Identity, Memory, and the Bildungsroman in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure*

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Abstract: *Abdulrazak Gurnah's * Memory of Departure * (1987) inaugurates a distinctive voice in postcolonial fiction, tracing the psychological and historical fractures that define post-independence East Africa.Through the protagonist Hassan, the novel explores the crisis of identity resulting from the collision between inherited cultural structures and modern aspirations.Unlike the classical European Bildungsroman, which typically culminates in integration and maturity, Gurnah's novel stages self-development as disillusionment–the painful awakening of a subject denied both belonging and mobility.This paper argues that * Memory of Departure * transforms the Bildungsroman into a postcolonial allegory of stagnation, wherein memory, shame, and silence supersede progress, and exile becomes the only viable form of consciousness. Drawing upon theories from Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, Cathy Caruth, and Marianne Hirsch, this paper examines how trauma, displacement, and collective amnesia structure Gurnah's early novel as both a psychological and political narrative of survival.*

Keywords: Identity, Trauma,Memory, Survival,Refugee, Bildungsroman,Abdulrazak Gurnah.

I. Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure* published in 1987, he inaugurated a literary project deeply preoccupied with exile, memory, and moral fracture. The novel's protagonist, Hassan, inhabits a liminal space between aspiration and despair, embodying the disorientation of a generation caught between colonial legacies and postcolonial disillusionment. Set in an unnamed East African coastal town reminiscent of Gurnah's native Zanzibar, the novel depicts a society decaying under authoritarianism and economic stagnation.

Unlike the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* in which the protagonist's education culminates in social integration. Hassan's story unfolds as an *anti*-Bildungsroman, marked by failure, shame, and disinh-eritance. His quest for self-realization is thwarted not by personal inadequacy but by systemic injustice and inherited trauma. As Edward Said observes in ** Reflections on Exile **, "exile is not a matter of choice; it is an unhealable rift between the self and its native place" (Said 173). Gurnah transforms this rift into a narrative principle, tracing how displacement and silence structure both the psyche and the postcolonial nation. Hassan's relationship to his family, especially his violent father and submissive mother, mirrors the internal contradictions of a newly independent society still haunted by colonial domination. His father's cruelty, fueled by poverty and humiliation, becomes the domestic echo of political tyranny.*"When he came home at night, his stick was covered with blood and hair, and there was never a mark on him"* (Gurnah 15). The unmarked body of the father symbolizes a continuity of impunity, mirroring the postcolonial state's reproduction of colonial violence without accountability.

The novel's narrative voice, oscillating between memory and repression, reveals what Cathy Caruth terms *"the belated understanding of trauma,"* in which the past intrudes upon the present as a series of unresolved wounds (Caruth 7). Hassan's recollections, often fragmented and emotionally distant, dramatize the impossibility of closure in societies that have failed to confront their histories. Memory, in Gurnah's vision, becomes both an archive and a burden–a repository of pain that must be carried when it cannot be resolved. Through its structure and tone, *Memory of Departure* challenges Western narrative models of progress and self-realization. It articulates what Homi Bhabha calls *"the unhomely condition of postcolonial existence,"* where public history and private life bleed into each other (Bhaba 13). Gurnah situates the individual's search for selfhood within the moral and political breakdown of the nation, suggesting

that identity formation under postcolonial conditions is inseparable from collective trauma. This paper explores * *Memory of Departure* * through three interrelated frames: the politics of the body, the rupture of memory, and the ethics of shame. Together, these dimensions reveal how Gurnah's novel redefines the *Bildungsroman* as a narrative of psychic survival amid the ruins of independence.

