

Power Absorbency and Transmogrified Life: Traversing the Survivance in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Novel *Dottie*

Dr. Rajkumar Bera¹; Subhadip Das²

¹Assistant Professor of English, Midnapore City College, West Bengal, India

²Research Scholar, Midnapore City College, West Bengal, India

Abstract: Abdulrazak Gurnah is a Zanzibar-born British novelist and one of Africa's most well-known contemporary novelists. The novels written by him provide a distinctive picture of pre to postcolonial East Africa, and the effects which colonisation has on the people. The writings of Gurnah also depict the struggles that people belonging to East Africa had to face in the post-colonial age, both in and outside of their countries. Highlighting human relations has been one of the top priorities for Gurnah. In the postcolonial Western social sphere, the traditional concept of power associated with sovereignty, domination, threat or violence has been changed to surveillance, normalising judgements, categorization, discipline and observation of accepted hetero-normative social ideals which have further been complicated with the practice of apartheid. Gurnah's novel *Dottie* is a saga of the journey of life of its protagonist, Dottie from a naive, exploited black girl to an independent, strong woman full of self-respect. While fighting desperately to raise her siblings and herself in a racist, white social structure she confronts constant oppressive power structure that posits and assigns the Blacks a peripheral exploited position besides confronting the power discourse of her own community which is used to subdue and subjugate the woman rights and voices. Her continuous struggle for women dignity and values and for educating herself emancipates her from this fatal predicament and transmogrifies her life, ultimately leading to her absorbency of existing power mechanism in order to make her fit and accepted in the contemporary socio-cultural setting.

Keywords: Power, Transmogrifies, Surveillance, Absorbency, Categorization, Social structure.

The novels of Gurnah employ careful narrative strategies which focus on the idea of power and how it impacts human interactions. Gurnah shows the complications which characters belonging to multiple origins face, the novels, thus, do not follow linear plots,

and different factors contribute to the development of characters. In the novel *Dottie* the central character is a coloured girl Dottie who goes through immense suffering and this suffering is due to the lack of basic necessities which the character and her siblings faced while growing up (Okungu, 2016). The novel is a searing tale of a woman who is trying to rediscover herself through her troubled family history. Dottie knows very little about her family history. Despite being born and growing up in the country, Dottie is often seen to feel rootless, she cannot relate herself to her white neighbours. The sense of belonging is instilled in a child from their parents, in the case of Dottie and her siblings, they never had a parent to guide them. The inability to acquire a father figure in life and having a negligent mother made the characters suffer from an identity crisis. The growth which Gurnah focuses on is not merely physical, as the characters age they also grow psychologically, Dottie becomes more spiritual and her moral judgement also improves. Dottie is not necessarily an immigrant but, in her struggle, to find herself, her skin colour and public treatment towards her make her one. The novels of Gurnah often depict a society where power is generally determined by the race, class and gender of a person. As a result, women of colour become the primary victims, the evils of exploitation and violence within the society have been shown by the author in great detail as they are important for the rediscovery process of Dottie.

The word 'power' has a crucial impact on lives with its multiple denotations and connotations leading to the ultimate destination of either authority or subject to it. Previously the concept of power was top-down, hierarchical. It was viewed as something exercise of violent measures to repress an individual's position, status, ambition or voice. It was seen as a force to control a person or a resource according to the will of a person of higher position. This concept of power gets radically changed in the hands of French epistemologist Michell Foucault with his neologism power/knowledge. Foucault was heavily influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of power, knowledge and truth. In *The History of Sexuality*, Vol-I, Foucault opines that power is

The multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation, as the process by which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general effect or institutional crystallisation is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of law.... (Foucault, 1990:92)

Foucault conversely suggests that power circulates in all spheres of life. Thus, everyone in this power relation is both the victim and subject of power circulation. Knowledge has a reciprocal and productive relationship with this power relation. Unlike Marxist ideology

which argues that the masses are oppressed due to prohibited access to knowledge, Foucault says in *Discipline and Punish* that

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (Foucault, 1990:196).

