



**Literature as Resistance: Social Transformation and Structures of Power in Abdulrazak  
Gurnah's Fiction**

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**Abstract**

Narratives of transformation have long served as powerful literary spaces through which societies examine change, authority, identity, and resistance. Literature does not merely represent human experience; it also questions the systems that organize, control, and often silence human lives. In postcolonial writing, this function becomes especially significant because literature records the hidden consequences of colonial rule, migration, displacement, and unequal political power. This paper examines these concerns through the fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah, whose novels explore the complex relationship between individual lives and larger structures of power. By focusing on selected works such as *Paradise* (1994), *By the Sea* (2001), and *Afterlives* (2020), the study analyses how Gurnah portrays social transformation through migration, memory, colonial violence, exile, and survival. His narratives reveal that power does not operate only through formal institutions such as colonial administrations, governments, courts, or armies; it also functions through trade, family relations, language, religion, cultural memory, and social hierarchy. Through qualitative textual analysis, this paper argues that Gurnah's fiction presents literature as a form of resistance, not through loud political slogans, but through the careful recovery of suppressed histories and marginalized voices. His novels show how ordinary people negotiate oppressive structures, endure historical trauma, and create new forms of identity and belonging. The study concludes that Gurnah's works invite readers to rethink the relationship between literature, governance, and social justice by demonstrating how storytelling can expose injustice, challenge dominant histories, and imagine more humane forms of social transformation.

**Keywords:** *Abdulrazak Gurnah; Social Transformation; Power Structures; Resistance; Postcolonial Literature; Migration; Colonialism; Governance; Identity; Memory.*



## Introduction

Literature has always been more than an artistic representation of life. It is also a powerful mode of social reflection, historical recovery, and political questioning. Through narrative, societies examine the values, institutions, and power relations that shape human existence. In contexts marked by colonialism, migration, violence, and displacement, literature becomes even more significant because it preserves experiences that official histories often ignore or suppress. It gives voice to those who are pushed to the margins by empire, nation, class, race, gender, and migration regimes. In this sense, literature becomes a form of resistance: it resists silence, erasure, simplification, and domination.

Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction occupies an important place in contemporary postcolonial literature because it examines the deeply human consequences of historical and political transformations. His novels are not limited to personal stories of migration and exile; they present a broader vision of how lives are shaped by colonial histories, social hierarchies, trade networks, family structures, and state power. Gurnah's fictional world is filled with characters who are displaced, indebted, exiled, orphaned, colonized, or forced to negotiate unfamiliar social systems. These characters do not exist outside history. Their lives are shaped by political decisions, colonial expansion, economic exploitation, and the formation of modern nation-states.

The title "Literature as Resistance" is therefore suitable for approaching Gurnah's fiction because his novels resist dominant narratives of empire, civilization, nationalism, and belonging. Rather than presenting history from the viewpoint of rulers, administrators, or official records, Gurnah writes from the perspective of vulnerable individuals whose lives are caught within larger systems of power. His fiction does not offer a simple division between victimhood and heroism. Instead, it presents resistance as a subtle, complex, and often painful process. Resistance appears through memory, narration, survival, silence, refusal, adaptation, and the preservation of dignity.

This paper examines how Gurnah's fiction connects social transformation with structures of power. The study focuses mainly on *Paradise*, *By the Sea*, and *Afterlives*, while also recognizing the broader concerns that run through his literary career. These novels explore different historical moments: the world of trade and colonial intrusion in *Paradise*, the experience of exile and asylum in *By the Sea*, and the violence of German colonialism and its afterlives in *Afterlives*. Across these works, Gurnah shows that social transformation is never neutral. Change is often produced through domination, displacement, war, migration, and unequal access to power. Yet his fiction also shows that individuals and communities respond creatively to these conditions by reshaping memory, relationships, identity, and belonging.

## Literature, Resistance, and Postcolonial Transformation

In postcolonial literature, resistance does not always appear as direct rebellion or open political action. It may appear as the act of remembering what has been erased, narrating what has been silenced, and



questioning what has been accepted as truth. Colonial power often depended not only on military and economic control, but also on the control of knowledge, language, and representation. Colonized people were frequently described through stereotypes that justified domination. Postcolonial writing resists this by producing alternative narratives that restore complexity to colonized lives. Gurnah's fiction participates in this tradition of literary resistance. His novels challenge simplified accounts of colonial history and migration. He does not present the colonized world as passive or culturally empty before European arrival. Instead, he portrays East African coastal societies as complex spaces shaped by trade, religion, language, family, debt, desire, and hierarchy. This is important because colonial narratives often represented African societies as lacking order or history. Gurnah's fiction resists such misrepresentations by showing that these societies possessed their own systems of exchange, authority, morality, and conflict long before European domination became fully established.

