Review

Gender identities and the search for new spaces: Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Paradise*

Eleanor Anneh Dasi

Department of English, ENS, University of Yaounde I, Cameroon.

Received 18 August, 2017; Accepted 24 October 2017

There is growing ambivalence in the concept of gender in our societies today principally because its definition has moved from biological to social, implying that gender categories are not simply limited to male corresponding to man and female corresponding to woman, as it was traditionally, but man can now pass for woman and vice versa depending on the individual. These new constructions have contributed to reshaping and reformulating assigned roles and expectations of individuals, along with creating conflict particularly when such roles, attitudes and behaviour are considered non-conformist. In such a situation, there is need for creation of a new space particularly in culturally diverse settings where values conflict with each other. Gurnah’s Paradise is replete with differing notions of gender and the way they are valued, used and trusted. It is from this perspective that this study explores the varying perspectives on gender, that is, gender binary, gender variance and gender fluid, their roles, relationships and representations and how these prompt the search for new spaces within diverse and contradicting cultural settings. Individuals within such settings manifest traits which enforce continuities in creating, structuring and sustaining gender differences. Thus, individuals’ reassertion of their gender positions alongside carving out their own spaces is investigated. By implication, individual’s experience of gender and how it helps in forming their social identities in relation to other members of society is examined. This reveals that no matter how absurd gender categories may seem, they are bound to (co)exist due to diversity in cultures and individual perceptions of self.

Key words: Gender, gender variant, gender expression, masculinities, femininities, sexual identities, new spaces.

INTRODUCTION

Most postcolonial writings deal with individual and communal struggles for a sense of place and identity. These identities range from individual, cultural to national and always involve social, political and economic forces to deal with. In the quest for individual identities, we go back into who we are, how we feel and if these make us comfortable in our beings. This means that we may begin to question some of our fundamental beliefs about ourselves, and others’ perceptions of us, and to form new perceptions of ourselves. One way by which we become aware of ourselves is by gender categorization.

For a long time, gender was synonymous to biological

E-mail: wandasi5@yahoo.com.

Authors agree that this article remain permanently open access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License
sex; which means male corresponded to masculine gender and subsequent identification roles while female corresponded to feminine gender with its corresponding identification roles. This perspective of gender seemed so natural and true that it became commonplace and thus was expressed in our beliefs, institutions, actions and desires. Again, it was reinforced by upbringing, culture, schools, churches, media etc. which all shaped our understanding of ourselves in relation to gender. These two gender categories were central to the understanding of our individual selves and others such that any definition out of this was considered unnatural (Marinova, 2003).

However, with changes in world views, human relationships were brought under the influence of different and varied cultural backgrounds. Under such influences, the concept of gender came to be interpreted differently, significantly so from its traditional definition which distinguishes masculinity from femininity, thus giving it new perspectives. In analysing the implications of femininity, Butler (1999: 19-29) argues that “the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category woman has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social and political intersections in which the concrete array of ‘Women’ are constructed”.

By implication, gender goes far beyond the biological and social prescriptions assigned to it. Gender therefore does not simply mean being male or female; it is one’s innermost concept of self as male, female, both or neither. These new or contemporary perspectives hold that gender is simply a socio-cultural concept; we neither are born with it nor possess it but rather do it (West and Zimmerman, 1992) and/or perform it (Butler, 1988). This contemporary certainty about gender opposes the age-long assumption that gender is a biological reality thus making the concept difficult to understand.

However, Ann Oakley makes it clear that one is either male or female in biological terms but socialization processes may force or pressure one to become masculine or feminine. This is supported by De Beauvoir (2011) intimation that “one is not born a woman, one becomes one” Though she makes this statement in relation to the oppression and marginalization of the female gender, it nonetheless presupposes that masculinities and femininities are socially and culturally constructed thus there is no fixed state of being male or female.

At the backdrop of this, gender analysis then comes in to recognize that men and women have different experiences, needs, issues etc., and live different lives. Even so, not all men and not all women have the same interests. Each individual’s interests may be determined by their social positions and/or cultural identities. With this recognition comes the need for equity in the treatment of individuals with different gender identities. For this to happen, different approaches may be needed depending on the different cultures.

