

Racial Prejudice and the Texture of Un-belongingness in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Dottie*

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on racial issues and the concept of un-belongingness in the third novel of Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Dottie*. Racial discrimination occurs when one person or a group of persons believe that their culture and society are superior to that of the other. Such feelings arise from various factors. Racism is also the oppression of one group by another group or groups. In the writings of Abdulrazak Gurnah, racial prejudice takes place primarily because of immigration. The characters in Gurnah's writings were forced to migrate from one culture to another because of unrest in the societies. This migration made the characters of Gurnah's novels suffer and face racial intolerance. Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Dottie* explores the state of mind of a person who faces bias based on race. The protagonists of this novel, Dottie, her siblings, and other black characters, faced racial discrimination based on their skin color, which ultimately gave them the feeling that they didn't belong to the society they had been living in. This paper focuses on the reasons for racial intolerance and the hatred that grows in the hearts and minds of those who face discrimination based on race.

Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah, migration, racial conflicts, biasedness, intolerance, oppression.

Introduction

The Nobel Laureate in Literature for 2021, Abdulrazak Gurnah, got the Nobel Prize for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fates of the refugees in the gulf between cultures and continents. Born on 20th December 1948 in the Sultanate of Zanzibar to Muslim parents of Arab descent, Gurnah was forced to migrate to England when he was only a teenager because of the unrest in Zanzibar due to the Zanzibar revolution. "Migration also occurs because of unrest in societies to escape conflicts, human violations, and compulsions of circumstances" (Rana and Sharma 6545). Gurnah's escape from Zanzibar and his struggle to settle in England is visible in his writings. He came to England as a black refugee and faced all that all the refugees faced. His initial days in England were full of poverty, and he faced a lot of racial discrimination. The experiences that he faced as a refugee made him realize that he wanted to say something.

As a consequence, he started speaking through his writings. Discrimination based on race, migration, exclusion, distress, and identity crisis are the themes of his writings. The characters of most of Gurnah's novels come from the East Coast of Africa, but the characters of his third novel, *Dottie*, are exceptions. In an interview with Nisha Jones, Gurnah states, "One book doesn't necessarily follow the last one logically, although it does come out of the same pool where all the books have come from. There are several different starting points for the novel." (37).

Dottie (1990) is the third novel of Abdulrazak Gurnah. This novel talks about the struggles faced by immigrants and reflects how the racial discrimination that a person witnesses because of his skin color traumatizes a person. This novel also speaks about the biasedness that a person faces based on skin color, which makes a person feel that he doesn't belong to the society he is living in. This leads to all the confusion and uncertainties in life, which involves a person in the world of crime. Discrimination and biasedness based on race lead to mental trauma, which also affects the psychological and physical health of a person. "Studies typically have concerned Black-White differences in medical care and have suggested

that racial discrimination by health care providers may adversely affect treatment and recovery” (Krieger and Sidney 1370).

Exploration of Racial Biasedness and its Trauma

Dottie, the third novel of Abdulrazak Gurnah, is about a young girl, Dottie, whose grandfather Taimur was a Pathan and came to England as an immigrant. Taimur was a sailor and worked for the Royal Navy. In one of the battles, he fought bravely against the Turkish forces, and as a result, his request to go to England was accepted. He came to England with much hope and looked for a good place to live, but he failed as “white people didn’t take foreign lodgers” (Gurnah 13). Banerjee, in his research paper, writes, “Hostility and disparaging attitudes to the foreigners is neither uniform nor unbiased. Race, ethnicity, skin colour and geographical locations of the foreigners are determining factors and essential conditions of the treatment they are going to receive” (871). The natives had started disliking the foreigners, and the anger against foreigners resulted in riots against the foreigners. “They ran riots and tried to hurt or kill as many of the blacks and brown people who lived among them as they could find. For two hot days in June the fighting raged. The Somali hotel in Millicent Street was attacked by soldiers and citizens, and was then set on fire. Lives were lost. Taimur Khan himself was chased through the streets by crowds of people carrying sticks and shouting abuse” (Gurnah 15-16). The rioters were about to kill Taimur Khan when he was saved by the arrival of police. The racial hatred for foreigners was so great that even police personnel slapped him and then arrested him. The judge of the court where Taimur Khan, along with others, was produced because the administration believed that the problem was started by the immigrants stated that “‘East is East and West is West,’ ‘and never the twain shall meet’ (Gurnah 17). The height of racial discrimination is understood by the statement of the person who is supposed to protect and every human being for him is equal.

