

Negation and Silenced Love: A Critical Stylistic Analysis of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift*

Ayotunde Mamudu *
Assistant Lecturer,
Department of English,
Faculty of Arts,
University of Jos, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* revolves around delicate existential issues migrants face living abroad. This study highlights the expression of love particularly the paradox of its manifestation in a foreign land. The word 'silence' appears eighty-two times and is integral to the silencing of love. Abbas has the rare opportunity to attend school and relish the potential opportunities which a Western education portends but he is restricted by a forced early marriage to a girl he doesn't know. Abbas' life comes spiraling after this. Ironically, he becomes silent after getting married to the girl he truly loves and bottles up his past, particularly about running away from a previous marriage, which he felt was a trap till his dying days. Through Leslie Jeffries 'Negating' as a textual conceptual function tool, this study presents the paradox of love and its silencing in Gurnah's text as 'negating has the effect of producing mental images of both the negated and the positive proposition'.

Keywords: *Abdulrazak Gurnah. Critical Discourse. Foregrounding. Love. Negating. Silence.*

Introduction

The Last Gift tells a compelling story about Abbas, the central character who is in his early sixties. Abbas was born in Zanzibar and raised by his Muslim father considered to be a strict farmer. In as much as a text should be taken for its textual value, a reader can't help associate Abbas with Gurnah who was born in Zanzibar when it was still under British rule. Gurnah left his country at a time when political violence and citizen revolutions were rife. Abbas just like Gurnah, escapes persecution from a clash of religious and cultural ideologies with the introduction of Western education. Abbas is influenced by this colonial and post-colonial history and embodies the theme of identity crisis for migrants as his only coping mechanism is

* Author: Ayotunde Mamudu

Email: ay2nde@gmail.com

Received: 10 April. 2025. Accepted: 15 June. 2025. Available online: 25 June. 2025.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#)



to suppress his past in silence. Abbas later conceals his immigration story from his wife and two children by retreating into a shell of prolonged silence which unsettles the family till his death while in England and this theme is strengthened with the repetition of the word silence to foreground the far-reaching implications on the lives of the main characters. He met Maryam in Exeter and got married to her when she was 17; he was 34 after relocating. Abbas' past is a recollection of a time when he was forced to marry a girl back in Zanzibar because he saw her nakedness while she changed clothes. This is bizarre because the girl changed her clothes outside her house right in line of Abbas' sight from his window high up in his apartment. Abbas was pressured to save his family name by doing the right thing which meant marrying the girl to erase any taboos he had broken to smear his image and the image and reputation of the girl's family. He was also hoodwinked into accepting responsibility for her pregnancy which wasn't his. He was barely married to her and realized her pregnancy predated their union. He was mocked for his gullibility by the girl's relatives who openly sneered at him and made it look like their family was doing him a favour with little tokens of food and cash till he couldn't put up with the humiliation and stealthily runs away when he turned 19. By serendipity, Abbas becomes a sailor before settling down in England.

Maryam, Abbas' wife, also has a checkered background, culminating in her running away with Abbas from her foster parents who have a history of maltreating her. She was abandoned by her birth parents and raised by migrants of Asian ancestry. Abbas has two children, a boy Jamal and a girl, Hanna. The text has all the trappings of a fantastic love story but Gurnah throws in the unusual. Sadly, Abbas suffers a series of strokes later in life, perhaps as a result of the burden of his silence and is forced to record the story of his past on a tape recorder which Maryam buys. *The Last Gift* could then be the metaphorical unravelling of a past that enables Abbas' wife and children to trace their roots from the stories left in the recorder only after he is dead.

