

“Postcolonial Melancholia” In Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Pilgrims Way*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of Postcolonial Melancholia in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Pilgrims Way*. It is the story of an orderly and disillusioned Zanzibari immigrant leading a marginal and melancholic life in the Britian. The paper focuses on Gilroy’s concept of Postcolonial Melancholia, which can serve as a theoretical framework to analyze the protagonist Daud’s experiences. The paper discusses how the protagonist Daud negotiates his orderly position in conditions of race and migration. The paper also focuses on the colonial past and the progressive reconstruction of his identity through his attachment to Catherine Mason. Additionally, it addresses the psychological distress and sense of dislocation produced by his displacement to racially prejudiced Britain. By situating Daud’s personal struggles within broader socio-historical contexts, this paper underscores the enduring impact of colonial histories on contemporary postcolonial identities and experiences.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Melancholy, Migration, Racial Prejudice, Abdulrazak Gurnah.

Eli Sorenson suggested that “Leading critics have argued that the contemporary field of postcolonial studies has become melancholic, as a consequence of its industrialization in recent years” (65). In analysing the politics of race and tracing its history back to imperial policies that established racial hierarchies to justify colonial domination and racial inequalities, Gilroy adopts Foucauldian concepts of power, discourse, and biopolitics. Through this lens, he explores how biopolitical power exercised and discursively elaborated to maintain these systems.

Abdulrazak Gurnah is a Tanzanian Born British writer. He has won Nobel prize for Literature in 2021 “for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and fate of refugees in the gulf between cultures and continents. One crucial aspects of his biography were his forced migration from Zanzibar to the UK in 1968, amid the turmoil following the 1964 Zanzibar revolution on the island. The trauma of that experience has fed much of his literary writings and the wellspring of his novels of loss and displacement. His novels revolve around refugees who travel from Africa to Europe and issues such as identity and spiritual belonging of refugees in the context of Postcolonial Society. He treats the impact of colonial and post colonialism in Africa rationally through his writings. He also gave an account of great sympathy towards refugees those who suffered from colonial persecution. His immigrant experience shows that Abdulrazak Gurnah is a diasporic writer, specifically an East African diasporic writer. Gurnah often uses the Indian Ocean region and the East African littoral as settings in his novels. Most East African writers represent generational and political transitions, reflecting the diverse historical realities within the region. Gurnah’s novels delve deeply into familial relations and conflicts, the endless betrayals within these relationships, and the loss of the past. Each novel exposes another nuance, another past, and another self-inflicted betrayal. His political landscape, addressing gender, sexuality, race, and class, is finely tuned and certainly stronger than that of other writers.

Pilgrim’s Way focuses on Daud’s experiences in England, where he hates receiving letters from his African friends. He works as an orderly in a hospital and has conversations with Catherine Mason, who talks about her father and her brother Richard. One day, Daud attends a party. *Pilgrim’s Way* tells the story of Daud, a hospital orderly whose life in Canterbury, England, in the 1970s, is marked by the haunting loss of his family. He is traumatized by his dreadful experiences, especially the racism he faces in Britain, which leads him to live a melancholic and marginalized life. However, when he becomes involved with the nurse Catherine Mason, she helps him confront his past and work through his traumatic experiences.

The paper focuses on racial and post-colonial melancholia as manifested in the novel through the dislocated and melancholic individual subject haunted by his past. In England, Daud encounters multiracial and multicultural exchanges. Karta, one of his friends, talks about his family, especially his father Samuel, who was a solicitor. In his school days, Karta’s English teacher introduced him to Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong’o, sparking his interest in these authors. His father was obsessed with Westernization, leading him to change his name.

The paper focuses on Gurnah’s writing in the context of post-colonial theorizations of melancholia. Most theorists suggest that melancholia is not merely a private psychological affliction but has cultural and historical dimensions often generated by post-colonial histories. Sigmund Freud explores two concepts: healthy mourning and pathological melancholia. For Freud, “mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (243). *Pilgrim’s Way* mentions how migration brings no end to melancholic losses, regardless of its promises.

