

Voices Beneath the Palms: The Art of Cultural Remembrance in Gurnah's Narrative

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Abstract

Cultural and personal memories are intertwined aspects that helps people to remember the past and their influence in the formation of identities, perceptions, and interactions. The narratives related to war explores the exposure to trauma, guilt, fear, and aftermath of conflicts. It provides insights into the collective memory of war and the struggles of personal suffering. These genres encourage the creative exploration of memory and identity by reimagining historical events in alternative settings. Abdulrazak Gurnah, a Tanzanian-British writer is a master storyteller who places much emphasis on memories and uses them as an art of cultural remembrance in his narratives. In *The Last Gift* (2011), the story represents the journey of his characters through painful memories, secrets and personal histories. This paper intends to study the role of memories as an art of cultural remembrance.

Keywords: Storytelling, cultural memories, personal histories, fear, trauma.

Literature plays a diverse role in the narrative structures to transform historical events into cultural memory. These structures describe the timelines related to historical accounts, flashbacks, fragmented timelines, and multiple perspectives that reflect the complexity of memory and its reconstruction of stories. Literary texts represent the cultural memory of their time and the societal values, beliefs, and experiences through storytelling. It plays a crucial role in preserving, transmitting, and shaping cultural memory. It also ensures that the collective experiences and histories of societies are remembered and understood by the people since the time they acquired the speech faculty. The features of a story help them to remember much more than just facts alone. Cultural and personal memories play a significant role in recollecting the past. Cultural memory is the collective and shared way of remembering the past within a group or society. It is expressed and transmitted through various forms and media, such as texts, images, rituals, monuments, and archives. In the 1990s, German Egyptologist Jan Assmann, developed the concept of cultural memory to explore how societies remember and transmit their cultural heritage over long periods. He examines how the images of the past, such as memory, historical consciousness, identity, and culture help a group of people to remember, preserve, and transmit their past experiences,

values, and identities. (Assman 129) Cultural memory affects personal identity by providing a sense of belonging, continuity, and meaning to individuals who share a common past, culture, and values. It helps individuals to construct and communicate their self-image and personality concerning their group membership and social context. Pierre Nora, French Historian introduced the concept of “*memory sites*” and mentioned about the preservation of the symbolic institutionalised heritage to which individuals build their identities and affirm themselves as part of a group. (Nora 24) ‘Many cultures have relied on oral and folk tales and stories to pass knowledge from one generation to the next. Cultural mythology helps in recreating the cultural identity of a group of people. It fits with the values and beliefs of the group. It is often done with rituals or ceremonies that relate to the stories.’ (Jenkins 2013) Storytelling is an age-old art that continues from generation to generation. It connects people together to entertain each other, to learn from each other, and often to teach young people about life and their world. It shapes the reality of the world in their minds. It has been important in all cultures since the dawn of history to bring people together. It helps to learn about others and empathise with them and their situations. (Abrahamson 1998) It helps the reader to understand the character’s feelings and ideas and push them to reciprocate their emotions. While passing down stories, it also influences individuals to perceive and interact with others by different or conflicting memories and identities. Stories evoke feelings within the readers for that individual and his way of living. It is a powerful tool in the hands of an astute professional like Abdulrazak Gurnah. A strong marque relies on the narrative of a story. It is up to the craftsmanship of a narrator to narrate the situation artistically. Gurnah introduces every character in the novel through different narrators. Storytelling encourages the listener’s imagination and interacts with the elements and images of a story through the using of words and actions. ‘It has a profound impact on culture because it shapes beliefs and ideas. Stories create a shared understanding of the world inside and outside culture.’ (Jenkins 2013) The interactive nature of the mode of narration makes the listener more imaginative and creative. The readers find themselves in the narration and have an unconscious involvement in the storytelling. The nature of the artist’s storytelling techniques allows the story to directly and immediately impact the readers. The narrators represent the past lives in their narratives so deeply that the readers immerse their emotions and feelings and foster a deeper connection to history.