Therefore, power is not repressive; rather it is productive. Through the use of continuous surveillance, knowledge, categorization and ensuring measures for subjugation to hetero-normative societal behaviour and discrimination, it aims at extricating most out of the individual and to control and civilise society according to power's pre-intended norms. In the same manner the power structure in the white European societies saw the outsider black immigrants in its social networks and assigned them their discriminated, lowered position and socio-economic role in order to control and 'discipline' them for the benefit of existing society's political, academic and economic power. Disciplinary power viewed the body as a machine as a way of extorting it for economic reasons. Disciplinary power does not rely on force and, instead, controls the subject through hierarchical surveillance, normalising judgement and examination. The protagonist Dottie of this novel Dottie, had to face this dominating power structure to which she is both a victim as well as an agent. In the novel when the white Polish woman leaves her excrement on the cot of baby Hudson, she chases her and screams in anger, "It's not enough that they spit on us and make us clean up their shit for them. Now they want to shit on us. Well, I'm going to sit out here and wait until that dirty bitch comes out then I'm going to shit in her mouth." (Gurnah, 2021:227). Where there is power relation, there is resistance. The above instance of resistance to this oppressive power regime enables Dottie to lead slowly to power absorbency and to a transmogrified life. The effect of this power relation does not afflict Dottie alone, but other characters as well in this novel. Through constant surveillance and pre-fixed hetero-normative ideals the power structure of the white British society falsely accuses Jimmy of burglary and sentences him for five years of imprisonment. Regarding their victimised socio-cultural predicament Patterson bitterly remarks, "that's where they want all of us. In Jail. The way they look at it, all black men are criminals and deserve to be locked up. It's because they don't like people like us in their country. They're afraid of us and of what they've done to us." (Gurnah, 2021:237).

However, Dottie as well as her mother Sharon had to struggle with the power regime in both the black immigrant society and in the host society. Sharon was her adopted name, her real name being Bilkisu. She was of mixed Asian and African origin of Muslim community. Since her childhood she resisted against the different form of power relation of her community exercised by a sovereign authority---her father figure. In her case we

can clearly see the perfect mingling of sovereign power, bio-power and disciplinary power. Her father wanted to hold the right to decide whom his daughter would marry and have sexual intercourse. For, otherwise her daughter would bring dishonour to his family. He tried to impose self-control on her through constant surveillance:

The trouble between Bilkisu and her father started when boys began to look at her. At first, he only scolded her and asked her to remember that these were the children of the same people who had chased him through the streets and would have killed him if he had not run faster than them. Then he had threatened to take her out of the school, had forbidden her to go out after dark, and had started to talk of marriage. ... He was so disappointed in her that he was sure she would bring home a man who would exploit and ruin her. (Gurnah, 2021:18).

However, Bilkisu could not triumph in the end in spite of her defiant resistance against this power structure. She became a victim to the darker, exploitative side of power relations of both her native community and of course the racist white English society. Both of them considered her just as body/machine for their satisfaction of carnal desire and extremely exploited her sexually making her a cheap whore. She even took the Christian name Sharon to get a benefit in Western world and to defy his sovereign father figure as well, leading her to no gain at all. She dies of a sexual disease leaving her eldest daughter Dottie, another girl Sophie and a son Hudson. Here begins Dottie's struggle, her resistance to existing power relations in order to pull up her family together, which ultimately brings her power absorbency and moves to a self-conscious, independent woman from a meek, exploited, self-pitying black girl like her mother. Dottie's struggle can be divided into two spheres. She had to fight against the racist white society which only intended to ostracise the outsider blacks in order to keep hold on the socio-economic benefits and to exploit the black immigrants. Interestingly, Dottie is not an immigrant; neither is she purely a black African. Instead she had to face the same cruel, oppressive power regime. However, she also did fight against the oppressive power structure of her native community which also had assigned a very low, diminished stature of women characters socio-economic stature besides exerting bio-power on them and subjugating them to sexual exploitation too.

