
**POSTCOLONIAL MIGRATION, WESTERNISATION AND IDENTITY
FORMATION IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S THE LAST GIFT**



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ABSTRACT

In recent times, migration has become a postcolonial leitmotif due to the unsettling and unnerving sociopolitical and economic snares ravaging African postcolonies. On a daily basis, Africans are forced to flee in droves from their homelands to the West in search of safety and security. On getting to the West, African immigrants are often disappointed and disillusioned by the realities they encounter. From hardships, to racial hostilities, cultural displacement, identity rifts, alienation, estrangement, and so on, the African immigrant is thrust into a predominantly white space that threatens to shrink and silence them. Hence, this essay, by deploying the postcolonial theoretical framework, examines postcolonial migration, Westernisation, and identity formation in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift*. From critical textual analysis, the essay reveals that migrancy has been engrained in the consciousness of the African body politic as an escape route to the West in hope of better living conditions. Through the tragic life and symbolic secrecy of Abbas, postcolonial migration is revealed to dislocate and shroud indigenous identities and true selves. African immigrants are not only physical but psychological refugees straddling two cultures—the root culture and the foreign culture. Consequently, they become subjects of Westernisation, often as a survivalist strategy, which, in the long run, engenders the corrosion of their indigeneity and distortion of their sense of self. The essay concludes that Africans, in a hegemonic world, must strive towards cultural assertion. One such way is that African immigrants should (re)articulate their cultural heritage especially to the next generation who must seek creative means to store, preserve, and broadcast these narratives of truth (in books, films, pictures, documentaries, researches, songs, et cetera,) for the sake of posterity, against the machinery of epistemic violence.

Keywords: Postcolonial migration; Westernisation; Identity formation; African immigrants; Cultural displacement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* encapsulates the realities of African immigrants and the myriad quagmires hauled against them as they navigate the length and breadth of foreign milieus. The novel ushers to the fore pertinent issues affecting the livelihood and welfare of African immigrants in the West. These issues, such as disillusionment, exile, racial hostility, diasporic alienation, cultural displacement, identity rift, et cetera, pose as threats to the safety and stability of African immigrants, impacting their physical, psychological, social and emotional wellbeing.

In *The Last Gift*, the major character, Abbas, on whose life the narrative is hinged, is forced to flee from Zanzibar to England due to a social dilemma. Abbas, from an impoverished home, is thrust into an arranged marriage with Sharifa, the daughter of a wealthy merchant. Abbas moves into the wealthy merchant's family house where he is maltreated. Subsequently, Sharifa gets pregnant and instead of joy on the part of Abbas, it is suspicion that ensues. He begins to suspect the pregnancy is not his, and he has only been used to shield the reputation of the merchant's family, as it would be deemed a thing of shame for the merchant's daughter to give birth out of wedlock. Eventually, unable to live with and confront his new reality, he flees as a stowaway on a ship to England. One would think the gravity of Abbas's dangerous option of fleeing as a stowaway on a ship does not in any way correspond to the familial issue that has befallen him, being that there are probably less dangerous resolutions. But Gurnah, as usual, with his somewhat understated yet sublime narrativisation of human emotions, seems to point to the hypothesis that we all react to social, political, and economic crises differently, especially in the face of globalisation. While some may attempt to resolve these sociopolitical and economic pitfalls by staying back in the milieus that have birthed them, others may, as a means of escape, opt to migrate to new or foreign spaces.

While Gurnah ingeniously singles out a social crisis that forces Abbas to flee to England, there are manifold sociopolitical and economic impasses responsible for Africans' forced exit from their home countries to the West. They include multidimensional poverty, democratic unsettledness, insecurity, ethnoreligious confrontations, terrorism, insurgency, dearth of viable jobs, non-existent social infrastructures, and so on. In spite of the independence, African postcolonies have proved to be detrimental spaces barring the holistic emancipation of their populace. First, African nation-states are Eurocentric constructs which were not necessarily designed for optimal functionality. Second, African nation-states are governed by a decadent and incompetent political class that fosters a continuum of chaos and calamity entrenched into the fabric of their respective polities. There is no gainsaying Africa's political elite are preoccupied with self-aggrandisement and salaciousness. Hence, the masses find themselves battling throes of unbelonging, alienation, depression, and death, at the bottom of the social ladder. Suffice it to say that the widespread disillusionment machinated by postindependence decadence displaces and expels Africans from their homelands to hostlands. Africans troop to the West en masse in the hope of finding conducive and safe spaces.

Furthermore, the ideological and thematic inclination of *The Last Gift* situates it within the purview of migrant or Afrodiasporic literature. The main characters, Abbas, Maryam, Hanna and Jamal, are African immigrants whose lives are conditioned by Eurocentric systems and ideologies. They are thrust into labyrinths of alienation, estrangement and loneliness by the overwhelming grip of unhomeliness and unbelonging predominant in white spaces. Their hopes are oftentimes shattered to pieces of disappointment and regret because they become disillusioned by the perpetual pangs of hardship and survival. They live from hand to mouth, hopping from one menial job to another, and are displaced from city to city chasing the next whiff of opportunity.

