



The Theme of Migration in the *Memory of Departure* by Abdulrazak Gurnah

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Abstract

The novel Memory of Departure (1987) by the Tanzanian writer Abdulrazak Gurnah stands as one of the foundational works of postcolonial literature. It addresses the question of migration and the migrant, shedding light on the motives and consequences of departure. The narrative skilfully depicts the suffering of its protagonist, Hassan Omar, in parallel with the events that threaten his life during his journey to Nairobi, undertaken in the hope of escaping a strained social and political reality, only to find himself locked in a bitter struggle with isolation, alienation, and a fractured sense of identity. Accordingly, this study seeks to examine the representations of migration and to understand its underlying drivers through an analysis of Memory of Departure. This novel approach offers a complex vision of migration. It intertwines the dimensions of war, estrangement, and the search for identity and freedom within a narrative that reflects the predicament of the African individual in the postcolonial world. This article, therefore, raises a central question about how the memory of departure constructs and represents the theme of migration.

Keywords: theme; migration; memory of departure; identity; Abdulrazak Gurnah.

Résumé

Le roman Memory of Departure (1987) de l'écrivain tanzanien Abdulrazak Gurnah est l'une des œuvres fondatrices de la littérature postcoloniale. Il aborde la question de la migration et des migrants, mettant en lumière les motivations et les conséquences du départ. Le récit dépeint avec talent les souffrances du protagoniste, Hassan Omar, parallèlement aux événements qui menacent sa vie

pendant son voyage vers Nairobi, entrepris dans l'espoir d'échapper à une réalité sociale et politique tendue, pour se retrouver finalement pris dans une lutte acharnée contre l'isolement, l'aliénation et un sentiment d'identité fracturé. En conséquence, cette étude cherche à examiner les représentations de la migration et à comprendre ses moteurs sous-jacents à travers une analyse de Memory of Departure. Cette approche novatrice offre une vision complexe de la migration. Elle entremêle les dimensions de la guerre, de l'éloignement et de la recherche d'identité et de liberté dans un récit qui reflète la situation difficile de l'individu africain dans le monde postcolonial. Cet article soulève donc une question centrale sur la manière dont le souvenir du départ construit et représente le thème de la migration.

Mots-clés : thème ; migration ; souvenir du départ ; identité ; Abdulrazak Gurnah.



Introduction

The novel *memory of Departure* by the Tanzanian novelist Abdulrazak Gurnah, who resides in Britain, is regarded as one of the foundational works of postcolonial literature. It offers a sincere portrayal of the individual's reality, with all its political, social, and cultural manifestations, presenting the human being as an active agent rather than a victim. Through its chapters, the novel depicts migration as an existential condition, conveyed through the experience of its protagonist, Hassan Omar, and his urgent desire to escape his painful reality, free himself from his social imprisonment, and break away from the poverty and oppression that afflicted his country during and after the colonial era. Ultimately, the novel reflects the internal fragmentation of the African individual, torn between the memory of the homeland and the allure of an alternative homeland.

Accordingly, this article seeks to answer the following problem: How is the theme of migration manifested in *the memory of departure*? What meanings does the subject of migration carry within the novel? To what extent does the narrative succeed in establishing a connection between the imagined and the real?

Thus, the study aims to do the following:

- Examine the theme of migration in *the memory of departure*, gain a deeper understanding of its meaning, and explore how this theme is constructed literarily through a critical reading that investigates the dimensions of this experience.

- The phenomenon of African migration was identified, and its causes and consequences were determined.
- Highlight the individual's suffering in a postcolonial world.

This study employs analytical and descriptive methods, which enable us to trace the principal representations of the migration theme in *the memory of departure*.

We concluded that addressing the theme of migration in *Memory of Departure* necessitates division into three sections: the first presents an overview of the novelist Abdulrazak Gurnah and his major works; the second provides a summary of the novel *Memory of Departure*; and the third examines the manifestations of the migration theme in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure*.

