

*The Paradigm of Silence in Diasporic Fiction:
The Case of Abdulrazak Gurnah*

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Abstract

Silence occupies a central position in diasporic fiction, where experiences of displacement, trauma, and fractured belonging often resist direct articulation. In Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* (1996) and *The Last Gift* (2011), silence emerges as a complex narrative strategy through which migrant subjects negotiate loss, fragmented identities, and postcolonial shame. The two novels portray characters whose lives are shaped by omissions, fabricated stories, and selective acts of remembrance, revealing how traumatic memory remains suspended between remembering and forgetting. In Gurnah's fiction, storytelling and reticence coexist, while the creation of imaginary homelands exposes the emotional precariousness of migrant existence. Ultimately, the tension between what is narrated and what remains unsaid reveals how postcolonial belonging and memory are continually reshaped by trauma, shame, and omission.

Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah; *Admiring Silence*; *The Last Gift*; postcolonial shame; silence.

“The origin of a story is always an absence”.
Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated* (2002, 230)

Diasporic belonging and fragmented memories

Memory occupies a central position in diaspora studies, where attachments to the place of origin are often regarded as a defining feature of displaced communities. As William Safran observes, “Diasporas retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements” (2007). Yet such recollections are rarely stable or unproblematic. To employ Salman Rushdie’s seminal notion, “imaginary homelands” emerge from the interplay of loss, remembrance, and idealised visions of one’s native country, often generating tensions and contradictions in diasporic self-representation (1991). Accordingly, diasporic fiction frequently explores complex forms of belonging that transcend fixed national frameworks and challenge coherent notions of identity (Frank 2008, 18-19).

The dialectic between home and unhomeliness permeates much exilic and diasporic writing, illuminating experiences of estrangement and precarious belonging. Migrant narratives often foreground what Avtar Brah defines as “homing desire” (1996): not the simple wish to return home, but the search for forms of attachment beyond the idea of origin as a stable point of reference. As Brah observes: “Diasporic identities are at once local and global. They are networks of transnational identifications encompassing ‘imagined’ and ‘encountered’ communities” (192). Language reveals the connections between emotions and space by transforming places into affective landscapes shaped by memory. Recent work in affective geographies has further highlighted the ways in which place is invested with emotional meaning (Berberich, Campbell and Hudson 2013). Drawing on Yi-Fu Tuan’s reflections on place attachment (1974), diasporic experience may be understood through the interplay of distance, loss, and memory. Diaspora consequently entails an ambivalent relationship to home, experienced simultaneously as presence and absence, belonging and dislocation.

Migrations between East Africa and Great Britain, as well as movements within the Indian Ocean world, are at the core of Abdulrazak Gurnah's narratives. The Nobel Prize-winning Zanzibari-born British writer recreates the geographies of the Swahili coast through narratives shaped by mobility, loss, and historical transformation (Hodapp 2024). Throughout his work, storytelling and silence operate as complementary narrative modes through which characters confront traumatic pasts, negotiate belonging, and make sense of displacement. Rather than signifying mere absence or muteness, silence functions as a repository of unspoken histories, a response to trauma, and a means of mediating the tensions between past and present. In this way, Gurnah's fiction exposes both the burdens of colonial and postcolonial histories and the limits of language in articulating them.

It is especially on Gurnah's employment of silence, and on the dialectic between speech and reticence deriving from migrants' post-traumatic conditions, that this contribution focuses. As major trauma scholars have argued (LaCapra 1994; Caruth 1996), traumatic experiences are marked by a constant oscillation between remembering and forgetting: painful memories are suppressed in order to survive, yet they repeatedly resurface in fragmented and disordered forms. Silence consequently becomes a crucial mechanism for coping with trauma and displacement. For characters uprooted from their homelands and forced to inhabit unfamiliar and often hostile environments, language itself may become a source of alienation rather than communication. Gurnah's paradigm of silence may also be related to Gayatri Spivak's reflections on the silencing of subaltern voices within hegemonic discourses (1988). Silence may function not only as a form of marginalisation, but also as a strategy of self-preservation and resistance.

