



MIGRANT IDENTITY AND TRAUMA IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S *PILGRIMS WAY AND ADMIRING SILENCE*

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the complex intersections of migrant identity and trauma in Abdulrazak Gurnah's early two novels *Pilgrims Way* (1988) and *Admiring Silence* (1996). Gurnah articulates the lived experiences of African migrants negotiating the harsh realities of exile in Britain while bearing the weight of colonial and postcolonial histories. Through the portrayals of Daud and the unnamed narrator, Gurnah investigates the ways in which racism, alienation, memory, and silence interplay to shape fragmented migrant identities and unresolved psychological traumas. The paper, engaging with the theories of postcolonial and trauma, argues that Gurnah situates migration not as a liberating escape but as a site of continuing trauma. Through Stuart Hall's theory of identity as becoming, Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the "third space," and Cathy Caruth's account of traumatic belatedness the article shows the role of displacement and psychic trauma in shaping identity. The study highlights how Gurnah depicts the enduring legacies of colonialism as well as portraying the struggles of displaced individuals in exile.

KEYWORDS:

MIGRATION, IDENTITY, TRAUMA, SILENCE, HYBRIDITY, MELANCHOLIA, RACISM, POSTCOLONIAL BRITAIN.

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INTRODUCTION

Migration, a movement of people from one place to another, but it is not merely a physical movement from a geographical location to another but it is also a profound psychological rapture and cultural alienation that reshapes identity. A migrant in a foreign land searches for belonging but he encounters, in reference to Gurnah protagonists, the bitter experience of alienation, silence, racism, and the trauma of dislocation. Abdulrazak Gurnah, the Nobel Prize-winning novelist of Zanzibari origin, has consistently illustrated these complexities in his fiction. Gurnah minutely describes psychological and social textures of migration in his fiction. His early novels *Pilgrims Way* (1988) and *Admiring Silence* (1996) are particularly significant for the ways they depict the fractured lives of East African migrants. Often his characters grapple with the burdens of the past and the pressures of assimilation in late twentieth-century Britain. These two early novels of Gurnah mostly set in England with Zanzibar in the background, present how migrants negotiate their identities within constrained conditions. The protagonists—Daud in *Pilgrims Way* and the unnamed narrator of *Admiring Silence*—both seek belonging,

intimacy, and recognition, and find themselves as *other* in a foreign land. Humiliation as being other in Britain shatters their sense of self and as migrants carries a weight of unresolved traumatic past.

The concept of migration and identity is crucial in postcolonial theory and trauma studies. These studies provide critical lenses through which the psychological, cultural, and political dimensions of displacement can be understood. Post colonial legacies constantly reshape identities and sense of belonging. Stuart Hall's influential essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" argues that identity is not as a fixed essence but as a process of "becoming as well as being" (Hall 225). Migrant identity is a negotiation of past legacies and new encounters. As Bhabha observes that these negotiations happen in "third space". When migrants encounter cultures in third space, producing "hybrid" identities that are neither wholly assimilated nor entirely authentic to origins (*The Location of Culture* 37). In Gurnah's novels, protagonists such as Daud and the unnamed narrator grapple with this tension: they live in liminal spaces where belonging is conditional, fragile, and continually redefined. Dislocation

deeply affects the migrants as Edward Said describes exile as a state of “unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place” (*Reflections on Exile* 173), a situation that resonates strongly in Gurnah’s fiction. Paul Gilroy in his concept of the “Black Atlantic” emphasises on the transnational framework of migrants. Migrant identity involves the circulation of people, memory, and cultural forms across geographies (Gilroy 19). For Gurnah’s characters, migration is not only a physical journey but also a process of negotiating racialized structures in Britain while remaining haunted by the cultural and political turmoil of East Africa. This sense of instability becomes a source of trauma for displaced individuals.

Trauma is another important framework to study the migrant identity. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (4). In Gurnah’s fiction trauma may not arise solely from events of violence but from the ongoing, repetitive stresses of racism, cultural estrangement, and loss of belonging. Dominick LaCapra uses the term “acting out” and “working through” trauma, and emphasis on the resisting nature of trauma that often left unresolved (41). Furthermore Michelle Balaev highlights that trauma “reshapes identity through memory and narrative” (5).

