



COLONIALITY OF GENDER: WOMEN OF COLOUR IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S *DOTTIE*

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ABSTRACT. This article examines Abdulrazak Gurnah's (Nobel Laureate 2021) novel *Dottie*, which portrays the precarious lives of non-white British women as they negotiate socioeconomic vulnerabilities within the 20th-century anti-immigration milieu. It shows Gurnah delineating empathetic networks of vulnerability, affirming a close correspondence between familial, social, and institutional systems that reproduce colonial and racial subjugation in postcolonial Britain. Employing a theoretical framework of the coloniality of gender and intersectionality, it analyses this subjugation as structural violence perpetuated by socioeconomic disadvantage and racial ostracisation, and manifesting in gradually piling allostatic load and consequent weathering. Dottie's narrative is explored through her resilient negotiation of intersectional violence, allostatic load, and weathering, ultimately ensuing posttraumatic growth. In doing so, it highlights Gurnah's emphasis on networks of care, empathy, and hope, rather than yielding to structures of coloniality, including toxic racial solidarity, as countermeasures to the socioeconomic marginalisation of racial minorities.

Keywords: Dottie, Gurnah, coloniality of gender, intersectionality, structural violence, racism.

LA COLONIALIDAD DEL GÉNERO: MUJERES DE COLOR EN *DOTTIE*, DE ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

RESUMEN. Este artículo examina la novela *Dottie* de Abdulrazak Gurnah (Premio Nobel 2021), que retrata las vidas precarias de mujeres británicas no blancas mientras negocian vulnerabilidades socioeconómicas dentro del contexto xenófobo del siglo XX. Demuestra que Gurnah delinea redes empáticas de vulnerabilidad, afirmando una correspondencia cercana entre sistemas familiares, sociales e institucionales que reproducen la subyugación colonial y racial en la Gran Bretaña poscolonial. Utilizando un marco teórico de la colonialidad del género e interseccionalidad, analiza esta subyugación como violencia estructural perpetuada por desventaja socioeconómica y ostracismo racial, y que se manifiesta en una acumulación gradual de carga alostática y el consiguiente desgaste. La narrativa de *Dottie* se explora a través de su negociación resiliente de la violencia interseccional, la carga alostática y el desgaste, resultando finalmente en crecimiento postraumático. Al hacerlo, destaca el énfasis de Gurnah en redes de cuidado, empatía y esperanza, en lugar de ceder a estructuras de colonialidad, incluyendo la solidaridad racial tóxica, como contramedidas a la marginalización socioeconómica de minorías raciales.

Palabras clave: *Dottie*, Gurnah, colonialidad del género, interseccionalidad, violencia estructural, racismo.

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1. INTRODUCTION: COLONIAL MODERNITY, BLACK BRITISH LITERATURE, AND *DOTTIE*

Abdulrazak Gurnah's fictional oeuvre depicts societies in which access to power, opportunities, and agency are moulded by race, gender, and class, and their intersections. His non-white women of the British "diaspora space" (Brah, 1996, p. 189) are entangled in a complex web of patriarchal-familial, cultural, and racial relationships, haunted by the histories of slavery and colonialism. In *Pilgrims Way* (1988), *Dottie* (1990) and *The Last Gift* (2011), Gurnah demonstrates that postcolonial gender violence in Britain cannot be comprehended using the same framework as applied to precolonial violence, whether against non-white or white women. We need to consider the gendered construction of race and the racialisation of gender to better address it. This article, examining Gurnah's *Dottie*, argues that the novel portrays the "coloniality of gender" (Lugones, 2008, p. 5) as a form of slow and structural violence in delineating the central character Dottie, her siblings, and her mother, Bilkisu. Rendered intergenerationally, such violence, afflicting 20th-century black British women, is evident in socioeconomic trauma and the consequent physiological "weathering" of the body. The introduction of the article locates coloniality of gender within the context of colonial modernity, to highlight its intersectional structure, and its manifestation in enhanced allostatic load and weathering. Embedding *Dottie* within the 20th-century black British narrative, it

underscores the expansion of the thematics of rupture, migration, and structural intersectional violence in the novel's networked transnational and transcultural canvas. To probe structural socioeconomic violence and consequent trauma, the article theorises coloniality of gender, employing Maria Lugones, and socioeconomic trauma, following Lucy Bond and Stef Craps, as de-essentialising frameworks to address the weathering of the 20th-century black British. Further, Bilkisu's life is unravelled as a site of cultural coloniality and socioeconomic trauma, treating cultural stricture, economic marginalisation, and racial oppression as illustrations of structural violence. The article foregrounds the lingering effects of colonialism and racist thinking by analysing transgenerational trauma and socioeconomic stressors that pile on allostatic load, producing faster weathering for Bilkisu, Dottie, and her siblings. In examining Dottie's struggle against the weathering structures and gendered racism, it asserts the novel's emphasis on the ethics of resilience, empathy, and care against the structural violence of coloniality of gender.

The intersectional framework of coloniality of gender is seminal for this study, as colonial modernity intertwined race and gender to sustain colonial power structures. Edward Said (1979), for instance, unveils that the Europeans conceived the non-Europeans in gendered terms as "passive, seminal, feminine, even silent and supine" (p. 138). Similarly, critical race theorists assert that race and gender should be understood as "inseparable" (Kilomba, 2021, p. 54) and "always interlocked" (p. 55). This interconnected oppression is what Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, p. 140) calls "intersectionality", revealing power implications in complex race, gender, and class-based oppression, where systems of power "collide", "interlock", and "intersect" (Crenshaw, 2017, p. 5). These intersections create compounded forms of oppression that are often invisible while analysing race and gender as separate categories. A key colonial tactic was enforcing a rigid hyper-masculine ideal for men, with "denial of psychological bisexuality in men" (Nandy, 1983, p. 4) or strangulation of "androgynous creative force" (Walsh, 2016, p. 72). This warped ideal of manhood continues to manifest masculine constructions in postcolonial socio-cultural spaces, perpetuating gendered vulnerabilities. Even after the formal demise of political colonialism, coloniality—or the surviving power patterns— permeates the "consciousness and social relations in contemporary life" (Mendoza, 2016, p. 114).

