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## **Narratives of Trauma, Silence, and Migration in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Fiction**

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### **Abstract:**

This research paper explores the interwoven themes of trauma, silence, racial discrimination, and migration in the selected works of Abdulrazak Gurnah. Drawing on a wide range of scholarly sources and critical perspectives, this paper examines how Abdulrazak Gurnah employs narrative voice, memory, and silence to articulate the psychological and sociopolitical experiences of displaced individuals. Set within a postcolonial framework, the analysis highlights how Gurnah's fiction engages with the enduring impacts of colonialism, forced migration, and cultural dislocation, offering a nuanced portrayal of identity, belonging, and historical trauma. Focusing on novels such as *Pilgrims Way*, *By the Sea*, *Paradise*, *Desertion*, *Dottie*, and *The Last Gift*, this study analyzes how migration, racial prejudice, and silence function not only as recurring themes but also as narrative strategies used to articulate the fractured identities and deep psychological wounds of Gurnah's characters. The analysis is grounded in theoretical frameworks drawn from postcolonial studies, trauma theory, and memory studies, which together inform the critical approach adopted in this paper.

**Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah, Postcolonial Literature, Trauma, Migration, Silence.**

## **Introduction**

Abdulrazak Gurnah, recipient of the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature, is acclaimed for his powerful narratives that explore the enduring legacies of colonialism and the complex lived experiences of migrants and exiles. His works delve into themes of displacement, identity, memory, and silence, offering a nuanced portrayal of the psychological and sociopolitical dimensions of postcolonial existence. Born in Zanzibar in 1948 and exiled to Britain after the Zanzibar Revolution, Gurnah draws upon his personal history, closely tied to themes of displacement and identity loss, which permeate his literary oeuvre. His fiction, often situated between East Africa and Britain, intricately captures the fragmentations of identity, the legacy of racial and colonial violence, and the emotional aftermath of dislocation.

In a world where the global migration crisis continues to shape political and cultural landscapes, Gurnah's work provides a necessary and urgent exploration of what it means to be displaced, Gurnah's protagonists are often suspended between geographical, cultural, and emotional worlds, embodying the fragmented sense of self that defines postcolonial and diasporic existence. Their identities are shaped by displacement, memory, and the tensions of belonging, reflecting the psychological complexities of navigating multiple cultural realities. These characters often navigate silences, both imposed and self-chosen, which speak volumes about trauma, erasure, and the inability to articulate pain within dominant cultural frameworks.

Through the protagonists of novels such as *Pilgrims Way*, *By the Sea*, *Dottie*, *Paradise*, *Desertion*, and *The Last Gift*, Gurnah constructs a literary cartography of exile and diaspora,

punctuated by trauma and silence. These novels serve as literary testimonies to the exilic condition: a state marked by unhomeliness, cultural dissonance, and psychological fragmentation. His nuanced portrayal of characters that grapple with racism, historical amnesia, and identity crises invites readers to consider how narratives of displacement are constructed and, crucially, who has the power to tell them.

This paper investigates how Gurnah utilizes narrative voice, memory, and silence as both thematic concerns and narrative strategies. It draws upon theoretical insights from postcolonial studies, trauma theory, and memory studies to unpack how the trauma of migration and racial prejudice shape his characters' inner worlds and narrative forms. Ultimately, this research aims to demonstrate how Gurnah's fiction contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological and social consequences of migration, as well as the intricate processes through which displaced individuals negotiate agency and a sense of belonging.

### **Migration and the Trauma of Displacement**

Migration in Gurnah's fiction is not merely a geographical movement; it is an existential dislocation that profoundly alters the self. The trauma of leaving one's homeland, often under violent or coercive conditions, and confronting an alienating host society underscores much of Gurnah's narrative landscape. The characters in *Pilgrims Way*, *By the Sea*, and *The Last Gift* exemplify the psychological turmoil that accompanies the journey from home to exile.

*In Pilgrims Way*, Daud's experience as a migrant in Britain reflects the pervasive impact of racism, isolation, and existential disorientation. The novel reflects the broader postcolonial reality where the promise of a better life in the former colonial metropole turns into a struggle for

survival and recognition. Daud internalizes the trauma of his displacement, which manifests in both emotional withdrawal and physical inertia. The racial hostility he endures amplifies his sense of otherness, underscoring how colonial histories continue to shape postcolonial subjectivities: “Sometimes I wish I could be invisible, just walk and not be looked at, not be judged, not be hated” (*Pilgrims Way* 48).

*By the Sea* presents another angle of migratory trauma through the character of Saleh Omar, who arrives in England as an asylum seeker carrying not just physical baggage but also the psychological weight of imprisonment and betrayal. Memories of loss, statelessness, and bureaucratic dehumanization haunt Omar’s story. His narrative weaves together silences, both imposed and self-elected, that reveals how trauma can fracture speech and render lived experiences unspeakable. As one character recalls, “They looked at me like I was less than a person, like I had no name, no history” (*By the Sea* 59).

