



Exile After Slow Violence: Damaged Home and Limited Repair in Admiring Silence

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Abstract: This paper examines exile in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* as the afterlife of slow violence, damage whose causes recede into the past while its consequences continue to act on the narrator's present. Existing scholarship has largely emphasized silence, diasporic identity, and postcolonial memory while giving less attention to the material conditions that sustain estrangement. Drawing primarily on Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, the study uses qualitative textual interpretation to trace how ecological deterioration, infrastructural failure, social insecurity, and cultural displacement gradually weaken Zanzibar as a material, civic, and cultural ground of belonging. The study extends Nixon's framework by tracing the internalization of external damage within the narrator's subjectivity and reconceiving the ending as partial, unfinished repair. Accumulated pressures then enter the narrator's inner life as a cumulative structure of self-alienation. The findings show that exile begins before physical departure and persists because damage associated with home continues across time and space, connecting environmental and social attrition to fractured diasporic subjectivity. Even so, *Admiring Silence* does not offer complete restoration. Its ending imagines limited and unfinished postcolonial repair through critical distancing from imperial narratives, return to a damaged homeland, and practical reconnection with local survival, especially work surrounding water and infrastructure, measured by sustained labor and usefulness to a particular place. Delayed material damage shapes identity, memory, and the difficult possibility of repair beyond ecological harm.

Keywords: *slow violence, exile, diasporic subjectivity, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Admiring Silence*

INTRODUCTION

Leaving is easy to mark; exile is not. Edward Said's (2000) well-known remark that exile is "strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience" names a tension that runs deeply through postcolonial writing (p. 173). In Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*, the unnamed narrator moves between Zanzibar and Britain, but he is unable to settle securely in either place. Exile in *Admiring Silence* extends beyond a journey from one location to another; it settles into prolonged estrangement, one that gradually hardens into self-alienation and unbelonging. Two questions need to be asked

here: Why does exile in *Admiring Silence* last for such a long time? And does the novel still suggest any possibility of rebuilding the self after prolonged separation? The study aims to trace how accumulated ecological, social, and cultural damage produces prolonged exile in the novel, and to determine whether its ending makes repair possible.

Most studies of *Admiring Silence* discuss these issues from three main angles: silence in narration, diasporic identity, and postcolonial memory. Some scholars focus on silence and narrative voice (Barasa & Makokha, 2011; Kagai, 2014). They interpret the narrator's

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silence as self-protection, irony, or resistance to the racial pressures of urban life. Other critics focus on postcolonial identity and diaspora. They pay attention to mimicry, in-betweenness, and the narrator's unstable sense of home and belonging (Steiner, 2006; Ajulu-Okungu, 2006; Hand, 2007, 2012). Laboudi (2024) extends the discussion to memory and trauma. She shows how colonial history and displacement shape his sense of self and emotional life. Taken together, these studies show the cultural, psychological, and narrative complexity of *Admiring Silence*. But they mainly focus on symbolic and emotional instability. They say much less about the material and environmental forces that sustain his long estrangement.

Reading the novel through Rob Nixon's slow violence supplies the material and temporal register for the severance Said locates in exile, and distinguishes that process from the static structural violence Galtung defines, connecting the narrator's inner estrangement with the material and historical circumstances that precede it: damaged infrastructure, ecological decline, social insecurity, and the weakening of local cultural authority. The approach contributes to Gurnah studies in two ways. First, it shifts attention from symbolic and emotional accounts of exile to its delayed emergence from damaged environments and social worlds. Second, it reframes the ending as a limited and unfinished attempt to reconnect the self with a wounded place. The discussion traces how material history is internalized within the narrator's subjectivity, a dimension earlier scholarship has given limited attention.

Rob Nixon (2011) defines slow violence as violence that unfolds gradually and often cannot be easily seen. It is spread across time and space, and people do not always recognize it as violence at all (p. 2). He also stresses that it builds up little by little, so its effects often continue beyond immediate notice (p. 2). Slow violence gathers environmental damage, poor infrastructure, and the gradual weakening of everyday life into a single interpretive frame. It also draws attention to the temporal dimension of harm: for Nixon, violence is also a struggle over time, shaped by delayed effects whose force often emerges later (p. 8). In *Admiring Silence*, ecological damage, material decline, and long-term cultural displacement work together to weaken the narrator's connection to home and deepen his sense of unbelonging.

METHOD

The study employed qualitative literary analysis based on close reading. The primary text was Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* (1996), while scholarship on slow violence, exile, diaspora, colonial Zanzibar, infrastructure, and postcolonial identity contextualized the interpretation. Textual evidence was selected purposively for ecological degradation, scarcity, infrastructural failure, political insecurity, racial misrecognition, narrative fabrication, return, or practical repair. Selected material was grouped around three interconnected dimensions of slow violence: material and ecological deterioration, social and institutional breakdown, and cultural displacement. Selection favored excerpts combining descriptive detail with narratorial commentary, so each excerpt registered material circumstances alongside the narrator's response to it.

