

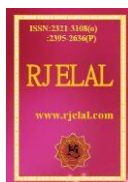


## NARRATING THROUGH LETTERS: EPISTOLARY VOICES IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S NOVELS

SAROJ KANTA BHUYAN<sup>1</sup>, Dr. MUKESH TIWARI<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, C. V. Raman Global University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English C. V. Raman Global University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India



### Article info

Article Received:24/10/2023

Article Accepted: 28/11/2023

Published online:04/12/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.4.137](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.4.137)

### Abstract

This research aims at examining the profound literary significance of letters in the novels of acclaimed Tanzanian-British writer Abdulrazak Gurnah. His oeuvre, which spans several decades, is characterised by its rich engagement with the epistolary form, a unique narrative device that serves as a window into the inner lives of his characters and the complexities of the postcolonial world they inhabit. Through close anatomisation of Gurnah's works, such as *Pilgrims Way* and *Gravel Heart*, placing emphasis on the role of letters and correspondence as storytelling mechanisms, the paper unveils the emotions, memories, and experiences of the characters that emerge through epistolary voices. It extends to the examination of the historical and cultural contexts within which Gurnah's characters write, providing insight into the complexities of identity, migration, and the impact of colonial legacies. Furthermore, the paper also delves into the narrative power of epistolary voices, investigating how the letters in Gurnah's novels function as tools for character development, interpersonal relationships, and the revelation of untold histories. Gurnah's characters use letters not only to communicate with one another but also to reflect on their own lives and grapple with personal and collective traumas. The epistolary voices in the two novels serve as a form of resistance against the erasure of marginalised narratives and underscore the power of individual voices in shaping broader cultural and historical discourses. His works stand as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling through letters, urging readers to consider the multifaceted dimensions of the postcolonial experience and the role of literature in the amplification of marginalised voices.

**Keywords:** Abdulrazak Gurnah, epistolary voices, *Gravel Heart*, *Pilgrims Way*, postcolonial literature.

### Introduction

A letter serves as a mode of communication encompassing social roles, personal expression, and a fundamentally dialogic nature that enhances the

depth of interpersonal interactions. Through letters, narratives of individuals and societies are conveyed, offering insights into the author's inclinations and

methodologies. This process transforms a person into an entity that can be regarded as a writer.

The primary role of a letter is to facilitate communication between two individuals. However, beyond this dyadic interaction, a letter can also represent an intersection of two distinct cultures, environments, sensibilities, and linguistic styles, contingent on the identities of the correspondents. These elements are vividly encapsulated within the letter, painting a rich tapestry of the context. Thus, a letter inherently embodies diverse viewpoints and constructs a detailed portrayal of a particular setting.

During the European Renaissance, scholars reevaluated the letter as a means of communication. Petrarch revisited Cicero's perspectives on epistolary communication, while Erasmus engaged in an in-depth examination of letters, subsequently developing his own treatise on the topic. In the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson further articulated the nuances of what he termed "the epistolik art," thereby enriching the genre's significance. This era, often referred to as "the golden age of letter writing" (Dawson 20), saw a heightened emphasis on letter writing. Coinciding with this period was the emergence of the novel as a literary form. The inherent ability of letters to convey emotions directly and authentically resonated well with the novel genre, which was increasingly focused on exploring the private lives of individuals.

During this era, conciseness in language became increasingly valued, leading to a refinement in linguistic expression. The letter, with its emphasis on 'dialogue' at its core, seamlessly integrated with the novelistic form. It can be argued that the epistolary genre truly came into its own in eighteenth-century England, evolving concurrently with the novel. By the nineteenth century, the letter had risen to prominence, extensively utilised for expressing personal sentiments, thoughts, and viewpoints, transcending its original informational function. Into the twentieth century, the letter was often regarded as a medium for confessional writing, as noted by Eliot et al.

The narrative technique of conveying stories through letters, a method as old as literature itself, is adeptly employed by Abdulrazak Gurnah, a Tanzanian-British author renowned for his extensive exploration of postcolonial themes over several decades. This research endeavours to examine the nuanced use of epistolary narration in Gurnah's work, with a particular emphasis on the role of letters and correspondence as central narrative elements. Gurnah skilfully utilises letters not just as elements of plot development, but as a profound tool for delving into the psychological depths of his characters, their personal challenges, and the wider socio-political contexts they navigate.

In works like *Pilgrims Way* (1988) and *Gravel Heart* (2017), the characters created by Gurnah traverse the intricate landscapes of self-identity, migration, and the enduring effects of colonialism, utilising letters as a vital conduit for their expression. These epistles unveil a spectrum of emotions, recollections, and life stories, offering readers a distinctive viewpoint to comprehend the characters' inner worlds. In Gurnah's skilled narrative, the epistolary format emerges as an influential instrument for the evolution of character and the disentanglement of complex personal relationships. Furthermore, this approach facilitates the exploration of hidden histories and individual stories, which are frequently marginalised in mainstream narratives.

