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SOCIO-CULTURAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF ALIENATION IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S SELECTED NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Alienation remains one of the most significant concerns in postcolonial literature, particularly in narratives of migration, displacement, and identity. This study examines the socio-cultural and psychological dimensions of alienation in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* (1996), *By the Sea* (2001), and *Gravel Heart* (2017). Guided by Hegel's philosophy of recognition and Marx's theory of alienation, the paper investigates how racism, capitalism, and cultural displacement shape the experiences of migrants and displaced characters in the selected novels. The study adopts a qualitative research design based on textual content analysis, allowing for an in-depth interpretation of the novels within their social, cultural and economic contexts. The findings reveal that alienation in Gurnah's fiction extends beyond physical displacement to encompass psychological estrangement, cultural dislocation, social exclusion, and fractured identity. Racism denies characters social recognition and belonging, capitalist structures commoditize migrant labour and reinforce exploitation, while cultural displacement destabilizes identity through the demands of adaptation and assimilation. These interconnected forces generate significant emotional isolation and a persistent quest for belonging. The study further demonstrates that Gurnah presents alienation not as an individual condition but as a consequence of historical, colonial, and socio-economic structures that continue to shape migrant experiences. By integrating Hegelian and Marxist perspectives, the paper contributes to postcolonial literary scholarship by illustrating how recognition, identity, and belonging are negotiated within contexts of migration and global inequality. It concludes that Gurnah's selected novels offer a compelling critique of contemporary systems of exclusion while affirming the enduring human quest for dignity, recognition, and belonging.

Keywords: Alienation, Belonging, Capitalism, Displacement, Migration, Cultural, Racism.

1 INTRODUCTION

Alienation has been examined from philosophical, socio-economic, psychological, and postcolonial perspectives, making it a multidimensional concept for understanding estrangement between individuals and themselves, other people, society, culture, and material conditions. The concept is particularly relevant to studies of migration and displacement because movement across geographical and cultural boundaries can disrupt established identities, social relationships,

and systems of belonging. Existing scholarship demonstrates that alienation cannot be adequately understood as an individual feeling of loneliness or isolation; rather, it is frequently produced through social relations, unequal power structures, economic conditions, racial hierarchies, and cultural dislocation. The following review therefore examines the major theoretical and scholarly perspectives that inform an understanding of alienation as a socio-cultural, economic, and psychological experience.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Alienation, Recognition, and Social Identity

Hegel (1977) provides an important philosophical foundation for understanding alienation through the development of self-consciousness and recognition. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel conceptualizes consciousness as developing through its encounter with the “Other,” suggesting that self-awareness is shaped through processes of separation, recognition, and reconciliation. The relationship between self and ‘Other’ demonstrates that individuals require recognition from others in order to develop a secure sense of self. The master–slave dialectic further illustrates how unequal relations of power complicate the achievement of mutual recognition. From this perspective, alienation may emerge when individuals are denied recognition or are positioned within unequal relationships that prevent them from being acknowledged as autonomous and socially valued subjects.

Marx (1975) develops the concept of alienation in a different direction by locating estrangement within material and socio-economic relations. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx identifies four dimensions of alienation: alienation from the product of labour, from the process of labour, from species-being, and from other human beings. Under capitalism, workers lose control over their labour and its products because production is organized around private ownership and profit. Labour consequently becomes an external activity rather than an expression of human creativity and potential. Marx's perspective therefore shifts attention from philosophical estrangement to the material structures that produce and sustain alienation.

The Marxian approach is particularly important because it demonstrates that alienation is embedded in systems of power and economic organization. Individuals may experience psychological estrangement not simply because of personal circumstances but because of their position within exploitative economic relationships. Economic dependence, precarious employment, commodification of labour, and unequal relations between employers and workers may therefore contribute to social and psychological forms of alienation. Fromm (1961) similarly explains Marx's concept of alienation by emphasizing the ways capitalist societies can transform individuals into instruments of production, thereby weakening their sense of individuality and human fulfilment. Harvey (2014) further draws attention to the contradictions and unequal power relations associated with contemporary capitalism.

2.2 Recognition, Misrecognition, and Social Exclusion

The relationship between recognition and alienation has been developed further by scholars of social identity and recognition. Honneth (1995) argues that individuals develop positive relationships with themselves through forms of recognition within interpersonal, social, and institutional relationships. Recognition provides the basis for self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem, whereas experiences of disrespect and misrecognition can damage these dimensions of identity. From this perspective, social exclusion is not merely a denial of material opportunities but can also undermine an individual's sense of worth and belonging.