From being subjected to racial segregation and slurs, to being treated as strangers and second-class citizens who are unwanted in England, the orchestrations of racial hostilities are endless. These vices are like spears pulverising the psyche of the average African immigrant who begins to question their identity and what it means to be black in a racialised world. Hence, a host of immigrants alter their identities and, at the expense of their roots, assimilate foreign cultures in order to fit into their new environments. Suffice it to say that the Western machinery is engineered to shrink African immigrants, silence them, and render them invisible. This essay therefore aims to analyse the signposts of migration, Westernisation and identity formation in

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* from a postcolonial perspective. The objectives of the essay are to: (i) examine postcolonial migration and how it engenders Westernisation; (ii) evaluate how Westernisation impacts the identity of African immigrants; and (iii) explicate how African immigrants evolve new identities, in *The Last Gift*.

2. CRITICAL RECEPTION OF ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S *THE LAST GIFT*

The literary critical space has witnessed a cornucopia of explorations on the form and content of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* published in 2011. Xinyi Liu examines *The Last Gift* from an exilic perspective by taking into cognisance its regional, racial, psychological, and cultural dimensions. Liu's study reveals that the major character, Abbas, who is displaced from Zanzibar to England, is a symbol of geographic exile (50). Abbas's children, Hanna and Jamal, due to their inability to neither find a "spiritual home" in the East African culture nor the English culture, are described as symbols of spiritual exile (Liu 51). Liu refers to Abbas as "a rootless wanderer" (50), and Maryam (Abbas's wife), Hanna, and Jamal as "cultural roots seekers" on a quest to unearth their true identity (51).

Taking a slightly different critical route, Riyad Abdurahman Manqoush, Ahmed Abdullah Al-Sakkaf and Ahmed Mabrook Al-Hawtali explore *The Last Gift* from the standpoint of minority identity, culture, and religion. The focus of their analysis is on how the diaspora impacts African Muslim immigrants' sense of self-identity (216). Their study reveals that African Muslim immigrants develop a self-diasporic consciousness that navigates three layers of identity—African, British, and Muslim (Manqoush, et al. 218). Hence, due to the obtrusive influence of the white culture, the African Muslim immigrants are thrust into a life space that alienates them from the mainstream society (218). Similarly, Ante Andaback reviews *The Last Gift* from a political, religious and patriarchal perspective, asserting that it "probes with remarkable precision and acuity at the effects of colonialism on the British psyche, exposing deep-seated racism and the hardships immigrants face there" (1). Andaback further adds that the novel "paints an accurate and harrowing picture of the rabid Islamophobia" which has swept through the West, and brings to the fore the patriarchal character of traditional Muslim societies like Zanzibar (1).

Another critic, Abhay Singh Rana, subjects *The Last Gift* to Homi Bhabha's theorisation of migration and cultural hybridity. Rana posits that migration engenders bouts of existential hardship and cultural hybridisation, as portrayed through the experiential odysseys of Abbas, Maryam, Hanna and Jamal. Immigrants struggle for survival and their identities are impacted due to their assimilation and adoption of Western cultures (Rana). Consequently, they become cultural hybrids as a result of the meld of the indigenous culture and Western culture (Rana).

Further, the scholar Ayotunde Mamudu analyses *The Last Gift* from a critical stylistic perspective, using Lesley Jeffries's textual conceptual metafunction tool of Negating. Negating is deployed to unravel meaning-making from the perspective of using language to deny assertions or to provide a negative context of issues to foreground what the positive representation should be (Mamudu 56). Mamudu observes that the word "silence" appears eighty-two times and is integral to the silencing of love (54). Mamudu's study presents the paradox of love and its silencing as represented through Abbas's recurring refusal to speak about his past marriage in Zanzibar despite his genuine love for his new wife, Maryam (54). The study highlights Abbas's adoption of silence as an escape mechanism from his past and present, which consequently builds a relational bane between himself and his loved ones (Mamudu 62).

Additionally, Qiao Han examines *The Last Gift* from the viewpoint of “community” in the era of Western modernity and rapid globalisation by deploying the theorisations of Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot. Han asserts that the major characters are constituents of an amorphous traditional community which suffers from exclusion in the new world order (77). According to Han, the novel explores the theme of global wasted lives created by the new world order through the juxtaposition of marginalised characters (79). Han posits that *The Last Gift* conceptualises the surge of disposable lives generated by the order-building and economic progress of global modernisation characterised by universal homelessness and rootlessness (79).

In conclusion, this study, like the aforementioned critical forays, seeks to contribute to the understanding of Gurnah’s *The Last Gift*. What this study attempts to achieve is to examine the propensities of postcolonial migration, how African immigrants are consequently encumbered by the weight of Westernisation, and the subsequent evolution of their identities. The study is undertaken by deploying the postcolonial theoretical framework.

3. THEORETICAL CONCEPTION

3.1. Postcolonialism and Postcolonial Fiction

Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, asserts that “postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order” and “postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of ‘minorities’ within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South” (245). Bhabha reckons that the global cultural landscape is riddled with unequal and uneven representations in which the Western-Eurocentric-supremacist faction lords it over the tricontinental faction.

Postcolonial theory is therefore tasked with “counter-hegemonic strategies” geared towards revealing how indigenous cultures and histories have been subjugated in literary works and intellectual discourses (Bhabha 246). It strives to be “a radical revision of the social temporality in which emergent histories may be written, the rearticulation of the ‘sign’ in which cultural identities may be inscribed” (246). It assesses how postcolonial fictions feature emergent histories and inscribe cultural identities engendered by colonialism and Westernisation. Gurnah’s *The Last Gift* is a postcolonial or counter-hegemonic text that brings to the fore indigenous historical and cultural realities. It features mainly African characters who have been hitherto misrepresented and underrepresented in Western literatures.

