Crisis of Muslim Migrants' Identity in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel Memory *of Departure*

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Abstract

This paper examines the crisis of Muslim migrant identity in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel entitled Memory *of Departure* (1987), highlighting the psychological, cultural, and existential struggles faced by African Muslim migrants in postcolonial contexts. Through a cultural and postcolonial lens, the study investigates how Gurnah articulates the crisis of identity of Muslim protagonists who find themselves dislocated from their African homelands and alienated within their host society, particularly Britain. The novel captures the sense of exile and displacement rooted in political oppression, economic instability, and post-independence disillusionment that force many African Muslims to seek refuge abroad. However, instead of stability, they encounter cultural marginalization, religious dissonance, and identity confusion Gurnah's narrative reflects a complex negotiation between memory and identity, as the protagonist reimagines Africa not as a place of return but as a site of trauma and loss. These reflections underscore the emotional toll of migration and the difficulty of constructing a coherent self amid fractured cultural landscapes. The study argues that *Memory of Departure* presents a powerful critique of both African political realities and Western cultural hegemonies, framing the crisis of Muslim migrant identity within a broader diasporic consciousness.

Keywords: migration, diasporic consciousness, Muslim identity**,** Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Memory of Departure*.

Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure* (1987) occupies a vital place in the canon of modern African fiction, particularly for its portrayal of migration, identity, and disillusionment in

postcolonial contexts. As Gurnah's debut novel, it introduces a number of recurring themes central to his literary vision, displacement, cultural alienation, memory, and the struggle for selfhood. Set in an unnamed coastal town in East Africa, the novel narrates the story of Hassan Omar, a young Muslim man confronting the limitations imposed by his family, society, and nation. His journey, both physical and psychological, serves as a metaphor for the broader crisis of identity experienced by many African Muslims caught between traditional norms and modern aspirations. Within the wider body of African literature, Gurnah's work offers a unique contribution by centring on the internal struggles of Muslim characters in the face of colonial legacies, political repression, and transnational dislocation.

This article examines *Memory of Departure* through a cultural and postcolonial lens, focusing on the crisis of Muslim migrant identity and the sense of transition that shapes the protagonist's journey. It investigates how identity is constructed, fragmented, and renegotiated in contexts of forced migration, using the theory of diasporic cultural identity as a critical framework. In particular, the study draws on the works of Hall (1990), Collier (2011), Al Maleh (2009), and Bolaffi et al. (2003) to explore the cultural tensions between homeland and host land, religion and secularism, memory and modernity. This theoretical perspective enables a nuanced reading of the novel as a narrative of existential rupture and diasporic transformation.

The study also situates the novel within the socio-political landscape of post-independence Africa, marked by authoritarianism, economic instability, and patriarchal structures that intensify the alienation of young, educated Muslims. Gurnah's depiction of migration is not romanticized as a route to liberation, but rather portrayed as a journey fraught with ambiguity, spiritual loss, and psychological fragmentation. In this context, *Memory of Departure* captures the deeply personal and collective trauma of displacement, reflecting what Hall (1990) refers to as the "unsettled identities" of the diasporic subject.

The article is structured into six sections. The first outlines the objectives and scope of the study. The second provides contextual background on Abdulrazak Gurnah's life and literary contributions, highlighting the autobiographical echoes in his fiction. The third reviews existing scholarly literature on *Memory of Departure*, identifying gaps, particularly in relation to Muslim identity that this paper aims to address. The fourth introduces the theoretical framework, applying key concepts related to transition, hybridity, and diasporic consciousness. The fifth section presents a close textual analysis of the novel, and the sixth offers concluding reflections on Gurnah's representation of the Muslim migrant experience.

Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in 1948 on the island of Zanzibar, off the coast of East Africa. He experienced firsthand the political upheavals that followed the end of British colonial rule, including the Zanzibar Revolution, which led to widespread violence and repression (Falk, 2007). These events compelled him to flee the country at the age of eighteen. Reflecting on that period, Gurnah (2004) wrote: "It was a time of hardship and anxiety, of state terror and calculated humiliations, and at eighteen all I wanted was to find safety and fulfilment somewhere else" (pp. 26-28). He pursued his studies in Britain and later lectured at Bayero University in Nigeria (1980–1982). In 2004, he was appointed Professor of English and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Kent. His literary works, including *Paradise* (1994), *By the Sea* (2001), and

Afterlives (2020), have received global recognition for their exploration of exile, memory, and identity, culminating in the Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to him in 2021.

