

Original Paper

Recovering Trauma - A Study of the Identity Reconstruction Strategy of the Protagonist in *Admiring Silence*

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Abstract

Admiring Silence is Gurna's fifth novel, in which the protagonist has been in exile in British for nearly 20 years, traumatized by family and society and trapped in an identity dilemma, and finally reconstructs his own identity by recovering from traumas. This paper analyzes the individual trauma experienced by the protagonist and its deep-seated causes in *Admiring Silence* from the perspective of Trauma and Recovery Theory and explains how the protagonist recovers from trauma in the reconstruction of family and social identity. The thesis points out that the abandonment of self-values by the African diaspora in a foreign country will go no return, and that only by constantly reconstructing oneself can one truly mend one's inner trauma.

Keywords

Abdullazak Gurna, Admiring Silence, Trauma Recovery, Identity Reconstruction

1. Introduction

The Nobel Prize for Literature in 2021 was awarded to Abdulrahzak Gurna, a novelist of Tanzanian origin now living in British. The Award words "for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents" identifies the theme of his work.

1.1 Research Background and Significance

Gurna is a writer who writes about African memory in a foreign land. Since the publication of his first novel, *Departing Memory*, in 1987, ten full-length novels have been published so far, and the Nobel Prize has brought Gurna and his works unprecedented attention. At the same time, with the increasing influx of refugees, European refugee policy has aroused strong opposition from many countries and their citizens. Gurna's works on the history of African colonization and the experiences and identities

of African immigrants in Britain are of strong social relevance for understanding colonial history and the construction of immigrants' identities.

1.2 The Writer and His Works

Here is how Xing Gao reviews the themes of his work: "The state of migration and imagined life away from home became his interest. Migration, displacement, loss, frustration, and loneliness have become constant themes of his works."

His works focus on the living state, exile, and the sense of belonging of colonized people, which is related to his personal migration experience. Gurna was born in Zanzibar on December 20, 1948, on the east coast of Africa. Zanzibar became independent from Britain in 1963, but after President Abid Karoumi came to power, there was political chaos and the country's Arabs were persecuted and even massacred. Gurna, being of Arab origin, had to flee to Britain as a refugee, where he arrived in 1968.

Gurna's time in Britain was torturous. First, he had no stable financial resources and his life was difficult. Secondly, he suffered a lot because of his black identity. As a black man, he could not integrate into the local British, and he could not go back to his hometown because of his Arab origin. In 1984, after 16 years, he could return to his homeland because of an amnesty for illegal departure, but by then, Tanzania had already changed. Gurna's life experiences and diasporic state have influenced the themes of his novels. In his works, he uses his own experiences to narrate his stories and depict the problems of the times. Gurna's words are a ray of light in the slit, shining on the faces of refugees from different cultural backgrounds, projecting his personal experience of being immersed in different cultures into the different images of refugees in his novels, and arousing readers strong sympathy for the refugees' cultural identity dilemma of "not being able to return to the past and not being able to see the future".

Admiring Silence, Gurna's fifth novel, is about a refugee from Zanzibar who has been living in exile in England for 20 years, suffering from double trauma due to family and social factors, fear of intimacy brought by his mother before leaving, and identity anxiety of being displaced. On the one hand, he is unable to fit into the UK, on the other hand, he is unable to go back to his hometown. The protagonist has been living in the middle of this gap, and finally, through his efforts, he heals the trauma and finds his family and social identity.

1.3 Literature Review of Admiring Silence

There are two domestic studies on this work. Zhenwu Zhu and Jianchu Gong take the construction of narrative voice as a clue to read the inner character of the novel, to understand the narrative strategy and aesthetics of silence, and further understand the narrative strategy and textual form of African literature. Feng Zhang works out that Gurna's use of multiple narrative strategies as a mean of expressing rich thematic meanings such as criticism of racism and colonialism, attack on the dark side of post-colonial society, and sympathy and reflection on immigrants' existential dilemmas and identity anxiety.