Discrimination on the basis of race is not only for first-generation migrants, but it stays and continues for generations. Sophie, the younger sister of Dottie and the third generation migrant faced racism in the hostel by fellow students. “Sophie weeping bitterly while she told her sister how much she hated the school and how the other girls tormented her. During the day they made her fetch and carry for them. At night, they dressed her in mocking finery and made her into their dark queen. She could not escape them, could not even sit by herself without being bothered. Someone always came by to say something or play with her hair, or make her into a butt of one of their endless jokes” (Gurnah 44).

Hudson, the younger brother of Dottie, was fostered by a white English family in another city after the death of their mother, as it was the policy of the government because children other than Dottie were not adults. Hudson didn’t want to return to his foster family after returning to stay with Dottie and Sophie, even though they were financially very poor. “What do you want to go and see those white creeps for?” (Gurnah 99). These words were enough to define the treatment black Hudson got from the white family he was living with. Al Areqi, while talking about racial biasedness, states, “Such experiences, particularly the traumatic ones, influence our future and impact our behavior without our realization” (268). The type of racial experiences Hudson had while staying with the white family filled his heart with hate and anger for whites. “If you let that white woman come back here, I’m leaving,” he said. ‘I don’t want to see her again. Do you understand? You’ve been letting her come into our lives and mess everything up. You don’t understand what these white people are like” (Gurnah 94). The racial discrimination that Hudson had witnessed made him feel that whites were against the black population. “White people hate us. They will do anything to keep us down” (Gurnah 95).

Because of discrimination based on the color that was witnessed in society pushed Hudson into the company of black people as “no harm can come to a black person at the hands of another black person” (Mirmotahari19). Most of the activities related to crime were taking place by black people. It has been observed that “racial discrimination is positively associated with increased crime” (Burt et al. 648). Dottie learned about Hudson's involvement with criminals. “He had been using drugs for nearly two years, she must’ve known that, he said. He didn’t use anything too expensive and always with his friends. They paid for their pleasure by selling in the streets, and by a little petty crime” (Gurnah 189).

Discrimination based on race is stressful and has its impacts. Discrimination is an unfavorable condition that impacts a person’s mental and physical health. The discrimination Hudson was facing was very stressful for him. “He had lost weight, and lost strength, and no longer showed any signs of the youthful zest” (Gurnah 181). It was very disturbing for him as England was his country, and he was born in England only. Even his mother was English, and he was facing discrimination only on the basis of his color, and this thing disturbed him a lot. He developed mental disorders. “She found Hudson on his knees, hitting the step with his forehead. Such gestures seemed the classic symptoms of disorder” (Gurnah 181).

Racial discrimination mostly happens with immigrants. Robert Ferguson states, “Every immigrant experiences this alienation from a new reality. The receiving world has no reason to make room, and its rhythms remain indifferent to the latest perceiver of them” (258). Natives become insecure as the number of immigrants increases. Natives feel that immigrants will take away their resources, and as a result, natives start treating immigrants in a wrong manner, which ultimately leads to racial struggle. “The inevitable racial struggle and immediacy of identity formation problematise the

relationship between the residents and refugees” (Banerjee 871). Sophie’s lover, Patterson, fought with a white man because of racial struggle only. “It doesn’t matter what the fight was about. It is only ever about the same thing, the same battle we have been fighting all this time,” he said calmly. ‘How to keep our freedom and how to keep our dignity. I did not want to talk about that, about the fight – there are too many cruel things in our lives already – but having mentioned it I should say that the man in question was severely punished for his bad manners” (Gurnah 245-246). Such incidents were creating the “atmosphere of hatred in the UK” (Mogili 472). The hatred that had started gaining ground spread to schools, and even the students were not spared. “A school boy in the North Kensington, whose parents were migrants from Trinidad, was beaten by a gang of English youths carrying iron bars and broken bottles, and was very nearly killed” (Gurnah 298). Not only the immigrants but even the black citizens of England were treated badly and violence was used against them by the white natives. The conflict wasn’t between the natives and immigrants but between blacks, whites, and races. It was considered that whites were the original inhabitants of England and all others were outsiders. The use of violence against blacks also made blacks start speaking the language of violence. “The only language they understand is violence and oppression, and the only way they will leave us alone is if we scare them enough. We have to make them fear us the way they taught us to fear them” (Gurnah 299). All the discrimination against blacks was happening in England, which was considered progressive and where all were treated equally. Dottie’s teachers had told their good things about England, “All people were the same, and that she would do best to realize that she now lived in England” (Gurnah 4).

