

## The Marginalization of People of Colour through White-guilt in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the notion of white guilt and how it is weaponised, consciously or subconsciously, in the marginalisation of people of colour (POC), especially the Africans in the diaspora. It aims to show how white guilt changes its meaning from positive to negative when not controlled. This medium attempt to explain the struggles faced by black people in the diaspora through the lens of the Duboisian narrative of double-consciousness. It is argued here that white people, through their alleged guilt, cause more damage than good. For context, Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* is analysed as it eloquently captures white guilt and its consequences. Findings reveal that the form of social justice practised by white people, stemming from white guilt, gives white people a sense of superiority and causes harm to the psyche, and ultimately lives, of black people.

## 1. Introduction

One of the greatest African writers, Abdulrazak Gurnah, was born in 1948 in Zanzibar, a British colony. Gurnah received his education at the traditional schools in Zanzibar before leaving the country. In 1967 he migrated the Great Britain in which he settled and progressed to become the writer he is. Gurnah completed his college education at Christ Church College. After college, he was appointed as a lecturer at



the University of Bayero in Nigeria. Currently, he is a lecturer at the University of Kent, a position he has held since 2004 (Gikandi and Mwangi 2007).

While in Britain, Gurnah has started his writing journey in the 1980s, producing excellent and celebrated works of fiction. His published books chronologically are Memory of Departure 1987, Pilgrims Way 1988, Dottie 1990, Essays in African Writing, II 1993, Paradise 1994, Admiring Silence 1996, Reading the 'new' Literatures in a Postcolonial Era 2000, The Cambridge Companion to Salman Rushdie 2007, By the Sea 2001, Desertion 2005 and The Last Gift 2011, Gravel Heart 2017, and Afterlives 2020. Generally, Gurnah's protagonists are characters who suffer greatly in their home countries because of the devastation caused by the colonialists. His characters leave their countries and migrate to the west but cannot cope with the changes, and they will live a double life. Gurnah has received worldwide recognition; Booker Prize for Fiction in 1994, Los Angeles Times Book Prize (Fiction) in 2001, and Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia Region, Best Book) in 2006. In 2021, Gurnah received the Nobel Prize for literature.

The story of Gurnah's Admiring Silence, which was published in 1996, is about an immigrant man who cannot find true happiness. The man is unnamed; he has left his home country of Zanzibar to England. He has built a life for himself by getting a British woman as his lover, Emma, and a stable job as a literature teacher. He has a child named Amelia and has many white friends who listen to his stories with intense curiosity. His stories are fabricated, and in them, he glorifies the British colonialists, which draw even more attention from the white people. After a painful experience with discovering an illness, he has, and after receiving a letter from his mother, he decides to visit his hometown in Zanzibar after seventeen years.

The reader learns that he was very young when the protagonist left his country. The reason for his desertion was his country's turbulent political situation. When he arrives in his hometown and sees his family and friends, he gets conflicted as his real memories come back to him, opposing the fabricated life he has built. Since he has not told anyone in his hometown about Emma and Amelia, everyone, including his mother, pressures him to get married and accept a job offer from the government. Overwhelmed by everyone's pressure, he reveals that he already has a lover and a child in England, which results in bringing shame to himself and his family. After a

while, he decides to travel back to England. When he arrives in England, he gets shocked to find out that Emma has moved on to another man. This situation leaves the man with nothing as he left his original family; his created family left him as well.

## **2. Literature Review**

Racial discrimination happens daily worldwide, and it is an act that has persisted throughout history. Many movements have demanded an end to all racial discrimination, like the discrimination against black people in the US. However, a pang of collective guilt towards specific discrimination is a relatively new way of establishing justice. In this paper, the focus is on *white guilt* in particular. Shelby Steele is one of the most prominent writers investigating white guilt and its consequences. Steele states that every race experiences guilt; however, the type of guilt differs from one race to the other. Steele (1990, p. 499) argues that black guilt is when black people feel inferior to white people, and they get anxious because whatever they do, they cannot reach the status of white people. On the other hand, white guilt happens when white people get aware of gratitude for being white and not black in a system built to serve white people.

