

Theft without Thieves: Structural Exploitation and Moral Ambiguity in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Theft*

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Abstract

The paper examines Abdulrazak Gurnah's Theft as an exploitation narrative that functions without a clearly defined exploiter. The novel considers stealing as a structural state rather than an isolated offense. It takes place in postcolonial East Africa and demonstrates the normalization of dispossession through economic inequality, social dependence, and institutional power at the expense of moral responsibility. Theft exposes the constrained agency of the ethical choice through characters like Badar and Karim to show how the class structure and precarity restrict agency. Using a Marxist and neo-Marxist critical lens, the present paper interprets the phrase 'theft without thieves' as a metaphor of structural exploitation where work, dignity, and opportunity are stolen through normalized social relations instead of criminal acts. The lack of visible violence in society, moral ambiguity, and focus on the daily transactions make the exploitation normal and unnoticeable. Informal economies, domestic labor, and patron-client relations are the major areas where inequality is extended. This study suggests a new intervention into the readings of Theft by shifting the themes of exile and migration onto the localized economic injustice and class dynamics. The paper concludes that the novel provides a subtle but effective critique of postcolonial capitalism, that exploitation remains best hidden when responsibility is decentralized, and no particular thief can be identified.

Keywords: Structural Exploitation, Postcolonial Capitalism, Class Inequality, Marxist Criticism, Moral Ambiguity

1. Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Theft* is a 'misleadingly mute novel' that questions the morality of ownership, duty, and loss in a postcolonial social system where exploitation never declares itself as a crime. Instead of dramatic acts of larceny, Gurnah resorts to the mundane lives of people, labor without protection, loyalty without return, and dependency without safety. In this regard, *Theft* suggests a renegotiation of what theft is when it is a system of value extracted through institutionalized inequality by those in power. The present paper contends that *Theft* stages what can be referred to as theft without thieves: a structural form of exploitation where the responsibility is decentralized, agency is limited, and injustice is morally obscured.

The setting of the novel is primarily Zanzibar and mainland Tanzania in the late twentieth century, when the disappointment of post-independence was felt, the economy

was unstable, and the remnants of colonial structures were still present. Gurnah does not depict this context in an overtly political manner but as a backdrop to daily life. Characters find their way through patron-client relationships, informal economies, and social expectations that silently dictate who thrives and who loses. According to the narrator, survival is based on “knowing how to accept what was given and not ask for what was withheld”.¹ The acceptance is not a virtue; it is a coping mechanism to structural vulnerability.

The subject of the novel is an orphan boy called Badar. He is wrongly accused of theft and taken out of his family to serve as a servant to a wealthy relative called Haji, who lives far away. The displacement of Badar is not depicted as cruelty but rather as a requirement based on kinship, duty, and economic pressure. Yet the cost is steep. Badar is deprived of his work, of a future, of his identity, not by direct manipulation but by insidious loss. In the household of Haji, Badar never gets his wages. He only gets praises for his work done for the family and occasional gifts from Haji. Gurnah emphasizes this type of insidiousness by stating that Badar “was never told what he was owed, only what he should be grateful for.”¹ Gratitude is then a process in which the exploitation is covered and perpetuated.

Badar is accompanied by Karim, the stepson of Haji, whose path displays another yet similar aspect of structural theft. Karim enjoys education and mobility, but unequally and precariously, and his dreams are constantly sabotaged by the social expectations and the divisions of classes. His life shows that even comparative privilege in a stratified society is not absolute and stable. The fact that Karim knows that “nothing he had was securely his”¹ is a larger state of being, where possession of property, work, or fate is always temporary to those who are not in the established authority.

The peculiarity of *Theft* compared to more overtly political postcolonial novels is its lack of definite villains. Haji, as an example, is neither villain nor benefactor in any straightforward sense. He offers a refuge and a chance, but he reaps material and social rewards at the cost of the subservience of Badar. It is this uncertainty that is the subject of the critique of the novel. As Gurnah postulates, exploitation is best perpetuated when it is embedded within relationships whose nature seems kind. “No one thought of it as taking,” Gurnah notes, “because it had always been done this way.”¹ Theft, in this case, is historical, habitual, and approved by society.