Taylor (1994) similarly emphasizes the importance of recognition in identity formation. He argues that identity is partly shaped by how individuals are recognized by others and that misrecognition can result in forms of oppression and distorted self-understanding. Recognition is therefore central to belonging because individuals require social acknowledgement in order to perceive themselves as legitimate members of a community. The perspectives of Hegel, Honneth, and Taylor collectively demonstrate that alienation may arise when individuals are denied meaningful participation in social relationships or are represented as inferior, different, or undesirable.

These approaches are particularly relevant to experiences of migration and displacement, where individuals may encounter institutions and communities that fail to recognize their identities, histories, cultural backgrounds, or social contributions. Alienation in such contexts can therefore involve both external exclusion and internal psychological consequences.

2.3 Racism and Racial Alienation

Racism represents another important dimension of alienation because racial classification can determine who is perceived as belonging and who is positioned as an outsider. Bonilla-Silva (2018) explains that racism operates through social structures and everyday practices that reproduce racial inequality, while Fanon (1967, 2008) demonstrates the

profound psychological consequences of racialization for Black subjects. For Fanon, colonial and racial systems construct the Black person through the lens of the dominant racial group, producing experiences of objectification, inferiority, and psychological fragmentation.

Hall (1997) further demonstrates that racial identities are constructed through representation and discourse. Representations do not merely describe racial groups but participate in producing meanings about difference, normality, and belonging. Processes of “Othering” can consequently position particular groups outside the boundaries of the dominant social identity. Said (1978) similarly demonstrates how colonial discourse constructs the non-European as the cultural “Other,” establishing oppositions between European and non-European identities.

Gilroy (1993) extends this discussion to the experience of the Black diaspora, demonstrating that racialized identities are shaped through histories of movement, displacement, colonialism, and cultural interaction. Racial identity can therefore become a source of both belonging and estrangement, particularly when migrants encounter societies in which racial difference is used to determine social status and access to institutions.

Recent scholarship also confirms the relationship between racial discrimination and alienation. Baqar et al. (2024), for example, demonstrate that racial discrimination can generate isolation, otherness, and disconnection from society. Such findings reinforce the argument that racial alienation is simultaneously social and psychological: discriminatory structures exclude individuals from full participation while repeated experiences of ‘othering’ may become internalized as feelings of inferiority, insecurity, or unbelonging.

2.4 Capitalism, Labour, and Economic Alienation

Economic relations constitute another major dimension of alienation. Marx's theory demonstrates that capitalism separates workers from the products and processes of their labour and from their human potential. Within capitalist systems, labour becomes a commodity that is exchanged for wages, while workers have limited control over the conditions and purposes of production. Economic alienation therefore involves both material exploitation and psychological estrangement.

Fromm (1961) emphasizes that capitalist societies may reduce individuals to economic functions, transforming human beings into instruments of production and consumption. Harvey (2014) similarly examines the inequalities and contradictions embedded in capitalist relations. Such perspectives suggest that economic marginalization may affect not only material well-being but also identity, dignity, interpersonal relationships, and social participation.

The relationship between capitalism and alienation is particularly significant for migrants and other economically vulnerable populations. Migrants may occupy precarious positions within labour markets and may be concentrated in low-paid or insecure employment. Economic vulnerability can consequently interact with social exclusion and racial discrimination, producing forms of alienation that cannot be explained by economic conditions alone. The literature therefore suggests the importance of examining economic alienation alongside other social and cultural dimensions.

2.5 Cultural Displacement, Migration, and Alienation

Migration and displacement create another significant context in which alienation is experienced. Bhabha (1994) conceptualizes the “unhomely” condition to describe experiences in which individuals find themselves between cultural worlds. The migrant may no longer feel completely at home in the culture of origin while simultaneously experiencing exclusion within the host society. Bhabha's concept of the “Third Space” consequently challenges fixed notions of cultural identity and highlights the hybrid and negotiated character of migrant identities.

Gilroy (1993) similarly demonstrates that diaspora identities emerge through movement between locations, cultures, and histories. Diaspora therefore complicates conventional understandings of belonging because individuals may maintain connections to multiple cultural locations while experiencing exclusion from each. Cultural identity becomes a continuing process of negotiation rather than a fixed possession.

Hall (1990) also conceptualizes cultural identity as continually produced and reconstructed rather than as something static or predetermined. From this perspective, migration can destabilize established identities while simultaneously creating opportunities for new forms of cultural identification. However, the process of identity reconstruction may involve uncertainty, conflict, and psychological tension, particularly where migrants encounter pressure to assimilate into dominant cultural norms.

Berry (1997) provides a psychological perspective through his concept of acculturation, explaining how immigrants negotiate relationships between their culture of origin and the culture of the host society. Acculturation may involve integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization. These different strategies demonstrate that cultural adaptation

is not a uniform process and that difficulties in negotiating cultural expectations can generate acculturative stress and social isolation.