Steele's ideas about white guilt stem from his observations about American society. He argues that white guilt as a term came into existence in the 1960s as one could see the guilt on the faces of white people (Steele, 1990). He asserts that when white people see all the injustices towards other races and privileges white people get, they feel guilty. When white people feel guilty and admit it, they lose the moral high-ground, which, according to Steele, is not something they want. Hence, Steele (2006) asserts that this guilt does not necessarily bring about definitive change; it instead gives white people a chance to distance themselves from the injustices. By admitting racial discrimination and distancing themselves from it, a process called dissociation by Steele, white people gain back the moral high-ground.

Racial issues are challenging to deal with as they are sensitive matters that may lead to even more discrimination if one is not careful. Steele (1999) argues that white guilt is a good concept, so white people try to focus on racial discrimination. However, he says that white guilt became a tool for more injustices as white people

felt obligated to lift black people. Steele asserts that this idea of white saviours further establishes black people as incapable of doing the right things; it patronises black people instead of empowering them. The idea of black peoples' incapability to lift themselves means that they are always seen as victims. For Steele, being seen as victims in society means that black people are held to different standards, which is racial discrimination. Steele's arguments about white guilt and its consequences can be applied to Western countries where white people are the majority. Hence, in this paper, Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel is analysed which parts of its story happen in Great Britain.

Understanding Du Bois' double consciousness allows one to understand the connection between racial discrimination and white guilt. The concept of double consciousness (DB) was first used in 1903 by William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, an American author (Moore, 2005). Du Bois introduced the term in a series of essays titled *Souls of Black Folk*. Again, just like Steele's ideas, Du Bois idea of DB stems from his observations on American society. The idea of DB is that black people in America live between two identities, being black and being American. Also, black people see themselves whichever way other people present them; hence, they try to reconcile their identities to survive. Du Bois states that in the US, black people are allowed to be the person that the white people perceive, "...but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world..." (As cited in Meer, 2019, p. 5). According to Du Bois, black people in the US are not allowed to be who they are and do what they are used to do in their culture; hence as a survival mechanism, they develop two personalities, "...One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder..." (As cited in Meer, 2019, p. 5). Furthermore, Du Bois states that black people try their best to keep their values, normally live with white people, and practise what the new society offers without being shunned by their people.

The previous quotation gives detailed information about what is meant by DB. One sees that black people are not seen as fully Americans by others, presumably white people. They are away from Africa, so they are not seen as fully Africans, which leads to a loss of authentic self-identity. This sense of identity loss is created in the

minds of black people as they see themselves through the eyes of others. In the previous section about white guilt, it was said that white people think they have to be black peoples' saviours, which creates the victimhood mentality amongst black people. However, in the quotation above, one sees that black people want to overcome DB by themselves. It shows that black people should not be patronised and seen as victims as they are able and willing to change their situation by themselves. Black people want to be seen as fully Americans without compromising their blackness.

Wasserman et al. (2012) summarise the fundamental ideas of DB in a way that can be easily applied to the intended piece of writing. Wasserman et al. argue that the first idea of DB is the "...sense of inferiority that manifests in holding stigmatic conceptions toward a group in which one is a member..."; the second idea is "...endorsing ideologies or policies that are repressive to the group in which one is a member, and therefore ultimately to oneself..." (p. 5). These two ideas are present in Gurnah's *Admiring Silence*, analysed in this paper.

### **3. Analysis**

Abdulrazak Gurnah's writings have been the subject of many articles and research papers. The themes that Gurnah talk about provide researchers with a wide variety of options for their writing process. Racial issues, immigration, and desertion are prominent themes that Gurnah employs in his writings. In *Admiring Silence*, the ideas of leaving one's country, facing racial issues, and having double consciousness by a black man are masterfully narrated. Since Gurnah himself was an immigrant and his life was similar to the play's protagonist, one can read the underlying issues a black immigrant faces in great detail.

Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* consists of three parts; the first part is where one learns about the protagonist and his struggles in the UK; the second part talks about when the protagonist visits his home country. The third part is the resolution, where the protagonist returns to the UK. Straight from the first page of part one, one sees that Du Bois talks about 'black people developing stigmatised perspectives against other groups and their original societies'. The protagonist feels some pain, so he visits the doctor. He has a personal doctor, General Practitioner (GP); he feels proud of this

and feels sorry for others who do not have this luxury. He says, "...Here everyone has a doctor all to themselves...I explain this for the benefit of my less fortunate brethren and their females...I mean the poor sods who live in the darker corners of the world...". One can see the contempt in the protagonist's words towards the very same people he was a part of one day, and he is still related to them. He explains how people are not fortunate enough to have their doctors in the "darker corners of the world"; they are lucky to have one doctor for all. He continues berating people from other parts of the world, saying that they "...have to camp in the sun and rain for days, buffeted by tornados and dust-storms, waiting to have a gangrenous limb amputated, or receive an antidote jab for snake-bite, or even some anti-bacterial cream for their festering wounds or just to treat a touch of sunburn..." (Gurnah, 2016, p. 1).

At first, one might think that the protagonist is very sympathetic towards the people from 'the darker' places. However, when talking about immigrants, he says, "...They want more space in newspapers, they grumble when no one reads their endless books, and they demand time on TV...". For him, immigrants are insatiable beings who are not satisfied with anything, and they always demand more; ironically, he is an immigrant. So unwittingly, he alienates himself by alienating immigrants. On the same page, he dismisses the struggles of immigrants. He asks them to blame themselves rather than blaming other factors "...Even their evident brutalities against each other can always be blamed on something else: slavery, colonialism, Christianity, a European education, anything but their unmasterable greed..." (Gurnah, 2016, p. 4). Shelby Steele discusses this idea of feeling vindicated because of past injustices brought upon one "...the notion that past injustices perpetrated on a group of people absolve subsequent generations of that group of standard responsibilities" (Pearson, 2007, p. 9). However, Steele mentions the idea in the context of white guilt and does not talk about it to berate black people.

From the previous two paragraphs, one can see how the protagonist feels about himself and the people he is still realistically part of but wants nothing to do with them. One might wonder how this self-contempt got embedded into the protagonist's mind. The harmful stereotypes that are forced on POC might be one answer. The doctor that the protagonist went to see is quick to marginalise him by



saying, "'Afro-Caribbean people have dicky hearts,' he said, smiling to give me courage at such a distressing time, 'and they are prone to high blood pressure, hypertension, sickle-cell anaemia, dementia...'" (Gurnah, 2016, p. 5). So, the doctor casually presumes the protagonist's origins and attaches a series of defects and illnesses to him based on his presumed identity. The black protagonist is not seen as an individual by the white doctor. The protagonist stays silent and does not correct the doctor that he is, in fact, not Afro-Caribbean.

Outside of the doctor's office, the protagonist is faced with difficulties by how people see and stereotype him; he does nothing but further reinforces them. When talking to colleagues and friends, the protagonist exaggerates his stories not to be seen as another immigrant. The idea of white guilt and how it might lead to further racial discrimination is seen here. In reality, his friends, his wife's friends, felt some guilt towards the black protagonist. This sense of guilt is not stated as guilt in the novel per se; however, it becomes evident when one reads further. The protagonist says that his white friends saw him and his stories as valuable things for their circle as it gave them a moral high-ground just by listening to him, "...It adorned them with the liberality of their friendly embrace of me..." (Gurnah, 2016, p. 42). Also, he was forced by the white friends to invent stories out of thin air as his mere existence and authentic stories were not enough for them, "...I was allowed so much room that I could only fill it with the invention. I did not think that the messy contortions of my own experience would do the trick in the way that stories of strangers on a moonlit terrace could..." (p. 42). So, the white friends seem to feel guilt and want to be seen as compassionate people; that is why they give the protagonist much time to tell his stories. However, in a way, it is communicated to him that they are not satisfied with ordinary tales, so he creates a fake persona and wants to be the person that the white people see.

