

# **The Gift of Legacy from a Father: A Transnational Study of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift***

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## **Abstract**

Transnationalism is sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges among non-state actors based across national borders--- businesses, NGOs and individuals sharing the same interests such as same religious beliefs or common cultural and geographic origins. There arises a kind of multistranded identity; multifaceted cultural and socio-economic relationship across geopolitical boundaries. When a Black African emigrates to a white European country, usually immigrant's ethnocultural self faces challenge in the face of dominant host culture, undergoes identity reconstruction through the process of inculturation or deculturation or hybridization and emerges as a confused, new assimilated cultural identity or a fragile attempt to keep pure past ethnic self-leading to identity crisis and quest for lost homeland. This article endeavours to map out the typical cultural conflict in the face of burning apartheid, faced by Abbas, an East African immigrant and his family in England and his ultimate gift to his children of his rich cultural heritage and ancestry in a country which hitherto deliberately denies any.

**Keywords:** Transnationalism, Culture, Identity, Apartheid, Immigrants.

## **Introduction**

The concept of 'transnationalism' precisely occurs in the postcolonial period when young generation of merits from erstwhile European colonies went to technologically advanced countries of Europe and North America to pursue their career for an affluent and better future in the decades of nineteen sixties and seventies. Steven Vertovec defines transnationalism as sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges among non-state actors based across national borders--- businesses, NGOs and individuals sharing the same interests such as same religious beliefs or common cultural and geographic origins. There arises a kind of multistranded identity; multifaceted cultural and socio-economic relationship across geo-political boundaries.

Culture is the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, practices, customary beliefs, social forms and material traits of racial, religious or social groups. Next comes the important conception of identity. Notwithstanding many definitions of identity, it can be safely passed that it is the qualities, beliefs, personality traits, appearance and expressions that characterize a person. It emerges during childhood as children start go comprehend their self-concept and it remains a consistent aspect throughout different stages of life. Identity is shaped by the social and cultural factors and how others perceive one's characteristics. Cultural identity encompasses the values beliefs and traditions that connect an individual to a community and sense of belonging. It's a dynamic process influenced by social, cultural and historical events shaping how people understand themselves and their places in this world. This identity can be tied to nationality and/or ethnicity, religion social class, generation or locality among other things.

Human beings develop identities through their interaction with both psychological and physical spaces around them. Psychological space is where a person's thought process takes place. Physical space includes the space where a person exists and interacts with his

environment, culture and community he or she grew up in. Ecology also plays an important role in constructing the perception of self or identity of a person whether be it in the ancestral land or in the land of settlement.

When a Black African emigrates to white European country, this sense of identity becomes immensely fractured or hyphenated when emigrant's ethnocultural self faces challenge in the face of dominant host culture, undergoes identity reconstruction through the process of inculturation or deculturation or hybridization and emerges as a confused, new assimilated cultural identity or a fragile attempt to keep pure past ethnic self, leading to identity crisis and quest for lost homeland.

Zanzibar born British diasporic novelist Abdulrazak Gurnah subtly delves deep into turbulent psyche of these diasporic, transnational immigrants from postcolonial perspectives. Gurnah's characters develop confused identities and undergo identity reconstruction while settling abroad to get political asylum or shelter or to escape some oppressed, tortured past.

Even in the state of building transnational identity, the experience of displacement, leaving culture, people and land behind and then coming into contact with new culture, people and ecology impacts their perception of self leading to a cultural crisis that prevails on throughout their lives.

## **Discussion**

Gurnah's novel *The Last Gift* is a telling representation of this reconstructed and conflicted sense of cultural identity. Himself being a diaspora, Gurnah aptly portrays the agony of cultural conflict faced by the East African immigrant Abbas and his family in white English society in the face of dominant host culture and burning apartheid in the process of acquiring transnational identity. Towards the end of the novel, it leads to the knowledge of their rich African cultural heritage and ancestry provided by Abbas to his family as his last gift. In this

light, The aim of the present research article is to analyze how the cultural anxiety is felt and faced by the major characters of the novel in England and how the knowledge of cultural legacy is transferred by the central character Abbas to his family in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *The Last Gift*. Objectives of the present research article are ---

- i.) To show how the ethno-cultural self of the major characters of the novel faces challenge in the face of dominant host white British culture.
- ii) To show the physical, economic and emotional effects of apartheid on the black African identity of the major characters of the novel.
- iii) To show how the central character Abbas hides his rich cultural legacy from his family and how he ultimately provides the knowledge of this as his parting gift to them.

like many other contemporary East African novelists like Ngugi Wa Thiongo or Maaza Mengiste, Gurnah never shies away from exposing the cruelties, internal hypocrisy within the East African society and the real cause and nature of the problem of belonging of the characters of his novels to their ancestral lands. Central character Abbas suffered from the absence of proper parenting. He grew up in a remotest village of Zanzibar, an East African country, without any facility to live a normal life. His extreme miserly father did not provide his family with basic needs. He grew up in a remotest village of Zanzibar, an East African country, without any facility to live a normal life. His extreme miserly father did not provide his family with basic needs. He grew up in a remotest village of Zanzibar, where life was extremely hard. And access to education or nutritional food habits was a dream. Even his brother Kassim had to fight with his father to send Abbas to school.