Examining the Texture of Un-belongingness

The feeling of un-belongingness is excruciating and has adverse effects on humans. The sense of exclusion makes a person lose confidence and feel alienated. Looking at the history of immigrants and blacks, it is found that the immigrants, especially the blacks, have seen a lot of racism and struggle, which made them realize that they have been left out of the mainstream. Abdulrazak Gurnah, when he came to England from Zanzibar as a refugee, also faced a lot of racism and discrimination that made him feel alienated.

Every society has its ways of living and doing things. Going to a new society and settling there is never easy because of differences in lifestyle and culture. In the novel *Dottie*, outsiders are brought by the government and administration to work, as Englishmen don’t do odd jobs. The natives thought that these outsiders would spoil the culture of England. “These are dangerous people, I don’t have to tell you. They will steal white women, and rob the Englishman’s house. They are criminals. England will be ruined” (Gurnah 57). Because of disliking for the black and difference in lifestyle, it is not easy for the black to find a place to live. The mantra of landlords was “No Dogs, No Children, No Niggers” (Gurnah 57). The type of treatment immigrants and blacks got made them feel that they were aliens. Most of the migrants came to England because of bad situations back home, and now they didn’t have any option but to lead the life of an outsider in a country they thought was progressive and treated everyone equally.

“Racial discrimination happens daily worldwide, and it is an act that has persisted throughout history” (Sadeeq and Mohammed 1141). The feeling of un-belongingness grows when there is discrimination everywhere. The black workers were treated differently and had different rules than their workplace counterparts. Even the salary given had discrepancies. The treatment immigrants were getting at the workplace made them realize “their insignificance” (Gurnah 106). “Their lives were filled with bitterness, and were poisoned by a sense of their inadequacy and failure” (Gurnah 106).

Most of Gurnah’s works have characters who migrated from the East Coast of Africa and faced racism. In *Dottie*, the main characters didn’t migrate from the East Coast of Africa. They were born in England, but still, in his third novel, *Dottie* Gurnah mentioned immigration and “how historical events led to the displacement of people” (Kanake and Choukade 128). It has been observed that “People leave their homelands to seek welfare, pleasure, and peace of mind” (Farooqi and Jamil 1044). Immigration is not easy, and the immigrants face extreme poverty and discrimination, and even their coming generations don’t forget the sufferings of their ancestors. The supervisor where Dottie worked remembered the sufferings of his grandparents. “He described the life of great poverty that his grandparents were forced to live in the slums of East London, and the persecution they suffered for being Jews” (Gurnah 162). Immigrants come hoping for a better life, but “the change of geographical space and the living environment, the strangeness of cultural traditions will make people feel at a loss” (Du and Cui 8).

“The refugee is made an increasingly conditional presence dependent on the host’s discretion” (Farrier 122). The host, the English people in *Dottie*, never treated the immigrants well, and therefore, the hatred for the natives in the hearts and minds of immigrants increased, and hence, the immigrants didn’t see England as a land suitable for them. Gurnah mentions the feeling of hate for the English in the hearts of blacks, “He could smell a white man at twenty paces, even in the dark, through sweat, urine, manure, perfume, you name it. No disguise could fool him. He described this white man’s smell vividly. It was the smell of a chicken gave off when it had been drenched by tropical rain, a mixture of steaming feathers, chicken dirt and wet fleas” (168).

In his research paper, Farrier states, “The encounter between the stranger and the host is effectively a contest – a contest of definition, and by extension, of recognition” (123). The blacks had understood that their services wouldn’t be recognized in England and were in England to do the jobs that Englishmen hesitated to do. “They don’t need us for anything apart from dirty jobs that no one else will do” (Gurnah 196). Moreover, “white people think themselves the most superior race, so the status of black people is naturally low” (Du and Cui 10). It was becoming challenging for the blacks to live in England as they were nothing in the eyes of the English. “How can you find any reason for living in a place where they treat you like an animal? All the time they show you that you are something they hate. Something below them...inferior to them. All the time! If you object, if you fight, they tell you you’re obsessed with the colour of your skin. You become a dangerous man, a trouble-maker, and they beat you to bring you in line” (Gurnah 196). Such things and treatments make a person go through a lot of stress and inner conflicts. “Inner conflict happens when the characters undergo an emotional battle” (Ahmed and Jahan 54). In the meantime, the government comes with a new law to throw away the immigrants as immigrants are no longer needed.