Disciplinary power of the English society compelled Dottie to separate herself from Sophie who was admitted to a convent under state's strict surveillance and observation to be educated under the society's preordained normative and Hudson who was to be brought up in the family of a foster parents. Dottie herself was given shelter in a home under the supervision of godlike social worker Brenda Holy. Dottie's resistance to this existing power structure begins with her desperate attempt to bring her siblings to her and live together as a family. With the help of Brenda she ultimately succeeded in

bringing Sophie and violently reluctant Hudson together and also succeeded in getting a rented flat for them from the house owner of her mother. After that, her struggle to provide for the family begins. However, despite all her attempts, Hudson became involved in criminal offences and drug rackets. He often accused Dottie of depriving him of a promising future which he might have in his foster family in Dover. Knowledge plays a pivotal role in all her resistance and attempt at absorbing the existing power structure. Generally, power decides what can be known and who can know that. Therefore, those who produce knowledge have made others accept this as truth because of the other forms of power like political, academic or economic power possessed by them. The reason behind power's desire for knowledge is simple: knowledge can be divided categorically and can be used to control. Persons having power structure knowledge about the world and ourselves and create an accepted 'truth'. That 'truth' decides what behaviour is permissible in society, and who has authority to take to the truth and to administer the remedy. Interestingly, in Dottie's case her resistance and absorbance of existing power relations are inextricably linked to her attainment of knowledge. With Brenda's inspiration she began to read, to go to the library often; her knowledge deepened. Gradually she starts to realise her position and that of the people like her and her zeal became determined to uplift the condition of her family and to transform their life. While reading David Copperfield which Mrs. Holly brought for her she is filled with positive vibes and determined enthusiasm to go ahead:

Once she started the book she read it all the time she could spare:There were times when she was so angry with the way that everybody was mistreating David that she shut the book and shook it with frustration.She was filled with joy when the poor boy became a rich and famous man. Just like Hudson would. She had no idea that books contained such riches. It took her a few days to work up the courage, but one Saturday morning after buying her vegetables and meat at the market, she walked across the road and joined the library. (Gurnah, 2021:36).

She even insisted Sophie and Hudson to get a proper education. She emotionally identified Hudson with David Copperfield and believed that her brother would one day become so prosperous and rich with the same diligence and struggle. She said to Sophie when the latter insisted on finding a job instead of studying: "Oh Sophie, you must learn first, otherwise, everything is a waste of time..." (Gurnah, 2021:75). However, her spirit to transmogrify their lives and her courage to turn reverse the wheels of existing power relations of the contemporary socio-political structure carefully observing the predetermined hetero-normative ideals and behaviours is best revealed in her taking back Sophie from the grip of a hell-like convent. Those in power shape knowledge about the world and ourselves, creating an accepted 'truth'. Truth decides which behaviour is permissible, and who has authority to espouse the truth and to administer the remedy.

Power allows for the dictation of what knowledge is produced and disseminated throughout society. Disciplinary power controls the subject through normalising judgements and hierarchical observation. Normalising judgements are used to categorise individuals who do not adhere to the established norm as abnormal and deviant. Schools are ideal places where these powers can be seen in work. One of the ways of exacting these powers in schools is by promoting these established norms. In racist British socio-political scenario these norms and ideals backed by the disciplinary power which aimed at extorting individuals for economic purposes, treated coloured girls like Sophie with utter humiliation and assigned the most inferior strata in the power relation. Sophie had already been 'categorised' as good for nothing. But as disciplinary power and biopower condition that those whose behaviour did not conform, or which society had deemed deviant, were to be subject to discipline and routine so that they may assimilate into society and monitor their own behaviour. The convent did not even allow Dottie to visit her sister regularly. The Matron says,

You are probably aware that Sophie is a little backward.... She will not become a great inventor or anything wonderful like that even if she stays with us for a hundred years, but there is no reason why, with proper remedial care, she should not be able to learn to look after herself. But she needs expert care! (Gurnah, 2021:43).

