



Memory Writing and Identity Construction in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*

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Abstract—Abdulrazak Gurnah is an Afro-British diaspora writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2021. His works, which center on issues like identity, racial tensions, and historical writing, mostly depict the living conditions of colonial peoples, refugees, and immigrants. *Admiring Silence* is a novel written by Gurnah in 1996. It tells the story of a Zanzibar refugee who, after 20 years of diaspora in Britain, is able to return home, but then has to choose to return to Britain immediately. This article takes spatial migration and diaspora under post-colonialism as the background for studying refugees and applies cultural memory theory and identity theory to analyze the memory and identity construction issues in *Admiring Silence*. Finally, it attempts to explain the reasons for the memory and identity dilemma of diaspora groups from the perspectives of colonialism and racism in the suzerain country, as well as the failed acculturation of diaspora refugees themselves.



Keywords—Abdulrazak Gurnah; *Admiring Silence*; culture memory; identity construction

I. INTRODUCTION

Abdulrazak Gurnah is a Tanzanian-born British writer of fiction, critic and reviewer of African literature. Central to much of his writing are the themes of the long-reaching and destructive impact of colonialism, the upheaval experienced by immigrants and refugees and the displacement in the world.

Admiring Silence (1996) is his fifth novel. Compared to his first four novels, *Admiring Silence* focuses more on characters who carry their worlds 'within' in an interior landscape constructed from stories, memories and the unreliability of imagined recollections. (Nasta, 2004) From a first-person perspective, the novel tells the story of the main character who emigrates to England and returns to his hometown to visit his family. In the form of memories, Gurnah skillfully connects the protagonist's experiences of life in Britain with the social, historical and political status quo of his hometown. By depicting the protagonist's contradictory psychology while weaving lies, Gurnah

vividly expresses the plight of the diaspora caught between geopolitics and culture.

Compared to *Pilgrims Way* (1988), *Paradise* (1994) and *By the Sea* (2001), the critics have paid little attention to this novel. Existing studies have mostly explored the narrative characteristics of *Admiring Silence*, such as the application and effects of narrative techniques of "unreliable narration" and "multiple focalization" (Barasa & Makokha, 2011; Kaigai, 2013; Zhang, 2022). Studies also focused on the theme of silence and mimicry. (Kaigai, 2013; Steiner, 2006; Zhu & Gong, 2022) In general, there is still room for further research on the content and themes of the identity and refugee of *Admiring Silence*.

Therefore, this paper analyzes the memory and identity construction concerns in *Admiring Silence* by using cultural memory theory and identity theory to contextualize the study of refugees within the background of spatial migration. And it also tries to explain the reasons behind such dilemma.

II. SPATIAL MIGRATION OF TRANSNATIONAL REFUGEES

"The spatial environment in the novel is a multidimensional existence with multiple meanings." (Yin, 2010) In the story, this transnational refugee's spatial migration has a very clear trajectory, with a total of three times.

The first spatial migration refers to the diaspora process of the protagonist from Zanzibar to Britain. Diasporas carrying cultural factors such as experiences, customs, language, concepts, and memories learned from their home country will inevitably face the dilemma of self-identity when they come to a country with vastly different historical traditions, cultural backgrounds, and social development processes. (Zhu & Yuan, 2019).

The protagonist fled to Britain from Zanzibar in order to escape political persecution. He has a stable job and has established a small family in Britain. This little home was a warm dwelling place he and his lover Emma have built, a place where he could catch a breath in racial discrimination. But behind the warmth, there was still an uncontrollable and unavoidable crisis of identity and home anxiety brought about by diaspora. The protagonist chose to compile stories and memories and also put on a mask in their "home" in order to adapt a new identity.

The second spatial migration refers to the protagonist's return to his homeland Zanzibar from Britain twenty years later due to a government amnesty. For him, hometown was no longer a place that brought warmth and shelter, but an overcrowded place filled with political coercion. The agelong diaspora leaved him with only fragmented and distant memories. While his identity was just like the memory, blurry and dislocated.