Additionally, Bhabha avers that postcolonial theory is the “tradition of the oppressed” (59). That is, it embodies a framework of ideas that query the existentiality of the colonised and the status quo of former colonies as represented in postcolonial fictions. It is common knowledge that colonialism thrived on the propagation of oppression and injustice; hence, postcolonial theory is dedicated to the study of how literary works portray indigenous peoples and their ways of life before the advent of colonial incursion, under colonial rule, and after former colonies were granted independence. *The Last Gift* reflects how postcolonial subjects navigate oppressive systems in a global world.

3.2. Postcolonial Migration and Migrant Literature

Postcolonial migration has become a major feature of the tricontinent. Mass migration and global movement, according to Sten Pultz Moslund in *Migrant Literature and Hybridity*, has garnered “speed and volume” since the second half of the twentieth century (1). This is due to a conjunction of several historical events such as the massive diasporas caused by the Second World War, the demise of the British empire and the subsequent migration from former

colonies to the West (1). Moslund also identifies “accelerated globalisation” which has created a highly mobile international workforce and an enormous traffic of illegal immigration as a consequence of the growing maladjustment between the developed and the underdeveloped regions of the globe as a factor that has necessitated migration (1). In addition, the increased speed and capacity of modern means and modes of communication and transportation have contributed to present-day migrancy (1).

The modern age, Moslund asserts, is “an age of unparalleled mobility, migration and border crossing” (2). Likewise, Salman Rushdie posits that mass migration and mass displacement are distinguishing features of our time (425). In the global ecosystem, migration has become a nexus, and a transcultural, transcontinental and transhistorical phenomenon, which Moslund defines as

the grand spectacle of a virtual surge of people flowing across the surface of the globe: refugees, exiles, expatriates, international vagrants, guest workers, immigrants, globetrotting travellers and package tourists, wanderers of all kinds crisscrossing the planet and all its national, ethnic, cultural, social and linguistic borders. It seems that we are witnessing a massive international and transnational defeat of gravity, an immense uprooting of origin and belonging, an immense displacement of borders, with all the clashes, meetings, fusions and intermixings it entails, reshaping the cultural landscapes of the world’s countries and cities. (1-2)

Migration transcends national, ethnic, cultural, social and linguistic borders, and is a catalyst for “new mobile identity formations” (3). It has shrunk the world into a global-cultural village. *The Last Gift* represents how Africans migrate from their homelands to the West, only to experience culture shocks and clashes. Due to the imposing temperament of the hostlands, African immigrants are culturally displaced and forced to assimilate Western ideals as survivalist techniques. In addition, their identity undergoes transformations as they navigate the inclement realities of living abroad.

Furthermore, Bhabha describes postcolonial migration as “a massive historical displacement” which is both transitional and translational (320). On the one hand, postcolonial migration is transitional because it entails a change of setting (place and time), and on the other, it is translational because it leads to transformations of identity, culture, perception, worldview, et cetera. It is impossible to contextualise postcolonial migration without taking into cognisance the sociopolitical and economic climes of postcolonies. After independence and colonial departures, postcolonies have spiralled into decadence due to neo-colonialism, maladministration, mismanagement, and a festering national character. Most postcolonies are fraught with sociopolitical and economic maladies, which are widespread vices that force millions of Africans to flee their homelands to the West in search of better living conditions.

Consequently, African writers are not exempt from this trend of migrancy as many of them have deserted their homelands and are now living and plying their trade abroad. Hence, there is a significant increase in the production of migrant literatures, such as *The Last Gift*, that portray African immigrants sojourning in the West and acclimatising to alien milieus. These literatures, Edward Said states, are brimming with “exilic energies” (403), and he refers to these writers as “chroniclers” of “[e]xiles, émigrés, refugees, and expatriates uprooted from their lands” (xiv). Abdulrazak Gurnah aptly fits into this description. In the 1960s, during the Zanzibar Revolution, Gurnah was forced to flee as a refugee from Zanzibar to England where he still lives as an immigrant.

3.3. Unhomeliness, Cultural Displacement and Double Consciousness

In apprehending the gravity of postcolonial migration, Westernisation and identity formation, Bhabha introduces a concept which he terms “unhomeliness.” Bhabha describes the phenomenon of unhomeliness as “a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition” that “has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of transhistorical sites” (13). That is, postcolonial fictions feature characters that are, for the most part, unhomed, due to the dynamics of cultural differences, whether politically, socially, or economically. Bhabha posits that once an indigene’s root culture is destabilised by external factors, such as colonialism and Westernisation, such an individual becomes unhomed because they experience cultural displacement. In the light of this, Tyson quips that, “Being unhomed is not the same as being homeless,” and so defines unhomeliness as “an emotional state: unhomed people don’t feel at home even in their own homes because they don’t feel at home in any culture and, therefore, don’t feel at home in themselves” (250). In *The Last Gift*, Africans negotiate the hegemonies of cultural difference in East Africa (root culture) and England (foreign culture).

Bhabha opines that unhomeliness is born of an “estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world” and is engendered by “extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (13). That is, it is a feeling of estrangement initiated by territorial and cultural shifts. These shifts, oftentimes, disrupt the indigene’s perception and worldview, which makes them not “easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres” (13). The African immigrants portrayed in *The Last Gift* are unhomed and live in the constant terror of unbelonging. Hence, unhomeliness, Bhabha argues, is rooted in “intricate invasions” such as colonialism and Westernisation, as described thus:

The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting. (13)

The invasion of one’s private space (home/culture) by an external force (colonialism/Westernisation) and the consequential displacement foster unhomeliness. In addition, Tyson notes that unhomeliness is engendered by forced migration which has scattered large numbers of peoples around the globe (421). This means African immigrants suffer unhomeliness because they possess no stable cultural identity and no real home in any culture (Tyson 250). They do not belong to the dominant culture and, in most cases, have rejected their own culture as inferior (Tyson 250). In *The Last Gift*, African immigrants are scattered all over England, and they do not belong to the English culture, and most of them have rejected their East African culture as inferior. Bhabha refers to this as “a place of dwelling, located between the unhomeliness of migrancy and the baroque belonging of the metropolitan” (26).