Stories are easy to pass, and it is that age-old oral culture that Gurnah continues in his writings. He gives a glance at the historical representation of life through his storytelling method. The readers are fascinated by the words he uses in Swahili, German, and Arabic in his novel and the way he translates them is impressive and highly appreciated. Many civilisations survived due to storytelling because they ensured the continuity of life experience for the next generation. Gurnah has portrayed his characters, stories, situations, emotions, and experiences in his novels. Every moment and event is elaborated precisely from the novel’s start to end. He represents the memories to configure the collective histories and shifts the narrative ideas to a deeper perspective. These memories serve as a reservoir for preserving and transmitting the cultural narratives of Zanzibar to their families. In *The Last Gift*, Gurnah represents the cultural memory of Zanzibar as the fragmented recollections of the protagonist, Abbas. His reflection on his past shows the vibrant colour of Zanzibar and its historical influences. It is marked by its rich cultural heritage and the scars of colonialism. He also highlights the complexities of identity, displacement, and belonging. As Abbas remembers his trauma,

“It must have seemed a good idea to our rulers, to awe the natives with British power and then soothe their children with jellies and cakes and pastries.” (Gurnah 246)

It is their way to frighten them with their knowledge and power. The impact of colonial rule on the island affected their lives and exposed the superiority of foreign governance to the cultural and economic disruptions. Gurnah has not just portrayed Zanzibar as a backdrop for Abbas's personal story, but his characters possessed a distinct history and memory that shape the lives of its inhabitants. Abbas often thought,

"...of that little country market under a tree, no, perhaps not thought, more like the image appeared in his mind as he made ready to sleep or when he drifted into memory. The image that came to him had depth and texture, and it was not a picture. He felt the warm breeze and heard the laughter of the people buying and selling." (Gurnah 63)

His memories played the role of a reservoir for preserving and transmitting the cultural narratives of East Africa. His recollections are full of sights, sounds, and smells of Zanzibar. It started from the bustling markets to the serene coastal landscapes of the seaside. These sensory details visualise the childhood of Abbas. The novel's title, *'The Last Gift'*, is similar to Abbas's stories, as a *last gift* to his family. He transfers his memories and shares his secrets with his family as a *gift*. He breaks his silence and helps them to understand his emotional guilt. The fragmented narration signifies the exploration of the intergenerational transmission of cultural memory. Gurnah portrays storytelling as a preservation of cultural memory and fostering a sense of continuity and belonging. He also emphasised the socio-political changes brought about by colonial rule on the island. The introduction of administrative and new legal systems, the exploitation of local resources, and the displacement of indigenous communities show the impact of colonialism. Abbas mentions,

"The violence and cruelty that took place there after independence and went on for years made it easier to put to one side any idea of going back." (Gurnah 248)

His recollections reveal the tensions and conflicts that arose from these changes and how the people of Zanzibar resisted and adapted to their new reality. He also wonders,

"...what has happened to them all, whether they survived the killings and the expulsion. If only one person survived, it would be my scheming sister. I do not have the strength for this." (Gurnah 249)

The novel portrays the colonial period as a time of upheaval, transformation, resilience, and survival. Gurnah represented the effects of colonialism in his works through the narrativisation of victims and their sufferings. He portrays a complex and diverse role of the colonial experience.

However, the novel also represents the cultural practices that explore Zanzibar's culture, from the traditional Swahili architecture to the intricate rituals of daily life. Gurnah explores the importance of cultural practices, such as the value of traditional music, the sanctity of communal gatherings, and the representation of rich culinary heritage. He narrates the uses of cultural elements to highlight the resilience and adaptability of the people. He reciprocates that the ordinary people maintain their cultural identity and existence in spite of the pressure of colonialism and freedom. As Abbas lies,

"...there in the dark, broken by disease in a stranger's land, he saw his father standing in the yard in the afternoon sun, his saruni rolled around his thighs, a half-woven basket on a tree stump in front of him." (Gurnah 55)

His memories are a significant part of cultural memory, which connects him to his homeland and heritage. They are full of personal recollections of childhood memories full of joy and sorrow, community and isolation, tradition and change. The novel provides a powerful tool of storytelling that keeps the cultural memory alive, even in the face of loss and displacement. The enduring impact of cultural memory formulates the stories to resonate with individuals and their collective identities.

