

Navigating Selfhood: The Quest for Self-Actualisation in Abdulrazak Gurnah'S *The Last Gift*

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ABSTRACT

The paper titled Navigating Selfhood: The Quest for Self-Actualisation in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* journeys into the theme of selfhood and the complex journey toward self-actualisation in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *The Last Gift*. It pivots around the protagonist and also explores how personal, history, memory and emotional reconciliation play a significant role in shaping one's identity. The paper brings attention to the psychological and emotional turmoil caused by displacement, colonial legacies and cultural alienation. It also asserts that self-actualisation is not a singular event but a continual multifaceted process that requires confronting suppressed emotions acknowledging trauma and embracing the complexities of identity. Through the journey of Nur, the paper exhibits broader themes of migration, memory and the postcolonial experience, illustrating how individuals can move toward healing and wholeness by accepting their fragmented selves. The works of Gurnah suggest that understanding one's personal and historical narratives is essential for achieving a coherent and authentic sense of self.

Keywords: Self-actualisation, Identity, Memory, Colonialism, Psychological struggle.

The psychoanalytical theory is one of the most challenging theories based on the works of Sigmund Freud, Marx, Darwin and Nietzsche. Freud's idea of the unconscious mind is discussed in his notable works like *The Ego and Id*, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *Totem and Taboo*. The psychoanalytical theory focuses on three major elements in its progress of the literary unconscious: on the author, on the reader, and on the text. The psychoanalytical theory is a form of literary theory that uses psychoanalytic techniques to analyse an individual's mental conditions. Through

psychoanalysis mental disorders can be cured by interacting with the conscious and unconscious elements of the mind. Having a conversation with the patient can help a psychiatrist to figure out the past that is buried in the unconscious mind.

The Psychoanalytic theory was developed by Sigmund Freud. He elaborates on how the memories of the unconscious mind would play a major role in one's life. Freud talks about the idea of repression which is linked with the unconscious mind. Repression is an attempt to hide the bitter past which would naturally be thrown into the unconscious part of the mind. Freud also discusses the concept of sublimation where the memories or experiences that are repressed would become something grander or noble. Freud has used several key terms to explain the psychic processes which include, 'transference', 'projection', 'screen memory', 'Freudian slip' or 'parapraxis', 'dream work', 'displacement' and 'condensation'. Dreams would not give an open insight into the person's mind but they would help to understand the element that rules him. They are an 'escape-hatch' through which "repressed desires, fears or memories seek an outlet into the conscious mind" (Barry 101).

Psychoanalytic critics would analyse the difference between the conscious and unconscious mind. The concentration would typically fall on the unconscious motives of the author and the characters under various stages of "emotional and sexual developments in infants" (107). They would also interpret "the conflict between generations or siblings or between competing desires within the same individual looms much larger than conflict between social classes for instance" (107). Not only Freud but Jacques Lacan was also one of the most prominent proponents of psychoanalytic criticism.

Freudian critics dig up the biography of the author to elaborate on the illustrations provided in the text. As far as Freud is concerned the unconscious mind of the author would probably be reflected in the

work that he creates. Whereas Lacanian critics of psychoanalytical theory pay close attention to unconscious motives and feelings but instead of excavating for those of the author or characters they search and those of the text itself, uncovering contradictory undercurrents of meaning which lie like a subconscious beneath the conscious to the problems that the characters undergo in a work. Barry has taken up the case of Hamlet. According to Freud, Hamlet procrastinates on the murder of his mother because of the Oedipus complex.

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* is a Diaspora fiction that unfolds the tales of families living in a foreign land with a shattered identity. The novel also explores the psychic trauma they undergo with their unshared past and their attempt to make themselves similar to the other people in the country. On applying the Freudian idea of the unconscious mind, the paper dwells on the life of Gurnah who is a Tanzanian by birth. At certain parts of the novel, Gurnah has shown through the characters, his attempts to make himself familiar with the culture and practices of England.

Gurnah belongs to Zanzibar in East Africa and immigrated to England. His protagonists, Abbas and his family intend to reveal the trauma that immigrants would undergo. Abbas hides a bitter past that becomes one of the reasons for his escape from Zanzibar. He has not revealed it to his family till he starts to lose his conscious state of mind. Towards the end of the novel, he reveals that he has abandoned a woman he has married as he is doubtful of her pregnancy. That is why he marries Maryam who is more than ten years younger to him. When she meets Abbas, Maryam is also finding means to escape from the clutches of her foster parents. Abbas becomes a reason for her flight. Their children Hanna and Jamal try to build up their world to survive within the whites. Jamal has crucially noticed the imbalanced state of his father and writes a paper that describes the plight of the immigrants. Gurnah has revealed several stories

through his characters that are not stable. The versions of the stories that the characters reveal differ in various circumstances.

