

**Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Dottie*:
A Narrative of (Un)Belonging**
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Having been educated in Tanzania, worked in Nigeria and migrated to England, Abdulrazak Gurnah has personally experienced the ways in which conflict between exclusivist and eclectic concepts of racial identity galvanizes one's own life into new initiatives and responsibilities. In Gurnah's case, the long exposure to outside influence has impressed a visible trace on the novelist's way of structuring a narrative, for his originality is a response to other works from the continent and echoes the new directions taken by others in the construction of spurious identities, which are neither "here" nor "there." Gurnah's fidelity to his Asian-African roots, his liaison with the inter-ethnic part of his soul, co-exists with the constant unsettling of national and cultural notions of "purity" and "authenticity," engendered by the complex, hybridized modernity of the twenty-first century. As Edward Said has commented, "Expatriation/exile for the intellectual is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled and unsettling others. You cannot go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation" (365).

The rootless nomadic traders of Gurnah's controversial novel, *Paradise* (1994), who exist in many languages, races and religions, as well as *Dottie*, a mixture of African, Punjab, English components, and the Tanzanian émigré school teacher who eventually decides to go back to his country in *Admiring Silence* (1997), are symptomatic examples of this 'restlessness' and 'movement' and of the author's experimentation with a changing reality observed from a continually de-centred and de-centring position. In all his work, Gurnah demonstrates that "the role of the artist as expatriate is a complex network of commerce, experience and representation not as a passive witness but as vital actor and agent of

modernity” (Kaplan 47). In this sense, Gurnah’s work is a dynamic site which lays bare the paradoxes, incompatibilities and ambivalences that are central paradigms of migrant experience and discourse. The ways in which “homeland” and the British environment are mediated and imagined through Dottie’s selective strategies for constructing of an identity of her own gives the reader fundamental insight into the very nature of migrant discourse itself.

Dottie (1990) is the story of three siblings, Dottie, Sophie and Hudson, the remnants of a poor family of ambiguously mixed origins. The central focus of the novel is the eldest sister Dottie, a factory worker born in Leeds, at the outbreak of the Second World War, whose real name is Dottie Badoura Fatma Balfour. Her ancestry, as her names suggest, goes back to Afghanistan, Punjab and Africa; her mother eventually settles in Britain where she becomes a low-life prostitute and alcoholic, and finally dies of gonorrhoea. The Balfours, therefore, are the ruined heirs of imperialism, war, deracination and betrayal. They find themselves in England and literally do not know where they came from: their mother was a prostitute, called Bisiku, and they do not know their fathers.

The central focus of *Dottie* is the subject “*en process*” and its play of diverse shifting identities within the larger framework of the political upheavals of 1960s England. Race (here, read black) and gender (here, read female) are the main stigmatized markers on the practice/politics side of the border, but they are not the only markers, for they trade places in a fluid system in which differences of nationality, sexuality and class are interchangeable. Gurnah depicts a society in which access to power is determined by race, class and gender: in the patriarchal society of his novel the black woman is abused and relegated to the sub-human. Gurnah not only describes acts of exploitation and violence perpetrated by individual men in the private domain of the home/family but also depicts analogous ones carried out by the public institutions of medicine, university, the law, and the police.

The two main dynamics of narration in *Dottie* are the author’s mindfulness of the explicit or implicit oppression of women by patriarchy, buttressed by cultural codes, and the contemporary writer’s awareness of his own alienation. Gurnah is aware that the nation does not naturally

proffer identities, nor does it lead to the fulfilment of a desire to belong to a real or mythical community, but often comes between post-colonial subjects and their quest for a communal ideal, for a space of belonging. In Gurnah's case, one gets the impression that expatriation, by distancing the subject from the idealized space of the nation, also generates "the desire for a unified image of the self as cast within the country's epic quest for its soul" (Gikandi 382). In this sense, on one level, it is possible to read this story as symptomatic of the ambivalence that informs the migrant writer's narrativization of his native land. At the matrix of this ambivalence is the writer's own alienation from the landscape and its people, alienation produced by factors of class, cultural conditioning and migrancy itself, which almost always precludes a complete integration with the new homeland. Under these circumstances, the land the protagonist finds herself in is strange and terrifying and is often framed, rather in keeping with orientalist paradigms, as violent, squalid, dark, and irrational. An instance of this characterization can be seen in the accentuation of the shadowy and grotesque that features in the description of seasons, "the biting cruelties of winter" (*Dottie* 117) and locations, "with naked wires, water-filled pits and piles of rubble" (133).

