

Mediating Identities through the Recollections of Displacement in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure* and V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

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Abstract

This paper investigates how memories of displacement influence the identities and narratives of characters in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure* and V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*. This analysis draws upon theoretical frameworks articulated by Stuart Hall and Marianne Hirsch, demonstrating the integral role of displacement memories in constructing narratives that convey resilience, cultural adaptation, and the lasting impact of forced migration. The study explores how personal and collective memories of displacement contribute to identity formation and narrative construction in these literary works. It examines how displacement disrupts and reshapes individual identities, prompting introspection and a reassessment of roots and connections. The analysis also delves into how displaced individuals maintain cultural ties through rituals, traditions, and collective memories while adapting to new environments. Moreover, the paper discusses how these novels reflect broader geopolitical and cultural tensions, challenging essentialist notions of belonging and illustrating adaptive strategies used by displaced individuals to establish meaningful lives amidst upheaval. Furthermore, it explores the internal struggles and resilience of protagonists amid dislocation, portraying universal human experiences such as longing for home, adapting to change, and seeking stability amidst uncertainty.

Keywords: Identity, Memory, Diaspora, Cultural identity, Colonialism, Problematics, Displacement.

Introduction:

Displacement denotes the involuntary or voluntary movement of individuals or communities from their habitual places of residence, stemming from factors such as political conflicts, economic hardships, environmental changes, or cultural upheavals. The consequences of displacement are profound and extend beyond mere physical relocation, encompassing psychological, social, cultural, and political dimensions. The term "Problematics of Displacement" encapsulates a detailed exploration of the intricate challenges and complexities arising from the experience of being displaced. It suggests a critical examination of the diverse issues, dilemmas, and contradictions inherent in displacement, both at individual and collective levels.

Central to "The Problematics of Displacement" is the disruption it imposes on established identities and narratives. Individuals and communities relocated from familiar environments often confront challenges

in reconciling their past with present circumstances. This disruption prompts a reassessment of personal and collective identities, as well as a renegotiation of belonging and cultural affiliations. Moreover, the term suggests an examination of the complexities involved in navigating social and cultural contexts. Displaced individuals frequently find themselves in environments characterized by distinct norms, values, and practices from those of their origin, resulting in feelings of alienation, loss, and nostalgia for home, while also presenting opportunities for cultural amalgamation and adaptation. Therefore the term "The Problematics of Displacement" serves as a comprehensive and thought-provoking framework for comprehending the manifold challenges, dilemmas, and implications associated with displacement. It emphasizes the necessity for meticulous analysis and empathetic engagement with the experiences of displaced individuals and communities, underscoring the urgency of addressing displacement as a multifaceted and urgent global concern.

Depiction of Displacement by Gurnah and Naipaul:

Gurnah portrays characters navigating postcolonial East Africa and Naipaul depicts protagonists navigating the Caribbean diaspora, illustrating how displacement disrupts and transforms individual identities, prompting introspection and a reconsideration of roots and connections. Both authors incorporate themes of cultural memory and heritage into their narratives, with Gurnah emphasizing ancestral ties and historical legacies amidst migration and colonialism's aftermath, while Naipaul explores how displaced individuals maintain cultural connections through rituals and traditions despite adapting to new social and cultural landscapes. Furthermore, Gurnah and Naipaul critique the enduring impacts of colonialism on postcolonial societies, highlighting social, political, and economic inequalities exacerbated by historical legacies that shape the lives and displacements of their characters. They delve into the psychological and emotional dimensions of displacement, portraying characters experiencing trauma, loss, and alienation in unfamiliar environments, yet also showcasing resilience and the universal human experiences of longing for home and adapting to change. Additionally, both authors explore the complexities of diasporic identities forged through displacement, depicting characters negotiating hybrid cultural identities shaped by heritage, displacement experiences, and interactions with diverse communities. Through their nuanced portrayals, Gurnah and Naipaul challenge simplistic notions of belonging, illustrating how displaced individuals employ adaptive strategies to establish meaningful lives amidst new and often challenging circumstances. Ultimately, their works offer profound insights into how displacement shapes both individual experiences and collective histories, contributing to a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural implications of displacement across diverse global contexts.

Theoretical Framework:

Memory theorists like Marianne Hirsch argue that memories of displacement are not solely personal but also collective, transmitted over generations and shaping both individual and communal identities (Hirsch 5). Stuart Hall's concept of identity as fluid and constructed within specific historical and cultural contexts offers a framework for understanding how characters negotiate their identities through memories of displacement (Hall 27). These theories elucidate the intricate interplay among memory, identity, and displacement in literature. Stuart Hall's idea of identity as a fluid and contingent construct shaped by historical and cultural contexts is particularly pertinent in analyzing Mr. Biswas's and Hassan's navigation of identity amidst displacement (Hall 27). Moreover, Homi Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" suggests that displacement fosters the development of new identities that integrate aspects of

both the homeland and the host culture, challenging essentialist notions of identity (Bhabha 19). These theoretical perspectives provide insights into how displacement influences identity formation in *Memory of Departure* and *A House for Mr Biswas*.

