

Colonial Shadows: Intersections of Trauma, Memory and Identity in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Fiction

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Received: 20 August 2025 Accepted & Reviewed: 25 August 2025, Published: 31 August 2025

Abstract

This paper examines how Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction re-frames the psychological and emotional impacts of colonialism, displacement, and forced migration while also examining trauma and survival in his works. The lived experiences of those whose identities have been upended by exile and empire are reflected in Gurnah's works. This paper examines how trauma is an embodied experience created by migration, memory, and stillness in *By the Sea*. Memory and trauma are studied as two principal ways postcolonial societies interact with their pasts and histories to build the future, making them essential themes of the literature written in the postcolonial nations. The paper also proves that memory is a means of erasing colonial histories and preserving indigenous histories and self in the context of colonization.

Keywords: Exile, memory, trauma, migration, identity, post-colonialism.

Introduction

This paper explores the significance of memory and trauma in selected works by postcolonial author Abdulrazak Gurnah. It seeks to investigate the complex ways that Gurnah uses trauma and memory to narrativise history and the self. Because they enable cultures to confront the past and envision new futures, these topics are essential to postcolonial literature. The wounds of colonialism, exile, and displacement are profoundly ingrained in his writing. The characters deal with broken homes, shattered identities, and suppressed pasts. In postcolonial circumstances, trauma is a historical wound ingrained in the history of empire, not only a psychological one. Individual pain as well as the collective memory of repressed and dispossessed groups are reflected in postcolonial trauma. The two characters of the novel are Latif Mahmud, a younger scholar and longtime exile, and Saleh Omar, an old and reserved man seeking asylum. Even though they now reside in a peaceful English sea town, their common history dates back to Zanzibar, on Africa's east coast, where their lives were once complexly and painfully intertwined. Their reunion in exile rekindles a deeply personal and unresolved history of betrayal, loss, and displacement despite the geographical and chronological distance from their homeland. As the author states in *By the Sea*,

"I speak to maps. And sometimes they speak back to me... Before maps, the world was limitless. It was maps that gave it shape... something that could be possessed, not just laid waste and plundered." (Gurnah 35)

The term memory serves as a resistance to prevailing colonial historiography in the postcolonial setting. Through preserving native narration, Gurnah addresses historical forgetfulness. This is especially evident in *Paradise* (1994) and *Afterlives*, where African lives are intertwined with the brutality of German colonialism and World War I. Characters like Ilyas, who returns from *Afterlives* (2020) with a jumbled identity and lost memory represents inherited violence—not just in what actually occurred, but also in what history chooses to forget. The novel *By the Sea* offers a compelling representation of trauma within the postcolonial context of Zanzibar. The novel explores the traumatic legacy of colonialism and slavery and the struggles faced by individuals and communities in reconciling with their past. Through his evocative storytelling, Gurnah deals

with the psychological and emotional impact of trauma, unraveling its disruptive force on the characters lives. The novel serves as a poignant example of how postcolonial literature can illuminate the intricacies of trauma, memory, and the quest for reconciliation within the context of historical injustices.

Gurnah expands trauma beyond individual psychology to encompass collective suffering. His works highlight the silences imposed by colonial power and the psychic toll of being excluded from official history. Postcolonial theory and trauma theory provide the framework for this analysis. Edward Said's Orientalism critiques Western representations of the East and introduces the concept of exile as a cultural and existential condition. For Said, exile is more than geographic dislocation; it is a rupture in identity and belonging.

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity helps explain the in-betweenness of Gurnah's characters, who negotiate between original cultures and imposed colonial structures. The 'third space' they occupy destabilizes fixed identities and opens possibilities for resistance. Saleh's silence upon arrival, his pretending not to speak English, "I had been told not to say anything, to pretend I could not speak any English" (Gurnah 5). It shows his resistance to being fully read or consumed by the dominant British system. This is what Bhabha calls "the borderline work of culture" operating in an ambiguous space that challenges dominant narratives.

