

Narratives of Fugue: Memory, Exile, and Fragmented Identity in the Fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah

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Abstract

The study explores the fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah through the concept of “fugue,” drawing on its psychological and musical meanings to analyze themes of exile, memory, and identity. Gurnah’s characters often experience displacement and fragmentation, which can be understood as a form of psychological fugue shaped by migration and postcolonial trauma. At the same time, his narrative style reflects a fugue-like structure, with recurring and overlapping memories that create a non-linear and layered storytelling pattern. Through selected novels, the study argues that Gurnah presents identity as fluid and unstable, where past and present continuously intersect. Ultimately, the paper highlights how the notion of fugue offers a nuanced framework for understanding diasporic identity in Gurnah’s work.

Key Words: Abdulrazak Gurnah Fugue, Exile, Memory, Identity, Migration

Introduction

The contemporary global landscape, marked by migration, displacement, and cultural negotiation, has generated a renewed critical interest in questions of identity, memory, and belonging. Within this context, the fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah occupies a significant place in postcolonial literature for its nuanced exploration of exile and its psychological consequences. Awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2021, Gurnah consistently foregrounded the experiences of displaced individuals whose lives are shaped by the enduring legacies of colonialism, forced migration, and cultural dislocation. His narratives resist simplistic representations of identity, instead presenting it as fluid, fractured, and continually reconstructed across temporal and spatial boundaries. This paper approaches Gurnah’s fiction through the conceptual lens of “fugue,” a term that productively bridges psychological and aesthetic domains. In its psychological sense, fugue denotes a state of dissociation characterized by memory disruption and a fragmented sense of self, often triggered by trauma. In its musical form, a fugue refers to a compositional structure in which themes recur, overlap, and develop in complex, interwoven patterns. By bringing these meanings together, the present study argues that Gurnah’s narratives can be understood as articulations of a fugue-like condition, in which characters experience dislocation not only in geographical terms but also in relation to memory and identity. The past, rather than remaining fixed, returns in fragments, reshaping the present and destabilizing any coherent sense of selfhood. Gurnah’s novels such as *By the Sea*, *Pilgrims Way*, and *Gravel Heart* offer rich textual sites for examining how exile produces a state of psychological and narrative fragmentation. His protagonists often inhabit liminal spaces between cultures, negotiating histories that are both personal and collective. Memory in these works functions neither as a stable repository nor as a linear progression; instead, it unfolds in recursive patterns that mirror the structure of a fugue, where repetition and variation coexist. This narrative strategy not only reflects the complexities of diasporic experience but also challenges dominant linear models of storytelling that privilege coherence and closure. Drawing on postcolonial theory and diaspora studies, this paper seeks to demonstrate how the concept of fugue provides framework for understanding the interplay between memory, exile, and identity in Gurnah’s fiction. It first situates the idea of fugue within relevant theoretical discourses, then undertakes a close reading of selected texts to trace the ways in which narrative form and thematic concerns intersect. Ultimately, the study argues that Gurnah transforms exile into a fugue-like condition—both disorienting and generative—thereby offering a complex representation of diasporic identity in the contemporary world.

Literature Review

Critical engagement with Abdulrazak Gurnah’s fiction has steadily expanded, particularly after his Nobel Prize in 2021, with scholars focusing on themes of exile, migration, memory, and postcolonial identity. Much of the existing scholarship situates Gurnah within the broader framework of postcolonial literature, emphasizing his exploration of displacement and the lingering effects of colonial histories on individual and collective identities.