Theoretical Incline

The current work is inclined to a critical stylistic framework established by Lesley Jeffries in 2010 and isolates one of its textual-conceptual functions tools for analysis. Jeffries proffers that the field has the potential of exploring the underlying ideology of a text as its major concern considering the interplay of ideologies and power functions. Maryam Dorpar asserts 'critical stylistics is largely inspired and informed by critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis'

(2). Jeffries avers that ‘all of the textual-conceptual functions that are the basis of critical stylistic analysis are part of the textual function of language in that they create a particular view of the world (or text world)’(412). Consequently, ten tools were established to probe into language meaning, however, for this study, only the Negating tool will be deployed. It is instructive to understand that Negating as a textual conceptual metafunction tool helps to unravel meaning-making from the perspective of using language to deny assertions or to provide a negative context of issues to foreground what the positive representation should be. Such a tool lays its credence in allowing the interpretation of meaning from a deeper ideational revelation.

Authorial Overview

Hand and Pujolras-Noguer avail readers of a panoramic view of all ten of Gurnah’s novels with the apt caption: ‘Historical Intimations: Abdulrazak Gurnah’s Cosmopolitanism of the Exiled’. The article has three sub-themes under which different novels are discussed. The first sub-theme is captioned ‘of displacement and related matters...’, the second is ‘constructing an East African Coastal Archive: storytelling as survival...’, and the third sub-theme is ‘continuing connections...’ This format adequately captures dominant threads that run through all Gurnah’s works which ‘unfolds tales of cruelty and betrayals, failed hopes and disappointments ...explore the power of memory and the role it plays in the construction of ourselves and our identities with brushstrokes of humour, pathos and sympathy’ (21). The paper starts from a brief history of Gurnah’s birth in Zanzibar in 1948, when it was still under the British. He witnessed his country gain independence in 1963 but it lasted for only eleven months when the Zanzibari uprising of April 1964 which led to the annexation of Zanzibar to Tanganyika took place. Tanganyika is present-day Tanzania. Gurnah and his brother left their native land in 1968 for Britain which was still grappling with racist abuse. Hand and Pujolras-Noguer say ‘The pervasive racism that permeated the ‘English experience of Gurnah was decisive in his determination to write to address his sense of being and re-address historical discourse’ (18).

The authors suggest that the language of Gurnah which is configured inside the tension of memory and desire, fated meetings, family feuds, East African coastal adventures, traumatized characters, nostalgic exiles and unfulfilled desires can be termed ‘cosmopolitanism of the exiled’ (18). *The Last Gift* was published in 2011 and is the eighth novel from the eleven published of Gurnah’s works. ‘Gurnah uses the Western secularized space to imagine Muslim

identity on his terms as, despite the focus on transnational human values such as kindness and generosity, his work needs to be read with its Muslim heritage in view' (21). The paper concludes that 'Exile is, to them, following Said, terrible to experience but it is also inside the essential sadness of their exile that Gurnah's characters create a cosmopolitan way of being in the world' (21).

Similarly, Okungo Ajulu has studied eight of Gurnah's novels from a power and human relationships perspective in her thesis submission for a doctorate at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Her work considers the representation of human relations, particularly on how power is attained and used to consolidate relationships. The thesis suggests that there are power dealings in everyday human interaction on different strata of society irrespective of macro-political power plays. The focus has been narrowed to family members, adults and children. Okungo investigates the different techniques Gurnah employs to capture avenues of power play using an application of implied authors or multiple narrators aimed at endearing readers. There is also focus on the symbolism and what occupies space, be it, rot, filth or squalor. The author provides great insight into the significance of family relationships which is similar to the current study. However, the point of departure in the current study will focus on lexicogrammatical elements that point directly to love and its negation at the ideational metafunction.

