

THE SEA IMAGE AND THE POETICS OF CULTURAL
DISLOCATION IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S NOVELS

Saydamatova Dilafruz Khamidullo qizi

Namangan State University

Third-year doctoral researcher (PhD student)

dilafruzsaydamatova97@gmail.com

Abstract: *This article explores the symbolic and narratological functions of the sea image in Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction, focusing particularly on the novels "By the Sea", "Desertion", and "Gravel Heart". The study examines how the sea operates not merely as a geographical setting but as a multidimensional metaphor representing migration, memory, displacement, and postcolonial identity crisis. Drawing on postcolonial theory, narratology, and linguopoetic analysis, the research demonstrates that the sea in Gurnah's novels embodies liminality and cultural dislocation, functioning as a space between homeland and exile, memory and forgetting, belonging and alienation. The findings reveal that Gurnah transforms the sea into a psychological and symbolic structure through which fragmented subjectivity and traumatic historical consciousness are expressed. The article concludes that the poetics of the sea in Gurnah's fiction reflects broader tendencies in contemporary postcolonial literature, where spatial imagery becomes a central mechanism for representing cultural instability and existential uncertainty.*

Keywords: *Abdulrazak Gurnah, sea imagery, cultural dislocation, postcolonial poetics, migration, memory, identity, narratology, linguopoetics, liminality.*

ОБРАЗ МОРЯ И ПОЭТИКА КУЛЬТУРНОЙ ДИСЛОКАЦИИ В
РОМАНАХ АБДУЛРАЗАКА ГУРНЫ

Аннотация: В данной статье исследуются символические и нарратологические функции образа моря в творчестве Абдулразака Гурны на материале романов “By the Sea”, “Desertion” и “Gravel Heart”. Анализируется, каким образом море выступает не только географическим пространством, но и многослойной метафорой миграции, памяти, культурной дезориентации и постколониального кризиса идентичности. На основе постколониальной теории, нарратологии и лингвопоэтического анализа выявляется, что образ моря в романах Гурны представляет собой лиминальное пространство между родиной и изгнанием, памятью и забвением, принадлежностью и отчуждением. Исследование показывает, что писатель превращает море в психологическую и символическую структуру, посредством которой выражаются фрагментарная субъективность и травматическое историческое сознание. Делается вывод о том, что поэтика моря в произведениях Гурны отражает общие тенденции современной постколониальной литературы, где пространственная символика становится важным механизмом репрезентации культурной нестабильности и экзистенциальной неопределённости.

Ключевые слова: Абдулразак Гурна, образ моря, культурная дислокация, постколониальная поэтика, миграция, память, идентичность, нарратология, лингвопоэтика, лиминальность.

Introduction

Contemporary postcolonial literature increasingly focuses on the representation of migration, displacement, and fragmented identity as central dimensions of human experience. In this literary context, spatial imagery acquires not only descriptive but also psychological, ideological, and cultural significance. Among the most recurrent symbolic structures in postcolonial fiction, the image of the sea occupies a particularly important place because it embodies movement, transition, separation, and historical memory simultaneously. The sea functions as a liminal space situated between homeland and exile, memory and forgetting, belonging and alienation [4].

The works of Abdulrazak Gurnah represent one of the most significant contributions to contemporary postcolonial fiction precisely because of their deep engagement with migration, historical trauma, and cultural dislocation. Gurnah's narratives are shaped by the colonial history of East Africa, the Indian Ocean world, and the psychological consequences of displacement. His fiction repeatedly explores how individuals reconstruct their identities under conditions of exile, social fragmentation, and historical instability. In many of his novels, especially "By the Sea", "Desertion", and "Gravel Heart", the sea becomes a central metaphorical and narratological structure through which emotional and cultural experiences are articulated [1].

In Gurnah's fiction, the sea is not merely a physical landscape or geographical background. Rather, it operates as a symbolic and psychological territory reflecting the instability of postcolonial subjectivity. Maritime imagery in his novels is closely connected with memory, silence, trauma, and identity crisis. Characters who cross or inhabit maritime spaces frequently experience emotional alienation, cultural hybridity, and existential uncertainty.

Thus, the sea functions as a narrative mechanism through which fragmented consciousness and displaced identity are represented [5].

From a postcolonial perspective, the sea also embodies the historical realities of colonial trade routes, forced migration, and intercultural encounters within the Indian Ocean region. Unlike traditional colonial narratives that romanticize maritime exploration and imperial expansion, Gurnah reconstructs the sea as a space marked by displacement, historical violence, and psychological rupture. This transformation allows maritime imagery to acquire anti-colonial and postcolonial meanings within the narrative structure [7].

Theoretical approaches developed by Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, and Paul Ricoeur provide important conceptual foundations for understanding the symbolic role of the sea in Gurnah's fiction. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the "third space" explains the liminal condition of postcolonial subjects whose identities remain unstable and continuously negotiated [4]. Similarly, Said's reflections on exile demonstrate that displacement transforms both personal memory and cultural belonging into fragmented experiences [5]. Ricoeur's theory of memory further reveals that recollection is not a fixed reconstruction of the past but a selective and narrative process shaped by trauma and discontinuity [6].

Another important aspect of Gurnah's maritime poetics is its narratological function. The sea is frequently associated with fragmented chronology, retrospective narration, and symbolic silence. Emotional experience is rarely expressed directly in the novels; instead, psychological meaning is encoded through spatial metaphors, narrative gaps, and descriptive imagery. Such linguopoetic strategies contribute to the formation of a multi-

layered aesthetic system where external geography reflects internal emotional states.