Twentieth-century black British literature variedly renders this intersectional coloniality, engaging racism as the central spine. Some of the early illustrations, Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and Caryl Phillips's *The Final Passage* (1985), portray the socioeconomic predicament of Windrush migrants from the Caribbean, encountering a cold, damp, and racist reception. They echo rupture, migration, and displacement of the trans-Atlantic crossing. Leila's decision to undertake the return journey to the Caribbean, wondering "Why isn't Santa Claus coloured?" (Phillips, 1985, pp. 202-203) reflects failure of arrival due to both racism and black misogyny. In *Crossing the River* (1994), Phillips creates a polyphony of trans-Atlantic voices and engages a fragmented narrative in tracing the tragic fate of the children of slavery. Sudanese Scottish Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* (2019) is a recent literary

intervention that coalesces diachronicity (slavery) and synchronicity (racism) in the intersectional racial experience of non-white women and portrays their socioeconomic and psychological conditions of alienation. Similarly, Somali British Nadifa Mohamed's *The Fortune Men* (2021), set in 1952 multiracial Cardiff's Tiger Bay and sharing *Dottie's* historical setting of post-war Britain, renders the institutional face of racism converging with social anti-black antagonism.

The above-discussed writings construct the black experience around "a political understanding of 'blackness'" (Stein, 2004, p. 14), representing a tension between blackness and Britishness. The black British literary space, although built around racial experiences, is also heterogeneous. It is to account for this heterogeneity that Mark Stein examines literary representations of black Britishness in the writings of African, Caribbean and Indian diaspora authors. *Dottie*, unlike Afro-Caribbean trans-Atlantic narratives, reflects the trans-oceanic imagery of a writer, incorporating Indian and Atlantic Ocean spaces. The novel's 20th-century black British experience is interconnected with a canvas that spans postcolonial margins and nations. Sally-Ann Murray (2013) aptly considers it challenging to locate Gurnah within simple identifications: Zanzibari, of Arab descent, Tanzanian, or English (p. 144). Gurnah's interconnectedness teases all confining or essentialising categorisations.

Dottie stands as a prescient literary archive, pioneering an early exploration of the intersectional oppression of women of colour in post-WWII Britain. It presents a careful probe into the often-erased experience of black Britishness without getting completely subsumed by the tropes of racist tragedy or trans-Atlantic hybridity. What is remarkable about Gurnah's work is that long before academic discourses like "intersectionality" and "coloniality of gender" became central to decolonial and feminist studies, he represented their material and lived realities in fictional form. Writing as a Zanzibari-born writer living in Britain, Gurnah is endowed with a unique lens of insider-outsider positionality that allows him to dissect the peculiarities of the English racial constructs with clarity. Also, *Dottie* is different not only from the broader canon of African immigrant literature but also remains atypical within Gurnah's own oeuvre. Most of his novels centre around East African men as main characters, whose experiences are also shaped by complexities created by their Swahili Arab lineage. In *Dottie*, however, Gurnah turns his gaze towards the complex, multi-generational story of a non-white British family, one which is rooted in, yet radically excluded from, post-war British society.

The narrative of *Dottie* commences with the desperate departure of Dottie's Pathan grandfather from somewhere in the North-West Frontier Province in Pakistan. Running away to avoid enslavement to his half-brother, his wanderings include his participation in WWI in the Middle East on a British naval ship before arriving at Cardiff and marrying a Lebanese woman, Hawa. Their daughter, Bilkisu, who runs away from home at seventeen to avoid a distressed marriage, dies at thirty-seven from an unnamed venereal disease, decaying, "derelict" (Gurnah, 2021, p. 26), and a social outcast. She leaves three children behind from various relationships and prostitution. Her elder daughter, Dottie, the protagonist of the novel, unlike Bilkisu, grapples with the hostile environment to protect her siblings, Sophie and Hudson,

and to improve her own life. In public spaces, she is considered one of the black immigrants and suffers gender vulnerability simultaneously; in her private space, she is subjected to cunning white lust and racially afflicted black masculinity.

David Callahan (2013) analyses Dottie's strife as counterproductive (cruel) optimism to protect the family in racist Britain that derecognises its black face and homogenises non-whites as immigrants. For him, Dottie's life is an ongoing journey of resilience and resistance to racism and exclusion. He finds Gurnah's work permeated with "cultural flows, rhizomatic and liquid disruptions and connectivities" (p. 29), challenging certainties and essentialised identification of his characters. Monica Bungaro (2005) reads the novel as a narrative of un/belonging and a search for identity. Simon Lewis (2013), exploring intertextuality, examines *Dottie* as a critique of the "racial exclusiveness of British textuality, and ... self-consciously constructed altertext of longing and belonging" (p. 39). This article, conceding to identity conundrums for the black British, unravels the novel's portrayal of intersecting socioeconomic oppression and its weathering impact on racial minorities through the lens of coloniality of gender. It also traces structures of resistance, resilience, and growth in their strife.

2. THEORISING COLONIALITY OF GENDER, SOCIOECONOMIC TRAUMA, AND THE WEATHERING HYPOTHESIS

The characters in *Dottie* evade broad categorisations such as "British", "woman", "black", "Muslim", as they never fit neatly into any one of these categories, thereby adding to the novel's complexity. Further, they navigate a diaspora space that structurally produces violence and challenges hybridity and in-betweenness as reading categories, often applied to Afro-Caribbean diaspora fiction. The conceptualisation of "hybridity" and "in-betweenness" (Bhabha, 1994) involves an intercultural third space of enunciation (a place of disavowal of colonial authority). Such a space of enunciation is not accessible to Gurnah's characters. For instance, Britain-born Bilkisu finds herself suspended between her father's Islamic preferences and the Britain that rejects her. There is no intercultural third space for her. Similarly, her daughter, a third-generation Briton, for most of the narrative, strives against her circumstances. To understand this condition of unplaceability for Bilkisu, Dottie, and other characters in the novel, and to grasp what wears them out, we need a framework sensitive to the violence embedded in categories that represent racial minorities and women. Maria Lugones's (2008) concept of "coloniality of gender", building on Aníbal Quijano's foundational work on coloniality, provides such a framework. It allows us to see how power operates not only through undisguised coercion but also through the imperceptible, slow, and gradual erosion of lives caused by the intersecting forces of race, gender, and class.