Fabricating stories and lying about one's history was not something the protagonist wanted to do when he first arrived in the UK. However, moving to a new environment and having other people impose their views and expectations upon him made the protagonist try his best to live up to those expectations; Emma is among those expectations. While narrating the beginnings of meeting her, he started to fabricate stories, "...I do not exactly know why I began to suppress things,



change other things, fabricate to such an extent..." (Gurnah, 2016, p. 42). The protagonist did not even know why he lied and created a fake persona. Unbeknownst to him, he was influenced by other peoples' expectations of him. He then admits that maybe the reason for him telling fake stories was to be the person she sees him as, "...to live up to her account of me..." (p. 42). This pressure from Emma can be attributed to white guilt also. As they were young, she was so eager to learn everything about him and his background and also, she was such an avid supporter of the causes of the POC that she was willing to die for, "...She was quite ready to sacrifice her parents to the cause..." (p. 12). So, she may have taken it upon herself to listen to every minute detail of his stories as a social justice duty. Since most peoples' lives are not all that eventful to keep telling stories, the protagonist felt the need to fabricate stories not to lose others' interest in him. This pressure also shows how white people feel about others' lives as abnormal and very different from everything they do. It displays some superiority complex as if everyone knows how white people live, so there is no need to explain their way of life, but others should. This idea might seem innocent and empathetic, but it contributes to more racial discrimination.

In part two of the novel, the protagonist visits his home country. At first, he feels at home. He feels good that he can finally see his mother and other family members. However, he starts being uncomfortable after some time as life in his home country is nothing like living in England. In England, he is used to having all the basic needs like electricity, water, and cleanliness and many other 'luxurious' services like having your doctor. Everything was scarce in his home country, like; electricity, water, salt, and sugar. It was an unpleasant experience for him. Due to political turmoil, he also did not recognise many people; people have changed or perished. He also feels detached from his culture. He and Emma built a life outside of marriage, which is blasphemy in his culture; this is another reason for his discomfort.

The guilt that makes white people even listen to POC only lasts until they do something that displeases the white people. When the protagonist was narrating his stories to the English people, everyone attentively listened. However, when he impregnated Emma, Emma's father changed and started to look at him with despise, "...there was no eager gleam in his eyes, no hunger for our usual



transgressions..." (Gurnah, 2016, p. 58). Furthermore, when Emma lost interest in the protagonist's stories, she moved on to another man, "...After a moment I asked her if there was someone else, and she said yes, there was..." (145). She admits that she wants to start another story with another man as he is not attractive to her anymore. Emma says something crucial which shows that she was doing everything she did out of white guilt and pity by saying that, "...she was now at the beginning of another story, one which she was choosing for herself, not a tale she had stumbled into and then could not find a way out of..." (p. 145). By saying she could not find a way out of the relationship, one can see that she may have felt guilty of bringing more misery upon a black man if she left, something that she could not handle as she was showing herself as the champion of defending POC's rights.

By the end of the novel, the protagonist loses everything; his created family, his original family, and his identity. He lost his created family in England as Emma has left him to another man. Although his mother has asked the protagonist to come back home and all is forgiven, he does not feel that he had a home there anymore, "...Come home, Akbar said, as he closed his letter. But it wasn't home anymore..." (p. 152). Finally, he has lost his identity as he does not feel he belongs anywhere, so he chooses silence instead.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Feeling guilty for something atrocious that has happened or still happening might be a good sign for change. However, the feeling of guilt and fighting for social justice must not overwhelm the victims into feeling or doing things they do not want. This paper aimed to show that even noble feelings or deeds might become harmful. It is crucial to let the racial discrimination victims be whom they want to be and accept them for who they are, not for whom some people want them to be. It was shown in this paper how devastating it is to hold POC to some standards and stereotypes that they have not chosen.