In the narrative's present, Arabs, Africans, Indians, Europeans and other nationalities square off against each other as the boundaries between dominator and dominated shift and settle. Men are pitted against each other, as either dominant or dominated. Traditions collide against one another, and each tradition within national boundaries represents a contested domain where national and trans-national cultures structure the tenure of social life and the contingencies of experience. Narrow cultural homogeneity is continuously questioned in the novel in favour of unashamedly contradictory, hybridized places where foreign and indigenous customs and practices merge in complicated and confusing ways. From this perspective, Gurnah's challenge to notions of cultural hybridity as being unanchored to socio-cultural privilege is decidedly path-breaking. Gurnah reminds us that we cannot forget the stipulations and privilege on which fences and borders are based. The value of *Dottie's* experience in the novel lies precisely in the projections of how such hybridity can never comprise an equilibrium between disparate stances.

If, as Guy Scarpetta states, “Impurity is the order of the day. We are of all the cultures and each person is a mosaic” (26), then the notion that different cultural traditions exist in equal measure within the self is a discursive construct that incidents in the text themselves challenge. For if we understand hybrid identity as a fluid site which implies a constant negotiation vis-à-vis assimilation or self-determination, signifiers of Hindu, Muslim and African identity in *Dottie* cannot possibly be forwarded equally, but rather exist as contrasting forces that depend on the exigencies of the moment. The indeterminacy of her diasporic identity is then produced by a continuous process of “trans-culturation,” of cultural translation into the new context. Dottie’s christening, an obvious clash with her Muslim names, is the first step towards cultural translation.

If identity is a site of negotiation, which depends on the exigencies of the situation, the black woman’s struggle to define herself within a mixed context of both contradictory and acceptable values and references is a never-ending process. This continuous process of re-conceptualizing space and national boundaries as the determinants of identity is further complicated by Dottie’s orphan status and her lack of individual and collective memory which “transmit both the historical facts that precipitated the dispersion and a cultural heritage” (Chaliand and Rageau 4). Although Dottie is aware that her names are foreign and cross centuries, cultures and territories, her knowledge of her multicultural history is impeded by her mother’s resentment of a family who wanted to marry her off to someone she hardly knew. Consumed by hatred and bitterness towards her family, on her death-bed, Bisiku tells Dottie that “she should never allow past things to tyrannise her, that religion and culture were stuff and mumbo-jumbo for old people to force those who come after to toe the line” (35–36). Unable to recognize fully the value of tradition and history, Bisiku “didn’t understand until it was too late, and maybe not even then, that her children would need stories to know who they were” (15).

Unsurprisingly then, home, with its cultural references, social knowledge, friends and family, all of which help provide a stable identity, is not there, and Dottie is forced to “imagine and fabricate stories round her names, making childish romances and warm tales of painless sacri-

fice and abundant affection" (11). Not only is home no longer a clearly identifiable geographical place; it hardly exists in terms of the character's mental landmarks. Memories of familiar places, peoples and things are absent. What survives in Dottie's conscience is the scarce and disconnected information about her family history that her mother gave her from time to time. Those stories, however, seem to fade away irreparably when her mother dies. Stories and scattered details of her childhood and her christening jostle in her head and "she could not be sure how many of the details were true and how many she altered to suit her needs" (11).

Arun Mukherjee has noted that "The new arrival, unlike the native-born ethnic, is bound to be preoccupied with his own sense of identity rather than with exploring his genealogy or with ancestor-seeking" (133). Dottie seems to contradict this logic. As a native-born ethnic coping with discontinuity and displacement, she not only experiences the loss of her geo-cultural home(s) but also, unable as she is to preserve her originary home in her inner self, initially fights to gain recognition within the nation-state boundary and territory. In dealing with her own cultural liminality she cannot go back to her mental landmarks—people, friends, family, smells, voices, sounds—because they are not deeply embedded in her memory. A different cultural temporality is produced from the experience of social marginality. This new temporality emerges from a narrative that shapes second and third-generation diasporic memory or what Marianne Hirsh calls *post-memory*: "Post-memory is not mediated through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (420). Actively or passively dominated by stories that precede their birth, post-memory is applicable to those "whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor recreated" (420).

