



MIGRANT NARRATIVES IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF ABDULRAZAK GURNAH: IDENTITY, DISPLACEMENT, AND BELONGING

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Abstract

This paper examines migration, identity, displacement, and belonging in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Paradise (1994), Admiring Silence (1996), By the Sea (2001), and Desertion (2005). It argues that Gurnah presents migration not simply as movement from one location to another but as a psychological and cultural process through which the self is unsettled, silenced, narrated, and remade. His migrant subjects carry the burdens of colonial history, family rupture, exile, racial exclusion, and memory, yet they are not portrayed merely as passive victims. Drawing on postcolonialism, diaspora studies, hybridity, and memory studies, especially the work of Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Frantz Fanon, Paul Gilroy, Edward Said, and Avtar Brah, the paper reads Gurnah's fiction as a critique of fixed identity, nationalist closure, and imperial history. It concludes that Gurnah's novels foreground the dignity and agency of displaced subjects by showing how memory and storytelling become crucial means of negotiating loss and constructing fragile forms of belonging.

Keywords: *Abdulrazak Gurnah, migration, identity, displacement, diaspora, belonging, postcolonial fiction*

Introduction

Migration has become one of the defining experiences of contemporary world literature. In postcolonial writing, the migrant is rarely only a traveller; he or she is a historically burdened subject whose movement is shaped by empire, war, poverty, racial exclusion, and unequal opportunity. Migration therefore involves more than crossing borders. It produces a crisis of language, memory, identity, and belonging, compelling the migrant to live between places, cultural codes, and competing versions of the self.

Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction is especially significant because it treats displacement as both a historical condition and an inward drama. Born in Zanzibar and later resident in Britain, Gurnah writes from within the Indian Ocean world, colonial East Africa, exile, and diasporic movement. His selected novels--Paradise, Admiring Silence, By the Sea, and Desertion--represent migration in several forms: debt-bound movement, exile, asylum, return, inherited memory, and emotional homelessness. The present paper argues that Gurnah's migrant identities are fragmented but dynamic: his characters are marked by loss and alienation, yet they continuously reconstruct the self through silence, memory, storytelling, and cultural negotiation.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonialism, Diaspora, and Hybridity

A postcolonial reading of Gurnah must begin with the recognition that migration in his fiction is inseparable from colonial history. Edward Said's analysis of empire shows that colonial power does not merely occupy territory; it also produces narratives about people, cultures, and places (Said, *Orientalism*; Said, *Culture and Imperialism*). Gurnah's novels challenge such imperial narration by recovering the experiences of those who are often absent from official history: debt-bound boys, refugees, silenced lovers, and exiles whose stories disturb the clean narratives of nation and empire.

Frantz Fanon's account of colonial alienation is useful for understanding the psychological pressure under which Gurnah's characters live. Fanon shows how colonialism forces the subject to see himself through the gaze of the dominant culture (Fanon). Similarly, Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a process of becoming, shaped through history, memory, and representation (Hall). Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the third space further clarify Gurnah's migrant world, where identities emerge through negotiation rather than purity (Bhabha). Paul Gilroy's double consciousness and Avtar Brah's diaspora space also help explain the divided yet creative condition of Gurnah's characters (Gilroy; Brah).

Displacement, Silence, and Memory in the Selected Novels

Paradise presents migration before the modern language of diaspora fully enters the narrative. Yusuf, the young protagonist, is handed over to the trader Aziz because of his father's debt. His movement is therefore not chosen mobility but coerced displacement. Through Yusuf's journey, Gurnah reveals an East African world shaped by trade, slavery, religious encounter, and German colonial expansion. The title Paradise is deeply ironic: the world Yusuf

enters is beautiful but also violent, hierarchical, and insecure. His life is formed by displacement before he is able to understand its meaning. The novel therefore provides the historical ground for Gurnah's later narratives of exile by showing how colonial and commercial systems uproot vulnerable subjects.

