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Exile and Fragmented Identity in by the Sea and Admiring Silence Using Postcolonial Theory

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of exile and fragmented identity in By the Sea and Admiring Silence by Abdulrazak Gurnah through a postcolonial theoretical framework. Drawing upon the concepts of hybridity and ambivalence articulated by Homi K. Bhabha, and exile and displacement as theorized by Edward Said, the study argues that Gurnah's protagonists inhabit liminal spaces that destabilize fixed notions of national, cultural, and personal identity. While existing criticism often emphasizes themes of migration and nostalgia in Gurnah's fiction, this paper contends that his narratives move beyond victimhood to foreground exile as a site of psychological negotiation and resistant self-fashioning. Through close textual analysis, the study demonstrates how silence, memory, and narrative fragmentation function as strategies through which displaced subjects reconstruct agency within hostile metropolitan spaces. Ultimately, the paper suggests that Gurnah reconfigures exile not merely as loss but as a transformative condition that generates new modes of belonging. By situating Gurnah's fiction within contemporary postcolonial discourse, this study contributes to ongoing debates on diaspora, identity, and narrative resistance in twenty-first-century Anglophone literature.

Keywords: Exile, Fragmented Identity, Postcolonialism, Hybridity, Liminal Space, Diaspora, Displacement, Memory, Silence, Narrative Resistance, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Identity Negotiation, Belonging, Migration.

1. Introduction

African Bildungsroman frequently dramatize the symbolic collapse of paternal authority, marking a historical shift from colonial structures to unstable postcolonial futures. This crisis of authority reflects what Edward Said's Orientalism exposes as the persistence of colonial epistemologies and what Frantz Fanon identifies as the psychic alienation produced by colonial domination. Political independence, in this framework, fails to dismantle inherited hierarchies, leaving postcolonial societies suspended between sovereignty and dependency. Gurnah's fiction situates exile as the lived manifestation of this unresolved condition, illustrating how the colonial past continues to haunt both individual subjectivity and collective belonging in the postcolonial present.

The present study focuses on two of Gurnah's novels—Admiring Silence and By the Sea—as representative texts through which the themes of exile, displacement, and fractured identity are most

compellingly explored. By employing postcolonial theoretical frameworks alongside close textual analysis, the paper seeks to illuminate how Gurnah's protagonists negotiate identity within the liminal spaces created by colonial history and forced migration. The methodology of the study draws on the works of Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to interpret themes of exile, hybridity, and marginalization, combined with a comparative literary approach that reads both novels side-by-side to identify shared structural patterns.

2. Objectives of the Study

This study pursues three interconnected objectives. First, it aims to examine how exile and displacement are represented in Gurnah's By the Sea and Admiring Silence as structural conditions rather than episodic experiences, demonstrating that exile constitutes the very foundation of postcolonial subjectivity in both narratives. Second, the study seeks to analyze how silence, memory, and narrative fragmentation operate as strategies through which Gurnah's displaced protagonists reconstruct agency and negotiate identity within hostile metropolitan environments. Third, and most broadly, the paper contributes to ongoing debates in postcolonial literary criticism by situating Gurnah's fiction within contemporary discourses on diaspora, hybridity, and narrative resistance, arguing that his work reconfigures exile not merely as loss but as a transformative condition capable of generating new—if always provisional—modes of belonging in twenty-first-century Anglophone literature.

3. Discussion

In Admiring Silence, the unnamed narrator's migration to England emerges from political disillusionment and social constriction rather than autonomous self-fashioning. The absence of stabilizing paternal or communal authority results in narrative fabrication and strategic silence. His Bildung does not culminate in integration but in liminality; identity becomes performative, contingent, and fractured. Exile in this novel is represented not as a temporary rupture but as a structural condition that produces persistent identity fragmentation. The protagonist's successive migrations between Zanzibar and England fail to culminate in integration or self-realization; instead, they intensify his sense of unbelonging. His fractured subjectivity emerges from the interplay of colonial residues, racial discrimination, and postcolonial instability, which continue to regulate mobility and belonging even after formal independence. At the same time, his reliance on silence, narrative fabrication, and failed acculturation deepens his alienation, rendering identity provisional and unstable. Suspended between homeland and host nation, he becomes a figure inhabiting geopolitical and cultural interstices—neither fully rooted nor fully assimilated.

