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## Negotiating the Politics of Amnesia and Silence in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift*

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**Abstract:** Devastating secrets conglomerated with layered silences are at the heart of people when they are alienated from their own family roots, integrated with new people, suffered clashes of culture and history and ultimately become hysterically strange. Amnesia, or forgetting primarily the history and roots, is an attempt to acculturate in a space which is full of inscrutable dilemmas and discrepancies. My paper intends to unravel the varied attempts of both the natives and the immigrants to mingle in new social, cultural and political backdrops by pondering over silence as a trope in the novel of Abdulrazak Gurnah, *The Last Gift*. Situation defuncts and disjoints history, culture, memory and identity so much so that people are forced to suppress their truths. History itself emerges as a silent character in the relationships which is perpetually complicated by the ongoing events of the life. Accommodating past as a part of life intensifies the challenges of living.

**Keywords:** Amnesia; Memory; Identity; Silence.

### I

Medically, amnesia is a disruption and dismantling of the episodic memory, that is, the inability to remember events and experiences. But amnesia—historically, socially, and culturally—is a deliberate attempt or a conscious trope to forget grievous occurrences of life which are past and detrimental to get acculturated and endured in present situation. A produced impairment confines the memory according to the requirements of the people where they either cease to remember a memory or partially recollect it. This paper proposes to excavate the politics and problematic of amnesia and silence in the lives of different characters, especially the protagonist Abbas, in the corpus of Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel, *The Last Gift*. How new cultures, a new nation, a new history shape the life and living of people, how they are forced to forget their past to acculturate in



the new world, and how the past of the parents affects and manifests the lives of children. This is an intention to dissect the traumatic process of forgetting and remembering of history and culture in the backdrop of varied historical circumstances befall in East African lands of Zanzibar and London, simultaneously.

## II

Homogenizing<sup>1</sup> is a political and social process of nation building, which is concomitant with different histories—combined, restructured and represented—to form a new history in different situations, thereby forming a history of convenience. In the postcolonial era, a broad classification of the communities of ‘Us’ and ‘Other’<sup>2</sup> is indoctrinated and proliferated across the globe, where both the communities, equally and seamlessly, contour their histories and cultures to dominate and to get dominated. Ali Behdad, one of the eminent theoreticians, in his seminal book, *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States*, rightly points out that, forgetting “is a form of disavowal in which one consciously decides to keep certain knowledge at bay” (4). He compares the expansive process of historical forgetting with the Freudian notion of negation, which is “a removal of the repression, though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed” (Behdad 4). In the systematic procedure of negation, one may acknowledge and remember an event, but he may either deny its significance or refuse to take responsibility of it. Denial is a split perception of “what constitutes our reality, a perception vacillating between denial and a supplementary acknowledgement” (Behdad 4). Though people have access to reality through their memory, their continuous silence chooses to ignore it.

History, being a non-linear, unpredictable and misbegotten subject, undermines and disowns those ‘remnants of past’ which are individual, and are challenging the mythification process of nation formation. In multicultural lands, like the USA and the UK, immigrants are always identified as a threat to national culture but, in reality, they are essentially contributors to its formation. As national forgetfulness is repudiation for forming culture, individual forgetfulness is for abandoning hardship and anxiety, state of terror and humiliations. James Young and Jana Braziel in their influential book, *Race and the Foundations of Knowledge: Cultural Amnesia in Academy*, illustrates the fact that historical amnesia<sup>3</sup> is “. . . a deep unwillingness to face and confront the



inflicted wounds of the past . . . these wounds have been academic, intellectual, and ontological as well as material or physical” (2). They have also associated history and memory as, “entangled ideas, not separate ones with the first belonging ostensibly to public culture and the second to individual psyche . . .” (Braziel 3). Therefore, healing of any wound can be successfully done through remembering, and not through forgetting or historical erasure of public or private memory.

