

Fragmented Identity and the Quest for Self in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*

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ABSTRACT

The research paper examines the unnamed narrator's struggle in finding his sense of identity and belongingness both in the homeland and the host land. The migration has shattered his relationship with his homeland, Zanzibar. He feels trapped by his unspeakable past in Africa. He has broken his relationship with Emma, an Englishwoman after two decades. He feels foreign in the both spaces. Diaspora creates a

state of in-betweenness in the life of the narrator. Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* was published in 1996. A Tanzanian-born British writer, Abdulrazak Gurnah has written novels and his novels deal with the questions of belongingness, colonialism, displacement, memory and migration. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in the year 2021. The present research paper attempts to read Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* in the diasporic perspective and adopts a qualitative methodology.

Keywords: Diaspora, Homing desire, Identity, Homeland, Host land.

The research paper explores the unhomeliness of the diasporic person whose identity is fragmented and is in the constant search for selfhood in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* (1996). The author picturizes the human experiences which arise out of identity crisis, cultural alienation and emotional isolation through his fiction. In *Reading the African Novel*, Gikandi notes that the text is the reconstruction of the reality and the consciousness of the author. It is not a mere content (Gikandi 23). Abdulrazak Gurnah is the most acclaimed Tanzanian-born British writer. During the time of Zanzibar revolution, he left his home country and came to England as a refugee. He studied in England and became Professor of English at the University of Kent. He started to write literary fiction and slowly gained popularity. He has written eleven novels. The Nobel Prize was awarded on 7th October 2021 for his "uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fates of refugees in the gulf between cultures and continents" (Abdulrazak Gurnah – Facts).

Gurnah's childhood memories, Zanzibar revolution and his life as an immigrant in England impacted his writings. He experienced poverty and alienation in England. Most of his characters are black immigrants who migrated to England. The recurrent themes of his writings are the disparaging power of colonialism and the immigrant experiences in a new land. Soleymanzadeh opines that the characters in

Gurnah's fiction depends on the direction of migration. It is peopled with immigrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, self-exiles, diasporic groups, travellers, as well as locals from Zanzibar and Britain – recognized as homeland and hostland (Soleymanzadeh 13). *Admiring Silence* is about an unnamed immigrant in England. He leaves Zanzibar because of political turmoil and studies in England. He becomes an English school teacher in England and has relationship with Emma, an Englishwoman. The couple give birth to Amelia without a marriage bond. He returns to Zanzibar to meet his family. He experiences the difference between his transformed homeland. He feels trapped by his unspeakable past in Africa and his romantic partner and daughter. Later he leaves Zanzibar and reaches England.

The novel is analysed through the diasporic lens. The word "Diaspora" is a Greek word which means dispersion and scattering. Etymologically, the diaspora refers to the dispersion of Jewish people. In contemporary, the diaspora refers to the people who leave their native land and settle in a foreign country. Diasporic literature forms a rich and influential tradition of literature that examines the themes of exile, identity crisis, isolation and assimilation. The diasporic writers study the interplay between the impact of colonialism and postcolonialism, their heritage and adopted cultures. The changing concept of home and nervousness about homelessness are prevalently discussed in diasporic literature.

The Cambridge dictionary defines home as the place such as house, apartment, etc., where one lives, especially with one's family. At the primary level, home refers to a residence of a person. Home is the institution where sick, old and homeless finds place to live. Home is a dwelling place and it is a place with boundaries and a geographical area. Humans tries to find better homes for better livelihood. In diasporic literature, Avtar Brah in his seminal essay, defines home as a set of emotional attachments, memories and everyday activities. The presence of a 'home', whether this is linked with a geographical place or with the dimension of family affections or private memories, appears as something ineluctable with which exiles

have inevitably to cope. The image of 'home' is alive even in those cases in which it has been rejected or abandoned willingly, even in the cases in which it is linked with feelings of hatred or resentment. Rosemary Marangoly George opines that the primary projects of twentieth-century fiction in English is to find home where individuals feel self and that place is home for the individual (George 3). This is demonstrated by Black diasporic writers such as Abdulrazak Gurnah.

Migrating from his home country Zanzibar for his education, he feels shattered. The pull factor for his migration is to pursue his education and for the betterment of life in England. He finds healthcare to be privileged. He opines that in England everyone has the doctor of their own. He quickly reminds of his own country people who are deprived of healthcare facility. Personal healthcare sounds like an impossible fantasy to the people of Zanzibar. He describes England as a hostile place and experiences a rapid rush of loneliness and terror in the hostland. He encounters a tough situation and does not know how to speak to the people. He affirms that he cannot not return to his homeland.

The individuals are displaced from their native land for various reasons and constantly search for their homes. The losing of home directly affects the belongingness of an individual. He is astonished by the sudden surge of loneliness and terror. He feels that he has lost everything. Emma comes and fills his life. He addresses England as a 'hostile' place which hurt him due to his strangeness. He becomes insecure in England. In the novel, Emma's presence in the unnamed character's life gives him belongingness in England, the host society. The void space is filled by Emma.