Gayatri Spivak's question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" highlights the silencing of marginalized voices. Gurnah attempt to answer this question by giving space to silenced subjects. He deals with the theme of trauma, which is closely associated with silence. Silence play a very important role in the novel. It used as a method of hiding identity and claiming resistance to dominant European discourse. It manifests feelings of shame, betrayal, and loss at times. It is also an intense declaration of guilt, fear, oppression, and resistance, "I thought I'd better speak before I created an impossible situation. Even though I would've preferred not to" (Gurnah 65). In literary terms, silence has various meanings, also being a subtle means of exposing inner turmoil and social criticism. During the interview with Nisha Jones, Gurnah highlights the importance of silence as a powerful narrative and emotional device,

When migrants come to Europe, they're diffident about their language if they're on their own and they're also diffident about English, say, because they're not sure if they can speak it properly. So, remaining silent is a way of preserving dignity and at the same time not putting yourself in harm's way. Silence is ambivalent. It is also powerful and can be far more eloquent." (Gurnah 37– 38)

Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman's trauma theories reveal how trauma resists coherent narration and reemerges through fragmented memory. Trauma in literature is often depicted symbolically, showing how pain is transmitted through silence, repetition, and disjointed storytelling. According to Cathy Caruth, In its most general description, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, the uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena. (Caruth 11)

Trauma theory helps us to understand the psychological wounds that the main characters, Saleh Omar and Latif. It also looks at how the character's social, economic, cultural, and political situations affects them and how these things make them act in strange ways in the chosen text. Herman focuses on how stressful events can affect people. In *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) Herman explain,

To study psychological trauma is to come face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature to study psychological trauma means bearing witness and horrible events. (Herman 7)

In the case of Saleh Omar for example, the trauma paradigm offers a few reasons to learn more about his life choices and set up safety, racial, and Western biases.

Saleh silence is not only a literal state but also a metaphor for the unspeakable trauma he carries from his past. He notes, I have no desire to explain my words, nor to speak the words they want to hear (*By the Sea*). His silence represents his internalised trauma, his reluctance to relive the past and the difficulty of articulating his experiences of loss and betrayal.

The novel describes Saleh's loss of family and identity due to the political turmoil in Zanzibar. After his property is seized and his family disintegrates, Saleh reflects on his alienation, he had been hollowed out by loss. He had lost the way of telling, and in so doing he had lost himself, This sense of 'hollowing out' is a recurring metaphor for the emotional and psychological toll of displacement, where the trauma of losing loved ones and home is coupled with the erasure of identity. It is stated in the book, "sometimes I think it is my fate to live in the wreckage and confusion of crumbling houses" (*Gurnah* 1). Saleh's trauma is intertwined with the betrayal he experienced at the hands of his friend, Hussein, who swindled him out of his business and property. This personal betrayal compounds the trauma of losing his homeland and is a microcosm of the broader historical injustices wrought by colonialism.

The novel portrays migration not as a resolution to trauma but as a perpetuation of it. As Saleh settles in England, he reflects on his fragmented sense of self, exacerbated by his status as a refugee, "there are no words for it in any language, the desolation of being without a place in the world. I know this feeling will be with me forever" (*Gurnah* 212). His exile from Zanzibar is not just a physical displacement but a psychological burden, where the past continues to haunt his present, "I am a refugee, an asylum-seeker. These are not simple words, even if habit of hearing them makes them seem so" (*Gurnah* 4). These statements from the novel *By the Sea* illustrates Gurnah's nuanced portrayal of trauma, highlighting how personal and collective experiences of loss, betrayal, and displacement leave enduring scars on individuals.

Trauma and Memory

Trauma can significantly affect a person's emotions and psychology. Anxiety, depression, dissociation, nightmares, flashbacks, and intrusive thoughts are some of the symptoms it may cause. Traumatized people frequently struggle to control their emotions, exhibiting elevated levels of dread, rage, or emotional numbness. These reactions can cause a great deal of vulnerability and suffering by interfering with their relationships and day-to-day functioning. Trauma is a disruptive force that destroys a person's feeling of continuity, safety, and security. It has the power to upend a person's worldview and cast doubt on their core convictions about the world, other people, and themselves. Trauma causes a fragmented and disoriented experience of reality by interfering with the natural processes of meaning-making and self-awareness.