Ecological and social material was examined through Nixon's categories of delayed destruction and inhabited risk; material tracing internalization was interpreted through the vocabulary of pain, misrecognition, fabrication, mimicry, and silence developed across the discussion. Nixon's concepts guided distinct interpretive procedures: temporal decoupling linked present-day circumstances to earlier colonial causes; delayed destruction traced harms that accumulate across long intervals; inhabited risk and environmentalism of the poor organized attention to scarcity, failing infrastructure, and the unequal burdens carried by resource-poor residents. The three dimensions form a connected progression: material and ecological deterioration weaken the conditions that sustain home; damaged infrastructure and scarcity carry that deterioration into social and institutional insecurity; the erosion of local authority, memory, and belonging extends it into cultural displacement. External pressures were then connected to their internalization in the narrator's subjectivity; return and infrastructural participation complicated the possibility of repair. Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence provided the principal framework, supplemented by Edward Said's account of exile and scholarship on postcolonial identity and Zanzibar's colonial history.

Textual details, narrative patterns, and historical contexts were compared across colonial and postcolonial periods to explain how gradual damage shapes exile and why the novel imagines only limited, unfinished reconnection.

Textual selection and theoretical framing shape interpretive judgments. Claims were checked against recurring textual patterns, historical scholarship on Zanzibar, and the conceptual boundaries of Nixon's framework; contradictory textual evidence was retained to reduce selective quotation and theoretical overextension.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Slow Violence and the Conditions of Exile

It was like blaming the hole in the ozone layer or the disappearing rain forests or leaking nuclear reactors for all the troubles which beset our stumbling world. Well, it wasn't me who did all that, nor was it the North African migrants in France or Tadjik horsemen thundering across the plains of middle Asia or Winnie Mandela or a passing comet. (Gurnah, 1996, p. 13)

In *Admiring Silence*, exile gathers slowly. It does not arrive all at once, with the clarity of a border crossed or a journey begun. Gurnah's fiction presents displacement as personal loss and a reorganization of how the world is inhabited and imagined (Samuelson, 2023). Nixon's concept of slow violence captures the process: violence that unfolds gradually, remains difficult to register in the moment, and leaves its damage scattered across time and space (Nixon, 2011, pp. 2-3). Gurnah gives slow violence no spectacular shape. Slow violence surfaces in deterioration, scarcity, fatigue, and the quiet wearing down of material and social supports that make habitation secure. Home does not vanish in a single stroke. In Gurnah's works, displacement often exceeds a simple homeland/hostland binary and unfolds through wider historical and oceanic entanglements (Kumavie, 2023). Home grows less secure, less sustaining, less able to receive the self that once took it for granted. Exile in *Admiring Silence* begins before departure. The narrator's later estrangement from both Zanzibar and Britain grows out of a longer history of erosion that first touches the environment, then enters social life, and finally unsettles cultural continuity. Ecological damage weakens the material basis of home; social breakdown presses that damage into the routines of ordinary life; cultural displacement leaves the narrator suspended between memory and habitation, attachment and distance.

At the ecological level, slow violence surfaces in a damaged Zanzibar where everyday

life has already absorbed environmental harm. The conditions he encounters correspond to Nixon's "incremental and accretive" damage, a form of "delayed destruction" whose effects emerge gradually over time (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). When the narrator questions Akbar about the surrounding squalor with rage, the answer is starkly matter-of-fact:

Later, when I tackled Akbar about it, and asked him [...] why it was that they did nothing about such squalor, he shrugged. "There is no water," he said. "The waste pipe itself is blocked, so are the sewers. Where do you want me to begin?" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 120)

The old town reveals the pattern on a wider scale: "whole areas where houses had been allowed to collapse, gloomy, shut-up streets which had once been clamorous bazaars, broken drains releasing sewage into the narrow streets, where it snaked in little stinking streams through which people walked" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 111). Water systems fail, drains break down, houses collapse, and public space absorbs the waste that infrastructure can no longer contain. Nixon describes violence that occurs "gradually and out of sight," becoming so embedded in the material conditions of life that it is often "not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). The logic extends into the landscape's history: "the British filled in the creek" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 111), while old images preserve buildings and gardens that have "since turned to rubble and vegetable patches" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 195). Environmental degradation is so deeply embedded in daily life that it is endured as routine and no longer fully recognized as violence, which unsettles the narrator.

From a historical perspective, the damaged environment exceeds a narrative of simple decline. As Graboyes et al. (2024) shows, British colonial officials in Zanzibar "managed malaria by managing water," working at both "micro and macro" scales, from puddles, gutters, and cesspits to "a multi-decade drainage of the tidal creek and surrounding swamp" (pp. 65, 67). Placed in historical context, the narrator's recollection that "the British filled in the creek" condenses a longer history of colonial environmental intervention. Measures presented as sanitary improvement also altered the island's waterscape and urban form: by the early 1960s, the creek had been

entirely filled in, and Zanzibar Town was physically “transformed,” with the former tidal divide replaced by reclaimed land and a road. The cumulative logic extends beyond a single act of reclamation: colonial rule repeatedly intervened in the island’s waterways, drainage, and domestic spaces through “health intrusions,” as the article describes them, leaving behind environmental changes whose consequences outlasted the moment of rule.

