



2020 / Vol:6, Issue:32 / pp.1641-1646

REVIEW ARTICLE

Arrival Date : 16.09.2020

Published Date : 19.11.2020

Doi Number : <http://dx.doi.org/10.31589/JOSHAS.410>

Reference : Saribas, S. (2020). "Immigrant Experiences And Silence In Gurnah's Last Gift", Journal Of Social, Humanities and Administrative Sciences, 6(32):1641-1646.

IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCES AND SILENCE IN GURNAH'S LAST GIFT

Gurnah'ın Son Hediye Romanında Göçmen Deneyimleri Ve Sessizlik

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ABSTRACT

Abdulrazak Gurnah is a Zanzibari-born fiction writer who has been concerned with the linkage between identity, culture and place to the reality of complex processes of capitalist modernity that have been consistently overlooked in the past by previous African writers. Gurnah, unlike Wole Soyinka and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, has refused to ignore the formation of the new global world in today's modernity since, in the contemporary post-colonial era, as a result of globalization, diversion, displacement, diasporic family perception and the quest for identity and belonging to a place have become the most concerning accounts rather than colonial experiences, nationality, language, or authenticity. Recent studies of Gurnah's writing show that his style is dissimilar to that of Salman Rushdie or Hanefi Kureishi or other British writers. He does not perfectly fit the bill of a British fiction writer. Perhaps because his uneasy cultural positioning is too slippery to fit preferred bills. It would be intriguing to track, in relation to time, place and purpose, the versions and aversions of identity and belonging that inform these different studies. As a Zanzibari post-modernist and post-colonial novelist Gurnah, never hesitates to point out disturbing and upsetting details in his novels based on Zanzibari people and the places those people have dispersed to over time for various reasons. He precisely addresses the themes of exile, guilt, hybridity, displacement, silence, and identity in his last novels, especially in *The Last Gift*. In this paper, immigrant experiences of identity and causes and effects of individual silence will be explored through characters who are trapped between first and second generations and are constantly in search of new identities.

Key Words: Migration and Displacement, Degeneration, Root Identity

ÖZET

Abdulrazak Gurnah kimlik, kültür ve mekân ile geçmişte sürekli Afrikalı yazarlar tarafından göz ardı edilen kapitalist modernizmin karmaşık yapısı arasındaki ilişkiye yönelik endişe duyan Zanzibarlı bir roman yazarıdır. Gurnah, Wole Soyinka ve Ngugi Wa Thiong'o'nun aksine, modern sömürge sonrası dönemde, globalleşme, çeşitlilik, yer değiştirme, diasporal aile algısı, kimlik arayışı ve bir yere ait olma sömürge deneyimleri, millet, dil ve özgünlükten daha önemli konular olması nedeniyle günümüzün modernizmde küreselleşen dünyanın oluşumunu göz ardı etmemektedir. Gurnah'ın son çalışması, stiline Salman Rushdie, Hanefi Kureishi veya diğer İngiliz yazarların stillerine benzemediğini ortaya koymaktadır. Yazar, İngiliz kurgu yazarı profiline tam anlamıyla oturmamaktadır. Belki de tedirgin kültürel yerleşimi tercih edilen profillere uymak için çok değişkenlik göstermektedir. Bu farklı çalışmalarda bilgilendirilen kimlik ve aitlik versiyonları ve bunlara duyulan hoşnutsuzluğun mekân ve amaç ile zaman arasındaki ilişkisini ortaya koymak ilginç olacaktır. Zanzibarlı bir post-modernist ve sömürge sonrası bir roman yazarı olan Gurnah, romanlarında çeşitli nedenlerden dolayı zamanla yayılan mekân ve insanlara dayanan üzücü ve rahatsız edici detayları vermekten kaçınmıyor. Son romanlarında özellikle *Son Hediye* romanında sürgün, suçluluk, melezlik, sessizlik ve kimlik temalarına değiniyor. Bu çalışmada, sürekli yeni kimlik arayışında olan ilk ve ikinci nesil arasında sıkışıp kalmış karakterler aracılığıyla kişisel sessizliğin nedenleri ve etkileri ile kimliklerin göçmen deneyimleri incelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Göç ve Yer Değiştirme, Dejenerasyon, Kök Aitliği

1. INTRODUCTION

The Last Gift is a fictional novel based on the life of Abbas, portrayed as a failure, as he immigrates from Zanzibar, a country in Eastern Africa, to England. In pursuit of a new social life, and in order to rid himself of his former life responsibilities, he voluntarily lives in exile for about forty-three years. The book opens with Abbas' illness, a result of a diabetic crisis at the age of sixties. His illness is the

most important symbol of his identity since it is the beginning of what in fact starts to break the silence he has kept for years. “As part of the process of stripping away evasion, the East African seaboard is eventually narrowed down to Zanzibar. Simultaneously, Abbas's diabetic crisis develops into a series of strokes it is as if his generative progress towards truth is being shadowed by the degeneration in his physical health, as well as triggered by it” (Forden, 2011:2). Interestingly, the father’s illness and death bring the immigrant Zanzibari family together in the name of finding their roots and identity.

