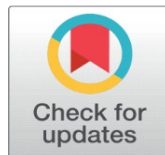


ENCOUNTERING STRANGE LAND: LIFE OF MIGRANTS IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S THE LAST GIFT

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ABSTRACT

Migrants have cross-cultural living experiences of their homeland and the host country. These migrants have a sense of belonging to countries and communities beyond their national borders. These migrants who cross national boundaries often find themselves in a state of great desperation and fear. Therefore, these displaced refugees experience fear of strangers, social isolation, and racial trauma. These asylum seekers overcome challenging and harmful situations and try to construct their own identities. Abdulrazak Gurnah is an East African of Tanzanian origin and works as a professor at Kent University in the UK. As a migrant, he deals with issues of belongingness, colonialism, displacement, memory, and migration in his writings. The Last Gift, Gurnah's eighth novel sheds light on the traumatic experiences of displacement and struggles through his character Abbas, the protagonist, who has migrated from the East Coast of Africa to England. In his search for social space in a host land, his psychological depression, and his ethnic distress as a migrant writer, Gurnah graphically explores the complexities of his life in a strange land. This article focuses on encounters faced by the migrants as they try to relocate and construct an identity of their own in the strange land. It also focuses on the refugees' ability to address the troubles they experienced and discovers the difficulties faced by first and second generation immigrants.

Keywords: Displacement, Transnational, Migration, Racial and Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Transnational migrants cross national borders to overcome poverty but struggle to find a solution in a new country. These displaced migrants have a sense of belonging to countries and communities beyond their national borders. Upegui-Hernandez, a literary critic, documents in his article, "Transnational Migration Theory", that "a process of movement and settlement across international borders in which individuals maintain or build multiple networks of connection to their country of origin while at the same time settling in a new country" (Upegui-Hernandez 2). So the migrants across who leave beyond national boundaries lives in a state of great desperation. Migrants go through many pathetic and traumatizing experiences in the strange land. These settlers face a lot of obstacles in their bid to find peace and shelter

in their migrant country, including the trauma of displacement, a sense of fear, racial prejudice, a feeling of depression, and social separation in an alien country. Tri Pramesti, a researcher documents in her article "The Narrative Displacement and Unhomeliness in Indonesian Exile Writings":

Displacement does not only mean dislocation, a movement from one place to another, it is more on how to adjust with the new environment and begins a new life, and in particular the necessity of mastery the new language. No matter how hard someone adjusts with the new environment... feel unhomeliness in a new place... occupy the position of margins and on the other hand their identity will not disappear without a trace in a new life. (44-5)

Gurnah, the Tanzanian professor of English and Postcolonial Literature at Kent University in Britain, is a novelist, short story writer, and critic. He was born in the East African island of Zanzibar in 20 December, 1948. He was forced to move to the United Kingdom because of the sustained violence against the Zanzibar Arabs in Tanzania. Gurnah has published ten novels, namely *Memory of Departure* (1987), *Pilgrims Way* (1988), *Dottie* (1990), *Paradise* (1994), *Admiring Silence* (1996), *By The Sea* (2001), *Desertion* (2005), *The Last Gift* (2011), *Gravel Heart* (2017) and *Afterlives* (2020). He has published ten novels which display his perspective on migrants, problems faced by them and their adaptability. Hence his works deal with colonialism, displacement, migration issues, belongingness and memory. His fiction revolves around inner anguish and adversity as they endeavour to settle down in the host land, assimilate with a new culture, and create new identities. *The Last Gift*, Gurnah's eighth novel, explores the predicament of immigrants who face multiple repercussions like psychological dilemmas, poignant obstructions, and their anxiety of hostility in the strange land.

Gurnah's *The Last Gift* addresses broader immigrant issues and different generations of immigrants in England. It recounts the story of Abbas, an immigrant from Zanzibar who settled in England. Abbas, the protagonist, leaves his native land of Zanzibar at the age of nineteen because of his family's poverty. Displaced people move away from their homeland and cross an international border to find safety in another country. In *The Literature of Displacement* examines that "A displacement can take place in our lives in the sense of moving, or being moved, from one location to another...human displacement, a broad category under which to consider narratives generated by migration, emigration, exile, and enslavement" (English). Working as a sailor, Abbas and his fellow migrants become aliens in their new homeland.