Migrant individuals face instances of racism, enforced displacement, and the loss of memory, which serve as significant traumas that threaten both personal and shared identities. Understanding the identities of migrants requires us to look at how hybridity, separation from home, and the reflection on painful experiences interact.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does Abdulrazak Gurnah depict the psychological and cultural trauma of migration in *Pilgrims Way* and *Admiring Silence*?
2. In what ways do Daud and the unnamed narrator struggle with identity in the context of racism, alienation, and cultural displacement?
3. How do silence, memory, and storytelling serve as mechanisms for addressing migrant trauma in these novels?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In these two early novels of Gurnah, scholars have emphasised over complexities and challenges that migrants faces as everyday racism, melancholia in *Pilgrims Way*, narrative withholding, mimicry and silence in *Admiring Silence*. Susheila Nasta puts Gurnah’s work in diasporic literature where identity is never stable but always contested. She highlights how Gurnah’s fiction captures “the tension between exile and belonging, between the colonial past and the migrant present” (145).

Critics investigate the depiction of racism and alienation in *Pilgrims Way*. Indicating that the identity is constantly sabotaged by exclusion, Sarah Lawall suggests the novel

“captures the everyday hostility of English society toward black immigrants in the 1970s (80)”. Similarly, Eckhard Breiting argues that Daud’s alienation reflects the precariousness of African students abroad, “caught between admiration for the West and awareness of its racism” (67). Engaging with the social textures Anne Ajulu-Okungu traces how food, eating, and hospitality reconcile power and sociality in both *Dottie* and *Pilgrims Way*, this momentarily atmosphere of hospitality never fully diminishes the border of exclusion. Emad Mirmotahari, points out the move “from Black Britain to Black internationalism,” arguing that the novel resists narrow racialism while imagining solidarities that exceed beyond the British nation.

Scholars view silence in *Admiring Silence* as both symptom and tactic. In the essay “Mimicry or Translation?” Tina Steiner reframes the narrator’s silence as an act of rambling translation rather than simple muteness. In the article “At the Margins” on *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift* Kimani Kaigai observes silence as a skilled rhetorical device that records trauma while protecting the narrator from further injury.

Stephanie Newell, highlighting the deception in *Admiring Silence*, argues that the narrator’s lies about his homeland reveals “the impossibility of reconciling diasporic existence with nostalgic representations of home” (213). Nouri Gana further observes that silence as both resistance and survival “the migrant’s silence is not absence but a strategy of negotiating the hostility of his environment” (63).

Maria Olausson’s chapter, “The Submerged History of the Indian Ocean in *Admiring Silence*,” situates the novel within Indian Ocean worlds and argues that the text’s withheld stories also index histories of trade, slavery, racial hierarchy that remain little articulable in metropolitan Britain. Adopting the Freudian frameworks Jopi Nyman analyzes Gurnah’s *Pilgrims Way* through the lens of melancholia in postcolonial context. He argues that Daud embodies melancholic subjectivity rooted in colonial trauma, loss, and the struggle to rebuild identity in a racist environment.

Further, Rana and Sharma position *Pilgrims Way* within broader notions of migration-induced trauma, identity crises, cultural conflict, and racial discrimination. Tia and Huan observe the spatial metaphors for identity negotiation in *Pilgrims way*. The study interprets Daud’s physical and spiritual roaming in Britain as “spiritual space,” reflecting his resistance to racial discourse and the legacy of empire. Zheng Qingyue puts *Admiring Silence* in the spatial and diasporic position and interrogates cultural memory and identity construction of the narrator as an unnamed Zanzibari refugee.

Invoking Edward Said’s theories on narrative power Bebutova and Ruzmatova frame the narrator’s identity crisis as shaped by forgetting origins and the imposition of Western narrative control, via experiences of memory, exile, and colonial trauma. Tina Steiner positions

Admiring Silence alongside *By the Sea* to illustrate Gurnah's exploration of storytelling as a migrant strategy. Felicity Hand notes that these works articulate alienation, migrant loneliness, and the meaning of "home".

