
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Corpus Stylistic Analysis of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*

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| ABSTRACT

Corpus stylistics, an approach integrating linguistics and stylistics, provides quantitative support for research into literary style. This study adopts a corpus stylistic methodology to construct an electronic corpus of Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Admiring Silence*, with ten contemporaneous postcolonial and migration novels as a reference corpus. With the aid of Python and AntConc, analyses of keywords and high-frequency three-word clusters are conducted. The findings show that the novel presents a stable stylistic pattern at the linguistic level: the high frequency of first-person pronouns and "I"-centered clusters sustains a narrative focused on the self-perception of the diasporic subject; the character network and cultural spatial contrasts reflected by keywords point to the protagonist's identity dilemma across two social and cultural contexts; meanwhile, the foregrounding of negative structures in clusters repeatedly reinforces the narrator's uncertainty about emotion, identity and belonging. Furthermore, the repeated appearance of politically relevant keywords and clusters embeds personal memory within the postcolonial historical context of Zanzibar, demonstrating that the narrative unfolds through the interaction of personal experience, psychological stance and historical context, thus forming an integrated narrative structure of the diasporic subject. This study deepens the understanding of Gurnah's narrative style, diasporic experience and political expression, and also illustrates the empirical value and potential applications of quantitative methods in postcolonial textual research.

| KEYWORDS

Admiring Silence; Abdulrazak Gurnah; Corpus Stylistics; Corpus Retrieval; AntConc

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the increasing integration of linguistics and literary studies has led to the development of corpus stylistics as a powerful methodological approach for the analysis of literary texts. By combining quantitative techniques with qualitative interpretation, corpus stylistics enables researchers to identify recurring linguistic patterns and to provide empirical support for stylistic claims that would otherwise rely on intuition. This approach is particularly valuable in the study of postcolonial literature, where narrative voice, identity construction, and ideological positioning are often embedded in subtle linguistic choices.

As the 2021 Nobel Prize laureate in Literature, Abdulrazak Gurnah has attracted increasing scholarly attention for his exploration of migration, memory, and postcolonial identity. His novel *Admiring Silence* presents a first-person narrative of a Zanzibari migrant living in Britain, depicting the complexities of diasporic experience and the fragmentation of identity across cultural spaces. Existing studies on this work have primarily adopted qualitative approaches, focusing on themes such as hybridity, multilingualism, and narrative voice. While these studies have generated valuable insights, they often lack systematic empirical evidence at the linguistic level.

In this context, the present study applies a corpus stylistic framework to investigate the linguistic and stylistic features of *Admiring Silence*. By constructing an electronic corpus of the novel and a reference corpus composed of ten contemporaneous postcolonial and migration novels, this study employs quantitative tools, including keyword analysis and three-word cluster

analysis, to identify distinctive patterns in lexical choice and recurrent structures. The integration of Python for data preprocessing and AntConc for corpus retrieval enables a rigorous and replicable analytical process.

The study aims to address the following research questions: (1) What are the key linguistic and stylistic features of *Admiring Silence* at the lexical and structural levels? (2) How do these features reflect the narrator's identity construction and diasporic experience? (3) In what ways do recurrent linguistic patterns contribute to the interaction between personal memory and postcolonial historical context?

By answering these questions, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of corpus-based literary research. It not only provides a data-driven interpretation of Gurnah's narrative style but also demonstrates the applicability of corpus stylistics in examining the linguistic realization of postcolonial themes. In doing so, it offers new perspectives on the relationship between language, identity, and history in diasporic writing.

2. Literature Review

Abdulrazak Gurnah, a British writer of Tanzanian descent, is the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature laureate. Taking his own migration experience as the foundation of his creation, he integrates the cultural diaspora, identity and spiritual plight of individuals in the postcolonial context into his narratives, profoundly revealing colonial experience and diasporic trauma. *Admiring Silence* is one of Gurnah's representative early works. First published in 1996, the novel is narrated from the perspective of an unnamed Zanzibari migrant, telling the story of his identity anxiety and postcolonial trauma caught between the dual cultures of Britain and Zanzibar. Current research on this work mainly focuses on identity construction, multilingualism and migration stories (Lu, 2023; Polezzi, 2016; Wang & Wei, 2025), dominated by qualitative analysis, while relatively few studies have adopted a corpus stylistic approach to its content.