However, natural environment amidst which an individual or community grows up has significant impact up on its cultural identity. Physical spaces are deeply intertwined with our emotions, memories, experiences and social interactions shaping how one understands oneself and one's place in this world. Access to benign and soothing natural ecospace, nutritional food

habits and education have been linked to improved cognitive function, greater self-discipline, impulse control and better mental health. Conversely exposure to extreme or barren natural environments can cause deficit of attention, higher rates of anxiety, depression and increased aggressiveness. All these resultant effects contribute to identity construction and culture. Here we cannot underestimate the impact of religion on cultural identity. Cultural identity is what Stuart Hall defined as one shared culture, a sort of collective one true self hiding inside many other more artificial or superficially imposed selves which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Extreme poverty, the need for someone to help in the farming, the exposure to cruel natural environment and less education cramped and narrowed the culture of his father who considered going to school will do nothing good to either Abbas or his family. At the age of sixteen Abbas got a chance to go to a teacher training college in town. His father could not provide the cost of living in a town. So, his married sister Fawzia arranged for his staying at a relative's house where he came across a beautiful girl whom he fell in love with. His native Muslim culture did not allow him to make any direct contact with the girl. He only met some glances, chance accidents and so on. However, his feelings for the girl were disclosed to everyone and at last the girl's relatives arranged his nuptial bond with her. The joy of getting his beloved crushed when immediately after marriage Abbas came to know that his wife had been impregnated by someone else even before marriage and this discovery almost traumatized him. His cultural influence could not bear with the idea that he had been made a scape goat to hide someone else's sin. His tormentor father, hearing the news of his marriage, put all the blame on the shoulder of Abbas's elder brother Kasim for Abbas's moral degradation as falling in love with someone and marrying her was considered unacceptable in the eyes of the conservative Muslim culture of East African communities. Abbas got a chance to escape from his wife and boarded a ship secretly leaving his wife at the hand of her fate in Zanzibar and at last settled in England where he had to confront a new crisis in his life. His rich cultural

tradition did not support this act of his leaving pregnant wife and this prick of conscience of became his inseparable attachment for the rest of his life.

In England he had to fight a new battle to reconstruct his identity in the face of dominant host culture as well as burning apartheid on the one hand and hiding his that identity which suffered his past act of guilt and remorse on the other. Gurnah's novels become the site of postcolonial cultural conflict acknowledging the observation made by the Nobel committee that his novels penetrate the effects of colonialism and the fates of refugee in the gulf between cultures and continent. However, entering the land of once colonizer every Black immigrant had to face, in the process of acquiring the transnational identity, the effect of what Bhabha referred to as the concept of 'Othering'. This concept is defined by the norms of dominant social order dictated by race, gender, class, ethnicity or sexuality. When we other or segregate a group of people united in a 'they' from another group united in a 'we' want to point out their perceived weakness and superiority of another group over them. According to Foucault, the politics of 'Othering' is essentially related to the politics of 'power dynamics' in a society. The problem of apartheid adds to this problem and as Abbas "entered the country there was an environment of hatred and unwantedness towards the immigrants or asylum seeker from England's former colonies specially when he is a black immigrant and when the economy of the country started to fall.

Interestingly, Abbas's desperate attempt at finding belongingness started with his falling in love with a mixed-race girl named Maryam, the daughter of a European mother and an African father and brought up by an immigrant Indian family. In the immigrant context cultural anxiety arises from the threat to native ethnic culture of the immigrants by the dominant host culture, here the racist white British culture 'othering' the so called 'savage' black immigrants. Indian conservative culture does not allow a young girl of the family to have free mixing with strange young men. When Maryam got older, his adoptive parents Vijay and

Ferooz imposed restrictions up on her in order to keep purity of the girl, which Maryam who grew up in the free social atmosphere of England, could never cop with this discipline. As a result of this cultural anxiety, there arose a tension Mayam and her foster parents. Besides, Abbas hid his real age to Maryam as well as his ancestry and rich cultural heritage to her for the fear of Maryam's rejection and to hide his past act of shame. Vijay and Ferooz never approved of their daughter's relationship with such an older black African like Abbas whose history and ancestry are totally unknown. The conflict between the effect of Western culture on Maryam and her parents' cultural anxiety to keep pure ethnocultural self resulted in Maryam's elopement with Abbas, which caused great setback for her Indian parents.

