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Migration ,Subalternity ,and Silence in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift*

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Abstract

Abdulrazak Gurnah, Nobel Laureate in Literature (2021), explores postcolonial migration as central theme in his fiction to highlight how displacement reshapes voice, agency, and belonging. Focusing on *Admiring Silence* (1996) and *The Last Gift* (2011), this study examines the interrelation of migration, subalternity, and silence as prominent elements in the construction of migratory subjectivity. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern voice and Kevin Olson's theory of subaltern silence, this article argues that migratory subalternity as a distinct condition generates silence that is a contextually responsive practice whose function changes across time, institutions, and generations. Through a chronological perspective, the two novels reveal an evolution in Gurnah's view of migratory experience. In *Admiring Silence,* silence performs a strategic function by which the migrant narrator is allowed partial agency and narrative self-fashioning within the hegemony of the host culture. By contrast, *The Last Gift* presents the internalization and institutionalization of silence, shaped by shame, trauma, medical discourse, and post-9/11 securitization of immigration. Analysing silence through an intergenerational lens and as a form of postmemory, the article reveals how the protagonist embodies somatic muteness and epistemic erasure, while his children negotiate inherited silence through writing, anger, and demands for articulation. This study invites the reader to regard migratory subalternity as a re-formulating condition, distinct from colonial and postcolonial marginalization.

Keywords: migration, subalternity, silence, *Admiring Silence, The Last Gift*

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Introduction

Antonio Gramsci's definition of the subaltern as being inferior in relation to a dominant power (1999), though not mentioning the migrants, includes them, since the concept of subalternity is applicable to immigrant's position in the social hierarchy of the host country. Identifying subaltern groups, Margery Sabin notes, "'subalterns' now include women, ethnic and racial minorities, immigrants, homosexuals, and other groups who, by race, class, gender or other markers, can be regarded as the dominant society's Other" (2008, 179). The subaltern position of the migrant, highly depending on the causes for migration, might appear as a novel experience or a familiar one. However, the challenge of migratory subalternity for migrants is no longer identical with that of their probable subalternity at home. In this sense, displacement is the determining context that re-formulates subalternity by exposing the migrants to the assimilating power of the host society, to which they might respond both actively or passively.

As a Zanzibari-British migrant novelist, Abdulrazak Gurnah explores migration experience as the central motif of his fiction, showing, both thematically and stylistically, how movement gives rise to the formation of subalternity: his protagonists mainly move from postcolonial subalternity to a migratory one. Gurnah examines the subaltern status of his migrant characters to reveal the "power-geometry" (Massey, 1993) of global flows, exposing the shifting quality of migratory subalternity. To mirror the shifting responses of his protagonists to marginalization, he makes use of silence either as a means of strategic resistance or as a symptom of institutionally internalized surrender. Hence, there is no surprize to see that silence is the central thematic element in *Admiring Silence* (1996) and *The Last Gift* (2011). Tracing Gurnah's engagement with silence in these novels allows the reader to realize how his view of the migration experience evolves from a relative optimism to pessimism. Shifting his focus from individual psychology in *Admiring Silence* to institutional power in *The Last Gift*, Gurnah demonstrates his growing knowledge of the complexity of migratory silence (Kaigai 2013, 133).

Significance of the Study

The contribution of this study lies in taking on s subaltern approach to Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift*. Reading these novels through the lens of

subaltern subjectivity, introduced by Spivak and later extended by Kevin Olson, this research provides the possibility to place the novels in dialogue and to explore how migratory silence converts from agency to internalized passivity, to second generation postmemory. In this study silence, as a conceptual tool, exposes the link between the psychological aspect of the migration experience, foregrounded in *Admiring Silence*, and the hegemonic cultural structure that exerts constraining pressures in *The Last Gift*. The comparative dimension of the study enables the reader to find out Gurnah's diachronic and shifting view of migration due to bureaucratic, political, and global transformations in monitoring movement.

Objectives of the Study

The present article explores migratory silence in Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift* to expose its shifting functions as the protagonists negotiate their subaltern status in their daily lives. The process of identity negotiation in each novel varies, depending on the performative use of silence and narrative fabrications that conceal it. In *Admiring Silence*, silence is strategic and used either as a survival mechanism or as part of false narratives that fill in the silent gaps in the migrant's memory and lived experience. By contrast, the paralyzing function of silence in *The Last Gift* is exposed through investigation of trauma, muteness, and lack of agency. Here, migratory silence becomes symptomatic of trauma and passivity, shifting from speech to the sick body. This paper intends to show that silence transforms from a chosen option in *Admiring Silence* into an internalized and institutionalized imposition in *The Last Gift*. Finally, inherited silence is examined in the life of the second generation of migrant characters to show their unravelling struggle for articulation.

