

BLOCKED PLUMBING: WATER, MEMORY, AND REPAIR IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S *Admiring Silence*

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 05-06-2026 Revised: 22-07-2026 Accepted: 20-09-2026 Published: 30-09-2026 Volume: 10 Issue: 3 DOI: 10.33019/lire.v10i3.637	This article examines plumbing and water in Abdulrazak Gurnah's <i>Admiring Silence</i> through the blue humanities. Although criticism has largely approached the novel through migration, silence, and diaspora, its insistent imagery of blocked toilets, broken pipes, sewers, irregular supply, and the later "water of memory" and "water of oblivion" has rarely been treated as a recurrent and uneven watery pattern. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study attends to the novel's water as storied matter that is at once literal and figurative, and follows how that water fails to sustain the forms of life it should carry. The argument shows that plumbing first narrates the breakdown of domestic and civic circulation, then carries the loss of the past inward, and finally returns as the narrator's wish to study plumbing and restore water's interrupted flow. Plumbing therefore becomes the storied point at which damaged habitation, threatened memory, and the desire for return are brought together, offering a water-centred account of Gurnah's fiction.
KEYWORDS	
<i>Abdulrazak Gurnah, Admiring Silence, blue humanities, plumbing, memory</i>	

1. INTRODUCTION

Abdulrazak Gurnah (1948–) was born on the island of Zanzibar, in present-day Tanzania, and left his homeland in the late 1960s to settle in the United Kingdom as a refugee. His fiction draws persistently on the colonial histories of East Africa and the Indian Ocean world, the condition of exile and displacement, and the fractured lives of migrants negotiating belonging across cultures. The Nobel Prize in Literature 2021 recognized his work for "his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents" (Nobel Prize Outreach AB, 2026). In a later UNHCR interview, Gurnah reflects on displacement, dislocation, and the need for more humane attitudes toward refugees, concerns that run directly through *Admiring Silence* in its treatment of migration, home, and historical injury (Thompson, 2022).

The novel follows an unnamed narrator who left Zanzibar as a young man and spent more than two decades in Britain with his partner Emma and their daughter Amelia, sustaining his dignity in a foreign culture through strategic silence and selectively invented stories of Africa. The narrative turns on his return to Zanzibar after an amnesty is granted to those in exile, a journey that brings his idealized remembered homeland into contact with the impoverished, politically unstable island he actually finds. The novel has attracted sustained scholarly attention for its exploration of displacement, the narrative function of silence, and the psychological cost of inhabiting two cultures at once. The material texture of the postcolonial world has remained at the margins of this conversation. This article takes up that dimension: the water and infrastructure that make the world livable, or fail to.



Plumbing is a persistent and unusually concrete detail in *Admiring Silence*. The novel returns to “blocked toilets,” “sewers,” and “pipes,” and the narrator’s later decision to study “courses on plumbing” confirms that these details carry deliberate weight. They belong to the damaged routines of everyday life, and their recurrence signals a more systematic pattern. Their full significance emerges when the novel reintroduces water in an altogether different register, as a figure of “memory” and “oblivion,” a shift that suggests the material and mnemonic dimensions of the text are governed by a continuous logic. This raises the central question of the article: how do the novel’s blocked water systems connect the breakdown of postcolonial habitation with the unstable work of memory and the desire for repair? This article approaches that question through the blue humanities, drawing the novel’s plumbing and its later “water of memory and oblivion” into a connected logic of circulation and repair.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The critical reception of *Admiring Silence* has developed through several distinct phases. In the years immediately following publication, scholars concentrated on the novel’s narrative form and the literary function of silence. Steiner (2006) demonstrated how storytelling serves as a discursive strategy for negotiating migrant belonging, showing that the narrator’s mimicry of the Western voice produces a site of ambivalence that leaves identity suspended. Barasa and Makokha (2011) examined the novel’s formal design—narration, narrative situation, and focalization—as the structural expression of the narrator’s search for identity in displacement. Kaigai (2013) treated silence itself as a generative code of meaning, foregrounding narratorial unreliability and multiple focalizations as key strategies for representing migrant experience. Arslan (2014) extended this analysis by connecting the novel’s silences to individual trauma, colonial history, and the pressures of life in England, arguing that silence operates simultaneously as suppression and as a form of resistance. Taken together, these studies clarify the formal and discursive means through which the novel renders the migrant condition. Their emphasis on silence, narration, and migrant identity leaves room for a closer consideration of the material and environmental world in which those narrative acts take place.

