



Refugee Identity and the Limits of Belonging in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*

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Abstract

Abdulrazak Gurnah's Admiring Silence offers a sensitive portrayal of refugee consciousness through the life of its unnamed Zanzibari narrator. His migration to England does not promise renewal. It exposes emotional, cultural and psychological fracture. Using theories by Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall and Cathy Caruth this paper examines the Admiring Silence by focusing on the related concepts of unhomeliness, hybridity and trauma. The unnamed narrator experiences an ambiguity that never resolves as a migration. Partial belonging is still maintained. Unbelonging develops into a habit. His concept of self is profoundly shaped by racial marginalisation and colonial memory. This fracture becomes worse by emotional neglect. Relationships reveal hidden anguish, especially with Emma. Instead of being absent, silence becomes a means of survival. The loss increases when the narrator return back to Zanzibar. Repetition and self-control cause trauma connecting individual pain with societal history. Gurnah portrays refugees as more than a matter of physical movement. It is also a psychological condition shaped by displacement. The unnamed narrator remains suspended between homeland and hostland, unable to find stability in either space. In Admiring Silence, home does not appear as a fixed place. Instead, it emerges as something fragile and continually reshaped by the experience of migration. Identity becomes a negotiated space formed by memory, silence and violence. It also reflecting the fragmented realities of refugee life.

Keywords: refugee identity, unhomeliness, hybridity, trauma, displacement, abdulrazak gurnah

Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* occupies a significant place in contemporary refugee literature. The novel offers a detailed account of exile, migration, and fractured belonging. It follows an unnamed narrator who leaves Zanzibar to England. His journey carries both physical and psychological displacement. Gurnah's fiction focuses migrants and refugees shaped by colonial history and postcolonial

distrust. Soleymanzadeh notes, "Gurnah's fiction is filled with immigrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, self-exiles, diasporic groups, travellers, and locals from Zanzibar and Britain" (Soleymanzadeh 13). Within this context *Admiring Silence* examines the emotional displacement and prolonged alienation. The narrator's departure from Zanzibar represents a break in his life. England is imagined as a land of possibility; it ultimately becomes a space of



isolation. His early experience reveals the panic of exile. He recalls, "I was astonished by the sudden surge of loneliness and terror I felt...that I could not return from where I came that, as I then thought, I had lost everything" (Gurnah 70-71). This moment reflects the loss of emotional stability. He later becomes a teacher and forms a relationship he never achieves belonging. His life remains divided between past and present. Exile reshapes his psychology rather than healing.

Homi Bhabha's concepts of unhomeliness explain this condition. He defines it as "the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place" (Bhabha 9). The unnamed narrator's life in England reflects this experience. Residence not produce comfort or stability. At the same time Zanzibar survives mainly through memory. His return exposes the gap between imagined home and lived reality. Political change erases the possibility of return. Home becomes an unstable idea than a secure place.

Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity clarifies the narrator's struggle. Hall argues that identity is not fixed or unchanged. He states that identity "is not fixed and forever unchanged...according to different living environments, historical and cultural influences, it changes" (Hall 178). The narrator adapts to England social norms and expectations. He changes his behaviour for England. This transformation remains incomplete. He hides his past to maintain balance.

Freud's concept of repetition and Caruth's theory of belated trauma are relevant in this context. Caruth explains that "trauma returns through repetition when it was not fully understood at the moment of occurrence" (Caruth 92). This pattern appears in the narrator's emotional collapse. His relationship with Emma triggers suppressed pain and anger. Political, racial and emotional violence gradually shaped trauma. Exile into a condition that continually affects the psyche. Through unhomeliness, hybridity, and trauma, *Admiring Silence* portrays refugee life as an unresolved condition. The novel avoids simple narratives of settlement or return. Instead, it shows identity as

shaped by silence, memory, and historical displacement. *Gurnah* highlights the emotional burden of living between cultures.