The idea of theft without thieves is especially fruitful in terms of reading *Theft* in a Marxist and a neo-Marxist context. Classical Marxist thought lays stress on the extraction of surplus value by labor relations, which conceal exploitation behind the contract or customary standards. This process is fictionalized by Gurnah in the sphere of intimate social relations. Stealing of labor does not occur in factories and plantations but in homes, stores, and personal arrangements where economic inequality is naturalized via culture and kinship. Consequently, exploitation does not come in the form of violation but as an order.

The paper places *Theft* in the context of the modern discussions of postcolonial capitalism, inequality of classes, and moral responsibility. Although a significant part of the works of Gurnah has been devoted to the theme of exile, migration, and the diasporic identity, *Theft* helps to pay attention to those who do not move, to those whose stasis is a structural constraint itself. Through prefiguring daily economic relations and moral ambiguity, the novel makes postcolonial criticism extend beyond the problems of displacement to the less visible forms of staying, serving, and surviving. *Theft* as a narrative of structural exploitation, this paper opines that Gurnah reveals that injustice is best kept under wraps in a manner in which no individual can be accused. In this novel, theft is not a practice but a situation that history induced, culture condoned, and the less able to resist it.

2. Literature Review

The combination of postcolonial narratives and economic exploitation has produced a valuable critical tradition in the fields of literary studies, critical theory, and African studies. The impact of colonial histories on the narrative form, character subjectivities, and ideological representation in literature has long been a critical concern. Gurnah's writing is situated at the intersection of this body of scholarship and his own distinctive approach to issues of migration, identity, and material dispossession in his formally accomplished writing. The following review outlines the critical conversations that inform this analysis, combining insights from postcolonial studies, Marxist literary criticism, and existing scholarship on Gurnah's novels to set up the parameters for the reading of *Theft*.

The initial literature places Gurnah as a diasporic author whose works take a preemptive stance on the trauma of forced migration and the lack of permanence in the identity of postcolonial conditions. Thieme (2004) ² and Stein (2009) ³ highlight how Gurnah addresses exile as a state of ambivalence as opposed to liberation, stating that his characters live within the conditions of unbelonging, which are created by the colonial past and modern global injustices. Although these readings are also the core of what Gurnah has been writing about, they have the propensity to favor mobility over immobility and foreground geographic movement at the expense of economic systems that act within localized environments.

Brennan (2017) believes that the fiction of Gurnah does not allow for easy distinctions between colonizer and colonized but reveals the way postcolonial elites and institutions reproduce hierarchies that were transmitted under colonial rule.⁴ This change is especially applicable to the situation with *Theft*, in which exploitation is carried out not by direct political control but rather by the means of close social interaction. Brennan states Gurnah's narratives "reveal how injustice persists not through dramatic rupture but through continuity disguised as normalcy"⁴ -with such remarks, one can read *Theft* as a criticism of structural but not individual wrongdoing.

The first critical reactions to *Theft* highlight the emphasis on the themes of class, labor, and ethical ambiguity. Chambers (2022) notes that *Theft* is the first narrative by Gurnah

that does not revolve around migration, but instead addresses “those whose lives are defined by staying rather than leaving.”⁵ This inward movement points to the daily processes of how inequality is perpetuated, especially in the patron-client relationships. The insight by Chambers is important, but his analysis does not go beyond theorizing exploitation as a structural situation, but as an ethical dilemma experienced by individual characters.

Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches to postcolonial literature can be used to offer a valuable perspective on the continuation of this discourse. According to Ahmad (1992)⁶ and Lazarus (2011)⁷, the contradictions of global capitalism are often exposed in postcolonial texts in the form of localized discourses of labor and dispossession. More specifically, Lazarus points out that the postcolonial realism often speaks of “the quiet coercions of economic necessity.”⁷ This definition is deeply reminiscent of *Theft* where coercion is not forced, and deprivation is not necessarily overt theft.