Despite the growing international scholarly interest in Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction after the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2021, the symbolic and linguopoetic functions of maritime imagery remain insufficiently explored, particularly in relation to cultural dislocation and postcolonial identity formation. Most existing studies primarily focus on migration, exile, and memory, while the sea as a narratological and psychological structure has received relatively limited systematic attention.

Therefore, this article aims to investigate the image of the sea as a linguopoetic and narratological construct in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels and to analyze its role in representing cultural dislocation, fragmented identity, and postcolonial subjectivity. The study seeks to demonstrate that the poetics of the sea in Gurnah's fiction functions as a multidimensional symbolic system integrating spatial imagery, psychological depth, and historical consciousness within contemporary postcolonial literary discourse.

Main Body

The image of the sea in Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction performs multiple narratological, symbolic, and psychological functions. One of the most significant aspects of maritime imagery is its connection with migration and cultural displacement. In novels such as "By the Sea" and "Desertion", the sea represents a transitional zone where characters experience the instability of identity and the fragmentation of memory. The sea separates individuals from their homeland while simultaneously connecting them to unfamiliar cultural spaces. Thus, maritime space becomes a metaphor for the liminal condition of the postcolonial subject [4].

In “By the Sea”, the protagonist’s movement across the sea reflects not only physical migration but also emotional and existential transformation. The sea functions as a symbolic border between past and present identities. The narrator’s memories emerge through fragmented recollections associated with exile, loss, and displacement. This fragmented narrative structure demonstrates that memory in Gurnah’s fiction operates as a discontinuous and reconstructive process rather than a stable recollection of the past . As Paul Ricoeur argues, memory is always selective and mediated through narrative reconstruction, particularly under traumatic historical conditions [6].

Furthermore, the sea in Gurnah’s novels embodies the tension between belonging and alienation. Characters often remain psychologically suspended between different cultural worlds without fully belonging to either. This condition corresponds with Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity and the “third space,” where postcolonial identity is formed through cultural negotiation and instability [4]. Maritime imagery therefore symbolizes not only movement but also the impossibility of fixed identity within postcolonial experience.

Another important dimension of the sea image concerns silence and psychological repression. In many episodes, emotional trauma is not expressed directly through dialogue or explicit confession. Instead, Gurnah encodes psychological tension within descriptions of waves, distance, storms, and coastal landscapes. The sea becomes a symbolic language through which unspoken fear, nostalgia, and emotional fragmentation are articulated. Such linguopoetic strategies allow external geography to reflect internal psychological states.

In “Desertion”, the sea also acquires historical significance connected with colonial encounter and intercultural relations. The Indian Ocean region in Gurnah’s fiction represents a contact zone shaped by trade, migration, and imperial history. However, unlike colonial adventure narratives that idealize maritime expansion, Gurnah reconstructs the sea as a space marked by emotional instability and cultural dislocation. This transformation challenges imperial discourse and redefines maritime imagery within a postcolonial framework [7].

The narratological organization of Gurnah’s novels further strengthens the symbolic role of the sea. Temporal fragmentation, retrospective narration, and narrative silence mirror the unstable movement of water itself. Past and present continuously overlap, creating a fluid temporal structure. Such narrative instability reflects the fractured consciousness of characters whose identities are shaped by displacement and historical trauma.

Additionally, the sea frequently functions as a metaphor for existential uncertainty. Gurnah’s protagonists often perceive maritime space as simultaneously liberating and threatening. On the one hand, the sea symbolizes escape and mobility; on the other hand, it evokes loss, insecurity, and emotional isolation. This symbolic ambivalence creates a complex psychological poetics where freedom and alienation coexist within the same spatial image.

From a linguopoetic perspective, Gurnah employs metaphorical density and descriptive minimalism in representing maritime space. Rather than relying on excessive emotional narration, he constructs psychological depth through indirect symbolic details. Silence, pauses, and fragmented descriptions become essential mechanisms for conveying emotional experience. Consequently, the

sea evolves into a multidimensional poetic structure integrating memory, identity, and historical consciousness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the image of the sea in Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction functions as a central symbolic and narratological structure representing migration, cultural dislocation, and fragmented identity. The analysis demonstrates that maritime imagery in Gurnah's novels extends beyond geographical description and becomes a complex psychological and postcolonial metaphor.

The study reveals that the sea embodies liminality and existential instability, reflecting the emotional condition of postcolonial subjects who exist between homeland and exile, memory and forgetting, belonging and alienation. Through fragmented narrative structures, symbolic silence, and linguopoetic imagery, Gurnah transforms maritime space into a mechanism for expressing trauma and cultural displacement.

Furthermore, the article confirms that Gurnah's representation of the sea challenges traditional colonial maritime narratives by reconstructing the ocean as a site of historical rupture and psychological fragmentation rather than imperial expansion. The sea therefore becomes a space where personal memory intersects with collective historical experience.

Overall, this research contributes to the understanding of spatial symbolism in contemporary postcolonial fiction and demonstrates that the poetics of the sea in Gurnah's novels represents an important aesthetic model for articulating cultural hybridity, emotional displacement, and postcolonial subjectivity in modern literary discourse [1; 4; 7].

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