In *By the Sea* (2001), one of Gurnah's most celebrated works, Saleh Omar's initial muteness upon arriving in England offers a particularly revealing example of how silence and language intersect in Gurnah's fiction. Saleh's silence is not an inability to speak English; it is a form of withdrawal that functions as a protective shell against the overwhelming impact of displacement and loss. Saleh states "I knew the meaning of silence,

the danger of words” (12), acknowledging the ambivalent power of language, which may both reveal and conceal traumatic experiences. Focusing on *By the Sea* and *Desertion* (2005), Helff (1999) argues that communication, multilingualism, and the various forms of translatability that emerge across cultures are central to Gurnah’s literary project (162). His characters inhabit multilingual and transcultural spaces in which reticence is not excluded but acquires meaning and agency. In Gurnah’s works, silence assumes multiple forms, ranging from colonial oppression and postcolonial shame to the difficulty of articulating experience, as well as to narrative strategies based on omission, fabrication, and intertextuality. The coexistence of English, Swahili, and Arabic further underscores the importance of translation and cultural mediation within the contact zones of the Indian Ocean area.

The autobiographical dimension of Gurnah’s fiction is essential to understanding his narrative strategies. In conversation with Susheila Nasta (2004), Gurnah reflects on the ways memory is transformed through narrative:

You don’t always remember accurately and you begin to recall things you didn’t even know you remembered. Sometimes such gaps are filled in so convincingly that they become something ‘real’ as opposed to something constructed. In that way the stories take on a life of their own; they develop their own logic and coherence. (353)

The stories migrants tell are often shaped by acts of reconstruction through which painful experiences of displacement are reworked. Gurnah’s characters display anguish, melancholy, and frustration generated by a condition of suspension between different places, cultures, and temporalities. Their narratives are dictated by the intimate need to renegotiate identity and belonging, while inhabiting “half-lives”: divided existences shaped by separation, loss, and the impossibility of finding a stable sense of belonging either in the homeland or in exile. The desire to reshape painful memories often leads Gurnah’s characters to blur the boundaries between silence, omission, and fabrication, particularly in relation to family histories and the unresolved legacies of the past.

Storytelling, reticence, and concealment

Building on previous readings of silence as both an “unspoken” narrative paradigm (Kaigai 2013) and a form of resistance (Fabris 2012), this article examines how silence in Gurnah’s fiction also articulates postcolonial shame, self-concealment, and the impossibility of fully narrating diasporic experience. According to Kimani Kaigai (2013), the narrative strategies of Abdulrazak Gurnah’s novels *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift* reveal the paradigm of the unspoken, the dynamic foil for a positive signifier (129), in the sense suggested by Stuart Hall (1985). Indeed, drawing upon his personal history as a migrant, Hall suggests that “positively marked terms ‘signify’ because of their position in relation to what is absent, unmarked, the unspoken, the unsayable. The meaning is relational within an ideological system of presences and absences” (109).

As Susan Sontag observes, “silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech (in many instances, of complaint or indictment) and an element in a dialogue” (1964). Rather than signifying mere absence, silence acquires multiple meanings and functions, often deriving its force from the interplay between narration and reticence. At the same time, silence cannot be separated from relations of power. Within dominant Western traditions, speech has frequently been associated with authority and agency, whereas silence has been interpreted as a sign of marginality, passivity, or exclusion. This issue becomes particularly relevant in postcolonial contexts, where, as Spivak (1988) argues, subaltern voices are often mediated or silenced by hegemonic discourses.

Yet in Gurnah’s fiction silence may function not only as a mark of marginalisation, but also as a strategy of self-preservation, concealment, and resistance. It gives expression to the unspoken legacies of colonialism, the burdens of trauma and displacement, and the difficulties of articulating painful or shameful experiences. In both *Admiring Silence* (1996) and *The Last Gift* (2011), silence is closely intertwined with storytelling: omissions, reticence, and fabricated narratives shape the protagonists’ attempts to negotiate memory, belonging,



and selfhood. Meaning consequently emerges not only from what is narrated, but also from what is withheld, requiring readers to reconstruct connections, piece together fragmented stories, and give significance to the gaps that structure the narrative.

