

Migration and Discontent in Select Novels of Abdul Razak Gurnah

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Abstract

Migration is a defining and pervasive theme in the fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah, deeply informed by his own trajectory as a Tanzanian-born writer who migrated to the United Kingdom. This paper explores how Gurnah represents migration not merely as a physical relocation, but as a complex psychological, cultural, and sociopolitical experience. His narratives intricately examine themes of displacement, fractured identity, and the search for belonging, offering a deeply nuanced portrayal of the migrant condition. Through his characters, Gurnah foregrounds the voices of the subaltern—those historically marginalized by colonial legacies, racial hierarchies, and unequal global systems. By analyzing selected works, this paper investigates the psychological and sociocultural effects of migration, highlighting how Gurnah's fiction challenges dominant narratives and brings visibility to silenced experiences.

Keyword: Migration, Discontent, Colonialism, Post-Colonialism, Identity, subaltern, Psychology.

Abdulrazak Gurnah, winner of the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature, is renowned for his incisive exploration of migration, displacement, and identity. Having fled Zanzibar as a refugee in the 1960s and settled in the United Kingdom, Gurnah channels his personal and historical experiences into his fiction. Migration, in his works, is not limited to movement across space; it encompasses cultural disorientation, psychological fragmentation, and systemic marginalization. This paper explores how migration and discontent function as intertwined themes in *By the Sea*, *Memory of Departure*, and *Dottie*, analyzing the emotional and sociopolitical cost of displacement.

Migration is a defining and pervasive theme in Abdulrazak Gurnah's works, reflecting his experiences as a Tanzanian-born writer who migrated to the United Kingdom. His novels mostly explore the multifaceted nature of migration, not merely as a physical movement across borders but as a profound psychological, cultural, and sociopolitical phenomenon. Gurnah's narratives delve into the complexities of displacement, identity, and belonging offering a nuanced portrayal of the migrant experience that resonates with the struggles of subaltern voices, those marginalised by colonial histories, racial hierarchies, and global power structures. Gurnah's works often depict migration as a consequence of colonial and postcolonial upheavals, where characters are forced to leave their homelands due to political instability, economic hardship, or social exclusion. In *Memory of Departure*, the protagonist's journey from Zanzibar to Kenya and beyond is driven by a desire to escape the constraints of a repressive society, only to encounter new forms of alienation and disillusionment. Similarly, *By the Sea* portrays the story of two Zanzibari immigrants in England, whose lives are shaped by the lingering traumas of colonial exploitation and the challenges of adapting to a foreign culture. These narratives highlight how migration is not a linear process but a continuous negotiation of identity and survival in hostile environments.

Gurnah's exploration of migration is the psychological anxiety it takes on individuals. His characters often grapple with feelings of dislocation, nostalgia, and identity fragmentation as they struggle to reconcile their past with their present. In *Admiring Silence*, the protagonist's dual existence as an immigrant in England and a storyteller of his homeland underscores the tension between memory and reality and the impossibility of fully belonging to the world. This psychological complexity is further compounded by the sociocultural challenges migrants face, such as racism, cultural erasure and the loss of communal ties. Gurnah's female characters, like Dottie in the eponymous novel, face additional layers of marginalisation due to gender, highlighting the intersectionality of subaltern experiences.

Migration in Gurnah's works is a site of suffering and resistance, reflecting the broader complexities of postcolonial existence. By centring the experiences of subaltern migrants, Gurnah challenges dominant migration narratives and offers a profound meditation on the

enduring quest for identity, dignity, and belonging in an unequal world. His novels serve as a powerful testament to the human cost of migration, while also affirming the indomitable spirit of those who endure it. This duality is deeply intertwined with the theoretical framework of subaltern theory, which provides a critical lens for understanding the marginalised voices and experiences of migrants. Subaltern theory, rooted in the works of scholars like Antonio Gramsci, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and the Subaltern Studies Collective, examines the lives of those excluded from dominant power structures, those who are silenced, oppressed, or rendered invisible by colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal systems. In the context of migration studies, subaltern theory becomes a vital tool for analysing the structural inequalities that shape migrant experiences and the ways in which migrants navigate and resist these inequalities.

In *Memory of Departure* (1987), Gurnah introduces a young protagonist, Hassan, who seeks escape from familial dysfunction and political stagnation in East Africa. The novel illustrates that migration begins with psychological estrangement even before physical movement occurs. Hassan's desire to leave is not romanticized but driven by despair:

"It's not escape I want; it's something else, something beyond these streets and this squalor."

Yet his escape becomes a mirror of disillusionment. Despite physical movement, Hassan remains psychologically shackled to the trauma of his homeland. "I carried my departure inside me like a wound" (Gurnah, p. 102).

Hassan's journey is emblematic of what Homi K. Bhabha calls the unhomely, where "the borders between home and world become confused," and identity becomes fragmented (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1994). Migration does not liberate Hassan; instead, it intensifies his discontent, as he struggles with both familial rejection and societal alienation. Hassan's migration, however, does not lead to liberation but to further disillusionment, reinforcing the idea that migration often fails to fulfill the promise of renewal.