Research Questions

1. How does Gurnah depict the intersection of migrancy, subalternity, and silence in *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift*?
2. In what ways does silence function both as a strategy of agency and as a symptom of paralysis within the migratory contexts of Gurnah's chosen novels?
3. How do the contrasting portrayals of silence in *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift* reveal Gurnah's evolving vision of migrant subjectivity and postcolonial identity?

Literature Review

Exploring migration as a form of subalternity in Gurnah's works is largely ignored, and, investigating silence in relation to migratory subalternity in *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift* forms the originality of the present research. Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"(1988) shows how subaltern's voice is candidly appropriated by the representing agents or institutional structures in a colonial context. Olson (2024) argues that subaltern silence is the product of postcolonial structures that function in modern forms through institutional erasures of personal subjectivity. Both of these fundamental researches do not take into account, in detail, migration as a subaltern condition in postcolonial era. Through an application of these theoretical frameworks to migrancy, this study aims to explore how silence operates when displacement, not merely colonialism or postcolonialism, forms subaltern experience.

Soren Frank critiques the heavy shadow of postcolonialism on migration literature and suggests to study additional "context[s] relevant to" it (2008: 11). His view is also indicative of the subaltern position of migration theory and literature in relation to postcolonial studies. However, by additional contexts Frank means globalization, whereas he does not consider silence as one of those contexts in which migratory subalternity becomes legible.

Kimani Kaigai explores the role of silence in Gurnah's above-mentioned novels from a narratological perspective. For him, the two narratives "deploy narratorial unreliability and use of multiple focalizations as modes of engaging with the characters' silence" (2013: 128). He observes that the narrative strategies of these stories assist the reader to "appreciate the heterogeneity of the migrant experience" (2013: 128). Yet, his narratological study does not explore through silence the interactions of migrancy and subalternity, and also, the heterogeneity of silence is not taken into account in relation to migrant subalternity.

In a PhD research project, Kimani Kaigai, Steiner and Odhiambo (2014) focus on how Gurnah employs "various artistic strategies as possible ways of thinking about individual identity and social relations with others" (iii). They argue that the formal elements and narrative perspectives in Gurnah's fiction raise the question of "hospitality and the anxieties of encountering the stranger, both in the social and the commercial spheres" (207).

Sissy Helff's (2015) reading of "strategic silence" in the framework of contact zone across Gurnah's later novels shows how it functions as a means of transcultural communication, emphasizing silence as dialogic and performative. Nonetheless, Helff's study does not include the concept of subalternity and its effect on the formulation of silence in migration experience.

In a doctoral dissertation, De Carlos Sola and Galvan Reula explore the role of silence and memory in the formation of identity in Gurnah's *The Last Gift* and *Admiring Silence* to highlight that, similar to women, "male immigrants, too, embark on a journey of self-imposed silence" (2023: 72). Acknowledging the "multi-dimensional" quality of silence, the authors focus on the way silence in the subaltern condition of migration shapes "not only the subaltern's persona but also their interpersonal dynamics" (73).

Mohineet Kaur Boparai (2021) in The Fictions of Abdulrazak Gurnah: Journeys through Subalternity and Agency allocates one chapter to *The Last Gift* where the role of archive and storytelling in the construction of subjectivity is analyzed. She finds out that to have authentic lives the characters of the novel "must articulate and record their traumatic memories" (27). According to Kaur Boparai, silence in this novel is the carrier of history. Her work does not take on the interconnection of silence and subalternity and its heterogeneous operations throughout the novel.

Hesna Labboudi (2024) explores 'the postcolonial heritage' in *Admiring Silence* to show how silence becomes a "tool of sarcasm" and a "mechanism of irony," allowing the protagonist to critique colonial legacies while navigating the racialized structures of the metropole, and meanwhile, to show the hurtful effects of this silence, especially as it culminates in the narrator's emotional and political dislocation upon his return to Zanzibar. Her study does not include the subaltern dimension of migrancy and she does not approach silence in *The Last Gift* comparatively. The comparative lens of the present research makes it possible to go beyond Labboudi's findings to reveal how silence might have disabling dimensions as well.

The novelty of this study is extended by exploring migratory silence in the second generation and by highlighting its manipulation in institutional contexts. While the earlier critics have covered silence through colonial and postcolonial representations, global contexts, formal structures, and transcultural framework,

none of them have theorised the heterogeneity of migratory silence as a subaltern condition, an analytical gap this study intends to bridge.