The outcome will be a making of multicultural people, that is, people who have embraced multiple gender/cultural identities and/or those who are products of multiple cultures and who do not have a strictly defined cultural identity. Gurnah’s Paradise focuses on women who defy their traditional gender roles and Muslim men in search of a new kind of masculinity. All these characters are caught in a web of diverse gender/cultural positions. This paper then draws attention to Gurnah’s presentation of the intricacies, however absurd, of gender formulation, the differing notions of gender and how they are used to reconstruct space within diverse and contradicting cultural settings. The study contends that gender differences promote irregularities thus the necessity to create a new space.

The notion that gender is based on biological sex is a social construction created and consolidated by traditional power structures. Schor (1992) supports this fact by stating that gender is a social construct pinned to a sexed body and this logically implies that both masculinity and femininity are cultural formations designed to secure the patriarchal organisation known as patriarchy.

Other critics of gender, such as De Beauvoir (2011) hold that this is a fictional construction which has no foundation. She contests that there is no such thing as femininity because the belief that there are mutably determined entities has lost ground. If there is no such thing as femininity, then there is equally nothing like masculinity since the former is challenged in relation to the later. It is therefore necessary for such structures to be dismantled so that the individual may freely express and/or construct their genders irrespective of nature and society. This dismantling necessitates the use of deconstruction as theoretical basis. Deconstruction has to do with unveiling the gaps, inconsistencies, masked prejudices and ambiguities inherent in traditional thought. Deconstruction, in its vaguest form, questions common truths and values that are taken for granted. In other words, it implies a systematic challenge of laid down values by adopting an oppositional standpoint (Norris 2002).

Bennett and Royle (2004) add that deconstruction is an approach whereby every and any kind of essentialism is disrupted and transformed. Essentialism in this case would mean the supposition that all humans are irreversibly male or female in biological terms. Deconstruction therefore does not only inverses or overturns hierarchies but also challenges the basis on which these hierarchies operate. The theory therefore builds on the idea of reading through concepts, finding out what has been excluded and constituting it in its whole. It refutes the absolute meanings of concepts and makes provision for a variety and range of meanings which too are in a state of continuous change. These elements are vital in understanding the concept of gender and its categories.
It is from this point of deconstruction that the gender theory has extended to include the queer theory. Queer theory is a collection of intellectual discourses that chart the relationship between sex, gender and sexual desire/orientation (Spargo, 1999:9). It involves new ways of understanding sexuality; exploring the formations of diverse sexual identities and the relationships between these opposing sexualities and cultural productions.

Initially, the word queer, which means weird or strange, was given a negative connotation and individuals with such orientations were treated or looked upon with a high degree of prejudice. However, in postmodern times, these individuals have come to view themselves as ‘normal’ in opposition to the ‘abnormal’ that used to define them, and so are now clamouring for their rights and claims to a unique sexual/gender identity. This new identity arises from a denial of the heterosexual model as the norm or ‘normal’. It contrasts the binary of male/female and insists, as Palazzani (2013) notes, that each sexual orientation is the same whether expressed towards the same sex, the opposite sex or both sexes. It vies for omnisexuality, polysexuality and multisexuality with each of these preferences being justified by the mere fact of its expression. Therefore an individual can choose to be heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual. These sexual identities are all bound up with gender classification.

Issues of gender and sexuality have received some critical attention in Gurnah’s works. Mwangi (2009) highlights the contradictions that are in involved in homosexual practices in Memory of Departure. He notes particularly that though the society publicly abhors Hassan’s sexual orientation, they secretly desire him as suggested in the looks, comments and casual touch. However, because of the ambivalence of the situation, Hassan is forced to mask his sexuality. This is indicative of phobia for homosexuality which Kimani (2014) also acknowledges but which on the other hand is “a gendered display of power” (9), with the one who is able to pay assuming the masculine role. Kimani (2014) concludes that characters' behaviours are determined by the interpretations society gives to their sexualities. Homosexuality particularly is negatively marked while heterosexuality is seen as normal. This is the dominant trend to which most African societies subscribe but which nonetheless has aberrations. This paper comes in to project the society of Gurnah’s Paradise as a complex blend of varied gender and sexual identities.

