

Loss Of Identity and The Quest for Belongingness in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Selected Texts

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Abstract

*Alienation, identity, and belongingness are recurring concerns in postcolonial literature, particularly in narratives of migration, displacement, and cultural dislocation. This study examines the loss of identity and the quest for belongingness in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* (1996), *By the Sea* (2001), and *Gravel Heart* (2017). The study seeks to establish how migration and displacement affect characters' sense of identity and how their experiences of exclusion motivate their search for acceptance and belonging. The analysis is guided by Hegel's *Social Philosophy* and Karl Marx's *Theory of Alienation*, which provide complementary perspectives on recognition, self-estrangement, social exclusion, and the effects of oppressive social conditions. Using qualitative close textual analysis, the study examines selected episodes, characters, interactions, and narrative representations in the three novels. The findings reveal that loss of identity is manifested through fragmented identities, social exclusion, diminished self-confidence, anxiety, loneliness, homesickness, fear, and emotional withdrawal. These experiences are intensified by cultural displacement, racial discrimination, unfamiliar social environments, and the breakdown of meaningful interpersonal relationships. The study further establishes that the characters' quest for belongingness is closely interconnected with their experiences of alienation. While some characters temporarily achieve acceptance through friendship, love, family relationships, and connections with fellow migrants, others remain caught between their countries of origin and host societies. The study concludes that Gurnah represents alienation as both a social and psychological condition in which exclusion from meaningful relationships and social recognition fractures individual identity and undermines belonging. The findings affirm Hegel's emphasis on mutual recognition in identity formation and Marx's view that oppressive social conditions estrange individuals from themselves, others, and their communities.*

Keywords: Alienation; belongingness; identity; migration; displacement; social exclusion; Abdulrazak Gurnah; Hegel; Marx.

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I. Introduction

Alienation is a significant concern in postcolonial literature, particularly in narratives that explore migration, displacement, cultural dislocation, and the struggle for identity and belonging. Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction provides a compelling representation of these experiences through characters who negotiate the tensions between their countries of origin and the societies in which they settle. In *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea*, and *Gravel Heart*, Gurnah portrays individuals whose movement across cultural and geographical boundaries exposes them to social exclusion, racial discrimination, fractured identities, and psychological estrangement. The characters' experiences demonstrate that physical relocation may result in social or emotional belonging. However, unfamiliar

environments and the denial of social recognition may intensify feelings of isolation, anxiety, loneliness, and loss of self. The study is therefore concerned with how loss of identity and the quest for belongingness are represented in Gurnah's selected novels, with particular attention to the relationship between external social alienation and internal self-estrangement. Guided by Hegel's Social Philosophy and Marx's Theory of Alienation, the study argues that identity is shaped through meaningful social recognition and relationships. On the contrary, social conditions that exclude individuals can estrange them from themselves, others, and their communities. Through qualitative close textual analysis, the study examines how Gurnah represents the interconnectedness of alienation, identity, and belongingness, demonstrating that the characters' persistent search for acceptance emerges as a response to the social and psychological consequences of displacement and exclusion.

II. Review of Related Literature

Research on alienation, migration, identity, and belongingness in postcolonial literature has increasingly focused on the ways displacement affects individuals' relationships with themselves, their cultures, and the societies in which they live. Within postcolonial studies, identity is generally understood as dynamic and historically situated rather than fixed or predetermined. Hall (1990, 1996) conceptualizes cultural identity as an ongoing process of construction and reconstruction shaped by history, culture, representation, and social experience. This perspective is particularly relevant to migrant and subjects who are in the Diaspora, whose movement across geographical and cultural boundaries may require continuous negotiation of identities. Bhabha (1994) similarly argues that postcolonial subjects often occupy an "in-between" cultural space in which identity is negotiated across different cultural locations. These theoretical perspectives have provided an important foundation for studies examining identity, displacement, cultural hybridity, and belonging in postcolonial literature.

Studies of Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction have addressed several of these concerns. Hand (2012), in examining *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea*, and *Desertion*, focuses on migrant identity, alienation, loneliness, and the problematic meaning of home. Her study demonstrates the importance of migration and displacement in understanding Gurnah's representation of characters who negotiate between their places of origin and the societies in which they live. The study is significant because it establishes alienation and fragmented identity as important concerns in Gurnah's fiction. However, its primary concern is the broader trope of migrant identity rather than a sustained examination of the relationship between loss of identity and the quest for belongingness across the three novels selected for the present study.