A second strand of scholarship shifted attention from narrative form to the cultural and experiential dimensions of displacement: what it means for a migrant subject to construct, lose, and renegotiate a sense of home. Hand (2012) traced the alienation and loneliness running through three Gurnah novels, including *Admiring Silence*, emphasising the fragmented identities and the ambiguous meaning of “home” that characterize Gurnah’s displaced protagonists. Following Gurnah’s Nobel Prize in 2021, critical interest intensified and broadened. Götsche (2023) situated *Paradise* and *Afterlives* within German colonial history in East Africa and its aftermath, demonstrating how Gurnah’s fiction binds the violence of colonial administration to the workings of memory across generations. When the novel’s blocked plumbing has been directly discussed, it has usually been interpreted within frameworks of postcolonial stagnation and frustrated homecoming (Ruberto, 2009, p. 212; Arslan, 2014, pp. 46–47). In these accounts, sanitary failure serves as a concrete sign of infrastructural breakdown and civic disorder, while water’s repeated movement between blockage, flow, memory, and oblivion receives less sustained attention.



More recent scholarship has begun to open ecocritical questions in Gurnah's fictions, though rarely with sustained attention to *Admiring Silence* itself. Samuelson's studies of Gurnah's coastal fiction develop the concept of an "amphibian aesthetic" shaped by the layered and ambivalent histories of the Swahili littoral, arguing that the coast in his work is an active spatial force (Samuelson, 2012, p. 499). Allahyari (2026) draws on Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence to approach *Paradise* and *Afterlives* as exercises in decolonial political ecology, where bodies and environments accumulate colonial harm across time and place. Rizzuto (2026) moves closest to the present article's concerns: approaching *Admiring Silence* through stalled and impeded mobility and media infrastructure, she locates ecological violence in atmosphere and the built environment, offering an account that critiques the accelerative logic of the Anthropocene. Across these three strands, plumbing and water remain static signs—of postcolonial stagnation, of frustrated homecoming, or of a coastal imagination oriented toward the sea—and their movement across the novel goes largely untraced: the same channelled, domestic water travels from blocked sanitation to the figurative "water of memory and oblivion," binding the breakdown of habitation to the instability of the past. This article traces that movement as a recurrent but uneven watery logic, and on that basis, it recasts the novel's concerns with home, memory, and return as questions of circulation and repair.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study begins from a complete survey of *Admiring Silence* in which every occurrence of water, toilet, pipe, drain, sewer, well, latrine, plumbing, memory, oblivion, and repair was marked. These occurrences distribute across the novel in three broad patterns that shape the analysis. In Part One (pp. 1–100), water appears mainly in the domestic prehistory of the narrator's Zanzibar childhood and in scattered references to life in England, establishing baseline conditions of provision and scarcity. In Part Two (pp. 103–174), the return to Zanzibar brings blocked infrastructure into repeated and visceral contact with the narrator's body and the condition of home, producing the most concentrated cluster of sanitary imagery in the novel. In Part Three (pp. 177–217), the same motif migrates from civic description into the narrator's self-conscious plumbing fantasy and, ultimately, into the Orphic conceit of the waters of memory and oblivion. The discussion follows this distributional arc and is organized into three interpretive stages: the failure of domestic and civic circulation, the inward turn from sanitary water to mnemonic water, and the narrator's late desire to study plumbing as an unfinished form of repair.

Because a single water reference may operate on more than one level, the analysis distinguishes four registers and attends to specific textual signals for each. In the literal-infrastructural register, water and sanitation appear in descriptive prose recording physical conditions—broken drains releasing sewage into streets, a toilet that no longer runs—and the narrator's language is visceral or matter-of-fact, without tonal departure. In the ironic register, the narrator's characteristic evasive wit signals the shift: when the invention of the flush toilet is attributed to an Englishman in the same breath as the slave trade and colonialism, the absurdist accumulation and the comic parenthetical announce that water is an instrument of satirical critique. In the figurative-mnemonic register, the text makes the shift explicit: "Water is a gift to the dead... This is an Orphic conceit" signals entry into mythological terrain, and the narrator's own bridging sentence— "This is another place where plumbing comes into things"—then



reconnects the figurative to the material, and itself authorizes the claim that the two registers are linked. In the structural register, the same verbal formula—“toilets blocked,” “toilets were going to remain blocked”—recurs across different narrative contexts in Parts Two and Three; that recurrence signals that the motif has accumulated symbolic weight beyond any single scene. An interpretive claim is advanced only where one of these signals is present; where a water reference appears without them, it is treated as local and literal, outside the scope of the wider motif. The method therefore preserves the motif’s unevenness: it follows recurrent water references where repetition, tone, or explicit narrative linkage supports connection, and it leaves isolated details in their local scene.

