

Finding the True Self: The Reconstruction of Identity in Dottie from the Post-colonial Feminist Perspective

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Abstract: Abdulrazak Gurnah is one of the post-colonial novelists and a literary critic and won the Nobel Prize for writing in 2021. As an author with strong sense of social responsibility and morality, Gurnah bases most of his works on the colonial history from the perspective of Africans, trying to gain domestic and international attention for his concerning about identity, social conflict, racial conflict and gender oppression. The novel *Dottie* demonstrates an African girl who created her own sphere of space and identified herself to defend against the harsh racialism in the 1950s in Britain. This paper attempts a brief illustration from the perspective of post-colonial feminism on this novel as well as a prospect for its future.

1. Introduction

1.1 Abdulrazak Gurnah and *Dottie*

As an African-British immigrant, Gurnah was born in 1948 on the east coast of Africa, Zanzibar. Gurnah went study in England at the age of 20, now he is one of the famous post-colonial novelists and a literary critic. Based on his own experiences, the complexity of Abdulrazak Gurnah's writing in themes has led to the plurality and multiplicity of criticism of Gurnah abroad. The novel *Dottie* targets the experience of an African woman in London after World War II. The protagonist, Dottie, discovered the family history oppressed by the British behind her fancy name.

1.2 Literature view

Based on his own experiences, Gurnah combines his own experiences to create a series of works set in pre- and post-colonial East Africa and Britain that focus on themes such as identity social fragmentation, racial conflict, gender oppression, and historical writing. Most of the characters in Gurnah's writing create a new identity to adapt to the new social environment, but they are still deeply entangled in real life and past experiences, trying to find a sense of balance.

Since the late 1980s, Gurnah has published eight novels, including *Memory of Departure*, *Paradise*, *Admiring Silence*, *My Mother Lived on a Farm in Africa* and *The Last Gift*. And the novel *Paradise* was itself nominated for the Booker Prize in 1994.

1.3 Theoretical framework

Post-colonial feminism is primarily a study of the oppression of women in the third world by post-colonialism and patriarchy. Postcolonial feminism, which combines gender issues with racial issues, is a feminist critique in the context of post-colonialism. The combination of postcolonial criticism and feminist criticism enriched and innovated literary criticism. Their similar historical and cultural backgrounds and shared goal of equality give them the opportunity to combine. Their criticism is aimed at the political, economic, and cultural “discourse” of the mainstream “white men” in Western society, representing the attempts of marginalized and vulnerable groups to march into the mainstream culture and strive to be marginalized.

2. Post-colonial Feminist Theory

2.1 Racial oppression towards the female and black

One of the most important theory of post-colonial feminism is the sideline other races. In the 1960s England, where whites are completely dominant, African people and other minorities are others. White culture has super control, occupies absolute dominance, and tries to achieve cultural and national assimilation. They spread their culture through school education and the mass media, and racially oppressed and discriminated against blacks, especially black women. Race (here, read black) and gender (here, read female) are the main stigmatized markers on the practice/politics side of the border, but they are not the only markers, for they trade places in a fluid system in which differences of sexuality and class are interchangeable. As Luo Gang and Pei Yali elaborated in *The Politics of Race, Gender and Text - Theory and Critical Practice of Post-colonial Feminism*, race and gender are the main stigmatized markers, but in a dynamic system, differences such as sexual orientation and class also influence each other [1].

However, in the sphere of space and time, Dottie seems constantly troubled by dominant questions about the “history” of her identity. Although Dottie is aware that her names are foreign and cross centuries, cultures and territories, her knowledge of her multi-cultural history is impeded by her mother's resentment of a family who wanted to marry her off to someone she hardly knew. As Nyman pointed out in the research on contemporary diasporic fiction, diasporic individuals often face difficulties in culture and identity, and family factors play a complex role in it [2]. Dispossessed and separated from her former identities and her history, Dottie seeks to understand the complex cultural territory in which she finds herself, a territory where the dominant and the subordinated interact, struggle and negotiate their differences. For Dottie, the relationship to her people's past history is marked by misfortune and displacement just as her desire to reinvent herself is retarded by her confused origins.