However, Dottie gets enough courage to overcome her primary meekness to take her sister out of this pathetic condition and absorbs the power being herself the active agent of the power relation when she says, "I ain't afraid of you. You want to keep her here like a circus animal, but I'll be back for her. Then she can come and live with her family..... You're a cruel, bad, bad woman." (Gurnah, 45). She had to suffer such racist behaviour even in the food packing store where she worked. After the race violence in Notting Hill in 1959, when white workers and superiors remarked and looked at her with anger and disdain for being a nigger and 'jungle bunny', she still worked on there to maintain her family. Even then she screwed up her courage to protest any racial prejudice against her or black people. Her resistance to the existing oppressive power structure and her ascension in the power relations became the power struggle of the black community in the face of dominant racist white power regime. When one of the white foremen of the factory where she had been working tried to sexually exploit her, an angry Dottie turned around on him and abused him. Unknown to her she brought her blackness into it: "You think that just because I'm black I won't mind being squeezed up by a dirty old man like you," (Gurnah, 2021:289)

Her gradual maturity and transformation made her ask what happened to the nigger boy whom people had stoned in Mike Butler's tall tale. Interestingly, her first love came in her life in the form of a white European, Ken. In this relationship she too has worth as a

complete person. Gurnah in this novel ironically shows that while resisting the oppressive power regime of racist European socio-political structure in order to be an active agent in that power discourse, Dottie often gets help from some god like white European characters like Brenda Holly, Ken or Estella, her teacher, whom she could change with her pure heart. This is 'contamination' by Gurnah's characters as hailed by several critics like Emad Mirmotahari or Luca Prono. Another great instance of Dottie's attempt at obtaining self-respect and power absorbency occurs in the pub scene with Ken. A white drunkard could not bear to see Dottie as a girlfriend of a white European like Ken. As bio power sought to control the individual's body and as oppressive power structure assigns her the role of being exploited, the drunk even expressed his wish to take sexual benefit from her. He even made obscene hints at her. "Without a thought, Dottie rose and tipped the drunken man out of the chair. He crashed into the table and slid to the floor, swearing with anger and surprise." (Gurnah, 153). She even protested against Ken who asked her not to do such things. Her insistence on being a part of British life is clearly revealed in her reaction to Ken's assumption that she might be a foreigner. "I'm not a foreigner, she thought." (Gurnah, 138). In the end she achieved that power and boldly asked Ken to leave her life when the latter suffered from indecisiveness and did nothing but depend on Dottie. Importantly, Dottie is not a blind supporter of black retaliation. Dottie is shown to feel "there was something shameful about all the killing and chaos that was going on in Africa." The thought process of the character shows that she can be critical of merciless butchery in the name of resistance. It also shows she had been detached from her past which was changed later.

Dottie's life was a true life of dedication and sacrifice for her family. Her determination towards ensuring a healthy atmosphere to the next generation of people like Hudson marks a beginning of change towards a new life in her. But after Hudson wasted his life being involved in drug dealing and criminal activities and Sophie drifted away with new boyfriends, Dottie realised the importance of choosing a respectable life of her own. She wanted to get a better job. She joined the evening class for secretarial course at Morley college where she met Estella as her teacher and who eventually became her friend, philosopher and guide. The attempt of a black woman to be self-sufficient to be able to live her life alone in a racist white society laid the foundation of her transmogrified life. Estella gave her the much required confidence and helped her to move alone in life, to find a place of her own. Another twist came when her friendship with a white woman like Estella and her new job was vehemently opposed by her own sister Sophie and her gangster lover Patterson. They even stopped talking to her while living in the same house. The power relation of her native family structure found it threatening and disgusting to have a friendship with a white European who was a representative of their oppressors. Dottie's new job also made them feel insecure. This is the result of the torments they had

suffered in the power relations of European society. Patterson even physically forced her to listen to his advice. But Dottie had become emotionally strong by this time and gathered much courage to defy Patterson's cruel intentions. Patterson became the symbol of the sovereign power and patriarchal authority to subdue Dottie. One evening he attempted to rape Dottie for the second time. Interestingly, Dottie's knowledge of him helped her attain courage and overpower him. She successfully defended herself against his force to molest her. Her knowledge here is inextricably linked to her attaining power to defy more powerful Patterson and go achieving her transmogrified life:

...he came into the kitchen one night while she was doing the washing and tried to take her by force. She had sensed this would happen, that he would be unable to put up with her diminishing dependence and would try to crush her in just such a way.... He was on her before she realized his presence..... She fought back with a ferocity and strength that took him by surprise. She made no attempt to call for help, or to scream like a frightened innocent, but clawed and kicked and twisted and bit until he released her. (Gurnah, 2021: 322).

