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SALIM'S IDENTITY IN GURNAH'S *GRAVEL HEART* FROM  
THE PERSPECTIVE OF POST-COLONIALISM

FANG JIANING

Master of Arts in British and American Literature  
Dingfuzhuang Nanli 1, Chaoyang District,  
Beijing International Studies University, Beijing 100024.  
E-mail: [fjningg@163.com](mailto:fjningg@163.com)



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ABSTRACT

Under the influence of colonialism, conflicts between colonial countries and colonies lead to intensified conflicts between and within countries, causing turmoil and unrest, among other things, leaving people in dire straits. Under such circumstances, people are eager to escape the war and choose a relatively stable living environment, which also promotes a significant increase in the flow and communication of people between countries. Compared with the past, the identity of the subject is no longer fixed, unified, and complete, but tinged with the characteristics of fluidity, multiplicity and even contradiction, and people's longing for identity is more urgent than ever. Born in 1948 in Zanzibar, Tanzania in the Indian Ocean, Gurnah comes to the UK as a refugee in the late 1960s, and then studied and worked in the UK. The double life experience both in Zanzibar and the UK is conducive for him developing deep feelings and thinking about identity issues. In *Gravel Heart*, Gurnah describes the conflict between cultures that Salim, the protagonist in *Gravel Heart*, faces after he is displaced from his hometown and the identity confusion that resulted therefrom. He shows the existential crisis and identity dilemma faced by Africans who leave for Britain in the post-colonial era, and provides solutions to the identity crisis in his work, namely, making an emotional connection with his compatriots, returning homeland, and buying real estate, thus the importance and significance of pursuing and reconstructing identity in post-colonial era can be reflected.

**Keywords:** Identity; Post-colonialism; Homi K. Bhabha; Salim; *Gravel Heart*;

Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah is born in 1948 and grows up on the island of Zanzibar in the Indian Ocean but arrived in England as a refugee at the end of the 1960s. He has published ten novels and a number of short stories including but not limited to *By the Sea*, *The Last Gift*, and *Gravel Heart*. The themes of refugee disruption run throughout his works, mainly describing the living conditions of colonial people, focusing on identity, ethnic conflicts, and historical writing. The living conditions of the post-colonial era presented by him have important social realistic significance. The 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature is awarded to Gurnah "for his uncompromising

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and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents," according to the Swedish Academy.

Gurnah's *Gravel Heart*, published in 2017, is a novel featuring immigrants. In this novel, Gurnah develops his theme of a young person's confrontation with evil and uncomprehending surroundings. This exciting and austere first-person narrative depicts the fate of the young Salim up until the conclusion's terrifying revelation of a family secret kept from him but decisive for his entire trajectory as a rootless individual in exile. Far away from home, Salim fails to keep close communication with his parents on the one hand, and gradually loses his cultural identity. On the other hand, he finds that it is hard to adapt to the learning and living environment in Britain, and is even excluded by racial discrimination. Being dissociated from the two cultures, Salim tries to find his place.

### Literary Review

This paper aims to analyze the crisis and identity of Salim's cultural identity from the perspective of Homi K. Bhabha's post-colonial theory. Research on this book and its protagonist, Salim, has been relatively limited at home and abroad, mainly from the perspectives of interactive narrative techniques, an ethic of community and trans-modernity, and the discussion of unequal rights and the unfriendly relationship between characters in multicultural to reflect the identity of the characters, but rarely discussing this work and the protagonist from the post-colonial perspective. Therefore, it is necessary to explore Salim's identity crisis with post-colonial theory. So far, there has been no domestic research on Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* or the protagonist Salim. Only a small number of foreign scholars have studied Gurnah's work.