Through the author's narration, readers know that Dottie's grandfather is named Taimur Khan, who is Pathan, that is, an Afghan living in the northwestern border of India, and believes in Islam. He served as a sailor on the HMS *Argent* of the British Royal Navy. Because of his bravery and resourcefulness in the war, he was favored by the captain, and granted British status, and the captain promised to send him to England. In England, he was often ridiculed by others and rejected by white people, but these were not problems for the hardworking and tolerant Khan. He liked his new life and used evening classes to increase his knowledge. The British discrimination and malice against blacks and foreigners eventually developed into riots. Khan was chased and jumped into the river to escape. Finally, the police came to quell the riots. After his daughter Bilkisu was born, Khan regarded her as the apple of his eye, but the beautiful Bilkisu attracted white boys after entering puberty, which made him very angry. “My parents may be the same people who almost killed me back then.” The relationship between father and daughter deteriorated. The conflict between father

and daughter also has deep cultural reasons. Khan adhered to Islamic religious beliefs and moral values, while his daughter yearned for white life and love. Facts had proved that Bilkisu's choice does not work. Khan was a representative of self-improvement, hard work, wisdom and bravery among black immigrants. He survived in the cracks of the UK, kept learning, absorbed the advantages of Western culture, and found his own foothold. However, the national ideology emphasized that "the East is different from the West (Gurnah 24). Under the general environment, the cultural conflict between East and West occurred in the form of family conflict, and caused permanent tragedy and irreparable trauma.

2.2 Gender oppression towards the female and black

Gurnah depicts a society in which access to power is determined by race, class and gender: in the patriarchal society of his novel the black woman is abused and relegated to the sub-human. Tate also mentioned a similar social phenomenon when researching black women writers. Black women are at the bottom of society under the double oppression of race and gender [3].

Female and black face a more complex situation on the road to redemption than white women and black men. White women only need to overthrow white patriarchy to achieve equality with white men. On the contrary, female and black exclusively have to aim at racism to get liberated. However, black women are forced to fight against racism, but also have to deal with gender discrimination. They inevitably fall into the dilemma of racism and sexism.

Through the adoption of Dottie's point of view, Gurnah gives a devastating picture of patriarchal power's cunning, hypocrisy and ruthlessness. The author's interest in the female condition is also apparent in the ways he demonstrates the grasp exerted by male power in every area of life, and the relentless bullying and exploitation women suffer from men and the institutions they control.

For instance, Dottie appears to be deeply concerned with the way in which others, primarily men, perceive her. The male gaze is something Dottie grows aware of when she is working at the factory or simply walking down the streets: "The eyes of these men truly roved, moving from one victim to another with egoistical hunger" (108). Her mother's sordid past impinges on her when she pictures herself with men and "the fear of abuse that she had lived with, that she Sharon had caught her to be aware of" (107) holds a firm grip on her consciousness."

From 1942 to the end of World War II, black American troops continued to be deployed to Britain. The early dispatch of troops caused great chaos in quiet British towns. Zhu Gang mentioned some relevant historical events during World War II in 20th Century Western Literature. During this period, American black troops were sent to Britain, which had a certain impact on British towns [4]. The British were afraid that the dark skin of the black soldiers would touch the milky skin of their girls. Letters from readers of major newspapers across the country expressed concerns about these matters. To this end, a high-level meeting was convened in the UK, and the Secretary of State for Defence proposed guidelines for the military, especially the Women in the British Armed Forces (ATS), to avoid forming friendships with black soldiers and to ban the media from reporting any relevant news. In addition, restaurants, bars, etc. were not allowed to set foot in black soldiers. But the sex trade between American soldiers and British women continued, mostly through the lure of chocolate, candy and food. Bilkisu's venereal disease might have been infected at this time, and she was in pain in the late stages of the disease, Hudson didn't know why, but hid and hated his mother (Gurnah 8).

He became obsessed with being an American, and started to talk with a clumsy imitation of an American voice. He was different from all of them, he said. His father was an American Negro. In Hudson's story the father was a fabulous creature who was part of the glamour of America: a tap-dancing, smiling man in a suit who rode in huge white Cadillacs and spent his days going from

hotels to apartments, as everyone did in the movies. Nobody talked of who Dottie's father was, or Sophie's, he reminded his sisters. Nobody knew, not even their mother.