Literally and physically defeated by her, Patterson's influence on her started to diminish and Dottie's power absorbance in the existing power structure in her own community culminates. It is symbolised when Patterson left her house after Sophie's illness. With motherly care and affection, she again took the responsibility for the treatment of Sophie and Hudson as she had always done. Her finding a house of her family's own is a symbol of her strong footing in this racist, hegemonic, materialistic white European society circulated by oppressive power structure. It is also a symbol of her recognition in the contemporary power system. It is like the 'house' in *A House for Mr. Biswas* where the house stands for the power, identity for Mr. Biswas. The idea of transmogrification in Dottie is not just the journey that Dottie undergoes to change her circumstances, but also the shifting identities of the characters. Race and gender are the primary basis through which racism is carried out, the characters change places unwillingly and are stigmatised as immigrants despite being born and brought up in England. In a society where the value of a person is dependent on their race, class and background, black women are seen to be reduced to subhuman. The novel being about transmogrifying one's life, Dottie embarks on a heroic endeavour of resistance and personal independence. On the path to achieving self-realisation Dottie is faced with several obstacles against her self-expression and Dottie is required to carefully develop strategies that would help her in breaking these barriers and achieving freedom. Through the use of flashbacks, nostalgic reflections, truth and lies, the author has carved up the road for Dottie's development. The study has already shown how Dottie often changed up her past to find comfort in her memories. Dottie realises through the novel that disruptions in life are needed to acquire opportunities in her journey towards self-discovery. The novel is one of change and

through the hurdles and hardships, Dottie understands that she is not an unworthy immigrant. Dottie rebels against the social order to educate herself, acquires a place within society and shapes her destiny.

Ajulu-Okungu, (2016) in their research has shared that the novel not only shows the fine racism that the characters experience in their lives but also shows the problems with unhomeliness and the impact of social and political changes. The theme of food is consistent in the novel and is one of the factors that drive change. While working at the food factory slowly ruined Dottie's self-esteem, the concept of food and drinks is what helps her with her change and becoming an intellectual. The drinks that she enjoys with her classmates after the evening classes help her bring a sense of cohesion to her life. Her friendship with Estella is built over dinner at a restaurant, and the social stigma and barrier are broken as both women feel comfortable sharing their innermost secrets. The meeting with Michael Mann also occurs over a meal at the restaurant. Food therefore carries different symbolism for the characters and becomes the gateway for Dottie to escape the repressive social and political climate of England. In the words of Ruberto (2009), the novel *Dottie* makes use of bildungsroman and through the usage of this theme the author has successfully shown how the black subjects of the British empire have changed in the foreign land, it also depicts the mass migration that took place from the colonies. Gurnah through the usage of narrative strategies has shown the intertwined story of immigrant life and how it has transformed the culture of Britain. It is believed that Gurnah has shown some of the feelings and emotions he has witnessed in England through the character of Dottie, the wider history of colonialism and immigration has been depicted. Change is in every essence of the novel, at the beginning Dottie is shown to be reluctant to express her true feelings and emotions as she deems others to be untrustworthy, but once Michael helps her, she slowly starts opening herself and recovering her past. Towards the end of her struggle Dottie meets SS Michael, who shares the horrible atrocities the European countries have conducted in Africa. Dottie never really learned about her family history but she was able to absorb the struggle that other Africans have faced from the collective stories. Both the characters can relate to each other, while Dottie never really fits into British society, Michael finds it hard to adjust to the Africans living on the East Coast of Africa (Lavery, 2014). Gurnah loves dealing with complex characters, the encounters which these characters have with the space that they inhabit have been shown as sites of abjection, thereby showing that physical spaces cannot be separated (Ndonye, 2014). Ken, the first boyfriend of Dottie shows the other side of London, while growing up she has only experienced poverty but now she learns about the parks, arches and squares that exist within the city. In the end a happy family like picture is drawn with Michael encouraging Dottie to look for her family ancestry and with little Hudson among them against the backdrop of "the immense city spread away into

