

Materialized Writing of Traumatic Memory: The Trauma Representation and Healing Function of the “Gift” Imagery in *The Last Gift*

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Abstract

The expression and redemption of traumatic memory have always been significant topics in the fields of literary creation and research. The “gift” imagery in *The Last Gift* transcends the superficial connotation of traditional gift-giving, transforming into a material carrier of traumatic memory and a medium for healing. This paper employs trauma theory as its core framework to investigate the material anchoring of traumatic memory, elucidate the mediating function of the “gift” imagery in the transmission of individual and intergenerational trauma, and ultimately reveal the healing path through which the “gift” imagery facilitates the traumatized subject’s memory reconstruction and self-reconciliation. The study reveals that *The Last Gift* enriches the expressive dimensions of trauma literature and deepens reflections on the possibility of traumatic redemption by transforming ineffable traumatic memory into perceptible textual existence through the material symbol of the “gift”.

Keywords

The Last Gift, gift imagery, traumatic memory, materialized writing, healing function.

1. Introduction

The inherent unspeakability and fragmented nature of traumatic memory consistently present significant challenges in the creation and interpretation of trauma literature research. In her trauma theory, Cathy Caruth emphasizes that “trauma describes an experience that is overwhelming, where the individual is unable to integrate the event into their existing cognitive schemas”. [3] These psychological experiences, which are challenging to concretize through language, frequently necessitate material symbols or narrative carriers to be expressed and anchored in the world. Trauma is often accompanied by the loss of identity and home for exiled writers. Material or narrative “gifts” then serve as essential media that connect the individual to their homeland, the past, and the present, transforming abstract exile trauma and intergenerational anxiety into tangible existence. They are an essential core element in trauma narratives. Many works of exile literature, from Naipaul’s writing of colonial trauma to Coetzee’s expression of identity dilemmas, employ similar carriers to accomplish the literary transformation of traumatic memory, attesting to the central value of such carriers in trauma narrative. [6]

Using the core narrative carrier of the “gift” as a hub, Nobel laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *The Last Gift* profoundly connects exile trauma, intergenerational estrangement, and identity reconstruction, thereby establishing a distinctive paradigm of exile-trauma writing. The “last gift” in Gurnah’s work is not a tangible object, but rather the protagonist Abbas’s narrative confession of his own exile experiences and identity secrets, in contrast to material images in other trauma literary works. This “gift” includes his recollections of his homeland, Zanzibar, the adversities he faced during his exile, his early secret of leaving his wife and child behind, and the truths about his identity that he had long denied to his family. The narrative sequence of

trauma transmission and interactions is naturally formed by the inherent logic of “giving-receiving”. In the text, this “gift” serves as not only a conduit for Abbas’s self-redemption but also as a means of establishing a connection with his children and resolving intergenerational trauma. Consequently, the “gift” is elevated beyond mundane emotional giving and is endowed with rich connotations within the exile trauma narrative.

Based on this, this paper systematically examines the dual functions of the “gift” imagery in Gurnah’s *The Last Gift*, employing trauma theory as its fundamental support. The study will initially investigate the manner in which this narrative “gift” materializes the representation of exile trauma through memory recall and identity confession. Subsequently, it will demonstrate how the “gift” aids Abbas and his children in the process of dissolving intergenerational trauma and reconstructing their self-identity through transmission and decoding. In addition to addressing a gap in the existing research regarding the correlation between the core imagery of the text and the exile trauma narrative, this research also provides a referable theoretical application paradigm for the interpretation of trauma carriers in exile literature, thereby deepening our understanding of the thematic connotations and artistic expressions of Gurnah’s exile literature.