To interpret the movement from sanitary water to mnemonic water, this study draws on the blue humanities. As a field within the broader project of material ecocriticism, which holds that matter and meaning together constitute the fabric of the world’s stories (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014, p. 5), the blue humanities develop that premise in an explicitly aquatic direction. Oppermann (2023) describes it as a material-ecocritical field that treats water as “fluid-storied matter,” asking critics to think with water as an active, signifying presence. The blue humanities first developed around oceans and seas, and its attention has since extended to distressed and contained freshwaters in the built environment—a scope that licenses treating the novel’s domestic, channelled water as storied matter whose disrupted flow narrates the condition of home, memory, and return. Blue humanities scholarship remains an active site of debate about how far this aquatic attention should travel: Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis (2013) press for critical attention to water in its most constrained and degraded forms, and Neimanis (2017) regrounds the field in a posthuman feminist phenomenology of watery embodiment and interbodily circulation. This study therefore draws on Oppermann’s framework selectively, taking up the vocabulary of fluid-storied matter and the field’s capacity to follow water through domestic as well as oceanic systems. Three adjacent resources are enlisted at specific points of the discussion—infrastructure studies (Larkin, 2013; Anand, 2017) to frame plumbing as a civic system, Nixon’s (2011) slow violence to register the temporal depth of colonial damage, and postcolonial ecology (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011) to set the failing sewer within a wider environmental inheritance—and these inform specific analytical moments while remaining subordinate to the primary framework.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion develops the article’s argument in three stages. It begins with the novel’s blocked toilets, pipes, drains, sewers, and unstable water supply, treating them as signs of damaged domestic and civic circulation. It then turns to the later passage on the “water of memory” and the “water of oblivion,” where water moves from sanitary infrastructure into the register of remembrance, loss, and identity. Finally, it considers the narrator’s decision to study plumbing as an unfinished gesture of repair. Across these stages, water appears as a material and mnemonic force: it sustains life when it flows, exposes postcolonial damage when it is blocked, and carries the narrator’s desire to reconnect home, memory, and return. The sequence remains uneven: water links home, memory, and return in some passages, and in others exposes their separation.

4.1 Plumbing and the Breakdown of Home



The water that runs, or fails to run, through the novel's pipes, toilets, drains, and sewers is storied matter: channelled, domestic water whose movement carries meaning about the life it is meant to sustain (Oppermann, 2023). Oppermann's account of chemicals "flushed down toilets" passing into rivers shows that the blue humanities can follow water through domestic, urban, and ecological systems (2023, p. 43). In *Admiring Silence*, attention to toilets, pipes, and sewers brings that concern to the household and civic systems where sanitary water is first managed. These fixtures form an order of circulation, the built network that infrastructure studies describe as an architecture for the flow of everyday life (Larkin, 2013). They govern the supply of water, the removal of waste, and the routines that keep domestic space habitable. When that system fails, the damage appears in the most ordinary practices of everyday life. Plumbing thus enters the novel first as material, channelled water whose breakdown shapes the basic conditions of home.

Gurnah gives this sanitary system an explicitly ironic civilising history. The narrator observes that "the first water-closet with a trap was proposed by an Englishman in the sixteenth century," before adding that "any idea of any value first occurred to an Englishman [...] the slave trade [...] colonialism [...] and, not least, the flush toilet" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 213). The joke places plumbing within a wider imperial comedy of invention, progress, and moral superiority. Harington's book is then described as a "philosophical disquisition" on "the production and disposal" of "water-borne waste". Water is therefore introduced as something modern civilisation claims to organize, cleanse, and control. The novel thus first makes water visible through a failed promise of civilised management before returning to it as a figure for memory and oblivion. The later scenes of blocked toilets, broken pipes, failed sewers, and irregular water supply expose the fragility of that claim.

