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EXCLUSION, BUREAUCRACY, AND RACIALIZED MIGRATION IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S *BY THE SEA*

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ABSTRACT

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2002) interrogates the paradoxes of hospitality within the asylum process, revealing how conditional welcome operates as a mechanism of control rather than care. Through a critical engagement with Jacques Derrida's *hostipitality* and Achille Mbembe's *necropolitics*, this article examines the protagonist's arrival in England and his subsequent placement in a deteriorating boarding house as an extension of state governance over displaced subjects. While asylum ostensibly signifies protection, the conditions imposed upon refugees transform hospitality into an instrument of containment, where inclusion is contingent upon submission to bureaucratic and social constraints. Drawing on Derrida's theorization of hospitality as inherently violent, the study demonstrates how the host's power to grant refuge simultaneously reinforces the foreigner's subjugation. Mbembe's *necropolitics* further illuminates the ways in which asylum seekers exist within a state of managed decay, where their survival is permitted yet systematically devalued. Gurnah's portrayal of the asylum process thus critiques the host nation's myth of benevolence, exposing the coercive structures that sustain postcolonial modes of regulation and exclusion. By situating *By the Sea* within this theoretical framework, the article argues that the novel problematizes the ethical contradictions of asylum policies, revealing how displaced individuals are reduced to spectral presences within the host nation's borders.

Keywords: *By the sea*, Derrida, Hospitality, Necropolitics, Postcolonial migration.

ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'IN *BY THE SEA* ROMANINDA DIŞLANMA, BÜROKRASİ VE IRKÇILIĞA DAYALI GÖÇ

ÖZ

Abdulrazak Gurnah'ın *By the Sea* (2002) adlı romanı, iltica sürecindeki misafirperverlik kavramının paradokslarını sorgulayarak, koşullu misafirperverliğin nasıl yardımdan ziyade bir kontrol mekanizması olarak işlediğini ortaya koymaktadır. Jacques Derrida'nın misafirperverlik ve Achille Mbembe'nin nekropolitik kavramlarıyla eleştirel bir ilişki kuran bu makale, eserin başkahramanının İngiltere'ye varışını ve ardından harap haldeki bir pansiyona yerleştirilmesini, yerinden edilmiş özneler üzerindeki devlet yönetiminin bir uzantısı olarak inceler. Sığınma görünürde koruma anlamına gelse de mültecilere dayatılan koşullar misafirperverliği, kabul edilmenin bürokratik ve sosyal kısıtlamalara boyun eğmeye dayandırıldığı bir çevreleme aracına dönüştürür. Derrida'nın misafirperverliği doğası gereği şiddet içeren bir olgu olarak kuramsallaştırmasından yola çıkan bu çalışma, ev sahibinin sığınma sağlama gücünün aynı zamanda yabancının boyun eğdirilmesini nasıl pekiştirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Mbembe'nin nekropolitiği, sığınmacıların, hayatta kalmalarına izin verilen ancak sistematik olarak değersizleştirildikleri, kontrollü bir çürüme durumu içinde var olma biçimlerini ortaya koymaktadır. Böylece Gurnah'ın iltica sürecine dair tasviri, ev sahibi ülkenin iyilikseverlik mitini eleştirerek sömürgecilik sonrası düzenlemeleri ve dışlama biçimlerini sürdüren zorlayıcı yapıları açığa çıkarmaktadır. Makale, *By the Sea* romanını bu kuramsal çerçeveye yerleştirerek, sığınma politikalarının yarattığı ahlaki çelişkileri tartışmaya açtığını ve yerinden edilmiş bireylerin ev sahibi ülkenin sınırları içinde nasıl hayalet varlıklara indirgendiğini göstermeye çalışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *By the Sea*, Derrida, misafirperverlik, nekropolitika, postkolonyal göç.

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Introduction

The unprecedented scale of global displacement has brought renewed urgency to questions of hospitality, particularly as nation-states grapple with their ethical obligations toward asylum seekers. With over 100 million people forcibly displaced worldwide, the traditional frameworks of hospitality face mounting pressure against increasingly restrictive immigration policies (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2024). The contemporary landscape of migration is marked by a stark asymmetry. Scholars have noted that while highly educated and skilled migrants, as well as short-term labor migrants, are actively recruited and welcomed, undocumented and irregular migrants, along with refugees and asylum seekers, face heightened scrutiny and restrictive policies (Inglis, Li, & Khadria, 2020, p. 1). This tension manifests not only in political and social spheres but also finds profound expression in postcolonial literature, where writers explore the complex dynamics between hosts and guests in contexts of forced migration.

This article asks a central question: how does Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* reveal the ambivalences of hospitality when read through the dual lenses of Derrida's *hostipitality* and Mbembe's *necropolitics*? In pursuing this question, the analysis highlights how the novel not only dramatizes the refugee's struggle within the bureaucratic machinery of asylum but also interrogates the broader ethical and political limits of hospitality in a postcolonial context. Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2002) lays bare these tensions by depicting the journey of Saleh Omar, an asylum seeker navigating the structural constraints of refugee status in Britain. His arrival at Gatwick Airport and his subsequent placement in a deteriorating boarding house encapsulate the paradox of conditional welcome: he is granted refuge, yet his existence is regulated, surveilled, and ultimately dehumanized.

