



Cultural Displacement, Silence, and the Quest for Belonging in Abdulrazak Gurnah's "*The Last Gift*"

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Abstract

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* explores the psychological, emotional, and cultural aspects of migrant life in postcolonial England. Abbas protagonist in the novel considers exile as merely a geographical displacement but also as a constant struggle including silence, trauma, and a fractured identity. The paper analyses the roles of memory and silence as means of oppression and survival, enabling Gurnah's characters to recreate their identities after colonial dislocation. This paper examines how Abbas's suppressed narratives and his family's genetic silences reflect alienation. Cathy Caruth's notion of trauma as an unhealed psychological wound and Stuart Hall's perspective of cultural identity as a "production" rather than an unchanging essence. Homi Bhabha's ideas of hybridity and unhomeliness explain the novel's depiction of the immigrant's fragmented sense of belonging, while Derrida's concept of hospitality emphasises the struggle between acceptance and rejection in the migrant experience. The research contends that *The Last Gift* represents displacement as a state that leads to both loss and rebirth, as Gurnah's characters find meaning through narrative and intergenerational reconciliation. Finally, Gurnah's narrative converts trauma into memories, facilitating the expression of identity within the delicate realm between memory and belonging.

Keywords: cultural identity, trauma, silence, belonging, hybridity, memory

Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah's literary universe has been consistently preoccupied with the psychic and cultural repercussions of exile, migration, and historical dislocation. Having moved from Zanzibar during the revolution and settled himself in England, Gurnah turns his own experiences into narratives that represent displacement as an important aspect of the human experience, rather than merely a specific historical incident. The novels, especially *Paradise* (1994), *By the Sea* (2001), and *The Last Gift* (2011), explore the

complexities of memory, home, and belonging as experienced by common people crossing the borders between Africa and Europe. *The Last Gift* explores the complicated traumas of silence and migration through the character of Abbas, who unspoken past persists for decades. Abbas begins to reveal the facts of his past life, he reveals the emotional roots of displacement and present difficulties of balancing identity across the borders.

The novel opens with Abbas experiencing a stroke, a traumatic occurrence that serves as both a



literal and symbolic representation. The paralysis of the body reflects the immobilisation of relationships. Abbas's silences shift beyond merely personal hesitation; they express trauma and guilt, reflecting the severe scars of colonial and postcolonial displacement. Gurnah's novel situates the migrant's silence within a larger epistemology of trauma. Abbas's refusal to speak of his past his abandonment of his first family in Zanzibar. The recurring sense of estrangement in Gurnah's fiction aligns with what Lois Tyson defines as "unhomeliness" a state in which one feels "not at home even in one's own home because you are not at home in yourself" (Tyson 421). Beyond its psychological dimension, *The Last Gift* reflects the cultural negotiation of identity as theorized by Stuart Hall. For Hall, identity is not an essence that preexists experience but a process of "collective" but "heterogeneous cultural identity" (Hall 223). Abbas and his family represent this fluidity; their lives in England are marked by both the presence and absence of Zanzibar, and their hybrid existence challenges concrete concepts of nationality and belonging. Hall's concept of a "heterogeneous cultural identity" is seen in Abbas's children, Anna and Jamal, whose fragmented understanding of their roots represents the intergenerational descent down of displacement.

Moreover, the novel foregrounds the politics of inhospitality in the migrant's hostland. Derrida's view "The state establishes rules through which people can be divided into citizens and non-citizens, citizens and foreigners, hosts and guests. It can identify individuals; and therefore, it can include or exclude whosoever it chooses based on the laws, which it has created" (Derrida 2) becomes crucial in reading the social alienation of Gurnah's characters. England function both as refuge and rejection "a strange land that does not want me" (Gurnah 53) highlighting how postcolonial Britain maintain exclusion while the disguising of democratic. Meanwhile, Gurnah's writing provides narrative authority to the voiceless. As Maria Cristina Rodriguez notes, displaced individuals "create voices that will serve as a shield for their lack of place and identity" (Rodriguez 107). In *The Last Gift*, Abbas's eventual confession and his family's rediscovery of their silenced history enact what Cathy Caruth calls "listening to the wound" the transformation of trauma into narrative understanding.

This study is significant as it delves into the ways in which Gurnah's fiction converts silence and memory into a form of cultural expression. This paper examines *The Last Gift* through the framework of trauma studies and postcolonial thought, presenting it within a transnational context that connects their own experiences of suffering to broader narratives of migration. Gurnah's novel provides as a profound analysis on the resilience of the human spirit amidst feelings of alienation, emphasising that identity is not merely passed but is constantly changed through the process of narrating.

