

## “Exile” in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *The Last Gift*

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**Abstract:** In post-colonial literature, “exile” includes three meanings, namely, regional, racial, psychological, and cultural ones. The Tanzanian writer Abdulrazak Gurnah, winner of the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature, constructed the image of the African diaspora represented by the Abbas family in his work *The Last Gift*, which showed the process of their triple exile and personal identity pursuit. Based on the close reading of the text, this paper analyzes the diaspora status and identity reconstruction of the main characters in the work, aiming at further supplementing the research system of Gurnah’s novels.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Identity Reconstruction

### 1. Introduction

The 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to Tanzanian novelist Abdulrazak Gurnah (1948-), a British-based writer of African descent. An East African-born, British-exiled writer and scholar of West Asian ancestry and Arab culture, Gurnah grew up in a multicultural region and in an era of colonialism and post-colonialism. His novels focus on the dispersed lives and tragic fates of the minor characters under the background of colonial oppression, which is mainly manifested in the fragmentation of the protagonist’s original social identity and self-identity caused by the new social background, reflecting the suffering and identity crisis caused by colonialism and dispersal to the people.

Gurnah was born on the island of Zanzibar (incorporated into Tanzania in 1964) on the coast of East Africa. Zanzibar has a long history of colonization and became a British colony in 1890, only declaring independence in 1963. The ambiguity of Zanzibar’s cultural intermingling has had an obvious impact on Gurnah’s creative work, as his English writing is interspersed with vocabulary and allusions to Arabic, Kiswahili, and Punjabi, and his reflections on ethnicity, race, and colonial culture are often marked by the deep imprints of Islamic civilization and East African culture. He arrived in the UK in 1968 to study, and he later pursued a PhD and became a professor of English at the University of Kent, where he focused on postcolonial theory. Gurnah’s life is a state of dislocation and dispersion. On the one hand, there is the delay in time, i.e., he survives in the gap between the past and the future, and the time he really belongs to the “present” is very short and can be said to be fleeting. On the other hand, there is the change of space, as he is dispersed from Zanzibar in Africa to the UK, and he faces the fact that he can’t go back to his homeland to become a real stranger. He is a true stranger in a strange land. Whether in terms of time delay or spatial migration, Gurnah’s dispersed life and refugee status have contributed to his erratic existence, which also influences his novel style of dispersed narrative in the post-colonial context. And “Gurnah claims that he has never forgotten his hometown Zanzibar no matter where he is, which is not an irrepressible flood of emotions of the dispersed but a kind of ‘retrospective’ reflection, which is the conscience of the intellectuals”.<sup>[1]</sup> For Gurnah, whose 10 full-length novels are set in the socio-historical culture of Zanzibar and East Africa. Africa is Gurnah’s cultural root. He seeks to recreate the lives of the African people, thus drawing more people’s attention to Africa.

Gurnah’s eighth novel, *The Last Gift* (2011), focuses on the existential dilemmas and identity issues of the African diaspora in Britain. The protagonist is Abbas, a sixty-three-year-old immigrant from Zanzibar who is paralyzed by a stroke. On his deathbed, he finally dares to face himself honestly and tells his lifelong secret to a tape recorder as a “last gift” to his family. At the age of nineteen, he left his wife behind due to low self-esteem and suspicion and came to England to start a family with a mulatto girl, Maryam. Abbas had long escaped his previous life in the colonies, and as a result, he was seen by his children as a somber, evasive, and disturbed eccentric father. His wife, Maryam, born in England, is an outcast whose origins are a mystery, and who ultimately fails to find her own identity. His son, Jamal, and daughter, Hanna, are the descendants of immigrants who have difficulty integrating into

British society due to differences in color, race, and culture. And as their parents' identities are unknown, they are at a loss as to where they came from, and both of them are caught in the sensitivity and pain of being cautious, with a serious lack of sense of belonging. This paper focuses on the postcolonial writing in the novel, analyzes the geographical, spiritual, and cultural exile experiences of the main characters under the confusion of their identities, and explores the issue of the reconstruction of cultural identity on the basis of a close reading of *The Last Gift*.

At present, Western research on Gurnah has formed a relatively diversified research perspective, while China research on Gurnah is still in the preliminary stage, mainly in the form of introductory articles, and the current research on Gurnah's works is mostly focused on the two works *Seaside* and *Paradise*.<sup>[2]</sup> Therefore, the study of *The Last Gift* helps to promote the systematic study of Gurnah's works in China.