This paradox reflects a broader pattern of displacement in contemporary society. As Diken argues, "almost all people are in one way or another displaced, or become immigrants, because of globalization, increasing mobility, urbanization, tourism, etc." (1998, p. 124). Migration, in this sense, has become emblematic of modernity, signaling deeper socio-political transformations. Rushdie reinforces this notion, describing the migrant as "the archetypal figure," (2002, p. 415) while Said characterizes the present era as "the age of the refugee" (2000, p. 174). Saleh Omar's displacement from postcolonial Zanzibar underscores this phenomenon, revealing how the asylum process relegates individuals to a liminal space where belonging remains precarious and contingent upon state authority.

This article examines *By the Sea* through Jacques Derrida's *hostipitality*, a term that encapsulates the inherent violence within the concept of hospitality. Derrida argues that while absolute hospitality is an ethical ideal, in practice, hospitality is always conditional, requiring the foreigner to conform to the host's legal and cultural frameworks. The state's demand for legibility, evident in the protagonist's interrogation at immigration and his forced linguistic and social adaptation, demonstrates how hospitality functions as a mechanism of sovereignty rather than an unqualified act of care. Féher and Heller's comparison of the nation to a house with doors that can be opened or closed to strangers is particularly relevant here (1994, p. 143). The host nation constructs asylum as an act of benevolence, yet this welcome is mediated by strict conditions, akin to a house where some guests are permitted entry while others remain outside, denied access. Saleh Omar is not simply received; he is categorized, measured, and subjected to bureaucratic scrutiny, reinforcing the host's power over the guest. His assigned accommodation further exemplifies this dynamic. The neglected, unhygienic conditions of Celia's boarding house reveal how hospitality, rather than offering dignity, serves as an instrument of discipline, positioning the refugee within a hierarchy of worth.

Building upon this analysis, Achille Mbembe's *necropolitics* extends this critique by framing asylum as a site where state power is exercised not only through inclusion and exclusion but through the management of life itself. Mbembe argues that sovereignty functions by determining which lives are valuable and which can be left to wither in spaces of neglect. The protagonist's placement in a dilapidated space, where survival is permitted but dignity is eroded, materializes this necropolitical logic. He is not outright expelled, but neither is he fully integrated; rather, he occupies a liminal zone of existence where his presence is tolerated yet systematically devalued. The squalor of his accommodations, the restrictions imposed on his movement, and the bureaucratic indifference toward his well-being exemplify how the state's hospitality operates within a necropolitical framework that renders certain subject's disposable.

Methodologically, this study employs close textual analysis of certain parts, combined with postcolonial theoretical frameworks, to examine how Gurnah's narrative challenges dominant humanitarian discourses surrounding asylum. The novel critiques the host nation's myth of benevolence, revealing how the asylum process is less about humanitarian care and more about sovereignty, control, and the regulation of displaced bodies. For the purpose of this article, the analysis will be confined to one of the protagonists, Saleh Omar, specifically his entry into England and his initial stay at Celia's boarding house, where the challenges of adaptation, performative exile, and bureaucratic scrutiny intersect. His time in Celia's establishment encapsulates the postcolonial condition of the asylum seeker, where displacement is not merely geographic but also epistemic and existential. Stripped of agency and subjected to an exclusionary system that perpetuates colonial hierarchies, Saleh's experience reveals how asylum operates as an extension of imperial control, rendering the refugee both visible as a subject of regulation and invisible as a bearer of rights.

Theoretical Framework

Scholarship on Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* has engaged with Jacques Derrida's theorization of hospitality, particularly the fraught interplay between welcome and exclusion that Derrida terms *hostipitality*. Notably, Laya Solaymanzadeh's dissertation, titled *Hospitality, Multiculturalism and Narrative Agency in Abdulrazak Gurnah's By the Sea, The Last Gift and Gravel Heart*, provides a substantial engagement with Derridean hospitality, applying it to a broader discussion of Gurnah's treatment of migration and multiculturalism. While Solaymanzadeh offers a comprehensive reading of *By the Sea* within this framework, my study narrows its focus to Saleh Omar's arrival in England and his initial accommodation at Celia's boarding house. This selective approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the material and symbolic conditions of hospitality at the moment of entry, which I argue is particularly revealing of the tensions between asylum-seeking and sovereign control. Moreover, this study extends the theoretical conversation by integrating Achille Mbembe's concept of *necropolitics* to examine how sovereign power structures the conditions of hospitality within the necropolitical logic of migration governance. Rather than treating hospitality as an isolated ethical dilemma, I argue that the novel critiques asylum policies as a site of sovereign control where state power renders refugees simultaneously visible as subjects of regulation and invisible as rights-bearing individuals.

Jacques Derrida's concept of hospitality provides the primary theoretical foundation for understanding the inherent tensions in acts of welcome. In *Of Hospitality*[2], Derrida articulates the fundamental paradox between unconditional and conditional hospitality. Derrida argues that unconditional hospitality is the ideal form of hospitality where one says "yes to who or what turns up" (2000, p. 77) without imposing any conditions or expectations. This means welcoming the guest, whether they are a foreigner, immigrant, animal, or even something non-living, without asking for their name, identity, or any compensation (Derrida, 2000, p. 77). It demands offering "all of one's home and oneself" (Derrida, 2000, p. 77) to the guest unconditionally. As opposed to the ideal unconditional hospitality, Derrida introduces conditional hospitality, which is governed by rules, norms and limits (2000, p. 77). Derrida identifies a fundamental contradiction or *antinomy* between these two forms of hospitality (2000, p. 77). On one hand, the law of unconditional hospitality demands absolute openness, allowing guests to cross thresholds freely. On the other hand, the laws of hospitality impose conditions to manage practical realities, such as rights, duties, and societal rules. These conflicting demands create what Derrida calls *aporias*, which are unsolvable dilemmas (2000, p. 77). For example, while the host should ideally welcome the guest unconditionally, practical constraints like safety, legality, or resources necessitate conditions.