2. The “Gift” Imagery: The Material Anchor of Traumatic Memory

Abbas, an immigrant who fled from Zanzibar to Britain, wandered through various ports as a sailor, unsettled. Despite settling in Britain, he continued to struggle to integrate into the foreign land due to his humble immigrant status, while simultaneously drifting away from his roots by deliberately forgetting his homeland. The “weightlessness of memory” and the “rupture of identity” are the core of exile trauma in Gurnah’s work. His traumatic memory is rendered profoundly ineffable by this dual estrangement. On his deathbed, he leaves his children a “narrative gift” in the form of a cassette recorder. This gift serves as the narrative anchor of his exile trauma, transforming chaotic traumatic experiences into an ordered narrative and achieving the solidification and externalization of traumatic memory. Unlike conventional material gifts, this “gift” is conveyed through language but has a tangible “materiality”, serving as a fundamental connection between Abbas and his children, as well as his traumatic past.

2.1. Narrative Carrier: The Structured Presentation of Traumatic Memory

Abbas’s exile trauma has always been in a “fragmented” state, encompassing the shadows of his childhood in Zanzibar, the guilt of abandoning his wife and child in his early years due to inferiority and suspicion, the hunger and fear during exile, the rootlessness of drifting as a sailor, the discrimination and loneliness in Britain, and the long-term concealment from his current family. These memory fragments are akin to dispersed sand, making it challenging to integrate them using conventional language. The “last gift”—a comprehensive narrative of his personal experiences recorded on a tape recorder—serves as an organized container for these fragmented memories, thereby facilitating the reconstruction of traumatic memory through narrative. [2] While lying on his sickbed, paralyzed and bedridden after a stroke at the age of sixty-three, Abbas finally breaks his silence and confesses his past to his children. He admits that he did not settle in Britain as openly as he had previously claimed, but rather fled with the guilt of having abandoned his wife and child. He had never mentioned his Zanzibar family of origin to his children, always remaining reticent about his past, leaving his children to grow up in identity confusion. [1]

Organizing Abbas’s exile experiences and hidden past into a coherent narrative, this narrative “gift” is organized along a timeline, rendering the original chaotic, traumatic memory plain and tangible. For instance, his narrative of the early exile period— “drifting as a sailor through

various ports, living in uncertainty and precariousness”—concretizes the hardship of exile; his account of “being unable to find decent work in Britain due to immigrant status and suffering discrimination” transforms the psychological trauma brought about by his humble identity into specific scenes; and his confession of “abandoning his first wife and child in Zanzibar due to inferiority and suspicion and being tormented by guilt for years” directly presents his inner guilt trauma. Abbas not only organizes his own traumatic memories but also enables his children to intuitively perceive the pain he has concealed for an extended period through this narrative presentation. This narrative “gift” serves as a medium that converts exile trauma from “unspeakable” to “understandable”.

2.2. Identity Anchor: A Traumatic Bond Connecting the Fragmented Self

Abbas intentionally severed ties with his past in Zanzibar after settling in Britain, suppressing his family-of-origin experiences. Gurnah repeatedly examines the trauma of “identity rupture” in *The Last Gift*. He was unable to fully integrate into British society in order to establish a sense of belonging, nor could he revert to his original identity as a result of deliberate forgetfulness, which resulted in a state of “self-splitting”. The anxiety and anguish that resulted from this separation are the fundamental components of his exile trauma. [7] The “last gift” serves as a confession of his true past, forming a traumatic bond that unites the fragmented self, thereby accomplishing an initial integration of the “split self”.

Abbas consistently refrained from discussing any matters concerning his homeland with his children before his confession, and he refrained from mentioning his Zanzibar past. This “avoidance” is a typical example of trauma; he endeavored to alleviate the pain of identity rupture and the remorse of abandoning his wife and child by “forgetting”, but instead he sank into a more profound state of self-alienation. As a “gift” to his children, he is compelled to confront his own past and acknowledge his “splitting” and “imperfection” when he presents his Zanzibar past, exile experiences, and hidden remorse. He is no longer the father who meticulously preserves his dignity in Britain by recounting the stories of Zanzibar and confessing his early wrongdoings; rather, he reverts to his authentic self, which is characterized by a profound sense of remorse, ties to his homeland, and painful experiences. This narrative “gift” enables him to communicate with the authentic self that had been suppressed for years, thereby reuniting the fractured identity. This “gift” also aids the children in comprehending their father’s long-standing “strangeness”: his silence, his aloofness, and his sensitivity to topics about his homeland, all of which are a result of the trauma of identity rupture and inner guilt. The “gift” serves as an identity key for the children to comprehend their father’s trauma.

