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Research Article

National Consciousness and the Politics of Remembering in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*

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Abstract: This paper examines how Abdulrazak Gurnah portrays the concept of national consciousness in *Admiring Silence*. The novel narrates the story of an unnamed man who leaves Zanzibar and tries to establish a life in England. He retains memories of home that shape his identity. His memories reflect how a nation strives to express a shared story about its people. At the same time, these memories reveal the pain and instability that come when real lives do not fit the official story. The study draws on the work of Pierre Nora and Maurice Halbwachs to examine how memory shapes a nation. Nora explains that memory manifests form through places and symbols that people return to in thought. Halbwachs explains that memory develops inside social groups and changes with them. These concepts clarify how the unnamed narrator in the novel struggles with both personal memory and state-promoted memory. The paper argues that Gurnah represents national consciousness as never fixed. It emerges from conflict, hope, fear, and loss. The unnamed narrator wants to belong; however, he also sees how nations hide their wounds. His memories reflect his desire for connection and his wish to speak the truth of his past. The novel presents an in-depth investigation of an individual's life between home and exile from his perspective.

Keywords: : Refugee; Memory; National consciousness; Identity; Exile

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Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah often writes about people who leave home and try to rebuild their lives in host lands. Their memories travel with them and shape the way they understand who they are. In *admiring silence*, he presents an unnamed narrator who leaves Zanzibar and settles in England. He tries to adapt to a new life; however, he carries a strong feeling of the past. His thoughts reflect how memories influence his behavior and feelings. They also highlight how national consciousness develops through the memories people hold about their homeland. National consciousness usually forms through shared narratives. These narratives help people feel that they belong to one community. A state often promotes a single narrative to strengthen unity. It uses public speeches, school lessons, and symbols to support the concept. However, lived experience is seldom simple. Many people remember events differently. Gurnah shows this contrast through the unnamed narrator, who recalls moments of hope in Zanzibar alongside confusion and fear. His memories reveal that the public image of the nation does not always match the personal truth experienced by ordinary people. Memory becomes significant in the novel because it keeps returning to the narrator even when he tries to silence it. Scholars like Pierre Nora and Maurice Halbwachs help us understand this role of memory. Nora explains that memory is carried through people, objects, and shared behaviors. These serve as memories of the past. Halbwachs explains that memory develops through social groups; a person remembers not only through personal thought but also through the influence of family, the community, and the larger society. When applying these concepts to the unnamed narrator, he remembers Zanzibar through the people he knew and through the political world that shaped him. His memories persist with him in England and influence how he sees the new society. The power of memory becomes clear when he returns to Zanzibar after many years. The familiar views of the island awaken feelings he tried to forget. He realizes that he has changed over the years. The place also feels different from the one he left; this experience shows that memory does not remain stable. As an individual's behavior changes, it evolves. Gurnah uses this incident to portray how exile affects the meaning of home. The return does not give him full peace because he now stands between two lands. His memories hold both comfort and loss.

National consciousness becomes more complex when seen through these changes in memory. The protagonist remembers the early hopes of independence in Zanzibar. He also remembers disappointments that develop beneath those hopes. Gurnah suggests that national consciousness is not one stable idea; it develops through conflict and change. It contains dreams of a shared identity; however, it also holds many unresolved problems. This paper analyses *Admiring silence* using concepts from memory studies. It argues that Gurnah uses the narrator to portray how personal memory interacts with the broader narrative of the nation. The protagonist's memories question the official image of national unity. They reveal emotions of their lives in England, and their return to Zanzibar shows how memory crosses borders and continues to influence identity. In this narrative, Gurnah presents national consciousness as a process shaped by ordinary people who have mixed feelings about home, exile, and belonging.

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Memory Foundations and the Formation of National Consciousness

Memory is key to how people see themselves and their nation. In *Admiring silence*, Abdulrazak Gurnah uses the protagonist's early memories of Zanzibar to portray how national consciousness begins long before a person learns political ideas. These memories grow through family life, school experience, neighborhood voices, and the shifting hopes of the community. When the narrator later moves to England, these early scenes remain within him and form the base of how he sees both home and exile. His memories help us understand how both shared stories and individual emotions shape national identity.