Trauma causes a fragmented and disoriented experience of reality by interfering with the natural processes of meaning-making and self-awareness. It can have long-lasting impacts that affect a person's relationships, thoughts, and behaviors in addition to the immediate aftermath of the incident. When discussing traumatized memory, Latif offers the ambiguous metaphor of a warehouse:

I want to look forward, but I always find myself looking back, poking about in times so long ago [...] tyrant events which loom large over me and dictate every ordinary action. Yet when I look back, I find some objects still gleam with a bright malevolence and every memory draws blood. It's a dour place, the land of memory, a dim gutted warehouse with rotting planks and rusted ladders where you sometimes spend time rifling through abandoned goods. (*Gurnah* 86)

In the novel, trauma and memory are intricately intertwined, with memory serving as both a source of pain and a potential path towards healing. Gurnah's narrative skillfully navigates the characters' fragmented memories, revealing their attempts to make sense of the past and reconcile conflicting emotions. The novel highlights the challenges and complexities of navigating trauma and memory through the characters' experiences, inviting readers to reflect on their understanding of these themes and their significance within postcolonial contexts.

It illustrates how his memories are incomplete and fraught with the pain of abandoning his identity and home. His past is now a fragmented collection of traumatic recollections that he finds difficult to make sense of rather than a cohesive story. Saleh is hesitant to relive some of his former events because his memories are frequently unpleasant. His trauma is not only rooted in events but in the act of remembering itself. He observes, "the past is an ache, a sharp pain that dulls only with forgetting, but that will not go away" (Gurnah 124). This statement captures how trauma lingers in memory, refusing to be fully forgotten and continually resurfacing, causing emotional distress. Saleh's trauma is exacerbated by his inability to escape the memories that haunt him.

Gurnah examines the challenging issue of whether reconciliation is ever really possible through the interactions between his protagonists. According to him, it might be feasible if the parties are receptive to introspection and have gained sufficient maturity to confront the past with honesty. As Saleh Omar reflects, maturity allows one to revisit past errors with a desire for redemption, "and even if I was sinful and wicked before, it is a function of mature years to seek to explain and redeem the folly and malice of younger years, to give redress and receive understanding" (Gurnah 145). This statement encapsulates the novel's emotional heart, a yearning for understanding, forgiveness, and a resolution that might transcend pain.

Throughout the novel, Gurnah emphasizes how trauma alters memory, making it difficult to distinguish between what is real and what is distorted by pain. Saleh reflects, "I have lived too long with the memories of what I have done and what I have failed to do, and they have become a part of me, as real as my skin" (Gurnah 165). This statement reveals the pervasive nature of trauma, as the memories of past events are not only inseparable from his identity but also physically embodied. Trauma distorts memory, blending the lines between past and present.

By the Sea examines the trauma of exile through Saleh Omar, a refugee who arrives in England claiming asylum. Saleh chooses silence, refusing to speak English as a way to protect himself from bureaucratic scrutiny and emotional exposure. His silence is not weakness but strategy. It reflects what Caruth calls the "unspeakability of trauma." (Caruth 5)

Trauma and Identity in *By the Sea*

In Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*, the protagonist Saleh experiences personal traumas that deeply shape his identity and journey towards reconciliation. Saleh's trauma is rooted in a series of profound losses and betrayals. The sudden death of his mother and the subsequent abandonment by his father leave him in a state of emotional turmoil and profound loneliness. These experiences of loss and betrayal not only shape Saleh's understanding of relationships but also impact his perception of self-worth, leading to a deep-seated sense of insecurity and vulnerability. Saleh's trauma fuels his quest for self-understanding and the search for a coherent sense of identity. His traumatic experiences and the ensuing emotional struggles compel him to question his place in the world and grapple with his worthiness. As Saleh navigates through memories, he seeks to reconstruct his fractured identity, wrestling with the effects of trauma on his sense of self.

When Latif Mahmud recalls the painful traumas through his story-telling to his companion, the hidden identities of Gurnah's characters are revealed. As a guest at her house, Uncle Hussein instructs in English. Because his younger brother becomes Uncle Hussein's sexual companion, Latif Mahmud exposes his filthy behavior, "you are a child of sin, she said" (Gurnah 92). The whole of Latif's family presents a gloomy picture of Zanzibar society during colonialism.

