

## TRANSMISSION OF TRAUMA AND MEMORY: A MARXIST ANALYSIS OF ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S THEFT

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### ABSTRACT

The thesis examines the intergenerational transmission of trauma and memory in the novel *Theft* (2025) by Abdulrazak Gurnah, within the framework of Marxist literature criticism, which is dialectical and combines the concept of the political unconscious proposed by Fredric Jameson with the theses on the philosophy of history of Walter Benjamin. The study explores how trauma is created and perpetuated by class exploitation, economic dispossession, patronage systems and neocolonial structures across three generations in the history of Zanzibar, from the revolution in 1964 to the transition from postcolonial socialist experiments to EU-funded development and to tourism economies. By closely reading the gaps, the silences, the shifting of the centres of focalisation, the non-linearism of time, and the multivalent metaphor of 'theft' the analysis shows that, in the novel, trauma is not only psychological but rooted in the economics of postcolonial capitalism. Family narratives, family "wrongs", and family "silences" provide solutions to structural contradictions, ideological, whereas Benjaminian moments of revolutionary memory interrupt conformist historicism and point toward and point to utopian possibilities of care and endurance. The results show that Gurnah's work is a diagnosis of the political unconscious of unfinished decolonisation and an opportunity at the same time for fragile sites of resistance. It is a materialist perspective that combines psychoanalytical trauma theory and historical materialism and adds to postcolonial literary criticism by demonstrating ways in which literature can both reflect and remaster the "hurt" of history.

**Keywords:** Abdulrazak Gurnah, Transmission, trauma, the political unconscious, revolution, postcolonial capitalism, Zanzibar Revolution, class exploitation, and intergenerational memory.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The intergenerational transmission and cultural expression of trauma and memory is a key issue in the fields of literature, history and culture today. As scholars begin to appreciate the effects of trauma beyond its immediate victims, in an era defined by the echoes of colonialism, partition, dictatorship, and genocide, as well as the

structural violence of neoliberal capitalism, many people are seeking to understand how trauma manifests in the lives of children. As trauma is increasingly being recognised as having ripple effects beyond immediate victims, in an era defined by the legacy of colonialism, partition, dictatorship, genocide, and the structural violence of neoliberal capitalism, many are

interested in how trauma 'shows up' in the lives of children. Rather they are mediated, inherited and reworked in the context of narrative, visual culture, familial practices and general ideologies. Especially in literature, it serves as a privileged place in which these mechanisms of transmission show up, are challenged and can even be changed. A useful way to take the discussion beyond the purely psychoanalytical and deconstructive discussions of trauma is a Marxist analytical approach. It introduces historical materialism, which provides a historical and material perspective to the analysis of trauma, as well as on the historical struggle to remember, forget and/or sell it as part of the dominant ideologies or counter-hegemonic projects.

Cathy Caruth's trauma theory work is based on the contradictory temporality and unrepresentability of traumatic experience. Trauma, she asserts, is not processed or absorbed in the consciousness at the moment of trauma, but rather comes back in a delayed fashion, as fragments, repetition, and intrusive memories that are not narrative able. That immediate seeing of a violent event can be what Caruth calls an "absolute inability to know it," can be "paradoxically" belatedness. This latency leads to the idea that history, like trauma, is never solely an individual's, or that history is the very means by which one is implicated in the other's trauma. (Caruth, 1996, p. 24) In literary texts, such disturbances of chronology, gaps and repetitions in the formal structure can repeat the struggle of the psyche with the unclaimed past. Caruth's model highlights the psychic and representational crises created by trauma, but some critics have pointed to the dominance in the model of Eurocentric, event based, catastrophic traumas, and the lack of theorizing of the everyday, structural, and long-term trauma perpetrated by capitalism and colonialism.

For Marianne Hirsch the transmission of memory can be intergenerational and familial, and is extended by her notion of postmemory. Postmemory is a term used to describe the involvement of the "generation after" with powerful, sometimes traumatic events that happened before their births, but were

nonetheless so deeply embedded in the stories, pictures, actions and silence that they become a memory in their own right (Hirsch, 2008, p. 106; Hirsch, 2012).

The literature of Africa has historically been a venue where such complex experiences of trauma and memory have been explored. Writers deal with history not as occurrences but as the manner in which history continues to live in the psychological and emotional lives of individuals. Abiola Irele (2001) argues that in postcolonial African literature memory is usually not presented as a solid record of events but a continual and often painful reconstruction of events. This literary tradition is exemplified by the fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah. Gurnah was born in Zanzibar in 1948 and came to England as a young refugee in the late 1960s, an experience that significantly affected his literary imagination and his continuing interest in issues of displacement, exile and cultural dislocation. He started writing in the 1980s and has always been interested in the long-term effects of colonial disruption and the intricate social dynamics of East African coastal cities. His work was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2021 for its "uncompromising and compassionate" indictment of colonialism and the refugee experience.

