

The Last Gift: The Imaginative Immigrants' Community of Abdulrazak Gurnah

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Abstract: In the current global context, immigration has emerged as a significant issue. With the deepening progress of globalization, diasporic movement between countries has gained increasing prominence, leading to scholarly focus on the thoughts and emotional expressions of refugee displacement and its impact on immigrants. In *The Last Gift*, Abdulrazak Gurnah presents a panoramic depiction of the marginalized peripheral characters, Family Abbas, expressing his concern about the global production of disposable lives in the new world order. The novel portrays a shared, co-existing life by illustrating relationships between isolated yet interdependent characters, offering an alternative human organizational form, which has responsibility for not dislodging “others”. Additionally, Gurnah captures the inherent contradiction between the urgent need for commonality in the world and its unattainability, highlighting root of the wandering lives lies in the impossible of constructing “a community”. And this serves as a reminder for readers to continue giving these restless lives profound and constant attention.

1. Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah is an Afro-British writer and literary critic who won the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature. *The Last Gift* (2014) is one of Gurnah's recent and representative works. Since the publication of *The Last Gift*, scholars at home and abroad have conducted extensive research on it, and the research heat has soared even higher after Gurnah's award, with more diverse and in-depth content. The characters in Gurnah's works do not enjoy the “displacement” advantage that postcolonial writers often rave about, but rather the “devaluation” of this advantage, highlighting the pain caused by their rootlessness; Gurnah creates a new “immigrant aesthetics” through this difference. Although some parts of *The Last Gift* are similar to other novels in that they involve the social history and living conditions of the East African coastal region or the lives of immigrants who have settled in Britain, this novel is relatively unique in Gurnah's creative system, as it tells the story of the family Abbas, not just the personal stories of immigrants. Topics, for instances, personal experiences of immigrants portrayed in the novel will have a profound impact on the family atmosphere and the growth of children, as well as how family members save themselves and reconcile with each other, have not been touched upon in Gurnah's other novels on immigration. This collective writing on immigrant families indicates that Gurnah's consideration about immigrants has extended from the individual to the group level, thus endowing his immigrant

writing with new content and meaning. At the same time, the writing about refugees in literature is essentially about describing the process of detachment, traversing, and reconstruction of characters in different commonalities. So from this perspective, the story of immigrants is the story of community. Therefore, analyzing refugees and immigrants in Gurnah's novels from the perspective of "Community" do have significant value for text expansion and theoretical deepening. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze relevant writing in *The Last Gift* from the perspective of "Community" and this study takes the theory of "Community" as its framework, by pointing out the relationships between marginalized characters in the book that are both separate and interdependent, which depicts a common and co-existing life scene, and envisions a form of human life organization different from traditional exclusive commonalities in the era of global modernization. Meanwhile, this paper aims to reveal the inherent contradiction between the urgent need for a common ground in the present world and its unattainability, and locate the fundamental cause of adrift and wasted lives during the process of analyzing the unconsumability of community, so that provide a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the immigrants' imagination of community in *The Last Gift*.

2. Literature Review

Published just about in ten years, *The Last Gift* has not yet attracted many academic attentions both abroad and at home. Critics focus on various domains, ranging from dispersion identity, narrative strategies, characters' silence, and colonialism.

To sum up, domestic and foreign scholars have mainly studied Gurnah's *The Last Gift* from the perspectives of African refugee dispersion identity, narrative strategies, characters' silence, and colonialism. Among them, the interpretation of identity issues and post-colonialism has been quite rich and mature. However, there has been considerable neglect of the community of African immigrants/refugees, with only a few scholars mentioning the commonality briefly. The community is currently being vigorously discussed in China, and the issue of refugees has significant practical significance in today's society. Therefore, this study will delve deeply into the imagined, unfulfilled community in Gurnah's *The Last Gift*.

The development of the "community" is a long and complex process. Since Plato's *Republic*, many scholars have actively offered their own ideas and interpretations. To this day, "community" remains a hot keyword in discussions. In this article, the main ideas of Nancy and Blanchot, coming from their masterpiece *La communauté désœuvrée* and *La Communauté inavouable*, are used to support the arguments presented. Nancy and Blanchot are two of the thinkers who make a great contribution to the study of "community" in the projects of western modernity. They offer main foundations of contemporary criticism. Their great opinions, like "singularity", "death" and so on also provide a new perspective for analyzing impossibility of community in *The Last Gift*.