The third spatial migration refers to the protagonist voluntarily leaving from his hometown Zanzibar to Britain. After being completely disappointed with his hometown, the protagonist has gained a new understanding of home and identity. Physical space was no longer the core of his identity, but spiritual identification and empathy were the sources of his sense of belonging. He could only choose to return to his small family in Britain to recreate and solidify his self-identity.

But due to the deception of the previous twenty years, his lover leaved him and the small home collapsed finally. This deprived him of the last bit of belonging he has gained and made him lose the last opportunity to integrate into society and build his self-identity. Britain eventually becomes the foreign land that he is trapped in.

He drifts between two countries and two cultures, constantly suffering from identity and memory dilemmas

in three different migrations, and eventually becomes a "homeless" exile living in the geopolitical and cultural crevices. This spatial migration not only makes him feel a loss of cultural belonging, but also reinforces his identity crisis.

III. MEMORY WRITING AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF TRANSNATIONAL REFUGEES

In *Admiring Silence*, the focus is on the complex state of individual identity and memory. Gurnah uses words to unravel this complexity, unraveling the vines of branching paths in memory, and then searching for peace of mind for refugees and immigrants. He unfolds his entangled thoughts from the rift between the protagonist's words and silence, uncovering real memories and gradually diagnosing the protagonist's long-standing illness.

Specifically, the protagonist's three spatial migrations cause him to wander between Zanzibar and Britain. The unstable spatial environment results in a lack of necessary conditions for people to build a complete identity and obtain identity recognition. In different stages and countries, the protagonist faces different difficulties in memory and identity.

3.1 Historical Traumatic Memory and Original Ethical Identity Crisis in Native Land Zanzibar

The protagonist's hometown memories are not fully presented to the readers from the beginning. In the second part of the book, the protagonist's intergenerational dialogue with his mother when he returns to his hometown allows us to glimpse some of the childhood memories and historical trauma before his diaspora.

The protagonist's biological father Abbas disappeared before he was born. His mother was greatly affected by this and has remained silent on this matter for many years. Only the step-grandmother Bi Nunu took the initiative to mention some things about Abbas when the protagonist was five years old. The protagonist pieced together some unknown stories with these scattered fragments. Until he left home, he never truly understood his father's story. But in his awkward relationship with his mother and stepfather, he learned a sense of shame, alienation, and the ability to remain silent. For many years, the mother regarded the departure of her husband Abbas as a shame and never made it public until the protagonist returned to his hometown and gathered the courage to ask what kind of person his disappearing father was. Only then could she identify the origin of the protagonist's silence from her answer.

Memory is not only at the center of history and governance, but also a crucial force that plays a role in constructing individual and collective identity. While the forgetting and loss of memory represent obstacles to identity recognition. In the story, mother's memories and answers were the only way for protagonist to recreate his prehistory. But the mother's silence made it impossible for the protagonist to know the story before his birth or the story of his biological father. As Nie Zhenzhao (2014) said: "There are various classifications of ethical identities, such as those based on blood relation, ethical relationships, and collective and social relationships." Blood relation is originally the most fundamental and solid ethical identity. But due to the impossibility of tracing back, the protagonist experiences anxiety about the ethical identity of blood.

3.2 Unspeakable Burdensome Memory and Ethnic Identity Crisis in Alien Land Britain

After suffering from historical memory trauma and ethical identity crisis when he was a child, the protagonist fled from the former British colony of Zanzibar to Britain to avoid political persecution. This is a process from "periphery" to "center", and from cultural "weakness" to cultural "strength". In this process, the cultural fragmentation and alienation between individuals and society brought about by foreign migration and cultural collision lead to a new crisis of racial identity for him.