II. The Body and the State

In **Memory of Departure***, the body functions as a primary text through which both personal and political violence are inscribed. Abdulrazak Gurnah locates the protagonist Hassan's awakening not in intellectual revelation but in the visceral experience of oppression his own and that of those around him. The domestic and political spheres mirror each other, constructing a world in which discipline and degradation are normalized. Through this symmetry, Gurnah transforms the family into a microcosm of the postcolonial state–ruled by patriarchal violence and sustained by silence and shame. The novel's opening chapters depict Hassan's father as an embodiment of arbitrary power. His cruelty toward his wife and children echoes the authoritarian practices of the newly independent regime. *"When he came home at night, his stick was covered with blood and hair, and there was never a mark on him"* (Gurnah 15). This chilling image encapsulates the continuity of colonial logic in the post-independence moment, as the father's impunity mirrors the state's unaccountable brutality. Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, observes that *"the colonized man is an envious man"* who turns the violence of colonization inward upon his own community (Fanon 42). Gurnah dramatizes this internalization of power: the father's body, immune to wounds, becomes the grotesque emblem of authority's reproduction. Hassan's body, by contrast, registers the injuries of both personal and political subjugation. His adolescence unfolds under conditions of scarcity and fear, where hunger and humiliation define subjectivity. *"My stomach ached with a hunger I could not name," he recalls, "and I thought of all the ways I might escape, though there were none"* (Gurnah 28). This unnamable hunger, both physical and existential, underscores how deprivation produces not resilience but paralysis. The body becomes a site of failed potential, an allegory for the suffocated postcolonial nation itself. The mother's body, too, bears symbolic weight. Her passivity and silence embody what Gayatri Spivak calls "the subaltern's epistemic erasure" a condition in which women's suffering remains unspoken because it is structurally excluded from representation "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak 287). When she endures her husband's beatings without protest, her silence reflects not complicity, but the impossibility of speech within patriarchal economies of control. Through her, Gurnah reveals how colonial patriarchy, far from disappearing after independence, mutates into domestic tyranny, preserving hierarchy through gendered submission.

The violence of the father and the endurance of the mother delineate the moral geography in which Hassan's consciousness forms. His home, ostensibly a space of nurture, becomes a school of subjection. The body learns to obey before it learns to desire; it learns to hide before it learns to speak. This dynamic transforms Hassan's eventual quest for education into an act of rebellion against corporeal discipline. The desire for knowledge is, at its root, a desire to reclaim the body from the forces that govern it. Yet education, as Gurnah portrays it, does not liberate. The state's educational institutions reproduce the same hierarchies that deform the family. Hassan's teachers, corrupt and indifferent, function as extensions of political authority rather than as agents of enlightenment. The moment he realizes this disillusionment marks his moral awakening: *"The headmaster's cane had left its mark, but the shame stayed longer than the pain"* (Gurnah 42). The physical wound fades, but the internalized awareness of power's injustice becomes the enduring legacy of his youth. Anthony Synnott's notion of *"the body social"* offers a useful framework here: *"The body is both personal and political, both individual and collective; the social body reproduces itself through the discipline of the physical one"* (Synnott 6). Gurnah's narrative literalizes this dynamic. The disciplinary violence enacted upon Hassan's body mirrors the structural violence that sustains the state. Through repeated scenes of beating, humiliation, and endurance, Gurnah traces how oppression becomes embodied, how history is written into flesh.

The novel foregrounds the erotic as a contested terrain of power and shame. Hassan's early experiences of desire are tainted by fear, secrecy, and guilt. His body is never autonomous; it is constantly under the gaze of authority–religious, paternal, and political. This control of sexuality parallels the regulation of speech and thought, suggesting that the state's intrusion into private life is total. Gurnah thus situates bodily repression at the heart of postcolonial subjectivity: the suppression of desire becomes the measure of obedience. In this sense, * *Memory of Departure* * participates in a larger postcolonial discourse about embodiment and sovereignty. The body, once colonized, remains the terrain on which freedom must be reclaimed. Fanon writes, *"In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself"* (Fanon 229). For Hassan, however, such self-creation is perpetually deferred. The social order leaves no space for self-definition beyond endurance. His bodily survival, stripped of autonomy, becomes his only form of agency. By the end of the novel, the body, scarred, hungry, and silenced, becomes a metaphor for the failed nation. The father's violence, the mother's silence, and Hassan's shame together compose a national allegory of repetition without renewal. Gurnah's realism is not merely descriptive; it is diagnostic. Through the intimate vocabulary of pain, he maps the continuity of colonial structures into the postcolonial present. The body, as both symbol and substance, becomes the novel's most enduring archive of history.

