



Breaking Through Barriers and Searching for Identity: On the Growth of Dottie in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Bildungsroman Dottie

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Abstract

Dottie is the third full-length novel written by the 2021 Nobel Prize-winning African-British writer Abdulrazak Gurnah. It is a story of a black girl born in Britain named Dottie, who struggles to make a living in London and grows up with self-improvement. The family trauma that Dottie faced and the marginalization of her identity under multiple discrimination greatly stunt her growth. But with the stimulation of negative-type guider Patterson, the enlightenment of mentor-type guiders Mrs. Holly and Dr. Murray, and the companionship of partner-type guider Ms. Estella, Dottie gradually awakens. By reading the classics, learning about family history, and developing vocational skills, Dottie breaks through the barriers of race, gender, and class to gain a foothold in Britain by herself. And with the reclaiming of the meaning of her name, Dottie ushers in an epiphany of her growth and enters a new phase of exploring life. Through the portrayal of Dottie's personal growth, Gurnah provides the long-missing experience of growing up black, giving readers a path to bridge the racial divide and reconstruct the identity.

Keywords: Bildungsroman; Growth; Abdulrazak Gurnah; Dottie

1. Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah is an Afro-British diaspora writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2021. His works, which center on issues like identity, racial tensions, and historical writing, mostly depict the living conditions of colonial peoples, refugees, and immigrants.

Dottie, the third of Gurnah's eight published novels, is unique in having an English-born protagonist—doubly unique in that this protagonist is female. This novel, as a typical Bildungsroman, tells the growing story of Dottie, a black girl born in 1950s England. She earns a living, raises her younger siblings, makes friends, and falls in love in London during her age from 17 to 26. Even Dottie faces various initial difficulties and dilemmas in the growth, she eventually breaks through all the barriers and realizes her self-fulfillment under the guidance of positive and negative guiders.

At present, most scholars at home and abroad analyze the novel from the themes of literary ethics, feminism, identity crisis, and creation theory. Reading *Dottie* from the perspective of bildungsroman can enrich the knowledge and understanding of the text, reveal the importance of guiders and epiphany on the road of growth, and provide some feasible suggestions for the growth of black individuals.

2. Dottie's Initiation Dilemma of Growth

Dottie's dilemma of growth in the beginning not only encompasses the different traumas that each family background would experience, but from a macro perspective, her dilemma stems from the marginalization of her identity in the context of the era of multiple discrimination of race, class, and gender.

2.1. Family Trauma

Born into a black family in England, Dottie's life has been full of hardships since childhood. Dottie, her sister Sophie, and her brother Hudson come from three fathers, but no one knows who their fathers really are, as all were born when their mother was young and prostituted. Of the three, only Hudson's father is mentioned, a black soldier in the U.S. Army (GI) in England during World War II who lives with Dottie's mother for two months. Hudson thus considers himself an American, while disdains with his two sisters, calling them "wild children".

With her mother bedridden with a sexually transmitted disease, Dottie takes on the responsibility of caring for her younger siblings. After her mother's death, her brother Hudson is adopted by a decent family in Dover and her sister Sophie is accepted into a special school for girls in Sussex.



Dottie is nearly 18 years old and works hard to earn money for the reunion of her siblings in a factory.

But their life after reunification does not go as planned. Dissatisfied with the living conditions provided by his sister, Hudson becomes a street gangster, abusing and trafficking drugs, providing sex service for homosexuals, robbing and going to jail. After managing to get to New York after his release, he only ends up drowning in the Hudson River. Sophie, on the other hand, indulges in lust with her boyfriend, gets pregnant and has a child at her young age, and becomes seriously ill. The burden of earning a living and taking care of the household all rests on Dottie's shoulders. In order to find a better living environment for Sophie's baby, Dottie continues to work hard at the factory.

The family trauma that Dottie suffered is largely attributed to her mother. Dottie's mother, whose real name was Bilkisu, was a prostitute who sold her body for a living and did not control her fertility like a professional prostitute. She kept having children and then sold her body to support herself and her children. After contracting a sexually transmitted disease, she was too ashamed to get treatment and died in her 30s in agony.

