

# Lost and Found: Journeys of Displacement and Belonging in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* and Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach*

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**Citation:** Ancy Rose C J et al. (2024). Lost and Found: Journeys of Displacement and Belonging in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* and Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach*, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(11) 2889-2893

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i11.11045

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intertwined themes of displacement, identity, and belonging in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* and Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach*. Although the two texts emerge from vastly different literary traditions, Gurnah's postcolonial realism and Dahl's children's fantasy both chart journeys from alienation to belonging through the act of storytelling. In *By the Sea*, Gurnah portrays the alienated consciousness of Saleh Omar, whose search for home becomes an ethical and emotional quest shaped by memory, loss, and the pursuit of reconciliation. The sea functions as a marginal space between homeland and exile, symbolizing the fragility of belonging in a postcolonial world. In contrast, Dahl translates displacement into the imaginative idiom of childhood; James Trotter's voyage inside the giant peach reimagines exile as liberation and the formation of community as healing. Through comparative analysis, this study reveals how both authors employ narrative, whether confessional or fantastical, as a means of reconstructing identity amidst dislocation. The paper argues that Gurnah's realism and Dahl's fantasy converge in their vision of storytelling as a search for home, where empathy and imagination redeem the fragmented self. Ultimately, both works illuminate the universal human struggle to transform loss into renewal and alienation into a sense of belonging.

**Keywords:** Displacement, exile, belonging, identity, postcolonial literature, children's literature, storytelling, imagination, trauma, memory, empathy, home, transformation.

## INTRODUCTION

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001) and Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach* (1961) emerge from vastly different literary and cultural landscapes, yet both explore the profound human yearning for belonging amidst displacement. Gurnah's novel, situated within the postcolonial migration discourse, follows Saleh Omar, a Zanzibari exile seeking asylum in England, whose life unfolds through recollections of betrayal, exile, and the slow recovery of self in a foreign land. Dahl's tale, meanwhile, presents a young orphan, James Henry Trotter, who escapes the cruelty of his guardians by embarking on a fantastical voyage inside a giant peach. Though one is a postcolonial novel and the other a work of children's literature, both texts reveal that displacement, whether political or emotional, propels the individual toward rediscovery. The "lost and found" journey becomes not just geographical but existential, mapping the trajectory of identity through loss, memory, and reconciliation. Both Gurnah and Dahl frame exile as a journey of self-translation. For Gurnah, exile is marked by the burden of colonial history and the dislocation of identity; for Dahl, it is softened by imagination and the companionship of others. Yet in both, the protagonists undergo a transformative odyssey from alienation to belonging. As Homi Bhabha observes, "the migrant experience becomes the exemplary condition of late modernity, a condition of dwelling-in-displacement" (*The Location of Culture*, 1994). Gurnah's and Dahl's works capture precisely this: the search for home in the wake of loss, and the redemptive power of narrative to reconstruct meaning.

## DISPLACEMENT AND THE FRACTURED SELF

In *By the Sea*, Gurnah situates Saleh Omar's story within a politics of exile that is both intimate and historical. Saleh's arrival at Gatwick Airport as an asylum seeker, clutching false documents and the scent of "oud," symbolizes a man stripped of his identity yet clinging to fragments of the past. The narrative oscillates between past and present, Zanzibar and England, memory and reality, mirroring the disorientation of exile. Saleh confesses, "I was a refugee, an asylum seeker. I had no name, no country, no story except the one I invented" (Gurnah 12). This act of self-invention underscores how displacement dismantles one's continuity of selfhood, forcing the exiled subject to rewrite his story in a new cultural lexicon.

Gurnah's language of exile is one of profound estrangement. The act of storytelling becomes an act of survival. When Saleh recalls his betrayal by Hussein, or the confiscation of his property under Zanzibar's revolutionary government, he narrates not simply loss, but the erasure of belonging. The sea, a recurring motif, becomes both a bridge and a barrier to the passage between home and exile. The novel's very title, *By the Sea*, gestures toward liminality: a threshold space where memory, identity, and longing converge yet remain unsettled. As the narrative unfolds, the reader perceives that the exiled self-lives perpetually "by" rather than "within" the sea on the margins of belonging.