Stylistics is one of the important branches of linguistics. Corpus stylistics is the combination of literary stylistics and corpus linguistics. The former applies research methods and theories of linguistics to literary texts, while the latter covers the generation and extraction of quantitative information, providing data support for literary criticism. In recent years, with the continuous development of corpus stylistics, its application fields have been expanding and research methods have been constantly updated. For example, the Wmatrix semantic analysis tool has been used to examine the foregrounding features of internal and external deviations in the emotional density of novels, so as to analyze the emotional writing of fictions (Huang, 2025); AntConc software has been employed to analyze metaphors in novels to understand the author's creative intention and the social value of the works (Zhang, 2024); meanwhile, corpus stylistics has also been applied to the style research of functional translators by exploring the stylistic differences of different translators in the reconstruction of the same literary character (Li et al., 2025). Different research perspectives have not only expanded the paths of linguistic research, but also continuously provided new perspectives for literary studies.

Despite the increasing application of corpus stylistics in literary studies, there remains a lack of systematic quantitative analysis of Gurnah's works, particularly with respect to how linguistic patterns encode diasporic identity and postcolonial experience. Moreover, previous studies have rarely combined keyword analysis with cluster analysis to examine both lexical salience and recurrent structural patterns in a unified framework.

3. Research Design

This study is divided into three main stages: corpus construction, corpus retrieval and data analysis. Python is used for corpus cleaning, annotation and chart plotting in the research process, and AntConc is employed for corpus retrieval and relevant data collection. The research adopts a combined quantitative and qualitative method, integrating theory and data in the analysis.

In the corpus processing stage, Python is mainly used for text preprocessing, namely the standardization of electronic texts in the observational corpus and the reference corpus, including format conversion, case unification and punctuation removal, to avoid interference from irrelevant information in data statistics. In the corpus retrieval and statistics stage, AntConc serves as the main analytical tool. Specifically, AntConc performs the following functions in this study: generating a keyword list based on the comparison between the observational corpus and the reference corpus, and calculating the keyness of keywords; extracting high-frequency three-word clusters to identify repetitive and patterned linguistic structures in the text.

To ensure the objectivity and accuracy of this study, two self-built corpora are constructed: the observational corpus and the reference corpus. The observational corpus is the electronic text of Gurnah's novel *Admiring Silence*, with a total word count of 76,921. The reference corpus selects ten English novels by contemporary writers of Gurnah, published around the same period as *Admiring Silence*. These contemporaneous postcolonial and migration novels together form a cross-cultural narrative corpus, used to compare and analyze the uniqueness of keywords concerning identity, diaspora, cultural conflict and subject

construction in *Admiring Silence*. The novels include *The Moor's Last Sigh*, *The Black Album*, *The Nature of Blood*, *White Teeth*, *A Way in the World*, *Anita and Me*, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, *The Unconsoled*, *Astonishing the Gods* and *Brick Lane*, with a total word count of 1,478,383.

It should be noted that the total word count of the reference corpus is significantly larger than that of the observational corpus, and the difference in corpus size may affect the statistical results of keywords: low-frequency words in a large-scale corpus may be diluted, while high-frequency words in a small-scale corpus may be relatively amplified. To reduce the potential bias caused by unbalanced corpus size, this study adopts the log-likelihood ratio (the default setting of AntConc) as the indicator of keyword keyness in keyword analysis. This statistical method is highly robust in comparative analysis between corpora of different sizes and can effectively identify statistically significant items. In addition, when interpreting keyword results, this study conducts a comprehensive analysis combining the semantic category distribution of keywords and the subsequent three-word cluster analysis to avoid over-interpretation caused by single frequency differences.

