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Melancholy in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart*: An Examination of the Novel's Portrayal of Loss, Mourning, and Betrayal

Kanika Mahajan

PhD Research Scholar.

&

Dr Manjinder Kaur Wratch

Assistant Professor in English,

Desh Bhagat University,

Mandi Gobindgarh (Punjab).

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Abstract:

Nobel laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah's bildungsroman novel *Gravel Heart* (2017) is a story of a small ambitious boy Salim who wanted to achieve significant things in life, instead he experiences feelings of melancholia as a result of broken relationships largely due to his father and mother's domestic fall-out. In the Zanzibar of 1970s, Salim is merely seven, when his father abandons the house; at first his mother says he has only gone away for a few days. Soon it becomes clear that he has moved out and is renting a room in another part of town. For first few days, her mother delivers him a basket of food every day, then she asks Salim to take over the duty. Neither parent ever speaks of the reason for their discord. Salim, the protagonist of the novel, experiences a deep sense of loss and mourning after the death of his mother and the subsequent alienation from his father. The novel discusses his journey from his childhood to adulthood. Salim, an intellectual boy born in Zanzibar spent his adulthood in Britain and had led a fully traumatic life of melancholy making his father the culprit for his distorted life. This research paper analyses conditions of melancholia as represented by Sigmund Freud in his *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) and thus discusses the presence of 'melancholia' in the protagonist's life, which was the result of his parent's secrets and Salim, the protagonist trying to negotiate with his life in Britain, and his uncle's condescending behaviour towards him.

The article incorporates revealing secrets which added to his melancholia, his encounter with the truth after his mother's death, his act of writing imaginary letters to his mother that he never posted, and his gradual search for his own identity amidst his chaotic life. The core of melancholia lies in his family's hidden truth and the traumas he faced as a kid, the related loss of his family and his community, the disillusion generated by hidden truths and his life as an immigrant in Britain. In Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Gravel Heart* the themes of loss,

mourning, and betrayal are explored through the experiences of the main character, Salim. Salim's feelings of alienation and disconnection from his cultural and historical roots can also be seen as contributing factors to his melancholic state

Keywords: melancholy, adulthood, bildungsroman, condescending, encounter, disillusion, immigrant, trauma.

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels are filled with his heroes migrating to Britain and this one too is no exception. Like Gurnah's other stories here also the protagonist of the story plans to migrate abroad and is haunted by his past. Silently suffering and being uprooted from their culture are common feelings shared by Gurnah's characters. In this sense, it is a collective structure of feeling, a term defined by Raymond Williams "as how meanings and values are actively lived and felt" in our everyday settings (132). Melancholia, as proposed by Williams, is a response to trauma that is shaped by social factors and is not solely a personal experience but also has collective and influential aspects (133). In *Gravel Heart* melancholy spurs from Salim's traumatising experiences of his early childhood, racism and migration, till his later stage. Salim tries to portray his melancholy to make meaningful the lost histories and histories of loss (Kaplan 514).

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his book *Being and Nothingness* (1943), critiqued Freud's understanding of melancholia as a symptom of the loss of the loved object and instead characterised it as a condition of 'nothingness' where the subject loses the sense of being in the world. Jacques Lacan, in his seminar "The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis" (1954-55) proposed a revised version of Freud's melancholic identification, where the subject identifies with an idealised image of the lost object in order to maintain a sense of continuity and identity. Additionally, the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips in his book, *Melancholy and the Critique of Modernity* (1998) explores melancholic experience as a form of resistance to the demands of modernity, and how it can be used as a critique of our culture.

This treatise studies the psychoanalytical work of Sigmund Freud *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) in relation to Abdulrazak Gurnah's work, *Gravel Heart* (2001). Freud first published a paper on 'Melancholia' in 1917. He wrote about 'Mourning' and 'Melancholia' - considering both as different ways of mourning grief. The concept of melancholia has been discussed in cultural criticism for many years, and its implications have been discussed from time to time. Melancholy is an internal pain. It's a bit complicated way of mourning grief. Sigmund Freud defined 'melancholia' as a psychological state characterised by deep and persistent feelings of sadness, accompanied by a sense of personal obligation and self-blame.