Both the selves of ‘Us’ and ‘Other’ mutually endeavor to evolve their trajectories to build a unified nation. Clive James in his path-breaking work, *Cultural Amnesia: Necessary Memories from History and the Arts*, explores through forty years of labor, the dark corners of the writings of different writers from different parts of the globe. He declares:

Young readers will find some of that story here, and try to convince themselves that they would have behaved differently. But the way to avoid the same error is not through understanding less. It can only be through understanding more. And the beginning of understanding more is to realize that there more than can be understood. (8)

The history, we understand, is not the complete history but it is like the tip of an iceberg, where more is kept underneath, constituting immense intensity and complications. Acknowledging history and taking liability of that history are two different shades of politics. The hegemon, the so called carrier of history, concedes that something has happened but they never accept how that event happened, or who is the perpetrator of that phenomenon. The natives hegemonize the ‘Other’ through interpreting their history in their own terms, but the immigrants also reinterpret and re-contour their history to get assimilated in new land. Behdad firmly points out that, “disavowal can be a more systematic form of denial in which the subject takes a self-righteous position,” which involves a conscious “distortions and misinterpretations of truth” (5).

Memory, as a manifestation, not only affects the mind of an individual, but also metamorphoses subsequent existence. Freud expounds that, “The constant memory of the dead person became the foundation of the hypothesis of other forms of life, and first gave him the idea of life continuing after apparent death” (188). The history ceaselessly gnaws one’s life through its repetitions in flashback, and present happenings. History or gruesome past, as Caruth argues, through the notion of trauma, can be deciphered as a rethinking of references of past which does not





aim at eliminating history, but at resituating it in our present understanding. Freudian idea of history elucidates that contemplation of history through reminiscence of the characters need a continuous rethinking the possibilities of history, as well as, our ethical and political relations to it. Persistent confrontation with violence and humiliation in the past unknowingly etches a mark in our memory.

Memory, through the escalator of nostalgia and remembering, is always evocative of forming and contouring an individual history which is ultimately unattainable. Memory creates an intricate relation between history and survival, where “. . . the return of the traumatizing event appears in many respects like a waking memory . . .” (Caruth 60). Freud insists, only memory can etch “the old features into the new picture; in fact the old materials or forms are removed and replaced by new ones” (179). For Freud, as analyzed by Caruth in her essay, “Recapturing the Past” that, “trauma is not in the repression of an event experienced and its return, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself” (8). Unforgettable traumatic experiences, instead of being suppressed in unconscious, kept latent in memory. Caruth comments that, “The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (8). The irksome past hurts more when remembered in our hidden consciousness.

Memory has an intricate and invariable link with the identity of an individual, where multiple identities and affiliations of one are superseded by a particular identity. War, inevitably, universalizes a solitary association of an individual that eventually leads to violence and prejudice against him. Stuart Hall theorizes that, identity “is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think” (222) where it is frequently related with different problematic of identity created by traumatic situations and perpetuated through single overpowering identity. Identity is never static or “an already accomplished fact,” instead, identity as a construct is incomplete, and is relentlessly in a process of formation in its cultural, temporal, and spatial associations. He opines that identity does not proceed in a linear “straight, unbroken line,” but operates in a “dialogic relationship” between “the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture” (Hall 226). The continuity of past or history, through its different resonances, grounds one in it, and the discontinuity with the event reminds one of its dissociation from it. Continuity and disjunction



persist simultaneously and consecutively which, at large, influences an individual and his multiple affiliations.

Further, the relation of identity and violence with history is conceptualized by Amartya Sen in his prolific book, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. “One’s sense of identity,” as Sen argues, “can be a source not merely of pride, and joy, but also of strength and confidence” (1). Identity of an individual contributes to the strength of warmth among members of one community, and excludes many people from their plural affiliations. War and violence, not only disintegrates Nation, but also decentralizes inner selves and identities of an individual, a family and a community. The conspicuous endowment of identity instigates violence by “... the imposition of singular and belligerent identities on gullible people, championed by proficient artisans of terror” (Sen 2). The retrieval of memory and history simultaneously foster crisis of identity in one’s life, who is suffering from the trauma of loss, suppression and displacement. Sen also points out that a person has multiple affiliations, and plural associations. One’s identity is required for getting recognition in society or community. But particularizing and prioritizing one identity of an individual over the other, either through the choice of his particular community, or his own, is inescapably conducive of violence. “Plural affiliations”<sup>4</sup> are inflicted upon with the baggage of one single identity thereby dispensing all the other in the backdrop of varied events of tumult. Sen critiques the very act of universalizing of one identity thereby effacing the others of an individual, or a group, that consequently produces existential crisis.