2.3. Emotional Embodiment: The Externalization of Guilt and Redemption Trauma

Abbas’s exile trauma is also inextricably linked with profound guilt concerning the abandonment of his Zanzibar family of origin, his deliberate severance from his own past, and his long-term concealment from his children in Britain. This remorse, like a yoke, impedes his ability to reconcile with his family and himself. As a confession of regret, the “last gift” serves as the conduit for his emotional externalization, conveying his desire for redemption and remorse toward his family.

This narrative “gift” that is laden with remorse serves as both an emotional compensation to his children and an attempt at self-redemption. Abbas had suppressed his guilt for years, which exacerbated his traumatic experience. He was unable to attain inner peace or open his heart to his children. He externalizes his interior guilt by “giving” the narrative, thereby communicating his genuine emotions to his children. This externalization provides him with transient relief; however, his redemption is contingent upon his children’s listening and his wife’s companionship. Simultaneously, this “gift” embodies his aspirations for his children: he aspires

for them to comprehend his anguish, embrace his imperfections, and, by studying his past, uncover their own origins, thereby liberating themselves from the trauma of identity confusion. Consequently, this narrative “gift” is the central axis of Abbas’s quest for self-redemption and the concentrated externalization of his traumatic emotions.

3. The Transmission of the “Gift”: The Diffusion and Bonding of Intergenerational Trauma

Gurnah’s work posits that exile trauma is not confined to the individual; rather, it is passed down through generations through “estrangement” and “silence”. The intergenerational trauma bond is formed as a result of Abbas’s exile trauma, which is imperceptibly transmitted to his children through years of emotional distance, concealment of the past, and silence. [8] The “last gift” serves as a narrative that disrupts the silence, thereby facilitating the “explicitation” of intergenerational trauma during its transmission and establishing the foundation for its resolution. The transmission of this narrative “gift” is “interactive” in contrast to the “direct transmission” of material gifts. It necessitates the giver’s “telling”, the wife’s “assistance”, and the recipient’s “listening”. Intergenerational trauma transforms “implicit” into “explicit” during this interaction.

3.1. Implicit Transmission: The Diffusion of Trauma in Silence

The central behavior of “silence” has already implicitly transmitted Abbas’s exile trauma within the family before the “last gift” is given. His silence is not merely a lack of speech; it is a productive absence that is tension-filled. It functions as both a defense against the unspeakable traumatic past and as an obscuring of the family’s shared memory. Gradually, an invisible cognitive and emotional barrier is established by this persistent silence during the children’s upbringing. Seven

The children are raised in a domestic environment that is “muted” with respect to history. They can perceive their father’s presence, but they are unable to experience the origin and fundamental significance of his life. They dwell in the “present” but are entirely cut off from the “past”, that is, the foundation of their father’s and the family’s identity. This state of rupture, which is sustained by silence, creates a traumatic environment for growth. In order to construct their identity, the children must establish a foundation of “rootlessness”; they are unable to acquire a comprehensive narrative regarding the origin of their own identity. As trauma theory demonstrates, the inexplicable anxiety, identity confusion, or emotional alienation of the next generation are frequently the result of unstated but perceptible family secrets or historical shadows. [4] *The Last Gift* is characterized by a pervasive sense of alienation in family relationships. The children and father maintain a polite but substantial distance; they may experience confusion or dissatisfaction, but they are unable to penetrate the veil of silence to comprehend the underlying cause. The trauma of Abbas is therefore transmitted through the “lack” and “suspension” of language, which is silently implanted into the family’s emotional structure, thereby forming an oppressive undertone of shared life, rather than through language.

