

An Analysis of the Politics of Home in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Dottie*

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Abstract:

Tanzanian-British writer Abdulrazak Gurnah, laureate of the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature, has produced a series of thought-provoking works, among them *Dottie* (1990) represents his sole exploration from a female perspective thus far, which effectively portrays the intricate predicaments faced by discrete ethnic minority groups as they navigate self-construction and identity-seeking within European society. Drawing on Rosemary Marangoly George's theory of "the Politics of Home", this thesis addresses the establishment of the protagonist Dottie's "home" through three distinctive perspectives: the physical, the socialized, and the spiritual. Firstly, from the perspective of the physical home, on one hand, having a personal space is crucial for Dottie's sense of security; on the other hand, as a woman in comparison to men, Dottie's tendency to more firmly rooting down is precisely her defense of her physical home in an era when men and women experience significant unequal status within the domestic space. Secondly, from the perspective of socialized home, Dottie obtains her family identity through the maintenance and control of her household, while simultaneously cultivating her community identity by expanding her interpersonal network. The amalgamation of Dottie's familial and social attributes contributes to the development of her socialized home. Finally, from the perspective of spiritual home, facing the dual predicament as a "cultural marginalizer", Dottie finally constructs a self-reliant spiritual home and finds "the notion of belonging" through the integration and harmonization of historical and cultural roots, current Englishness, and future possibility in life. This thesis aims to present readers with a pathway for ethnic minority women to construct self-assured home, realize their self-worth and find their belongingness in a heterogeneous culture, providing valuable insights into bridging racial divides and promoting multicultural integration.

Keywords:

Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Dottie*, The Politics of Home, Identity, Multicultural Integration

1. Introduction

In the post-colonial context, diasporic literature, as a crucial medium for depicting the identity dilemmas and cultural struggles of ethnic minorities, has emerged as one of the core themes in global literary studies. Abdulrazak Gurnah's awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2021 has further stimulated the research upsurge on African diasporic writing. As a prominent figure in this field, Gurnah draws deeply on his own migratory experiences to portray the lived realities of minority communities

in the postcolonial era. Among them, *Dottie* (1990), his only novel written from a female perspective, concretely presents the predicament of ethnic minorities' identity construction in a heterogeneous society by narrating the diasporic journey of the black female Dottie's family in Britain, thus possessing unique research value.

Existing research on *Dottie* has approached the text from multiple perspectives, focusing primarily on two dimensions: identity issues and narrative strategies. Identity-focused work initially brought together three interlocking concerns: the tension between personal and collective selves, described as a "cruel optimism" (Callahan 2013); the reconstruction of ethical identity and its entanglement with community imagination (Huang Hui 2022); and the crisis of identity accompanied by the search for subjective agency (Shi Tianrun and Huang Hui 2022). A parallel stream of research, attending to narrative form, examines food symbolism, intertextual critique of colonial ideology, and postcolonial counter-writing through textual rewriting (Ajulu-Okungu 2014; Lewis 2013; Zhu Zhenwu and Su Wenya 2022). As this paper makes identity its primary analytical lens, it engages chiefly with the first strand while acknowledging the contextual insights offered by the second. Therefore, this study will base on the theoretical perspective of "The Politics of Home" which first formally introduced by Rosemary Marangoly George in 1996, to explore the process through which the black female character in Gurnah's *Dottie* seek new space, construct her own spiritual home, and shape self-identity values within a multicultural context. On the basis of an in-depth thesis of this work, this thesis will further explain the construction of self-identity value in the third-generation minority woman in the context of her dispersed families.

2. The Construction of Physical Home

"Home" bears profound personal significance. Rosemary George argues that "home" is both a refuge and a space to escape from, whose value lies in its unequal accessibility as an exclusive domain fought for by a few [5]. This explains Dottie's intense desire for an exclusive private space, as such a domain is crucial for maintaining her autonomous identity.