Silence, Memory and Trauma

Gurnah's *The Last Gift* turns the internal silence of its protagonist, Abbas, into a psychological landscape influenced by trauma, guilt, and memory. The novel's structure oscillating between past and present mirrors the fragmentation of a mind haunted by unspoken pain. Abbas's silences are not mere absences of speech but embodiments of what Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (Caruth 3). The paralysis of his speech after the stroke embodies this psychological wound, illustrating the ways in which trauma is expressed physically when words is insufficient. The opening scene of the novel "One day, long before the troubles, he slipped away without saying a word to anyone and never went back. And then another day, forty-three years later, he collapsed just inside the front door of his house in a small English town." (Gurnah 1) introduces silence as the novel's governing metaphor, one that binds his flight from Zanzibar to his muteness in England.

Trauma in *The Last Gift* operates through the tension between remembering and forgetting. Abbas's insistence that he "I can't remember anything, I tell her, but it is a lie. I remember many things and I remember them every day, however hard I try to forget" (Gurnah 143) is contradicted by his obsessive recollections of the past. Abbas's silence is thus not an act of concealment but a form of psychic survival. Susan J. Brison's view that trauma renders a person "A traumatic event is one in which a person feels utterly helpless in the face of a force that is perceived to be life-threatening" (Brison 13) explains Abbas's inability to voice his



experience. His silence functions as a shield against re-experiencing the terror of abandonment, shame, and guilt.

Maryam, his wife, and their children experience the consequences of this inherited silence. When his son Jamal asks, "Why do you never talk about your family?" and his daughter Anna insists, "What I want from them is a story that has a beginning that is tolerable and open" (Gurnah 42-44), the novel exposes silence as intergenerational trauma. The family's fragmented sense of identity arises not only from physical displacement but from the father's inability to translate memory into narrative. Caruth's assertion that "trauma is known only in the way it returns to haunt the individual many years after the event" (Caruth 48) is realized through Abbas's recurring memories, which erupt unbidden in his old age.

The fragmented experiences transform memories into an unintentional revival of the past, a reflection that refuses resolution. Gurnah juxtaposing Abbas's silence with the articulate expressions of his children, whose enquiries expose a blend of curiosity and frustration. Their quest of a united family narrative reflects an endeavour to deal with the inherited trauma of dislocation. Abbas's silence thus speaks volumes it communicates guilt, fear, and the weight of an unhealed past. His stroke induced aphasia is symbol of silence becomes the language of trauma. The narrative technique used in the novel emphasises this theme. Gurnah's non-linear storytelling reflects the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. The relationship of past and present reveals an imbalance, indicating that the traumas of displacement are deeply embedded in the subconscious of the migrant. When Abbas talks about his father's anger "He shouted... 'Those European teachers and their school have turned your head. Now they'll beat you in the streets like a dog'" (Gurnah 85) represents the manifestation of colonial power within family structures. The memory presents Abbas's trauma within the larger context of colonial modernity, emphasising how race, education affect the sense of identity. The humiliation of being punished for reaching beyond societal boundaries serves as a basis for his enduring silence.

Gurnah's representation of Abbas's feeling of alienation in England intensifies this psychological trauma. When Abbas calls himself "a monkey from Africa" (Gurnah 44), he internalizes the racist gaze

of the host culture. This moment signifies not only racial humiliation but the psychic split between self and identity a form of trauma that extends beyond personal experience to collective memory. The concept of memory as both a burden and rehabilitation persist throughout the novel. Abbas's confession about his decision to reveal his suppressed past. When he expresses to Maryam that he is "tired of not talking about these things" (Gurnah 153), his statement represents what Caruth defines to as "listening to the wound". Abbas initiates a process of transforming trauma into a form of testimony, shifting from a state of isolation towards one of communication.

Maryam's patience and empathy allow Abbas to face his hidden past. This dynamic transforms silence into conversation, enabling the unexpressed to be communicated. Gurnah emphasizes this domestic intimacy as a metaphor for collective recovery. It indicates that memory persists not in isolation but through interconnected narratives. The aesthetic characteristics of silence function as a form of political reflection. The silence represents the marginalization of migrant voices within prevailing narratives. *The Last Gift* illustrates how Abbas's prolonged silence symbolizes the historical suppression of colonized individuals. His concluding narrative, therefore, transforms into a declaration of autonomy. In preserving his memories, "his voice was clear and composed" (Gurnah 262), Abbas symbolically asserts his right to shape his own narrative. Silence is not completely eliminated but rather redefined as a form of resilience. The relationship between trauma and silence in *The Last Gift* illustrate Gurnah's profound comprehension into exile as a psychological condition. The novel examines the simple concept of nostalgia, portraying the migrant's experience as constant relationship of memory and forgetfulness. Abbas's final confession does not change the past, however it highlights the potential for significance in the amid loss. Thus, Gurnah's narrative represents memory as a dual entity, serving as both a confinement and an expression of freedom. The haunting impact that upholds awareness and the means through which identity is rebuilt. *The Last Gift* serves as an example to the enduring impact of narrative in transforming pain into acceptance, indicating that even silence, when accepted, connects with the essence of resilience.