Krishnappa (2020) similarly identifies cultural alienation as a condition involving disconnection from one's own culture or from the dominant culture, often manifesting through identity loss, isolation, and difficulties in establishing belonging. Cultural alienation therefore intersects with psychological and social alienation because individuals may experience uncertainty about their identities while simultaneously encountering exclusion from social communities.

2.6 Postcolonial and Diaspora Perspectives on Alienation

Postcolonial scholarship provides an important context for understanding the relationship between alienation, colonial history, migration, and identity. Fanon (1967, 2008) demonstrates that colonial racial hierarchies can become internalized, producing psychological fragmentation and an unstable relationship between the self and the social environment. Bhabha (1994) emphasizes cultural hybridity and the “in-between” position of individuals who negotiate multiple cultural locations, while Gilroy (1993) examines the historical and cultural experiences of diaspora communities shaped by slavery, colonialism, migration, and racialization.

These perspectives broaden the meaning of alienation beyond Marx's economic framework by emphasizing the cultural and psychological consequences of displacement and racial difference. At the same time, they demonstrate that alienation is historically produced rather than simply the result of individual inability to adapt. Colonial histories, racial representations, cultural hierarchies, and unequal relations between societies can continue to influence migrant experiences even after formal colonial structures have ended.

2.7 Research Gap

The reviewed literature demonstrates that alienation is a multidimensional phenomenon that operates across philosophical, social, economic, cultural, and psychological levels. Hegel (1977) establishes recognition as fundamental to self-consciousness and social identity, thereby showing how misrecognition can produce estrangement. Marx (1975) locates alienation within material and economic relations, demonstrating how capitalist labour can separate individuals from their work, their human potential, and other people. Honneth (1995) and Taylor (1994) extend the recognition perspective by demonstrating the importance of social acknowledgement for self-confidence, self-respect, identity, and belonging. Fanon (1967, 2008), Hall (1997), Said (1978), and Gilroy (1993) demonstrate how racialization, representation, colonial discourse, and diaspora can generate social exclusion and psychological fragmentation. Bhabha (1994), Berry (1997), Hall (1990), and Krishnappa (2020) further show how cultural displacement, hybridity, acculturation, and identity negotiation complicate migrants' experiences of belonging.

Although these perspectives provide substantial explanations of individual dimensions of alienation, the literature tends to address them within relatively distinct theoretical or thematic categories. Hegelian scholarship emphasizes recognition and self-consciousness; Marxist scholarship focuses primarily on labour, capitalism, and material relations; postcolonial scholarship emphasizes colonialism, racialization, cultural difference, diaspora, and hybridity; while other scholarships concentrates on psychological adaptation and cultural adjustment. There remains a need for an integrated approach that examines how these dimensions interact to produce alienation as both a socially structured and psychologically experienced condition.

In particular, insufficient attention has been given to the relationship between racism, capitalist relations, cultural displacement, social recognition, and psychological estrangement as interconnected dimensions of alienation. The literature establishes that each of these factors can produce exclusion or dislocation, but less attention has been devoted to how they operate simultaneously and reinforce one another within literary representations of migrant experience. There is therefore a need for literary scholarship that brings together Hegelian recognition and Marxian alienation while drawing on perspectives on racism, diaspora, cultural displacement, and identity.

This study addresses this gap by examining the socio-cultural and psychological dimensions of alienation in Abdulrazak Gurnah's selected novels, *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea*, and *Gravel Heart*. Guided by Hegel's philosophy of recognition and Marx's theory of alienation, and informed by postcolonial perspectives on racism, cultural displacement, and diaspora, the study examines how structural conditions of exclusion become connected to psychological experiences of estrangement, fractured identity, and the quest for belonging. The study therefore extends existing scholarship by treating alienation not as an isolated experience or single thematic category but as an interconnected socio-cultural, economic, and psychological condition.

Objectives of the Study

The study addresses this gap by examining the socio-cultural and psychological dimensions of alienation in *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea*, and *Gravel Heart*. It specifically investigates:

- How racism contributes to alienation.
- How capitalism contributes to alienation
- How cultural displacement contributes to alienation.

Significance of the Study

This study explores the themes of alienation by looking at the social-cultural and psychological dimensions in the selected novels of Abdulrazak Gurnah, namely *Admiring Silence* (1996), *By the Sea* (2001), and *Gravel Heart* (2017). The research examines how structural exclusion becomes psychologically internalized and how the resulting alienation shapes the characters' continuing quest for identity, recognition, and belonging.

