

FRAGMENTS OF THE PAST: MEMORY, TRAUMA AND IDENTITY IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S THE LAST GIFT

M. Pattammal¹, Dr. C. Shola Fernando²

¹Ph.D Scholar (Full – Time), Register No: 22112024012008, Department of English, Aditanar College of Arts and Science Tiruchendur Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India.

²Research Supervisor Assistant Professor of English Aditanar College of Arts and Science, Tiruchendur, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India.

ABSTRACT

Abdurazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* deeply explores the relationship between memory, trauma and identity, weaving a narrative that examines the lasting effects of displacement and personal history. Through the protagonists fragmented recollections, the novel delves into the burden of migration, the struggle to create identity and the haunting presence of unresolved pasts. This paper analyses how Gurnah employs memory as both a narrative and a thematic device, illustrating the tension between personal and collective histories. By placing *The Last Gift* within the border of the Postcolonial Literature, this study highlights the novel's engagement with the themes of exile, cultural hybridity, and the search for belonging. Ultimately, this paper argues that Gurnah's portrayal of memory and trauma serves as a powerful lens through which identity is continuously negotiated and reconstructed.

Keywords: Memory, identity, trauma, migration, displacement.

“Memories, even your most precious ones, fade surprisingly quickly. But I don't go along with that. The memories I value most, I don't ever see them fading.” (280)

From *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro

Each moment that passes creates a vast memory woven with endless incidents. Each incident represents experiences, emotions and trauma which shapes our identity. Memories become clear some time and appear blur other time. The brain records the moment and constantly recreate or reconstructs those incidents when it is retold. According to the new experiences, emotions and present thought, people might alter or add some details to suit their need. This study about memory in Literature focusses on the memories based on one's individual experience. The techniques like flashbacks, unreliable narration explores the trauma, through which the memories can be presented.

Memory also navigates the displacement, shapes identity and allows individuals to maintain connection with their homeland, while adapting to the new culture. Memory, migration, trauma and identity are interwoven with one another and shapes the lives of an individual by helping them to understand their past, present and future. This paper explores the traumatic past memories of Abbas from the novel *The Last Gift* (2011) by Abdulrazak Gurnah. It observes the trauma, individual and collective memory, Abbas's immigrant experiences and how it shapes his individual identity.

The novel shows its fragmented narrative structure through the complexities of remembering and forgetting. The novel constantly navigates between the past and the present. Abbas's

memories suppress him and passes the trauma to his children as they were unaware of their identity. Since memory, trauma and the crisis with the identity are the diversified traits of displacement, it paves the way for the analysis of postcolonial identity, migration and policy of remembrance.

Abdulrazak Gurnah, the Noble Laureate “for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fates of all the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents” (BBC). He is a Tanzanian born novelist, currently lives in UK. Being born in the Sultanate of Zanzibar, he has moved to England in 1960 as an asylum seeker during the Zanzibar revolution. Later he became a Professor of English and Postcolonial Literature at the University of Kent. The writings of Gurnah always encircles the theme of war, displacement and the trauma of colonialism. The novel *The Last Gift* explores the complexities of memory in the context of migration and trauma.

The novel has an omniscient narrator, who explains the collapse of Abbas in a strange land after being there for 43 years. Abbas’s fragmented memories are symbolic of his fractured identity and his unresolved struggle with belonging. As Abbas nears his death, his fragmented memories begin to surface more frequently, forcing him to confront his past. His interior monologue explains the position of him in the postcolonial context. Abbas, a Tanzanian born man living in England. He’s an immigrant who suppress his past and his family who struggle to understand their fragmented heritage. His silence not only isolates him but also creates a void in his family’s understanding of their cultural roots. Through Abbas’s fractured recollections, Gurnah illustrates how migration disrupts memory, leading to identity crisis, intergenerational trauma and struggles with belonging. He holds things for too long and doesn’t reveal to anyone and he blames himself for not being explosive about his past. His collapse forces him to confront the traumatic memories of him to his family, through which he passes the trauma to his generation.

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. It was late in the day when it happened, returning home after work, but it was also

late in the day altogether. He had left things for too long and there was no one to blame but himself (1).

The theoretical insights of scholars such as Maurice Halbwachs, who introduced the concept of collective memory; Paul Ricoeur, who examined the relationship between memory and forgetting; and Marianne Hirsch, who developed the idea of post memory in relation to intergenerational trauma. By analyzing *The Last Gift* through these perspectives, this paper seeks to demonstrate how Gurnah’s novel contributes to broader discussions on memory, migration, and identity.

One of the most striking aspects of *The Last Gift* is its portrayal of memory as fragmented, elusive, and at times unreliable. Abbas, the protagonist, has spent most of his life in England without revealing much about his past in Zanzibar. His memories are not neatly preserved but rather repressed, resurfacing only when his physical decline forces him to confront them. This aligns with Paul Ricoeur’s (2004) argument that memory operates

selectively and some experiences are actively remembered while others are forgotten or being altered over a period of time. Abbas's silence about his past is not merely an absence of recollection but an active form of forgetting, a defense mechanism against trauma.