the dusk, lit by strings of small lights and phosphorescence of the nearby river.” (Gurnah, 2021:395). This again implies her strong footing and absorbance of power of the contemporary power relations and her healthy, transformed life. Gurnah has transmogrified the life of Dottie, while once she was young and ignorant, she has now become more aware of her surroundings, has self-control over her life and possesses immense maturity.

Two main dynamics playing within Dottie, as pointed out by Bungaro (2005),-----the author has been mindful towards the implicit and explicit oppression which women have to go through because of their race and gender, Gurnah has partially written the novel from his awareness about the alienation which people of his kind often experiences. Dottie is not an immigrant and thus has not faced the trauma of being uprooted from her habitat. “They didn’t know who they were, or what people they belonged to”, the verse showcases the lack of choice which Dottie has with her condition. Dottie is so involved with her problems in life that the struggles of the past experienced by her family become irrelevant. She considers herself as “bastard son of the nation” and therefore does not have a position or identity. Although initially, she believes that there is no escape for someone like her, she realises she needs to find herself to bring a change.

It is believed that Gurnah has shown some of the feelings and emotions he has witnessed in England through the character of Dottie, the wider history of colonialism and immigration has been depicted. Dottie learns to accept herself through the course of the novel and the transnational diasporic communities that exist within herself. The sense of alienation and un-belongingness that Dottie faces is partly because of her own ignorance of her past history, and her difficulty in trying to understand her condition in a multicultural context. Hybridity and plurality are what in the end help Dottie with her sense of un-belongingness in the Western world. England therefore in the novel is not merely a geographical space but rather a mental and cultural space, where Gurnah presents the female character at the centre of the stage (Bungaro, 2005).

References:

1. Ajulu-Okungu, A. (2014). Power and Sociality of Food and Drink in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Dottie* and *Pilgrim's Way*. *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies*, 1(3-4), 130-139.
2. Bungaro, M. (2005). Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Dottie*: A Narrative of (Un) Belonging. *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 36(3-4).
3. Mirmotahari, E. 2011. *Islam in the Eastern African Novel: Literatures and Cultures of the Islamic World*. Palgrave Macmillan.

4. Foucault, Michel. 1990. *The History of Sexuality: Vol-1: An Introduction*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
5. Kagai, E. K. 2014. 'Encountering strange lands: migrant texture in Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction' Ph.D. Dissertation: Stellenbosch University.
6. Lavery, C. 2014. 'Writing the Indian Ocean in Selected Fiction by Joseph Conrad, Amitav Ghosh, Abdulrazak Gurnah and Lindsey Collen'. *Ph.D. Dissertation*: University of Oxford.
7. Matheka, J. M. 2019. 'Interactive Narrative Technique In The Depiction Of Societal Disintegration In Abdulrazak Gurnah'S Gravel Heart'. *Ph.D. Dissertation*: University of Nairobi.
8. Murray, S. A. (2013). *Locating Abdulrazak Gurnah: Margins, Mainstreams, Mobilities*. *English Studies in Africa*, 56(1), 141-156.
9. Ndonge, C. M. 2014. 'Out of place': Abjection in the early fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah'. *Ph.D. Dissertation*: University of the Witwatersrand.
10. Okungu, A. A. A. 2016. 'Reading Abdulrazak Gurnah: narrating power and human relationships' *Ph.D. Dissertation*: University of the Witwatersrand.
11. Petersen, K. H. (1995). *Cautious Optimism and a Danish Third World Literature Prize: Abdulrazak Gurnah and the ALOA Prize*. *Kunapipi*, 7(3), 20.
12. Ruberto, M. N. (2009). 'Itinerant narratives: travel, identity and literary form in Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction'. *Ph.D. Dissertation*: Nottingham Trent University.