



Agency, Resistance, and The Persistence of Subalternity in Abdul Razak Gurnah

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Abstract

The themes of agency and resistance are central to understanding subaltern experiences, especially among individuals who are marginalised and displaced. In Abdulrazak Gurnah's selected works, these themes are deeply embedded in the narratives of characters who grapple with various forms of social, cultural, and political oppression. Here, agency signifies the capacity of individuals to make choices and take actions that confront and question their subjugation. Resistance includes both direct challenges to authority and more nuanced, everyday acts of defiance that seek to restore a sense of dignity and autonomy.

Keywords: Agency, Resistance, Subalternity, Colonialism, Marginalised, Identity.

The assertion of agency and acts of resistance are critical themes in exploring subaltern experiences, particularly in the context of marginalised and displaced individuals. In the selected works of Gurnah, these themes are intricately woven into the lives of characters who contend with the effects of social, cultural, and political oppression. Agency, in this context, refers to the ability of individuals to make decisions and take actions that challenge the conditions of their subjugation. Resistance encompasses both overt acts of defiance and subtle forms of opposition aimed at reclaiming dignity and self-determination. Gurnah's novels depict characters who, despite being subjected to historical and colonial forces, strive to carve out their identities in environments that often deny them recognition and voice. For instance, some characters attempt to reclaim their lost cultural identities by preserving traditions, while others resist by seeking education or forging new social connections. Though sometimes small and seemingly insignificant, these actions play a pivotal role in their quest for self-empowerment and identity formation.

The persistence of subalternity, however, remains a significant challenge. Even as characters engage in acts of resistance, they often find themselves trapped in cycles of marginalisation. Gurnah's narratives emphasize that subalternity is not merely a consequence of individual actions or choices but a structural condition rooted in historical injustices and ongoing socio-political inequalities. The lingering effects of colonialism, displacement, and trauma create barriers that are difficult to overcome, no matter how determined the individual may be.

Memory and trauma are also central to the characters' struggles for agency. The act of remembering past experiences, whether of migration, loss, or oppression becomes a form of resistance in itself. By revisiting and confronting their histories, characters are able to assert control over their narratives and challenge the dominant forces that seek to erase or diminish their experiences. Gurnah's portrayal of memory as a tool for resistance highlights the enduring connection between past and present in the lives of the marginalised.

Additionally, the theme of hybrid identity emerges as a significant outcome of resistance and agency. As characters navigate multiple cultural influences, they often embrace hybrid identities that reflect their origins and new realities. This negotiation of identity is portrayed as both a challenge and a source of empowerment, enabling characters to move beyond rigid labels and assert their individuality. Gurnah's works give voice to the subaltern experience through these nuanced portrayals. His narratives shed light on the complexities of resistance and agency, showing that even the most minor acts of defiance can profoundly impact identity and self-perception. By centering marginalised characters' stories, Gurnah highlights their struggles and celebrates their resilience and determination to be heard. This chapter, therefore, underscores the intricate relationship between resistance, memory, and identity, offering a deeper understanding of the enduring nature of subalternity in a postcolonial world.



Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to make choices and take actions that challenge their oppressed status. In Gurnah's works, characters often face significant social, cultural, and political barriers but find ways to assert their autonomy. These assertions may take the form of preserving cultural heritage, seeking new opportunities, or redefining their roles in society. Such actions reflect the characters' determination to overcome their circumstances and assert control over their lives.

Resistance, in Gurnah's narratives, manifests both explicitly and implicitly. Explicit resistance can be seen in acts of defiance against social or political oppression. In contrast, implicit resistance may involve subtler actions, such as the preservation of cultural identity or the refusal to conform to imposed norms. Gurnah skillfully portrays how these forms of resistance are essential for the characters' survival and self-empowerment.

Subaltern theory, a critical framework developed to analyze the experiences of marginalised groups, is particularly relevant to Gurnah's portrayal of his characters. The term "subaltern" refers to those who are socially, politically, and economically excluded from dominant power structures. In Gurnah's novels, subaltern characters often deal with displacement and the legacies of colonialism. By highlighting their struggles and resilience, Gurnah sheds light on the enduring impact of historical injustices and the ongoing fight for recognition and voice.

Through a detailed exploration of these themes, Gurnah's works reveal the intricate connections between resistance, memory, and identity. The characters' journeys illustrate that despite persistent subjugation, there is hope and potential for self-determination. This analysis provides a deeper understanding of the complexities of subalternity and the ways in which literature can serve as a powerful medium for expressing the voices of the marginalised.

Gurnah's novels consistently portray characters who face displacement and its accompanying challenges, such as social marginalisation, cultural alienation, and economic hardships. Scholar Laheg Abderrahmane in his dissertation stated;

Abdulrazak Gurnahisa Tanzanian-born British author. He fled the country after the coup of 1964 and the ensuing persecution and went to England to further his studies. Well renowned for his works dealing with the tormenting effects of colonialism, the refugee dilemma, and displacement in the world. The themes of long term and destructive impact were predominant in his writing and the turmoil in which immigrants live. (Laheg 2)

However, despite the adversity they encounter, these characters actively assert their agency, seeking autonomy and self-determination in complex and often hostile environments. This exploration delves into how Gurnah's characters assert agency in various forms, offering a nuanced understanding of their struggles and triumphs in reclaiming control over their lives.

