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Exile, Belonging, and the Post-colonial Imagination in the Novels of M.G. Vassanji and Abdulrazak Gurnah

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Abstract

This paper explores the representation of exile and belonging in the novels of M.G. Vassanji and Abdulrazak Gurnah, two prominent postcolonial authors whose works grapple with the consequences of displacement, colonial history, and diasporic identity. Focusing on Vassanji's The Gunny Sack *and* The In-Between World of Vikram Lall *alongside Gurnah's* By the Sea *and* Memory of Departure*, the paper examines how both authors use fragmented memory, narrative disjunctions, and emotionally exilic landscapes to portray fractured identities in transit. It interrogates how home becomes both a geographic and psychological construct, often lost, imagined, or nostalgically reconfigured. The study highlights how the post-colonial imagination, grounded in historical trauma and personal exile, creates narratives of longing and the search for rootedness in a dislocated world.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Post-colonial literature has long grappled with themes of displacement, migration, exile, and the fragmented self, born out of the complex legacies of colonialism. As nations navigated the aftermath of imperial dominance, writers from formerly colonized regions turned their creative focus toward the human consequences of these upheavals. Central to post-colonial discourse is the question of identity — who one becomes when home is lost, when languages are foreign, and when cultural signposts are ruptured or reinterpreted. Exile, both literal and metaphorical, becomes not only a condition of existence but a formative psychological and aesthetic force within postcolonial writing (Ashcroft et al. 2006). Within this thematic constellation, the literary works of M.G. Vassanji and Abdulrazak Gurnah emerge as rich sites for investigating how fragmented homes are imagined, remembered, and reinvented through fiction.

M.G. Vassanji, a Tanzanian-born Canadian writer of Indian descent, and Abdulrazak Gurnah, a Zanzibari-born British author and Nobel Laureate, are two seminal voices in postcolonial literature whose narratives resonate with the diasporic experience of East African communities. Both authors share a concern with the historical legacies of colonialism and the displacement of people across borders — whether through forced migration, political exile, or generational rupture. Vassanji's novels such as *The Gunny Sack* and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* are deeply anchored in the East African Asian community's historical entanglements with colonialism, memory, and identity. Similarly, Gurnah's works, including *By the Sea* and *Memory of Departure*, probe the inner lives of displaced individuals caught in the crosscurrents of national

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upheaval and personal trauma. Both writers depict the postcolonial subject as one suspended in an interstitial space — belonging nowhere, yet longing for multiple homes, often fractured by violence, betrayal, or longing.

In post-colonial theory, the idea of "home" has been variously conceptualized as a physical space, a site of memory, a political construct, and a psychic landscape. Edward Said, in *Reflections on Exile*, contends that "exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place" (173). The experience of exile, according to Said, produces a lasting sense of estrangement, yet also endows the exilic subject with a critical distance that allows for the interrogation of both colonial and postcolonial realities. Homi Bhabha's concept of "the third space" further complicates ideas of home and belonging, suggesting that identity is formed in the liminal zones between cultures, where hybrid selves emerge from negotiation and translation (55). Paul Gilroy, in *The Black Atlantic*, introduces the notion of diaspora as a "counterculture of modernity," where the idea of home is less about territorial roots and more about mobility, memory, and affiliation across transnational spaces (19). These theoretical frameworks illuminate how postcolonial writers reimagine home not as a fixed location but as a fluid, often contested space, shaped by trauma, nostalgia, and negotiation.

Against this critical backdrop, this paper investigates how M.G. Vassanji and Abdulrazak Gurnah construct "fragments of home" in their selected novels. It examines how the notion of home is recalled, reassembled, or imagined in the minds of their exilic protagonists who traverse continents, political regimes, and historical moments. Vassanji and Gurnah do not romanticize the return home; instead, they foreground the impossibility of return and the emotional labor of reconciling the past with present alienation. Through the intimate lives of their characters, the authors explore the psychic toll of exile and the tentative acts of re-rooting in unfamiliar lands.