At the same time, Gurnah does not romanticize precolonial or postcolonial societies. His fiction reveals that power and inequality also exist within local communities. Debt, patriarchy, servitude, class hierarchy, and social exclusion are shown as part of everyday life. This gives his fiction a unique critical depth. He does not simply oppose Europe and Africa as two fixed categories. Instead, he examines how different forms of power intersect. Colonial authority, commercial exploitation, patriarchal control, and nationalist exclusion all become part of the same field of social struggle. Therefore, literature becomes resistance in Gurnah's work because it refuses one-sided history. It resists the colonial archive, but it also resists idealized versions of community and nation. His fiction insists that social transformation must be understood through the lived experiences of individuals who suffer under overlapping structures of power.

### **Structures of Power in *Paradise***

*Paradise* is one of Gurnah's most important novels for understanding the relationship between social transformation and power. Set in East Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century, the novel follows Yusuf, a young boy who is taken away from his family because of his father's debt. His movement from home into the world of trade introduces the reader to a society shaped by economic dependency, social hierarchy, and colonial intrusion. At the surface level, *Paradise* may appear to be a coming-of-age story. However, beneath this personal narrative lies a deeper examination of power. Yusuf's life is not shaped by his own choices. He is transferred into the household and commercial world of Aziz, known as "Uncle Aziz," because debt has turned family relationship into economic obligation. This shows how power operates through social and economic structures. Yusuf is not imprisoned by a formal state institution, but his freedom is nevertheless restricted by the logic of debt, trade, and dependency. The novel reveals that social transformation often begins with displacement. Yusuf's removal from his family is not merely a personal tragedy; it represents the reorganization of social roles. He moves from the position of a child within a family to the position of a dependent within a commercial network. His



identity is transformed by the demands of trade, service, obedience, and survival. Through Yusuf, Gurnah shows how economic systems reshape human relationships. Family, childhood, labour, and belonging are all affected by structures of power.

The trade journeys in *Paradise* further reveal the complexity of East African social life. The caravan does not simply represent commerce; it is a mobile social institution. It brings together different languages, ethnicities, religions, and cultural practices. It creates temporary forms of order, cooperation, and exchange. Yet this order is fragile and unequal. The movement of goods is accompanied by the movement of bodies, obligations, fears, and desires. Trade connects communities, but it also produces exploitation and dependency. Colonial power enters the novel as a growing historical force. The presence of the Germans signals a major transformation in the political structure of the region. Local systems of authority and trade begin to encounter the expanding machinery of European colonial rule. Gurnah does not present colonialism only as a distant political event. Instead, he shows how it gradually enters everyday life, changing the possibilities available to individuals and communities. The arrival of colonial authority threatens existing networks, but it also exposes the weaknesses and inequalities already present within them.

In this way, *Paradise* presents social transformation as a layered process. Precolonial trade structures, family debt, religious authority, and colonial expansion all interact with one another. Yusuf's life becomes the site where these larger systems meet. His vulnerability reveals the hidden violence of social order. The novel therefore functions as resistance by exposing how beautiful or orderly social worlds can contain deep forms of domination.

### **Power, Exile, and Memory in *By the Sea***

While *Paradise* explores displacement within the world of trade and colonial expansion, *By the Sea* examines the experience of exile, asylum, memory, and postcolonial governance. The novel focuses on Saleh Omar, an elderly man who arrives in England seeking asylum. His journey is not presented as an adventure or a simple search for opportunity. It is shaped by loss, fear, political conflict, and the burden of memory. In *By the Sea*, power operates through borders, immigration systems, documentation, and the authority of the modern state. Saleh Omar's arrival in England immediately places him under the gaze of official institutions. His identity must be explained, verified, translated, and judged. The asylum process becomes a structure of power because it determines who can speak, who can be believed, and who can belong. The migrant is required to narrate his suffering in a way that can be understood by bureaucratic systems. Gurnah's treatment of exile is deeply complex. Exile is not only physical separation from homeland. It is also a condition of linguistic, emotional, and historical displacement. Saleh carries memories that are painful, fragmented, and difficult to communicate. His past cannot be easily reduced to official categories. Through this, Gurnah critiques the way governance systems often simplify human experience. The state demands clear identities, documents, and explanations, but