**GENDER EXPRESSIONS**

Human society from time immemorial operated on the gender binary concept, that is, people were considered as either man or woman based on their biological sex. This implies that only two genders exist and every one must fit either in the man or in the woman category. It was on the basis of this that roles and responsibilities, including norms, attitudes and activities of the various genders were assigned, depending on what was deemed appropriate and/or correct for a particular gender.

In this process, femininity was constructed and defined through patriarchal idea which made the woman inferior to the man. However, apart from these two categories of gender, gender is also determined by an individual’s feelings and actions. For example, if a girl child feels and manifests masculine traits, she will not be categorized under the feminine gender but will rather be referred to as gender variant or gender non-conforming. This outward manifestation of a new identity is what is referred to as gender expression. It may either be through behaviour, dressing, hairdo, voice and attitude. Gender expression also works the other way round, that is, people assign gender to others based on their physical appearances, mannerisms and other characteristics.

Gurnah (1994) creates two gender variant of women in the characters of Ma Ajuza and the Mistress (Aziz’s wife). They are both given physical masculine traits. Ma Ajuza, for instance, is described as “a large, strong looking woman with a voice which cut through crowds”. These features indicate strength, aggressiveness and vigour as manifested when she squeezes Yusuf into her arms. “Then while he struggled and kicked, she ululated with joy”. The fact that Yusuf struggles and kicks shows how strong her grip is. This strength goes along with her display of what society would term masculine role. She professes love to Yusuf publicly and tries to woo him, calling him “my husband, my master”, cajoling him with “compliments and promises”, tempting him with sweet meat and offering him “pleasures beyond his wildest imaginings if he came with her” Gurnah (1994: 56).

In most African and Muslim societies, it is completely out of place for a woman to try to woo a man and publicly profess love. She does not even consider the fact that a compatible love/marriage relationship, by societal standards, is one in which the man is older than the woman. She is forty and but is so passionate and desperate to have an adolescent for husband. On the contrary, it is common to find a man of Ma Ajuza’s age marrying a woman of Yusuf’s age. She reverses this order put in place by culture and society and exhibits a gender role which is at variance with her assigned sex, social and cultural positions.

Much like Ma Ajuza, the mistress is described in words that reflect masculinity; “sharp featured and handsome” (Gurnah, 1994: 209) and also performs the role of a man by making advances at men. She marries Aziz through her personal effort of attracting him with gifts after hearing of him through business gossip. In the Swahili culture on which the text is based, male/female roles are specific, based on the gender binary continuum and each category is expected to align to these prescriptions. Such activities as wooing and paying bride price are meant for men so it is absurd for a woman to perform these roles.
However, as Spivak (1990: 205) argues, the supposed universally imposed categories cannot, with exactitude, define someone. Each of the categories that define humans is temporary and therefore changes with time and this includes categories of gender with their affiliated roles and responsibilities. This is confirmed in the character of the Mistress who bypasses her given gender role and goes ahead to woo Aziz and make all preparations for their marriage. When she becomes a victim of Aziz’s emotional starvation, she shifts her attention towards Yusuf. The age difference between them, to her, does not constitute a barrier as she overcomes it with the thought that Yusuf’s love will cure both her physical and emotional illnesses. She believes, “One touch from the beautiful boy will cure this wound in [her] heart”. She treats him with tenderness, love and passion in the hope that he will reciprocate her love. Thus contrary to the behaviour society expects of them, the Mistress, like Ma Ajuza, is tough, and highly assertive; articulating her femininity in behaviours that are considered aberrant.