More recent scholarship has extended the study of migration and identity in Gurnah's works. Cox (2025), in examining *Pilgrim's Way* and *By the Sea*, considers the ways migrant characters negotiate their past and present while attempting to reconstruct cultural identities in unfamiliar environments. Particular attention is given to memory, adaptation, racism, and loss as elements shaping migrant identity. Similarly, Kaimosi and Monanti (2026), in their study of *Paradise* and *Afterlives*, examine the relationship between colonial displacement, psychological trauma, cultural erasure, and identity. Their work demonstrates the continuing scholarly interest in the psychological and cultural dimensions of displacement in Gurnah's fiction. These studies broaden understanding of migration beyond geographical movement by drawing attention to memory, trauma, cultural dislocation, and identity reconstruction. Nevertheless, they focus on novels other than the complete combination of *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea*, and *Gravel Heart* examined in the present study.

The broader literature on migration also emphasizes the relationship between displacement and social exclusion. Byrne (2005) conceptualizes social exclusion in terms of processes through which individuals or groups are disadvantaged and prevented from participating fully in social and economic life. From this perspective, exclusion is not simply an individual experience but may result from social and institutional structures that restrict participation and recognition. Berry (1997), in his work on immigration, acculturation, and adaptation, similarly observes that migrants may encounter difficulties associated with unfamiliar cultural environments, language differences, discrimination, and the loss of established social networks. Such experiences can complicate migrants' adaptation and affect their relationships with both their heritage and host cultures. This scholarship is useful for understanding the broader social conditions within which migrant identities and experiences of belonging are negotiated.

Psychological perspectives on alienation further expand the literature by drawing attention to loneliness, self-estrangement, anxiety, and the need for meaningful social relationships. Tobin (2016), associates self-estrangement with the human need for belonging and suggests that disconnection from the self may generate a desire for relationships and spaces in which individuals experience acceptance. Such perspectives suggest that belongingness involves more than physical residence within a particular geographical location. It encompasses psychological security, social relationships, recognition, and an individual's sense of connection to others. The literature therefore provides a basis for examining the relationship between alienation and belongingness as interconnected dimensions of human experience.

The theoretical literature on alienation also provides important perspectives for interpreting identity and belonging. Hegel's Social Philosophy places recognition and the relationship with the "Other" at the centre of the development of self-consciousness. Hegel (1977) argues that the individual's sense of self is developed through interaction and recognition by others; the absence or denial of recognition can consequently result in estrangement. Marx's Theory of Alienation provides a complementary perspective by locating alienation within social and material relations. Marx (1975) draws attention to the ways individuals may become estranged from themselves, others, productive activity, and their social world under particular social and economic conditions. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for examining alienation as both a relational and structural phenomenon. However, although they have been applied extensively in broader studies of alienation, their combined application to loss of identity and the quest for belongingness in Gurnah's selected novels remains insufficiently developed.

The reviewed literature therefore establishes several important strands of scholarship. First, studies of postcolonial identity have conceptualized identity as fluid, relational, and continuously reconstructed (Hall, 1990, 1996; Bhabha, 1994). Second, scholarship on Gurnah has examined migration, alienation, fragmented identity, cultural displacement, memory, racism, and the meaning of home (Hand, 2012; Cox, 2025; Kaimosi & Monanti, 2026). Third, research on migration and social exclusion has highlighted the effects of discrimination, cultural unfamiliarity, loss of social networks, and limited participation on migrant experiences (Berry, 1997; Byrne, 2005). Finally, theoretical scholarship on alienation emphasizes the importance of recognition, social relationships, and structural conditions in shaping individuals' relationships with themselves and others (Hegel; Marx). However, the existing literature has not sufficiently brought these strands together to examine, comparatively and systematically, how loss of identity is related to the quest for belongingness in *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea*, and *Gravel Heart*. This limitation provides the basis for the present study.

Although existing scholarship on Abdulrazak Gurnah has examined migration, displacement, fragmented identity, cultural alienation, racism, and the meaning of home, limited attention has been given to the interrelationship between loss of identity and the quest for belongingness across *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea*, and *Gravel Heart*. Previous studies tend to examine individual dimensions of migrant experience or focus on particular novels, thereby leaving insufficiently explored how social exclusion, cultural displacement, and lack of recognition simultaneously produce identity fragmentation and motivate migrants' search for acceptance. The literature also provides limited sustained application of Hegel's concept of recognition and Marx's theory of alienation as complementary perspectives for explaining both the psychological and structural dimensions of Gurnah's migrant characters' experiences. The present study addresses this gap by undertaking a comparative analysis of the three selected novels, examining how alienation from society, culture, relationships, and self contributes to loss of identity and how these experiences subsequently shape characters' efforts to achieve belongingness. This focus responds to the need for a more integrated understanding of alienation and belonging as interconnected processes in Gurnah's representation of migrant experience.

Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by Hegel's Social Philosophy and Karl Marx's Theory of Alienation, which provide complementary perspectives for examining loss of identity and the quest for belongingness in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea*, and *Gravel Heart*. Hegel's conception of alienation emphasizes the relationship between self-consciousness and recognition. From this perspective, individuals develop and affirm their identities through meaningful social relationships and mutual recognition; consequently, exclusion, rejection, and the absence of meaningful interaction may result in self-estrangement and a weakened sense of identity. This perspective is useful in interpreting Gurnah's migrant characters, whose experiences of rejection and social isolation undermine their confidence and sense of belonging. Marx's Theory of Alienation complements Hegel's perspective by locating alienation within social and structural conditions that separate individuals from themselves, others, their communities, and meaningful human activity. In the selected novels, migration, racial discrimination, social exclusion, cultural displacement, and unequal social relations contribute to the characters' estrangement and fractured identities. The two theories therefore enable the study to examine alienation at both psychological and socio-structural levels. Hegel explains the characters' need for recognition and meaningful relationships, while Marx illuminates the social conditions that produce and sustain their marginalization. The framework consequently conceptualizes loss of identity as a manifestation of alienation and the quest for belongingness as a response to the absence of recognition, acceptance, and meaningful social participation. The chapter's findings support this theoretical relationship by demonstrating that characters such as Salim, Saleh Omar, Latif, and the unnamed narrator experience identity fragmentation and social isolation because they are denied the recognition necessary for secure selfhood and belonging.

III. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design and close textual analysis of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea*, and *Gravel Heart*. The novels were purposively selected because of their sustained engagement with migration, displacement, alienation, identity, and belongingness. Primary data comprised selected passages, characters, dialogues, events, and narrative descriptions relevant to the study objectives. The data were thematically classified under loss of identity, quest for belongingness, social exclusion, psychological alienation, cultural displacement, and related manifestations of estrangement. The selected textual evidence was interpreted through Hegel's Social Philosophy and Marx's Theory of Alienation, supported by relevant scholarly literature. The approach enabled the study to examine how individual experiences of identity fragmentation and the search for belonging are shaped by social, cultural, and structural conditions.

Loss of Identity

The findings demonstrate that loss of identity in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea*, and *Gravel Heart* is closely associated with migration, displacement, cultural difference, social exclusion, and fractured interpersonal relationships. Gurnah's migrant characters experience difficulty sustaining previously established identities as they encounter unfamiliar cultural and social environments. This finding supports Hall's (1990, 1996) conception of identity as dynamic and continually reconstructed through historical, cultural, and social experiences. Rather than possessing a fixed identity, the characters negotiate between competing cultural affiliations, resulting in uncertainty about who they are and where they belong. Mhene (2022) similarly associates loss of identity with alienation, isolation, loneliness, and diminished belonging. The findings further support Hegel's emphasis on recognition in the development of self-consciousness and Marx's understanding of alienation as estrangement from oneself, others, and society.

Fragmented Identity

A central finding is that migration produces fragmented identities because Gurnah's characters are compelled to negotiate between their cultural origins and the expectations of their new environments. Hall (1990) argues that cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a process of becoming, while Bhabha (1994) conceptualizes the postcolonial migrant subject as occupying a hybrid or "in-between" cultural space. These perspectives are particularly applicable to the unnamed narrator in *Admiring Silence*. Although he establishes a life in England, he continues to carry his Zanzibari past with him and deliberately conceals aspects of his identity. The narrator acknowledges the tension between his two worlds through his concealment of his Zanzibari background from Emma and her family while simultaneously withholding aspects of his English life from his family in Zanzibar. His situation illustrates Hall's (1990) argument that identity is continually constructed rather than permanently possessed. The narrator's inability to become completely English or to return fully to his former Zanzibari identity places him in an unstable cultural position, demonstrating how migration can create an identity that is fragmented across different cultural spaces.

A similar experience is evident in *Gravel Heart*. Salim's first encounter with English social conventions produces embarrassment and self-consciousness. When he struggles with the use of a knife and fork at his uncle's house, he observes the reactions of those around him: "I gave everyone a start so that I could follow their example" (p. 59). His discomfort is subsequently intensified when he moves to the accommodation known as OAU. Although he lives with fellow African immigrants, he continues to describe himself as "a stranger from a small town," anxious about his "destination and direction" (p. 83). This passage is significant because it demonstrates that physical proximity to people from similar cultural backgrounds does not automatically produce belonging. Salim's alienation is partly psychological: he has not yet developed the confidence necessary to negotiate his new environment. His identity is consequently positioned between the familiar cultural world of Zanzibar and the unfamiliar social world of London.