Theoretical Framework

The current study approaches the theme of identity crisis among Muslim migrants in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure* through the lens of diasporic cultural identity theory, with particular attention to the dynamics of conflict and alienation. The notion of conflict is especially significant, as it embodies not only sociological and psychological tensions but also philosophical and historical dimensions that are central to the migrant experience. As Collier (2011) argues, conflict is often a "desirable aspect of human existence, (p.47)" suggesting that internal and external struggles are essential for identity formation. In *Memory of Departure*, such conflict is evident in the protagonist's desire to escape political repression and economic stagnation in his homeland, only to face emotional and cultural dislocation abroad. The concept of transition, which is the movement from one cultural, political, and psychological space to another, further complicates the migrant's identity (Mirmotahari, 2011).

Some migrants idealize their homeland, while others reject it, but both perspectives generate a fractured sense of self. For many Muslim migrants, particularly those from postcolonial African contexts, this crisis is intensified by a strong attachment to cultural heritage, religion, and familial expectations. The search for material success abroad often fails to provide psychological fulfillment, as these individuals remain burdened by a lingering sense of marginality and unbelonging. The memory of the homeland, saturated with religious and cultural meaning, acts as both a source of identity and a site of internal conflict. For African Muslim migrants, this alienation from their homeland is deeply tied to childhood memories, religious identity, and collective history.

As Collier (2011) asserts, "the past gives us our sense of identity," (p.53), reminding us that memory, heritage, and ancestral land are inseparable from one's understanding of the self. This idea is central to Gurnah's portrayal of identity in *Memory of Departure*, where the protagonist's sense of self is torn between Islamic values inherited from his family and the sociopolitical realities of both his homeland and his imagined future abroad. Moreover, the fractured self of the migrant is a recurring theme in diasporic discourse. Bolaffi et al. (2003) emphasize that "the condition of alienation has more and more been received as the outcome of migration," (p.11) especially in narratives where the migrant is unable to fully integrate into the host society nor return home unchanged. Gurnah's novel captures this tension vividly, presenting identity not as a fixed construct but as a fluid, contested space shaped by religion, displacement, and longing.

This paper, therefore, situates *Memory of Departure* within a broader discourse of Muslim diasporic consciousness, where Gurnah's representation of identity reflects the psychological and spiritual struggle of negotiating multiple cultural affiliations (Cambers, 2011). As Al Maleh (2009) notes, the diasporic subject is often compelled to "negotiate multiple homes," (p.178) a process that defines the identity crisis at the heart of Gurnah's narrative. Through this theoretical

framework, the study explores how the novel illustrates the complexities of Muslim migrant identity, rooted in both personal memory and collective displacement.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis in this study is carried out in one fictional phase of Gurnah, discuss the images of suffering of the proposed diasporic cultural framework as exhibited in the selected novel of that era. The first aspect of sense of crisis as depicted in the selected diasporic cultural stories, which will be explored, is themes of conflict and rise of sense of crisis.

As previously discussed, examining the narratives of the selected African Muslim author is particularly significant, as these life stories often portray profound everyday struggles, emotional upheaval, and spiritual conflicts, both internal and in relation to others (Ruzy & Manaf, 2009). Typically, the African Muslim characters featured in such narratives serve as narrative witnesses, bearing testimony to the complex challenges they face. To fully understand and evaluate the realities of their daily lives, it is essential to situate these characters within their specific historical and sociocultural contexts. In his first novel *Memory of Departure* (1987), Gurnah draws his inspiration from the author's early life in Zanzibar and the consequences of his leave (Hand,2010). The actions take place in a coastal city in East Africa after the independence. Its narrator, Gurnah voices the sense of frustration and restrictions he suffers within the post colonization. The novel utilizes the trope of the roaming self through Hassan the first-person narrative who negotiates the conflicting reactions of expectation and loss when he leaves his homeland.

The early moment in *Memory of Departure* (1987), Gurnah starts with giving a unique description of the protagonist's family. He portrays various images of the situation and the conditions in which Zanzibar and his family were suffering, his mother starts her day by filches of first prayer as a depiction of struggle. In brief, this paper examines the selected text based on African Muslim diasporic cultural framework focusing mainly on themes of conflict, and accordingly attempt to achieve the objectives stated in this paper.