This study is guided by three primary research questions. First, how is exile represented in the selected novels of Vassanji and Gurnah? Second, in what ways do the characters experience or reclaim a sense of belonging, however provisional or fragmented? Third, how do memory and narrative technique reflect postcolonial dislocation and diasporic subjectivity? These questions aim to illuminate the authors' narrative strategies and thematic preoccupations as they give voice to lives displaced by colonial legacies and global migrations. By analyzing the intersections of exile, memory, and the search for home, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions in postcolonial studies regarding the meaning of identity in a world defined by movement, loss, and longing.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The exploration of exile, identity, and belonging in the works of M.G. Vassanji and Abdulrazak Gurnah is deeply embedded in the theoretical discourses of postcolonial studies, trauma and memory theory, and diaspora studies. These frameworks provide critical lenses for understanding how postcolonial subjects experience and narrate displacement, and how the notion of "home" becomes fragmented, imagined, or reconstructed across time and space. The complexity of exilic identity in postcolonial literature is shaped not only by the material conditions of migration but also by affective attachments to memory, loss, and longing. It is imperative to ground the analysis within the conceptual tools offered by these interrelated fields to grasp the full significance of post-colonial imagination in the selected texts.

One of the central concepts in postcolonial theory is hybridity, as articulated by Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha argues that postcolonial identity is not rooted in singular or essentialist notions of culture, but rather emerges through "the third space of enunciation," where meaning is negotiated through cultural translation and ambivalence (55). In this liminal space, hybrid identities are formed — not as coherent wholes but as evolving entities shaped by the collision and intersection of colonizer and colonized cultures. This hybridity is not simply a blending of cultural traits but a site of resistance and rearticulation of power.

Alongside hybridity, liminality—the condition of being "in-between"—characterizes many postcolonial and diasporic identities. The

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characters in Vassanji's and Gurnah's novels often occupy spaces between nations, histories, and selves. As Stuart Hall notes, identity is not a fixed essence but a "production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (222). This processual nature of identity underscores the perpetual dislocation of the postcolonial subject — a dislocation both geographical and psychological, where the self is caught between memory and the present, between belonging and estrangement. Said's concept of exile reinforces this condition: "Exile is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place," a state that inflicts a permanent sense of rootlessness (173).

The experience of exile and displacement is often traumatic, leaving deep psychological and emotional scars. In this context, trauma theory offers a powerful framework for understanding how the past continues to haunt the postcolonial present. Cathy Caruth, a foundational scholar in trauma studies, describes trauma as "an overwhelming experience that cannot be fully grasped as it occurs but returns in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other symptoms" (4). Trauma is not simply an event but a rupture in consciousness and time, a distortion that resists linear narrative. This is especially pertinent in the fiction of Gurnah and Vassanji, where characters struggle to piece together fractured memories and identities amid the silences of loss and exile.

Michael Rothberg extends trauma theory into the postcolonial and global context by proposing a "multidirectional memory", in which memories of different historical traumas (e.g., colonialism, slavery, migration) interact and reshape one another across cultural boundaries. Rather than competing for recognition, Rothberg argues, these memories coexist and inform one another, contributing to new forms of solidarity and understanding (3). In the diasporic narratives of Vassanji and Gurnah, such multidirectionality becomes visible in the intertwining of personal and collective trauma, where private memories echo the broader wounds of empire and displacement.

Diaspora theory further enriches the understanding of fragmented identity in postcolonial literature. Scholars like Stuart Hall and James Clifford have emphasized that diasporic identity is not simply a nostalgic longing for a lost homeland but a "subject-position constituted in and through displacement" (308). For Hall, diaspora implies a "rupture and discontinuity" as much as continuity, creating identities that are defined not by origin but by movement, negotiation, and hybridity (235). The diasporic subject, therefore, must continually negotiate between past and present, memory and forgetfulness, origin and reinvention.

In this regard, home is never merely a geographic place but a site of discursive construction. For Clifford, the diasporic experience creates "routes" rather than "roots"—a dynamic, mobile conception of belonging that challenges nationalist, territorial definitions of identity (251). Vassanji's characters, for example, often attempt to reconstitute a sense of self by assembling fragments of memory and cultural inheritance, while Gurnah's exiled figures grapple with the tension between forgetting and remembering, exile and return, silence and speech.