Securing a private, material domestic space constitutes the very foundation upon which self-identity is constructed and a sense of autonomous selfhood is sustained. Before Dottie succeeded in getting her brother, Hudson, back from his foster family, she was prepared to rent "a two-bedroom flat" [6] for Hudson with a separate living space despite her meager salary at the time. But the landlord's breach of contract frustrated her plan, leaving Hudson confined to a shabby, oppressive space. This subjected Hudson to growing up within the domain of his elder sister's, whom he was already resented, resulting in making Hudson feel constantly oppressed by her, and further intensifying his negative feelings. In addition, the plight of Dottie's younger sister Sophie was similar to Hudson's. Unlike Dottie, Sophie never chased for a private space of her own, and was therefore in a position of "dependence": on her mother, on her sister, on the landlords Andy, Jimmy, and Patterson... Given Sophie's prolonged attachment to the "desired place" of Dottie, it is unsurprising that she eventually poured out her dissatisfaction with her sister's "domineering control" [6] to Dr Newton. Conversely, independent female characters like Laura and Estella secured personal spaces through their own efforts, as did Dottie herself by funding her housing independently disregarding any hints from the landlord or Patterson. Therefore, as Horelli notes, a standalone residence is not only a guarantee of personal independence but also a symbol of selfhood [8].

Moreover, John Ruskin posits that women are endowed with the capacity to transform wherever they reside into a home, fashioning it into a sanctuary suffused with tranquility, love, and a distinctive aura. It is said that women are more inclined to develop an emotional bond with the “home” [15]. It is reflected in the female characters’ obsession with buying a house and evident in the different reactions of men and women with regard to “the space of home”, which is, an incline of downward rooting. In contrast, in *Dottie*, most of the male characters are in a state of “mobility”. Hudson was sent from London to Dover and later brought back to London by Dottie. But it wasn’t long before Hudson abandoned his siblings’ home again and wandered around London, eventually traveling as far as New York and dying in a foreign land. To escape the burden of his family, Kane left his brother disabled by war and his pregnant wife, traveled around the world, and engaged in numerous careers. Laura’s husband was unbearable to put up with the British cold weather and the discrimination, so he abandoned Laura and their daughter. And the old doctor’s grandson, Michael, also almost “making Conrad’s journey in reverse” [6]. Conversely, despite having the thought of “gone to sea and roamed the world for a year or two” [6], and facing the burdens of family and discrimination, Dottie still chose to take deep roots in London and vowed to build her own home in this land that originally did not accept them.

The divergent behavioral patterns exhibited by men and women towards the concept of “the space of home” in the mid to late 20th century can be attributed to the distinct significance and values associated with the notion of “home” for each gender. Early writers on gendered perceptions of home claim that men consider it to be a signifier of status and achievement whereas women view home as a haven [10]. The perspectives, however, have undergone a transformation following the emergence of the second wave of feminism. For men, home is a space in which they have ultimate authority, yet limited responsibility for the domestic and child-rearing duties that take place in it. Home is a haven from the pressure of the outside world, even a site of leisure and recreation [10]. In contrast, despite being generally considered a feminine, nurturing space created by women themselves, “home” was seen to be a site of oppression, tyranny and patriarchal domination of women, where women often lack both authority and a space of their own within this realm [10]. This concept is evident in *Dottie*. Later on in the story, once Dottie became aware that Patterson was essentially viewing the Balfour sisters as a means of asserting his dominance, she initiated a struggle with him for control over the realm at the house. Dottie’s domain expands from “the only remaining small area within her bedroom” to encompass the “divided cupboards”, “separate meals”, and “distinct bills”, which parallels the gradual disintegration of Paterson’s authority within their “home”. The aforementioned statement suggests that Dottie’s behavior epitomizes her defense of personal space and her unwavering downward rooting in an era when men and women experience significant unequal status within the domestic space.