The individual may also experience vague sense of self and a diminished ability to experience pleasure. According to Freud, 'melancholia' may arise as a defence mechanism against feelings of anger and hostility towards a lost object or person, with the individual directing these emotions inward towards themselves. Melancholic pain is felt within the unconscious mind because it is deeply felt pain. Freud has divided the mind into 3 main parts: conscious, unconscious and subconscious and, melancholic thoughts go into the unconscious mind. The unconscious mind is a warehouse of repressed, generalised thoughts and feelings, which are difficult, aggressive, shameful, or traumatic thoughts. Freud believed that melancholia arises as a result of conflicts between the conscious and unconscious mind. In his theory, the individual's conscious mind is aware of the loss they have experienced, but their unconscious mind harbours feelings of anger, hostility, and resentment towards the lost object or person. To cope with this internal conflict, the individual directs these negative emotions inward, leading to a sense of self-blame and worthlessness.

Freud saw the unconscious mind as a repository for thoughts, memories, and emotions that are not accessible to conscious awareness. He believed that these hidden desires and conflicts can manifest in various forms of psychological distress, including melancholia. Salim was going through the same repressed feelings which he repressed as a kid and felt shameful because of his father. He had a traumatic childhood where he has to live without his father and was in constant shame because of his mother because she had an affair with some different man. Because of these melancholic and shameful feelings, he decided to run to London to stay with his uncle. Like Freud said Salim also repressed his conscious feelings into his repressed mind feeling he could run away from them.

The novel *Gravel Heart* is set in colonial East Africa and explores the impact of colonialism on the lives of the characters, particularly on the main character, Salim. The novel portrays how the colonisers disrupt the characters' sense of belonging, disrupt their cultural and historical roots, and create feelings of loss and disconnection. Salim's experiences of loss and disconnection as a result of colonialism can also be seen as contributing factor to his melancholic state.

The novel revolves around the story of Salim, who moved from revolutionary Zanzibar to restless London for his further education. It is a story of exile, betrayal and migration. His singular experience in life added to his melancholia. His life is full of more melancholic memories than happy ones. In London, he is faced with many challenges, navigating the complexities of life can be a daunting task for many adolescents, and Salim is no exception to this. He, like many young individuals, struggles to find his footing and direction

in life. He moved to a new country with a different culture and different people, where he knows no one but his charismatic and controlling uncle and his family. He struggles to live his life according to his uncle's wishes, wearing the clothes he chooses and attending business school which his uncle wished him to attend. He fled to Britain thinking that he will be happy there but his fate did not leave him and he was doomed there also.

As the story develops, Salim believed that his father didn't want him, simply because his father never shared anything with him. He was a bookish child from the beginning only, living with his parents and his adored Uncle, in a house full of secrets. He was a dreamer haunted by the terrors of life. So, when the story starts, he goes into flashbacks and recalls his first melancholic experience.

I came to realize at a young age that my father did not have any desire to have me as his child. I understood this before I even knew what it meant to be rejected by a parent and long before I could understand the reasons behind his actions. (*Gravel Heart*, 9).

Salim has long held onto the belief that his family has rejected him, particularly his father. This perception is based on his memories of his childhood, which were largely positive during his first four years of life. However, by the time he turned seven, his recollections began to take a turn for the worse. Regrettably, he possesses few memories that he can hold dear, and he is uncertain whether the ones he does have are authentic or are mere figments of his imagination. The majority of his recollections are marked by bitterness and sorrow, often featuring heated disputes with his mother and feelings of abandonment by his father. Since the age of seven, he has been afflicted by a dogged sense of shame, which he attributes to his father's actions. This has resulted in him holding his father responsible for every wrong that has befallen him.