This tendency continues in the novel *Theft* (2025) that demonstrates the social and economic growth of present-day Tanzania. The unfolding plot is mediated by a web of characters, whose family secrets, changing social situations and the continuing effects of historical disruption all play out in networks of kinship and economic reliance. The title itself is multivalent, referring not only to discrete acts of loss or appropriation, but also to the slower, more systemic erosion of dignity, opportunity and historical continuity. That the novel's focus on patronage, dependency and social hierarchy reveals how interpersonal relations are determined by material conditions and unequal access to resources.

Even if it is often handled from a psychological perspective, the trauma is ultimately made up of the material conditions of life. Poverty, social inequality and economic dependency do not

simply generate pain. They provide circumstances in which trauma is more likely to happen, more difficult to handle and more easily transferred from generation to generation. Raymond Williams (1977) argues that human experience is rooted in “lived materiality”, and that economic systems are a major force for shaping emotions, memories and relationships. This is particularly the case in postcolonial societies when structural inequalities limit opportunity and reshape social relations. In *Theft*, Gurnah stresses this link by highlighting the impact of economic dependence and class difference on family relations and individual choices. Patronage systems create imbalances of power which lead to subtle controls. Often people are compelled to remain silent about terrible situations in order to preserve their social and economic security.

*Theft* (2025), a novel by Abdulrazak Gurnah, focuses on the novel to the extent that it is the centre of this study. The novel follows the lives of three characters set in Tanzania between the late 1980s and early 2000s just before the onset of socialist experiments and the rapid liberalization of the economy, tourism and international aid: Karim is influenced by his mother Raya's forced marriage and domestic abuse, separation, and the subsequent rebuilding of fractured family bonds; Fauzia confronts childhood illness, academic promise, marriage and post-partum struggles; and Badar, a young servant, has hidden familial connections, an unjust accusation of theft, and a movement from his village origin to Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam, raising questions of belonging and betrayal. The repeated theme of “theft” echoes in several ways: literal charges of theft, betrayals of trust and intimacy, and the failure to fulfil family duties; and prompts reflection on dispossessions of the past and dispossessions of structures. In *Theft*, a Marxist examination of the transmission of trauma and memory brings out the complex ways in which such intimate, familial wounds are manufactured and passed on in material circumstances and class relations, not just psychically or culturally.

## 1.1 Statement of the Research

This study examines the transmission of trauma and memory from one generation to another in the novel by Abdulrazak Gurnah entitled *Theft* (2025) through the application of the dialectic approach presented by Walter Benjamin in his 1940 essay entitled “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and Frederic Jameson in his 1981 publication entitled “The Political Unconscious”. This research examines the impact of the uncompleted 1964 Zanzibari revolution and the colonial capitalist legacy on three different generations through the processes of subtle and silent dispossession such as intergenerational abandonment, servitude rooted in class difference, silencing of families and re-commodification of land and labour in the process of globalisation.

## 1.2 Research Objectives

- To explore the impacts of class and economic exploitation on different characters in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Theft*.
- To show the exploitation on the basis of class and economic factors, causing trauma in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Theft*.
- To show the traumatic elements in the Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Theft* taking memories.

## 1.3 Research Questions

- 1. How do the impacts of class and economic exploitation on different characters in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Theft* reflect?
- 2. How the exploitation on the basis of class and economic factors are causing trauma in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Theft*.
- 3. How the traumatic elements in the Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Theft* taking memories?

## 1.4 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the growing field of materialist postcolonial criticism by offering a rigorously dialectical framework that bridges Benjamin's philosophy of history with Jameson's interpretive method. It goes beyond psychological or cultural approaches to the study of trauma in Gurnah's works to explore the role of the

economic base in its superstructure representation within the narrative of families, individual aspirations, and current development theories. By examining *Theft*, a more recent but under explored novel by Gurnah, the study highlights the far reaching influence of the 1964 Revolution in people's lives and collective memory, proving the capacity of literature to understand the political subconsciousness of capitalism and redeem the defeated via revolutionary memory. The findings will be relevant for scholars of East African literature, trauma studies, memory studies, and Marxist criticism.

### 1.5 Scope and Delimitation

The novel chosen for discussion is Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Theft* (2025). The study is delimited to a materialist analysis grounded exclusively in the dialectical pairing of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*. It deals with the portrayal of intergenerational trauma, transmission of memory, class conflicts and the metaphor of theft in the unique historical context of Zanzibar's postcolonial experience. The study is rooted in the specified theoretical framework for methodological consistency and depth, however larger postcolonial, trauma or memory theories are discussed when necessary. The study is conducted through close symptomatic reading of the novel's narrative techniques, character dynamics particularly Karim, Fauzia, and Badar, familial silences, and representations of space and development. It does not extend to comparative analysis with Gurnah's other works or exhaustive engagement with other critical approaches.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Marxist historical materialism gives a theoretical foundation for the interpretation of literary writings in terms of socio-economic systems and class relations. The basic assumption of historical materialism is that the material conditions of a society, the modes of production and the relations of production, define the overall social, political and intellectual process of existence

(Marx, 1977, p. 389). The important point here is that human consciousness and cultural creations such as literature are not isolated but are determined by the economic bedrock on which the superstructure of ideology, law, politics and art rests. This link is expressed by Marx and Engels (1970) in *The German Ideology* when they state "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (p. 64), referring to the ideological function of cultural resources within class societies.