Dispossessed and separated from her former identities and her history, Dottie seeks to understand the complex cultural territory in which she finds herself, a territory where the dominant and the subordinated interact, struggle and negotiate their differences, a territory she initially dares not question: "She would not have dreamed of protesting against

the proper pre-eminence of England, nor had she for a moment considered questioning or challenging its rectitude” (12). Since Dottie does not directly experience the trauma of uprooting, her need for redefinition of self in the new context becomes an imperative: “They didn’t know who they were, or what people they belonged to. They knew this place and this was all they had. There was no choice but to hang on here, and make room for themselves” (170). She appears so involved with the chaotic flux of reality that the unknown past becomes irrelevant for the moment except for the pain it evokes in the character for having passed away without apparently leaving traces. As the bastard child of the empire, Dottie initially believes that there is no scope for agency or self-definition in the pre-immigrant moment, other than that identity conferred by the fixed terms and conditions of nation-state and race, of inter-national agreements and bureaucracy.

However, throughout the narrative, Dottie seems constantly troubled by dominant questions about the “history” of her identity. Even when consciously rejecting association with her mother’s deformed past, she is unconsciously obsessed with questions that point to the absence of a stable system of meanings in the British, multicultural environment she is experiencing. For Dottie, the relationship to her people’s past history is marked by misfortune and displacement just as her desire to reinvent herself is retarded by her confused origins. In both an individual and a collective sense, she cannot derive her authority from any genealogy. If the notion of space as a physical construct is obvious, in Dottie’s case, “space” as a mental construct from remembrance or imagination is also problematic. Without parents to connect her to a genealogical tradition, she seems to have no past and appears to many people as if she had made herself. Home and foreign countries, whether imaginary or not, also acquire temporal counterparts. Salman Rushdie’s words, then, that “the photograph of my childhood house reminds me that it’s my present that is foreign and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time” (*Imaginary Homelands* 9) cannot apply to Dottie’s predicament. Dottie creates mental worlds or imaginary homelands and “she spent hours dwelling over her beautiful names” (12) to compensate for what she has lost. “The past is a foreign country” goes

the famous opening sentence of L. P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between* (1). For Dottie, both past and present are foreign.

If, on one hand, the past remains buried and inaccessible, unable to give a sense of direction and coherence to the present that is continually described as chaotic, traces of that past are imprinted on her skin and in her names. Dottie cannot cling to any geographical or cultural location to identify herself, but she is nonetheless available for categorization, as her "alien" names and dark skin, markers of "otherness," impose on her an identity whose implications she neither fully understands nor entirely accepts. Dottie's identity is thus socially constructed through the colour of her skin. Blackness is used as a generic marker to refer to what is against the norm, that is, non-white and poor. Throughout the novel, the British seem to show little interest in distinguishing between different cultural groups. This is why, on most occasions, Dottie is addressed by locals as "foreign." As Roger Bromley observes, "The diasporised (like the deviant) bring into transparency and visibility the possibility of *indistinction* because they are perceived as coming from outside the localised and ordered and bearing several visible markers of difference, of alterity" (13). Sometimes, Dottie is addressed in the novel as "West Indian" (213) and again here, Bromley reminds us that "African-Caribbeans in Britain are criminalized out of all proportion to their numbers because they are . . . figures of excess and transgression within zones of indistinction" (13). On the other hand, Dottie is recognized by other immigrants, like her Cypriot landlord, as being not quite as black as the West Indians, "I have some Jamaican niggers living in my house in Brixton. I take pity on them. Everywhere they go the landlords say no. No dogs, no children no niggers. . . . Don't worry, darling. You're not very black, not like them Jamaican niggers" (56). Thus, if Dottie as a black is perceived by locals as threatening because she apparently lacks the vestments of the local, national territory—despite having been christened and being a native-speaker of English—white immigrants of other nationalities seem to be able to distinguish among "gradations of blackness." Dottie's presence in the local territory is in a sense tolerated by other white immigrants like the Cypriots or the Russians, on the grounds of her varied degree of blackness. Since "blackness" is