Aníbal Quijano (2024) envisages coloniality as an entangled matrix, controlling, dominating, and exploiting labour, sex, public authority, subjectivity/intersubjectivity, and their resources and products. He posits that colonialism did not end with the demise of formal colonial administration; rather,

colonial relations outlive it through the enduring structures of modern power. Yet, his framework, as Maria Lugones (2008, p. 2) points out, with the heteronormative and male-centred focus on control of “sex, resources and their products”, is inadequate to account for what happens to people like Bilkisu and Dottie. Lugones addresses the inadequacy of his coloniality/modernity model by situating it alongside intersectionality, bringing two analytical traditions together to address what neither could do alone: the “modern/colonial gender system” (p. 1). In doing so, she not only advances decolonial feminism by responding to the racial exclusions within mainstream feminism, which has often assumed a universal female subject, but also points out the inadequate exploration of gender within coloniality discourse. While the colonial understanding of gender is implicit in both feminist and coloniality frameworks, Lugones (2008) insists on making it explicit to “unveil the reach and consequences of complicity with this gender system” (p. 1). Her work vividly demonstrates that coloniality is not a closed or static model, but what Mignolo et al. (2024) describe as an “open framework” capable of growth and self-correction (p. 5).

The examination of *Dottie* through coloniality of gender questions the *complicity* of white feminism and racial theories by explaining how gender is reorganised when it compounds with race and class. Unlike Eurocentric feminism, which cannot account for Dottie’s (along with her mother’s and sister’s) racialised vulnerability, and unlike black male-centric race theories, which cannot fully address the gendered dimensions of her suffering, coloniality of gender unravels how power operates at their intersection. It also reveals that the trauma that these characters experience is not primarily psychological in the sense that Sigmund Freud (1957) or Cathy Caruth (1996) describe. Freudian and Caruthian psychoanalytical models are focused solely on event-based and spectacle-oriented violence, which cannot capture the kind of trauma that Gurnah traces. In *Dottie*, violence is not spectacular, but it carries historical, structural, and epistemic dimensions. The novel, thus, envisages what Lucy Bond and Stef Craps (2019) conceive as decolonisation of trauma studies. They observe that trauma theory has mainly focused on Euro-American events like World War II, the Holocaust and the 9/11. Coloniality of gender resonates with what such decolonisation requires: “broadening the usual focus of trauma theory” and “acknowledging the traumas of non-Western or minority populations for their own sake” (Craps, 2013, p. 31). The intersectional socioeconomic violence, as reflected by coloniality of gender, is both “slow” (Nixon, 2011)—slowly festering and frequently culminating in catastrophe—and “structural” (Galtung, 1969)—built-in to perpetuate injustices. It manifests in chronic poverty and inadequate access to social security and empowerment infrastructure, relegating racial minorities to precarious strife (child labour, prostitution, drug peddling, etc.), and socio-legal challenges. Such grinding piles on allostatic load, culminating in faster physiological weathering. McEwen and Stellar (1993) define “allostatic load” as “the cost of chronic exposure to fluctuating or heightened neural or neuroendocrine response resulting from repeated or chronic environmental challenge” (para. 4). For marginalised groups, this chronic stress leads to “weathering” (Geronimus et al., 1992, p. 207), a process of accelerated health deterioration. Geronimus et al. (1992), in the case of U.S.

blacks, conclude that poor black women had the possibility of the highest allostatic load, followed by non-poor black women, highlighting the racial burden of gendered trauma. Higher allostatic load demands greater coping efforts, culminating in faster biological weathering. This is what we see in Gurnah's characters: bodies that wear out prematurely, exhausted by the relentless demands of survival. Bilkisu's gradual decay, Hudson's death, Dottie's struggle to keep herself and Sophie alive, all these are not just unfortunate tragedies, but predictable outcomes of lives lived under sustained structural violence.

Dottie foregrounds that the burden of structural violence is inherited and has lingering intergenerational ramifications. Marianne Hirsch's (2008, p. 105) concept of "postmemory" describes how trauma can be transmitted across generations and functions as a personal and cultural stressor long after the event itself (for instance, transmitted memory of slavery). Gurnah's characters carry the past in their bodies, in their self-doubt and lack of conviction, and in the flawed decisions that stem from exhausted judgment. He portrays non-white characters who have internalised the world's judgment of them, who suspect their ontological and cognitive capabilities and whose battered bodies and lives testify to the weathering hypothesis.

Dottie not only documents suffering and desolation but also underscores resilience. Its characters are suspended in a socioeconomic environment that homogenises racial differences into blackness, and Islamic identity into Arabness, denying them specificity and therefore full humanity. Yet within that suspension, they find networks of care and empathy. For instance, Dottie's care for Sophie and Hudson, the bonds that form between individuals, and the moments of recognition that traverse racial and cultural lines, foster what Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun (2004, p. 406) call "posttraumatic growth". These instances offer an alternative epistemology and ontology, a way of knowing and being, that challenges the entrapping logic of coloniality. Gurnah, thus, on the one hand, narrativises the coloniality of gender as an ongoing structural condition for 20th-century British women of colour, exposing the normalisation of their epistemic erasure, their ontological suppression, and their perpetual vulnerability, and, on the other hand, he insists that even within the crushing weight of structure, human beings find ways to hold each other up.