Gurnah's depiction of Abbas's memories also reflects the impact of colonial history on personal identity. Abbas's migration from Zanzibar to England is not simply a geographical shift but a rupture in his sense of self. The colonial and postcolonial histories of Zanzibar, marked by social upheaval and violence, inform Abbas's decision to suppress his past. This echoes the experiences of many postcolonial migrants who find themselves caught between the memories of their homeland and the realities of their new lives.

Memory in *The Last Gift* is not confined to Abbas alone; it extends to his children, Hanna and Jamal, who inherit the consequences of his silence. This dynamic is best understood through Marianne Hirsch's concept of post memory, which refers to the way trauma is transmitted across generations. According to Hirsch (1997), the children of trauma survivors internalize their parents' experience and their memories as if they were their own, even though they did not directly live through those events.

In the novel, Hanna and Jamal grow up in a household where their father's past is a mystery. They sense the weight of unspoken history but lack the details to fully understand it. This absence of knowledge affects their sense of identity and belonging. Jamal, in particular, struggles with his racial and cultural identity, feeling disconnected from both his British surroundings and his father's Zanzibar roots. Hanna, on the other hand, experiences this gap as emotional distance, leading to tension in her relationship with her father and at times she used to wonder how difficult for her "father to be a stranger and facing strangeness all his life" (119). Every time when his children face the English society, they were humiliated for being different from others and for their unknown identity. At the lunch meet with Nick's family, Hanna has been asked about her native and when she said "I don't know" (117), she was humiliated as "I'm shocked. 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" (117).

When Hanna says "I am British", he waved his words away and said:

We see families falling apart because children do not want to know about the world their parents came from. To keep communities together, host and stranger need to 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. (117 – 118).

The novel thus illustrates how memory is not only personal but also relational. The past does not simply disappear; it lingers, shaping the lives of those who come after. Abbas's eventual decision to reveal his story to his children is not just an act of personal catharsis but also an attempt to heal the fractures caused by his silence. In *The Last Gift*, Abbas's personal memories are deeply intertwined with the collective memory of postcolonial migration and displacement. His story is not unique but part of a larger historical pattern of people who have left their homelands in search of a better future, only to find themselves alienated in their adopted countries.

The colonial histories of Zanzibar and Britain are present in the novel, not as explicit historical accounts, but as undercurrents that shape the characters' lives. Abbas's silence can

thus be seen as a metaphor for the ways in which certain histories, especially those of former colonies are often omitted or distorted in mainstream narration. The structure of *The Last Gift* mirrors the concept of memory which is disjoint in nature, nonlinear, and often unreliable. The novel shifts between past and present, between different characters' perspectives, and between moments of clarity and obscurity. This fragmented narrative style reflects the difficulty of constructing a coherent self when one's history is marked by displacement and trauma.

By using multiple viewpoints, Gurnah allows readers to see how memory is reconstructed through different lenses. Abbas's version of events is not the only one; his wife and children also contribute to the process of remembering and interpreting the past. This multiplicity of perspectives highlights the idea that memories and identity is not a fixed entity and it is constantly evolving. And memory is essential to heal and to create an identity. Through *The Last Gift*, Abdulrazak Gurnah presents memory as a complex and contested space, deeply influenced by trauma, migration, and intergenerational transmission. The novel illustrates how memory shape identity while also revealing the limits of remembering and the costs of forgetting. After the death of Abbas, his family came to know their identities and their familial origin. At this moment, Hanna has the feel of being suspended between the real and the imaginary place shows the double consciousness which every migrant undergoes. Jamal and Hanna want to go back to their native Zanzibar and Jamal wants to write a short story with an immigrant subject and titled as "The Monkey from Africa".

Abbas's life is woven with the fragments of past that reshapes his family's identity. Being a victim of the Post Colonial society, he has carried the trauma all over his life which leads his children to struggle with identity crisis. They have forced to change their identity to survive in the alien land. Once they've found their identity after being a prey for a long time in the hands of the orientalist, they've decided to explore and cherish their origin. Abbas's journey from silence to revelation mirrors the struggle of many postcolonial migrants who navigates between past and present, loss and belonging.

WORKS CITED

Primary Source

Gurnah, Abdulrazak. *The Last Gift*. Bloomsbury, 2011.

Secondary Sources

Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Post memory*. Harvard University Press, 1997.

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. Faber and Faber, 2005.

"Nobel Literature Prize Abdulrazak Gurnah named winner 2021": BBC News, BBC, 07 Oct. 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-58828947> .(accessed date 06/02/2025)

Ricoeur, Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. University of Chicago Press, 2004.