



## MIGRATORY EXPERIENCE IN THE NOVELS OF ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

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### Abstract

Being educated in Tanzania and then migrated to England for his further exploration of study and career, Gurnah has gone through many experiences of conflict between racial identity and personal adjustment. Gurnah's ethnic identity to his Asian-African roots through his soul as well as body co-exists and reflects through his narrative gesture. Edward Said in this respect has commented, "Expatriation/exile for the intellectual is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled and unsettling others. You cannot go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation" (1994, 365). The subject of rootlessness is evident in most of the novels of Gurnah, as Monica Bungaro rightly comments, 'The rootless nomadic traders of Gurnah's controversial novel, *Paradise* (1994), who exist in many languages, races and religions, as well as *Dottie*, a mixture of African, Punjab, English components, and the Tanzanian émigré school teacher who eventually decides to go back to his country in *Admiring Silence* (1997), are symptomatic examples of this 'restlessness' and 'movement' and of the author's experimentation with a changing reality observed from a continually de-centred and decentring position' (2005, 25-26)

**Key Words:** contemporary, culture, experiences, identity, postcolonial, relationship, slavery

### Introduction

On the basis of recent studies on contemporary writing, we can locate Gurnah's novels within the British literary canon of postcolonial writings. Ann Blake in this regard acknowledges *Dottie* as a series of well-structured narrative:

But, in the context of the postcolonial domestic novel, what most distinguishes Gurnah's novels is that themes of racial violence, the legacy of slavery, and cultural definitions of the British subject, together with the migrant's search for family and identity – for 'home', are here incorporated in many layered narratives of family relationship and marriage, the domestic novel's traditional matter (2001, 51).

Blake suggests that Gurnah deviates from his contemporary writers in terms of depicting migrant experience in Britain. More precisely, Gurnah appears to be more fascinated to the conventional forms and structures that unfold socio-cultural and familial relationships through different generations in Britain. Through the life of more than one generation in Britain, Gurnah is keen to create a historiography of mass migration. The intergenerational narrative device permits the reader to get acquainted with a time span of over fifty years. It portrays a social discourse of the migrants from the different colonies and their progressive integration into political and social realm of Britain. This significant narrative technique employed by the author gives an opportunity of reconnoitring extended episodes in recent British social history.

In the novel *Dottie* we are presented with different dislocated characters. Some of them are



born in Britain but still dislocated because they have no white colour of their skin and also have no other marks of belongingness. So they are identified with migrants who are alike in skin colour. Dottie's mother, after running away from her family in Cardiff at the age of seventeen, she changes her name from Bilkisu to Sharon. After that she keeps wandering as a prostitute in different towns in the United Kingdom:

At the age of thirty-six she was a derelict, tortured by a vile disease whose name she dared not even utter to her children. She was broken by misery, and filled with despair at her wasted life. By then they were living in South London and Bilkisu's mind was constantly wandering back to her childhood. Often now she talked of returning to Cardiff to die, and it would fall to Dottie to comfort her. I don't even have a name; Bilkisu would cry (Dottie, p.27).

It was the time when she was taking her last breathing. When she was admitted to in the hospital by a black unknown person, the doctors found 'her body was so full of poison that they could not save her. In her uterine canal, they found a pair of nylon stockings that was green with slime' [sic] (Dottie, p.28).

The death Sharon changed the course of orphaned children. They all were separated and had gone through different ways:

Sophie was to be sent to a special girls' school in Sussex because she was backward. Hudson was to be fostered out to a family in Dover. Dottie was to be left to fend for herself since she had a job and was eighteen, but she was not to worry because Mrs Brenda Holly [the social worker] herself would come and check that she was all right (Dottie, p.32).

The orphaned children are isolated because they do not know about their relatives. The narrator communicates with the reader that Sharon never informed her children anything about their relatives: 'She did not understand until it was too late, and perhaps not even then, that her children would need those stories to know who they were. . . . So they did not know that Bilkisu's father was a Pathan called Taimur Khan' (Dottie, pp.15-16). We come to know about Taimur Khan later in the novel. Taimur Khan had come from Pakistan after the death of his father. We come to know about the past of Taimur Khan that, during the First World War, he 'found himself working as a sailor on a Royal Navy ship, the *Argent*, in the Shat el Arab by Basra' (Dottie, p.18). Taimur Khan, the captain of the ship, has been granted 'the right to call himself an Englishman' (Ibid) for his courage. For his bravery, he deported to England and 'he arrived in London in April 1919 and took a train to Cardiff [...] there were many black and brown people, some of whom had been living there for decades and generations. Many of them were Somalis and were Muslims, so he would not lack hospitality'(Dottie, pp.18-19).