Admiring Silence shifts attention to the migrant's life in Britain. Its unnamed narrator leaves Zanzibar and constructs an existence in England, but that existence depends on concealment. He creates stories that make him acceptable to his English partner and her family, while withholding painful truths about his past. Silence becomes both protection and prison. It allows him to survive in a society that cannot fully receive him, yet it prevents genuine intimacy and belonging. The novel demonstrates that migration can produce double consciousness: the narrator must understand himself through memories of Zanzibar and through the expectations of British society. His identity is therefore not unified but performed, fractured, and emotionally strained.

By the Sea offers Gurnah's most sustained treatment of asylum, testimony, and narrative repair. Saleh Omar arrives in Britain as an elderly asylum seeker from Zanzibar, while Latif Mahmud carries another version of the same postcolonial history. Their stories intersect through memories of property, betrayal, political violence, and displacement. Gurnah presents asylum not merely as a legal status but as a condition in which the displaced person must submit his past to suspicion while carrying memories that are difficult to speak. Saleh's silence at the point of entry is again a survival strategy, but the novel gradually reveals that silence must eventually give way to narration if recognition is to become possible.

Desertion extends the theme of migration by showing how displacement is inherited across generations. The novel links an early twentieth-century encounter between Martin Pearce and Rehana with later stories of love, shame, and separation. Its title suggests abandonment at several levels: personal desertion, colonial betrayal, emotional withdrawal, and the abandonment of people by history. Gurnah refuses to romanticize cultural crossing. The third space in *Desertion* is creative but also painful; love across boundaries is shaped by race, class, empire, and social judgment. The novel shows that the past survives in fragments, and that later generations inherit stories they only partly understand.

Storytelling, Agency, and the Search for Belonging

Across the selected novels, Gurnah repeatedly connects migration with storytelling. His characters survive not by recovering an untouched origin but by narrating the brokenness of

their lives. Storytelling becomes a way of resisting erasure and challenging the official narratives of empire, nation, immigration bureaucracy, and family honour. Even when Gurnah's narrators are evasive or unreliable, their speech matters because it reveals the pressures under which migrant subjects are forced to speak or remain silent.

At the same time, Gurnah avoids sentimentalizing migrant resilience. *Paradise* ends with Yusuf facing the machinery of colonial war; *Admiring Silence* exposes the emotional cost of concealment; *By the Sea* offers recognition without complete repair; *Desertion* reveals the long afterlife of colonial and familial abandonment. Belonging remains partial, fragile, and sometimes impossible. This refusal of easy resolution is central to Gurnah's ethical force. He represents migrants neither as abstract symbols of suffering nor as simple models of triumph, but as human beings whose identities are made through loss, memory, endurance, and negotiation.

The selected novels also challenge exclusionary ideas of nation and identity. They show that cultures have always been interconnected through trade, language, faith, desire, and violence. The migrant is not an exception to history but one of its clearest witnesses. In Gurnah's fiction, identity is neither pure origin nor complete assimilation; it is a negotiated relation to place, memory, and other people. For this reason, his fiction remains central to contemporary debates on migration and diaspora: it insists that the migrant must be recognized as a subject whose story exposes the unfinished histories of colonialism and the ethical failures of the modern nation-state.

Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*, *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea*, and *Desertion* offer a profound literary exploration of migration, identity, displacement, and belonging. These novels show that migration is not merely geographical relocation but a psychological and cultural process in which the self is unsettled, translated, silenced, and narrated anew. Gurnah's migrant subjects are shaped by colonial histories, family ruptures, political violence, and racialized encounters, but they are not merely victims of these forces. Through memory, silence, storytelling, and ethical relation, they create provisional forms of agency and belonging.

Read through postcolonial and diasporic frameworks, Gurnah's fiction reveals identity as fragmented but dynamic. Fanon's colonial alienation, Said's critique of imperial representation, Hall's cultural identity, Bhabha's hybridity, Gilroy's double consciousness, and Brah's diaspora space all illuminate the complexity of Gurnah's narrative world. Yet Gurnah's

novels exceed theory by giving emotional depth to the lived experiences of displaced people. In an age marked by forced migration and hardened borders, his work stands as a major humanistic intervention, calling for the ethical recognition of migrant lives and for a more generous understanding of belonging.

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