

Damned for Difference: A Study of Xenophobia in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Dottie*

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ABSTRACT

Abdulrazak Gurnah a post Second World War Zanzibari immigrant in Britain, in his third novel, Dottie (1990), presents a gripping account of a third generation diaporic black female whose identity and belonging are controlled and conditioned by the racial prejudice and sexual discrimination. The novel under its purview captures and critiques the disparaging construction of the Blacks as well as their marginalized status in the so-called cosmopolitan hub of the world. By focusing on Dottie the protagonist, an Asian-Black descent, the present paper attempts to interrogate how the Black Britons respond to and negotiate with the xenophobia of the white skinned people of England. As the novel contours several revelatory instances to pinpoint the indefinable citizenship of the black people, the present attempt also seeks to address the insidious viciousness they become continuously subject to. Notwithstanding, by acknowledging that this ambience of pervasive racial segregation is rooted in white- black dichotomy, the paper attempts to offer a socio-historical reading of the (un)belonging of Black people in England.

Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah, Xenophobia, Racism, Black Britons

Main Paper: Unwilling to wedge his characters in the mono-dimensional rhetoric of diasporicity that locates and reads the very existence as sluggish and sordid, Gurnah reconstitutes the traditional conceptualization of identity and culture by suggesting the dispersed people's unrelenting pursuit for (re)creation of identity as an essential condition and/ or prerequisite of transnational existence. While examining Gurnah's narrative oeuvre, Felicity Hand, an ardent critic on the field puts down, "They all deal with the alienation and loneliness that emigration can produce, at the same time they all pose questions about identity, loss and the very meaning of 'home' (Hand 75). This observation contours not just Gurnah's thematic map but presupposes his particular interest and unyielding obsession with the riddled and enigmatic diasporic existence. However, by reconstituting the mono-dimensional and inflexible formation of nation, broader and boundary, Gurnah advocates that migration (both intra and international) is a natural norm of and essential condition for present era of globalization. He votes for the dispersed people's unrelenting pursuit for construction of multivalent identity and creation of ambiguous 'self' through the complex and compelling process of negation and negotiation. Gurnah problematizes the concept of 'myth of homeland' and therefore pushes his characters, from a critical objectivity, to counter and be a part of the dense and diverse diasporic community that exists in the crowded world cities. Gurnah's attitude to the contested issues like displacement, translation and transfiguration is shrouded by ambivalence. Perhaps Gurnah's novels are 'novels of delegitimation' which "reject not only the Western *imperium* but also the nationalist project of the post colonial national bourgeoisie" (Appiah 353, italics original). However, this ambivalence becomes a strategic ploy that offers allows/ benefits Gurnah to meditate more deeply on the agony of the diasporic individuals who are torn between the crisis of 'uprootedness' and dilemma of 're-rooting'. Gurnah makes his authorial conscious even more counteractive to the Eurocentric simplistic discourse of diaspora, exile and migration. After the classical typology of diaspora contended by William Saffran, recent scholarships on this field invites and informs a myriad of issues that simultaneously profits and problematizes the discourse of diaspora and transnationalism. Recent conceptualization of diaspora, emphasizes on the disposition of geographical relocation and cultural rehabilitation to coup with the trends of multiracial conglomerate. However this 'mingling' is often made impossible in the ambience of persecution and unacceptance.

Dottie, Abdulrazak Gurnah's third novel slightly differs from the author's general approach on the politics of space and construction of identity in the cosmopolitan cultural matrix of England. This female bildungsroman presents Dottie, a third generation migrant of Afro-Asian origin, in the context of post WWII England. By charting her struggle Gurnah shows how her identity and belonging are controlled and conditioned by the racial prejudice cultural discrimination. The meager critical attention so far casted on Dottie solely focuses on the eponymous female protagonist. The present, however, includes lives of other

characters that experience the position of 'displaced others' and develop 'identities' to either contest or coup with the prevalent racialised xenophobic ambience.

Despite England's military/political victory in the Second World War, her imperial superiority is threatened to be diminished. In the next twenty years she witnesses independence of most of her colonies and is obliged to admit immigration of many of her former colonial subjects. This huge influx of African, Caribbean and Asian population eventually reconfigure the demographic index of the entire island. These non-European foreigners are considered potential threat to the solidarity and superiority of the English society. The immigrants often experience racist remarks, unwelcomed gestures, disparaging jibes. In his article "Language, Race and the Legacies of the British Empire", K.A. Appiah suggests that despite their long presence in UK, the Blacks are never spared of the racist rampage and socio-cultural exclusion, "The history of black Britain has been a history of struggle and no less so in the twentieth century than before. The specific grievances have changed over time, but the fundamental objectives of their exertions remain the same" (*Black Experience and the Empire* 347). 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. The immigrants' continuous struggle for articulation of identity and affirmation of space get further thwarted by the natives' general wariness and enigma. Dottie and other characters of the novel occasionally encounter gazes of unreliability and discriminatory attributions. We contend that these exclusionary strategies underscore the intense fear of the natives who are deliberate to either maintain distance or to practise domination on the immigrants. These if jeopardize the immigrants' lives in the 'alien spaces', equally justify the vulnerability of 'Britishness' which undermines or scarcely/reluctantly exercise socio-cultural interaction with the non-European immigrants.