Without a home that could provide a stable identity, finding ways to integrate into British society and build a new identity was his only option. In order to integrate into white society, the protagonist attempted to achieve assimilation by imitating the British people around him. "I imagined that I looked as they did, and 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, 1996)

However, he did not integrate into white society as he imagined. The simplified and stigmatized understanding of "the other" by colonizers did not give the colonized the opportunity to integrate and be listened to. The one-sided and rigid historical narratives of colonial powers infiltrate strong discourse of power, and unconsciously compress and shape individual true memories. These misconceptions have brought psychological trauma to the colonized, forcing the protagonist to resist only through silence and fabricated stories.

In life, facing the self-centered superiority of white people, the protagonist often suffered from racial and cultural biases. The family doctor rashly diagnosed the protagonist's illness as heart disease based on his skin color. One of his in-laws never talked to him, the other

only wanted to hear empire story to satisfy his vanity. While in work, his black identity makes him tremble in the position of a teacher. He was constantly afraid that the schoolchildren were going to rise in rebellion and force humiliation on him.

In order to better integrate into Britain, he fabricated his past, using compiled memories to cover up past traumas and attempting to construct a new identity for himself. However, those fabricated beautiful memories were very unfamiliar to him, "they were foreign, strange, different, as far away from where I was as night from the day" (Gurnah, 1996). On one hand, he was unable to draw nutrients from his memory for identity construction. On the other hand, he was unable to build his new identity under the pressure of the dual marginalization of life and career. The homeland that could not be returned and the new home that could not be integrated made the protagonist become a wanderer in the gap between geopolitics and culture, unsure of where to go.

3.3 Coercive Legitimated Memory and Dislocated Identity in Homeland Zanzibar

For those who are displaced, their hometown is an inseparable spiritual hinterland. However, after years of leaving home, diasporas will re-examine their homes from a new perspective. At this time, their homes are far from their memories. Can such a home still serve as a solid support for the displaced and provide them with a stable identity?

In *Admiring Silence*, the life experiences of over 20 years in Britain did not bring a clear sense of belonging to the narrator, and his mind was always surrounded by memories of Zanzibar. At the same time, his memories of his hometown became increasingly blurred. The culture and traditions of his hometown also became increasingly distant to him. After returning to his long-lost hometown, the narrator witnessed and learned from his family about the various dark aspects of the local society. The devastation of Zanzibar filled the protagonist with disappointment towards this country and created a distance from his homeland.

Specifically, after Zanzibar broke away from British colonial governance, the domestic revolutionary upheaval triggered the collapse of social order. Zanzibar's politics, economy, and people's lives were all in crisis under the influence of political movements. Economically, the country after independence heavily relied on foreign aid and faced shortages in daily necessities. Compared with the chocolates and perfume brought by the protagonist, his family needed more common necessities of life. Politically, this new government fell into the quagmire of extreme nationalism. They strived to beautify the former

colonial society, erased the traces of former colonial rule, and attributed all social problems to colonial history. The entire country has fallen into an identity dilemma and was unable to reshape itself.

Besides, the protagonist's disappointment with the country as a "big family" was not comforted in his "small family". His family could not provide him with the confidence to regain his African identity. In reconstituted family, he maintained a polite and not intimate relationship with his mother, stepfather and half brothers and sisters, which made him always feel that he was an outsider in the intimate relationship. When he confessed to his family that he was living with a British woman and has a daughter, due to differences in race, religion, culture, and other aspects, his family could not accept the fact that he lived with a white pagan without marriage. They treated this behavior as a betrayal of Muslim culture and a shame to the family. This further alienated him from his already less intimate family.

In the fractured and misplaced memory of the hometown, and the double disappointment and estrangement of "big family" and "small family", the identity of the protagonist was even more blurred. Whether it was the initial turmoil of regime change in Africa's homeland, or the new government's attempt to fabricate the illusion of redemption on the ruins of the homeland, these firsthand experiences and scenes have crushed the protagonist's breath, causing him to flee to Britain with heavy memories. But unlike the first time he was forced to leave home, this time the protagonist chose to take the initiative to leave.