Dottie's mother had a decent family. She was beautiful and intelligent and was a treasure in her parents' hearts. But she had sex with a white boy at the age of 17, which was opposed by her parents, and she ran away from her family in Cardiff to escape her father's arranged marriage. From then on, she went on a path of no return. Lu Xun delivered a speech on "What Happened After Nora Left" at the literary meeting of the Beijing Women's Higher Normal School in 1923, arguing that there were only two ways for Nora to go after she ran away: "Either she degenerated or she came back." The runaway Bilkisu then took the path of depravity.

After fleeing to Leeds, Bilkisu gave birth to Dottie and her sister Sophie. At this time, she met Jamil, a railroad electrician a few months younger than her. The days with Jamil were the happiest and most stable days of Bilkisu's life, but the good times always not last long. Jamil's family sent people to threaten and beat Bilkisu in order to break them up. She had to take the two children to escape from Leeds by train.

When the train arrived in Carlisle, Bilkisu was found without a ticket and was thrown off the train. There were many U.S. Army soldiers in Carlisle who treated Bilkisu like a prostitute. Hudson's father was one of this group of mixed black and white American soldiers. She once said that they all had a taste for money. But she grew to like him because he was a regular visitor to her. He said he had lived on the banks of the Hudson River and played on the banks every day. These words led her to name her child Hudson as well. Hudson's father and Bilkisu maintained a steady relationship for only two months before leaving with the troops.

Bilkisu expresses her deep remorse for running away from her family and betraying her father late in life, but she is in a state of delirium and her words are fragmented. Dottie is only

listening by her side out of obligation, not really understanding or trying to figure out these words. While packing for the move, she finds a photo of her mother and her grandmother. The photo evokes memories of her mother, and she regrets that she did not listen carefully to her mother's stories about her grandparents at that time.

The family trauma that Dottie will suffer is predetermined from the moment Bilkisu runs away from home. Dottie's trauma is the result of acting as a mother in the name of an eldest sister. She can't reconcile the contradictions and conflicts of these two ethical identities especially when her individual ability is not enough to support the livelihood of the whole family. On one hand, she has to mentally comfort her ailing mother and her brother who's bored with life. On the other hand, she has no access to education. More deeply, Dottie's trauma is deeply imprinted by the split between past and present, between individual memory and family history. The role of her father is absent, even the power to remember her father is deprived. It is unknown to anyone, not even their mother. As a black person born in England, coupled with the absence of her parents, Dottie has no way of knowing the history and culture behind her family and ethnicity. She can only piece together a relatively complete sketch of her life through some scattered fragments of memory.

2.2. Marginalization of Identity Under Multiple Discriminations

The historical background that Dottie faced was Britain in the 1950s and 1960s. With the shattering of the illusion of the empire on which the sun never sets, the former British colonies have become independent successively. More and more black people came to Britain for exile, study, immigration, or other reasons. They demanded the same personality and rights as British people with the raise of the consciousness of equality. At this time, the British white people treated them with indifference, exclusion, and hatred due to their strong sense of disparity. London became "a site of transformational social and cultural confrontation". To some extent, *Dottie* epitomizes the dilemmas of post-war immigrants in Britain, and Dottie's struggles become a reflection of that generation of immigrants.

Dottie's most pressing identity question is whether she is an English or a foreigner. Stuart Hall, a representative scholar of British diasporic aesthetics, argues that "Identities are never finished, never ended, just like subjectivity itself, they are always in process Identity is always constructed through contradiction and division". The identity of the diaspora often tends to change, contradict, and dislocate. Individual identity is highly influenced by social culture, and social space provides legitimacy for identity politics. Both in terms of the objective fact of Dottie's birthplace and her self-identity, she is a native Englishwoman. But out of her skin color and her name, native whites, including her first love Ken, simply classify her as a foreigner. Unlike ordinary exiles, Dottie has lost the collective and historical memory of her ancestors and homeland. She tries to make herself accepted in England without a way out, but she is always treated as another with

use value, making Dottie more confused about her identity for a long time.