It is also possible to interpret Abbas’ illness as the psychological illness of people in Zanzibar under British colonization. Displacement and leaving the land to the British colonizers created a perceptual defect about what belongs to whom in Africa. There is no specific hint in the book about that except for the scene in which Nick and his father, Ralph, discuss “the government campaign that was then just beginning, to expropriate land owned by farmers descended from European settlers and give it [back] to African peasants” (Gurnah, *The Last Gift*, 2011: 02). Ralph does not believe that returning this land back to the African people will make things better. He believes that “you have to think cleverer than just reversing a historical injustice; otherwise you end up committing another one and making everyone into the bargain” (Gurnah, *The Last Gift*, 2011:102). Gurnah explains this perception in his essay “Writing and Place” as “colonialism legitimized itself by reference to a hierarchy of race and inferiority, which found form in a number of narratives of culture, knowledge and progress. It also did what it could to persuade the colonized to defer to this account” (Gurnah, “Writing and Place,” 2004:9). Therefore, what is controlled in Africa by the British belongs to the British. Two arguments are made clear here: firstly, does this mean that the identity of the Zanzibari people belongs to the British government as well? In other words, if the lands of Zanzibar belong to the British, does it mean that the identity of these Africans has been converted to English as well? Secondly, while the truths in Abbas’ past are revealed and his silence breaks down, simultaneously, the people of Africa (of Zanzibar in this novel) begin to regain their ancestral lands. This might be construed as regaining the root of their identity from the hands of British colonizers as well.

2. THE CONCEPT OF ROOT IDENTITY

The strokes that Abbas suffers urge him to break his silence and tell his family the truth. “He wanted the words back so he could talk, so he could tell her [Maryam] about his years of silence, so he could describe to her his wretched cowardice” (Gurnah, *The Last Gift*, 2011:127). In one of Gurnah’s interviews, he explains Abbas’ silence as: “That’s primarily a shamed silence, rather than an admiring silence. It’s clearly a lying, disguising silence. Whereas in the case of Abbas, it’s one of those stories that you wish to bury forever and not to ever remember (Steiner, “A Conversation with Abdulrazak Gurnah,” 2010:162). This silence has cost the family members a lot. Hanna becomes outraged for not knowing a single thing about her background history; Jamal has put himself into his father’s shoes and begins to sympathize with him after finding out the truth.

The questions above include one thing: the concept of root identity. This issue can be explained through the freedom of Gurnah’s characters in *The Last Gift*. Intrinsically, no one in the family is free, from the first generation or the second one. Even though Hanna and Jamal seem they have their own autonomy and lead British lives in England, they do not have any sense of belonging. Hanna, especially, who prefers to be called Anna since it sounds more British, strives to create the image of “a proper English girl”. She wants to construct an identity for herself that is acceptable in Europe. Gurnah himself describes her attitude in this way: “Being a Muslim in this current climate is not easy for her. She changes her name; she doesn’t know why. She doesn’t discuss it. But there are various ways in which she wants to distance herself:” (Steiner “A Conversation with Abdulrazak Gurnah,” 2010:163).

“Hanna’s struggle with identity has evoked a curiosity in Jamal as well. Unlike Hanna, however, he approaches the problem in a more analytical way rather than being critical.

He wondered where he was from. Always, when he saw someone like him, someone dark, someone as old as his neighbor, he wanted to ask, where are you from? Have you come a long way? How can you bear to be so far? Was it so intolerable there, wherever it was? It must have been, for you to choose to live in this ugly northern city. How has it been here in all these years? Have you come through?" (Gurnah, *The Last Gift*, 2011:86).