Settling in Britain turns out to be a painful process for Abbas. His departure from Zanzibar has already been a kind of death for him. "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... He had left things for too long and there was no one to blame but himself" (Gurnah 1). His adjustment is not all that easy for him, which could be observed as the distress of departure. "Leaving was already a kind of death and dying again did not seem as unbearable. It was not because of life was such a tragedy that I desired it to be short but there did not seem any good reason for it to go on as it was" (Gurnah 239). Immigrants are required to move to a strange land because they have no money and no choice. Edward W. Said, a literary critic, in his book, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (2000), expresses his views on exile, he observes:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. (*Reflections* 173)

Migrants are dealing with a wide range of stressors in a strange land. Heidarizadeh, a researcher, documents in his article "The Significant Role of Trauma in Literature and Psychoanalysis" that "a traumatic event involves a single event or experience; it involves the feelings and emotions" (Heidarizadeh 789). Immigrants are suffering from the trauma of relocation to a new country, like fear, homelessness, isolation, and oppression.

Abbas struggles to encounter social isolation in the strange land. He is unable to walk long distances because of his diabetic crisis. After forty-four years of living in England, he still calls himself "a long time ago and I am still here, like a tiresome guest in my own life" (Gurnah 239). He describes himself as "the sinful traveler fallen ill in a strange land, after a life as useless as a life could be. Talking hurt him, it gave him a pain in the chest, and he was too weary to explain" (Gurnah 9). Being an immigrant, England is a strange land for him, and it's difficult to live in. Masango, a researcher, documents in his article "The Pain of Migrants in a Strange Land" that:

Emotional states of new alien migrants in pain in a strange land include numerous transient moods or anxiety disorders, some of which can also have longer duration effects on victims of abuse. Because of the bitter experiences,

most new alien black migrants ...pressure for money from family members back home in Nigeria or other African countries where they migrated from, is responsible for most migrants' emotional state of pain. Most of the time, these migrants suffer anxiety disorders, which often leave them sad, moody and sorrowful. (Masango 2)

In England, Abbas has to do the filthy work on board the ship that makes him feel inferior: "We stepped out of their way when we saw them coming, not only on that ship but everywhere. I don't know how the world learned to fear them so, but I know I have still not learned to rid myself of it even now. I have to be firm with myself not to step aside, not to defer, to say I'm afraid of nothing" (Gurnah 250-51). Abbas does not feel like an integral part of the English community. Katharina Spreier, a researcher, observes in her article that "Immigrants also face various hardships when in the host society - such as exploitative work conditions, inadequate living conditions, hostility, and discrimination - which may lead to psychological conditions for some individuals" (Spreier).

Second-generation immigrants also face the predicaments connected with the search for a new identity. Russell King and Anastasia Christou, literary scholars, in their article, "Diaspora, migration and transnationalism: Insights from the study of second-generation 'returnees'" opines that "I was born in England but I always felt unwelcomed in my own country, so I can't call England home, if you mean home as a place of warmth and comfort... prejudice and discrimination was always there... in London you grow up constantly looking over your shoulder... I'm comfortable in my own skin. I'm a very hard worker..." (176).

Anna and Jamal try to settle in the country where they were born and raised, but the strange land still considers them migrant workers. Even though they are second-generation migrants, their identity as British is not accepted in Britain because of racial politics. Jamal changes and adapts to his new transnational identity, but English society does not accept him.

The Last Gifts shows Abbas's children, Anna and Jamal's feelings of alienation. Abbas's son, Jamal, is twenty-six, doing a Ph.D. at the University of Leeds, and his research is on "migration trends and policies in the European Union" (Gurnah86). Jamal views displacement as a very frustrating experience. "Moving is a moment of ruin and failure, a defeat that is no longer avoidable, a desperate flight, going from bad to worse, from homelessness to homelessness, from citizen to refugee, from living a tolerable or even contented life to vile horror" (Gurnah 73). Jamal never felt attached to his birthplace (England), and his academic position, particularly the subject of his Ph.D. studies, makes him feel strange:

That feeling – that there was something to be ashamed of – had been with him most of his life, even when he did not know of its presence and had only slowly begun to understand its several causes. It added to the sense of difference and oddness that he had grown up with, a sense of strangeness. He had learned to recognize that feeling in many ways and not just in response to hostility and unkindness and the teasing at school. He saw it in the stilted and careful smiles he received from some of the mothers of other children he knew, in the way people tried hard to prevent him from noticing that they had seen something to notice, in the ingenuous and sometimes insistent and cruel questions the children asked about his country and its customs. It was years before he learned to say this is my country, and it was Hanna who taught him to say that. (Gurnah45)

Abbas's daughter, Anna is twenty-eight, teaches English at a school, and has moved in with her English boyfriend, Nick. She tries very hard to fit into English culture. Anna endeavours to enhance herself as a young Englishwoman moving in with Nick, describing it as "...starting again, like making something new out of bits and pieces, like having another go at getting it right this time" (Gurnah 31). She attends the Easter ceremony with Nick and his family. In lunchtime conversation, the inhospitality makes her feel inferior: "She did not think they liked her, and she could not make herself like them, not even Jill (Nick's mother), who had shown her kindness. She thought it was a kindness offered in shame to disguise their distaste" (Gurnah 228). She has to eventually break up with Nick, the boyfriend because his family is adamant that Anna is not a British citizen. When Uncle Digby inquires about her parents' origins, she replies that they are from East Africa. "'To look at you, I'd say you are from the coast', Uncle Digby said, announcing her origins with authority . . . where on the coast was she from?" (Gurnah 117). Therefore, Nick's family creates inhospitable relationships with Anna by questioning her citizenship and marginalizing her from their society.