While some articles foreground familiar themes such as identity crisis, displacement, and racialized injury in both novels. The present analysis provides a robust focus on how Gurnah's protagonists continually renegotiate identity under the traumatic experiences.

PILGRIMS WAY— RACISM, AND THE FRAGILITY OF BELONGING

Pilgrims Way portrays the story of Daud, an East African Muslim living in England, whose everyday life is filled with racialised encounters everywhere; on buses, in queues, at work. Everyday racism constitutes an incessant assault on the psyche, manifesting as a continual source of trauma. Trauma is not represented as a singularly catastrophic event; rather, it is characterized as a relentless drip, drip, drip—what contemporary academic discourse identifies as "repetitive racism." The novel depicts an atmosphere of hostility. Gurnah highlights the exclusionary nature of British society in the late 1970s in *Pilgrims way*. Gurnah writes: "People stared at him as if he were an intruder in their ordered lives, a trespasser who did not belong" (*Pilgrims Way* 34). The racism that Daud faces is both casual and systematic. The hostility that he endures, makes assimilation impossible.

His friendship with Karta, a migrant like him shows solidarity among the marginalized yet also vulnerability of exclusion. As Lawall notes, "Daud's alienation mirrors the larger condition of African immigrants in Britain, visible yet erased, present yet excluded" (100). Traumatic experiences of everyday racism and hostile atmosphere shatters Daud's sense of self.

Daud also faces an identity crisis in his romantic relationship with Catherine, a white English woman. While his initial relationship shows him some hope of assimilation and belonging, but cultural misunderstandings and societal prejudices hinder their bond. At one point, Daud reflects: "She saw me as exotic, not as someone who belonged here" (117). This remark highlights how migrants are often romanticised yet simultaneously denied full subjectivity. The friction of these frames creates shame and traumatic moments; a duality of identity when he cannot tell whether he is being loved as himself or being asked to perform an acceptable migrant self.

Ultimately, Daud's identity is fractured or in Du Bois's words of "double consciousness". He feels lost in liminal spaces neither he fully belongs to his homeland nor assimilated in Britain. As Gurnah observes: "He belonged nowhere, not to the Africa he had fled, nor to the England that kept him at arm's length" (121). This "in-betweenness" reflects what Homi Bhabha calls the "unhomely," where migrants inhabit "the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world" (13).

ADMIRING SILENCE—STRATEGIC SILENCE, MIMICRY, AND BELATED CONFESSION

Like Daud of *Pilgrims Way*, the unnamed narrator or protagonist of *Admiring Silence* left Zanzibar to study in England with the burden of the past on his psyche. Unlike Daud, he acquires a "mimic" identity (Bhabha) and integrates more visibly into British society, forming a long-term relationship with Emma, an Englishwoman, and working as a teacher. To avoid social conflicts he allowed himself to be read into a version of Englishness. Bhabha's view of mimicry clarifies this situation. The unnamed narrator presents himself "almost the same, but not quite" trying to fit into the English society but visibly fails to meet expectations (86–92).

But his mimicry and assimilation was based on deception. To escape the past trauma, he fabricates stories about his homeland, creating an idealized Zanzibar. He admits: "I had created a country and a history that was entirely my own invention" (*Admiring Silence* 42). But on his return to his native land in Zanzibar after a long time; he discovers his identity is not fungible. He found himself caught in estrangement. Rather than reunion, he encounters suspicion and resentment from his family. He, thinking of them: "They had endured pain, and I had been away, silent and safe" feels a guilt of absence. (174). The unsettled debts of family and history surge forward. This fabrication is not simply dishonesty but a survival mechanism. As Newell observes, his lies reveal "the impossibility of reconciling diasporic existence with nostalgic representations of home" (213). That exposes the fragility of the story he has told himself about who he is now. This confrontation reveals the failure of return as a resolution for displacement. Migration has permanently reshaped him, leaving him neither fully at home in England nor in Zanzibar.

COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: TWO REPERTOIRES OF MIGRANT SELF

In both the novels silence is a central device to grapple with trauma. Daud folds himself in silence when confronted with racism *Pilgrims Way*. His inability to articulate trauma reflects its unspeakable nature. In *Admiring Silence*, the narrator adopts silence as his survival mechanism. Here silence echoes Cathy Caruth's notion of trauma as "an unclaimed experience" (4). Trauma resists articulation, yet continually haunts the psyche and shapes the sense of self. Gurnah's characters present a paradoxical situation: through silence they conceal trauma, yet inarticulation testify its presence. Nouri Gana aptly notes that "the migrant's silence is a discourse in itself, one that speaks of survival in spaces that deny voice" (Gana 64).

Berman suggests that Traumatic memories can significantly disrupt identity formation, as they may alter one's sense of self and influence how individuals perceive and interpret their experiences. Traumatic memories as a burden of past shapes identities in both novels. Daud is haunted by memories of his homeland's violence, while the

narrator of *Admiring Silence* struggles with fabricated memories and suppressed truths. Michelle Balaev's insight that trauma "reshapes identity through memory and narrative" (5) is evident here: Gurnah's characters are defined by what they remember, what they invent, and what they cannot say.

Two types of trauma in both the novels are the anticipatory trauma and the belated trauma that shape their identities. Both novels are obsessed over what a word can cost. In *Pilgrims Way*, Daud, preparing the self for predictable injury, remains alert for his tone, accent, and audience; in *Admiring Silence*, the narrator withholds, then speaks too late suffering from belated trauma (Caruth 4).

Furthermore melancholia and mimicry play a significant role in shaping their identities. In "Pilgrims Way," melancholia is intricately linked to the protagonist Daud's identity as a Zanzibari migrant in 1970s Britain. This melancholia stems from historical traumas related to colonialism, the loss of family and community, and the disillusionment with a racist British society. Daud's melancholic state is expressed through his creation of alternative colonial pasts and imaginary correspondences, which serve as attempts to reconstruct his identity amidst the alienation he faces (Nyman). *Admiring Silence's* essence is the unease of mimicry: the narrator's practiced Englishness remains precarious for exposition. Bhabha notes that the host culture wants sameness without giving up hierarchy (86–92).

Migrants in Gurnah's fiction suffer from fractured and unstable identities. Both the protagonists, dwelling in-between space, find no belonging in neither homeland nor in host country. Trauma shapes their existence. Their psychological wounds have roots both in past violence of homeland and present repetitive racism in Britain. Silence, mimicry, melancholia function as symptoms of alienation as well as strategy of survival in hostile context. Assimilation is limited as the cultural and racial gulf is wide that is difficult to fulfil. The notion of return or revisit their Zanzibari abode, a symbol of their earlier identity, signifies a fresh negotiation rather than a mere restore of their initial self. Thus returning to homeland fails. Return deepens estrangement rather than reconciliation. Gurnah shows how histories of violence and empire continue to shape migrant trauma on the backdrop of colonial and postcolonial legacies.

CONCLUSION

Both the novels *Pilgrims Way* and *Admiring Silence* by Abdulrazak Gurnah provide a deep insight into transformative experience of migration and trauma on postcolonial migrant grappling with fractured identities and unresolved psychological trauma. Through the portrayal of Daud and the unnamed narrator, Gurnah intricately illustrates the complexities of exile and the effects of racism, memory, and silence on migrant subjectivity. Migration reveals neither liberation nor a destination but rather as a state of continuous alienation, wherein the concept of belonging remains elusive and

trauma endures. By weaving individual stories into broader historical and political contexts, Gurnah critiques the ongoing legacies of colonialism and foregrounds the psychological effects of displacement. His novels underscore the impossibility of simple resolutions: assimilation fails, return fails, and silence both protects and destroys. Ultimately, Gurnah insists upon the humanity of migrants, showing how their struggles embody resilience even amid fracture. In illuminating the intimate and painful realities of migration, *Pilgrims Way* and *Admiring Silence* contribute to postcolonial literature's enduring task: to give voice to the displaced, the silenced, and the traumatized.

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