According to Freud, melancholia is a way for individuals to protect themselves from overwhelming emotions of anger and hostility towards a person or object they have lost. Instead of directing these feelings outward, the individual turns them inward and focuses their anger and blame on themselves. For instance, Salim, who has lived with his uncle since childhood, may have developed a pattern of ignoring his mother's feelings and holding her responsible for his unhappiness. This behaviour could be a manifestation of his melancholia, as he may be unconsciously directing his anger towards himself and blaming himself for the loss of his father and the absence of his mother in his life.

Freud's theory suggests that this self-blame is a defence mechanism that helps the individual cope with the pain of loss by avoiding the direct confrontation of the object of their anger. However, this can also lead to feelings of worthlessness and self-loathing, which can

further exacerbate the individual's depression and sense of loss. According to Freud, these melancholic feelings are outside of our consciousness but this doesn't mean they are out of mind and hence melancholia occurs. Freud believed that the loss is so deep that it sticks to our unconscious mind. In *Gravel Heart* there are many incidents where Salim repressed his feelings for example when he goes to give the basket to his father, his father didn't talk to him he just ignored him throughout his life. His mother keeps on seeing another man Hakim against the wishes of his son Salim, this also caused melancholic feelings in Salim. Later when he decides to go to London to study and wanted to study literature but his uncle Amir wanted him to study Business, at that time also Salim had no choice but to accept his uncle's decision, in another incident his lady love rejects him merely because he is Black. Salim has been accustomed to suppressing his emotions from a very young age, which has resulted in him experiencing more melancholic moods than happy ones in his adult life. The act of repressing emotions involves pushing feelings, thoughts, and memories into the unconscious mind. As a child, Salim may have learned to repress his feelings as a way of coping with difficult situations, such as the loss of his father and his mother's absence. Over time, this habit may have become ingrained in his behaviour and way of thinking, leading to a tendency towards melancholia in adulthood. He may be struggling to confront and process his emotions in a healthy way.

His melancholia also spurs from nostalgia when he revisits his childhood home after fifteen years, but this house has changed just like his life. At that time he feels more melancholic which spurs by his old memories. This novel contains more melancholic experiences than happy ones.

Overall, Salim's history of repressing his feelings may be playing a significant role in his current struggles with melancholia. By working to address and process his emotions, he may be able to break free from this pattern and experience more happiness in his life.

Melancholia in Broken Relationship

In the novel, Salim experiences feelings of loss and mourning as a result of betrayal by the people he loves, such as his father and his uncle. The novel also explores the theme of betrayal in the context of colonialism and its impact on the lives of the characters. Salim's experiences of betrayal by the colonisers and their agents in the novel can also be seen as contributing to his melancholic state.

For Freud, "mourning is often the response to the loss of a loved person, which has taken the place in their life. It is a major loss such as a loss of one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (243). To Freud, melancholia is pathological and created problems with the survival

of the individual (243–244). Melancholia is different from mourning because it includes “disturbance of self-regard which arises in persons with such pathological features as a profoundly painful dejection, interrupted interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, reticence for all activity” (244), which results in self-hatred and a worthless view of oneself, incapable of any achievement and morally disgraceful attitude (246). This also includes mothers' and fathers' melancholy, the pain of their lost love, separation and betrayal. Salim's father left home because of his wife's betrayal. It includes the mother's melancholy because of whom a happy family breaks. It includes melancholy of broken homes and broken relationships. Saida broke from Masud, Billie broke from Salim, Masud left his family, and later Salim too left his family.

Salim's melancholia starts as a child only when his father left him: “At that young age, I had clearly defined and tangible fears that consumed my thoughts. I would often imagine scenarios of abandonment, such as getting lost in a crowded public place or sinking without a sound in the dark green waters off the wharf, which caused me distress and anxiety.” According to Freud melancholia is a deep loss from within. Salim was unhappy at such a tender age because even at the age of seven, he understood the concept of shame. He couldn't stand the way people looked at his father. He secretly wished that he would disappear without a trace, never to be seen again (*Gravel Heart* 33).