## 2. Abbas as a Symbol of Geographic Exile: a Rootless Wanderer

The protagonist, Abbas, is a typical image of the Afro-descendant "exile" portrayed by Gurnah in *The Last Gift*. When people leave the cultural context to which they belong and are exiled to a new environment, they are in a state of geographic exile, where their old selves cannot continue, and they have to adapt themselves to this unfamiliar environment. When the new environment is difficult to integrate and the old self cannot continue, they become rootless wanderers.<sup>[3]</sup> Born in Zanzibar, East Africa, Abbas ran away from home at the age of nineteen and became a sailor. At the age of thirty-four, he traveled to Exeter, England, and met Maryam, with whom he married and eventually settled in Norwich until he died at the age of sixty-three from three strokes. However, his extended stay in England did not provide him with a sense of belonging to his family, and he struggled to fit in, leading to a persistent sense of uncertainty and loneliness in exile. Throughout his life, Abbas kept the secrets of his past buried deep in his heart and kept his mouth shut, symbolizing his active severance of his ties to British society. Therefore, when his geographical exile occurs, he is destined to be unable to continue his original self in the new environment of England, and he is always accompanied by a spiritual lack of belonging. In Abbas's eyes, England was a strange land that did not want him. He was a rootless stranger who always thought that one day he will leave. Only in some port cities can he feel a trace of warmth when he saw immigrants like him who have left home for miles. When he saw old dark-skinned men alone, he thought, "They looked so strange," and "walking English streets like beasts out of their element, pachyderms on concrete pavement".<sup>[4]</sup> Thinking of his own helpless loneliness in a foreign country, he couldn't help but feel sorry for them as well as for himself. He also never got used to the English weather. On that cold February evening, everyone around him had put on heavy clothes according to their experience, but he always wore "the coat he wore for most months of the year",<sup>[4]</sup> and shivered in the cold. Despite having lived in England for many years, he still harbors a sense of wanderlust, "the habit of mind of a stranger unreconciled to his surroundings, dressing light so he could throw the coat off quickly when the time came to move on".<sup>[4]</sup>

According to Edward Said, "exile" is a form of cultural "dislocation" and "migration." When the geographical "displacement" is completed, the sense of cultural "dislocation" also arises.<sup>[3]</sup> The meaning of exile is given in his article entitled "Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals" in his book *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994), where he argues that:

The exile therefore exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half-involvements and half-detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on another.<sup>[5]</sup>

When Abbas came to England from East Africa, he was "displaced" from his place of existence, and with that came a sense of cultural dislocation. He wanted to integrate into the British cultural atmosphere but had to face the harsh reality that he was always on the margins of British culture, the other.

For the dispersed, drifting away from the homeland to a new country, accepting a completely different culture and customs, the body temporarily has a new home. But in their hearts, they can't let go of their longing for their homeland, and the national and personal memories in their souls can't be dissolved with the physical dispersion.<sup>[6]</sup>

Zanzibar is his homeland, where he has lived for more than ten years, so the influence of traditional national thinking and the Muslim cultural complex on him has become a cultural imprint that cannot be erased in his life. At the same time, they perceive themselves as being in a foreign country,

unconsciously amplifying their cultural discomfort, while firmly rejecting Western culture and values, and thus becoming more and more conservative in their attitudes towards culture and ideas.<sup>[7]</sup> The unfamiliar Christian culture of England was so overwhelming that he even considered it to be “the overwhelming corruption”.<sup>[4]</sup> Therefore, he insisted that his children stay away from all Christian activities organized by the school. In addition, the history of colonization in his hometown led to Abbas’s fear of the British, exacerbating his sense of “dislocation.” When he walks down the street, he finds himself “surrounded by these people, with their red faces and untruthful smiles and their fearful aura”.<sup>[4]</sup> He fears the English and knows that he has never learned to rid himself of that fear even now. Whenever he sees an Englishman approaching, he dodges aside to make way for them. “I have to be firm with myself not to step aside, not to defer, to say I’m afraid of nothing”.<sup>[4]</sup> Abbas was in the half of what Said calls “exile” and did not fulfill the other half of “exile”: “a secret outcast,” so he never transcended himself in exile and achieved spiritual liberation. Therefore, he has never transcended himself in exile and attained spiritual liberation.