Admiring Silence and *The Last Gift* present stories that are complex on two levels: first, because the narrators struggle to articulate traumatic experiences; second, because the voices recounting them are hesitant to disclose family histories. Storytelling in Gurnah's fiction is therefore inseparable from various forms of silence. As Kaigai (2013) observes, silence functions not only as a textual feature but also as a catalyst for interpretation. Meaning emerges through the tension between disclosure and reticence, as readers piece together fragmented narratives and engage with what characters do not, cannot, or refuse to say. Silence thus operates both within the text and beyond it, generating a dialogue between narrative, context, and readers' interpretation (129-130).

Silence appears in the title itself of *Admiring Silence*, derived from Robert Louis Stevenson's *In the South Seas* quoted in the first epigraph.¹ The novel centres on an unnamed narrator who migrates from Zanzibar to Britain, and gradually constructs his life through omissions, fabrications, and partial disclosures. For seventeen years he remains absent from his homeland, maintaining his connection to it largely through the stories he tells his partner Emma and her family, many of which are shaped by his desire for acceptance. The return to Zanzibar ultimately exposes the tensions between narration and concealment that have sustained his diasporic existence.

Questions of silence, family secrets, and self-narration are further developed in *The Last Gift*, which establishes an important intertextual connection with *Admiring Silence* through the narrator's father. A marginal figure in the earlier novel, the protagonist's father re-emerges as Abbas, whose life story becomes central to the later narrative. While the earlier novel focuses on the silences generated by migration and self-fashioning, *The Last*

¹ "He is an admirer of silence in the island; broods over it like a great ear; has spies who report daily; and had rather his subjects sand than talked". R.L. Stevenson, "The King of Apemama", *In the South Seas* (1890).



Gift shifts attention to the concealed histories of the family. Abbas's long silence about his past, his first marriage, and his departure from Zanzibar structures the novel. Decades after settling in England with Maryam, a diabetic crisis leaves him temporarily unable to speak, transforming silence from a voluntary practice of concealment into a physical condition that precipitates the belated narration of his life story.

Admiring Silence and *The Last Gift* share a marked emphasis on storytelling as a way of constructing and reconstructing the characters' lives, yet these stories are full of gaps, silences, half-truths, and lies. The two novels engage with the politics of voices marginalised by dominant narratives, interweaving speech and silence. While *Admiring Silence* relies almost entirely on the first-person voice of its unnamed narrator, *The Last Gift* combines several first-person perspectives with an omniscient narrator, creating a more polyphonic structure. Through these different narrative configurations, Gurnah explores the various forms of silence and silencing that shape both individual lives and family histories, producing a palimpsestic account of subjective experiences.²

In *The Last Gift*, silence is closely connected with hidden histories and the complexities of family relationships shaped by migration. It becomes a force that structures both the narrative and the lives of the characters. One of its most significant manifestations is Abbas's deliberate concealment of his past. For decades, he lives quietly in England with his wife Maryam and his children Jamal and Hanna, without disclosing the circumstances that led him there. This carefully constructed barrier stems from a combination of shame, fear, and the desire to protect both himself and his family from the consequences of earlier choices. The resulting atmosphere of secrecy creates a sense of "apartness" within the family, particularly for Abbas's English-born children, who feel disconnected from their heritage. Hanna expresses a desire for "a story that has a beginning that is tolerable and open, and not one that is tripped with silences" (Gurnah 2011, 44).

² Several of these issues have also been discussed in Cilia (2025).

Abbas's collapse and subsequent aphasia ironically force a confrontation with his long silence. His inability to speak in his final days compels Maryam and his children to confront his troubling silences: "Ba's silences were sometimes dark" (32). The physical silence becomes a catalyst for the unearthing of the past. Furthermore, the silence surrounding Maryam's own history mirrors Abbas's reticence, though it arises from different circumstances. Her reticence derives not from concealment but from the partial and uncertain knowledge of her own past. The anxieties and ambiguities surrounding her early life contribute to the broader atmosphere of withheld histories that permeates the family. Similar feelings affect Jamal and Hanna who, despite having been born and raised in England, experience a persistent sense of displacement and a longing to reconnect with a heritage shrouded in silence. Their situation highlights one of the novel's central concerns: the difficulties faced by second-generation migrants in constructing a coherent sense of self while confronting the gaps, omissions, and unresolved histories inherited from their parents.

