



# The Psychodynamic Perspective of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart*

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Date of Submission: 27-10-2023

Date of Acceptance: 08-11-2023

## ABSTRACT:

The psychodynamic perspective analyses human behaviour at different stages of life and uncovers unconscious anxieties, desires and problems. The concept of inter-relationships within a family and childhood experiences are explored and as well as the defence mechanisms that are adopted by the characters are analysed. This study attempts to track down the psyches of the characters in the novel *Gravel Heart* by Abdulrazak Gurnah, who are unable to deal with their problems and fall into alienation and loneliness. They often escape their circumstances by exiling themselves from the community or immigrating to forget the place that caused traumatic experiences. An individual's relationship with family and the surrounding community in childhood is the beginning of the psychological history. Sigmund Freud's lectures on psychoanalysis are referred to analyse the psychological status of characters in the novel. Abdulrazak Gurnah is the first Tanzanian author who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2021 and also the second Black African Nobel Laureate. He is regarded for providing the world with interesting fiction that does not distort historical facts or diminish human values.

**KEYWORDS:** *Gravel Heart*, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Alienation, Psychodynamics, Sigmund Freud.

## I. INTRODUCTION:

Abdulrazak Gurnah a Tanzanian-born British writer is the first to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 2021, and the second Black African Nobel Laureate. He was born in Zanzibar island in 1948 and migrated to England at the age of 18 as a refugee when the 1964 revolution broke out. The experiences of Abdulrazak Gurnah with displacement have created a solid foundation for his writings on migration, alienation, self-identity, exile, colonialism, and postcolonial contexts. He is

the fourth Black writer to become a Nobel Laureate, after Wole Soyinka in 1986, Derek Walcott in 1992, and Tony Morrison in 1993. The Swedish Academy stated that Abdulrazak deserves the Nobel Prize for his "uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism." Abdulrazak Gurnah's writings are dominated in form and content by questions of identity, memory and transition, and how these are shaped by the legacy of colonialism, which the author effectively describes as "the great machinery of conquest and empire". Gurnah creates fictional characters who are constantly struggling between past and present to acquire new identities to adapt to their new environments. Gurnah's novels are based on the shattering effect that moving to a new geographical and social context has on the identity of the characters.

This paper focuses on how fear of abandonment, inferiority in the community, low self-esteem, fear of intimacy and death have created a psychological scar on Salim, the protagonist of the novel and his family. The psychological development of Salim from childhood to adolescence will be analyzed by applying the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis. He emphasizes that: "The significance of this period of childhood is twofold: on the one hand, during it the instinctual trends which the child has inherited with his innate disposition first become manifest, and secondly, others of his instincts are for the first time awakened and made active by external impressions and accidental experiences." Examining his patients, Freud revealed the roots of their problems, which were primarily psychological rather than physical. Evoking the immigrant experience with unsentimental precision and insight, *Gravel Heart* is a powerfully affecting story of isolation, identity, belonging and betrayal, and one of Abdulrazak



Gurnah's most incredible achievements. The novel deals with Salim, the protagonist of the novel who is in search of the reason for his father's deliberate isolation from the family and his mother's mediocrity. The defence mechanism of Salim and his parents have adapted to hide their pain is highlighted in this paper through the lens of psychoanalytical criticism. Salim tries to resolve the internal conflicts within himself but fails to get a satisfactory answer from either of his parents. Salim's dissatisfaction towards his mother's unresponsiveness to his questions is apparent when he declares:

"But she would not say more about Baba and her and it went on for years like that. If I gave her direct factual questions, sometimes she answered those but not if I wanted details of how it was with them" (32, 2017).

#### THE ANALYSIS OF PSYCHODYNAMICS IN THE NOVEL GRAVEL HEART

The novel *Gravel Heart* is named after a phrase from the Shakespearean play *Measure for Measure*, from the lines "Unfit to live or die. O, gravel heart." of the play. The title seems apt to narrative as it describes Salim's search for an answer to his father's voluntary isolation and his mother's strange behaviour. From the beginning of the novel, Gurnah portrays Salim as a tormented being who suffers because of something that happened in his childhood. Salim is a bookish child, a dreamer who is often haunted by nightmares. As his father, Masud abandons him and moves out, retreating into dishevelled introspection, Salim is confused and ashamed. Initially, Salim could not understand the reason behind his father's separation from the family, because it was kept a secret away from him by his mother and his uncle. On the day of his father's departure, Salim expresses his feelings:

"The moment of his leaving passed without my noticing at first. The everyday turmoil in my seven-year-old mind must have been absorbing and profound because it took me some time to understand that something important had happened to our lives." (33, 2017).

Salim thinks that the most precious and memorable period of his life was when he was a three-year-old child, living with his father as a natural family. This is described in the first chapter of the novel titled "A Stick of Candy Floss." Salim recollects some of his fondest memories with his father, which made him happy like:

"On hot days when the door was left open, the slight breeze lifted the doorcurtain in a lazy

billow into the room. Sitting in the sun on that doorstep with my stick of candy floss meant my father and I would have had our feet on the road, assuming my legs were long enough to reach the ground, and we would have seen life trickling by." (13, 2017)

The novel also reveals the enormous trauma of Salim and his confusion over the regular disappearances of his mother with a stranger without any explanation. Certain truths about his mother Saida's life become distressingly clear to him, but Salim manages only a half-conversation about it with her and becomes increasingly isolated within his anger and confusion. Repression in a neurotic patient is defined by Freud as "any powerful impulse or instinct which was embarrassingly continued to operate in the realm of the unconscious where it retained its full "cathexis" or investment of energy. This instinct began to seek substitutive satisfaction by circuitous routes and would produce neurotic symptoms" (Rafey, 2005). Humans are driven by fears, needs, desires and conflicts that take over our lives. However, fears and illegal and guilty desires are suppressed in our subconscious. Lois Tyson (2015) emphasized that "The unconscious is the storehouse of those painful experiences and emotions, those wounds, fears, guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts we do not want to know about because we feel we will be overwhelmed by them" (p. 29).

