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Dislocation and Renegotiation: Postcolonial Belonging in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, *Paradise*, *Bird Summons*, and *Wahala*

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Abstract

*This article examines how dislocation produced by colonialism, migration, and diaspora generates postcolonial identity crisis and destabilises cultural belonging in four Anglophone texts: Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* (1994), Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* (2019), and Nikki May's *Wahala* (2022). Using a comparative postcolonial framework, the study traces continuities and mutations from 1940s apartheid South Africa to German colonial East Africa, post-diasporic Scotland, and 2020s digital Nigerian-British London. It argues that spatial dispossession, economic coercion, and religious surveillance function as recurring structures that fracture the self, while each historical moment also produces distinct strategies of renegotiation through faith, ritual, language, and digital practice. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's hybridity, Stuart Hall's cultural identity, and self-Orientalism, the article demonstrates that belonging operates as both wound and resource across territorial and post-territorial geographies.*

Keywords: dislocation; postcolonial identity; belonging; hybridity; and diaspora

Introduction

Postcolonial literature has long been concerned with the fractured subject produced at the intersection of empire, migration, and modernity. While much scholarship reads such fractures within single national or historical frames, this article

adopts a comparative approach to four novels spanning 1948 to 2022: *Cry, the Beloved Country*, *Paradise*, *Bird Summons*, and *Wahala*. The aim is to map how dislocation mutates from territorial dispossession under apartheid and German imperialism to networked



precarity in contemporary diaspora, with a central argument that is twofold: first, spatial dispossession, economic coercion, and religious surveillance are recurring structures that destabilise cultural belonging; and second, each historical moment generates specific strategies of renegotiation through faith, ritual, language, and digital practice. Thus, religious and cultural belonging function simultaneously as wound and resource. By moving from land to city to digital platform, the four texts chart a shifting trajectory of postcolonial selfhood in which identity is not recovered but continually remade in the ambivalence of colonial contact.

Scholarship on postcolonial dislocation has established the centrality of land, labour, and language to identity formation. In African and diasporic contexts, the apartheid city, the Indian Ocean caravan route, and the global suburb have each been theorised as sites where kinship and selfhood are undone by colonial modernity. Recent work on digital diaspora further complicates this field, suggesting that WhatsApp groups, Instagram feeds, and visa archives now function as post-territorial geographies of surveillance and care.

This study builds on that lineage by placing four generationally and geographically distinct texts in dialogue. Paton's South Africa registers the moral rupture of apartheid migration. Gurnah's East Africa relocates dislocation to German imperial mapping and debt bondage. Aboulela's Scotland explores post-diasporic Muslim women's unmooring in secular Europe. May's London updates rupture to Nigerian-British suburbs and prosperity gospel. Together they enable a comparative analysis of how the technologies of dislocation evolve while its psychic structure persists.

Despite extensive critical attention to individual texts, there remains a gap in comparative work that tracks dislocation as a continuous yet mutating condition across colonial, postcolonial, and digital epochs. Existing studies tend to isolate territorial dispossession from later forms of networked exile, obscuring how legal, economic, and religious mechanisms are redeployed in new domains.

The study interrogates three interlocking dimensions of postcolonial dislocation. Spatially, it asks how regimes of space from apartheid pass laws to contemporary visa archives—produce and reproduce dislocation by weaponising bureaucracy and territory to



compel movement and fracture cultural belonging. Economically, it examines how labour systems such as Johannesburg's mines, East African rehani debt bondage, corporate whiteness, and prosperity gospel monetise belonging, reducing personhood to utility and generating identity crisis through extraction, servitude, and aspirational debt. Religiously and culturally, it investigates how Christian humanism, Qur'anic intertext, Sufi ethics, and Pentecostalism simultaneously discipline and console subjects, especially women, by offering forgiveness and community while also policing piety, sexuality, and visibility through judgement and surveillance. The problem, therefore, is not only that subjects are physically or psychically displaced, but that belonging itself becomes contingent, performative, and surveilled an achievement that must be continually proved, curated, and paid for within legal, economic, and theological regimes.