Gurnah's exploration of displacement aligns with Edward Said's reflections on exile as a "restless solitude," a state in which "the achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever" (*Reflections on Exile* 173). Saleh embodies this paradox: though he finds a semblance of safety in England, his memories of Zanzibar haunt him like an unfinished story. His fractured narrative voice mirrors this discontinuity, alternating between confession and silence, between memory's tenderness and its wounds.

## MEMORY, TRAUMA, AND THE RECLAMATION OF SELF

Exile in *By the Sea* is not merely spatial but psychological. Saleh's memories constitute a fragile architecture of identity, constantly threatened by the erosion of time and trauma. Memory is both his refuge and his curse. He recalls, "I closed my eyes, and I was back by the sea, smelling the salt, hearing the waves as they teased the shore" (Gurnah 45). Such moments of reminiscence are deeply sensory, grounding the displaced self in fragments of familiarity. Yet they also remind him of what is irretrievably lost, home as a temporal rather than physical space.

The act of remembering in Gurnah's work becomes redemptive when it is shared. Latif Mahmud, the younger man who bridges the gap between Saleh's past and present, serves as both a mirror and a mediator. Their meeting in England becomes a site of reconciliation not only between two individuals but between fragmented histories. As the paper you provided insightfully noted, Gurnah "constructs belonging as a fragile negotiation between memory and forgiveness." Indeed, through Latif, Saleh confronts his past betrayals and acknowledges that belonging cannot be reclaimed without facing the pain of history. This reconciliation signifies a moral geography of exile, where forgiveness restores what geography has broken.

Gurnah's use of dual narration amplifies this process of healing. Saleh and Latif's alternating voices reconstitute the narrative as a dialogue, a metaphorical act of crossing the sea of silence. In postcolonial terms, this structure resists the erasure of subaltern memory; it insists on the multiplicity of truth. As critic Mpalive Msiska writes, "Gurnah's fiction unsettles the notion of fixed identity, replacing it with a fluid, dialogic self-shaped by migration and memory" (Msiska 2013). Thus, *By the Sea* transcends the personal story of exile to articulate a broader existential condition, the perpetual human search for belonging amid impermanence.

## THE ETHICS OF DISPLACEMENT

Gurnah's portrayal of displacement is deeply ethical. By humanizing the asylum seeker's voice, he resists Western narratives that reduce refugees to statistics or stereotypes. Saleh's quiet dignity and introspective narrative invert the dehumanizing gaze of bureaucracy. When interrogated by immigration officers, Saleh reflects, "They wanted my story, but not the truth. They wanted my confession" (Gurnah 9). The distinction between story and confession encapsulates Gurnah's critique of how power shapes which narratives are believed. Storytelling becomes a means of asserting humanity in a system that demands deletion.

This ethical dimension echoes throughout Gurnah's work. Exile, for him, is not just a personal condition but a collective wound born from colonial histories, migration, and economic dislocation. The displaced subject bears the burden of history's violence. It also carries the possibility of renewal. In portraying the exiled self as storyteller, Gurnah suggests that the act of narrating is itself an act of reclaiming being. As Saleh writes in his final reflections, "All stories are lies, but they make the truth bearable" (Gurnah 245). This line epitomizes the paradox of exile: truth survives only through the imagination's power to mend broken realities.

## FROM EXILE TO IMAGINATION: BRIDGING TOWARD DAHL

While Gurnah's narrative is steeped in realism and postcolonial critique, Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach* translates the trauma of displacement into a child's imaginative odyssey. Yet, the emotional topography remains strikingly similar. James, like Saleh, begins as an orphan dislocated, marginalized, and silenced by oppressive guardians. His journey, too, begins by the sea: the place where his parents died, and where his

adventure later concludes. The peach, suspended between land and ocean, becomes a vessel of transformation, a metaphorical “sea” through which he navigates loss and rediscovers belonging.