Other forms of gender expression in Paradise are related to male/male relationships. Different types of men are produced in the novel with different types of relationships viz homosocial, homosexual and heterosexual. Traditionally, the homosocial category refers to relationships between same sex people which are not of a romantic or sexual nature. Such relationships take the form of friendship and/or mentorship. It is a kind of bonding in which close friendship ties are formed through shared activities and cooperation. Such is the relationship between Khalil and Yusuf. These two exhibit traits of friendship which extend into mentorship and even to brotherhood. Put in Khalil’s care, Yusuf benefits from his mentorship. He is taught the dos and don’ts of business and is educated on the likes and dislikes of their master. The intimacy between them extends into some form of brotherhood as Khalil plays the role of big brother. He forbids Yusuf from smoking claiming he cannot bear to see him get spoiled. In their exploits, “They visit the town every Friday to say prayers at the mosque, and play kipande and football in the streets” and even go out to sea with some fishermen (Gurnah, 1994: 50). These activities are considered masculine and therefore align with their biological sex as they are geared towards developing their masculinities in accordance with societal and cultural prescriptions.

Still in the category of homosocial, another kind of friendship is formed between Hamid and Yusuf which can be termed fraternal. Hamid plays the role of a father and friend to Yusuf as he encourages him to start a garden in his compound. “Well, I will clear the bush for you and you can plant a flower garden for us” (Gurnah, 1994: 68), he says. Creating a garden is also a masculine activity as it involves physical force most often attributed to the male gender. Here, Yusuf is taught by example and by instruction so that he better grasps the lesson.

Furthermore, Hamid sends Yusuf to school to learn to read and write the Quran as a way to better situate him in the religious values of the people including learning his role as a man within the Islamic tradition. By leading Yusuf into a life of prayer and faith, he is performing his role as a father and by extension, training Yusuf to be a responsible family head in future. In most traditional African societies, men inhabit separate cultural and social spaces, roles and norms. A man’s manhood is determined by membership to these spaces and failing to get membership tantamount to a denial of manhood. Some cultures further require that boys go through a rite of passage into adulthood to be part of this male space. It is only through this initiation that they can learn the history, sacred objects and secrets of the land. Yusuf does not undergo such initiation but learns to be a man from Khalil’s and Hamid’s mentorship thus maintaining hegemonic masculinity that leans towards the binary gender order.

Because societies are strict on aligning with either of the two prescribed gender categories, a third space is hardly available. However, due to the desire to experience another kind of sexuality, some males in Paradise engage in male/male sexual relationships. Mohammed Abdalla provides a very interesting spot of this homosexual continuum as he “picked porters who will be willing to get down on all fours for him during the journey” (Gurnah, 1994: 47). The narrator describes one of the sexual scenes in deep detail:

In the depths of the night (Yusuf) heard mutterings, and then small movements. After a while he recognized the sound of furtive caresses, and later heard soft laughter and muted whispers of pleasure (Gurnah, 1994:57)

He uses his masculine strength (“he was a tall strong looking man, who strode around with shoulders thrown back anticipating a challenge”, to sexually brutalise, oppress and victimize his employees. That is why “he had a reputation as a merciless sodomizer” (Gurnah, 1994: 46-47). This show of extreme masculinity is geared towards maintaining structures of power that go far beyond patriarchy.

Patriarchal power generally guarantees male authority over females and every male is free to practice it. However, having power and authority over other males is claiming supremacy and dominion over a people or better still, serving as a defence against oppression. This goes in conformity with Dollimore (1991) finding, after exploring the relationship between power and sexuality, that what is labelled as perverse can be a politically subversive force (Carter, 2006).

Mohammed Abdalla asserts his masculinity in ways that can be considered perverse (homosexuality). Homosexuality is not common and even unwelcome in most African and Muslim societies, and can thus attract homophobia. Therefore the only concrete way by which
he can surmount attitudes of homophobia towards him is by adopting an aggressive masculinity.