In postcolonial paradigm cultural anxiety also stems from what Homi Bhabha referred to as hybridity and mimicry. According to Bhabha the term hybridity is far from just mixture of the cultural identity of the colonizer and the oppressed 'Other' or the colonized. The working of unconscious in the colonial context is far reaching. It is the symbolic place, the site up on which the subject is to be constituted, the something which it lacks but must seek. The 'Other' in colonial or postcolonial context is very much related to this unconscious. It perceives the colonized in simultaneously both ennobled and demeaned ways which reflect the internal division within the colonizer or dominant social culture and can initiate the cultural anxiety on both parts. In this way, in postcolonial cultural theory hybridity becomes the site of resistance, the strategic reversal of the process of domination that looks the colonial power squarely in the eye. It is an in between space. It not only displaces the history that creates it but sets up new structures of authority and generates new political initiatives. Mimicry designates a gap between the norm of civility as represented by European enlightenment and its distorted colonial imitation. It serves as the sly weapon of anti colonial civility and is an ambivalent mixture of deference and disobedience. To Bhabha, the operations of the unconscious in the imperial context is far from simple as desire for as well as fear of "the other" doesn't allow the

identities of the colonizer and the colonized to stay fixed and unitary. It undermines the socio-cultural authority and normatives of the dominant host society as it imitates it only outwardly. Exactly same things happen here when Abbas's son Jamal and Hanna tried to imitate the British culture, lifestyle and dresses in the initial part of the novel only to discover later how despicable they and their culture have been constructed in the eyes of racist, dominant white British culture and to be bold enough to look squarely in the eye of the dominant host society. Ironically, this opens another dimension of cultural anxiety in the mind of Abbas who cannot tolerate his children being representatives of East African conservative Muslim culture, washed by the English culture.

Hanna, daughter of Abbas in the novel, preferred to be called Anna outside her house because that was more acceptable in British culture than an African Muslim name Hanna. "It became an embellishment of her Britishness... 'I hate the name Anna', she said". (Gurnah 46). It's her desperate attempt at being one of the dominant cultural hierarchy which is also influenced by the void in the domain of her knowledge of her cultural history and ancestry caused by the silence of her father about this. Whenever anyone asked Jamal or Hanna about their ancestry and culture, they had nothing to do except remaining silent. It also caused a conflict within her. Hanna said to Jamal,

"There are times when I hate that they brought me here. ...not because other places are free from cruelties and lies, but just to be saved from so much demeaning pretence. Not to have the chore of pretending to be no different from people who are full of shit about themselves." (Gurnah 46).

However, when Jamal teased her for this and ironically said that he should change his name to Jimmy too, there was the look of hurt in her eyes; perhaps she felt the guilt of committing some treachery to her ancestral culture.

In school, Jamal, Abbas's son grew up with a sense of difference, oddness and a sense of strangeness as a result of his different culture and customs besides facing hostility, unkindness and teasing. The attitude of the racist British culture was to associate these black African immigrants with all poverty and backwardness. When the teacher talked about poverty in the class, he could not resist a quick glance in Jamal's direction. It is as if poverty is to be found in places where people like them lived and the Britishers, who have redeemed themselves from this condition, must learn not to despise those who have not yet found the means to save themselves. However, Jamal too, like Hanna, in the initial stage tried to mimic the white British culture to socially mobilize himself, but in the long run he realizes that the hatred, the intolerance was so spread in the psyche of the so called white European towards the colored people like them that it was impossible to be accepted in the dominant culture of the host society. As a result he took recourse to the deep studies of his ancestral religion Islam and joined a group who believed in the fundamental traits of the religion. Maryam, wife of Abbas, suffered apartheid even in her childhood. In the drawing class in school a white girl deliberately kept scribbling on Maryam's paper and calling her smelly, as if a darky girl deserved that. "Then the girl spat on her face." As a reaction when Maryam hit the girl with a flower vase, the headmistress punished only Maryam. (Gurnah 25).