This study intends to meticulously dissect the subtle techniques employed by Gurnah in integrating the epistolary form to enrich his narrative craft. It posits that the letters in Gurnah's literary works transcend the role of mere narrative adornments, playing a crucial role in elucidating the intricacies of the postcolonial experience. Through a detailed examination of these epistolary components, the paper aims to shed light on the ways in which Gurnah's characters engage with written correspondence to introspect, confront both individual and shared traumas, and express their identities in a milieu influenced by significant historical and cultural shifts.

Through this analysis, the research highlights the far-reaching consequences of Gurnah's literary

endeavours, underscoring the pivotal role of individual narratives in forming collective historical consciousness and stories. It contends that the epistolary elements in Gurnah's novels extend beyond mere mechanisms of storytelling; they act as tools of defiance against the sidelining of certain stories within the postcolonial narrative. The ultimate objective of this paper is to enhance the comprehension of Gurnah's literary technique and to underscore the vital importance of the epistolary format in depicting the diverse aspects of the postcolonial reality, particularly in giving voice to narratives that are often overlooked or silenced in the wider realm of literature.

### Discussion

In *Pilgrims Way*, the epistolary format serves as a recurrent theme, with Daud, the protagonist, being the central figure in all correspondences either as sender or recipient. This study delves into the multifaceted roles these letters play within the narrative and scrutinises Daud's specific choice of letters as his medium for seeking social engagement. It is crucial to acknowledge that these letters are predominantly fictitious, existing within the realms of Daud's mental landscape. Presented as Daud's unspoken internal dialogues, they are visually distinguished in the text through italicisation, serving both thematic and rhetorical purposes. As noted by Traseira, these letters psychologically assist Daud in navigating experiences of discrimination and racism, employing a strategy that avoids overt confrontation or resistance (240). This research further examines how Daud utilises the epistolary form to process the trauma associated with displacement and reveals how this method effectively addresses the broader narrative of colonialism, particularly the aspects involving dislocation. Additionally, the study highlights how these letters function as catalysts for memory, thereby illuminating the gap between the aspirations and disenchantment experienced by migrants.

The prominent role of the letter in *Pilgrims Way* is pivotal for grasping the novel's core theme. A thorough examination of the letter's structure and purpose sheds light on Daud's peripheral status and

his stagnation throughout most of the narrative. Altman emphasises the necessity of exploring the unique communicative methods inherent in epistolary literature for a deeper understanding and appreciation of its artistic qualities. He further observes:

[...] for the letter novelist the choice of the epistle as narrative instrument can foster certain patterns of thematic emphasis, narrative action, character types, and narrative self-consciousness [ . . . ] for the reader of epistolary literature, the identification of structures common to letter novels can provide (and expose) important models and perspectives for interpretation of individual works. (9)

The utilisation of the letter in the novel emerges as a mechanism for creating humour, thereby serving as an insightful instrument for comprehending how Daud, paradoxically, evades self-pity in spite of formidable challenges.

The letters in the narrative serve as strategic tools for navigating through an unsympathetic social landscape, providing Daud with a means to cultivate a personal voice and foster acceptance. Catherine Gubenatis posits that letters in fiction act as a medium to express a character's internal thoughts. Given that *Pilgrims Way* is primarily conveyed through Daud's perspective, Gubenatis's concept proves enlightening. Typically, the narration recounts events external to Daud's mind, but suddenly, Daud starts to articulate his "internal states" as mental letters. This portrayal of imaginative, unwritten letters disrupts the continuity of the narrative.

In this context, the epistolary elements serve not merely as a mechanism to regulate the progression of the narrative but also act as a medium through which Daud's inner turmoil as an immigrant is vividly portrayed. This struggle is rooted in his efforts to assert his identity within a space that is distinctly liminal and marginal. The initiation of this correspondence coincides with a scene where Daud is employed in the operating theatre of a hospital, assuming the role of an orderly. He self-deprecatingly refers to his position as akin to

*"a kind of glorified cleaner"* (Gurnah 15), underscoring his sense of displacement and subordination. He muses that, given a choice, he would have rejected night-duty, unlike the nurses who have the option to decline.