Matheka presents the essentiality of the interactive narrative technique in deciphering the contents of a novel. The interactive narrative technique helps in exploring the diverse pathways deployed by the author which leads to the realization of fragmentariness in narration. Under fragmentariness in narration, the author examines the different points of view by using a nonlinear plot, letters, and silence where details are required to enunciate trauma. It also examines the use of characterization in enhancing disintegration. Strands of narratology theory are deployed to analyze the fragmented narrative structure in the novel. Through an interactive narrative technique, a depiction of societal disintegration is presented. At the same time, the author presents different images of a fragmented society, ranging from fractured social set-up to malfunctioning political systems. These images are either abstract or even concrete in a sense. Social abjection theory by Imogen Tyler is used to show how disintegration leaves citizens in a state of wretchedness. Through the deployment of an interactive narration strategy in the depiction of disintegration, the author argues that it is through Gurnah's prowess that the various levels of fragmentations are narrated.

In Sreya's essay, a new approach to interpreting Gurnah's novels is outlined. The main intervention is to argue that Gurnah's works address the problem of modernity through a trans-modern approach; in particular, the author focuses on how his novels operate through a narrative mode that privileges philosophical and political ideas of community. The author believes that Gurnah's novels relay an ethic of community, where the community is the practice of perceiving the world relationally, signifying a resistive gesture to the closures initiated by a violently skewed (European) modernity. Turning to the idea of the Indian Ocean to elaborate the trans-modern principle of inter-cultural community, Gurnah's novels articulate a radically different idea of modernity. This focus has bearings on the novel form itself, which not only functions by taking the Indian Ocean as an operating metaphor but also organizes a dynamic trans-modern modality: a mode, that is, of knowing and perceiving the world through the knowledge emerging from Indian Ocean journeys and encounters.

The research reported in Laya's thesis started with the hypothesis that Gurnah's immigrant characters, and his novels themselves, negotiate their immigrant identities with and through narrative, and the additional hypothesis that hospitality would be a significant parameter in analyzing the novels' presentation of narrative agency in multicultural settings. The thesis focuses on and analyzes negotiations of identity and narrative agency through the concepts of hospitality and multiculturalism as practiced in the relationships between the characters, and characters and states, in physical and relational spaces within the multicultural contexts of the novels. Extending hospitality in these spaces provides for negotiations of narrative agency and identity, allowing

the characters to negotiate their subjectivity through sharing their stories either written or oral, or both within asymmetric power relations, and thus to resist powerful discourses that summarize them through stereotypical perceptions and more usually disregard their discourses and narratives. On the other hand, inhospitable relationships and spaces hinder these negotiations, marginalize these subjectivities, and buttress powerful discourses, which continue to ostracize and suppress other sources of knowledge and its production. In this sense, the multiculturalism practiced in those multicultural spaces is undermined as some cultural beliefs and practices and narratives become unvoiced and unheard, rendered subaltern.

### Theoretical Perspectives

Post-colonialism, originating in western literature in the middle of the 20th century, is a political and critical academic trend and becomes increasingly popular in the late 20th century. It zeroes in relational discourse between the metropolitan state and the former colony. As an excellent representative of post-colonialism, Homi Bhabha plays a remarkable role in the contemporary American literary world. His two works *Nation and Narration* and *The Location of Culture* have tremendous repercussions throughout the world. According to Bhabha, a nation is a kind of “narrative” construction; it comes from a mixed interactive function in various cultural elements in the state of competition. Since national hybridity is inevitable, cultural identity is no exception.

People who leave their colonized homeland and live in colonial countries will lose two contradictory cultures and neither of them is their home. The colonized will have dual consciousness in this way. The sense of falling into two cultures and belonging to neither of them is defined by Homi Bhabha as “unhomeliness”. Bhabha borrows the Freudian terminology, “the unheimlich”, which means the ‘unhomeliness,’ to indicate that what is covered in the construction of hybrid identity is an “estranging sense of the relocation of home and the world—the unhomeliness—that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations.” (Bhabha, 13) Being “unhomed” is different from being homeless. Even if you are within one, you will not feel at home.

This paper will discuss the following two aspects: how does Salim lose his national cultural identity? Facing the unfamiliar environment, how does he construct his own identity?