However, this theoretical ideal inevitably confronts practical limitations, as the very act of extending hospitality requires conditions, rules, and expectations. This tension creates what Derrida terms *hostipitality*, or *hostis* where the potential for hostility always resides within hospitality itself. In other words, Derrida connects the idea of hospitality (welcoming others) with hostility (fear or rejection of others). These terms are intertwined because welcoming the foreigner always carries the possibility of conflict. He notes that the foreigner reminds us of our own vulnerabilities. Hospitality is haunted by the "ghost" (Derrida, 2000, p. 4) of alterity, or the unsettling presence of someone who is different. In Derrida's words, "The hostis responds to hospitality in the way that the ghost recalls himself to the living, not letting them forget" (2000, p. 4).

Derrida demonstrates how the presence of the foreigner (*xenos*) compels society to reexamine their limits, underscoring the conflict between embracing others and resisting their otherness through the lens of philosophical discussions in Plato's works. Derrida conceptualizes the foreigner as a "foreign son," (2000, p. 9) a figure who exists both within and outside the family of logic and philosophy. When the foreigner confronts and questions the authority of foundational thinkers such as Parmenides, who is often seen as the "paternal authority of the logos," (Derrida, 2000, p. 10) they take on the role of a symbolic parricide. In doing so, they metaphorically challenge and undermine the established authority of this philosophical father.

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[2] The work originally appeared in French as De l'hospitalité in 1997, emerging from a series of seminars held in 1996.

This symbolic parricide finds resonance in Plato's *The Sophist*, where the xenos challenges the authority of established thinkers.

Derrida refers to Plato's dialogue *The Sophist*, where the foreigner (*xenos*) challenges authority. In *The Sophist*, the *xenos* (foreigner) is seen as a sophist, someone who "speaks differently" (Derrida, 2004, p. 4) and is mistrusted by the city or state. Derrida highlights the prejudice against the foreigner for their different language or ideas (2000, p. 4). The foreigner's inability to speak the host's language serves as a significant barrier, accentuating feelings of exclusion and reliance on others. This dynamic reveals a paradox within the concept of hospitality: the expectation that the foreigner must conform to the host's conditions contradicts the notion of an unconditional welcome. Furthermore, the inherent power imbalance in hospitality becomes evident, as the host holds control over the relationship, rendering it fundamentally unequal:

> That is where the question of hospitality begins: must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to speak our language, in all the senses of this term, in all its possible extensions, before being able and so as to be able to welcome him into our country? If he was already speaking our language, with all that that implies, if we already shared everything that is shared with a language, would the foreigner still be a foreigner and could we speak of asylum or hospitality in regard to him? This is the paradox that we are going to see become clearer. (Derrida, 2000, pp. 15-7)

Derrida's analysis underscores how the foreigner's presence disrupts established political frameworks and cultural norms, particularly concerning language and the sense of belonging. While hospitality is often regarded as a virtuous act, it is intricately intertwined with structures of authority and mechanisms of exclusion, complicating its idealized perception.

Through an exploration of the rights and obligations inherent in hospitality, Derrida reveals its dual nature as both a mechanism for fostering human connection and a system that imposes constraints on full inclusion. Hospitality is inevitably shaped by power dynamics, which are influenced by societal and familial norms. The foreigner, or xenos, is neither entirely alien nor wholly excluded; rather, they are bound to the host through a mutual pact that is a reciprocal agreement that entails specific rights and responsibilities (Derrida, 2000, pp. 23-5). This relationship is inherently bidirectional, requiring the foreigner to uphold their end of the pact by adhering to its terms. Hospitality is contingent upon the foreigner's identity being tied to a family or group, as they are welcomed precisely because they can be named and categorized (Derrida, 2000, p. 25). However, this very condition restricts the possibility of unconditional hospitality, as the host's demand for the foreigner to conform to predefined categories such as possessing a family name or social identity, which in turn introduces limitations that undermine the ideal of unconditional welcome (Derrida, 2000, p. 25). Furthermore, Derrida points out that hospitality is controlled by the host or city who has the power to welcome or reject the guest (2000, p. 40). In other words, the host must have control over their home to decide who to welcome, filter, or exclude. The paradox Derrida identifies becomes particularly acute in the context of asylum systems, where the state's sovereign right to control borders exists in tension with ethical obligations toward those seeking refuge. This theoretical framework helps illuminate how hospitality operates simultaneously as both welcome and control, protection and surveillance. As Derrida observes, the host's power to offer welcome is inseparable from the power to set conditions upon that welcome, creating an inherent power differential that shapes all subsequent interactions.