Contrasting with the nurses, who presumably possess some degree of autonomy, the narrative highlights the stark absence of agency among the orderlies, as denoted by the phrase "the orderlies had no choice" (16). This enforced passivity significantly impacts Daud, compelling him to initiate correspondence with Solomon, the superintendent of the theatre. The intensity of his emotional and cognitive disarray is vividly conveyed through the depiction of him grappling with the task of letter-writing, a process accompanied by "a buzzing in his head." This metaphorical buzzing signifies the overwhelming nature of his experiences and the internal turmoil he faces in articulating his thoughts and feelings:

Dear theatre superintendent [ . . . ] I greet you, ineffable, Solomon. An orderly is an orderly, and little can be done about that. I write simply to register a protest concerning your cruel rule that I should have to do a month of night-duty. I'm of a sensitive disposition, and I find the solitariness of those long nights turns me into a hysterical paranoid. I cannot promise not to run amok in the plaster store. (16)

Daud utilises letter writing as a tool for expressing dissent, yet the potential impact of this method is undermined by his acquiescence to the unchangeable nature of his circumstances, succinctly summarised in his resigned acceptance that "an orderly is an orderly." This phrase poignantly underscores his feelings of isolation and a profound sense of powerlessness. However, the narrative adeptly employs Daud's sense of humour as a device to highlight his resilience and self-determination. His use of humour positions him as a self-aware individual, one who recognises himself as a victim of adverse political dynamics. Despite this recognition, he notably avoids succumbing to self-pity, instead, maintaining a degree of agency and dignity in his self-perception.

In Daud's subsequent epistolary instance, which unfolds following a nocturnal shift, an intriguing interaction transpires. As he makes his way home, Daud observes an individual seated in a vehicle amid the congestion of traffic. He initiates communication through a gesture, yet the man's reaction is one of perplexity, as he scans his surroundings, ostensibly uncertain of the intended recipient of Daud's gesture. Unfazed, Daud persists, augmenting his wave with a notably "powerful" smile. Despite this effort, the man in the car responds by deliberately closing and then reopening his eyes, resolutely fixing his gaze forward, effectively disregarding Daud. It is within this milieu of dismissal and non-recognition that Daud is propelled to articulate his frustrations and sense of alienation in his letter, using the medium as a channel to convey his experiences of social invisibility and disconnection.

In his narrative, Daud strategically employs the epistolary format as a tool to reestablish his identity and presence within a societal structure that seems to systematically exclude him. This approach resonates with Stuart Hall's conceptualisation of marginalised individuals utilising creative means "to carve a new kind of space at the centre" (Stein 21). Importantly, this study should also consider two additional letters Daud composes that same morning, which further elucidate the depth of his marginalisation in various public spheres and his employment of the private act of letter writing as a form of engagement and response.

In the wake of his attempt to communicate with the man in the car, Daud's attention shifts to a girl crossing the street. Her apparent disinterest in him strikes a chord, as he is particularly struck by "the confidence with which she could seem so cold" (Gurnah 26). In response, Daud assigns a fictional name to her and mentally composes a letter directed at her. This internal "grumbling" through a letter to an unresponsive audience becomes a symbolic act, showcasing his response to perceived indifference and his struggle for acknowledgment in a context where his presence is seemingly overlooked or disregarded:

Dear Pale Face ... what was that look for? Did you think I was studying you with desire throbbing through my veins? Is that why you looked amused? Black boy lusts after white flesh: this morning a girl was accosted by a red-eyed black boy on the Kingsmead Bridge. He stormed towards her through raging traffic, oblivious of the cars, goaded by a mad lust. "Who am I? What I am doing here?" he screamed, tormented by clash of cultures. The girl has asked for her name to be withheld, but the alienated creature's name is Daud. You have been warned. (26)

In this letter, Daud's perception as a black migrant feeling endangered is highlighted. He perceives the media as a protector of native populations, a safeguard he finds inaccessible. The letter points to the media as a catalyst for racist attitudes towards black individuals. Simultaneously, it reveals Daud's own lack of confidence, marked by intense fear and xenophobia.

Although the letter is Daud's attempt to address racism rooted in historical factors outside of his control, the storey uses these exaggerated replies to show how migrants' psychological distress frequently results from their own anxieties and insecurities. The letter makes reference to how white racist discourse presents black men as naturally violent and unmanageable. Angela Y. Davis, addressing similar issues in the U.S., contends that "the myth of the black rapist has been methodically conjured up whenever recurrent waves of violence and terror against the black community have required convincing justification" (173). Daud's imagined letters reflect his awareness of being entrapped in both a traumatic collective history and a stereotype-laden present.

The apprehension evident in the letter, when examined through Frantz Fanon's theory of "negrophobia" which he delineates as "phobia as a disguised expression of sexual desire" (Fuss 31), assumes a layered significance. This theory posits that deep-seated stereotypes, particularly the portrayal of black men as potential rapists, have profoundly impacted the white psyche, resulting in the criminalisation and pathologisation of any

possible attraction a white girl might feel towards a man of colour.

However, the narrative intricately reveals that Daud's anxieties are not unfounded but are rooted in his own lived reality: he harbours romantic feelings for a white girl named Catherine. Importantly, the story actively deconstructs the myth of black male sexual aggression. This deconstruction is accomplished firstly through the portrayal of Daud as he rebuffs the advances of a white Swiss woman, and secondly, through his depiction as a sympathetic, kind, and gentle character, especially in his interactions with Catherine.