The notion of "home" in postcolonial literature transcends physical geography to become a discursive and affective space. Home may be remembered, mythologized, or mourned, but rarely is it depicted as whole or retrievable. It becomes a palimpsest of longing, trauma, and cultural memory — a space always mediated by loss and desire. As Avtar Brah suggests in *Cartographies of Diaspora*, home is "a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination", a place of belonging that is often constructed in relation to displacement and loss (192). This imagined home carries the emotional weight of identity and the psychic need for rootedness, even as it is known to be irrecoverable.

In both Vassanji's and Gurnah's narratives, home is evoked not through return but through objects, smells, names, and silences — what Marianne Hirsch would call "postmemory," the inherited memories that define second-generation diasporic subjects (13). These fragments of home are not static but reconstructed through storytelling, imagination, and cultural transmission. In this sense, home is not a place but a process — a creative act of memory, longing, and survival.

Exile and Fragmentation of Identity

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Exile in postcolonial literature is not merely the displacement of the body but also the estrangement of the self. It often results in a fractured identity, where the loss of homeland, language, and community erodes the subject's sense of continuity and belonging. In the works of Abdulrazak Gurnah and M.G. Vassanji, exile emerges as both a lived condition and a metaphor for the emotional, psychological, and political ruptures inflicted by colonialism and postcolonial instability. The characters in their novels navigate histories of betrayal, migration, and dislocation, constructing identities from the fragments of memory and loss. In their narratives, exile is not a temporary state but a condition of being, marked by cultural uprootedness and the continuous negotiation of self in unfamiliar geographies.

In *By the Sea*, Gurnah introduces Saleh Omar, an elderly asylum seeker who arrives in England carrying the silence of trauma. His self-imposed muteness at the beginning of the novel symbolizes the profound emotional exile he has endured — not only from his homeland, Zanzibar, but also from his former identity. Saleh's displacement is intensified by the psychological violence of exile, as he remarks: "I have lived through most of the disasters and betrayals of the late twentieth century... and now exile. So now I feel like I am dead already, a hollow man" (Gurnah 5). This confession reveals that exile has not merely altered his geographical location; it has fundamentally hollowed out his sense of self. The trauma of displacement renders him voiceless, a ghost of his former life, struggling to make sense of an alien cultural and linguistic landscape.

Moreover, Saleh's connection to his homeland is mediated through memory and symbolic objects, such as the carved wooden incense box, which becomes an emblem of a lost cultural world. The scent of the incense transports him to moments of beauty now severed from his present reality: "The smell was like everything from before, from a time when there was beauty in the world" (Gurnah 21). These fragments of the past offer momentary solace but also underscore the irretrievability of home. His fractured memories do not coalesce into a coherent narrative but exist as scattered episodes, mirroring his disintegrated identity.

Gurnah's earlier novel *Memory of Departure* explores exile as a more internalized, psychological process. The protagonist, Hassan Omar, experiences what can be termed **"internal exile"**—an emotional and intellectual alienation within his own homeland. Trapped in a politically corrupt and socially repressive society, Hassan dreams of escape but remains bound by familial trauma and personal disillusionment. His journey to the capital city, ostensibly for education, ends in humiliation and abandonment, reinforcing the notion that even within the borders of one's country, one can be utterly estranged. He reflects: "My body walked the streets... but inside I was locked away from the light of others" (Gurnah 104). This inner exile, marked by shame, silence, and repression, reveals how political realities and personal history intertwine to create a fragmented, unmoored self.

Gurnah's characters illustrate that exile is not just spatial but deeply ontological — affecting how individuals perceive themselves, relate to others, and narrate their identities. The trauma of dislocation, whether physical or psychological, is thus embedded in the fabric of the self, disrupting the linearity of memory and the coherence of identity. As critics like Felicity Hand argue, Gurnah's fiction shows how trauma "haunts the present and destabilizes narrative authority" (84), rendering identity a perpetual site of struggle and negotiation.