Trauma and shame in *Admiring Silence*

Experiences of violence, loss, and displacement often give rise to silences that function both as forms of self-protection and as acknowledgements of the inadequacy of language to convey traumatic experience. Such silences may also emerge between generations, reflecting the difficulty of transmitting painful histories and the enduring impact of colonial legacies. While this pattern recurs throughout Gurnah's fiction, *Admiring Silence* presents a more ambiguous case, in which reticence frequently becomes a deliberate strategy of self-fashioning. In this novel silence is a deliberate choice, a kind of performance. One of the most striking uses of silence is the protagonist's intentional omissions and inventions regarding his past. Arriving in England as a student, he consciously chooses to remain silent about significant aspects of his life in Zanzibar and recreates a simplified narrative for his English acquaintances. This performative silence becomes a fundamental aspect of his



adopted English identity. While he develops a genuine affection for Emma and her family, his inability to fully share his past creates a subtle but persistent barrier. The silences in their conversations, the unspoken questions, and the parts of his life that remain deliberately vague contribute to a sense of incompleteness in their understanding of him. The narrator systematically withholds crucial aspects of his existence from both his English and Zanzibari worlds: “The truth was that I had not written home about Amelia, the other truth was that I had not written home about Emma, either. As far as they were concerned back there in Nativity, neither Emma nor Amelia existed” (Gurnah 1996, 89). Omission and fabrication thus become central strategies in the construction of a diasporic self suspended between different worlds. Indeed, the boundary between lies and silences is often blurred, since acts of deception depend upon the suppression of truth.

The protagonist’s inward reticence is equally significant. As he becomes increasingly detached from Zanzibar, he develops a persistent emotional numbness, avoiding memories, feelings of guilt, and the implications of his decision to remain in exile. Yet the novel also explores the limits of this carefully maintained strategy of concealment. The arrival of his mother’s letters and his eventual return force him to reassess the omissions that have sustained his life abroad and to confront the consequences of displacement.

Postcolonial political tensions are likewise marked by forms of reticence and suppression. Although the narrator remains primarily focused on his personal experience, the novel repeatedly evokes an atmosphere of corruption, intimidation, and latent violence characterising post-revolutionary Zanzibar. He is approached by influential governmental figures who present him as essential to their projects, whose dubious nature he only partially understands. His mother, however, immediately perceives the threat concealed behind their apparent cordiality, warning him: “You don’t know these people [...] They’ve gone crazy with malice. Look at how dry their faces are. God emptied their hearts of pity, *astaghfirullah*” (158). The novel thus presents the postcolonial state itself as a force that discourages open speech, while the narrator’s reluctance to engage with these forms of

political intimidation reflects both anxiety and a desire to distance himself from the troubling legacies of his homeland.

The novel therefore presents the postcolonial state itself as a silencing force, sustained by intimidation, secrecy, and fear. In this respect, Gurnah links the narrator's reticence to the lingering shadows of the Zanzibar Revolution and the legacy of repression that followed it. This atmosphere of intimidation is anticipated by the second epigraph of the novel, drawn from Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* (1177): "Your Self's grown gross, / dog that sleeps and feeds". The image evokes a condition of passivity and self-silencing that reflects the narrator's hesitation to engage with the oppressive climate produced by postcolonial power.

The reluctance to articulate these political realities is closely connected to broader dynamics of postcolonial shame, which permeate both personal and collective experiences. As Courtois (2026) has argued, shame occupies a crucial place in Gurnah's narratives, shaping forms of self-representation, concealment, and reticence.³ Recognising its significance is therefore essential to understanding the function of silence in Gurnah's fiction, as well as in postcolonial literary production more broadly (Attwell, Pes, and Zinato 2019). Emerging from histories of domination and inequality, postcolonial shame often manifests itself as discomfort with one's origins, language, or cultural background, and may result in a reluctance to speak about the past or to fully embrace one's heritage in a social environment shaped by colonial hierarchies.