Maurice Halbwachs explains that memory forms through social groups and helps a person feel continuous across time. He writes that "the memory involves the sense of a continuant self, a subject of experience that not only exists in time, but also exists through time" (Poole 267). This idea aligns with the protagonist, who leaves Zanzibar while holding the memories of his childhood. These memories keep him connected to the person he once was and guide how he understands the world he enters. They portray identity as developing under the influence of others. Family, friends, and community life all shape what he remembers and how he remembers.

Pierre Nora argues that memories are transmitted through places, objects, and communal practices. He says that "to identify the most obvious and crucial center of national memory, and then to reveal the existence of the invisible bonds tying them all together" (Nora 17). Nora also notes that the modern world feels a break between past and present because the past no longer feels rooted. He observes that "We have gone from the idea of a visible past, from a firmly rooted past to a past that we experienced as a radical break in continuity" (Nora 12). These ideas help us read the protagonist's struggle. His memories of Zanzibar feel bright when he remembers them, but uncertain when he tries to place them in his present life in England. They remain alive inside him, yet their meanings shift over time.

The protagonist's early memories of political transformation in Zanzibar portray how national consciousness develops through daily life. As a boy, he observes people discussing the end of colonial rule across Africa. He remembers how they followed each new independence event with excitement. He remembers people studying new maps and naming leaders who became symbols of hope. He describes this moment in clear detail when he says, "we kept track of other colonial departures like keeping score in a game: Ghana, Nigeria, Somalia, the Congo, Senegal, Mali, then much nearer home: Tanganyika, Uganda... In the streets, people bickered over the details of constitutional conferences, with their special clauses on this and that, over new flags and anthems, over designs of stamps. Heroic leaders indiscriminately filled the imagination: Kwame Nkrumah, Ahmed Sekou Toure, Patrice Lumumba, Jomo Kenyatta. There were new maps to be studied, new names, new countries that seemed to surface with incredible solidity out of the featureless mass that had previously been Africa" (Gurnah 73). These memories show that a sense of belonging grows when people see themselves as part of a wider moment. Hope becomes part of the national feeling. However, Gurnah also portrays that hope does not erase anxiety. The

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protagonist remembers how some groups carried anger and mistrust. He remembers how people lived in their own emotional spaces shaped by past wounds. He observes that "we were nowhere near each other, but us in our separate yards, locked in our historical ghettoes, self-forgiving and seething with intolerances, with racisms, and with resentments" (Gurnah 74). These memories show that national consciousness contains both unity and conflict. It develops through dreams of a shared future but also through unresolved histories. The protagonist's understanding of the nation is shaped by the community's mixed emotions long before he leaves Zanzibar.

Family life shapes his early perception of the nation. His mother listens to political speeches with calm attention. She claps at certain moments and laughs quietly when a speaker makes a sharp remark. The protagonist remembers these reactions with affection: "She listened to the endless speeches with the same unflurried air, clapped at the abuse of opponents, and abuse is mostly what it was, and laughed her silent, bubbling laughter when some meanness had struck home" (Gurnah 76). These simple moments reveal how national feelings grow inside homes. Children learn about their country from public speeches and their elders' quiet responses. Memory is constructed through these intimate events and helps create a personal sense of national belonging. Food memories also help shape his early identity. "We were offered a choice of the fruit in season: oranges, melons, mangoes, jackfruit, lychees, and, of course, bananas" (Gurnah 28). These events convey joy and comfort, but they shift when he recalls the hardships of colonial life. The contrast reveals how memory changes meaning as a person grows older. Minor details become symbols of both pleasure and loss. Through these moments, Gurnah shows that national consciousness is shaped not only by grand events but by the simple experiences of daily life.