Bachus also manifests homosexual tendencies as he considers himself sexually attractive and admirable to other men. Both his physical and psychological attributes are feminized. For example, he keeps long hair, his body is soft and round, he has a mild voice and loves singing love songs. According to him, his voice is so sweet and angelic that "if a Maharaja heard [him] sing he’d offer his favourite piece of meat to [him] for a night". Other bitchy verbalizations such as,

"I’d love nothing better than to sit here and stroke your anus all day,"
"come behind the wall and give me a massage" and "come and suck my cock" (Gurnah, 1994: 54) are indicative of sexual desire with men since he is directly addressing them. From every indication, he would easily give himself up for sexual pleasure to any willing man for the fun of it. However, from the mockery of the porters, we realize that he has children thus making him a bisexual character though with a somewhat diminished masculinity. This attribute might be as a result of some deficiency in developing a mainstream manhood which deficiency may have been as a result of boyhood effeminacy or weak masculine identity as portrayed by his feminine body features. Studies in sex reveal that feminine qualities in young males make it difficult for them to associate with their peers or identify with typically male activities thus the inability to form a masculine identity (Brody, 1986). However, because he finds himself in a typically heterosexual milieu, he is forced to abide by its dictates.

The most common form of gender expression is the binary category demonstrated by heterosexuality. This category is exhibited in the text through the protagonist’s parents. Their relationship reflects the ideal in most African and Muslim cultures wherein the roles and responsibilities of each parent, according to their biological gender prescriptions, are respected. Such a relation operates on the patriarchal model which places the male at the helm of family affairs. Most often, his rule is dictatorial and selfish, putting his interests first before anybody’s.

However, as head of the family, the man (father) has the responsibility to assure the wellbeing of the family; working to provide for their every need, while the woman (mother) takes care of the home; doing all the house chores, raising the children and most importantly, submitting to the man’s authority. Being the ruler of the household, Yusuf’s father commands patriarchal power. He takes all important and major decisions without consulting his wife or seeking her opinion while for her part, she is expected to obey and execute. One of such major decisions is sending Yusuf, his lone child, off to serve Aziz as debt repayment. This act of his goes a long way to prove the injustices and inconsistencies of patriarchy and his failure as a father under such a system. Not only does he assure his own family’s disintegration, he allows others to initiate his only son into manhood by his deliberate yet unconscious actions. At age 12, the son has to start learning what it means to be a man in Muslim culture. This entails a close bonding with the father who has the responsibility to initiate his son into masculine activities in preparation for the son’s own manhood. It is rather from his mother’s guidance and Hamid’s and Khalil’s friendliness that Yusuf learns to be a "man".

The relationships between Aziz and his wife, the Mistress also falls into the category of gender binary. Like the relationship between Yusuf’s parents, this one is also based on the patriarchal pattern wherein the man exercises authority over the rest of the members of the family. Patriarchal authority goes in line with hegemonic masculinity, which can be seen as the power a man wields that testifies to his manhood.

Kimmel (2004: 184) notes that this power of manhood is measured in terms of how strong, successful and reliable a man is. It is a sum total of those cultural symbols that give a man authority over other men and particularly over women – preventing their inclusion in public life.

In most traditional African societies, manhood is determined by the wealth a man acquires, the number of women he can afford for and the power and control he exerts over other men. Aziz squarely fits into this definition of masculinity and is presented in the novel as the most influential and revered male figure. He is a successful businessman, has two wives and is feared and respected by other men in his community. His business exploits carry him to other places where he spends long periods of time yet his wives remain, as tradition demands, within the confines of the home. From every indication, his gender identity is constructed on social and cultural prescriptions making him an epitome of African masculinity.

The afore-gone discussions indicate that there are lapses and discrepancies in socio-cultural exigencies of gender. In an attempt to fill these gaps, individuals express their genders in ways that are considered weird and absurd but which nonetheless are a true manifestation of their personal desires and perceptions of themselves. This somehow accentuates the need for new spaces that can accommodate this new line of thought and behaviour.

CONSTRUCTING NEW SPACES

Societies and cultures ascribe roles to men and women constructed on gender ideology, which is again based on the gender binary scale. Gender ideology revolves around a set of cultural beliefs through which a society constructs and wields its gender relations and practices. It constitutes legends, narrative and myths about what it means to be a man or a woman, and suggests how each
should behave in the society.