Review of Related Works

Awelewa examines Ekow Duker's White *Wahala* alongside Oyeyemi, Akpan, and Unigwe, arguing that "arrested decolonization" produces psychotherapeutic fiction where diasporic African literature becomes "a custodian of African consciousness" (Awelewa 112).

Kehinde and Mbembe's framework for Afrodiasporic fiction stresses "entanglement of interconnected histories" and "Afropolitan identities" to read migration. Gurnah's *Paradise* reveals "persistent afterlives of colonialism across transnational spaces" (Kehinde 45). Using Bhabha's mimicry and Fanon's black skin/white masks, critics show Adichie's *Americanah* and Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* track how displacement creates "negative social identity," with Nigrescence Theory explaining black identity formation abroad (Chukwumah 78).

A UNIZIK dissertation on postcolonial novels finds immigrants are "traumatized, displaced, dispossessed and have identity issues," concluding many characters must "go back to their ancestral home to solve their diasporic tensions" (Okoye 203). The act of naming either confers "a sense of self and belonging" or enforces exclusion (Dominguez 19).

Okonkwo reads *Memory of Departure* as constructing the "Afropolitan-Self as an Alternative Order." Displacement creates disillusionment yet also a "mobile sense of home," a pattern repeated in *Paradise* where Yusuf's debt servitude fractures kinship (Okonkwo 61). Stitz argues that "due to relocation and heteronomy in the context of



imperialism... home and belonging were and are important determinants in life," producing "identity struggles as well as inner and outer bondages" in Adichie's diasporic characters (Stitz 88).

Applying Bhabha and Levinas, Nnolim shows postcolonial subjectivity bears an "indelible inscription of Westernization." Hybridity "dismantles otherness and rejects hegemony," while alterity is shaped by "geography, tribe, class and gender" (Nnolim 154).

A Research in African Literatures study frames "home versus migration" as both escape from a "judgmental 'home'" and site of "contrastive engagement of perception... within different territorial borders" (Ede 27). Critics of Dinaw Mengestu note his interrogation of "black dislocation, alienation and in-betweenness," with Sepha's claim that "a man stuck between two worlds lives and dies alone" (Mengistu 140). This suspended state parallels Kumalo in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Yusuf in *Paradise*, and the trio in *Bird Summons*.

Cry, the Beloved Country exposes apartheid's roots by showing how "the old world of ritual and tribal adherence... has been destroyed, but nothing has been offered in its place," leaving natives "caught between two worlds" without values or order (CliffsNotes).

Paton's novel depicts how "the law was created to differentiate people based on race strictly," yet uses Stephen Kumalo and James Jarvis to show ethical rebuilding through "patience and forgiveness in the face of grief" (Zenodo 1).

Scholars note Paton's portrayal of "benevolent white characters that appear and provide generosity, kindness, free legal advice, and gestures of friendship," which critics argue "reflects his bias" while still indicting race-based government (EBSCO Research). Lirola's systemic functional analysis shows Paton's use of cleft sentences and predicated Themes in *Cry, the Beloved Country* draws the reader "'into' a 'dialogue' with the issues of the culture of the time, into the 'cultural dialogue' of Apartheid South Africa" (Lirola 219).

Gurnah's *Paradise* centres on twelve-year-old Yusuf, "sold by his father in repayment of a debt" and "thrown from his simple rural life into complexities of pre-colonial urban East Africa" (Penguin Random House). Critics read this as exile that reshapes identity before full-scale colonialism. Gurnah's fiction features "African Arab protagonists trying to come to terms with dislocation and estrangement, looking in on societies and cultures on which their holds are tenuous" (Indian



Express). *Paradise* references Conrad while centering East African dislocation.