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure* (1987) opens with a detailed portrayal of the protagonist Hassan Omar's life within a broken Muslim household in a coastal town in East Africa. His early years are marked by poverty, emotional neglect, and a lack of meaningful guidance, all of which contribute to a deepening crisis of identity that becomes central to the novel. These formative experiences serve as the initial ground where cracks begin to form in Hassan's sense of self as a Muslim individual. Gurnah subtly reveals that Hassan's struggle is not merely one of social or economic deprivation, but of spiritual dislocation and cultural alienation within his own homeland. His sense of identity, shaped by his Arab Muslim background, is undermined by domestic abuse, religious hypocrisy, and the disillusioning realities of post-independence Africa.

Hassan is the second of four children in an Arab Muslim family ruled by an alcoholic and violent father. The family's dysfunction, especially the father's moral and spiritual failings, stands in stark contrast to Islamic ideals of paternal responsibility and compassion. The absence of positive male guidance and the passive religiosity of his mother who is depicted as murmuring

fragmented prayers while tending to the fire, reinforce Hassan's perception of Islam as hollow and ineffective in resolving familial and societal injustices. For instance, Hassan recalls:

> *"My mother was in the backyard tending to the fire. Fragments of the prayer she murmured drifted to my ears before I stepped outside. I found her bent over the brazier, softly blowing to ignite the charcoal" (p. 5).*

This domestic image, seemingly mundane, underscores a deeper emotional and spiritual vacuum. His mother's actions are caring, yet devoid of active resistance or moral intervention. Her subdued religiosity, characterized by whispered prayers, becomes a symbol of a Muslim identity reduced to ritual rather than resilience. Such moments reveal the fissures in Hassan's early identity formation and highlight how deeply cultural disillusionment is intertwined with spiritual estrangement.

These early cracks in Hassan's sense of self are further exacerbated as he attempts to leave home to pursue education in the capital. However, the transition is neither liberating nor empowering. Instead, Hassan experiences further alienation, encountering moral corruption, sexual exploitation, and elitist indifference. His Muslim identity, already fractured by his upbringing, faces further erosion as he is unable to reconcile his spiritual background with the urban secular realities he confronts. His narrative voice, often marked by repetition, self-doubt, and guilt, reflects a diasporic consciousness marked by fragmentation and loss. As Hall (1990) explains, the identity of the diasporic subject is "never singular but multiply constructed," shaped by history, displacement, and cultural contradictions.

Gurnah's portrayal of Hassan thus reflects the broader crisis of Muslim migrant identity, a condition where spiritual beliefs, cultural norms, and the desire for modern progress are in constant conflict. The novel does not romanticize migration or identity reconstruction but instead presents a nuanced view of the psychic disintegration experienced by Muslim youth caught between inherited religious values and postcolonial disillusionment. Hassan's story exemplifies how Muslim migrants struggle not only with physical displacement but also with an internal exile, estranged from faith, community, and a coherent sense of self.

The onset of Hassan Omar's internal conflict, central to his crisis of Muslim migrant identity is vividly established in the earliest pages of *Memory of Departure*. As a child of seven or eight, Hassan is already exposed to the emotional exhaustion and material deprivation that define his family life. One of the first poignant encounters is with his mother, captured in the line:

> *"I saw that the fire had darkened her face and brought tears to her eyes. I asked for the bread money, and she frowned as if loath to be disturbed from tending the flames" (p. 5).*

This seemingly simple exchange conveys layers of suffering. The image of the mother tending fire, her face darkened and eyes wet with tears, symbolizes not only physical exhaustion but a life of silent endurance. Her reluctance to respond to Hassan's request reflects more than frustration, it is indicative of chronic emotional depletion. The fire becomes a metaphor for both domestic responsibility and the psychological heat she bears in silence. Hassan's early sensitivity to this suffering begins to fracture his self-understanding. He is not just a boy growing up in poverty. He

is a witness to the quiet, daily erosion of dignity, especially that of his mother, whose weariness is a powerful emotional imprint on his consciousness.

The emotional weight of the mother's condition is deepened when the narrator reflects on her abuse by his father:

> *"She could smell it on him when he came home for her. At first, she had cried and accepted it as the way of the world, and kept her shame to herself. Then he started to beat her because of her hurt silence. My grandmother told her that marriages were like that, but that things would work out in the end" (p. 21).*

This passage reveals the intergenerational normalization of female suffering within the family's cultural framework. The grandmother's advice reflects a broader communal complicity in silence, one that encourages endurance rather than resistance. For Hassan, witnessing such passivity and injustice undermines his perception of familial and religious values. Islam, as practiced in his household, seems unable to protect or uplift the vulnerable. Instead of serving as a moral compass or source of comfort, the religious and cultural norms reinforce patriarchal abuse and resignation. This contradiction plants the seeds of disillusionment and internal dissonance, which later manifests in his diasporic struggle for identity.