In this respect, the behavioural patterns of individuals are restricted and limiting while again reinforcing stereotypes and inequalities. On the basis of these, these individuals seek to break free from such constraints by shifting to other gender categories. In as much as such movements remove the unnecessary inequalities that had existed since the dawn of time, they also necessitate new spaces. Such spaces are meant to reassert their real gender identities, roles and responsibilities in order to create an atmosphere of psychological stability in which they will feel comfortable. Again, they should have spaces in which they can fully assert themselves and express their gender identities freely.

The gender binary model aligns with patriarchy to create inequalities between the man and the woman. Femininity was constructed and defined through patriarchal laws which made the woman inferior to the man and limits her behaviour and attitude. However with the new gender options, women have begun debunking stereotypes. Such is the case with Ma Ajuza, who, by adopting a gender variant identity, is rejecting and challenging the cultural script written for her by patriarchy.

Taking on an otherwise masculine role is equivalent to refusing to let patriarchy define and construct her femininity. She does not only try to woo Yusuf but does so publicly thus claiming public space largely considered as masculine space. Her invasion of what society considers the masculine domain shows that she does not limit herself to the cultural meaning attached to her ascribed gender as a woman but rather creates a gender category that is not common in most conservative societies and lives and acts according to the new norms. This position she adopts is made possible by her power of rhetoric and her strong and imposing personality. Her frequent singing, dancing and particularly her search for others’ flaws in their cultural conformity are a way of strengthening herself and her position. All these she does while ignoring public gossip and deluding herself into believing that Yusuf can actually love her. This way, she is able to maintain psychic stability and live within her own created space.

Having a personal identity largely depends on one’s perception of the self but recognition from others also plays a significant role. Most often when this recognition is absent, one’s identity becomes vulnerable as it may result in lack of self-esteem and confidence. The Mistress seems to suffer this fate as she stays confined in her matrimonial home. Her husband does not care about her thus she is both physically and emotionally starved. This causes her shame and humiliation that leads to the destruction of self-esteem which almost causes the collapse of her soul. Unfortunately, she is unaware of the power that she wields as a rich woman, which awareness can be a strong weapon against subjugation and domination.

In her earlier life, the mistress had used her financial authority and influence to win Aziz over for marriage after which she becomes submissive, adopting a gender binary role. She soon realizes, with Aziz’s neglect, that this gender conformist position is tearing her apart so she needs to bend further to come out of her dilemma. To free herself from this barrier, she rebels against, and transcends the line that stops women from making advances at men. Pretending that she needs prayers, she starts inviting Yusuf in her house then expecting him to “touch her heart and heal the wound in it” (Gurnah, 1994: 210), notwithstanding the fact that she is married and Yusuf is much younger than she is.

Yusuf then becomes to her an outlet through which she can escape Aziz’s torture. She bypasses the Muslim traditional code of conduct which forbids sexual relationships between old women and young boys, and involving married people, adopts a gender fluid position and goes ahead to court Yusuf in the hope that he will relieve her of the pain she feels. This move becomes significant in achieving liberation, making meaning out of her existence and creating for herself an authentic identity out of the restrictions of a male-dominated society.

One other domain which calls for the construction of new spaces is in the area of feminism. Women generally and African women specifically are marginalised because of their gender and this experience of marginalisation impedes the woman’s self-definition. Such experiences range from the denial of personal development, educational development and voice. This is very particular in Africa where women suffer under the yoke of patriarchy. As a traditional African woman, Yusuf’s mother faces these challenges of being reduced to a housewife, nurturer and home-keeper. Though she accepts these roles, she does not want to be limited to the domestic realm. She nurses plans and ambitions of becoming a successful and influential business woman. Note should be taken here that though the understanding of women’s problems in Africa vary considerably, one major feature that cuts across feminisms in Africa is the inclusion of men in their struggles for liberation. They believe that collaboration and accommodation will ensure that both genders work together, even if not equally, to improve the material conditions not only of the women but of the family and society at large. This is why Yusuf’s mother pleads with her husband to allow her engage in business, saying,

“Let me do this for you, and especially for my son. I want to be economically empowered” (Gurnah, 1994: 48).