III. Memory as Rupture

Memory of Departure functions not as continuity but as fracture. Gurnah constructs a narrative in which recollection becomes both a mode of survival and a symptom of trauma. For Hassan, remembering is an act of both defiance and despair–a struggle to impose coherence upon an experience defined by dislocation. The novel's fragmented structure, shifting between past and present, mirrors the temporal disorientation of the traumatized subject. What emerges is a poetics of rupture: a vision of history as a wound that refuses to heal. Hassan's memory is unstable and recursive, returning obsessively to scenes of humiliation, fear, and abandonment. Early in the novel, he confesses, *"There were things I could not forget, though*

I tried not to think of them" (Gurnah 23). This paradox–the inability to forget coupled with the inability to remember fully–captures what Cathy Caruth identifies as the defining feature of trauma*: "the unclaimed experience of an event that is not fully known in the moment but returns belatedly in its repetition"* (Caruth 4). Hassan's recollections surface unbidden, disrupting his attempts at self-control and undermining any linear narrative of growth. Through this disjointed narration, Gurnah challenges the teleology of the European *Bildungsroman*, which depends on the protagonist's reconciliation with the past. In Gurnah's revision, memory resists closure. The past is not overcome but re-enacted, contaminating every effort at renewal. The novel's title, * *Memory of Departure* *, encapsulates this tension: memory and departure, remembrance and escape, become inseparable. Hassan cannot depart from his memories because they constitute the only continuity he possesses. The novel's landscape reflects this psychic condition. The East African coastal town, once vibrant, is now depicted as decaying and stagnant. The sea, traditionally a symbol of mobility and freedom in diasporic literature, becomes instead a boundary that marks entrapment. *"The smell of salt and rot came with the wind, and I thought how little the world cared for us"* (Gurnah 31). The physical environment mirrors the moral exhaustion of its inhabitants. Marianne Hirsch's theory of *postmemory*the transmission of traumatic experience to subsequent generations illuminates how Gurnah constructs a society haunted by inherited suffering (Hirsch 22). The trauma of colonial subjugation persists as cultural memory, shaping identities even in the absence of direct recollection.

For Hassan, memory functions as both a personal inheritance and a social burden.His father's bitterness, his mother's silence, and the community's resignation are transmitted to him as an affective legacy.*"He would speak of lost times with anger, of men who had taken everything from him, and I learned that bitterness before I learned hope"* (Gurnah 18). Consequently, the son inherits not wealth or wisdom, but grievance–a memory of injury that defines his moral worldview. Gurnah portrays this intergenerational transmission of resentment as both understandable and destructive: it binds the subject to the past while denying the possibility of transformation. The act of narration itself becomes an attempt to mediate this paradox. By retelling his own story, Hassan performs a therapeutic repetition, translating pain into language. However, this narration is marked by hesitation and ellipsis, as though words cannot contain the weight of experience.The frequent use of silence, incomplete sentences, and abrupt shifts in tone suggests that memory remains resistant to mastery. Anne Whitehead argues that "*trauma fiction foregrounds the gaps and breaks of remembering as a means of bearing witness to the unrepresentable"* (Whitehead 6). Gurnah's prose exemplifies this: rather than offering catharsis, it insists on incompletion. Importantly, Gurnah's treatment of memory extends beyond the psychological to the historical. The novel portrays postcolonial East Africa as a space where collective amnesia enables political oppression. Hassan's father's generation, once hopeful for independence, has replaced colonial masters with local despots. *"They had changed the flag but not the faces of power*" (Gurnah 37). This line distills.

Gurnah's critique of postcolonial nostalgia–the tendency to romanticize national liberation while ignoring its moral failures. The memory of colonialism becomes selective, purged of self-implication. Gurnah resists this selective forgetting by staging memory as confrontation. When Hassan reflects on his father's cruelty, he recognizes in it the residue of a historical condition: "*He had lived in the time of masters and never learned to stop serving them"* (Gurnah 47). Memory here becomes diagnostic, exposing the psychological continuity between colonizer and colonized. As Edward Said argues in * *Culture and Imperialism* *, *"the legacy of empire is an inheritance of intertwined histories"* (Said 19). Gurnah's novel dramatizes this inheritance through intimate recollection rather than political rhetoric, showing how the private sphere internalizes public trauma.