Hassan's sympathy toward his mother is not only emotional but also existential. He feels guilt and sorrow, yet lacks the agency to change her condition. His efforts to envision a better future for her, to create some semblance of hope, reflect his desperate attempt to balance the inner conflict between despair and aspiration. However, the surrounding environment, marked by domestic violence, poverty, and spiritual emptiness that overwhelms these efforts. His early exposure to such emotional complexity intensifies his identity crisis, particularly as a young Muslim male seeking meaning, belonging, and dignity amid familial and societal collapse.

In this context, Gurnah's narrative underscores how the protagonist's Muslim identity is shaped through trauma and disillusionment rather than faith and fulfilment. His childhood becomes the foundation for a diasporic consciousness that is fragmented, guilt-ridden, and emotionally burdened, a central feature of the broader crisis of Muslim migrant identity the novel so poignantly explores.

In *Memory of Departure*, Abdulrazak Gurnah addresses the psychological and emotional conflicts that define the protagonist's coming-of-age journey through a deeply personal and painful lens. Gurnah's narrative technique is consistent in its willingness to expose uncomfortable truths, including familial violence, cultural contradictions, and spiritual dislocation. Through the protagonist Hassan's experiences, the novel reveals how the tension between domestic suffering and cultural silence shapes a fractured, multilayered identity that continues to haunt him throughout his life.

One of the most telling depictions of this inner turmoil is found in Hassan's reflection on his father's violence and his mother's passive responses:

> *"He used to beat us, and our mother would respond only with a stern look, hesitant to confront him in our presence. She refrained from intervening directly, choosing instead to*

tend to our wounds with quiet care—applying remedies, murmuring songs of comfort, and soothing us with her gentle touch. Yet, she never taught us to resent him. In retrospect, perhaps hatred would have better prepared us to endure his cruelty" (p. 21).

This scene encapsulates the contradictions inherent in Hassan's early family life. The mother's silence, while perhaps rooted in religious or cultural notions of patience and submission, ultimately leaves her children emotionally unprepared for the brutality they experience. Her care is tender, yet her refusal to confront the abuse suggests a systemic normalization of suffering, one that is particularly jarring in a household that identifies with Islamic values. Hassan's ambivalence, his longing for maternal love and his simultaneous recognition of her helplessness that reveals an emotional complexity that leads to a deep crisis of self-understanding.

The conflicts Hassan experiences are not merely interpersonal; they are internalized as a crisis of identity. Growing up in a household where religion is present but not transformative, where violence is common but not condemned, Hassan develops what Stuart Hall (1990) terms a "discontinuous self" a fractured identity shaped by displacement, silence, and contradiction. As a Muslim youth, Hassan is caught between the expectations of a religious and cultural tradition that promises moral clarity and the harsh realities of a postcolonial African society riddled with dysfunction.

Furthermore, Gurnah introduces the theme of multiple selves, wherein Hassan wrestles with different aspects of his identity: the obedient son, the silent observer, the budding intellectual, and later, the migrant yearning for escape and truth. This multiplicity is a source of profound confusion and internal conflict. His "thirst for truth," as you rightly note, is inextricably linked to a desire for resolution, not only of his personal trauma but also of the broader condition of the African Muslim subject grappling with postcolonial disillusionment and spiritual alienation.

In this way, Gurnah portrays the *crisis of Muslim migrant identity* as beginning not in migration itself, but in the fractured home spaces from which migration emerges. The protagonist's journey outward, geographically and emotionally, is driven by an urgent need to reconcile these internal fractures, to construct a self that is whole amid the fragmentation imposed by history, family, and faith.

Another powerful representation of suffering in *Memory of Departure* emerges not in opposition to an external colonial force, but rather from within the marginalized community itself. Abdulrazak Gurnah critiques the deeply embedded structures of social discrimination, particularly within the minority Muslim-Arab African community, that lead to internalized oppression and fractured identity. The absence of intercultural engagement and systemic exclusion from national development render individuals like Hassan, who is of Arab descent, perpetually foreign in their own homeland. The society's reified view of race, class, and belonging breeds isolation, forcing Hassan into an existential crisis about his self-worth and his place in the world.

This inner conflict is illustrated when Hassan expresses his desire to pursue higher education, only to be mocked and reminded of his racialized status:

"So, where do you expect to get the money from?" he asked mockingly. This government won't give it to you, no matter how clever you think you are. They won't waste their funds on a mixed-blood Arab like you." (p. 29).

