

## **Wounds of the past: Remembering and Reconstructing the Self in Gurnah's Novels**

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### **Abstract**

*The works of author Abdulrazak Gurnah effectively convey the lasting effects of past pain, highlighting their profound impact on shaping troubled identities in postcolonial societies. This paper will analyse how memory, both individual and communal, serves as an important narrative tool through which dislocated characters in Gurnah's works attempt to overcome their pain and regroup in some manner. Gurnah's characters tend to exist in 'in-between' zones, where they experience loss, silence, and dislocation due to colonization, wars, and displacement brought on by forced migration. However, in Gurnah's works, remembering is not a linear or redemptive experience; in fact, it can be fraught with difficulties and resistances, and it is through such troubled engagement with memory that characters attempt to regain their agency and feel a sense of belonging. The article argues that in works like "By the Sea," "Desertion," and "Afterlives," suppressed histories of the past emerge through narrative and introspection. Gurnah challenges traditional historiography by centering marginalised voices and depicting the psychological wounds caused by imperialism. Through memory, characters discover a redemptive tool to reconstruct their fractured identities, although these identities are not fully restored but rather rebuilt as constructs of memory. The article contends that Gurnah's fiction ultimately demonstrates how memory shapes the ongoing construction of the self after loss.*

**Keywords:** *Memory, Postcolonial Identity; Emotional, Displacement; Exile, Loss of belonging*

### **1. Introduction**

Displacement and exile are decisively central to postcolonial studies. Such literature foregrounds the lasting psychological and cultural legacies of colonial domination and forced migration. Contemporary postcolonial literature finds in Abdulrazak Gurnah a rightfully distinctive

voice. His fiction recurrently dramatises memory, trauma, and identification. Writing from Zanzibar into British exile, Gurnah marshals histories of colonial violence, migration, and cultural dislocation. He recounts characters wounded by their past. His narratives challenge dominant historical discourses. They recover marginalised experiences and illuminate the complex ways in which individuals remember, suffer, and reconstruct the self,

I speak to maps. And sometimes they say something back to me.

It was maps that gave it shape and made it seem like territory,

like something that could be possessed, not just laid waste and plundered. (35)

Gurnah's fiction engages seriously with the correlation between memory and identity. Remembering, in the case of his protagonists, is not a nostalgic return to the past, or even a process of linear remembering, but a painful and fragmented encounter with the suppressed memories of the past. The characters in his novels, such as *By the Sea*, *Desertion*, and *Afterlives*, traverse the threshold of homeland and host land simultaneously, where the unfinished memories of parting, deception, and the injustices of colonial occupation still inform their identities in the present. Remembering is both a burden and a necessity in these cases.

This paper interrogates the ways that Gurnah, through his novels, represents the wounds of the past as the pivotal point in the reconstruction of the self. Using the wide insight afforded by postcolonial theory and trauma studies, this study discusses how memory works both as a tropological gesture and as a strategy that converts narration into an enabling factor through which characters negotiate displacement, silences, and belonging. By locating Gurnah's strained attempts at nonlinear narration, interior monologue, and lacunae, this paper raises the question of how identity is alternatively disguised by undecipherable strands in the weaving of his fiction. Identity is not located or even recovered whole; it is continuously remade within acts of remembering and storytelling. The ultimate aim of the paper is to demonstrate how Gurnah's fiction redefines postcolonial identity as an ongoing process determined by historical trauma, ethical remembrance, and the unending struggle to reconcile past wounds with present realities.

In *Desertion* (2005) and *Afterlives* (2020), Abdulrazak Gurnah expands his consideration of the wounds of the past through a consideration of the role of colonial history, illicit love, war, and displacement in constructing personal and collective identities. In *Desertion*, issues of abandonment, trans-cultural desire, and treachery are positioned within a colonial administration in East Africa by the British. The novel, through a non-linear narrative, presents just how personal

relationships are embedded within colonial power relations, causing lasting psychological impressions through these relationships and their entailment within imperial power relations through memory as a way of accessing or plumbing hidden histories in order to come to terms with collective identities.