The return home brings this infrastructural failure into view with immediate force. In one of the most revealing scenes, the narrator confronts a town in which "food was short," "toilets were blocked," water was available only "for two hours in the middle of the night," and electricity was "as likely to be off as on" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 151). These details gather around a single condition of failed circulation. Water no longer arrives with regularity, waste no longer leaves the household, and the most basic requirements of domestic life can no longer be secured. The temporal detail matters here. Water becomes scarce in a specifically temporal form: it is available only at an hour that forces everyday life to adjust itself to infrastructural interruption. The rhythms of washing, cleaning, and bodily maintenance can no longer follow habit or need, but must bend to the narrow window left by a failing system. The scene in the bathroom sharpens this failure further. The narrator finds that "the toilet was blocked" and that "there was no running water anymore," so even washing becomes a matter of managing "the bucket" before retreating from "that blocked, stinking toilet" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 120). At this point blockage is registered as a bodily and domestic problem, felt through smell, touch, inconvenience, and disgust. The scene also presses beyond the level of one broken fixture. As Akbar explains, "The waste pipe itself is blocked, so are the sewers" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 120). The failure therefore extends from the toilet to the pipe, and from the pipe to the urban network beyond it. The scene reveals a home-space whose basic systems of supply and disposal no longer function reliably. Return leads the narrator toward a damaged environment in which habitation itself has become precarious. Thinking with this water, the reader watches it cease to sustain the body and the



household, a small instance of the distressed, channelled water the blue humanities ask us to attend to (Oppermann, 2023).

The force of the bathroom scene increases when blockage is placed alongside the novel's wider account of civic exhaustion and political emptiness. The narrator comes to understand that "the food-stores were going to remain empty," that "schools would be without books," that public language would continue to fill the air with "cruel, duplicitous promises," and that "of course the toilets were going to remain blocked for a long time" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 202). These details belong to the same damaged order of failed provision. Empty food-stores mark the interruption of material supply, schools without books register the thinning out of institutional and educational support, and blocked toilets expose the collapse of the basic systems of domestic maintenance. Even political language participates in this broken order. Promises continue to circulate, but they do so in place of effective provision, producing a world in which words move while goods, services, and waste do not. Blockage therefore carries a larger structural meaning here. It condenses a condition in which circulation has failed across multiple levels of collective life, from nourishment and education to sanitation and governance. The toilet remains a concrete object, but it also comes to stand within a broader system of civic inertia. Home is damaged in this scene because the infrastructures that sustain everyday confidence have ceased to support ordinary life with any reliability. This inertia is a specifically postcolonial one. The pairing of "cruel, duplicitous promises" with toilets that "remain blocked for a long time" sets the rhetoric of the independent state against its material record, so that blockage appears as the visible residue of nationalist pledges that were never honoured and of a public sphere starved of investment.

Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence names the temporal structure of this damage. The harm done by blocked drains and failed sewers is gradual and cumulative: it compounds in the bodies and domestic routines of those with least access to repair, across years and generations, without declaring itself as a crisis. In *Admiring Silence*, the blocked toilet records a failure that was ongoing long before the narrator returned, and that the postcolonial state has allowed to deepen rather than address.

Beyond the temporal dimension, infrastructure studies notes that systems of circulation become most apparent at the moment they break down, when their failure exposes the political relations they were meant to carry (Larkin, 2013). The blocked sewer is in this sense a document of uneven development and state neglect. It records how the apparatus of provision that colonial modernity advertised, and the postcolonial state inherited, was left to decay, with citizens absorbing the cost in the most intimate routines of body and household.

The concept of hydraulic citizenship specifies, in turn, what that absorption entails politically: access to functioning water infrastructure constitutes a form of civic recognition, a signal that the state registers its subjects' claims and presence (Anand, 2017). The blocked drain withdraws that recognition—marking a zone in which the postcolonial state's obligations, and the promises with which independence arrived, have stopped flowing. Seen this way, sanitary failure is the concrete form that political failure takes.

This pattern extends beyond *Admiring Silence*. DeLoughrey and Handley (2011) argue that postcolonial literatures recurrently show how colonial and postcolonial governance transforms environments: the extraction regimes, administrative negligence, and broken



promises of successive governments accumulate in soil, water, and infrastructure as much as in social memory. The novel's blocked pipes and failed sewers belong to this environmental inheritance. Their persistence long after independence records how the postcolonial state absorbed the colonial apparatus of provision without sustaining it, converting the material promises of modernity into a set of chronic, embodied failures.