Contravening the stereotype of the hypersexualised black male, the narrative presents Daud as a character who is seemingly incapable of causing harm to native-born British girls. This portrayal of his inherent harmlessness is further emphasised in a scene where he participates in an evening gathering for foreign students along with Karta. In this setting, Daud is characterised as an individual marginalised and isolated, engaged in a quest for community and belonging, a quest that ultimately remains unfulfilled. This portrayal underscores the complexity of Daud's character and situation, as he navigates the intersections of race, desire, and societal perception in a context that is fraught with historical and cultural prejudices.

Daud's perception of alienation from a welcoming and sociable milieu is markedly accentuated by his developing affection for Catherine, a white nurse with whom he is professionally acquainted. This burgeoning attraction exacerbates his sense of isolation and self-inflicted distress. As articulated in the novel, "The more he saw her, the more his desire and his loneliness seemed like self-mortification, like something he did to himself" (Gurnah 46). This observation poignantly encapsulates the complexity of Daud's internal struggle, intertwining his deepening emotional attachment with a heightened awareness of his own solitude.

In an attempt to navigate these tumultuous emotions, Daud engages in the imaginative act of drafting a hypothetical letter to Catherine,



contemplating an invitation to dinner. However, when he eventually broaches the suggestion in reality, Catherine's polite refusal, "I can't go out tonight" (51), triggers a subdued yet significant response from Daud, who dismisses his invitation as merely "just a thought" (51). Following this interaction, Daud's response manifests in the creation of an intricate, imagined letter. This epistolary construct serves as a means for him to intellectually and emotionally process the rejection, allowing him to rationalise and cope with the feelings of humiliation that ensue.

This aspect of Daud's narrative underscores the role of the epistolary form as a psychological tool for self-reflection and catharsis. It highlights how imagined correspondences can provide a safe space for the articulation of complex emotions and thoughts, particularly in contexts where direct expression is constrained by societal norms and personal insecurities. The narrative thus explores the intricate dynamics of unrequited affection, racial and cultural barriers, and the individual's quest for emotional solace in the face of social exclusion:

Dear Catherine, it was a mistake to ask you, an even bigger mistake to panic when you said no. I panic at the slightest excuse, I'm ashamed to say. My cowardice, is due to a sort of upbringing I had . . . as a result of all these, dear Catherine [ . . . ] although I'm sure you've already guessed, I'm afraid of everything. And you said no when all seemed well. Why did you do that? Where will I find the strength to ask you again? (51)

The act of composing the letter marks a pivotal moment for Daud, leading him into a phase of introspection characterised by self-criticism for his perceived social ineptitude and a judgmental view of Catherine's seeming detachment, particularly as an outsider. This juncture signifies his initial conscious recognition of the underlying purposes of his epistolary endeavours. He acknowledges the therapeutic utility of these letters, noting that they serve as a means of emotional regulation and mental equilibrium, as evidenced by his reflection that "whenever things looked as if they were getting out of hand, he dashed off a calming

letter" (52). This practice exemplifies a coping mechanism that allows him to manage and mitigate his emotional turmoil.

This coping strategy is further exemplified following an incident where Daud faces a rebuff from Miss Paula during a futile attempt to locate Catherine. The consequent emotional response propels him to compose another letter in which he asserts that "it doesn't matter" (141). This statement, however, is understood by the reader to be in stark contrast with his genuine emotions. The act of penning this letter underscores the dissonance between Daud's outward expressions and his internal state, highlighting the letters as a medium through which he navigates his complex emotional landscape.

This narrative element not only illustrates his use of letter writing as a psychological tool for self-soothing and emotional processing but also delves into the nuanced ways in which individuals confront and manage personal crises and disappointments. It reflects a deeper exploration into the human psyche, particularly how individuals often resort to creative or indirect methods of expression when direct confrontation with their emotions or situations is too daunting or painful.

Daud's utilisation of the epistolary form represents a significant deviation from conventional norms associated with letters as instruments of social communication and dialogue initiation, thereby challenging established narrative and epistolary conventions. One of the primary conventions disrupted by his letters is the conventional narrative/letter triadic structure, typically comprising the narrative or letter, the narrator or letter writer, and the recipient of the story or letter.

In his context, the recipients of the letters are addressed with terms such as "Dear Catherine, Pale face," among others. However, the critical aspect of these letters is that they are never actually dispatched. This crucial detail underscores his position as an individual who is metaphorically and perhaps literally displaced, resorting to communication methods that are, in essence, non-

communicative or ineffective in the traditional sense.

This narrative technique not only challenges the reader's expectations of epistolary communication but also serves as a metaphor for Daud's own sense of dislocation and isolation. The act of writing letters that are never sent symbolises a deeper, unfulfilled desire for connection and understanding in a world where he feels misunderstood and marginalised. The letters thus become a medium for expressing the inexpressible, articulating thoughts and feelings that remain unheard in his physical reality. This approach to storytelling and character development offers a nuanced exploration of the themes of loneliness, alienation, and the human yearning for connection in a context where traditional modes of communication are rendered inadequate or impossible.

