



# The Struggle For Self-Discovery: Exploring Identity And Belonging In Abdulrazak Gurnah's Works

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## Abstract.

Postcolonial literature has emerged as one of the important genres for articulating and engaging with complex legacies of colonialism in terms of the identity constructed from those legacies. This paper focuses on exploring thematic and narrative frameworks that mark the definition of postcolonial literature, specially concepts of identity formation, hybridity, migration, and speaking of the marginal voice. These themes are considered against historical, social, and cultural backdrops while analyzing the narratives in this regard and challenge the traditional discourses of literary narratives. Further analysis of Abdulrazak Gurnah, especially in relation to his novel *Memory of Departure*, will be done along the lines of themes that feature self-discovery, migration, and exile.

This paper examines the intricate themes of identity and belonging in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure*. It delves into how Gurnah articulates the psychological and cultural conflicts faced by his characters, particularly the protagonist, Hassan. By exploring the complexities of displacement, memory, and the search for identity, this study highlights the novel's critical engagement with postcolonial issues and the broader human struggle for self-understanding

**Keywords:** Postcolonial, exile, migration, displacement, identity crisis, belonging, maturity.

## Introduction-

Postcolonial literature stands as a dynamic and essential genre, deeply embedded in the experiences of nations and individuals shaped by the legacies of colonialism. It critically examines the enduring impact of colonial histories and the intricate challenges related to identity. This paper aims to analyze the key themes and narratives that define postcolonial literature, providing a comprehensive insight into how Postcolonialism influences literary works and the construction of identity. Emerging from the aftermath of colonial rule, postcolonial literature delves into the significant effects of colonization on nations, societies, and personal identities. It often portrays the tensions between colonizers and the colonized, exploring how historical colonial dynamics continue to shape contemporary identity and cultural expressions.

African literature, a significant section of postcolonial writing, ranges from the broad expanse of West Africa to East Africa, South Africa, and its neighboring region, Rhodesia. Critics differ over the categorization of African literature; some believe it to be part of modern world literature, while others perceive it as a political document that protests colonial oppression by the whites. It still remains an outgrowth of literature in English and French. It is, to say the least, didactic and instructive, often working as documentary literature that reflects a lived experience with African and Blacks. Gurnah states, “As the years passed, we bore with rising desperation the betrayal of the promise of freedom.” (MoD 28)

The thematic concerns in African literature reflect the profound effects of colonialism, focusing on issues such as freedom, identity, and the displacement of Africans. Displacement—whether physical or figurative—became a central theme as a result of colonization. African writers such as Abdulrazak Gurnah illustrate the complex history of colonization and decolonization, emphasizing the consequences of displacement in their works. Gurnah examines how forced migration, internal conflict, and dominance of the colonizers contribute to this sense of alienation and dislocation in the African society. This feature of internal conflict, therefore, characterizes much postcolonial literature because it explains the psychological and emotional conflict involved in being torn away from the homeland of Africa.

The notion that identity is fluid and created within specific historical and cultural contexts provides a basis for understanding how characters negotiate their identities through memories of

relocation (Hall 27). These ideas clarify the complex interactions between memory, identity, and displacement in literature. Stuart Hall's conception of identity as fluid and a construct that is shaped by history and culture makes his argument quite relevant in examining Hassan's way of negotiating identity in the midst of displacement (Hall 27). In addition, Homi Bhabha's idea of "hybridity" always argues that displacement gives way to new identity developments, blending the best of the homeland and the host culture, in contradiction with essentialist notions of identity (Bhabha 19). These theoretical concepts open up tremendous understanding about how displacement would affect identity development in *Memory of Departure*.

In Gurnah's works, it can also be realized by examining colonialism and post-colonialism that run strongly within the structure of early works such as: In *Memory of Departure* published in 1987; *Pilgrim's Way* (1988), *Dottie* in 1990, analyzing immigration hardships around Britain to try and concentrate in most places he looked, from which most subjects find to live without some specific kind of a social life for racism purposes with some experience he might feel his lack in loss. As Jones (2005) pointed out, Gurnah looks into the misfortune of the refugees who have been victimized by systemic racism and are deprived of their identity in an uncongenial place.

