

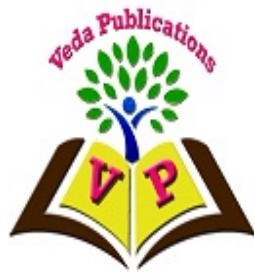


RESEARCH ARTICLE

**CONTESTED MEMORY AND WHITE MYTH IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S
ADMIRING SILENCE**Manshi ^{1*}, Dr. Mandvi Singh²^{1*}(Research Scholar, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan.)²(Associate Professor, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan.)Emails: manshiyadav807@gmail.com ; mandvi.chauhan2008@gmail.comDoi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2025.12104>**ABSTRACT**

History has often been shaped by popular narratives that aid to justify or reinforce the power structures of the time. Britishers established a dominant historical colonial narrative that portrays them as benevolent masters, who aimed to make the rest of the world civilized. However, with the advent of the "memory boom," writers from the Global South began to challenge these dominant narratives, bringing to light the experiences and perspectives of the colonized, which led to the emergence of counter-narratives. While South Africa has produced many notable writers addressing these themes, East African voices have been comparatively underrepresented. One such prominent voice is Abdulrazak Gurnah, the 2021 Nobel Prize winner. He is known for his acute explorations of African colonialism and its enduring legacies in contemporary times. In simple words, his writings feature the white 'myth' in ongoing postcolonial discourse.

Hence, central to this inquiry is Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*, this paper will explore the construction of the colonial myth and how it has become a permanent part of colonial collective memory. Additionally, this study will highlight the difference between the dominant narrative and the lived experiences of the colonized. Methodologically, this research draws on Roland Barthes' concept of myth as a socially constructed system of meaning and conduct a close literary analysis of the selected through memory perspective. Myths, in Barthes' percept, serve as tools of ideological control, presenting specific historical and cultural constructs as universal truths.

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INTRODUCTION

Abdulrazak Gurnah, the recipient of the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature, is known for his profound explorations of African colonialism and its enduring legacies. His writings demonstrate history on the worldwide stage, with indigenous characters at the crossroads of colonial realms that go beyond typical British colonial borders. As stated by Steiner and Olausson: "Gurnah offers stories that imagine 'Africa' and indeed 'Britain' as inter-cultural and inter-linguistic spaces of geopolitical proximity and possible affiliation" (2) In his novels, he continuously examines the history of miscegenation and disputes between diverse communities in Zanzibar as well as Tanzania, both before and after independence (Bardolph 84).

Despite the rich scholarship of African colonialism, Gurnah's novels provides an unexplored perspective of the colonial history. As Nora says, history is the popular memory spread across the people. This popular memory aids the agenda or propaganda of the dominant power while leaving others at periphery. Gurnah's works focuses on the ordinary citizen of East Africa, who either lives there or migrate to some other country. Unlike many other African authors, he puts his characters into the broader context of colonialism. In simple words, his story is deals with the colonialism at global scale. Gurnah critiques the Eurocentric values that still persist in the contemporary world. To assert their supremacy, Europeans employed specific images and ideas to shape and manipulate perceptions of colonialism. This process began with economic exploitation, creating dependency among the colonized. Subsequently, they enlisted the colonized

for labour, ultimately reducing them to servitude and dispossessing them of their ancestral lands. The overarching aim of colonialism was to promote a narrative of civility. It position the colonized world as barbaric and uncivilized, while claiming a mission to "civilize" it.

Similarly, Roland Barthes' concept of myth offers valuable insight into this process. Barth, a French semiotician and theorist, looks at everyday things, like steak and chips, wrestling, or soap powders, and examines the hidden meanings behind them. He notices that these objects are often seen as "universal" or normal, but in reality, they carry multi-layered messages related to **bourgeois** (wealthy, upper-class) and **capitalist** (money-focused) cultures. For example, things like food or popular activities might seem simple, but they can actually be symbols of social class or economic systems. Barthes calls the power these objects have to influence and shape how we think about the world "**myths**" because they present certain ideas as natural or universal when, in fact, they're connected to specific cultural and social forces.

He said myths function as second-level systems of signification, where meaning is attached to a form to create a deeper, often distorted, understanding of reality. Myths transform historical or social realities into something that seems "natural" or "eternal," masking the political or ideological motivations behind them (Barthes). This process, as Barthes explains, is not about erasing the original meanings, but rather layering them with additional, often misleading, significance. Myths can shape our collective consciousness, influencing how we interpret symbols and institutions in society. He also



argues that myths can serve as tools of power, normalizing dominant ideologies like capitalism, empire, and liberalism by presenting them as universal truths. His concept of myth can be closely connected to colonialism, here its called 'white myth'. It refers to the set of colonial narratives that justified and perpetuated the dominance of European powers, often portraying their rule as civilizing and benevolent. "Barthes implies that the ideological functioning of myth serves the interests of a group or society" (Eeden 21). These myths served to legitimize the exploitation of colonized peoples and mask the exploitative and violent realities of imperialism by framing it as natural or even morally righteous. It is further codified through colonial speech, which exemplify white mythology's ideological control.