synonymous with “deviant,” her not being “quite” the same as black, though still black enough to be discriminated against, guarantees Dottie an “in-between” space from which she can negotiate new cultural environments and relations. At times, however, the negativity commonly associated with the condition of “black”—that is, primitive, dirty and aggressive—is perceived by Dottie as a unifying marker of shared experience: “It was that way of talking about people like her, for she knew that *Jamaican niggers* could be effortlessly stretched to include her, as if they were primitive and criminal” (55). Often defined as backward, deviant, primitive and/or alien, marginalized people quickly become “the invading-thieving-scrounging-idle-foreigner-criminal-taking-our-jobs/homes/land others whose lack of conformity, whose ‘difference,’ arises out of struggles over the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion” (O’Brien 229). In the social phenomenon of immigration, the movement of individuals or groups is shown to produce processes of conflicts and confrontation rather than of dialogue and *métissage*. At times of political and economic crisis, Indians and Africans, mostly perceived as unhealthy minorities—“there were grumbles about Niggers ruining the country” (98)—became the target of expulsion or the victims of looters and violence. Racism, misogyny, homophobia are all forms of territorial cleansing. The presence of a variety of diasporic communities within the space of the “host” society, then, dramatizes the possibility of conflicts and encounters in a post-national context.

Another clear indicator of the outsider, which situates the black migrant as being outside localization and a threat to territorial order, is offered by the stereotypical image of the intense, different, distinguishable odour of the black man or woman’s body: “In the changing room, she had to put up with the usual insults about bad smells” (98). In this sense, Dottie’s skin colour others her and locates her in a biologically constructed racial category. The central phenomenon of inclusion and exclusion from the socially, economically and culturally constructed nation functions via the drawing of internal boundaries (of class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion and culture), but also decisively via the drawing of external boundaries—to neighbouring peoples and states and to “alien” peoples from/in the colonies. Gurnah points out that the image

of one's own nation (Britain) was formed by means of counter-images or negative images of the "other" and the "alien."

Dottie's awareness of being the other ("why she could not be the same as everyone else?" 36) is, however, accompanied by a firm sense of belonging: "She belonged here" (37); "I'm not a foreigner" (122). Since identity is a product of both self-identification and socio-cultural categorization, Dottie's self-image and self-understanding as "British" clashes with dominant representations, constructions and ideologies of "authentic Englishness." Dottie's experience is marked by transformation, hybridity and plurality: "She couldn't resist to picture herself as living between lives" (116). Hybridity in this context is perceived as a threat to the hegemonic culture. Not only is her past a fragmented, multilayered experience, but her present, her current location, also requires a constant navigation across boundaries. Gradually, Dottie learns to move across existing frontiers and cut across fixed allegiances. Dottie's ability to merge elements from a variety of cultures and to incorporate difference while simultaneously transcending it is evident in her eating habits: cassava, bacon, flapjack, jelebi.

As the visibly different other who is obliged to prove she is not indifferent because she is different, Dottie shows how those at the margins constantly disturb, problematize and so supplement the constructs of a homogenized and cohesive national identity, conjured by the hegemonic majority and officialdom. Dottie's frustration is heightened by the realization that answers to issues of identity must be self-engendered. Her sense of self-preservation is not born of a position of strength but rather of a feeling of racial and sexual vulnerability. Being at ease as an alien is a privilege afforded, if at all, by a tiny minority who are in a position of hegemony and therefore have substantially more control of their surroundings. The richness of Gurnah's novel is that most of his characters are shown to be outside this hegemony.