Oxford Advance Learners' Dictionary defines xenophobia as "a strong feeling of dislike or fear of people from other countries" (*OALD* 1771). Xenophobia then is an impulse that goads exclusion. It clearly defies the classical notion of hospitality that acknowledges cordial reception and confirmed security. The host's feeling of detest and distrust confirm marginal status of the newly appeared immigrants. A prominent line of demarcation runs between them. Etymologically the word xenophobia is a combination of two Greek words: 'xenos' (foreigner/stranger) and 'phobos' (fear). Though it is exclusively with irrational fear, Sundstrom and Kim include other affective emotions, "Fear is not the only, or necessarily the primary, affect involved...envy, resentment, or feelings of incongruity may be experienced first, and these may or may not precipitate fear" (Sundstrom and Kim 23). These associative feelings make the 'presence' of xenophobia more prominent and conspicuous. Xenophobia can be termed as 'inferiority complex' that paradoxically augments from latent lack of self-belief. The natives' suspicion of becoming minor in their own land and becoming inferior in the status, spontaneously results in the politics of exclusion in the form of despise, malice, and grudge that eventually culminate in xenophobia. They further argue that despite xenophobia's overt attachment to racism, these are not altogether congruous and therefore should not be interchangeably applied. Whereas racism is based on the pre-conceived notion of racial superiority, xenophobia stems from downright aversion to the foreigners. Xenophobia may be a type of racist outrage but its operational field is more diverse and resilient. Establishment of nation-state forges certain determining factors to confirm homogeneity. It takes protective measures to ensure 'right' of its 'rightful citizens' only. Reservation of socio-cultural singularity becomes eminent. The native inhabitants of the land are instructed to maintain superiority of their heritage that consequently jeopardizes condition of the immigrants who certainly belongs to different socio-cultural and religious origins. With the mass infiltration of migrants the Western countries anticipate polyethnicity which not only implies cultural pluralism but intimidates the constriction and processual of singular socio-cultural framework. Intrusion of non-European immigrants (legally or illegally) especially in England commences a struggle between the migrants and the inhabitants. The later, claiming their racial superiority and long 'possession' on the land become desperate. They become hostile, prejudiced and uncooperative with the migrants. Even the Blacks who are there before this tide, are equally or (in some cases) more severely put under the microscope of unreliability. This denial and exclusivist attitude become normative and, xenophobia and civic ostracism becomes associative despite "its denial through ostracism, whether intentional or neglectful, is morally condemnable" (Sundstrom and Kim 23).

Jamie Bordeau in his book traces two causes that make xenophobic violence recurrent in an appalling rate: a) economic strife and b) escalation of nationalism and nativism. To illustrate his first argument he refers to the classical metaphor of 'scapegoat' or '*pharmakos*', the sacrifice of which is necessary for civil purification. When a country undergoes economic agitation the immigrants are accused since majority conceives them sole responsible for their deprivation. The immigrants vis a vis foreigners are accused for cut down of wages, alarming rate of unemployment and a potential "threat to job security" (Bordeau 6). While

illustrating his second argument Bordeau contends, “Anti-immigrant sentiment sometimes leads to the rise of nationalistic political parties and nativist groups” (Bordeau 7). As it is already mentioned nationalistic sentiment and nativist discourse tend to obliterate possibility of any alternative or counter narrative. The different belongings of the foreigners make them unworthy, untrusted and ill fitted to the prevalent nationalist discourse. Notwithstanding their difference to the cultural norms of the host nation confirms their marginal status. They are always reminded of their ‘foreignness’. The us/other binary becomes operational at every sphere of society and cultural levels to resist their assimilation with the governing culture. The nativists’ demand of unquestionable superiority and preservation of rights makes the fissure more prominent. The inhabitants and foreigners are put and presented as conflicting categories. Social scientist like Angelika Bammer, in this context, devises a new ramification of xenophilia which under its guise of affection and attraction for the foreigners engenders the stereotypical binary more functional. The embrace “becomes the devouring embrace that takes the other in until there is nothing left of ‘them’ but us” (Bammer 47). This observation unfolds the myriad ways of subjugation and deprivation that the migrants have to encounter and survive both as individual and community.(deceptive). The negative construction of the foreigners as evil, profit-seeking, selfish and poacher is necessary to justify their abandonment and consequent persecution.