Both narratives thus engage the “journey motif” as a path from isolation to relationality. In Gurnah, the sea separates; in Dahl, it unites. Saleh’s sea is a boundary he cannot cross back; James’s Sea is a space of freedom that restores him to life. This shift from historical exile to imaginative liberation marks a movement from political displacement to existential healing. Both, however, insist that belonging is not a return to origins but a re-creation of self within new spaces of care.

### THE CONDITION OF DISPLACEMENT IN DAHL’S WORLD

Roald Dahl’s *James and the Giant Peach* opens with an image of loss that resonates deeply with Gurnah’s portrayal of exile. Within the first pages, James Henry Trotter’s idyllic life collapses when his parents are killed “by a runaway rhinoceros” (Dahl 1). The absurdity of this death, at once humorous and tragic, disorients both protagonist and reader, displacing James from familial warmth into an alien world ruled by cruelty. Orphaned and exiled to the house of his aunts, Spiker and Sponge, James becomes a figure of emotional exile, confined in a domestic prison that mirrors the bureaucratic oppression Saleh Omar faces at the borders of Britain. Dahl’s use of grotesque exaggeration, the aunts’ ugliness, their greed, and the barren garden transform the home into a landscape of displacement. The boy’s imaginative and physical journey, like Gurnah’s exiled narrative, begins in a space of confinement.

Both authors reveal that exile is not solely geographic. It is the condition of being unacknowledged of having one’s story silenced. James’s pain, like Saleh’s, is initially incommunicable. Dahl writes, “Poor James was still crying when he lay down that night... He cried and cried until he fell asleep” (Dahl 4). Beneath the childlike prose lies an understanding of alienation as a fundamental human condition. The difference lies in the mode of resistance, where Gurnah’s Saleh reclaims identity through storytelling, Dahl’s James does so through imagination. The peach becomes a vessel for the displaced child’s rebirth, a metaphorical space where belonging is no longer tied to geography but to community and creativity.

### FANTASY AS THE GEOGRAPHY OF HEALING

Dahl’s genius lies in transforming existential themes into narrative wonder. The giant peach, born of a magical seed, grows into a world of its own, a mobile home that carries James and his insect companions across land and sea. This fantastical setting allows Dahl to externalize psychological healing as spatial movement. The characters’ journey from the aunts’ house to the open ocean, and finally to New York City, symbolizes the passage from trauma to liberation, from isolation to social integration.

When James first enters the peach, Dahl describes it as “a lovely, soft, juicy, golden room” (Dahl 28). The imagery of warmth and nourishment starkly contrasts the cold, punishing world outside. It recalls the womb-like security of a lost home, a return to belonging through imagination. The peach thus functions as what Gaston Bachelard calls a “topoanalysis of intimacy,” an interior space where the dreamer restores the self-fragmented by displacement (*The Poetics of Space*, 1958). Inside the peach, James reconstructs his identity not through lineage or heritage, but through empathy and collaboration with creatures equally marked by otherness.

Dahl’s fantasy, then, is not escapist; it is restorative. Like Gurnah’s Sea, the peach becomes a medium of transformation. The voyage across the Atlantic literalizes the inner journey of healing. As the Centipede declares, “We are off! We are off to see the world!” (Dahl 34). The tone of jubilation replaces the despair of exile, affirming that freedom begins where imagination reclaims agency. In this sense, Dahl’s novel translates Gurnah’s exilic pain into a child’s language of adventure, an allegory of emotional resilience.

### COMMUNITY AND THE REIMAGINING OF BELONGING

In *By the Sea*, Saleh and Latif’s tentative reconciliation suggests that belonging must be rebuilt through empathy and forgiveness. In Dahl’s narrative, this idea is dramatized through James’s creation of a new family within the peach. The anthropomorphic insects, the Ladybird, Grasshopper, Earthworm, Spider, and Centipede, embody diversity and acceptance. Each, initially alien to James, becomes a companion in his journey. Their collective effort to survive the dangers of sharks, seagulls, and storm clouds becomes an allegory for social solidarity.