### III

The island of Zanzibar was enslaved by the imperialist power of Britain in 1890 and eventually Zanzibar evolved as a British protectorate. The long history of Anglo-Zanzibar war resulted in gaining independence from British Monarchy in December 1963 as a constitutional monarchy. And a month later, the bloody Zanzibar revolution, has again devastated many lives. Both the war histories of Zanzibar were mostly miserable for the poor, who were either sold in the slave trade, or forced to migrate from their homeland to Britain in search of survival. The novels, later cited in this paper, explicate this miserable struggle of the migrants of Zanzibar in the



backdrop of pernicious revolutions. Sen argues, “Despite our diverse diversities, the world is suddenly seen not a collection of people, but as a federation of religions and civilization” (13). The characters, introduced in the two novels, are suffering the residue of the revolution, though they assume diverse identities and history, they are forced to lug the baggage of being a “nigger.”

Abdulrazak Gurnah, one of the eminent Tanzanian novelists based in the United Kingdom, in one his autobiographical essays, “Writing Place,” declares:

Traveling away from home provides distance and perspective, and a degree of amplitude and liberation. It intensifies recollection, which is the writer’s hinterland. Distance allows the writer uncluttered communion with the inner self, and the result is a free play of the imagination. (28)

One moving away from his/ her homeland does not enunciate that he/she is sloughing off the original history or self because distance bequeaths the capability to amplify and broaden the spectrum of recollection or remembering, thereby consolidating the relation with the original latent self. “Traveling away from home” is an unavoidable phenomenon in the post imperial world, where characters like Abbas, who is significantly and medically silent father of Jamal and Hanna, and Maryam, are continuously struggling to flow with the living of the new land by enveloping all their dismal and catastrophic secrets. Abbas’s mysterious and enigmatic life began when “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 just collapsed . . .” (Gurnah 1) and remained silent without saying any further words. Silence, as a trope, is used by the novelist and the protagonist in the entire gamut of the novel, *The Last Gift*, to weave the inexplicable net of amnesic history. Abbas deliberately stayed silent for forty three years, but the moment he desired to unravel his turbulent corners of his origin, he suffered from double strokes, Aspasia and partial paralysis resulted in losing his voice. Caruth says; “For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (*Unclaimed* 18).



A traumatic history though kept in silence by Abbas but it is fully perceived when he tried to unravel the suppressed secrets.

Abbas was the “sinful traveler fallen ill in a strange land, after a life as useless as a life could be” (Gurnah 9). His eternal silence has a sense of preferred solitude and a feeling of menace, which seem to inflict on him a shameful frowning and anxiety. His silence always makes other feel that there is something which he desperately wants to conceal, and does not incline to take responsibility of it. He is incessantly acting in the new world in the sense that his “abilities and deficiencies will guide . . . , to becoming active participants in a productive society,” (James 9) whether he like that society or not. On the one hand, for Abbas banishing and forgetting history silently is a convenient way out, but on the other hand, Maryam always tried to be perspicuous and intelligible about her past before her children. She even challenges the mystery of Abbas in her mind, and emphatically declares that, “I don’t want to forget them. I don’t want to be like you” (Gurnah 41).

Abbas, suffering from Asplasia and third stroke, wants to reside in solitude and peace with his silence. He lied to Maryam that he could not remember his past days in Zanzibar, but he can “remember many things and . . . remember them every day, however hard . . . try to forget” (Gurnah 243). He is caught out in lies and silences. Behdad says, immigration “is an experience of traveling, of moving away from home to a new territory,” (10) a traumatic cultural, spatial and historical displacement predicated upon the challenges to survive, thereby building a new identity. Abbas has simultaneously lurking for both identity and belonging, and he poignantly introspects that, “. . . how I had lost that place, and at the same time lost my place in the world . . . . That’s what it means to be a stranger in another people’s land” (Gurnah 249). His struggle to exist is circumscribed repeatedly by the thoughts of re-presenting the history of his childhood as a happy one, instead of, narrating the truth that how his Muslim society constituting of many religion and race have underlying rage waiting to get surfaced, or how “the rough justice the children of the enslaved planned to inflict on their sultan and on everyone else who mocked and despised them,” (Gurnah 243) or he denied unleashing the hatred they have among them. Though he tried to hide every discriminations and





pangs but as Caruth rightly says, "... the repetition of the traumatic experience in the flashback can itself be retraumatizing..." (*Unclaimed* 63) and his memories of the past does traumatizes him.