Theoretical Framework: Subalternity, Migration, and the Dynamics of Silence

Extending Gramsci's concept of the subaltern (1990), this article approaches subalternity as a process of identity negotiation in relation to the experience of migration. By focusing on the dynamic dimension of subalternity, Massimo Modonesi highlights its shifting interplay of acceptance and resistance, depending on historical and social contexts (2014, 36). Migratory subalternity is a structuring condition that positions migrants, through movement, in a subaltern status where their fluid subjectivity is constantly re-formulated, being exposed to the assimilating process of the host culture. By intersecting the concept of migration with subaltern studies, this study calibrates its analytical lens to explore how silence functions differently across shifting subaltern contexts in the chosen novels by Gurnah, revealing migratory subalternity as a spectrum. This study frames migratory silence as a temporal disjunction, inhabiting multiple, non-linear time spaces, rather than only a positional one. In *Admiring Silence,* marginalization serves as "an unprecedented source of creative energy" (Ashcroft et al. 2002, 12) revealed through the strategic silences and the narrative fabrications of the unnamed narrator. In contrast, *The Last Gift* portrays the institutionalization of silence, rendering the migratory subject inactive. This study approaches these novels as positions within the migratory subalternity rather than examples illustrating the condition.

As the basis of its theoretical framework, the present study draws on Spivak's concept of subaltern speech (1988) and Olson's theory of subaltern silence (2024) to expose the trajectory of subaltern silence from "epistemic violence" to its institutional and symbolic mechanisms in the contemporary, postcolonial, and cosmopolitan contexts. Extending Olson's conceptualization of subaltern silence to migratory context exposes displacement as a process by which migrants are driven to marginalized positions, where "silence is a mode of subordination" (Olson 2024: 8). Accordingly, this study argues that migratory silence does not function in a single, unified way when it manifests across various subaltern positions. As Olson explains, "[s]ubaltern subjects are not simply silent. Rather, they are silenced in quite varied and heterogeneous senses" (2024: 308). Depicting the various forms of postcolonial

subaltern silence, he states that, in some cases, silence appears as "diminished presence," and in others, as complete absence or unintelligibility. Sometimes the subaltern is heard but not believed, their speech lacks legitimacy. The challenge, then, is "to characterize the complex forms of silence appearing in each situation, being aware of the radical differences between them" (2024: 308). Exploring migratory silence in Gurnah's chosen novels extends Spivak's and Olson's theory of silence. It presents migratory silence as stage-specific (arrival, settlement, return, second-generation), functionally unstable (strategic or paralytic), and relational (to family, memory, body, institutions).

Theoretically speaking, this paper examines how migratory silence, as a continuation of Spivak's colonial silencing and Olson's postcolonial conceptualization of subaltern silence, is dependent on historical contingencies of the migration experience. As a result of dislocation, the migrant subject is engaged in a process of self-negotiation in which the imposed silence exerted by the host culture, though constraining, unknowingly opens up spaces of activity for him/ her. Such spaces of activity are mostly grounded in the past life and memories of migrants of which the guest has no awareness. Being exposed to the assimilating pressure of the host culture, the migrant subject finds moments of resistance, but only temporarily, within silent spaces of activity, reflected in *Admiring Silence* where silence depends on ignorance, memory, asymmetrical recognition, and historical contingency. Tracing the trajectory of silence from *Admiring Silence* to *The Last Gift*, this study explores how silence is reformulated by the shifting, migratory subalternity. Transposing silence from language to sick body, the institutionalized silence in *The Last Gift* is exposed through sick body and its subsequent collapse. The heterogeneity of migratory silence is further highlighted when the stage of intergenerational silence is taken into account in this novel, where the second-generation characters respond in opposite ways to resolve it through acceptance or rejection.

Discussion

Strategic Silences: Self-Fashioning and Narrative Control in *Admiring Silence*

Admiring Silence relates the life of an unnamed narrator who emigrates from Zanzibar to England, where he lives with a British partner, Emma, and their daughter.

Working as a teacher in London, he does not return home for twenty years. During this time, he conceals his past and constructs a fictional identity to align with the expectations of his wife and her family. When he finally returns home, he experiences a sense of estrangement and cultural dislocation. Upon returning to England, he finds that Emma has moved on with a new partner, and Amelia also leaves him shortly afterward. Isolated and displaced, the narrator chooses to remain in a country where he no longer feels a sense of belonging.

Establishing silence and subalternity as the novel's central thematic axes, the ironic epigraph at the opening of *Admiring Silence* offers a lens through which their interconnection is exposed. It cites R. L. Stevenson's description of a local king who is "an admirer of silence in the island; broods over it like a great ear; has spies who report daily; and had rather his subjects sang than talked" (qtd. in Gurnah 1996: 6). The colonial context of Stevenson's text establishes the background to indicate how silence and subalternity are employed as means of perpetuating dominance. The paranoid king imposes silence as a means of surveillance and control, preferring performative loyalty (singing) to authentic communication (talking). Thus, the epigraph highlights the colonial logic of domination through silencing, and, anticipates Gurnah's exploration of how subaltern identities are constructed in migratory contexts.