*“Gurnah adopts an interesting choice in how he makes his characters navigate this difficulty. Instead of making the novel just an account of Salim’s sense of fragmented identity as an immigrant, the method through which it operates makes Salim work out the details of his own life and identity through the details of other lives. As with his other novels, Gravel Heart ultimately illustrates the condition of a whole community: people learn of themselves through others who have impacted their lives; life, as it were, is in community, even if dispersed across space and time.”(Datta, 24)*

This work tells the life of Salim’s grandfather in the voice of Salim. During the turmoils of national independence and domestic revolution, his grandfather is involved in partisan disputes and persecuted. His grandmother is too fragile to face the cruel reality, loses the courage to live, and soon passes away. “The tragedy of their lives brought them closer in an urgent way, made her obsessively protective of him, and made his demands on her absolute and undeniable.”(Gurnah, 200) Saida, Salim’s mother, who loses her parents at an early age, therefore values her blood relatives very much. She takes care of her younger brother Amir and lives with him. Even after marriage, she does not separate from her younger brother. It is also the family misfortune that causes Saida to pay special attention to the family member and family affection, so when Amir is in danger, Saida chooses to sacrifice her marriage to preserve the safety of her brother, regardless of her husband Masud’s feelings and rejection. “He is the only brother I have, we must do whatever we can to get him out.” (Gurnah, 221) Being oppressed, Saida has no choice but only commits to power and break up with her husband, all of which cast a shadow over Salim’s heart. The estrangement between mother and son led to Salim’s identity crisis during his study and life in the UK. Conspicuously, Gurnah’s *Gravel Heart* is a story of one family’s misfortunes, but from a deep level, it reflects the profound influence of colonialism and revolution on generations of one family, and this profound influence has an inescapable responsibility for Salim’s identity crisis.

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### Salim's Family Woes: The Gradual Loss of Cultural Identity

Salim's mother Saida, gives herself up to Hakim, a government official, to save her brother Amir, then gives birth to Munira, Salim's half-sister. His father, Masud, can not stand such humiliation and betrayal, tortured by his incompetence and cowardice. He cannot help but voluntarily give up his family as well as a decent job and run away from home. Since then, he has lost interest in everything, just like a zombie. Salim is so upset about and dissatisfied with his father, who should abdicate his responsibility as a father.

*"For several days the idea frightened me in a physical, heart-racing way, as if I had lost my grip on my father's hand in a huge crowd of strange people some distance from home, or slipped over the edge of the sea-wall into the black-green water so that my father could not hear my screams."(Gurnah, 34)*

The family around him refuses to stand on his side, even uncle Amir looks down on Salim's father, calling him a "weak man" and questioning Saida why bothers bringing him food every day. Salim's memories of his father playing intimately with him receded in and out of his mind, not knowing whether these memories are dreams or reality, but his father's absence from most of his life is real and haunting, and no one around him is willing to explain what had happened. Salim's quest for and confusion about his father would only lead to his mother's tears or lie. Naturally, Salim believes "my dad doesn't want me anymore." (Gurnah, 34) Gradually, Salim begins to loathe his father, who is clearly in his thirties but looks like a beggar with vicissitudes of life. Just like two strangers meeting in the street. He despises his father from the bottom of his heart. "I thought my father was a spineless and defeated man who had allowed himself to be humiliated into silence and craziness, that he had lost his mind or had lost his nerve."(Gurnah, 45) On the other hand, in the absence of his father, his mother's pregnancy makes the truth self-evident, and it brings Salim closer to her unspeakable shame, lifting the veil of the family's secrecy. Salim learns that it is his mother, not his father, who has ruined the happy family, and his relationship with his mother becomes rigid and antagonistic. "There were times when I found her repulsive and could not bear to be near her. I did not hide my disdain from her. I shut myself away in my room whenever I was home and kept out of her way, doing schoolwork or reading."(Gurnah, 48) Especially after the birth of his sister Munira, Salim's rebelliousness becomes more brazen: he often plays pranks and refuses to comply with his mother's pleas.