Maybe if she were given this chance, the family would have stayed whole and Yusuf would have enjoyed the benefits that go with living in a complete family. At this point, it is therefore very necessary that women be accorded this additional space that they seek.
Begley (2000) specifically notes that beliefs associated with the psychological traits and characteristics of individuals and the activities believed to be appropriate to men and women are what constitute gender stereotypes, while gender roles are defined by behaviours. These patterns of behaviours, when associated with either men or women tend to overlook individual variations thus holding on to the belief that behaviours are inevitably associated with genders. Such stereotyping affects conceptualisation of men and women and help in establishing social categories of gender which in turn orientates the way people think (Begley, 2000: 160).

According to such conceptualisations, the woman is the weaker sex while the man is the stronger. It is therefore expected that jobs requiring physical energy be performed by men while house chores specifically are to be performed by women. However, Gurnah presents male characters that deviate from this expectation. Hamid, for instance, abandons clearing some bushes simply because a sharp twig stabbed his palm. It is not the act of abandoning that is contended with here but rather his reaction to the incident. It is said, “with a despairing wail he threw the machete on the ground and stormed back to the house” declaring, “I’m not going to kill myself over that forest” (Gurnah, 1994: 68).

Wailing is a show of emotional weakness often associated with women. Again, using forest to mean bush simply indicates that he does not have enough physical strength to bring it down. This whole scene therefore exposes Hamid as both physically and emotionally weak, traits that do not conform to societal definition of masculinity. It can be inferred from this that ascribed physical and emotional traits are not adequate to strictly define a gender; the individual builds these traits from within and fashions his life according to them. Another character who does not strictly align to his ascribed masculine behaviour is Aziz. Though he can be considered an epitome of African masculinity because of his position in society, there are nonetheless lapses in his nature which put to question the validity of traditional roles and responsibilities that have been attributed to males.

Aziz does not follow the traditional pattern of wooing a woman; the Mistress cajoles and entices him with riches and he marries her; while Amina is given to him as debt repayment. His manhood is not honoured when he has to depend on a woman’s wealth to enrich himself. Principled manhood entails working and living up to one’s filial responsibility. This goes along with it assertiveness, pride and a sense of achievement and fulfilment. Aziz has two wives but does not raise a family. He rather takes pride in the respect he commands out of home than in his achievement within the family realm. What this denotes is that some of the roles and responsibilities ascribed to particular genders are becoming stifling and limiting to individual goals and aspirations and so these individuals are slowly shifting from such prescriptions. They are looking for independent ways of defining themselves and their objectives in life and not necessarily living by societal dictates. Aziz definitely does not find it humiliating being a man with the help of a woman. He does not also find it out of place living without children of his own. His priorities have been set on achieving wealth and fame within his community and that is what he goes for. In the process, he bypasses cultural and societal recommendations that guide and/or define his masculinity. This move from traditional patterns of behaviour is a way for vying for a redefinition of masculinity thereby creating a new masculine space - one that has as its base individual cravings.

Sometimes, the circumstances of life warrant a shift in the acting out of gender roles. Such is the case with Yusuf whom we see at some point in the text doing house chores like sweeping the yard, cleaning the dishes and going grocery shopping in Hamid’s household. Yusuf’s ability to “manage the home,” a role that is reserved for women, must have been learned from his mother with whom he spent most of his childhood. As an only child, Yusuf benefits from a close bond with his mother, who is expected, according to patriarchal rules, to train him to be a man. Most of what Yusuf learns is linked to being a woman, but the mother nonetheless cautions him that “bravery is what is required of a man ... be brave like your mother” (Begley, 2000: 56). Though we do not see Yusuf engaging in strictly masculine activities while with his mother, the mere fact of his mother recognizing his maleness through reminders of bravery helps Yusuf in building a masculine ego based on the gender binary matrix.