Achille Mbembe's necropolitics builds on and moves beyond Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, which examines how modern states regulate populations to manage life. While biopolitics concerns the governance and optimization of life, Mbembe shifts the focus to the ways sovereign power determines who may live and who must die (2019, p. 66). This division creates a biological hierarchy, regulated through racism, which Mbembe identifies as a central mechanism of necropolitical control (2019, p. 71). Drawing on Foucault, he argues that racism functions as a "technology of power" (2019, p. 71) that enables states to justify the systematic elimination of certain groups. In this framework, sovereignty is not only about preserving life but also about the ability to render populations disposable.

For Mbembe, racial thinking, rather than class struggle, has historically been the primary justification for domination and violence against "foreign peoples" (2019, p. 71) in Western political thought. Foucault cites the Nazi state as the most complete manifestation of biopower, in which the regulation of life was inseparable from the sovereign right to kill. This culminated in the "final solution," (Mbembe, 2019, p. 72) a systematic genocide rooted in racism and biological hierarchies. However, Mbembe extends this analysis by demonstrating that colonialism and apartheid functioned as precursors to such oppressive systems. He argues that colonial rule and apartheid combined racial violence with bureaucratic control, operating as testing grounds for extreme forms of sovereignty (Mbembe, 2019, p. 77). Under colonial governance, lawlessness was institutionalized, as colonizers viewed the colonized as "savages" (Mbembe, 2019, pp. 77–78) incapable of forming organized communities or sovereign states. This dehumanization rendered their deaths inconsequential, reinforcing the colonizers' justification for unchecked violence (Mbembe, 2019, p. 78).

Expanding Foucault's framework, Mbembe redefines sovereignty as the power to create "death-worlds," (2019, p. 92) spaces where existence is marked by perpetual exposure to death. Unlike biopolitics, which seeks to optimize and sustain life, necropolitics operates through disposability, social erasure, and systemic violence. These conditions, evident in colonial rule, refugee crises, apartheid, and military occupations, reduce individuals to a state of social death (Mbembe, 2019, p. 92). Here, life itself becomes indistinguishable from death, as populations are subjected to structural abandonment and prolonged suffering.

By shifting the analytical lens from biopolitical governance to necropolitical subjugation, Mbembe reveals how power functions through the administration of death rather than the mere regulation of life. His work underscores the enduring legacy of colonial violence, demonstrating that necropolitical structures persist in contemporary forms of state control and global governance.

In the context of asylum-seekers, necropolitics manifests through bureaucratic delay, legal limbo, and the spatial containment of migrants in sites of exclusion whether in refugee camps, detention centers, or even within the invisible walls of hostile immigration policies. Rather than relying on overt violence, necropolitical governance operates through the prolonged marginalization of displaced populations, producing what Mbembe terms "living death" (2019, p. 92) conditions, where individuals are stripped of agency and rendered disposable. The suffering imposed is not necessarily immediate or visible; rather, it unfolds through institutionalized neglect and systemic abandonment.

For instance, Britain's asylum policies reflect the legacies of colonial domination, particularly in their disproportionate scrutiny of applicants from former colonies such as India, Pakistan, and Nigeria. Scholars like Nadine El-Enany in *(B)ordering Britain: Law, Race and Empire* (2020) argue that these policies are rooted in Britain's imperial history, where the colonial subject is both indebted to and subjugated by the imperial center. According to El-Enany, British immigration law operates as an extension of British imperial authority and the white supremacist framework that supported it. She emphasizes that the "categorisation of people into those with and without rights of entry and stay" (2000, p. 17) continues to reinforce and replicate colonial methods of racial stratification. The asylum seeker, in this sense, becomes a figure caught in the liminal space between gratitude and resistance, a position shaped by the colonial legacy of dependency and dehumanization. The power dynamics inherent in hospitality take on additional complexity when viewed through the lens of colonial history, particularly in cases where asylum seekers originate from former colonies seeking refuge in former colonial powers. As Uma Narayan puts it, "Postcolonial global reality is a history of multiple migrations, rooted in a number of different historical processes" (1997, p. 187).

Necropolitics operates through mechanisms that control mobility, exclude populations, and subject displaced individuals to conditions of extreme vulnerability. In refugee camps, detention centers, and border zones, life is rendered precarious not only through outright violence but also through the withdrawal of care, a crucial ethical dimension often overlooked in discussions of hospitality. This is particularly relevant to the theme of *hostipitality*, a term coined by Derrida, which captures the ambivalence of hospitality. While hospitality traditionally signifies care, Mbembe's framework reveals how it can simultaneously function as an instrument of power, determining who deserves protection and who is left in a state of existential limbo. By positioning hospitality as a function of sovereign control rather than an act of pure generosity, Derrida challenges conventional understandings of asylum. In *By the Sea*, Gurnah offers a literary articulation of this critique, as seen in the immigration officer's dehumanizing interrogation of Saleh Omar.

Stranger at the Gate: *By the Sea*

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *By the Sea* explores the lived experiences of refugees and asylum seekers, centering on the journey of Saleh Omar, a displaced individual navigating the complexities of exile. Fleeing the East African coast, he arrives in England under the assumed identity of Rajab Shaban Mahmud, a deceased man from Zanzibar. This deception establishes an implicit connection to Latif Mahmud, the novel's second protagonist, a university literature professor who embodies a different trajectory of displacement. Despite his fluency in English, Saleh Omar deliberately adopts an air of linguistic incompetence at first, choosing silence as a strategic means of reinforcing his status as "more a stranger, a refugee" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 143).