Dottie has experienced widespread racial discrimination in her life and work, those discrimination that may not be directed at her, but is always present. Dottie's landlord in Cyriot berates black tenants from Jamaica in front of Dottie, calling them dirty, disorderly, and bad. Dottie is distressed, "because she knew that the Jamaican nigger could be extended to her indefinitely" (Gurnah, 2021). In the packinghouse that Dottie worked, stories that showed the savagery and vulgarity of blacks are popular for their exotic atmosphere and used as examples of the uncivilized nature of blacks. The packinghouse's director, William Hampshire, bluntly states that "I'd send them all home tomorrow if it were up to me." Dottie finds these statements absurd and unjust, but she cannot query them, because "she was uneducated and saying the wrong thing would make people think she is ignorant". (Gurnah, 2021)

Dottie is once harassed by a drunk man when she is chatting with her white boyfriend Ken in the bar. He is so insulting that Dottie pushes him off the chair without thinking. But later Ken says to Dottie, "You don't have to do that," to which Dottie angrily expresses her disbelief. Ken further explains that "you have to act superior to them. That's the only way you'll be accepted in England". (Gurnah, 2021) This response is absurd, but it is also universal: white people will only respect black people who have shown considerable worth. In general, white middle-class respect for blacks comes not from a fundamental equality of personality, but from an assessment of the value of human creativity. As a member of the white British community, Ken is well aware of this condescending psychological pattern of judgment, and advises Dottie that "that bickering fisherman's rage will only expose you to more prejudice". (Gurnah, 2021) Dottie's essential marginalized identity dilemma stems from this paradox: as a native Englishman, she cannot see a future; as a black diaspora, she cannot find a past.

In addition to race and class discrimination, as a black woman, Dottie has also suffered a lot of gender discrimination.

Ken is a white employee of the factory that Dottie worked. He is Dottie's first love. At first, Dottie is skeptical of the relationship, not only because of the color of skin, but also because her mother and sister's promiscuous life makes her feel instinctively disgusted and afraid of men. But Ken does not have the same rejection on black people that other white people have. He tells Dottie about his traveling experiences in Australia, the United States, India, and other countries. Fishing, writing poetizing, painting, all of these are wonderful experiences that Dottie cannot imagine. In a sense, falling in love with Ken gives Dottie a utopian world that free from tedium, poverty, and discrimination. But it doesn't last long, as Dottie has to face the difference in their backgrounds. When Dottie introduces herself, she deliberately omits her name "Fatima" with distinctly exotic characteristic. But she is still laughed at by Ken, who believes she is a foreigner,

causing Dottie's heart to hurt. Finally, the relationship comes to an end when Ken confesses to Dottie that he already has a wife and child. Bourdieu argues that submission to male domination is achieved through a form of "symbolic violence". It is unified by a "gentle, imperceptible and invisible violence that is hard to perceive by its victims". The utopian fantasy that Ken creates with his own experiences and stories is, in essence, a "symbolic violence". (Shi & Huang, 2022) Dottie's identity as a lover seems to become a substitute, given meaning by the white male represented by Ken.

When sister Sophie's boyfriend goes to jail, his brother Patterson takes his place to take care of Sophie and Dottie. Patterson is a black man from Ghana, in whom both the human and bestial elements are fully expressed. On one hand, when they first meet, Patterson behaves in a courteous and gentle manner, bringing some food or household items as gifts whenever he comes to visit the children, and helping Dottie's family move to a new house in terms of money and other affairs; on the other hand, this assistance manifests itself as an exploitative and dependent economic relationship. As time passes, Patterson behaves more and more aggressively. He has sex with both Dottie and Sophies. When Dottie refuses to continue having sex with him, he uses violence to force Dottie into submission. Such behavior reflects the suppression of the bestial factor over the human factor and the free will over the rational will, which is a manifestation of Patterson's weak ethical consciousness and a kind of naked power gaze of men over women. This gender suppression comes not only from Patterson but also from Dottie's previous lover Ken, both of whom conspire to discipline black women under the authority of patriarchy. Not only debt and violence but also spiritual dependency, give the favorable conditions for this discipline.

The "difference" and "otherness" of race, gender, and class shape the dynamic interaction between "center" and "margin", "subject" and "object". (Shi & Huang, 2022) Dottie's marginalized identity reflects the psychological trauma of the "minority" in Britain's post-war pluralistic political culture. The constant movement of social and cultural identities in historical and practical contexts has created multiple dilemmas for Dottie.

