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Negotiating Generosity and Subjugation: Hospitality, Servitude, and Friendship in Abdulrazak Gurnah's "Theft"

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Abstract

This paper examines Abdulrazak Gurnah's 2025 novel *Theft* through the intersecting lenses of hospitality, servitude, and friendship to explore everyday generosity alongside systemic subjugation in a postcolonial Tanzania. Focusing on domestic spaces, social worlds, and intimate relationships, the study foregrounds these sites as locations where moral, ethical, and structural tensions coverage in daily life. Drawing on theoretical work by Marcel Mauss, Jacques Derrida, and Emmanuel Levinas, this paper situates the novel within broader debates on gift economies, relational ethics, and postcolonial hospitality. Mauss's theory of the gift illuminates' obligations of reciprocity in social exchange, demonstrating that generosity is never wholly disintegrated but shaped by commitment and duty. Derrida's reflections on hospitality expose the power relations and hierarchies underlying even seemingly unconditioned welcomes, while Levinas's ethics of the other enables close attention to moral responsiveness and relational obligations of the characters.

The novel's representation of servitude emphasizes the affective dimensions of labour, revealing how economic dependence intertwines with social obligation and emotional care. Friendship emerges as a frail yet ethically significant space in which assistance, solidarity, indebtedness, and moral negotiation coexist. The article argues that *Theft* reveals the deep entanglement of generosity and servitude, showing how acts of care may both empower individuals and entrap them within relations of dependency. By integrating literary analyses with ethical and postcolonial theory, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of relational and moral economies shaped by historical and structural pressures in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah, Theft, hospitality, servitude, gift economy, postcolonial literature.

Introduction

Theft (2025) by Abdulrazak Gurnah is a large-scale exploration of human relationships, family life and relationships, and society in post-colonial Tanzania. While demonstrating characters as they navigate colonialism and economic precarity, it also overtly interrogates the ethics of intimacy. Central to the narrative is a continuum of care or containment fraught with risk: those who offer assistance, offer counsel, or offer hospitality are "invested," anticipate obligations, exacerbate power differentials, and increase the sociality of behaviour. In this notional way, Theft portrays generosity as a function not of isolated moral virtue but as part of a complex web of relational and structural configurations, revealing ethical uncertainties that characterize human interaction.

The novel portrays multiple social and economic locations among interwoven characters, and the characters are each subject to differing moral and to differing relational choices based on their economic and social position. For example, young laborers, and domestic staff have to navigate the forms of care and morality demanded by their employers and older family members, while comparatively more privileged individuals negotiate with the burdens of care and morals they exert to their families or friends. Gurnah shows us how these spaces simultaneously operate as sites of care, moral instruction, and social control for domestic, social, and friendship networks. The text adds to the docile examination of everyday decisions, sacrifices, and compromises that illustrate relational life, while opening up conversations about wider structural and ethical questions that trouble postcolonial societies.

This paper investigates “Theft” as an example of postcolonial literary study and ethics. Gurnah's fiction has long been recognized for its excavations of displacement, memory, and the afterlife of colonial power. Theft extends these ideas into another dimension, one that enters the mundane moral and relational work that knits social life together. Examining the concept of hospitality, servitude, and friendship, this article considers how Gurnah illumines the interwoven and sometimes competing relations of generosity and obligation, and how social, economic, and historical circumstances constrain and enable moral agency.

The theoretical framework that guides this analysis is informed by Marcel Mauss, Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas. Mauss's classic work on gift economies shows that giving is always in connotation with expectations of reciprocity and social obligation. Generosity is driven by networks of social debt. Derrida's deconstruction of the hospitality problematizes the idea of unconditional welcome by showing how acts of offering care or shelter reveal the power relations that are always already inherent in those situations. Levinas's ethics of responsibility to the Other put moral attentiveness to human relations to the forefront by emphasizing the ethical weight of interpersonal obligation. These three authors allow us to read Theft in a way that attends to the structural and ethical dimensions of domestic and social engagement.

In combining literary analysis with postcolonial and ethical theory, this paper examines how Gurnah represents relational complexity, moral ambiguity, and the interplay between autonomy and obligation. By doing so, it contributes to an understanding of the moral and relational economies that operate within postcolonial societies, emphasizing that everyday acts of care, labour, and friendship are simultaneously sites of generosity and subjugation.

Literature Review

Critics have noted Abdulrazak Gurnah's interest in themes of historical memory,

migration, and postcolonial ethics. In particular, Callimanopulos (2025) attends to the microeconomies of care and moral negotiation, and the ways that care and an ethics of obligation flow through personal relationships founded in love. Morrison (2025) engages in similar ethical work, drawing attention to how the visibility of the marginalized, through their acts of kindness, functioned in both protecting and controlling others. Together, multiple readings help frame Gurnah in terms of his investment in ethical and moral frameworks. His work becomes animated in the discussions concerning the ethics of relationality and intimacy in postcolonial literatures.

