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Reimagining Diasporic Identities and Character Voices in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* (2011)

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Abstract

This study amplifies diasporic identities through character voices in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *The Last Gift* (2011). It centres African diasporic voices and marginalised perspectives and experiences rather than privileging Eurocentric interpretations. Informed by postcolonial theory and diaspora studies, this study employs narrative discourse analysis, a qualitative method involving close examination of narrative structures, character voices, and linguistic patterns in the text. It examines how Gurnah's narrative reframes diasporic displacement as a transgenerational and sociopolitical phenomenon profoundly shaped by colonial legacies. The novel's intimate portrayal of Abbas and his family presents complex diasporic identities marked by cultural hybridity, double consciousness, and profound experiences of alienation. This perspective demonstrates that diasporic displacement extends well beyond physical relocation. Instead, it is a multifaceted phenomenon that af-

fects personal and collective identity across generations, as exemplified by the perceptions, mindsets, behaviours, and lives of Abbas' two children. It demonstrates the impact of colonialism on cultural heritage, belonging, identity, alienation, and generational differences within diasporic communities. Moreover, *The Last Gift* shows how silences and recovered narratives can function as political acts of rebellion against dominant diasporic displacement and identity discourses. The present study contextualises the novel within broader discourses around African displacement. It contributes to scholarly discussions of displacement and belonging by demonstrating how narrative form itself can register the fragmented consciousness associated with diasporic displacement.

Keywords: diasporic identity; character voices; alienation; linguistic registers; postcolonial migration; silence; narrative discourse

1. INTRODUCTION

Diasporic displacement is a recurring theme in African literature, registering the legacies of colonial violence and the lived realities of migration, exile, and belonging. Literary representations of displacement are not solely thematic; as Bakhtin [1] argues in relation to the novel, they can emerge through encounters among socially differentiated voices. Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* (2011) exemplifies this dynamic: the novel is concerned as much with what characters withhold as with what they articulate, including who speaks, how they speak, the registers they employ, and the moments at which they speak. The novel brings together familial memory, intergenerational history, and lives shaped by displacement within a postcolonial context. The central plot follows Abbas, a migrant in Britain who, late in life, begins to disclose long-suppressed memories of his childhood in Zanzibar, his displacement, and the trauma of exile. Significantly, Abbas struggles to reveal this history directly to his family; instead, he records his confessions on tape, a narrative choice through which Gurnah mediates the act of disclosure. The recorded voice is fragmented, hesitant, and elliptical, marked by pauses and interruptions; its uneven movement contrasts with the more assured third-person narration that frames the account.

The word “gift” in the novel refers, in part, to Abbas’s long-concealed history: his silence weighs heavily on the family, while the belated “gift” of disclosure requires his children to confront their fractured identities. The novel also explores Abbas’s marriage and his abandonment of his pregnant first wife amid feelings of shame, familial pressures, and wider social constraints. Maryam, his second wife, describes herself as a “foundling”; raised in foster care, she brings her own obscured history into their marriage. Their children, Hanna, a teacher, and Jamal, a doctoral researcher in European Union migration policy, respond differently to the dislocation inherited from their parents. Through divergent speech patterns, distinctive vocabularies, and meaningful silences, Gurnah constructs a narrative that, as Kaigai [2] suggests, makes the unspoken available for interpretation.

Studies of displacement literature increasingly examine racism, diasporic identity, and questions of belonging and exile, concerns also explored in research on Gurnah’s fiction [3]. Gurnah’s work addresses these issues through the formal resources of character voice. Crucially, Gurnah does not merely speak on behalf of his characters; he allows their distinctive voices to express different forms of subjectivity. Hanna speaks in brittle, rhetorically charged sentences; Jamal tends towards patient, carefully qualified subordinate clauses; Abbas recalls events through fragmented, recursive expressions; and Maryam moves between understatement and moments of direct confession. Together, these voices create a dialogic texture that can be understood through Bakhtin’s account of heteroglossia [1], in which socially situated forms of speech interact without being absorbed into a single authoritative narrative perspective. The article first outlines its theoretical context, then closely examines selected passages from *The Last Gift*, before discussing how these observations illuminate diasporic identity and narrative voice.

The intergenerational differences in speech also deserve attention because the characters’ modes of expression do not simply reflect personality. Their language reveals unequal access to family history, distinct educational experiences, and different expectations about what may legitimately remain private. The younger generation’s questions often demand an answer that Abbas cannot readily supply, while Maryam’s restraint marks the distance between lived experience and public explanation. Read through Bakhtin’s theory of socially situated discourse [1], these differences show how competing understandings of identity take shape through dialogue, interruption, and silence. Such contrasts also explain why disclosure in the novel does not automatically produce mutual understanding.