This breakdown reaches further back than the moment of return. Earlier descriptions of domestic life place habitation within conditions of long-standing material scarcity: "There was no electricity," "their water came from the well," and "there was a pit-latrine at the other end of the backyard," while the house itself "reeked of paltriness and poverty" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 49). These details widen the meaning of blocked plumbing by placing the later bathroom scene within a longer history of domestic scarcity. It sharpens and localizes a condition that has already shaped domestic life at a more basic level. Water reaches the household in its most laborious form, drawn by hand from a well. Sanitation remains rudimentary, displaced to the far end of the yard and organized around a pit-latrine. Electricity is absent altogether, which places the household outside the circuits of regular convenience, illumination, and modern domestic routine. The scene therefore establishes a home structured by effort, exposure, and insufficiency before the narrator ever confronts the blocked toilet on his return. Treated as storied water, even this scarce, hand-drawn water already tells the story of a home that water must be carried to, never simply flowing to support it.

4.2 Water, Memory, and Oblivion

Water enters a more inward register and becomes bound to memory, loss, and the unstable persistence of the past at the end of the novel:

Water is a gift to the dead. The soul of the dead is parched with thirst for life and craves to drink the water of memory, but can only drink the water of oblivion. This is an Orphic conceit. Yet what matters is not being dead. This is another place where plumbing comes into things. (Gurnah, 1996, p. 216)

With this quotation, the narrator frames a problem of memory: people long for the past, while their access to it remains unstable. Termed an "Orphic conceit", the quote draws on classical mythology's dual underworld waters: Mnemosyne's memory-infused water and Lethe's forgetful water. As documented in Bacchic gold tablets, deceased spirits are guided toward the Lake of Memory to seek cold drinking water, whereas souls heading for reincarnation drink from Lethe to erase their former lives (Graf & Johnston, 2013, p. 41). Beyond this contrast, the texts specify that memory must be actively claimed: the dead must state their origins before the guardians allow them to reach the Lake of Memory, and without that act of self-identification the life-giving water stays out of reach (Graf & Johnston, 2013, pp. 4–6). Gurnah borrows the tablets' "parched with thirst" metaphor to depict mortal longing for memory's nourishment. Though driven by desperate craving, souls cannot guarantee access to memory water, a mythic paradox the author transposes to real human experience: the longing for the past often ends in no more than a loose, uncertain hold on it. The present analysis keeps this mythological system subordinate to the use Gurnah makes of it. The requirement that the dead name their origins before memory's water is granted rephrases, in mythic terms, the returning narrator's own



predicament: he too must lay claim to a past he can no longer securely reach, and the novel keeps the myth subordinate to that human difficulty.

The double nature of water as simultaneously material and mnemonic draws on a long philosophical tradition. Bachelard (1983) argues that water is the element most intimately aligned with the structures of human memory and imagination, precisely because its material properties—flowing, dissolving, reflecting, engulfing—translate directly into the grammar of dreaming and mourning. He distinguishes between waters that clarify and nourish, carrying the past intact into the present, and waters that dissolve and make forget, severing the self from its history. Gurnah’s opposition of the water of memory and the water of oblivion follows this philosophical topology: the narrator craves the water that preserves the past and receives, instead, the water that erases it. Chen (2013) extends Bachelard’s framework into material ecocriticism, arguing that the imagination of water is always also an account of the social and economic conditions that govern its flow. The novel makes this concrete: the water that carries mythic memory is the same water that arrives only at two in the morning and will not drain away through the blocked pipe. Building on this mythic framework, the blue humanities clarify how water operates as both material substance and story-bearing medium. At the core of the blue humanities is water’s fluid, story-bearing nature, which the novel makes visible through the two opposing mythic waters: one anchors the past in consciousness, the other dissolves what has been remembered (Oppermann, 2023). In keeping with Oppermann’s definition of freshwater as “a gift of life” (2023, p. 37), the novel turns that life-giving power toward the dead, letting water carry the weight of lost lives. Work on cultural memory echoes this: the past stays retrievable only when people consciously claim their own history (Assmann, 2008). The water of memory does more than prompt recollection; it keeps lived experience present. The water of oblivion breaks that connection and lets the past drift out of reach. The image of being “parched with thirst” sharpens this tension: the thirsty long for the continued life that memory water would give, whereas they drink the water of oblivion instead, and so lose the very past they crave. Oblivion thus becomes a loss suffered against one’s will, even as the longing for days gone by persists.

