An Analysis of Hassan's Growth Process in Memory of Departure from the Perspective of Trauma Theory

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Abstract: Tanzanian author Abdulrazak Gurnah won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2021, his first novel *Memory of Departure,* which is set in a 1960s East African seaside town and tells the story of its protagonist Hassan's growth process. Based on the theory of trauma, this paper discusses the causes of Hassan's multiple trauma causes and how he recovers these traumas to achieve spiritual rebirth. This paper in order to encourage modern people to have the courage to face the spiritual trauma, and to face the future with a positive and optimistic attitude.

1. Introduction

1.1 Gurnah and *Memory of Departure*

Gurnah, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, is the author of *By the Sea*, *Desertion*, and *The Last Gift*. There is a common theme running through Gurnah's brushstrokes——"diaspora". In his works, diaspora is not only a geographical migration, but also a profound reflection on identity and cultural roots. Through the concept of diasporic writing, Gurnah skillfully transforms personal emotions and experiences into literary metaphors in which readers can glimpse themselves. He examines the subject of diaspora from the perspective of globalization, thus challenging the hegemony of Western-centrism. Through this way of writing, people can see the living conditions and values of people in different cultural backgrounds. Gurnah's writing style, like a mirror, reflect the common human suffering and hope, and inspire us to rethink how to find our position in an ever-changing world.

His first work, *Memory of Departure*, paints a vivid picture of Africa. Hassan, the protagonist of the novel, is an adventure-hungry teenager on an endless journey in search of his identity and sense of belonging. As the plot unfolds, we witness his deep attachment to his hometown and complex feelings about his broken family. Finally, after a series of twists and turns, he decides to return to the place that brought him painful memories, in search of the lost warmth and peace. This novel has been widely praised by readers for its profound exploration of human nature and its concern for the fate of individuals in social changes.

1.2 Trauma Theory

The term "trauma" originated in ancient Greek, appears frequently in medical literature, and has evolved into a technical term used to describe and study various types of trauma caused by external forces. With the development of the times, the study of trauma has encompassed the interdisciplinary development of various disciplines such as psycho-psychology, neuromedicine, history, philosophy, sociology, and literature.

In the nineteenth century, psychologists led by Sigmund Freud stood at the forefront of the times, and they integrated the traumatic events that individuals may encounter in the process of growing up with psychological principles to form a unique theoretical system. These psychologists have not simply come up with the term "psychological trauma", but have used it as a cornerstone to delve into and study the deepest pain and struggles of the human heart. In the 20th century, a wave of scholarship swept the field of psychology, especially the study of the concept of "trauma", which underwent a significant transformation. Cathy Caruth in the early 1990s defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed and the uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.[1]" Subsequently, Judith Herman devoted herself to an in-depth study of trauma, providing a more comprehensive and systematic perspective for understanding trauma at a time, and since then trauma theory has matured. Herman's contribution to trauma theory lies in her proposal of how to repair trauma, trying to reveal the lesser-known parts of the psyche structure by understanding the psychological trauma experienced by individuals, so as to lead people to face and heal their own inner trauma.

2. Trauma Formation

2.1 Family Environment: Violence and Hatred

The psychological trauma experienced in childhood can cause a range of psychological problems and the events experienced can be single or continuous if not properly managed[2]. Hassan's deformed family relationships were one of the factors that contributed to his childhood trauma. First of all, his father was a perennial alcoholic and domestic violence. Whatever the situation, violence was the only way for his father to solve the problem. His mother and siblings were the targets of his father's domestic violence. Secondly, Hassan's mother is a typical African female figure who survives with a humble, reticent attitude. Despite his father's bad character, Hassan's mother always sided with him to defend him. When the father committed domestic violence, the mother always chose silence and forbearance. His older brother Said is like a shadow of his father, and he is also a hot-tempered man. Hassan's grandmother always curse his family, believing that they could not change their current life. His sister was avant-garde and free-spirited. However, which is unacceptable in Muslims, and in the end her only result is to fall.

