
NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN THE FICTION OF ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

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Abstract :

*This paper examines the narrative strategies employed by Abdulrazak Gurnah to articulate the complexities of exile, memory, and postcolonial identity. Gurnah's novels—such as *Paradise*, *By the Sea*, *Desertion*, and *Afterlives*—demonstrate a sophisticated use of polyphonic narration, retrospective storytelling, and narrative fragmentation. These formal techniques are not merely stylistic but are intrinsically linked to the ethical and political dimensions of his fiction. Drawing upon theoretical perspectives from Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva, and Homi Bhabha, the paper argues that Gurnah's narrative techniques work to unsettle dominant historical discourses and offer space for alternative forms of remembering and witnessing.*

Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah, narrative technique, postcolonial literature, memory, exile, fragmentation, polyphony

Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction is notable not only for its thematic engagement with colonial legacies, exile, and identity, but also for the complexity and subtlety of its narrative technique. His storytelling does not follow conventional linear forms; instead, it unfolds through fragmented memories, multiple narrators, and layered temporalities. These narrative choices are essential to the representation of the migrant and postcolonial subject—individuals whose lives are marked by rupture, silence, and displacement.

Abdulrazak Gurnah employs a variety of narrative techniques to enrich his exploration of migration and subalternity. His use of multiple narratives and perspectives allows for a multifaceted view of his characters' experiences and the historical contexts they navigate. This chapter delves into these techniques, illustrating how they contribute to the depth and complexity of Gurnah's storytelling.

One of the defining features of Gurnah's narrative technique is polyphony, or the use of multiple, autonomous voices within a single narrative structure. This concept, theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination*, describes a mode of narration in which no single voice dominates and where a diversity of perspectives coexists in tension and dialogue (Bakhtin 6). Gurnah's use of multiple narrative perspectives serves to provide a comprehensive and layered understanding of migration, displacement, and subalternity. By presenting different viewpoints, he allows readers to engage with the nuances and complexities of his characters' experiences.

Gurnah's use of polyphony is especially evident in *By the Sea*, where the story is alternately narrated by Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud. Each recounts his own version of a shared past, and the result is not a synthesis but a dialogic structure that forces the reader to negotiate between subjective truths. Gurnah does not offer a singular narrative of victimhood or heroism; instead, he embraces the contradictions and silences that define the postcolonial experience. This technique offers distinct perspectives on their shared history and experiences of displacement. Saleh Omar, an elderly asylum seeker, narrates his journey and the traumas he has faced, providing an intimate glimpse into the challenges of forced migration and the loss of identity. His narrative is juxtaposed with that of Latif Mahmud, a younger man who harbors resentment towards Omar due to past familial wrongs. The interplay between their narratives creates a dialogue that reveals the complexities of memory, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Through their differing perspectives, Gurnah explores the subjective nature of truth and the multifaceted impact of historical events on individual lives. This technique not only deepens character development but also emphasizes the interconnectedness of personal and collective histories.

In "Desertion," Gurnah employs multiple narratives to weave together past and present, highlighting the continuity of historical impacts on individual lives. The novel alternates between the narratives of Rashid and his brother Amin, providing insights into their family's history and the lingering effects of colonialism. Rashid's narrative, set in the present, reflects on his family's past and the broader historical context of colonial and postcolonial East Africa. Amin's narrative, drawn from his notebooks, offers a retrospective account of their upbringing and the romantic and familial entanglements that shape their identities. By interweaving these narratives, Gurnah underscores the enduring influence of colonial relationships on subsequent generations.

This technique allows Gurnah to explore themes of memory, identity, and the passage of time. The dual narratives provide a rich tapestry of experiences, illustrating how the past continues to shape the present. Through the characters of Rashid and Amin, Gurnah examines the personal and collective struggles to come to terms with historical legacies and the search for meaning and belonging in a postcolonial world.

The narrative structure of *By the Sea* is emblematic of Gurnah's broader commitment to non-linear and fragmented storytelling. The novel does not follow a traditional beginning-middle-end structure. Rather, events are revealed gradually through memories, flashbacks, and reflections. This technique reflects the psychological state of the narrator—a refugee caught between past and present, haunted by exile and loss. Saleh Omar, for instance, conceals critical information until later in the narrative, challenging the reader's assumptions and compelling a re-evaluation of earlier passages. As Susheila Nasta observes, "Gurnah's fragmented narratives enact the dislocations they describe" (Nasta 221). The form mirrors the content, producing a literary space that honors the fragmented nature of migrant memory.

Retrospection is another hallmark of Gurnah's narrative method. Most of his novels are told from the perspective of a narrator who is looking back on past events, often from the standpoint of exile or geographical displacement. This retrospective structure creates a

productive distance between the narrator and their younger self, allowing for reflection and reinterpretation. In *Desertion*, the story of a colonial-era love affair between a British Orientalist and a local woman is mediated through the voices of their descendants. These layered voices serve to complicate the romanticized version of the past, exposing the power imbalances and betrayals that underlie colonial narratives. The retrospective narration thus becomes a form of ethical engagement with history—a way of bearing witness to silenced stories while acknowledging the limits of memory.

