

The Narrative Strategies and Family Ethics Dilemma in Gurnah's Gravel Heart

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Abstract: Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* explores family ethical dilemmas amid African colonial and civil unrest. The narrative reconstructs Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, particularly illuminating the moral quandary faced by Salim's mother as she grapples with the choice between preserving her brother's life and maintaining her own chastity; Gurnah's innovative use of the epistolary narrative delineates Salim's subjective reality and psychological state as he navigates the complexities of ethical identity amidst his dislocation in a foreign land; besides, the shifting narrative perspectives serve to elucidate the roots of such ethical dilemmas. In *Gravel Heart*, Gurnah adeptly weaves a familial ethical narrative within the historical framework of political turmoil in Zanzibar, thereby offering a critique of British colonialism and post-colonial strife through familial ethics, exposing post-colonial Africa's darker aspects and reflecting Gurnah's ethical concern for Africans facing dual predicaments.

Keywords: Gravel Heart; Gurnah; narrative strategies; family ethics

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1 Introduction

In 2021, Abdulrazak Gurnah, an obscure writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature, was gradually known to the world's readers. Previously, Gurnah's works had been recognised by British literary critics as having "both the sharp writing style of Naipaul and the poetic language of Ben Okri". (Zhang Feng 2012:13) Of course, Gurnah, who is deeply influenced by post-colonialism and his African immigrant's experiences, from his debut *Memory of Departure* (1987) to his latest work *Theft* (2025), "the state of immigrant mobility and the imagined life of his homeland have become his interest. Migration, displacement, loss, frustration, and loneliness have become constant themes in his work." (Gao Xing 2022: 203)

Compared to Gurnah's other widely discussed works, his 2017 novel *Gravel Heart* has received less academic attention in China. As of 2025, domestic research primarily focuses on its narrative art and African diaspora themes: in narratology, Huang Hui and Chen Hongfei (2024) examine the cultural connotations of epistolary narrative, while Wang Lili and Pei Xiaoyue (2023) reveal dynamic shifts in the assimilation theme; in identity studies, Ma Bingwen and Shao Yuzhuo (2022) highlight obstacles to immigrant integration posed by dual identity, and Zhu Zhenwu and Cheng Yale (2022) elucidate the contemporary significance of diasporic communities overcoming spiritual predicaments through *Gravel Heart*. The aim of this is to explore the link between multiple narrative strategies and the work's thematic implications.

Narratology serves as both an intermediary and tool for ethical interpretation, reproducing, transmitting, and critiquing cultural and ethical values within specific contexts. As Susan S. Lancer argues, "narrative is not only storytelling but, more importantly, carries social relations" (qtd. in Zhou Liqiu 94). Literary ethical criticism further requires critics to "enter the historical scene" (Nie Zhenzhao 256) and analyze social phenomena historically. The integration of narrative form and ethical criticism thus encompasses narrative, family ethics, history, culture, and ideology.

In *Gravel Heart*, Gurnah employs intertextuality, innovative epistolary style, and shifting narrative perspectives to explore the ethical dilemmas of protagonist Salim's family while tracing three generations of immigrant experiences. Set against Zanzibar's post-independence historical shifts, the novel analyzes lasting psychological and physical scars from colonization and political turmoil on Africans. It reflects Gurnah's deep understanding of African societal complexities, offering profound reflections on family ethics and embodying distinct humanistic concern.

2 Intertextual narrative: the ethical dilemma of the family

Gurnah's dual role as literary critic and author grants him nuanced insight into diverse literary traditions and mastery of varied narrative strategies. His works often allude to Shakespeare, as seen in *Gravel Heart*: though its plot seems simple, its core concept draws from *Measure for Measure*, paying homage to the playwright. As Gurnah noted in an interview, he frequently explores intertextuality with cross-cultural texts. This novel's narrative shifts between Zanzibar (now Tanzania) and London, tracing protagonist Salim's childhood. His father Masud abruptly left, and his mother Saida later married Chief Protocol Officer Hakim, with whom she had a daughter, Munira. These upheavals shattered Salim's sense of family identity, traumatizing him and prompting his move to England for studies. Upon returning as an adult after his mother's death, he confronts long-standing family ethical dilemmas by reminiscing with his father, finally resolving the mystery.

The family constitutes a fundamental organizational unit within society, predicated on biological ties and centered around the institution of marriage. This unit serves as the foundation for individual growth and development, while also functioning as the primary conduit for the transmission of moral values (Cai Bingbing Song Tongtong 2011:44). In Masud's story, his parents initially lived a loving, though hard, life amid turbulence. When Saida's brother Amir fell in love with Asha — daughter of a powerful figure — he antagonized her brother Hakim. To save Amir, Saida endured humiliation, submitting to Hakim and bearing him a daughter. Though Masud understood her helplessness, he left in anger, living alone. As Hegel noted, "Marriage is ethical love with legal significance" (qtd. in Liu Jingyu 2014:134). Saida's fateful ethical choice destabilized traditional family structures, fracturing Salim and Masud's sense of ethical identity. This highlights tensions between personal morality and familial loyalty, revealing the fragility of once-stable ethical bonds, as traditional respect and duty collapsed, transforming their relationships irreversibly.