In *The Last Gift*, Abbas’s physical ailment acts as a metaphor for the emotional paralysis caused by migration and secrecy. His belated confessions, recorded as a “last gift” to his family, reveal a lifetime of suppressed memories, unacknowledged guilt, and fractured identity(4). The act of recording his story becomes a therapeutic gesture, highlighting the role of narrative in coping with trauma: “All my life I have lied, not out of malice, but because the truth hurt too much” (*The Last Gift* 213). His decades-long silence functions as a defence mechanism that both protects him from further harm and isolates him from meaningful connection.

Across these narratives, Gurnah illustrates how migration is both a cause and a manifestation of trauma. It disrupts the temporal continuity of life, forcing individuals to negotiate between a haunting past and a precarious present. This disjunction creates what trauma theorist Cathy

Caruth describes as an “insistent return of the past,” wherein the migrant’s identity remains entangled with memories of displacement (Caruth 4). Gurnah’s characters do not simply migrate; rather, they remain perpetually suspended in a liminal space where belonging is elusive and identity remains unsettled.

Moreover, the novels reveal how host societies, rather than providing refuge, often exacerbate trauma through racism, cultural alienation, and institutional neglect. The characters’ efforts to reconcile their fractured identities are continually obstructed by external structures of exclusion, such as systemic racism, cultural marginalization, and bureaucratic barriers. As a result, the process of healing becomes complex, uneven, and often incomplete. Gurnah thus uses the narrative form to simulate the fractured temporality of trauma and the enduring psychological scars of migration.

### **Silence as a Narrative and Symbolic Strategy**

Silence in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s fiction functions not merely as a lack of speech but as a profound narrative and symbolic strategy that conveys trauma, resistance, and the limits of representation. Across novels such as *Paradise*, *Desertion*, *By the Sea*, and *The Last Gift*, silence is used to signify the emotional and psychological consequences of colonialism, exile, and racial marginalization. It represents a form of non-verbal expression, articulating that which is too painful, repressed, or dangerous to voice aloud.

In *Paradise* and *Desertion*, Alfred Oyaromwenga notes that silence is a deliberate narrative device deployed to enunciate trauma. Gurnah crafts characters that either cannot speak about their pasts or choose not to. Their muteness becomes emblematic of the inner turmoil they experience. Rather than functioning as passivity, silence emerges as a powerful form of presence,

an “absence that speaks” (Omwenga 114). It allows readers to intuit the depth of suffering without explicit articulation, aligning with Pierre Macherey’s idea that “literary meaning often resides in what is not said” (Macherey 87).

Gurnah also utilizes silence to critique the historical and cultural systems that suppress certain voices. For instance, in *By the Sea*, Saleh Omar’s initial muteness upon arriving in Britain is strategic. His decision not to speak English becomes a subversive act of resistance against the surveillance and categorization imposed by the immigration system: “I decided not to speak. I would not utter a word in that language” (*By the Sea* 4). In this context, silence functions both as a survival tactic and as a statement of agency. It disrupts the bureaucratic expectations of confession and compliance, pointing to the unequal power dynamics embedded in asylum processes.

In *The Last Gift*, silence takes a more introspective form. Abbas’s decades-long refusal to share his past reflects the psychological toll of exile and self-imposed estrangement. His use of a tape recorder to document his life story marks a transition from silence to speech, symbolizing a tentative reclaiming of narrative authority: “I am telling you now because there is no one else to tell” (*The Last Gift* 205). This delayed articulation mirrors the therapeutic process in trauma recovery, where “speech is often postponed until the subject feels safe enough to revisit their pain” (Herman 181).

Silence in Gurnah’s work also intersects with gender and generational conflict. Female characters, in particular, are often silenced within patriarchal and diasporic contexts. Their voicelessness not only exposes systemic inequalities but also underscores the resilience required to endure persistent marginalization. At times, silence acts as a veil for suppressed stories and unacknowledged pain, indicating the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Spivak’s theory

of the subaltern resonates here, as these women often “cannot speak” within hegemonic discourses but express resistance through silence (Spivak 271).

Furthermore, Gurnah’s narrative structure often mirrors the thematic presence of silence. Gaps in chronology, fragmented memories, and disjointed storytelling mimic the disruptions caused by trauma. What is omitted or left unsaid becomes as significant as what the narrative reveals. The effect is a layered narrative that invites readers to become active interpreters of silences, engaging with the text on both emotional and intellectual levels.