Although themes of displacement and exile have been extensively discussed in scholarship on Gurnah’s fiction [3–5], the linguistic mechanisms through which these experiences are represented have received comparatively less sustained attention. The present article addresses this critical gap. This study examines how *The Last Gift* rethinks displacement by placing African diasporic voices at the centre. It also explores how Gurnah’s fiction connects colonialism to cultural alienation and how diasporic characters exemplify double consciousness and generational variation. Gurnah presents diasporic displacement not simply as exile but as a transgenerational condition that complicates cultural belonging and personal identity. The analysis engages with postcolonial theory, diaspora studies, and double consciousness to demonstrate how the novel navigates alienation and cultural hybridity. Importantly, the analysis argues that these thematic concerns are inseparable from their linguistic realisation: who speaks, how characters express themselves, and what remains unsaid are central to understanding how diasporic identities are constructed, contested, and transmitted between generations in *The Last Gift*.

This article addresses the following research questions:

- How does Gurnah use narrative structure to represent diasporic displacement and trauma in *The Last Gift*?
- How does the novel depict alienation, double consciousness, and generational memory as central to the diasporic condition?
- How do the character voices in *The Last Gift* negotiate postcolonial discourses of diasporic identity?

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study employs narrative discourse analysis, a qualitative textual method that systematically examines the linguistic and structural features of literary narratives to investigate how character voices, silences, and symbolic language contribute to the construction of diasporic identities. This approach integrates discourse analysis with narrative inquiry at three levels: the micro-level of language (including metaphors and repetition in dialogue), the meso-level of narrative organisation (including focalisation through Abbas and Hanna), and the macro-level of thematic positioning within postcolonial contexts.

The analytical strategy focuses on idiolect: the distinctive vocabulary, syntactic arrangements, and rhetorical habits through which individual characters become recognisable. Drawing on Leech and Short's account of speech and thought presentation [6], the analysis considers how free indirect discourse, reported speech, and direct quotation position characters differently within the narrative. The study also draws on Kaigai's analysis of the unspoken [2] to interpret silence and strategic omission as meaningful elements of the novel's discourse.

First, passages were selected through close reading and transcribed with attention to their wording, immediate narrative contexts, and relevant textual framing. Degrading and estranging expressions, including "*an old latrine*" and "*no longer a real place to me*," were examined in relation to their immediate syntactic contexts. Such phrasing conveys rejection and irreversible loss; its placement within Abbas's retrospective account suggests an internalised sense of rupture that he struggles to communicate directly to others [7].

Second, character voices and recurring discourse markers were coded. Initial coding identified distinctive idiolects: Abbas's nostalgic and resigned tone, expressed through repetitions of "*strange land*" and recursive constructions; Hanna's interrogative voice, marked by rhetorical questions and exclamatory syntax; and Jamal's reflective silences and qualified, academically inflected register. Axial coding linked these markers to postcolonial concepts. Third, intertextual and structural relationships were mapped by comparing narrative disruptions with plot chronology and examining the distribution of character perspectives as evidence of power relations involved in identity formation. Finally, the interpretations were considered alongside relevant theoretical arguments [1, 2, 8, 9], so that broader claims about displacement remained anchored in identifiable features of the text.

The distinction between a character's direct speech and the narrator's representation of that speech is important throughout this analysis. A hesitation recorded in dialogue, for example, does not necessarily have the same narrative function as an omission in retrospective narration. The present reading therefore considers the speaker, the narrative situation, and the surrounding response before interpreting a pause, a repeated phrase, or a change of register as evidence of alienation. This distinction is particularly valuable in a novel where intimate family knowledge circulates unevenly among generations, and where the reader may learn about a past event before the characters themselves receive an explanation.

3. THE BACKDROP OF *THE LAST GIFT*: THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

Migration is a recurring theme in African literature, registering the enduring consequences of colonialism and lived experiences of displacement. For African diasporic writers, exile shapes questions of identity and memory as well as the narrative forms through which lived experience is represented. Abdulrazak Gurnah, who received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2021, provides a substantial, ongoing engagement with ideas of exile, homecoming, and cultural dislocation. Gurnah's characters do not merely experience exile; they remember, describe, and contest its meaning through speech. In Abbas's case, memories of displacement are conveyed through a particularly hesitant and retrospective mode of narration that distinguishes his experience from that of younger characters. Ojaide's discussion of migration in recent African literature [10] offers a useful context for understanding Gurnah's emphasis on private, fractured testimony rather than a singular narrative of national recovery. In *The Last Gift*, displacement becomes not merely a historical event but an enduring condition through which the characters understand their lives.