Dottie's recognition and acceptance of trans-national diasporic communities within herself depends on her determination "to provide oneself with one's own place" (de Certeau 36). This relates to the struggle by diasporic peoples to achieve, as Stuart Hall suggests, a movement from margin to centre, to provide their own place for their own being. In this

sense, the text charts what is simultaneously a transcultural reading and a reading of the city (London), an opening up of spaces to a “new difference.” The novel maps another land of belonging, another image of “Englishness.” Making oneself up, creating a self, is not simply a matter of addressing the question of “who am I in the present,” but also a matter of a cultural analysis of the proscriptions and prescriptions, historically and politically, that characterize someone who is at one and the same time, English, Indian, black and so forth. It is the beauty of “globally interconnected particularities instead of a Western particularity” (Boyce Davies 106). Dottie’s initial embarrassment at her physical diversity and her refusal to be associated with, and “be put in the same camp as those foreigners with their primitive ways,” gradually gives way to the realization of “how complex the reality of *those places* was,” an awareness that “had given her more strength” (152). Dottie makes this discovery through her encounters with Estella, Michael and the old black man in the library who teach her the value of the quest for origin and the tracing of a history, familial and national, not “the inviolable identity” of her origin, but in Foucault’s terms, “the dissension of other things” (142).

Moreover, through Dottie, Gurnah theorizes both the anxieties and the potentially liberating possibilities of displacement, although at the end of the novel, Dottie’s diasporic condition is clearly seen as empowering because within it rests the possibility for resistive intervention. Through Dottie, Gurnah shows not only that transculturalism casts identity in a new light: as a melding, or fusion, of ethnic backgrounds and cultural experiences, all equally important. The novel also shows that transculturalism goes the other direction from multiculturalism: the only way Dottie can finally survive as a migrant is by getting out of boundaries, by moving across existing frontiers, by seeing herself as made up of a confluence, a river of different things running through her. The trans-cultural female individual becomes at once partial and plural. She is plural because she stands between and thus partakes of many cultures, and she is partial because, having lost touch with her former worlds, she has lost part of herself. Although the loss of her former spatial and temporal dimensions contributes to Dottie’s sense of alienation, in the end, loss becomes an important license to invent. Dottie is an empty site that can host many

different colliding and collaborating identities. This specific property enables her to function as a link between the different worlds within the fiction: the African, the Indian, the British, and the Middle East. Dottie, as a markedly fused identity, not only mixes and matches cultural heritages, but also eventually asserts the right to identify herself as she chooses. In this way, she explores forms of transformation and difference by constantly working in and “re-working” various cultural environments. By moving across cultures, she can at the same time articulate different perspectives, testing the positions or spaces that, according to the exigency of the moment, she wants to adopt creatively.

The discovery that she can create herself, which Dottie makes with pain and great effort, enables her to gain a new, exhilarating perspective on life: “If the condition of our lives is not that moment on the forest path that you described to me, if we don’t just have to wait until the killer finds us, then it must be about what we do, how we live” (332). Dottie’s craving for acceptance and integration with her fellow men and women makes her initially judge her mother severely as a seemingly useless tie with a childhood that has no attraction. But she finally abandons her secret dreams that her assimilation will make the whites forget her colour and starts seeing the solution to her plight in the realization that one’s identity is not strictly one-dimensional, but is defined and more importantly recognized in rapport with the other, past and present: “I know it’s only part of what matters, that there are others, but it’s the part I’m living now” (332). Although Dottie experiences what George Lamming has called “the consolation of freedom,” nevertheless, she is also aware of the missing dimensions of her parents’ narratives and subjectivities. The last scene focuses once again on the mystery of Dottie’s names and the places they might come from: China, the Middle East, Africa. Dottie is a clear example that one’s identity is not singular but multiple, based on the meeting and intermingling of different peoples and cultures, past and present. Now she can say, “It’s taken me all these years to begin to find myself, to know what to look for. One day I’ll go and look for them” (332).

Here Gurnah is not advocating the idea of a melting pot, of a simple rainbow merging. Instead of a melting-pot identity, what emerges is

what Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera* calls “the new *mestiza*,” a process of synchresis:

The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. (79)

Not only does Dottie juggle cultures and operate across them, but she also sustains the contradictions inherent to each culture she partakes of and turns the ambivalence into something positive: “She could not resist the picture of herself as someone between lives” (116). If initially Dottie is eager to accept the “foreign” identity forged for her by the new environment she experiences, the only one she knows, she gradually starts transcending boundaries and fixities, and comes to realize that “There are a million possible Earths with a million possible histories, all of which actually exist simultaneously. In the course of one’s daily life, one weaves a course between them, but does not destroy the existence of pasts and futures we choose not enter” (Rushdie *Grimus* 53).