Geographical and cultural exile ultimately leads to spiritual exile, which can also be understood as a feeling of rootlessness.<sup>[3]</sup> The place where a person was born is the origin of his coordinates in this world and also the base of his inner stability. Without a point of origin, the world is always uncertain to him, and his heart is also uncertain. When the dispersed person comes to a country with a cultural background very different from that of his home country, he is bound to feel confused about his belonging to the self, and it is difficult for him to perpetuate his self-identity in the new social environment, which leads to the exile of his mind. Abbas is the loneliest and most wandering character in this novel. As a teenager, he overcame all kinds of difficult conditions to study hard and eventually enrolled in a teacher training college. However, the infidelity of his first wife and the humiliation of his family made him lose hope in life, and he had to give up his decent and lucrative job as a teacher in his hometown and embark on the road of escape. The past humiliating experiences internalize unspeakable traumas, and as Freud discusses in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*:

Melancholia is mentally characterized by a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love, the inhibition of any kind of performance and a reduction in the sense of self, expressed in self-recrimination and self-directed insults, intensifying into the delusory expectation of punishment.<sup>[8]</sup>

As a result, Abbas never told his family about his past, his family, or even where he came from, saying only that he was “a monkey from Africa”.<sup>[4]</sup> The children remember him as a silent father. Most of the time, he would ignore the family’s questions, and if the children got on his nerves, a look of annoyance would appear on his face. He had lost his homeland as well as his place in the world and he had to be a stranger in another people’s land.

### 3. Hanna and Jamal as Symbols of Spiritual Exile: Cultural Roots Seekers

The novel also presents second-generation immigrants living between the strong British culture and the weak African culture, represented by the daughter Hanna and son Jamal. They were born in England and did not experience geographical exile, yet they were born into the complexities of racial exile. Their mother is a founding of unknown racial identity, and their father, despite being from faraway East Africa, never mentions his past or introduces them to his homeland. As a result, Hanna and Jamal are unable to define their cultural identity and find the culture of origin to which they are supposed to belong. At the same time, they are faced with the dilemma of not being able to integrate into British society, which leads to their lack of a spiritual home and their spiritual “exile.”

“Identity has social attributes. Identity is a product of society; on the one hand, society gives meaning to an individual’s identity, and on the other hand, identity needs to be constructed and refined gradually in society”.<sup>[9]</sup> For Hanna, she wanted to be accepted and respected in British society and wanted those around her to accept her as well. Therefore, she changed her name to Anna because it seemed to sound more “British”. She tries to transform herself into an Englishwoman in every way, changing the tone of her speech and the way she dresses, even though to her mother, Maryam, “it was as if she was deliberately remaking herself from someone she did not like”.<sup>[4]</sup> She is careful to conform to the dominant culture, and she doesn’t try to dispel Nick’s resentment of her father when she accidentally describes him as “a bigoted immigrant” in front of him.<sup>[4]</sup> “She wondered if it was to make Nick see that she was unlike them, that she was not one of those immigrants”.<sup>[4]</sup> As Hanna enters university, her accomplishments allow her to begin rebuilding her sense of identity. “She was fully Anna now, ” and the name Anna is no longer the only thing that symbolizes her “Britishness” but has

been relegated to the status of an “embellishment”.<sup>[4]</sup> Hanna desperately wants to fit in with white British society, represented by Nick’s family, and “wanted to feel that she had been invited into their warmth and intimacy”.<sup>[4]</sup> And her tightly dressed British identity does not change the persistent mainstream socio-cultural discrimination against immigrant culture as well as her own lack of cultural self-confidence and the low self-esteem and sensitivities that accompany her immigrant status. She is still scrutinized and questioned as the labeled displaced immigrant from Africa. She realizes that “she would inevitably fail to impress, and yet she would have no option but to try to please, and defer and play the fool”.<sup>[4]</sup> As Yang Jincai points out, “the hegemonic discourse of white British people always depicts them as foreigners, but never culturally absorbs them and makes them ‘real’ British”.<sup>[10]</sup> Even though Hanna was born in England, she is still not seen as British and will be asked where her true homeland is.