The researcher, Ian Duncan's insightful analysis of J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and its use of the epistolary format sheds light on the multifaceted nature of letters as narrative devices. Duncan characterises the letter as "an exercise in storytelling" (184), highlighting its capacity to narrate and convey personal experiences. However, the use of letters in *Pilgrims Way* diverges significantly from those in *Age of Iron*, particularly in the way they function within the narrative. In *Pilgrims Way*, Daud's letters fulfil a dual role. On one hand, they represent an expression of personal engagement, reflecting his inner thoughts and emotions. On the other hand, they paradoxically signify a tangible refusal to engage genuinely with others in his life. While these letters seem to be communicative, ostensibly directed towards specific characters, their existence is confined solely to Daud's mind. They are never physically sent out, making them an introspective tool rather than a means of external communication.

This dichotomy imbues Daud's letters with a sense of irony. While they are ostensibly crafted to initiate dialogue, they paradoxically serve to shut down real-world communication. They become a medium for self-reflection and internal dialogue, rather than a bridge to connect with others. This

narrative strategy effectively highlights the complexities of communication and interaction, especially for individuals grappling with feelings of displacement and alienation. The letters thus become a symbol of the unvoiced and unacknowledged, underscoring the often-invisible barriers that hinder genuine interpersonal communication and understanding.

Consequently, it is unsurprising that in addressing Catherine's rejection, Daud subsequently composes a letter to her, imagining a particular response he wished she had provided. While the letter is ostensibly aimed at starting a conversation with Catherine, it becomes redundant as Daud is essentially responding to his own queries. In a state of feeling spurned yet desiring to escape this sentiment, he writes:

Dear Catherine . . . admit it, you were pleased that I asked you, weren't you? But you were right to refuse, I think you probably found the idea quite strange . . . After all this, do I dare connect your rejection of me with my social-cultural and subcutaneous deprivation? How can I explain to you that we are an unfortunate people who don't know about gratitude? We know about resentment, about frenzy. We are quick to take offence, primed to blow. So next time I invite you to have dinner with me, your best course will be to say yes, and look pleased about it. Otherwise I will make up my mind to be annihilated. (57-58)

The letter in question poignantly highlights Daud's profound sense of alienation, a condition largely precipitated by the challenging racial dynamics within his new societal context, culminating in a significant personal disintegration. This scenario resonates with Frantz Fanon's analyses in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where Daud's experience can be interpreted as a "[d]evaluation of [the] self" (55), a concept deeply rooted in Fanon's exploration of racial identity and perception.

Fanon, drawing on the work of Germaine Geux, delves into the complex psychological dynamics experienced by black men, such as Daud, in their interactions with white women. He identifies

a phenomenon described as “affective self-rejection,” which is emblematic of a broader psychological condition akin to an abandonment neurosis. This state is characterised by a profound and distressing sense of exclusion, a pervasive feeling of being superfluous in all contexts, a constant state of insecurity, and an anticipatory stance towards rejection.

This psychological framework elucidates a self-perpetuating cycle wherein the individual, driven by an unconscious compulsion, engages in behaviours that inadvertently result in the very rejection and marginalisation they dread. Daud’s situation, as depicted through the unspoken content of his letters, exemplifies this cycle. His internalised sense of inadequacy and alienation not only informs his perception of social interactions but also drives his response mechanisms, which, in turn, reinforce his sense of marginalisation. Thus, the narrative captures the intricate interplay between psychological state and social experience, particularly in the context of racial and cultural dislocation.

Fanon’s examination of the interactions between black men and white women within colonial contexts finds a compelling parallel in the depiction of Daud in the novel. Daud emerges as a symbolic figure embodying the struggles of contemporary black individuals in Britain to attain self-realisation amidst a complex racial landscape. This is particularly evident as Daud transitions from articulating his personal experiences of rejection to employing the collective term “we” in his statement “we are an unfortunate people.” This shift in narrative perspective serves as a crucial literary device, prompting readers to situate Daud’s personal experiences within the larger framework of the experiences of black people in the UK.

John McLeod’s analysis further enriches this context, pointing out that the entire nation, not just London, is influenced by the dynamics of “racialized whiteness and the cellular balkanization” (192). This observation underscores the pervasive impact of colour politics on societal structures and interpersonal relations. Against this backdrop of racial politics, Daud’s letters acquire greater

significance, highlighting the barriers to effective communication imposed by racial dynamics.

By adopting a collective voice with the use of “we,” Daud’s narrative transcends his individual experiences, thereby encapsulating the shared struggles of other migrants in similar situations. The novel, through Daud’s character, thus becomes a medium to explore the broader implications of migration into environments that are unwelcoming or hostile. Daud is positioned as a prototypical male migrant, and his story illustrates the multifaceted challenges faced by individuals like him, as well as the broader implications for the group they represent. This narrative approach offers a critical insight into the complexities of migration, identity, and racial politics, highlighting the often-overlooked psychological and social repercussions for migrants in such contexts.