migrant lives are shaped by ambiguity, trauma, and historical complexity. Memory becomes a major form of resistance in the novel. Saleh's narration allows him to reclaim a past that has been distorted by conflict and silence. In exile, memory becomes a way of preserving identity, but it is also a painful return to betrayal, loss, and humiliation. Gurnah shows that memory does not simply heal; it also unsettles. It forces characters to confront the unresolved histories that continue to shape their present lives. The relationship between Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud is central to the novel's exploration of power and transformation. Their shared history reveals how personal lives are entangled with property, family conflict, political change, and postcolonial instability. Their meeting in England brings the past into the present. It also shows that migration does not erase history; rather, it carries history into new spaces. The migrant subject is therefore not someone who begins again without memory. Instead, the migrant must negotiate the continuing pressure of the past within the structures of the present. *By the Sea* also reveals how postcolonial governance can reproduce new forms of exclusion. Political independence does not automatically guarantee justice or freedom. The novel suggests that the postcolonial state may inherit and transform earlier structures of domination. Individuals may continue to suffer under corruption, revenge, property disputes, and political instability. Gurnah's fiction therefore resists celebratory narratives of nationalism by showing the unfinished and uneven nature of postcolonial transformation.

### **Colonial Violence and Historical Recovery in *Afterlives***

*Afterlives* extends Gurnah's concern with power and transformation by focusing on German colonial rule in East Africa and its consequences for ordinary lives. The novel examines how colonial violence enters families, communities, bodies, and memories. It is not only about war or empire in a political sense; it is about the long-lasting effects of colonial power on intimate human relationships. The title *Afterlives* itself suggests that history does not end when a political event ends. Colonialism continues to live on through memory, trauma, silence, and social disruption. The lives of characters such as Ilyas, Hamza, Afiya, and Khalifa are shaped by forces larger than themselves. They are affected by military recruitment, colonial discipline, gendered vulnerability, family separation, and social uncertainty. Through these characters, Gurnah shows that colonial history is not abstract. It is lived through hunger, fear, longing, injury, and the struggle for dignity. One of the most powerful aspects of *Afterlives* is its attention to those who are usually absent from official histories. Colonial archives often record administrators, soldiers, wars, treaties, and economic policies. Gurnah, however, turns attention to ordinary people whose lives are transformed by these events. This is a major form of literary resistance. By narrating the lives of those who are historically marginalized, the novel challenges the authority of official history. Hamza's experience in the colonial military structure reveals the violent discipline of empire. His body and mind are shaped by command, punishment, and fear. Colonial power appears not only as external rule, but as a system that enters the emotional and physical life of the colonized subject.



Yet Hamza's later attempt to rebuild life also shows the possibility of survival after violence. His relationship with Afiya becomes a space where care, tenderness, and domestic reconstruction resist the dehumanizing effects of colonial power. Afiya's story is equally significant because it reveals the gendered dimensions of power. Her life is shaped by family control, social vulnerability, and limited autonomy. Through Afiya, Gurnah shows that structures of domination are not only colonial or political; they are also domestic and gendered. Her search for stability and dignity demonstrates how women negotiate oppressive structures within both private and public spaces. In *Afterlives*, social transformation occurs through damage and reconstruction. War, colonialism, and displacement break existing forms of life, but characters attempt to create new bonds and meanings. This does not mean that suffering is erased. Rather, the novel shows that resilience exists alongside trauma. Gurnah's fiction does not offer easy healing; it presents survival as a slow and fragile process.

### **Migration and the Transformation of Identity**

Migration is one of the central forces in Gurnah's fiction. His characters move across villages, coastal towns, colonial territories, and continents. However, migration in his novels is not merely geographical movement. It is a process that transforms identity, memory, language, and belonging. Migration forces characters to ask who they are when they are separated from home, family, community, and familiar systems of meaning. In Gurnah's fiction, identity is never fixed. It is shaped through movement, loss, memory, and negotiation. Yusuf in *Paradise*, Saleh Omar in *By the Sea*, and Hamza in *Afterlives* all experience forms of displacement that change their understanding of themselves. They are not simply victims of movement; they are subjects who must reinterpret their lives within changing social conditions.

Migration also reveals the unequal distribution of power in the modern world. Not all movement is free. Some characters are moved by debt, war, colonial recruitment, political fear, or economic necessity. Their mobility is shaped by forces beyond their control. This is important because migration is often discussed as a personal choice, but Gurnah's fiction shows that movement is frequently produced by historical and structural pressures. At the same time, migration creates new forms of social life. Migrants form new relationships, remember old worlds, adapt to new institutions, and develop complex identities. In this sense, migration becomes a source of social transformation. It breaks existing structures, but it also produces new possibilities. Gurnah's fiction captures this double nature of migration: it is painful and creative, destructive and transformative, disorienting and productive.