Gurnah's depiction of Saleh Omar's arrival at Gatwick Airport serves as a microcosm of the tensions inherent in Jacques Derrida's concept of hospitality. Hospitality, as Derrida argues, is never unconditional; it is governed by legal structures that demand recognizable markers of identity, such as a name, documentation, or familial ties (2000, pp. 23-25). This requirement for legibility is starkly illustrated in the immigration officer's scrutiny of Saleh Omar's "joke document" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 5). By referring to the passport in such terms, Gurnah critiques the arbitrary yet authoritative role of identity papers in determining inclusion and exclusion within national borders. The novel thus foregrounds the fraught interplay between bureaucratic control and the fundamental human need for refuge, revealing the often dehumanizing processes that underpin modern asylum systems.

The physical setting of the airport itself reinforces these dynamics of power. The "little podium" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 5) from which the immigration officer operates symbolizes the elevated position of state authority in determining who may cross borders. This spatial arrangement physically manifests what Derrida describes as the power dynamic between host and guest, where the host nation maintains control over the conditions of welcome (2000, p. 25). Expanding on this idea, Pico Iyer observes that, "Airports say a lot about a place because they are both a city's business card and its handshake; they tell us what a community yearns to be as well as what it really is" (2000, p. 42). Saleh Omar's experience upon arrival in England, however, subverts this metaphor entirely; the host nation's 'handshake' emerges not as a gesture of welcome but as an instrument of interrogation and control.

According to Derrida, hospitality is always linked to judgment, power, and the limits of the law, creating tension for the foreigner who seeks acceptance (2000, pp. 39-41). Gurnah's portrayal of the protagonist's arrival at the Gatwick Airport critiques this conditional framework, exposing the violence embedded in the requirement for asylum seekers to conform to the host's legal and social categories. The immigration officer Adelman's "suppressed joy" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 5) upon discovering the protagonist's lack of entry documentation highlights the perverse satisfaction derived from enforcing exclusionary practices. This moment underscores how the state's power to grant or withhold hospitality becomes an exercise in dominance rather than compassion. Moreover, Adelman's questions to Saleh Omar such as "Reason for seeking entry into the United Kingdom? Are you a tourist? On holiday? Any funds?" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 7) establish the officer Adelman as a gatekeeper, one who holds the authority to determine whether the foreigner meets the conditions of welcome. Derrida's assertion that true hospitality would welcome the anonymous, the unnamed, without preconditions, contrasts sharply with the structured demands of sovereign borders (2000, p. 27). The protagonist's experience at Gatwick highlights how the host's demand for identification by asking the question of "What is your name?" (Derrida, 2000, p. 27) constructs the foreigner as both a legal subject and a potential threat, thereby limiting the possibility of unconditional hospitality. This demand reveals a fundamental paradox: while absolute hospitality remains an ethical ideal, conditional hospitality is the pragmatic mechanism through which societies regulate movement and maintain order (Derrida, 2000, p. 27). It becomes obvious that the power to grant or deny hospitality is not merely an administrative function but an assertion of dominance, where control over borders translates into control over human lives. Through this portrayal, *By the Sea* challenges the illusion of hospitality as an act of generosity, revealing instead the mechanisms of surveillance and exclusion that underpin modern asylum systems. The protagonist, lacking a valid visa, anticipates hostility: "I was used to officials who glared and spluttered at you for the smallest mishap, who toyed with you and humiliated you for the sheer pleasure of wielding their hallowed authority" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 5).

Among these inquiries, "Do you speak any English, sir?" (2000, p. 15) stands out as a critical marker of inclusion and exclusion, highlighting Derrida's contention that language often becomes the threshold for hospitality. Derrida argues that the foreigner is frequently marginalized because they do not speak the language of the host country or its legal institutions, thereby embodying an outsider status (2000, p. 15). This paradox is central to the asylum process, as individuals seeking refuge must articulate their claims within the linguistic and bureaucratic structures of the host nation.

Language proficiency has been increasingly positioned as a prerequisite for integration, reinforcing its role as a gatekeeping mechanism in migration policies. France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK have codified linguistic requirements, tightening their policies throughout the 2000s (Wright, 2020, p. 153). Evidence of language proficiency has been required at entry, and those seeking residence have been obligated to attend language courses where necessary (Wright, 2020, p. 153). These policies reflect an underlying logic of conditional hospitality, where belonging is predicated on linguistic conformity and the ability to assimilate into the cultural and civic expectations of the host nation. Gurnah underscores this conflict through the portrayal of Saleh Omar, whose feigned lack of fluency is presented as a barrier not only to communication but to his very legitimacy as an asylum seeker. Adelman's pointed remark, "You don't even speak the language, and you probably never will," (Gurnah, 2002, p. 11) reinforces the implicit demand that linguistic conformity is a prerequisite for belonging. This linguistic demand, as Derrida asserts, constitutes a form of coercion, compelling the foreigner to translate their experience into the acceptable framework of the host (2000, p. 15). The officer's insistence that "It's very rare for old people to learn a new language" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 11) underscores the perceived futility of Saleh Omar's efforts to adapt, casting his pursuit of refuge as misguided. Derrida's notion of conditional hospitality becomes evident here: the host welcomes only on terms that preserve their sovereignty and privilege (2000, pp. 15-17). In highlighting Saleh Omar's limited language ability and advanced age as hindrances, Adelman tacitly endorses the same exclusionary boundaries that characterize the state's asylum policy. Derrida's provocative question, "If the foreigner already spoke our language, would they still be a foreigner?" (2000, p. 15) finds a haunting resonance in Gurnah's narrative. Saleh Omar's inability to fully navigate the host's linguistic and social expectations underscores the persistence of his foreignness, irrespective of his legal status. Through this encounter, Gurnah critiques the conditional nature of hospitality, revealing how the promise of refuge is undermined by demands for conformity and the maintenance of hierarchical power structures. Gurnah's text thus lays bare the inherent contradictions of hospitality as a power-laden exchange, where the act of welcome is contingent on the foreigner's willingness and ability to conform to the host's linguistic and cultural terms. This dynamic illuminate the ethical complexities Derrida highlights that hospitality, rather than being a pure and unconditional gesture, is fraught with boundaries that delineate who may belong and under what terms.