The utilisation of the epistolary form in *Pilgrims Way* serves as a pivotal narrative tool, offering readers a profound insight into the protagonist’s experience of dislocation in his host country and his endeavours to secure a sense of inclusion within this societal framework. The letters, which provide an unfiltered window into Daud’s innermost thoughts and reflections, effectively capture the manner in which racialised discourses of exclusion are internalised by the migrant individual.

In the absence of viable avenues for protest or overt expression, Daud resorts to the imaginary letter as a means of self-rearticulation. This practice allows him to reimagine his own identity, transitioning from a position of marginalisation to one of greater agency and visibility. While the segments of the novel narrated by the omniscient narrator meticulously detail Daud’s public life and the ironies embedded within it, the letters offer a contrasting perspective, revealing his private reactions to the public humiliations he endures.

This juxtaposition of public and private realms within the narrative framework underscores the multifaceted nature of Daud’s migrant experience. It highlights the intricate interplay between external societal dynamics and internal personal responses, particularly in relation to issues of identity and belonging. The letters thus emerge



not only as a medium for personal reflection but also as a symbolic representation of the migrant's struggle to navigate and reconcile the various facets of their existence in a new and often challenging environment. This narrative approach thereby deepens the understanding of the complexities faced by migrants, illuminating the often unseen emotional and psychological dimensions of their journey.

The strategic choice of Daud to employ imaginary letters as a mode of self-expression and a form of subtle protest is rendered particularly cogent in the context of his humorous reflections following Catherine's refusal to join him for dinner. This epistolary approach manifests as a passive, yet poignant, means for Daud to engage with the underlying politics of marginalisation that afflict him. His utilisation of self-mocking humour in these letters suggests an acute awareness of the limitations and potential ineffectiveness of more confrontational strategies in addressing the nuances of his marginalisation.

This humorous self-reflection serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it allows Daud to articulate and confront the challenges inherent in his situation, highlighting the complexities of navigating a social landscape marked by exclusion and racial dynamics. Secondly, it enables him to avoid the trap of self-pity. By employing humour, even of a self-deprecating nature, Daud maintains a level of emotional distance and perspective, which aids in preserving his sense of dignity and self-worth.

In moments of difficulty, this perspective becomes crucial in understanding Daud's inclination towards less confrontational forms of coping. The act of composing "a calming letter" (Gurnah 52) emerges as a strategic mechanism for self-soothing and emotional regulation. These letters function not only as a medium for personal catharsis but also as a subtle form of protest against the conditions of his marginalisation. This narrative device thus sheds light on the nuanced ways individuals in marginalised positions may navigate their realities, employing creative and indirect methods of expression and resistance in environments where

direct confrontation may be either impractical or counterproductive.

In Gurnah's *Gravel Heart*, similar to *Pilgrims Way*, the epistolary format is employed as a powerful mnemonic device. This literary technique enables Salim, the protagonist, to establish a symbolic reconnection with his homeland, thereby mitigating feelings of nostalgia and dislocation. The act of writing letters in this narrative context serves as a conduit through which Salim navigates his confusion and experiences of displacement, particularly in the setting of London. The incorporation of the epistolary format in *Gravel Heart* enhances the narrative's realism, effectively mirroring the complexities and nuances of everyday life. However, the function of these letters extends beyond mere replication of daily dynamics. They act as vital memory aids for the narrator, serving as repositories for his daily experiences and reflections, which he meticulously documents in his notebooks.

The fate of these letters, most of which never reach their intended recipients; symbolises Salim's profound state of disorientation and the disconnect between his current life and his past. While Salim writes numerous letters to his mother and some to his father, the narrative reveals that only a few of these letters are actually delivered to his mother, and none successfully reach his father. This aspect of the story not only underscores the physical and emotional distance between Salim and his family but also reflects the broader theme of communication or the lack thereof within the context of migration and displacement.

Salim's unfulfilled attempts to communicate through letters embody the struggles inherent in maintaining connections across physical and cultural divides. The letters become metaphorical representations of his efforts to bridge these gaps, underscoring the challenges faced by migrants in preserving ties to their homeland while navigating the realities of their new environments. Thus, the novel uses the epistolary form not only as a narrative device but also as a symbol of the migrant's quest for identity, belonging, and connection in an ever-changing and often alienating world.

The novel's third chapter is significantly titled "I will write to you every day" (Gurnah 57), which poignantly encapsulates Salim's dedication to maintaining regular correspondence, despite the fact that not all of these letters are ultimately dispatched. This chapter marks a pivotal point in the narrative, foregrounding the role of letters as a key element in the story. In the early phase of his epistolary practice, Salim's letters predominantly focus on detailing his new life in London, where he resides with his uncle Amir and aunt Asha. These letters typically commence with the culturally resonant phrase "greetings and after greetings" (62), setting a tone of respect and continuity with his cultural traditions before he proceeds to narrate his day-to-day experiences.