In *By the Sea* (2001), the protagonist Saleh Omar's migration to England reflects deep emotional scars. Fleeing political persecution, he is reduced to a refugee dependent on asylum systems that deny his history and dignity. Gurnah narrates: "I came to this country to die. That's what I told myself. I had no hope of anything else." (Gurnah, 153)

The emotional numbness, shame, and guilt carried by Saleh highlight the psychological toll of forced migration and the impossibility of full reintegration. Gurnah's characters often exist in a liminal space—neither fully accepted in the host country nor fully able to return home. In *Dottie* (1990), the protagonist, born to an African father and white English mother, grows up in post-war Britain, culturally isolated and alienated. Her search for identity is complicated by racism, social neglect, and the absence of familial roots:

"No one ever told her where she belonged, and nothing in her life had made her feel that she did." (Gurnah, p.285)

Dottie's discontent stems not from a literal act of migration but from a symbolic displacement—being born into a society that refuses to acknowledge or embrace her hybridity. This cultural alienation becomes a form of internal exile.

Similarly, in *By the Sea*, Latif Mahmud—a migrant academic—articulates the pain of double displacement. Though intellectually integrated, he is emotionally dislocated. His correspondence with Saleh Omar reveals the trauma of betrayal, the rupture of homeland ties, and the cost of survival in exile; "I found myself becoming another person... pretending, reshaping, erasing." (Gurnah, 58)

Gurnah presents this identity crisis not as an isolated phenomenon but as endemic to postcolonial migrant experiences, shaped by the collapse of nationalist ideals and the racialized hierarchies of the West.

Dottie's inner world is shaped by silence—both the silence of her parents about their past and the silence imposed by the dominant culture. As Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory suggests, the trauma of displacement can be inherited across generations, shaping the emotional landscape of those born in exile (Hirsch, 1997). *Dottie* (1990) explores the experiences of a

second-generation migrant in Britain. Born to African immigrants, Dottie struggles with poverty, racism, and identity loss. Her British citizenship does not shield her from exclusion. Gurnah carefully portrays how migration across generations still produces discontent, as identity and belonging remain unresolved.

“They wanted to be English and they wanted me to be English, but it was impossible. The English didn't want us” (Gurnah, p. 85).

In Gurnah's works, the psychological and sociocultural effects of migration are central to the narratives, offering a nuanced portrayal of the migrant condition. Gurnah's characters frequently struggle with the psychological scars of displacement, such as the trauma of leaving their homelands, the nostalgia for lost identities, and the alienation of living in unfamiliar environments. For instance, in *Memory of Departure*, the protagonist's journey is marked by a deep sense of loss and disillusionment, as he confronts the harsh realities of migration. Similarly, in *By the Sea*, the characters' experiences of cultural alienation and bureaucratic oppression in England highlight the psychological instability of migration.

These themes are particularly evident in *Admiring Silence*, where the protagonist's dual existence as an immigrant in England and a storyteller of his homeland underscores the tension between memory and reality, as well as the impossibility of fully belonging to either world. By examining these psychological and sociocultural effects, this chapter seeks to illuminate the multifaceted nature of migration in Gurnah's works, highlighting the ways in which migrants navigate and resist the challenges of displacement.

In *Dottie*, Gurnah shifts his focus to the experiences of women in the diaspora, exploring the intersections of gender, race, and class in the context of migration. The protagonist, Dottie, is a young woman of mixed heritage who grows up in post-war Britain, grappling with the legacy of colonialism and the racism that permeates her society. Her search for identity and belonging is shaped by her marginalisation as a black woman in a predominantly white society, as well as by her family's history of displacement and loss.

In Gurnah's fiction, discontent is not merely personal but structural. Migration exposes the inequalities of the global order, the legacies of colonialism, and the failures of both postcolonial states and the West. Migration is often depicted as a response to historical injustice and as a site of continued marginalization. The protagonists are not simply victims but bearers of complex histories, navigating the contradictions of memory, race, and exile.

As Gurnah notes in an interview:

“Migration is not always about betterment. Often, it is about escape, survival, the need to breathe outside the constraints of history and nation” (Gurnah, *The Guardian*, 2021)

Through these portrayals, Gurnah complicates the notion of migration as a purely individual or passive experience, instead emphasising its collective and transformative dimensions. His works reveal how migration is shaped by intersecting forces of colonialism, globalisation, and inequality, while also highlighting how subaltern migrants navigate and resist these forces. By centering the voices and experiences of those often excluded from dominant narratives, Gurnah's novels challenge us to rethink our understanding of migration and its implications for identity, belonging, and justice.

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels reflect a nuanced portrayal of migration, where the journey away from one's homeland does not end in contentment but often deepens a sense of dislocation. His characters wrestle with loss, memory, and the burdens of identity in hostile or indifferent environments. Through them, Gurnah complicates the idea of migration as progress, portraying instead a journey fraught with unresolved tensions and psychic wounds. Migration, in his fiction, is an act of necessity that rarely guarantees belonging. Discontent becomes not only a personal emotion but also a political condition shaped by history, race, and global inequality.

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