PERSISTING WHITE MYTH AND CONTESTED MEMORY

In *Admiring Silence*, Gurnah critiques the colonial mythmaking that sustains Eurocentric narratives of superiority, colonial benevolence and civilization. The novel tells the story of unnamed narrator and the protagonist who is living in England and started a family with white woman, Emma. On the surface, *Admiring Silence* depicts an unreliable narrator concealing his past from his English family and fabricating a life history that conforms to his current social reality. In the first half of the novel, the narrator has to face various stereotypes and bias because of his origin. He criticizes the prejudicial historical narratives which have mounded collective memory surrounding empire from the start, particularly its imperialistic portrayal of heroes such as Pocahontas. Her account reveals how colonial

authorities used events in history to ensure their supremacy. Pocahontas' tale has been reduced to a narrative emphasizing her surrender and incorporation to European values, converting her from 'a symbol of defiance' to a manifestation of imperial 'success'. They condensed her multifaceted personality to a straightforward story of devotion and affection to her native English companion, John Smith. Pocahontas' character is shorn of its multifaceted nature to match the colonial narrative, and the protagonist is likewise devalued by a racialized collective memory apparatus. This aligns with the observation of Roland Barthes argues that myths serve as tools of ideological control, presenting specific historical and cultural constructs as universal truths. Words and visuals, in his opinion, are equally responsible for creating mythologically significant literature. He proposes that myth operators neutralise, render harmless, and legitimise societal constructs. Mythological speech usually reduces anything to their essence or stereotype, freezing them in a timeless allusion that it tries to defend. The white mythology of colonial speech is an example of a book that codifies and legitimises myths.

Further, The colonizers intentionally erased key aspects of Pocahontas' life, including her captivity, forced conversion to Christianity, her renaming to "Rebecca," and her coerced marriage to an Englishman. Pocahontas' life was manipulated for colonial purposes, transforming her into a symbol of the "civilizing mission" rather than respecting her agency as an indigenous person. Gurnah's statement "*she would have done better to stay at home instead of inserting herself into stories of Empire*" (Gurnah 6-



7) reflects on her co-opting into the colonial narrative and turning into a one-dimension figure that served the interests of the British Empire. It reduces her entire personality and lived experience to a myth that reinforced colonial ideologies.

In addition, the narrator's many of the interactions in the novel revolve around his father-in-law, Mr. Willoughby, whose worldview aligns with prevailing Eurocentric beliefs and ideologies. As a white man, Mr. Willoughby often exhibits condescension and objectifies his son-in-law, further reinforcing these narratives. During a lunch conversation, he remarks describing a former schoolmate as "*a darkie... a splendid runner... one of nature's gentlemen*"(22), illustrate white myth's patronizing reduction of colonial subjects. Thus, the narrator responds sarcastically to these enduring white myths that persist in the conversations of his father-in-law. He further narrates a tailored incident about his difficult childhood, waking up early, working on the farm, and running six miles to school every day without food. One day, a European school inspector visited his class and suddenly asked him a question. But because he was so hungry, he couldn't answer. The speaker replies that the inspector wanted to know 'who was the first European to eat a banana?' (22). Mr. Willoughby reacts with approval, as if he thinks it was a good and important question. The narrator further narrate that the European school inspector seems to understand the speaker's exhaustion and leans in to hear his weak reply: "**Alexander the Great,**" he whispers. After that, the inspector takes care of him, giving him food, a bicycle so he doesn't have to run to school, and paying his school fees. The story of the European

official "adopting" the speaker fits into the myth that the Empire was a **force for good**, providing education and resources to its colonial subjects. Furthermore, the speaker's exhaustion and inability to challenge this myth [*"on that afternoon I just did not have the strength to say it aloud"* (23)] highlight how colonial ideology is internalized and normalized, making it difficult for the colonized to resist or articulate a counter-narrative. The reference to Alexander the Great, another historical imperial figure, reinforces the idea that conquest and dominance are inevitable and heroic, further supporting the myth of white superiority and the righteousness of empire.

Mr. Willoughby thinks about this story and gets emotional. Then he asks, "Was it fair to abandon the Empire? Was it fair to them?" (23). Mr. Willoughby statements re-interpretes colonised rule through second-order signification. As it reinterpreted through myths that justify colonization by the 'white man's burden'. Additionally, his mother-in-law was also "*not interested in hearing any stories from me, although she might have con- descended to listen to a couple of anecdotes on torture or starvation or child marriage, or some vital and contemporary narratives about drugs, prostitution, illegal entry or armed robbery. Anybody would*" (72). The mention of topics like *torture, starvation, child marriage, drugs, and illegal activity* implies that such stories are what people, especially those from privileged or colonial backgrounds, expect or even prefer to hear about marginalized communities. Further, the phrase "*Anybody would*" reinforces the idea that these kinds of sensationalized or tragic narratives are more readily consumed by audiences who see them as confirming their preconceived notions about the



world. These repetition of sanitised version of colonial stories solidifies in the collective consciousness making it real memory all around the world as Bathes observed.