3. The Construction of Socialized Home

According to Fei Xiaoping, “Home” is not a simple natural object, but a “subject-imaginary”, involving the identity and political experience of individuals in different spaces [3]. In *Dottie*, the “identity and political experience of individuals” conducted in different “spaces” actually consists of two attributes: familial and social attributes, which shape Dottie’s socialized home from different perspectives and ultimately constitute her identity confirmation.

A dwelling characterized by cohabiting families and strong emotional bonds constitutes a genuine “home”, as opposed to merely being a physical structure. From the perspective of Rosemary George, membership (of home) is maintained by bonds of love, fear, power, desire and control [5]. Such “bonds” are full of affection elements (positive or negative) and are necessary connections between family members. This is precisely why Dottie attached great importance to fostering strong bonds with her loved ones. After Bilkisu’s death, the London Council denied Dottie’s guardianship of her younger siblings, sending Sophie to a special school, placing Hudson in foster care, and seizing their Stockwell house -- causing Dottie profound anguish. Over the subsequent years, She worked diligently to reclaim Sophie, then enthusiastically refurnished their once “bare and damp” [6] dwelling during her solitary days, finally turning the residence into a true “home”. It is in the maintenance and control of the family that Dottie generates a sense of authority in the domestic space, and thus obtains the manifestation of her own identity. As the eldest sister who “carrying the burden of her sister’s imbecility and of her brother’s naive and malice” [6] for many years, Dottie naturally becomes “the authority” among three of them. The novel also clearly reveals Dottie’s thoughts on her own desire to control the family: “she realised now that the sense of control had been some compensation for the responsibilities she had assumed to be her burden” [6]. In the maintenance of the “home” built on the bonds of blood and the control of family, Dottie establishes her first “identity”, an identity with familial attribute.

Dottie’s sense of “identity” is not only acquired in maintaining her family, but is also built up through specific activities and relationships within the society and the community. Shelley Mallett muses in her article “Understanding home: a critical review of the literature” that “house or dwelling accommodates home but home is not necessarily confined to this place. The boundaries of home seemingly extend beyond its walls to the neighborhood, even the suburb, town or city” [10]. In *Dottie*, Gurnah places significant emphasis on the role of individual identity construction, particularly that of females, in relation to the context of community. Dottie’s sense of identity is not confined to the small circle of her family, but is deeply rooted in the broader community and society. Cynthia Dobbs found in her research that home, as an “open-borders communal space”, its freedom and security are defined by the degree to which black women feel simultaneously safe, free, and connected [2]. However, it was exceedingly arduous for women, especially black women, to seek for a sense of “security”, “freedom” and “connection” in the male-dominated British society of the 1960s. Because Dottie suffered from both racial and gender discrimination during that era.

Firstly, the racial discrimination suffered by Dottie constitutes a significant impediment to the development of her identity. Lewis argues that racial ideology makes it nearly impossible for African immigrants to be both black and British [9]. Though a native Briton, Dottie was barred from identifying as English due to her blackness. Ironically, it is because Dottie is not that dark -- “quite as black as the West Indians” -- that she’s been given some breathing space: “. . . I have some Jamaican niggers living in my house in Brixton. . . Don’t worry, darling. You’re not very black, not like them Jamaican niggers” [6]. Secondly, the gender discrimination suffered by Dottie is one of the hindrances to the acquisition of her identity. In the mid-20th century, the powerful British patriarchal system still silenced women, putting black women like Dottie at greater disadvantage than black men. Despite having black skin even in England’s darker times, Dr. Murray was given the chance to pursue a highly

esteemed career as a community doctor due to his privileged male social identity. Consequently, he was capable of establishing a thriving practice in Wimbledon and successfully owning a “large house” by Clapham Common.