Rather than representing Africa through a single, stable nationalist perspective, Gurnah foregrounds fragmentation, ambivalence, and the instability of lived diasporic experience. Lewis [11] examines questions of identity and nationalism in Gurnah's fiction, providing a comparative context for considering the unstable relationships among education, cultural belonging, and perceptions of home. Gurnah's attention to ambiguity also resonates with Bhabha's theorisation of the "*third space*" [9], in which cultural identity is hybrid, unstable, and continually negotiated.

Abbas embodies double consciousness through his fractured self-perception: his recorded voice renders Zanzibar as a place of irreversible loss: "[Zanzibar] is no longer a real place to me," "*an old latrine*," "*I don't want to say more about Zanzibar*." These expressions share a linguistic emphasis on negation, refusal, and disavowal. "*No longer*" denotes temporal rupture and irreversibility. "*An old latrine*" figures the homeland through an image of degradation and estrangement. "*I don't want to say more*" performs refusal directly, reinforcing the role of meaningful silence identified in Kaigai's narratological analysis [2]. Importantly, all three of these statements occur in Abbas's taped monologue, which is elliptical and self-interrupting, as though the tape recorder itself creates a different, more disarticulated style of speech

than a face-to-face conversation.

This contrasts sharply with Hanna's rejection: "*I want to be able to say this is what I am,*" "*Sometimes it makes me feel that I am living a life of hiding and shame. That we all are.*" Hanna's voice is assertive, declarative, and predominantly first-person, with diction emphasising visibility and self-definition ("*say,*" "*living,*" "*hiding*"). Her rhetoric is accusatory, whereas Abbas's is largely resigned. The short, abrupt sentence "That we all are" is a performative statement, involving the whole family in a state of concealment she does not want to normalize. Burgess [12] situates this struggle within the turmoil of East African history, especially the post-independence violence and political disarray of the 1960s. Gurnah highlights that alienation does not end upon arrival but develops into a form of exclusion where migrants are continuously marked as outsiders.

Neumann and Bach [5] examine the representation of migrants in Gurnah's *Paradise* and *Afterlives*, providing comparative context for his treatment of colonialism, mobility, and identity. In *The Last Gift*, Gurnah likewise reconstructs experiences of displacement through perspectives that resist uncomplicated nostalgia or assimilation. His work foregrounds histories of slavery, colonial exploitation, and cultural erasure that remain absent from European migration frameworks. By realigning the discourses of diasporic displacement and identity, Gurnah repositions displacement as a socio-political condition inextricably linked to colonial legacies.

The Last Gift demonstrates how Gurnah blends familial memory with collective history. The central character, Abbas, embodies the silence of the migrant who refuses to share their past until the end of life. The forms of silence examined by Kaigai [2] are enacted through delayed disclosure, eventually conveyed by tape recording when Abbas is too ill to speak easily. Abbas's voice is not straightforwardly confessional; rather, it breaks off, changes direction, and opens spaces that the narrative does not immediately fill. The technology of tape recording thus becomes a metaphor for the mediation and deferral of diasporic memory. Saleem's discussion of alienation in modern literature [13] offers broader conceptual context for the anxious and unsettled identities represented in Gurnah's narrative. The novel locates these experiences within a fractured past and an uncertain future rather than treating alienation as an isolated psychological condition. This paradox is not merely thematic but is embedded in the structure of Abbas's language: his use of conditional and subjunctive constructions ("*if I had stayed,*" "*what might have been*") marks the hypothetical, counterfactual nature of a diasporic consciousness which exists in the space between what is and what could be, between home and host country.

In Gurnah's novel, diasporic displacement is a transgenerational experience inscribed in language as well as in the characters' lives. Abbas's children receive not only fractured identities but also multiple language abilities that are a result of differential relationships with parental silence. Jamal responds linguistically in a restrained, observing, and inquisitive manner, while Hanna responds in a reactive, exclamatory, and confrontational fashion. This contrast reveals the complexities of inheritance as a diasporic condition.

