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**The Humanitarian Vision in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* and *Theft*:
A Study in Realism and Ethics**

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Abstract

The humanitarian perspective in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* (2017) and *Theft* (2025), illustrates how both novels reflect a mode of humanitarian realism - a narrative approach that merges social critique with an ethical concern for human worth. Gurnah's fiction highlights themes of exile, the lingering impacts of colonialism and the quiet moral actions that help individuals preserve dignity within fractured societies. Through understated narration, emotional depth and moral complexity, he turns simple gestures of kindness, remorse and empathy into subtle acts of resistance. While *Gravel Heart* expresses humanitarian realism through inner conflict and silence, *Theft* extends it to collective experiences and moral negotiation within communities. This comparative analysis suggests that Gurnah avoids both sentimentality and overt political rhetoric, instead presenting an ethics rooted in "everyday humanitarianism." By depicting compassion within historical and social limitations, Gurnah proposes a politics of dignity that complements structural critique. His compassionate realism thus reimagines postcolonial fiction as a form of witnessing and moral restoration, positioning empathy as a quiet but powerful expression of justice.

Keywords: *Humanitarian Realism, Postcolonial Ethics, Humanitarianism, Ethnicity, Integrity.*

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels are widely celebrated for their compassionate portrayal of displacement, the lingering shadows of empire and the quiet moral gestures that uphold human dignity in times of turmoil. Awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in the year 2021 "for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee," Gurnah writes quietly but insistently about the human face of historical forces, showing how everyday kindness or brutality shapes lives across generations and geographies. In his two recent and thematically resonant works - *Gravel Heart* (2017) and *Theft* (2025) - Gurnah returns repeatedly to human relations under stress: the obligations and resentments that bind family and community, the moral economies of patronage and dependency and the ways memory and shame configure identity. This study argues that *Gravel Heart* and *Theft* enact a form of humanitarian realism: a literary strategy that combines sober social description with ethical attention to the precariousness of human dignity, thereby asking readers to witness suffering without reducing characters to mere symbols.

Drawing on close readings of both texts and situating them within recent critical responses and scholarship, I show how Gurnah's humanitarian realism operates at the level of narrative perspective, characterization and ethical smallness - the modest acts of care, apology and recognition that recur through his narratives - and how these elements together produce a political claim: that compassion, however constrained, is itself a form of resistance to histories of dispossession. [The Washington Post+1](#).

The phrase humanitarian realism is not a standard critical term but a useful heuristic for describing fiction that refuses sentimentalism while foregrounding moral attention to suffering. In this sense, humanitarian realism shares affinities with social realism's attentiveness to socio-economic structures and with testimonial literature's ethical insistence that witnessing matters. What distinguishes Gurnah's approach is the mingling of structural critique (colonial legacies, economic precarity, tourism economies and state violence) with narrative practices that humanize rather than instrumentalize characters: point of view that lingers over ordinary moments, sentences that compress long histories into small gestures and a refusal to moralize or to offer easy redemption. This combination yields work that is realist in its attention to conditions and humanitarian in its ethical priority: to render the interior life of persons who've been marginalized by history. Scholarship on Gurnah frequently emphasizes his "compassionate penetration" of colonial legacies and refugee experience; reading him through humanitarian realism amplifies that critical attachment while drawing attention to formal features - choice of focalization, muted irony, and moral micro-politics that produce his ethical effect. [NobelPrize.org+1](#)

Gurnah's international profile changed markedly after the Nobel Prize, which prompted renewed critical attention to his backlist and new works alike. Critics have observed how his novels often move between the Indian Ocean world and British urban centers, interrogating how histories of colonialism shape contemporary formations of belonging and shame. Reviewers of *Theft* note that Gurnah continues to explore the entanglements of obligation and dependency in late 20th century Zanzibar and Tanzania and that the novel's moral core lies in its attention to small, often silent, acts that generate dignity or cruelty. [The Guardian+1](#). Earlier responses to *Gravel Heart* foregrounded its coming of age frame - Salim's search for truth about his parents' separation and the attendant shame that propels his exile - but critics also emphasized the novel's broader social registers: the intersections of gendered power, patronage and the emerging migration economies that move protagonists from coast to metropolis. [Library Journal](#). This critical backdrop underscores continuity in Gurnah's work: his persistent interest in how personal histories intersect with larger political economies and how narrative attention to small ethical choices can illuminate systemic injury.