*"When she sent me on an errand I took hours and sometimes deliberately bought the wrong thing or sometimes bought nothing, just put the money back in her hand without explanation and walked away as she shouted with rage. Once she sent me out to buy a tin of powdered milk for Munira's feed and I returned with a can of fly-spray."(Gurnah, 48)*

Many acts of rebellion are an expression of Salim's dissatisfaction with his mother. However, this dissatisfaction does not end when Salim goes abroad to study, which means that the relationship between mother and son remains in a state of antagonism and estrangement during separation, which further leads to the fact that Salim refuses to confide his true feelings to his mother when he is depressed or feels lonely at abroad.

*"I abandoned several letters because I had lost the thread of my thoughts or had been too frank or homesick and unhappy. I left the unsent letters in the notebook so it also became a place where I captured solitary and gloomy reflections, sometimes deliberately."(Gurnah, 68)*

When Salim encounters difficulties or feels homesick, he writes letters to his mother back home. However, the content is just superficial pleasantries. Those letters that truly express his inner vulnerability and resentment towards his mother cannot escape the fate of being unsent. The broken relationship between his parents leads to spiritual trauma for Salim. The family shrouded in secrets cannot bring Salim warmth and a sense of belonging. "I was the debris of their disordered lives."(Gurnah, 94) He is unable to form an intimate bond with his parents and identify with his cultural identity.

Salim grows up estranged from his father, and the only man he admires in the family is his uncle, who always maintains a harmonious relationship with Salim, playing with him, eating foods he doesn't like, and siding with him in times of blame, which is a source of joy for him. When he grows up, his uncle goes to Britain for

further study due to his work, which allows him to travel around the world. Every time Amir came home, he never forgets to buy clothes and souvenirs for Salim. "He became a figure of legend and glamour to me." (Gurnah, 50) In his heart, Salim hopes that his uncle is his father. Salim also loves the photos they took during their travels around the world, and the landscapes in the images seem real in their presence. All these are what he can hardly access in backward Zanzibar, and quietly plant the seeds of longing for life abroad in his heart.

As a family member and the guide who brings Salim to England to study, uncle Amir is the savior who helps Salim get rid of trauma that existed in his family, and at the same time, he incurs more trouble for Salim. Salim's dependent life in Amir's house is not pleasant. From what clothes to wear to what major to study, he always obeys his uncle Amir and everything is under their control. It seems that they are the ones who have the final say, which is also a constant reminder for Salim that "I was Auntie Asha's and Uncle Amir's poor relation." (Gurnah, 63) In Salim's view, he has no reason to refuse the kindness of his uncle, nor entitled to make decisions based on his preferences.

On the one hand, when his uncle chooses Business Studies for Salim, Salim has no special feelings about the so-called respectable and flexible major that "makes plenty of money". Instead, he prefers to learn literature. However, it is uncle Amir sponsors his study and life in the UK. How could he refuse his uncle's proposal? If he disobeys his uncle's will, that will be so ungrateful. Therefore, Salim silently puts his favorite major at the bottom of his heart. A wrong beginning foreshadows a painful learning course and an unhappy ending. "I could not disguise from myself that I had no interest in what I was studying." (Gurnah, 69) Gradually, he skips classes and immerses himself in reading novels that interest him in the library. From being able to scrape through the exam at the beginning to screwing up everything, he has to confess to his uncle that he feels like giving up the business major and learning literature, and this willful behavior directly angers his uncle, "I don't know why you want to study literature. I don't know where this idea came from. It's a pointless subject, of no practical use to anybody." (Gurnah, 77) His uncle cannot accept Salim's wayward behavior and no longer supports his study and life. Salim is unwilling to make concessions in his major. He has no choice but to leave his uncle's home and starts an independent life in a strange country. "I was on my way to Guinea Lane, and more likely on the way to heartache and struggle...I could not prevent my eyes from smarting with regret and self-pity that I should find myself alone where I was, and where I did not want to be." (Gurnah, 81) Salim makes a clean break with his uncle's family. Despite the kinship, Salim is unable to identify with his uncle and continues to form intimate bonds with them.