As is known to all, in *Measure for Measure*, Angelo — ostensibly a champion of virtue who condemns adultery — succumbs to temptation when Isabella pleads for her brother Claudio's life, attempting to exploit his authority for sexual favors. Unlike the play's Isabella, who defies power by preserving her chastity and urging Claudio to confront execution, Gurnah's African family faces a harsher reality: "There was no Duke to put things right for this Isabella, no one to restrain the man of appetite who, once he had her in his grip, never let her slip away. Nor was there any role for you in the play, Baba, because Shakespeare had already reserved the heroine for the Duke." (Gurnah 2017: 251) Clearly, Salim's family's ethical crisis is rooted in colonial rule and post-coup political turmoil. His personal fate intertwines with history, bearing witness to and articulating its cruelty.

Gurnah innovatively reinterprets Shakespeare's play in *Gravel Heart*, deliberately eschewing the playwright's typical comedic resolutions. Instead, he employs a pragmatic perspective to examine the complex interplay of power and morality. This nuanced approach reflects his identity as a contemporary writer and underscores his independent judgment. Through distinct storytelling, he offers incisive insights into political realities, interpersonal dynamics, and marital institutions, ultimately prompting readers to reflect on the multifaceted nature of modern human experience.

3 The improvement of epistolary narratives: self-exile in the loss of family ethical identity

The epistolary technique, a classical novel-writing device, constructs narratives through character letters, typically using first-person narration to foster reader empathy and realism. Its uniqueness lies in "dual authorship" and "dual readership": fictional characters act as letter writers and recipients, while real authors and readers serve as creators and audiences. However, the form declined due to constraints of overly subjective perspectives, limiting objective plot development, and was overshadowed by other 20th-century narrative techniques. Gurnah already mastered epistolary narration in his early short stories, demonstrating mature style. In *Bossy*, he vividly portrays immigrant suffering through protagonist's letters. Building on this experience, he skillfully employs the traditional epistolary form in *Gravel Heart*. Letters from Salim to his mother form the core of the novel's second part, allowing Gurnah to reveal Salim's profound understanding of English life and culture.

It is worth mentioning that Gurnah innovatively divides the letters into three categories in *Gravel Heart*: those sent and received by his mother, drafts Salim tears up in frustration, and unsent heartfelt journal entries. This distinctive approach enriches narrative technique while deepening thematic resonance. Salim's torn drafts reveal his estrangement from his

uncle's family, resentment toward his mother's remarriage, and anguish of displacement abroad. Yet childhood familial influences fostered cowardice, leaving him unable to confide in his mother; instead, he channels emotions into writing, only to destroy the letters. This device illuminates his inner life in the UK and childhood ethical dilemmas, which stripped him of his roles as son and brother, reducing him to a spiritual exile abroad. In the letters to his mother, Salim struggles with unresolved emotions about their relationship. Fearful of adding to her worries, he shares only superficial details of his fast-paced London life — work demands, challenges adapting to an unfamiliar environment, health updates, and daily routines—yet cannot hide his heartache over being abandoned by his lover due to racial prejudice.

Salim's unsent diary letters reflect his inner world. Unable to understand his mother's past ethical choices, he grows emotionally distant, leaving many thoughts unspoken. As he writes, "I found that I had understood something after all and that there was a way through it" (Gurnah 2017:91). Echoing Zhu Zhenwu and Cheng Yale (2022:135), "Writing is essentially a form of telling": Salim uses letters and diaries to express unspoken thoughts, relying on inner strength to self-accept and ease sorrow, even if his words remain unsent.

Gurnah skillfully transcends traditional epistolary time constraints in *Gravel Heart*. Salim's letters not only chronicle his emotions and circumstances but also reflect on his past, redefining epistolary form and function. His three letter types embody the "id, ego, and superego", offering a multifaceted portrayal of Salim—his reality, inner complexities, and spiritual aspirations.

4 The shift of narrative perspective: the roots of the family's ethical dilemma.

Gennett interrogates, in *The Narrative Discourse*, the concepts of "who sees" (narrative perspective) and "who speaks" (narrator role and voice). Though distinct, perspective and voice are interdependent and mutually constrained (Hu Yamin 22). Thus, readers grasp the narrator's and characters' observations and emotions solely through the narrator's expression.

In the novel's latter half, Gurnah shifts focalization from Salim to Masud, illustrating the distinction between perspective and narration within the first-person framework. The dual narrative perspectives "I"— Salim recounting his departure and adult return, and Masud reflecting on past familial ethical dilemmas—enhance narrative complexity while highlighting the interplay of memory and moral conflict in their relationships.