“The migrant workers from the old empire who had come in their thousands in the good years were now no longer required. No one could persuade these pesky creatures that they were not welcome anymore, and that the natives were beginning to get restless and irate. No more work, kapish, basi, imshi, but they still came. So, for the sake of civil peace, the British government under Macmillan passed the first of its anti-immigration laws, panicked into pusillanimous retreat by the presence of a few thousand of the silent sullen peoples over whom it had been lording it for centuries” (Gurnah 199). Immigrants come by leaving everything behind to make a new country their homeland. In a new country, they give their everything, their youth, their family life, and help in building the nation and growing it. They give their hundred percent, set up the things, and start a new life from scratch. They also create a social life for themselves, make new friends, and adopt the language and culture of the country they migrate to. And one day, when an order related to banning immigrants is passed, they are broken. They are hurt not only mentally and emotionally but also physically. They had given the prime of their life for the sake of the nation they migrated to, and now, when their services are not required, they don’t belong to the country they considered their home.

Discussion and Conclusion

Dottie concentrates on a world that is full of racism, social prejudices, the struggle of immigrants, inequality, second-class treatment of blacks, and the feeling of un-belongingness in the hearts and minds of immigrants and blacks. This text was written so well that it appears authentic and real. The racism is depicted in such a manner that it reminds of the colonial rule in India, where “No dogs or Indians” used to be the sign outside British establishments during the Raj (Dhillon). The English were of the opinion that the niggers were destroying the culture of England, and because of these views of English, the English people started targeting blacks, and “the gangs of Londoners scoured the streets for black victims” (Gurnah 109). The gangs of rioters were chasing and targeting every black irrespective of gender. “The newspapers were full of stories then too, although the violence was much worse. There were killings in Cardiff and Port Talbot, Liverpool and South Shields. Houses were ransacked and dens of blacks and Chinese were found lurking everywhere and put to the torch” (Gurnah 110). The violence against blacks was not only limited for immigrants only, it had also made the black natives fearful. *Dottie* who was a British national and had been living in Britain for the last three generations, was fearful too, and “the late journeys home frightened her” (Gurnah 114-115). *Dottie* was considered a foreigner only because of her skin color, her skin color also made the others feel that she is culturally different. “She and her family are insidiously excluded from membership in the polity by others who read her skin colour as a cultural marker” (Callahan 29). Debayan Banerjee, while mentioning the plight of black British citizens, states, “The Black Britons historically suffered injustice, become victim of virulent racist intolerance and endure segregation in all spheres. They are defined by and become subject to the regulatory politics and as well as policies of the White. Race, ethnicity, colour remain operative in the way they are assessed and accused” (870).

Racial biasedness also generates hatred in the heart of the sufferer, and he prepares to stand up and raise his voice against the oppression. “They think because we’re black we can put up with this kind of mistreatment? My dears, we will go there tomorrow morning and demand our rights” (Gurnah 203). An immigrant comes to a new place leaving everything behind to make the new land his home. Sometimes immigrants never go back to their original lands. Gurnah, through his “novels obsessively represent how difficult England, English culture, and English literature make it for immigrants of color (for want of a better phrase) and their descendants to establish themselves as ‘at home’ in the United Kingdom” (Lewis 40). The feeling of un-belongingness comes when no equal treatment is witnessed. An immigrant comes with a lot of hope, but he ends up doing small jobs and is not allowed to do anything that is not approved by the whites. “I do the only work a black man is allowed to do in this country, I slave for the white man” (Gurnah 246). Such feelings make a person realize that he doesn’t belong in this place.

Dottie is a tale that portrays the challenges and misfortunes of migration. Circumstances force a person to migrate and move to a place where their future can be secured. Many times, this desire to have a convincing future leads a person to face racial discrimination. Discrimination based on race doesn't apply only to the immigrant, but sometimes the fire of racism also burns the native who is different through the color of their skin. It leads to mental and emotional trauma and brings the feeling of un-belongingness.

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