Gurnah's novel *Paradise* (1994) also dials up the intensity, focusing this time on the socio-political disruption in colonial East Africa at the outbreak of World War I. The results were severe, leaving deep scars in the social and economic structures of the region, leaving these refugees and immigrants in dissonance and identity loss. It would further exacerbate the disintegration of the communities, with suffering at a multi-level. (Helff, 2015)

In *Memory of Departure* (1987), Gurnah introduces many of the motifs that will define his later work, including the manipulation of memory, the pain of exile, and the reevaluation of family histories. Yet this aspect of self-identity as performativity has been neglected in critical discourse, especially where cosmopolitanism and transnational identities are concerned. About the same, Hassan, the protagonist-narrator, presents for the reader in Gurnah a different perception about gender roles, identity fluidity, and what it would take for a person to disentangle their rigid societal expectations at home into self-realization. In the process, Gurnah takes up a multidimensional understanding of identity that borders beyond traditional strictures and under the rubrics of migration and exile.

## Migration, Exile, and Identity

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure* of Departure is a seminal work in postcolonial literature that addresses the profound impact of colonization on individual and collective identities. Set against the backdrop of post-independence Zanzibar, the novel navigates the personal and societal challenges of identity formation within political turmoil and cultural displacement. Edward Said's reflections on exile align closely with Gurnah's experiences, "Expatriation/exile for the intellectual is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled and unsettling others. You cannot go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation" (Said, 365). The work vividly expresses how the act of leaving homeland memories plays along in the character's self-definition. The author observe, "The streets of Zanzibar were a maze of memories and every alley sang with the whispers of those remaining behind" (Gurnah 45). This is exactly how memories associated with displacement spur strong emotions in the form of desire and nostalgia that impact on the plot as well as a sense of identity.

Gurnah's work is greatly influenced by his experiences of migration and exile. His writing profoundly probes the themes of displacement and the effects of colonial and post-colonial experiences. Gurnah himself refers to the plight of migration: "You think you understand places" (UNHCR), referring to his own struggles as a youth who migrated from Zanzibar to the UK. His themes often center on whether one should belong or not, especially within the framework of colonial histories and cultural dissonance. Gurnah's view on migration is seconded by critics. Erik Falk views Gurnah as having a "strong anti-nationalist stance and its relation to diaspora and displacement." (Falk, 2007)

In the novel Gurnah introduces Hassan, a young man whose journey reflects a broader search for identity within fractured cultural landscapes. Hassan's narrative is not just a physical departure but a psychological quest for meaning during a cultural crisis. Gurnah portrays the emotional and internal struggles that come with exile, highlighting the painful process of leaving and the deep yearning for home. Gurnah remarks, "The streets of Stone Town whispered stories of generations past, each corner a repository of memories now tinged with nostalgia" (MoD 12) for Hassan; exile is both escape and an on-going personal struggle; his memory of leaving shapes the existential battle between past and present.

In fact, the theme of inner conflict tension, displacement pervades all throughout the novel. As Erica Jong (1942-), the famous American writer says, “Conflict is the soul of literature,” Gurnah infuses life in them by using highly developed characters. His characters often are mired in the struggles that they go through mentally and existentially by their wants, emotions, religions, and other expectations in the society. One powerful example of this inner conflict appears in *By the Sea*, where the character Saleh Omar reflects: “I am a refugee, an asylum-seeker” (Gurnah, 2004). These words encapsulate the emotional turmoil of displacement—helplessness, loneliness, anxiety, and the loss of personal values.

Similar to this, Gurnah explores Hassan's inner turmoil in *Memory of Departure* by focusing on his emotional turmoil about being held responsible for his older brother's passing. Hassan is thrown into an emotional whirlpool by his family's icy lack of compassion and coldness. He wishes his parents would be more understanding and kind, but they still hold him responsible for something he had no control over. His inner turmoil is at its height when his family reprimands him and his neighbors comfort him. The suffering of Hassan is a result of the conflict between his real family relations and his romantic illusions.