Furthermore, Tyson observes that cultural displacement is traumatic because it is a “feeling of being caught between cultures, of belonging to neither rather than to both, of finding oneself arrested in a psychological limbo,” and hence, one’s cultural identity crisis makes one a “psychological refugee” (421). This feeling of being trapped between two cultures is what William Edward Burghardt Du Bois refers to as “double consciousness” (2). Double consciousness is a feeling of “two-ness,” “two un-reconciled strivings,” and “two warring ideals” (Du Bois 2). That is, it is born of two antagonistic worldviews—the indigenous versus the Western. Similarly, Rushdie, in *Imaginary Homelands*, opines that the immigrant’s identity is “at once plural and partial” and that immigrants sometimes “straddle two cultures” and at other times “fall between two stools” (18). Hence, identity, according to Rushdie, is “ambiguous and shifting” and provides a fertile territory for postcolonial writers to plough (18).

Double consciousness, Tyson posits, is characterised by “an unstable sense of self,” and “was heightened by the forced migration colonialism frequently caused” (421). However, more recently, double consciousness has been made prominent by the forced migration caused by postcolonial crises. These postcolonial crises force Africans to flee from their countries to the West in search of better living conditions. On getting to the West, they are plunged into a psychological battle of letting go of their indigeneity and embracing Westernisation. In the hostland, they experience cultural displacement and begin to see the world from two antagonistic perspectives. They are encumbered by alienation, rootlessness, estrangement and racist confrontations. The West suppresses and sidelines them, and treats them as second-class citizens. As coping mechanisms, African immigrants jettison their root cultures and cling to Western ideals. They assimilate Western mannerisms, speech patterns, appearances, names, beliefs, et cetera. In predominantly white settings, to be an African immigrant is to be trapped in the psychological limbo of uprootedness.

In contemporary postcolonial studies, the concept of home is dynamic. This is because the great dispersal of Africans was initiated by colonialism and that displacement has progressed till the present day. From the forced migrations during the slavery era to the forced migrations engendered by postindependence quagmires, Africans have remained largely unsettled. Hence, to the African, home is proportional to the urgency of settlement and the agency to live out one’s dream. Omar Taher aptly puts it thus: “Home is not where you were born; home is where all your attempts to escape cease.” Africans are overwhelmed by the constancy of escape, from fleeing their homelands to the West in search of greener pastures, to getting there only to experience diasporic disillusionment; home, therefore, becomes a construct of relative safety. Suffice it to say that the African is never really *at home* whether in their country where their existence is threatened daily by a plethora of postcolonial crises, or in the West where they are persistently racially abused and marginalised.

3.4. Hybrid Identity and The Third Space

Identity has proved to be a dynamic concept, especially in today’s globalised world. Francis Deng defines identity as “the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture” (1). That is, on the one hand, a person’s identity could be defined based on what they think of themselves or what they see themselves as, and, on the other, a person’s identity could be defined based on what another person thinks of them or sees them as. Likewise, Peter Katzenstein asserts that identity comprises “mutually constructed and evolving images of self and other” (59). This implies that identity is a construct based on personal and interpersonal views. For instance, Africans do not usually think of themselves as “blacks” while in Africa, but once they migrate to the West, they suddenly realise their “blackness” which is an identity imposed on them by the whites in order to subjugate and inferiorise them. The identity of the African immigrants in *The Last Gift* is defined by the whites based on skin colour, race, religion, language, and culture.

There are different types of identity, but this essay focuses on hybrid identity. The emergence of hybrid identity can be attributed to the mass migrations and interracial relations characteristic of the modern world (Gomez-Pena 74). The creation of hybrid identities is evidence that borders are shifting, reforming, and being created (Smith 6). Hybrid identity is a reflexive relationship between the indigenous and the Western (Smith 3). Keri Smith asserts that the “identities are not assimilated or altered independently, but instead elements of cultures are incorporated to create a new hybrid culture” (3). The creation of hybrid identity, according to Roland Robertson, is a “twofold process involving the interpenetration of the universalization of particularism and the particularization of universalism” (100). The

indigenous and the Western interact to create a new identity that is distinct in each context (Smith 3). In the process of interaction, the indigenous influences the Western and the Western influences the indigenous. The indigenous is Westernised and the Western is indigenised. Hence, hybrid identity is a signification of the “encounter, conflict, and/or blending of two ethnic or cultural categories” (Lo 199).

Hybrid identity is a product of the intermixing of cultures. It is a merger between the indigenous identity and Western identity (Smith 4). The African immigrant therefore is neither one thing nor the other, but rather an entity of two warring ideals. This identity formation is summed up by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* thus: “a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness ... one ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (2). The African immigrant is psychologically plagued by an innate battle bordering on holding on to their indigenous cultural roots and embracing Western ideals. The African immigrant therefore occupies a hybrid space and navigates between two cultural groups and occupies space within both cultural groups (Smith 7). Notwithstanding, the hybrid status of an individual’s identity in this age of globalisation and increasing modernisation has become beneficial because it affords such an individual the ability to negotiate across linguistic, cultural, spiritual, racial and physical barriers (Smith 4).