The employment of letters in the text serves as a critical narrative tool, underscoring the complexities and nuances of Salim's emotional journey. Through these letters, the novel deftly explores the profound impact of migration on personal identity and the individual's connection to their cultural and familial roots. His letters act as a bridge between his past and present, offering a medium through which he can process and articulate the myriad emotions and experiences associated with displacement and acculturation.

Furthermore, the letters reveal the internal struggles and conflicts that arise as Salim navigates his new environment, highlighting the challenges of adapting to a new culture while striving to maintain a sense of self and connection to his homeland. The epistolary form in the text thus becomes a powerful vehicle for exploring themes of identity, belonging, and the transformative effects of migration, providing a lens through which readers can gain deeper insights into the migrant experience and the enduring ties to one's origins amidst the flux of relocation and change.

In the novel, Salim is portrayed as an individual who grapples with the intricacies of letter writing, a struggle that is intensified by the confusion he endures under the influence of his uncle Amir, a relative highly regarded by his mother. This portrayal underscores the complexity of Salim's character and his emotional state as he navigates

new environments and relationships. His recognition of his own ineffectiveness as a letter writer is poignantly conveyed in an unsent letter, where he admits his difficulty in progressing beyond the initial few lines of his correspondence (65). This admission reflects not only his struggle with articulating his thoughts and feelings but also hints at a deeper sense of dislocation and uncertainty.

As the narrative progresses, Salim's letters increasingly mirror his nostalgia and longing for his homeland. He vividly recounts memories of time spent with loved ones in Zanzibar, juxtaposing these reminiscences with his current experiences. However, he consciously withholds these more emotive and personal versions from being sent, out of a concern that they might cause undue worry to his mother. This self-censorship is a significant narrative element, highlighting his internal conflict and his desire to protect his family from the complexities of his own emotions and experiences. Instead, he retains these unsent letters in his notebook, opting to compose alternate versions that focus on the more positive aspects of his life in Guinea Lane. He emphasises the support he receives from individuals like Mr. Mgeni, who helps fill the paternal void created by his father's absence. These revised letters, while less personal, conclude with expressions of his deep longing for his family; his mother, father, and sister Munira.

This nuanced portrayal of Salim's letter-writing process offers a compelling insight into the migrant experience, particularly the emotional dilemmas faced in communicating across distances. The letters become a canvas for him to explore and express the complexities of his identity, emotions, and experiences, while also serving as a testament to the enduring bonds of family and the challenges of maintaining these connections amidst the realities of migration and displacement.

In another unsent letter, Salim reveals his premonition of possibly never seeing his mother again, pondering if his relocation to London was her way of lovingly exiling him as a means to rid herself of his presence (161). He mourns the broken connections with his family, expressing his grief not to anyone in particular but through these letters that

seldom reach their intended recipients. This narrative choice by Gurnah underscores the emotional turmoil and disconnection experienced by Salim, symbolised through the act of writing letters that remain undelivered.

Salim appears to derive comfort from writing to his mother, as it offers him a semblance of direct connection with her. This practice continues for him even in contemplating mortality, as evidenced by his continued correspondence. He articulates this sentiment, saying:

When I finished reading my mother's letters, I read through my notebooks. There were three of them, filled with what started off as incomplete or abandoned letters, but the later entries read as if they were never intended to be sent. My mother was the absent reader. The unsent letters a conversation I was having with her in my mind. Two of the notebooks were full but there were still some blank pages in the third for me to compose another letter to my dead mother (161).

The act of composing letters to his deceased mother offers Salim a profound sense of solace, a practice he extends in a similar vein to his absent father. In the narrative, he acknowledges crafting "an imaginary letter" (104) to his father, wherein he articulates his appreciation for the paternal guidance received before his journey to London. Notably, this letter remains unsent, existing only within the realm of his imagination. However, its significance is far-reaching, as its contents persistently "roam back and forth" within the landscape of his thoughts (120).

This method of engagement, though purely imaginary, emerges as a crucial therapeutic outlet for Salim. It provides him with a means to not only externalise but also to internalise and process his experiences and emotions. By engaging in this form of epistolary communication, he effectively creates a dialogic space for reflection and introspection, enabling him to navigate the complexities of his emotional landscape. The significance of these imaginary letters lies in their function as a symbolic medium for him to maintain a connection with his

past, particularly with pivotal figures in his life who are no longer present. This narrative device adeptly captures the psychological and emotional dimensions of coping with loss and displacement. It underscores the power of memory and imagination in bridging temporal and spatial divides, highlighting how such imagined communications can serve as a conduit for healing and self-discovery.