Inner conflict in Gurnah's characters is often intertwined with existential struggles. Hassan, for example, experiences an identity crisis when he gives a false name while registering for a card, symbolizing his psychological and social dislocation. By failing to embrace his true identity, he struggles with an inferiority complex, reflecting his sense of disconnection from his environment and the societal standards around him. This feeling of self-doubt increases when Hassan feels insulted by his uncle who does not provide money despite knowing his monetary conditions. Gurnah describes this emotional stress: “There was an amused smile on his face. I assumed it was the one he reserved for poor nephews.” (Gurnah, 103)

This theme of self-worth and inferiority is very much influenced by colonial history. According to Frantz Fanon, the colonized mind has an inferiority complex because they are perceived as inadequate compared to the values and culture of the colonizers. In Gurnah's work, for instance, in *By the Sea*, characters like Saleh Omar take up this inferiority, feeling that the British are superior. This juxtaposition of love and hatred toward the colonizers creates a severe psychological turmoil within the characters. As Saleh reflects, “It was as if they had remade us, and in ways that we no longer had any recourse but to accept, so complete and well-fitting was the story they told about us” (*By The Sea* 18). This concept of double

consciousness—he caught

between two cultures—actually breeds an

unstable self, according to Fanon, a sort of psychological limbo (Tyson, 421).

Furthermore, Hassan experiences a deep sense of racial and cultural conflict. He is constantly belittled by others, including his uncle's servant, who insults him by calling him "an animal." These repeated humiliations exacerbate Hassan's internal struggle, leading him to question his worth and his place in society. As Gurnah describes: "I wished I could leave that house and return to them, and tell them that we deserved no better. The whole world holds us in contempt" (M0D 118). His internal conflict intensifies as he faces racial discrimination both from his own ethnic group and the larger society.

The racial alienation of Hassan also becomes worse as he is scoffed at by Salma, a cousin who accuses him of not eating ice cream properly before white people. In the same way, a friend of Salma mocks him saying: "What do you people on the coast know? You're just sailors and fishermen" (MoD 133). These incidences portray a racial gap which Hassan has to cross in a quest to try and find an identity.

Apart from the racial and cultural conflict, Gurnah also delves into how inner conflict leads to moral crises. Hassan, for example, grapples with his actions and beliefs, feeling estranged from his own morality. A crucial moment comes when he slaps his drunken father to try to let loose his pent-up anguish. Yet, at the same time, this aggressive action also gives him shame: "I leaned forward and slapped him as hard as I could[...] feeling shame for the pleasure it gave me" (TMD 58). This is what best illustrates the inner battles which Gurnah's characters live through with all their moral and emotional messiness.

## **Identity Crisis and "Selfness"**

The concept of "selfless," or the development of a stable identity, is central to understanding the internal conflicts of Gurnah's characters. In *Memory of Departure*, Hassan's journey toward self-awareness is deeply hindered by external forces, including family dynamics, societal expectations, and the looming shadow of colonial history. The derogatory terms hurled at him, such as "Jerk," "Wog," or "Nigger," are not merely insults—they strike at the very core of his identity, creating a psychological rift that is difficult to heal. These terms are markers of a fractured identity that reflects broader societal disdain for his race, ethnicity, and position in the socio-political hierarchy. This rejection of his identity, compounded by an internal struggle to belong, encapsulates the larger theme of "Double Consciousness"

discussed by W.E.B. Du Bois, where marginalized individuals experience a fragmented self-awareness due to the imposition of an external, often hostile, gaze.

Hassan's sense of "selfness" is constantly undermined by the societal pressures that expect him to conform to a specific racial and cultural identity. His internalization of these negative perceptions exacerbates his feelings of inadequacy and dislocation. This feeling of inferiority is amplified when he is compared to animals, as seen in the repeated insults from figures like Bwana Ahmed and Ali. These interactions reinforce the theme of racial humiliation, a recurrent experience for characters in postcolonial literature, where the colonized are continuously subjected to dehumanizing stereotypes.

## **Displacement and the Search for Belonging**

There are more dominant and obvious themes present in *Memory of Departure*-displacement, of a physical sort but also deep in the guts, a type of ontological crisis. That kind of displacement shakes the root of the very idea of belongings as well as one's existence; it simply results in emptiness. The protagonist Hassan, like many of Gurnah's characters, grapples with the feeling of being uprooted, lost between different worlds he says, "I tell you, this Africa. We're savages" (MoD 28). His migration, as well as his journey of remembering and forgetting, demonstrates the painful disjunction between his past and present identities.