Salim's uncle Amir, the brother of his mother who becomes a senior diplomat offers him the opportunity to move to the United Kingdom for his studies. Since the home has become a place of disturbing memories, Salim agrees to his uncle's offer to move to London. Amir suggests Salim stay with him and his wife and study business in college. Salim's wish to study Literature is considered a "senseless obsessional action" done by him in favour of his father as his interest in Literature is embodied as his longing for his father. Salim's unconscious drive to pursue Literature was because the books that his father left at home became substitutes for his father's absence and are represented as a last remembrance of him. Salim immigrates to the United Kingdom (UK), a world that is a total contrast from his homeland, Zanzibar in terms of simplicity of place and people. Although in London he cherishes his childhood memories of living in Zanzibar, he never finds a reason to return to his homeland because for him his mother was the one who sent Salim to London:

"...mother was the one who sent me here and that something broke in my father's life a long



time ago and I was the debris of their disordered lives” (95, 2017).

He is afraid to return home and considers himself a permanent invalid, never feeling comfortable anywhere, exiled from every world. He is also uncertain about his life in a foreign country because he does not intend to live in London, he is running away from repressed childhood memories that interfere with his daily life and his existence. In due course, Salim sets in a search to uncover the story of his father’s voluntary exile and the secret that his mother has kept hidden. Salim discovers some parts of the truth that were kept hidden from him in a conversation with Aisha, his uncle’s wife. Salim learns from his aunt-in-law, Aisha that what Amir is doing isn’t for Salim’s sake, but additionally for his mother’s. She also discloses something strange, claiming that his uncle is attempting to pay off his debt. She mentions that his mother had to yield herself to Hakim to have Uncle Amir released from jail. Later, Salim informs his uncle that he wishes to study Literature instead of business management, hearing which Amir is enraged and dismisses Salim from the house. Salim then stays at a private house called the Organisation of United Africans, where he experiences the feeling of freedom. In this context, Amir describes Salim as immoral, inept and thankless.

As time passes, Salim feels that staying in London is unhomeliness and alienated which causes him psychological depression. Tyson defines this kind of dilemma in one of his books, *Critical Theory Today*, with the term “double-consciousness” which is often associated with an unstable sense of self. His cultural identity is stuck in this dichotomy: The living place or the hometown. Salim learns that his mother passes away a day before Christmas, but is unfortunate for not being able to attend her funeral. At the end of the novel, Gurnah gives voice to Salim’s father to narrate his story which makes Salim feel relieved. Masud never answered Salim’s questions previously as he uses silence as a technique to escape reality and also, he thinks it is not appropriate time to inform Salim. He says that Saida, Salim’s mother sacrifices her honour and lives with a stranger named Hakim, to save her brother Amir, who is accused of raping Hakim’s minor sister Aisha. This explains Masud’s mysterious behaviour and detachment from the family. Saida is wavered between keeping her family’s honour and satisfying Hakim’s outrageous demands, but ultimately, she chooses to sacrifice her dignity to rescue her brother. Siundu (2013) observed: “Gurnah’s fiction provides a narrative

where honour is infused in the characters’ grappling with the challenges of their respective socio-cultural status, while simultaneously capturing the fluidity of the concepts and experiences of honour and shame”(p. 4).

To escape the vicious looks of society and his wife’s recurrent absences, Salim’s father Masud chooses voluntary exile in a rented room. Masud resorts to silence, avoidance, exile, fear of intimacy and abandonment of the family as a means of defence to escape from his repressed emotions. The traumatic childhood experiences of Salim make him acknowledge his parents’ deaths as something inevitable, that cannot be avoided. Gurnah has skillfully represented the painful experiences faced at various stages of life, not only by Salim but also by his parents which is explained through Masud’s narration of the story. Masud’s narration gives us insight into the psychological scars that made him silent for years. After his mother’s death, Salim realizes that his home is no longer a home, so he makes a decision to go back to England. Being unable to come out from the clutches of fate, Salim and his father failed to change the reality. To move forward in this life, a man needs a gravel heart.

## II. CONCLUSION

Abdulrazak Gurnah’s recent novel *Gravel Heart* involves many illustrations of devastating inferences of psychological disturbances and their consequences which are explored through themes like family relationships, isolation and exile. According to Sigmund Freud, “the significance of infantile experiences should not be totally neglected, as people like doing, in comparison with the experiences of the subject’s ancestors and of his own maturity; on the contrary, they call for particular consideration. They are all the more momentous because they occur in times of incomplete development and are for that very reason liable to have traumatic effects.” The novel *Gravel Heart* refers to the story of a broken family and as well to the deterioration of a fragmented society that has lost its moral and cultural values. The horrific childhood experiences have left an indelible mark on Salim’s future life. His father’s isolation from his family and his mother’s suspicious behaviour have stunted the psychological development of Salim. Despite unleashing the truths and secrets that ripped his family apart and caused him psychological turmoil, he could never come to good terms with his unconscious to have peace in his life or to start over with his father in the place they both had memories



in. Hence Salim chooses to go back to London preferring his solitude.

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