His aunt Asha, on the other hand, treats Salim differently from her children. Being enthusiastic and caring at the very beginning, she gradually loses patience with Salim and asks him to do housework and take care of her child. "When she called for me by shouting my name as she sometimes did, I had to drop whatever I was doing and run to her, to avoid her accusing me of disrespect." (Gurnah, 65) Once, in the process of chatting with aunt Asha, Salim learns that uncle Amir is the initiator of his family tragedy and causing his parents to separate. "Did she have a choice?" (Gurnah, 75) Salim's question lifts the fig leaf from his aunt's conscience. Then came the wrath and curses of aunt Asha after the revelation, and the delicate relationship with her becomes worse. In Salim's mind, his uncle's image also falls, he is no longer the hero he thought. "The last traces of the awe I once felt for Uncle Amir were gone, and I had learned to beware his compulsion to dictate and control, and to escape the suffocating family life he required me to be part of." (71) Uncle Amir is intimately involved in Salim's family tragedy. The reason why uncle Amir sponsors Salim to study in Britain is to repay what Saida has done and her sacrifices for the sake of Amir. Thus, Salim holds a grudge against his uncle, and the gap between them is doomed to be unbridged. When Salim moves out of his uncle's house, he not only forfeits his uncle's financial support but also loses contact with his one and only family member, becoming a wanderer living in a foreign country.

*"It was when I first came here and became a vagrant, when I lost so much... But it turned out to be untrue. It was a lie I was forcing on myself because I had no choice." (Gurnah, 82)*

In short, in a foreign country, Salim barely feels the warmth of his uncle's family,

On the contrary, the existence of blood ties makes his homeless seem more desolate and helpless. The young generations of Zanzibar come to Britain cherishing hope in their heart, but this modern country is not as full of success as they thought. Instead, a difficult situation they are encountered in the first place is to think over how to survive. To repay Saida has done, Uncle Amir promises to take Salim to study abroad, which gives Salim a chance to escape. According to Matika, escape implies two meanings. Superficially, Salim escapes from an uncomfortable situation in his life. In a deeper sense, Salim is in search of his own identity. Little does Salim know that he has escaped from his broken family, only to encounter another trouble.

### Salim's Life at Abroad: Denied by the Foreign Culture

When he first arrives in England, Salim is alarmed by the ignorance that emerges from all the embarrassment of his journey. As he settled down, Salim looks around at his luxurious, unfamiliar home and asks himself, "What am I doing here?" (Gurnah, 61) Salim has never been abroad before, and his first air trip fills him with anxiety about what he may do something stupid.

*"I was so overwhelmed by the strangeness of everything – the inside of the aircraft cabin, the land spread out below, the very idea of being above the clouds. I was so anxious not to do anything stupid. I felt that I was on the brink of something momentous and had no idea that I was just another innocent about to be put through the mill."* (Gurnah, 57)

Life in London is different from the life Salim lived in Zanzibar before. He is unfamiliar with western tableware and never takes advanced means of transportation. Therefore, Salim is ridiculed mercilessly by his uncle's family because of his embarrassing performance on the plane and his bewilderment about how to use knives and forks.

*"He... gave my mother a full account of my arrival... and laughing at my provincial awkwardness at the airport... Uncle Amir laughed out loud at my clumsiness while Auntie Asha suppressed her smiles. Even the children joined in with their giggles, I smiled too because even I knew about the unavoidable comedy of the knife-and-fork moment that initiated someone like me into the life of Europe."* (Gurnah, 61)

Salim's first day at college is full of fear and trembling. The labyrinth of roads, the cars whizzing by, and the sea of people on the road, all of which are inexperienced for Salim before and gradually disorient him.

*"London terrified me so much... It humbled me that I recoiled with so much anxiety. I felt as if the city despised me as if I were a tiresome and timorous child who had wandered unwelcome out of the dust and rubble of his puny island shanty into this place where boldness and greed and swagger were required for survival."* (Gurnah, 63)

Salim feels uncomfortable walking in heavy traffic, which indicates that the advanced western culture beats the backward African culture by a landslide, which makes him feel inferior. To some extent, this inferiority is also the expression of Salim's lack of identification with his own culture. The vast differences between the two environments, whether it's the modes of transportation, the diversity of the population, or the pace of life, are out of Salim's ken. Living in such a hostile, friendless city without family, such an alien and repressed life undoubtedly causes Salim anxious. Salim learns that he has to get used to the pace of this modern city, which is a brand new challenge for him. To survive, Salim has to be very vigilant in dealing with his surroundings.