Abbas, who succeeds in hiding his past, loses when he is sixty years of his age. He notices that he can no longer hide, as the scar that certain memories leave is unable to be healed. The repressed feelings in his unconscious mind wish for someone to share. When Abbas forcefully hides his emotions, it finds an outlet by causing terrible restlessness to him. He becomes childlike at times and behaves oddly and all his memories have then become “less and less like a distant fantasy of someone else’s life” (2). The days he spends at home after the stroke brings several changes in his life. His silence takes him to some other places that remain ‘repressed’ in his unconscious state of mind. Maryam also notes a change in his attitude. Abbas whom Maryam sees now has changed from the Abbas whom she met forty-three years ago in Exeter. Abbas needs Maryam to be there with him forever but he tries to avoid her because he fears his mental state. He does not reveal anything about his past life in Zanzibar that Maryam is eager to know. Maryam believes that Abbas can be cured only when he reveals the past that is concealed within his unconscious part of the mind. Abbas loves solitude to enjoy the recollection of his hidden memories.

Maryam gives him a tape recorder so that he can speak about his past whenever he wants to. She makes Abbas confess everything. After the confession he unburdens all the pangs that have been tormenting him for long and he experiences a huge solace. Making a patient confess the ‘repressed’ thoughts of the unconscious mind is a kind of psychoanalytical approach. Peter Barry in his book *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to literary and Cultural Theory* describes it as follows:

The classic method of doing this is to get the patient to talk freely in such a way that the repressed fears and conflicts which are causing the problems are brought into the

conscious mind and openly faced, rather than remaining buried in the unconscious. This practice is based on specific theories of how the mind, instincts and sexuality work. (97)

All the 'repressed thoughts' of Abbas suppress his confidence. This leads him to suffer a collapse after forty-three years. He wishes for someone to be there to let thoughts free from the clutches. The thoughts get faded and become a memory that is associated with someone's life as he says

The wish was like a memory as if he remembered someone doing just that a long time ago picking him up and taking him home. But he did not think it was a memory. The older he became, the more childlike his wishes were at times. The longer he lived the nearer the childhood drew to him and it seemed less and less like a distant fantasy of someone's life.

(2)

Abbas is comfortable with Maryam every time, even though his behaviors are indifferent to her presence. She remembers the days when she was introduced to him Exeter. His smiling and energetic face appears on her consciousness each time. Maryam has Ferooz her stepmother to communicate with. For an abandoned child like her, Ferooz becomes a sense of solace. Later she finds the same care with Abbas. The plight of Maryam and Abbas shows the psychological journey of people who have strong memories to ponder. The happiness in receiving someone as their own is immeasurable. Gurnah reflects it as,

Nobody had talked to Maryam like that before not that she remembered expecting her to ask questions, to want to know about things. At least that was how Maryam wanted to remember her as someone who someone who spoke to her differently from the way anyone had spoken to her before someone who expected her to be curious. (26)

Maryam remains unconfused as she confesses at least some portion of the bitter experiences she has faced in Ferooz's and Vijay's house. Her mental consciousness remains stable as she has not forcefully suppressed the memories that yearn to get reflected. Abbas' case is different from that of Maryam. Abbas' reading of Homer's *The Odyssey* relates his hidden past with that of Odysseus. Abbas feels like Odysseus who has also remained irresponsible with his family. William Mc Dougall in his *An Outline of Psychology* has discussed the behavioral changes in the victim through the concept of "conduct or behaviour". He describes it as follows:

By the term "conduct or behavior of any person" we denote every movement and every other observable change of bodily condition which seems to express his experience...movements of the limbs, the face, the throat and chest and other bodily changes such as sweating and shedding of tears are apt to accompany or follow upon experiences of certain types, in a more or less regular and orderly fashion. (6)

The same behavioural changes are observable in the case of Abbas, where Jamal the son of Abbas becomes the observer and Abbas the victim. When Abbas is hospitalised after he has a mild stroke, Jamal observes the behavioural changes that Abbas has been undergoing. The behavioural changes in Abbas are the result of the 'repressed thoughts' in his unconscious state of mind. Silence, sweating and sudden shift in the mental state are the primary changes that Jamal has seen in Abbas. Jamal describes the changes in Abbas as,

Ba's silences were sometimes dark and his solitariness had a feeling of menace as if had gone somewhere where it would not be pleasant to meet him. At those times his face turned down frowning his eyes glowing with a kind of ache or shame. When he spoke in

that state even when he spoke to Ma, his voice was harsh and his words were cruel. (32-33)

Abbas is very kind to his family. Jamal remembers their story time with Abbas. The stories that Abbas narrates are touched by the past that he wants to hide from his children. Abbas tries to move away from the past which he would not have belonged to. The images in the stories of Abbas show how he escapes from his native land, Zanzibar.