By transforming the colonial context of the epigraph into that of migration, Gurnah sets the stage to dramatize how immigrants confront subalternity through their demands for speech. The unnamed narrator of *Admiring Silence* hopelessly complains, "our part of the deal was to be colonized, assimilated, educated, alienated, integrated, suffer clashes of culture, win a flag and a national anthem, become corrupt, starve and grumble about it all" (Gurnah 1996: 17). It charts a historical continuum of subalternity, from colonial subjection to nationalist failure, and migratory exile. It also suggests that subalternity merely changes its form rather than disappearing altogether. The convergence of migrancy, subalternity, and silence in the epigraph gestures toward a contemporary reformulation of migrant identity, one where migrants are muted by the 'song' of the host culture. Yet the narrator also gestures toward resistance, noting that the crowd of migrants still "want more space in newspapers ... and demand time on TV. The stories they tell, so many accusations!" (Gurnah 1996:

10). It exposes both the persistence of marginalization and the desire to challenge it through storytelling. These demands for visibility reflect a deeper impulse to rewrite the dominant narrative, to replace imposed silence with lived testimony.

The early chapter of *Admiring Silence* moves from a collective image of silence to a more personal, agentive one. The episode in which the narrator visits his doctor for chest pain dramatizes the migrant's subaltern silence within the host society. The doctor condescendingly attributes the narrator's ailment to his geography and race, exposing his own ignorance. Unaware of narrator's Zanzibari origin, the doctor rationalizes, "'Afro-Caribbean people have dickey hearts, … and they are prone to high blood pressure, hypertension, sickle-cell anaemia, dementia, dengue fever, sleeping sickness, diabetes, amnesia, choler, phlegm, melancholy and hysteria" (Gurnah 1996: 12). His pseudo-scientific reasoning makes the narrator feel "worse," reducing him to "a slow child or a palsied ancient who had lost hearing and speech, as if [he] was an uncomprehending native" (Gurnah 1996: 12). The colonial echo deepens the narrator's alienation, but his silence is not passive. Through interior monologues that contrast with his outward silence, the narrator mocks at the doctor's ignorance. As he notes, "I swallowed all those incurable diseases with a stoical gulp and an inward sneer" (Gurnah 1996: 12), transforming silence into a site of irony, critique, and self-preservation. Echoing Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry (1984), the doctor's approval of this "respectful silence" reveals how silence is misinterpreted as submission, although the narrator strategically uses it to undermine the doctor's authority. As Kaigai observes, "the narrator's silence empowers him by poking fun at the doctor's assured knowledge. His silence and its efficacy draw attention to regimes of (mis)representation" (2013: 132). The unnamed narrator continues to play the game of silence and fabrication as satirical critique, when there is a shift in audience and context. Focusing on his exchanges with Mr Willoughby (Emma's father), it shows how fabrication functions as a means to reveal the host culture's gullibility, colonial nostalgia, and racist fantasies. Mr Willoughby is hungry for colonial nostalgia, for confirmation of British benevolence, and for the stereotypical images of Africa. His conversations with the narrator illustrate this hunger vividly. He reveals his racial fantasies by speaking of "a chap at school, a darkie like you. Splendid runner. He was Mohammedan, though. I can't remember where he came from, somewhere in darkest

Africa" (Gurnah 1996: 22). Intending to expose Mr Willoughby's gullibility, the narrator, by deliberate exaggeration, explains how, by the end of British Empire, "the government had legalized cannibalism" (Gurnah 1996: 21). Then, he turns the lens on his own family life to show the benevolence of empire and says, "in my father's house all the beds were made of gold, and until I was sixteen, servants bathed me in milk and then rinsed me in coconut water every morning" (Gurnah 1996: 22). His colonial desire having been reflected in theses inventive narratives, Mr Willoughby's reactions reveal regret for leaving the colonial countries out of irresponsibility, "Was is fair to abandon the Empire? Was it fair to them?" (Gurnah 1996: 23). In fact, these fabrications validate his imperial nostalgia and encourage "the artist" in the narrator (Gurnah 1996: 29), implying his awareness of the performance. Just as the doctor scene exposes how silence lays bare the racial bias embedded in everyday dialogues, the Willoughby episode demonstrates how silence evolves into fabrication, converting narrative into a satire of the host culture's colonial fantasies.

In *Admiring Silence,* Silence also functions as a strategy of survival and psychological distancing. It becomes especially visible in moments of personal conflict, where speech might heighten danger. Silence as a survival strategy is dramatized in the restaurant scene, where Peter's (the chef) angry reaction to the narrator's relationship with Emma, as waiters, is met not with argument, but with a silent, performative kiss:

> 'You're out,' he shouted at me. 'Now.' He expelled Emma from the kitchen and then proceeded to utter a stream of filth at me, whose metaphors attempted to evoke my degraded and uncontrollable lust. … I did not contest any of it, but hung up my plastic apron, kissed him on both cheeks and departed without even asking for any pay. Who needs a carving knife between the ribs? (Gurnah 1996:51-52)

Remaining silent disengages the narrator from violence and stereotypes. The narrator's silence gives Peter an opportunity to expose his racial hostility and sexual clichés, interpreting silence as a sign of inferiority. The kiss, a gesture of exaggerated civility by which the narrator maintains moral superiority and refuses to be reduced to the stereotypical role assigned to him, becomes both ironic and strategic, allowing the narrator to exit with dignity and restraint. The carving knife image, signifying

physical power, displaces silence from psychological to a bodily register, an anticipation of Abbas's bodily silencing in *The Last Gift*. Whereas Spivak's model of subaltern speechlessness emphasizes structural erasure through representation, Gurnah complicates it by showing how, in certain migratory situations, silence functions differently.