Here comes another aspect what Antonio Gramsci termed as 'cultural hegemony'. It is the dominance of ruling class over the dominated through the control of ideas, values and beliefs. This dominance is achieved by shaping the culture of a society, making the worldview of the ruling class the accepted cultural norm. White racist European culture did exactly the same thing in the context of imperialism. The novel *The Last Gift* is a perfect example of stream of consciousness technique. At such a moment of reflection Abbas retrospects while the people like him came across white Europeans: "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.” (Gurnah 250) However, this cultural hegemony quite indifferently naturalized the mean work of latrine cleaning as the duty of a black East African. Abbas reflects that in his sea voyage to England, “The British officers were aloof and did not seem surprised to see me doing that dirty work. It was what they expected of me, and that helped me not to feel embarrassed myself.” (Gurnah 251).

The cultural anxiety was revealed when Abbas refused the European concept of birthday celebration. His East African culture made him consider that “celebrating birthdays was conceited, something foreigners did to spoil their children.” The same was about celebrating Christmas. His African Muslim cultural background restrained him at first from enjoying the festivity. However, later in order to meet his children’s happiness he himself started celebrating it.

Interestingly, this cultural anxiety resulted in Abbas’s family tension too. As Hanna grew up, Abbas’s cultural outlook tried to resist her from wearing modern Western dresses or mixing freely with her boyfriends, which brought sharp confrontation from her. (Gurnah 82). Controlling children by parents even when they are grown up was an important aspect of the conservative East African Muslim culture which faced challenge in the liberal British culture. As a result, Hanna started to refute all her father’s attempt at restraining her leading to his suffering from anxiety. (Gurnah 94).

When Hanna started going to school in her childhood, Muslim parents started a campaign to exclude their children from any event “that had to do anything with Christian practices.” for the anxiety that it would eventually make their children forget their Muslim culture and turn them to Christianity. (Gurnah 112).

At a family gathering at her European boyfriend Nick’s house, Anthony, a racist white boyfriend of Nick’s sister openly ridiculed Hanna as a ‘gungle bunny’ for her dark complexion

and East African origin making her cry silently. (Gurnah 118) The belittling attitude of white British culture towards the culture of the black characters of the novel was mixed with sense of apartheid. Nick's father Ralph, in order to prove the superiority of British outlook and culture, criticized the then state of African people's being cowed down and submissiveness to their tyrant rulers and satirically asks Hanna "Is it something in their cultures that incline them to be that way? Is it religion?" (Gurnah 106). Workings of cultural hegemony, the effects of assuming the apparent supremacy of white British culture always go on in the mindset of Ralph, here the champion of dominant culture. That is why his obsession was to make comparison of the cultures and national characters between his and other colored races, whose real point was to observe that British culture and steadiness were a force for decency and a quality to admire. This again is the example of cultural anxiety that he did not seem to notice the abrasive underside of his comparisons which was a smug suspicion of everyone else's unsteadiness. Even he could not tolerate and was talking so much out of awkwardness about Hanna's presence, that he did not like her there in their family but was too polite to let it show. Even before break up Nick accused Hanna and other immigrants of being melodramatic, incapable of taking the hospitality of them. Hanna realized the same colonial mindset of Nick. (Gurnah 237).

Towards the end of the novel, we come to know the reason why Abbas never revealed his proper ancestry even to his family. It is because he abandoned his previous wife in Zanzibar for she had been married to him concealing the fact of her being already pregnant by someone else before marriage. Before death, at the insistence of his wife, he records all these past secrets and this becomes the last gift for his family from him, which was hitherto covered for the feeling of guilt, of bringing shame on his family. However, it acts as a grounding, a sense of cultural rootedness in his children. A sense of relief occurs in them as now they can answer the inevitable question: "Where have you come from?" In the end of the novel we see Jamal writing

to Hanna “I want to go to Zanzibar, definitely.” Although it gives them the feeling of having ancestral heritage, in postmodern transnational era returning to ‘homeland’ remains a myth, a possibility--- not actual return. That's why Hanna replies, “Will we really go to Zanzibar? Or will it remain a nice story, a pleasing story, a happy myth?”

### **Conclusion**

Thus, this novel clearly shows that the cultural anxiety stems from the confrontation between the cultures of the colonizers and the one time colonized, oppressors and the oppressed, and the assumption that dominant white European culture is always reigning supreme leading to cultural conflict and trauma felt by the African black immigrants in the British socio littoral of England, deliberately belittling any non-European black community and culture. The sense of apartheid widened this gulf between cultures and continents. Besides these, Abbas, reticence about his past, his rich cultural heritage and ancestry created void in his family regarding their root and tradition which could have given them the sense of fulfilment, while confronting the atmosphere of hatred and humiliation. However, Abbas's last gift of recording eases the predicament of Abbas's family as they now could answer the haunting question in any host society, “where have you come from?” which they had not been able to answer so far as their father's sense of guilt made him hid his ancestral legacy. Herein lies the importance of this article.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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