Memory is centre to an individual's identity. Identity formation is not solely shaped by individual experiences but is also influenced by broader historical and social events that collectively impact a community's shared consciousness (Boparai). Similarly, in *Admiring Silence* the protagonist's identity is shaped not only by his individual memories but also by the collective memory of those around him, which is influenced by the white myth propagated by colonial powers. The narrator's life in England is shaped by the prevalence of white myths, which romanticize colonial history and present the British Empire as a benevolent force. In order to survive within this framework, he adopts two primary strategies: silence and sarcasm. Silence allows him to avoid direct confrontation with these dominant narratives, whereas sarcasm enables him to mimic and subtly critique them. Silence is displayed with dual meaning "both as a condition and a choice in the novel" (Arslan 18; Mirmotahari 60). In the 'doctor's scene,' where the narrator remains silent, the focalization enhances the narrative by emphasizing the racialized and parochial views held by the doctor. The doctor's fixed position on the "Afro-Caribbean" identity reflects a limited and prejudiced understanding of the narrator, which the silence actively critiques. "As the representative of the 'Empire narrative' the doctor speaks for himself and therefore opens his own 'ignorance' to the reader" (Kaigai 132). This scene also illustrates the clash between dominant colonial narratives and

the authentic experiences of marginalized individuals. The doctor's fixed, stereotypical views about the narrator embody the white myth, a second-order system of signification that reduces complex identities to simplified, essentialized categories. In contrast, the narrator's lived experience, shaped by personal, cultural, and historical factors, defies these reductive assumptions. His silence in the conversation acts as a form of resistance, rejecting the imposed colonial narrative and leaving space for his complex identity to remain unspoken (Makokha). By withholding his voice, the narrator challenges the colonial history that seeks to define him through fixed categories, subtly revealing the ignorance and emptiness embedded in the colonial gaze. On the other hand, when speaking to figures like Mr. Willoughby, he fabricates stories about his past that align with the expectations of the colonial myth, reinforcing the Western world's imagined version of empire. However, his true experiences, that were marked by oppression, displacement and struggle, are only revealed in moments of solitude. They expose the dissonance between his reality and the mythologized history he encounters in England. This fissure brings out the contested nature of memory as the Western world continues to circulate on a distorted version of the past.

During the narrator's fight with Emma about degradation of Amelia and her generation, he says "teach her about nobility and principle and sacrifice and laughter and whatever else it is that our degraded culture is no longer capable of. Rescue her" (Gurnah 14). The narrator critiques the idea of "saving" or "rescuing" the child from the so-called



"degraded culture" and highlights the disconnect between the colonizer's perception of the colonized world and the reality of colonized's lived experiences. This is reminiscent of the white myth in colonial discourse, which portrays the colonial mission as one of civilizing and saving the colonized, often at the expense of disrespecting the agency of the people they claim to help. Later, the narrator's sarcastic tone, and his mention of "the savage's critique of Europe," challenges the assumptions held by the colonizer. He implies that his resistance and critiques are often dismissed as intolerant or radical, terms often used to discredit those who oppose colonialism. The term "savage" here refers not to the narrator's actual behavior but to how the colonizer perceives him and the other colonized people, as primitive or in need of guidance. The narrator sarcastically suggests that his critiques sound extreme to his interlocutor because they cannot understand the colonial wounds he bears.

After seventeen years, the narrator's return to Zanzibar forces him to directly engage with the reality that has been absent from the colonial myths he encountered in England. The visit reveals the lasting impact of colonial rule, not as the civilizing mission often portrayed in Britain, but as a history of violence, exploitation, and unresolved trauma. His homecoming intensifies the contrast between the stories he told in England and the truth of what he experiences in his homeland. The memories of colonial oppression, once suppressed or distorted, resurface in full force. That confirms Gurnah's assertion that "*History turns out to be a bundle of lies that covers up centuries of murderous rampage around the globe*" (Gurnah 7). By placing personal

memory against official history, the novel exposes the constructed nature of colonial myths, which reveals the empire sought not only to dominate lands but also to control narratives.

CONCLUSION

Despite perceptions that colonialism's effects have diminished, Gurnah's novels reveal the persistence of racial and cultural stereotypes. His work exposes the ongoing presence of "white myth" in contemporary global society, critiquing the subtle ways in which colonial ideologies persist and shape postcolonial identities. *Admiring Silence* offers a nuanced critique of how colonial ideologies persist in contemporary global society. Through its exploration of white mythologies, the novel reveals the insidious ways in which history is constructed, distorted, and weaponized to sustain Eurocentric power structures. Gurnah's novel challenges readers to recognize how colonial myths endure through cultural narratives, institutional memory, and individual consciousness. By portraying the narrator's fractured identity and his struggle against imposed historical constructs, the novel underscores the urgency of decolonizing knowledge and reclaiming marginalized histories. In doing so, *Admiring Silence* not only exposes the limitations of Western historical frameworks but also advocates for a more pluralistic and inclusive understanding of history, identity, and belonging.

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