'But what was she before she was British?' ... 'Do you mean you don't know, or you don't want to know? It makes me sad to hear you speak with such little interest about your home, Anna... We see families falling apart because their children do not want to know about the world their parents are originally from. To keep communities together, host and stranger need to know each other, but we cannot know each other if we don't know ourselves. We who care for the welfare of immigrants work as hard as we know how to get that message across, to encourage people to know. Those words I am British feel like a cold tragic blast to me sometimes. (Gurnah116-118)

Settlers undergo many poignant experiences in their strange land. These migrants face extreme discomfort or unfriendliness with people from other cultures and intolerance towards migrants, like racial discrimination and prejudice. Migrants feel discomfort while interacting with people from other cultures, especially white people in England. Immigrants often experience racial prejudice and unwelcome gestures in the host country. Katharina Spreier, a researcher, observes in her article that "Immigrants also face various hardships when in the host society - such as exploitative work conditions, inadequate living conditions, hostility, and discrimination - which may lead to traumatic sequelae or psychological conditions for some individuals" (Spreier). Abbas and his family endure different forms of racial trauma from the host people and society. Nick, Anna's boyfriend, overtakes xenophobic opinions on immigrants by making fun of Anna's family. He utters:

I feel sorry for people like you because you don't know how to look after yourselves. Your father was a whingeing tyrant, bullying everyone with one misery or another, in the grip of a psychic crisis, so it seemed ... But no, it had to be another festering drama. And then it turns out your father is an absconder and a bigamist but he couldn't just talk about this, the whole crowd of you in the grip of a hopeless melodrama, acting like immigrants. (Gurnah 235)

Anna endures different forms of racism and inhospitality from the host people. She becomes embarrassed and regretful for describing her family and especially her father, which "made him sound like a bigoted immigrant" (Gurnah 114). She finally transforms into a sympathetic person and changes her position to reconcile with her father. After her breakup, she deliberately starts a new life: "her life was about to start again and she was twenty-eight years old, a good age, and she could feel full of vigour and hope" (Gurnah 237).

Transnational migration involves confronting and reconstructing a migrant's identity in a new culture. It leads to the rise of new communities and the formation of new identities and relationships in a strange land. Settlers often face the difficulty of learning a new language, adjusting to a new environment, and navigating the social system in their host country. Gurnah's *The Last Gift* traces the complexity of a migrant's life in the host land, but he tries to overcome the distressing situation. Abbas tries to construct a space for himself in the strange land. Abbas builds a feeling of homeliness and happiness in a foreign land after getting into a relationship with Maryam. Abbas's personality has developed so tremendously that he has earned a white girlfriend. He smiles at Maryam, "the happiness of his life" (Gurnah 242), a smile that "made her feel good that smile, as if she was someone he had recognized, as if they were part of an understanding, or something the two of them knew that no one else there did" (Gurnah 14). To Maryam, "he was such a battler... they were so lucky...to have found each other like that ..." (Gurnah 50). A strong sense of attachment to each other makes Abbas's family a close-knit family with children who also strive to make sense of their lives.

Abbas wants to buy a new house that will develop his personality in this strange land. He saved enough to buy a home where they could feel secure and protected: "Her swaggering sailor man turned inspired householder because he was inspired. He wallpapered, retiled the bathroom, repaired what needed repairing, and turned out to be a tireless gardener. He planted vegetables and flowers and a plum tree" (Gurnah 83).

Gurnah's *The Last Gift* reflects the piteous experiences of immigrants' struggles and anxieties and details settlers' psychological behaviour. His narratives deal with his characters' negotiations of their various experiences as immigrants leaving their homelands, entangled between different locations, and trying to build their identities. Gurnah's *The Last Gift* highlights the root causes of dislocation and emotional pain suffered by alien settlers in England. *The Last Gift* explores not only the immigrant's painful experiences in the host country but also the issues surrounding migration and its impact on the migrants. Gurnah's works not only emphasize the positive experiences of transnational identities but also address the difficulties of migrants.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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