In 1964, shortly after Zanzibar's independence from British colonial rule, political turmoil erupted from partisan conflicts and power struggles. This upheaval devastates Salim's family: maternal grandfather Ahmed dies in factional violence, and his grandmother grieves to death, leaving Salim's mother and uncle to fend for themselves. Meanwhile, his grandfather Maalim is forced to relocate his family. Tragedy persists when Masud's marriage collapses due to Hakim's interference. Unable to help his wife, Masud grew increasingly tormented, withdrew from his family, and spiraled into depression. Two years after Salim moved to Britain, Maalim took Masud to Kuala Lumpur for recuperation. There, Masud regained strength: "Away from the disappointment and shame I felt here, I began to feel a return of my strength" (Gurnah 2017: 225).

By releasing past burdens, Masud, upon reuniting with his son, hopes Salim will build an independent life free from the family's former ethical dilemmas. Familial bonds extend beyond marriage and blood ties to encompass ethical dimensions, with family ethics forming the foundation of broader social ethics. Central to this framework are the principles of paternal benevolence and filial piety (Yi Lijun 2010: 132). Paternal benevolence requires fathers to nurture, love, and educate their children, ensuring basic life rights and a supportive development environment. Emulating his own father's comforting wisdom, Masud fulfills this nurturing role, reassuring Salim, "You'll love again" and advising, "You can't live alone" (Gurnah 2017: 240). Their open dialogue breaks down typical father-son barriers. When Salim first left home, his father urged: "Open your eyes in the dark and recollect your blessings. Don't fear the dark places in your mind...Recollect your blessings—that is the beginning of love" (Gurnah 2017: 46). Before his subsequent departure, Salim asked his father to repeat this wisdom, resolving to stay steadfast amid adversity for redemption. Though Salim later missed both parents' funerals, filled with regret, their nocturnal conversations and faded memories revealed his father's silent love and his mother's hardships, easing the psychological trauma from the family's ethical struggles.

The novel juxtaposes historical memory and reality, blurring past-present boundaries through intertwined memories

and enhancing narrative tension via a non-linear, time-jumping structure. "In recollection, individuals unconsciously embellish and reconstruct past experiences, shaped heavily by emotional states" (Zhu Zhenwu Cheng Yale 2022:135). Using dual or multiple perspectives mitigates this bias, making storytelling more objective and credible. As the narrative unfolds, ambiguities surrounding events dissipate, enabling nuanced, multidimensional character portrayals. This transformation redefines, interprets, and explores the self while excavating past experiences profoundly.

Gurnah has stated, "I do not wish to depict individuals as mere victims; rather, my intention is to portray those who, despite their apparent powerlessness and insignificance, lead lives rich in meaning. It may appear that by acquiescing to a greater authority, they manage to safeguard the most vital and dignified aspects of their existence." In *Gravel Heart*, son Salim and father Masoud embody such ordinary yet resilient figures. They serve not merely as narrative tools but as retrospective narrators actively shaping and guiding the storyline, transforming the text into a dynamic, evolving space. Through their slow, nuanced narration, they maintain a close bond while collectively seeking healing. Having endured numerous adversities and stood the test of time, they possess the strength to persevere and pursue redemption, even amid unyielding harsh realities.

5 Conclusion

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Gurnah (2022:15) stated, "I believe writing must also reveal alternatives—what the domineering gaze overlooks: the quiet assurance of seemingly insignificant people amid others' disdain. Thus, I strove to depict this truthfully, exposing both ugliness and virtue, letting humanity emerge beyond simplifications and stereotypes. When successful, this reveals a certain beauty." Since family is central to human life, family ethics naturally becomes a pivotal, unavoidable theme in Gurnah's works.

Nie Zhenzhao argued that ethics centers on social frameworks, interpersonal ethical relationships and hierarchies, and individual-society dynamics. In literary analysis, ethical reasoning hinges on recognizing these structures that govern human interactions with others, society, and nature (qtd. in Liu Jingyu 133). In the reimagined *Measure for Measure*, the narrative emphasizes Salim's mother's ethical dilemma: balancing her brother's survival with his chastity. An epistolary format reveals Salim's moral confusion and emotional distress abroad, stemming from the loss of his familial ethical identity. Shifting narrative perspectives deeply explore the ethical conflicts within Salim's family, framing their personal crisis as symbolic of Africa's underclass suffering—rooted in both external colonization and internal political turmoil.

Literature serves as a reflection of societal dynamics, capturing and engaging with the temporal and cultural contexts of its creation. It overtly and subtly refracts the moral aspirations and practices of specific social groups (Wang Xiaolan 55). Unlike grand narratives depicting colonial oppression or the Zanzibar's upheaval, Gurnah's works employ diverse narrative strategies to tenderly examine ordinary people's familial experiences. His writing poignantly portrays African diaspora communities navigating adversities amid colonial and internal conflicts. This not only demonstrates his profound understanding of African society but also offers thoughtful reflections on family ethics, articulating a distinct humanistic perspective.

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