Thus, silence in Gurnah’s fiction is not a void but a site of complexity and meaning. It challenges hegemonic discourses, reveals the ineffability of trauma, and provides a medium through which displaced characters negotiate their identities. As a narrative and symbolic strategy, silence enables Gurnah to explore the fractures of exile, the violence of racial erasure, and the fragile process of healing.

### **Racial Discrimination and Unbelonging**

Racial discrimination in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s fiction operates not only as a socio-political force but also as a deeply personal and psychological experience that alienates characters from both the host society and their sense of self. His narratives consistently depict racial prejudice as a mechanism of exclusion and symbolic violence that produces a persistent sense of not belonging. In *Dottie*, the titular character and her siblings, born to immigrant parents in Britain, are subjected to various forms of racial prejudice. This discrimination is not merely episodic but deeply structural, manifesting across key areas such as education, housing, healthcare, and societal perception. For Dottie, these structural exclusions take the form of constant reminders of her otherness, including her dark skin, cultural difference, and perceived foreignness, which gradually fracture her sense of identity. She expresses her emotional trauma by saying that “we

lived in our own country like strangers” (*Dottie* 52). As Abhay Singh Rana emphasizes, such conditions culminate in internalized trauma, “eroding Dottie’s self-worth and instilling a lifelong feeling of displacement even within the only country she has ever known” (Rana 89). *By the Sea* reflects this persistent sense of not belonging, as Saleh Omar’s asylum-seeking status subjects him to bureaucratic scrutiny and implicit racial bias. Authorities repeatedly question his identity, and his initial silence makes him unintelligible to the systems of power that govern his fate. “He did not ask me my name, not even once,” Omar remarks, underscoring the erasure of identity through racialized indifference (*By the Sea* 45). Gurnah uses Omar’s experience to critique the systemic racism embedded in immigration protocols and national ideologies, where immigration authorities consistently treat the racialized subject as suspect or inferior. Echoing Sara Ahmed’s framework in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), racism is not only an act of exclusion but also a mode of orientation that directs how bodies navigate and inhabit social spaces (Ahmed 121).

In *Paradise* and *Desertion*, Gurnah interrogates the colonial roots of racial categorization. Characters like Yusuf and Rashid navigate hierarchical systems based on race and ethnicity, which mirror the colonial caste structures that persist even after independence. “They said I was an Arab, but I had never been to Arabia,” Yusuf muses, reflecting the arbitrary yet consequential nature of racial labels (*Paradise* 87). These novels portray how colonial ideologies of racial superiority continue to haunt postcolonial societies, perpetuating inequality and social exclusion. As Edward Said asserts in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), imperialism “consolidates the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale,” yet it also stratifies them through a racialized logic that persists into the postcolonial era (Said 15).

Gurnah's concept of "unbelonging" operates on multiple levels (Kharoua 126). It reflects the characters' exclusion from dominant national narratives, their marginalization in everyday life, and the internal conflicts they face in negotiating their identities. Gurnah's narrative seeks to expose, with honesty and clarity, the ongoing racism in Zanzibar and Britain, racism that stems from the same mindset which once justified colonialism and slavery, reflecting a world "marked by the racial division of subjectivities into 'units of camps'" (Kharoua 126). Moreover, racial discrimination in Gurnah's fiction is not isolated from other forms of identity-based oppression. It intersects with class, gender, religion, and migration status, producing a complex matrix of disadvantages. For instance, women of colour in his narratives often face double marginalization for their race and their gender. In *Dottie*, the protagonist recalls, "[m]y mother said we had to be twice as good to be seen as half as worthy" (Dottie 103). This statement exposes how racial ideologies not only influence how others perceive Black individuals, but also affect the intimacy of familial relationships and one's sense of self. GayatriSpivak's notion of the subaltern as "those who cannot speak within dominant discourses" resonates with these women's constrained expressions of identity and agency (Spivak 271).

Ultimately, Gurnah's treatment of racial discrimination underscores its dehumanizing effects and its role in shaping a diasporic identity marked by fracture and flux. His characters do not merely suffer racism, but they instead carry its psychological weight, negotiate its consequences, and, in some cases, resist its definitions through storytelling, silence, or strategic assimilation. Through this, Gurnah presents a nuanced exploration of how racism fosters unbelonging and how literature can serve as a means of reclamation and resistance.

## **Narrative Agency and Identity Reconstruction**

In Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction, the narrative agency serves as a crucial mechanism through which characters navigate their fractured identities and histories of displacement. The act of storytelling whether, oral, written, or withheld, becomes an essential form of resistance and self-definition, especially within diasporic and postcolonial contexts. Gurnah crafts characters that reclaim power by narrating their lived experiences, thereby challenging dominant historical and cultural narratives that have rendered them invisible or voiceless. As Stuart Hall explains, identity is not "an already accomplished fact" but a "production" (Hall 222), and Gurnah's characters exemplify this dynamic creation through narrative.