4. Results and Data Analysis

4.1 Keyword Analysis

Retrieving and extracting keywords with corpus tools is one of the important methods of corpus stylistics, which helps to analyze the linguistic and thematic features of literary works. As one of the main indicators reflecting stylistic features, the frequency, keyness and semantic distribution of keywords can provide strong data support for stylistic analysis such as character image and plot construction (Shepherd & Sardinha, 2013). In this paper, AntConc is used to generate a wordlist of *Admiring Silence*, and a keyword list is produced with the self-built reference corpus as the benchmark. Meanwhile, the keyness of keywords is calculated, and the keyness values of the top 50 keywords in *Admiring Silence* are ranked as shown in Table 1.

First, the first-person pronouns "I" (21st) and "my" (19th) both appear at an extremely high frequency in the keyword list and have significant keyness. Among them, "I" occurs 2,105 times with a keyness of 103.517; "my" occurs 773 times with a keyness of 108.124. The high-frequency use of first-person pronouns is not a universal phenomenon in various stylistic forms, but a linguistic choice with clear stylistic functions. In *Admiring Silence*, this distribution feature clearly indicates that the novel adopts a first-person narrative perspective, constituting an important stylistic marker of its memoir-like narrative mode. Combined with the text content, the novel unfolds from the perspective of an unnamed Zanzibari-British male migrant, and the narrative always centers on his personal memory, life experience and psychological activities. From the childhood memories of Zanzibar mixed with lies and truth, to the migration dilemma in British society, and then to the confusion and unease after returning home, "I" and "my" run through the whole text, building a highly subjective narrative atmosphere. This memoir-like stylistic feature strengthens the text's focus on the process of memory, identity and self-understanding, which is highly consistent with the theme of how the diasporic subject repeatedly written by Gurnah reconstructs the self in narration.

Second, the large number of character names and titles in the keyword list further reveals the social relation structure of the narrator in cross-cultural life. The distribution of these words presents a distinct binary feature, clearly reflecting the completely different social network forms of the narrator in the two cultural spaces of Zanzibar and Britain, and further highlighting his dilemma of identity fragmentation.

On the one hand, there are a large number of Zanzibari characters, whose names and titles account for more than ten entries among the fifty keywords (e.g., "Hashim", "Akbar", "Bi", "Rukiya", "Ahmed", "Abbas"). Among them, "Hashim" (2nd) occurs 100 times with a keyness of 601.453; "Akbar" (3rd) occurs 86 times with a keyness of 484.912, both being highly representative Zanzibari characters in the text. These characters include various types of relationships such as relatives and fellow villagers, all rooted in the narrator's memory. Some are decisive relatives in his life, some are fellow villagers who provided him with practical help and emotional support in a foreign country, and others are acquaintances and fellow townspeople he faces again after returning home. These characters weave a dense social network in the novel, forming an important part of the narrator's local identity. For example, after returning home, the narrator becomes acutely aware of the changes in his surroundings and expresses dissatisfaction with the present condition of Zanzibar, describing his daily life as filled with complex and unfamiliar interactions with people and places that were once familiar to him (Gurnah, 2021). Since the narrator has never attended a mosque in Britain, he feels anxious when accompanying his stepfather to pray after returning home, worrying about making mistakes or being exposed as neglectful. However, once the prayer begins, his familiarity with the setting brings him a sense of comfort and even joy; when others praise his piety, he experiences a feeling of pride, as he is temporarily recognized as belonging rather than as an outsider (Gurnah, 2021). This homecoming experience is not simply presented as a completed process of returning to local identity, but reveals the high instability of the narrator's identity: emotionally and memorially, he is still deeply connected to Zanzibari society; practically, he experiences rupture and anxiety due to long-term diaspora; and the temporary stability of his identity depends on the recognition and acceptance of others. This state of wandering repeatedly between belonging and estrangement is a typical emotional characteristic of the diasporic subject towards hometown.