One prominent way Gurnah's characters assert agency is through their efforts to reclaim their cultural identity.

In *By the Sea*, Gurnah illustrates the power of supportive communities through the relationship between Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud, two displaced Zanzibari men who find solace in each other's shared history and experiences of exile. Initially wary of one another, their connection grows as they exchange stories, bridging the gaps of misunderstanding and alienation that displacement has created. Their bond is not just a personal reconciliation but also a form of collective resistance against the erasure of their pasts and identities. By supporting each other emotionally and intellectually, they reclaim their narratives, challenge the isolation imposed by their migrant status, and forge a space of belonging in a foreign land. This solidarity, built on shared struggles and memories, exemplifies how displaced individuals resist marginalization by forming meaningful, self-sustaining communities. In *By the Sea*, Gurnah illustrates We were strangers, and now we are not. We have told each other stories, and that has made us less strange to each other. Perhaps that is all we can do, to make the world less strange, less lonely (Gurnah 178).

In *Dottie*, the protagonist, Dottie Badoura Fatma Balfour, embodies social resistance through her refusal to conform to the racial and class prejudices that seek to marginalise her. As a Black



woman in post-war Britain, she faces systemic discrimination and exclusion, yet she resists by striving for education, financial independence, and self-definition. Rather than succumbing to societal expectations that dictate subservience and invisibility, Dottie actively pursues knowledge and asserts her autonomy in a world that seeks to deny her both. Her quiet but firm rejection of imposed inferiority and her determination to navigate a hostile society on her own terms illustrate a subtle resistance that challenges the social hierarchies designed to suppress her. Through her resilience, Gurnah highlights how everyday acts of defiance contribute to broader struggles against inequality. Gurnah stated;

She would not be what they wanted her to be, a shadow in their world, a servant to their needs. She would be herself, whatever that meant, and she would find a way to make it mean something (Gurnah 92).

In *Memory of Departure*, Hassan's brother, Ahmed, exemplifies political resistance by engaging in radical activism against the oppressive political system in postcolonial East Africa. Unlike Hassan, who remains largely disillusioned and powerless in the face of corruption and social decay, Ahmed actively aligns himself with political movements that seek to challenge the ruling elite and their exploitative policies. His involvement in anti-government activities reflects a conscious effort to dismantle structures that perpetuate inequality and subjugation. However, Gurnah also portrays the risks associated with such activism, as Ahmed's defiance places him in constant danger of state repression. Through Ahmed's political engagement, the novel illustrates both the necessity and peril of resistance, showing how the fight for justice and systemic change is fraught with challenges but remains an essential means of reclaiming agency and challenging marginalisation.

Gurnah's works often explore the lasting impact of colonialism on the lives of displaced and marginalised individuals. Social and political resistance in these narratives frequently involves challenging the legacies of colonial rule, including the economic, social, and cultural structures that continue to perpetuate inequality. Characters resist colonial and postcolonial oppression by reclaiming their histories, challenging colonial narratives, and asserting their cultural identities. This resistance is an act of defiance against historical injustices and a means of affirming their autonomy and self-worth in the present. By confronting the remnants of colonialism, characters work to dismantle the structures that have long upheld their subaltern status.

In *By the Sea* and *Memory of Departure*, Gurnah portrays characters actively engaging in social and political resistance to protest marginalisation and oppression. These novels highlight how individuals navigate complex social and political landscapes, using various forms of resistance to assert their autonomy and challenge systemic inequalities.

. One significant form of resistance in *Admiring Silence* is the protagonist's decision to critique colonial history and its ongoing impact on his life. Although he initially remains silent about his identity and past, he gradually confronts the internal and external forces that seek to suppress his story. His decision to reflect on his cultural heritage and question the dominant narratives imposed by colonialism is an act of intellectual and political resistance. This self-reflection allows him to reclaim control over his identity, rather than allowing it to be defined by societal expectations or colonial legacies. Gurnah in his novel *Admiring Silence* stated, Colonialism did not end with independence; it just changed its clothes and learned new tricks. It was in the way people looked at me, the way they spoke to me, the way they expected me to be grateful for their tolerance" (Gurnah 156).

The complex interplay between agency, resistance, and subalternity in Gurnah's works reflects the multifaceted nature of identity formation and social struggle. While acts of resistance and self-assertion are critical for challenging marginalisation, they are often not enough to fully overcome the systemic forces that perpetuate subalternity. Gurnah's characters must navigate a delicate balance between preserving their cultural heritage and adapting to new environments, all while resisting societal pressures to conform or assimilate.



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