By the Sea intricately explores the interplay between personal and collective trauma, highlighting how individual and collective identities are shaped by historical injustices. The novel foregrounds the burden of historical injustices, such as slavery and colonialism, on the characters and the broader community. The weight of this collective trauma lingers in the background, influencing the characters' perspectives, relationships, and the possibilities for reconciliation. The historical injustices endured by the community become a shared source of pain, perpetuating a collective struggle for healing and a quest for justice. Latif uses the ambiguous metaphor of a warehouse when talking of traumatic memory,

I want to look forward, but I always find myself looking back, poking about in times so long ago [...] tyrant events which loom large over me and dictate every ordinary action. Yet when I look back, I find some objects still gleam with a bright malevolence and every memory draws blood. It's a dour place, the land of memory, a dim gutted warehouse with rotting planks and rusted ladders where you sometimes spend time rifling through abandoned goods. (Gurnah 86)

Memory emerges as a constructive force in the characters' journeys of reconciliation, offering glimpses of empowerment and opportunities for growth. In *By the Sea*, memory serves as a source of empowerment, enabling characters to confront and understand their traumatic experiences. Through memory, individuals reclaim their agency and gain insights into the root causes of their pain. Memory becomes a tool for survival, empowering characters to challenge oppressive narratives and seek paths towards healing and reconciliation. *By the Sea* examines the trauma of exile through Saleh Omar, a refugee who arrives in England claiming asylum. Saleh chooses silence, refusing to speak English as a way to protect himself from bureaucratic scrutiny and emotional exposure. His silence is not weakness but strategy. It reflects what Caruth calls the "unspeakability of trauma." (Caruth 5)

Memory plays a pivotal role in shaping narratives of reconciliation in the novel. By revisiting and reconstructing memories, characters engage in a process of meaning-making and truth-seeking. Memory becomes a catalyst for dialogue, understanding, and the potential transformation of relationships. It serves as a vehicle through which characters navigate the complexities of their past, opening up possibilities for reconciliation and the forging of new identities. Throughout the novel, Saleh struggles with his inability to communicate freely in English, a language that is both imposed by colonial power and essential for survival in his new life,

I spoke a few words of English then, but not many. Even now, I find that it takes an effort to follow conversations, to recognize the inflections and changes of tone in speech, and to put sentences together in the way that they do. (Gurnah 53)

This linguistic barrier reflects not only the trauma of displacement but also the challenge of reconstructing identity in a new cultural context. Saleh's struggle with English symbolizes the struggle to navigate a foreign, hostile environment while grappling with an unstable sense of self. Trauma in *By the Sea* is also rooted in the colonial history of Zanzibar. Saleh's personal history is tied to larger political betrayals that forced him into exile:

We lived among traitors, who collaborated with the colonial powers, and those who knew only their greed. In their eyes, we were of no value except to serve their ambitions. When I think of those days, I am consumed by a kind of cold anger, a pain that never leaves me. (Gurnah 84)

Gurnah underscores the collective trauma experienced by colonised people, emphasizing how the betrayal by the indigenous leaders contributes to the scars caused by imperial domination. Saleh Omar's identity conflict is a reflection of this multi-layered betrayal, which has shaped both his view of himself and his faith in others. The novel unfolds dual narrative through the characters Saleh and Latif Mahmood, both characters shared haunted past and personal betrayals. Their union in exile, far from their homeland triggers buried memories and unresolved grief. The author poignantly illustrates that trauma does not end with migration, rather it accompanies the exile, it travel with the migrant and finds new form in the asylum process, where storytelling becomes both a demand and a risk.

Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction is a powerful archive of postcolonial trauma, exile, migration and memory. Through fragmented memories, silences, and narrative shifts, Gurnah gives voice to those displaced and devastated by colonialism. His characters represent a broad spectrum of survival some broken, some resilient, but all human. His work urges us to remember that colonialism was not just a historical event but a lived experience whose aftershocks continue to echo in the lives of those it displaced. *By the Sea* portrays the long echoes of exile how trauma travels, reshapes identities, and resists forgetting. Gurnah compels readers to witness these struggles and reflect on the lingering legacies of colonial violence. His novels do not offer easy reconciliation but invite deep engagement with memory, identity, and survival in postcolonial contexts.

Memory is a key component of the trauma experience and recovery in the novel. People may experience flashbacks or nightmares as a result of intense and painful memories of traumatic occurrences. But in the face of adversity, memory is also an essential tool for adaptation and survival. By allowing people to draw lessons from the past and make wise judgments in the present, memory acts as a survival mechanism. It increases an individual's probability of self-preservation in the face of trauma by enabling them to identify and steer clear of possible threats. Traumatic event memories can trigger increased alertness, enabling people to react appropriately in dangerous circumstances.

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