3.2. Explicit Transmission: Traumatic Resonance in Narrative

The transformation of intergenerational trauma from “implicit” to “explicit” is achieved when Abbas transmits his exile experiences and identity secrets to his children as a “gift” (via the recording). The children not only comprehend their father’s trauma but also recognize that their own trauma is closely linked to their father’s through emotional resonance. [2] The children finally comprehend the reason for their father’s sensitivity to the subject of “homeland” after listening to his account of his Zanzibar past and the tribulations of exile. They comprehend why their father always lived “cautiously” and “silently” after learning about his early guilt of

abandoning his wife and child and the long-term concealment. This “understanding” generates a profound emotional resonance with their father’s trauma, as they realize that their own identity confusion and familial alienation are a direct result of their father’s exile trauma and inner remorse.

This explicit transmission does not “aggravate trauma”, but rather “clarifies trauma” - the children no longer attribute their suffering to their “father’s coldness”, but rather comprehend the traumatic roots and guilty psychology behind that “coldness”. This emotional resonance progressively dissolves the intergenerational estrangement and enables the children to more clearly understand their own trauma. One could argue that the explicit transmission of the “last gift” is the necessary condition for the resolution of intergenerational trauma. Only by identifying the source of the trauma can one confront and reconcile with it.

3.3. ExTransformation in Transmission: The Reconstruction of Trauma: From “Estrangement” to “Bonding”

In contrast to the “continuation of pain” that is typical of traditional trauma transmission, the transmission process of the “gift” in Gurnah’s work also entails a reconstruction of the meaning of trauma. Intergenerational trauma is transformed from “the root of estrangement” to “the bond of connection”. Before the “gift” was transmitted, Abbas’s exile trauma was the cause of intergenerational estrangement; after the transmission, this trauma serves as an emotional bond between father and children. The children initiate an active exploration of Zanzibar’s culture and history after comprehending their father’s trauma, with the intention of “reconnecting” with his past and compensating for the years of estrangement. They also begin to communicate with their father and even assist in the organization of recollections associated with his past.

The core of this transformation is the “truth” conveyed by the “gift” – Abbas discloses his “imperfection” and “pain” to his children through the “gift”, and the children, through the “gift”, embrace their father’s “imperfection”. This “authentic interaction” transforms the relationship between generations from “superficial estrangement” to “deep connection”. This accurately depicts the reconstruction of trauma’s significance; the father’s exile trauma is no longer solely his personal suffering; it is now the collective memory of the entire family; it is no longer the source of estrangement, but rather the bond that unites family members. The “last gift” is transmitted, thereby completing the transition from “destruction” to “construction” in intergenerational trauma, thereby establishing the groundwork for subsequent trauma healing.

4. Decoding the “Gift”: Identity Reconstruction and the Healing of Intergenerational Trauma

In *The Last Gift*, the decoding process of the “gift” corresponds precisely to these three stages, as Herman’s theory of trauma recovery posits that healing from trauma necessitates three stages: “establishing safety, remembrance, and mourning—reconnection”. [5] By interpreting the narrative “gift”, Abbas and his children confront, mourn, and reconcile with intergenerational trauma, ultimately achieving self-identity reconstruction. The decoding of this “gift” is not a one-way “reception” but a two-way “interaction”: Abbas completes the remembrance and mourning of his trauma through “telling”, while the children complete the acceptance and understanding of trauma through “listening and responding”, resulting in mutual healing through the interaction.

4.1. Establishing Safety: Rebuilding Trust After Breaking Silence

The “rebuilding of trust” is the fundamental component of a secure environment, which is a prerequisite for trauma healing. This is the case for Abbas and his children. Abbas’s silence and concealment had long disrupted intergenerational trust, as the children were unable to trust

their father's "authenticity" and the father was unable to trust his children's "acceptance" before the "last gift" was given. The "last gift" is Abbas's deliberate effort to actively dismantle the trust barrier. He discloses his most vulnerable, concealed trauma and remorse to his children, and this "exposure" demonstrates his confidence in them and provides a potential avenue for trust to be reestablished.

The children's "acceptance" and "listening" subsequently culminate in the restoration of trust. Upon the conclusion of Abbas's narration of his past through the recording, the children refrain from blaming their father for his concealment and instead opt to comprehend his challenges. This "acceptance" causes Abbas to feel "safe" as he recognizes that his children will not abandon him due to his "imperfection" or distance themselves from him due to his trauma and defects. The creation of this secure environment enables him to relinquish his internal defenses and confront his trauma with composure; the children, as a result of this interaction, regain faith in their father. Initially, the decoding of the "last gift" establishes the foundation of trauma recovery by reestablishing trust and creating a secure environment.