Avtar Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contested Identities* explains the homing desire of the diasporic individual. It refers to the ongoing search for belonging, stability and emotional rootedness wherever one lives. Brah's concept of homing desire rejects home as a single fixed place or origin. The

home finds multi-locality which reflects the fluid and contingent nature of home in diaspora (Brah 23). Brah distinguishes 'feeling at home' and 'claiming home.' The unnamed narrator emotionally feels connected to a place because of Emma and Amelia, but may not be socially recognized in the host society.

The relationship with Emma gives him a life motivation in England. The unnamed protagonist finds home with Emma in England. When Emma questions about his family, he fabricates the best version of his story to make it less messy. He doesn't disclose his relationship with Emma to his mother. He feels that Emma cannot understand his past in Africa. Emma remains unaware that their relationship is uninformed to his parents. The outspoken nature of Emma affects the relationship. She accuses his parents for not sending the greeting card wishes for Amelia's birth. But he remains silent.

Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* says unhomeliness is not homelessness; it is the condition where the individual feels social and cultural displacement from their personal and social environments (Bhabha 9). The 'unhomed' describes the state of being 'not at home' even in one's own place, culture or skin and a state of cultural and psychological dislocation. The home not only refers to geographical space but also mental space. When he returns to Zanzibar, at the airport, he claims that "I felt as exposed as if I had stepped off the plane naked, or as if my clothes were too baggy or too tight, or too colourful or ridiculous, as if I were a refugee from a circus" (Gurnah 118). His return to Zanzibar gives him the feeling of alienation. He knows that England is not his home. His home country Zanzibar looks different to him. The streets once he used to travel are not the same. The houses are collapsed, gloomy, the streets shut-up, and drains broken and deliberately neglected, looking more like vandalism. He feels the whole city to more like a victim of vandalism. The city lacks the joy and that triggers him to lose his sense of belonging. He visits the mosque after many years and smiles secretly, recalling the memories through the

smell on the mats of the floor. People welcomed him in mosque and called him Hashim's son. "They did not think me alien" (153).

In-betweenness and hybridity represent being caught between two cultures. Hybridity refers to a mixture of various cultures, and in-betweenness arises from the perplexity of being exposed to two different cultures. The person does not belong to particular culture. The identity formation is not fixed, and is fluid. Amur Malik requests the unnamed protagonist to stay in Zanzibar. It helps in the development of their country. Capable people have left for other countries to work and only boneheads live in the country. Amur Malik says how Zanzibar is being developed and reconstructed, and that these plans are based on the Western model. The impact of globalization is seen.

In the novel, the unnamed protagonist is stuck between the two cultures. He neither belongs to any culture. Gurnah has left the character unnamed in order to emphasize the in-betweenness and the character's identity crisis. After two decades of his life in England, he goes back to Zanzibar and finds that his mother is married again. His stepfather seems distant and does not accept him as a part of his home. In certain circumstances, he affirms that England is not his home while the life with Emma in England makes him claim England as his home. He wants to leave Zanzibar and cherishes the relationship with Emma. He finds the sense of home only with Emma and decides to leave his own nation and return to her, since Zanzibar no longer feels as home.

The search for his identity continues in England. He questions his character and behaviour in England as an ill-mannered, heartless and dishonourable barbarian. He thinks about his parents for disapproving his marriage with a Zanzibarian girl. His continuous search for his self makes him to think that he is a pitiful vagrant, a stranger, an alien, without any choice. His conversation with Ira, a hybrid woman in

the flight about disappointed love alarms his relationship with Emma in England. Ira was married to an Englishman for ten years who left her. The conversation makes him realize that they both face the same problem.

Two decades of living in England does not excite him. He finds himself living in England for reasons he no longer knows. His only solace and reason for his life in England is Emma. As Tyson in his *Critical Theory Today* opines the concept of unhomeliness results not merely from individual psychological disorder but from the trauma of displacement within which one lives. The unnamed protagonist finds himself with the historic figure, Pocahontas. Pocahontas is a daughter of the most powerful Native American and is taken captive by English colonialists. She gets married to an Englishman and is converted into Christianity. She tries to adopt to the lifestyle but is left stuck between the both. She struggles to identify her culture. She admits that she cannot obtain one culture as she is uncovered to two different cultures. She is the representative figure of being in-between. The unnamed character compares himself with Pocahontas. He wishes to name his daughter Pocahontas. “‘It’s going to be a girl,’ I said. ‘And we are thinking of calling her a Pocahontas’” (97).

The unnamed protagonist prefers silence in the end, and he lingers with the thought of belongingness. He is constantly in search and questioning. The lack of belonging gives an endless psychological unease and takes away his happiness in the host land. The psychological and cultural fragmentation highlight the characteristics of diasporic existence in the unnamed protagonist, due to his inability to fully integrate into English society and also feel being an ‘alienated native.’ Thus, the research paper concludes that the quest for self is an ongoing process and the search for home and identity remains unresolved.

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