Gravel Heart centers on Salim, whose childhood is marked by a household split and a father who retreats into silence. The novel dramatizes how familial secrets produce psychic fragmentation and how exile from home is as much an interior exile as a physical journey. Critical accounts have read the novel's psychoanalytic resonances and its preoccupation with traumatic memory; such readings are apt because Gurnah composes scenes that refract large historical ruptures- tensions of the postcolonial archipelago, the social costs of economic precarity through the intimate register of family life. [Jurnal Universitas Advent Indonesia+1](#)

The humanitarian realism of *Gravel Heart* emerges in two formal choices. First, the novel's focalization emphasizes attention rather than spectacle. Gurnah refrains from sensationalizing Salim's suffering; instead the narration dwells on quotidian acts - a mother's injunctions, a neighborly exchange, the ritualized distribution of food that cumulatively reveal the moral economy of Salim's world. Moments of compassion are small: a neighbor's discreet help, an uncle's awkward generosity, a friend's brief solidarity and it is precisely the abundance of these small acts that constructs a humane

counterpoint to institutional neglect. Second, Gurnah renders shame as both a social and an ethical category. Shame in *Gravel Heart* is not merely an internal feeling but a public grammar that organizes relationships: it constrains speech, enforces silence, and channels desire into constrained forms. By narrating how shame shapes choices (for Salim and for others), the novel compels readers to see the ways social structures do colonial legacies, patriarchal reputations and economic dependency which produce moral constrictions. The ethical implication is subtle but powerful: the reader learns to witness without pity and to recognize that acts which restore dignity (even if small) carry political valence. This tonal balance such as compassion without condescension epitomizes humanitarian realism.

Library Journal

Theft returns to many of the themes Gurnah has pursued across his oeuvre - migration, indebtedness, the labor of love and servitude but enlarges them into a multi-vocal narrative that tracks several protagonists as they navigate late 20th century Zanzibar's social transformations. Contemporary reviewers have emphasized Gurnah's restraint and his focus on how obligation and gratitude are exchanged within asymmetrical relations. Financial Times+1 In *Theft*, so called "thefts" are not merely criminal acts: they are metaphors for the ways lives, memories and possibilities are taken by colonial histories, by economic forces, by interpersonal betrayals. Yet Gurnah pairs this imagery of loss with careful attention to the small reparative gestures that may recuperate dignity.

Narratively, *Theft* uses interlocking points of view to show how moral claims are contested. For instance, characters who feel entitled to restitution often fail to perceive the costs borne by those they deem subordinate; conversely, characters who owe allegiance sometimes perform acts of moral autonomy that complicate simplistic readings of victimhood. The novel thus stages ethical ambiguity: compassion becomes morally costly and kindness may be entangled with expectations of repayment. Gurnah's humanitarian realism here lies in refusing reductive binaries; rather than presenting virtuous victims and villainous oppressors, he renders a moral landscape where agency is uneven and ethics occur in contested social fields. Critics have noted how this approach allows Gurnah to critique not only historical injustices but also the contemporary economies of tourism and volunteerism that codify unequal obligations. Financial Times+1

Comparing *Gravel Heart* and *Theft* clarifies both continuities in Gurnah's humanitarian realism and novel inflections in his later work. Both texts concentrate on the local households, neighborhoods, modest workplaces and both insist that the politics is always mediated by the quotidian. Yet *Gravel Heart* is more inwardly focused: it is a bildungsroman that explores personal identity and silence, and the humanitarian effect is accomplished by deep interiority and sustained focalization on Salim's consciousness. *Theft*, by contrast, practices a broader social gaze, mapping multiple lives and showing the interplay of friendship, love and economic change across a community. The humanitarian realism of the earlier novel is therefore psychological and private; the later novel's humanitarian realism is relational and public. Together they demonstrate Gurnah's range: the capacity to make both interior pain and social obligations ethically legible. Library Journal+1

Three formal mechanisms underpin Gurnah's humanitarian realism across both novels. First, narration - particularly restrained, empathic focalization which resists spectacle. Gurnah declines melodrama; instead, he allows moral complexity to emerge from character interaction and understated description.