David Callahan in his analysis suggests, 'what Dottie desires is to have her identity grounded in family, secured in the community, and shielded from traumatic interruption'(2013, 29). Keeping in mind the end goal to provide social significance to her separated family, Dottie starts by attempting to unite her siblings again after their dispersal by Social Welfare authorities. Dottie prevails with regards to taking them back to her home however Hudson gets engaged with drugs addiction and died in the end while attempting to find his father in America. Sophie declines to go to attend school and gives birth to a baby boy. She named her baby Hudson after her dead sibling. Dottie after getting self- educated has



found a superior work. But she faces so many questions about her background at the time of interview:

Dottie was invited for an interview at Lever House just off Blackfriars Bridge. She borrowed some smart clothes from Estella and went [...] the man who interviewed her looked amused when she walked in, and asked her the question that earned her the appointment in the first place. What on earth made you think we would consider you for job like this? Your background is not at all adequate (Dottie, p.267).

Still Dottie never lose hope and she is committed with the spirit that she must produce her life out of her ruined past.

Dottie's approach towards the life can be compared with the theory of '*post- memory*' given by Marianne Hirsch. Her theory focuses on the experiences of second- generation holocaust survivors that highlight the importance of '*memory*' and '*after memory*' which plays a meditative role for current generation to feel the traumatic situation of past in which their parent lived:

Post-memory characterises the experiences of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor re-created. [...] This condition of exile from the space of identity, this diasporic experience, is characteristic of post-memory (1996, 653).

Hirsch elaborates that the children of the holocaust survivors go through psychological apprehension of being marginalised. Although Hirsch develops this concept in relation to the Jewish but she is very much assertive to say that 'it may usefully to describe the second-generation memory of other cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences' (Ibid, 656); and I find it worthy to include this theory here while analysing *Dottie*.

Through a profound analysis of Dottie's character, it can be traced that how traumatic family history impacts the present. Similarly as with all offspring of diaspora, Dottie's understanding of leaving home and settling in another nation is missing as an occasion in her life despite the fact that it comes altogether to shape the way towards getting her own identity in Britain. She is a fatherless child of second-generation migrants.

Bungaro in his study points out how '[r]ace (here read black) and gender (here read female) are the main stigmatized markers on the practice/politics side of the border, but they are not the only markers, for they trade places in a fluid system in which differences of nationality, sexuality and class are interchangeable' (2005, 26). Even though Dottie born in England and belongs to third-generation immigrants, her identity as a British is subjected to the racial politics of Britain. Dottie's supreme desire of life is to find her ethnic root and feel at home. We can point out it from the novel when her teacher suggests her:

That all people were the same and that she should do best to realize that she now lived in England, and she should determine to do what she could to make herself acceptable. She could do more to help herself to that end than behave to such an obstinate and dreamy way [...] when in Rome you have to do as the Romans (Dottie, p.11).

Though this is an example of rhetoric delivered to Dottie by her teacher, she is aware of the



fact that here people are not the alike. Dottie is reminded even in her family that people are neither equal nor the same. As her brother Hudson considers himself as:

‘Different from all of them [...] his father was an American Negro [...] the father was a fabulous creature who was part of the glamour of America [...] Nobody talked of who Dottie’s father was, or Sophie’s, he reminded his sisters. Nobody knew, not even their mother [...] I am not a bastard I am not a bastard like you’ (Dottie, p.13).

And further he declared that ‘when he was older he would go to New York to find his father’. Through the above statement it seems that Hudson contends to migrate to an ‘imaginary homeland’ the phrase coined by Rushdie, but Dottie resolves to make UK her homeland.