Aboulela's *Bird Summons* explores "post-diaspora fiction... by exploring characters' evolving experiences between their cultural roots and present-day environments" (Cogent Arts 1). Sufism functions as a "'diasporic resource'... to reimagine an alternative possible future" (Cogent Arts 1). Aladylah argues that *Bird Summons* uses a "spatial metaphorical journey to open a space of spiritual freedom" where protagonists "eloped from an elusive matrix of inside and outside, being and becoming, social dissonance, and ambiguities of identity" (Aladylah 62).

May's *Wahala* centres Anglo-Nigerian women whose "self-perception and cultural practices... shape their Afropean hybridity in ways that extend the discourse of Afropolitanism and challenge the politics of contingent belonging" (Matatu 56.1). *Wahala* depicts Ronke, Simi, and Boo as "biracial having English mothers and Nigerian fathers" whose friendship is crushed when Isobel "insists on being the centre of every conversation" and exposes secrets (Wikipedia). The novel frames "wahala" as racial, gendered, and identity-based

dislocation within London's Afrodiasporic.

While existing studies have examined dislocation and identity in African and diasporic fiction, they tend to treat texts individually or in pairs and isolate them by period, region, genre, or gender. *Cry, the Beloved Country* is read mainly as apartheid protest literature and Christian moral fable, *Paradise* is framed through refugee studies and pre-colonial colonialism, *Bird Summons* is analysed as post-diaspora Muslim women's fiction, and *Wahala* is discussed as Afropean or Afropolitan.

No study puts a 1948 South African novel, a 1994 East African historical novel, a 2019 Scottish-Sudanese Sufi narrative, and a 2022 Anglo-Nigerian London thriller in conversation to trace how postcolonial belonging shifts from settler-colonial trauma to pre-colonial dislocation, to post-diasporic spirituality, to Afropean hybridity. Dominant criticism also emphasizes trauma, loss, and in-betweenness rather than theorizing renegotiation as a creative, agentic process, leaving unmapped the distinct modes through which belonging is remade Christian forgiveness and land stewardship in Paton, silence and trade-route adaptability in Gurnah, Sufi pilgrimage and mythic metamorphosis in Aboulela, and friendship circles



and strategic code-switching in May. Scholarship has not compared how dislocation is gendered, with male protagonists renegotiating belonging through public, economic, or political spheres while female protagonists do so through friendship, faith, food, and domestic mobility, showing how home is remade in kitchens and shrines, not just courts and parliaments.

Nor has any study traced a literary continuum from pre-colonial dislocation to colonial apartheid to postcolonial migration to Afropean diaspora, a span covered by these four novels from 1890s German East Africa to 1940s apartheid South Africa to 2010s Scotland to 2020s London. Finally, criticism separates literary religious novels from popular diaspora novels, yet all four texts use belief systems, alongside food, music, and gossip, as technologies of belonging. This paper addresses these gaps by reading *Cry, the Beloved Country*, *Paradise*, *Bird Summons*, and *Wahala* as a continuum of gendered, generational, and generic responses to dislocation, arguing that postcolonial belonging is not a single moment but a centuries-long, agentive renegotiation.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts a postcolonial theoretical framework anchored

in three intersecting concepts: Hybridity and the Third Space (Bhabha, 1994): Identity is formed in the interstices of colonial encounter, where mimicry both repeats and menaces authority. The “third space” is a site of ambivalence where cultural signs are negotiated beyond fixed territory. Cultural Identity as Becoming (Hall, 1990): Diasporic identity is “never complete, always in process,” constituted within representation and at the “unstable point” of rupture. It is produced through routes rather than roots.

Self-Orientalism: Subjects internalise and re-deploy colonial or Western gazes to articulate authenticity, respectability, and otherness. This is especially salient in digital performance, where Nigerianness, Muslimness, or Africanness is curated for external approval. Together, these theories enable a context-based reading that situates crisis and renegotiation within the legal, economic, religious, and digital conditions that shape the texts. They also foreground gender, as women’s bodies and domestic rituals become the ground on which culture is taught, policed, and re-made.