In *Admiring Silence*, shortage has become one of the ordinary circumstances through which life in Zanzibar is organized. Nixon’s account of the environmentalism of the poor identifies those “lacking resources” as the principal casualties of slow violence and environmental threat as a set of “inhabited risks” experienced concretely in everyday life (Nixon, 2011, p. 4). Basic commodity scarcity is evident in the narrator’s recollection: “So whatever you could find – rice, sugar, simsim, millet – even if it was of poor quality, there was always a good market for it” (Gurnah, 1996, p. 140). Scarcity alters the terms of value, making even inferior goods precious so long as they remain obtainable. The pressure also reshapes habits of consumption: “People learnt to eat jaggery and brown rice and shellfish when before they would have spurned such food as fit only for servants and heathens” (Gurnah, 1996, pp. 140-141). Nixon stresses that the struggles of the poor are rarely single-issue struggles, because environmental pressure is inseparable from economic and cultural survival (2011, p. 4). It enters the intimate routines of living and changes the social meanings attached to eating, consuming, and enduring. The postcolonial present offers no clean release from scarcity: “There was only electricity for a few hours each day, soap was short, as was pepper, sugar, toothpaste, rice, you name it” (Gurnah, 1996, p. 120). Scarcity presses most heavily on those who remain tied to Zanzibar’s diminished resources and unstable provisions. In *Admiring Silence*, environmental harm acquires a distinctly social form: it is carried into everyday life, borne most directly by the resource-poor, and normalized through repeated acts of adjustment.

Scarcity also has a deeper historical structure. Zanzibar’s colonial economy prioritized a narrow export base, above all cloves and coconuts, over the balanced provisioning of local life. As P. J. Martin (1991) notes, cloves were for about 150 years a major

export crop of Zanzibar, first established through large plantations worked by slave labour. Colonial land use further intensified export dependence: much of the arable land was directed to cash-crop production, leaving insufficient room for food cultivation and making subsistence increasingly vulnerable. The poor therefore inherit damaged environments and economies in which subsistence has long been subordinated to extractive and export-oriented priorities.

Taken together, the ecological world of *Admiring Silence* is one in which home has already thinned from within. Water, sanitation, housing, and food supply no longer support life with any steady assurance; they register a place living under the pressure of “delayed destruction” and “incremental and accretive” harm. By the time exile registers as movement, the erosion has long been underway, already passing from the damaged environment into the fractured social world that the narrator returns to.

Johan Galtung (1969) coined the term “indirect or structural violence,” which describes the unequal organization of space, infrastructure, and institutional power in *Admiring Silence*; Nixon’s slow violence speaks more directly to the novel’s deeper temporal logic. Nixon distinguishes slow violence from the more “essentially static” cast of structural violence by turning to “time, movement, and change,” and by tracing violence that becomes “decoupled from [their] original causes by the workings of time” (Nixon, 2011, p. 11). Colonial hierarchy furnishes the structure; its force persists beyond formal decolonization, so that, in Nixon’s phrase, “the post is never fully post” (Nixon, 2011, p. 8). Social breakdown in the novel thus emerges as the temporally extended afterlife of structural violence, damage whose causes lie in the colonial past and whose consequences continue to unfold across the postcolonial present.

That temporally extended damage enters social life first through the persistence of spatial fracture. The town remains divided into unequally serviced worlds: “The district was called The Other Bank,” and in some areas people live “without running water or a sewage system” (Gurnah, 1996, p. 111). The persistence of spatial fracture also invites a historical question: how did the two sides of the town come to embody such unequal social

worlds in the first place?

That uneven social world did not arise by accident. Scholarship on Zanzibar's urban history shows that the divide between Stone Town and Ng'ambo (literally "The Other Side," also called the "New City") was gradually turned into a colonial geography of privilege. The tidal creek first marked a physical separation, but British rule overlaid it with racial, class, and administrative meanings, hardening it into a durable social boundary. Ng'ambo became the area associated largely with African and indigenous Zanzibari residents, while the urban core to the west was prioritized for wealthier European, Arab, and Asian inhabitants and for European-owned commercial activity. Colonial planning thus worked through Garth Myers's (1995) "manipulation of space as a means of fostering hegemony," and later efforts to reconstruct Ng'ambo continued to treat it as a space organized from above and detached from lived experience.

Within this longer history, the poverty gap in *Admiring Silence* is inseparable from the colonial production of urban difference. Wealth, services, visibility, and civic value were concentrated in one part of town. Research on colonial housing and infrastructure in Zanzibar shows that official planning discourse became a tactical instrument for the "domination of space" (Myers, 1997) while electrification and street lighting "did not create, but rather emphasised, a system of social classification" (Winther, 2008). The line between the two sides of town came to separate more than neighborhoods: it separated comfort from neglect, investment from omission, and political visibility from marginality. Colonial spatial ordering sustains inequality by structuring residence, living circumstances, and access to urban value across the city.