This shift from practical sanitary water to symbolic memory water extends plumbing’s material sense into the realm of memory. Across both registers, water is associated with continuity: the continuity of daily domestic life through functioning infrastructure, and the continuity of personal memory through access to the past. The analogy therefore has a limit. Blocked sanitation and mnemonic loss correspond across the novel, while each keeps a distinct pressure: one is foul, bodily, and infrastructural; the other is mythic, psychological, and affective. The failure explains the text’s assertion that “plumbing comes into things” (Gurnah, 1996, p. 216), matching Oppermann’s argument on water’s dual trait: existing simultaneously as tangible material and abstract metaphor (2023, p. 11).

The mnemonic stage extends the argument of section 4.1: the same interrupted circulation now turns inward, onto the past itself, so that forgetting comes to share a logic with sanitary failure. The question this opens, and which the next section pursues, is whether such circulation can be repaired at all.

4.3 Repair and Unfinished Return

The narrator asks himself, “Why this interest in plumbing?” and answers at once, “Because I don’t want to talk about Emma, and I’m not going to” (Gurnah, 1996, p. 214). This reply gives



plumbing its immediate emotional ground. It offers a direction for thought at the very moment when emotional life has become unbearable. The turn to repair begins here as a displacement of grief, a way of redirecting pain into a problem that can at least be approached through work, inquiry, and technical attention. The narrator of *Admiring Silence* is never a transparent observer of his own motives, and the shift toward plumbing carries the evasiveness that structures his voice throughout the novel. Across the narrative he has maintained his standing in England through strategic silence and selectively invented stories about Africa. The Emma admission performs the deflection it announces: the technical problem is attractive precisely because it can be discussed where grief cannot. The very fluency with which he pivots from Emma to pipe joints and blocked drains is continuous with the silences and inventions that govern his narration, a symptom of the refusal of direct speech that has defined him from the opening pages. Plumbing in this passage figures repair and denial within the same gesture. The impossibility of direct emotional speech is folded into the very move toward restoration. The analysis that follows holds both registers simultaneously: the repair claim on home is genuine, and its function as psychological displacement remains visible.

The irony operates through the same structural mechanism as the satirical register developed in section 4.1, though its target has turned inward. When the narrator attributes the flush toilet's invention to an Englishman in the same breath as the slave trade and colonialism, "(ha ha ha)" confirms that seriousness and comedy coexist so that neither fully controls the other (Gurnah, 1996, p. 213). In the Emma passage, the same mechanism runs closer to the bone. "I don't want to talk about Emma, and I'm not going to" (p. 214) is structurally a joke: it names the thing to be avoided, announcing the avoidance with a rhetorical tidiness that forecloses further disclosure. The narrator's self-awareness becomes its own cover story. By naming his avoidance so crisply, he can present himself as candid while what has happened with Emma—the substance of what stays unspoken—remains out of reach for reader and narrator alike. The unreliability of this narrator lies not in conscious deception but in the limits of self-knowledge and in the pressures that make full speech impossible; the frank admission is, precisely, the least frank move available to him.

Work on repair clarifies what the narrator genuinely reaches for in this turn. Jackson describes repair as the continuous and largely unseen labour that holds the "order and meaning" of complex sociotechnical systems in place, preserves human value, and fits those systems to the changing circumstances of organizations and lives (Jackson, 2014, p. 222). The narrator's interest in plumbing names a wish to take up the quiet maintenance that keeps a shared world habitable. His attention proceeds from what Jackson calls broken world thinking, an orientation that begins from breakdown as an ordinary condition and locates value in care for the systems most people overlook. The plumbing fantasy carries this ethics of attention toward the infrastructures that sustain domestic and civic life.

This redirection quickly takes a practical form. The narrator plans to take "courses on plumbing," wants to "get to the bottom of the blocked toilets," and wonders "what clogs up the works" (Gurnah, 1996, pp. 212, 216). The vocabulary is diagnostic, procedural, and deliberately technical: the language of a person with a project. The more methodical the fantasy becomes, the further its stated object diverges from what cannot be named. To ask what clogs up the works is, technically, the opposite of asking what has happened with Emma and with the intimacy and



belonging she represented. Plumbing repair becomes a fantasy of restoring water to a function it has repeatedly lost: the capacity to sustain habitation, continuity, and belonging; and this fantasy holds even as the reader registers that the pipes the narrator wants to clear are not the ones doing the damage.