The use of recorded speech rather than immediate, face-to-face communication is an important formal feature of Abbas's fragmented account of displacement. His speech is not simply reduced; it is structurally transformed into mediated narration, shaped by pauses, hesitations, and fragmentary recollections. Recording alters the conditions of communication by transforming speech into an event that can be heard later, interrupting the immediacy of interpersonal exchange. In Kaigai's view, the power of the text to 'make the unspoken speak' is manifested in this displacement of voice, but with Abbas, the result is a paradox: his voice is at once revelation and concealment. His word usage, though generally simple and restrained, is less descriptive, suggesting he is not necessarily lacking but perhaps suppressing traumatic memory. The spaces between his sentences, the pauses separating phrases, and the absence of elaboration become meaningful narrative features, carrying aspects of a history that cannot readily be articulated. Abbas's voice, therefore, is not an unmediated expression of identity but a fragmented linguistic space in which trauma, memory, and displacement converge.

"*My dad's a bigamist, my mum's a foundling. . .*" It was wrong of him not to tell us years ago. "*What does she mean by telling us now she was raped at the age of sixteen by some monstrous Indian boy? Couldn't she have just kept that to herself?*" At the linguistic level, this passage has a particularly revealing quality. The syntactic parallelism "*my dad is a bigamist and my mum is a foundling*" decontextualizes family narratives, removing context and empathy. The closing rhetorical question "*could she not have just kept that to herself?*" echoes the logic of those who in the novel deplore the lack of disclosure in their father, showing a generational ambivalence about disclosure that is not resolved by the novel. The latter comes from Jamal, who is curious in a quiet way: "*Zanzibar, that sounds like a great place to be from.*" The importance lies in the use of the modal verb "*sounds*" which places Zanzibar in a mediated position rather than direct, that is, as mediated by discourse his father's stories and his own academic reading. For Jamal, being from Zanzibar is a postmemorial relationship: the island is a place of origin and inherited identification rather than a place he has personally inhabited. Jamal's register is always hesitant and is normally embedded within qualifications like "*it appears*" and "*one might argue*", as a consequence of his schooling and his tendency to arrive at conclusions with greater restraint when it comes to the inherited trauma he has experienced. The novel reads, "*He listened in silence. He did not ask for any details, nor interrupt*" [7]. Jamal's most eloquent speech act is this practiced silence, which is a style of respectful, absorptive listening not experienced by Abbas's generation.

Ultimately, Gurnah's novel emphasises the importance of migrant voices for understanding contemporary African and global history. He presents exile and diasporic displacement in ways that go beyond shallow interpretations of tragedy or freedom. He depicts displacement as a condition that includes alienation and loss but also opens toward new negotiations of culture and identity. Gurnah reframes the literature of displacement within a postcolonial, African Muslim viewpoint, contributing to a larger postcolonial discourse about the importance of historically underrepresented voices.

4. COLONIALISM AND DIASPORIC DISPLACEMENT THROUGH GURNAH'S LENS

When writing about the literature of migration, it is necessary to situate migration within its historical and political contexts. Migration scholarship broadly describes a migrant as a person who moves away from their usual place of residence, either within a country or across international borders, temporarily or permanently, for a range of reasons [14]. Gurnah's fiction adds complexity to this neutral framework by locating migration in the durable material and political contexts of empire. Read through postcolonial theory [8, 9], the novel depicts colonialism not merely as historical background but as a structuring force shaping how characters speak, what they articulate, and what they feel compelled to leave unsaid.

"Micro-narratives" become especially significant in the characters' everyday interactions, where apparently insignificant remarks may convey substantial emotional or political meaning. Instead of long speeches, Gurnah builds character through brief moments of conversation, marked by hesitation, interruption, and fluctuation in tone. For instance, when characters respond indirectly or sidetrack questions, they make linguistic decisions that suggest an interplay between disclosure and concealment. Such encounters show that diasporic identity is expressed not only through large-scale narratives of migration but also through subtle discursive choices. An economy of words, incomplete sentences, and recurrent reliance on implication rather than explicit explanation all contribute to the linguistic representation of dislocation. In this respect, micro-narratives do not simply stand on the margins of the text but rather play a central role in understanding how trauma and memory are encoded in the text's common language.

