

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Narrating Migration and Belonging in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Works

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Abstract

Migration and belonging have become defining themes of postcolonial literature, but they cannot be understood through theme alone. The way the story is told shapes how memory, identity and home are understood. This research analyses two of Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels *Pilgrims Way* (1988) and *By the Sea* (2001) to demonstrate that in Gurnah's fiction narrative form is not a neutral container but the very means by which migrant identity is constructed. We compare two narrative architectures: the single internal focalization of *Pilgrims Way*, where the storyworld is filtered through one consciousness; and the dual dialogic narration of *By the Sea*, where two personages tell incompatible accounts of one shared past. Drawing on M. Bal's focalization, J. Phelan's unreliable narration and M. Bakhtin's dialogism, and supported by the postcolonial framework of E. Said and H.K. Bhabha, we show that Gurnah uses fragmentation, flashback, the unsent letter and silence to render displacement and that silence in particular operates as both trauma and strategic refusal.

KEYWORDS

Gurnah, migration, belonging, focalization, dialogism, silence, unreliable narration, diaspora.

INTRODUCTION

Migration and belonging are central concerns of contemporary literary studies, but research that combines postcolonial interpretation with systematic narrative analysis remains limited and within Uzbek literary studies Gurnah's fiction has only recently become a subject of attention. Gurnah, awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2021, writes from the personal experience of exile and his fiction treats migrant experience as a deeply human and historically situated condition. Abdulrazak Gurnah's central concern is the search for an ideal place and time for personages who carry social and political pressures larger than themselves.

Pilgrims Way and *By the Sea* are especially useful for narratological inquiry because they stage exile, memory and racism through markedly different narrative forms. Our

research seeks answers to three questions: how do the two novels thematize migration, memory and the historical cosmopolitanism of the Indian Ocean world; which narrative techniques Gurnah uses to render displacement; and how the contrasting narrative architectures of the two novels single internal focalization in *Pilgrims Way*, dual dialogic narration in *By the Sea* produce different models of migrant personage. The importance of the research is in bringing a sustained narratological reading of these two novels into Uzbek literary scholarship.

METHODS

The primary materials are A. Gurnah's *Pilgrims Way* (1988) and *By the Sea* (2001). The methodology is qualitative and

fourfold. Textual analysis interprets passages at the level of language and image; narratological analysis examines voice, focalization, temporal order and the dialogic interaction of perspectives; comparative analysis juxtaposes the two novels to expose contrasting models of personage; and postcolonial interpretation places the texts inside histories of empire, migration and racism. The narratological tools of G. Genette, M. Bal and the theory of unreliable narration (W. Booth, J. Phelan, D. Shen) frame the analysis of technique. M. Bakhtin's dialogism frames the analysis of voice. E. Said and H.K. Bhabha frame the analysis of belonging.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Migration, memory and the Indian Ocean

In both novels migration is more than geographical relocation. The personages who leave Zanzibar inhabit transitional, in-between spaces, caught between a homeland to which they cannot return and a host society that does not admit them. The result is alienation and the loss of home becomes a psychological rupture rather than a mere physical separation.

Against this condition A. Gurnah sets the historical cosmopolitanism of the Indian Ocean coast. The East African littoral is portrayed as a space shaped by centuries of contact among African, Arab, Persian and South Asian communities where identity was always formed through intercultural exchange. The novels then contrast this open past with the restrictive realities migrants face in Britain, where everyday racism and bureaucratic suspicion reduce complex individuals to the single label of refugee. Memory mediates between these two worlds, and silence marks the point at which trauma exceeds language a feature as central to A. Gurnah's postcolonial poetics.

Narrative techniques of displacement

Gurnah uses a consistent repertoire of devices to render displacement. Fragmentation and non-linear order, theorized through G. Genette's analepsis, mirror the workings of traumatic memory. Events surface in scattered flashbacks that the reader must reassemble so that narrative form itself reproduces the disrupted temporality of migrant life. Focalization, in M. Bal's sense, governs the partiality of knowledge: by confining the focalizing position to a single consciousness or by shifting it, A. Gurnah controls how much of the past is visible and from whose vantage.