He has lived a hooligan life for fifteen years before getting settled with Maryam. He hates his own past, and eventually lost himself in new world. His anger for getting ridiculed and trapped in his first marriage and consequences of Zanzibar war of independence in 1960s have abetted him to suppress his former forty four years. His shame and regret were never away from him. The violence and terror in the atmosphere of Zanzibar have resisted him from going back or returning to his history which he recurrently distorts and defunct. He, easily and guiltlessly, denounces to take the responsibility of abandoning his wife with unborn child. He declares, "I don't know anything about Zanzibar anymore. It is no longer a real place to me" (*Gurnah* 250). He even records his history in a tape recorder so that he will not be forced to confess his history before his children.

Maryam, an orphan from her birth and wife of Abbas, is placed in contrast and contrapuntal to her husband. Though she was left by her original parents just after she was born; though she does not know her original identity, she is continuously facing, accepting and acquainting her past blatantly and clearly before others. She does not feel the shame that her husband feels for his past. But a single long ceaseless silence of her husband about his past has broken her from within. Abbas is a "bigamist" and he has married earlier when he was in Zanzibar and left her earlier wife and unborn child on the doubt that the child she is bearing does not belong to him. This doubt though seems to an instance of irresponsibility on the part of Abbas, his insecurity was rooted in the bitter words thrown upon him by the family members of his earlier wife. He was hiding his shame and terror for long thirty years because he knew that he will be despised.

His guilty silence, forgetting and suppressing of past, about his poor shameful life in Zanzibar have shrugged him for years. But this revelation now makes Maryam doubtful about his husband and she thinks that, "when he said to her, let's go, he was treating her as if she was like him, someone who could just leave. He did not think it would be for life . . ." (*Gurnah* 152). Maryam, being such a strong consolidated character, starts doubting every look of her husband. For any history, as Caruth claims, "is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced" (17). Though she tries to



forget the events and Abbas strives to make her understand his love and loyalty, it fiercely haunts her life, and they experience an unspoken distance. Some history is required to be suppressed to continue with a smooth survival. Zanzibar is more a heart wrenching affliction than a delight for Abbas, and when he attempted to face it everything got dismantled and desolated.

Like her husband, she has also kept a filthy dark secret about her past from their children, that is, about her encounter with Dinesh, the nephew of Vijay and his ravishing effort to rape her. Vijay and Ferooz were her foster parents, who were only condescending on her, and were never like real parents for her. Dinesh consecutively attempted to rape her, to molest her. She has tried to forget this event but she could not. She says, "It is only a man forcing himself on me, and after all these years I should have forgotten about it, like an old scar that fades. But I still feel the humiliation of it, the injustice" (Gurnah 193). She wanted to let her children know her secrets of menace. Further, it is only at the end of the novel, when she got reconciled with her foster parents her half identity got divulged. Her original identity was veiled by her foster parents. A long named "foundling" is daughter of an immigrant polish mother and a black light complexioned father about whose identity nobody is aware of. Maryam is a women who has lived major years of her life without recognizing her actual origin, which is still somewhat obscure. The history though full of trauma, ends in "a happy myth" where her children tried to connect every loose ends of Abbas's "immigrant family."

Abbas, being the father, has never thought of sharing his original culture with his children and this silence has created a kind of rift and deprivation in the sense of belongingness in the mind of Jamal and Hanna. Hanna does not know to which place or nation she belongs. When she says "I m British," (Gurnah 117) her voice fumbles and when Uncle Digby asks her land of origin then her peculiar reaction was that:

"My father is from East Africa," Anna said, hating Uncle Digby for being an oily old fake and hating herself for being intimidated into a disclosure that she had no faith in. She has almost said I *think* but she managed to suppress that. (Gurnah 116)

She is not even aware of her original identity, which is camouflaged by the silence of her father about his identity, his place of origin, and his past culture. Her identity, as her father's, is



relentlessly kept in flux. Uncle Digby emphatically declares that, 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 117). She is both strange to herself and to the host land.