Abbas's movement from Zanzibar through mainland Africa and eventually to England can be read in relation to the colonial and patriarchal pressures examined in scholarship on Gurnah's fiction, including Falk's work [4]. Colonial power relations continued to shape relationships within Zanzibar, including tensions between generations even after formal decolonisation. In *The Last Gift*, Abbas remembers that his father "tried to shut Kassim up with abuse" [7]. The word "shut up" is instructive: it is a politics of voice suppression and a colonial strategy of silencing dissent carried over into living in the home. The father, Othman, uses language as his weapon to control his sons' dreams and aspirations, and physical violence to replace the imperative constructions. The conflict involving Kassim's support for education and Othman's opposition to Abbas's further schooling offers insight into competing attitudes towards colonial education. It also suggests how debates about schooling could become domestic expressions of wider political and cultural anxieties. The colonial disruption extended to land dispossession and economic marginalisation. As Gurnah observes in *The Last Gift*, only two or three generations prior, colonisers were taking land, leaving behind ongoing grievances and structural inequity [7]. The novel presents the impact of these dispossessions on migrant status as people are removed from their homes for reasons beyond their control. Abbas's movement in Britain demonstrates the material and psychological dislocation brought by colonialism across Africa.

The novel further considers colonialism as a cause of racial polarisation. Zanzibar was ruled by the "ethnic divisions of colonial Zanzibar based on Arabs, Indians, indigenous islanders, and African mainlanders" [15]. Colonial governments benefited from pitting "Swahili with some Arab ancestry on the one hand, and Swahili with African and Shirazi (Persian) ancestry" against one another [15]. Gurnah's novel reimagines these impacts of colonialism on migration: colonialism directly forced migrants to escape the challenges and conflicts attributed to colonial governance. Significantly, memories of these colonial divisions are conveyed through Abbas's recollections and distinctive speech rather than exclusively through an external historical account. The emphasis therefore falls on the imperfect, fragmented, and emotionally charged register of lived memory rather than on an impersonal reconstruction of the historical record.

The reason for this displacement is the "*ambition and fear and desperation*" that Gurnah [7] renders. The three unqualified nouns in this syntactic series convey the psychological complexity of migration under colonial conditions without reducing the experience to melodrama. The tricolon marks Abbas's emotional terrain as one of agency, coercion, and urgency, to the extent that it cannot be reduced to any one of these emotions, whether of victimhood or adventure. This formulation is Abbas's vocabulary for his own situation, personal and socially constructed, because it is presented in the first-person retrospective.

African land comes to life through speech as Hanna watches Nick and Ralph discuss paternalistic colonialism. As if it were their job to adjudicate, the colonists speak of "*reversing a historical injustice*" [7]. The measured, legalistic, and abstract style of this exchange reproduces the political rhetoric it purports to assess. The colonisers use the passive voice: "*It would be disastrous*" and strip any agency from the African, from the sentences which are supposed to represent the interests of Africa. Hanna's position as a witness to the exchange can also be interpreted as a form of silent refusal. Hanna

is not part of the exchange, and her absence says what Said [16] might call the counterpoint of the colonised subject who is listening to the discourse of the coloniser but not constituted by it.

This recalls Fanon's [8] critique of the persistence of colonial authority in post-independence environments. Gurnah uses historical consciousness to view diasporic displacement as part of a trajectory: the initial violence of colonialism, the inequalities of the colonial legacy, and the continuing neo-colonial power of the West. Taken together, these examples show how *The Last Gift* connects displacement with the material and political consequences of colonialism. Abbas's immigration to Britain cannot be understood as individual fulfilment alone; it is shaped by land dispossession, colonial education, and ethnic divisions, all recalled through Abbas's distinctively fragmented and emotionally charged narrative voice.

A comparative study of the characters' voices reveals the novel's subtle, complex linguistic stratification. Abbas's mediated and fragmented speech contrasts with the more dialogic and fluid expressions of the younger generation, whose experiences of cultural assimilation differ from his own. Abbas is a hesitant speaker, one who is silent and reconstructs his feelings in retrospect; the younger characters speak in a more immediate, interactive style, sometimes asking questions directly and negotiating their identities. This is a generational difference in confidence, expression, and access to cultural memory. Furthermore, the use of variant vocabulary and syntactic forms indicates different orientations towards memory and belonging, the speech of Abbas evokes the burden of the past, while the younger characters are flexible and hybrid. These differences demonstrate why both form and content matter: the manner of communication is itself an important site for representing diasporic consciousness.

5. CULTURAL HERITAGE, IDENTITY, AND THE LINGUISTICS OF LOSS

In addition to analysing the text's treatment of diasporic identity, attention to linguistic register further deepens this analysis. The transitions between formal, restrained narration and more colloquial, emotionally charged dialogue indicate the characters' shifting feelings of belonging. Language becomes more unstructured and fragmented when the emotional experience is intense, suggesting that it is difficult to put into words. By contrast, in less dynamic encounters, the reliance on carefully selected, carefully crafted language signals a bid for coherence and social stability. The use of imagery in the dialogue is also important, with recurring metaphors of distance, silence, and separation underscoring the thematic issues of displacement. The linguistic characteristics show that identity is not merely told but enacted in language; that each register reveals a different aspect of the diasporic condition.