The findings of this study are expected to benefit literary students and scholars at different levels by providing insights into the analysis of the theme of alienation. In addition, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological and social effects of alienation among individuals who find themselves living in foreign lands. By examining the experiences of immigrant characters in Gurnah's novels, the study further highlights the challenges associated with displacement and the search for belonging in unfamiliar environments.

Furthermore, the study provides a platform for applying theoretical perspectives such as Marxist Theory and Hegel's Theory of Alienation in literary analysis, thereby enriching critical approaches to the interpretation of Gurnah's works.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Hegel's Philosophy of Recognition

Hegel's conception of alienation provides an important foundation for understanding estrangement as a process of self-consciousness and identity formation. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel (1977) presents consciousness as developing through its encounter with the "Other," suggesting that self-awareness emerges through processes of separation, recognition, and reconciliation. Hegel's master-slave dialectic further demonstrates that identity and self-consciousness are constituted through relations of recognition and unequal power. This perspective is particularly relevant to literary representations of migrants whose identities are shaped through encounters with unfamiliar social and cultural environments.

3.2 Marx's Theory of Alienation

Marx (1975) transforms alienation from an idealist and philosophical condition into a material and socio-economic one, locating it within capitalist relations of production. His four dimensions of alienation: estrangement from the product of labour, the labour process, species-being, and other human beings, provide a framework for examining how economic structures, exploitative labour, and unequal social relations produce both material and psychological estrangement. Marxist theory identifies capitalism as inherently alienating because it separates individuals from their labour, the products of their work, fellow workers, and ultimately themselves. The division of labour, private ownership, and commodification of labour power make workers dependent on wages while denying them control over production.

3.3 Integration of Hegelian and Marxian Perspectives

Hegel's concept of recognition and Marx's theory of alienation provide complementary perspectives for examining both the interpersonal and structural dimensions of alienation in Gurnah's fiction. Hegel illuminates the relational dimension of alienation by emphasizing the role of recognition in the development of self-consciousness and identity, while Marx foregrounds the material and structural conditions that estrange individuals from their labour, social relations, and human potential. Honneth (1995) extends the question of alienation through his theory of recognition, arguing that individuals develop a secure sense of self through social relations characterized by recognition and mutual respect; consequently, experiences of misrecognition can generate forms of social exclusion and damaged self-identity.

4 METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative research design based on textual content analysis. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth interpretation of *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea*, and *Gravel Heart* within their social, cultural and economic contexts. The study focuses on characterization, narrative events, interpersonal relationships, and social interactions through which alienation is represented. The selected textual evidence is interpreted according to the study's focus on racism, capitalism, cultural displacement, social exclusion, fractured identity, loss of recognition, and psychological estrangement. The analysis therefore examines the ways in which historical, socio-cultural, economic, and psychological forces interact to produce alienation and shape the characters' quest for identity, recognition, and belonging.

5 RACISM AND ALIENATION

Racism can be understood as a socially constructed system of hierarchy that privileges certain racial groups while marginalizing others through institutional, cultural, and interpersonal practices (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Fanon (2008) views racism as a structural condition with roots in colonial histories that produces psychological and social fragmentation among racialized subjects. Hall (1997) affirms that racial identities are continuously produced through representation and discourse, creating processes of “othering” that determine inclusion and exclusion. Gilroy (1993) similarly observes that racialized subjects in the diaspora experience displacement and estrangement as they navigate societies that mark them as culturally and racially different. Consequently, racism generates social exclusion, stereotyping, unequal access to belonging, and psychological alienation. Baqar et al. (2024) affirm that racial discrimination contributes to alienation by producing isolation, otherness, and disconnection from society. The three novels demonstrate these processes through characters whose experiences of racial discrimination in foreign environments deepen their emotional, psychological, and social alienation.

In *Admiring Silence*, the unnamed narrator encounters racial stereotyping in institutional and interpersonal contexts. During a medical consultation, the doctor assumes that he is Afro-Caribbean and attributes his condition partly to his “age and race” (p. 10). The narrator recognizes that the doctor is actually referring to Black people and internally challenges the racial assumptions behind the diagnosis. His failure to correct the doctor exposes his internalized marginalization and the pressure to remain silent within a racially prejudiced environment. The encounter reduces him to a racialized body rather than recognizing him as an individual. Similarly, Mr Willoughby repeatedly uses derogatory descriptions of Black people, questioning their presence in universities and recalling a Black schoolmate as “Sambo” (pp. 22–29). His comments imply that Black people are intellectually inferior and do not naturally belong within English educational and social institutions. The narrator consequently invents stories about his background as a defensive response to the racial gaze directed at him. This denial of recognition reinforces Hegel’s (1977) argument that a secure sense of self develops through mutual recognition. Said (1978) further explains that colonial discourse constructs non-Europeans as the “Other” through stereotypes that justify marginalization.