Fernando Galván explores the reasons and purposes of the protagonist's frequent lies, and Barasa and

Makokha explore how the various aspects of storytelling - narrative, narrative context and focus - present the themes of seeking self-identity and post-colonial migration in his fifth novel, *Admiring Silence*. Using Trauma Theory, this paper analyzes the trauma suffered by the protagonist and its underlying causes in *Admiring Silence* and deciphers how the protagonist achieves self-recovery to awaken readers' understanding of and concern for traumatized people.

2. Trauma Theory

The word "trauma" is derived from the Greek word "τῤαῦμα", which refers to "piercing the skin". Freud introduced the word "trauma" into the field of psychology to describe the sudden, unexpected, emotional damage and shock to the mind. Trauma theory originated in the early 1990s and was proposed by the American scholar Kathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. She believes that trauma does not stop at the moment when a catastrophic event hits the heart, but persists in the mental world of the traumatized person, repeatedly tormenting the traumatized person's psyche and distorting or even destroying his or her integrity. In the aftermath of a traumatic event, survivors of trauma may experience symptoms such as silence. Early trauma research focused on the pathological aspects of trauma, focusing on the individual's mental illness. With the emergence of various modernization issues in the 20th century, scholars have tended to explore group trauma symptoms in the context of socio-political culture. How to reproduce the traumatic experiences of those individuals or groups on the margins of society and help them to get out of the trauma became the focus of contemporary trauma theory research.

Judith Lewis Herman is well known for her contributions to the treatment of trauma disorders. In her 1992 masterpiece, *Trauma and Recovery*, a feminist perspective on Herman's 20 years of practice and research at the Center for Women's Psychiatry and clinical work with victims of sexual and domestic violence is presented. The book expresses concern for victims of incest, domestic violence, etc. Trauma patients must reshape psychological functioning that has been damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience during the recovery process. Trauma syndromes share basic characteristics and the recovery process follows a common pathway. The process of recovery can be divided into three stages: the establishment of safety; remembrance and mourning; and reconstruction of ordinary life.

3. The Trauma Suffered by the Protagonist and its Deep Causes

In *Admiring Silence*, the protagonist mainly suffers from family and social traumas, which make him fall into an identity dilemma.

3.1 Family Factor: Awkward State

In *Admiring Silence*, one of the factors that traumatize the main character is his family. The main character has been studying away from home for almost 20 years, and at the age of seven, his mother married Hashim, a wealthy businessman. His real father, Abbas, a scholar who was teaching in a high school at the time of his marriage, disappeared before the protagonist was born, about which his mother

is silent, except that his father died, and he learns through the fragmented information from his grandmother that his father stolen into England and got married there. According to Judith Herman, “Basic trust, acquired in the primary intimate relationship, is the foundation of faith.” and the traumatic event begins to “shatter the sense of basic trust. Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life.” His father left his mother when she was pregnant, leaving her in a state of loss of trust in intimacy and shame about the abandonment of others, all of which drive the patient to retreat from intimate relationships. After his mother has two more children, she has to take care of her stepfather and the children as well as mingle with the guests, and her concern for the protagonist is reduced: “And of course I lost my mother, at least as I had known her before.” His mother never spoke of Abbas’s trauma to him, but the silence caused intergenerational trauma to the protagonist. The silence of the protagonist’s mother and the speculation of others lead the protagonist to never mention the fact that he married and had children in England to others: “I thought of lying, of writing to say that I was married to an English woman, but I never did, afraid of the havoc that would let loose, afraid of the litanies of blame that would follow.” He is afraid that his actions - stealing into England, marrying and having a child there - would bring secondary harm to his mother; afraid of the accusations of his relatives and not daring to tell them that he had followed the same path as his father. Picard believes that silence produced language. In his opinion, language itself is ephemeral, and only through truth can language obtain independence and continuity in the face of silence. Truth, as an objective event, exists in the logic of language. Once language loses the support of truth, it needs to retreat into silence. In the trauma narrative, when the trauma is beyond the scope of logic and reason, and language cannot express the feeling of trauma, then silence may be a better trauma language. His stepfather treats the protagonist as if he were a relative living in his family :