On the other hand, the number of British character names is very small, with only three British character names appearing in the top fifty keywords. However, these three keywords have extremely high keyness: "Emma" ranks first with 152 occurrences and a keyness of 914.307; the keyness values of "Willoughby" (5th) and "Amelia" (6th) reach 336.783 and 240.552 respectively, far exceeding most Zanzibari characters. This data feature demonstrates the narrator's social dilemma in Britain: his social network is extremely narrow, and "Emma", "Amelia" and "Willoughby" - his wife, daughter and wife's parents - are almost all his social connections in Britain. Although the narrator has lived in Britain for twenty years, and the text repeatedly mentions the sweetness and fulfillment when he first met Emma, he has always been in a state of loneliness and frustration over a longer period. Even though Emma "drew me into her circle of friends so completely that at times I forgot myself, and I imagined that I looked as they did, and talked as they did" [8], according to text retrieval and keywords, the names of these friends never appear in the text. This absence at the linguistic level reveals the superficiality of the narrator's integration into British society. In addition, when Emma finally chooses to leave, he even feels that "I find myself living in England for reasons I no longer know" [8]. The high keyness of British characters stems from the narrator's high dependence on a small number of intimate relationships, while their scarcity reflects the marginalized situation of the migrant subject in society, confirming the universal dilemma that migrants have limited social relations and their life stability often relies on very few emotional bonds (Ahmed, 2013).

Furthermore, although the surface narrative of *Admiring Silence* focuses on personal memories and family stories, the continuous emergence of political words in the keyword list places these private narratives in the postcolonial political context of Zanzibar, forming a dual narrative structure of personal memory and political history, which is also one of the typical features of Gurnah's works. The top 50 keywords include multiple core political terms, such as "rais" (28th, Swahili for "leader, president", specifically referring to local political leaders in Zanzibar), "minister" (14th), "project" (38th), "funding" (43rd), "uprising" (44th). These words jointly outline the complex political reality of Zanzibar after independence, including the continuation of colonial legacy, the dilemma of political construction and persistent social conflicts. *Admiring Silence* adopts a dual narrative structure interweaving personal memory and political history, revealing the deep entanglement between individual fate, national history and power structure in the postcolonial context (Stubbs, 2005). This narrative feature of interwoven personal memory and political history is objectively confirmed by the quantitative data of keywords, and also deepens the understanding of Gurnah's creative concept of reflecting on colonial trauma through personal narration.

In summary, through the generation and analysis of the wordlist and keyword list of *Admiring Silence*, it can be seen that the novel presents distinct stylistic features in linguistic distribution and lexical characteristics. First, the high-frequency first-person pronouns highlight the memoir-like narrative mode of the text, making the subject's memory and understanding of identity and self the core clue for the advancement of the story. Second, the distribution of character names in keywords clearly reflects the narrator's limited social structure in Britain and extensive social network in Zanzibar. Although British characters are few in number, they have extremely high keyness, revealing the narrator's high dependence on a single intimate relationship in a foreign country; on the contrary, numerous and frequently appearing Zanzibari characters form the deep foundation of the narrator's memory and sense of belonging, showing the complex emotional characteristics of the diasporic subject towards hometown. In addition, the continuous emergence of political keywords indicates that personal memory can never be separated from the influence of Zanzibar's colonial and postcolonial history. Keyword analysis not only reveals the narrative perspective and character network structure of the text, but also presents the inseparable narrative feature of personal memory and social history in Gurnah's works at the linguistic level.

Table 1. The first 50 keywords in *Admiring Silence*

N	keyword	Freq.	Keyness	N	keyword	Freq.	Keyness
1	emma	152	914.307	26	to	2430	92.643
2	hashim	100	601.453	27	england	64	90.251
3	akbar	86	484.912	28	rais	15	90.202
4	stepfather	57	342.798	29	when	370	85.102
5	willoughby	56	336.783	30	about	346	83.995
6	amelia	40	240.552	31	ira	15	82.822