His detachment from his father caused melancholy in him and he blamed his father to be the culprit. He saw only detachment and defeat from his early childhood. After Salim's father had been absent for many years, he had grown accustomed to not feeling any pain when he thought of him. However, when he saw him looking dishevelled and bruised in the streets, it was difficult to hold back his tears of shame. He admitted that he was afraid of him and didn't want to confront him (37).

In later years, Salim found himself in a deeply passionate and committed relationship with his love, Billie. For him, Billie had become the focal point of his existence, the centre of his daily life and his world now revolved entirely around her. Sometimes they met after work mid-week, but mostly they waited for the weekend to meet. He always had fear when he was with Billie that she would be ashamed of him, of the work he did, of his lack of ambition, of his strangeness, his ordinariness, his blackness, and his poverty (126). Like other relations which he loved and cherished this relationship too betrayed and deserted him because she left him solely because of his skin colour, calling him a black nigger.

He tried to stop her and reason with her, but her family was against him also. Billie's mother threatened to kill herself so he had to let go off her love. This relation also

added to his melancholy. All his relations added to his melancholy. He never experienced a happy relationship.

Masud's decision to leave his home and be alone was a manifestation of his deep melancholy. The pain inflicted upon him by his beloved wife had become too much to bear. Although leaving one's home is a difficult decision, Masud's feelings of sadness were stronger than his love for his family. He was devastated by the betrayal of his wife, which made it impossible for him to continue living in the same environment. Masud chose to isolate himself, not even considering his only son Salim. In the *Gravel Heart*, no character is immune to feelings of melancholy. Every character has experienced sadness at some point, including Masud, who was heartbroken from the inside. His wife attempted to make amends for her guilt by sending him food baskets every day. However, they were not sufficient. Every character has tasted the taste of sadness now and then.

Melancholy and Guilt

Sometimes melancholy results from guilt also which is true for Salim's mother Saida. She always thought about her brother Amir and felt that she has responsibility for him but she forgot about her husband and her son. She chooses Amir's happiness and well-being over her happiness and destroyed her happy family. Saida's actions of betraying Salim's father, Masud, by sleeping with Hakim, were driven by her desire to secure her brother- Amir's release from jail. Amir had been imprisoned by Hakim, who held significant power in the community. Saida, who loved her dear brother Amir, begged Hakim to release him, but he demanded that she sleep with him as a condition for Amir's freedom. Saida made the difficult decision to prioritise her brother's release over her family's well-being and broke her home by sleeping with Hakim. Unfortunately, this decision resulted in long-lasting melancholy not only for Saida but also for Salim and Masud. Saida's actions caused immense suffering to her family, and Salim and Masud had to live with the consequences of her decision for the rest of their lives. This decision not only affected Saida but also brought melancholy in Salim's life forever. If Amir was not so selfish, he could have stopped his sister but rather he persuaded her to his interest. Amir broke a happy family. Saida's guilt caused melancholy in her life and also in those related to her.

Uncle Amir tried to compensate as much as he can by showing some sympathy towards Salim. He always blamed Masud for their broken home and wanted his sister Saida to get over him. He didn't like their old home and wanted to move somewhere else, Uncle Amir often described Saida's house as a slum. On one occasion, Uncle Amir would leave in a fit of

anger, uttering sarcastic or belittling comments (34). Because of guilt, Amir invited Salim to London for his future prospect. Because he knew Salim was without a father so he took responsibility for settling him there.

Betrayal and Melancholy

Melancholy is an internal pain. It's a bit complicated way of mourning grief. According to Freud melancholic pain is felt within the unconscious because it is deeply felt pain. Melancholia in Freud's theory is a complex psychological condition that involves feelings of intense sadness, guilt, self-blame, a distorted self-image, and a conflict between conscious and unconscious desires. It is also seen as a defense mechanism against overwhelming feelings of anger and hostility towards a lost object or person. Salim was also going through the same repressed feelings which he repressed as a kid and felt shameful because of his father. He had a traumatic childhood where he has to live without his father and was in constant shame because his mother had affair with some different man. Because of these melancholic and shameful feelings, he decided to go to London to stay with his uncle.