3. BILKISU: CULTURAL COLONIALITY AND SOCIOECONOMIC TRAUMA

Bilkisu, mother of the central character Dottie, is the daughter of a Pathan father, Taimur Khan and a Lebanese mother, Hawa. She is raised in Cardiff in a household deeply afflicted by her father's racial trauma and dominated by his Islamic cultural preferences. His anxieties mirror the collective trauma of first-generation migrants who dread what psychologists call "culture shedding" (Berry, 1997, p. 13), that is, the gradual cultural erosion of heritage over generations. The rift between Bilkisu and her father widens when boys begin noticing her. He becomes paranoid at the thought of a white guy "exploit[ing] and ruin[ing] her" (Gurnah, 2021, p. 22) and of Bilkisu bringing home shame. He reminds her never to forget that white boys were

the “children of the same people” (p. 21) who nearly killed him in the 1919 Cardiff race riots. He was their victim then, and now his unresolved trauma seeps into his daughter’s life. The affection between them dies. Overwhelmed with panic, Taimur fixes her marriage with a Karachi sailor, whom she finds abhorrent. Bilkisu, finally, flees home at the age of seventeen, to avoid an unwanted marriage and “her father’s wrath” (p. 22) should he discover her possible pregnancy by a white boy. She never returns, and after many failed relationships with men and prostitution, becomes derelict and dies an atrocious death, ashamed to share her pain.

Bilkisu’s story expands the limits of the Western psychoanalytical trauma theory conceived as: “an overwhelming experience of *sudden or catastrophic events*” [emphasis added] that produces “*delayed, uncontrolled repetitive*” [emphasis added] psychomotor responses (Caruth, 1996, p. 11). Bilkisu’s suffering is not sudden but cumulative, becoming destructive over time, rather than an instantaneous catastrophe. It unfolds through what Johan Galtung (1969) terms “structural violence”: violence built into social structures that produce a “petrified, hierarchical structure” (p. 171) and hinder human potential. It evolves through what Rob Nixon (2011, p. 2) calls “slow violence”, a concept he originally conceived to describe slowly festering (and revealing its full impact in retrospect) environmental injustice to the poor, which equally applies here. These theoretical positions allow us to see what the Caruthian psychoanalytical model obscures: for racial minorities, violence inheres not in exceptional events but in the routine operations of racism, sexism, patriarchy, and class (or unequal distribution of poverty). We call it “sociocultural trauma”, a term that draws on Jeffrey Alexander’s (2004) “cultural trauma” to capture collectivity and on Nneoma Otuegbie’s (2025) “economic trauma” to capture economic deprivation and exploitation. The coloniality of gender produces precisely such trauma through its entanglement of gender marginalisation, cultural stricture, racism, and economic exclusion.

Her father’s traumatic racial experience, his cultural preferences, and her own subsequent fall into chronic poverty cause Bilkisu’s predicament. Her father, himself a victim, becomes implicated in the tragic fate she suffers. His unresolved agony passes to her. Bilkisu’s complicated weight of inherited trauma, compounded by firsthand experience of socioeconomic injustices, demonstrates what Michael Rothberg calls the convergence of the “synchronic” and “diachronic” (p. 9) axes of racial violence: violence that happens now and that which arrives from the past. All her life, she has blamed her father, “the fierce patriarch” (p. 11), for how her life turns out. For a time, she fights back. She escapes from the patriarchal domination at home and asserts her agency by changing her name to Sharon Balfour. By taking a Christian first name, she passes herself off as a non-Muslim. Her choice of Balfour as a surname is a deliberate act of rebellion against her father, who detested the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, for the Balfour Declaration (1917). The declaration reflected the British pledge for a national home for Jews, the creation of which in Israel led to lasting violent ramifications for the Palestinian Arabs. In doing so, she “contemptuously toss[es] aside the [paternal] loyalties” (Gurnah, 2021, p. 22) and seizes control over her own story. However, having absorbed cultural coloniality

and her father's racial affliction, Bilkisu now encounters a phase of socioeconomic trauma caused by economic destitution and social ostracisation. To survive, she commodifies her body, roaming the cities of England and Wales and "attracting men with her dusky looks and her red lips, and fulfilling for them their prurient fantasies of A Thousand and One Orgies" (p. 23). What begins as a series of short-lived relationships inevitably descends into formal prostitution. The very body which Bilkisu wields as a tool for liberation becomes an object for commercial exploitation. Thus, her body becomes a site of complex implication, embodying both her agency and her victimisation.

This cycle of oppression is reinforced when cultural parochialism once again quashes her next chance of escaping socioeconomic predicament. She meets a Jamaican man, Jamil, in Leeds, with whom she dreams of a fairy-tale marriage "like Badoura and Qamar Zaman" (Gurnah, 2021, p. 25). But Jamil's father refuses to let his son "be ruined by a woman like her" (p. 25). "A woman like her" can refer to prostitution, her non-Christian background, her problematic heritage, or an intersection of all these judgments. In a stark irony, Jamil's father, who positions himself as the guardian of cultural purity, threatens Bilkisu and her daughters with rape and torture. Abandoned again and convinced that "fathers are tyrants. They can't help being like that" (p. 25), Bilkisu flees. Now a mother of two daughters, she moves to Carlisle, where her poverty deepens, and she is forced to commercialise her body further.

In Carlisle, Bilkisu's condition is set against a backdrop of intense racial segregation in 1940s Britain. With World War II underway, the British government, paranoid about interracial relationships, mandated that black American GI soldiers be kept "strictly away" (p. 12) from white women and barred from white social spaces. This policy aimed to control white female sexuality by ostracising black men, apparently threatened by stereotyped black male hypersexuality. However, it propelled black women, like Bilkisu, into deeper economic deprivation. Cut off from white men and from respectable black soldiers, these women found themselves with few options. Carlisle became a site where structural violence concentrated. For Bilkisu, commercialising her body was not a choice but the only means of survival. The racism that originated on slave plantations to justify economic exploitation (Williams, 1944) now pervades the British civilian society beyond slavery. Intertwined with chronic poverty, it now displays its "incremental and accretive" (Nixon, 2011, p. 13) violence, revealing itself not in spectacular brutality but in slow, cumulative destruction. In Carlisle, "the black soldiers treat . . . her as a whore" (Gurnah, 2021, p. 26), exploiting her vulnerability, controlling her labour and turning her into a disposable body. This city bestows her with two devastating legacies: her son, Hudson, born to a black American GI, and the venereal disease that kills her at the age of thirty-seven. Her death is not sudden. Her body turns septic, stench, and rots away. Gurnah exposes what the classic Western conception of trauma would render invisible: a human being stripped of humanity not by a single catastrophic event but by a slow decay from structural violence (of race, gender, and poverty).