3. Dottie's Growth Brought by the Guiders

No man is an island. "Everyone grows up being influenced by people who enrich the protagonist's life experience and perception of society in both positive and negative ways. In the process of observing the social roles played by these people, adolescents gradually establish their own roles and directions in life." (Rui, 2004)

Although there are family traumas that cannot be easily healed and identity dilemmas that cannot be readily solved, Dottie continues to grow under the stimulation of negative-type guider Patterson, the enlightenment of mentor-type guiders Mrs. Holly and Dr. Murray, and the companionship of partner-type guider Estella, deepening her understanding of

herself and the outside world and becoming more independent and confident.

3.1. Patterson: Negative-type Guider

Negative type guiders are modeled after Satan, the devil. They will tempt the protagonist in various ways and lead him astray. As in *Faust*, the Devil Mephisto symbolizes the power of denial, luring mankind to fall, but also unwittingly contributing to mankind's progress. In *Dottie*, Patterson, the adopted brother of Dottie's brother-in-law Jimmy, is exactly this type of character. Patterson tries to use his male gender dominance to take complete control of Dottie's life, molding Dottie into a "meek" woman who is only dependent on a man, and turning her away from the path of independence and freedom she has grown up on.

Originally from Ghana on the Gold Coast, Patterson has a family-oriented African heritage and quickly assume the responsibility of taking care of Dottie and Sophie after Jimmy goes to prison. At first, Patterson is courteous and soft-spoken, always bringing gifts of food or household items whenever he comes to visit the child and helping Dottie's family with money and other affairs. With his help, Dottie is able to get a loan from the British Housing Association and eventually buy a house in Brixton. However, this assistance gradually manifests itself into an exploitative and dependent economic relationship. As time passes, Patterson also behaves in an increasingly aggressive manner, having sexual relations with both Dottie and Sophie. When Dottie refuses to continue having sex with him, he uses violence. This naked power gaze is a form of male discipline of black women under the authority of patriarchy. It is not only debt and violence but also spiritual dependence that gives this discipline favorable conditions.

Dottie and Sophie make different choices about this. He always questions and snickers at Dottie's attendance at night school for secretarial courses. The atmosphere in the house becomes subtle, as Patterson and Sophie reach an unspoken agreement to isolate Dottie during meals and conversations. Because Sophie, her obedient sister, has been completely attached to Patterson, who has considerable economic strength. Should she choose to return to her family or continue her course to learn vocational skills for personal fulfillment? Faced with the crossroads of growth and choice, Dottie bravely chooses the latter.

And as Dottie takes off in her career, Patterson is outraged at her integration into white circles, believing that she has betrayed her family and, more importantly, the whole black community. At this point, infuriated Patterson wants to repeat his tactics and tries to dominate Dottie with violence in their sexual relationship. But this time, the two engage in a fierce struggle, "instead of trying to call for help or screaming like a frightened innocent, she clawed, kicked, twisted and bit until he released her." (Gurnah, 2021) While calling for help and screaming are ways of turning to others, Dottie fights back tenaciously with knowledge of her own body. Dottie's restoration of control over her body is a metaphor for the refusal to submit to the female body, which has been shaped,

inscribed, and rewritten by male power, history, and society. And it symbolizes Dottie's regaining control of her own destiny.

3.2. Mrs. Holly: Mentor-type Guider

Mentor-type guiders can guide and inspire the protagonist. "After understanding the confusion and helplessness of the growing protagonist, they will consciously assume the responsibility of education and help the growing protagonist to correct the wrong values and behaviors." (Zhang, 2015) Mrs. Holly, the social worker who helps Dottie after her mother's death, plays a vital role in Dottie's initial growth.

After the death of Dottie's mother, the community decides that Dottie is not capable of caring for the family, so they contact a respectable family in Dover to have her brother Hudson adopted and a special girls' school in Sussex to have her sister Sophie admitted. Dottie, nearly 18 years old, is working hard in a factory to earn money for the reunion of her siblings. Mrs. Holly takes care of Dottie from time to time. But Dottie is hostile to Mrs. Holly because she can't accept it for a while.