He told them the most absurd incredible stories, and they swallowed them whole Hanna and he. He knew how to draw them in and they could see in his face that the stories were true. There was one story in which he was chased for hours by a troop of laughing elephants. He described them to his children the great beasts thundering behind him, lumbering leather checked pachyderms laughing their trunks off their double chins and their huge bellies swinging as they trotted after him, cackling and snorting. Do you know why they are called pachyderm? Because they have such thick sins. He outwitted them in the end by lying flat on the ground. (34)

The image shared by Abbas in one of his stories is 'laughing elephants' which signifies his relatives in Zanzibar. He addresses them as 'leather-checked pachyderms.' The word pachyderm denotes animals with thick and dark skins which is the usual skin pattern of African people. Finally, he tells his children that they are kind enough to leave once their prey surrenders. They will never hurt if they find their opponent helpless. The narrator describes it as "you have to understand, their Ba told them, that it offends elephant sense of fair play to stamp on something lying flat and still on the ground" (34). Abbas also tells stories of a hungry shark in a coral reef of Sulawesi after having several encounters with the shark finally he manages

to escape from them. All these stories by Abbas have a deep reflection of his past which he yearns to keep hidden.

Freud explains this process of representing hidden elements under two terms. They are 'displacement' and 'condensation'. In the former the 'repressed fears and wishes' get hidden when a person tries to reflect while in the latter it gets reflected through 'images puns and metaphors' (Barry 101) Lacan also describes this concept when he talks about the prominence of language in the reflection of one's unconscious state of mind. The person who wishes to repress fears will never handle normal language whereas he/she uses certain 'metaphors', 'puns' or 'imageries' to express it. Lacan's idea is summarised by Peter Barry as, "whenever the unconscious is being discussed the number of linguistic analyses increases since puns, allusion and other kinds of wordplay are often the mechanism which make manifest the content of the unconscious" (114).

The same idea applies to the Freudian 'dream-work' mechanism also. All the images produced in the dream are metaphors of the 'repressed thoughts' of one's unconscious psyche. Freud analysed the effects of the dream mechanism with one of his patients named Dora. All the dreams that Dora has seen have a similarity to the thoughts that affect her more. The same is that of the protagonist Abbas. Ernest Jones in *Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis* discusses the type of dream is different from a nightmare or an ordinary dream. It is a fusion of anxiety and terror followed by "a sense of oppression on the chest as of a heavy body lying there, with a consequent dread of suffocation" (110). Freud in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* points out that the major aim of dreams is to free the victim from the extreme emotions that he/she embraces. When the victim is affected by terrible pangs, the dreams would help them to reflect it by representing "reality in symbols" (64).

When Abbas recovers from a mild stroke, he has moments to reflect on his past. The dreams that he sees represent his anxiety and fear through some unreal images and symbols. Gurnah describes it as follows:

Sometimes he drifted away, into sleep or away from his moorings into those deep silent places that he could not help returning to that he hated returning to. Even in his daze he knew that he had left things for too long, as he had known for many years. There were times when he thought he was already gone, that he was out of reach hanging on to a rope that was unwinding from a spool while he slowly dissolved. But he was not gone and he came awake again and he remembered that dream he had at times when he worked at sea of hanging on to a piece of rope as his body dissolved in a rush of water. (9)

According to Lacan in analysing the dreams of the character the Freudian ideas of 'displacement' and 'condensation' is applicable as these are also represented through images and symbols. Abbas hates it if people or his children ask him about the stories of their past or how they feel in their strange land. He hates the help offered by Maryam to the people of the refugee centre Norwich. He can sense the plight of the immigrants when they are asked questions and offered advice to grab a secure life in the strange land. All these will enhance their sense of isolation according to Abbas.

Lacan's idea of the mirror stage can be applied to analyse the changes in the character of Hanna and Jamal, the children of Abbas. According to Lacan the child dwells in a stage of consciousness before he/she tries to understand his/her self. The 'mirror stage' comes when the child sees his/her reflection in the mirror and "begins to conceive of itself as a unified being separate from the rest of the world" (Barry 115). The child starts to use language to socialize with society. The former stage is called 'imaginary' and

the latter stage is called 'symbolic'. In *The Last Gift*, the changes in the character of Abbas' children in their behaviour toward Abbas can be studied under this concept. Hanna the daughter of Abbas has had an amiable relationship with Abbas but her character has changed when she finds her family a barrier for her to grab a good space in society. Her relationship with her boyfriend Nick becomes fragile and her acquaintance with the other friends of her college is not strengthened.