Reading Bilkisu's tragic life through the lens of coloniality of gender reveals a matrix where cultural subjugation, economic dependence, and racial stigmatisation intersect. As a non-white 20th-century black British woman, this matrix defined and confined her sense of self. Any attempt at rebellion (changing her name, choosing her lovers, fleeing her father) risked falling into the ditch of penury and shame. Men preyed on her vulnerability, taking advantage of her innocence and young age with false promises of a happier future, only to abandon her with added baggage. Her story becomes a tragic tale of futile rebellion and intersectional oppression. But she is not the only casualty of this catastrophe of race, gender, and poverty-driven structural violence; the damage is intergenerational. Her son, Hudson, forced as a child to oversee his rotting, stinking, and dying mother, absorbs her trauma. Consumed by a sense of betrayal from his sisters and propelled by socioeconomic hardships, racism and anti-white antagonism, he turns to drugs, crime, and male prostitution, and proves a "wasted life" (Bauman, 2004). Worn down by hatred and violence, vulnerability, and exploitation, he displays signs of weathering. Barely sixteen, he has already lost his youthful vigour. After completing an eighteen-month conviction period at a reform school, he migrates to the USA, where, ironically, he is found drowned in the same river he is named after, the Hudson. Bilkisu's daughter, Dottie, on the other hand, inherits her defiance but also her shame. Rather than seeing her mother as a figure of anti-patriarchal agency, she remembers her as an embodiment of shame, viewing her choices as anomalous, perverted, and bound to failure. In this, Dottie unconsciously mirrors colonial views, perceiving her own mother as hypersexualised and morally suspect. Similarly, Dottie disapproves of Sophie's reliance on male patronage (the same pattern that destroyed Bilkisu) and of Hudson's regression into the world of crime under the banner of racial solidarity. Gurnah thus traces how trauma perpetuates itself not only through structures but also through the judgments the traumatised pass on to one another. He also exemplifies the tragic consequences of the choices of surrender or rebellion through Sophie and Hudson, respectively. These choices mirror the allostatic toll of British racism, depicted throughout the novel. Dottie, on the other hand, overcomes weathering by treating the inherited trauma as a warning sign. As the next section illustrates, she strategically strives for survival and invests in networks of empathy and care.

4. DOTTIE: WEATHERING, GENDERED RACISM, AND RESILIENCE

Through narrativising the traumatic lives of Taimur Khan, his daughter Bilkisu, and his grandchildren Sophie, Hudson, and Dottie, the novel reflects that "literary testimony communicates affective and relational contagion" (Atkinson, 2017, p. 4). It also illuminates how "transmissive cycles of trauma that are grounded in structural social organisation" (Atkinson, 2017, p. 4) have intergenerational consequences. Simultaneously, in portraying indomitable Dottie and her engagement with networks of support, the novel reflects Gurnah's aesthetic and ethical choices. It emphasises his endorsement of resilience, empathy, and care as counterforces to coloniality of gender.

Twelve-year-old Dottie is thrust into adulthood with the death of her mother, Bilkisu. She is prematurely burdened with work and caregiving responsibility towards her younger siblings, while she herself wilts under the squalor of her mother's prostitution, illness, and death, and their chronic poverty. Bilkisu's death disintegrates the family because Dottie is underage and lacks the means to get custody of Sophie and Hudson. They are sent away to foster care. After fighting and coercing the social worker, Brenda Holly, Dottie succeeds in bringing them home, but this compounds her financial and mental strain. She and her siblings suffer socioeconomic marginalisation and oppression, preventing them from living what Brené Brown (2022) calls "a wholehearted life"—one defined by "engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness" (p. 2). While still in their teenage years or early adulthood, they internalise racist despair, wondering "[w]hy are we black people so useless?" (Gurnah, 2021, p. 165) and feeling that their life is "like living in Hell... Like a kind of punishment" (p. 221).

The white supremacist Britain marks third-generation Britons, Dottie and her siblings, as foreigners, engaging their skin colour as a "cultural marker" (Callahan, 2013, p. 29). This othering begins institutionally when, after their mother's death, the social worker, Brenda Holly, prefers to send Sophie to a boarding school experienced with "foreign girls" (Gurnah, 2021, p. 33) and Hudson to a family desiring "a foreign child" (p. 33). Similarly, their landlord, Andreas, explicitly groups Dottie with immigrants, while declaring that the Englishmen bring "niggers like [her] from Jamaica to do the dirty work" (p. 59). David Callahan (2013) rightly critiques scholars like Jaqueline Bardolph and Monica Bungaro who compound this fallacy by misreading Britain-born Dottie and her siblings as "migrants" (p. 29). This imposition of foreignness is doubly binding due to a "rupture in the family line" (Callahan, 2013, p. 30)—the unknown paternal lineage and a withheld maternal history. Being born of Bilkisu's multiple short-lived relations, the children never inherit their father's culture. Additionally, harbouring anger against her parents, Bilkisu never mentioned them to her children. Consequently, Dottie will never know the full heritage that her name, Dottie Badoura Fatma Balfour, represents. The entanglement of racial appearance with foreignness has consequences beyond economic exclusion and psychological burden. It imposes a racially constructed judgment on their intellect and morality. Such judgments reflect structural operations of "coloniality of power" (Quijano, 2024, p. 153), functioning through the control of knowledge, subjectivity, economy, authority, and gender and sexuality.

In her early life, Dottie lives in crippling fear of almost everyone around her: teachers, the supervisor at work, the policewoman, and the social worker, Brenda Holly. These white people make her feel "dirty [-] grubby and covered with mud and ochre like the savage" (Gurnah, 2021, p. 37). She internalises racist tropes, where blackness equates with primal squalor. The racial othering implants in her an internalised inferiority complex that manifests repeatedly. She is ashamed of her inability to comprehend an unabridged Dickens and of having to read from the children's section. She displays disbelief when Dr Murray notices her and avoids engaging with him. She refrains from commenting on the absurd sensationalisation

of immigration to Britain as “a national catastrophe” (p. 64), while fully knowing of massive European emigration to settler colonies. Thus, facing economic destitution, educational handicap, and social alienation, Dottie undergoes a profound crisis of self-worth in her early years.