Gurnah also makes extensive use of intertextual references, weaving allusions to both European literary traditions and East African oral storytelling into his fiction. In *Paradise*, for example, critics have long noted the novel's intertextual dialogue with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. But whereas Conrad's Africa is depicted as a dark, mysterious void, Gurnah reclaims this landscape through the eyes of Yusuf, a boy caught in the currents of Swahili trade and colonial encroachment. By offering a counter-narrative that privileges African experience and knowledge systems, Gurnah challenges Eurocentric representations of Africa. As Priyamvada Gopal notes, *Paradise* "unsettles the canonical map of imperial fiction, displacing its center and resisting its certainties" (Gopal 58). The narrative voice in *Paradise* is restrained and reflective, avoiding grand moral pronouncements and instead emphasizing the ambiguities of agency under colonialism.

Gurnah often employs fragmented narratives to reflect the disjointed and tumultuous experiences of his characters. This technique mirrors the fragmented identities and disrupted lives of those affected by migration and displacement. In "Paradise," the narrative is fragmented to reflect Yusuf's journey from his rural home to the complex world of precolonial urban East Africa. The disjointed structure captures the confusion and upheaval of Yusuf's experiences as he navigates servitude and encounters various cultural and social influences. The fragmentation in the narrative also serves to highlight the impact of colonial intrusion on traditional African life. As Yusuf's story unfolds, the reader is presented with a series of vignettes that depict the diverse and often conflicting forces shaping his world. This technique emphasizes the sense of dislocation and the struggle for coherence in a rapidly changing environment.

Gurnah's use of rich descriptive language enhances the sensory experience of his narratives, bringing to life the settings and emotions of his characters. For instance in "Paradise," Gurnah's vivid descriptions of the East African landscape, markets, and social interactions create a vibrant backdrop for Yusuf's journey. The detailed imagery immerses the reader in the world of the novel, making the characters' experiences more tangible and immediate. The descriptive language also serves to highlight the contrasts and conflicts within the narrative. Gurnah's portrayal of the natural beauty of the landscape juxtaposed with the harsh realities of servitude and colonial intrusion underscores the themes of displacement and cultural disruption. Abdulrazak Gurnah's narrative techniques—multiple narratives and perspectives, fragmented narratives, epistolary elements, nonlinear storytelling, and rich descriptive language—contribute to the depth and complexity of his exploration of migration and subalternity. These techniques allow him to present multifaceted views of his characters' experiences, capturing the nuances of their struggles and the broader historical and cultural

contexts that shape their lives. By employing these techniques, Gurnah not only enhances the literary quality of his works but also provides a more comprehensive and empathetic portrayal of the challenges faced by migrants and displaced individuals. His narratives encourage readers to engage with the complexities of identity, memory, and belonging, offering valuable insights into the human condition in a globalized and often fragmented world.

In *Afterlives*, one of Gurnah's most ambitious novels, these techniques reach their full maturity. The novel spans generations and shifts between multiple points of view to depict the enduring impact of German and British colonialism in East Africa. The characters' personal lives are deeply entangled with historical events, yet the narration resists simplification. The story unfolds gradually, through quiet moments, familial tensions, and unspoken traumas. Gurnah's prose is understated, yet rich with emotional and historical resonance. The fragmented structure, shifting focalization, and elliptical narration reflect the disrupted temporalities of postcolonial history—where the past continues to reverberate in the present, and where storytelling becomes a form of survival.

Language itself is a key component of Gurnah's narrative technique. Although he writes in English, his prose carries the cadences and idioms of Kiswahili and Arabic. This linguistic hybridity reflects the multicultural world of the Swahili coast and the syncretic identities of his characters. The inclusion of untranslated words, oral storytelling patterns, and culturally specific metaphors challenges the monolingual assumptions of the English novel and creates a more inclusive narrative space. As Elleke Boehmer points out, Gurnah's "language enacts the shifting ground of identity, belonging, and history in postcolonial contexts" (Boehmer 143).

Gurnah's narrative technique is not simply a matter of literary innovation—it is an ethical stance. His refusal to offer conclusive judgments, his emphasis on interiority and ambiguity, and his multi-layered narrative structures all serve to foreground the humanity of his characters. These individuals are not allegories or symbols; they are complex beings shaped by history, but not reducible to it. The quiet, introspective tone of Gurnah's narrative voice—what some critics have called his "understated realism"—allows readers to enter deeply into the moral and emotional worlds of his protagonists.

To conclude, Abdulrazak Gurnah's narrative technique is central to his literary and political vision. Through polyphonic narration, retrospective structure, intertextual dialogue, linguistic hybridity, and narrative fragmentation, he constructs a literary form that reflects the dislocation, complexity, and resilience of postcolonial life. His fiction invites readers not only to learn history, but to feel its wounds, to listen to its silences, and to engage with its ethical demands. As such, Gurnah stands as one of the most important narrative stylists in contemporary literature—offering not just new stories, but new ways of telling them.

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