Gurnah takes the position of third world women and questions Western feminism in the novel. From the unconventional narrative in the novel, it is not difficult to see that the initial focus of traditional feminist criticism was women in the white Western world, while black, indigenous, and third-world women were not in their sight. With the rising tide of feminism, Western feminists began to focus on women in the third world, but when describing the category of "female", they generally attributed it to a group with integrity and consistent interests, ignoring the third world. The heterogeneity of factors such as class, race, religion, culture, and politics contained within women in the world has forgotten that women in the third world suffer from double oppressive forces. On the one hand, imperialism and colonialist culture try to suppress them. On the other hand, like all women, they are oppressed by the mainstream patriarchal culture. This double oppression puts women in the third world in a state of "cannot speak". However, the feminist critique, which focuses on overturning gender discrimination and emphasizing equality between men and women, fails to fully take into account the unique identity of women in the third world. After the "marriage" of post-colonialism and feminist cultural theory, postcolonial feminist theorists have verified the rootless situation of third world women deprived of subjectivity and identity from multiple perspectives.

Western white feminist criticism regards women in the third world as conservative, ignorant, dull, and backward groups, while women in the first world in the West are progressive, civilized, and intelligent images. This binary opposition is undoubtedly a vestige of colonialist discourse. Therefore, third world women should strengthen solidarity, form alliances, examine women from multiple levels, break the stereotype of "third world women", and change the reality of third world women measured by the standards of first world white women, effectively enable the majority of women to obtain comprehensive liberation in the true sense.

2.3 Deconstructing double marginalization

As an African-American woman of immigrant descent, Dottie is marginalized in both British and African cultures, inferior to men in family and society, but her quest for identity and self never stops. As the story comes to its end, Dottie learns to earn what she needs, to see the best side of herself, and to overturn her previous image of herself as an unworthy immigrant. An all-too-common approach would be to stay and accept subordination. A more interesting option is to locate oneself in the struggle for social transformation.

During Dottie's experience, she met Michael, who shared the same trouble as her, that Micheal's mother left home for the severe conflicts with family and never returned home. Then the two young men, puzzled by their family history, quickly became good friends and found the lost family memories with each other's help. The story of Micheal's mother, Ms. Murray has also become another version for the reason that she had similarities but differences with Dottie's mother, Bilkisu.

Because of family conflicts, Bilkisu and Ms. Murray they both ran away from home, but Bilkisu was young and ignorant and had no ability to live independently, so he could only fall, while Michael's mother was more mature, found a decent job by her own ability, married a white bank clerk who pursued her, and let the white family accept her, and never gave up her job after marriage. The story of Bilkisu and Ms. Murray is a reflection of the vigorous feminist movement of the 60s of the 20th century: women's independence must be based on the full development of the individual, otherwise they have to eat the bitter fruit of their own rash actions. Although Bilkisu and Michael's mother have different paths of life, their psychological suffering is the same.

Growing up in a single-parent family, Dottie endured hardships and bore the financial burden of

the family while caring for her ailing mother Bilkisu and younger siblings. After her mother's death, 17-year-old Dottie did not feel sorry for herself, but worked harder in the factory, trying to save money to bring her sister Sophie, who was sent to a special school, and her adopted brother Hudson, back to London in order to reunite the family happily. At the same time, Dottie also found time to go to the library to read literary classics, read newspapers and listen to the radio to understand current affairs and politics, and formed an independent personality. After her family's living conditions improved, Dottie first attended night school to study secretarial courses, and finally applied to become a secretary by relying on her excellent ability.

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3. Conclusion

African women are doubly marginalized in society, lacking a voice in white culture, and losing their traditional African cultural identity. Ashcroft et al. elaborated on this marginal situation of African women in post - colonial society in *The Post - Colonial Studies Reader*. They are voiceless in white culture and lose their traditional African cultural identity at the same time [5]. Women, who take on the responsibility of doing housework and caring for family members, have been chronically under-represented in society. Edward Said also involved relevant discussions about women taking on the responsibility of housework and caring for family members while being chronically overlooked in society in *Orientalism* [6]. In this context, after countless painful struggles, Dotty bravely transcended both cultures, created a spiritual refuge for himself, and found a home. It also sets a good example for many African-American women to bravely face racial and gender discrimination under the oppression of dual culture.

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