The protagonist of *Admiring Silence* experiences a submerged sense of shame about his Zanzibari past when confronted with the perceived superiority of English society. As he admits: "The shame was intense for a few minutes but it soon passed and I became used to my lies" (Gurnah 1996, 33). His recourse to mimicry within the often hostile context of Britain represents an attempt to gain voice and agency, but it also entails a profound

³ In his analysis of *Theft*, Courtois reads Badar as an embodiment of internalised postcolonial shame, characterised by a persistent sense of inferiority and dependence inherited from colonial relations of power (2026, para. 21).

dissociation from his social and cultural background (Steiner 2009, 99, 105). At moments, he imagines himself fully integrated into English society: “At times I forgot myself, and I imagined that I looked as they did, and had lived the same life that they had lived. [...] But this was only at times [...] For my alienness was important to all of us – as their alienness was to me” (Gurnah 1996, 61–62). Mimicry thus reveals not only a desire for assimilation, but also an acute awareness of difference.

The experience of forced migration or asylum seeking can be accompanied by feelings of shame, of being unwanted or a burden on the country of arrival. As Courtois (2026) suggests, postcolonial shame often finds expression in forms of concealment, reticence, and fractured self-representation. Shame can lead to silence about one’s past and arouse a desire to become invisible, revealing how colonial legacies continue to shape identities, relationships, and acts of narration. In this context, silence becomes a testimony to the enduring burden of a history marked by colonial domination.

According to Federico Fabris (2012), silence in Gurnah’s fiction may also be understood as a pragmatic act of individual resistance. He argues that *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift* portray characters in conditions of marginalisation and disempowerment who use reticence as a means of resisting oppressive and racist structures. In *Admiring Silence*, however, silence becomes not only a form of resistance but also a space for negotiating identity, allowing the protagonist to counter self-effacement and assert agency. The narrator masks his silences through the stories he tells both himself and others, particularly Emma’s parents, Mr and Mrs Willoughby. These narratives take the form of inventions devised to shield him from the sense of alienation that characterises his life in Britain; at the same time, they reproduce and parody stereotypical representations of colonial migrants, as well as familiar motifs drawn from imperial adventure narratives.

The fact that the protagonist remains unnamed is significant: he is not recognised as a full member of the English community and occupies an uncertain social position:



At times, I felt invisible to them. My voice sounded strange when I spoke in their midst, as if I was speaking in an incomprehensible tongue. I found myself losing track, confusing words, and becoming tongue tied. When they talked about me (or even to me), it felt that they were pitying me, that I was a victim of unavoidable natural forces, a cyclone or a cholera epidemic or an inherited deformity. (Gurnah 1996, 30)

The protagonist's anonymity suggests that he is one among many marginalised subjects, migrants, exiles, and colonial others, whom the narrator ironically evokes as "hubshis, abids, bongo-bongos, say-it-loud-I'm-black-and-I'm-proud victims of starvation and tyranny and disease and unregulated lusts and history, etc." (10). Significantly, the first-person narrative begins with this omission, foregrounding a subjectivity marked by uncertainty, displacement, and an unresolved sense of belonging.

The narrator's reticence is also rooted in personal experiences that precede his migration to Britain. His father's abandonment of the family and his upbringing with a stepfather leave lasting feelings of shame and emotional vulnerability. Many of the narratives he constructs for Emma's family are therefore not simply inventions, but attempts to present his life in a more acceptable and coherent form. By reshaping the past, he seeks both to escape painful memories and to reproduce, often ironically, elements of colonial discourse. Recounting stories about his parents, his friends, and his country, he "suppress[es]", "change[s]" and "fabricate[s]" (62) crucial details of his own experience

The narrator's reliance on storytelling and his increasing entanglement in his own fabrications also reveal the difficulties of articulating the historical legacy of the Indian Ocean world. Unable to explain aspects of his social and cultural background to his English interlocutors, he constructs exaggerated narratives of European benevolence and African backwardness, reproducing and parodying colonial stereotypes. These inventions further reinforce the novel's unreliable narrative texture, a feature that, as Olaussen (2013) observes, links Gurnah's fiction to broader literary representations of the Indian Ocean world (66).