The trauma of Abbas's exile is inseparable from his sense of lost cultural heritage and identity. Abbas's cultural dislocation is expressed in solid sensory and material specifics by Gurnah. The novel notes that Abbas is completely overwritten by the coldness of February, not having the proper clothing, not knowing the seasonal cycles in British life, which serves as what Boehmer [17] describes as the "*material discourse*" of displacement, the body itself is the site on which colonial history and religious rupture are written. Abbas's physical unpreparedness is neither merely comic nor simply pitiable; it becomes a metaphor for the difficulty of cultural transition and for the body's enduring familiarity with the climate and sensations of another place.

Abbas's recorded voice repeatedly employs rhetorical forms of negation and exclusion when referring to cultural belonging. The word "*no longer*" serves a specific temporal purpose in Abbas' statement that Zanzibar "*is no longer a real place to me*" [7]. It denotes a definite moment of discontinuity, a moment when the homeland no longer exists in experience. This is not simply forgetfulness; it is a conscious articulation of loss as an experience that has already taken place. The accompanying comparison of Zanzibar to "*an old latrine*" [7], a scatological metaphor that Abbas never uses to describe Britain, implying that he has internalized, to the extent that he reproduces it in his internal monologue, the denigration of his home country's colonization. The internalisation of the coloniser's contempt as analysed by Fanon [8] is clearly seen in Abbas's vocabulary.

Abbas and his family's loss of a sense of belonging reflects the "mismatched overlap between notions such as geographical home, social collective belonging, and cultural identity" [3]. This incongruity is linguistically marked by Abbas's attempt to talk about home. The deictic system of his recorded speech, his use of "*here*," "*there*," "*that place*", reveals an underlying indeterminacy: neither Britain nor Zanzibar functions consistently as a stable point of reference. In the novel itself, "*here*" moves from Britain to Zanzibar, depending on the temporality of the recollection, to perform the homelessness thematised by the novel. Gurnah plays with cultural heritage and identity as an unstable, contested and ongoing construction in a context of displacement.

6. DIASPORIC IDENTITIES, ALIENATION, AND VOICE

As in Gurnah's other fiction, *The Last Gift* explores the forms of alienation that accompany diasporic identity formation. One aspect of diasporic identity is the sense, as noted by Naujoks [18], that, to some degree, the country-of-origin government is one's own. Abbas, however, speaks critically of Zanzibar and its colonial administration, as well as the

postcolonial political conditions that followed. This contempt is reflected in his written voice, a register of disillusioned retrospect, with long qualifying clauses listing what was lost before reaching the short, emphatic noun of condemnation: "*latrine*," "*strange land*." The register resembles a case presented against a defendant who is also the narrator.

This divided perspective can be considered through Du Bois's concept of double consciousness [19], although its distinctive expression in the novel emerges through the experiences of the four principal characters. Diasporic double consciousness is frequently "*laced with nostalgia, filial piety, and credulity*," Dayal [20] writes. The characters in *The Last Gift* are various linguistic representations of double consciousness. Abbas's recorded voice is the most formally complex, with the historical present (Zanzibar memory), the simple past (British arrival), and the present tense (illness) all functioning simultaneously, as if grammatically enacting the non-linear temporality of diasporic consciousness. Changes in tense and disruptions of chronological sequence evoke the non-linear understanding of diasporic time suggested by Clifford's account of diasporas [21]. Rather than tracing a simple movement from exile to belonging, Abbas's recollections repeatedly return to unresolved earlier experiences.

Uncle Digby's double consciousness is stated unapologetically: "*We see families breaking up because children are not interested in knowing about the world that brought their parents together*" [7]. The formulation "*do not want to know*" presents the question of inherited history in terms of desire and refusal. It suggests that the younger generation's distance from the past may involve choice as well as ignorance, and that this refusal has ethical implications. This formulation is important in the light of Hanna's characterization, it is a language filled with rhetoric of refusal. She uses negative constructions significantly more often than Jamal "*I don't want to hear it*," "*I didn't ask for this*," "*I can't deal with this right now*", and her syntax is typically short, declarative, a language of closure which she imposes on her parents' histories.