3.4 Displaced Refugees Living Between Geopolitical and Cultural Crevices

In the dual blow of hometown and foreign land, the protagonist placed his final hope on the small home he and Emma established. He initially believed that the love between him and Emma could become his home. Emma's emotional identity and symbolic family concept provided the protagonist with a spiritual shelter in heterogeneous cultural conflicts, becoming an important support for establishing self-identity.

However, the gap between the two was further separated by the long-term erosion of words and silence. Upon arriving in Britain, Emma chose to abandon him because she could no longer tolerate his silence. Emma's abandonment deprived him of a sense of belonging that he has only recently gained, causing him to lose the meaning of living here. The only spiritual refuge also collapsed. Whether to stay in Britain, which was considered an "alien land" or return to a "native land" that was no longer home, would only leave him with endless pain.

Actually, Emma's departure was predetermined. Her love affair with the protagonist symbolized the relationship between the center and periphery of colonialism. The two could never empathize with each other and were destined to be a "disappointed love". As a white woman who grew up in the British cultural environment, she was unable to completely escape the influence of mainstream ideology. Sometimes the racial biases she unconsciously revealed, which she claimed to be harshly critical of, made their relationship increasingly tense. When the protagonist shared his fabricated stories, she always conducted a scholarly analysis of the entire event as a doctoral researcher in narrative studies, to demonstrate that her discourse power was stronger than that of the protagonist. As with the connection between the colony of Zanzibar and the suzerain Britain, the triumph of one side meant the collapse of the other.

Finally, in the constant tug of war between "me" and memory, "I" became a homeless wanderer living in the crevices between geopolitics and culture.

IV. REASONS OF MEMORY AND IDENTITY PREDICAMENT OF TRANSNATIONAL REFUGEES

4.1 Ubiquitous Racism, Colonialism and Nationalism

Racism and colonial history coexist. Although colonization has become history, the racial issues arising from colonization continue to exist. Gurnah's own tumultuous experiences provide him with a continuous source of inspiration. As an Arab descendant, he was persecuted in Zanzibar and immigrated to Britain when he was in his teens, coinciding with Enoch Powell's "River of Blood" speech. Amidst the strong racial sentiment in British society, Gurnah began writing. For a long time, colonial peoples have been forced to be "silent", and their history has been written by colonizers.

As mentioned earlier, the protagonist in *Admiring Silence*, as a black refugee, suffers from racial discrimination from the white British community, which makes him constantly endure racial and cultural biases. Facing such white people, "I" is no longer a unique individual, but a representative of the colonial people. "I" can only satisfy their sense of white superiority by fabricating stories or staying silent in order to conform to their image of colonized people. However, these silences and lies are not feasible. They make the protagonist more restrained and increasingly distant from the true "story". Unable to articulate the unequal treatment and past pain he has suffered, he loses his own voice over time. So, he lost the initial opportunity to construct his own identity under the pressure of racism.

Returning to the long-lost hometown is a second opportunity for the protagonist to reconstruct his identity. However, the revolutionary upheaval in Zanzibar after its departure from British colonial governance triggers a collapse of social order. It breaks away from the pre-independence social model, but does not form a stable social structure, so the entire country falls into a brief identity dilemma. Such a chaotic social environment cannot provide strong conditions for the protagonist's identity reconstruction.