In *The Political Unconscious* (2002), Jameson elaborates on these main concepts to imply that all works are imbued with a 'political unconscious' that contains the historical and ideological tensions of their time of production. Narrative, according to Jameson (2002), is a socially symbolic act that mediates between individual experience and collective history by means of formal tactics that reveal and conceal class antagonisms (p. 20). It is a hermeneutic that allows critics to dig the repressed historicity of literary works, and to explain how aesthetic forms function in the strains of material reality. Jameson's three tiered approach to the analysis of texts as political history, society and history in the broadest sense provides a sophisticated tool for Marxist literary interpretation that rises above mechanistic economism.

Caruth (1996) writes about the nature of trauma and its relationship with memory and history. According to her trauma is an overwhelming experience that cannot be fully processed at the time it occurs and returns later through repeated memories and emotional flashbacks. She emphasizes that traumatic memory does not follow a straight chronological line but appears in fragments gaps and silences within personal narratives. Mambrol (2018) describes how trauma theory has moved from clinical psychology into literary and cultural studies. He states about the way literature captures what is difficult to speak and how writers use broken structures to show the lasting impact of violence. He highlights that literary texts become a necessary space where silenced memories find expression and where the past continues to shape the present.

Craps and Buelens (2008) criticize the traditional theories of trauma which regard trauma as an instant and brief event. Their writings are postcolonial trauma novels. In this kind of works, the brutality of colonialism is a continuous structural process that affects deeply the communities over generations. They suggest that postcolonial literature employs specific narrative strategies such as fractured timelines and many perspectives in order to embody the inheritance and resistance of historical sorrow.

The seminal work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) by Cathy Caruth is still fundamental. Trauma is the event that is not fully processed or understood at the time, but comes back later as bits and pieces, nightmares and compulsive repetitions, according to Caruth. Traumatic knowledge is the most direct knowledge of a violent event that is an absence of knowledge or the “paradoxical absence of immediacy” (Caruth, 1996, p. 92). This time allows trauma to pass through time and subjects. Like trauma, history is never “one’s own”, the history is “the way we were implicated in each other’s traumas” (Caruth, 1996, p. 24). The transmission is transhistorical and ethical: future generations or other subjects are involved in the past traumas in the very shape of history and narration. The manifestations of trauma in literature are seen in irregular sequences, gaps and non-linear structures that recreate the trauma as it fails to be integrated into the psyche. Though Caruth’s model has been effective and influential in explaining the intergenerational and infectious nature of trauma, it has been challenged for its universalising implications and its emphasis on Western (or Holocaust) based models.

Dominick LaCapra’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001) provides a historian’s intervention, those who “act out” compulsive repetition, and those who “work through” critical distancing, with the magical potential to be an ethical and political agent, and to mourn. “The end of all history in trauma” is not the right way to go, warns LaCapra, nor is the unspeakability principle to become “a general aesthetic or ethical norm.” He stresses the importance of the

historical particularity and of the dangers of “memory envy” or of taking the place of the survivor. Such critiques reveal the continuing issues surrounding representability of trauma, ethical issues with transmission, and the danger of ‘psychologizing’ entire cultures and/or reducing historical processes into psychic injuries.

## 2.1 Marxism, Trauma, and Memory:

### Theoretical Intersections

The ideas of Marxist literary theory can be used to explain the effects of material and ideological conditions on trauma and memory. It is central to the works of Fredric Jameson: *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981); and his introduction to the Algerian revolution, *The Dream Life of Paul Aries* (1972). According to Jameson, any cultural artifact is a “socially symbolic act” and it is a way of “imagining” a solution to social “contradictions” that cannot be faced in reality. The famous quotation of “History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis” (Jameson, 1981, p. 102) comes to mind. In this perspective, history is filled with a traumatic essence: it is the burden of class struggle, of exploitation, of lost potentials, which is symbolically managed or repressed. The “political unconscious” refers to the historical contradictions which are revealed and concealed in the text. In a Marxist reading then, the narratives draw attention to the “hurt” of history, as well as (and frequently more) its most radical implications.