The most explosive event in Hassan's childhood was the death of his older brother. His brother was burned to death in front of Hassan, and due to his own young ignorance, Hassan was unable to rescue Said at the last minute. By the time his parents arrived, his brother had already been buried in the fire. His parents hated Hassan in their hearts and regarded him as a "murderer." His father always looked at him coldly, and even his mother, who was the only one who was close to him, chose to stay away from him. When Hassan had a high fever and his body was suffering from pain, what surged in his heart was not the fear and struggle of the disease, but a deep longing. He hopes to return to the embrace of mother's love that makes Hassan's hearts warm and longs for comfort. Despite his young age, his parents still regarded him as an enemy and misfortune to the family. Hassan's life is shrouded in the shadow of his family, and his family relationships are complex and

twisted, forcing him to endure an inextricable fate. "I could only feel terror and loathing for the world they had brought me into.[3]" Hassan's family environment had a profound impact on him. His family's unprovoked reprimands and even violence deeply hurt the softest part of his young heart and left him feeling hopeless. This pain accompanied him as he grew into a young man, and it became a trauma in his heart that would not heal. "Silence for silence[3]", Hassan gradually turned silence into a shell to protect himself , thus forming his own taciturn temperament, which is difficult to reveal to outsiders.

2.2 Living Environment: Discrimination and Poverty

The small town Kenge is a home to people who have been tricked by fate and are struggling to survive. As the Arabs continued to plunder the blacks, Zanzibar gradually became a slave center in East Africa, and Kenge in the novel was the black coast. Slave traders took these unfortunate African people from their original lands and brought them to this desolate and barren place. There is no law, and there is no justice or equality. Slaves were driven like livestock, living in despair and misery. The corners of this place are full of blood and suffering, and the air is filled with an undispellable atmosphere of misery, which makes people face the cruelty of existence and the injustice of the world. With Nairobi as its capital in the 18th century, the British East African colonies were one of the most leading, fashionable and modern cities in Africa. Born into Africa's lowest family, Hassan lived in an environment of filth, anger and endless torment and suffering. When he chose to flee home and join his wealthy uncle, he planted the seed of his ideal in Nairobi. However, the rich uncle's contempt for this uncivilized town, his words are full of disdain and ridicule, and deep down. He defines Hassan as a poor relative who has come from the countryside to beg. Hassan knew he would not recover his grandfather's legacy to his mother, and his only thought was to have the perfect holiday in Nairobi. However, he knew the fact that in wealthy Nairobi, he had to learn to pretend to be crazy and stupid in order not to pose a threat to his uncle.

Influenced by Western culture, the wealthy local residents proved their social status by imitating Western patterns of life. Hassan's uncle considered Africans to be barbaric and treacherous, and it was these natives who hindered his international smuggling business. Salma believed that Western restaurants were superlative, and expensive ice cream represented the eating patterns of the upper class. At the same time, she thought that Western art also represents advanced ideas. In order to prevent his uncle and cousin from despising him, Hassan carefully hid his broken shoes and changed his clothes three times a day. The huge material impact caused Hassan's inferiority complex to start a problem[4]. Hassan was extremely sensitive to his every move, and he was afraid that one of his inconspicuous actions would cause his uncle to sweep him away. In his interactions with his uncle's daughter, Salma, Hassan always fantasized about being able to get closer to her. But he knew that Salma could not fall in love with a poor boy like him, so he deliberately kept his distance. The hardship of the living environment and the contempt of the relatives around him was the second factor that led to Hassan's psychological trauma.

2.3 Social Environment: Rootlessness and Diaspora

In Africa, the colonizers with their strong ships and artillery and powerful cultural offensives, did not become the "other" of Africa, but made Africa the "other" of Europe[5]. In the eighteenth century, Zanzibar broke free from British colonization and established the United Republic of Tanzania with Tanganyika. Africa is a battleground where European enters at his own risk[6]. Zanzibar is dependent on Western aid externally, and its products are imported from Europe and the United States. Internally, the Zanzibar government has done nothing to expand the employment rights of local intellectuals, and the whole country has fallen into a state of stagnation.