4.2. Mourning Trauma: Emotional Release through Remembrance

The fundamental phase of trauma recovery is the "remembrance and mourning of trauma" phase. It is only through the revisiting of trauma and the release of suppressed emotions that one can send farewell to trauma. Abbas concludes the emotional release and remembrance of his exile trauma by recounting the "last gift". He weeps and chokes up numerous times during the recording; this emotional catharsis is the release of his suppressed traumatic emotions over the years. He weeps for the suffering of his forced exile, the guilt of abandoning his Zanzibar family, and the years of identity split and self-alienation. This "crying" is not a sign of frailty; rather, it is a response to and expression of grief regarding the trauma one has experienced.

Abbas can securely release his emotions as a result of the children's listening, which serves as a "container" for his emotional release. Their silence, understanding, and acceptance make this possible. While listening, the children also lament their own trauma: mourning the estrangement from their father and the years of identity confusion. This "shared mourning" fosters emotional intimacy between the generations and liberates both from the "repression" of trauma.

4.3. Identity Reconstruction: Self-Transcendence after Reconciliation

The ultimate objective of trauma healing is "self-transcendence" and "reconnection". By decoding the "last gift", Abbas and his children not only accomplish intergenerational reconciliation but also complete the reconstruction of their self-identities. Abbas finally acknowledges his early defects and accepts his years of struggle, and he finally accepts his complete past: he is both a father who built a family in Britain and an exile from Zanzibar. He no longer denies himself due to past errors or feels inferior due to his exile identity; rather, he incorporates these experiences into a "whole self". He reconciles with his past and establishes an emotional bond with his family through this "gift" during the final phase of his existence.

The children's identity reconstruction as "children of immigrants" is completed by this "gift". They had previously been in a state of "identity confusion", unable to completely integrate into mainstream British society and unaware of their Zanzibari cultural heritage. They acquire knowledge about their family history and embrace their status as "immigrant descendants" as a result of their father's "gift". They commence the process of actively acquiring knowledge of the language and culture of Zanzibar, attempting to engage in communication with African immigrants in their community, and establishing their own identity. They no longer experience feelings of inferiority as "immigrant descendants"; rather, they regard it as a distinctive "identity marker". The decoding of the "last gift" enables Abbas and his children to transcend

trauma and discover their own sense of belonging, which is the result of trauma recovery. This identity reconstruction is the result.

5. Conclusion

This paper has conducted a comprehensive examination of the trauma representation and healing function of the “gift” imagery in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *The Last Gift*, employing trauma theory as its primary framework. The research reveals that Gurnah’s “last gift” is not a conventional material gift, but rather a narrative confession (in the form of a recording) by Abbas of his own exile experiences, concealed past, and inner guilt. This “gift” serves as the narrative anchor of exile trauma. It externalizes guilt and the desire for redemption through its emotive embodiment, while its narrative carrier facilitates an organized presentation of traumatic memory. Additionally, its identity anchor serves to unite the fragmented self. This “gift” facilitates the transformation of intergenerational trauma from implicit to explicit during transmission, reconstructing trauma from the source of estrangement into a bond of connection. The “gift” enables Abbas and his children to rebuild trust, lament trauma, and reconstruct their identity, thereby achieving mutual healing of intergenerational trauma.

Gurnah profoundly portrays the identity dilemmas and traumatic pain of immigrant communities, while also revealing possible paths for intergenerational reconciliation and identity reconstruction, through the narrative writing of the “gift” imagery. This transforms the unspeakability of exile trauma into a comprehensible literary narrative. This work not only enhances the traumatic expression aspects of exile literature but also fosters deeper contemplation of the theme of “rededication and trauma”. Gurnah’s writing is a critical literary reference for contemporary society, as it offers valuable insights for resolving intergenerational estrangement and attaining cultural integration, as well as an understanding of the traumatic experiences of immigrant communities.

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