The interplay between individual and collective memory shapes Hassan's perception of time.The narrative's non-linear structure, characterized by constant temporal slippages, collapses the distinction between past and present. Hassan's attempt to recall his childhood produces not clarity but confusion: *"Sometimes I could not tell if it had happened that way or if I had dreamt it afterward"* (Gurnah 54). This uncertainty captures the phenomenology of trauma: memory as a dream-like reconstruction rather than factual recall. The self becomes dispersed across temporal fragments, incapable of sustaining continuity. The rupture of memory, therefore, is both aesthetic and ethical. Gurnah refuses to offer redemption through recollection; instead, he reveals remembering as a moral act fraught with pain. Hassan's recollections do not reconcile him with his past they indict both himself and his society. His narrative voice, oscillating between confession and detachment, reflects a consciousness unable to locate innocence. As Michael Rothberg contends, the ethics of memory lie not in fidelity to the past, but in the acknowledgment of multiplicity: *"Memory is multidirectional, always already entangled with the histories of others"* (Rothberg 11). Gurnah's narrative performs this entanglement, situating Hassan's personal trauma within a network of colonial and postcolonial violences that exceed his comprehension. By making memory the site of rupture rather than recovery, * *Memory of Departure* * transforms the *Bildungsroman* into an anti-developmental narrative.The protagonist does not emerge wiser or freer, but more acutely aware of history's persistence within him. The act of remembering becomes an acknowledgment of defeat and endurance simultaneously. *"The past was heavy and it would not let me go"* (Gurnah 88). In this sentence, Gurnah crystallizes the paradox of postcolonial identity: to survive, one must remember; yet to remember is to remain bound to what must be escaped.

IV. Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure* reimagines the *Bildungsroman* as a narrative of paralysis and endurance, transforming the European model of development into a distinctly postcolonial meditation on survival. The novel's moral force arises from its refusal to offer redemption or reconciliation; instead, it exposes the intimate entanglement of private pain and public decay. Through Hassan's fractured consciousness, Gurnah portrays a world where colonial hierarchies persist within domestic life, where the state reproduces the very violence it claims to have overthrown, and where the search for identity culminates not in self-discovery but in silence.

In this reconfiguration, the novel performs a critique, it dismantles the colonial myth of progress. Hassan's failed coming-of-age marks the collapse of every narrative of integration familial, social, and political. His father's tyranny mirrors the postcolonial state's moral bankruptcy; his community's complicity reflects the collective amnesia of a society unwilling to confront its inheritance. Gurnah thus situates personal disillusionment within a wider historical logic: the perpetuation of power through repression and forgetting. At the heart of *Memory of Departure* lies the tension between memory and survival. Hassan's memories, fragmented and painful, resist erasure but also obstruct renewal. "The past was heavy and it would not let me go" (Gurnah 88) encapsulates the novel's paradoxical insight: that the very memory which defines the self also anchors it to suffering. Gurnah refuses the consolations of nostalgia or catharsis; his protagonist's recollection functions as witness, not therapy. Memory, in this context, becomes an ethical acta means of preserving truth in a society addicted to denial. Hassan's silence and shame are not forms of defeat but the conditions of moral survival in a world where speech and pride have been corrupted. As Edward Said reminds us, "The exile knows that in a world where power is everywhere, survival itself can be an act of resistance" (Said 186). Gurnah's protagonist exemplifies this ethos. His departure, stripped of triumph, becomes the novel's final moral statement: to endure without surrendering to hatred is itself a victory over the logic of domination. Stylistically,*Memory of Departure* anticipates Gurnah's later novels, where silence and displacement recur as narrative strategies. Yet this early work remains unique for its austerity and focus. Its spare prose and psychological precision render visible the cost of survival in the aftermath of empire. Gurnah's realism, though grounded in the local, achieves universality through its ethical depth. The novel's world haunted by hunger, fear, and unspoken love becomes a mirror for all societies that inherit violence and call it order. Ultimately, *Memory of Departure* stands as one of the most profound explorations of postcolonial subjectivity in modern fiction. Its power lies in its quietness, in the way it renders the ordinary suffering of the marginalized as an ethical drama of immense scope. Through Hassan, Gurnah articulates a humanism grounded not in pride or progress but in compassion and endurance. Silence becomes testimony, shame becomes conscience, and memory though burdened by pain becomes the final proof of humanity's persistence against oblivion. In a literary tradition often dominated by the rhetoric of freedom and assertion, Gurnah's first novel offers an alternative moral vision: that survival, when stripped of illusion, is itself a form of integrity. The journey of *Memory of Departure* thus begins and ends in silence a silence that speaks for all who have been silenced by history, yet continue, against all odds, to endure.

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