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## Research Paper

# Displacement and Identity: An Analysis of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure*

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## ARTICLE DETAILS

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper focuses on displacement and identity issues in Abdulrazak Gurnah's first novel, *Memory of Departure*. Migration happens mainly because of socioeconomic issues. It has been noticed that migration occurs in search of better livelihoods and new opportunities. Still, it has also been seen that migration occurs because of unrest in societies and compulsions of circumstances. Human migration has been taking place for ages, but illegal migration or migration not permitted by the law of the land is recently happening. "Illegal immigrants who undergo political unrest and social turmoil during migration are often sufferers of an identity crisis, imprisonment, torture, and exploitation through bonded labor"(Bose & Satapathy 473). In the writings of Abdulrazak Gurnah, most of the characters immigrate from one culture to another because of political reasons or unrest in the societies they belong to. Because of immigration, the characters of Gurnah's novels suffer from identity crises and cultural conflicts and hence speak about multiculturalism and ethnicity. This paper states that because of uncertainty in society, the characters in *Memory of Departure* struggle, and because of it, the migration to a new land for a better future is necessary. This displacement to a new land leads to an Identity crisis.

## 1. Introduction to Abdulrazak Gurnah's Literary Work

Born on 20th December 1948 in the Sultanate of Zanzibar, present-day Tanzania, Abdulrazak Gurnah is a British novelist, intellectual, and academic. In the 1960s, during the Zanzibar Revolution, he moved to the United Kingdom as a refugee. The life of Gurnah, like all refugees, was a whole of poverty, and he had experience of being alienated. The prolonged poverty and alienation period made him realize he wanted to say something. As a result, he started writing based on his experiences. This time was when he had all the confusion and uncertainties in life. In the initial years of his life in the UK, he studied at Christ Church College, Canterbury. Later, he went to the University of Kent and earned his Ph.D. in 1982. He started his teaching career in 1980 at Bayero University Kano in Nigeria. Later, he taught English and postcolonial literature at the University of Kent. He is a Nobel Laureate in Literature for 2021. After Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize in 1993, Gurnah became the first black writer to receive the Nobel Prize. The writings of Abdulrazak Gurnah have themes of politics and culture, immigration, diaspora, migration, postcolonial disappointments, identity crises, and displacement. Abdulrazak, in conversation with Nisha Jones, states that "one book doesn't necessarily follow the last one logically, although it does come out of the same pool where all the books have come from. There are several different starting points for the novel. On the one hand, it was a way of taking a more extended look at why things are the way they are now. Most of what I have written about has not only been concerned with Zanzibar but with other small places along that coast" (37).

## 2. Understanding the Theme of *Memory of Departure*

*Memory of Departure* is the first novel by Abdulrazak Gurnah, published in 1987. This novel is about a young boy living with his family in a poverty-stricken seaport town in a coastal East African country. Hassan Omar, the protagonist of

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*Memory of Departure*, is forced to leave his country because of circumstances back home and because he has no future in his home country. He was born in a society where violence and despair were part of life. His family life was also disturbed. His father used to drink a lot and beat his mother now and then, and the children pretended that they knew nothing. "And when he came home in the early hours, stumbling against the door, shouting obscene abuse, beating my mother, we all acted asleep. At times, I thought I should do something to stop him. I was the eldest and only a few inches shorter than him. Perhaps, we were all as pathetic as he thought we were, but I was afraid to shame my mother" (35). The story of Hassan is of when his country had just gained independence from British colonial rule; hence, all the happenings that took place in Hassan Omar's life are the result of Post-colonialism. According to Said (qtd. in Klikauer), "although the "age of empire" largely ended after the Second World War, when most colonies gained independence, imperialism continues to exert considerable cultural influence in the present. To be aware of this fact, it is important to look at how the colonial powers used culture to control distant lands and people"(151). Though his country had gained independence, the treatment of the ruling class was similar to that of the colonizers. "Refusal to answer questions about race had been an act of defiance against the British, an assertion of unity and nationhood. Refusal to answer the question now was against the law" (Gurnah 71-72). The characters in *Memory of Departure* are traumatized in such a way that they feel no hope in their own country, which has gained independence.