The social world depicted in *Admiring Silence* is marked by arbitrariness, fear, and the collapse of civic security. Under such a government, law, protection, and trust no longer anchor public life; the constant possibility of sudden violation takes their place. The novel condenses civic breakdown into a brutal sequence of acts like "murder, expulsion, detention, rape" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 69). Violence spreads across the political, the domestic, and the bodily. The atmosphere of

disorder also shapes the arbitrary arrest of Uncle Hashim, when "three men dressed in plain clothes and carrying guns, who did not bother to identify themselves because Uncle Hashim already knew who they were, took him away to detention" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 70), followed almost immediately by the confiscation of his house, its furnishings, and his electrical goods shop. Power here offers no guarantee of justice. It operates through seizure, intimidation, and unpredictability, so that government serves as a source of social insecurity. Even the formal language of protection proves hollow: "And our part of the deal was to be colonized, assimilated, educate, alienated, integrated, suffer clashes of culture, win a flag and a national anthem, become corrupt, starve and grumble about it all" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 16). Governmental disorder leaves promises, rights, and institutions without credibility and pushes social life into confusion, precarity, and fear.

Why does postcolonial government so closely resemble the colonial order it claims to replace? Scholarship on Zanzibar suggests that the answer lies in continuity at the level of governing logic, extending beyond changes in personnel. Garth Myers (1995) shows that colonial and postcolonial reconstructions of Ng'ambo shared "similar objectives, failures and consequences," all tied to the "bureaucratisation and centralisation of power," the "manipulation of space as a means of fostering hegemony," and the "alienation of residents from the planning process." Chris Jones's (1996) study of Zanzibar land law reinforces the pattern: despite legal reform, control over land remained heavily mediated by the state, so that postcolonial rule inherited and extended a colonial habit of treating land as an object of governmental disposition detached from lived social ground. Bernadeta Killian (2008) further explains that, at the "core" of Zanzibar's political conflicts, there is "the politicization of racial identity by leaders seeking the legitimacy to rule," which means that colonial-era divisions outlived independence and were repeatedly reactivated for political gain. Other scholars sharpen the argument by describing Zanzibar's later political order as one of "continuity through collusion": even reconciliation arrangements often "fail to mitigate the political dynamics

baked into the political economies” and remain “insufficiently anchored in local society” (Roop et al., 2018). Taken together, these studies suggest that the postcolonial state in Zanzibar comes to resemble the colonial order because decolonization did not dismantle its deeper techniques of rule.

The novel presents a quieter, more corrosive displacement of indigenous culture. According to Nixon (2011), an “official” order of value begins to displace a “vernacular” one, “discount[ing] spiritualized vernacular landscapes” and severing “webs of accumulated cultural meaning” (p. 17). Colonial influence has already entered the level of consciousness, shaping the standards through which knowledge, value, and seriousness are judged. The narrator’s admission that he has received “enough colonial education” (Gurnah, 1996, p. 11) signals that colonialism survives in institutions and habits of thought, while his bitter summary that “our part of the deal was to be colonized, assimilated, educated, alienated, integrated” and sent “back to the library shelves for more tales ... the Triumph of the West” makes clear that education has remained tied to Western narratives of authority and civilization (Gurnah, 1996, p. 16). Local cultural authority therefore steadily loses ground to imported frameworks of knowledge and value.

Amur Malik’s translation project exposes the hierarchy directly:

“We want to make the profound thoughts they contain available to ordinary people. Of course, the project will work out its own priorities but I would’ve thought it would probably want to begin with Shakespeare, Marx, Tolstoy, and Hemingway... Marx we need so that people can have a firmer understanding of the democratic socialism which is the governing ethos of our state, and Tolstoy for his sympathy with the peasants and the masses.” (Gurnah, 1996, pp. 156-157)

His desire to make “the profound thoughts” of Shakespeare, Marx, Tolstoy, and Hemingway available to ordinary people discloses intellectual ambition and a hierarchy in which cultural seriousness is still imagined as arriving from elsewhere. It depends on support from “a Scandinavian cultural foundation,” on “reliable donors” such as “the Scandinavians and the Dutch,” and even on possible trips to Copenhagen to coordinate the work. External funding and authorization

continue to mediate culture. He is troubled by a cultural order in which Zanzibar’s immediate realities, memories, and needs recede before imported canons and donor-backed prestige. The novel traces slow violence here as a gradual weakening of indigenous cultural authority: a society may remain on its own soil, while increasingly looking elsewhere for the standards by which thought, value, and collective purpose are to be judged.

At the spiritual level, slow violence in *Admiring Silence* works through a quieter kind of disorder. Imported canons, donor-funded projects, and colonial habits of thought continue to carry disproportionate prestige, whose force is cultural as well as institutional, shaping the standards through which seriousness, authority, and value are recognized. Colonial damage therefore reaches beyond the environment and the state into the realm of judgment. Cultural displacement takes hold when a society no longer draws confidence from its own histories and urgencies and seeks intellectual authority elsewhere.

The weakening of indigenous cultural authority in Zanzibar was closely tied to colonial education. Caitlyn Bolton’s (2021) study of “useful” knowledge documents the process. In colonial Zanzibar, schooling worked with projects of governance, moral regulation, and social reform. It also gave greater value to forms of literacy, discipline, and rationality linked to colonial modernity. Corrie Decker (2010) traces a related shift in social values. Under colonial schooling, Zanzibari ideas of “respectability” and “modernity” changed. Cultural legitimacy came to rest more heavily on approved forms of conduct, literacy, and self-presentation. The effects reached beyond the curriculum. Education also changed the standards by which people judged seriousness, advancement, and value. A related pattern extended outside the school system. Oberauer (2008) shows that British rule did not formally abolish waqf in Zanzibar, though older patterns of waqf practice were disturbed. Cultural damage could therefore unfold slowly. An institution might still exist in name and form, while the social basis that once gave it authority, continuity, and communal meaning could be steadily weakened.