In his work *Necropolitics*, Mbembe defines sovereignty as the capacity to "define who matters and who does not," (2019, p. 63) a power starkly embodied in Edelman's role. His exclusionary rhetoric, "People like you come here without any thought of the damage they cause. You don't belong here, you don't value the things we value, you haven't paid for them through generations, and we don't want you here" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 12) encapsulates the way microaggressions serve to assert dominance, framing the immigrant as an unwelcome disruption rather than a person seeking refuge. The rhetorical framing of migrants as inherently destructive aligns with Mbembe's argument that racism has become so deeply embedded in everyday life that it functions as "the air one breathes." (2019, p. 59). Edelman's assertion of his European heritage further reinforces exclusionary notions of belonging by positioning himself as a rightful inheritor of Europe while simultaneously erasing the narrator's humanity (Gurnah, 2002, p. 12). In doing so, he enacts the logic of nanoracism, which, as Mbembe suggests, operates through "small humiliations" (2019, p. 59) designed to pressure marginalized individuals into "self-deportation" (2019, p. 59) by making their presence increasingly intolerable. Moreover, Edelman's threat "We'll make life hard for you… commit violence on you" exemplifies hydraulic racism, the systemic racism enforced by governments through "state machines" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 59) like immigration policies, detention centers, racial profiling, and deportation. As an asylum-seeker under interrogation, the narrator situates him within a regime were migration policies function as tools of segregation. Mbembe critiques such systems for their veneer of neutrality, arguing that governments legitimize exclusion by invoking "the rights of man and the citizen" (2019, pp. 59-60) while treating displaced people as "industrial waste." (2019, pp. 59-60). The airport, as a site of interrogation, becomes a metaphorical camp, a space where the narrator's body is scrutinized, contained, and rendered disposable. This is in line with Mbembe's characterization of camps as "structural features" of globalization, designed to "keep away what disturbs." (2019, p. 60). Mbembe states that Necropolitical power functions through taxonomy, in other words: "It is the compulsion to categorize, to separate, to measure, and to name, to classify and to establish equivalences between things and between things and persons, persons and animals, animals and the so-called natural, mineral, and organic world" (2019, p. 158). The state's capacity to classify does not just establish identity but also defines the conditions of disposability. In this schema, the black body is not merely exploited but incorporated into the machinery of production as both a commodity and an energy source, fueling the capitalist economy while simultaneously being rendered waste. This situation becomes clear in the asylum process of Gurnah's protagonist as seen in the state's selective admission criteria:

> Perhaps, despite the indignantly superior moral gesture of allowing people from my country asylum, someone had started to count the cost of admitting a man of my age to the United Kingdom: too old to work in a hospital, too old to produce a future England cricketer, too old for anything much except Social Security, assisted housing and a subsidised cremation. (Gurnah, 2002, pp. 48-9)

This is in accordance with Derrida's concept of *hostipitality*, where *hospitality* is inherently hostile, demanding the guest's submission to the host's terms. The protagonist is welcomed, yet his worth is immediately calculated in economic and social terms. He is permitted entry, but his future is pre-scripted in a necropolitical framework that sees him as an economic burden rather than a productive subject. His admission is less about human rights and more about strategic calculation.

The figure of Kevin Edelman, described as "the bawab of Europe," (Gurnah, 2002, p. 31) satirizes the continent's transformation from a colonizing force, "hordes that went out to consume the world" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 31), to a gatekeeper denying entry to those now "sliming up to beg admittance" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 31). This duality mirrors Mbembe's assertion that colonial violence persists through reinvented hierarchies of power. The term *bawab*, meaning custodian or doorkeeper, encapsulates Europe's necropolitical authority to regulate life and death at its borders. This hierarchical dynamic is further illuminated by Said's argument that the relationship between the Occident and the Orient is one of power, domination, and a complex hegemony (1978, p. 13). Said contends that the West has historically constructed the East as an inferior, exotic, and dependent entity, a framing particularly relevant in asylum contexts, where host nations position themselves as benevolent saviors. This self-representation obscures the structural asymmetries of power in the act of providing refuge, perpetuating dominance under the guise of hospitality. As Said explains, "Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing the relative upper hand" (1978, p. 15). This notion is consistent with Mbembe's assertion that postcolonial regimes reproduce the exclusionary logic of colonial rule, policing movement and settlement through xenophobic nationalism (2019, p. 180).