Thus, finding identity and social recognition amid racial and gender double oppression became a key challenge for Dottie to construct a socialized home. Her breakthrough lies in George’s view that home is not neutral but an extended community with comforts and terrors [5]. A core principle of home politics is “select inclusions and exclusions” [5] based on kinship-like shared attributes. It is in actively interacting with such a community that Dottie’s path to break racial and gender dilemmas is realized. She progressively broadens her “select inclusions” from solely daring to build relationships with black and female workers in the food-packing factory; to enrolling on an evening secretarial course at Morley College and building a friendship with Estella, a white Jew; to working at Lever House as a secretary and establishing a rapport with Mrs. Waterson, a white English. This gradual integration with the dominant England culture implied Dottie’s construction of community, which is also a section of her socialized home.

4. The Construction of Spiritual Home

In Gurnah’s interview with Susheila Nasta, he made it clear that in the context of *Dottie* and *Pilgrim’s Way*, the outside world was no longer the center of inquiry, and the “sense of people carrying their worlds within them” becomes Gurnah’s interest during this period [12]. This is perhaps why the maturation process of Dottie in the book is almost simultaneous with the construction of her spiritual home. In *Home truths: fictions of the South Asian diaspora in Britain*, Nasta discussed the popular theme of ‘Imaginary Homelands’, which was firstly coined by Salman Rushdie in the 1980s as a powerful metaphor to describe the fragmented vision of the migrant abroad. According to Nasta, ‘home’ is not necessarily a real place but a mythical construct built on the discontinuous fragments of memory and reconceived in the imagination [11]. In other words, from the perspective of post-colonial criticism, homeland can also be the construction of a spiritual home in which individuals express resistance and seek identity in cross-ethnic contexts and heterogeneous cultures.

Immigrants caught between two cultures are in a state of “cultural marginalizer”. Robert E. Park first proposed the concept of “marginality” in 1928 while studying human migration. He pointed out that “one of the consequences of migration is to create a situation in which the individual finds himself striving to live in two diverse cultural group” [13]. This concept was later developed and elaborated by Everett V. Stonequist. He argued that the marginal individual experiences an “undetermined status” where the one “may be rejected by both cultural groups” [14]. Dottie faced this dual predicament -- migrancy and displacement -- when constructing her self-assured spiritual home, as she was a “cultural marginalizer” caught between two cultures. As a third-generation British immigrant, Dottie, though born and raised in the UK, was labeled as an “alienated native foreigner” due to her skin color. Deprived of family and national historical heritage by her mother’s rebellion, she felt profound “isolation and loneliness” [6]. Even though she adopted English language, writing and dressing styles, she was still regarded as an “alien” by mainstream society, with remarks like “when in Rome you have to do as the Romans” making her feel “like a traitor” [6], as her exotic background destined her exclusion.

To break through this predicament, Dottie embraced the multicultural integration

path: she forges a way out of her identity dilemma by tracing her historical and cultural roots, actively constructing a viable Englishness in the present, and deliberately preserving a horizon of future possibility. Nasta argues that “home” is a fluid concept and constructing “homes without walls” fosters belonging when diasporic historical ties are fractured [11]. The exploration of the meaning of her name by Dottie can be perceived as a thread in her root-finding and construction of a spiritual home. Halsey notes naming is a vital African cultural ritual [7], and Dottie’s three stages of exploration of her name -- the ignorant fantasizing, the inferior hiding, and the sincere acceptance -- becomes the very medium through which she excavates a lineage that colonial erasure has sought to bury. Through this process, the name ceases to be a simple label and becomes instead a narrative threshold across which she steps into a fuller, more historically grounded understanding of who she is.