3. Development Process of Unfinished Community

This chapter primarily analyzes the reasons why the characters in *The Last Gift* have a need for community, as well as the entire process of community development, culminating in its destruction, based on Nancy and Blanchot's "community" theory.

3.1. Formation of "Wasted Life" in the Global Modern Context

According to Ferdinand Tönnies, community means "true and lasting human common life, while society is merely a temporary, superficial thing. Therefore, community itself must be understood as a vibrant organism, while society is a mechanical aggregation and artificial creation".^[1] With the

advancement of modernization and the accompanying cultural conceptual changes, the connotation of this concept has been continuously evolving, with one of its turning points being the “Nancy’s debate” that dismantled the unity and organic nature of the above-mentioned “community” concept and constructed a theory of community based on the premise of difference and communication sharing.^[2] Nancy(4) believes that the community based on “organic/intrinsic” foundation presupposes itself as a subject, entity, or sacred ground(a God, a natural disposition, a talent, an imperial rule, a heaven, a nation, a state), all these “things” presuppose “one”, unity, and solidity, and are objectively able to regulate secondary things. The presupposed subject poses demands for identity and internality, where identity erases the distance and differences among individuals in the community, integrating them into “a blended, identical existence”(10);^[3] while internality defines individuals in the community as “producers of their own essence”(3). When a person becomes their own producer, the result is the alienation of their essence. Nancy and Blanchot, respectively, dismantled the community through their critique of the subject and their focus on the absolute “the other”, and opened up the theoretical approach of “community”. They pointed out that individuals in community are not as subjects but as “unique existence”(singularity), deciding on their own limits and differentiating themselves from each other. Consequently, a unique existence does not merge with another singularity to form a larger entity, but rather extends itself beyond its own limits and touches the other in its limits “where one passes into the other”. Similarly, there is no coercive relationship between the singularities, only a “relationship without relationship...the relationship of ‘incommensurable ones’, which means the relation of sharing and communication(43).^[4] Nancy and Blanchot’s deconstruction of traditional community is particularly significant in the global modernization context of Gurnah’s novel, as more and more people like the family Abbas on earth are being filled up as the process of global modernization advances. Traditional communities refuse to accept these “wasted lives” because of their coercive relationships with individuals and their exclusionary power, but the communicative, sharing-based community opens up a possibility for these discarded lives to exist towards others and to coexist with others.

As Zygmunt Bauman put it, the “wasted lives” refer to those populations who “cannot or people do not want them to be recognized or allowed to stay”(6).^[5] In the novel, Abbas’s flight from the oppression of his original family and the conspiracy of marriage refers to production of dispossessed populations. He flees his wife, his homeland, and everything or everyone he knows. In the eyes of Zygmunt Bauman, the attraction of this self-chosen flight lies in the fact that life after the escape “has no obligations and duties, especially no long-term obligations that bind his freedom of behavior with uncomfortable intimacy in the community”. Abbas gains the freedom to come and go through this flight, but the freedom based on flight is a wandering freedom. Bauman calls this freedom as “freedom without certainty”, and considers it “no different from being abandoned”. As a result, while Abbas is fleeing familiar communities such as family, tribe, and nation, he is also choosing a wandering path of abandonment and loss. Mariam’s wandering is distinguished from that of Abbas: she is a mixed-race child born in Britain who was abandoned in infancy and does not know her biological parents. An orphan who has been adopted by several families, and she was treated well by her last adoptive mother, but because her adoptive father’s nephew harassed her, and they were strict with her, finally, she fled the family, just like Abbas, and ended up in a strange land. In order to survive, she had to marry and form a new family, creating a new community to root herself in the unfamiliar land. For them, the new homeland was not vast or full of opportunities, because they unconsciously gathered in the “wasted population” community for warmth. The atmosphere of the novel is filled with dark, damp, unhealthy, and powerless. The work they engage in is at the bottom of society, such as cleaning, canteen work, or care-giving, not “great and glorious, saving lives”(10).^[6] This family community’s separation from society and their silence about their personal past directly causes their children, a son and a daughter, to be in a “dispersed” state and

discriminated against or excluded by the local community. They are exiled in a state of endless wandering, absolutely unable to know whether this “drift” is temporary or permanent. Even if they can temporarily settle down, they are still in a seemingly never-ending journey, for the destination is always unclear, and a place that they can call “destination” is forever unreachable. They will never be capable of escaping the pain of temporariness, uncertainty.