Accordingly, Derrida's *hostipitality* manifests most literally in the protagonist's asylum process in Celia's boarding house where asylum seekers are offered temporary accommodations. He is granted *hospitality* in Celia's house, yet the conditions render the space unlivable. Upon entering his assigned room, the protagonist observes: "The rug on the bed puffed up a thin cloud of dust when I pulled it back. The bed-sheets looked and smelled as if they had been slept in before. There were spots of blood on the pillowcase" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 56). The ostensibly benevolent gesture of hospitality is thus undermined by neglect and degradation, reinforcing Derrida's assertion that hospitality is always an expression of power (2000, p. 51).

Celia's ability to offer a bed reinforces her sovereignty over the asylum-seekers, even as the accommodation itself is a space of indignity. The protagonist's reaction which is "an irrational fear of contamination" (Gurnah, 2002, p.56) reflects his recognition that he is being positioned within a hierarchy of value, where his presence is tolerated but his dignity is not respected. Furthermore, the asylum-seeker is hosted but only within rigid boundaries. His movement is controlled, and his belonging is always contingent upon adherence to regulations. Celia's remarks exemplify the conditionality of his presence: "I lock the front door at ten o'clock at night, so I'm afraid that if you're out after that you'll have to ring the bell until someone comes to let you in" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 56). This seemingly mundane rule reinforces the power dynamic of *hostipitality*. Asylum is granted only if guests conform to the host's moral and cultural expectations. In his *Critique of Black Reason* Mbembe says that "Racial subsidies, racial extractions, and racial prohibitions determined who would be part of the human family and who would not." (2017, p. 16). This proves the claim that contemporary border regimes perpetuate colonial divisions, determining who is worthy of inclusion. In alignment with this, Fanon states that "The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards (1963, p. 18). He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness and his jungle. That is, modern citizenship laws sustain colonial hostipitality by structuring inclusion and exclusion along racial lines.

Celia positions herself as a benevolent savior when she says "we can't just turn them away" while at the same time she reflects on how her town used to be: "There weren't any foreigners then, when I was growing up, just the odd French traveller, not real foreigners" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 54). The distinction between real foreigners and undesirable others underscores the constructed nature of European identity. As Mbembe points out, the war on migrants is not simply about border security; it is about preserving a hierarchy in which mobility remains a privilege of Europeans while others are rendered stateless and disposable (2019, p. 103).

Mbembe argues that necropolitical governance is not solely about killing; it is also about allowing certain subjects to exist in a state of managed decay (2019, p. 126). The protagonist's room, reeking of "vomit and semen" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 56) with blood-stained sheets, and the bathroom's "dark murk" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 56) reflect a state of deliberate neglect. This aligns with Mbembe's "waiting rooms" (2019, p. 102) for "people who have already been stripped and deprived of virtually everything into "bare bodies" debased by a lack of water, hygiene, and sleep" (2019, p. 102). The filth is not accidental but systemic, a necropolitical tactic to dehumanize and discipline racialized subjects. The bathroom, a "dark murk" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 56) with a "black hole" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 56) toilet, becomes a metaphor for necropolitical abandonment, where the state's neglect manifests as physical rot. That is, the room's filth symbolizes necropolitical extraction where asylum seekers are housed in spaces that mirror their status as disposable labor.

Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia* argues that Britain's contemporary anxieties about immigration stem from an unresolved relationship with its imperial past, manifesting in racialized exclusions masquerading as cultural discomfort. Gurnah's depiction of asylum-seeker accommodation undercuts the myth of British tolerance, revealing instead the hollow, conditional nature of hospitality extended to the racialized Other. The apparent openness to diversity is, in reality, a restrictive framework that demands conformity rather than genuine inclusion. Celia's insistence that "it's a strain having you look at me like that and not even know what you're thinking" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 58) highlights how linguistic difference is framed as a barrier to full inclusion. Rather than acknowledging the protagonist's silence as a product of displacement and trauma, Celia perceives it as an inconvenience, an impediment to the seamless functioning of the household. This mirrors Gilroy's assertion that multiculturalism in Britain is often predicated on an implicit demand for assimilation, where racialized others are expected to conform to the cultural and linguistic norms of the dominant group (2005, p. 123). Despite the insistence that the protagonist will "have to learn some English" (Gurnah, 2002, p. 58) in order to be fully recognized, he remains permanently marked as outsider. This state of cultural liminality resonates with Dirk Hoerder's observation that migrants have historically occupied spaces of "in-betweenness" (2020, p. 197). Yet, the modern nation-state has increasingly sought to erase such pluralism in favor of monocultural and monolingual ideals (Hoerder, 2020, p.197). Migrants, much like colonized subjects before them, have been subjected to policies that demand complete assimilation while simultaneously denying them full belonging (Hoerder, 2020, p.197). The expectation placed upon them is not a gradual process of cultural adaptation but rather an enforced surrender of the culture of socialization.