Displacement, as explored in Gurnah's writing, is the aftermath of colonialism—a condition that forces individuals to confront the painful truths about their fragmented identities. Gurnah's characters often live in a state of tension, caught between nostalgia for a homeland that no longer exists in the same way and the harsh reality of life in a foreign land that offers no real solace. The character Moses Mwinyi in *Memory of Departure* encapsulates this sense of cultural decay and loss, where the country is not only physically dislocated but morally and spiritually displaced. Gurnah's writing emphasizes the long-term trauma caused by colonialism, where migration leads to cultural alienation, loss of tradition, and a deep sense of identity crisis.

He skillfully intertwines these threads of loss and remembrance to prove how dislocation influences individual identity along with societal identity. "Each journey back to Zanzibar was a pilgrimage of memory, retracing blurred traces of houses and hearts abandoned" (TMD

115) the emotional and psychic effects of displacements are drawn out by his journey and every step in front of him battles the reconciliation of past lived experiences and with the realities before him. Here, the analysis of the nature of memory transforms into an overarching force in crafting the identity sense of the subject and relationships or connections of himself to his ancestry and heritage.

Gurnah's narrative explores the general impact of displacement, focusing on how it has a deep effect on personal and collective narratives.

## **The Role of Memory and Exile**

In *Memory of Departure*, Memory plays both the role of being a curse and a means of survival. While for Hassan, the memories have not only been his own recollections but shared moments that form an 'identification with exile and estrangement'. Here, memory acts as a connecting thread between his former existence in Zanzibar and his present dislocated existence. However, it is not a simple connection. Gurnah uses memory as a fluid and dynamic process, where the past is not simply recorded but continuously reshaped by the present. The concept of exile, thus, becomes a defining feature of the novel, not merely as a physical state of being away from one's homeland, but as a profound psychological and existential condition.

Abdulrazak Gurnah utilizes the theme of displacement through memory to elaborate on the theme of 'return' in very rich, multifaceted terms. Hassan's efforts at reconciliation with his own past and the political upheaval in Zanzibar are attempts at personal and national identity. Gurnah's focus on exile challenges those very concepts of home and belonging as much as in postcolonial settings. The return of the character after twenty years does not represent the return to any physical land, but to some psychological space scarred by trauma from colonialism and the cuts of an undigested past.

## **Nationalism and Identity in Postcolonial Zanzibar**

The complexities of nationalism are particularly relevant in the context of *Memory of Departure* through the post-independence setting in Zanzibar. The colonial rule is suddenly replaced by an independent, sovereign nation, leaving new challenges ahead for Hassan and other characters involved. Gurnah explores a tension between civic and ethnic nationalism where the nation-state becomes the site of exclusion rather than including all. Ethnic and racial tensions between the

Arab population and the indigenous Africans in Zanzibar make it difficult to conceive of a unified national identity.

It criticizes the national project in its manifestations within the postcolonial African context where, instead of representing diversity and otherness in cultures and ethnicities, the ideologies of homogeneity that political leaders appropriate tend to disregard them, which is something that characterizes Hassan and a myriad of characters within this narrative, creating this sense of liminality in being suspended between two worlds. The search for a cohesive national identity becomes an impossible task for most, leading to feelings of alienation and internal conflict.

## Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure* is a profound exploration of identity, displacement, and memory in a postcolonial world. Through Hassan's journey, Gurnah offers a poignant critique of the psychological and cultural effects of colonialism, examining the painful process of self-discovery in a world that constantly marginalizes and otherizes its characters. By intertwining personal and collective histories, Gurnah highlights the complex nature of exile, the trauma of displacement, and the struggle to forge a coherent identity amid chaos. His novel challenges the idea of home, belonging, and national identity, offering a powerful commentary on the lasting impact of colonialism and the enduring quest for self-actualization in an ever-shifting world.

*Memory of Departure* is a critical review of post-colonial nation-building and the complexity of identity formation following colonialism. The experiences of Hassan and others help Gurnah to outline the tensions of ethnic, civic, and racial identities, pointing out the deep divisions within Zanzibari society. The novel's portrayal of the aftermath of the revolution, where hope quickly turns to disillusionment and corruption, offers a poignant commentary on the challenges faced by post-colonial nations. Gurnah's nuanced exploration of memory, exile, and displacement not only enriches the post-colonial literary canon but also invites reflection on the evolving nature of identity in a globalized world, making it a significant contribution to contemporary literature.

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