It is interesting to note that *Afterlives* can be seen as an even more compelling reflection on the “afterlife” of colonial violence and how this manifests specifically through the experience of African troops who were conscripted in significant numbers to serve in the colonial forces of Germany during the First World War. The texts emphasise survival over heroism and focus on how lived experience is irrevocably changed as a function of imperial warfare. *Afterlives* suggests that the experience of colonial violence constitutes an “afterlife” that continues long after the actual violence has passed and that such violence continues to inform memory and self. By extension, works such as *Afterlives* and *Desertion* both underscore the preeminent concern of Gurnah’s oeuvre that identity in the post-colony is necessarily constructed through an ongoing engagement with memory and survival.

## **2. Memory and Identity in *By the sea***

In postcolonial literary studies, memory can be said to play a pivotal role as the conduit by which identities are broken down, explored, and reconstructed in the aftermath of colonialism. *By the Sea*, written by Abdulrazak Gurnah, presents a profound study on the ties between memory, identity, and exile, with a special emphasis on the role that memory plays in defining identity. In the novel, memory is not represented as a straightforward recollection of the past but as a disruptive and often painful force that continually shapes and intervenes in the present.

By the historical context of Zanzibar’s colonial experience and the modern British experience that runs parallel to it, *By the Sea*, Gurnah foregrounds characters whose identities are destabilised by the intersecting forces of migration, treachery, and historical-political transformation. Memory becomes both the weight and the lifeline that Gurnah portrays. Memory retains personal and collective histories that are marginalised and made obscure. It is at the same time that memory opens up the wounds which are impossible to close.

The protagonist’s engagement with memory reveals the intricate relationship between unresolved past trauma and the ongoing formation of identity in the present. Through the surfacing of these repressed memories, the protagonists are confronted with the unresolved tensions and losses that constitute their fragmented identity. Gurnah, therefore, proposes that identity, within the postcolonial realm, is not essentially determined but works instead towards being continuously

reconstructed through processes involving memory, narration, and encountering loss. Memory, for Gurnah, in his novel *By the Sea*, functions as a transformative force that enables displaced subjects to reclaim their identity.

### **3. Displacement and Loss of belonging in *Afterlives***

*Afterlives* presents displacement as a long-lasting condition forged through colonial violence, war, and migration. Set within the context of German colonial domination in East Africa, the novel examines how imperial authority fractures personal lives, social structures, and identities, resulting in a persistent sense of non-belonging. Characters such as Ilyas, Hamza, and Afiya experience displacement not just as physical removal from home but also as an emotional and psychic rupture that serves to fracture the coherence of their sense of self.

Gurnah presents colonialism as a system that wrenches individuals out of their anchoring points- family, culture, and morality. Hamza's involuntary military service becomes a powerful metaphor for the alienation imposed by colonial rule. who do not belong to a native community or to the very colonial structure that exploits them. His return from the war fails to restore any sense of belonging; instead, it intensifies his isolation, demonstrating that displacement persists long after physical relocation has ended.

In *Afterlives*, the erosion of belonging is intimately linked to memory, repression, and the silences surrounding traumatic experience. Characters struggle to articulate their trauma, and the impossibility of fully narrating the past points to the enduring damage wrought by colonial history. By foregrounding marginalised perspectives, Gurnah demonstrates that colonial displacement generates enduring legacies of suffering from which postcolonial identities emerge. Consequently, belonging remains unstable and incomplete, requiring continual renegotiation through memory, interpersonal connections, and collective endurance.

Ultimately, *Afterlives* suggests that Displacement should be understood not as a one-time historical occurrence but as an ongoing condition that continues to shape postcolonial life and identity. By portraying lives marked by loss, fractured memory, and partial healing, Gurnah emphasizes the lasting consequences of colonialism on identity and belonging.

### **4. Emotional and Cultural Displacement in *Desertion***

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion* (2005) is a highly evocative novel that examines displacement through relationships shaped by both emotional and cultural dynamics. While the

text is set in a colonial environment in East Africa, it nonetheless explores the relationships that developed in a cultural setting foreign to all involved.

From an emotional perspective, *Desertion* foregrounds themes of abandonment, silence, and unmet desire throughout its narrative. The complex relationship that evolves between Martin Pearce and Rehana, an Indian-African woman and the lover of Martin Pearce, who happens to be a British colonial officer, becomes an area of emotional dislocation. The relationship that the couple shares in the context of colonial India and Africa becomes an area of emotional dislocation for both of them. Rehana's position becomes that of an outsider between the indigenous population of Africa, the Indian diaspora, and the British colonial rule. Her emotional context becomes that of secrecy and isolation. This is due to the emotional dislocation she has experienced in both of her relationships. Rehana's initial emotional experience is marked by a profound sense of isolation.