However, one of the most remarkable aspects of Dottie lies in its exploration of the spiritual home construction that extends beyond mere finding one’s cultural roots. She did not immediately abandon everything she had in England and embarking on a journey to her homeland to delve into the memories of uprooting. Instead, Dottie starts to realize that one’s identity is not strictly one-dimensional, but is defined and more importantly recognized in rapport with the other, past and present [1]. Although Simon Lewis interrogates the exclusivity of Englishness as an ideology from intertextuality perspective, it remains undeniable that Dottie does, to a certain extent, acquire this very Englishness through her reading practice. Her attainment of Englishness is accomplished through a deliberate, self-directed immersion in the national literary tradition, a process that subtly reconfigures Britain’s own apparatus of “knowledge as power” [9]. In *Dottie*, the two literary works explicitly identified as core texts in Dottie’s reading practice -- *David Copperfield* and *Mansfield Park* -- exert distinct formative effects on her self-fashioning across different stages of her life. As a quintessential Bildungsroman that shares the same generic framework as *Dottie*, *David Copperfield* appears against the backdrop of the harsh, orphan-like adversity marking Dottie’s early years. *David Copperfield* presents a trajectory from destitute child laborer to established writer, achieved exclusively through individual perseverance. This model instills in Dottie the foundational conviction of self-advancement. As Dottie gradually comes to enshrine reading as an inviolable domain of her inner spiritual life, *Mansfield Park* emerges as the moral and spiritual counterpart to this phase of her development. Within the social hierarchy of *Mansfield Park*, Fanny is the only character who retains unclouded moral judgment of Henry Crawford. Her refusal of his romantic overtures embodies the form of spiritual autonomy available to the disempowered within structural hierarchies of power. This literary paradigm leaves a deep mark on Dottie’s own spiritual orientation. As her younger siblings each veer onto wayward, morally compromised paths, Dottie maintains the same lucid, steady self-constancy, rejecting every seemingly expedient route toward psychic decay. It is through the cumulative influence of these works that reading carves out both a coherent developmental trajectory and a robust spiritual foundation for Dottie, ultimately enabling her to forge her own distinct articulation of Englishness within the deeply exclusionary fabric of English society.

Moreover, at the end of the story, in her dialogue with Michael we can also predict that Dottie sustains an unwavering openness to future affiliation with her own racial and cultural heritage. She preserves, with quiet determination, the potential and the capacity to draw closer to her community of origin, keeping this horizon of return alive even as she inhabits her hard-won Englishness. This is not a sign of incomplete

assimilation but a conscious refusal to foreclose any part of her composite self. The very skills of self-cultivation that reading has sharpened -- discernment, self-reflection, historical awareness -- now equip her to imagine a future in which she might more fully reckon with the Black diasporic traditions that shaped her family's past. By holding this possibility open, Dottie treats identity not as a destination to be definitively reached but as a capacity for ongoing re-narration, ensuring that her sense of self remains responsive to the claims of racial solidarity, ancestral memory, and as-yet-unrealized forms of belonging.

Through the integration and harmonization of historical and cultural roots, current life sources, and future life visions, Dottie successfully achieves social mobility and builds up her own spiritual home, thereby discovering a sense of belongingness within herself.

5. Conclusions

This study employs Rosemary George's theory of "The Politics of Home" to explore the process of home construction undertaken by Dottie, a Black female character in Gurnah's novel *Dottie*, within a multicultural context, thereby illuminating the identity formation dynamics of third-generation ethnic minority women. The paper reveals that Dottie's construction of home presents a progressive path from the physical to the social and ultimately to the spiritual, culminating in a coherent and self-reinforcing cycle of identity recognition.

The construction of her physical home, achieved through defending private space, provides the basic guarantee for Dottie's personal independence and self-liberation. The construction of her socialized home breaks through the boundaries of physical space and consolidates the foundation of her identity perception by relying on family and community connection networks. The construction of her spiritual home resolves the dual dilemmas of a "fractured past" and an "alienated present". By integrating historical roots, current life and future aspirations, it realizes class mobility and the establishment of a sense of belonging. In depicting Dottie's personal growth, Gurnah presents readers with a pathway for ethnic minority women to construct self-assured home, realize their self-worth and find their belongingness in a heterogeneous culture. It provides valuable insights into bridging the racial divides and realizing multicultural integration.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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