Saad Zaghloul, and others. The political condition of Zanzibar before the revolution is as follows:

> It was the 1950s in a colonised territory, not the place to speak in this way. The British authorities preferred to forget that they were conquerors who ruled by coercion and punishment, and considered any outspoken comment on this as sedition. The empire was very fond of that word, but it was almost too late for words like that: sedition and legitimate government and constituted authority. It was time for them to go. There were heated debates late into the night; shouted conversations in cafes, rallies where activists spoke with hatred and derision; friends fell out and turned secretive as political lines were re-drawn. They were heady times, exulting times, watching British police officers scowl powerlessly on the fringes of rallies as the crowds roared, knowing that the departure of the mabeberu and their lackeys and stooges was unavoidable.[43]

This depiction illustrates the socio-political atmosphere that influenced Ibrahim to resign from the position of colonial government. These tensions arise due to socioeconomic disparities, ethnic divisions, and growing calls for independence. Ibrahim becomes an informal adviser in one of the political parties, giving public speeches and participating in rallies. His ideas are a "raucous challenge to the colonial order and taunted political rivals."[44] This public association of Ibrahim as a part of anti-colonial intellectuals got him killed during the revolution. The anti-colonial activities, nevertheless, are the worlds within worlds, juxtaposing the British Empire with local or regional political organisations. The disintegration of closed space in colonised Zanzibar challenges the implied narrative of the British, resulting in the postmodern placelessness of the place-bound community. This social unrest is further complicated by the revolution, which is quite visible in Ibrahim's family, as Saida discloses:

> When news of the uprising reached them, their father's instructions were that if soldiers or gunmen appeared at the house, which they were certain to do as he was such a well-known campaigner for the other party, there was to be no yelling and screaming. Everyone but him was to lock themself in an inner room because there were rumours of assault and violence and he did not want his wife and his children to be exposed to insult or harm.[45]

The revolution is viewed as unstable and ambivalent in its outcomes, as atrocities committed by Blacks against Zanzibarians triggered mass killings and an exodus of intellectuals, professionals, and experts. These killings and subsequent exodus contributed to the failures in the development of existing norms and power structures due to a dysfunctional political system. Hence, the 1964 post-independence revolution in Zanzibar marked a significant chapter in the

---

[42] Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*, p. 15.
[43] Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*, p. 17.
[44] Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*, p. 18.
[45] Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*, p. 19.

postcolonial revolution of Blacks, challenging the hegemonic structure of Omani Arabs and Indians, often backed by foreign powers like the British, Europeans, and the Americans.

However, the 1964 revolution did not resolve the deep-rooted ethnic tension and social inequalities; instead, it ignited the tension more, turning the world upside down. The land owned by Saida's parents is "confiscated and became state property, to be given away to a zealot or a functionary of the revolution, or to his mistress or cousin."[46] The shift in the power of the existing structure highlights the displacement of the place-bound community, marking these spaces as heterotopia. The revolution as heterotopic spaces are not often freely accessible, making them between penetrable and inaccessible. Entry into these spaces generally requires adherence to certain rules and protocols, with disobedience resulting in punishment or even death. Saida reveals the way her family chose to live during the revolution:

> They all did what they could to show the men with guns that they were obedient, harmless, pathetic people without the slightest spark of defiance or rebellion. […] When they started to go out more regularly, it was to see how changed and quiet the streets were, how some houses stood empty or had new people staying in them, how armed men in unfamiliar uniforms stood on street corners or wandered into shops to help themselves to what they needed. They learnt to avoid eye contact, to avoid provocation, to avoid looking at the acts of malice performed in plain sight.[47]

This quotation reflects how sociocultural landscapes transform into an unfamiliar space locus. The changes in the perspective of Saida's family do not just eclipse the traditional place-bound identity, but their trauma also contributes to dissociative amnesia as they had witnessed the horror and terror during the revolution. Amid this terror, many individuals choose to migrate. This migration of individuals to other locations contributes to the decline of place-bound communities, resulting in placelessness, non-homes, racial segregation, and ethnic cleansing. Saida's mother also tries to do that by getting help from a brother or a cousin living further up the coast, but before she "could carry out her desperate plan, before preparations to leave had even progressed beyond words and words and endless oaths never to forget her children come what may, she fell suddenly ill."[48] This never-ending suffering impacts the psychological condition of Saida's mother, eventually leading to her death. The terror faced by Saida's mother or family as a whole during the revolution shook their fundamental connection with the land. In this way, Saida says, "We had left so much behind in the old house and were afraid to ask for it back: clothes, furniture, clocks, books, photographs."[49] The situation highlights the contrasting scenarios between the past and present, suggesting that returning to the past could hurt them while remaining in the present might lead to losing their family's ancestral land. This land is more of the identity that seems to be lurking in Saida's story as she struggles against her own identity, trauma, and placelessness.

Salim's grandfather, a renowned scholar, Maalim Yahya, is another victim of the 1964 Zanzibar revolution. He works as a teacher but lost his job shortly before the uprising. Salim

---

[46] Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*, p. 19.
[47] Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*, p. 20.
[48] Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*, p. 23.
[49] Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*, p. 26.