The importance of cultural continuity is further demonstrated through Mr Mgeni. Despite having lived in England for a long time, he experiences cultural disconnection because he lacks someone with whom he can speak Kiswahili fully and naturally. His encounter with Salim provides an opportunity to recover a linguistic connection to his past: "It makes me so happy to, to speak the old language" (p. 88). Language here becomes more than a means of communication; it becomes a marker of cultural identity and memory. The finding therefore extends Hall's (1990) understanding of identity by demonstrating how cultural identity may remain psychologically significant even after prolonged geographical displacement.

In *By the Sea*, Saleh Omar provides an even more explicit representation of fragmented identity. As an asylum seeker, he assumes the identity of Rajab Shaaban Mahmud and describes his existence in Britain as a "half-life of a stranger" (p. 2). His statement, "I am a refugee and an asylum seeker," further demonstrates how institutional categories become imposed upon his sense of self (p. 4). Saleh's identity is therefore divided between his former existence in Zanzibar and his new identity as a refugee in Britain. His experience corresponds closely with Bhabha's (1994) notion of the "in-between" subject whose identity is formed through cultural negotiation

and contradiction. Unlike a straightforward transition from one identity to another, Saleh's experience represents a continuing negotiation between memory, displacement, survival, and belonging.

Social Exclusion and Loss of Identity

The findings further demonstrate that social exclusion contributes directly to the erosion of identity. Byrne (2005) defines social exclusion as processes through which individuals or groups are systematically disadvantaged and prevented from participating fully in social and economic life. This is particularly evident in *Admiring Silence*, where the unnamed narrator encounters rejection within Emma's family. Mrs Willoughby's discomfort with her daughter's relationship with an African man positions the narrator as socially unacceptable. Her desire for Emma to have a "normal friendship" rather than a relationship with him demonstrates the racial assumptions underlying her rejection.

The narrator's sense of exclusion becomes more pronounced when Emma becomes pregnant. Mrs Willoughby responds with what the narrator describes as "a long look of ... hatred," while Mr Willoughby watches him with "pity and disenchantment" (p.96). These gazes are significant because they communicate rejection without requiring explicit verbal condemnation. Ahmed (2000) argues that the "stranger" is socially produced through processes of othering. The narrator is therefore not inherently an outsider; he is constructed as one through the attitudes and reactions of those around him. More significantly, these judgments become internalized. His description of himself as a "confused offspring of mixed parentage" suggests that external rejection has begun to affect his own perception of identity. Social exclusion thus moves from the external social environment into the psychological domain, producing self-doubt and fractured self-understanding.

The findings therefore demonstrate that identity loss in Gurnah's fiction cannot be understood simply as an internal psychological problem. It is partly produced through social relationships in which migrants are repeatedly reminded of their perceived difference. This supports Byrne's (2005) conception of exclusion and Ahmed's (2000) argument that social environments actively produce the figure of the outsider.

Psychological Effects of Identity Loss

The study further establishes that identity loss has significant psychological consequences, including loneliness, anxiety, fear, low self-esteem, confusion, and emotional withdrawal. In *Admiring Silence*, the narrator's arrival at university marks an intensification of his psychological alienation. He recalls: "I arrived at the institute to do my course. That's when I began to understand how much Ahmed had protected me and how frightening England really was" (p. 93). His subsequent isolation in university accommodation becomes overwhelming. He describes feeling "like someone weeping in a crowd" and admits that the bank, canteen, supermarket, and streets seem intimidating because he does not know "how to speak to people and win them over" (p. 94).

This experience illustrates the psychological consequences of social isolation. Cacioppo and Patrick (2008) argue that chronic loneliness can heighten social anxiety and make ordinary social interactions appear threatening. The narrator's experience supports this observation because his inability to establish meaningful relationships transforms ordinary spaces into sources of anxiety. His alienation consequently affects not only his social participation but also his confidence and understanding of himself.

Salim experiences a comparable psychological struggle in *Gravel Heart*. His sense of alienation is evident in his description of London as a "wilderness" and his confession that he loathes "this life, this place" (p.121). The metaphor of the "wilderness" is particularly significant because it represents London not simply as a geographical location but as an unfamiliar psychological and cultural environment. Berry (1997) explains that migrants may experience acculturative stress when they attempt to negotiate the expectations of a host society while maintaining connections with their heritage culture. Salim's anxiety and disorientation therefore demonstrate the psychological cost of negotiating between two cultural environments.