The framework is clear and relevant to the topic of trauma and memory. “Hurt” can be seen as an effect of traumatic histories dispossession (colonial), revolutionary violence, economic crises. Memory practices are places where dominant ideologies contribute to forgetfulness and naturalisations of this hurt (e.g. a history of progress that talks over primitive accumulation) or counter-memories are able to voice class consciousness and utopian futures. Louis Althusser’s theory of the ideological state apparatuses and the ideology of memory (1971) also helps to understand the interpellations and reproductions of memory in institutions,

education and culture. Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony draws attention to the constant contestation of "legitimate" memory and over which traumas are remembered and which are ignored.

Notwithstanding these echoes, there has been limited discussion of the potential interconnections between Marxist theory and trauma/memory studies, a "missed encounter," as Enzo Traverso has called it, the subject of some criticism by scholars and the explicit focus of Gal Kirn's work. In her account of the structural need of capital to forget violence, Kirn has translated into Marxist memory one of the most explicit recent attempts to bridge the fields in her 2025 article, "A Contribution to Marxist Memory Studies: The Structural Need of Capital to Forget Violence and Eternally Remember Debt." Capitalism structurally allows for the forgetting of its foundational violences (primitive accumulation, colonialism, slavery, genocides) and the creation of new forms of memory that are focused on debt and guilt, argues Kirn. Drawing on Marx's concept of 'primitive accumulation' and its continued forms ("accumulation by dispossession", according to David Harvey; 'accumulation by straining' memory, according to Kirn, 2025), Kirn suggests the possibility of a 'primitive accumulation of memory': capital is able to forget or distort the memory of violence in order to legitimate itself, while it is simultaneously building indebted subjects whose 'memory straining towards the future' ensures their compliance and repayment. Stef Craps's *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds* (2013) is a much needed postcolonial addition to the materialist concerns. Criticizing the Eurocentrism, Holocaust/western event-based trauma focus, and the universal appropriateness of a modernist view of fragmentation and aporia for witnessing of the founding texts of trauma theory (Caruth, Felman, Laub, LaCapra), Craps argues that trauma theory has been unable to adequately represent the experiences of people whose trauma has not been centered on the Holocaust or other western event-based traumas. Citing the Eurocentrism, Holocaust/western event-based trauma focus, and

the universal appropriateness of a modernist view of fragmentation and aporia for bearing witness, Craps concludes that trauma theory has not been able to adequately represent the experiences of people whose trauma has not been centered on the Holocaust or other western event-based trauma. He states that breaking with Eurocentrism involves not just extending the scope of the traditional trauma theory, but also recognizing traumas of non-western or minority groups "for their own sake" and "on their own terms" (Craps, 2013, p. 19). Trauma of colonialism – dispossession, cultural destruction and structural violence – must be acknowledged as its own and as part of metropolitan history, to be neither derivative nor secondary. Although Craps does not explicitly articulate a Marxist framework, it provides a space for considering the materialist analysis of the generation and reproduction of colonial and postcolonial traumas as a result of ongoing, structural and economically based violences.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BENJAMIN AND JAMESON

This research provides a comprehensive and integrated unique approach to investigate Abdulrazak Gurnah's book *Theft* (2025). It combines the analysis of trauma transmission and intergenerational memory with the Marxist literary criticism and historical materialism that is enabled by two theories which are selectively chosen and dialectically paired by the author Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981) and Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940). The choice of these two thinkers is intentional and syntactically beneficial it excludes eclecticism (with multiple authors) which can become watered down, whilst maintaining the complete dialectical tension necessary for a truly materialist interpretation. Benjamin's foundational image of history as catastrophe is complemented by the foundational image of history as remembrance that Jameson provides, and his interpretation of how the form of the narrative symbolically works with real class contradictions. In combination, they form an internally coherent whole that captures trauma

and memory as historically situated phenomena which are shaped by colonial capitalism's primitive accumulation, Zanzibar's unfinished revolution and the neo-colonial re-commodification of land, labour and memory under late capitalism's globalisation.

The entire framework is based on Walter Benjamin's image of History in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), a materialist view. As a rejection of the bourgeois historicism which dismisses the past as a mere historical fact that is merely something that once was and is no longer Benjamin counters with the 'tradition of the oppressed' that teaches us that the state of emergency which we live in, is not the exception but the rule. History does not advance, but "one single catastrophe keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of the Angel of History's feet," Benjamin explains. The Angel's face is oriented to the past but a storm from Paradise pushes him to the future the debris, "progress" by our name. The revolution itself in 1964 in Zanzibar an overthrow of the Omani/Arab elite, but not the deeper structures of exploitation is exactly this piling wreckage, in the concrete historical context of Theft. The incomplete liberation that the revolution brings creates a traumatic continuity the older generation is left with "tales of grievances" instead of childhood's stories of wonder life's burden is carried by the older generation without complaint and the younger ones Karim, Fauzia, Badar are left with a world where childhood itself has been stolen, opportunities taken away. These are not personal psychic wounds but rather the fruits and effects of the colonial primitive accumulation, the betrayals of the revolution and the return of global capital, via tourism and "green" development projects.