### 3. Analyzing the Concept of Departure in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Narrative

Human migration, according to Massey (qtd. in Bose & Satapathy), is "a social process that involves the consensual demarcation of lines in space by a human community that is ratified, supervised, and enforced by civil authority" (474). The protagonist of *Memory of Departure* is a young man, Hassan Omar, who lives with his family in Kenge. Kenge was a poverty-stricken town where people were not happy, "This was Kenge, where the toilers and failures lived, where wizened prostitutes and painted homosexual traded, where drunks came for cheap *tende*, where anonymous voices howled with pain in the streets at night" (Gurnah 2). This condition of Kenge was because of the colonial past, Iftakhar Ahmed and Nusrat Jahan write about colonialism in Africa, "colonialism plays a vital role in the way of displacement of the colonized. Undoubtedly, the Europeans dominated the Africans through their colonial legacy. The colonizers subjugate the Africans politically and culturally. Even the colonizers occupy everything belonging to the colonized, including their lands and shelters" (52). Situations do force a person to get out of his country, but the influence of the company a person is in, particularly those who influence society, motivates a person to go out and make a better life. A teacher of Hassan with whom he had a conversation says, "What do you want to do with your life? Go away, make something of yourself. What about England? Godless country, but there Are opportunities there" (18).

Manhood had arrived at Hassan Omar, and he and his friends had started seriously discussing their future. But he knew that it would be difficult for him to have a better future here, even though the country was on the verge of independence as he was an Arab. "With our history of the misuse and oppression of Africans by an alliance of Arabs, Indians and Europeans, it was naive to expect that things would turn out differently" (Gurnah 29). Things were also not favorable as far as his family situation was concerned. His father used to drink and beat his mother, and the children had no future. His younger sister Zakiya, who was three years younger than him, was poorly affected by the atmosphere at home. She grew up in a Muslim family that was suffering from poverty, and in a town like Kenge, she was deprived of many things she wanted to do. Her life took a different path, " Now, at sixteen, she moved from one affair to another with the cynicism of a much older person, abandoning all discretion" (Gurnah 37).

Because of his family situation, Hassan's only refuge was the town's docks, where he started dreaming of going to a new place for a better life. Soon, he realized that because of the country's dire financial situation, the results of the examinations he and other students had appeared for wouldn't be declared and they would be offered clerical jobs with meager salaries. Moreover, getting a scholarship to study further would be impossible because of his ethnic affiliation. His mother comes to his rescue and tries to convince him to go to his maternal uncle, who lives in Nairobi. She says, "Your uncle Ahmed in Nairobi, my brother,' she said. We'll go to him. He's a rich man now. You're his family. He must help you" (52).

Hassan leaves his family to stay with his uncle in Nairobi, discovering a more extensive world there. This new world showed him cruelty, but it was the place that showed him the other part of life, and he became hopeful. This novel reflects the struggles of Third World Africa to shed its colonial skin, with its tradition of poverty and oppression, and to construct a new identity for itself. It has been noticed that migration mostly takes place because of compulsions. Even Abdulrazak Gurnah's migration from Zanzibar resulted from situations that forced him to leave his birthplace. Debyan Banerjee, in his research paper, states the reason for Gurnah's migration, "He fled to England in early 1968 because, after the Revolution (1964), Zanzibar became a place of terror and unrest, where the rule of autocratic leaders results in political betrayal after the country's independence from the British (1890-1963)" (874).

Migration for the migrant is never easy. It is also not easy for his family as they are saying goodbye to their loved one. No one wants to leave his place, but the hope of a better future and the hope of making the lives of loved ones better forces a person to take the most challenging decision of life. In Hassan's case, we understand how important it was for him and his family to go to Nairobi to get the money from his uncle. Even when his father is at the railway station to say goodbye to Hassan, his father reminds him of the real purpose he is going to Nairobi. "Don't come back with nothing,' he said in a more

familiar voice. 'You do everything possible to persuade that thief to help you. We don't want anything for ourselves, just to do our duty by our son. This is not a holiday. Do you understand? Don't dishonor us, and don't come back with nothing' (76-77).

Going to a new land and geography is always painful. In his book *Orientalism*, Said describes the mental state of a person who goes to a new place and the way one misses the native land. "When one travels in Judea, at first a great ennui grips the heart; but when, passing from one solitary place to another, space stretches out without limits before you, slowly the ennui dissipates, and one feels a secret terror, which, far from depressing the soul, gives it courage and elevates one's native genius" (173).

#### 4. Exploration of Identity in *Memory of Departure*

Migration and identity crises lead to inner conflicts as well. In *Memory of Departure*, the protagonist suffers from homelessness, cultural differences, and cultural isolation in the society he migrated to. The suffering evokes emptiness in his life and pushes him to alienation and, hence, to an identity crisis. Identity evolves along with significant life changes in how somebody defines himself when he is at home and how he defines himself when he is away from family. Identity also changes with time and age. "Identity phenomenon is not a fixed aspect of personality. It is always in flux and therefore evolving by nature. With this effect, one cannot essentialise or fix its position in any context in particular and in general" (Narain 2). Hassan Omar, the protagonist, also defines his identity from time to time and from age to age. He was born into a low-income family in a poor town. At the novel's beginning, we see the usage of vicious, vulgar language. The atmosphere at home, where the beating of his mother by his father was a regular affair and sexual encounters of his elder brother with other young boys were part of life. And then the demise of his brother in an accident. The blame was put on him, and it gave him a different identity. He couldn't understand why he had been blamed when he did nothing. We understand his helplessness when he says, "Why did they blame me who had never done him any harm? They all beat him. I was five. He was my friend, he was my brother. He was my only friend and my only brother. Why did they blame me?" (Gurnah 12). It made him submissive and the one who thought that he was unwanted at home.