The novel's protagonist could not bring his identity into English society, so he created a fake persona. It is critical to understand this point as to why this POC felt the need to lie. He was able to finish college, get a job, start a family, and have the 'luxury of having his doctor. So why did he feel that he needed to do more to be



accepted? Was not he accepted in society already? This paper's author's opinion is that white guilt contributes to the protagonist's doing more. The white people feel guilty for what their ancestors did to the black people, so they overcompensate, resulting in more discrimination. The white people feel the need to be social justice warriors; they need to save the day. They tell black people to do certain things that white people see as beneficial in ending racial discrimination. By telling the black people what to do, they create another circle of dos and don'ts around people of colour.

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## پوخته:

ئەم ئارتیکلە لە بیرۆکەیی هەست بە تاوانی سپی پێستەکان دەکۆڵیتەووە که چۆن بە زانین بێت یان بە نەزانین بەکار دەهێنرێت بۆ زیاتر وەلانی کەسانێتر، بە تایبەتی رەشپێستەکان، لە کۆمەلگەکانی رۆژئاوا. هەست بە تاوان کردن لە هەستیکی ئەرینییهووە دەگۆرێت بۆ هەستیکی نەرینی کاتیک کۆنترۆڵ نەکرێت. ئەم لیکۆلینەوویە هەولێ شیکردنەووی کیشەوگرفتیی رەشپێستەکان دەکات لە روانگەیی بێردۆزی دوو هەستی نووسەری گەورە دبووا. دەردەکەوێت که سپی پێستەکان لە رێگەیی هەست بە تاوان کردن زیان زیاتر دەدەن هەتا سود. بۆ ئەم لیکۆلینەوویە رۆمانی نووسەری گەورەیی تەنزانی-بەریتانی عبدالرزاق گورنە بە ناوی رێزگرتن لە بێدەنگی شیدەکرێتەووە که زۆر بە ژوانی باسی ئەم بابەتە دەکات. ئەنجامی ئەم لیکۆلینەوویە ئەو دەردەخات که ئەو هەولێ سپی پێستەکان دەیدەن بۆ دادگەری کۆمەلایەتی هەستیکی خۆ بە گەورە زانین دەبەخشیت پێیان و زیانیکی زۆریش دەدات لە مێشک و ژبانی رەشپێستەکان.

## الملخص:

تستکشف هذه المقالة مفهوم الذنب الأبيض وكيف يتم تسليحه ، بوعي أو بغير وعي ، في تهميش الملونين (POC) ، وخاصة الأفارقة في الشتات. يهدف إلى إظهار كيف يغير الشعور بالذنب الأبيض معناه من الإيجابي إلى السلبي عندما لا يتم التحكم فيه. تحاول هذه الوسيلة شرح النضالات التي يواجهها السود في الشتات من خلال عدسة السرد الدوبوازي للوعي المزدوج. يُقال هنا أن الأشخاص البيض ، من خلال ذنبهم المزعم ، يتسببون في ضرر أكثر مما ينفع. فيما يتعلق بالسياق ، يتم تحليل إعجاب الصمت لعبد الرزاق غرنة لأنه يلتقط ببلاغة الشعور بالذنب الأبيض وعواقبه. تكشف النتائج أن شكل العدالة الاجتماعية الذي يمارسه الأشخاص البيض ، والذي ينبع من الذنب الأبيض ، يمنح البيض شعورًا بالتفوق ويسبب ضررًا نفسيًا السود ، وفي النهاية حياتهم.