***Memory of Departure* and *A House for Mr Biswas*: Negotiating Identity Amidst Displacement through recollecting memories:**

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Memory of Departure* intricately explores how displacement profoundly affects its characters, illustrating how memories of their homeland and the challenges of relocating shape their narratives and identities. Utilizing displacement theory and insights from cultural theorists, this analysis examines how Gurnah employs memories of displacement to develop the characters' narratives. By exploring how characters in *Memory of Departure* and *A House for Mr Biswas* navigate their identities through memories of displacement, this study provides deeper insights into the complexities of migration, cultural adaptation, and the formation of personal and collective identities. Both novels demonstrate that memories of displacement are not mere reflections of the past but pivotal elements that shape characters' current identities and future paths.

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Memory of Departure* intricately examines the theme of displacement through the perspective of its protagonist, exploring how memories of departure from one's homeland deeply influence personal identity and narrative. Against the backdrop of Zanzibar's decolonization and political upheaval, the novel delves into the complexities of migration, loss, and cultural dislocation. Through the protagonist's journey, Gurnah illustrates how memories of displacement play a crucial role in shaping and reshaping one's understanding of self and belonging. In *Memory of Departure*, the protagonist grapples with displacement from Zanzibar to England. Gurnah vividly depicts how memories of departure from their homeland become fundamental in molding the protagonist's self-perception. The narrator reflects: "The streets of Zanzibar were a labyrinth of memories, each alleyway resonating with voices of those left behind" (Gurnah 45). This quote demonstrates how memories of displacement evoke feelings of yearning and nostalgia, influencing the protagonist's narrative and identity as they navigate their new reality in England.

In Gurnah's novel, the protagonist and other characters confront the upheaval caused by displacement from their native Zanzibar. The recollections of their previous lives assume a critical role in shaping their narratives of grief, yearning, and adjustment to new surroundings. Gurnah depicts this by stating, "The streets of Stone Town whispered stories of generations past, each corner a repository of memories now tinged with nostalgia" (Gurnah 12). This citation demonstrates how memories of displacement elicit feelings of sentimentality and attachment to the homeland, influencing the characters' stories as they navigate unfamiliar territory in their new lives. It emphasizes how memories of displacement provoke profound feelings of nostalgia and desire, highlighting the protagonist's emotional connections to the physical and cultural environment of Zanzibar. As political turmoil compels the protagonist to depart, these memories of a once-familiar home assume a central role in their construction of selfhood in an unfamiliar and novel environment.

Throughout *Memory of Departure*, Gurnah intertwines themes of grief and recollection, demonstrating how memories of displacement not only shape individual identity but also collective histories. The protagonist's journey involves efforts to reconcile past experiences with present circumstances, grappling with the emotional and psychological impacts of displacement: "Each return to Zanzibar is a pilgrimage of memory, tracing faded outlines of homes and hearts left behind" (Gurnah 115). This

introspective journey underscores the novel's exploration of memory as a transformative influence, impacting the protagonist's evolving understanding of self and connection to their cultural heritage. Gurnah's narrative reflects on the broader implications of displacement, emphasizing its profound effects on personal narratives and communal identities.

Similarly, in V.S. Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr Biswas*, the theme of displacement is explored through the protagonist, Mr. Biswas, who was born into a Trinidadian family of Indian descent. Naipaul portrays Mr. Biswas's struggle with identity amidst displacement: "He felt a stranger in this land of his birth, where the landscape had changed but memories remained vivid" (Naipaul 82). This passage emphasizes Mr. Biswas's sense of alienation from both his ancestral homeland and the colonial society in which he lives, illustrating how memories of displacement shape his personal narrative and pursuit of belonging.

Cultural Alienation and Identity Negotiation:

In Gurnah's narrative, the protagonist adjusts to life in England, deftly contrasting current realities with vivid memories of Zanzibar. Memories of displacement not only serve as a mode of reminiscence but also as a tool for navigating the challenges of cultural adaptation and integration: "In the crowded streets of London, echoes of Zanzibar resonated, offering solace amidst the alienation of the urban landscape" (Gurnah 78). This excerpt illustrates how memories of displacement provide a sense of continuity and cultural rootedness amidst the disorienting effects of migration. Gurnah emphasizes the protagonist's negotiation of identity through memories that transcend geographical boundaries, underscoring a nuanced depiction of diasporic awareness and belonging.