Abbas's self-descriptions, gathered throughout the novel, depict the alienation of the first-generation migrant, "*a tiresome guest in my own life*" [7]. "*the sinful traveller fallen ill in a strange land*" [7], "*broken by disease in a stranger's land*" [7] "*dying in a strange land that did not want him*" [7]. The phrase "*strange land*" is Abbas's most characteristic phrase for Britain, and deserves careful study. The adjective "*strange*" in his idiolect never clearly gives way to "*familiar*". Because the land remains strange, alienation appears as an enduring condition rather than a transitional stage on the way to belonging. The genitive construction, "*a stranger's land*", further moves Abbas away from any sense of belonging, the land is a stranger's, and Abbas is the stranger denied the land's belonging. The novel reinforces this through free indirect thought. The country still felt strange. Abbas's consciousness in the novel's narrative present, not his younger self's temporal proximity to death, has not cleared up any of the estrangements. Temporal proximity to Britain has not cleared up any of the estrangements. Abbas goes on to speak about his childhood experience: "*Now I was to find myself in the midst of these people, with their red faces and false smiles*" [7]. The distinction among words such as "*false*," "*hypocritical*," and "*untruthful*" is revealing: each suggests a different moral evaluation of outward friendliness. This diction connects Abbas's perception of politeness with the possibility that apparent inclusion can conceal exclusion.

Gurnah's writing has created modes of identity that are grounded in national affiliations, that is, "*diasporic pluralisms*," as Appadurai [22] calls them. The characters in Gurnah's novel, especially the first-generation immigrants, can be discussed in terms of Clifford's [21] conception of "*here*" and "*there*," in which linear history is broken and the present tense is always marginalized by an imagined future that is also the past. Abbas's speech grammatically disrupts the present tense, with present-tense statements interrupted by past-tense subordinate clauses, so that the present tense is formally "*displaced*" and the effect is that the experience of consciousness is rendered "*displaced*" as well.

Linguistic register in Maryam's text is markedly different from Abbas's. Whereas Abbas is reserved, metaphorical, and recursive, Maryam tends towards understatement and laconic expression. The word "*foundling*," which she calls herself, exemplifies her economical style of communication. She conveys the significance of her beginnings through minimal lexical detail, leaving readers to infer the emotional consequences. In Gurnah's fiction, silence can communicate as forcefully as speech; Maryam's linguistic minimalism offers a suggestive example of the narrative function of the unspoken discussed by Kaigai [2, p. 128]. In the narrative, the account of sexual assault is presented through reported speech rather than dramatised directly. This formal distance mirrors the restraint that also characterises Maryam's dialogue and demonstrates how narrative mediation can shape readers' access to painful experiences.

Hanna's disorienting experience within British society and Jamal's inability to call England "*home*" accentuate the second generation's divided sense of belonging. Hanna later recognises that she had been "*unfair*" to her father, partly because he "*would never say anything*" about the memories and customs that shaped his earlier life [7]. In this moment of retrospective shame, the language is significant, for the first time in the novel, Hanna's declarative, accusatory voice becomes confessional, indicating a change in how she relates to the family silence she had been condemning.

7. GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES AND THE INHERITANCE OF VOICE

Gurnah further explores how migrants and their descendants experience isolation, the loss of belonging, and questions of identity across generations. Abbas and Maryam are first-generation migrants, and thus embody displacement directly. Their children, Jamal and Hanna, continue this fractured multiplicity of identity in different ways as second-generation

migrants. This is reflected in Hirsch's [23] notion of postmemory, where descendants of migrants inherit a crushing weight of vicarious memory, shaping identity in ways visible with Abbas and Maryam's children.

Jamal's curiosity and the sense of having lived in a Zanzibar he never visited are illustrative of postmemory. The phrasing "*sounds like*" (which relies on report rather than experience) and the verb form "*to be from*" (which places Zanzibar in an experienced past as a place of origin, not at home) collaborate to create a relationship to homeland that is irrevocably mediated. The formal register of Jamal's academic writing extends to his personal reflections. He approaches his family's history in a register resembling the qualified, evidence-oriented language associated with his doctoral research on European migration policy. His engagement with his father's account is nonetheless characterised by attentive restraint: "*he listened in silence, he did not ask for any details and he did not interrupt*" [7]. His listening is also discursive, a performing of the attentive, noninterruptive kind that his academic training holds dear. The posters of Junior Wells, Nelson Mandela, and Thabo Mbeki in Jamal's room also suggest an assembled diasporic identity composed of mediated images of African and African-American cultural history rather than of living family traditions.