"Consternation spread among a people whose race had become more a state of mind than any identifiable characteristic.[3]" The foreign culture brought by the colonizers is like a strong and violent current, ruthlessly impacting the ancient cultural roots of this land. Instead of bringing true tranquility to its inhabitants after independence, Zanzibar has created a deep crisis of cultural identity. The fierce collision between different cultures has destroyed the traditional local social structure and left indelible scars in people's hearts. These scars gradually evolved into deep doubts about their own culture. Hassan had fantasized about being a British student studying and working in the British Isles. The lack of money and the fear in his heart are hindering Hassan's progress step by step. Even if he had enough money, he would not have the confidence to set foot on British soil. This fear stems from his doubts about his ability to be accepted into a heterogeneous culture: he does not know if Britain can be a place to put his heart, and whether he can be a respected person. In this unbearable social environment, Hassan strengthened his determination to flee his homeland. For him, Nairobi represents a new hope and freedom. When Hassan arrived in Nairobi, the harsh reality made him deeply aware that no matter where he was, the rootless state of mind was always with him. On the one hand, he fantasized that his uncle could help him get a position in Nairobi and get out of the impoverished town Kenge forever. On the other hand, he is clearly aware of the gap between him and the city, and no matter how hard he tries, it will be difficult to become a member of it. This state of wandering "on the edge" between two spaces or two worlds is enough to show that Hassan is just an outsider to urban space[7]. In a foreign land, that lingering sense of wandering and a strong desire to belong always makes people feel lost and helpless. This emotion is intertwined and becomes a direct manifestation of the challenges encountered by individuals on the road to cultural identity. Faced with the culture shock of an unfamiliar environment, Hassan constantly searches for a connection between himself and the land, often finding himself in a world that he cannot fully comprehend. This contradictory feeling undoubtedly deepened his deep confusion and uneasiness.

3. Trauma Recovery

3.1 Establishing a Safe Environment: Reconciling with Family

In the first stage of trauma recovery, the victim tries to control his or her body and surroundings[2]. At least at the moment of Hassan' parting, his family had great hope and genuine concern for him. After the breakdown of his relationship with his uncle, Hassan returned to the familiar town Kenge. The pungent smell of the bath is no longer as disgusting as it once was, but makes Hassan feel at home. Although the energetic futon and the scented bathroom in the comfortable space of his uncle's house are in stark contrast to the blackened holes in Hassan's backyard, none of which give Hassan a sense of security. Hassan recounted his experience in Nairobi to his family, gradually releasing his long-held heart. He was amazed that his mother cared about his future naturalization, and that he could even have his own room. This return has brought him closer to his family. When faced with the choice of career, Hassan no longer just wants to choose to flee as before, but takes on the responsibility of the family like a real man. Reconciliation with his family is an important step for Hassan to heal his traumas and regain love and warmth in his heart. Through communication, he gradually unraveled estrangements in the past years, making his home a haven for healing power. For Hassan, the pain of the past has been relieved, and in the process, Hassan has learned how to face the past with a more mature and tolerant mindset, and draw courage and strength from it.