This restraint invites readers into ethical engagement: rather than being told how to feel, readers must observe and interpret. Second, temporality matters: Gurnah often juxtaposes memory and the present, showing how past violences continues to shape present moral choices. In *Gravel Heart*, memory is a source of haunting shame; in *Theft*, it supplies context for obligations that characters carry across decades. This temporal layering makes compassion historically informed rather than merely affective. Third, irony, often quiet, sometimes mordant functions not to distance the reader from suffering but to signal moral ambivalence. Gurnah uses irony sparingly to reveal hypocrisy or the gap between professed values and practical actions; the irony thus sharpens rather than undercuts the humanitarian claim, prompting readers to examine complicity and responsibility. Scholarly discussions have recognized Gurnah's moral subtlety, noting especially his capacity to represent complicated ethical terrains without descending into didacticism. [London Review of Books+1](#)

One of this essay's central contentions is that Gurnah's focus on "ethical smallness" -modest acts of care, civil speech, reparative listening constitutes a political strategy. In contexts where large-scale justice is deferred or impossible, everyday acts that restore dignity become crucial. These acts do not necessarily transform systems of inequality immediately but they build alternative norms of mutual respect that can sustain communities and contest dehumanizing structures. This strategy is visible in *Gravel Heart's* neighborly gestures and in *Theft's* subtle exchanges of hospitality and refusal. It echoes what relief scholars and human rights advocates sometimes call "everyday humanitarianism": practices that preserve human dignity in the absence of institutional redress. Gurnah's fiction thereby performs a double work: it diagnoses historical injury and models forms of humane living that resist the reduction of persons to statistics or tropes. UNHCR and other commentators on Gurnah's work have observed that he writes with an eye toward dignifying the refugee and the displaced rather than objectifying them as an aim that literary humanitarian realism shares. [UNHCR](#)

Critiques and limits. To be sure, humanitarian realism as practiced by Gurnah has limits. Some critics might argue that focusing on moral micro-politics risks depoliticizing large structures; there is a danger that attention to humane acts could substitute for demands for structural change. Moreover, the aesthetic restraint that produces ethical subtlety can be read by some as conservatism - an unwillingness to stage radical confrontations with power. These are fair critiques and Gurnah's novels do not claim to be blueprints for political transformation. Yet his texts do complicate the supposedly binary choice between ethical witness and political agitation: by rendering how dignity is preserved in ordinary life, they suggest that political projects of justice must attend to the social grammars that produce shame and dependency. In other words, humanitarian realism in Gurnah's hands does not replace structural critique but complements it, insisting that justice also involves repairing quotidian relations of regard. Several reviewers and scholars have noted that Gurnah's approach foregrounds moral repair precisely because systemic remedies remain elusive; their commentary underscores the productive tension between literary modesty and political insight. [Taylor & Francis Online+1](#)

Reading Gurnah through the lens of humanitarian realism yields several implications. First, it broadens our understanding of how postcolonial fiction can be ethically charged without resorting to polemics. Gurnah demonstrates that careful attention to ordinary lives can itself be an intervention, reshaping readers' moral imagination. Second, Gurnah's mode suggests methodological possibilities for scholars:

a focus on narrative ethics that attends to focalization, temporality and small acts of care may reveal political meanings not captured by macro-historical analysis alone. Third, his work challenges the academy to preserve the relation between literary form and moral conception; Gurnah shows that style and ethics are mutually constitutive. Recent scholarship and reviews of his work especially after the Nobel recognition have increasingly highlighted these interconnections, arguing that Gurnah's humane poetics offers a model for writing about displacement that avoids spectacle while insisting on political seriousness. [NobelPrize.org+1](#)

Gravel Heart and *Theft* together exemplify Abdulrazak Gurnah's humanitarian realism: novels that combine structural awareness with ethical attention to the small acts that make human life possible. By focusing on the moral economies of shame, obligation, gratitude and everyday help, Gurnah's narratives refuse both the sentimentality that flattens suffering and the abstraction that strips persons of their interiority. Instead, they offer a mode of literary witnessing that dignifies characters, compels readers to reckon with historical injury and imagines politics as inseparable from everyday acts of regard. In a world where displacement and inequality remain acute, Gurnah's humane realism is a quiet but urgent corrective: it asks readers not merely to know about suffering, but to practice forms of attention that preserve dignity. As scholarship and reviews since his Nobel recognition have suggested, these works encourage a politically engaged reading that honors both the individual life and the structural forces that shape it.

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