Cultural displacement in *Desertion* is also widespread. In Gurnah's narrative, cultural interactions depict a "contact zone" where African, Arab, Indian, and European cultures converge within colonised East Africa. Characters in the narrative occupy "cultural spaces," but they are not fully included in any of the cultures they encounter. For example, social and cultural existence as "cultural in-betweens" of Rehana and her family constitutes their experiences of being excluded and supervised in their morality. This condition of "cultural in-betweenness" can be seen in Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, wherein identity is created in the "spaces between," but it is also the space of being left out and misunderstood. Moreover, in *Desertion*, the liberatory potential of hybrid identity accessed in the "contact zones" is negated in favour of the emotional experiences of confusion.

As a thematic concern, *Desertion* extends beyond personal abandonment to symbolise the broader neglect and erasure of cultural and historical continuity. The colonial power abandons the moral duty of governance, leaving the fragmented societies with the unfinished business of trauma. Communities of the land and the diaspora undergo abandonment by the imperial structures in which they are exploited but not recognised or accepted. The complex notion of abandonment instills the sense of loss prevailing in the lives of the characters, even when the empire is gone.

Memory plays a key role in representing the intertwined emotional and cultural dimensions of displacement in the narrative. The structure of the novel embraces time sequences that traverse the past, present, and unresolved emotional experiences that are handed down in time. The descendants in the later generations not only inherit pieces of historical experiences in the families,

in the case of the Rhoads family, but are also burdened by the displacement in culture. In the end, *Desertion* presents displacement as an internalised condition, suggesting that emotional and cultural dislocation can occur independently of physical migration. *Desertion* defines the romantic conception of the meeting point across cultures because it reveals how displacement can be a site for extremely problematic power imbalances that can cause irreparable emotional distortions to selves. *Desertion*, through its highly nuanced representation of displaced selves, is thus a highly crucial text through which to read postcolonial displacement.

## 5. Conclusion

In *By the Sea*, *Afterlives*, and *Desertion*, Gurnah writes a highly complex story on issues related to memory, displacement, and loss of belonging in creating postcolonial identities for his characters. These three works, when analysed together, develop a premise in Gurnah's works where displacement is not just limited to moving from one geographic location to another, thus being a migrating individual, but rather a condition experienced on an ongoing basis on intense cultural, psychological, and emotional levels. The pain of colonialism continues in his works through memory, silence, and relationships.

In *By the Sea*, memory appears as an imperative channel through which displaced persons articulate their identity in exile. Gurnah also insists that memory was disruptive, painful, rather than restorative, although this was the only avenue through which disintegrated identities might confront their loss in order to reclaim their narrative power. Identity in this novel also develops as something that was neither static nor recoverable in full, but constantly reconstructed in memory. Memory in this novel, therefore, assumes both negative and positive implications, in which survival in exile is possible.

*Afterlives* continue such an examination by placing the emphasis on the experience of displacement in the collective and historical manner through which colonial violence and war enact it. Figures such as Hamza, Ilyas, and Afiya represent the aftermath of imperialism, where the experience of belonging is always subverted. Gurnah makes it clear in his use of displacement not as a physical but an emotional process of silence and the inability to properly articulate an experience of trauma. Thus, belonging becomes a conditional process in the sense of being dependent on precarious connections.

The novel highlights the effects of displacement on intimate relationships. The novel presents the unequal power dynamics present in the colonial contact zones. Gurnah's novel portrays the effects of displacement on cultural liminality. Through the character Rehana, Gurnah presents

cultural liminality as a space where exclusion, secrecy, and displacement occur. Memory in Gurnah's novel has an intergenerational approach. This enhances the internalisation of displacement. Together, these novels disrupt the ideologies of hybridity, reconciliation, and encounter that have often romanticised in postcolonial discourses. Gurnah draws attention to the ways in which postcolonial identities cannot be contained in any notion of a solution but rather in the process of continued negotiation of memory, trauma, and loss. Displacement in his work then emerges as the defining characteristic of the postcolonial condition—one which resists solution but in which a deeper understanding of identity as historically traumatised can be reached.

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