Celia's house, then, operates as a site of "inclusive exclusion," (Gilroy, 2005, p. 8) a system where people are included only to be excluded. The narrator Saleh Omer is physically present yet stripped of agency, mocked for his language barriers, and denied empathy. Even the other asylum seekers Ibrahim and Georgy laugh at his Black Muslim identity:

> 'Pig,' Ibrahim said, grinning from ear to ear, and turning to share the joke with Georgy. 'Muslim man, he don't eat pig, he don't piss alcohol. Clean clean clean, wash wash wash. Black man.' Georgy laughed out loud at black man. I don't know if it was the thought of a black man who was a Muslim that made him laugh, or the comedy of a dark-skinned man in a frenzy of clean clean clean, wash wash wash, or if they were sharing a private joke. (Gurnah, 2002, p. 53)

This passage illustrates how asylum seekers themselves internalize exclusionary hierarchies, positioning Saleh Omar at the intersection of multiple axes of marginalization. While immigrants in general are frequent targets of exclusionary forces, Muslim immigrants have been the primary focus of hostility (Kivisto, 2020, p. 429). This hostility manifests in forms of social derision and institutionalized discrimination that mark Muslims as cultural outsiders whose religious practices and identities are framed as incompatible with national belonging. Scholars have noted that through the twentieth century, color-coded racism was augmented by a new form that rearticulated older racial logics in cultural terms, making it necessary to speak of *racisms* in the plural (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991; Barker, 1981; Gilroy, 1987; Solomos & Back, 1996, p. 542, qtd. in Solomos, 2020, p. 542). From this perspective, older biologically determined racial exclusions and contemporary forms of cultural racism operate through distinct yet overlapping logics (Solomos, 2020, p. 542). The laughter directed at Saleh Omar thus reflects a layered form of exclusion: he is simultaneously racialized as a Black man and marked as culturally alien due to his Muslim identity. Hoerder, Harzig, and Shubert state that "In the postcolonial period, Britain adopted a "race relations" (2003, p. 10) paradigm for understanding and regulating difference and "otherness." (2003, p. 10). This means that instead of fully embracing diversity, Britain treated ethnic minorities and migrants as separate groups whose presence needed to be managed rather than fully integrated.

Gilroy identifies the resurgence of xenophobic populism across Europe as an ideological crisis stemming from a refusal to engage with the legacies of empire and the realities of contemporary multiculturalism (2005, p. 2). His analysis suggests that the imagined purity of national identity has been unsettled by the presence of migrants, refugees, and racialized others, exposing a fundamental ambivalence in the European discourse on hospitality (2005, p. 2). Gilroy identifies xenophobia and nationalism as the ideological scaffolding upon which contemporary Britain rationalizes its rejection of cultural diversity, a sentiment echoed in Celia's rigid hospitality (2005, p. 2). Consistent with this perspective, Sarah Ahmad introduces "stranger fetishism" in her work *Strange Encounters* to argue that "some bodies are already recognised as stranger than other bodies." (2000, cover page). Ahmad argues that strangers are not just external figures but are produced by social processes of inclusion and exclusion (2000, p. 6). These processes shape how we perceive who belongs and who does not. Ibrahim and Georgy's attempt to position themselves as more familiar by othering the protagonist Saleh

Omer is a clear example of "stranger fetishism" to claim proximity to the host's conditional tolerance.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of *By the Sea*, this study has demonstrated how Abdulrazak Gurnah critiques the paradoxes of hospitality within contemporary asylum regimes by revealing the coercive structures that govern displacement and refugeehood. By engaging Derrida's *hostipitality* and Mbembe's *necropolitics*, the article has shown that asylum operates less as an act of benevolence and more as a mechanism of sovereign control, where the refugee's survival is permitted but their dignity remains precarious. Saleh Omar's experience at Gatwick Airport and his subsequent confinement within Celia's degrading accommodations underscore the conditional and disciplinary nature of hospitality, where welcome is contingent upon linguistic, legal, and cultural conformity. The novel exposes the dehumanizing consequences of this system, revealing how postcolonial subjects, despite seeking refuge in former imperial centers, continue to be subjected to the hierarchical power structures that sustain colonial legacies. Gurnah's text ultimately disrupts the dominant humanitarian discourse surrounding migration, illustrating how asylum-seekers are rendered disposable within a necropolitical order that privileges sovereignty over solidarity. By situating the novel within broader theoretical discussions of postcolonial displacement, this study has illuminated the persistent entanglements between hospitality, exclusion, and the afterlives of empire. As the global refugee crisis intensifies, Gurnah's work serves as a powerful indictment of the ways in which asylum policies reproduce systemic inequalities, compelling a critical reassessment of the ethical responsibilities of host nations.

More importantly, the contribution of this article lies in demonstrating how Derrida's antinomy of conditional versus unconditional hospitality, when read alongside Mbembe's *necropolitics*, reveals the layered logics of sovereign control embedded in asylum. This dual framework not only deepens postcolonial literary analysis but also provides migration studies and political theory with a conceptual bridge to interrogate the ethical contradictions of refugee governance. Methodologically, the article underscores the value of close textual analysis as a means of uncovering how literature encodes structural forms of power that policy discourses often obscure. At the same time, the analysis is necessarily limited by its selective focus on Saleh Omar and the early episodes of arrival and settlement, which leaves unexamined other narrative trajectories and thematic strands. Such delimitation, however, opens avenues for future research. Comparative studies could extend the framework to Gurnah's other works or to parallel postcolonial refugee narratives. Scholars might also investigate the roles of multilingualism, performative silence, and gendered experiences in shaping refugee subjectivities. In doing so, the dialogue between literature, philosophy, and political practice can be further enriched, ensuring that Gurnah's critique resonates not only within postcolonial literary studies but also in broader debates on the ethics and politics of displacement.

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