Early readings of Gurnah’s work foreground the condition of exile as central to his narrative universe. Critics have argued that his protagonists are often caught between cultures, inhabiting liminal spaces that destabilize fixed notions of belonging. This sense of in-betweenness aligns with broader postcolonial concerns regarding hybridity and cultural negotiation. Scholars examining novels such as *By the Sea* and *Pilgrims Way* highlight how migration produces not only geographical dislocation but also psychological fragmentation, leading to crises of identity and self-perception. Another significant strand of criticism focuses on memory as a key thematic and structural element in Gurnah’s fiction. Studies suggest that memory in his works is neither linear nor reliable; rather, it is characterized by discontinuity, repetition, and partial recall. This fragmented mode of remembering reflects the traumatic histories associated with colonialism, displacement, and exile. Critics have also noted that Gurnah’s narrative technique often mirrors this instability, employing non-linear storytelling and shifting perspectives to convey the complexity of diasporic experience. Furthermore, recent scholarship has increasingly examined the role of narrative form in shaping Gurnah’s representation of identity. His fiction is often described as layered and polyphonic, incorporating multiple voices and temporalities that resist closure. This has led some critics to interpret his work as challenging dominant Western narrative conventions, instead privileging fluidity and multiplicity. Despite these valuable contributions, the concept of “fugue” has not been substantially explored as a critical framework in Gurnah studies. While scholars have addressed fragmentation, memory, and non-linearity, there remains a gap in connecting these elements through a unified conceptual lens that encompasses both psychological and aesthetic dimensions. This paper seeks to address this gap by employing “fugue” as a central analytical category, thereby offering a more integrated understanding of how Gurnah’s fiction represents the interplay between exile, memory, and identity.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon postcolonial theory and diaspora studies to contextualize the fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah, while introducing the concept of “fugue” as a bridging framework that connects psychological and narrative dimensions. Postcolonial theory provides the foundational lens through which issues of colonial legacy, displacement, and identity formation are examined. Central to this approach is the idea that colonial histories continue to shape contemporary experiences, particularly for individuals who inhabit diasporic spaces.

The notion of hybridity, as articulated by Homi K. Bhabha, is especially relevant in understanding Gurnah’s characters. Hybridity refers to the creation of new cultural identities through the interaction of colonizer and colonized cultures, resulting in a “third space” that resists fixed definitions. Gurnah’s protagonists often occupy such spaces, negotiating multiple cultural affiliations while simultaneously experiencing alienation and displacement. This condition complicates traditional understandings of identity as stable or unified.

In addition, diaspora theory contributes to the analysis by emphasizing the role of migration, memory, and transnational belonging. Diasporic identities are shaped by a constant negotiation between homeland and host land, where memory plays a crucial role in sustaining connections to the past. However, as scholars have noted, these memories are often fragmented and mediated by trauma, leading to a sense of discontinuity in personal and collective histories. Within this theoretical context, the concept of “fugue” offers a productive extension. Psychologically, fugue denotes a state of dissociation in which individuals experience disruptions in memory and identity, often as a response to trauma. This notion resonates with the experiences of Gurnah’s characters, whose lives are marked by displacement and loss, resulting in fractured selfhoods.

The fugue state thus becomes a useful metaphor for understanding the instability and fluidity of identity in postcolonial contexts.

At the same time, the musical structure of fugue provides an aesthetic framework for analyzing Gurnah's narrative technique. In a musical fugue, themes recur, overlap, and develop in complex patterns, creating a layered and dynamic composition. Similarly, Gurnah's narratives are characterized by repetition, temporal shifts, and intersecting storylines, which mirror the recursive nature of memory and the non-linear experience of time in diasporic life.

By integrating these perspectives, the present study conceptualizes Gurnah's fiction as operating within a fugue-like mode, where psychological fragmentation and narrative form are deeply interconnected. This framework allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how exile, memory, and identity are represented, moving beyond isolated thematic analysis to reveal the structural coherence underlying Gurnah's work. Early readings of Gurnah's work foreground the condition of exile as central to his narrative universe. Critics have argued that his protagonists are often caught between cultures, inhabiting liminal spaces that destabilize fixed notions of belonging. This sense of in-betweenness aligns with broader postcolonial concerns regarding hybridity and cultural negotiation. Scholars examining novels such as *By the Sea* and *Pilgrims Way* highlight how migration produces not only geographical dislocation but also psychological fragmentation, leading to crises of identity and self-perception.

Another significant strand of criticism focuses on memory as a key thematic and structural element in Gurnah's fiction. Studies suggest that memory in his works is neither linear nor reliable; rather, it is characterized by discontinuity, repetition, and partial recall. This fragmented mode of remembering reflects the traumatic histories associated with colonialism, displacement, and exile. Critics have also noted that Gurnah's narrative technique often mirrors this instability, employing non-linear storytelling and shifting perspectives to convey the complexity of diasporic experience.

Furthermore, recent scholarship has increasingly examined the role of narrative form in shaping Gurnah's representation of identity. His fiction is often described as layered and polyphonic, incorporating multiple voices and temporalities that resist closure. This has led some critics to interpret his work as challenging dominant Western narrative conventions, instead privileging fluidity and multiplicity.