In contrast, Hanna's voice challenges the silence inherited across generations. Her language, the most noticeable use of the "*dialogised*" voice in the novel, is always constructed in relation to the discourse of others (her parents' silences, her father's confessions, her British social environment) and is always energised by refusal and correction, not by assertion. The catalogue "*My Dad is a Bigamist, and My Mum is a Foundling*" casts her parents into nominal categories that are both true and nominal, and Hanna's linguistic strategy seems to involve naming these difficult facts in deliberately direct terms, as though such clarity could protect her from their emotional complexity.

For Hanna, parental silence is a burden rather than a gift, and her alienation from that silence emphasises how generational memory causes fracture rather than unity. Assmann's [24] conceptualisation of generational forgetting is relevant here: Jamal reconfigures inherited memory into curiosity through a scholarly linguistic register, while Hanna distances herself through confrontational declarations, pointing to a rupture in diasporic inheritance that is not merely emotional but discursively constructed.

Maryam's estrangement from her origins further complicates the intergenerational picture. Her estrangement does not arise from colonial exile but from the absence of biological origins. In her construction of a passive account of how these people had treated her well and then later wounded her with "*such casual misuse*" [7], she evokes a picture of an object being acted upon rather than an agent acting upon it, and of violence being done through a vocabulary of neglect rather than of malice. This is among the most persistent stylistic features of Maryam's account: she frequently presents herself less as the agent of her history than as the recipient of other people's decisions. Gurnah thus parallels the grammatical positioning of the displaced subject in Abbas's register (who is structurally passivized in his speech) by passivizing the abandoned child in Maryam's idiolect, illustrating two distinct yet structurally similar forms of passivization.

Hall's [25] assertion that cultural identity is always in a process of "becoming as well as being," constantly reshaped by the intergenerational negotiation of history and trauma, is here borne out not only thematically but through the novel's formal differentiation of character voice. Silence from Abbas, qualified curiosity from Jamal, confrontational clarity from Hanna, and linguistic minimalism from Maryam together illustrate that displacement is never a singular experience but a transgenerational phenomenon that produces distinct, sometimes conflicting, identities within families and that these identities are constructed, first and foremost, through language.

The preceding analysis demonstrates how Gurnah represents diasporic displacement through fragmented narrative techniques and the distinctive voices of individual characters. In relation to the first research question, the novel's non-linear structure and mediated speech reveal how trauma disrupts conventional expectations about coherent storytelling. In response to the second question, alienation, double consciousness, and generational memory emerge not only as themes but also through patterns of expression, omission, and silence. Finally, in response to the third question, character voices become sites of negotiation through which postcolonial identities are continually mediated and contested. By foregrounding register, vocabulary, and micro-narratives, this analysis shows how identity is actively produced within the text through formal choices that make recurring themes meaningful in different ways across generations.

8. CONCLUSION

The Last Gift is a formally sophisticated contribution to the literature of migration, distinguished by its presentation of migrant and second-generation voices. In contrast to studies that focus solely on displacement as a thematic construct, the present analysis demonstrates the discursive dimension of Gurnah's treatment of migration. Character-specific idiolects, linguistic registers, and speech acts contribute to the construction of diasporic identity while registering the emotional, political, and temporal dimensions of postcolonial experience. The lived experiences of Abbas, Maryam, Jamal, and Hanna collectively reveal that displacement is not a single event but a transgenerational phenomenon constituted through different and conflicting languages within the same family unit.

Abbas's taped confessions, with their recursive, elliptical, and temporally fractured structure, enact Kaigai's [2] principle that the text "make[s] the unspoken speak." Abbas's recorded voice foregrounds the circumstances of its production: a

seriously ill man speaks into a machine instead of engaging directly in the conversations that his long silence has made so difficult. Maryam's linguistic minimalism conveys a parallel reticence, often representing violence and loss through passive constructions. Jamal's scholarly, carefully qualified register reflects a mediated, postmemorial relationship to inherited dislocation. Hanna's is declarative and accusatory, reflecting the generational refusal of inherited silence that Assmann [24] theorizes as generational forgetting.

The study argues that diasporic identity formation is not merely symbolically layered but also *discursively produced* through the texture of speech, differences of register, recurrent syntactic habits, and meaningful silences. *The Last Gift* thus continues the discussion of diasporic literature, situating African and Muslim diasporic experiences within discussions of language and displacement that challenge reductive understandings of "exile" and "belonging." The novel's formal distinction of voices is a narrative technique that simultaneously foregrounds the plurality and contestation that Hall theorizes at the level of cultural identity, an identity that is always both being and becoming, always speaking and being spoken, always partially silenced and always recovering its voice.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data availability

This study is based on textual analysis of a published novel and publicly available scholarly literature; no new empirical dataset was generated.

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