Overall, in *Admiring Silence*, slow violence unfolds across three interconnected dimensions. The novel locates the beginning of

exile well before departure. It gathers through a long history of attrition in which home is steadily diminished as an environment, as a social world, and as a cultural horizon. Nixon's framework casts exile as the accumulated effect of delayed and uneven damage, unfolding across the postcolonial present until estrangement grows inseparable from the very circumstances of living.

Exile as Internalized Slow Violence: Self-Alienation and Unbelonging

Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past. They generally do not have armies or states, although they are often in search of them. (Said, 2000, p. 177)

The previous section argued that slow violence undermines the material and social foundations of home; the focus now shifts to the narrator's internalization of such harm. In *Admiring Silence*, slow violence moves from the outer world into the inner one, gradually internalized as pain, racial misrecognition, fabricated self-narration, mimicry, and unbelonging. Exile therefore exists both as a spatial condition and as an inward structure of feeling, through which the narrator experiences himself as divided, displaced, and unable to inhabit any stable version of home. The inward movement is consistent with Gurnah's broader treatment of displacement, which, as Ajulu-Okungu (2006) notes, repeatedly links ideas of home to the unstable making of selfhood under diaspora and migration.

Once exile penetrates consciousness so deeply, the narrator's inner fracture deepens with harsh inevitability. Postcolonial fiction frequently portrays identity as something provisional, relational, and unsettled by colonial afterlives (Anam, 2023). Gurnah gives the inner fracture a bodily register from the outset: the narrator is "leaning heavily on this pain," which grows "more clear, more precisely located, concrete," until it hardens into "an object that occupied space within me," filling him with "loneliness and terror" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 3). Pain settles into the structure of his daily life and his sense of self. Even ordinary intimacy cannot absorb it. His ritual of "three rums and three fags" reduces life to "the few minutes behind and ahead of me," while "everything else turns into impotent gurglings in a far ditch" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 11). The

pressure surfaces again in the language he uses about his daughter's judgment: "I'm a tragedy ... I am one of the lost" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 12). A self that speaks in these terms has already moved far beyond temporary disorientation. The crisis is underway before return, before confession, before any decisive break in the plot.

Pain carries a distinctly temporal weight. Nixon (2011) emphasizes that slow violence is recognized as violence only with difficulty because its causes are "decoupled" from its effects "by the workings of time" (p. 11). The narrator's pain bears that decoupling. The pain points to no single nameable event; it gathers as cumulative pressure from colonial education, displaced family, departed home, and racial misrecognition in England, all folded into one bodily sensation. He cannot describe it except by personifying it as something that "occupie[s] space within" him (Gurnah, 1996, p. 3), and even ritualized intimacy cannot dissolve it. Pain in *Admiring Silence* therefore serves as the inward signature of slow violence: damage that has gathered slowly, lost its visible causes, and now persists as inhabited burden. The self that lives with such pain has begun to take the temporality of slow violence into its own structure, no longer able to treat suffering as an event that began somewhere and might end elsewhere.

England then sharpens that fracture instead of easing it. The doctor places him inside a racial category that is not his own—"Afro-Caribbean people have dicky hearts"—and the narrator, though fully aware of the error, chooses "respectful silence" while feeling himself reduced to "darkies, hubshis, abids, bongo-bongos ... You know, my race" (Gurnah, 1996, pp. 9-10). That silence is already a divided response: outward compliance, inward recoil. A similar division surfaces in his own retrospective bitterness. He admits that he has received "enough colonial education" to behave sportingly, then condenses the postcolonial bargain into a devastating sequence: "colonized, assimilated, educated, alienated, integrated," before being sent "back to the library shelves" for "the Triumph of the West" (Gurnah, 1996, pp. 11, 16). By then, the grounds for self-division have been fully prepared. Home has already been eroded; the metropolitan present recognizes

him only through misrecognition, and he has learned to live inside that doubleness of humiliation and irony. Self-alienation emerges as exile's most likely inward outcome.

That inner division persists through fabrication. The narrator moves between incompatible versions of his own life, tailoring Zanzibar into something that can be received with ease in England. He offers Emma and her parents "romantic and reassuring tales" of home, shaping the past into a version that can be admired, consumed, and emotionally managed. Gurnah later exposes the conscious construction: "I realized with small stabs of shame afterwards that I had embellished my story to make it less messy, and had fabricated details where these had escaped me" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 41). His admission is exact: he misleads others and reworks the past into something more bearable to narrate. A comparable impulse surfaces when he recalls that Emma's fascination with his stories "made me happy, and above all it made her happy," and that the lies became easier because "they could do no harm" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 41). The harm, however, gathers quietly in the gap between lived experience and narrated self. Each embellishment smooths the past for circulation in England, while carrying the narrator further away from any direct relation to his lived experience.

