

## **Quest for Identity and Inner Turmoil in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Theft* and *Gravel Heart***

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### **Abstract**

The study of how people and organisations create, preserve, and negotiate their identities is known as cultural studies, and it frequently emphasises how culture shapes these identities. When people's current cultural identity and new cultural influences collide, identity crises can occur, particularly in situations involving migration. Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels mostly dealt with issues like displacement, identity crisis, belonging, migration, and the inner conflicts that happen between the characters in the novel. The experiences of the immigrants and their challenges in adjusting to new cultures and continents are also regularly depicted in his books. The characters in both of his novels, *Theft* and *Gravel Heart*, have similar inner turmoil and identity crises that can be seen in his works. The present paper deals with how the characters face identity crises in other countries and the inner conflicts that happen within the families.

**Keywords:** Migration, identity crisis, inner conflicts, displacement.

### **Full paper**

David Goggins, in his autobiographical essay, quoted about identity that "If you want to be one of the few to defy those trends in our ever-softening society, you will have to be willing to go to war with yourself and create a whole new identity, which requires an open mind." (Goggins) The culture of the native community differs from that of other cultures. People either migrate to other countries in search of a better life, or they are forced to move from their native place. This results in an identity crisis for an individual in a foreign land. Identity refers to a person's classification according to their gender, race, religion, ethnicity,

and nationality. Identity plays a great role in a person's life. An identity crisis is mostly associated with migrants who are trapped between two cultures, languages, and races. Most of Gurnah's novels are about migrants who face difficulties and hardships in other countries as well as within their countries.

In *Theft*, Karim, the protagonist, was born to Raya and Bakari Abbas. They lived in Pemba. Abbas was a building contractor. He divorced his first wife, Mamkuu, and married Raya in his forties. Raya left her husband when her son Karim was three years old. Abbas treated Raya poorly; she was tortured and abused. They moved to Raya's family's house. Karim has an elder brother named Ali, who was the son of his father's first wife. When Karim was in secondary school, his father passed away. His mother started working in a clothing store, and she began to discover a new life, which led to her growing detached from her son. Karim was taken care of by his grandparents, especially his grandmother. He was worried about his parents. "Karim, at times wondered why parents like his, who were neglectful and unloving, bothered to have children. He had only a hazy memory of his father, and his mother often rebuked him." (Gurnah 16)

An identity crisis, especially among teenagers, can undoubtedly be exacerbated by a shattered family. A sense of self for young people can be upset by the emotional turmoil and instability that comes with family dissolution, which can cause them to become confused about their values, roles, and connections. Feelings of loss and hatred toward the familial circumstances might make this even more difficult. Growing up in a broken home presents numerous challenges for young people. Clinical depression, anxiety, and melancholy are more likely to occur. Erikson stated that "In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity." (Erikson 130)

Raya was in an affair with Haji Othman and married him. He is from Dar es Salaam. Haji owned a pharmacy shop. Meanwhile, Karim went on to stay with his step brother Ali's family. Ali married Jalila. She treated Karim as her younger brother. After two years, Karim's mother invited him to Dar es Salaam to visit them. After visiting them, Karim stayed back with Ali and Jalila and finished his schooling. Karim was awarded a scholarship to study at the University of Dar es Salaam, so he migrated there. He stayed in the hostel and started his studies. He often went to see his mother and Haji at their place and stayed for lunch or dinner. He moved from the hostel and stayed with his mother for the second year, and then returned to the hostel for the third year.

Badar, a servant, was recruited to work in Raya's house. He was fourteen years old. He was taught to clean the house, to cook in the kitchen by Raya, the mistress. Haji bought clothes for him to wear for special occasions. He taught him to buy food for cooking and other things from the shop in the market. Uncle Othman did not like Badar staying in his house. Many years back, Badar's father, Ismail, worked for Haji's father, Othman. Ismail was a distant relative. No one in the village respected him. One day, Ismail stole the money from his master, Othman, and left. "Then he stormed out of the house, and that same day, he was gone. He stole the money the master kept in a cashbox in his office and disappeared." (Gurnah 140) This incident broke Othman's heart.

Karim saw Badar when he came to stay at his mother's house. He was generous towards him and treated him kindly. Took him to the mosque along with him, read him some stories. Badar was hardworking and became a loyal servant to Haji and Raya. Badar usually went to buy goods from Fadhili's grocery shop, as taught by Haji. One day, Fadhili showed the information in the record books to Othman, as things were bought in excess amounts. Badar was framed and accused as a thief by Othman, and he told Haji that Badar should leave his house immediately. "That boy has been stealing those goods to someone. I don't want that thief and son of a thief in my house. Get rid of him at once." (Gurnah 142) After this incident, Badar came to know that he was related to Haji's family. Haji was kind to Badar. Karim met Fauzia, and he fell in love with her. Their wedding took place in a small manner.