A nuanced function of migratory silence is seen through the narrator's relationship with Emma and the self-image he fabricates by reshaping his past through storytelling. "When we first knew each other, Emma was full of questions about me and about my home. She was so beautiful and so full of life … that I could not imagine that she really wanted to know about the calloused and stiffened memories that attached me to my past" (Gurnag 1996: 30). Emma's questions seem as a form of soft surveillance and her desire for exotic life history of the narrator indirectly identifies which stories are worthy of telling. In an interview, Gurnah explains that his aim in *Admiring Silence* "was something to do with the seduction of the possibility of making yourself anew … he [the narrator] is seduced because these are cleaner stories" (Steiner 2013: 161). Silence, in this context, functions not only as a narrative mechanism for covering the shame of a poor past, but also as a mechanism of inventive narratives. That is why he confesses, "I was allowed so much room that I only could fill it with invention" (Gurnah 1996: 53).

Ambivalence is central to the experience of migration where both speaking and silence sound painful. Here, it is fabrication that resolves both pains temporally. Doing his best to answer Emma's questions, the unnamed narrator observes:

> I realized with small stabs of shame afterwards that I had embellished my story to make it less messy, and had fabricated details where these had escaped me. The shame was intense for a few minutes but it soon passed and I became used to my lies. It made me happy, and above all it made her happy. No, above all was that it could do no harm. She never seemed to tire of hearing about my home and my people, and I confess that my fabrications were generally to repay her interest, although some were obviously to make us appear less petty to each other, to make our lives seem noble and ordered. (Gurnah 1996: 30-31)

The reciprocal performance of fabrication is dramatized when the narrator confesses that his lying was "to make her happy". It exposes the relational aspect of

silence. On the one hand, Emma's implied demands for 'clean' and exotic narratives align with the commodification of migrant experience and aestheticization of trauma. On the other hand, fabrications reconstruct not only the narrator's life stories but also his identity. His lying is not just about the past, he is reconfiguring his migrant self to align with Emma's interpretive view. It illustrates that silence operates dialogically and is context-bound.

The Limits of Strategy: Homecoming and Dislocation in *Admiring Silence*

In *Admiring Silence*, silence is also explored from the perspective of migrants returning home. Generally speaking, return is typically marked by disillusionment and non-belonging dramatized through silence, since the returnee discovers that the 'home' imagined in exile no longer exists. Such a disappointment, as Dodgson-Katyio notes, "is not just that of the protagonists who return and are disappointed by what they find, but is also that of their families, friends and colleagues who had expectations of them which are not met" (2016: 3). Return, in this sense, becomes another stage in the migrant's journey, a continuation of displacement rather than its resolution. Saffran's insight that "some diasporas persist … because a homeland may exist, [but] it is not a welcoming place" (1991: 91) precisely captures the unnamed narrator's condition at home. When he walks along the beach filled with memories of his childhood, he recognizes that the landscape has decayed into "rubble" (Gurnah 1996: 152). In fact, the silence of the 'rubble' reflects the silence of memories since the beach is no longer supportive. His lament, "I felt like a refugee from my life … an expulsion from my past" (Gurnah 1996: 152), translates emotional estrangement into spatial imagery. The rubble and ruins are not only signs of physical decay but metaphors for a fragmented self, displaced from both homeland and hostland.

The narrator's homecoming becomes a recognition of his ongoing marginalization, a consequence of the identity transformations that migration has imposed on him. His re-encounter with Zanzibar reveals that the very process of becoming intelligible in Britain has rendered him unintelligible at home. This process reflects what Stuart Hall conceptualizes as "the positions of enunciation" (2021: 222), the hybrid cultural viewpoint from which migrant subjects speak or are spoken. It is a position that renders them legible in one context while alienating them in another. He now tries to hide his alienation through silence when interacting with people of

his country. Reflecting on his dislocation at home, he observes:

> "After so many years away, my days were full of impact, full of intricate negotiations with people and places I had known differently. I felt that I had to be alert all the time, as if everyone was looking to catch me out in some dereliction, probing my account of myself, the way I spoke, my observance of social rituals to see how I would reveal my distance from them. I was keen not to be seen to have changed beyond recognition, not to be thought alien." (Gurnah 1996: 111)

The confession captures the protagonist's struggle with re-assimilation and his awareness of the tension between migratory self-transformation and social expectation of home. His silence here is a passive defence mechanism, a means of concealing the distance he feels from those who still claim him as one of their own. It reveals the fact that silence's function is stage-specific, no longer strategic at home.