Identity, Migration and Trauma

Migration and refugee writings provide useful frameworks for understanding *Admiring Silence*. The novel portrays exile as a lived experience. Identity in the novel is unstable and unfinished. The narrator struggles to find himself, with his identity emerging through memory, loss and silence. Homi K. Bhabha's concept on hybridity and liminality are fixed in this context. Bhabha describes identity as existing "in-between the designations of identity" (Bhabha 5). This statement reflects the narrator's experience. He belongs fully to neither Zanzibar nor England. In England, he remains characterised a hostland. In Zanzibar, he viewed as someone who has left and changed. His position exposes the limits of national and cultural terms. Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness helps to illuminate this condition. For the narrator, England becomes emotionally empty, offering presence without belonging. He recalls his arrival with fear and disorientation. "I was astonished by the sudden surge of loneliness and terror I felt" (Gurnah 70). This feeling does not fade with time. Even after years in England, he admits that he remains alien. The physical presence of a house does not produce a sense of home. As Tyson explains, unhomeliness does not mean homelessness. It signals a displacement between inner identity and outer space (Tyson 421).

Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity supports this reading. Hall argues that identity shaped through history and social change. It is never fixed or complete. He states that identity "is not fixed and forever unchanged...according to different living environments, historical and cultural influences, it changes" (Hall 178). The narrator adapts to England. He learns new habits and social codes. He works as a teacher and forms relationships. This adaptation remains partial. He oppressed his past and present. His identity layered and conflicted.

Migration theory frames *Gurnah's* narrative. Moslund notes that migration literature often



presents the breakdown of stable identities. "Visions of the dissolution of fixed cultural identities and the assertion of cosmopolitan hybridization and ethnic fragmentation" as counter-models to "exclusive national or ethnic identities" (Moslund 5). Migration writings often depict identity as fractured rather than unified. Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* reflects this condition, where hybridity produces uncertainty instead of empowerment. The narrator attempts mimicry in order to belong. He admits that he wanted to "I imagined that I looked as they did, talked as they did, and had lived the same life that they had lived, and that I had always been like this and would go on unhindered way beyond the sunset" (Gurnah 53).

This effort fails, as Sadeq argues, "they didn't become English, and still, they were rejected, and worse yet, considered mimics by the English" (Sadeq 257). Rejection reinforces the narrator's sense of marginality. Trauma theory offers an important way of approaching this experience. According to Freud, trauma is a rupture that the mind struggles to contain. Caruth develops this idea that, trauma as an event that returns through repetition. "trauma returns through repetition when it was not fully understood at the moment of occurrence" (Caruth 92). The narrator's emotional breakdown after Emma leaves him reveals this pattern. He reacts with intense anger and grief. "I wish I could unhear what she said...At the end of the week she left" (Gurnah 145). This response reflects more than personal loss. Trauma as something accumulated through exile, rejection and violence. These experiences extend beyond England and are deeply rooted in the narrator's memories of Zanzibar. Political upheaval and social decay haunt his consciousness. When he returns, he finds homeland full of neglect and loss. The ruined landscapes seem to mirror the way he feels inside fragmented and worn. Trauma moves across time and space, connecting past and present in an ongoing wound. *Admiring Silence* presents identity as a fragile process shaped by migration and trauma. Silence becomes a means of survival while also carrying the weight of emotional memory. The narrator struggles to speak his past, yet he remains

unable to leave it behind. Refugee identity emerges as an ongoing process rather than a settled state. The novel exposes the psychological cost of living between nations, cultures, and histories.

Home, Belonging, and Cultural Conflict

In *Admiring Silence*, the concept of home remains unstable. The narrator's belonging develops through conflict, memory and rejection. Zanzibar and England fail to offer security. Each space produces a different form of alienation. Gurnah portrays home not as a fixed location. The narrator's return to Zanzibar exposes the nostalgia. His memories of home are confronted by material decay and social disruption. He observes "whole areas where houses had been allowed to collapse...broken drains releasing sewage" (Gurnah 92). This reflects the destruction of the comfort of return. The homeland, he imagined no longer exists. Political neglect and violence have transformed the landscapes, leaving Zanzibar unfamiliar and unsettled upon his return. This space intensifies the conflict created by family expectations. His relatives urge him to return and rebuild his life in Zanzibar. His brother promises employment and social acceptance. The narrator is hesitant of their statement. He senses that he no longer belongs in his homeland. Family members accuse him of being lost and disconnected from his people "You're lost now, not only to us but to yourself. Just like your father" (Gurnah 154). One relative declares, "Then you're lost. You've lost yourself, and you've lost your people. A man is nothing without his people" (Gurnah 157). These statements reflect a communal view of identity in which belonging is rooted in bonding and history. Exile is a moral as well as psychological displacement.