Discussion

This paper reveals how the text captures the theme of negation and silenced love by using negation as a tool to convey profound appreciation for true love, that which is desired. This theme of love as mirrored in silence is also greatly affected by trauma. The silence of Abbas' history is also central to his deep-seated aspirations to escape his past. The grammatical selection of the word 'silence' which ordinarily is 'negative' as against 'professing' or 'speaking' appears eighty-two times attracting the attention of readers to the voices and emotions of those being silenced. For such a word to be repeated eighty-two times at the lexeme level, means it foregrounds issues at the larger phrasal, sentence and textual levels. Who is being silenced? Why are voices silenced? What effect does this silencing have on the characters? These questions serve to establish the objectives of this paper, as ultimately, it will reveal:

1. The stylistic relevance in employing negation for silence.

2. How silence estranges the main characters

3. How silence is used to establish and heighten concern about the complexities of nostalgia, loss and love.

Abbas finally gets married to a woman of his choice and faces a lease on life but ironically, cannot express how he truly feels about his wife or their relationship because a hundred percent commitment to his wife would mean, letting her know of his past. Abbas' trauma also crystallizes in fear and guilt that he abandoned a woman back in Zanzibar who is expecting a child for him even though he very well knows that the child isn't his. This sticky situation acts as the inciting incident which is the thrust of the novel. This situation compels Abbas to leave his comfort zone and embark on a journey of self discovery in a different land. The self-conflict within Abbas' is one of the crucibles in a series of complex conflicts the novel tries to unravel in a compelling narrative. For Abbas, 'there was so much he should have said, but he had allowed the silence to set until it became immovable' (9). This metaphor of something immovable has been employed to solidify the bottling up of emotions and creates a vivid sense of loss and agony the reader feels for Abbas. Silence is esoteric and should not be attributed with features of objects that are indeed movable, but the figure of speech presents silence as this huge awkward boulder that gets in the way of Abbas and his family. It then presupposes that for Abbas to foreground love for his wife, he has to background the love for an estranged wife back in Zanzibar. This art of using the negative to highlight the positive, is at the core of negation as a textual tool.

Silence also drives another predominant theme of migration and identity. It presents Abbas and his family as experiencing a cultural shift highlighted by challenges of settling into a new environment burdened by the baggage of suppressed memories of a colonial heritage. Abbas' journey away from Zanzibar and settlement in England reflect a deeper psychological flight than geographical or physical movement. An example of this mental dislocation can be found where Abbas 'drifted away, into sleep or away from his moorings, into those deep silent places that he could not help returning to, that he hated returning to' (9). There is first and foremost an acknowledgment that Abbas has drifted and is dislocated mentally as well as physically. The image of leaving a mooring expresses a loosening from a berth. Once a boat isn't tethered properly to its berth, it can be forced out of harbour in strong tides and into uncharted waters.

Additionally, the judgment statement which indicates that Abbas ‘hated returning to’, ideologically tells the reader that Abbas didn’t desire to remain silent in perpetuity. This encapsulates the self-conflict Abbas battles within himself that is not accessible to any of his family members. Such silence reflects Abbas’ postcolonial identity struggle, a past he has left and a present that doesn’t accept him. Hence, this propels the reader’s anxiety and desire for the hero of the story to break free from this trap and embrace the love all around him. Abbas is seen as an anti-hero as he is not covered with glowing attributes. The text creates a feeling of depression when the main character is described with ‘his eyes closed, silent and unreachable, as if he was in one of his distant places (25). The reader as well as Jamal, Abbas’ son will always wonder why Abbas is ‘so silent about his time before?’ (31). It raises inquiries as to why ‘his father was often silent, and preferred solitude so perhaps he was not in agony where he was (25). There is a contrast with this last statement. It introduces a new dimension to Abbas’ silence, ‘perhaps he was not in agony’, presupposes that this silence was a retreat away from the slavery he was held captive in the hands of in-laws who had forced a marriage on him. The trauma of being enslaved by his fellow country men dislocates and heightens his suspicions of associating with people. He is now ‘free’ in a different land and enters into a marriage of his own volition but believes the price he has to pay for keeping this newfound love and family is to remain silent, hiding the past from ruining his new found fortunes. So, the questions earlier raised about why are voices silenced and who is being silenced reveal that Abbas is silenced and his silence has far reaching implications in further silencing his family and preventing them from enjoying the experience of second-generation migrants as they can’t fully function without knowledge of their origin.