Having analysed *Admiring Silence* through the lens of migratory silence as a mode of subalternity, this study demonstrates that the narrator's silence often remains, despite its costs, a strategic mode of self-fashioning and negotiation with the systems that marginalize him. Through Gurnah's wider perspective of his fiction, yet, it is also revealed that there are moments when migratory silence stops to function as agency and converts into a mode of internalized paralysis. Capturing such a moment, *The Last Gift* exposes institutionalized silence as a mode of psychic immobilization linked to somatic failure and traces its postmemory consequences for the second-generation of migrants.

Paralyzing Silence: Trauma and Inheritance in *The Last Gift*

Intertextually connected to *Admiring Silence* through the character of Abbas, the father of the unnamed narrator who mysteriously disappeared in the earlier novel, *The Last Gift* (2011) recounts the life of Abbas following his escape from Zanzibar to England forty-three years earlier. The novel begins with Abbas's collapse from a diabetic crisis that renders him physically silent and immobile.Through shifting focalization, the omniscient narrator reconstructs Abbas's past: his youth in a poor rural family, his early marriage and unexpected flight from Zanzibar, his years as a sailor in the Indian Ocean, and his subsequent life in England with his wife, Maryam, and their two children. Beneath the outward domestic stability lies a heavy silence that

conceals Abbas's earlier life and emotional trauma. As his illness progresses, Abbas finally decides to break his lifelong silence, revealing to the family the hidden story of his first marriage and the child he abandoned. *The Last Gift* charts the institutional and intergenerational consequences of migratory silence.

Representing soft marginalization, Abbas's migratory subalternity marks a paralysing silence constructed by institutions and internalized over his years of migration. His silence assumes multiple, overlapping functions: it hides a shameful past, includes trauma, and accommodates the host culture's marginalizing gaze. Abbas's condition corresponds to what Olson defines as internally imposed silence, one that makes the subject "structurally unintelligible" and "socially alienated" (2024: 8). Facing death, Abbas's fear is not of dying itself but, as he confesses, of "dying in a strange land that did not want him" (Gurnah 2011: 41). For him, it is a haunting recognition that his decades of life in migration has produced no sense of belonging. Passing other elderly, dark-skinned migrants on English streets, he perceives his reflection in their alien presence: "beasts out of their element, pachyderms on concrete pavements" (Gurnah 2011: 42). The image of the pachyderm, massive yet misplaced, reflects the paradox of migratory visibility: the migrant body is hyper-visible as difference yet inaudible as voice. Gurnah thereby translates Spivak's question concerning the ability of the subaltern to speak, into the visual register of exile, where being seen replaces being heard and where visibility itself becomes a technology of silencing. Abbas's public presence conceals his self-erasure. It exposes how the modern host society formulates otherness through visibility without recognition.

In these novels, illness imagery plays a central symbolic role that deepens Gurnah's exploration of migratory subalternity. Both novels begin with scenes of physical pain, signalling the anguish of exile. In *Admiring Silence*, the narrator's story opens with a vague and persistent chest pain:

> I have found myself leaning heavily on this pain. At first I tried to silence it, thinking it would go and leave me to my agitated content. That it would linger for a season, a firm reminder of the disquiet that lurks and coils below the surface of the stubbornly self-gratifying vision of our lives. Far from going, it became more clear, more precisely located, concrete, an object that occupied space within me, cockroachy, dark and intimate, emitting thick, stinking fumes

> that reeked of loneliness and terror. When I woke up in the morning, I groped for it, then sighed with plunging recognition as I felt it stirring inside me, alive and well. (Gurnah 1996: 7).

As part of the initial paragraph of the novel, it reveals the agency of the pain. It is "alive", creeping, "intimate", and monstrous. Reflecting how silence is materialized in the body as a presence, the pain becomes an object that occupies a place: it emits "thick, stinking fumes" and the narrator "gropes for it" every morning as if it were a companion. These somatic symptoms of the pain support the argument that illness is an embodied form of speech, a kind of inward articulation when verbal articulation is impossible. Describing in creaturely, pest-like terms such as "cockroachy" and "dark", the language anticipates doctor's racial misreading, discussed in the preceding section. Here, the body already internalizes dehumanizing imagery. Aligning with the bodily dimension of silence, the pain resists to be hushed by the narrator's attempts. Thus, his attempt to silence pain is an attempt to cover racial anxiety, and, pain's refusal to be silenced refers to the emergence of subaltern embodiment. The fact that pain grows "every morning" signals the daily growth of psychic tension reflecting his "agitated content".