After the accusation, Karim took Badar along with him to Zanzibar. Due to Haji's support Badar became a trainee at the Tamarind Hotel. Later, he became an assistant manager there. Karim considered Badar as a younger brother, and he also helped him. "Karim was helping him out of generosity rather than obligation." (Gurnah 167) Badar stayed with Karim's family for months, and then he was shifted to a nearby room. Fauzia gave birth to Nasra. At first, Karim was so happy, but later things changed. Every time the baby cried, Karim got frustrated. Badar loved both Karim and Fauzia. With every visit of Badar, the baby got attached to him and felt comfortable.

Meanwhile, a foreign volunteer named Jerry Bruno came and stayed in the Tamarind hotel. Badar was in charge at the reception. He agreed to take Jerry to the restaurant, but due to his work shift, he was unable to accompany her. Eventually, Karim took her to the restaurant and they had a conversation about his wife and daughter. They started meeting on Fridays. Jerry came to see Fauzia and Nasra twice. Karim shared the good news with Fauzia about being

employed in the green development project and attending a ten-week training program in Copenhagen. Karim lied to Fauzia and started meeting Jerry. He wanted to be with her, sleep with her and betray Fauzia. Jerry asked him to live his life as he wished without regrets. His wife and daughter left Karim after knowing about his betrayal. Karim also showed his true evil nature to Badar in the end. Badar accepted it gracefully and learned to endure it.

In the novel *Gravel Heart*, the protagonist, Salim, was born to Masud and Saida in Zanzibar. His father worked as a clerk in the water authority in Gulioni. Masud left home when Salim was seven years old and studying in school. Salim missed his father; he did not know the reason behind his father's departure. His mother tried to convince him that his father had gone out for a few days. Masud stayed in his friend Khamis's garage. In the beginning, while working in the office, Saida packed the lunch basket and gave it to her husband by herself; later, she asked Salim to do it regularly.

Salim liked his uncle Amir, who is his mother's brother. He showered gifts and presents on him. Amir was working in the Coral Inn; later, he became the minister of foreign affairs and married Asha. Meanwhile, Saida was pregnant again and gave birth to Munaira. She revealed that the father of the child is Hakim and that he is the brother of Asha. Uncle Amir advised Salim to go to London for his higher studies, as he and Aunt Asha were living there, which would help him out. Before leaving for London, Salim went to inform his father about his journey to London.

The silence and the untold secrets within the family also went on to shape Salim's identity. After migrating to London, Amir wanted Salim to pursue business studies as his profession so that he could make money. But after a year, Salim made sure that he had no interest in studying Business Studies. "I can't take the examinations. I don't want to do Business Studies. It was a mistake. I have no ability for the work." (Gurnah 70) But Uncle Amir did not accept his decision; instead, he forced Salim to continue and asked him to revise and pass the exams. Salim tried his best. Aunt Asha explained that his uncle is doing this favour of taking care of him as he owed it to his mother, as she helped him with his marriage. She also added how her brother Hakim fell in love with his mother. Salim spoke on behalf of his mother and questioned whether his mother had a choice of marrying Hakim, which paved the way to get him expelled from the house. "Now I am here like a vagabond at your mercy." (Gravel Heart 74)

Salim wanted to pursue Literature. He asked for his financial guarantee, or else he would go back to Zanzibar. Before parting ways, Uncle Amir cursed him harshly. “I expect you got mixed up with drug addicts and criminals; this city is full of them. Now you can join them and be a proper cheating unemployed immigrant.” (Gravel Heart 76) He agreed to a financial guarantee, but will not support him. But later, Salim was forced to look after himself in a foreign country. He stayed in the Organisation of African Unity house along with other Africans. He went to college in the mornings and started working in a supermarket in the evenings. Mgeni helped Salim with work and money after hearing his sad past. Later, he found a job and worked in Café Galileo.

Salim felt unhappy about what his uncle did to him. “I could not get over how he had taken away from my home and discarded me to a life of such sterility.” (102) After passing the exams, Salim informed Uncle Amir of his success in the exam. This was not welcome news for Amir. He was so furious on seeing the letter, and he harshly told him to look after himself and would not provide money anymore. Salim was caught between two cultures, which led to questioning his identity. The problems immigrants face abroad are predominantly seen in Gurnah’s novels.

Thus, family plays an important role in identity formation. Young people’s perceptions of their role in the place they live and interactions with others might be affected when families split up. Yoav Norah Harari stated that “Identity is defined by conflicts and dilemmas more than by agreement” (Harari 109). It might be difficult for a single parent to provide for their family’s fundamental necessities. Broken families can therefore negatively affect many facets of their community. Silence within the family also plays a major role in both novels. Second marriage and extramarital affairs are a few reasons why the family bond breaks, and the children are forced to suffer. In *Theft*, the character Karim, at the end of the novel, betrays his wife, Fauzia, and abandons his daughter, Nasra. His identity shifted from good to bad due to his complex character and his upbringing. Badar, the servant who remained loyal was considered and framed his identity as a thief, just because his father was a thief. In *Gravel Heart*, because of Saida’s fault and betrayal, the entire family suffers. The peace and unity in the family are lost. In both novels, *Theft* and *Gravel Heart*, the present paper showcases the problems of how a person’s identity is affected and questioned because of the inner conflicts that happen within the families.

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