Silence in the text, reflects postcolonial struggles as embodied in Abbas. There is a forlorn feeling that comes with being displaced in a land of unfamiliarity. Abbas has refused to detach himself from the country of his birth and embrace a new way of life. Family life is ordinarily supposed to be characterized by camaraderie and good cheer, but a past has been shaped by a strict father and regimented Muslim life this is negated as the narrator tells us that ‘It was in such moments that they seemed a strange family, these moments they appeared and then retreated from, these stories and events which made brief unexpected appearances and then disappeared amid long looks and drawn out silences’ (31). This excerpt reveals that Abbas himself does not enjoy the company of his family, rather, they seem very awkward whenever they are gathered together. Abbas would rather stay away to reflect his displacement in society.

Life is short and so good and bad times should be shared with loved ones. Abbas' family stood by him regardless of his withdrawal and it was anticipated that one day he would come out of it. But, for Maryam 'It was not so little to spend so many years waiting in patient silence, knowing that one day he would be struck down just like this' (35). The reader feels this heartbreak along with the family who have been waiting for a happy ending. The reader is gripped by the narrative who anticipates that Abbas would or should be given the opportunity to share in the joy and love that his family members are yearning for from him.

Ironically, Abbas is terrified of losing his family that he has retreated from. He struggles with a postcolonial identity, one that globalization encourages. He kicks against many things Western. He doesn't see the need to celebrate birthdays and accept technological inventions. Abbas hated it whenever someone was on the phone in particular. 'He could not bear voices or music on the radio, and so a silence enveloped him and oppressed the air around him' (39). Hanna on the other hand, tries to distance herself from her Muslim roots by Anglicizing her name to Anna. She even thought up English sounding variants for her brother who wasn't as keen as her to ditch his name. The negation tool can then be used to foreground how the technology Abbas rejected later became his saving grace as he could only record the story of his past on a tape recorder which his wife and children could listen to. He was fortunate to regain his speech after a series of medical strokes to speak into the recorder whenever he was left alone. Abbas painfully recollected his past in narrative flashbacks and provides insight to his past to the reader.

More identity struggles can be seen where the narrator suppresses thoughts of Abbas' daughter who 'if it was up to Anna, and she would not admit to thinking this to anyone either, she would let the stubborn man go quietly or at least leave him alone with his secrets and his silences intact' (55). Hanna has become disjoined from her father and now wishes him death as captured in the euphemism 'go quietly'. This marks an ideology that the past should be forgotten and the present embraced. This is the case because 'the children found his silences daunting' (68) as they were now weary of all attempts to communicate with him. At some point, Jamal suspected his father was a murderer or something more sinister that made him remain silent. The children knew next to nothing about their father putting them in an awkward position in public. Hanna responds 'I don't know' to Uncle Digby who surprisingly remarks 'You don't know where your father comes from!' (80). Jamal and Hanna cannot understand why their father has rejected the customs of a country they wish to call theirs since they were

born in England. This identity tussle does not give the children the confidence to identify who they are or strengthen relationships with potential life partners. The children suffer an inferiority complex not knowing if they are good enough for someone else since they do not know who they are themselves.

Maryam stands as Abbas' pivot regardless of her husband's misgivings; 'she was also trying to understand the shame he felt for what he had done, what kind of shame it was that made him choose to live with that guilt in silence, when he could have told her and found some relief, as he had now in the end' (103). The reader feels a sense of pity for Abbas as the conflicts are resolved and Maryam finds out the truth. She does not condemn her husband for what he has done but wishes he had opened up to her earlier on in life so that they could have both found inner peace. She didn't think Abbas past was good enough reason to have denied them of a blissful marriage. This simply tells the reader that Abbas' fears were misplaced. Abbas regretted not opening up and embracing his true feelings towards his family, 'now he wanted the gossips back so he could talk, so he could tell her about his years of silence, so he could describe to her his wretched cowardice' (87).