Circumstances forced him to go to a new land to find a better living, which could be helpful for his and his family's future. He wanted a passport to travel to a new country, but it wasn't easy to get one because of his Arabian lineage. His sister Zakia offered to help, "You wouldn't even know what you were talking about. I'm seeing the man anyway ... and I thought I would ask him for you. But if you don't want me to ..." (66). The text brings to light the situation Hassan Omar was going through. He wanted a passport to travel badly, but he didn't want to get help from a man his sister was having an affair with. Hassan was going through a lot of emotional stress and inner conflicts. He was helpless. "Inner conflict happens when the characters undergo an emotional battle" (Ahmed and Jahan 54).

His journey to Nairobi starts on a train, a new experience for him. He reached Nairobi, and everything was grand there. His uncle's house was big, and everything was in order at his uncle's house, unlike his own house. By entering his uncle's house, Hassan understands the material difference between his family and his uncle's. His uncle's place was exactly what the home of a wealthy Englishman could be. He understands his condition and identity when his cousin taunts him for having a hole in his shoes. He feels nervous and speechless. He says, "I tried to think of something clever and self-deprecating to say, but all I felt was a resentment that I was forced to talk about shoes at all" (108). An identity crisis usually occurs when there's a change in a person's life, and here in Nairobi, Hassan's life got a complete transformation, which also changed his outlook. Hassan's uncle Ahmed is a self-made man who had moved from the country to the city of Nairobi and secured financial prosperity. Ahmed wants Hassan to get adjusted and used to the new life.

Hassan Omar had gone to his uncle's place to get money as a share of his mother in the ancestral property, but here in Nairobi, his uncle Bwana Ahmed wanted to make him his employee. Bwana Ahmed says, "I can't trust any of those managers," he told me, as we raced off with the money to catch the banks before they shut, 'They cheat me all the time. That's why I would like you to come and work here. You could keep an eye on things for me, and then when you've got enough experience, I'll make you one of my managers' (139). According to Erikson (qtd. in M & Chandran), "Identity crisis is a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in the society" (41). The same was happening to Hassan. He had come to take money from his uncle, and his uncle wanted him to be his worker.

Hassan Omar fell in love with Salma, his uncle's daughter. It was love at first sight. How Salma presented herself in front of Hassan was new and impressive for Hassan Omar. Salma was well-dressed and well-mannered and used some English words during conversation. Hassan Omar hadn't met any girl of Salma's stature in his life, so it was apparent that he was in love with her. His uncle Bwana Ahmed learned about their liking for each other, and he was furious. Ahmed poorly beat Salma, and Ahmed called Hassan an animal, and insulted his family. "Didn't they teach you anything? Didn't they teach you any manners where you come from? You stay in a man's house and then you abuse his daughter. Oh God, I've Never learnt" (154). This incident changed Hassan completely and

he got an insight into which he really is. He got to know that he didn't belong to this society. There is a lot of difference. The difference between class, difference of culture, and difference of community. "The essence of identity which, is sometimes understood in terms of something fixed and unvariable, is questioned in the contemporary world" (Das 2).

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

*Memory of Departure* deals with migration, family crises, exile, identity issues, and resentment. All these issues later shaped Gurnah's future works. This text was written so well that it appears authentic and genuine. "Gurnah tends to have reflections on those 'broken mirrors'- not from a hope for recuperation, but an obligation of speaking the truth" (Banerjee 875). The migration and identity issues highlighted by Gurnah deal with disadvantaged people of the fictional town Kenge who are trying to adjust to an independent country with the same colonial functioning of the ruling class. The circumstances and family situations often force people to cross borders in the hope of better living, which ultimately leads to inhuman treatment and losing the social identity that they had in their homeland. Hassan Omer returned to Kenge after a lot of embarrassment and losing respect and identity at the hands of people he hoped to get help from. He had returned to Kenge, but he understood that staying at home would have no purpose and decided to leave his home again under family pressure. "After his humiliating return, he discovers more degradation in the family space which arguably serves miniature form of the bluster he confronts in the public domain. Despite his inclination to live in the country his mother and sister pursue his immediate leaving" (Monisha & Robinson 148).

It is a tale that depicts the struggle of depression and misfortune through migration and identity. Despite all the hurdles, poverty forces a person to leave his homeland in the hope of a better future, but sometimes some of them are compelled to return empty-handed because of circumstances and situations.

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