Abandonment is a recurring motif in Gurnah's fiction and plays a crucial role in the dynamics of family life, both at a literal and symbolic level. In *Admiring Silence*, the narrator is marked not only by his father's earlier departure, but also by his own repeated acts of

withdrawal from those closest to him. Like several of Gurnah's protagonists, he inhabits a position that oscillates between leaving and being left behind, revealing the emotional complexity of abandonment and its enduring consequences for both those who depart and those who remain.⁴ At the end of the novel, he does not know how to break the "fragile silence" (Gurnah 1996, 217) that pervades him. In addition to the profound sense of detachment he experiences in England, his ties with his family in Zanzibar remain uncertain and fragile. Zanzibar and England thus become equally inadequate as places of belonging. Having travelled between Africa and Europe in search of a home, he gradually comes to realise that home is not a physical location but an inner condition that must be negotiated rather than recovered. As Mohineet Kaur Boparai (2022) observes, "When he comes to admire silence and being comfortable alone, he has reached home" (96).

Aphasia and family secrets in *The Last Gift*

In *The Last Gift*, silence operates differently than in *Admiring Silence*. Abbas loses the ability to speak after a diabetic crisis. Yet the novel gives access to his thoughts through an omniscient narrator who opens the frame narrative and sets the plot in motion. Although this narrative voice encompasses the story as a whole, focalisation frequently shifts to Abbas's wife and children. Readers are therefore required to reconcile these different perspectives and, from a mosaic of individual stories, construct an inevitably partial understanding of Abbas and the aspects of his life that remain concealed (Kaigai 2013, 133). The novel's multiple focalisation reinforces this process. Abbas's memories, Maryam's recollections, and the perspectives of Jamal and Hanna never fully coincide, producing a polyphonic narrative in which no single voice can claim complete authority. Family history emerges only through the juxtaposition of partial and often incomplete accounts.

⁴ In *Desertion* (2005), as signalled by the title, abandonment operates at both an intimate and a historical level, shaping family relations, love affairs, and the legacies of colonial encounters.



Readers learn how painful Abbas finds the loss of speech caused by his illness, and we are told that, once he recovers his voice, he is “no longer able to contain his eagerness to tell” (Gurnah 2011, 149). Although he had previously claimed that he remained silent because “there was no one to tell anyway” (152), he eventually records his life story on tape, overcoming his fear of verbal self-disclosure. Abbas’s trajectory is marked by a transition from voluntary silence to pathological muteness, a shift that ultimately compels him to confront memories he had long attempted to suppress. The tape occupies an ambivalent position within the narrative: it is both the silent recipient of his confession and the medium through which his story can be transmitted to others. In this way, the recorded testimony becomes a form of belated storytelling through which Abbas seeks to come to terms with his past. As the narrator observes at the beginning of the novel, he “had left things for too long and there was no one to blame but himself” (1). The confession is therefore inseparable from feelings of guilt, particularly those arising from his decision to abandon his first wife, his unborn child, and the family. This tendency towards abandonment, together with the silence it generates, recurs throughout Gurnah’s fiction and shapes the emotional lives of both those who leave and those who remain.⁵

The protagonist of *The Last Gift*, although he has kept silent voluntarily for almost four decades, finds himself physically unable to speak. Abbas’s silence oscillates between present and past, originating in the act of abandonment that shaped the rest of his life: “One day, long before the troubles, he slipped away without saying a word to anyone and never went back” (1). There is a marked irony in this formulation: the apparently simple act of leaving “without saying a word” generates a silence that will dominate Abbas’s life for more than forty years. His prolonged reticence is not simply the result of forgetfulness but a deliberate attempt to keep painful memories at bay. As he eventually acknowledges: “I thought I would keep quiet about all that for as long as I could. I thought if I started to talk I would