Further, Bhabha opines that the fusing of the indigenous and Western culture engenders an unstable hybrid identity that is neither indigenous nor Western (56). However, Bhabha sees hybridity as an empowering condition where both cultural purity and cultural diversity are rejected and thus becomes a means of resisting a unitary identity, emphasising instead multiplicity and plural identities, existing between cultures, in what he has called the Third Space (Nayar 92). The Third Space is a cultural space or domain of cultural production and articulation of cultural difference (Bhabha 56). The Third Space is the in-between position which is a product of the negotiations, interface, and exchange across cultural boundaries (Smith 8). Hybrid identity arises from the meeting and blurring of cultural boundaries. In *The Last Gift*, African immigrants are exposed to untold hardships, racial hostilities, and treated as second-class citizens in England. They encounter foreign cultures which engender cultural alienation, culture clash and culture shock. In a bid to fit in, they assimilate these foreign cultures, thereby taking up new identities, personalities, belief systems, names, mannerisms, et cetera. Some also engage in interracial relationships which may produce hybrid offspring. Most often than not, African immigrants jettison their indigeneity due to the imposing nature of Westernisation, and imbibe Western ideals as survivalist mechanisms. *The Last Gift* narrativises these dynamics of Westernisation.

3.5. Diaspora and Identity Formation

In today’s globalised world, identity formation continues to pose numerous questions, especially to Africans, and Stuart Hall, in the essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” concurs that it is neither transparent nor unproblematic (222). Postcolonial writing itself is a praxis of identity that strives to project what it means to be African or black in a hegemonic world. Quite a number of postcolonial fictions such as *The Last Gift* feature the diaspora experience, which Hall refers to as the narratives of displacement (223). Hall suggests that postcolonial fictions are practices of representation which embody the “positions of *enunciation*” (222). That is, postcolonial fictions are born of experiences representative of the dynamic worldviews, perceptions, and positions from which postcolonial writers craft them. These positions, according to Hall, are influenced by “particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific” (222). In the light of these, Hall defines identity as “a ‘production’, which is

never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (222).

On the one hand, Hall asserts that cultural identity is a product “of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (223). That is, one’s true cultural identity is marked by a shared history and ancestry and encompasses the original self, devoid of artificial impositions (selves) from within or without. This implies that identity can be adulterated, that is, made superficial or artificially imposed by a particular place and time. Therefore, a person who has undergone this superficiality or artificial imposition develops multiple identities or selves. The African immigrants represented in *The Last Gift* develop multiple identities. Due to Westernisation, their original (indigenous) self is fragmented into artificial selves.

Hall’s proposition is that it is impossible to unearth one’s true identity without tracing historical and ancestral lines because cultural identity is supposed to “reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (223). That is, indigenous identity ought to be stable and unchanging and encompass fixed cultural signs that transcend colonial history, but this is not the case as seen in *The Last Gift*. The African immigrants portrayed develop superficial or artificially-imposed selves conditioned by Western ideals. The West imposes on the African immigrant a superficial identity engendered by a Eurocentric milieu. Hence, the underlying goal of the postcolonial writer is to discover, excavate, bring to light and express the identity of the African diaspora through fiction. Postcolonial fiction, therefore, is an imaginative rediscovery, an act of imaginary unification, a creative re-telling of the past which imposes an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas (224).

On the other, there is, as Hall has identified, a second, related but different view of cultural identity. According to Hall, despite the cultural identity born of one, shared culture which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common, there is a cultural identity “which constitute[s] ‘what we really are’; or rather – since history has intervened – ‘what we have become’” (225). That is, cultural identity is dynamic and undergoes constant transformation. In Hall’s first view, cultural identity is somewhat tied to a fixed source, a traceable ancestry, but in his second view, he suggests that cultural identity is conditioned by place, time, history and culture. As a matter of fact, it is perpetually evolving between being and becoming. Therefore, in order to apprehend and appreciate the uniqueness of the African identity, the ruptures and discontinuities brought about by place, time, history and culture must be taken into cognisance (225). In *The Last Gift*, the identity of the African immigrants is ruptured by their displacement from Africa to Europe, their daily interaction with the English people, the ripples of imperial, colonial and neo-colonial history, and the Western-Eurocentric-supremacist culture. Apparently, cultural identities, Hall argues, are “Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (225). Therefore, based on the second view of cultural identity, the identity Africans share is precisely tied to the experience of a profound discontinuity engendered by slavery, transportation, colonisation, and migration (227).

Consequently, what postcolonial fictions set out to achieve is the creative repositioning of the African identity in relation to different points of reference machinated by the West such as marginal, underdeveloped, peripheral, et cetera (227-228). Postcolonial fictions are therefore encumbered with the task of enunciation in an ecosystem of Western-induced silence of Africa.

Hall further highlights how the “black subject” has been mispositioned within the “dominant regimes” of Eurocentric representation thus:

In terms of colonialism, underdevelopment, poverty and the racism of colour, the European presence is that which, in visual representation, has positioned the black subject within its dominant regimes of representation: the colonial discourse, the literatures of adventure and exploration, the romance of the exotic, the ethnographic and travelling eye, the tropical languages of tourism, travel brochure and Hollywood and the violent, pornographic languages of *ganja* and urban violence. (232-233)

The West has appropriated certain stereotypical and derogatory images to the identity of the African. This misrepresentation of the black subject is born of otherness and exoticism. Hence, postcolonial fictions such as *The Last Gift* are charged with centring indigenous identities which are “constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (235).