M.G. Vassanji similarly interrogates the experience of exile and its impact on identity in his novel *The Gunny Sack*, where the unnamed narrator pieces together his East African Asian ancestry through stories, letters, and fragments stored in a literal gunny sack — a metaphor for diasporic memory. The act of narration becomes a means of reconstructing a lost lineage that spans India, East Africa, and colonial histories. However the identity that emerges from this process is far from unified. Instead, it is fragmented, contradictory, and haunted by absences. The narrator confesses: "I have only fragments of stories, not truths, and so my history is uncertain" (Vassanji, *The Gunny Sack,* 7). This uncertainty reflects a broader diasporic condition, where the rupture of migration and the erasures of colonial record-keeping render identity unstable and provisional.

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The stories contained in the gunny sack do not offer closure or coherence but instead reveal the complexity of diasporic heritage. The burden of remembering — and the impossibility of fully knowing — creates a fragmented self, suspended between nostalgia for the past and alienation in the present. The narrator's search for belonging becomes a journey through historical and emotional detritus, where the borders of personal and communal identity blur. As Chelva Kanaganayakam notes, Vassanji's fiction is "an archive of loss" in which characters "sift through ruins to construct narratives that are always contingent" (59).

In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Vassanji delves even deeper into the political dimensions of exile. The protagonist, Vikram Lall, narrates his life from exile in Canada after being disgraced in Kenya due to political corruption and betrayal. His "in-betweenness" is not merely ethnic — as a Kenyan of Indian descent — but moral, psychological, and national. Vikram exists at the margins of multiple identities: never entirely accepted by Africans, distrusted by Europeans, and disconnected from his Indian heritage. His status as an insider-outsider leads to a profound identity crisis, mainly as he reflects on his complicity in Kenya's post-independence failures: "I am a man of no nation... a man suspended in the in-between" (Vassanji 9).

Vikram's exile is not redemptive but punitive, resulting from both external political forces and his internal alienation. He becomes a symbol of the postcolonial subject who has lost faith in the nationalist project and his own moral compass. His narrative, told retrospectively, is suffused with regret, guilt, and confusion, revealing how memory is not a reliable path to truth but a terrain of evasions and distortions. As he attempts to document his life, Vikram admits: "The truth lies somewhere in the confusion, in the slippage of memory" (Vassanji 148). Here, Vassanji shows how the exilic subject not only suffers physical dislocation but also struggles to reconstruct a self in the face of political disillusionment and historical erasure.

In both *The Gunny Sack* and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, exile fractures identity along temporal, cultural, and emotional lines. The past is not a stable point of return but a contested field of memory, while the present offers no solid ground for self-definition. Vassanji's characters, like Gurnah's, reveal the existential weight of diasporic existence, where home becomes an elusive construct, and the self is endlessly reconstructed from fragments of memory, history, and loss.

The Quest for Belonging

The postcolonial subject, especially in the diaspora, is often portrayed as caught in an endless search for belonging. For characters in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels and M.G. Vassanji's novels, belonging is never secure or complete but negotiated through memory, silence, narrative, and cultural traces. Exile creates not only a physical separation from one's homeland but also an emotional and psychological severance that fractures the possibility of belonging. In their literary landscapes, Gurnah and Vassanji depict belonging as a fragile construct—formed from fragments of the past and reshaped within the unsettling present. Whether through remembered homes, language, silence, or broken family ties, both authors portray the quest for belonging as a central postcolonial concern, deeply tied to questions of identity, loss, and history.

In the works of Gurnah and Vassanji, the idea of "home" is often a ruined space, irretrievably lost yet hauntingly present in memory. In *By the Sea*, Saleh Omar's recollections of Zanzibar are filled with longing and pain. The island is remembered not as a geographic reality but as a lost world evoked through the scent of incense and the texture of silence. The smell of ambergris from the carved wooden box he brings to England triggers his memory of a time when "there was beauty in the world" (Gurnah 21). However, this sensory memory also underscores the impossibility of return; Zanzibar, once home, is now inaccessible—both geographically and emotionally. Saleh confesses, "I have lived with the memory of what was once my home, and I cannot describe to you the sadness of knowing that I can never go back" (Gurnah 17). Home becomes a spectral presence—real in effect but lost.