Racial prejudice also affects the narrator’s employment. His employer, Peter, objects to his closeness to Emma, an English student, and eventually dismisses him, associating Black masculinity with “degraded and uncontrollable lust” (p. 66). The incident demonstrates how racial stereotypes about Black people as intellectually inferior, morally suspect, and socially disruptive translate into exclusion from economic opportunities. Fanon (1967) argues that racism constructs Black people as dangerous, hypersexual, and uncivilized, thereby legitimizing their exclusion from social and economic spaces. In *Admiring Silence*, therefore, racism operates simultaneously through medical discourse, interpersonal relations, education, the workplace, and wider media representations, producing a persistent sense of ‘unbelonging’.

By the Sea similarly presents racism as a major source of alienation. Latif encounters racial abuse while studying in Germany when local youths mock him and his friend Ali as “Africans” (p. 119). The casual nature of the abuse demonstrates how racial prejudice becomes normalized in everyday interactions. Bonilla-Silva (2018) describes such normalization as a feature of everyday racism in which discriminatory attitudes become embedded in ordinary social practices. Latif also experiences ridicule on a bus when another passenger makes a snorting sound and laughs at him, while the driver joins in the mockery (p. 135). Such experiences deny him recognition and dignity and reinforce his position as an outsider. From the perspectives of Marxist alienation and Hegelian recognition, the refusal to acknowledge Latif’s humanity estranges him from the host society and fragments his sense of identity.

Latif also encounters institutionalized racial exclusion. At the university hostel, African students are crowded together in a space he describes as a “catacomb” (p. 114). The physical segregation reinforces their status as racial outsiders and intensifies his homesickness and emotional isolation. His encounter with the racial slur “blackamoor” further demonstrates how language can dehumanize and alienate Black people. Disturbed by the word, Latif consults a dictionary and discovers a series of negative terms associated with “black,” leaving him “despicable, disheartened, smeared” by the experience (p. 72). Thus, racism operates through both physical exclusion and language.

The novel also reveals the historical foundations of racial domination through Elleke’s recollection of her European family’s colonial experience in Kenya. Her statement, “We were Europeans. We could go anywhere in the world we wanted” (p. 135), reflects the colonial assumption of European racial superiority and entitlement. Her further assertion that Europeans had a right to places occupied by people with “dark skins and frizzy hair” (p. 131) reduces Africans to racialized physical characteristics and denies them legitimate ownership of their land. The outbreak of the Second World War destabilizes this privilege when the family faces possible internment, creating an ironic reversal in which those who previously enjoyed unrestricted mobility experience displacement themselves. Their fear of being mocked by Africans also illustrates how racial perceptions shape feelings of vulnerability and displacement.

Saleh Omar, who adopts the identity of Shabaan, experiences racial discrimination after arriving in England as an asylum seeker. He describes the refugee accommodation as a place where people are treated like “casual and valueless nuisance[s]” (p. 43). African and Arab asylum seekers are segregated from others, while Shabaan subsequently experiences racial ridicule from fellow asylum seekers and his hosts because of his age and Blackness (pp. 53, 62). These encounters demonstrate that racial prejudice can be reproduced even among displaced people, revealing the depth of socially embedded racial hierarchies. His humiliation further intensifies his alienation and displacement in exile.

In *Gravel Heart*, Salim’s experiences demonstrate how racism affects intimate relationships, education, employment, and social identity. Even before overt rejection occurs, Salim fears that Billie may be ashamed of “my strangeness, my ordinariness, my blackness, my poverty” (p. 140). His anxiety illustrates the internalization of racial discrimination. This fear is later confirmed when Billie’s family rejects their relationship and refers to him as “a Muslim nigger from Africa” (p. 147). The family’s refusal to recognize him beyond racial and religious stereotypes results in humiliation, rejection, and alienation. Hegel (1977) explains that self-consciousness develops through mutual recognition; therefore, the refusal to recognize Salim as an individual deprives him of the recognition necessary for self-realization.

Salim also encounters racism in employment and cultural institutions. His employer Mark responds to his revelation that he is from Zanzibar by invoking the stereotype of “Darkest darkest Africa” (p. 109). As a student, Salim is excluded from a production of *The Winter’s Tale* because of his race, while a white woman tells him that she would have slept with him “if I weren’t black” (p. 112). These experiences reveal how racial hierarchy operates both institutionally and intimately. Fanon (1967) argues that racial discrimination encourages Black people to internalize feelings of inferiority through the racial gaze of the dominant society. Honneth (1995) similarly associates alienation with the denial of recognition, while Taylor (1994) emphasizes that identity is shaped through social recognition. Bhabha’s (1994) concept of the “in-between” condition further explains Salim’s transitional position. He is physically present in England but remains excluded from full cultural and social acceptance.