As Lewis in his analysis suggests that she starts with self-enlightening through reading different books, ‘She read with a relish that she found in nothing else. Each new piece of knowledge suggested the next so she moved from one book to another with the rightness of logical discovery. Sometimes she tried to write down what she had found out but it took her too long to do this’ (Ibid, p. 48). Lewis’ observation is very much justified in the relation with her Dottie’s engagement with different texts that signify her “struggle to create alternative, self-authored ways that allow her to overcome the ‘racial deficit’ bequeathed [her] by a *racialised* English Literature” (Ibid). The difficulty and her limited literacy during the course of self-educating are reflected through the following passage:

She still could not read the large Dickens books she had once taken out of the library, and at times she despaired that she ever would. In her mind that had become the test of her advances. How could she ever think of herself as learning anything when a whole row of large Dickens novels stood on the library shelf, looking down at her? And Dickens was not the only one to mock her with ignorance. Everywhere she went, everything she did announced her stupidity to her. She did not even know who Archbishop Lanfranc was, or what he did. Everyone else in the country probably did (Dottie, p.49).

In any case, in spite of her learning from book, Dottie does not get away from the dominant feeling of an absence of adequate understanding to enable her to face the questions of others. We can notify a moment from the text when her friends at work have confronted on issue of migration, she does not try to make them understand about migration:

With her limited knowledge, Dottie starts from finding the significance of her name to attaining education. She makes up her consciousness to discover self personality and her status as a black girl in the world of white. During the course, she comes in contact with an old black migrant Dr Murray from Algeria at the library. Dr Murray becomes a kind of knowledge resource to fulfil her motive to understand the historical position of black in the world of white. Dottie’s perpetual curiosity to know the history as well as geo-politics of black people is like a self-quest to find her genealogy to which she can get identified.

Gurnah through using inter-textuality in his text enables Dottie to make conversation with other similar and dissimilar worlds through official or unofficial sources. For example when she tries to find about the racial riots in Stepney in 1919, she ‘had not got anywhere with the encyclopaedia [...] She did not know how to look up riots in Stepney’ (Dottie, p.105). She then turns to inquire Mike Butler, her work mate who ‘seemed to have been present at every important event in recent years, perhaps every notable happening in the entire



twentieth century' (Dottie, p.96). Dottie acquires some terrible facts from Butler that have moulded her views about the world. Butler's accounts of the specific events help Dottie's to get familiar with the unknown facts of her own world and of the past as well:

This information is very essential for Dottie, since it creates the context with her current situation in which she is keen to understand the world. The places mentioned in the above quoted lines from the text are the symbols in the novel to depict how different worlds sometimes meet with each other and how it is possible to live with those who are not alike. Dottie by the end is empowered to recognise the fact that the world before was not exceptional in treating with its *others*. She also realised that as an *others* in current Britain, she first needs to learn from this fact described by Butler. However Dottie does not know any direct events related to her grandfathers' life, but still this information enables her to understand that xenophobic period in which Taimur Khan, her grandfather lived. Dottie then settles with an opinion that there are no considerable changes since her grandfather's time.

Through above quoted lines from the text, we can hear the sound of racist comments from which Dottie must overcome if she wants to find a homely space. We can notice Dottie's courage to buy a house in Clapham which is dominated by white population. She has dream to buy 'a clean, cheerful house, with plenty of room for our little child to play. It will have a drawing room and a nursery. And a real garden at the back [...] like a dream house' (Dottie, p.198). Most probably she gets inspiration to buy a house in the white dominated area through Dr Murray who has owned a house in Clapham. And even during riots against black in Clapham, Dr Murray was survived. Dottie's optimistic approach can be traced through the line, 'here and there in the primordial chaos, a little flower appeared' (Dottie, p.106). In this way, I find Gurnah is competing with his optimistic power of narrative with Robert Browning's poetic power of optimism.

Dottie also challenges the views on the basis of which an anti-migrant sentiment has been created in contemporary Britain:

Did they know what was being said about them? She did not see where these fears of the black man turning criminals came from. They were just making a living. Only the other day she had seen in a newspaper that hundreds of thousands of people left England in the last year to find a better life in America and Australia and South Africa. Hundreds of thousands! In the same year, hundreds of thousands of others had left Italy and Germany and Holland to seek a better life (Dottie, p.59).