4. METHODOLOGY

This essay deploys the qualitative method. First is critical textual analysis which deals with the close reading of the primary text, *The Last Gift*. The terminus ad quem of close reading is to highlight aspects of the primary text that feature the signposts of migration, Westernisation, and identity formation. The in-depth reading of the text creates the avenue for the deconstruction or breaking down of the text in tandem with the objectives of the study. After deconstruction, the excerpts are then situated within the postcolonial framework to draw out meaning, which is eventually evaluated. Second is the referencing of secondary texts such as books, journals, articles, et cetera, in the library and online. The referencing of secondary texts aids the contextualisation and streamlining of the study.

5. SYNOPSIS OF *THE LAST GIFT*

The Last Gift narrates the life of a Zanzibari man, Abbas, who flees his country as a stowaway on a ship to England on suspicion that his newlywed wife’s pregnancy is not his. Abbas lives as an immigrant in England with his wife, Maryam, and two children, Hanna and Jamal, whom he does not inform about his past. He is struck by a diabetic ailment that leaves him immobile and almost lifeless. He is forced to reveal the secrets of his life to his family who are shocked and disappointed. On learning about their roots, Hanna and Jamal plan to visit Zanzibar.

6. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

6.1. Postcolonial Migration, Secrecy And Hardship In *The Last Gift*

The Last Gift brings to the fore the issue of postcolonial migration. Abbas, a Zanzibari, goes on exile to England in order to escape a social predicament. Abbas is from an impoverished family and his father is an extremely miserly man who values pigeons over his own children. Growing up in Zanzibar, Abbas is encouraged to go to school by his brother Kassim and, at some point, his sister, Fawzia, sells her dowry for him to attend college. The narrative, overtly or covertly, seems to connote that poverty is one of the root causes of postcolonial migration. Many African households are languishing in abject poverty which forces them to seek better living conditions abroad.

Subsequently, Abbas gets entangled with a wealthy merchant’s daughter, Sharifa. The merchant suspects foul play between his daughter and Abbas, which is not a good omen for the reputation of his family. Through Abbas’s sister, Fawzia, a marriage is brokered between Abbas

and Sharifa. Abbas moves into the merchant's family house and is treated with no regard. Sharifa falls pregnant and Abbas suspects he is not the owner, and that indeed his marriage to Sharifa has been orchestrated to protect the merchant's family reputation. Abbas takes his destiny into his own hands and deserts his marriage, and flees as a stowaway on a ship to England.

After many years in England, Abbas now has another family: a wife, Maryam, and two children, Hanna and Jamal. They live as African immigrants traversing the volatile and racially charged length and breadth of England. By sojourning in England, Abbas sheds the skin of his indigenous self by not telling his family about his roots. He withholds from his family his genealogy and the circumstances that dictate his exile to England. Hence, his indigenous identity is shrouded in secrecy. Abbas's secrecy symbolises how postcolonial migration hides the African immigrant's true identity. The secrecy symbolises hidden and suppressed indigenous identities, detached and discarded true selves, and severed roots.

Subsequently, Abbas's reluctance and refusal to reveal his ancestry affects the worldview and perception of his children. Hanna and Jamal know nothing about their lineage, which implies that the next generation of Africans living in the West are unaware and unconfident about their roots. This exposes them to being easily tossed about by the waves of Eurocentric ideologies. Unfortunately, Abbas is forced to reveal his origins and life experiences to his family when he suffers a health condition (diabetic crisis) that renders him immobile and almost lifeless. His family is dismayed and shocked by his revelation. Abbas, a man of secrets and silences, before his eventual death, offers his family the memory of his life as the last gift.

Pertinently, this revelational last gift is crucial especially to the next generation. From Abbas's confessions, Hanna and Jamal learn new things about their Zanzibari ancestry, and they develop a more formidable sense of self. Their newfound knowledge breeds in them a certain strand of affection towards their roots, and they even plan to visit their homeland (Zanzibar). Suffice it to say that it would have been catastrophic if Abbas had died without revealing his true identity to his family. Metaphorically, his death would not have been only biological but also cultural due to him being a repository of indigenous epistemologies. In addition, Abbas's wife, Maryam, uses a tape recorder to capture Abbas's confessional sessions for preservative purposes, because there is so much the brain can remember. Hence, *The Last Gift* draws attention to the urgency for African immigrants to (re)articulate their ancestries to the next generation and for the next generation to be able to record, store, produce and broadcast these narratives of truth in films, books, songs, documentaries, journals, et cetera, for the sake of posterity, against the machinery of epistemic violence.

Postcolonial migration is mostly inspired by the hope of better living conditions in the West, but this not often the case. *The Last Gift* reveals how African immigrants are thrust into bouts of hardship. In England, African immigrants, striving to survive, are overwhelmed with ceaseless waves of adversity. They are faced with the inability to secure decent jobs and are frequently displaced from city to city chasing glimmers of opportunity. Maryam shuffles from one menial job with meagre pay to another. She works as a cleaner in a hospital for twenty years before she is moved to the hospital canteen. She hates the job and describes it as miserable. She would prefer to do something else, but is at a loss for options. When Abbas falls ill, she requests for some time to take care of her husband, but is denied despite her long years of dedication and service. This prompts her to abandon the job and seek alternatives. She eventually volunteers for a Refugee Centre in Norwich.