Benjamin's idea of *Eingedenken*, 'messianic remembrance' is not a nostalgic, melancholy act but rather a revolutionary one, a dialectical practice. "At moments of danger" a memory comes to mind it can be "wrestled away from a conformist historical consciousness" and "seized as it flashes up at a moment of danger. This remembrance does not bring back the past or redeem it and redeems the present instead, it

gives the present a "weak messianic power" on which the past has a claim. Theft is a series of such flashes occurring at just the moments where the realist "surface" of the narrative seeks to fill in the gaps and quieten its silences: Raya's unaccounted-for flight, the "murky arrangement" of Badar's deposition into servitude at the age of thirteen, the unspoken revolutionary flair of Rafik, and the sudden appearance of ancestral debt as literal theft. These moments stop the forward march of individual ambition and of tourist driven "development," and compel characters and readers to deal with the vanquished of 1964. Thus Benjamin comes to the realization that trauma is catastrophe: the ahistorical psychic repetitions and latencies he encounters in the novel are not the repetitions and latencies of psychic life but repetitions and latencies that are delayed or compounded by an economic base that remains unaltered. The passing on of trauma is made apparent by the accumulation of unprocessed past.

The central interpretive tool that works out the historical image into an actual work of literature is the method *Socially Symbolic Act* (1981) by Frederic Jameson. The "uninterrupted narrative" of class struggle is repressed in all Jameson's narrative texts and is replaced by "imaginary solutions" to the "material contradictions" that are not actually soluble. Political unconscious, the 'unconscious' historical contradiction that is repressed and made apparent at the same time in the formal activity of the text. A fast moving succession of focalisations, the novel's seamless time shifts between personal memory and collective history, and its indirect and oblique disclosure of family secrets, all operate symptomatically in Theft. These formal devices are not only a representation of trauma, they embody the ideological labour of symbolically negotiating the more fundamental and structural tensions of postcolonial capitalism.

In the social horizon, the text is read in a symbolic way in the struggle of classes. The ideological interpellation that Badar's life-long servitude is met with labour in the hotel, and Karim's rise to government service, highlights the workings of ideological interpellation. Family

stories and hegemonic, post-Independence individualist discourses of "ambition" naturalize class positions, making theft a personal destiny, rather than something systemic.

Whereas the historical horizon, the "long shadow" of 1964 and processes of late-capitalism open up through the text. The projects funded by the EU to "green" the development of Zanzibar and the re-commodification of the island's land and history by the shift toward a tourist playground have cost the island dearly. The attempts of the revolution to reclaim the island's land and memory have come at a high price for Zanzibar, as the "green" projects funded by the EU have transformed it into a tourist playground. The "left-turn climax" and the last act of the novel's nursing, in the era of globalisation, indicate at a glance the "utopian horizon" that Jameson is talking about, a glimpse of collective solidarity, but it's limited to within the novel, literature's role as ideology containment and disruptive.

In this synthesis literature is made an area of contestation. On the other hand, Theft could be seen as a celebration of the ideology it portrays the shift to the individual's goals and sturdy resolve is a form of historicism, a conformist ideology. Conversely, the novel's formal devices, its avoidance of linear narrative, its multiple viewpoints and its deliberate narrative gaps, highlight Benjaminian moments which temporarily exorcise the past. Neoliberal individualism is challenged by these flashes which open up utopian possibilities the last care displays themselves while being contained, they point to a collective redemption that surpasses the limits of neoliberal individualism. The video then situates Theft not merely as a trauma reflection, but also as a discrete aesthetic product not only as a diagnosis of the political unconscious of postcolonial history, but a break or an interruption in that history as it is remembered in a different way, one that is emancipatory.

## 4. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

### 4.1. Political Unconscious: Narrative Gaps and the Repressed Class Struggle

Frederic Jameson's idea of the political unconscious, as elaborated in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), is that all narrative texts are 'socially symbolic actions' that seek to reconcile genuine material tensions with imagined solutions. As Jameson points out, the 'unbroken narrative' of class struggle is repressed in every book and instead by 'imagined solutions' to conflicts that can never be really resolved. The critic's job is to read symptomatically, to find those gaps, silences, and formal ruptures where the political unconscious struggles against the limits of what can be expressed within current ideology.

In *Theft* (2025), Abdulrazak Gurnah deploys formal strategies that both conceal and disclose the terrible legacy of Zanzibar's incomplete decolonisation. The fast switching of focalization between Karim, Fauzia, Badar and Raya the non-linear narrative structure that shifts between past and present without warning; the deliberate narrative silences around key events these are not just aesthetic choices but ideological operations that negotiate the class contradictions of postcolonial capitalism.