Salim never accepted that other man, Hakim who replaced his baba (father). He always had bitterness towards his mother, father and that other man. Once when that man visited them, he stayed out for the whole day so he could ignore him. He rejected gifts brought by him and he rejected his mother because of that man.

When I learned of the man's plans to visit, I avoided going home all day by taking long walks outside of town. Despite my inability to express it to my mother, the sight of her constant aura of subtle sorrow deeply affected me. The thought of the cold-hearted man sharing intimate moments with her and belittling my father caused me great distress (*Gravel Heart* 45).

Melanie Klein, in her book, *Melanie Klein* (1946) developed her own theory of melancholia, which emphasised the role of internalised objects, such as the mother, in the melancholic experience. She like Salim contributed her melancholy to her family. Salim also always thought his family was responsible for his melancholic experience. Freud also believed that in melancholia, the individual experiences an internal conflict between their conscious and unconscious desires. This conflict can result in a distorted self-image and an inability to recognise and express one's true feelings. Salim always wrote letters to his mother about his stay in London, about his life, his love life about everything but never dared to post them, as a

consequence of his resentment and despondency towards his mother. He unconsciously wanted to share everything with his mother but on a conscious level didn't have the guts to post. He often wrote "Salamu na baada ya salamu. Though many months may pass and I remain silent, you are often in my thoughts. Even as the years go by, the memories remain fresh in my mind and the longing for everything I've lost only grows stronger (85)". No matter how much she tried, he always felt emotionally distant from her. Freud's melancholia is a very deep-rooted emotion. It cannot be easily shaken off. Sigmund Freud's perspective on melancholy suggests that it is a manifestation of emotional injuries, such as neglect, rejection, and disappointment. These experiences may evoke conflicting emotions, such as love and hatred, within a relationship and can exacerbate pre-existing ambivalent feelings (*Mourning and Melancholia* 161). When her mother always asked him to come and meet her but he never wanted to return to her. It was not because he was happy in London but because he was running away from his family which gave him melancholic and traumatic childhood.

These feelings didn't go away when Salim went to London. He thought he would shake them off but he was wrong. Every decision he made with his uncle intensified his melancholy. He wanted to study literature but his uncle wanted him to study business, so he gave up his ambition even though he read many books by Shakespeare and was in love with literature but had to give up his love here as well. Later, he secretly pursued literature but didn't have the guts to share this with his uncle and because of this decision he had a conflict with his uncle, his aunt tried to stop Salim and forced him to alter his decision but this time he was persistent and eventually he had to leave his uncle's London home. According to Freud, melancholia is a type of grief that persists over time and becomes deeply ingrained in an individual's daily life. He believed that people do not easily overcome this emotion and often learn to live with it, as it becomes habitual and part of their daily routine. In other words, melancholia becomes a persistent part of an individual's emotional landscape that can be difficult to shake off.

To conclude we can say that these examples exhibit how different writers have inferred, stretched out, and defined Freud's theory of melancholia. The novel, *Gravel Heart* presents a complex and nuanced portrayal of melancholia that is consistent with Freud's theoretical framework. The protagonist's experiences of deep and prolonged sadness, guilt, and diminished pleasure are all characteristic of melancholia, as described by Freud. The story also highlights the ways in which melancholia can become habitual and deeply ingrained in an

individual's daily life. This is consistent with Freud's understanding of melancholia as a type of grief that persists over time and becomes part of an individual's emotional landscape.

Overall, the novel *Gravel Heart* can be seen as a compelling case study of melancholia, offering insights into the ways in which this emotional state can impact an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. The story's portrayal of melancholia is consistent with Freud's theoretical framework and can serve as a valuable resource for researchers and clinicians seeking to understand and treat this complex psychological condition. It is also important to note that the understanding of melancholia is an ongoing development in the field of psychoanalysis and other related fields.

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