However, personal memory is based on personal experiences, emotions, and perceptions of one's past. It creates the self-image and personality of an individual. Endel Tulving introduced the concept of episodic memory in the 1970s. It refers to the ability to recall specific events and experiences from one's life, which is a crucial component of personal memory. (Tulving 384) In the episodic memory system, information about specific events is tied to the situational context in which they occurred. The individual remembers information about the event 'what' and its context of occurrence 'where' or 'when' it happened. The stream of consciousness technique captures the flow of thoughts and memories as they occur in the character's mind and provide an intimate glimpse into their personal recollections and emotional states. Both, cultural and personal memories are interdependent and complementary to each other, as one provides a framework and a context for the latter, while personal memory enriches and diversifies cultural memory. Abbas's past contains secrets, guilt, fragmented narratives, and longing for peace. His silence about his past has created a gap between him and his family, which is only bridged when he begins to share his story. He left his family and abandoned his wife and unborn child out of fear and a burden. He admits and expresses before his present wife, Mariam, that he,

"...committed an unkind and thoughtless act, and silence was a way of coping with the memory of it, offering a deadpan face to the burden of it." (Gurnah 253)

His personal memory is an emotional journey of certain life events that he cannot remove from his past. It reveals Abbas's inner struggles and the impact of his past decisions on his present life. The reflection of his past haunted his choices of his present path, which he did not take for resilience. His memories are covered with a sense of loss and missed opportunities, which forces him to struggle with the consequences of his actions. The weight of his silence pushed him to bear the pain of physical and emotional ailments that he could no longer ignore. His sense of displacement and alienation compounds the internal turmoil in his adopted country, where he feels disconnected from both his roots and his present reality. His peregrination in self-discovery of his secrets and guilt helps him reconcile with his past. He accepted that,

"I had meant to save you from this sordid knowledge so that you would look ahead and be brave and not be paralysed by these shameful memories." (Gurnah 253)

Abbas has suppressed his feelings for a long time, as he revisits his past, he confronts the pain and trauma. The fragmented recollections of the past represent a powerful picture of his inner world, that struggles with his guilt of the past and regrets of the present. These memories create a breeze in the waves as they trigger mundane events or objects with more profound significance related to the past. A particular location, a photograph, or a familiar scent can easily help anyone to recollect the memories of the buried motions and forgotten experiences of the past. He, too, remembers such events at certain moment of his life, which gives the essence of past mysteries. He consciously balances the delicate relationship between holding on and letting go of his memories. Thus, the process of remembering is both

cathartic and agonising for him. He creates a bridge to fill the gap between his past and his present, and between himself and his loved ones through the act of storytelling. His family has been waiting for a long time to have a glimpse of his unspoken secrets from his past, so that they can understand the silence behind his existence. His stories help them to explore the emotional and psychological landscape that has moulded him throughout his journey. His wife and children can see him in a new area of enlightenment as he opens up and fosters empathy and connection to himself. The journey of sharing his memory becomes a means of healing and reconciliation, as they come to terms with the complexities of their collective history.

The consistency of memory reflects the broader themes of identity and belonging. The novel represents Abbas's struggle to reconcile his past with his present, and the revelation of facts and recollection of memories play an active part in transforming his identity and acceptance of existence. The story also explores the broader immigrant experiences, where the search for identity is altered with tension and ambiguity. However, Gurnah's politics of storytelling encourages the readers to experience the ebb and flow of Abbas's recollections of memories. He uses vibrant imagery and lyrical dialogues to highlight the memories of Abbas's secret and resonant past. Memory is not confined to a single event or episodes; instead, it is an ongoing battle between the past and the present. The fluency of narrativisation represents that Abbas's journey explores the broader cultural and historical forces which makes life vulnerable. His reflections on his memories reveal the complexities of identity formation. The polarity of the memories explores the pressure between maintaining a connection to one's cultural roots and adapting to a new environment. His sense of self helps him to analyse his experiences and the cultural heritage of Zanzibar. His memories carry the burden of secret, guilt, and desire for his home, which forces him to reconsider his internal struggles and helps him to reconcile with his past and accept the present life in England. The novel shows that the cultural memory of his home influences his identity. It also represents the traditional values, ideas, and historical events as essential factors that have left an indelible mark on him. Through storytelling, Gurnah connects the generations and shows the importance of cultural memory in reconnecting the past with the present. The importance of storytelling maintains a sense of continuity and belonging as a means of cultural preservation. It is through the act of remembering and sharing stories that helps the characters to confront their past, heal old wounds, and forge a new sense of identity. The fragmented recollections help Gurnah to represent how memories resurface unpredictably and often trigger sensory experiences or emotional states. This non-linear approach explores how human memory operates by capturing the spontaneous and sometimes disjointed manner in which the person recalls their past.

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