Similarly, in Vassanji's *The Gunny Sack*, the narrator reconstructs his sense of home and identity through the contents of a literal gunny sack filled with letters, documents, and personal effects passed

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down through generations. The narrator's ancestral home in Dar es Salaam exists only in recollection, mediated by stories, fragments, and silences. "What I have," he notes, "are not truths but fragments... myths that we have made into history" (Vassanji 7). The sack becomes a metaphor for a diasporic archive—an assemblage of memory that preserves and distorts. For both authors, home is imagined and invoked through cultural artifacts but cannot be physically recovered. These remnants of the past offer fleeting moments of rootedness while simultaneously exposing the rupture and fragility of the diaspora.

The use of language in these narratives is deeply entangled with colonial history and the experience of exile. Both Gurnah and Vassanji write in English, the colonizer's language, and their characters must often navigate the complex implications of speaking and writing in this tongue. In *By the Sea*, Saleh's refusal to speak upon his arrival in England is a profound act of resistance. His silence is not only a symptom of trauma but also a rejection of the linguistic and bureaucratic system that seeks to define and control him. "I have no desire to explain my words, nor to speak the words they want to hear," he declares (Gurnah 1). His muteness becomes a form of protest, an assertion of autonomy against a system that demands confession and submission.

Conversely, when he finally speaks, it is through carefully chosen words, shaped by his memory and experiences, reflecting the ambivalence of using the colonizer's language. English, for him, is both the means of survival and a reminder of dislocation. This paradox echoes Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's critique of linguistic colonization, where language becomes "both a carrier of culture and a means of domination" (16). In this context, silence, too, carries meaning—standing in for what cannot or will not be spoken in the language of empire.

In Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, language is equally fraught. Vikram, a narrator deeply embedded in colonial and postcolonial politics, tells his story in English, yet his silences are just as telling. His narrative is marked by omissions and reticence, particularly during political complicity and moral failure. Vikram's secrecy, especially about his role in government corruption and the betrayal of his friends, is a form of self-erasure. He confesses: "I am a man who has failed to speak the truth, even to myself" (Vassanji 157). In both authors' works, silence operates as both symptom and strategy—reflecting trauma, shame, resistance, and the limits of language in conveying diasporic experience.

Fractured familial relationships also deeply affect the quest for belonging in these novels. Characters often experience exile from their homelands and their families—particularly from fathers, whose absence or betrayal becomes a recurring motif. Latif Mahmud's estranged relationship with his father is central to his emotional dislocation in *By the Sea*. Latif is haunted by his father's silence and abandonment, whose political affiliations and personal decisions fractured the family. Their painful reunion in exile does little to heal the wounds, as Latif reflects on the past with bitterness and confusion. "He left me in a silence I never understood, and perhaps never will," he laments (Gurnah 113). The broken bond between father and son symbolizes the broader collapse of home, tradition, and continuity.

Similarly, in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, the protagonist's sense of self is deeply shaped by his family's history of displacement and betrayal. Vikram's grandfather was brought to East Africa as a colonial railway worker; his father sought assimilation into British colonial society, while Vikram himself becomes ensnared in postcolonial corruption. Each generation inherits the traumas of the last, yet none entirely belongs. Vikram's relationship with his sister Deepa is the only emotional anchor in his life, but even that is torn apart by political and racial forces beyond their control. His final reflection—exiled, alone, and remorseful—underscores the futility of his lifelong search for belonging: "I have become a footnote in someone else's history" (Vassanji, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, 322).

Both Gurnah and Vassanji emphasize that the trauma of exile is often passed from one generation to the next. The inability of characters to resolve the emotional legacies of abandonment, betrayal, and silence renders their sense of identity fractured and transient. Belonging, in these novels, is not found in place or bloodline, but in the tentative acts of storytelling, memory, and connection—however ephemeral or broken.

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The Post-Colonial Imagination: Narrating Exile and Memory

Post-colonial literature not only reflects the dislocations and traumas of empire but actively reconstructs meaning through storytelling. The novels of M.G. Vassanji and Abdulrazak Gurnah foreground narrative as a crucial site where memory, identity, and exile converge. Their works demonstrate that narration itself becomes a process of survival, resistance, and identity-making, especially in contexts where histories have been silenced or distorted by colonial discourse. Through fragmented narrative structures, rich symbolism, and metafictional reflections, both authors reimagine the postcolonial condition not merely as an experience of loss but as a dynamic field of literary and cultural production.