Because Jamal "studied migration trends and policies in the European Union" (Gurnah, *The Last Gift*, 2011:86), he had some answers. "Ambition", "fear", "incomprehension", and "desperation" lead immigrants to other countries. He also attends Friday prayers and Islamic readings in order to learn more about people like him. In contrast, Hanna prefers to join Christian occasions with her boyfriend, perhaps to be accepted into their society and find her real path in life. One can observe that this immigrant family suffers from a lack of freedom. At one time in their lives, they experienced a dependency on other people. For instance, Abbas' former life was built on dependency on his wife Sharifa's wealthy family to complete his education and additionally, to maintain his marriage. However, he finally escaped this life as he was sick of the mocking attitudes of Sharifa's brothers and father. "So, in early December 1959, when he was nineteen years old, he ran away from her and from his country and from everything and everyone he knew. That was the courageous and admirable thing he did. He ran away" (Gurnah, *The Last Gift*, 2011: 143). In the name of his autonomy and freedom, he believes that he did the right thing.

Tina Steiner, in her essay "Writing "Wider Worlds": The Role of Relation in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Fiction" (2010), covers the identity issue that the Zanzibari family has been suffering by benefiting from Eduourd Glissant's theory: The lack of freedom experienced by Gurnah's characters can be linked to what Glissant refers to as "root identity" and its "predatory effects". Root identity, Glissant explains, rests on the "violence of filiation," of a genealogy going back to a founding myth or origin of a land, which becomes a territory" and has to be "preserved by being projected onto other territories, making their conquest legitimate". This conception of identity rests on the idea of the autonomous self and of territory that then "sets in motion the thought of other and of voyage (Steiner, "A Conversation with Abdulrazak Gurnah," 2010: 127). In the dinner scene with Nick's family, Uncle Digby pushes Anna a lot about her origins. Hanna's status and belonging to British society in Nick's family becomes questionable since her identity is indefinable. Digby asks, "Where do you come from?" and Nick answers instead of Anna: "Anna's British." (Gurnah, *The Last Gift*, 2011: 116).

"She's rejecting that position of weakness we were discussing earlier. She's rejecting the indeterminacy of the migrant second generation. Are you English? Are you British? Are you something else? Where do you belong? So, what Digby's wanting to say, we know you don't belong exactly, where do you really belong? It's a way of debating of how someone like her might be read, but also how someone like her wishes or is afraid of being read. So, she is not interested, particularly, in being given this indeterminacy. She wants to be English. Not because, at least not in the novel anyway, not because there's anything in particular she admires about being English, but so she can just get on with her life, like everybody else (Steiner "A Conversation with Abdulrazak Gurnah" 163).

In an interview Gurnah restates what he said before via Uncle Digby. "Places don't live just where they are, they live within you" (Steiner Steiner, "A Conversation with Abdulrazak Gurnah," 2010: 3) and "To keep communities together, host and stranger need to know each other, but we cannot know each other if we don't know ourselves" (Gurnah *The Last Gift*, 2011: 117). In this sense, Hanna's status and belonging to British society in Nick's family eyes becomes questionable since her identity is indefinable. "Migration and displacement, as Gurnah's fiction insists, are common occurrences in Southern Africa and across the globe, and therefore it becomes imperative to see others in relation to ourselves, to perceive their right of abode even if they cannot claim national belonging (Steiner, "A Conversation with Abdulrazak Gurnah," 2010: 126).

Another point about the freedom and identity issue comes up when the reader takes notice of the interest that Abbas has for news about the events that include only Muslim people like the Bosnian massacre or the Iraq campaign. When he hears about the campaign of the US in Iraq, he feels sympathy for them because he knows that the reality is not as it seems. Initially, people in Iraq were happy because they thought that they were being rescued from a villain.

“The war has started by then, and havoc had descended on Iraq. They saw repeated images of Iraqis cheering the arrival of Americans and the joyous toppling of statues of the tyrant, and the hard men who understood realities declared that the Iraqis themselves wanted this war. Their army did not even bother to fight. They wanted the Americans to win. And look, the war is all over, and we are witnessing the barbarian encampment burning. It will be messy for a while and then get better” (Steiner, “A Conversation with Abdulrazak Gurnah,” 2010: 126).

Abbas does not believe this. He does not believe that any non-Muslim would be allowed to be killed like Bosnians or Iraqis in this age. His reaction to the spokesman on TV is an unmissable point in the name of limited freedom he has experienced throughout his life. He says “You don’t believe a word you are saying, you liar. What you really mean is I don’t care what happens to these people because they are not like us (...) Would they allow this if these people were not Muslims? In Europe?” (Gurnah 123). In these lines, even Jamal could hear the rebellion and suffering in Abbas’ voice against people and governments that have restricted Muslim societies for their beliefs, skin color, and culture for years.