Laya Soleymanzadeh's study of *By the Sea*, *The Last Gift*, and *Gravel Heart* foregrounds the interplay between hospitality, narrative space, and identity formation. She argues that "hospitable environments, both physical and relational, are necessary for displaced characters to share their narratives without fear or constraint" (Soleymanzadeh 71). In these spaces, narrative agency is not just an individual act of speech but a relational phenomenon that allows for mutual recognition and healing. Gurnah's characters often inhabit inhospitable societies that refuse their narratives, thereby enforcing silence. However, when allowed space, such as the written letters in *By the Sea* or the audio recordings in *The Last Gift*, they begin to reconstruct their identities from the fragments of memory and trauma. Saleh Omar accentuates this point by saying that, "I told stories to make sense of myself, to remember who I had been" (*By the Sea* 65).

This narrative self-fashioning is particularly evident in Abbas from *The Last Gift*, whose initial silence about his past gives way to a deeply personal act of narration via a tape recorder. This delayed storytelling signifies not just personal healing but also an ethical responsibility to pass on memory across generations. Abbas's act challenges the invisibility imposed by migration and

trauma, illustrating that the reclamation of narrative is integral to the reconstruction of selfhood. “The truth was a burden I could no longer bear alone,” he states (*The Last Gift* 210), underscoring the therapeutic release of suppressed history. Through this process, identity becomes dynamic rather than fixed, a negotiation between past and present, memory and voice. In their 2002 study titled *A Study of Gurnah's Memory Narrative and Diaspora Identity*, Yujin Du and Dan Cui further explore Gurnah’s use of memory as a narrative strategy for examining hybrid, racial, and gendered identities. In their analysis, memory serves as both a textual and psychological device through which characters resist erasure. Gurnah’s protagonists often remember selectively, revealing that narrative agency includes the power to choose what to disclose and what to suppress. This selective memory emphasizes the performative nature of identity, where storytelling functions as a mode of survival and reinvention. Drawing from Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, the act of telling becomes a mode of becoming, as identity “is always in the process of being constituted” (Butler 33).

Narrative agency in Gurnah’s work is not confined to protagonists alone. Secondary characters also play a role in affirming or contesting dominant narratives. For instance, patriarchal structures often silence female characters, but they reclaim agency through subtext, gesture, and resistance to normative roles. Their narrative strategies, which range from withholding information to revealing hidden histories, highlight the complexity of speaking from the margins. These acts challenge not only personal trauma but also collective myths about nation, race, and belonging. Gayatri Spivak’s question, “Can the subaltern speak?” (Spivak 271), finds partial answers in these layered and often resistant voices.

Moreover, Gurnah’s metafictional awareness underscores the tension between authorship and audience, suggesting that stories are shaped not just by those who tell them but also by those who

listen. In this sense, the reader becomes a participant in the reconstruction of identity, invited to piece together silences, contradictions, and revelations. This dynamic reflects a postcolonial epistemology that values multiplicity over coherence and fragmentation over linearity. Thus, narrative agency in Gurnah's fiction is both a theme and a method. It allows characters to resist cultural invisibility, articulate trauma, and forge identities within hostile or indifferent environments. Through storytelling, Gurnah's characters assert their humanity and individuality, crafting a space in which they actively imagine belonging even amid displacement. Their narratives are not merely testimonies of suffering but acts of reclamation offering resistance to erasure and a pathway to self-realization.

## **Conclusion**

Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction represents a profound engagement with the emotional and political geographies of migration, exile, and postcolonial trauma. His novels move beyond mere chronicles of suffering to offer textured explorations of identity, memory, and voice. Through the strategic use of silence, memory narrative, and storytelling, Gurnah portrays how displacement fragments the self while also opening avenues for its reconstruction.

Each of Gurnah's characters carries within them a landscape of silence and memory, histories of fragmentation and resilience that reflect broader cultural and geopolitical tensions. These internalized geographies of trauma and displacement are not static; rather, they shift and evolve through the act of narration. Whether through oral confession, written letters, or selective recollection, the characters assert their agency and resist cultural erasure.

Gurnah's novels also invite readers to engage with narratives that mainstream discourses often overlook or marginalize, challenging them to witness the interior worlds of displaced individuals not as distant subjects of empathy but as complex agents of history. In doing so, his fiction makes a critical intervention in postcolonial literature, reminding us that healing and identity do not emerge from a return to a lost homeland but from the act of forging voice and presence within the very terrains of loss and exile. To conclude, Gurnah's body of work underscores that identity in the postcolonial diaspora is neither fixed nor inherited, but it is continually made and remade through the fragile, courageous act of storytelling. His narratives offer both an archive of postcolonial pain and a blueprint for resistance, making space for the silenced, the exiled, and the forgotten to be heard and remembered.

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