As a teenager, Dottie encounters explicit racism and sexism at her workplace. In the days following the anti-immigrant Notting Hill violence of 1958 in London, racial harassment amplifies, and she is subjected to racial slurs and bullying. Colleagues intrude into the privacy of the toilet, complaining about foul smells, hurling verbal abuse like “jungle bunnies”, “nig-nogs”, “niggers” (Gurnah, 2021, p. 108), and accusing immigrants of ruining and contaminating England, “the earthly paradise” (p. 109). This rhetoric carries the memory of the slavery era. The racist tropes that riots invigorate, including lascivious black sexuality and threats of miscegenation, validate Simon Lewis’s critique of “the ideology of Englishness” (p. 42), which ostracises native-born black Britons. This surge in racist anti-immigrant sentiment reflects what Stef Craps (2013) identifies as the nature of structural trauma: it is historically rooted but “continues to cause damage in the present” (p. 32). It perpetuates the coloniality of gender for non-white women. Ultimately, the colonial constructs that Walter Mignolo (2011) calls “colonial difference” (p. 86)—an epistemological hierarchy that subjugates non-white races as primitive—and that Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) calls “ontological colonial difference” (p. 254)—which reduces them to rape-thirsty, rapable, and thus, disposable bodies—remain operational. These constructs continue to fuel the structural racial violence against the non-white British.

Dottie is socioeconomically battered, racially alienated, and domestically disappointed. Her dwellings at Balham are weathered, smelly, and hygienically compromised. Her building is inhabited by destitute immigrants: a perpetually wailing Indian man, a stinking and excreta-throwing woman, and an ageing Irish sex worker. This slum is her only option in a housing market openly hostile to people of colour, where signs like “No Dogs, No Children, No Niggers” were common (Gurnah, 2021, p. 59). The relentless stress of these material living conditions and her daily strife for survival augment Dottie’s allostatic load. She displays signs of weathering at the age of twenty, “dried up and terrified, like something that had already died and now could only contemplate its extinction” (p. 119). Her psychic wound manifests in a recurring nightmare where a joyful, innocent little girl “skipping and trotting” (p. 120) is violently dragged by a man with slime-smearing lips. This dream reflects her internalised fear and anxiety.

The concept of “weathering”, as defined by public health researcher Arline Geronimus (2006), explains the health deterioration of African Americans and other marginalised groups due to cultural oppression and economic exclusion. Furthermore, Kayla Yup (2022) notes that chronic stress and socioeconomic disadvantage contribute to a high allostatic load, which causes adverse health outcomes like “older age, heightened mortality, brain health decline, and low socioeconomic status” (para. 10). Notably, studies have revealed racial disparities in allostatic load, with black individuals exhibiting higher levels on average than white

individuals (Guidi et al., 2020). By portraying weathering as an intergenerational phenomenon, Gurnah renders it as representative of 20th-century black British life. The weathering consequences of this socioeconomic exclusion are starkly manifest in Bilkisu, who met a brutally painful and shameful demise at the age of thirty-seven. This pattern continues with the next generation: Dottie's sister, Sophie, suffers a cardiac arrest at the young age of twenty, confining her to a life of rest and a prescribed diet. Meanwhile, their brother Hudson's path illustrates a different form of destruction. He is initiated into drugs, prostitution, and petty crimes by black youngsters, who exploit his socioeconomic vulnerability and channel his rage through anti-white sentiment. His self-destruction is fuelled by his resentment towards his sister, Dottie. He cannot forgive her for first leaving him alone to care for their derelict mother, and then for pulling him back to their squalor from his stable foster home. His regression—from idealising his white foster family to detesting the entire white race—is a direct response to the exclusionary racism surrounding him. His entrapment in the world of crime demonstrates that attributing black crimes solely to race glosses over the foundational socioeconomic disadvantages of racial minorities. He explains to Dottie:

They [the white] treat you like an animal... All the time show you that you are something they hate. Something below them... inferior to them... If you object, if you fight, they tell you you're obsessed with the colour of your skin. (Gurnah, 2021, p. 191)

In this lament, Hudson describes the very trap that Stuart Hall (1997) identified: the colonial project of endlessly confining the black man within a binary of hyperaggression (requiring taming) and infantilility (requiring constant supervision and guidance).

Amidst this chaos, Dottie discovers a glimmer of hope in Ken Dawes, an English coworker. Having witnessed how men “misused her [mother] and fed her diseases and alcohol” (Gurnah, 2021, p. 173), Dottie is wary of the intrusive male gaze. Although unaware of her lineage, she carries what Marianne Hirsch (2008, p. 105) calls “postmemory”—intergenerationally transferred traumatic memory—from Bilkisu. This includes the trauma of misogyny transferred through witness and affect, and Bilkisu's warning against cultural stricture: “religion and culture were stuff and mumbo-jumbo for old people to force those who come after them to toe the line” (Gurnah, 2021, p. 36). Dottie's own workplace reinforces misogyny and reflects the abject vulnerability of working-class women rendered powerless in the face of a “usual scrutiny” (p. 51) and “egotistical [male] hunger” (p. 120). Ken appears different from these “predatory men” (p. 20). He gradually enchants Dottie with heroic tales of his travels, becoming her “first love” (p. 128). Their conversations are a vehicle for Gurnah to layer contemporary global conflicts and power equations over the historical palimpsest of old migrations and colonial injustice. Intertextualising diffused global crises and violence, they speak of Atlantic crossings, India, Argentina, Indonesia, the Suez Canal and the Middle East, “white Australia” (p. 125), the U.S. Civil Rights champion John F. Kennedy, and the Civil Rights march

in Tennessee. Gurnah deploys narrative strategies such as parallels, juxtaposition, and palimpsest to mutually refract historical and contemporary racial and ethnocentric oppressions and build bridges of empathy. For instance, the backdrop of the 1958 Notting Hill violence invigorates the memory of the April 1919 Stepney riots and Jewish persecution in Tsarist Russia in the conversation between Dottie and her Jewish charge-hand, Mike Butler. Concurrently, the invocations of the Balfour Declaration, World War II and the 1956 Suez Canal crisis, challenge easy labelling of victims and perpetrators. Michael Rothberg (2019) theorises such a conundrum in his conception of the “implicated subject”: one who “occup[ies] positions that align one both to histories of victimisation and to histories of perpetration” (p. 91). The narrative also tracks political and economic crises of postcolonial African nations regressing into coups and ethnic violence. Amidst the turmoil, the narrative also highlights moments of hope for racial minorities, such as the election of civil rights champion John F. Kennedy as the US President, and Algerian triumphs against the French. This narrative schema underscores that Dottie’s individual struggles are embedded within a global order of coloniality.