3.2. Becoming of Strangers in an Exclusive World Community

In *The Last Gift*, Norwich, a geographically based geo-community, is also a political community based on public opinion, as a traditional community that “celebrates the land, lineage, even race” distinguished by Blanchot(75).^[4] The novel opens by emphasizing the Norwich town that Abbas has moved into is damp, dark, and uncomfortable, especially his sense of unease and alienation from his surroundings. Meanwhile, the novel in Chapter 2 portrays his residence as a political entity through a depiction of a persistent, elusive public opinion, as “any political ‘community’ [is] based on ‘opinion’”^[7], which is manifested in the novel as Hannah’s forced assimilation to British culture in order not to be looked down upon by her new British boyfriend’s family, in which she changes her name to Anna. This will make her feel that the changed name is a decoration item for her Britishness, and even get angry with her younger brother Jamaal for still calling her Hannah. The focus on identity is a pressing demand of traditional community in the new world order, and thus leads to their exclusivity. As mentioned earlier, when modernity advanced to every remote corner, the channels through which discarded lives were traditionally channeled were blocked, and wasted lives accumulated locally, gradually overflowing.

Traditional community refused to accept these heterogeneous individuals within themselves in order to maintain their own identity. Therefore, Anna was afraid of meeting her boyfriend’s family, afraid of their eyes and evaluations, and had various inferior psychological states. In the conversation at the family dinner table, Hannah was always obsessed with the subtle and uncomfortable subtext of her boyfriend’s family’s various hints. Any mention of politics and nationality would make Hannah sensitive, unable to speak and failing to hold her head up. At the same time, the parents of Hannah’s boyfriend were not really fond of her, considering her to be a real and legitimate “person”, and they clutched her arm, while the other hand began to fondle this “trophy” because, in the eyes of the British, it was supposed to be like that. Hannah’s ignorance of church worship knowledge, her timidity and fear of political and religious issues, and her confusion and stammering about her background also made her boyfriend Nick feel as if he had met someone who had never seen the moon. These also directly led Hannah to feel that she was “a dog in trousers”. This mixed public opinion is what Blanchot(15)^[4] calls “the shared will of the multiplicity of existence, a simple ‘sharing’ that takes place within the limits”, which means a simple sharing only among members being recognized, and refusing to open its limits to the objects it rejects, negates, and excludes.^[4] Just as local residents in England insist that immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees possess normal working ability and do not occupy their social resources, otherwise they are only seen as “surplus people, not only aliens but also cancer cells that devour the normal tissue of society”(36).^[5] The identity requirement and coercive relationship implied by traditional community are obviously beyond the reach of the discarded population as “outsiders” or “surplus people,” so they can only be excluded from the community.

3.3. Disillusionment of the Permanently Rooted Community

As “the other” on the margins, although they are excluded from the boundaries of traditional community, Gurnah launch an imagination of community among them to resist the exclusionary force of the former and try to place themselves within the latter. The possibility of community lies

precisely in the fact that these marginal figures do not confine themselves to the illusion of subjectivity, but, instead, they extend their limited singular existence to their fellow beings and realize the possibility of community through communication and sharing. The finiteness of these marginal figures is specifically manifested in their individual isolation and mutual differences. The former define the limits of singular existence, while the latter prevents them from moving from isolation to collective fusion. This isolation and difference are clearly expressed in the narrative structure and narrative content of the novel. The novel as a whole adopts a first-person narrative and parallel voice to tell the story of Abbas, Mariam, and their children moving from complete strangers to gradually approaching each other through gradually revealing themselves to each other, but each chapter is composed of separate stories told by Abbas, Mariam, Hannah, and Jamaal that have nothing to do with each other. Furthermore, the author further enhances the sense of isolation among the narrative voices by alternating the names Anna and Hannah in different chapters to create a narrative gap.