Here, identity becomes a fixed barrier, a "mixed-blood" label that disqualifies Hassan from merit-based progress. The political system, under the guise of national development, practices exclusion and marginalization through racially determined quotas. The enforcement of identity passes and racial categorization, as noted in the new legislation, further entrenches this systemic discrimination (p. 63). These mechanisms contribute to a broader sense of alienation and distrust within the protagonist's psyche, exacerbating his fractured identity.

Hassan's reflections on national identity also underscore this crisis. As he states:

"All we possess are things like African art, literature, history, and culture, but none of it helps us manufacture even something as simple as a screwdriver or a tin of talcum powder for ourselves" (p. 75).

This moment captures his disenchantment not only with the limitations of his community but also with the idealization of post-independence African identity. The perceived failure of Africa to offer technological or economic progress becomes symbolic of Hassan's feeling of personal and collective inadequacy. Though he is academically gifted, supported by a teacher who sees his potential, the sociopolitical structure around him offers no pathway forward. His growing detachment from cultural pride and his inability to reconcile his Muslim-Arab identity within the African nationalist framework deepen the rift in his sense of self.

Therefore, Hassan's decision to leave his homeland is not simply a physical migration, but a psychological and ideological rupture. His departure signals what could be termed a "double migration": one away from the geographic homeland and another away from the communal and religious structures that have failed to nurture him. His identity as a Muslim migrant is shaped by exclusion at every level, familial, societal, political, and as he looks outward toward the West for educational and existential opportunity, the unresolved trauma of marginalization continues to haunt him.

As previously established, the narrator's life in *Memory of Departure* is defined by a persistent sense of alienation and displacement, experienced within two primary realms: the private domain of the home and the broader public sphere. In the domestic context, his family home in Zanzibar, Hassan grapples with emotional and psychological trauma rooted in familial dysfunction, poverty, and a lack of nurturing relationships. However, this internal space, though restrictive, offers some semblance of familiarity and emotional attachment. The more profound crisis of identity, however, unfolds in the public realm, where the protagonist confronts complex layers of marginalization. Being of Arab descent within a predominantly African society places Hassan in a doubly marginalized position: he is both an ethnic minority within his native land and a religious minority whose Muslim identity is often misunderstood or devalued in the Western, particularly British, worldview.

Thus, Hassan's experience of public space, whether in his homeland or in the imagined host land that reveals a deep ambivalence toward both African nationalism and British colonial

modernity. This dual rejection forces the narrator into a liminal space where he belongs neither fully to Africa nor to the West. His identity is continuously shaped by conflicting ideologies, historical narratives, and cultural expectations that he cannot reconcile. This fractured positionality, caught between Arab-African identity and postcolonial Western dominance, exemplifies Gurnah's broader critique of the diasporic condition. The narrator's journey, then, becomes one of negotiating a sense of self in the face of overlapping prejudices, ultimately reinforcing the psychological crisis of the Muslim migrant navigating multiple systems of exclusion (Hall, 1990).

Conclusion

The analysis of the novel Memory *of Departure* by Abdulrazak Gurnah displays a profound and unsettling portrait of the crisis of Muslim migrants' identity, shaped by layers of personal, cultural, and political disintegration. The protagonist Hassan's journey embodies the struggle of African Muslim migrants who are torn between the oppressive conditions of their homeland and the alienating promises of exile (Ruzy and Manaf, 2009). The novel carefully unpacks the intersectional factors that contribute to this identity crisis, economic deprivation, authoritarian governance, postcolonial disillusionment, racialized marginalization, and intergenerational trauma. These realities fracture the protagonist's sense of self and destabilize any coherent affiliation with either his native society or the imagined sanctuary of the West. Gurnah's narrative resists romanticizing either the homeland or the destination; instead, it explores the psychological toll of existing in a liminal, in-between space where the migrant is simultaneously estranged from his roots and unwelcome in his new environment.

As Hassan navigates physical displacement and cultural exile, his Muslim identity becomes both a source of spiritual anchoring and a site of vulnerability, exposed to erasure, silencing, or distortion. The novel reveals that the migrant's crisis is not only spatial but also existential: belonging is not simply denied by geography, but by a world that continues to fragment and redefine him through exclusionary discourses. Last but not least, Gurnah's *Memory of Departure* stands as a compelling critique of the enduring consequences of colonial legacies and failed national projects. It amplifies the voices of Muslim migrants who live out an identity crisis marked by dislocation, loss, and the persistent search for dignity and meaning.

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