Such knowledge reflects through above lines is a clear indication of her growing knowledge. It depicts that Dottie keeps herself updating with current situation from news sources. Her assertiveness reveals about the hatred and intolerant tendencies of the contemporary English society towards migrants. Dottie also exposes the hypocrisy of the people around her who declare they are not racist. We can trace such hypocrisy from the statements of William Hampshire, Dottie's co-worker. He asserts that 'not have anything about them [black people] personally. For all I know they are fine people [...] but their methods are not the kind I would want to see practised in England [...] If it was up to me, I would send them all home tomorrow' (Dottie, p.58). As a reader we come to see Dottie's journey from an illiterate and ignorant Dottie to an enlightened Dottie who now knows about the real nature of the people around her and how to manage with them.



Dottie's concern for her sister Sophie also occupies a significant place in the text towards which we should turn out our analysis. While giving the space for Sophie in the text, Gurnah must have been thinking of portraying Sophie in contrast of Dottie's traits. When Dottie realises about the interest of their landlord and his erotic gaze at Sophie, Dottie tries to protect her from the landlord: 'His pursuit of Sophie was casual but insistent. He asked about her, brought her small presents, chocolate or candy and always managed to hold her hand or stroke her cheek' (Dottie, p.67). Sophie as being unaware of the repercussions, it seems by her responsive approach that she is relishing this sensual treatment of the landlord. Dottie tries to discourage her from that predatory man but she does not get succeed to save her. Dottie is encouraging her to pursue education and warns her that 'without education everything else was a waste of time' (Dottie, p.70). But she laughs at this idea eventually she is trapped by various men in her life. When Sophie is thinking to leave home, it reminds Dottie of her mother Sharon who also left her home. Dottie imagines:

It made her look like a street tart. Perhaps such things did run in the blood [...] she watched her sister walk away waving as if she was leaving for a long journey. Sharon must have taken the same pleasure at things like that at one time anyway (Dottie, p.93).

While Dottie has been putting all effort to improve her life, Sophie does not show same conviction and determination towards her life. She makes herself submissive to the predatory men who come in her way. She is usually guided by the decisions of other people. Even she does not have name to give her new born baby. She keeps waiting for her the boyfriend and father of her baby to come but Jimmy never comes and ultimately she named her baby after her dead brother Hudson.

The journey that Gurnah's protagonist Dottie takes towards social consciousness acculturation in the words Paul Gilroy is called the culture of conviviality:

Conviviality introduces a measure of distance from the pivotal term "identity", which has proved to be such an ambiguous resource in the analysis of race, ethnicity, and politics. The radical openness that brings conviviality alive makes a non-sense of closed, fixed and reified identity and turns attention toward the always un-predictable mechanism of identification (1993, p.xi).

Gilroy's notion in the context of Dottie's journey is significant to understand particular situation in which someone starts to recognise the continuous changes at micro as well as macro level. Dottie's gradual consciousness of being a black female in the white dominated society demonstrates how her multicultural and racial identity occupies a space in modern nation. And after going through this process, unlike her mother and her sister, she endeavours to control of her destiny by the end of the novel. So she can be regarded as a product of transformation, economic independency, and ultimately enlightened personality.

Gurnah follows narrative ethics to develop Dottie not only socially or culturally but also psychologically. His intention seems to show *Dottie's* evolution commencing from being alienated to synthesis as a person; and further he transmits on to her progression as a woman who gets opportunity to interact with different cultures at same time. As Monica in her critical analyses suggests that:

## Conclusion



By withholding information on the fate of his female characters, Gurnah creates for his readers a sense of the uncertainty that he sees as dominating the lives of his people. The posing of ethical and social choices and the individual's ability to weigh and make choices are at play here. Gurnah's urbane critique of postcolonial societies makes apparent the magnitude of the psychic damage inherent to many master-slave relationships and the propensity for any European, colonial arrangement to redress the damage in colonial subjects (Ibid, p36).

The above perception is very much sound in context of narrative gesture that Gurnah incorporated in his novel *Dottie*. Though it is narrated by third person unnamed narrator, but it seems like *Dottie* is communicating with the readers in first person autobiographical tone that enhance the aesthetic value of the novel,

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