*"I learned to live in London, to avoid being intimidated by crowds and by rudeness, to avoid curiosity, not to feel desolate at hostile stares, and to walk purposefully wherever I went... I learned to live with the chaotic languages of London, which did not speak to each other, and to cope with English that was broken and wrong, missing articles or in the wrong tense... I feared the silent empty streets at night, and always hurried home when I left work, crossing the street as soon as I glimpsed a group of people on the pavement ahead."* (Gurnah, 68)

The contrast between the two environments reminds Salim of his hometown and his mother thousands of miles away. Longing for the quiet, slow pace of his old life, Salim is tortured by homesickness. He is longing for the familiar environment of his town but is unable to go back, while he is unable to embrace the new world.

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*"At first I thought my real life would begin after I reached London, that I would do things differently from then on. I thought everything would change for me here in the land of luxury and freedom and opportunity, that nothing could possibly thwart me. (Gurnah, 82)*

Salim yearns the study life in this new world. He expects to live a university life as it should be, participating in academic societies, walking around the campus, and attending academic seminars. But in reality, Salim's life at the university is quite different from his imagination. He finds himself on the edges of this university life and hardly says a word in class. "When I spoke it sounded wrong: not the grammar and the arrangement of words but something deeper, as if I was making things up and my stumbling efforts were evident to everyone...I felt uncomfortable among them."(Gurnah, 105) Salim, coming from Africa, finds it hard to handle his studies as other students do. Neither does he fit in with the student community. His classmates are keen to discuss their concerns: liberation politics in South America, the persecution of Roma people in central Europe, gay rights in the Caribbean, the war in Chechnya, animal rights, the ozone layer, reparations for colonial plunder, etc. On the contrary, Salim seldom thinks deeply about things. Not only does Salim slacken off his major as he is not interested in it, but he also lies to his uncle about the fact that he skips classes in order to enjoy novels he is interested in or sneaks around and plays with his friends.

In short, Salim, who comes to Britain to study with full hopes, realizes his helplessness in adapting to a foreign learning environment. By large, it represents the dominant position of the advanced colonial culture compared to the backward colonial culture. Salim, who has lost his cultural identity, also lacks the confidence and perseverance to accept a foreign culture.

Losing close contact with his sole relative uncle Amir in a foreign country, Salim finds his true love in Britain, but the hard-won love is strongly opposed, and the racial discrimination Salim suffers intensifies his identity crisis.

Salim meets the love of his life, Billie in England. He enjoys every moment with her, they shop together and live together. Before meeting her, Salim is always accompanied by loneliness. After living with his girlfriend, he changes his habits slowly to keep up with hers. With Billie, Salim's life is full and blessed. Salim abandons voluntarily the rules that he used to stick to for his girlfriend. There is no doubt that Billie's presence injects vitality into Salim's boring life, expelling the solitary feeling and sense of void over the years. His girlfriend becomes an integral part of Salim's life, to the extent that for a moment, Salim even forgets about his loneliness and the oppression of the environment. However, Billie's mother, who is a racist, breaks up Salim's wonderful life. "A nigger is a nigger however nice he is."(Gurnah, 144) With this prejudice, Billie's mother forces her daughter to break up with Salim by committing suicide. In her worldview, suicide is "an act of sacrifice, a sacred act to maintain the family's honor."(Gurnah, 144) It is worth losing her life to defend the honor of the whole family. Being forced to break up with his girlfriend, Salim suffers the double blow of both losing the woman he loves the most and the deep sorrow of racial discrimination in this foreign country. Racism is so ingrained in those white people that they become bigoted and stubborn and discriminate against those people of color. Thus, Salim's identity remains elusive in the face of Caucasians.