In the Dottie-Ken relationship, Gurnah inverts familiar polarities. A white man woos a non-white woman in the Othello-style, with (although not so heroic) stories of past triumphs. For a time, Ken’s company allows Dottie to see the world as full of “enchantments” rather than a place for “cringing expectation” (p. 130) of misery. But he ultimately proves Dottie’s premonitions correct by foregrounding her foreignness, commenting on her name, and advising her on how to be “accepted in England” (p. 151). His betrayal reveals his inherent sexism. After growing bored, he becomes parasitic, torments her with self-pity, and confesses to being an absconder from his pregnant wife, fully revealing his dark side. Although wounded by this failed encounter with love, Dottie musters the decisiveness to ask the indecisive Ken to leave. This painful experience prepares her to confront her marginal status in society. Through Ken, she directly encounters her fears of being disposable—“a dusky bit of stuff that he could use and discard” (p. 123). She also realises the futility of trying to distance herself from her complex belonging. Her diffidence is evident when she omits her given name, Fatma, while introducing her full name to Ken because it sounds “so obviously and familiarly foreign, like a cliché” (p. 135).

Ken’s departure plunges Dottie back into the burdens of her dysfunctional family, compounded by a sense of shame for failing to protect them. Her crisis deepens when she witnesses her siblings toppling in their lives, leaving her “resigned and defeated... almost past caring... [without] the strength to keep fighting for all of them” (p. 249). Dottie loses the racially wounded Hudson to anti-white black antagonism that wallows in the dandyism of hatred and crime without grasping its darker repercussions. She tastes more of it through Sophie’s irresponsible lover, Jimmy, and his so-called Ghanaian brother, Patterson. Both display masculine and misogynistic revulsion against white people. Jimmy’s imprisonment brings Patterson to Dottie’s domestic space soon after Sophie gives birth to his son. The child, named Hudson after her dead brother, is given the second name, Patterson, to signal Jimmy’s racial solidarity, a gesture Patterson exploits to gradually take over the household. Often

harbouring moroseness and violence under his skin, Patterson links contemporary events, like the 1965 election-time racial violence, with the historical brutalities of slavery. His deep-seated anti-white antagonism is evident when he warns Dottie about white election-time racial tolerance, predicting “soon they will get tired and make us carry passes and live in ghettos” (p. 285). His counterstrategy against this future, he declares, is “violence and oppression” (p. 285) to “scare them enough” (p. 285). This exemplifies the very trap Stuart Hall (1997) described: adoption of hyperaggression and retribution as a survival strategy. Patterson’s locked-in anti-white aggression frequently translates into domestic violence against Dottie, reinforcing his patriarchal authority through physical intimidation and abuse.

Patterson assumes lordship by funding their new house in Brixton, which Dottie and Sophie had dreamt of buying to escape the squalor of the rental in Balham and provide young Hudson with a healthy childhood. His intrusion deepens as he begins exploiting Sophie’s sexual vulnerability. He takes over the legal and financial matters, displays “methodical and stubborn violence” (Gurnah, 2021, p. 273) around the household, and runs his illegal racket from the house. By rendering them dependent on him, he unveils “wilfully and with ease, how hopeless and vulnerable their position was” (p. 278). Despite her vigilance, Dottie falls prey to his predatory male desire in moments of weakness. Other than inflicting physical and sexual aggression on her, he inflicts psychological control and authority, relishing Dottie’s “abject loss of control” (p. 308) and her defiance turning into “jabbering submission” (p. 308). Mindful of Dottie’s guilt of sleeping with him (her sister Sophie’s boyfriend), Patterson enjoys prodding it, calling her “sis” (p. 287) right after having sex with her. Dottie is appalled to observe her conceding to “his scheming” (p. 288). Patterson, a victim of racial oppression himself, reflects the complex implications of the victim-perpetrator binary in his relationship with Dottie. He embodies what Steiner and Olaussen (2023) describe as an “individual’s capacity to act in paradoxical ways”, adding a characteristic of “indeterminacy” (p. 2) to Gurnah’s fiction. Through Dottie’s struggle against an entangled edifice of raced and gendered oppression involving both white and black male agents, Gurnah exposes the analytical limits of white feminism and black race studies.

Dottie’s fighting spirit and stubbornness to survive—a form of resistance—is manifest in her defiance of multilayered socioeconomic and legal white authority. Despite immense challenges, she retrieves Sophie and Hudson from foster care and survives racial domination. Now, she must face Patterson, whose masculine and misogynist control is built around the rhetoric of “racial solidarity” (Collins, 2022, p. 164). Patterson threatens the very foundation of Dottie’s world: her role as a caregiver. This responsibility has given her a “sense of control” which has been “some compensation for the responsibilities she [has] assumed to be her burden” (Gurnah, 2021, p. 278). Dottie’s fighting spirit, caregiving attitude, and ability to survive collectively build her resilience. In developmental psychology, this Dottie-like resilience is defined as achieving “good developmental outcomes despite high risk status, sustained competence under stress, and recovery from trauma” (Werner, 1995, p. 81). Ultimately, unlike Hudson and Sophie, who succumb to the damaging

lure of racial solidarity and fall into deeper socioeconomic squalor, Dottie actively challenges it.