Unreliable narration is central, not incidental. In *Pilgrims*

Way the protagonist Daud does not deliberately deceive; his perception is distorted by trauma, racism and isolation so that he reports events accurately yet misinterprets neutral situations as threatening. Following J. Phelan, this is bonding rather than estranging unreliability: the reader recognizes the distortion and is drawn into sympathy.

The unsent letter is another important device. Daud composes letters in his mind mock-bureaucratic, sarcastic, sometimes addressed to a generic Pale Face that he never sends. These letters give him a private narrative space where he can articulate what cannot be said in the social world: anger, fear, irony, refusal. They also work as emotional regulation. Formally, the unsent letter is a doubling of the internal focalization: a second interior layer in which Daud speaks the response he cannot deliver.

Silence completes the repertoire. It functions both as the symptom of trauma that cannot be voiced and as a deliberate strategy of self-protection. The clearest example is the opening of *By the Sea*, where Saleh Omar, a fluent English speaker, pretends not to understand English before the immigration officer Kevin Edelman, withholding speech in order to keep control of his story. The novel marks this gesture intertextually through H. Melville's *Bartleby* ("I would prefer not to"), turning the colonizer's language against itself.

Two architectures of migrant personage

Pilgrims Way constructs migrant identity through a single internal focalization. The entire storyworld is filtered through Daud's consciousness, so that racism, loneliness and exclusion reach the reader already coloured by his insecurity. Identity here is a psychological process unfolding within one mind. The metaphor of pilgrimage seals the architecture: Daud refuses to enter Canterbury Cathedral and aligns himself with the travelling pilgrims rather than the arrived authority, so that migration appears as an unfinished interior journey.

By the Sea operates on a radically different architecture. Two first-person narrators, Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud, alternate across the novel's three structural parts: *Relics*, *Latif*, *Silences* and present incompatible memories of one shared Zanzibari past. The contested house, the ebony table, the lost generation of the Mahmud family each event surfaces twice, once from each narrator's position and the two accounts cannot be reconciled into one authoritative history. In M. Bakhtin's terms this is dialogic narration in its strongest form: meaning is constituted by the interaction of two voices that

the text refuses to subordinate to a single authority. The resolution arrives not through official systems but through the private breaking of silence between the two men.

The contrast between these two architectures is more than formal. It is epistemological. Each architecture defines what a migrant subject can know about himself and about the past. In *Pilgrims Way* the reader inherits the limits of one perspective; in *By the Sea* the reader is enlisted as a third position who must assemble meaning from the convergence and divergence of two voices.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

This research is limited to two novels and to the broad outlines of their narrative architectures. The Swahili and Arabic linguistic strata of A. Gurnah's prose deserve a separate systematic analysis. The model could also be tested against *Gravel Heart* and *Afterlives* where elements of the two architectures appear in combined forms. A further investigation may also bring cognitive narratology to bear on how the reader actually reconstructs fragmented migrant memory.

CONCLUSION

The research demonstrates that migration and belonging in A. Gurnah's *Pilgrims Way* and *By the Sea* are constituted by narrative form. The thematic field is set by psychological rupture against the historical cosmopolitanism of the Indian Ocean world. The narrative techniques: fragmentation, flashback, focalization, unreliable narration, the unsent letter and silence render displacement at the level of discourse. And the two novels build migrant personages through contrasting architectures: single internal focalization in *Pilgrims Way* and dual dialogic narration in *By the Sea*. Read through narratology, M. Bakhtin's dialogism and postcolonial theory, A. Gurnah's fiction shows that identity, like the narratives that bear it, is fragmented, dialogic and continually reconstructed. By foregrounding form, the research affirms both the aesthetic complexity of migration fiction and its political force.

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