It seems that the domestic upheaval is caused by the incompetence of the authorities and government as well as the strong racial exclusionary sentiment brought about by dual nationalism. However, it can be found that the true reason is actually the dominant colonialism and colonial power discourse through investigating the Zanzibar's history. Before British colonizers came to implement colonial rule in Zanzibar, due to natural conditions, there were few opportunities for communication with the outside world. There was no need to establish a complex social labor system and clear racial boundaries. However, with the invasion of Western colonizers and the beginning of the racial division of colonies using ruling discourse, the peace within the original ethnic groups was disrupted. After the liberation of Zanzibar from British colonial governance, the racial identity under British colonial ideology was strengthened into political identity in the internal political party struggles of Zanzibar, leading to intense conflicts and violence in Zanzibar. It can be seen that the British introduced their racial paradigm into Africa during the colonization process, ultimately triggering the Zanzibar Revolution. The racial paradigm was a pattern constructed by Western colonizers that had a subtle impact on people's concepts, perceptions, and imagination. Therefore, the introduction of this paradigm in colonies was so silent that when the colonial people became aware of it, they already had to accept its consequences and seek coping strategies. (Zhang, 2023)

Gurnah believes that "we" are manipulated by language and Western constructed identity patterns. "Our" subjectivity has been influenced by colonial history, ideology, and discourse power. We are confined to the racial consciousness created by power, which ultimately leads to racial violence and social chaos.

4.2 Failure of Acculturation

Undoubtedly, objective reasons play a leading role in the failure of identity building, but this also depends on the individual's attitude and choices. Transnational refugees cannot avoid the need to solve the conflict between two cultures. Acculturation is the term used to describe the change in one or both of the initial cultural types that

occurs when people from various cultural groups interact directly and continuously. It's a framework that takes behavioral shifts, societal norm perception, and individual attitudes into account.

In 1992, Berry put forth a bi-dimensional acculturation model (Fig. 1) that divides different adaptation processes into two categories. One dimension concerns the retention or rejection of an individual's native culture. While other dimension concerns the adoption or rejection of the host culture. From these two dimensions, four acculturation strategies emerge: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization.

		Value and Maintain Native Culture	
		YES	NO
Value and Maintain Host Culture	YES	Integration	Assimilation
	NO	Separation	Marginalization

Fig. 1: The Bi-dimensional Acculturation Model

The protagonist's first two experiences of identity construction failure due to objective factors have brought him back to silence. The burden of silence carried by the protagonist, coupled with his personality weaknesses such as timidity, pessimism, self-pity, obsession with fantasy, and lack of action, lead him to choose to reject both cultures (Britain and Zanzibar) simultaneously. On one hand, years of the diaspora have dissipated his emotions and memories of his hometown of Zanzibar. Twenty years later, his return home journey allows him to witness the devastation of his hometown. He chooses to personally cut off his connection with his hometown with extreme disappointment. Besides, his wife's departure causes the collapse of his last thoughts in Britain. The protagonist has always existed as an isolated immigrant individual. Due to the lack of community support, the narrator stands alone and has no place to return, falling into loneliness and despair. He completely loses the idea of integrating into the host culture and ultimately ends up in marginalization. This means that he cannot find a home and a sense of belonging on both the periphery and the center, and can only survive in the gap between the two. The failure of acculturation—marginalization makes him miss the last opportunity to build his identity forever. He can only live as a marginal man in a crevice for the rest of his life.

V. CONCLUSION

Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* revolves around the memory and identity problems of transnational refugees and centers on the origins of the refugee problem—that is, the act of refugees leaving their home country and settling in another. In two countries, three spatial migrations, and four different stages, the protagonist fails to gain identity and construct a new identity due to pervasive colonialism and racism, as well as his own failed acculturation. In the end, he can only become a displayed refugee living in the geopolitical and cultural crevices. This article reflects Gurnah's concern about the fate of race and refugees intertwined in cultural and geopolitical cracks, criticism of racism and colonialism, criticism of the dark side of postcolonial society, and sympathy and reflection on the survival difficulties and identity anxiety of refugees. Besides, he also has a worldwide viewpoint, which enables the tale to be transnationally and cross-culturally presented on a large global scale. He cares about the real situation of world migration, and in the era of deepening globalization and modernization, it has enlightening significance for the refugee issues of countries around the world.

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