Blanchot points out that “fundamentally, existence requires the other or something else in order to come into being. If existence is alone, it encloses itself and falls into sleep and quiet... For existence, it goes towards the other... Therefore, every existence’s survival summons another or many others... Consequently, it summons a community”(11). So, “the most personal thing cannot remain as a secret for one person alone, because it breaks the boundaries of the individual and demands to be shared, more precisely, to be affirmed as sharing itself”(34).^[4] Both Abbas and Mariam have deeply felt this loneliness in their own experiences of displacement. Abbas turned to Mariam because of his loneliness, and the two shared their most secret past experiences in the community of love. Abbas, under Mariam’s persuasion, was willing to open up to his children and tell them about his previous life as a sailor, his previous marriage, and the reasons for his escape. For the singularity, what is crucial is to reveal oneself to the other so that it can break the limitation of oneself. Exposing oneself to the other realizes the possibility of looking at the existence of other and being co-existence with the other.

In terms of narrative content, the isolation of characters is manifested in their tendency to be silent: they regard their life experiences as the most secret parts of their hearts and refuse to reveal them easily to others, thus causing mutual misunderstanding and lack of communication. For example, Mariam hold the view that Abbas’s words don’t make sense, and he wants to be alone. Every time he tries his best to tell Mariam something, only to utter a string of incoherent curses, and then he cannot help but cry. The reserve of inner secrets and the silence towards others clearly show their singularity, limitedness, and more importantly, lead to an urgent demand for sharing and commonality. Nancy(10) believes that the separation between unique existences that constitutes the prerequisite for community also summons the urgent demand for it, because “this separation is not only persistence, but also constitutes approaching: it is not an inevitable residue, it is the condition of existence-approaching.”^[3] Without it, there is only the same existence that is homogenized”. In the process of exposing to others and being revealed by others, singularity can experience similar experiences and therefore be able to transcend cultural differences and share in common. However, the dilemma faced by global modern society is that it urgently calls for community, but simultaneously, has to confront the incompleteness, negativity of community. This is because a genuine expose towards others can only occur when the other dies. Anna and Mariam truly experienced the absence of the Other in Abbas’ death, which allowed them to touch the boundaries of their own limits and fully expose themselves to the Other. Before that, their connection with Abbas was only a tenuous one. He was very cautious and restrained in revealing his life experiences to the other, and often fell into silence after self-revelation, even before just touching each other. Anna had longed for the authentic voice of her father Abbas, even going so far as to feel disgusted by his experiences of polygamy and remarriage, and therefore decided to leave home, preferring to

live with her boyfriend Nick. But Abbas' death made her to touch the boundary of the singularity and bring community to them. After that, Anna and Mariam deeply felt the importance of Abbas to them. Abbas' death and the tape recorder he left behind told the complete story of his life, which caused strong empathy in his wife and children, enabling them to truly understand and appreciate their father, and ultimately changing her name back to Hannah. Honest narration and emotional listening have formed a deep form of communication between family members, which only exists after the death of the singularity. The differences of the singularities and the "rupture" caused by death argue for the uncompleteness of the permanent community, and the sharing that arises from the continuous transition of the many singularities is uncompletable, unfinished, but imaginative.

4. Conclusion

Gurnah's novel explores the theme of global wasted lives created by the new world order through the juxtaposition of characters from the Abbas family and a broader panorama of marginalized characters. He focuses on the concerns of disposable lives generated by the order-building and economic progress of global modernization, which are piling up in the same place until they overflow, leading to a sense of universal homelessness and rootlessness. These marginalized characters, who are excluded because they cannot meet the homogeneity and inner consistency requirements of traditional communities, are depicted by Gurnah as being in a state of mutual isolation and interdependence. He thus creates a community imagination among them, to resist the exclusionary force of traditional communities and try to accommodate themselves within the communal space. These wasted lives are not subjects, but unique existences(singularity) that reveal each other's most secret experiences in sharing, and achieve a possibility of existing together with and being present to others. However, the uncompletable sharing they engage in is in contradiction to their urgent call for community in that communion can only arrive at the moment of the other's death. Therefore, they will forever be adrift in the sea of life, continuously seeking communion and with others, but unable to reach the other shore. Gurnah's community imagination vividly reveals the emotional needs of the world in the present: when global wasted human produced by the new world order are excluded from the various rights entitled by traditional communities, what they urgently need is a community based on emotional attachment. Gurnah's revelation of the uncompleteness of community indicates the difficulty of achieving that stage, and eventually requires us to give continuous and profound attention to these restless lives.

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