In *By the Sea*, Saleh Omar's psychological alienation is expressed through his deliberate withdrawal from social interaction. At the beginning of the novel, he states, "I don't have a telephone in my flat, I refuse to have one" (p. 1). His rejection of communication can be interpreted as an attempt to create a private space in which he is protected from painful memories, bureaucratic demands, and further emotional disruption. However, this withdrawal also deepens his estrangement. Gurnah reinforces this condition through the experiences of other refugees in the detention centre, including the "fragile silences" of the Ethiopians and the intimidated Sudanese (p. 45). Silence consequently functions paradoxically as both a coping mechanism and a manifestation of alienation.

Loss of Identity and Quest for Belonging

The findings ultimately establish that loss of identity and the quest for belongingness are inseparable. The more the characters experience rejection, displacement, and social isolation, the stronger becomes their desire for recognition and acceptance. Said (2000) associates exile and displacement with isolation, disconnection, and a lack of belonging. This relationship is particularly evident in *Gravel Heart*, where Salim's desire for belonging

precedes his migration. His opening statement, "My father did not want me" (p. 1), establishes a lifelong desire for acceptance. His later experiences in England therefore intensify rather than create his struggle for belonging. Berry (1997) further explains that migrants may experience social isolation as they encounter unfamiliar cultural environments, discrimination, language barriers, and the loss of established social networks. Salim's experience in London and Mr Mgeni's longing for Kiswahili illustrate this process. Mr Mgeni's happiness at speaking "the old language" with Salim demonstrates that cultural belonging can be restored, at least temporarily, through linguistic and interpersonal connections (p. 88).

The same relationship between alienation and belonging is evident in *By the Sea*. Saleh's description of himself as living a "half-life of a stranger" (p. 2) captures his inability to achieve complete belonging in Britain while remaining separated from the Zanzibar of his past. His experience demonstrates that physical relocation does not automatically produce social or psychological belonging. Rather, belonging requires recognition, participation, meaningful relationships, and the ability to maintain a coherent sense of identity.

IV. Conclusion

The findings affirm the complementary relevance of Hegel's and Marx's theories of alienation. From a Hegelian perspective, the characters' loss of identity is closely connected to the denial of recognition. Their repeated experiences of rejection and exclusion undermine their ability to develop a secure sense of self. Their desire for friendship, love, family connection, and cultural familiarity can therefore be interpreted as a search for recognition through which identity may be affirmed.

Marx's theory complements this perspective by drawing attention to the social conditions that produce alienation. The characters' experiences cannot be separated from displacement, racial exclusion, institutional marginalization, and unequal social relationships. In *Admiring Silence*, for instance, the narrator's experiences of exclusion and loneliness demonstrate how social conditions become internalized as psychological estrangement. In *By the Sea*, Saleh's status as a refugee and asylum seeker places him within institutional categories that further complicate his identity. In *Gravel Heart*, Salim's experience demonstrates how cultural dislocation and the inability to establish meaningful relationships can produce a fractured sense of self.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Gurnah represents loss of identity as a multidimensional consequence of displacement, cultural dislocation, social exclusion, and psychological estrangement. In *Admiring Silence*, the unnamed narrator's divided cultural identity, experiences of racial exclusion, and loneliness in England gradually undermine his sense of self (pp. 82, 93–96). In *Gravel Heart*, Salim's experiences of cultural unfamiliarity, social anxiety, and loneliness reveal the difficulties of constructing a coherent identity in a foreign environment (pp. 59, 83, 88, 121). In *By the Sea*, Saleh Omar's assumed identity, status as a refugee, description of himself as living a "half-life of a stranger," and deliberate withdrawal into silence demonstrate the profound psychological consequences of displacement (pp. 1–2, 4, 45).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that identity loss generates the quest for belongingness. The characters seek acceptance because recognition and meaningful relationships are necessary for restoring confidence, dignity, and a coherent sense of self. Hall (1990, 1996), Bhabha (1994), Berry (1997), Byrne (2005), Ahmed (2000), Said (2000), and Cacioppo and Patrick (2008) provide complementary explanations for these experiences, while Hegel and Marx provide the principal theoretical grounding. The three novels ultimately suggest that belonging is not achieved simply through geographical settlement; it depends upon recognition, cultural continuity, meaningful relationships, and social participation.

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