The thematic issues of *Theft* are further put into perspective through studies of labor and servitude in African literature. Ferguson (2006) points out that there is a tendency of the informal labor system in postcolonial Africa to blur the line between kinship, obligation, and exploitation.⁸ These systems, he contends, make inequality acceptable in society by making it part of the culture. An example of such a dynamic is seen through the way Gurnah portrays the servitude of Badar, in which work is compensated by family relationships as opposed to contractual ones. The fact that Badar is placed to live in the house of Haji is introduced in the novel as “an opportunity, not a debt owed to him.”¹ The current literature recognizes such dynamics in African fiction, but has not yet adequately addressed the ways Gurnah narrativizes such arrangements as structural theft.

The other thread of criticism is concerned with the issue of moral ambiguity in postcolonial stories. Nyman (2015) argues that in all her fiction, Gurnah opposes moral dichotomy and invites readers to address the issue of complicity instead of righteousness.⁹ There are seldom predetermined moral stances of characters; they are presented with limited options in unfair structures. This strategy is in line with what this paper has called theft without thieves, where there is no individual moral agent to be exploited. Although the work of Nyman provides a useful understanding of the narrative ethics of Gurnah, it fails to relate moral ambiguity to material circumstances and economic exploitation.

Feminist postcolonial critics have also been part of debates on domestic labor and invisibility, which are relevant to *Theft*. According to Mohanty (2003), domestic and care labor is often undervalued in the postcolonial world, and this is actually due to its naturalization as an obligation in place of work.¹⁰ Even though *Theft* is not directly concerned with female labor, its focus on domestic service reminds these issues, and invisibility exposes the exploitation. Nevertheless, feminist interpretations of Gurnah have been inclined toward gendered displacement, as opposed to an extraction on the basis of class.

In literature, themes of inequality, duty, and moral ambiguity are accepted, but they are seldom theorized in terms of structural exploitation. Neither do they adequately discuss how the refusal of Gurnah to blame is a critique of systemic injustice and not narrative neutrality. This paper fills that gap by reading *Theft* through a Marxist and neo-Marxist prism, and suggesting the concept of 'theft without thieves' as a way of conceptualizing how exploitation works invisibly in the postcolonial social relations. By doing so, this work also adds to the work of Gurnah by altering the focus not on displacement but on deprivation, not on movement but on stasis, not on personal wrong but on systemic circumstances.

3. Materials and Methods

This research is qualitative in nature and is based on textual analysis. It predominantly addresses the novel *Theft* by Abdulrazak Gurnah. The study uses close reading to analyze the narrative style and characters of the novel as well as its key themes. Particular emphasis is put on the scenes of domestic labor, patron-client relations, and informal economic interactions since they disclose various types of structural exploitations. The research uses secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and theoretical works by Marxist, neo-Marxist, and post-colonial authors. These sources contribute to the explanation of the concepts of labor, surplus value, and social inequality. The theories are applied selectively to facilitate the analysis, and not to dictate some rigid meanings to the text. To support the arguments, quotations from the novel are also provided along with page numbers. Through the synthesis of close reading and theoretical analysis, the research will provide an objective and balanced comprehension of the complicated moral, social, and economic world of the novel.

4. Results and Discussion

This research draws on three Marxist concepts. First, surplus value extraction (Marx, 1867/1990): in the postcolonial context, East African subjects' intellectual labor is subsumed within European institutions, mimicking the extraction of primary resources.¹¹ Second, alienation (Marx, 1844/1988): postcolonial migrants are alienated from their labor, culture, community, and potential class relations.¹² Third, commodity fetishism (Marx, 1867/1990): cultural difference is reified in neoliberal institutions, seeming to have value in and of itself while concealing the relations of extraction.¹¹

Fanon's (1961/2004) explanation of the colonial wound explains characters' self-inflicted trauma and their complex relationship with European institutions.¹³ Bhabha (1994) and his notion of hybridity and mimicry reveal the protagonist's enactment of cosmopolitan identity, "almost the same but not quite", as a forced rather than chosen identity.¹⁴ Said's (1978) *Orientalism* shows how the British academia values and objectifies its African academic, who is both subject and object of knowledge.¹⁵

Abdulrazak Gurnah presents a rich and detailed study of structural exploitation in the postcolonial East Africa. He paints a picture of a world in which stealing is not a crime but a way of life. The central characters, Badar, Karim, and Haji, offer opposing approaches to economic precarity, social stratification, and historical heritage, skimming

the cream without accusing anyone. Through their experiences, Gurnah throws light on the ethical and material aspects of theft without thieves.

