



Cruelty to Compassion: A Study of Colonial Aspects in Memory of Departure (1987) and Pilgrim's Way (1988)

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Abstract

This paper examines the transformation from cruelty to compassion in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure* (1987) and *Pilgrim's Way* (1988). Both novels explore the psychological and cultural effects of colonialism on individuals and societies. Through a postcolonial lens, the study investigates how themes such as identity, displacement, racial discrimination, and historical trauma are depicted in Gurnah's early works. The protagonists of both novels are shaped by the cruelty of colonial and postcolonial systems, yet they gradually evolve towards emotional resilience and compassion. The paper argues that compassion is not only a healing mechanism but also a subtle form of resistance and survival. Gurnah's narratives reflect the complex interplay between historical forces and personal experiences, illustrating how literature can challenge colonial *legacies* and *affirm human dignity*.

Keywords: *Postcolonialism, Colonialism, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Identity, Displacement, Trauma, Cruelty, Compassion, Migration, Racial Discrimination, Exile, Resistance, Healing.*

Introduction:

Abdulrazak Gurnah, a Tanzanian-born British writer and Nobel Laureate (2021), is one of the most prominent voices in contemporary postcolonial literature. His novels explore the emotional, psychological, and political aftermath of colonialism, particularly in East Africa and the experiences of African immigrants in Britain. In his early novels *Memory of Departure* (1987) and *Pilgrim's Way* (1988), Gurnah



presents intimate narratives shaped by colonial legacies—stories of displacement, racial alienation, and the human yearning for dignity and connection.

Memory of Departure is set in a nameless postcolonial East African country and follows the story of a teenage boy, Hassan Omar, who dreams of escaping poverty, oppression, and family trauma through education. The narrative portrays how the residual structures of colonial authority and violence—both political and domestic—continue to shape the post-independence society. Hassan's personal suffering becomes a mirror of a larger, national crisis rooted in colonial history.

On the other hand, *Pilgrim's Way* is set in 1970s England and centers around Daud, an immigrant from East Africa. He faces systemic racism, cultural alienation, and psychological confusion while trying to integrate into British society. Through Daud's experiences, Gurnah addresses the colonial mindset embedded in Western society that marginalizes non-white immigrants and reduces them to "others." Despite these challenges, Daud's development reflects an inner journey toward emotional resilience and compassion, particularly through his relationships and acts of understanding.

Both novels showcase how individuals shaped by cruelty—whether through state violence, societal rejection, or colonial ideology—can still foster compassion as a form of healing and resistance. Gurnah's storytelling does not simply document suffering; it humanizes it. His characters evolve not through dramatic rebellion, but through the subtle power of empathy, love, and self-awareness.

This study aims to examine the colonial and postcolonial aspects portrayed in these novels, focusing on how the protagonists' lives are affected by systemic cruelty and how they gradually transition toward compassion. The paper will analyze key themes such as identity, exile, race, trauma, and healing, using theoretical frameworks from postcolonial critics like Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Frantz Fanon. Through this analysis, the research will illustrate how Gurnah's early novels reveal the enduring effects of colonialism and the possibilities of emotional survival in its wake.



Abdulrazak Gurnah, a Tanzanian-British author and Nobel laureate, is a significant voice in postcolonial literature. His works often engage with themes of migration, exile, identity, and the lingering effects of colonialism. Two of his early novels, *Memory of Departure* (1987) and *Pilgrim's Way* (1988), offer profound insights into the personal consequences of political and historical oppression.

Memory of Departure follows a young man growing up in a politically unstable, postcolonial African state, where familial dysfunction and systemic repression mirror the violence of colonial rule. In contrast, *Pilgrim's Way* centers on Daud, an East African immigrant in 1970s England, who faces everyday racism and cultural alienation. Though the settings differ, both protagonists experience psychological torment rooted in historical and political forces.

This paper aims to explore how Gurnah presents colonial and postcolonial cruelty and how his characters evolve emotionally through their suffering. Using postcolonial theory—particularly the works of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Frantz Fanon—the analysis investigates how colonial legacies persist in modern structures and individual psyches. Most importantly, the study highlights how the protagonists' capacity for compassion represents a transformation of pain into strength—a redemptive process central to Gurnah's narrative philosophy.

Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure* and *Pilgrim's Way* present compelling portrayals of individuals grappling with the harsh realities of colonialism and its aftermath. The cruelty experienced by the protagonists is multifaceted—social, political, racial, and familial. Yet, rather than succumbing to despair, the characters engage in a quiet but powerful journey of self-awareness and

Compassion emerges in both novels as a counterforce to the dehumanizing effects of colonial and postcolonial violence. It allows the characters to reclaim agency, preserve dignity, and rebuild fragmented identities. This shift from cruelty to compassion not only humanizes the protagonists but also critiques the enduring legacies of empire.



Gurnah's early novels demonstrate how literature can expose the deep scars of colonialism while also offering pathways toward reconciliation and emotional survival. Through nuanced storytelling and psychological depth, Gurnah gives voice to those displaced by history and affirms the resilience of the human spirit.

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