“When his children threw themselves at him, he laughed and hugged them, smiling at his wife. He brought them little presents of fruit or sweets, and sometimes a cheap toy that had caught his eye. With me he was always gentle and, well, polite, as if I was an orphan he had accepted responsibility for. ”

In this description, the protagonist seems to be an audience sitting in front of the TV, referring to his families by pronouns like “he”, “his wife” and “they”, which gives the readers the feeling that he is an outsider of his family. The reduced care of the mother and the distant relationship with the stepfather put the protagonist in an awkward situation of being an outsider in the family relationship. The lack of security and happiness brought trauma to the protagonist. “I know that I thought then that when I grew up I would not marry, and would not have a child. I could not imagine how a love such as my mother’s for me could be lost. It seemed so unfair.” Symptoms of the protagonist’s trauma are a tendency to silence and a fear of intimacy.

3.2 Social Factor: Home Anxiety

The second factor that traumatizes the protagonist is society. Gurna often draws on his own experience to reflect the African diaspora in his works. In the post-colonial era, the social and psychological pain

suffered by Africans in the collision with colonists was largely reflected in the serious identity problems of the diaspora. The protagonist went to the UK to study at the age of 22. Due to political reasons, the new government of Zanzibar was just established at that time, allowing him to apply for a temporary tourist visa to go to neighboring countries, and he would be arrested if he returned three months overdue. He went to the UK to study illegally, and he could never go back to Zanzibar. Twenty years later, changes in government lead to granting amnesty who have left the country illegally, allowing them to return home. He studies and teaches in British, but never fits in. When “the diaspora comes to a country with radically different historical tradition, cultural background, and social development process, bringing with them cultural factors such as experience, customs, language and ideas acquired in their home country, they are bound to face the dilemma of self-identity”. After moving out of the university dormitory full of foreigners, the protagonist feels a sense of abandonment when he entered British society. He feels that “I did not know how to speak to people and win them over to me, that the bank, the canteen, the supermarket, the dark streets seemed so intimidating, and that I could not return from where I came – that, as I then thought, I had lost everything.”

Individuals are in search of identity, and this desire is heightened when they are in a foreign country. Identity is the product of society. On the one hand, society gives individual identity meaning; on the other hand, identity needs to be gradually constructed and improved in society. The protagonist in a foreign country longs for the acceptance and respect of the local people and the recognition of the people around him. Faced with survival and Emma’s parents, he has to force himself to integrate into British society. However, it is difficult for the diaspora to integrate into British society, and they could only struggle to live on the edge of the society, experiencing various after-effects of British colonial culture -- a mixture of narcissistic imperialism, deep-rooted racism, and arrogant charity spirit. Mr. Willoughby represents the imperialist mentality of the British public, believing that “the British Empire” brought light to the African colonies, the protagonist tells him some imperial stories such as British officials funded students and helped colonial people to cure diseases to gain his father-in-law’s support and recognition. His father-in-law believes his tales of empire, and he sometimes makes up stories with exaggeration, while laughing inwardly at Mr. Willoughby’s ignorance and self-importance. He has always been sarcastic in telling such stories, he thinks “Mr. Willoughby was only interested in my Empire stories. It made me wonder how he could have got through his life so far without the steady supply I provided him with.” As Gurna said in the interview, the proliferation of lies is meant to satirize “these fools believe anything.” His relationship with Emma has never been supported by his in-laws yet, therefore Emma cannot be relied on to feel a sense of belonging to Britain. His inability to integrate into British society and return to his native land exacerbates his identity anxiety.