— while observing the 1963 group photograph of Yahya in the headmaster's office — reflects on the condition of many teachers who "were killed at that time."[50] Yahya departs from Zanzibar to Dubai with his wife and two daughters, but Masud stays behind. This family disintegration dramatically shifts from the modern place to the postmodern placelessness, creating pauses, twists, breaks, ruptures and discontinuities determined by power relations. The displacement finds a new life, identity and place outside of its own construction. Therefore, the 1964 indigenous Black revolution in Zanzibar is counterproductive in producing the sociocultural landscape. It is impossible to comprehend the misery, trauma, and terror the Omani Arabs and the Indians, or the people of Zanzibar as a whole, have suffered or witnessed during the revolution. The transformation of places in the material or geographical aspects is bound to impact the cultural and social landscapes of the place. Understanding that the 1964 Zanzibar revolution (i.e., the consequences of the marginalisation of Blacks at various times by various foreign powers) is not just limited to the nation, not territorial or state-based boundaries. This revolution has turned single-place constructs, or utopia, into the proliferation of multiple incompatible spaces, or heterotopia. The revolution discombobulates the Zanzibarians by reinvigorating the most familiar places, turning them into heterotopias.

Nevertheless, the post-revolution period demonstrated a widespread change in the actual landscape, initiating the eclipse of traditional place-bound communities. Salim's father, Masud, says, "With the revolution, that politics turned violent and punitive, and forced many people into flight because they feared for their lives and their futures".[51] Masud's father departs from Zanzibar to find a good job in Dubai. This displacement of Masud's family marks a rupture in the collective social space. The rupture in space is also evident when the Government of Zanzibar imposes strict censorship policies, restricting freedom of speech and expression. The control over the organic production of space owned by the section of citizens is being exploited by authoritative or dictatorial governance. The apparent utopia is turned into what Foucault calls heterotopias. In this manner, Masud states:

> Everyone knew who the censor was, and that he was a loud-mouthed, timid man who cut anything that he thought the powerful might dislike: no Sindbad or Aladdin or Ali Baba because film-makers who liked those stories could not imagine these people without a turban, which meant a suspicious nostalgia for the overthrown sultans, none of those silk robes and flowing beards and kissing of fingertips for the same reason, no spy thrillers because the Russians were always the villains and the Russians were now the government's friends, no empire adventures because the British were so sneeringly superior and always defeated their dark-skinned antagonists, and no undressed black people because that made them look like savages.[52]

This passage delves into the intricate social space now controlled by the totalised government. The ideological imperatives highlight the way in which heterotopic spaces are shaped and manipulated. These places are often reconstructed to favour a particular societal group with more power and influence over social relations. The revolution, by nature, brings social and

---

[50] Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*, p. 10.
[51] Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*, p. 180.
[52] Gurnah, *Gravel Heart*, p. 183.

cultural transformations in society, but it has its own rules and regulations that oppose the existing governing structure. This includes the disorderliness of Zanzibarian society and the violent, charged nature of the revolution.

The aftermath of the 1964 revolution was witnessed by a series of challenges, including unjust arrest and detention of opposition parties, widespread corruption, authoritarianism, abuse of power, and disintegration of the family. These issues highlight the dynamic social and political structure that emerged in post-revolution Zanzibar, controlling social unrest and instability. Salim's family — whether from the side of his mother or father — is a victim of the tumultuous events of the 1964 revolution. Salim's return from London to Zanzibar in search of answers about his family's past — which was impacted by the revolution — creates a sense of discontent and uneasiness. He encounters the sociocultural alterations in the post-revolution landscapes of Zanzibar, leading to the disassociation of his childhood memory and a sense of place-bound identity. This experience reflects a broader postmodern cultural phenomenon — dominated by global economic forces — which leads to the disappearance of place-bound communities. Salim struggles to reconcile with his homeland in the age of rapid change, showing the placelessness of a familiar land. The displacement of Salim in post-revolution Zanzibar is evidenced as a place-bound community either migrating to another place because of trauma created by the revolution or being sacked by the global economic market. The change in social structure and cultural landscapes leads to unfamiliarity, or loss of place-bound identity. Salim is a victim of such transformations — worlds within the world, placeless places and non-homes — situating Foucault's heterotopia in the complex interplay of power dynamics and social structures.

Conclusion

Despite the concept of heterotopia, Foucault contributes to the abstracting of space rather than seeing it as a continuous process of production. For Lefebvre, the continuous production of space by society is crucial, as is recognition of the different but interrelated kinds of space that contribute to this production. Lefebvre believes that Foucault focuses too much on one particular 'isolated' site and looks at it all by itself, for example, "spaces with the spaces of institutions, the control and surveillance within institutionalised spaces (such as prisons), the space of the body, and epistemological spaces".[53] These institutionalised spaces of the body are being analysed in a more isolated way that disconnects from the space around it. Foucault can calmly assert that "knowledge is also the space in which the subject may take up a position and speak of the objects with which he deals in his discourse".[54] Foucault never really distinguishes between the different kinds of space to which he refers, "nor how it bridges the gap between the theoretical (epistemological) realm and the practical one, between mental and social, between the space of the philosophers and the space of people who deal with material things".[55] Foucault also does not analyse the shift in significance from temporal constraints to spatial relations.

---

[53] Smethurst, *Space, Time and Place in the Postmodern Novel*, p. 28.
[54] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith (London and New York: Routledge. 1972[1969]), p. 201.
[55] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 4.

This article, by discussing *Gravel Heart* as a literary representation of sociocultural landscapes and reconceptualising the placelessness of place-bound identity — seeks to explore the 1964 Zanzibar revolution through Foucault's concept of heterotopia. By showcasing the colonial practice of the British Empire, Gurnah, to a certain extent, challenged the legitimacy of the ruling governance, which subsequently brought the marginalised voice to the forefront in order to distort the hegemonic practices. The revolution of Zanzibar — in its own nature of construction — creates heterotopic spaces that fail to conceptualise or acknowledge the continuous production of social space. Salim's encounters with the space of the 1964 post-revolution society mark the inception of postmodern placelessness, leading to not just the decline of the place-bound community but also its eventual disappearance.