Similarly, By the Sea portrays exile as structurally embedded in postcolonial history. Saleh Omar's displacement following political betrayal and dispossession reveals how independence reproduces new forms of exclusion. His initial muteness in Britain signals not only personal trauma but the erosion of narrative agency itself. Through fragmented recollection and belated confession, he reconstructs a self marked by loss and ambivalence. The novel shows that exile fragments identity, and migrants attempt to reconstruct a sense of self and belonging through memory, silence, language, and personal relationships. Through the experiences of Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud, Gurnah illustrates that displacement forces individuals to carry broken pieces of their past into unfamiliar spaces, where identity must be continuously

renegotiated rather than fixed. Memory, forgetting, and emotional healing become essential processes through which migrants reclaim their stories and rebuild a sense of belonging.

This liminal positioning reflects Gurnah's broader critique of the enduring structures of colonial power and the exclusions reproduced within postcolonial societies. In both novels, exile functions not as episodic migration but as the defining structure of postcolonial subjectivity, where identity remains perpetually unsettled and historically burdened. The traditional Bildungsroman trajectory toward maturity and coherence gives way to deferred identity, where selfhood is continually negotiated within transnational systems of power, memory, and displacement. This is made vivid in Admiring Silence when the narrator reflects: "I did not have the heart to tell him that I was not Afro-Caribbean... strictly an Indian Ocean lad... and still unable to escape the consequences of those early constructions" (Gurnah 10). The protagonist is wrongly categorized through racial stereotypes, which erases the complexity of his cultural and geographical origins. His silence in the face of misidentification demonstrates how displaced individuals often internalize or endure imposed identities in the metropolitan space.

In By the Sea, Gurnah further dramatizes the dehumanizing power of institutional structures through the narrator's encounter with a British immigration official, whom he describes as "Kevin Edelman, the bawab of Europe, and the gatekeeper to the orchards in the family courtyard, the same gate which had released the hordes that went out to consume the world and to which we have come slinking up to beg admittance. Refugee. Asylum-seeker. Mercy" (Gurnah 31). This passage reflects the unequal power dynamics between Europe and migrants from formerly colonized regions. The labels "refugee" and "asylum-seeker" reduce complex identities to bureaucratic categories, illustrating how exile fragments personal identity and dignity. The protagonist's adoption of a false name reinforces this theme: "And my name is Rajab Shaaban. It is not my real name, but a name I borrowed for the occasion of this life-saving trip" (Gurnah 41). By presenting himself under a borrowed identity, the protagonist conceals his real self in order to survive within the bureaucratic structures of asylum and migration, becoming a metaphor for the fluid and fractured identity of the diasporic subject.

Gurnah also uses colonial architecture itself as a symbol of enduring oppression. In By the Sea, the narrator observes a prison building on the island, constructed by the British at the turn of the century as a secure location for difficult natives (Gurnah 223). The narrator's confinement in a space originally built to discipline colonized subjects reflects how colonial systems continue to marginalize individuals in the postcolonial period, illustrating how historical colonial power shapes the psychological condition of exile.

Edward Said's reflections on exile are powerfully echoed throughout Gurnah's fiction. Said describes exile as a condition of permanent displacement, fractured identity, and an unhealable rift between the individual and the homeland. In By the Sea, Gurnah illustrates this idea through Saleh Omar's forced migration from Zanzibar to England, where he arrives as an asylum seeker carrying only a small box of incense. His life in exile is marked by alienation, linguistic barriers, and the loss of social identity, reflecting Said's idea that exile produces a feeling of estrangement both from the homeland and the host society. Saleh's fragmented memories and gradual narration of his past also mirror Said's notion that exiles often live through memory and storytelling as a way to reconstruct identity.

Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial concepts—especially hybridity, mimicry, and the "third space"—illuminate the identitary negotiations that both protagonists perform. Bhabha argues that colonial encounters create hybrid identities, where the colonized subject lives between two cultures and cannot fully belong to either. In Admiring Silence, the unnamed narrator migrates from Zanzibar to England and attempts to adapt to British society through mimicry. However, this imitation never grants him complete acceptance; instead, it produces a sense of ambivalence and partial belonging. The narrator's silence and fabrication of stories about his past illustrate Bhabha's concept of the "third space"—a cultural in-between zone where identity is constantly negotiated. The emotional cost of this condition is crystallized in the narrator's longing: "Emma, how I missed her" (Gurnah 183)—a moment that reveals his inner division between Zanzibar and England. Likewise, the impossibility of return is acknowledged when the narrator admits: "Come home, Akbar said, as he closed his letter. But it wasn't home any more, and I had no way of retrieving that seductive idea except through more lies" (Gurnah 239).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's insights also help explain how displaced characters experience silencing and marginalization in colonial and postcolonial structures. In By the Sea, Saleh Omar's initial choice of silence before immigration authorities reflects Spivak's argument in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that marginalized individuals—especially migrants and colonial subjects—are often excluded from dominant systems of representation and voice. His fragmented memories and gradual narration of his life story reveal the psychological effects of exile, where identity becomes unstable and shaped by displacement. Through storytelling, Saleh attempts to reclaim agency and articulate a voice that colonial and institutional powers attempt to suppress. In Admiring Silence and By the Sea alike, silence operates not merely as the absence of speech but as a complex response to colonial displacement, racial marginalization, and cultural alienation—functioning in multiple forms that are simultaneously strategic, traumatic, and redemptive.

4. Major Findings

The study yields several significant findings. First, exile in both novels is shown to be not a temporary or episodic rupture but a structural condition that constitutes postcolonial subjectivity itself—exile becomes the defining mode of being rather than a passing state. Second, silence, memory, and narrative fragmentation function simultaneously as symptoms of trauma and as strategies of resistance: Gurnah's protagonists use withheld speech and selective narration to negotiate their fractured identities and reclaim a measure of agency denied by institutional and colonial power. Third, the borrowed name and false identity in By the Sea, alongside the fabricated histories in Admiring Silence, reveal that identity in the diaspora is inherently performative and contingent rather than stable or recoverable. Fourth, the application of Bhabha's third space demonstrates that Gurnah's protagonists inhabit a cultural in-between zone where hybridity is not a celebration but a site of ambivalence and psychological cost. Fifth, and most broadly, the study finds that Gurnah reconfigures exile as a transformative condition: rather than simply documenting loss, his fiction traces the emergence of new—if always provisional—modes of belonging forged through the interplay of memory, storytelling, and resistant self-fashioning.

5. Conclusion

Gurnah's fiction thus presents a powerful critique of colonialism and its lasting effects on identity and belonging. Through narratives shaped by displacement and migration, Gurnah portrays characters who struggle with fractured identities as a result of colonial history and exile. His works reveal how colonialism disrupted indigenous societies, imposed foreign structures, and forced individuals into conditions of marginalization, producing exile not only as physical migration but also as a psychological state of alienation and cultural in-betweenness. Haunted by memories of their homeland and confronted with exclusion in the host society, his protagonists struggle to reconstruct a coherent sense of self. Trauma, memory, and displacement are central to this process: colonial history, political upheaval, and forced migration produce psychological dislocation and identity crises among exiled subjects. Memory becomes both a burden and a survival mechanism, as protagonists repeatedly revisit their pasts to make sense of dislocation and reconstruct a sense of self.

Read together, Admiring Silence and By the Sea demonstrate how exile in Gurnah's fiction is not episodic but constitutive of postcolonial subjectivity itself. Gurnah reconfigures exile not merely as loss but as a transformative condition that generates new—if always provisional—modes of belonging, contributing to ongoing debates on diaspora, identity, and narrative resistance in twenty-first-century Anglophone literature.

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