But Mrs. Holly is a diligent, decent, and essentially empathetic soul. After recognizing Dottie's antagonism, she tries to mollify her by ringing her both a photograph of Hudson riding a donkey on the cliffs above Dover and an abridged copy of *David Copperfield* with an illustration of a "thin woman chasing a boy on a donkey across the cliff". She tells Dottie that Hudson is adopted by a decent family in Dover, which reminds her of David in *David Copperfield*, who is also adopted by Miss Bess in Dover. Mrs. Holly also gives Dottie the book of *David Copperfield*.

After that, Dottie reads this book day on the commuter bus and night at home. Also, this book arises her curiosity and passion on reading other books. "It took her several days to work up the courage to finally cross the street and walk into the library one Saturday morning after buying vegetables and meat at the market". (Gurnah, 2021) At first, Dottie is bored with Dickens' voluminous work. Slowly, she is able to read some simple romances and detective novels, but she still finds it difficult to read *David Copperfield* for the second time.

Despite this, when Dottie and her first boyfriend Ken go on a date, she proposes "to see *City Road*, where David Copperfield lived when he first met the Micawbers, and *Highgate*, where David and Dora spent their marriage, and *Steerforth*, where David's mother lived". (Gurnah, 2021) Because David attends school in *Canterbury*, Dottie also suggests a pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral with her friend Estella. It is through her reading and gradual acquaintance with *David Copperfield*, a gift from Mrs. Holly, that Dottie constructs her formative history. Dottie also receives *A Beautiful New World* as a Christmas gift from Mrs. Hawley.

Dottie has accomplished growth through reading and self-improvement. From the time she received *David Copperfield* from Mrs. Holly, reading serves as a key that opens up a new and rich world for Dottie. She begins to read a lot of British classics, gaining knowledge and strength in reading,

constantly getting to know the world and broadening her insight. As a child, Dottie lived an unstable and turbulent life with her mother. Frequent school changes left Dottie without a consistent education. Since entering the library, Dottie has become aware of the political events taking place in the world. Dottie, as an ethnic minority, concerns about newspaper reports of attacks on black children by white Americans, outrages by the repression of Algerian violence in Paris, and discusses the political revolution in Congo. Gradually, she develops independent thoughts and judgments about racial issues.

3.3. Dr. Murray: Mentor-type Guider

Dr. Murray, an elderly black man, is another mentor-type guider in Dottie's life. Dottie cannot understand the story between her grandfather and mother as clearly as the reader, because she can only glimpse the family history from her mother's confusing words. She often goes to the library to read books, and each time she meets an elderly black gentleman, Dr. Murray. Through her interactions with Mr. Murray, Dottie gains a new perspective on her family's history and even on the whole history of the black people, and her view of life rises to the level of a philosopher.

They only greeting with each other every time, but Mr. Murray is very friendly to Dottie. In Dottie's description, the old man keeps sitting in his usual place, stroking his beard and looking intently at the newspaper. His eyes will often turn to her. Whenever she sees him, he will habitually stand up and greet her. One day, the newspaper publishes a story about the Algerian War of Independence, and this headline in the newspaper gives Mr. Murray and Dottie the opportunity to interact with each other. Mr. Murray is excited to see the story and shares it with Dottie. Dottie doesn't know anything about Algeria before, but after Mr. Murray's mention, she follows the information about Algeria in the newspaper and in the encyclopedia and learns about the spirit of the black people who achieves freedom through their own struggle.

After the death of Mr. Murray, Dottie is visited by his grandson, Michael Mann, who has inherited his grandfather's mansion and wants to get to know the grandfather he never met more. From the mouth of this black journalist, a "parallel story of father-daughter conflict" is told. It is an updated version of the story of Dottie's mother and grandfather. Dottie thus gains a deeper understanding of her family stories.