From there, the private turn toward plumbing widens into a way of imagining belonging. Taking up Oppermann's "thinking with water" (2023, p. 1), together with the oceanic "wet ontology" that treats water as dynamic, voluminous matter in continual formation (Steinberg & Peters, 2015), the narrator seeks belonging through water by rebuilding its interrupted flow. Anand (2017) calls the recognition produced through water infrastructure "hydraulic citizenship": a standing in the city earned through political and material claims on its pipes and water supply. The phrase points to more than access in a narrow technical sense. It names a form of standing produced through infrastructure itself, where to demand connection, repair, or service is also to assert one's place within a shared collective life. That idea helps clarify why plumbing in *Admiring Silence* carries more than technical value. When the narrator imagines offering "my services to my homeland" so that "we can sort out those blocked toilets" (Gurnah, 1996, p. 214), plumbing becomes a material claim on home. Return is imagined through labor, through water and waste, through the effort to make a damaged place livable again. The wish to repair the blocked system becomes inseparable from the wish to re-enter the homeland in a form that is useful, needed, and recognized.

To restore water's flow would also restore its work of connection and remembrance. Neimanis understands watery bodies as joined through a shared circulation, with water acting as a medium that links separate lives and holds the traces of what has passed through it (Neimanis, 2017). Considered alongside this account, the narrator's wish to clear the pipes reaches toward a water that can resume the binding of household, community, and memory, the same function the "water of memory" performs in the novel's Orphic passage. This material approach also meets a recent turn in Gurnah criticism: Allahyari (2026) examines the German East Africa novels through the material temporalities of matter and the body, treating historical violence and memory as bound to the matter that human life inhabits. Following water through the failing pipes of *Admiring Silence* extends that material attention from the body and the archive toward domestic infrastructure.

The novel, however, makes clear that any such repair faces serious obstacles, above all the homeland's turbulent politics. The fantasy of service and return never settles into completion. The narrator imagines going back, seeing the Prime Minister again, and celebrating "my return to the fold," only to find that "the Prime Minister has gone after all" and has already been imprisoned (Gurnah, 1996, p. 214). This political instability shows how hard any future attempt at restoration would be. At this point, plumbing serves as an unfinished response. It offers a practical image of clearance, service, and restored passage, while leaving fully open whether home, memory, and belonging can in fact be repaired. The novel ends by preserving that uncertainty. Repair remains possible as desire, vocation, and claim, while full restoration stays out of reach.



5. CONCLUSION

Through its recurring plumbing imagery, *Admiring Silence* shows how blocked water connects three of the novel's central concerns: a home that no longer shelters securely, a personal past under threat, and a return that remains incomplete. The failure of sanitation, in the house and in the wider community, gives material form to postcolonial decline, while the mythic waters of memory and forgetting turn that same failure into a loss felt within. The narrator's wish to repair pipes carries this further, making physical repair a way of imagining reconnection with home—a repair that is uncompleted.

The article therefore presents water as a pressured, uneven motif with incomplete coherence: some references gather into the larger pattern, while others remain partial, resistant, or failed connections. This account of sanitary details as storied water reframes *Admiring Silence* as a novel in which postcolonial return is mediated by damaged water systems, Gurnah's environmental imagination is routed through domestic infrastructure, and diaspora and memory are carried by pipes, waste, and water. The stakes of this interpretation extend beyond the addition of one more motif to Gurnah criticism. By locating return in the failure and repair of water and waste, the study revises the dominant account of postcolonial homecoming. The infrastructure that would make any home habitable fails when the exile returns, so that belonging becomes a hydraulic and civic problem alongside its psychological dimension. In tracing how the same broken circulation governs sanitation and remembrance, it also redirects the study of Gurnah's environmental imagination away from its established focus on ocean and coast and toward the contained, domestic water of the built environment. And in tracing memory through pipes and waste, it unsettles the human-centred frame in which diaspora and memory are usually discussed. The migrant subject's recovery or loss of the past is bound up with the matter that carries it. These are the terms in which a water-centred approach changes our understanding of the novel.

NOTES

1. Lethe is the river or spring of forgetfulness in the classical underworld. To drink from Lethe is to lose memory of one's former life.

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