As Diamond (2009: 37) argues, “a mother’s recognition and affirmation of her son’s maleness help him to progressively differentiate from her rather than establish his sense of masculinity in violent opposition to his femaleness”. By recognition and affirmation, he means the mother’s ability to help the son in his movement towards maleness Yusuf internalizes the values learned from his mother on the difference between being a man and a woman. This way, he is able to resist homosexual attempts, considering the practice absurd and deviant, and proving his heterosexual masculine leanings by attempting love relationships with younger women. He therefore maintains the space ascribed for him by culture and society but suffers a deficiency of proper initiation into the cult of manhood usually mediated by the father. Because of this deficiency, he is unable to continue the legacy of patriarchy and uses the German regimen as an escape valve.

In direct opposition to heterosexual masculinity is homosexual masculinity which, until recent years, has been considered a “perverse” form of sexuality/masculinity. This is because it is different and difference has always been considered “other”, which as Hooks (1990) explains, presupposes a negative
perception and therefore a marginal position. She argues that we cannot speak of gender without additionally referring to sexual, race and class differences. These categories on which identities are formed have been subject to exclusion and oppression especially when they are in the minority (Palazzani, 2013).

Individuals who belong to such groups and manifest bizarre traits are usually treated with scorn and prejudice. This explains why when Bacchus manifests homosexual tendencies; his peers taunt him with spiteful comments about his mother, insinuating that he was not brought up according to the gender prescriptions of their society and culture. Despite these, he maintains his position as a bisexual character by staying true to his feelings and overlooking the meanness with which he is treated.

Furthermore, Ethel Spector Person observes that different cultures produce different varieties of masculinities and even within western societies, masculinity is not the exclusive sphere of heterosexual men (Diamond, 2009). This hypothesis is proven in Gurnah's Paradise through the character of Mohammed Abdalla. He has a typical homosexual identity. He does not have a wife or children but yet is as aggressive, assertive and chauvinistic and wields authority as any other influential heterosexual male in the novel. Most traditional African and Muslim societies seriously frown at homosexuality and uphold heterosexuality as the ideal form of sexuality. However, the new argument raised by gay Muslims is that if Allah forbids homosexuality, then why does he allow people to be born gay? This demonstrates that even religion, which is considered worldwide as provider of moral codes of conduct, does not have a fundamental basis for the preference of heterosexuality to homosexuality.

As gathered from the gender identity of Mohammed Abdalla, there is a clear indication that traditional masculine traits are not only inherent in heterosexual males. Therefore, there is no concrete foundation for the prejudice against homosexual males, which prejudice only enforces division and slows down individual achievement. This is corroborated by Frank's (1987: 167) observation that "hegemonic masculinity is an obstacle to a truly socialist society ... that dominant form of masculinity assists in the production of an unjust and unequal society". Mohammed Abdalla and others like Simba Mwene and Bacchus are looked upon with disdain but they nonetheless feel secured and fulfilled in their new and distinct identities.

**CONCLUSION**

Gender roles and relationships are becoming increasingly ambiguous given that gender has come to be viewed as a social construct rather than a biological category. It is perceived differently by different people and depends largely on the individual's awareness of themselves. Therefore an individual may be a biological male but a social/sexual female. Masculinities and femininities are no longer adequately defined by socio-cultural roles and responsibilities but by individual perceptions of who they are and what they want themselves to be. Men and women, even in typically traditional set-ups where strict adherence to ascribed gender roles is expected, are becoming increasingly aware of the inadequacies and limitations of biological and cultural definitions of their gender/sexual beings and selfhood and are now fighting to reverse such structures. They argue that there are no specific roles and attributes that define a gender since gender is in a fluid state. That is why most of the main characters in the novel do not conform to socio-cultural and biological definitions of their genders but rather define themselves in ways which go out of the supposed 'normal' yet are psychologically and physically fulfilling.

**CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

**REFERENCES**