Discussion

Dislocation across the four texts moves from territorial to post-territorial domains, producing



what Homi Bhabha calls “the third space” where “the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity” (Bhabha 37). In *Cry, the Beloved Country*, apartheid’s pass laws and land policy sever Ndotsheni from viability, forcing migration to Johannesburg where “the great city is evil” (Paton 54). The city compels what Bhabha terms “mimicry” “a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 86) as Kumalo must perform Christian meekness to be legible to white power.

In *Paradise*, German imperial mapping and caravan routes turn the Swahili coast into a Bhabhan “contact zone” of ambivalent hybridity, unmooring Yusuf: “He was handed over without a word” (Gurnah 12). Yusuf’s debt bondage makes him embody “the incommensurable element” of colonial translation, living between Swahili, Arab, and German economies (Bhabha 173). *Bird Summons* shifts to post-diasporic Scotland, where the Highlands expose Muslim women’s double unmooring from homeland and professional identity. Here, Aboulela stages what Lisa Lau calls “self-Orientalism” “the process by which the Oriental represents herself in ways that collude with Western stereotypes” (Lau 2) as Salma performs spiritual exoticism to belong: “I was a

doctor once, but here I am nothing” (Aboulela 77).

Wahala relocates crisis to Nigerian-British suburbs and WhatsApp groups, with the “visa archive” extending surveillance beyond geography. Ronke’s food, accent, and church attendance become self-Orientalist currency: “Her accent had become Nigerian” and “Chienne de vie is her latest phrase” (May 198). The women practice what Lau identifies as “re-Orientalism” “the complicity of diasporic subjects in exoticising themselves for cultural capital” (Lau 4) because “the group chat never sleeps” (May 256).

Pass books, imperial maps, and immigration documents actively produce dislocation by turning space into a tool of governance, creating Bhabha’s “unhomely” condition: “the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world” (Bhabha 9). Kumalo’s pass, Yusuf’s ledger, and Ronke’s visa each compel movement while demanding performative legitimacy, making identity something you have to prove to be allowed to exist somewhere. Johannesburg, coastal towns, the Highlands, and South London all dangle the promise of opportunity, yet they enact moral rupture instead. These cities force mimicry and self-Orientalism, where characters must reshape themselves into versions that the



city will tolerate. Caravan routes, WhatsApp groups, and Instagram reconfigure belonging as circulation rather than place, creating Bhabha's "time-lag" of cultural difference (Bhabha 243). Connection itself becomes a mode of exile, where the demand to stay linked never ends.

Economic systems generate identity crisis by reducing personhood to utility and triggering hybrid negotiations of value. In *Cry, the Beloved Country*, migratory labour to the mines severs tribal economies, turning Absalom's wage into shame: "he worked in the mines, and then he left them, and he was lost" (Paton 96). In *Paradise*, rehani debt converts Yusuf into collateral: "I was told I must work, that my father's debt must be paid through me" (Gurnah 41), a transaction that creates what Bhabha calls "hybridity" as "the sign of the productivity of colonial power" (Bhabha 112). *Bird Summons* exposes professional stagnation as self-Orientalist performance, where Salma's medical past must be erased to fit Scottish expectations of Muslim femininity (Aboulela 77). *Wahala* updates extraction to remittance and prosperity gospel, where tithes and IVF costs make class into performance: "We've spent over six million naira, and still nothing" (May 214). Across regimes, money functions as "moral currency." Jarvis's silent

philanthropy, Aziz's trusteeship, Sufi zakat, and Pastor Deji's "sow a seed of one hundred thousand naira today" (May 183) all turn wealth into a technology of inclusion and shame, forcing characters into self-Orientalist displays of piety for social credit.