Fabrication also operates with a particular relation to memory. The narrator reworks pieces of a Zanzibar that has already been damaged, rendering it presentable to an audience that cannot bear its actual material life. His stories transform broken drains into picturesque alleys, food shortage into local color, and political fear into romantic background. Each act of fabrication conceals personal experience together with the long historical damage that Chapter Two traced. Fabrication completes the internalization of slow violence by making its visible signs unspeakable. The narrator keeps the damaged homeland out of his English speech precisely because the damage cannot be acknowledged without making him, in turn, a representative of a place no one in his immediate world wishes to inhabit.

Storytelling therefore serves as one of *Admiring Silence*'s most intimate mechanisms of self-alienation. As Felicity Hand (2007) observes, narration in *Admiring Silence* functions as an enabling device for a migrant

subject burdened by loneliness and displacement, but its enabling power here is shadowed by evasion and concealment. The narrator withholds Emma and Amelia from his family in Zanzibar, while withholding his family and childhood from Emma. One silence is sustained by another, and the self must keep moving between them. By the time amnesty makes return possible, these parallel fictions have already structured his closest relationships for years. Self-alienation deepens through a divided narrative life. Each story offers momentary relief, a brief space in which the pressures of exile can be arranged and softened. Meanwhile, each story enlarges the distance between the narrator and any coherent account of himself. A life carried by so many incompatible narratives loses the possibility of inward continuity.

Mimicry gives the crisis a more intricate shape. The narrator learns to produce a version of himself that will pass smoothly through English social space. Before Emma's parents, he has already learned the discipline of accommodation: "Murmur audibly, smile brightly, say nothing" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 20). In that small formula lies an entire social education. Speech is pared down, expression is managed, and self-presentation is adjusted to the expectations of others. When Mr Willoughby greets him with "there are thousands of darkies in universities these days" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 20), the narrator meets the insult with performance, keeping exposure at bay. He slides into anecdote, irony, and tonal play, keeping the encounter under control while withholding any stable self from it. Tina Steiner (2006) argues that mimicry works as the narrator's principal mode of negotiating migrant identity, but leaves him "stripped of identity" and unable to carry his past meaningfully into the present (p. 301). The social gain is immediate; the inward cost is cumulative.

These performances do not stay confined to hostile encounters. They migrate into the narrator's most intimate relationships, where the managed self continues to operate. With Emma, whom he loves, he still edits, softens, and stages his account of Zanzibar, substituting a palatable homeland for the damaged one he actually carries. The habit of accommodation that shields him in public also hollows out the private sphere in which he might otherwise be known. Mimicry corrodes from within: the

smoother the performance, the further the narrator drifts from any self that could be recognized and shared. Slow violence here operates as a success that costs him the possibility of intimacy, since the self that passes most easily is also the self least able to sustain a genuine bond.

The cumulative cost of these adjustments is visible in the texture of the narrator's silence. Silence in *Admiring Silence* functions as the deepest organization of speech, a structure of controlled withholding. The narrator falls silent before the doctor's racial misrecognition, before Mr Willoughby's casual racism, before Emma's parents' polite incomprehension, and before his Zanzibari family about the life he has built in England. Each silence answers a particular pressure, and each pressure traces back to a different stratum of slow violence: colonial categories, social hierarchy, racial classification, and the loss of a stable mode of self-disclosure. His silences are inhabited risks of a particularly intimate kind: places in his life where slow violence has rendered direct speech impossible.

Unbelonging reaches its fullest clarity at the moment when both homes fail together. Zanzibar no longer offers restoration; England, once he goes back, offers no security either. The novel closes the circuit with devastating economy: "Come home, Akbar said, as he closed his letter. But it wasn't home anymore, and I had no way of retrieving that seductive idea except through more lies. Boom boom" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 176). In Nixon's terms, "place is displacement" (Nixon, 2005, p. 241): the narrator's return to Zanzibar cannot restore him to a stable sense of home. He comes back, but Zanzibar has already been reconstituted by histories of rupture, loss, and uneven continuity. The line gathers the whole crisis into a single recognition. Home remains seductive, but only as an idea sustained by fiction. England fares no better.

In *Admiring Silence*, self-alienation emerges as the most intimate mode of exile. Prolonged fabrication weakens the continuity of the self, mimicry trains it into divided performance, and unbelonging strips both homeland and host country of their power to steady it. The result is a subject suspended between lives that cannot be reconciled and homes that can no longer be inhabited as before.

Gurnah's novel thus relocates exile from the fact of departure to the long interior wearing-down of the self.

Limited Repair Through Critical Distancing, Return, and Practical Reconnection

After exile has been internalized as self-alienation and unbelonging, *Admiring Silence* does not offer a full recovery of identity. Its final movement is more limited and more uncertain. The narrator begins to loosen the authority of imperial narratives, returns to Zanzibar as a damaged homeland, and turns to practical reconnection. Repair develops as unfinished reattachment to a wounded place. Nixon (2011) argues that slow violence poses "representational, narrative, and strategic challenges" (p. 2), while resistant writing and activism work against the "silences" protected by "the normalized quiet of unseen power" (p. 6). In *Admiring Silence*, limited repair unfolds along that arc through three movements: critical distancing from imperial narratives, return to a homeland encountered in its damaged materiality, and reconnection gathered through practical participation in forms of repair that bear directly on Zanzibar's life.