Cultural Identity and Belonging

The Last Gift significantly examines the idea of cultural identity with the experience of dislocation. The novel portrays migration not merely as a change in location instead of a deep existential dilemma, highlighting the struggle between the need for connection and the inevitable sense of alienation. Through Abbas and his family, Gurnah explores the complex, interconnected identities that arise from migration and colonisation. Stuart Hall's statement that "cultural identity is not an essence but a positioning" (Hall 223) conveys the novel's core conflict: identity is not something passed down but is constantly redefined through historical conflict, memory, and adaptation. Abbas's life divided between Zanzibar and England emphasises this process of transformation. His physical journey from the colonial Indian Ocean world to postcolonial Britain signifies the transition from one system of belonging to another, yet neither offers him with a feeling of wholeness. He is "a tiresome guest in my (his) own life" (Gurnah 239), suspended between past and present, home and exile. His alienation stems not only from displacement but from his internalized sense of unbelonging a condition that Hall identifies as characteristic of consciousness, in which "people who are in every respect part of a place but who neither feel part of a place nor are regarded as part of a place" (Hall 352). This feeling of alienation affects the family's existence in England. Maryam, discovered as an abandoned baby, represents the fractured history of colonial modernity. She possesses "She had enough sense to know that she was someone without any worth" (Gurnah 181). Her origin narrative reflects Abbas's own silence concerning his history, establishing a home establishing by what has been destroyed. The children of Anna and Jamal, navigate a reality in where their concept of belonging is shaped more by performance than by real connection. They speak in English, identify as British, and yet feel alienated from both their home and host cultures. Anna's dream sequences, where she finds herself in "She lived in a part of the house and the rest of it was derelict" (Gurnah 88), represent a subconscious investigation into identity: she exists in a transnational space, neither completely at home nor completely alien. This transitional idea aligns with Homi Bhabha's concept of "Unhomeliness", where the colonised

individual undergoes an alienation between cultural realms. Bhabha states, "To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in one's own home because you are not at home in yourself" (Bhabha 133). Anna and Jamal's challenges reflect a sense of dislocation; their identity as British individuals is characterised by a lack of visibility and a feeling of uncertainty. When Anna states, "I hate it. Sometimes it makes me feel that I am living a life of hiding and shame. That we all are" (Gurnah 44), encapsulates the moral and emotional cost of hybrid identity. Their identity is formed through imitation, reflecting a desire to fit into the dominant culture while maintaining being aware of their differences.

The novel examines the complex relationship between cultural belonging and the dynamics of hospitality politics. In *Of Hospitality*, Jacques Derrida contends that the state establishes "rules through which people can be divided into citizens and non-citizens, hosts and guests" (Derrida 2). Gurnah demonstrates this exclusive logic by portraying England as a realm of selective acceptance. The welcome offered to migrants is uncertain reliant on silence and adherence. Abbas's self-description as "a monkey from Africa" (Gurnah 44) highlights the internalisation of the racist hierarchies present in British society. His alienation is not only psychological but systemic he is allowed to live in the hostland but never fully welcomed into it. In this context, home becomes a metaphor for recognition. Gurnah's characters are denied this comfort.

Gurnah further expands his depiction of alienation to encompass the wider social landscape of England. Relationships with British neighbours reveal nuanced expressions of bias disguised in manners. When Nick calls Abbas as "the absconder" (Gurnah 219) or mocks his family for "acting like immigrants" (Gurnah 235), the narrative reveals the enduring presence of colonial arrogance within modern multicultural environments. Gurnah's portrayal beyond the personal context, addressing with political themes and interrogating the narrative of a harmonious multicultural society. However, Gurnah doesn't condemn his characters to despair. By using narrative and remembrance, he proposes the potential for reconstructing identity outside the confines of home and exile binaries. When Abbas finally tells his story, he reclaims what Rodriguez describes as "a voice that serves as a shield for their



lack of place and identity" (Rodriguez 107). His narrative offers as an outlet of healing, connecting the fractured elements of his past with the muted reality of his present. Abbas's voice, characterised as "clear and composed" (Gurnah 262), represents the rise of power from a state of alienation. Anna experiences a sense of "strange pride and unexpected elation" (Gurnah 262), acknowledging her father's suffering as a expression of courage. Her response changes inherited shame into empathy signifying the inception of belonging through understanding. Maryam's silence perseverance takes on a significance. The abandoned child, serving as the listener to Abbas's confession, represents the cyclical nature of displacement. Her patience changes listening into a moral ethical of hospitality an openness that contrasts with the host country's isolation. In this way, Gurnah redefines belonging not as national identity but as relational care. Home becomes the act of listening, and hospitality becomes a moral rather than political gesture.