1. Brief Overview of the Novelist Abdulrazak Gurnah

Abdulrazak Salim bin Gurnah al-Kindī, known in literary circles as Abdulrazak Gurnah, is a Tanzanian novelist and writer of Yemeni Arab descent. He was born in 1948 on the island of Zanzibar, part of Tanzania, but fled in 1968 to the United Kingdom during a period when the Muslim minority was subjected to persecution, massacres, and violence. He settled there to pursue his studies and begin his academic career (see "Abdulrazak Gurnah in an Interview with BBC: Gurnah Wins for His Uncompromising Narrative on Colonialism," October 17, 2021; <https://www.bbc.com>).

Gurnah initially studied at Canterbury Christ Church University before moving to the University of Kent, where he obtained a doctorate in English literature in 1982. He is currently a Professor of English and postcolonial literature and the director of postgraduate studies in the Department of English at the University of Kent.



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Gurnah is regarded as one of the most prominent novelists focusing on postcolonial literature, particularly through the themes of migration, displacement, identity, racism, and the impact of colonialism, as well as its social and psychological consequences for individuals (see “Abdulrazak Gurnah,” <https://ar.wikipedia.org>).

Gurnah was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2021. The Nobel Committee praised his work as a “rigorous and deeply insightful exploration of the effects of colonialism and the fates of refugees in the gulf between cultures and continents” (“A Panel Discussion with Abdulrazak Gurnah, Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature,” <https://islamonline.net>).

Among his most notable novels are as follows:

- *Memory of Departure* (1987)
- *Pilgrims Way* (1988)
- *Paradise* (1994)
- *Admiring Silence* (1996)
- *By the Sea* (2001)
- *Desertion* (2005)
- *The Last Gift* (2011)
- *Gravel Heart* (2017)
- *Afterlives* (2020) (see “Abdulrazak Gurnah,” <https://ar.wikipedia.org>)

2. Summary of *Memory of Departure*

The novel *memory of Departure* by Abdulrazak Gurnah tells the story of a Tanzanian migrant named Hassan Omar, a member of a family corroded by corruption and vice. Following his country's independence and out of fear of losing its most capable citizens, the government discourages

young people from travelling abroad by refusing to announce examination results. Consequently, Hassan Omar decided to travel to Nairobi to live with his wealthy uncle, Ahmad, hoping that the latter would release his mother's rightful share of the family inheritance. However, his uncle refuses, leaving Hassan once again on a ship, bound by sea for a long journey filled with challenges and suffering. He moves from place to place in search of a better life, yet migration offers him neither peace nor security. Instead, it imposes upon him an internal struggle in which he confronts questions of identity, belonging, place, and alienation.

The novel ends without closure, leaving the reader questioning the idea of migration, as although Gurnah seeks to expose the effects of colonialism and the consequences of the postcolonial condition on individuals and societies in East Africa, as well as on migrants' destinies.

4. Manifestations of the Theme of Migration in the *Memory of Departure*

4.1. The Theme of Identity and the Search for the Self

The dream of departure persists as an anxiety that haunts the protagonist of Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel, *Memory of Departure*, on every page, carrying within it a single purpose: the pursuit of a better life denied him in his homeland. The novel reveals the theme of migration and its motivations through the character of Hassan Omar, whose childhood is shaped by physical and psychological punishment. His father is a drunk and a tyrant, compelling him to obedience and respect "through threats and intimidation" (Gurnah, p. 22). His brother Saïd is of poor character, and his death leaves in Hassan's heart a deep wound and an unforgettable



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painful memory, particularly since he is accused of causing the fire. Hassan described the scene of his brother's burning as follows: "I stood and watched him burn. He closed his eyes and fell to the ground... then his legs struck the bed, and the frame collapsed over him, and he burned completely... Why did they blame me? He was my only friend and my only brother" (Gurnah, pp. 19–20).