Finally, *Gravel Heart* exposes institutional racism through the story of a Black woman whose death fails to attract sustained police interest after authorities discover that she is Black (p. 98). The episode reveals a hierarchy of human value within the legal system and deepens Salim’s awareness of the racialized structures of his host society. Overall, the three novels portray racism as a multidimensional mechanism of alienation operating through institutions, interpersonal relations, language, intimate relationships, education, employment, and historical colonial structures.

6 CAPITALISM AND ALIENATION

Marxist theory identifies capitalism as inherently alienating because it separates individuals from their labour, the products of their work, fellow workers, and ultimately themselves. The division of labour, private ownership, and commodification of labour power make workers dependent on wages while denying them control over production. Capitalism may also commoditize human beings by valuing them according to their economic usefulness rather than their intrinsic worth (BBC, 2015; IMF, 2025). This condition is evident in Gurnah’s representation of migrants, refugees, and workers whose economic vulnerability intensifies their alienation.

In *By the Sea*, Omar’s experience as an asylum seeker illustrates the commodification of human beings. He ironically presents himself as an object that Britain should acquire just as colonial powers historically appropriated valuable objects from their colonies: “I am fragile and precious too, a sacred work, too delicate to be left in the hands of natives, so you’d better take me too” (p. 18). His asylum claim itself is connected to British political interests, since the government had decided that people from his country could qualify for asylum as a means of demonstrating opposition to their government (p. 10). Omar therefore ironically commoditizes himself in order to gain access to Britain, exposing the continuing relationship between colonial power, political interests, and the treatment of human beings as objects of value.

The novel further recalls how European and Arab traders historically exploited Africa by buying, kidnapping, and transporting Africans as labourers (p. 15). From a Marxist perspective, this represents an extreme form of alienation because Africans were separated from their labour, bodies, communities, and cultural identities. Marx (1975) associates capitalism with the dehumanizing logic in which profit overrides human value. The forced removal of Africans from their communities created both economic and cultural alienation. The traders’ imposition of their “way of looking at the world” also demonstrates ideological domination, through which oppressed people may internalize their subordinate position.

Contemporary asylum practices in *By the Sea* continue this commoditizing logic. Omar describes refugee accommodation as an encampment operated by a private company, with asylum seekers housed in warehouse-like structures (p. 42). Kevin Edelman warns him that the British system will “make life hard” and subject him to indignities and possibly violence (p. 12). The treatment of asylum seekers reduces them to their perceived usefulness or burden

within an economic system. Their humanity, dignity, identity, and histories become secondary to institutional calculations of value. Das (2023) observes that capitalism often produces poor working conditions because profit maximization encourages exploitation and neglect of workers' well-being.

In *Admiring Silence*, the unnamed narrator's part-time restaurant employment illustrates capitalist alienation. Rather than providing dignity and economic security, his work involves "dirty, greasy water, recalcitrant crockery and feeding on crumbs" (p. 62). His willingness to eat customers' leftovers demonstrates the extent to which exploitative labour erodes human dignity. Marx (1975) argues that capitalist labour alienates workers because work ceases to express human creativity and instead serves the interests of capital. Fromm (1961) similarly maintains that capitalist societies transform individuals into instruments of economic production, weakening their individuality and self-worth. Harvey (2014) emphasizes the unequal power relations within capitalism, particularly where employers exploit economically vulnerable workers.

The narrator's relationship with Emma temporarily counters this alienation because companionship restores a sense of humanity and emotional connection. Honneth (1995) argues that recognition and interpersonal relationships are essential for self-confidence and social belonging. However, Peter's hostility toward the relationship demonstrates the power of the workplace to suppress human interaction. His dismissal of the narrator shows how capitalist structures can subordinate personal relationships to workplace authority and productivity.

In *Gravel Heart*, Salim similarly experiences exploitative migrant labour. While waiting to join college, he works in a supermarket and later in a warehouse and launderette, describing himself as a "migrant helot" (p. 65). His labour is repetitive, menial, and undertaken primarily for survival. Later, he and other African students work long hours while struggling with debt and the "fantasy of making good" (p. 85). Their experiences demonstrate how migrants occupy vulnerable positions within capitalist systems and how economic insecurity produces both social and psychological alienation.