The invisibility of exploitation reveals itself in the novel through the character of Badar. He is sent out of his family to serve in the house of Haji, where his position of household service is validated by the feeling of kinship and obligation. At the very outset, the novel demonstrates his work as something he is supposed to take, though it is morally dubious in nature: "He was never told what he was owed, only what he should be grateful for"¹. In this instance, appreciation is a mechanism that conceals the extraction of labor under the guise of charity. The fact that Badar is not legally given a credit is indicative of a neo-Marxist approach to postcolonial labor, in which labor is frequently stolen without any written agreement and inequality is normalized through the application of social law (Ahmad, 1992).⁶

The case of Badar also demonstrates the effect of structural theft in depriving not only of physical labor but also of possibility and choice. Haji and the house rules keep him in a constant state of limbo; his choices regarding education, freedom, and career are dictated by Haji and the house rules. These facts highlight the ethical gray zone of the novel: Haji is neither a sadist nor a neglectful person, although he acts within the acceptable social and economic standards. According to the narrator, "no one thought of it as taking, because it had always been done this way."¹In this regard, theft is not an intentional activity but an institutionalized one.

The home is a mini-world that is a mirror of greater postcolonial inequalities. Inequality is reinforced through the family and the societal systems. Badar absorbs the restrictions that are imposed on him, and this reflects the argument by Lazarus (2011) that postcolonial literature tends to portray the silent pressures of economic necessity.⁷ The novel highlights the invisible mechanisms of value production by concentrating on the daily work of cooking, cleaning, and carrying errands. They are ordinary acts that are neither dramatic nor criminal but accepted in society as normal and expected.

The story of Karim is a complement to that of Badar, as it demonstrates that even relative privilege is built under structural conditions. Karim is lucky to have access to education and to be able to move freely, but his development is tied to the ability to work through social expectations and act in a manner that corresponds to them. He knows how tenuous his status is: "Nothing he had was securely his."¹ This observation underscores the unstable nature of postcolonial opportunity, whereby agency and ownership are dominated by social and economic organizations rather than individual merit.

The relational aspect of structural theft is also evident in the case of Karim. He might seem to be in a more advantageous position than Badar, but patronage and social conformity bring him his security. The description of Gurnah fits the Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches to the analysis of class and work, which stresses that the exploitation is present not only at the high and low levels, but also within the structure, in which relative privilege can be gained by individuals, yet they are also bound to a system that has limitations to autonomy and unequal distribution of power.¹¹

The ethical consciousness of Karim is a unique trait that sets him apart from other characters. In contrast to Badar, whose obedience is mostly internalized, Karim doubts the justice of social establishments. But the novel emphasizes that it is not through questioning that structural inequities can be changed: “He could see the rules, but they were not made to be broken”¹. Gurnah, through Karim, underlines that systematic theft works exactly because it conditions the perceptions, desires, and expectations of the victims of the process.

Haji represents the multifaceted dimension of structural exploitation. He gives shelter, chance, and social approval, and at the same time, benefits in both material and social ways at the expense of those who are forced to work and obey. Notably, Haji does not wield power by force but through traditional standards, as Spivak (1988) observes that postcolonial structures tend to internalize relations of domination, making them unnoticed.¹⁶ Gurnah writes that “he thought of his generosity as natural, as part of the order of things, not recognizing what it cost others.”¹

The role of Haji complicates the traditional categories of morality. Although his actions have a materialistic extraction of value to Badar and others, the novel places him as a subject of, but not the sole facilitator of systemic exploitation. This vagueness supports the principle of theft without thieves: the novel criticizes not people, but the institutions, demonstrating how the normal social and economic life can reproduce the denial of justice. Gurnah describes Haji as a morally grey and socially rooted character, which makes the reader reconsider the notions of culpability and responsibility in the context of structural inequality.