These narrative gaps, shifts in focalisation and fluidity of time are formal elements that act in *Theft* as Jamesonian ideological operations that aim to symbolically resolve or conceal the material problems of postcolonial capitalism. By presenting trauma as individual psychological drama or isolated family hardship, the book provides "imaginary solutions" to genuine structural issues like the unfinished 1964 revolution, ongoing class exploitation and neocolonial displacement through "green" development schemes. But these gaps and silences do not completely succeed in hiding the reality. Instead they simultaneously disclose the political unconscious: the more the language attempts to conceal the material suffering, the more glaringly it exposes the unresolved class conflicts, colonial treachery, and continued neo-colonial violence. At moments of critical peril, Benjaminian flashes of revolutionary

remembering shatter the ideological closure of the narrative, exposing the political unconscious and compelling both characters and viewers to confront the unresolved historical pain and the destiny of history.

One of the most jarring narrative gaps in the work is the rendering of Raya's interiority post-marriage to Bakari Abbas. Chapter 1 relates her marriage in a dispassionate, almost clinical narration which rushes from her father's fear about Rafik to her reluctant acceptance of Bakari Abbas:

*"And so it happened that her father, physically weak but of a domineering nature, got Raya to agree to a marriage she feared she would hate. That was the way she had been raised and the way everyone she knew lived their lives"* (Gurnah, 2025, p. 12).

The importance of this divide becomes politically evident when viewed against the historical background of post revolutionary Zanzibar. The 1964 revolution that toppled the Omani Arab aristocracy did not liberate but rather dispossess in new ways. Raya's father's fear over Rafik, a comrade who "joined the comrades, as they called themselves, and became a member of the Umma Party" (p. 10) and was "sent to Cuba for military training" (p. 10), illustrates the revolution's betrayal of its emancipatory promises. "more handsome than ever, returned a heroic, slender warrior dressed in a solid green khaki uniform" (p. 10). Rafik symbolizes the revolutionary class that, when it gained power, became indistinguishable with the oppressors: "The warriors of that time, of which Rafik was then one, knew only how to terrify people, for there was really no enemy in sight, just scared, brow-beaten citizens." (Gurnah, 2025, p. 10-11)

The chapter opens with a long flashback to Badar's travel to the Mistress's residence. The writing is weighted with description, weighted with sensory detail the snarl of the engine, dust and heat and petrol fumes (p. 39) but is strikingly mute about what precisely the arrangement is that has led him to this place. Uncle Othman "did the talking" with Badar's father, and then suddenly Badar saw they had stopped talking and were both looking at him. He thought he had

missed an instruction and waited anxiously to be rebuked. Then they both got to their feet and he got up too. 'You will stay here with Uncle Othman,' his father said, gesturing towards the man they had come to visit. He did not look at Badar as he said this. (Gurnah, 2025, p. 41)

*He would be their servant boy, their boi, he understands it now. So abrupt, and no one had explained.* (Gurnah, 2025, p. 44)

The silence is the point. the formal quiet of the text on the parameters of Badar's slavery is parallel to the historical silence on the continuance of quasi-feudal labor relations in postcolonial Tanzania. The revolution that was intended to put an end to exploitation has just shifted its forms, creating new hierarchies that are never acknowledged as such.

Consider Bakari Abbas, Karim's father. Fauzia recalls in Chapter 17 Karim "by the head" (p. 218) lifting their baby daughter Nasra, thus postponing the novel's revelation of Karim's brutality until here. The recollection is painful and re-emerges in the setting of their marriage dissolution, connecting Karim's potential for violence with that of his father. But there are already signs in the text Raya's disgust at Bakari's "energetic invasions" (p. 13), her fears that "one day his viciousness would become violent" (p. 13), her secret plotting of escape. The belated unveiling of the tale, what Jameson terms the "return of the repressed" the tangible pain of patriarchal violence passed down through generations.

*Suddenly he shouted in anger, stood up, went into the bedroom, reached into the cot, took Nasra by the head, lifted her up, his hands on either side of her temples, her body hanging free. The shock made her cry out and choke up. He dropped her back into the cot, turned and stormed back to the chair where he had been sitting.* (Gurnah, 2025, p. 218)

*It's him, that boy, said Baba. Fadhili told me the boy just comes and asks for whatever he wants and he gives it to him. That boy has been stealing from us and selling those goods to someone. I don't want that thief and son of a thief in my house. Get rid of him at once. Do you hear me, at once. I don't want him in my*

house for a single day more.' (Gurnah, 2025, p. 139)

As the reader learns, this claim is unfounded the grocer Fadhili has been inflating the household account. But the false charge exposes a deeper truth. "Son of a thief" is Uncle Othman's reference to Badar's father, Ismail, who years ago stole money from Uncle Othman. The present theft is a cover for the old theft; Badar is paying for his father's crime. This is what Jameson would term a 'symptom': a surface symptom reflecting a deeper structural conflict that cannot be explicitly stated; the true thief, however, is the grocer Fadhili, who, as a little capitalist, can collect excess from the home and the servant. Fadhili's cheating is a primitive accumulation on a limited scale, the appropriation of value without corresponding exchange. But the story can't tell this as theft, since then it would reveal the logic of capital itself. Instead, the blame falls on Badar, the weakest link in the network.