It becomes further imperative to note that this 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. The immigrants of European and American origins are easily accepted as ‘us’ and their process of social interaction and cultural assimilation remain untroubled and agreeable. This double-dealing unveils prejudice of the native inhabitants and somewhere xenophobia and racism lose their distinctiveness. Cindy Warner et al succinctly point out, “Particular groups of foreigners are targeted, and the ethnic origins of these groups differ from country to country” (Cindy Warner 2). In the novel under discussion we encounter several white skinned immigrants who enjoy a superior position to the other immigrants. Their proximity to the center emphasizes continual domination and deprivation of other migrants.

The trans-generational narrative of *Dottie* explores the various dynamics of immigrants’ experience in Britain. Since diaspora connotes both spatial and temporal disjunction the migrants’ lives in the host land precipitates both crisis and claim. The inevitable racial struggle and immediacy of identity formation problematise the relationship between the residents and refugees. The subordinated marginal status of the migrants in the alien land intensifies the pain of loss and the burden of guilt that they carry on their shoulders. If this characterizes condition of the first generation migrants, the subsequent generations, despite their earnest strive for assimilation; remain forever ‘hybrid’ despite Bhabha’s positive insistence on the term. It becomes hard for them to redeem themselves as objects of xenophobia. Marco Roberto in his thesis brilliantly points out how and in what context Gurnah addresses the migrant- issue in *Dottie*: “What Gurnah re-enacts in this novel is a dialogical and dialectical process of formation of subjectivity and the succession of historical events related to the struggle for investigation of immigrant communities in Britain throughout the twentieth century” (Marco Roberto 97). The novel becomes singular for the time it captures, from the early days of First World War to the early decade of the of the second half of the twentieth century and the generations it covers, from a grandfather of Asian origin to a granddaughter of mixed parentage. It evolves around the harrowing experiences of the characters that become constant victim of racial segregation and xenophobia before words like globalization, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism etc get currency. The time frame viz a viz trans-generational narrative recounts how migrants’ status of victimhood remains unchanged despite their staying in England over a length of time.

In a bird’s eye view *Dottie* is an appalling story of a young girl who struggles to cope with racist animosity and sibling jealousy quite single handedly. Involuntarily denied of and restricted from proper family root, she tries to mitigate the pressure and burden by fighting a lone battle. Dottie tries to lead, not follow. Gurnah attempts to capture story of a young woman fighting racist animosity and sexist oppression quite single handedly. But the discriminatory racist politics that Dottie undergoes has its prelude in the experience of her grandfather, Taimur Khan who comes to England at the end of First World War. A man from Pakistan-Afghanistan border area, Taimur is backstabbed by his family and at the advent of First World War joins the British Naval Army. By his bravery and fortitude he earns trust of the Captain who eventually ‘sanctions’ is admission in England. Accompanied by a Malayan he takes residence in Cardiff, a place predominantly crowded by blacks and browns. However, he is constantly reminded of his foreignness and can fathom the extent of animosity, the natives have for them, “[I]n Cardiff he went about his business with as much dignity as he could manage, suffering the petty persecutions his hosts inflicted on him with smiling

tolerance”(Dottie 11). This ambience of segregation is intensified as Taimur notices, “...the people of the town were angry with foreigners because of the women. Their faces became tragic when they said our women” (Dottie 12, italics original). The intimacy between the White female and Black male culminates the Whites’ fear and wrath as this axiomatically propose people of mixed race and thereby, ‘purity’ of the English identity. Taimur is a victim of the 1919 Cardiff Race Riot that once again testifies the life of uncertainty and perturbation that the coloured migrants of England is known to live with. There Taimur is stoned brutally and even when the police come to rescue they too accuse him for fueling the riot, “They were told it was the black and brown people who had caused all the trouble...” (Dottie13). The riot outpours the xenophobia of the hosts and soon it is legitimized by the Govt. as it many of the coloured migrants were arrested and sent away. However, Taimur escapes the ‘return’ as his lawyer cum English teacher speaks for him.