The protagonist comes to realize that the great differences in race and class cannot be remedied by association. Born into a poor family of colored people, he struggles for his livelihood. What's worse, he is frustrated at being discriminated against and denied concerning his identity in a foreign country. In the western world, people of color have always been constructed as "the other", inferior to white people. They are subjected to all kinds of discrimination and oppression from them. People like Salim are excluded, isolated, and marginalized, and fall into a difficult situation of identity loss and self-denial. Far from recognized, Salim doubts himself and lacks confidence in gaining happiness. He even feels guilty and insecure when he is surrounded by eudemonia and fears that his partner will abandon him at any time. " All these voices of characters simultaneously affect the person Salim becomes later in life, making him feel lost and useless to the world"(Matheka, 32) Even after years of living in the UK, Salim can not suppress his subconscious feeling that he is just a stranger. As an immigrant, Salim spends all his life searching for his identity.

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### Solutions to the Identity Crisis in Salim

Everything has to be started from scratch since Salim is no longer under his uncle's wing and leads an independent life. Without his uncle's financial support, Salim has seen the hardships of being at the bottom of the social ladder by supporting himself with a meager income from part-time jobs. Salim misses his hometown and his mother more than ever because of the hardships of life. "Even as time passes I find I cannot forget and that I miss everything so much. I miss the sight of familiar faces and old buildings and streets." (Gurnah, 91) The longing for his hometown and his mother brings Salim comfort but also pain. "I don't know why I cannot shake off this feeling of painful longing. Why can't one place be as good as another?" (Gurnah, 92) Thousands of miles apart, Salim can't help but miss his mother, but also feels resentful for not being able to return to her. "I know there is a thought I have been keeping at bay, which is that you are a betrayer, that you sent me here to be with Uncle Amir to get me out of your way, that you could think of no further use for me." (Gurnah, 92) His distorted thoughts deepen the estrangement between him and his mother. In the letter, his mother writes to him expressing her sadness to hear the unkind things Salim saying about her. "I don't know what I have done to you to deserve that." (Gurnah, 84) Salim does not defend his mother's misunderstanding of him, and the misunderstanding and estrangement between them force Salim to seek a sense of identity in a foreign country.

"We were of various races, religions, sets and cliques; and we had somehow found ourselves on the same small island. Nothing bound us together except this common residence." (Naipaul, 98) Family and hometown are the sources of a person's sense of belonging. Returning to the motherland is indeed a way of gaining an identity, but when it is impractical to return and someone has to stay in the unfamiliar world, the emotional connection with fellows is another way to solve an identity crisis. In college, Salim makes new friends who share a similarity of coming from African countries with him. "I made unexpected friends: Reshat whose parents were from Cyprus, who made me laugh with his endlessly dirty talk, and Mahmood from Sierra Leone, whom we called Mood for short, who never seemed to run out of smiles and goodwill." (Gurnah, 68) Hanging out on weekends and playing football together, they, of African origins, enrich Salim's life greatly. Thanks to their appearance, Salim's life is no longer dull. After moving out of his uncle's House, Salim moves into The OAU House (the Organisation of African Unity), where Mr. Mgeni, an African who also speaks Swahili, gets on well with Salim and takes good care of him. "I liked him at once and grew to like him a great deal more as I came to know him." (Gurnah, 80) As a landlord, his efforts are not limited to the responsibilities of a landlord. He is more like a father. Sometimes, seeing dirty dishes in the sink, he washes them; Sometimes he brings cakes to Salim. Mr. Mgeni's care makes him feel the warmth of family. "I do not know why I have been offered these kindnesses, by Mr. Mgeni in particular...Mr. Mgeni invites me to eat with his family and he helps me with work and things like that." (Gurnah, 92) Mr. Mgeni does his best to get Salim jobs, and through his connections, he asks lawyers to help Salim sort out residency papers. In addition, with his help, Salim applies for a loan to solve his tuition problems, so that he can go back to the campus and choose his favorite major. When Salim passes his entrance exam successfully, "Mannie heard the news he hugged me without a word and kissed me lightly on both cheeks. Peter grinned and grinned and then dragged me off to a Turkish café for a celebration meal." (Gurnah, 101) For Salim, the heartfelt blessings of his friends give him a hard-won sense of identity and great comfort. After returning to school, Salim often comes back to visit Mr. Mgeni, "Seeing Mr. Mgeni and everyone there at the house was like going home" (Gurnah, 102) Salim receives real warmth in England. To a certain extent, he finds his identity there.