Hanna calls her family an odd one and starts to hate Abbas for not revealing things about his roots. Her attempts to become a British woman and to express her hatred towards her father are the situations that describe how distinction appears between the 'imaginary' and the 'symbolic' stage. The moments that Abbas remembers about Hanna's change is described by Gurnah as follows:

One day when Abbas was making one of his blunt jokes about her clothes, Hanna had said to him: Leave me alone, Ba and had left the room and marched right out of the house to go wherever she was going. It stunned him. She had never spoken to him like that before. Sometimes she did not come back during vacations, just visited for a few days and then left. Perhaps that was what happened to everyone and they all learned to swallow what hurt they felt as their children tired of them. (82)

Jamal is opposite to that of Hanna as he tries to understand the difficulties of Abbas and Maryam. He writes a paper on immigrant life to understand it more. When he meets Mr. Harun Sharif, he finds a close resemblance to that of his father. Sharif abducts the wife of his colleague whereas Abbas abandons his wife doubtful of her pregnancy. Both shut themselves up from the public and remain under the beauty of solitude. Jamal's quest for self when his psyche develops from the 'imaginary' to the 'symbolic' stage brings in a positive change.

The psychological journey of Abbas sums up the application of psychological theory in *The Last Gift*. When he suppresses his memories, it finds an outlet by letting him mentally sick. At times those memories start ruling his conscious self when they move away from his realm of unconsciousness. It is those moments he starts talking about his past to Maryam and his children. Once he talks about his father and how he pursued education with the help of his brother Kassim. Certain moments let his 'repressed thoughts' get expressed without his consciousness.

When Abbas happens to see the name Mfenesini in a TV program, he starts talking about attending his school education here. He ends his story abruptly for he does not want to reveal his entire past life to his family. He feels great pain whenever he remembers those memories. He can no longer bury them entirely as he remains sick unable to turn his attention to some other activities. Gurnah describes the pathetic situation of Abbas,

For years he had tried not to think of these things, and sometimes he even persuaded himself that he had forgotten many of them. His tears there in the dark were for his brother Kassim as much for himself on that January morning in 1947 a nostalgic old man's tears for two people now lost to him in a frenzy of panic and guilt. Now he was ill and worn out, unable to busy himself or distract himself lying in the dark waiting for the pain to arrive. (60-61)

After having confessed everything that torments him for years, Abbas starts to undergo an inactive state of mind. He does not show any reaction to TV news programs that talk about Zanzibar and other news related to immigrant people. He points out that he behaves oddly toward Maryam intentionally. It is not due to his illness. When he grows older his grip on the emotions that he hides also starts to lose its

strength. Every memory associated with his past life remains alive within his unconscious realm of mind.

The way to suppress them makes him to act like a human who has lost mental stability.

Abbas hates Maryam for asking him more about his past than he wants to forget. He tries to hide them as he wants to live a new life without any guilt or fear. He feels guilty for being rude to his family by abandoning them for some unreal reason. Abbas himself has described it as,

I can't remember anything, I tell her but it is lie. I remember many things and I remember them every day, however hard I try to forget. I thought I would keep quiet about all that for as long as I could. I thought if I started to talk I would not be able to stop. Or I can't tell you about that now. I thought I would wait until the time came to talk about these things so they did not seem cowardly and shaming, but that time cannot come. I did not know it would take this long to realize that. (243)

Abbas faces such physical and mental dilemmas after so many years, as he finds himself guilty of abandoning his wife in Zanzibar under mere doubt. Abbas has his explanations for doing so but once the years move forward, he thinks that he is cheating Maryam, Jamal and Hanna. But his mind is not ready for an open confession. This state occurs when the process of self-actualisation happens. Self-actualisation is a process developed by Abraham Maslow in his hierarchy of needs. The five sets of needs are physiological, safety, love and belongingness, esteem and self-actualisation. When all the first four needs are fulfilled, the victim would enter a state of complete maturity.

Saul Mcleod in his work *Simply Psychology* discusses the characteristics of self-actualisers and behaviour leading to self-actualisation. Some of them tolerate uncertainty, a sudden expression of actions, enjoying solitude, having high moral standards, not giving prominence to others' thoughts on his/her

opinions and being prepared to hold on to his/her views no matter what others would think. All these characteristics are found in Abbas' final phase of life. When he reaches the final phase called self-actualisation he decides to confess everything to his family. But that happens without having any knowledge of his conscious state of mind.

Thus, the novel *The Last Gift* by Abdulrazak Gurnah becomes a revelation of his own experiences as an immigrant and the journey that he has undergone by enduring all the humiliations in a strange land. This paper vividly shows not only the psychological dilemma of being an immigrant but also the entire journey of Abbas to reach the state of self-actualisation. By attaining the state of self-actualisation, Abbas gets relieved of his mental pangs and undergoes a state of peace later.

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