3. SILENCE IN THE LAST GIFT

Silence in this novel can also be read as the inability of immigrants to articulate their issues or needs. Sometimes an immigrant cannot name the issue or give it a meaning even though he or she wants to. Here, the role of the audience is to be able to articulate what is left unsaid. The problems signified can only be observed by the reader because the immigrant subject is sometimes too abstract and complex to discuss in a dialogue. As Stuart Hall points out: “positively marked terms “signify” because of their position in relation to what is absent, unmarked, the unspoken, the unsayable. The meaning is relational within an ideological system of presences and absences” (Hall, 1985:109). In this sense, it is likely that Gurnah’s language in fiction is much deeper than it seems. Murray also points out that:” Gurnah’s many reviews of, and remarks on, others’ writing suggest that he has continued to value creative agility and even deliberate uncertainty as important facets of fiction, the willingness to harbor in the same textual space nuanced attention to language and story, political vicissitude and metaphysical depth” (Murray, 2013: 143).

The Last Gift is a complex fiction to summarize because firstly, immigrant experiences like those of Abbas and Maryam’s are staggering and startling, secondly, the characters hesitate to express their intimate feelings about the truth they are in. This hesitation is mainly based on the problem that there is no actual listener for the speaker. Since Abbas felt guilt and shame about his past, it was not easy to understand him even he spoke. On the other hand, the fiction is not only built on the silence of Abbas and the internal dialogues of the characters, but also the dialectic dialogue between the speaker and the listener. Jamal is a good listener in this novel and allows other people to talk about their own life stories. Harun, who shares his memories with Jamal, says: “You are a very good listener, Jamal. I was watching you in case you fidgeted or looked wearied, so I would know to stop, but you did not. It is a handy skill for an aspiring writer. Now you see, you have indulged the ego of an old man and he has pounced on your sympathy to burden you with these miserable thoughts (Gurnah, *The Last Gift*, 2013: 216). In this sense, Jamal’s silence differs from his father’s silence. His silence enables others to pour out their souls and give information about the self. Kimani Kaigai explains in his essay “At the Margins: Silence in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Admiring Silence and *The Last Gift*” that:

“He [Jamal] is the paradoxical interlocutor who, though often silent, acts as the vehicle through which other characters find the voice to express their memory. For as a good listener of stories, he also asks questions and makes brief comments that help the narrative articulate itself more sharply. For example, after looking at Harun’s photograph he hands it back and says: ‘She looks very lovely’, and this simple comment triggers Harun to speak about the memories that the pictures encapsulate as well as the places where the photographs were taken and why they no longer hang on the wall” (Kaigi, 2013: 137).

Here the reader understands that Abbas is an unarticulated character since there is no one that he can narrate himself to. Until Abbas’ death, in real terms, nobody pays attention to Maryam’s history as well. Nick seems to listen to Hanna; however, he is actually not that interested in hearing Hanna’s feelings. Harun triggers Jamal’s will to tell stories. The novel ends Jamal’s short story named *The Monkey from Africa*. “That this short story goes by the same title Abbas conferred upon himself signifies that though the novel is completed, Abbas’s story is not over and that he must be sought both physically as the family plans to visit Zanzibar, and imaginatively through stories – even after his death” (Kaigi, 2013: 138).

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important to point out that Gurnah’s narrating style is quite distinctive. Gurnah jumps between time sequences, perhaps causing difficulties for the reader to follow the story. This might be due to the complexity of the reality of an immigrant’s life. It is not possible to explain the stories of these immigrants with one narrator. From time to time, inner voices are heard through the fiction, or sometimes the omniscient narrator pops up to have the audience see and grasp the character’s personal life experiences. Gurnah emphasizes the point in his fiction that marginalized groups can narrate their own lives since they are too complex. In his essay “At the Margins: Silences in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift*”, Kimani Kaigai states: “Through the multivocal construction of the narration, and letting the narrators disclose to the reader that the story is being told from unreliable memory, Gurnah manages to caution the reader to neither be sentimentally overwhelmed by migrant stories simply because they are interestingly told, nor to be overly dismissive of stories simply because it seems likely they ‘are not even true’ as the opening quote suggests” (Kaigai, 2013:138). To conclude, the lives of immigrants include much deeper meanings than can be seen at first glance. Gurnah’s use of different narratives makes it possible for the reader to understand exactly what these immigrants have been through in a more meaningful way.

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