6.2. Westernisation and Identity Formation in the Last Gift

Westernisation is the process of making the indigene Western in attitude, ideology and lifestyle. Rooted in otherness and hegemony, it comprises the conditioning of Africans by Eurocentric ideals. It takes on an imposing posture whose end goal is to impact indigenous identity. It is orchestrated to make the African behave and become like the European, and conform to Western practices. In *The Last Gift*, Westernisation constricts the lives of Abbas, Maryam, Hanna and Jamal, and riddles them with an unsettled sense of self. They choose to become Westernised as a coping mechanism and in order to fit into predominantly white spaces, and they do so by altering their identities and personalities, particularly their names, mannerisms, behavioural traits, social circles, et cetera, so as not to be treated as outcasts.

The first trace of Westernisation and identity formation can be seen in the life of Abbas. On getting to England, he jettisons his true identity by mentally detaching himself from his roots, as if to say that in England he has suddenly become a new self. This is a symptom of Westernisation, because it instils a feeling of inferiority into the consciousness of African immigrants, so most of them navigate the metropolis without any sense of indigenous pride. Before his eventual confession, the identity he maintains before his wife and children is an artificial one.

Unlike Abbas who deliberately shrouds his true identity in secrecy, Maryam's identity is shaped by the circumstance of her being a foundling and her social relationships and interactions. As a baby, Maryam is abandoned by her mother outside the casualty doors at Exeter Hospital. Maryam's mother leaves a note that reads, *Her name is Maryam they won't let me keep her*. The police ascertain that Maryam's mother must be a "darkie of some kind," and because there is no crime associated with the incident, the case is dismissed as one of foolish action and consequence (Gurnah 20-21). Maryam is put out for long-term fostering with the Riggs family in Exeter. Maryam's childhood is plagued by constant shuffling from one foster home to another, where she suffers abuse that leaves her traumatised.

Maryam, due to a variety of foster homes that attend to her, is exposed to a kaleidoscope of cultures that eventually forge her identity. For instance, when she is nine years old, she is adopted by Ferooz and Vijay who live in Exeter. Ferooz is a Muslim woman from Mauritius, while Vijay is a Hindu man from India. Ferooz and Vijay's union is opposed by their families, but they ignore their wishes and start a family together, and this is when Maryam comes into the frame. She grows up as a student of both cultures, alongside the others she assimilates in the course of her life, and, at the end of the day, she is quite unsure of who or what she really is. She is an embodiment of cultural displacement; hence, her identity is conditioned by English, Mauritian, and Indian cultures, coupled with the uncertainty of her unknown origins. Another traumatic event Maryam narrowly escapes is when she almost gets raped by Vijay's cousin, Dinesh. Unfortunately, when she opens up to Ferooz about it, Ferooz slaps her. Ferooz and Vijay's foster home is Maryam's last, because it is where she lives for years before she meets Abbas who tells her he is a sailor. Ferooz and Vijay dislike Abbas, which pushes Maryam to elope with him to Norwich.

Hanna is another African immigrant whose identity undergoes Westernisation. She is fussed and alienated by her parents' nondisclosure of their true identities, especially Abbas. She is fully aware the black community abroad is an endangered one, as she says to Jamal:

There are times when I hate that they brought me here... That they did not find another place to have me and to have you. 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. But I suppose they did not have any choice in the

matter, really, only an appearance of choice. They could have chosen not to have me, but after that the matter was out of their hands. (Gurnah 46)

Hanna is weighed down by the burden of pretending to be “someone else” that has to blend into a system that despises her. She is trapped between the cultural boundaries of her indigenous culture and the Western culture. Africans in the West are forced to live “suppressed and dissembling lives” (Gurnah 46). Most of them suppress who they truly are (being) and take up artificially-imposed selves (becoming).

Consequently, due to the pressure of Westernisation, and as a coping strategy, Hanna subjects her identity to transformation. First, she changes her name from Hanna to Anna, and, second, she fine-tunes her mannerisms and behavioural traits to be more British-like: “She was fully Anna now, and hardly ever talked about her difference in the same way. It became an embellishment of her Britishness” (Gurnah 46). Hanna assumes a hybrid identity which is neither fully African nor fully British. She becomes a psychological refugee trapped between two cultures of which she cannot fully lay claim to any. She even advises Jamal to change his name to Jimmy. Also, as part of her Anglicisation campaign, she gets into a relationship with Nick, a British academic.

It is implied that Hanna’s relationship with Nick is founded on her desire to fit into the British social sphere. During Easter, Nick takes Hanna to see his parents, Jill and Ralph, and partake in the family get-together. Although Hanna is a Muslim, she attends the Easter service to please Nick. The get-together is also attended by Laura, Nick’s sister, and her boyfriend, Anthony. At the gathering, Ralph is quite talkative and critical of Africa and its people. He makes a lot of racial remarks as though he knows Africans more than they know themselves. Unsurprisingly, Ralph’s comments represent the mindset of an average Eurocentrist who views Africans as subhumans in need of enlightenment. Ralph insinuates that Africans are habituated to oppression, historically conditioned to injustice, and possess a weak national character compared to the British (Gurnah 105-106).