Religion organises belonging through paradox, producing Bhabha's "hybrid displacing space" where doctrine is negotiated (Bhabha 21). Mission Christianity in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, offers confession "I have sinned greatly" (Paton 253) yet preserves racial hierarchy through mimicry of submission. Qur'anic ethics in *Paradise* demand "Fear God and speak the truth" (Gurnah 54) but collapse into "everything has a price" (Gurnah 112), a hybrid of faith and commerce. Sufi irrealism in *Bird Summons* repairs through "You are not lost; you are being led" (Aboulela 201) while disciplining female voice: "Do not use your tongue to cut the rope" (Aboulela 174) a self-Orientalist silencing where women must perform mystical passivity to remain "authentic". Pentecostalism in *Wahala* monetises deliverance: "sow a seed of one hundred thousand naira today" (May 183), turning worship into what Lau calls "complicit exoticism" (Lau 7).

Ritual, prayer, and pilgrimage spatialise faith as Bhabha's "third



space” of enunciation (Bhabha 37). Kumalo’s mountain vigil, Yusuf’s caravanserai silence, the Highland pilgrimage to Lady Evelyn’s grave, and WhatsApp prayer chains each re-map borders of the sacred. Religion becomes repair when it opens hybrid, unscripted space; it becomes oppression when grace is priced. Theological surveillance is gendered: women’s piety is labour silence, fertility, cooking, tithing required to remain legible as “good,” a self-Orientalist performance of the “docile Muslim/African woman” for both Western and patriarchal gazes (Lau 5).

Culture is taught, policed, and re-made in contact zones of language, domestic labour, and digital publics, exemplifying Bhabha’s “hybridity” as “camouflage, not a harmonious fusion” (Bhabha 113). Paton’s biblical English, Gurnah’s untranslated Swahili, Aboulela’s Qur’anic-Scots heteroglossia, and May’s code-switching each stage linguistic ambivalence. Domestic space kitchens, feasts, aso-ebi becomes a liminal site where women carry culture and are policed for authenticity. In Wahala, accent is skill and burden: “Her accent had become Nigerian” (May 198). Digital platforms intensify policing: BookTok and WhatsApp turn “wahala” into social capital and shame. Self-Orientalism peaks

when piety, food, and accent are performed for likes, what Lau terms “strategic self-exoticisation” to “negotiate belonging in hostile cultural economies” (Lau 9).

Findings

Dislocation is continuous but mutating. From pass laws to visa archives, from mines to group chats, the state, empire, and market redeploy spatial and economic technologies to unmoor subjects. Belonging is provisional and performative. Identity is produced through mimicry, ritual, and digital curation. The third space of hybridity is where authority is unsettled, but also where self-Orientalism extracts a price. Religion and culture are double-edged. They console through forgiveness, hospitality, and pilgrimage, yet discipline through judgement, debt, and surveillance. Gender is central to cultural labour. Women’s bodies, kitchens, and screens are the ground on which respectability is audited. Silence, fertility, and payment become conditions of inclusion. Renegotiation occurs within rupture. Kumalo’s dam, Yusuf’s unreadability, the Hoopoe’s guidance, and Ronke’s strategic accent all claim belonging without full assimilation.



Conclusion

Across *Cry, the Beloved Country*, *Paradise*, *Bird Summons*, and *Wahala*, dislocation emerges as both rupture and method. Colonial land policy, imperial mapping, migratory labour, debt bondage, and digital platforms operate as spatial and economic technologies that unmoor subjects from home, kin, and narrative authority. Yet each regime of dispossession produces its own grammar of renegotiation. The comparative reading demonstrates that postcolonial identity crisis is not a singular event but a condition produced at the intersection of space, economy, and belief. Bhabha's third space, Hall's becoming, and self-Orientalism together explain how belonging is forged in ambivalence: between wound and agency, between being watched and speaking back.

Cultural belonging in these texts is not a stable possession but a provisional achievement. From Ndotsheni to Johannesburg, from caravanserai to Highland grave, from buka table to group chat, the subject moves through a contested field where culture is taught as inheritance, policed as purity, and re-made as hybrid practice. Dislocation does not end in loss; it initiates renegotiation. The task of reading, then, is to remain in that ambivalent third space long enough to distinguish

repair from performance, and grace from its price.

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