Limited repair begins when the narrator loosens the hold of the stories that have long spoken for him. Earlier in the novel, his inward life had been marked by concealment, self-protection, and the strain of limited self-expression under exile (Barasa & Makokha, 2011; Kagai, 2014; Laboudi, 2024). A more deliberate stance emerges: he begins to pull away from the narratives that classify, contain, and diminish him before he can speak in his own terms. Critical distancing from imperial scripts operates as partial disavowal. The narrator continues to speak through, borrow from, and rework imperial terms, while pursuing an exacting refusal to let imperial narrative speak as truth.

That change comes into view most sharply when the narrator recognizes how completely he has been written into a script prepared in advance. Emma gives that trap its clearest formulation: "you can't change the story while you are in it," because "the story exists because it has to," and "we need you too much, and we need you as you are" (Gurnah,

1996, p. 15). Her words expose the coercive stability of imperial narrative. His assigned place is already there, waiting for him: grievance, inadequacy, resentment, dependency. He recognizes the trap with painful lucidity when he reflects that he had only been trying to say “NO to stories that rose and swelled heedlessly around me despite my feeble refusal,” while knowing that within those stories “my maladies and inadequacies would be perpetually in the foreground” and that he would still be imagined as someone requiring “the master’s firm guiding hand” (Gurnah, 1996, p. 15). The pressure of identity crisis is still present here, but its direction has begun to shift. He is no longer only the captive of these narratives. He has started to challenge their internal logic.

Resistance deepens in his treatment of imperial legend. His meditation on Pocahontas opens with a phrase whose cool distance already weakens narrative authority: “This is what was said of her” (Gurnah, 1996, p. 6). From there, the familiar romance of colonial encounter frays. The imperial version celebrates devotion, rescue, conversion, and civilizational uplift; the narrator’s retelling draws attention to capture, display, renaming, and removal. Pocahontas turns into “the beautiful native princess” folded into imperial fantasy, then a “noble native curiosity” transported to England, only to die far from home (Gurnah, 1996, p. 6). The effect is subtle but decisive. He re-enters one of empire’s cherished narratives and exposes the violence embedded in its elegance. Critical distancing here amounts to a changed relation to narrative. The old stories are no longer inhabitable as before.

Repair gains ethical weight through its refusal of two opposing tendencies in postcolonial narrative. On one side stands the redemptive ending, in which the protagonist recovers identity, reconciles with home, and emerges restored. On the other side stands the nihilistic ending, in which damage proves total and no relation to home or self remains possible. *Admiring Silence* declines both. Repair arrives without redemption: partial, slow, bound to ongoing risk, and requiring the narrator to remain amid ongoing damage. *Admiring Silence* enacts precisely the kind of response slow violence demands: patient, locally embedded, and refusing the

consolation of a single redemptive act.

The narrator’s earlier crisis had been fed by overexposure to borrowed languages of race, civilization, and historical value. England had supplied him with names, categories, and interpretive slots; colonial discourse had already prepared the terms under which he could appear. Here, that machinery starts to lose some of its force. The narrator challenges the “silences” of unseen power inwardly, through an increasingly exacting refusal to let imperial narrative speak as truth. At that threshold, the self loosens its dependence on inherited explanation. The self has not recovered wholeness, and no easy assurance arrives. The narrator gains a harder-won independence from inherited explanation. He tentatively detaches himself from the stories that have kept him in place.

Once imperial narrative begins to loosen its hold, return acquires a different weight. The journey back to Zanzibar does not deliver the narrator into the shelter of an intact origin. In exile narratives, home often survives as an ambivalent structure of memory, longing, and revision (Tozan, 2025). It brings him into renewed contact with a homeland encountered in its altered material life. Nixon’s account of slow violence directs attention to injuries that are “incremental and accretive” and to forms of “delayed destruction” whose effects accumulate across the postcolonial present (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Within Nixon’s temporal framework, return in *Admiring Silence* restores contact with a damaged homeland without recovering innocence or permanence.

That contact is difficult because memory has long softened home into image. Distance had allowed Zanzibar to survive in the narrator’s mind as attachment, ache, and imaginative residue. Return interrupts that arrangement. Material fact replaces the distance of recollection. The narrator can no longer sustain the hope that “home and belonging” might still become “real again”; they now appear to him as something closer to a “wilful fiction” (Gurnah, 1996, p. 76). The recognition is severe. Home remains affectively powerful, but its power now runs through disillusion. The idea endures; the old ease of inhabiting it does not.

Altered contact with place enables a partial reorientation of the self. The narrator

returns to a Zanzibar marked by erosion and the accumulated effects of scarcity, infrastructural decay, and damaged social life. The homeland ceases to function as a consoling elsewhere and presses upon him as a lived environment once more. Nixon (2011) describes a “displacement without moving,” a condition of places “stripped of the very characteristics that made [them] inhabitable” (p. 19). That phrase resonates with the narrator’s return. He has come back to Zanzibar, but he has also come back to a place thinned out from within, a place where attrition has entered the ordinary texture of life. Return confirms loss and resets perception. It compels him to see home as damaged ground.