In *The Last Gift*, Gurnah repeats the same motif of illness with Abbas's collapse to indicate somatic symptoms of displacement: "One day, long before the troubles, he slipped away without saying a word to anyone and never went back. And then another day, forty-three years later, he collapsed just inside the front door of his house in a small English town" (Gurnah 2011: 4). To emphasize the link between displacement and illness, the narrator juxtaposes the first day of Abbas's silent escape with the day of his wordless collapse as a migrant long time after. Both scenes position Abbas's silence as central: in the first moment his silence is voluntary whereas in the second moment it is involuntary. Mirroring the animal imagery of illness in *Admiring Silence,* Gurnah follows the same pattern of materializing illness. "He felt it coming, the collapse. Not with the dread of ruin that had idled by him for as long as he could remember, but with a feeling that something deliberate and muscular was steadily bearing down on him. It was not a strike out of nowhere, more like the beast had slowly turned its head towards him, recognised him and then reached out to smother him" (Gurnah 2011: 4). Whereas the earlier novel presents illness as a

psychological manifestation of displacement, *The Last Gift* exposes a radical image of illness as a corporeal collapse, reflecting another mode of silence as paralysis. The parallel openings establish a structural link between migration and illness. It indicates that exile is not only a geographical rupture but a corporeal one. The migrant's body becomes the site where dislocation, alienation, and unspoken trauma are inscribed. In this sense, illness is the body's articulation of what cannot be spoken; it literalizes subaltern silence in corporeal form.

To open *The Last Gift* with scenes of illness performs three interrelated functions that illuminate the complex structure of migratory subalternity. First, illness translates psychic rupture into the register of the body. The somatic silence is underlined through Abbas's visual depiction of his collapse: "He watched himself beside himself, a little panicked by the sly, irresistible dissolution of his rib cage and his hip joints and his spine, as if body and mind were separating themselves from each other" (Gurnah 2011: 5). This dissociative moment marks the fragmentation of migrant subjectivity through silent physical suffering. Illness thus becomes a metaphorical lens through which Gurnah renders visible the invisible wounds of exile.

Second, illness dramatizes the exposure of the migrant body to the institutional gaze of the host society, transforming Abbas from a speaking subject into an object of clinical knowledge. Once hospitalized, Abbas becomes subject to clinical scrutiny that, to borrow Spivak's term, enacts a form of "epistemic erasure", he is reduced to a catalogue of symptoms: "a diabetic crisis… late-onset diabetes … some brain damage … mild strokes… long list of prohibitions" (Gurnah 2011:8). This clinical reduction recalls Michel Foucault's notion of the medical gaze (2003), through which the patient's identity is filtered out and replaced by the authority of medical discourse. Abbas is literally silenced within this regime: "He sat silently while she [Maryam] debated his symptoms and his treatment with the doctor… Abbas smiled as he watched them battle over his sick body" (Gurnah 2011: 42). Even the doctor's seemingly benevolent manner, treating him "as if she was dealing with a broken radio" (Gurnah 2011: 8), marks a depersonalizing act that turns care into control and the migrant subject into a malfunctioning machine. Contrasting with the strategic silence of doctor scene in *Admiring Silence* as discussed before, silence here is involuntary: Abbas's silence is not chosen but imposed through institutional discourse, physical

paralysis, and system; whose limitation already was exposed in doctor scene of *Admiring Silence*, that recognizes him through his symptoms than his narrative.

Third, illness in *The Last Gift* signifies the collapse of 'home' and the paralysis of narration. The migrant's body becomes the final territory where dislocation is inscribed, a living map on which the loss of geography, culture, and language is registered. For Abbas, physical collapse mirrors the dissolution of belonging. Lying in his hospital bed, he wishes not to die "in a strange land that did not want him" (Gurnah 2011: 41), a lament that connects corporeal suffering with the yearning for home. Yet this desire remains unfulfilled, as his illness literally silences him. The doctor's prognosis, "[h]e would lose some function. Paralysed. … Hearing is not one of the lost functions, speech is. He can make sounds but not words" (Gurnah 2011: 42), transforms the medical report into a metaphor for epistemic dispossession. Abbas's bodily paralysis thus completes the trajectory of subaltern silence: from speech (in *Admiring Silence*) to inward muteness, and finally to corporeal stillness, where silence becomes total.

The Second Generation: Postmemory and the Demand for Speech

Abbas's 'shameful' silence is inherited by his children, who show contrasting second-generation responses to it. For Jamal, silence becomes both a mystery and a motivation. His father's reticence awakens in him a deep curiosity to unravel the hidden story behind Abbas's silence, transforming silence into an intellectual and emotional quest. His father's silence produces an identity gap that he feels compelled to fill it by writing about. Gurnah's concluding lines of *The Last Gift,* highlighting Jamal's decision to write a story, concentrate on the central role of writing in the life of second-generation of immigrants. Answering his sister's email after Abbas's death, Jamal happily writes: "Of course we'll go to Zanzibar. I want to see that tree where our father was shelling groundnuts while the great world was churning just out of eyeshot. I'm writing a short story. Another father story. Such a predictable immigrant subject. I am going to call it *The Monkey from Africa!"* (Gurnah, 2011: 204). Jamal's writing is both an act of resistance and an attempt to reclaim narrative authority. Refusing to inherit silence passively, he turns his father's silence into a narrative project. Not a return to origins and home, his home-coming exposes a desire to investigate the hereditary rupture his father never voiced. In so doing, he resists the

subaltern position from which his father was not able to escape.