Homi Bhabha defines homelessness as the alienation of moving one's family to another place, growing up away from one's native land and across cultures. In another sense, someone in a state of homelessness is like being at home but not feeling at home. Therefore, "homelessness" refers more to the colonial people having a home but not a sense of belonging. "In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting." (Bhabha, 13) After breaking up with Billie, who is such a special person to Salim, the pain also takes Salim off track from his normal life. "Sometimes I lose track of days, and on Wednesdays, I think it is Thursday" (Gurnah, 147) The feeling of loneliness returns to him, and the emptiness takes hold of Salim. In a letter to his mother, Salim once again misses the small but intimate old house where he never feels



oppressed. Living in London always enables Salim to feel exhausted and the air is thick and suffocating to him. "I feel even more of a stranger here now. I hate it but still I stay. I feel like a traitor but I am not sure who it is that I am betraying." (Gurnah, 147) Living in this city is just like being a stranger. Salim can not find a sense of belonging. The frustration and confusion caused by the failure of self-belonging make Salim lose his spiritual home and his mind has nothing to rely on thus is in a state of "exile". And his "identity of self cannot be confirmed in a continuous social culture, and self is lost in the process of cultural dislocation." (Ren, 141) In this context, Salim comes up with the idea of buying his own apartment, "I don't know what it is about buying the flat, but it makes me feel safe." (Gurnah, 147) After all, the house will not be separated from him by external forces. It seems that a house of his own helps Salim find a foothold in this city and acquire a sense of security and belonging.

"Even as he grows to maturity, he has no strong relationship with anyone as his parents have died and Mr. Mgeni, his last remaining relative also dies." (Matheka, 38) Everyone close to Salim eventually leaves him, his blood parents and uncle, the unrelated but likable Mr. Mgeni, and his one-time favorite girlfriend, Billie. Salim never assimilates into British culture. Specifically, he can't find identity in any culture and is stuck in the dilemma of in-betweenness. He refuses his stepfather's offer of a position when he can return home, while no special person is waiting for him in England. He is still alone in both two countries. It seems to me that Salim's refusal to stay in his homeland and his choice to return to England is partly due to his inability to form close relationships with his family as he is a teenager and gradually losing his national cultural identity. On the other hand, coming back to Britain is not because he identifies with British culture, but for years of living experiences there, "Just a lot of bits and pieces to sort out, bits of life." (Gurnah, 249) It is inexpedient for Salim to give up his job and house and start from scratch in his hometown. At the end of the novel, Salim returns to England as a marginal man, perhaps with a lifetime to construct his own identity. As an adult, Salim resolutely chooses to return to Britain just to show that he is standing in the cultural gap, wandering between two cultures, unable to feel identity on either side.

## Conclusion

Based on Homi Bhabha's theory of homelessness, this paper explores solutions to the identity crisis in Salim. *Gravel Heart* takes the broken family and the miserable fate of the normal people as a unique perspective, cleverly reflecting the influence of post-colonialism on colonial countries and its far-reaching impacts on three generations and specifically analyzes the protagonist Salim's rejection by foreign cultures after he gradually loses his national cultural identity. Having difficulties in his major in Business Studies and integrating into society, he encounters racial discrimination. Salim feels the unprecedented cultural identity crisis. In this case, Salim tries to solve his identity crisis by making an emotional connection with his compatriots, returning homeland, and buying real estate to get rid of the state of "homelessness". Finally, he finds that neither can he return to his native culture, nor integrate into the foreign culture, failing to find his cultural identity. *Gravel Heart* deeply expresses the author's concern and sympathy for the identity of the descendants of the colonial people and provides ways for those who encounter the identity crisis.

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