Dottie's resilience is bolstered by external support from two women: Brenda Holly, the social worker, and Estella Hoggar, her tutor at Morley College. Despite Dottie's initial resistance, Brenda Holly supports her in navigating crises with her siblings, securing social security benefits, and developing reading habits that mature over time. Meanwhile, Estella Hoggar awakens her ambition and courage. By sharing her own mother's story—a victim of patriarchal abuse due to lack of rebellion—Estella draws Dottie into a network of empathy and resilience. This transmission of courage and optimism prepares her to combat Patterson's misogynistic intimidation, which aimed at “standing in the way of possibilities, enforcing the limits” (Gurnah, 2021, p. 300). When Patterson attempts to molest her with the intention of crushing her spirit, she fights with “ferocity and strength” (p. 308). She refrains from screaming for help “like a frightened innocent” (p. 308). Instead, by “claw[ing] and kick[ing] and twist[ing] and bit[ing] until he release[s] her” (p. 308), she reclaims her sovereignty both from patriarchal abuse and toxic racial solidarity. Having triumphed in this pivotal struggle, Dottie emerges more resolute, nurturing what Frantz Fanon (1986, p. 110) termed “ontological resistance”—a fundamental rejection of the racial dependence to which her siblings tragically surrender.

This transformation represents what psychologists call “posttraumatic growth” (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004, p. 406)—where trauma or a challenging life crisis leads to positive psychological development. Dottie manifests posttraumatic growth through academic pursuit, rearing intellectual agency and career progression. She builds meaningful relationships with her Jamaican neighbours in Brixton, maintains connections with Brenda Holly and Estella Hoggar, and forms a bond with Dr Murray's grandson, Michael Mann. It is in these bonding spaces of “rapport, empathy or love,” nourished by their shared experiences of marginality, that Dottie witnesses “moments of freedom” (Steiner, 2010, p. 127). Her earlier weak statements about her belonging—such as simply stating “[t]his is where we live. We belong here” (Gurnah, 2021, p. 190), or “England” (p. 241)—now evolve into more critically engaged assertions like “I'm not a Londoner” (p. 316), reflecting her complex, evolving relationship with her identity. She compensates for her unresolved heritage by investing in cross-cultural third-world consciousness, thereby challenging colonial frameworks of knowledge and subjectivity.

As a postcolonial-postmodern novel, *Dottie*, in its open-ended closure, refuses cathartic narrative resolution and highlights the continuation of structures of colonality of gender. Denied the knowledge of her grandfather's migration to Britain, Dottie embodies an unresolved cultural lineage, challenging the diasporic narratives of return to real or imaginary homelands. She, rather than pursuing her unresolved past, invests in empathetically connecting with the third-world quandaries still subjected to ethnocentrism, political upheavals and Euro-American power structures. Although the novel's episodic and fragmented narrative acquires some linearity in rendering Dottie's life, it nevertheless suggests her embeddedness in a racial and gendered world where resolute resilience will only ensure survival,

not transcendence. Despite linearity, the narrative remains fastened to the tragic and resilient narratives of Ghanaian Michael Mann and Estella Hoggar, the daughter of Nazi-fleeing Jews. Gurnah engages intertextual references to Victorian fiction (*David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations* and *Mansfield Park*), which highlight the class oppression of white children, who are either orphaned or given away by their parents. This allows him to align his work with his larger endeavour: portraying women and children, who are denied “full expression due to social or gender dogma” (University of Kent, 2021). Through these narrative engagements, *Dottie* invests in building transnational and transracial empathetic collaborations. The extensive reference to *David Copperfield* contrasts with Dickens’ social realism, in which the narrative culminates in a cathartic resolution and the protagonist’s cognitive maturity. For Gurnah’s black Britons, there is no such resolution. There is either traumatic destruction (Hudson’s death as a banal parody of sublime tragedy, drowned in the river he is named after) or endless Dottie-like struggle against battering and weathering. However, by painting a powerful portrait of a non-white woman in Dottie, Gurnah insists on ontologies of resilience, empathy, and care in opposition to coloniality and counter-colonial violence. Dottie does not merely survive the systemic intersectional violence of race, gender, and chronic poverty; she embarks on a path of “posttraumatic growth” (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004, p. 406), displaying remarkable resilience, deep empathy and hard-won ambition.

5. CONCLUSION

Gurnah’s *Dottie* traces what traditional event-based models of trauma obscure, that is, the slow and structural violence that afflicts 20th-century black British women. Bilkisu’s rotting body, Hudson’s drowned one, Sophie’s failing heart, and Dottie being worn down at twenty—none of these come from a single event, but from forces too slow and too woven into the ordinary to attract attention until the damage is done. Their fate, read through the integrated theoretical framework—coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2008), structural and slow violence (Galtung, 1969; Nixon, 2011), allostatic load (McEwen and Stellar, 1993), and weathering (Geronimus et al., 2006), reveals the epistemic erasure, ontological predicament, and all-pervasive vulnerability that marked countless black British women’s everyday lives.

The novel also reveals how trauma persists through inter- and transgenerational transference in a lingering racist milieu. Bilkisu inherits her father’s trauma and passes it to her children; Hudson inherits his mother’s shame and enacts it on himself; Sophie perceives no alternative but to surrender and treads in her mother’s footsteps; Dottie inherits the same burden but carries it differently. Through these transmissions, Gurnah illustrates the entrapping logic of coloniality: those caught within it tend either to surrender to its structures or to embrace counter-racial violence that merely reproduces the trap. Gurnah’s alternative response, which challenges the coloniality of gender and repudiates toxic racial solidarity, is portrayed through Dottie and emphasises resilience and networks of empathy and care. Dottie’s bonds with Brenda Holly, Estella Hoggar, her Jamaican neighbours,

and Michael Mann are what enable her “posttraumatic growth” (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004).

Dottie intersects with Gurnah’s larger fictional oeuvre, including *The Last Gift* and *Pilgrims Way*, in delineating operational coloniality, racial trauma, and socioeconomic malaise perpetuated by 20th-century white-supremacist Britain. However, what is uniquely remarkable about *Dottie* is its expansion of the canvas of black Britishness and its absolving of blackness from national and cultural baggage, thereby opening spaces for interconnectedness. This article emphasises *Dottie* as an exemplar of interconnections of care, empathy, and hope. Therefore, it stands as a seminal text for any study of empathetic collaboration across margins; a reminder of what becomes possible when care, not hatred, becomes the ground of resistance.

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