Mr. Murray is a black doctor who lives in a mansion on Clapham Common and has a private practice in Wimbledon. At a time when discrimination against blacks is so strong in England, it is amazing that a black doctor can receive so many patients in his private practice and has such a high social status and contribution. Mr. Murray's daughter is introverted and mysterious, but has a certain decorum in her manner. From an early age, she shows great musical talent, especially on the flute. Whenever she attends a school concert, Mr. Murray will come to enjoy it. When Mr. Murray is in his 50s, he wants to marry a nurse 6 months younger than his daughter. So, the college-age daughter leaves home in anger and chooses to become a schoolteacher in Carlisle, the

furthest away from home. She finds a decent work on her own merit, marries a white bank clerk who pursues her, makes her husband's white family accept her, and never gives up working after her marriage. She is a representative of a successful woman. Although she thinks about her father all these days, she refuses to forgive him until his death.

When Michael finds Dottie, he finds that the tall, slim Dottie resembles his mother when she was young, which unravels the reason for Mr. Murray's friendliness to Dottie. Through Michael's narrative, the conflict between his mother and grandfather is put back in front of Dottie again. The shared ethnic identity between Michael and Dottie, as well as the shared pain of the family history, makes Dottie think more deeply about the family history. The story of Michael's family, to a certain extent, explains the origin of the conflict between Dottie's mother and grandfather. Actually, the descendants of immigrants like Michael and Dottie are trying to find a way out in the unstable space of multicultural collision in England, which inevitably requires breaking the confines of traditional cultural thinking. Dottie chooses to focus more on the time dimension of "present". As she says "How we live is more relevant and more important. I know that's only part of what's important, and there are others, but it's part of our life now." (Gurnah, 2021)

3.4. Ms. Estella: Partner-type Guider

Partner-type guider "accompanies the protagonist in his or her play and does not interfere with their behavior or speech, but rather exerts an indirect influence through prolonged contact." (Zhang, 2015) With the companion of a white Jewish woman named Estella Hoggar, who is also Dottie's teacher and friend from night school, Dottie encounters her greatest change.

As she reads more, Dottie begins to actively rebel and fight against social discrimination and male domination in order to further her quest for a minority voice. She takes a major step forward by enrolling in Morley College's secretarial program. This is not only to improve her survival skills but more importantly, to connect with the mainstream white British cultural scene. In fact, the secretarial program is much easier than Dottie have imagined. Dottie's studies go so well that her teacher Estella is so pleased with her and she often praises her amazing progress out loud to the class.

Estella's minority identity as a Jew matches with Dottie's minority identity, which is a key element of the creation of the community between them. Estella does not show her white superiority to Dottie but invites Dottie to share her lifestyle, such as watching plays and enjoying the food. Thus, Estella and Dottie's organic and harmonious sisterhood further provides the possibility of realizing a minority community. Furthermore, the construction of women's identity is often closely linked to the "long-term influence and inculcation of female elders" within the community. Estella shows her the template of a woman living independently and freely: having a good job, living alone in a prosperous area of London, having a fashionable car, and visiting her parents' house twice a month regularly... Her friendship with Estella gives her the courage to rebel against her deteriorating circumstances.

Behind Estella's success also lies the tragic story of a tyrannical father, Marcel, and an ill-treated mother, Georgia. But the difference is that Georgia ultimately chooses to shoot her husband, showing her determination to resist patriarchal oppression and accidentally igniting the spiritual fire of women's independence. In addition, Estella uses this fire encourages Dottie's growth and gives her the spiritual strength to resist Patterson's power in time. (Huang, 2022) Due to repeated absences from school, Estella finds Dottie's home and confronts with Patterson, breaking the absolute masculine space of power by external forces. Estella affirms Dottie's course performance, "I don't want to lose the best student in the class." Such a firm choice and praise inspires Dottie, who bravely chooses to continue her course, learn vocational skills for personal fulfillment, and decisively tears away the seemingly easy patriarchal pretense of returning to home and becoming dependent on Patterson.

While attending night school, Dottie discovers that her classmates have been hindered in various ways by their family or have long suffered by violence and oppression at the hands of their husbands. Therefore, they come here to become independent and to resist male oppression by learning. Dottie then realizes that she has been wallowing in self-pity and ignorance for years and has done nothing for herself. For years, Dottie has been making sacrifices for her family that they don't quite appreciate. Only this time, she learns for herself.