In addition, Eurocentric superiority is evident in the Nick family. “Britain’s Eurocentrism and deep-rooted Orientalist ideology prevented immigrants’ ethnic cultures from being treated equally. Immigrants from third-world countries are considered inferior, and their cultures are considered a mark of inferiority”.<sup>[11]</sup> Upon hearing that Hanna had never seen any kind of church service, Nick suggests that it was like “meeting someone who said he had never seen the moon”.<sup>[4]</sup> Nick’s father, Ralph, is keen to make comparisons of national character, but his real purpose is to demean other peoples, “a smug suspicion of everyone else’s unsteadiness,” which in turn emphasizes the qualities of the English.<sup>[4]</sup> This European egocentrism regards European culture as the highest evolutionary culture, while the national cultures of the Third World countries are extremely despised and even regarded as backward legacies destined to be eliminated. As Said argues in *Orientalism*, Orientalists put labels on East and West, “The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’ ”.<sup>[12]</sup> The arrogance and prejudice of this Western cultural superiority theory are directly reflected in Nick’s sister’s boyfriend, Anthony, calling Hanna a “jungle bunny” at the dinner table, which is offensive to black people.<sup>[4]</sup> Hanna is shocked by the call. In people’s everyday conversation, a subconscious action, a casual language, a complex expression can give off signals of racism. For the colonized, after de jure discrimination was abolished, de facto racial discrimination persisted, both in the form of racial discrimination by other organizations with significant influence, such as governments and businesses, and in the words, attitudes, and less overtly racist behavior of people.<sup>[13]</sup>

Despite the end of colonial rule, for Africa, racist discourse is still present in British society in the post-colonial era. Hanna has elements of both African and British geographies, but she does not belong to either of the two, placing herself in an awkward situation of dilemma. This is Hannah’s ethical dilemma: being “caught in the middle,” unable to return to Africa, and not well integrated into British society. As Nick becomes more and more successful at work, his white superiority gradually becomes apparent when dealing with Hanna, and he begins to become petulant, even interrupting her. Even when his misbehavior is exposed and Hanna breaks up with him, he is able to shamelessly molest her and toy with her “just to show her that he could have her whenever he wanted”.<sup>[4]</sup> And Hanna thought that “Just to take what he wanted. It was the colonial instinct”.<sup>[4]</sup> The Western hegemony represented by Nick turns the East represented by Hanna into the Other under the West, and Hanna gradually loses her right to speak and becomes an unspeakable object.

Hanna’s perception of her self-identity goes through a process from denial to affirmation. The attitude of Nick’s family towards Hanna exemplifies the white community’s alienation and rejection of the Third World immigrant community. And this existential situation of being othered causes the immigrant’s heart to gradually alienate itself from Western culture and to begin to reconcile with its own culture. Therefore, “She wished she could get up and leave, and walk quickly to the train station and travel to wherever her real nation was”.<sup>[4]</sup> That is, “when immigrants are discriminated against in the society to which they migrate, their identification with their original racial identity is strengthened by the threat and ostracism they feel”.<sup>[14]</sup> Hanna’s attitude towards her father also begins to change: she begins to understand the suffering he has endured and the sense of alienation that has accompanied him throughout his life, and realizes that his love is both clumsy and sincere at the same time. Regretting that she had described him as “a bigoted immigrant” in front of Nick, “She stood still for a long moment, thinking about him and begging pardon”.<sup>[4]</sup> At the end of the novel, she finally sees the nature of Nick’s colonialism, and after she breaks up with him she eventually gives up on continuing integrating into British society, and begins to re-examine her identity and rebuild her cultural identity.

Well, she told herself, she had better stop acting like an immigrant and go and take charge of herself. Her life was about to start again and she was twenty-eight years old, a good age, and she should feel full of vigour and hope.<sup>[4]</sup>

Toward the end of the novel, she accompanies her mother to her adoptive parents to find the mystery of her birth. And she is about to set foot in Zanzibar to trace her father's footsteps and past, returning to the roots of her people and culture.