Abbas’s identity of being an immigrant and Maryam’s of being a foundling compelled the two children to perceive and contemplate their family as a “strange” one wanting solidarity. Sen argues, “. . . denial of plurality as well as the rejection of choice in matters of identity can produce an astonishingly narrow and misdirected view” (67). The lack of proper identity and sense of belonging have created a kind of rage and irritation in Hanna’s mind. She denies to be called as Hanna instead of Anna, and boldly says that:

My dad is a bigamist and my mum is a foundling. Can you imagine telling anybody that and not sounding like a character out of a comic melodrama? Of course it’s not strange for immigrants men to be bigamists, and foundlings were everywhere in the 1950s. (Gurnah 196)

She not only stereotypes these immigrants from Zanzibar, but also carries a deep seated hatred for “vile immigrant tragedies” (Gurnah 196). Immigrants are always stereotyped as bitter and tyrannical. Hanna has frequently posed to be a British, but she was never accepted so by Nick, her fiancé, and his family. Nick’s family persistently tried to condescend on her and her family, where Nick even called Abbas an “absconder.” For Hanna, their sympathy “was a kindness offered in shame to disguise their distaste,” (Gurnah 228) whereas, for Nick, her family is something which is “in the grip of a hopeless melodrama, acting like immigrants” (Gurnah 235). Their family is encapsulated by bewildering stories and ancient memories of Abbas and Maryam in this “strange land” of Britain.

#### IV

Thus, though Behdad argues that amnesia or “disavowal can be more systematic form of denial . . . misinterpretations of truth,” (5) Joseph Young and Jana Evans Braziel rightly ponders that, “historical remembrance is present- and future-, as well as past-, oriented; it remembers the



past—however fractured, fragmented, or impartial—as an act of survival in present and for the future” (3). Silence and amnesia are persistently employed by the character of the novel, *The Last Gift*, as ensemble to dwell their life, in the backdrop of their diasporic and colonial life, in and beyond the lands of Zanzibar and London. It is not only the powerful diplomats and nation builders who take recourse to amnesia, but the people from ground level also keep their history silent for continuing and sustaining their lives, and their bonds. The first difference is the former suppresses ‘Other’ whereas the latter tortures and torments themselves to forget and sabotage their pain and humiliation. Furthermore, the former denies taking any responsibility of the loss; on the contrary, the latter terminates their lives in the remorse and infamy for being the perpetrator. The latter may try to suppress history, but does not renounce it. Every individual tries to forget their past but“... the shape of individual lives, the history of the traumatized individual, is nothing other than the determined repetition of the event of destruction” (Caruth 63) and it is difficult to forget or wipe any memory.

### Notes

1. Homogenizing of people as a phenomenon can be evaluated with the governmental policy of assimilation in multicultural Nations, like the USA, where varied heterogeneous immigrant communities with different cultural and social background are combined together, thereby avoiding their distinct identities.

2. In phenomenology, the term ‘Other’ is constitutive in their differences from the Self. The condition and quality of ‘Otherness,’ the characteristics of the ‘Other,’ is the state of being different from and alien to the social identity of a person and to the identity of a person and to the identity of the Self. ‘Otherness’ is a person’s nonconformity to the social norms of society, where ‘Other’ is alienated from the centre of society. But the concept of ‘Self’ requires the existence of the ‘Other’ as the counterpart for defining the Self. Friedrich Hegel has introduced the concept of the ‘Other’ as a constituent part of self-consciousness.

3. The conscious process of forgetting or amnesia is even affecting the academic and intellectual world. Knowledge is manifested and interpreted according to the need of the hegemon of the host land.

4. Sen says, “We are all individually involved in identities of various kinds in disparate contexts, in our own respective lives, arising from our background, or associations, or social activities” (23). Especially,



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in a diasporic space, an individual constantly negotiates with multiple affiliations to place himself in the fabric of society.

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