The Zanzibari protagonist Daud feels lonely and disappointed in Britain. According to Freud’s definition of the melancholic, Daud is characterized by “self-reproaches and self-revilings,” displaying a related fear of punishment; these

characteristics are inextricable from his experience in Britain, a country that he first enters as a lonely student and then lives in as a little-appreciated hospital orderly. Daud's melancholia stems from his loss of home and family; it is also linked with a gradual erosion of his ideals and the failure of his pilgrimage—a failure that is described as a process in which "his dreams of a better life had started to slip and lose" (231).

Melancholia in the novel stems from the traumatizing cultural memories generated by the experiences of colonialism, race, and migration. The novel shows that the melancholic subject, seeking to come to terms with and rearticulate the past in the context of migration, is involved in the process of "producing meaning out of histories and histories of loss" (Kaplan 514). The melancholic tone of the novel is also evident in its ironic title. The word "pilgrim" has a double meaning, referring to both an alien or a foreigner and a person traveling to a sacred place. Similarly, Daud's journey to Britain, like a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, is ironic, as the inward-turning nation doesn't offer him redemption. This is emphasized by the novel's setting: the cathedral city of Canterbury, which has served as a goal for many religious travelers since the days of Chaucer. Unlike other pilgrims, before the final chapter of the novel, Daud has never entered the cathedral.

The ironic allusion in the title to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is apt, for there is no progress for this melancholic migrant but rather a long way to follow. A closer look at Daud's melancholy shows further features identified by Freud as typical of the condition. The disturbance of self-regard is clearly evident in Daud, as the novel foregrounds his feelings of disappointment, shame, and despair. These negative features are manifested by his general passivity, lack of interest in his apartment, and his habit of not bothering to wash his clothes. At the beginning of the novel, his estrangement has turned into a general condition: the promises of the past have become lost ideals. What has pulled the migrant to the new country has turned out to be false and appears now as embarrassing and mocking.

The loss of ideals and hope, defined by Freud as part of the melancholic condition, is constitutive of Daud's melancholia and shows how it stems from his disappointment with his new environment. As an ambivalent migrant seeking to escape the violence and insecurity of his home island, Daud has failed to find a safer space. Rather, the xenophobic space of Britain constantly reminds him of the impossibility of being able to fully identify within the dominant and racialized ideal of Britishness. This adds to his estrangement: while his colonial upbringing has generated an image of Britain as a site where all hopes and fantasies are fulfilled, the former imperial center is unable to deliver on its promises. Its ideals are not accessible to racialized migrants who have to face the grim realities of Britain, its inequality, and racism.

In the case of Daud, the disappointment and the loss of ideals work on multiple levels. His encounters with racial exclusion and violence in Britain appear to reiterate the painful losses experienced in Zanzibar. As Daud reflects on his first year in Britain, the novel emphasizes the extent of the loss and shows how past traumas extend into the present. While the novel contrasts the coldness of Britain with the warm, golden beaches of home, the African past is not represented nostalgically but also involves the loss of friends and community. The migrant's current loneliness is combined with an embodied sense of fear generated by the potential violence of the British. At this moment, cracks open the wounds of history, and the narrator connects past experiences with traumatic memories of violence in Zanzibar. According to the passage, what Daud hoped would be a safe refuge and a site of pilgrimage turns out to be no such thing but merely a further gloomy location of racialized violence.

In *Pilgrim's Way*, Abdulrazak Gurnah intricately explores the themes of diasporic identity, melancholia, and dislocation through the experiences of Daud, a Zanzibari immigrant in 1970s Britain. Gurnah's portrayal of Daud's struggle with racism, alienation, and loss reveals the profound psychological impact of migration and the lingering effects of colonialism. The novel demonstrates how the hopes and dreams associated with migration are often thwarted by the harsh realities of cultural and racial exclusion, leading to a melancholic existence. Daud's journey illustrates the complexities of seeking belonging in a space that remains unwelcoming and hostile to outsiders. Gurnah's nuanced depiction of post-colonial melancholia not only emphasizes the individual trauma of the diasporic subject but also highlights the broader cultural and historical dimensions that shape their experiences. Ultimately, *Pilgrim's Way* is a poignant narrative that captures the deep-seated sorrow and sense of loss that define the diasporic experience, making it a powerful commentary on identity, belonging, and the unfulfilled promises of migration.

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