In *Memory of Departure*, cultural alienation becomes prominent as characters grapple with feelings of detachment from their native and adopted cultures. Hassan's interactions with unfamiliar customs highlight this cultural estrangement: "Their traditions felt foreign and unfamiliar, reminding me of the distance between my past and present" (Gurnah 82). This quotation illustrates how cultural alienation impacts the development of identities, compelling characters to navigate their cultural associations and redefine their sense of belonging amidst the upheaval caused by displacement.

Throughout the novel, Mr. Biswas experiences a profound sense of cultural estrangement resulting from his displacement within Trinidad's Indian community. Naipaul succinctly portrays Mr. Biswas's struggle with displacement: "He felt cut off from the land of his birth, which had since become foreign to him" (Naipaul 78). Additionally, Naipaul poignantly depicts Mr. Biswas's feeling of cultural alienation: "He felt adrift in a sea of unfamiliar faces, where customs and traditions clashed with his own sense of belonging" (Naipaul 56).

Education plays a significant role in Mr. Biswas's experience of cultural displacement and identity crisis. In Trinidad, the colonial education system prioritizes Western values and knowledge over local cultural traditions, contributing to Mr. Biswas's sense of cultural alienation. This education system creates a disconnection for Mr. Biswas between his inherited cultural identity and the values imposed by his schooling. Naipaul depicts Mr. Biswas's education as both advantageous and alienating, it equips him with skills and knowledge while simultaneously distancing him from his cultural heritage. His education fosters aspirations for social mobility and independence, yet reinforces the hierarchical structures of colonial society. Mr. Biswas's reflections on his schooling and interactions with his teachers reflect this ambivalence: "He was caught between two worlds, neither of which he fully belonged to" (Naipaul 45). This statement underscores Mr. Biswas's cultural displacement as he navigates the complexities of

his hybrid identity. It illustrates his estrangement from both his ancestral roots and the colonial society where he resides, revealing the deep sense of displacement that shapes his narrative and sense of self.

Emotional and Psychological Memories of Displacement and Identity Formation in *Memory of Departure* and *A House for Mr. Biswas*:

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Memory of Departure* examines the significant influence of displacement on individuals, particularly exploring how emotional and psychological memories of displacement shape and alter their identities. Against the backdrop of colonialism and decolonization in East Africa, the novel depicts characters dealing with loss, longing, cultural estrangement, and the search for belonging as they navigate the complexities of identity amid displacement, impacting their understanding of self, cultural ties, and personal histories amidst the challenges of cultural and geographical upheaval.

In *Memory of Departure*, emotional memories of displacement are evident as characters recall their homeland and the emotional connections they maintain with their past. For example, protagonist Hassan's memories of the coastal village evoke feelings of yearning and nostalgia: "I remember the scent of the sea breeze and the laughter of children echoing through the narrow streets" (Gurnah 23). This citation demonstrates how emotional memories connect characters to their cultural roots, influencing their sense of self by preserving and perpetuating cultural heritage amidst experiences of displacement.

In the novel, characters grapple with the psychological effects of displacement as they struggle internally to reconcile their past with their current situations. Hassan's introspective conversation reflects the psychological discord brought about by displacement: "I find myself torn between two worlds, unable to fully embrace either" (Gurnah 56). This internal dilemma underscores how psychological memories of displacement influence characters' identities by questioning their self-perceptions and cultural affiliations, encouraging them to adapt and endure amidst cultural and geographical displacement.

Psychological Impact and Emotional Resilience in *A House for Mr. Biswas*

Naipaul explores the psychological impact of displacement on Mr. Biswas, illustrating his journey towards emotional resilience amidst a lifetime of challenges and setbacks. Memories of displacement recur throughout Mr. Biswas's narrative: "Memories of the past haunted Mr. Biswas like specters, reminding him of what was lost and what could never be regained" (Naipaul 112). Mr. Biswas's psychological displacement originates in childhood, marked by significant trauma and loss. The death of his father, Raghu, and the subsequent displacement of his family create a profound sense of insecurity and fear. Naipaul vividly describes the psychological impact of these events: "Ever since the day of his father's death, he had felt like a stranger in his own house" (Naipaul 20). This early experience of loss and displacement forms the basis for Mr. Biswas's enduring psychological insecurity. Freud's theory of childhood trauma suggests that early experiences of loss and instability can have lasting effects on an individual's psyche (Freud 19). For Mr. Biswas, the trauma of losing his father and home at a young age instills a deep-seated fear of instability and abandonment. This fear manifests in his persistent anxiety and an underlying sense of being adrift, which continues to affect him throughout his life.