Jamal, as the most educated person in his family, was able to understand more than Hanna, after he started his doctoral research on migration movements into Europe, the bitterness and dilemmas behind the immigrant community. "He had learned something of how precarious, how mean, how resourceful the lives of these strangers were, how blood-soaked some of their stories were".<sup>[4]</sup> And that accelerates his return of spiritual exile and the realization of self-identity. Thus, he waits patiently for his father's silence and he is also able to cast understanding on his mother's past. Hanna, on the other hand, considers these to be "these shitty, vile immigrant tragedies," and so she chooses to flee.<sup>[4]</sup> "She had given up trying to unravel her unknown mongrel origins, and interested herself in what she was in her life, not what she came from".<sup>[4]</sup> Jamal is able to look more rationally at his immigrant status and the various racism he encounters whether it is explicit or implicit. In addition, he is able to look objectively at the complex causes behind it. He moved into the apartment in a neat and organized manner, without bringing any of his own furniture with him. Everything was prepared by the landlord, and he showed complete acceptance of the new space. He lived harmoniously with different races of people in his new apartment. In his eyes, all the plants are bright and vibrant after the move, and his orderly integration with the new space demonstrates the acceptance and personal assimilation of a part of the dispersed people to the other place. Jamal's gradual growth through education and social activities, and his gradual internalization of the social culture and language of the other country as a personal expression, allows the reader to get a glimpse of how a part of the diaspora becomes a member of the cultural community in the new country. Such individuals eventually acquire a bicultural or multicultural mindset, and they demonstrate a highly tolerant attitude toward different cultures and can make certain cultural frame shifts. By virtue of his personal acceptance and adaptation to the society, he does not complain about his origins as Hanna usually does, and would rather become something he does not like than try to integrate into the British society. He is able to accept his immigrant status openly, empathize with other immigrants, and think about immigration on a higher level and show humanistic concern for the dispersed groups. For the African people who are still struggling, he believes that they just haven't found the right way to save themselves yet, so they shouldn't be discriminated against and we should do what we can to help them. When he meets the dark-skinned displaced people, he subconsciously gives them his sympathy and care. At the end of the novel, he embarks on a journey with Hanna to find their roots, and continues his research on immigration, and the story that Abbas told at the end of his life. People like Jamal are more open about their personal experiences and cultural conflicts, and can more easily reconstruct their personal identities. This young intellectual figure is also, to a certain extent, the voice of Gurnah's personal experience.

#### 4. Conclusion

It was only after decades of living as a refugee in Europe that Gurnah was able to return to his homeland to visit his ailing father. Therefore, what makes his creations so moving is precisely his own personal experience and his complex feelings towards his homeland. The past of his hometown constantly flashes in his mind, so his works mostly focus on identity, racial conflict and historical writing, etc., intending to show the survival of the dispersed immigrants in the post-colonial era, with a high level of practical significance.<sup>[15]</sup>

In *The Last Gift*, the fathers reminisce about their childhood, their families, and their homelands, i.e., "the dispersed are displaced, wandering, anxious, and hopeless under the tension between the native and the foreign cultures, with a longing for the new world and an attachment to the homeland".<sup>[16]</sup> The choice to flee brought the first generation of immigrants to a completely new environment, bringing them complex intertwining of life and emotions in the years that followed. The second generation of dispersed immigrants face the dilemma of their parents' identity and the unique silence of being in a new state of perplexity and confusion. What kind of attitude they take to face the new culture, how to deconstruct and reconstruct their personal identity, and how to maintain a delicate balance in the family in a foreign country or a new hometown are the fundamentals explored in this work. Gurnah's silent narrative focuses on those imperceptible voices and penetrates deep into the hearts of the characters. Abbas has long escaped from himself and is unwilling to look back on his colonial past; his son Jamal and daughter Hanna, as descendants of immigrants, are not accepted by the white society due to differences in skin color, race, and culture, even though they have abandoned their own cultural identities in an effort to fit in with the local culture. The impending death awakens Abbas to the value of his life experience as a piece of history for his family. Gurnah has consistently written in exile

throughout his long literary career, gradually forming a genealogy of exile writing on the themes of reflecting on colonial history, imperial politics, traumatic memories, cultural identities, and human desires. The novel's setting of the episode in which Abbas uses his voice to convey information about the family's history is of special significance. It brings the family closer together, while at the same time bringing it closer to the centrality of hearing and sound in African cultural traditions, thus uniting the family with the African cultural body. *The Last Gift*, a work that closely follows the context of its time, vividly shows readers, through its three main characters, the triple exile experienced by first- and second-generation African immigrants in the post-colonial era: geographic, racial, and spiritual, and depicts the confusion and search for identity that immigrants commonly experience as a result of the lack of identity in their diaspora countries. In addition, Gurnah's writing is not only limited to the African people, but also places the stubborn, voiceless, and chaotic others in the society under the whole human cultural community to think about, to depict the wider world, and to explore the common way out for the identity of the alienated people, which highlights the author's deep concern for the fate of the migrants who are sandwiched between two cultures, and demonstrates his deep concern for the fate of the migrants. By revealing the difficulties and challenges experienced by immigrants, the book can make people reflect on the roots of colonialism and racism, and call for a more inclusive and equal treatment of all immigrant groups in society. "The last gift" is not only the final guidance that Abbas brings to his family after his illness, but also a gift full of hope that Gurnah brings to the post-colonial dispersed cultural community, which also gives the text a deeper connotation and value.

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