Here, the motives that contributed to Hassan Omar's migration became evident, exposing the turmoil produced by an upbringing marked by familial and social dysfunction and by a profound lack of regard for the human being.

The novel constitutes an implicit indictment of the political and social systems that drive individuals towards forced migration. The society in which the protagonist, Hassan Omar, lived was dominated by the decay of traditional values and oppressive political tyranny. He expresses his resentment towards his condition, saying, "A single feeling took hold of me, one of terror and disgust at the world into which they had brought me" (Gurnah, p. 24). Thus, migration became an inevitable destiny and a path to delivery, taking two forms in Hassan Omar's life: his migration to Nairobi and his subsequent migration to Mumbai and Madras.

Both journeys were marked by events familiar to the experience of any displaced migrant. In Nairobi, he suffered marginalisation and racism, stating, "I had the misfortune of colliding with a fruit seller and his cart, and the man insulted me, revelling savagely and fiercely in his abuse, voicing vile slurs about my lineage" (Gurnah, p. 173).

Migration to Mumbai and Madras represented a second stage, reflecting his yearning for a new horizon through

which to realise and liberate himself from the constraints of an imposed reality. His escape became an existential cry against oppression and deprivation. However, this phase was also fraught with anxiety: "However, I am now far from home, having been away for three weeks between Bombay and Madras, working as a medical assistant on board the S.S. Alice" (Gurnah, p. 218).

Within this context of suffering, the novelist employs the homeland as a symbol of value, identity, and belonging, where losing one's homeland equates to losing life itself. He states, "I think a great deal about my home and my family and about how life is going for them. I am in the deepest pain for having left that place. Who would have imagined it? It never once occurred to me that I would miss that country" (Gurnah, p. 221).

4.2. The Theme of Alienation

Hassan Omar begins to live in Nairobi, caught between a past burdened with sorrow and an uncertain present. Throughout his journey, he experiences a form of self-alienation that alters his consciousness, fragments his sense of place and self, and compels him to inhabit a hybrid identity. He states, "I am in exile, I tell myself, which makes it easier for me to endure this feeling because I can thereby give it a name that does not shame me" (Gurnah, p. 222).

His departure from his homeland once again becomes a source of alienation and tension, as he is subjected to rejection, marginalisation, and racism. He noted, "At other times, they call me a slave or a negro" (Gurnah, p. 220). This reflects the idea that "the recognition of foreign cultures is not always desirable for society; in many societies the



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human 'other' is excluded" (Richardson, December 2004, p. 145).

Thus, the problems of the self and the other can be resolved only when "we elevate human dignity by adopting the civilisational values achieved by all nations, which establish the foundations for building bridges of understanding among people, far from destructive identities. This occurs through openness to the external world, where the Other may be encountered, as well as openness to the internal world of the Self, made possible through timeless human values such as love, goodness, and justice" (Hammoud, 2013, p. 23).

Under these troubled conditions, the protagonist acquires the capacity for rebellion and self-critique. He states, "It was enough for me that I had begun to move, that I was running and had a chance of winning and that I had escaped the suffocation of the narrow alleys" (Gurnah, p. 111).

The protagonist of the novel serves as a vivid and truthful embodiment of the fractured migrant self. Misfortune and ill omen have shadowed his life from his days in his homeland to his migration to Nairobi. Memory becomes a haunting presence that troubles him continuously as he attempts to rearrange the fragments of his past to construct a bridge towards an unknown future imposed by oppressive imperial systems that failed to embrace the human being. Hassan Omar states, "And our leader stands beside the Queen of England... he is bloated, swollen to the point of bursting with the rotten fruits of his power, corrupt, debauched, and foolish... Moreover, we have these oily leaders whose only concerns are illicit money and other men's women, prattling

on about the dignity of the black man and then kicking him in the teeth" (Gurnah, pp. 60, 104).