In the broader context of the novel, Salim's use of imaginary letters represents a poignant exploration of the human need for connection and closure. It delves into the ways individuals employ creative mechanisms to confront and reconcile with their past, their losses, and the ongoing journey of self-realisation. Through this, the novel offers a nuanced understanding of the intricacies of human emotions and the resilience of the spirit in the face of change and adversity.

Gurnah realistically portrays the dynamics of a son communicating with his mother through letters. Salim writes two distinct types of letters: the initial version, laden with grievances, and the dispatched version, which highlights the positive aspects of life in London. In the first type, he details the mistreatment he suffers at the hands of figures like uncle Amir and Asha. However, cognisant of Amir's esteemed status in his mother's eyes, Salim refrains from sending these letters. Instead, he composes an alternative version with fewer complaints and more positive updates, aiming to spare his mother from worry. This practice allows him later in life to revisit his notebook and reflect upon the varied experiences he has endured. Through both the letters he sends and those he withholds; Salim shares his life's narrative with his mother.

Gurnah adeptly captures the fragmented psyche and tumultuous life of the protagonist, Salim, by depicting him as composing various types of letters: some are sent, others are not, and yet others are never meant to be sent. His life is portrayed as being engulfed in confusion and disarray, compelling him to mask his genuine emotions from his mother to spare her distress, opting instead to relay only those aspects of his life that would be pleasing to her. For Salim, letter-writing serves as a therapeutic

outlet, a means of catharsis that allows him to confront and alleviate the emotional turmoil stemming from his experiences as an immigrant. This act of writing provides him with a transient sense of having articulated his feelings, helping him to navigate the complexities of his fragmented existence.

### Conclusion

This in-depth examination of Gurnah's employment of the epistolary form in *Pilgrims Way* and *Gravel Heart* reveals that his integration of letters extends beyond conventional narrative techniques. These letters are not merely elements of the plot; they are powerful tools for delving into character development, psychological introspection, and shedding light on intricate socio-political environments. The author's skilful utilisation of the epistolary form enriches the reader's comprehension of the nuanced inner conflicts of his characters and their engagement with the broader world.

In *Pilgrims Way*, the protagonist Daud's engagement with predominantly imaginary letters signifies his efforts to contend with a society that sidelines him. These mental constructs of letters expose his inner conversations and function as a means of resilience amidst the adversities he endures as a migrant, wrestling with issues of identity, dislocation, and racial discrimination. Gurnah effectively employs the epistolary form to accentuate the disparity between the hopes and lived realities of migrants, thereby emphasising the psychological ramifications of marginalisation.

Similarly, in *Gravel Heart*, the use of the epistolary format unveils the emotional odyssey of Salim, an immigrant in London, as he grapples with feelings of displacement and nostalgia. The contrast between the letters he dispatches and those he retains reflects his inner turmoil and his attempts to sustain ties with his past amidst the complexities of his current life. For Salim, these letters become a means of catharsis, facilitating the articulation and management of his experiences and emotions.

The analysis of Gurnah's novels reveals the intricate ways in which the epistolary form can

enhance literary storytelling. The interaction of his characters with letters showcases the ability of this format to delve into intricate themes like migration, identity, and the impacts of colonialism. His strategic incorporation of letters deepens character development and prompts readers to reflect on the wider implications of the characters' journeys. This inquiry underscores the vital role of the epistolary form in literature, particularly its capacity to express the subtleties of human experiences amid historical and cultural shifts. His narrative approach thus exemplifies the profound capacity of written expression to capture the complexities of human existence and the continuous quest for identity and belonging in the postcolonial milieu.

### References

- Altman, Janet Gurkin. *Epistolarity*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1982.
- Angela Y, Davis. *Women, Race, and Class*. New York: Random House, 1981.
- Dawson, Warren R. *The Banks Letters: A Calendar of the Manuscript Correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks, Preserved in the British Museum*. Trustees of the British Museum, 1958.
- Duncan, Ian. "Narrative Authority in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*." *Tydskriff vir Letterkunde* 43.2 (2006): 174-185.
- Eliot, T. S., et al. *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*. Faber & Faber, 2009.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles I. Markmann. London: Pluto Press, 2008.
- Fuss, Diana. "Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification." *Critical Crossings* 24.2/3 (1994): 19-42.
- Gubenatis, Catherine. "The Epistolary Form in Twentieth-century Fiction." 2007. web. 15 6 2012.
- Gurnah, Abdulrazak. *Pilgrims Way*. London: Bloomsbury, 1988.
- Gurnah, Abdulrazak. *Gravel Heart*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017

---

McLeod, John. *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Stein, Mark. *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation*. Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2004.

Traseira, Maria Jesus Cabarcos. "Between Diasporic Identity and Agency: Versions of the Pastoral in Gurnah's *Pilgrims Way* and Mahjoub's *Navigation of a Rainmaker*." *Negotiating Afropolitanism: Essays on Borders and Spaces in Contemporary African Literature and Folklore*. Ed. Jennifer Wawrzinek and J.K.S. Makokha. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011. 235-257.