*I shall be extremely glad to join the team," Karim said, struggling not to grin with delight. ... I shall be employed on this green development project and paid a salary determined by the EU, which is going to be a great deal more than my present salary. (Gurnah, 2025, p. 208)*

The story does not invite the reader to wonder whether the success of Karim is contingent upon the very neo-colonial mechanisms that continue to exploit land and labour in Zanzibar. This EU-funded "green development" initiative, which requires training in Denmark, is one example of what Jameson terms "late capitalism," where exploitation is mediated through development discourse rather than through direct colonial brutality. But the story frames it as pure opportunity, a prize for excellence. This is the ideology of form at work: the novel's polyphonic structure, which provides voice to various characters, does not give voice to the critique of progress as neo-colonialism. The Jamesonian approach concentrates on the symptomatic character of these formal decisions. The novel's failure to have a single, authoritative narrator, its emphasis on fractured, fragmentary viewpoints, parallels the fracturing of social

consciousness under late capitalism. The "uninterrupted narrative" of class struggle is not provided as such, but merely to be read into the gaps, silences and inconsistencies that the book accidentally generates.

#### 4.1 Revolutionary Memory: Flash Memories and the Losers of History

*"This was the opening act of the revolution. Suleman was one of the boys, son of Hafidh. He'd signed up as soon as he left school in December and was barely a fortnight into his training. They searched for him among the injured, the mutilated, the dead, but they could not find him. And when the dust settled, and the tales began, and the winners started bragging, they could only suppose he was among the missing." (Gurnah 2025, p. 16)*

The brothers never spoke about the youngster amongst them save to mention him in their prayers (p. 16). The impact of Suleman's death is described via the family's reaction: This silence is a political manifestation as well as emotional sorrow. The unsaid loss becomes the "ancestral wrong" that organizes the family's relation to history. Karim's grandpa, whose "tales dried up or turned into bitter laments" (p. 16), personifies the way revolutionary hope turns into post-revolutionary bitterness. The Benjaminian "tradition of the oppressed" is now continued not in overt political speech but in the abolishing of wonder the substitution of childhood stories with "a recitation of injustices and grievances" (p. 15).

*What is even more remarkable is the way the book handles Rafik's death: "Rafik had been shot dead in a bloodletting orgy a year after her wedding." (Gurnah, 2025, p. 13)*

The word "bloodletting orgy" is alive and imprecise. The book refuses to name who killed Rafik or why. This rupture in the narrative is Benjaminian: it marks the difficulty of depicting revolutionary violence inside the victors' past. Like Suleman, Rafik is a loser of history, but a loser who was once a winner a figure whose fate uncovers the illusion of revolutionary "progress."

*One of the novel's most insistent silences is what Bakari Abbas did that was "so bad". No*

one is permitted to speak about him: "At the mention of his name her face and a dismissive gesture showed that she had no time for him" (p. 22). Karim grew up thinking "it must have been something bad" but not what: "One day he would have to. Or not. (Gurnah 2025, 77)

The silence is the family's "ancestral wrong": the unacknowledged violence that structures the lives of the generations to come. When Karim ultimately enacts his father's violence on his own daughter lifting Nasra "by her head" (p. 218) the stillness is shattered not by speech but by repetition. It is at this time of the painful re-enactment that the Benjaminian "flash" occurs: Fauzia "saw it all, saw the way he lifted her so that her neck took all the strain of her body" (p. 218). The memory of father violence, repressed for a generation, "flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin, Thesis VI)

This flash generates in Benjamin a "weak messianic power" (Thesis II), a potential for salvation via recollection. Fauzia decides to leave Karim, to return to her parents' house, an act of breaking with the cycle of violence. She will not let Nasra grow up as Karim did with a "father who was not a father" in the sense of loving presence. The narrative does not deliver a victorious resolution, but a sad, necessary break: "She didn't want to speak to anyone. Not yet. She sat on the sofa, and the sun streamed in through the window behind her. How was she going to do this? What could she salvage from the rubble of her life? (Gurnah, 2025, p. 216) In so many ways, "wreckage" is Benjaminian. Fauzia's life, like the lives of all the characters, lies within the pile of devastation that the Angel of History views. Her decision to go is a little redemption—not the redemption of history itself, but the salvation of one life from the cycle of violence.