The exploitation of workers is further demonstrated through Mark, the café owner. Andreou (2024) argues that capitalist systems enable exploitation because of unequal power relations between employers and employees, allowing employers to appropriate surplus value while prioritizing profit. Mark manipulates his employees through apparent affection, particularly the women, in order to secure their commitment to work. His attitude is summarized in the statement, "Business is business" (p. 115). When Salim and Annie become romantically involved and subsequently arrive late for work, Mark reprimands them: "Fucking is fucking and business is business" (p. 116). His response reduces human relationships to considerations of productivity and profit. Emotional attachment becomes a tool of labour management, while workers are expected to suppress their personal needs in order to remain productive.

Overall, *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea*, and *Gravel Heart* portray capitalism as a significant source of alienation. Through exploitative employment, commodification, unequal power relations, refugee management, and the subordination of human relationships to economic interests, Gurnah demonstrates how migrants become economically and socially marginalized.

7 CULTURAL ALIENATION

Cultural alienation refers to disconnection from one's own culture or from the dominant culture, often resulting from migration and social structures and manifesting in identity loss, isolation, and struggles for belongingness (Krishnapa, 2020). Gurnah portrays this form of alienation through characters who encounter unfamiliar cultural practices, institutions, languages, and social expectations in foreign environments.

In *Gravel Heart*, Salim experiences cultural disorientation immediately after arriving in England. Having never used a telephone or knife and fork, he becomes an object of amusement for his relatives: "I had no previous experience of speaking on the phone and felt an instant discomfort with the disembodied voice" (p. 59). His discomfort is reinforced when his family laughs at his difficulty using cutlery. Similarly, unfamiliar clothing and London's environment intensify his sense of difference: "The sweater was too hot, the coat was too big and made me feel as if I was wearing something discarded by one of the great Englishmen" (p. 61), while "London terrified me. I could not make them out from each other" (p. 61). These experiences illustrate what Hall (1990) describes as the continuous reconstruction of cultural identity and what Berry (1997) identifies as acculturative stress. They also reflect Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "Third Space," in which the migrant occupies an in-between position struggling with the culture of origin and the dominant culture.

Salim's alienation is further evident in his struggle to adapt to London's social environment. He explains, "I learnt to live in London, to avoid being intimidated by crowds and by rudeness, to avoid curiosity, not to feel desolate at hostile stares" (p. 66). Adaptation therefore becomes defensive rather than liberating, as he must modify his behaviour to negotiate an

environment in which he feels excluded. His encounter with London's technological and urban environment produces a similar response. The underground trains and overcrowded city astonish and frighten him: "I think I'm scared of the press of people." (p. 60). It gets so crowded on the underground that I feel as if I can't breathe. Trains that travel under the ground! We are so backward!" (p. 61). His response reveals how technological advancement can reinforce rather than reduce alienation by making him conscious of perceived cultural and developmental differences.

The university environment further deepens Salim's cultural and intellectual alienation. Although he had "coveted the life of a student" and expected to participate in a scholarly community, he finds himself "on the edges of this university life and hardly said a word in class" (p. 107). His difficulty engaging with the concerns of his fellow students indicates his lack of familiarity with the dominant academic culture. This can be related to Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital, since Salim lacks some of the linguistic and cultural resources valued within the institution.

In *Admiring Silence*, the unnamed narrator similarly experiences England as a space of admiration and estrangement. He is impressed by its healthcare, infrastructure, and institutional efficiency, noting that "Here everyone has a doctor, all to themselves" (p. 4). Yet his admiration does not translate into belonging. His encounter with the English workplace is particularly alienating. Working in a restaurant kitchen, he describes his working environment as resembling "a prisoner in a camp" (p. 62). This image reflects Marx's (1975) concept of alienated labour, in which capitalist work separates individuals from meaningful control over their labour. As Das (2022) observes, capitalist systems may privilege productivity and profit over workers' dignity and well-being. The narrator therefore experiences both economic and cultural alienation as a migrant worker. His teaching experience produces another form of cultural dislocation when he encounters students whose behaviour challenges his expectations of teacher authority. These experiences demonstrate that his alienation emerges through repeated encounters with unfamiliar institutional and social practices, consistent with Berry's (1997) account of acculturative stress.

In *By the Sea*, cultural alienation is evident in Omar's perception of the people around him. He admits that their behaviour appears strange and unfamiliar: "I have so little understanding of the striving that seem to accompany their most ordinary acts" (p. 2). He subsequently recognises the subjectivity of his perception, acknowledging, "...Perhaps I exaggerate" (p. 2). His difficulty interpreting everyday social practices reflects Hegel's (1997) conception of alienation as estrangement from the social world. Omar's displaced perspective prevents him from recognising himself within his new environment, although his growing awareness that his perception may be shaped by displacement signals the possibility of self-consciousness and adaptation.