One of the defining formal features of both Gurnah's and Vassanji's fiction is narrative fragmentation, which mirrors their characters' fractured identities and dislocated subjectivities. In Gurnah's *By the Sea*, the story unfolds through alternating narrative voices—Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud—whose recollections disrupt chronological time and reveal memory as disjointed and unreliable. This non-linear structure emphasizes the way trauma and exile distort one's sense of temporal continuity. Saleh confesses, "I am back again in the world I was once part of, but my life in it is only a story I tell, a memory I turn over in my mind, a fragmentary history" (Gurnah 87). The past is not a coherent narrative to be recalled at will but a constellation of emotionally charged fragments that haunt the present.

Similarly, in *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji structures the novel as a collection of intergenerational memories, narrated by a protagonist who is both participant and archivist. The gunny sack becomes a metafictional device—a literal container of stories, documents, and letters that drive the plot while reflecting on the act of storytelling itself. The narrator remarks, "This is not history, but memory. It is the remembered, the misremembered, the invented" (Vassanji 34). The unreliability of memory becomes a narrative strategy, one that acknowledges the gaps, silences, and subjective distortions that shape the diasporic imagination. By embedding letters, oral histories, and secondhand accounts into the text, both authors foreground the constructedness of narrative and the complexities of postcolonial memory.

Vassanji and Gurnah enrich their narrative worlds through symbolism and metaphor, using ordinary objects and natural elements to evoke deeper emotional and cultural resonances. In Gurnah's *By the Sea*, the sea is a central symbol that operates on multiple levels. It represents the physical distance between homeland and exile, the psychological turbulence of dislocation, and the possibility of transformation. Saleh's reflections on the sea—"It had a sound that was familiar but disquieting, as if it never wanted you to feel settled" (Gurnah 39)—capture the ambivalence of the exilic condition: familiar yet alien, soothing yet threatening. The sea's fluidity mirrors the characters' unstable identities and becomes a metaphor for the liminal spaces they inhabit.

In contrast, Vassanji's use of the gunny sack in the eponymous novel transforms a mundane object into an archive of displacement. Filled with letters, photographs, and keepsakes, the sack symbolizes the burden and necessity of memory in diasporic life. It is "a container of memory and forgetting, of guilt and nostalgia," as the narrator notes (Vassanji 3). Just as the sea in Gurnah's fiction is never still, the gunny sack is never fully unpacked; its contents are selectively remembered, misinterpreted, or suppressed, emphasizing the fragmentary nature of diasporic identity.

Beyond central symbols, both authors employ mnemonic devices such as food, language, and landscape to evoke the lost worlds of their characters. In *By the Sea*, the scent of incense and the texture of traditional foods conjure up Saleh's life in Zanzibar, linking sensory perception with memory. In *Vikram Lall*, Vassanji's descriptions of Nairobi's streets, colonial clubs, and multicultural households provide not only setting but a layered topography of belonging and exclusion. These symbolic elements act as triggers of memory, drawing attention to the characters' yearning for continuity in the face of rupture and exile.

For both Vassanji and Gurnah, fiction becomes a means of resistance—a way to reclaim silenced histories and reframe marginal experiences

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within the broader narrative of empire and its aftermath. Their novels challenge dominant colonial accounts by focusing on the lives of individuals who have been historically overlooked: traders, immigrants, refugees, and culturally hybrid subjects. This literary reclamation is particularly evident in Gurnah's *By the Sea*, where Saleh's personal testimony serves as a counter-narrative to official histories of postcolonial Zanzibar. By giving voice to a character typically marginalized—an elderly asylum seeker with limited English—Gurnah resists the bureaucratic reduction of refugee identity and insists on the complexity and dignity of individual experience (Hand 89).