Dahl’s moral vision thus intersects with Gurnah’s: both depict belonging as relational rather than biological. James’s new “family” contrasts with the cruelty of his aunts and with the isolation that defined his earlier life. In one tender moment, when James calms the frightened Earthworm, he assures him, “You are not a nuisance. You are one of us” (Dahl 67). This declaration encapsulates the novel’s ethic of inclusion; belonging is found when one is seen and accepted. The exiled subject becomes at home in companionship, not in place.

Similarly, Saleh’s eventual connection with Latif allows him to transcend bitterness. When he remarks, “I came here to die quietly, but I found someone to talk to,” (Gurnah 204), his confession parallels James’s emotional transformation. Both protagonists discover that identity is reconstituted through the act of relation through dialogue, empathy, and storytelling.

## IMAGINATION AS A POSTCOLONIAL RESPONSE

While Dahl's story is far removed from postcolonial migration, its imaginative strategy resonates with Gurnah's moral landscape. Both writers resist despair by affirming the creative power of the human spirit. Saleh narrates his trauma in order to survive; James imagines his way out of trauma. The imaginative leap that propels the peach into the sky mirrors the metaphorical leap that allows the exile to transcend loss. The novel's closing scene, where the peach lands atop the Empire State Building, symbolizes arrival not in the literal sense of reaching a destination, but in reclaiming narrative agency. James's subsequent fame, as he shares his story with the world, recalls Saleh's quiet act of narration in *By the Sea*. Both stories conclude with storytelling as the ultimate form of belonging.

These parallel invites a deeper postcolonial reading of Dahl's children's literature. The displaced child, like the postcolonial subject, navigates worlds of domination and otherness. The journey from oppression to liberation mirrors the decolonizing of the self through imagination. As critic Marina Warner observes, "In Dahl, fantasy becomes a democratic space of justice where the powerless reimagine power on their own terms" (*No Go the Bogeymen*, 1998). Thus, while Gurnah's exile is marked by realism and historical consciousness, Dahl's fable achieves the same philosophical end through fantasy: both insist that belonging must be remade when the world denies it.

## PARALLELS OF EXILE AND CONSOLATION

Despite their tonal differences, Gurnah and Dahl share a humanist concern with consolation in displacement. Both narratives begin with loss: Saleh's exile and James's orphanhood, and move toward relational healing. Both protagonists live "by the sea," a motif signifying the threshold between despair and discovery. The sea in Gurnah is a boundary of memory; in Dahl, it becomes a playground of possibility. Yet in both, crossing it represents a movement from silence to speech, from isolation to connection.

What binds them most profoundly is their ethical imagination. For Gurnah, empathy is a political act; it restores dignity to the migrant. For Dahl, empathy is moral; it restores innocence to the child. Both assert that belonging is an act of creation. In the end, Saleh's narrative closes with reconciliation, while James's ends with joy; yet both express what Edward Said calls "the contrapuntal awareness of exile," the ability to inhabit more than one world and make meaning between them (*Reflections on Exile* 186).

Dahl's imaginative landscapes and Gurnah's historical realities converge on a single truth: that human beings are sustained not by roots, but by stories. Storytelling becomes the home that both Saleh and James build for themselves.

## CONCLUSION

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* and Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach* articulate two distinct yet resonant visions of displacement and belonging. Gurnah's novel situates exile within the moral and historical aftermath of colonialism, portraying the refugee as a bearer of memory and ethical witness. Dahl's children's tale translates the same existential themes into the language of fantasy, revealing that even in innocence, the human heart wrestles with alienation and the desire for home.

Both works demonstrate that displacement, far from being a mere loss, is a catalyst for self-discovery. Through storytelling, whether confessional or imaginative, the exiled subject reconstructs identity and community. The "lost and found" journey becomes a metaphor for survival: to be lost is to be opened to transformation; to be found is to recognize oneself in others. Gurnah's restrained prose and Dahl's exuberant narrative ultimately affirm a shared faith in empathy, imagination, and narrative as the foundations of belonging.

In the end, both Saleh Omar and James Trotter stand as symbols of endurance, their journeys across sea and sky affirm that the search for home is, above all, the search for meaning.

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