3.2 Reconnecting with Others: Communicating with Salma

In the second stage the victim begins to give a deep and detailed account of the traumatic experience[2]. Hassan's implicit personality makes him silent all day long. Hassan has been abandoned by the world since he was born, and the noise around him seems to have nothing to do with him. All he felt was a deep sense of alienation and loneliness, as if the whole world was rejecting him, and he didn't want to try to fit in. This feeling made him feel both frustrated and helpless, and he longed for someone to understand him and accompany him, but he was afraid that his true feelings would hurt others. In Nairobi, Salma is Hassan's only solace. In a strange land, it was the kind Salma who persuaded her father not to be hostile to Hassan. In further communication with Salma, Hassan gradually became honest about his intentions in coming to Nairobi and the crimes committed by his father. In the process, Hassan recounted his painful experiences in the depths of his soul. Through the detailed narration of the traumatic events, he allows the inner pain to be vented and expressed, thus gradually alleviating the pain caused by these traumas. This process of self-disclosure helps to restore Hassan's mental health. In front of Salma, Hassan can be his truest self. The story ends with Hassan's uncle believing that he had seduced Salma in a misguided manner, so the uncle expelled him from the house and verbally abused him, leaving Hassan frustrated and returning to his hometown. Hassan promised Salma that he would correspond to her when he returned, but after a few months, Hassan still struggled to face his worries, knowing that he could not give Salma a hopeful future. The novel ends with a letter from Hassan to Salma, which makes it clear that Hassan has finally reconnected with Salma. In the end, will the two meet again and share the frontier? The outcome is unknown. Gurnah cleverly designed an open-ended ending, leaving endless room for the reader's imagination. This not only adds mystique to the story, but also inspires the reader to be curious and associate with what might happen to Hassan in the future.

3.3 Self-Redemption: Choose Hassan's Own Life

In the third stage, the victim is gradually ready to take a more active role in the real world, to have the courage to face fears, to make peace with the self, and to build a new self and trust in others[2]. Once Hassan's attempt to pass the national exam to realize his personal values and ideals is slim, but it is the only way to escape from Kenge. After a trip to Nairobi, Hassan witnessed the chaotic environment of Nairobi. There's also a strong sense of crime——smuggling businessmen driving expensive cars laden with illegal goods to the dark corners of the world. Compared with the disease-ridden and dying poor people of Kenge are the most helpless in Africa, struggling to survive in despair, waiting for death. Faced with the country's predicament and the suffocating circumstances in which it lives, many people will flee and seek a place that will bring more hope and opportunity. However, Hassan saw his family struggling to survive in a hard life, and he also felt that the people of Zanzibar as a whole were suffering untold oppression and suffering. Against this background, Hassan realized that it was only through practical action that he could truly bring hope and improvement to those in need. Therefore, he plans to let go of his obsession and share the pressure of the country and his family by filling in the teacher's college. However, Hassan's family knew that this land would only imprison Hassan's life, and even his father mocked him that he would eventually become an alcoholic, domestic violence and corrupt person. After repeated persuasion from Hassan's mother and sister, Hassan finally took a job on a ship called the *Alice* and chose his own life.

Gurnah once confessed that the voyagers made him very interesting. When people leave their hometowns, they also develop new perceptions of themselves. It was only after Hassan left his hometown three times that he realized that he had such a deep understanding of his homeland, and

the hardships of wandering made Hassan grow and have a clearer understanding of himself.

4. Conclusion

Starting from the theory of trauma, this paper explores the trauma and recovery of the protagonist in *Memory of Departure*, and aims to show the trauma caused by the lack of care in the family and the turmoil with the country, as well as convey Gurnah's great concern for the post-colonial country and the African diaspora. In Gourneh's work, he delves into the inner world of refugees in distress. Through delicate brushstrokes, Gurnah depicts the living conditions of countless migrants on the continent and the various challenges they face. These refugees are not just people who have been forced to leave their homes, they are also witnesses and participants in social change. In *Memory of Departure*, we can see the struggle at the individual level, the confusion about the future, and how to find one's position in an unfamiliar environment. At the same time, Gurnah delves into the intricate relationship between identity and cultural identity. In the process, he ingeniously interweaves personal experiences with the historical background of Africa, so that readers can feel how the state and the individual interact and affect the trajectory of each citizen's life. Through her own experience, Gurnah shows readers a common human suffering: the struggle of all people, regardless of skin color, on the road to freedom and dignity.

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