After returning to his hometown, the protagonist goes from the joy of being recognized to the dilemma of not being able to regain his identity. A surge of the familiar has brought with the prayer and the mosque, as well as “the smell of the mats on the floor, the bluish whitewash which covered the walls, the gentle hum of muttered prayers” all bring joy to the protagonist’s heart. When hearing others talk

about him, he feels that “they don't think me as an alien.” Although he has never been to a mosque in his nearly 20 years in the UK, he goes to the mosque regularly to gain the approval of his relatives, friends, and protagonist to help rebuild the country with the knowledge he learned in Britain, but modern politics in Africa after independence (decolonization, nationalism, socialism, class division, despotism, civil war, and religious conflict) brought as much disaster to the African people as the western colonial rule. What he saw and heard after returning to Zanzibar was “blocked, stinking toilets”, “only electricity for a few hours of each day”, and daily necessities in short supply, and the government cares nothing about people’s livelihood. He can not bring himself to work for a government that cares only about projects that could be funded externally. His families persuade him to marry a girl, so he has to tell the truth that he was married in England, which his family could not accept. As his stepfather says, “Your return made your mother happy. It made her think that you would marry and be part of us again. And now you are getting ready to run again, leaving us with the shame and disregard.” His families believe that he has brought shame to the family by running away as shamelessly as his father, and the estrangement causes the protagonist to leave in a hurry. The protagonist is separated from the community with the same experience and is always alone. He feels a deep sense of loneliness and anxiety. It is difficult for him to integrate into British society, and he can no longer go back to his hometown due to the sense of estrangement and alienation, which leads to his identity dilemma.

4. The Strategies of the Protagonist’s Trauma Recovery

Recovering trauma is not about locking away the memory, but about facing it and working to heal it. Judith Hermann, in *Trauma and Recovery*, suggests that trauma can be restored by creating a sense of safety, remembering and mourning, and reestablishing a connection to normal life.

4.1 Reconstruction of Family Identity

The protagonist reconstructs his family identity through the first two stages of recovering from the trauma.

4.1.1 Safety and Stabilization

The core experience of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others, and the first principle of recovery is the empowerment of the survivor. She must be the author and arbiter of her recovery. Others may offer advice, support, assistance, affection, and care, but not cure.

The protagonist leaves the traumatized environment, his home, in which he feels in an awkward position. After arriving in England, he meets Emma and thinks “she brushed away my embarrassments and temerities and made me laugh about the most improbable things, the most painful things.” They have had a child despite Emma’s parents’ opposition, and every time he thinks of the time together with Emma, his heart is full of satisfaction and happiness. For him, Emma’s care and close relationship with Emma make him forget his awkward position in the family relationship of origin. The place with Emma is his home. When he returns to Zambia and is reproached, he says to himself “I wished that I was away from there, that I was back in Battersea with Emma, back home. It was not England that was

home, but the life I had known with Emma. It was the secretest, most complete, most real part of me.” For him, home is not only a physical space but also a spiritual space. Life with Emma makes him find a home and a sense of security in the spiritual space. At the beginning of their acquaintance, Emma is very beautiful, studying for a doctorate, has a complete family of origin, and the anti-class criticism is very strong, which is impossible for black people who are in the diaspora and smuggled into the UK. After Emma reveals her feelings, he takes the opportunity to enjoy the ease brought by love, preventing his fear and trauma of intimate relationships. As Judith describes, in a rescue quest, the survivor may seek out powerful authority figures who seem to offer the promise of a special caretaking relationship. By idealizing the person to whom she becomes attached, she attempts to keep at bay the constant fear of being either dominated or betrayed.

4.2.2 Remembrance and Mourning

After the survivors regain their sense of self and environment, how to face the traumatic memory becomes the central task in the second stage of trauma recovery. Herman believes that when the traumatized person can fully, profoundly, and in detail recount the traumatic event, the traumatic memory will be transformed into narrative memory and integrated into the traumatized person's life memories. Due to his mother's reticence, the protagonist knows little about his father. Only when his mother tells him the story before he was born, can he understand why he is in an awkward position in his family and why he has a tendency of being silent. As a product of her mother's trauma, he is not destined to fit into the new family. Many days after his return, he spends the night with his mother, learning who his father is and when he left. Then he finally dares to confess to his brother Akbar that he is living with an English woman. By establishing a sense of security, remembering and mourning past traumatic events, the protagonist reconstructs his family identity, ceases to feel unfamiliar with intimacy, and does not measure her home by blood ties -- Home is where Emma lives.