Mr. Biswas's marriage to Shama Tulsi and his involvement with the Tulsi family introduce a new layer of psychological displacement. Hanuman House, the communal residence of the Tulsi family, becomes a site where Mr. Biswas experiences psychological oppression and alienation. The authoritative presence of Mrs. Tulsi and the lack of personal space create a suffocating environment that intensifies Mr. Biswas's sense of displacement. Naipaul portrays Hanuman House as a microcosm reflecting colonial

oppression, where Mr. Biswas's efforts to assert his individuality are met with resistance and hostility: "He felt like a prisoner, trapped in a world where his desires and ambitions were stifled by the collective will of the Tulsis" (Naipaul 75). The psychological impact of living in such conditions is profound, leading to feelings of powerlessness and frustration.

Homi Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely" offers a valuable framework for understanding Mr. Biswas's psychological displacement within the Tulsi household. Bhabha argues that the experience of being unhomed is not just a matter of lacking a physical home but also involves a profound sense of dislocation and estrangement within familiar spaces (Bhabha 13). Hanuman House embodies this unhomeliness for Mr. Biswas, where he is physically present but emotionally and psychologically alienated. This passage underscores the enduring psychological weight of displacement, where memories of past experiences contribute to Mr. Biswas's reflective contemplation on identity, belonging, and the pursuit of stability.

Search for Belonging and Identity Reclamation in *Memory of Departure* and *A House for Mr. Biswas*:

During displacement, characters initiate a pursuit of belonging, endeavouring to repossess and redefine their identities within unfamiliar cultural settings. Hassan's process of self-discovery is exemplified through his exchanges with his cousin Salma, where he discovers comfort in shared experiences and cultural legacy: "Through our conversations, I rediscovered aspects of myself that I thought were lost in migration" (Gurnah 110). This instance demonstrates how the quest for belonging facilitates the retrieval of identity, empowering characters to establish significant bonds and nurture a revived understanding of cultural identity amid displacement.

Mr. Biswas's endeavour to construct and possess a house stands at the core of his battle against psychological displacement. The ownership of a house symbolizes his yearning for stability, independence, and a cohesive self-identity. Yet, this pursuit is fraught with challenges, mirroring the broader complexities of affirming one's identity and autonomy in a postcolonial milieu. Naipaul encapsulates the psychological significance of this pursuit: "For Mr. Biswas, the house was not just a physical structure but a symbol of his aspirations, his hopes, and his struggles" (Naipaul 150). The house serves as a sanctuary where he can establish a sense of rootedness and surmount the psychological displacement that has haunted him.

Despite being displaced, Mr. Biswas nurtures ambitions of homeownership—an emblem of stability and integration in a society prone to marginalize the displaced. Naipaul delves into Mr. Biswas's unwavering pursuit of a house: "The quest for a house became Mr. Biswas's lifelong mission, a symbol of his struggle for dignity and belonging in a world marked by displacement" (Naipaul 145). Mr. Biswas's determination to acquire a house signifies his endeavour to establish a space where he can belong and assert his individuality. His pursuit reflects his yearning to forge a secure and autonomous identity, emancipated from the socio-cultural displacements that have plagued him. His aspiration to integrate and assimilate into society, to be part of the everyday scenes of the city, is evident: He was no longer content to walk about the city. He wanted to be part of it, to be one of those who stood at black and yellow bus-stops in the morning, one of those he saw behind the windows of offices, one of those to whom the evenings and week-ends brought relaxation. (Amazing Scenes).

Mr. Biswas's pursuit of a house can be interpreted as an attempt to establish a stable identity amidst the disruptions of his diasporic life. The house functions as a space where his scattered memories and life

experiences can integrate into a coherent sense of self. This narrative emphasizes how displacement symbolically influences Mr. Biswas's ambitions and his persistent search for a personal sanctuary amid societal demands and family obligations.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, memories of displacement play a crucial role in shaping the narratives and identities of characters in literature. Through an analysis of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure* and V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*, this study has illustrated how memories of displacement contribute to the formation of identity and narrative in these novels. Both works intricately examine the challenges and memories associated with displacement through the experiences of their protagonists, highlighting the profound impact of displacement on identity, cultural alienation, and the pursuit of belonging. Moreover, they depict how displacement influences the trajectory of the displaced narrative, portraying their journey towards self-discovery and resilience in the face of displacement's challenges. Drawing on theories of memory and identity, it is evident that memories of displacement are fundamental to characters' self-perception and their conception of belonging. By exploring these themes, we enhance our comprehension of the human condition within the contexts of migration and cultural displacement.

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