Pierre Nora explains that national identity is shaped through an awareness of its divisions. "Identity sustained by an enduring sense of its own divisions, of the powerful polarities, out of which it was built: these included not only political polarities, but also religious and geo-historical ones" (Nora 21). The protagonist's memories reflect this idea. He sees unity and conflict living side by side. Pride appears beside fear. Hope appears beside suspicion. These contradictions become part of his early understanding of the nation. They also explain why he later feels caught between belonging and distance when he thinks of Zanzibar from England. He remembers independence as a time of energy and possibility, yet he also remembers how some groups refused to forget their suffering. "To the nationalist rhetoric of their opponents, they proclaimed a satirical reprise of their despised Africanness, mocked the nationalists for their newfound conscience, and promised them an accounting in the very near future. All of which came to pass with incredible promptness" (Gurnah 74). These memories show that national consciousness is shaped by emotions that are not always visible in public life. It grows through both hope and grievance. Across these early narratives, Gurnah lays the foundation for the protagonist's later reflections. Memory becomes the space where he holds his deepest sense of identity. It also becomes the place where he begins to question the nation's official story. When he later struggles in England or returns to Zanzibar, he carries the memories that shaped him as a child. These memories show

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that national consciousness is not a single truth. It is a mixture of personal stories that continue to guide people as they move through life.

Exile Return and the Shifting Shape of National Consciousness

Exile plays a powerful role in shaping the experience of national consciousness in *Admiring Silence*. When the protagonist leaves Zanzibar and settles in England, distance alters his relationship with memory and belonging. The separation from home creates silence not only in his speech but also in how he reshapes his past. His memories do not disappear; they become protective and perceptive. The silence reflects the difficulty of carrying a national identity beyond the space where it first emerged. Through exile, the protagonist learns that national consciousness cannot travel across borders. Life in England places the narrator in a position of uncertainty. He attempts to live within British society, yet he remains aware of his difference. This stress becomes visible in his personal relationships. His emotional struggle surfaces when his expressions of frustration grow stronger, and Emma reacts with irritation at his "loss of control" (Gurnah 203). This moment reveals how exile affects emotional balance. The protagonist's inability to openly express his past creates distance in his domestic life. Silence becomes a survival strategy, but it also deepens isolation.

National identity becomes even more fragile when it is questioned by authority. "What passport were you traveling on?" (Gurnah 230). The passport represents official recognition by the state. When he acknowledges the loss or misplacement of his British passport, his identity unravels. The officer's reaction is marked by ambiguity when he "raised his eyebrows in an ambiguous gesture" (Gurnah 231). It exposes how belonging depends on documents rather than lived experience. The protagonist's memories and years of residence hold little value in the face of state power. Exile also intensifies nostalgia, but Gurnah portrays nostalgia with caution. The protagonist's memories of home remain strong; however, they are influenced by distance and longing. This conflict reflects the idea that nostalgia carries both comfort and illusion. "The nostalgic is right not to feel at home in the world, to want to escape from it, but wrong in the desire to actually return to that home whose memory haunts him" (Harries 14). This insight explains why exile does not lead the protagonist toward peace. His memories offer refuge, yet they also prevent him from fully belonging to the present. The return to Zanzibar brings these conflicts into sharp focus. After seventeen years, the protagonist expects visible change. He observes," I looked out of the car window that I had expected more change. Everything looked familiar, if shoddier than I remembered" (Gurnah 123). The physical landscape appears unchanged, though time has altered its condition. This moment shows how memory preserves images more faithfully than reality. Then the return does not restore the belonging. It reveals the gap between a remembered home and a lived present.

National consciousness becomes more complex during this return. The protagonist recalls political changes and early independence movements, and how people across Africa followed decolonization with intense interest. He describes how they "kept track of other colonial departures like keeping score in a game" and studied new flags and anthems (Gurnah 73). These memories reflect a period of shared hope.

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Political unity existed alongside fear of future disasters. The narrator's reflections show that national consciousness was built on both anticipation and anxiety. The novel also exposes how nationalism fails to resolve historical divisions. The protagonist remembers that people were "nowhere near us, but us in our separate yards, locked in our historical ghettoes" (Gurnah 74). This statement challenges the idea of a unified nation. It shows that nationalism often masks unresolved conflict, that groups remember injustice differently, and that they refuse to forget their suffering. Later reflections confirm this failure of unity when people rejected reconciliation and embraced grievance and vengeance. These memories demonstrate that national consciousness cannot erase historical wounds.