Similarly, Vassanji's metafictional approach in *The Gunny Sack* underscores the constructedness of all history and the need for alternative archives. His narrator does not offer an authoritative version of events but a series of provisional narratives shaped by gaps, distortions, and emotional investments. This aligns with Edward Said's call for "contrapuntal reading"—a method that reveals the silences and repressions of imperial discourse (66). Vassanji's fiction thus becomes a space for mourning and remembering, where diasporic subjects recover their agency through the act of narration, however imperfect.

Ultimately, for both authors, fiction functions as a healing practice, enabling the articulation of trauma and the reimagining of selfhood. As Michael Rothberg argues, postcolonial literature can "bring into dialogue multiple histories of suffering" and offer "new ethical frameworks for witnessing" (19). Gurnah's and Vassanji's works exemplify this potential by weaving together personal, communal, and historical threads into narratives that resist erasure, affirm dignity, and testify to the enduring struggle for belonging in a fractured world.

III. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The literary oeuvres of Abdulrazak Gurnah and M.G. Vassanji are shaped by shared postcolonial concerns—most notably exile, hybridity, and the enduring longing for home. Yet their distinct narrative voices, structural approaches, and modes of engaging memory offer rich ground for comparative analysis. While both authors explore the disorienting effects of displacement and the ruptures of colonial and postcolonial histories, they do so through contrasting stylistic choices and narrative strategies. Furthermore, their works prompt reflection on the politics of remembering and the ethical responsibilities of writing from a place of exile and marginality.

Gurnah and Vassanji converge on core postcolonial themes: the trauma of exile, the search for belonging, and the fluidity of identity in diasporic spaces. In *By the Sea* and *The Gunny Sack*, characters navigate lives radically altered by displacement—geographically, emotionally, and historically. For both authors, exile is not merely a physical journey but an existential condition that fragments identity and destabilizes notions of home. Saleh Omar in *By the Sea* and the unnamed narrator of *The Gunny Sack* both live in exile and attempt to reconstruct their fractured selves through memory and storytelling. Similarly, hybridity—the blending and colliding of cultural identities—is a central feature in both narratives. Gurnah's characters often straddle Swahili, Arab, and British worlds, while Vassanji's protagonists are products of Indian-African-European intersections. These hybrid positions underscore Homi Bhabha's notion of the "third space," where identity is constantly negotiated rather than fixed (55). Ultimately, both writers articulate a deep longing for home, even as they question its possibility. Home, for them, is a fragmented construct—an imagined space haunted by loss and irretrievability (Brah 192).

Despite these thematic convergences, Gurnah and Vassanji diverge significantly in their narrative style and structure. Gurnah's prose is marked by lyricism, psychological depth, and introspection. His novels often adopt a slow, meditative tone that foregrounds the characters' emotional lives as they grapple with loss, silence, and memory. The narrative in *By the Sea* unfolds through intimate interior monologues and layered retrospections, creating a textured psychological portrait of trauma and healing. Gurnah's style allows readers to experience the affective dimensions of exile—how it shapes the self not only socially but internally.

In contrast, Vassanji's narrative voice is more archival, historical, and encyclopedic. His fiction is

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deeply engaged with documenting community memory, especially of the East African Asian diaspora. In *The Gunny Sack* and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Vassanji adopts a quasi-historical tone, often using documents, letters, and oral testimonies to build a collective narrative. His style resembles what Linda Hutcheon refers to as "historiographic metafiction," blending historical detail with self-reflexive narrative techniques (5). This emphasis on communal and intergenerational history contrasts with Gurnah's focus on personal and psychological experiences. Where Gurnah immerses readers in the interiority of exile, Vassanji maps out its broader historical and cultural terrain.

Another key point of contrast lies in the politics of memory. Gurnah's narratives tend to revolve around personal memory—how individual characters recall, repress, or reinterpret their past. Memory is unstable, fragmented, and often painful in *By the Sea,* as Saleh and Latif navigate conflicting versions of shared history. Their reconciliation is tentative and incomplete, shaped more by emotional truth than historical accuracy. Gurnah's focus is thus on how memory shapes personal identity, particularly in contexts of trauma and dislocation.