Despite Hanna’s slick efforts to belong, her identity is questioned by Uncle Digby, a vicar and Ralph’s brother. Uncle Digby asks Hanna where she is from and Nick interjects and says: “Anna’s British” (Gurnah 116). Dubiously unsatisfied, Uncle Digby prods further: “But what was she before she was British?” (116). The question discomfits Hanna who wishes she can “get up and leave, and walk quickly to the train station and travel to wherever her real nation was” (116). Jill tries to stop Uncle Digby from bothering Hanna, but he goes on to refer to her as a “stranger” and seems to insinuate that even though Hanna is born and brought up in England, she cannot be British and must accept her status as an African immigrant (Gurnah 117). This scenario reveals how the Western machinery imposes on African immigrants the identity of subservience and silence. In addition, Hanna is racially slurred by Anthony who calls her a “jungle bunny” (Gurnah 118). Ralph also racially slurs Nick and Hanna’s unborn child as a “little jungle bunny” in anticipation of when or if they eventually have a child together (Gurnah 227). Later on, Hanna is convinced that Nick’s parents do not like her and are only putting up with her because of Nick. Eventually, Nick deserts Hanna for a white lady, Julia. Although Nick’s choice of Julia may appear romantically harmless, it, whether one chooses to admit or not, oozes with racial undertones.

Racial hostility, rooted in otherness, is an integral part of Western culture. *The Last Gift* mirrors how African immigrants are discriminated against and segregated by white supremacists. Harun, Jamal’s elderly Ugandan neighbour, lives in fear because he is relentlessly harassed by racist white kids. When he reports to the police, they say there is nothing they can do about it. This is a clear example of institutionalised racism, whereby

Western systems are wired to aid the oppression and suppression of African immigrants who live in cocoons of constant anxieties and vile tragedies.

Jamal is another African immigrant whose life is encumbered by the feeling of unbelonging. He, although born in England, is treated as an outsider due to his race. As he grows up, everything reminds him that he does not belong to the British culture, and this is worsened by his lack of knowledge about his Zanzibari origins. Hence, he straddles two unfamiliar cultures. Due to his skin colour, he suffers racial slurs such as “nigger” and “paki,” which are derogatory terms for Black immigrants.

Apparently, he is perplexed by not knowing his true identity—who he is and where he is from. Everywhere he goes he is quizzed about his origins by mostly white people, and on a particular occasion, he tells those who care to listen that he is a monkey from Africa (Gurnah 44). He makes himself the butt of his own joke as a defence mechanism against racial friction. On another occasion when he is asked about his ancestry, he asserts that England is his country, the only home he has known his whole life, even though he constantly feels like a foreigner. This is a state of rootlessness whereby he can barely lay any substantial claim to being African or English. On the one hand, his claim to being African is solely based on his skin colour and not because he possesses any strong ties to his African ancestry, and, on the other, his claim to being English is solely based on his birth in England.

As time progresses, Jamal commences his doctoral research on migration to Europe. Even the choice of his research topic is influenced by his dynamic identity. He channels his frustrations and curiosities into his studies, where he learns of “how precarious, how mean, how resourceful, the lives of these strangers [are], how blood-soaked some of their stories [are]” (Gurnah 47). His research reveals that migrating to Europe is a herculean feat and many Africans are willing and desperate to do whatever it takes; unfortunately, some lose their lives in the process, while others are scarred for life. Jamal comes to the realisation that migration, beyond trends and policies, is the immigrants and their turbulent stories, the silent spaces in their lives which remain unfilled, their ambitions and fears, and their desperation and incomprehension which have brought them from far places into foreign milieus where they struggle to survive and fit in, despite the surge of disparagement. In addition, *The Last Gift*, through Jamal’s strategic decision to do doctoral research on migration to Europe, touches on the issue of representation in the academia. The connotation is African researchers should conduct more researches on issues that pertain to the African race, and not just researches that serve white audiences. Through such researches aspects of indigenous existentialities are investigated, unearthed, projected and preserved.

7. CONCLUSION

Postcolonial migration has become a conspicuous pattern in the fabric of the modern world. Africans troop to the West en masse in search of greener pastures. They are displaced from their homelands to the hostlands due to a plethora of exilic conditions. *The Last Gift*, through the symbolism of secrecy and the tragic life of Abbas, sheds light on the role of postcolonial migration in engendering subdued indigenous identities and artificial selves. Many African immigrants jettison their indigeneity and choose to hide their true identities. *The Last Gift* also portrays how the harsh realities of living in the metropolis shatter the hopes of African immigrants who are constantly thrust into bouts of hardship.

In the hostland, African immigrants are exposed to Westernisation which imposes on them dynamic identity formations. Abbas, Maryam, Hanna and Jamal have their identities impacted by Eurocentric ideologies. They take up new names, imbibe Western mannerisms and behavioural traits, and recalibrate their social circles, all in bid to entrench themselves into the

superficial safety of the dominant culture. They suffer racial hostilities and are plagued by cultural displacement and double consciousness. Trapped in the psychological limbo of seeing the world from two antagonistic views, they find it herculean to find a home in any culture due to their uprootedness from their indigenous culture and the superimposition of the foreign culture. Hence, African immigrants are not only displaced physically but also psychologically.

Hanna and Jamal, in an attempt to reconnect with their roots, contemplate visiting Zanzibar. This is a welcome development since—despite their aggressive efforts to belong to the British culture and clime—they are constantly despised and reminded of their immigrant status and African ancestry. To be an African immigrant in the West is to be subject to an unstable sense of self. Hence, African immigrants must strive to stay rooted to their ancestry by engaging in acts that assert their indigeneity such as (re)articulating their cultural heritage especially to the next generation who must seek creative means to store, preserve, and broadcast these narratives of truth (in books, films, pictures, documentaries, researches, songs, et cetera,) for the sake of posterity, against the machinery of epistemic violence.

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