Earlier, identity had depended heavily on distance, embellishment, and narrative mediation. Return makes those arrangements harder to sustain. The land now answers through its own material state. Roads, drains, water systems, exhausted buildings, and diminished public life insist on a reality more stubborn than longing. Material contact reorganizes the self. Zanzibar can no longer be approached as pure memory or symbolic origin. It has to be encountered as a damaged, inhabited world whose needs exceed nostalgia and whose history exceeds lament. The identity that starts to gather here remains tentative, marked by injury and unbelonging. Its orientation has settled on the ground beneath it. That turn is decisive. Partial reorientation begins to gather where attachment passes through the damaged materiality of home.

Contact with the damaged land opens the way for a further shift: attachment moves out of memory and into action. The narrator’s relation to Zanzibar starts to change once he moves from distant abstraction to work that bears directly on the life of the place. “Environmentalism of the poor” stresses that those who live with attritional damage confront environmental threat as “a set of inhabited risks,” while their commitments are rarely separable from livelihood, survival, and the ordinary struggle to sustain a world in common (Nixon, 2011, p. 4). Reconnection in *Admiring Silence* gathers around participation in practical repair that answers the damaged material conditions of home.

Scale, urgency, and relation shape the narrator’s turn away from Amur Malik’s cultural project. Amur wants to translate the “profound thoughts” of “Shakespeare, Marx, Tolstoy, and Hemingway,” imagining cultural renewal through imported authority and donor-backed prestige (Gurnah, 1996, pp. 156-157). The narrator’s imagination moves elsewhere. He is drawn instead to the broken water system and to the practical labour of restoring the conditions that make collective life possible. That turn carries real weight. It shifts value from prestige to usefulness, away from abstract cultural aspiration and to the damaged infrastructure through which people actually live. Nixon’s (2011) “inhabited risks” (p. 4) name the terrain where environment, survival, and social life are knotted together in the everyday. Reconnection takes root there, in work responsive to the life of the place.

The temporality of repair in the novel matches the temporality of damage. Just as slow violence accumulated across decades of ecological erosion, social fracture, and cultural displacement, so repair must be understood as an extended, accretive process. The narrator’s turn to the broken water system functions as a small commitment within a much longer struggle whose outcome remains uncertain. The novel thus takes seriously its own theoretical premise: a damage that unfolds across time demands a response that also unfolds across time, refusing the consolation of a single redemptive act.

Water serves as the site of reconnection for pointed reasons. Throughout the novel it has carried the weight of colonial intervention and civic decay, from the filled-in creek to the unreliable supply of the postcolonial present. By turning to the broken water system, the narrator attaches himself to the very element through which slow violence had earlier registered its damage. Repair stays close to the ground of ordinary need; it concerns drains, pipes, and everyday provision. The narrator commits himself to a problem that narration cannot solve, one that yields only to sustained and shared labour. He exchanges the mobile, self-protective identity of the exile for a slower attachment measured by usefulness to a particular place. Small in scale and uncertain in outcome, the reconnection

locates the self within a collective effort that Gurnah treats as the only realistic ground of repair.

Two moments in the novel make the temporal logic especially visible. The first is the narrator's reflection that home and belonging now appear to him as a "wilful fiction" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 76), a phrase whose force lies in its insistence that home is still affectively present even though it can no longer be inhabited as a stable ground. The second is his recognition that he must turn to Akbar's letter and to the broken water system without expecting that either will restore him. Both moments function as quiet adjustments in how the narrator holds his own attachments, never as climactic events. They are exactly the kind of adjustments that slow violence requires: small reorientations of the self to damage that cannot be undone.

The novel ultimately offers a limited and unfinished repair. The narrator does not arrive at a fully reoriented self, and he does not overcome exile; he learns to relate differently to ongoing damage. His critical distancing from imperial narratives, his return to Zanzibar, and his attention to practical repair suggest a fragile reconnection with place, though the novel refuses to present the reconnection as resolution. Identity remains marked by loss; the past is not healed; home is not fully restored; and the self is not made whole. The narrator is no longer sustained only by distance, fantasy, or borrowed authority. The final movement of *Admiring Silence* imagines repair only partially, tentatively, and without final reconciliation—as a fragile practice of living with damage.

CONCLUSION

Exile in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* takes shape as the afterlife of slow violence. Ecological degradation, infrastructural failure, social insecurity, spatial inequality, and cultural displacement gradually weaken Zanzibar as a material, civic, and cultural ground of belonging, so exile begins before the narrator's physical departure. Accumulated damage enters subjectivity as pain, racial misrecognition, fabricated storytelling, mimicry, silence, and unbelonging. For postcolonial literary criticism, the approach extends Nixon's concept beyond ecological destruction and clarifies how delayed

material and historical damage can structure diasporic consciousness and narrative instability across representations of displacement.

The novel nevertheless refuses a redemptive recovery of home or identity. Nixon's environmental and temporal vocabulary captures cumulative harm; Zanzibar's racialized politics, colonial education, Islamic institutions, and postcolonial state formation require locally grounded historical scholarship. Its final movement suggests only limited and unfinished repair through critical distancing from imperial narratives, return to Zanzibar as a damaged homeland, and practical reconnection with water, infrastructure, and everyday survival. The past is not healed, home is not fully restored, and the self is not made whole. Gurnah instead imagines repair as a fragile practice of recognizing damage and reconnecting to place without denying the losses that remain.

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