Gurnah develops Dottie psychologically, showing her progression from alienation to synthesis as a person and as a woman operating in and across different cultures. No easy solutions are offered, however, as the open-ended structure of the novel does not suggest resolution. There is, in fact, a brooding sense of fate, a sense of a socially and historically defined destiny that moulds the woman’s identity and role. By withholding information on the fate of his female characters, Gurnah creates for his readers a sense of the uncertainty that he sees as dominating the lives of his people. The posing of ethical and social choices and the individual’s ability to weigh and make choices are at play here. Gurnah’s urbane critique of postcolonial societies makes apparent the magnitude of the psychic damage inherent to many master-slave relationships and the propensity for any European, colonial arrangement to redress the damage in colonial subjects. Thus, the novel provides a broad context of corruption, treachery and oppression within which Dottie’s personal disempowerment is initially absolute. Her choices seem severely lim-

ited not only by her status as an orphan, but also by a fatalism that is at once both culturally and colonially determined. Arabs, Europeans, Africans, Indians—each group appears a potential oppressor as the vulnerable Dottie discovers. Even when it seems possible that Dottie might navigate her way across the powerful master-slave boundary, cultural and psychological forces come into play, ensuring that little disrupts the prevailing balance of power. Gurnah helps us to think modern times as “marked by borrowing and lending across porous national and cultural boundaries that are saturated with inequality, power and domination” (Rosaldo 217). In this sense, the novel is not only concerned with the character’s coming to terms with her diasporic identity, but also directed outwards to the wider social and political context of the time.

It is in the patriarchal society of Gurnah’s novel that cultural and psychological forces operate. Even as the other is situated in absence and deflection, denied any possibility of subjectivity and self-representation by different ethnic groups colliding in society, so the other as a woman is shown to resist attempts of manipulation and exploitation. Through the adoption of Dottie’s point of view, Gurnah gives a devastating picture of patriarchal power’s cunning, hypocrisy and ruthlessness. The author’s interest in the female condition is also apparent in the ways he demonstrates the grasp exerted by male power in every area of life, and the relentless bullying and exploitation women suffer from men and the institutions they control. Angela Carter argues, “sexual relations between men and women always render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place and, if described explicitly will form a critique of those relations” (20).

The idea of a pervasive cluster of forces, which work together to enforce male domination in the private and public areas of life strongly, informs the pattern of the novel. The device of an accumulation of episodes and events as well as of clauses is, in fact, the major strategy that the author employs to emphasize the all-pervasive nature of male power. This network of accumulative events and phrases effectively represents and enacts the web of male power structures in which the female character feels trapped. In this way, the confrontation between female powerlessness and male power grows more acute. However, even if male power

is more overt, it is seen as less natural and imposed by community and social relations. It could be said that Dottie, as a black woman, is shown in constant danger of being possessed by men. The narrative focus then, shifts to her personal relationships, which reflect badly on men, generally, both black and white. Ken, Patterson and her colleagues at work try to exercise their power and impress their presence on the supposedly subaltern black woman, ultimately to possess her. This is the destiny that Dottie's mother, frustrated in all her efforts to be loved and supported by men, encounters, by finally succumbing to lassitude and alcoholism. And this is the destiny Sophie, her sister, is likely to embrace.

Dottie appears to be deeply concerned with the way in which others, primarily men, perceive her. The male gaze is something Dottie grows aware of when working at the factory or simply walking down the streets: "The eyes of these men truly roved, moving from one victim to another with egoistical hunger" (108). Her mother's sordid past impinges on her when she pictures herself with men and "the fear of abuse that she had lived with, that she Sharon had taught her to be aware of" (107) holds a firm grip on her consciousness. As products of a deracinated society, men seem unable to provide comfort and protection. If white men's ill will toward immigrant women seems to stem in the novel from a naturalized sense of superiority, black men's desire to "possess" the black woman is generated by their own dissatisfaction with life and by personal insecurity. Immigrant men, powerless in the public sphere, try to impose their power on women in the private domain in order to feel more secure: "To these men she would only be something to pass a few hours with, to torture and dismember for the violent thrill of asserting dominance and inflicting pain" (106). Feelings of exclusion and uprootedness, most prominent among immigrant men in moments of crisis, were often responsible for their anger towards women. As Anne McClintock notes, "Black men increasingly disenfranchised and excluded from the public sphere, became more tyrannical at home" (168). On the other side, local white men with their sense of superiority over non-whites, behave in the novel as legitimate predators of the black woman's body.