Taimur’s disgust for the Whites is best articulated by his daughter, Bilkisu who perceives the country more genial despite her mother’s observation, “*Times are harder now*” (Dottie 13, italics original). Evading her father’s selected groom, she leaves the house with an apprehension of being pregnant with a White boy; an event her father would never approve. Though the text denies this pregnancy, the apprehension confirms proximity between the host and the native where the former knowingly or unknowingly ruins life of a black girl, as Bilkisu ends her life as an infected prostitute. The ‘supposed pregnancy’ may be read as a metaphor of ‘revenge’ and ‘sadist counter’ by the Whites. Despite her inclination for the mainstream English life, Bilkisu can never rub off her Black identity.

That the coloured migrants are unwanted lechers in England is perceived by Hudson too. He is Dottie and Sophie’s brother and always desperate to his ‘home’, America; for his American black origin. Ironically when he returns from his Disneyland, he tainted with disastrous experience. Hudson’s case confirms that xenophobia runs in same temperature in both UK and USA. When Hudson retorts, “They don’t want us in their country. They don’t need us for anything apart from dirty jobs that no one else will do...What use can people like us have here?” (Dottie 93), the pain of unbelonging and the frustration with marginal existence sounds paramount. Sophie faces equal ‘alienness’ in the boarding school. There not just the peers but the teachers bully her for her skin colour and obesity. These perpetual attacks are palpable racist attitude of the Whites who now covers themselves under the shield of xenophobia. In the course of the novel, despite her promiscuity, we find no White man around her. The Greek landlord of Dottie wants to use her as nothing above than a sex toy. Patterson, a migrant from Africa is equally treated with such avarice. His relationship with Dottie and her family is a complicated one as despite his initial generosity he ultimately comes out as an opportunist predator. His riposte, “The only language they understand is violence and oppression, and the only way they will leave us alone is if we scare them enough” (Dottie 139), not only echoes the words of Caliban in *The Tempest*, but confirms the words’ relevancy in the postcolonial era. People like Hudson and Patterson do illegal work, supply drug and ammunition, become involve in street fights. Notwithstanding in the prevailing racist ambience the question occurs is this the life of their choice or they are pushed to it. Denied of any sociable job and deprived from a civilized status they have literally no other option. The Whites’ construction of the blacks as criminal, thief, anti-social and smuggler, may be read as the White man’s blindfolded accusation. The hosts leave no noble place left for them expect the dungeon of underworld.

Dottie as a third migrant though is supposed to be emancipated from racist politics, experiences them even more. The process of inclusion in the mainstream socio-cultural is never easy and Dottie in her utmost surprise observes how all her attempts become tangible and how she is gradually pushed to the corner. Interestingly, her skin colour leaves her in the destitute of unbelonging even in her own community. In the food processing factory she becomes a target of racist remarks and sexual assault. When in the factory her colleagues protest against infiltration, Mike Butler mentions the Race Riot in Notting Hill, 1959 (Dottie 52). The way, there, a black teenager was hunted down, makes the racist atrocity palpable. Later when Dottie is tempted to read about the riot in a local library in an Encyclopedia, she finds a nugatory entry. This ‘negligence of documentation’ viz a viz erasure of history, is regulated by, once again, xenophobia. In an argument Dottie firmly asserts, “This is where we live. We belong here” (Dottie 93). However, her personal as well as professional experience does firmly contradict this claim. In the course of the play, her lamentation for not having a distinct past, other than a pale photograph and some disjointed stories, make her morbid. Her psychological pain and physical plight doubly confirm the morbidity of the present she becomes unavoidably part of. Later her British-origin fiancé, Kane points to her ‘bizarreness’ of her name Dottie Badoura Fatma Balfour. As the name confirms not to the Western norm it axiomatically sounds ‘weird’, not ‘interesting.’ The relation breaks when Kane finds nothing more to ‘excavate’ Dottie and the

dialectical relationship between the Orient and the Occident, between the host and the foreigners and between the resident and the refugees become prominent.

Conclusion: To give my entire argument a final shape, I propose to conclude by mentioning two events in *Dottie*. The novel opens with the birth of Sophie's son, whom they call by their dead brother's name, Hudson. Though the novel hovers on flashback technique, the portrayal of the present never gets blurred. Hudson remains a mute observer of all the happenings. But silently he develops and would eventually come out as a fourth generation migrant in England. The question is what will be his process of assimilation? And how will he be treated in the racist, xenophobic ambience against the coloured migrants? Secondly, Patterson reveals that he brings his entire family to England for safe life and better living as his native country is torn into pieces, because of greedy post-independence politics. Gurnah leaves it unsaid what will be their 'statuses' in the new land and whether their 'living in' can compensate their 'leaving from'. May be the answers are in his subsequent novels which (till date) not only problematise the relationship between home land and host land, inevitably experienced by a diasporan; but vividly points out the lines of demarcation that a diasporan, especially a black one, experiences due to racist politics and prevailing xenophobia.

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