Language also functions as a significant source of cultural alienation. In *Gravel Heart*, Salim arrives in London expecting English to conform to the grammatical standards he has learned but encounters diverse and unfamiliar varieties: "I learn to live with the chaotic language of London, which did not speak to each other, and to cope with English that was broken and wrong, missing articles or in the wrong tense" (p. 66). His experience exposes the instability of linguistic expectations and demonstrates how language can become a barrier to belonging. From a Hegelian perspective, recognition is essential to the development of self-consciousness (Hegel, 1977); consequently, Salim's difficulty in negotiating unfamiliar linguistic forms contributes to his sense of exclusion. His experience also challenges assumptions about linguistic authority, revealing English as a fluid language shaped by class, ethnicity, and urban multiculturalism. Overall, cultural alienation in Gurnah's selected novels is presented as a multidimensional process involving unfamiliar customs, institutional practices, technological environments, academic cultures, and linguistic forms.

8 CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that alienation in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea*, and *Gravel Heart* is a multidimensional condition shaped by the interaction of socio-cultural, economic, and psychological forces. Rather than presenting alienation as an individual experience, Gurnah locates it within broader structures of racism, capitalist relations, cultural displacement, and unequal systems of recognition. The experiences of the novels' migrant and displaced characters reveal that physical movement from one geographical location to another does not necessarily lead to belonging. Instead, migration may expose individuals to new forms of exclusion, exploitation, cultural dislocation, and psychological estrangement.

The analysis has established that racism is a central mechanism through which alienation is produced and sustained. Across the three novels, racial prejudice operates through interpersonal encounters, educational and employment institutions, intimate relationships, language, and inherited colonial attitudes. The characters are repeatedly positioned as racial and cultural 'Others', limiting their opportunities for social acceptance and undermining their sense of dignity and self-worth. Hegel's philosophy of recognition is particularly useful in explaining this process: when individuals are denied recognition as equal and autonomous subjects, their capacity to develop a secure sense of self is compromised.

The study has also shown that capitalist relations intensify the alienation experienced by Gurnah's migrant characters. The precarious working conditions, economic vulnerability, and commodification of human value experienced by the characters illustrate Marx's argument that alienation is rooted in material and social relations. The unnamed narrator in *Admiring Silence*, Saleh Omar in *By the Sea*, and Salim in *Gravel Heart* encounter economic systems in which their value is frequently determined by their labour and usefulness rather than their humanity. Economic alienation therefore intersects with racial and cultural exclusion, demonstrating that the migrant experience cannot be adequately understood independently of material conditions and relations of power.

Cultural displacement constitutes another significant dimension of alienation. The characters encounter unfamiliar languages, customs, institutions, technologies, social practices, and expectations that destabilize previously established identities. Their attempts to negotiate these differences frequently place them in a precarious position, hanging between their cultures of origin and their host societies. Using Bhabha (1994) concept of the "Third Space" and Berry (1997) account of acculturation helps illuminate this condition of cultural and psychological alienation. Gurnah nevertheless complicates the idea that adaptation necessarily leads to integration. His characters may acquire new cultural practices and learn to negotiate their environments while continuing to experience exclusion and uncertainty about where they belong.

Significantly, the study demonstrates that the socio-cultural and psychological dimensions of alienation are inseparable. Feelings of loneliness, silence, humiliation, insecurity, homesickness, and fractured identity emerge from concrete experiences of racial discrimination, economic marginalization, cultural dislocation, and denied recognition. Psychological alienation is therefore not presented as an individual or internal condition; rather, it is produced and reinforced by social structures and historical relations of power.

The integration of Hegelian recognition and Marxist alienation theory provides an important contribution to the interpretation of Gurnah's fiction. Hegel sheds light on the relational dimension of alienation by emphasizing the role of recognition in the development of self-consciousness and identity, while Marx foregrounds the material and structural conditions that estrange individuals from their labour, social relations, and human potential. Read together with postcolonial perspectives on displacement, diaspora, and cultural hybridity, these approaches demonstrate that alienation in Gurnah's selected novels is simultaneously relational, economic, cultural, and psychological. This integrated perspective extends existing scholarship that has largely examined Gurnah through the related but more discrete themes of migration, exile, identity, racism, memory, and belonging.

Ultimately, *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea*, and *Gravel Heart* present alienation as a continuing consequence of unequal encounters between individuals, cultures, institutions, and systems of power. At the same time, the novels preserve a persistent quest for identity, and belonging. Gurnah's migrant characters do not simply seek a geographical place to inhabit; they seek social spaces in which they can be recognized, valued, and accepted. The study therefore concludes that meaningful belonging requires more than physical settlement or cultural adaptation. It depends upon recognition, social inclusion, cultural negotiation, economic dignity, and equitable participation in society.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

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