4.2 *Reconstruction of Social Identity*

The protagonist reconstructs his social identity through the last stages of recovering from the trauma.

4.2.1 Commonalities with Others

Having dealt with the traumatic past, the survivor is faced with the task of creating a future. There are many people who, after the stimulation of trauma, are inspired to engage in a wider world. This is the third stage. These survivors recognize a political or religious dimension in their misfortune and discover that they can transform the meaning of their tragedy by making it the basis for social action. Emma's abandonment makes him feel that he has lost the meaning of living here: “Now that she is gone, I find myself living in England for reasons i no longer know.” He begins to learn the knowledge of unclogging pipes, hoping that one day he can become an expert in pipe repair and return to Zanzibar to perform more actual deeds. Clogged toilets appear many times in the article, and in a country where citizens can not live a normal life, sewers are clogged and no toilets are used, the prime minister of the country is inquiring into the private affairs of the protagonist's marriage. The Secretary of Culture invites him to do a high-level translation of human civilization, but the most basic and dirty problems

are not solved. All of these are surprising to the hero and pave the way for him to choose to learn knowledge of plumbing. The toilet is a metaphor for the sleaze of the country's political system, and by learning what is blocking the pipes, he wants to do something practical for his hometown, which is an act of trauma recovery to connect with the community. As Herman says, it is about helping himself heal. While caring for others, trauma patients feel validated, loved, and cared for.

4.2.2 Re-Connection and Integration

The key to starting the last step in trauma recovery is social connection begins with discovering that you are not alone... Meeting someone who has been through something similar is enough to downplay and dissipate the alienation, shame, and stigma that trauma sufferers feel. The protagonist has long been out of the community, and from his description of his father, “sometimes I wonder whether i should make more effort to locate him”, we can see that if there is community support, he will have someone to lean on and talk to. Ella, an Indian woman he meets on a plane, has a condensed version of the protagonist’s experience. She was born in Nairobi, and at the age of 10, due to restrictive business policies in India and her father’s heart problems, her family emigrated to Britain. But even now, she can not shake off the feeling of being an alien and a foreigner in Britain. For them, their hometown is a place they cannot go back to, while Britain is a place where they cannot integrate and find their home and sense of belonging. They also have marriage not being blessed by families, and her husband found another woman and left her a year ago. She has never found a sense of belonging in Britain, “He means Britain to me”, so Britain gives her the feeling of disappointed love, and the protagonist can also feel this disappointed love, he hides too much of his story from Emma. Emma also unconsciously revealed her racist thoughts, which caused the estrangement between them. He tells Ella he “felt an echo of that disappointed love in my own buggered heart”. The conversation they had brought him comfort, and he realized he was not different. Group solidarity is the most powerful defense mechanism against terror and despair, and the best way to mitigate the damage caused by traumatic experiences. At the end of the story, Emma leaves him just like the ending of Ella’s story. Instead of breaking down as he imagined, he tends to seek the comfort of the community that has experienced the same thing. He sits by the phone and wants to call Ella.

5. Conclusion

As a writer of an African immigrant who fled to Britain as a young man, Gurna’s works depict the existence of the colonists and the anxiety of the refugees in their homeland and Britain. His works show his deep sympathy for people at the bottom and his humanistic concern for refugees. This paper uses Trauma Theory to analyze the individual trauma suffered by the protagonist in *Admiring Silence*. The symptoms of the protagonist’s trauma include fear of intimate relationships, silence tendency, and anxiety. This paper focuses on the living state of the hero and explores his inner world to arouse readers’ attention and concern for the living state of refugees. The protagonist first establishes a sense of security through the love relationship with Emma, then retells traumatic events in the dialogue with

his mother and reconstructs his family identity. Finally, he reconstructs his social identity through his contact with the community to complete his self-recovery. For diaspora facing an identity crisis, giving up self-value is the irreversible way to lose themselves. The care of others can only temporarily forget the damage caused by the trauma, and the efforts to rebuild themselves can truly repair the inner trauma.

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