Hassan Omar feels alienated from his society, perceiving it as artificial. He is consumed by fragmentation and cast into a painful struggle with himself. He criticises everything and longs for a society other than his own, saying, "It is better to stay by the filthy sea, far from the chaos and humiliation" (Gurnah, p. 14).

Through the character of Hassan Omar, the author succeeds in transporting the reader to the depths of the African individual's suffering—not merely as a victim of social or political circumstances but as a suspension between the secrets of the past and the aspirations of the future. Hassan Omar stated, "After three years of independence, it was clear that the future had to be sought elsewhere... What do you expect people to do in the face of such violence? Every day sacrifices and offerings are made; someone or other is uprooted and sacrificed for the sake of our nation's progress" (Gurnah, pp. 39, 106).

4.3. The Theme of Love

The issue of alienation shapes the novel under study, as Hassan Omar's sense of fragmentation and loss generates deep personal and collective frustrations. On the personal level, these frustrations are reflected in his father's imprisonment on charges of molting an eight-year-old boy, in his father's inability to speak, in his habit of walking with his head bowed, and in the loss of his brother Saïd. On the collective level, they are reflected in the images of war and destruction that engulf everything, producing poverty and deprivation and initiating his search for a lost paradise.



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As the pages unfold, chronicling Hassan Omar's departure to Nairobi, he falls in love with his cousin Salma. Addressing his mother, he says, "I love her and I shall marry her one day" (Gurnah, p. 200). Love becomes his refuge in a world devoid of humanity. In the novel, love functions as a form of resistance against the devastation wrought by colonialism; the relationship between Hassan Omar and Salma appears to be an attempt to reconstruct the self, distant from a wounded past. Hassan Omar says, "I dream of you; I think of you endlessly. I never knew that thinking of you would be like this" (Gurnah, p. 223).

4.4. The Theme of Freedom

Hassan Omar also represents African youth striving to liberate themselves from the constraints of their society and its colonial legacy, rendering them a symbol of African resistance and the struggle for independence. Gurnah sought to emphasise colonialism's responsibility for the phenomenon of migration, stating, "...In reality, what we are living through is now the very transformation produced by colonialism and its consequences. When people in former imperial countries claim that colonialism has ended, that is not true, for the consequences of colonialism remain present and operate in various ways" (Ali al-'Ammārī, *Shurūq Zakariyyā, Abdulrazak Gurnah: Memory of Displacement Cannot Be Erased*, Sharjah International Book Fair, <https://sibf.com>).

Despite the contempt and rejection he endures as an African in Nairobi, Hassan Omar remains tolerant. He recognises that the exclusionary view directed towards him constitutes an explicit reaction shaped by prevailing

conditions because the migrant always lacks a sense of belonging. He states, “The man insulted me, revelling savagely and fiercely in his abuse, voicing vile slurs about my lineage” (Gurnah, p. 173).

Conclusion

At the end of this study, we obtained several results, which may be summarised as follows:

- The novel *Memory of Departure* presents new representations of the theme of migration, born of a new cultural, political, and ideological context associated with postcolonial literature, which led to the emergence of a new form of narrative writing known as post-colonial novels.
- Gurnah is among the most significant writers to address the human condition in a contemporary world marked by challenges and upheavals. The character of his protagonist, Hassan Omar, appears to be an indictment of the global system that drives individuals to migrate and, simultaneously, as a reference to the political and economic crises that have compelled many to leave Africa.
- The novel *memory of departure* reveals the suffering endured by individuals in Africa and their persistent sense of exile, alienation, and fracture.
- Through the figure of the migrant, Gurnah paints a painful human portrait in which fractured identity and broken selfhood are brought to the fore. The novel *memory of Departure* thus stands as a literary document that exposes the contradictions of the



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modern world and gives voice to those who have found no place in their homelands.

- The narrative rests on a depiction of a troubled, afflicted African reality in which individuals struggle for survival and search for meaning in a postcolonial world.

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