Despite these valuable contributions, the concept of "fugue" has not been substantially explored as a critical framework in Gurnah studies. While scholars have addressed fragmentation, memory, and non-linearity, there remains a gap in connecting these elements through a unified conceptual lens that encompasses both psychological and aesthetic dimensions. This paper seeks to address this gap by employing "fugue" as a central analytical category, thereby offering a more integrated understanding of how Gurnah's fiction represents the interplay between exile, memory, and identity.

Textual Analysis: Fugue, Memory, and Fragmented Identity

The fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah consistently foregrounds characters whose identities are shaped by displacement, loss, and the unstable workings of memory. In *By the Sea*, the protagonist Saleh Omar exemplifies a fugue-like condition, both psychologically and narratively. His identity is not presented as fixed but gradually revealed through fragmented recollections. At one point, he reflects on the unreliability of memory, suggesting that "memory is a treacherous thing," emphasizing its instability and susceptibility to distortion (Gurnah, *By the Sea*). This notion aligns with the psychological understanding of fugue, where memory disruption leads to a fractured sense of self. Moreover, the narrative structure of *By the Sea* mirrors the musical form of a fugue. The story unfolds through alternating perspectives and recursive memories, particularly between Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud. Their intertwined narratives function like overlapping melodic lines, each revisiting shared histories from different angles. This polyphonic structure reinforces the idea that identity is not singular but composed of multiple, sometimes conflicting, voices. A similar pattern emerges in *Pilgrims Way*, where the protagonist Daud experiences racial alienation and cultural dislocation in England. His sense of self is destabilized by persistent experiences of exclusion, leading to an internal fragmentation that resembles a fugue state. Daud's reflections often oscillate between past and present, revealing how memory intrudes upon his current reality. As he navigates an unfamiliar social landscape, his identity becomes increasingly disjointed, shaped by both personal trauma and systemic marginalization. In *Gravel Heart*, Gurnah further develops this theme through the character of Salim, whose life is marked by familial rupture and migration. The narrative unfolds through a series of recollections that are neither chronological nor complete, reinforcing the fugue-like quality of memory. Salim's attempt to reconstruct his past reveals the gaps and silences that define his identity. The recurring return to certain memories—particularly those involving his parents—creates a pattern of repetition and variation, echoing the structure of a musical fugue. Across these texts, Gurnah employs a narrative technique that resists linear progression, instead privileging fragmentation and recurrence. This stylistic choice reflects the lived reality of diasporic subjects, for whom time is experienced not as a continuous flow but as a series of disruptions and returns. The fugue thus becomes both a metaphor and a structural principle, capturing the complexity of identity formation in contexts of exile. The application of "fugue" as a conceptual framework allows for a deeper understanding of how Abdulrazak Gurnah represents diasporic identity. His characters do not simply experience displacement; they inhabit a condition in which identity itself becomes unstable and continuously negotiated. The psychological dimension of fugue highlights the impact of trauma and memory disruption, while the musical dimension underscores the narrative strategies that convey this instability.

Gurnah's fiction challenges the notion of identity as coherent and unified. Instead, it presents identity as a dynamic process shaped by historical forces, personal experiences, and the act of remembering. The recurring and overlapping memories in his narratives suggest that the past is never fully resolved but continues to shape the present in unpredictable ways. This aligns with broader postcolonial concerns regarding the persistence of colonial histories and their impact on contemporary subjectivities. Furthermore, the fugue-like structure of Gurnah's narratives invites readers to engage actively with the text, piecing together fragments to form a provisional understanding of the characters' lives. This participatory aspect reflects the complexity of diasporic experience, where meaning is not given but constructed through negotiation and interpretation.

Conclusion

This study has argued that the concept of "fugue" provides a productive framework for analyzing the fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah, particularly in relation to themes of exile, memory, and identity. By integrating psychological and musical dimensions, the notion of fugue captures both the internal fragmentation experienced by Gurnah's characters and the structural complexity of his narratives. Through close readings of *By the Sea*, *Pilgrims Way*, and *Gravel Heart*, the paper has demonstrated how Gurnah constructs a narrative mode that reflects the disorienting yet generative nature of diasporic life. His fiction reveals that identity is not a fixed entity, but an ongoing process shaped by memory, loss, and cultural negotiation. Ultimately, Gurnah's work transforms exile into a fugue-like condition, offering a nuanced and compelling representation of postcolonial identity in a globalized world. This approach not only enriches our understanding of his fiction but also contributes to broader discussions in postcolonial and diaspora studies.

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