Vassanji, on the other hand, is more invested in communal memory—the collective stories of a displaced people and their place in the broader history of empire. *The Gunny Sack*, for instance, reads as an attempt to reconstruct the erased or forgotten history of the East African Asian community, spanning generations and geographies. His work participates in what Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer term "postmemory"—the transmission of trauma and memory across generations (13). By anchoring his narratives in family archives, community lore, and historical documentation, Vassanji positions fiction as a means of cultural preservation and resistance against historical erasure.

Both Gurnah and Vassanji write from positions of voluntary or forced exile, raising important questions about the ethics of representation, voice, and positionality. Writing from exile offers a vantage point of critical distance—what Edward Said calls "contrapuntal perspective"—but it also entails a burden of responsibility: to speak for silenced communities, to bear witness, and to resist romanticizing or simplifying complex histories (Said 66). Gurnah, who fled Zanzibar and later taught postcolonial literature in the UK, uses fiction for ethical witnessing. His characters do not seek to resolve trauma but to make space for its acknowledgment. Saleh's refusal to speak in the early pages of *By the Sea* is not simply silence—it is a refusal to be co-opted into reductive bureaucratic narratives of asylum.

Vassanji, likewise, undertakes the task of ethical memory work, reconstructing diasporic histories that have been marginalized or overlooked. His narratives, however, are often haunted by the tension between documentation and appropriation. In *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, the protagonist's retrospective account is fraught with guilt, complicity, and ambiguity, prompting readers to question whose stories are being told and how. Both authors resist the temptation of resolution or redemptive endings, emphasizing the ambiguities and burdens of exile instead.

In this way, Gurnah and Vassanji offer complementary approaches to postcolonial narrative—one deeply internal and affective, the other historically embedded and culturally expansive. Together, they demonstrate the richness and complexity of diasporic storytelling, reminding us that exile is not only a condition of displacement but also a site of profound literary and ethical inquiry.

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The comparative study of M.G. Vassanji and Abdulrazak Gurnah reveals a shared yet uniquely articulated vision of exile, displacement, and the ever-elusive search for home. Across the selected novels—*By the Sea*, *Memory of Departure*, *The Gunny Sack*, and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*—both authors portray "home" not as a fixed geographical location but as a fragmented, imagined construct shaped by memory, history, and longing. Whether mediated through sensory symbols such as incense and sea breeze, or embedded in physical artifacts like letters and old sacks, home emerges as something irrecoverable yet urgently desired. The exilic characters at the center of their narratives navigate identities that are fractured, haunted, and hybrid—

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formed in the interstices between cultures, languages, and historical moments.

This paper has shown that Vassanji and Gurnah extend the concept of home beyond national boundaries, into a domain where emotional resonance, symbolic meaning, and personal narrative assume central roles. Drawing from postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and diaspora theory, their novels interrogate how personal and collective memories serve as a mechanism to reconstruct identity in the wake of loss. Gurnah's lyrical, introspective storytelling captures the psychological cost of silence, exile, and betrayal, while Vassanji's layered, archival narratives reflect the communal burden of historical erasure and generational trauma. In doing so, they articulate a diasporic consciousness that transcends linear historiography and fixed belonging.

Their works make a vital contribution to postcolonial discourse by reclaiming the marginalized histories of East African Asians, Zanzibari migrants, and hybridized communities often excluded from nationalist or colonial archives. Both authors challenge dominant narratives by giving voice to individuals who live between worlds—who speak the colonizer's tongue but think in the rhythms of lost homelands; who remember ancestral places but carry new, often painful, affiliations. In this way, their fiction aligns with what Edward Said describes as "contrapuntal reading"—a mode of analysis that foregrounds silenced histories and peripheral perspectives within imperial culture (66).

Ultimately, the fiction of Vassanji and Gurnah offers critical tools for understanding the psychological aftermath of empire and migration, particularly the emotional and epistemological dislocations it produces. Their narratives do not provide closure or easy redemption but rather offer a space for reflection, recognition, and sometimes reconciliation. Through fragmented memories, hybrid identities, and ambivalent returns, their protagonists model the fragile hope for belonging—not as a return to origins, but as a process of continuous negotiation and reimagination. In a world increasingly shaped by migration, exile, and transnational flows, the works of Vassanji and Gurnah remain profoundly relevant, illuminating the inner lives of those who live at the edges of belonging and identity.

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