From this perspective, therefore, Dottie embarks on heroic endeavours of resistance, mastery, self-realization and personal independence.

Silences and obstacles to women's attempts at self-expression are enhanced in the novel as a sign of Dottie's enterprise in developing subversive strategies for breaking free of restrictive and damaging relationships and situations. Throughout the novel, she seems to waver between habitual uncertainties about herself and others, especially men, and new sources of energy and strength, springing not only from a deep-rooted love for life and its potential, but also, from a will to resist dissipation. The heroine never loses her capacity for endurance, even when, in moments of loss, her life, full of dramas and burdens, appears unbearable. The uncovering of what patriarchy normally subsumes coincides with the author's project of centring marginal voices.

Dottie's ignorance of her past history, and the recognition of the difficulty an individual with no past is bound to experience in a multicultural context that is shown to undergo constant transformation, are also responsible for her endemic identity crisis. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, her identity is characterized by transformation, hybridity and plurality, and her sense of belonging to the West is marked by an experience of unstable cultural identity. In this sense, England is not just a cartographic or locational site, but also a mental and cultural space. Dottie is not only produced in and by that space but also partly produces it as her place of belonging/not belonging. The frequently asked question—"Where are you from?"—is never fully answered to the satisfaction of her white interlocutors.

Gurnah's narrative strategies, therefore, help push the female character into the centre of the stage by insisting on examining the confusion and anxiety about roles and identity that beset her psyche. By means of flashbacks, prolepses, analepses, summaries, surprise and suspense and the intricate web of lies, truths, half-truths, mistakes, that create an intriguing plot, the author shows Dottie's development towards alternative ways of being. This does not mean that Dottie has discovered the secret of life, but that she is eventually able to regard disruption and errors as valid opportunities for self-discovery, as spaces where possibilities of a rich selfhood and tolerance towards others are open. Through Dottie, Gurnah offers a critique of discourses of fixed origins and racialized identities while taking account of the character's "homing desire,"

as distinct from “a desire for a homeland” (Brah 205). “Home,” then, is replaced by a homing desire that signals processes of “multi-locationality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries” (Brah 194).

As the story comes to its end, Dottie learns to earn what she needs, to see the best side of herself, and to overturn her previous image of herself as an unworthy immigrant. An all-too-common approach would be to stay and accept subordination. A more interesting option is to locate oneself in the struggle for social transformation. This is exactly the case with Dottie. Unlike her sister, she feels that she does not exist to be experimented upon, psychologically moulded or literally carved up according to the whim of the next aggressive male she meets. She rebels against gender and racial apartheid by struggling to find her own money to educate herself and by turning from her position as an object of desire to be possessed, to being the agent of her own destiny. The female character that got caught in a guilty trap in her attempt to extricate herself from the undesirable social conditions grows into a woman working towards liberation, increasingly independent and self-assured.

More important, she finally understands that present life is made meaningful only with constant reference to the past and to the extent to which she is capable of embracing it as a collection of potential spaces out of which one must weave a viable world. Dottie is eventually forced to admit the impossibility of cutting herself free from her past if she wants to operate fully in the present. Dottie’s final realization of the fundamental role of the past in shaping her present identities is based on her newly-acquired conviction that “the only way we can know with certainty as we move along times’ path that we have come to a genuinely new place, is to know something of where we have been” (Kennedy 68).

The search for the identity of her grandfather whom she has never known is in line with this discovery. In searching out her past, Dottie comes as close as she can to acquiring a new sense of identity and location, where geographies of differences do not reveal divisions but can uncover interdependencies and connections. A concept of identity which takes into account the notion of *becoming* (negotiations, perhaps) as well as *being* (maintenance, perhaps), in Stuart Hall’s words, “lives with and through, not despite, difference” (402).

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