7	bi	30	180.41	32	halima	13	78.175
8	mother	195	170.649	33	and	2629	75.849
9	nuru	28	168.382	34	asked	105	74.882
10	prime	37	161.55	35	ahmed	19	74.093
11	uncle	99	153.661	36	after	204	70.961
12	that	1177	135.227	37	petty	18	65.803
13	rukiya	22	132.298	38	project	20	59.923
14	minister	38	129.642	39	plumbing	11	59.365
15	amur	21	126.285	40	abbas	15	59.36
16	or	383	123.665	41	teachers	21	59.276
17	malik	20	120.271	42	seem	44	57.977
18	father	152	120.189	43	funding	15	57.566
19	my	773	108.124	44	uprising	12	57.454
20	school	95	106.398	45	passport	19	54.624
21	i	2105	103.517	46	with	734	54.335
22	safiya	17	102.23	47	did	243	50.562
23	terrace	23	101.201	48	chairman	12	49.855
24	was	1423	100.073	49	buggered	14	49.516
25	stories	49	95.094	50	for	726	48.728

4.2 High-Frequency Cluster Analysis

In corpus stylistic research, clusters (N-grams) can reveal repetitive and patterned linguistic structures in texts, and are important means for analyzing narrative style, thematic features and character psychology (Stubbs, 2005). Different from keywords that focus on lexical keyness, clusters emphasize the structural repetition of language in continuous contexts, thus capturing the formation mechanism of narrative habits and discourse stance. Therefore, this study selects three-word clusters as the main analytical unit: on the one hand, three-word clusters carry more stable syntactic and semantic structures than two-word collocations, which is more conducive to presenting syntactic information and narrative patterns (Biber et al., 1999); on the other hand, in literary texts, three-word clusters often appear as fixed narrative formulas or repeated emotional expressions, serving as important stylistic markers for portraying character psychology and narrative perspective (Hoover, 2013).

Based on the statistical results of three-word clusters generated by AntConc (see Table 2), it can be found that the high-frequency three-word clusters of *Admiring Silence* present three significant stylistic features: a subjective narrative framework centered on "I", the foregrounding of emotion and cognition formed by negative structures, and the structural existence of the political context in narration. These three are not isolated, but together form a triple structure of "self-experience — psychological attitude — historical context" at the narrative level.

First, six of the top ten high-frequency three-word clusters are centered on the first-person subject "I" (e.g., "I don't", "I didn't", "I couldn't", "I did not", "that I was", "I had been"). The high-density distribution of first-person clusters not only verifies the first-person memoir-like narrative of the text again, but also reflects the pattern of the narrator's linguistic habits, that is, the narrator constantly takes self-experience as the narrative center to connect memory and practice. As Hunston (2010) pointed out in relevant research, "clusters carry stance". The repeated first-person cluster structures in the text form a highly subjectivized narrative style. This linguistic pattern mutually confirms the high-frequency phenomenon of first-person pronouns revealed by keywords, indicating that the narrator's subjectivity is not only reflected in lexical choice, but also deeply embedded in syntactic structure.

Meanwhile, the large number of negative structures leads to the foregrounding of emotion and attitude. Among the top ten high-frequency three-word clusters, there are five clusters with negative semantics: "i don t" (54 times), "i didn t" (36 times), "i couldn t" (29 times), "i did not" (26 times), "don t know" (24 times), all ranking among the high frequencies. Among them, "i don t" becomes the most frequent three-word cluster in the text with 54 occurrences, fully indicating that negative semantics is the core tone of the text's linguistic expression. Negative words are often regarded as having foregrounding function in literary language, especially used to express uncertainty, denial, self-conflict and psychological concealment, which can transform the narrator's implicit emotions into explicit linguistic features (Wales, 2014). The high-frequency repetition of these negative clusters in *Admiring Silence* is not a simple linguistic habit, but a direct externalization of the narrator's psychological state: the narrator repeatedly defines his own experience in the forms of "cannot", "do not know", "unwilling to admit", showing hesitation and withdrawal about personal identity, emotional relations and social position. These negative linguistic acts are highly consistent with the core narrative theme of the text, presenting the uncertainty of the diasporic subject in the process of identity construction at the linguistic level, and forming a semantic echo with the identity fragmentation revealed by the character network and cultural spatial differences in keywords.