### **Governance and the Control of Human Life**

Governance in Gurnah's fiction appears in many forms. It is not limited to formal political rule. Governance includes colonial administration, immigration systems, military command, family authority, trade hierarchy, religious influence, and social expectations. These structures regulate human behaviour and determine the possibilities available to individuals. In *Paradise*, governance appears



through debt, trade, and colonial expansion. Yusuf's life is governed by economic obligation before it is governed by the colonial state. In *By the Sea*, governance appears through immigration procedures, asylum interviews, documents, and national borders. In *Afterlives*, governance appears through colonial military discipline and the organization of colonial society. Across these novels, Gurnah shows that power is not located in one place. It is dispersed across institutions, relationships, and everyday practices. This representation of governance is important because it expands our understanding of power. Power is not only exercised by rulers or governments. It also works through ordinary social arrangements that appear natural or necessary. Debt, family duty, gender roles, and cultural expectations can become instruments of control. Gurnah's fiction reveals these hidden structures and invites readers to question them. At the same time, his novels show that individuals are not completely powerless. They may not always defeat oppressive systems, but they find ways to survive, remember, narrate, care, and endure. These acts may seem small, but they are significant forms of resistance. In Gurnah's fictional world, resistance often takes the form of preserving humanity within dehumanizing structures.

### **Literature as Historical Recovery**

One of the most important contributions of Gurnah's fiction is its recovery of neglected histories. His novels bring attention to East African experiences that have often been marginalized in dominant accounts of colonial and postcolonial history. He writes about the Indian Ocean world, Arab-African interactions, German colonialism, migration to Europe, and the emotional lives of displaced people. By doing so, he expands the geographical and historical scope of postcolonial literature. Gurnah's fiction resists the idea that history belongs only to official archives. He shows that history also lives in memory, storytelling, silence, family conflict, and personal trauma. The past is not only what is recorded by institutions; it is also what is carried by individuals. This is especially important for communities whose experiences have been ignored or misrepresented by colonial records. Through storytelling, Gurnah restores dignity to lives that might otherwise remain invisible. His characters are often ordinary people, but their experiences reveal the deep structures of history. Their stories show how empire, trade, war, migration, and governance affect everyday existence. Literature therefore becomes a counter-archive. It preserves emotional truths that official histories may fail to recognize.

### **Human Resilience and Ethical Transformation**

Although Gurnah's fiction presents suffering, displacement, and domination, it is not hopeless. His novels also explore resilience, care, memory, and ethical responsibility. Characters survive by forming relationships, telling stories, remembering the dead, and seeking forms of belonging. These acts do not remove historical violence, but they make continued life possible. Human resilience in Gurnah's fiction is not presented as simple strength. It is often quiet, wounded, and uncertain. Saleh Omar's narration, Hamza's rebuilding of life, Afiya's search for dignity, and Yusuf's movement through a world of uncertainty all show different forms of survival. These characters do not always control history, but



they respond to it in meaningful ways. This is where literature becomes ethically transformative. By reading Gurnah's fiction, readers are invited to enter the lives of people shaped by colonialism, migration, and exile. The novels create empathy, but not sentimental empathy. They ask readers to understand the structures that produce suffering. This movement from feeling to understanding is central to the transformative power of literature. Gurnah's fiction therefore does not merely describe injustice; it trains readers to recognize it. It asks us to think about how power works, how history is remembered, and how human beings continue to seek dignity under difficult conditions. This ethical function makes literature a powerful force of resistance and social transformation.

### Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction demonstrates that literature can function as a profound form of resistance. His novels resist colonial narratives, nationalist simplifications, historical silences, and institutional forms of domination. Through *Paradise, By the Sea*, and *Afterlives*, Gurnah reveals how individual lives are shaped by structures of power such as debt, trade, colonial administration, migration control, military discipline, family hierarchy, and postcolonial governance. The social transformation represented in his fiction is complex and often painful. Change does not occur as a smooth movement toward progress. Instead, transformation emerges through displacement, violence, memory, adaptation, and survival. Gurnah's characters live within oppressive structures, but they also negotiate, remember, narrate, and rebuild. Their lives show that resistance is not always dramatic; it can be found in endurance, storytelling, care, and the refusal to disappear from history. This paper has argued that Gurnah's fiction is significant because it connects literature, power, and social change. His narratives reveal how governance affects ordinary lives and how literature can expose the human consequences of political and historical systems. By recovering marginalized voices and examining the afterlives of colonialism and migration, Gurnah offers a literary vision rooted in empathy, historical awareness, and ethical responsibility. Ultimately, Gurnah's fiction teaches that literature is not separate from society. It participates in the struggle over memory, justice, and meaning. His novels remind us that storytelling can challenge power, preserve suppressed histories, and imagine more humane ways of understanding human life. In this sense, Gurnah's literature becomes not only a record of suffering but also a powerful act of resistance and transformation.

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