Gurnah's work also foregrounds the theme of exile. Xinyi Lui asserts that there is a triple exile encapsulated in the experiences of geographical, racial and spiritual separations of characters (54). Abbas found joy when he became a sailor with the liberty of leaving any country at will. This reveals the inner workings of the character's mind. He didn't want to be held down in once place and perhaps bugged with the responsibilities of family life. This technique of foreshadowing what would come in the later parts of the story should be noted as part Abbas' character flaws.

After he marries and settles down in England, he cannot function outside his initial cultural and religious heritage seeing the customs of the British as not acceptable to him. Abbas never accepted life in England and so he isolated himself, he always held the opinion that he would leave some day: 'I'll never let myself die in a strange land that does not want me, and here he was, more or less on the crematorium trolley' (39). Abbas couldn't tell a change in seasons and was never prepared for winter with appropriate clothing. He was sceptical about the freedoms that came with westernization against his regimented past life. He was never one with his new home and anticipated a day he would return to the land of his birth, but tragically, this

never happened till his death. His family on the other hand are now emboldened to trace their father's past and take a step further by one day visiting Africa.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted how negation encapsulates ideological tensions in the text as negation seeks meaning-making from the perspective of using language to deny assertions or to provide a negative context of issues to foreground what the positive representation should be. This presupposes that the real message being passed across is that migrants should not be silenced and exiled because of their colonial heritage in their destination countries. Therefore, all the assertions that Abbas has been in denial of are made obvious, that what he truly craves is a life of togetherness characterized by talking and not the silence he has adopted. In other words, negation as a tool has helped in foregrounding all the negative aspects of silence only to reinforce a claim that negation and silenced love is not the ideal. The true message is that love should not be silenced as Abbas truly loved his family but was forced into silence to preserve a past he had run away from. The study then elucidates an interpretation of meaning from a deeper ideational metafunction, that in actual fact, Love's 82 silences foregrounds calls for a deliberate attention and intentional attitude to love and loved ones.

Summarily, the study has shown the stylistic relevance in employing negation for silence as a tool in foregrounding the opposite of silence. The study has also shown how silence estranges the main characters and also revealed how silence has been used to establish and heighten concerns about the complexities of homesickness, loss and love. In this regard, Abbas really does not want to be left alone to be suffocated by a historical past, but he lacks the emotional intelligence to bring this up as he is trapped in-between two seeming opposing worlds. The greatest irony of this tale is that the protection Abbas thought he was giving to his family, was misplaced as his family prepare to visit the land Abbas ran away from after his death.

Works cited:

Abdulrazak Gurnah. *The Last Gift*. Bloomsbury, 2011.

Dorpar, Maryam. “The Arguable Stylistic Layers in Critical Stylistics of Short Story and Novel”. Language related Research. Vol.5, No.5(Towe 21), January,February and March 2015.

Hand, Felicity and Pujolras-Noguer. Historical Intimations: Abdulrazak Gurnah’s Cosmopolitanism of the Exiled. Asociacion Espanola De Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos (AEDEAN) Nexus, vol.1, 2022, pp 16-22. www.aedean.org

Jeffries, Lesley. ‘Critical Stylistics’. The Routledge Handbook of Stylistics. Editors, Burke, Michael. Routledge, 2014 (pp408-420).

--- ‘Critical Stylistics’. The Bloomsbury Companion to Stylistics. Bloomsbury, 2016, (pp159-176).

--- Textual Construction of the Female Body: A critical Discourse Approach. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

--- Opposition in Discourse: The Construction of Oppositional Meaning. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010.

--- Discovering Language: The Structure of Modern English. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Jeffries, Lesley et al. Stylistics and Social Cognition. Rodopi, 2007.

Norgaard, Nina et al. key Terms in Stylistics. Continuum International Publishing group, 2010.

Okungu, Anne Anyango Ajulu. Reading Abdulrazak Gurnah : Narrating Power and Human Relationships. University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg,2016.
<http://hdl.handle.net/10539/22241>

Xinyi Liu. ““Exile” in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s The Last Gift’. Academic Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2024, vol 7, issue 44:49-54.