Yet Jamal's relation to silence is also painful. Growing up as an immigrant child, he internalizes the shame and difference that accompany him. As the narrator observes, "[t]hat feeling – that there was something to be ashamed of – had been with him most of his life, even when he did not know of its presence and had only slowly begun to understand its several causes" (Gurnah 2011: 36). It evokes Abbas's internalized sense of migratory shame, transmitted psychologically to Jamal. The passage continues to detail how teachers and classmates alike unconsciously reaffirm his difference, reminding him of poverty and backwardness "in the world where people like him lived" (Gurnah 2011: 36). When his classmates laugh at immigrant passers, he tries to "pretend he was not any different from the chucklers" (Gurnah 2011: 37). It captures the internalization of exclusion and the quiet endurance of subaltern identity. Being caught in a paradox, Jamal belongs legally and socially, yet he is never recognized as belonging wholly to the host culture.

In contrast, Hanna reacts to Abbas's silence with impatience and anger. While Jamal seeks meaning within the silence, Hanna demands speech and clarity. Hanna's response is charged with anger and confrontation. Being shaped as "the generation after" by "traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension" (Hirsch 2012: 5), She insists that her father offer a coherent narrative of his origins, but Abbas jokingly responds that "he was a monkey from Africa" (Gurnah 2011: 35), a remark that ignores her desire for rootedness and intensifies her frustration. Her anger about her father's silence reveals her demand for a simple, dignified story that would free her from the shame of disconnection. For Hanna, silence is not protection but imprisonment, a failure of love and communication that denies her the right to a stable identity. Marianne Hirsch underlines the fear of the second-generation "to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated by our ancestors" (2012: 5). Hanna explicitly expresses this fear confessing, "[s]ometimes it makes me feel that I am living a life of hiding and shame. That we all are'" (Gurnah 2011: 35). She recognises that her parent's silence is swallowing her own story. Her own words reflect this sense of inherited loss: "'They are lost,' she said. 'Ba deliberately lost himself a long time ago, and Ma found herself lost from the beginning… What I want from them is a story that has a beginning that is tolerable

and open, and not one that is tripped with hesitations and silences (Gurnah 2011: 35–6). In parallel way, Hanna's desire for a new name (Anna) indicates her rejection of inherited silence and signals her tendency for a self-fashioned identity. As Hirsch's concept of *postmemory* (2012) suggests, the children of migrants inherit not direct recollections but silence and fragments of their parents' traumatic pasts, shaping their identities through gaps, absences, and half-told stories. Through Hanna, Gurnah dramatizes how the second generation confronts the limits of inherited silence: it becomes not a shield, as for Abbas, but a suffocating legacy that demands articulation.

Conclusion

Juxtaposing migratory silence in Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift*, this article shows that it functions as a historically responsive mode of migratory subalternity. It transforms across various modes to throw light on migrant's fluid subjectivity, marking the evolving pressures exerted by host societies over time. From chronological perspective, the two novels expose a growing pessimism in Gurnah's vision of migrant life. Located in the context of 1990s, *Admiring Silence* enacts, through narrative agency, an optimism charged by post-Cold War hope, early global mobility, initial diasporic negotiations. In contrast, *The Last Gift,* which converts strategic silence into somatic collapse, contextualizes pessimism rising out of the xenophobia of Muslim and African immigrants in post-9/11, intensified border regimes, securitization of immigration, and hostile immigration policies in UK. The shift from individual psychology in *Admiring Silence* to structural constrain in *The Last Gift* signal's Gurnah's deeper survey of migration and trauma in global and intergenerational scope. The later Gurnah is more attentive of structures than individuals and his later fiction emphasizes the paralysing effect of medical and bureaucratic institutions. He sees the migrant's voice as increasingly disciplined by institutional power. The second-generation figures reveal that silence emerges in the form of postmemory, challenging the process of full assimilation. Placed in dialogue, Jamal's turn to writing and Hanna's affective insistence on speech expose the generational afterlife of subaltern silence: a move from embodied muteness to a demand for articulation, invoking challenging consequences. By charting the evolution of silence across the two novels, Gurnah invites a reconsideration of

migratory subalternity not as a fixed identity but as a shifting condition, shaping migratory silence as stage-specific, functionally unstable, and relational.

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