Likewise, with Estella's urging and encouragement, Dottie playfully submits her resume to important positions in Somerset House, the BBC, and the Foreign Office, which have long been monopolized by the white elite. Dottie's action is offside to the "black expectation". Although it is joking in nature, it shakes the psychological presupposition of black women in British society and shows Dottie's efforts to construct the subjectivity while breaking the original social space and order.

At the end of the course, the resume she put out earns her a job interview. The interviewer O'Brien, while not offering her the job directly, assures her that if she can pass the typing and shorthand exams, she can join the ranks of typists. This opportunity greatly motivates Dottie, who "felt she was at the beginning of a new era when she could begin to change her life". (Gurnah, 2021) At the end of the novel, Dottie successfully passes the job application and leaves the factory to get a job as an office typist. Her supervisor Mrs. Watterson likes her very much and her colleagues are discreet but friendly. She is not only respected by her white employers but also formally accepted by the British society.

At the later story, Sophie's condition worsens and she is taken into hospital care. Dottie mourns the fact that her sister looks so much like her mother in the final days. But after reading and education, she enters the workplace and no longer feels inferior because of her minority identity. She goes around municipal government and building societies for financial support, strides proudly ahead in and out of offices and markets, and handles the emergency jobs that come up from

time to time. She may still be denied by many white people as British, but she gains respect in the eyes of white people including Estella, Mrs. Watterson, O'Brien, etc., and found a way out in the construction of her own identity. (Shi & Huang, 2022)

4. Dottie's Epiphany

In the process of growing up, the protagonist often matures and enters a new stage of life after having an epiphany. "Epiphany" is originally a religious term, which later used by James Joyce to denote a revelation gained in the secular world. Through an epiphany, the protagonist in Bildungsroman gains a deep understanding of himself or herself or the nature of something. In *Dottie*, with the reclaiming of the meaning of her name, Dottie ushers in an epiphany of her growth and enters a new phase of exploring life.

It is worth noting that Dottie's name is closely linked to the question of her identity and is frequently mentioned in the text. There are several discussions of names in the novel, and the plot moves forward gradually as the meaning of the names is interpreted. "In a sense, it can be said that this is a story about the growth of black women through the exploration of names." (Lu & Zhou, 2021).

Dottie is the only one of Gurnah's novels to carry on the tradition of British novels with the protagonist's name as the title of the book. This long tradition includes a large number of eponymous female characters, but Dottie has no textual precedent in the English literary canon to help her chart a course of self-realization as a woman of color. As Tina Steiner (2006) states, although Dottie reads Dickens and Austen, "these stories do not give her what she needs to write her story of success or belonging or at least some degree of material comfort." Gurnah also responds that "Dottie is not a member of this textual community". Because the female protagonists of literary classics such as *Jane Eyre* and *Emma* are white women, and the novels focus on middle-class love and marriage, Dottie, a black woman, cannot draw on experiences from these classics. In fact, names and naming are a ritual in African culture. There is a rich cultural connotation behind names. It is in the exploration of names that Dottie learns about her family's history and completes the reconstruction of her identity.

Dottie's full name is Dottie Badoura Fatma Balfour. For a long time, Dottie is unaware of the complex cultural elements behind the name. Such a complex combination of names makes Dottie's family origins encompass multiple possible elements such as Chinese, Middle Eastern, and African. But such a name, along with her dark skin, becomes a mystery. But Dottie cannot help but love these names in her youth, and she "often imagined and fictionalized them, concocting childish romances and heartwarming tales with painless sacrifice and rich affection". (Gurnah, 2021) The existence of this name represents a certain element of fantasy, a happy memory of childhood baptism in church, and, more precisely, a fond imagination of an ideal father. Dottie's boyfriend Ken, once makes fun of her name, saying that this long string of

names needs to be “shortened”. In response, Dottie stands firm on her name and replies, “that’s how I was baptized.”

The name is the original proof of identity. The multiple meanings and ambiguities of the name represent the fact that Dottie’s identity is not effectively established after her birth. (Shi & Huang, 2022) Dottie’s imagination of the origin of her name precisely illustrates her mother’s departure from home and indifferent detachment from her family history, which deprives Dottie of the collective and historical memory of her original nationality. Because her “foreign” name and dark skin were signs of “otherness”, an identity imposed on her. Thus, unlike ordinary diaspora individuals, Dottie’s identity is squeezed by both her homeland and the foreign country which caused an even more severe identity crisis.