The unnamed narrator responds to these accusations with grief and self-doubt. He admits, "I sobbed for myself, for the shambles I had made of my life" (Gurnah 153). His tears reflect shame and instability. Home becomes a pain rather than comfort. In England, belonging is equally fragile. Racial differences shape the narrator's daily life, while his relationship with Emma exposes unspoken social



boundaries. Her mother's fear about a mixed-race child exposes deep rooted prejudice. She worries that the child would be "neither one thing nor the other" (Gurnah 26). This fear reflects colonial ideas and exclusion. He imagines stereotypes imposed on hybrid children. These reflections show how racism enters the personal life of the migrant. "Even their evident brutalities against each other can always be blamed on something else: slavery, colonialism, Christianity, a European education, anything but their own unmiserable greed, or their unregulated violence," (Gurnah 4). These structures prevent full participation in society. England offers survival but denies belonging. The narrator begins to see his presence as conditional and temporary.

Mimicry becomes one of his survival strategies. He attempts to adapt to English norms. He confesses, "I imagined that I looked as they did, talked as they did" (Gurnah 53). However, mimicry does not produce acceptance. As Sadeq explains, "they didn't become English, and still, they were rejected, and worse yet, considered mimics by the English" (Sadeq 257). This failure intensifies his unhomeliness and his struggle to belonging leads to emotional exhaustion. Trauma intensifies this conflict. Emma's departure reopens earlier wounds. "I wish I could unhear what she said...At the end of the week she left" (Gurnah 145). This moment triggers despair and anger. Trauma does not stay in the past but returns through silence and repetition. The narrator acutely aware of his profound isolation. He describes himself as "living a life of bondage and fulfilment, a stranger, an alien, without any particular distinction or use in that place" (Gurnah 148). His mother's plea to return cannot restore belonging. He realises that Zanzibar "wasn't home any more" (Gurnah 152). Home exists only as memory. Both homeland and host nation remain inaccessible. Through this portrayal Gurnah exposes the depth of psychological displacement. Home offers no security and becomes conflict and loss. Identity is forged within this struggle. *Admiring Silence* presents refugee life as an unending effort to create meaning in the absence of stable ground.

Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* explores a refugee identity shaped by exile, silence and emotional wound. *Admiring Silence* presents displacement not as a temporary phase but as an enduring condition that reshapes the identity. Through the narrator's migration between Zanzibar and England, Gurnah exposes the psychological cost of living without secure belonging. Identity in the novel remains unstable and unresolved. This study has shown how unhomeliness defines the narrator's experience. Homi K. Bhabha's ideas, the narrator exists between home and world. England provides survival but denies acceptance. Zanzibar demands loyalty while refusing recognition in return. The narrator's condition reflects Bhabha's claim that the migrant lives "in between the designations of identity" (Bhabha 5). Unhomeliness becomes a permanent state of passed feeling. Stuart Hall's understanding of cultural identity explains this instability. Identity is shaped through history and change inherited intact. The narrator adapts to England life but never belonging. He suppresses his past and reshapes his present. His hybrid identity remains incomplete. This migration produced silence. Identity becomes negotiated. The narrator carries the political violence, racial exclusion, and personal loss. Pain in the novel does not disappear with time. It returns again and again through memory and silence. The narrator's return to Zanzibar reveals decay and despair. The homeland of memory no longer exists. He recognises that Zanzibar "wasn't home any more" (Gurnah 152). This realisation confirms that exile cannot be restored by means of return. Home survives only as memory and longing. Silence reflects both survival and loss. It represents the limits of language in expressing displacement. By focusing on unhomeliness, hybridity and trauma the novel reveals the refugee experiences. The novel presents refugee life as a negotiation. Identity remains fractured, Gurnah refuses closure. Instead, he portrays exile as a condition marked by uncertainty, endurance and emotional wound. The novel portrays life lived between two worlds.



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