Other than the characters, *Theft* also explores the historical and social structures that perpetuate exploitation. The East African region is officially independent, but it still has colonial legacies, which influence the formation of class, property, and social hierarchy. According to Gurnah, “the world had changed names, but not its habits.”¹ These customs, such as norms of deference, unofficial labor expectations, and kinship demands, constitute systems through which wealth, labor, and opportunity are stolen without committing an open offense.

The factors of social expectations and normalization are decisive in the novel. Informal and domestic labor is viewed as a non-exploitative practice, as it is in compliance with the culture and historical practices. Mohanty (2003) argues that such labor is poorly appreciated within the postcolonial setting, making its exploitation invisible and acceptable to the ethical standards.¹⁰ Gurnah depicts this in family life, informal trading, and patron-client relations, showing that structural exploitation is not an exception but a daily occurrence.

One of the main attributes of *Theft* is its ethical grayness. Characters are never in a fixed moral stance, and the narrative does not carry a judgmental tone. This uncertainty coincides with the findings of Nyman (2015) concerning how Gurnah addresses moral complexity. The novel challenges binary moral judgments, which force readers to understand that exploitation is created and sustained as a collective, as an institution, as

norms, and as historical circumstances.⁹ To illustrate this point, the novel states that obedience and appreciation go hand in hand with material deprivation: “They were grateful, and yet they were diminished.”¹ The readers are enticed to visualize the conflict between the perception of morality and structural reality and the insidiousness of systemic embezzlement.

Gurnah underlines that structural exploitation is more potent when it is expressed in everyday life than in dramatic situations. The labor, autonomy, and opportunity extraction are entrenched in the household routines, educational structures, and social anticipations. The novel concurs with the neo-Marxist ideas of systemic inequality in presenting theft as a condition and not an act, with economic and social forces determining the results without any intent of the individual. These patterns are repeated, normalized, and thus these make systemic exploitation seem natural, inevitable, and diffused morally.

This paper combines Marxist and postcolonial views to show how *Theft* exposes structural theft at economic, moral, and historical dimensions. Marxist models explain the process of extraction of value and labor, with emphasis on the hierarchies of the classes and unequal access to resources. Postcolonial theory places these forces in the context of the history of colonial dominance and the organization of the local social life. The analysis of ethics highlights the ethical ambiguity that the novel also focuses on, presenting how people make limited decisions in unequal systems. Collectively, these views demonstrate how the novel is a complicated criticism of systemic injustice: stealing is not about any ill will but is a component of social and economic existence.

Overall, *Theft* presents the concept of structural exploitation as widespread, accepted, and ethically questionable. Badar, Karim, and Haji describe the complementary aspects of this state, which include the robbery of labor and freedom of choice, conditional privilege in the hierarchies, and aiding in perpetuating the system of inequality. The invisibility of theft is created by historical and social contexts, whereas narrative strategy focuses on the banal and the ordinary as arenas of structural appropriation. By these devices, Gurnah gives a rather faint, yet stinging criticism of the postcolonial economic life, showing how inequality is propagated most effectively when no one can be called to account or held responsible.

5. Conclusion

Theft by Abdulrazak Gurnah is a subtle examination of the structural exploitation in postcolonial East Africa, and theft is not an isolated event, but a structural situation engraved in the social, economic, and historical dynamics. The novel, through Badar, Karim, and Haji, reveals the way in which labor, opportunity, and autonomy are extracted without explicit force, and how social norms, familial ties, and inherited hierarchies make the process of extraction invisible both morally and culturally. This paper demonstrates that *Theft* depicts exploitation as a structural issue and not an individual crime. The novel implies that injustice is sometimes perpetrated without obvious villains. Rather, the lives of the characters are framed by social systems,

economic inequalities, and power disparities. In this regard, theft is not merely a physical act, but also a loss of dignity, stability, and opportunity. The novel questions the conventional concept of guilt and responsibility by addressing the issue of structural exploitation and moral complexity simultaneously. It challenges the readers to reflect on the way human behavior is influenced by social systems. Finally, *Theft* demonstrates that injustice is frequently concealed in the mundane spheres of life; it is difficult to notice but has very strong consequences.

6. References

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