In addition, "the prime minister" in high-frequency clusters reveals the structural existence of the political context in narration, proving that the text narrative is not a simple personal memoir, but a deep interweaving of personal memory and political history. As shown in Table 2, "the prime minister" ranks third with 30 occurrences, and is the only one of the ten high-frequency clusters that contains neither the first person nor negative semantics. Its high-frequency appearance has a strong directivity: it directly brings the political reality of Zanzibar into the narrative vision, implying that the narrator's personal memory is always entangled by external factors such as colonial history, political conflict and power structure, and individual fate is closely linked to national politics. The high-frequency appearance of this cluster is not an isolated political symbol, but mutually verifies the political keywords such as "minister", "uprising" and "funding" revealed in the previous keyword analysis, indicating that the novel's narrative always shuttles between personal memory and the postcolonial political reality of Zanzibar. The narrative of *Admiring Silence* always revolves around the relationship between the individual and politics. In the process of sorting out personal memory, the narrator can never be separated from the political context of Zanzibar. Political reality is not only the background of narration, but also the core factor affecting the narrator's identity construction and psychological state, showing the narrative feature of the text interweaving personal memory and political history.

In summary, the statistical results of three-word clusters reveal a triple stylistic structure of *Admiring Silence* at the narrative level: a first-person-centered narrative mode, the continuous emphasis on psychological uncertainty through negative structures, and the constant interweaving of personal and political historical contexts. These three linguistic modes jointly construct a typical diasporic narrative voice structurally: centered on "I", constantly denying and revising self-identity, and at the same time unable to break away from the historical and political context. Thus, cluster analysis not only supplements and deepens the results of keyword analysis, but also further confirms the internal connection of the novel among memory, identity and politics at the syntactic and discourse levels.

Table 2. Top 10 three-word clusters of *Admiring Silence*

N	three-word clusters	Freq.
1	i don t	54
2	i didn t	36
3	the prime minister	30
4	i couldn t	29
5	it was a	28

6	i did not	26
7	one of the	26
8	that i was	26
9	i had been	25
10	don t know	24

5. Conclusion

Taking *Admiring Silence* as the research object, this paper combines corpus stylistic methods to conduct a systematic quantitative and qualitative analysis of its keywords and three-word clusters, revealing the stylistic features of Abdulrazak Gurnah's narrative language and the identity representation it carries from the lexical and syntactic levels. The research shows that the text presents a highly consistent stylistic pattern at the linguistic level: the high-frequency use of first-person pronouns and "I"-based clusters establishes a narrative framework centered on the self-memory of the diasporic subject; the differential distribution of character networks and cultural spaces in keywords clearly presents the narrator's different identity states and subjective dilemmas in the two societies of Britain and Zanzibar, which together with the foregrounding of negative structures in clusters reveal his uncertainty in identity, emotional relations and social position; the continuous emergence of politically relevant keywords and clusters places individual memory in the postcolonial historical context of Zanzibar, further showing the internal connection between memory, identity and politics, indicating that the narrative always unfolds between personal experience, psychological attitude and historical context, thus forming a complete narrative structure of the migrant subject.

The academic value of this study is mainly reflected in two aspects. First, this study makes up for the limitation that existing research on this topic is mostly qualitative analysis, provides objective data support for the thematic interpretation and stylistic analysis of *Admiring Silence* through the quantitative method of corpus, and enriches the research dimensions of Gurnah's works. Second, it demonstrates the research path of corpus stylistics in the themes, narrative perspective and psychological characteristics of literary texts, providing a methodological example for reference for the cross-cultural narrative research of postcolonial and migration literature.

Meanwhile, this study also has certain limitations. The selection of the reference corpus is limited to novels of the same period and theme, excluding Gurnah's other works, making it difficult to form a dual comparison between the writer's personal style and the contemporary literary context; cluster analysis only focuses on three-word structures, without involving longer-sequence linguistic patterns. Future research can further expand the scope of the corpus, include Gurnah's complete creative system in the research, and combine more corpus tools such as collocation analysis and prosodic analysis to deeply explore the characteristics of his cross-cultural narrative.

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