⁵ Some of the issues discussed in this section, particularly the relationship between silence, aphasia, memory, and storytelling in *The Last Gift*, are examined more extensively in Brazzelli (2021).



not be able to stop” (242). Silence therefore functions as a defensive strategy through which he seeks to contain feelings of guilt, loss, and shame. Only later does Abbas fully recognise the burden imposed by this choice: “I committed an unkind and thoughtless act, and silence was a way of coping with the memory of it, offering a deadpan face to the burden of it” (253). Yet Abbas’s silence does not imply forgetting. On the contrary, he admits: “I can’t remember anything, I tell her, but it is a lie, I remember many things and I remember them every day, however hard I try to forget” (243). The novel thus reveals the paradox at the heart of his reticence: silence becomes a way of coping with memories that remain painfully present despite his attempts to suppress them.

The tape becomes the medium through which the truth about Abbas’s unspoken past is gradually revealed. More importantly, it transforms a lifetime of silence into an act of communication, allowing stories that had remained suppressed for decades to circulate within the family. Abbas is not, however, the only character who takes refuge in reticence. Maryam also withholds from her children the truth about her estrangement from her adoptive parents, while Jamal and Hanna grow up with only fragmentary knowledge of their family history. Pervaded by a sense of displacement and uncertainty about their origins, they experience a form of alienation within their own family. It is only through listening to the tape and engaging in dialogue with their mother that they begin to reconstruct the missing parts of their past and to imagine a future journey to Zanzibar, their “imaginary homeland”. Abbas’s long silence is rooted in the shame of having abandoned his first wife and unborn child, as well as in the guilt associated with severing all contact with his family of origin.

After listening to the tape containing her father’s memories and learning the truth about her origins, Hanna begins to overcome her sense of uncertainty and to reconcile herself with her roots. Jamal, too, is profoundly affected by the silences that permeate his family history. Unlike his sister, however, he responds not with frustration but with attentive listening, seeking to piece together the fragmented narratives of his parents’ lives.

Fascinated by the ways stories are transmitted, transformed, and reinterpreted, Jamal gradually assumes the role of an interpreter of family memory. Unlike Hanna, who seeks direct answers, he patiently listens to fragments, omissions, and contradictory accounts, attempting to reconstruct coherence from partial disclosures. In this respect, Jamal emerges as a figure who mirrors the work of the writer, assembling a coherent story out of silences and scattered memories. Significantly, at the end of the novel he announces: "I'm writing a short story. Another father story. Such a predictable immigrant subject" (Gurnah 2011, 279). The reconstruction of Abbas's life thus becomes the material from which narrative itself is produced. Through Jamal, *The Last Gift* acquires a metafictional dimension, reflecting on the processes through which migration, displacement, family histories, and even silences are transformed into storytelling.

Between speech and silence

As exemplified in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift*, diasporic literature reveals silence as a multifaceted strategy of concealment, affecting both personal histories and colonial legacies. At the same time, Gurnah's novels complicate the idea that diasporic identity is grounded in a stable or shared memory of the origins, since remembrance itself appears fragmented, partial, and deeply shaped by trauma, shame, and omission. Through omissions, reticence, and acts of fabrication, the protagonists seek to achieve a fragile stability in their lives, while attempting to negotiate painful histories that resist straightforward narration. In Gurnah's fiction, silence does not simply indicate absence or muteness, but becomes a complex mode of engaging with displacement, loss, and fractured belonging. Strategies such as concealment, replacement, fabrication, and irony emerge as crucial narrative devices through which the unsaid is articulated rather than merely represented. Often subtle and understated, irony exposes the contradictions underlying both personal and collective narratives, revealing the distance between lived experience and the stories characters tell about themselves. At the same time, the



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significance of silence ultimately depends upon the active participation of readers, who are required to reconstruct connections, interpret omissions, and negotiate competing versions of the past. The two novels thus show that diasporic subjectivities are shaped not only through acts of remembering and storytelling, but also through what remains concealed, partially disclosed, or impossible to narrate.

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