The Last Gift examines the concept of purity in cultural identity. Stuart Hall defines that identity is inherently "heterogeneous, composite and dynamic" (Hall 223). It highlights this hybridity through language, memory and intergenerational discourse. The essence of a family's identity develops not through their homeland, yet through the narratives they share and the unspoken truths they encounter. Despite their sense of alienation, they engage in an international process of identity formation that refuses closure. Displacement, while including suffering and fragmentation, also opens new opportunities for self-understanding. Abbas's confession prompts the family to break their collective silence, transforming their dislocation into a valuable source of insight.

In *The Last Gift*, the feeling of belonging is denied not by physical but in mental state. The significance of Gurnah's characters arises not from a return to a lost homeland. Through the representation of silence and the rise of displacement, Gurnah reshapes the concept of belonging within a postcolonial context. *The Last Gift* illustrates that identity emerges from the intricate relationship of voice, silence, and cultural negotiation, emphasising that it is not a fixed entity to be reclaimed but rather a concept that is constantly reimagined. Gurnah's perspective consistently transforms nostalgia into narrative, displacement into dialogue, and alienation into

the complex however significant act of belonging through narrative.

Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* offers profound examination of silence, memory, and the sense of belonging. The novel ingeniously combines personal trauma with collective history, developing a narrative that goes beyond individual suffering to represent the broader human experience. Abbas's fragmented recollections and the intergenerational effects of his silence reveal the emotional complexities of exile, demonstrating a state of being perpetually suspended between the past and present, and between belonging and alienation. The silence in *The Last Gift* represents the profound significance of untold narratives that come with displacement. Abbas's silence following the assault represents not only a personal struggle but also as a powerful colonial voice. The prolonged silence he experienced reflects the broader historical neglect of the migrant. Gurnah's representation of cultural identity deconstructs the fixed belonging. Stuart Hall's assertion that identity is a central theme resonates throughout the novel. Abbas's family dispersed across Zanzibar and England. Gurnah reveals the nuanced characteristics of hospitality in the host country. England, while apparently welcoming, is portrayed as a context of selective acceptance. The social terms that carry racial undertones. Abbas uncovers the ways in which national identity continues to be linked to forms of ethnic exclusion. Derrida's distinction between conditional and unconditional hospitality highlights this anxiety. The migrant are never fully welcomed. The narrative posits that the concept of belonging transcends just a physical return to one's homeland, thus emphasising an evolution of memory expressed through language. As Abbas tells his experiences to Maryam and his children, the scattered aspects of his life begin to merge into an uncertain unity. His voice silenced, transforms into a conduit through time, enabling his family to piece together their broken past. By engaging with her father's testimony, Anna takes part in the growth of a new and hybrid identity rooted in inheritance. Gurnah's narrative prompts a reconsideration of the moral implications surrounding memory. The novel prevents from expressing nostalgia or idealising a return; rather, it emphasises the importance of facing the past to



engage meaningfully with the present. Abbas's confession serves not as a means to reclaim his home, but rather than the fragmented aspects of his identity. This novel defines exile, transforming it from a state of solitude to a realm of artistic opportunity. The significance of *The Last Gift* extends beyond its direct narrative. It represents as a collection that captures the emotional and psychological aspects of migration. The challenges faced by refugees extend beyond the quest for physical shelter; they also grapple with articulating their fragmented identities. *The Last Gift* emphasises that identity is not regained through silence but reconstructed through expression. Gurnah's perspective reconsiders the individual act of recollection as a shared journey towards healing and resistance. The characters, despite their struggles with dislocation, show resilience through their ability to share their stories. Their narratives emphasise how the voice of the migrant, previously silenced, can emerge as an effective motivation for moral and cultural revival. By reframing exile as a dual experience of trauma and testimony, Gurnah transforms the understanding of belonging. In his novel home transcends a fixed place, it becomes a dynamic process of storytelling an ever-evolving conversation between identity and the past remembrance and repressed memory. *The Last Gift* thus becomes not only a novel of migration but a philosophical meditation on what it means to exist between worlds.

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