Family memory continues to shape the protagonist's understanding of these events. His mother listens to political speeches with calm attention and reacts quietly to moments of cruelty. She "listened to the endless speeches with the same unflurried air… and laughed her silent" (Gurnah 76). Her response reflects a more profound awareness of political performance. Through her, the narrator learns that national rhetoric often lacks sincerity. Memory within the family becomes a space where official narratives are quality judged. Even the future he imagined reflects his conflicted relationship with the nation. His interest in plumbing becomes symbolic. He explains his plan to return and repair infrastructure by saying he will" offer my services to my homeland, strictly on an expatriate salary so that we can sort out those blocked toilets" (Gurnah 236). This statement combines irony and affection. It shows a desire to contribute while remaining distant. National consciousness appears here as both responsibility and frustration. Through exile and return, *Admiring silence* reveals the limits of nationalism. The narrator's memories resist the simple story of unity. They expose silences, contradictions, and unresolved histories. National consciousness emerges not as a stable identity but as a fragile construction shaped by memory, power, and distance. Gurnah uses the protagonist's journey to show that belonging is never guaranteed. It is questioned by the memories people carry.

Conclusion

This study examines how memory forms the heart of national consciousness in *Admiring Silence*. Abdulrazak Gurnah presents an unnamed narrator who carries his past like a quiet companion. His memories influence his self-perception and his interpretation of the nation he previously regarded as home. Through the movement between exile and return, the novel reveals that national identity is never a single or fixed idea. It grows through people who liv in different conditions and who remember events in different ways. Public speeches or political promises can never fully control national consciousness, given the shifting nature of memory. The early years of the unnamed narrator in Zanzibar illustrate how simple daily life lays the foundation for national identity. His memories of food, school, and cultural events form the base of how he sees the nation. It carries hope and conflict, unity and tension. They reveal that people build their idea of the nation from mixed emotions. The memories he holds from childhood remain alive even after he leaves home. They continue to shape his sense of belonging long after he begins a new life in England.

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Exile deepens this inner conflict. The narrator tries to silence his memories because he fears they will disturb the life he builds with Emma. However, memory does not fade. It rises in moments of doubt and loss. His life in England becomes a space of both opportunity and constraint. He learns new habits yet carries an unspoken weight. His silence becomes both a shield and a burden. Scenes such as Emma's frustration at his loss of control and the moment when he cannot present his passport show how exile exposes the limits of belonging. He realizes that national identity depends not only on emotion but also on the state's rule, as seen in these small yet powerful moments. Gurnah shows that exile creates a new kind of memory shaped by distance and uncertainty. The return to Zanzibar reveals another layer of national consciousness. The narrator hopes to feel at home yet finds that home is both familiar and changed. The landscape reminds him of childhood, yet carries signs of time neglect. These moments show that memory does not simply match reality. A place remembered through affection becomes more complex when seen again after a long absence. Return brings comfort but also estrangement. It shows that home exists not only in the present but also in the mind of the person who remembers it. The unnamed narrator also recalls political memories with a new understanding. As a child, he admired the excitement of independence and the rise of new African leaders. As an adult, he sees that the divisions that lived beneath this hope, conflict among groups, did not disappear with independence. It remained a part of the national story. These memories show that both conflict and shared dreams shape national consciousness. Gurnah uses the narrator's reflections to question whether unity promoted by the state can ever cover the deeper motions carried by its people.

The novel explains that personal memory is stronger than official narrative. Governments may try to create a single shared version of the nation, yet individual memories reveal more complex truths, as the narrator's memories deviate from the national narrative. They express pain, hope, fear, laughter, and confusion. They show a life shaped by many influences. Through these memories, Gurnah presents national consciousness as a living and changing process. It is not formed in a single moment. It grows through each person who remembers their past and carries it into their present. The protagonist's journey teaches that identity is not found in one place. It exists across borders, inside memory, and through the shifting experiences of life. Home becomes a mixture of past and present. Exile becomes part of one's self. National consciousness becomes a quiet and imperfect attempt to hold these pieces together. Through these gentle and reflective writings, Gurnah invites readers to see that memory is not only personal but also political. It builds nations and questions them. It brings comfort but also exposes hidden truths. In this balance, the novel shows how people deal with both belongings and distance as they move through the world.

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