*The allegation that Badar is stealing groceries a charge that is untrue, as the reader learns – generates a moment of Benjaminian 'crystallisation' in which the repressed past of ancestral theft is made explicit. Uncle Othman's anger is excessive to the claimed offense since it's not about the groceries but about*

*Ismail:*

*"I don't want that criminal and son of a crook in my house. "Get rid of him now." (Gurnah 2025, p. 139)*

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this thesis, Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel Theft (2025) has been analysed in a highly dialectical Marxist way which combines the insights of Fredric Jameson's The Political Unconscious (1981) with those of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940). The study has shown that trauma in the novel is not a purely psychological phenomenon, but a material process, created by the economy of postcolonial capitalism (based on class exploitation, primitive accumulation and dispossession, patronage networks, and the re-commodification of land, labor and cultural space in the process of neocolonialism) and mediated by the superstructure of family narratives, strategic omissions, ideological solutions, and affective legacies. The analysis of the novel symptomatically has helped to uncover the political unconscious of the uncompleted 1964 revolution in Zanzibar and its long afterlife in a context of neoliberal globalisation, development projects funded by the EU, and tourism economies. Meanwhile, moments of revolutionary memory, Benjaminian flashes, in which the repressed past bursts through into the present, interrupt the forward march of neoliberal "progress" and "conformist historicism," and create fragile, yet powerful, utopian visions of care, endurance, and collective possibility of redemption. The thesis thus adds to the materialist postcolonial criticism which goes beyond the psychoanalytic concept of latency, and the postmemorial structures of the transmission of trauma, to the materialist concept of the concrete historical contradictions of class struggle, economic base, and ideological superstructure.

The textual analysis in Chapter 4 is able to establish that Theft stages trauma as "historically and materially produced" in contrast to being a purely psychological injury. The narrative silences are acts of Jamesonian ideology that deal symbolically with the structural contradictions by

shaping them into personal tragedy or family fate. The forced marriage of Raya into the inside of Bakari Abbas' body, the "murky arrangement" that brings the young Badar into servitude as a "boi", and the unspoken violence of Bakari Abbas are all strategic occlusions that naturalise the violence inherent in the patriarchal and class system, allowing the economic base to go unexamined. These gaps are not completely air tight. Rather, they symptomatically reveal the missing root of economic mode of production, as it is produced in the form of colonial land theft, betrayal and unfulfilled promises of the 1964 revolution, quasi-feudal labour relations and the continuous extraction through EU-backed "green development" schemes and the commodification of Zanzibari space as a tourist playground. The novel's polyphonic structure and non-linear temporality is a reenactment of the Caruthian latency of trauma and a reappearance of the repressed class struggle. The polyphony that can be heard at the surface of Karim and Fauzia's collage of sounds, both Badar's and occasional Raya's, seems to make the narrative power available to everyone, while none of the characters are able to maintain a unified perspective on the history of the social, the psychological dramas of individuals are symptomatically taking the place of social consciousness in the post-socialist world of late capitalism.

The multiple layers of "theft" as a metaphor are reduced to a Benjaminian dialectical image. It names the "ancestral wrong" to which Badar is committed to pay at the ancestral level, the abandonment of the Fauzia-Nasra at the personal level, the expropriation of land, labour and historical continuity at the structural level, at the level of the colonial and the postcolonial. This condensation reveals the continuity of exploitation from generation to generation and will not deny the existence of a single register for stealing. When it comes to moments of revolution, Benjamin's vanishings during the opening violence of 1964, Rafik's metamorphosis from revolutionary hero to terror machine, the false theft charge against Badar and Fauzia's observation of Karim lifting Nasra "by the head"

come to mind at moments of danger. These flashes don't have a victorious resolution or story-ending. They have, on the contrary, the promise of 'weak messianic power' the ability to apprehend the present rather differently, by brushing history against the grain, by meeting the defeated. The novel's simple conclusion Badar and Fauzia's silent marriage, Nasra's good health in the context of caring but not controlling and Badar's statement that he has "learned to endure" points to the utopian horizon of collective solidarity but without celebration. Care (Badar's tender treatment of the distressed Nasra) and endurance become tenuous and politically affecting other options to the appropriative possessive logic of theft which most of the relationships in the text are organized by. In brief: Theft uncovers the political unconscious of postcolonial capitalism, while respecting in its formal gaps and moral interventions the potential to remember and to do otherwise.

Finally, in Theft, the transmission of trauma and memory is a space of the constant class struggle, as revealed with quiet and insistent power in this book. Literature, when read dialectically, can diagnose the political unconscious of postcolonial capitalism, its silences, its naturalisations, its "thefts" and can retain and enhance the power of "messianism" of the vanquished. Literary criticism engages with a double vision that sees the economic foundation where historical hurt is generated and the moments of revolutionary memory which break the ideological closure, and, as such, it is a part of the unfinished business of history: to face hurt, to imagine and to start, although in an uncertain way, to construct other futures. The novel is not a redemptive one, it is a more challenging and necessary one, a gift of endurance and care and a political one of remembering otherwise.

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*Note: A small number of in-text citations in the extracted passages above (e.g., Irele, 2001; Marx, 1852/1979, the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte) do not have a corresponding entry in the thesis's own reference list; these have been preserved exactly as they appear in the source rather than supplemented.*