Faced with such an identity dilemma, Dottie chooses to construct her own identity, telling Hudson: “This is where we live. We belong here. Where else can you go? A place doesn’t give you reasons to live, you have to find them in yourself.” (Gurnah, 2021) Dottie believes that we must find the purpose of life. In fact, everyone has nowhere to go, but to find meaning in themselves. Dottie believes that to find meaning in oneself, one must first look for the meaning of the name.

As the story unfolds, Dottie’s family history is gradually shown. Her mother, originally named Bilkisu, fled her hometown of Cardiff at the age of 17 to escape her father’s control and then became a prostitute, calling herself Sharon Balfour. Sharon is named after a friend of hers at the time, and Balfour is named after the British Foreign Secretary, a politician her father dislikes. The Balfour in Dottie’s name is an important symbol of her mother Bilkisu’s rebellion against her grandfather Taimur Khan’s arranged marriage. At the end of the novel, the journalist Michael tells the story of the Chinese princess Badoura who falls in love with the Persian prince Gemel at first sight in the story of “One Thousand and One Nights”. Only then does Dottie realizes that the name Badoura means a short but sweet love affair between Bilkisu and her lover Jamil. She also learns that Fatma is not an evil witch as her mother explains, but the beloved daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and Khadijah, who is regarded by Islamic culture as the most perfect woman.

Dottie discovers her identity, and the multiculturalism embedded in it allows her to experience a new form of self-expression. Dottie looks so much like Michael’s mother that Michael says that his grandfather Dr. Murray thought of Dottie as his daughter. Dottie replies: “I have my own grandfather, thank you.” (Gurnah, 2021) In addition, she emphasizes her full name in an exaggerated tone. And when Michael asks Dottie why she isn’t looking for her grandparents, Dottie shakes her head and says, “It takes me so many years to start finding myself, to start knowing what to look for. One day I’ll go to them.” (Gurnah, 2021) Dottie is aware that it is her life in the present that makes more sense and allows her to reconstruct her identity. She says to Michael, “If we don’t have to wait for death to find us, then what we do and how we live now is more important.” (Gurnah, 2021) Her philosophical words in the end are the

testimony to her growth. From a poor family at the bottom, Dottie has grown up to be an independent woman with a good job and her own estate. Her love and cherish for the present life enable her to complete the reconstruction of her identity.

5. Conclusion

Dottie is a typical Bildungsroman. It is a story of Dottie, a descendant of immigrants, who grows up in England in search of herself and reconstructs her identity. Dottie, despite living in a marginalized social space and family environment where her sense of individuality and personal identity are constantly suppressed, struggles against her fate, explores the way out to construct her independent identity, and makes the choice to explore her self-worth and build her subjectivity. With the efforts of the guiders and herself, she gains a new self-understanding in the process of finding the meaning of her name, constructs her own subjectivity, realizes her identity as a black woman, and grows up in an epiphany.

In fact, the positive significance of Dottie’s growth is not limited to the “breaking” of the existing cultural order, but also the “establishing” of the ethical consciousness to reconstruct the rational order. (Huang, 2022) From factory worker to typist, from daughter to elder sister and aunt, the continuous growth of Dottie opens another door for her to integrate into the cultural space of British society step by step. In the face of the discrimination and inequality brought about by the identity politics of the British society, which brought together different colors, languages, and cultures, Dottie sets an example for the survival and integration of immigrants and their descendants in Britain by breaking the barriers and restrictions set for black women in the ethnic space with her independent personality, free spirit, and tireless efforts.

With his delicate brushwork and unique perspective, Abdulrazak Gurnah writes a story of the growth of a black girl from the dilemma and hesitation to the awakening and maturity. By using black individuals as narrative perspectives and speaking subjects in writing, Gurnah constructs the tradition of bildungsroman with African characteristics, so as to reconstruct the subjectivity of black people. It provides an alternative text for reconceptualizing the Bildungsroman and the human concerns of literature in the modern context.

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