Theoretical interpretations of hospitality and gift exchange provide structural visions of the degrees of generosity and obligation displayed through Theft. Mauss's (2002) landmark study of gift economies highlights, above all, that all exchanges of gifts create reciprocal obligations by making generosity inseparable from social obligation and moral debt. Viewed through a Maussian lens, Gurnah's text illustrates how even altruistic acts, such as providing shelter, help, or friendship, are laden with presumptive obligations and therefore limit recipients' choices and build social hierarchies. Derrida's (1992) critique of hospitality further complicates the picture. The ideal of the hospitable and unconditional welcome/morality is a morality that rarely transpires; acts of offering care are always conditioned by specific norms, standards, or power relations. The theoretical ideas applied to Theft enable an understanding of the ways domestic and social spaces come to be sites of ethical negotiation and relational tension.

The ethics of responsibility to the Other (Levinas, 1969) aligns with these views, underscoring the moral attentiveness that should be required in human interactions. Ethical responsibility is part of the social contract, an engagement based on attentiveness to and recognition of the needs and vulnerability presented by Other(s). Rather than being able to opt out of responsibility for the Other(s), the situation is far more complicated for most characters who experience. Through Theft characters experience (or don't) tension between ethical obligation and ethical constraint, negotiating moral responsibility in contexts created through historical, social and economic pressures.

Additionally, postcolonial scholars further contextualize these conversations into a more expansive political and historical frame. Designed, for example, argues that the patterns of colonialism continue to influence social stratification, labour relations, and other kinds of relationships, revealing how prior historical arrangements continue to mediate social interactions. Like Gurnah, postcolonial narratives are also grounded in these legacies, demonstrating that some psychological construct like generosity, hospitality, and friendship, will always be mediated by social, historical, and economic conditions. Recent studies of Gurnah's Theft point to the engagement of domestic practice and a larger moral economy. Lynch (2018) examined the relational networks that produce everyday care and attention, stating explicitly that acts of hospitality, as well as acts of service, are always engaged in social power and social expectation. Ahmed (2004) similarly engages with affective economies, illustrating how all aspects of emotion, attachment, and moral attention are done under labour and obligation, affecting the lived experience of the characters. Together, these studies illustrate how Gurnah's work is always actively engaged in the interplay between generosity, obligation, and structural constraint, and thus, there are many rich opportunities for ethical, postcolonial, and literary analysis.

Analysis

The examination centers on hospitality, servitude, and friendship. Each section will highlight ethical and relational tensions,

character negotiations, and narrative devices that bring to light these complexities.

Hospitality as Ambivalence

In Theft, hospitality works simultaneously as an ethical ideal and, unwittingly, as a more subtle means of social control. Characters who provide shelter, food, or guidance are also establishing a network of obligations to shape the behaviours and choices of the individuals they are helping. For example, households that open their doors to extended family or local workers are doing so within a system of expectation; there is a level of thanks, acquiescence, and sometimes labour, that is implied in their normative hospitality. Gurnah's novel illustrates that hospitality is never unmediated or apolitical; hospitality is a do-it moment, relational and situated action rooted in systems of social stratification, moral codes, and histories.

This ambivalence reflects Derrida's (1992) claim that unconditional hospitality is often a desire rather than a reality. In the novel, all those receiving hospitality are also cognizant of its implicit obligations. For example, a young servant or neighbouring people are generally expected to perform chores, assist with errands, or lend some other good turn, not just in gratitude, but rather as part of a social network of relationship that includes an obligation of belonging or ethical responsibility. While this takes place, Gurnah emphasizes that hospitality includes the essence of care, along with protection, and then provides durable expectations of justice and morality within the structure of social interaction.

Additionally, the home in this story serves as a moral laboratory. Shared meals, the act of sleeping in someone's home, and being in domestic spaces are considered small simulations of societal negotiations between care and control. In addition, the ambivalence of hospitality is not just structural; it is also emotional. While supporters may derive some ethical pleasure from providing others with aid, they know the possibility of being indebted, disrupted, and even morally compromised. Likewise, people who benefit from generosity often straddle roles of appreciation, agency, and subjection. In this way, hospitality operates as a site where ethical ideals, social hierarchy, and relational tensions meet.

Gurnah's narrative emphasizes that hospitality extends beyond mere material provision; it encompasses attention, moral guidance, and affective labour. Hosts carefully monitor conduct, offer advice, and intervene in disputes, reinforcing social norms while simultaneously demonstrating care. Therefore, the ethical aspect of hospitality cannot be divorced from the relational and structural aspects of this work: the moral good of offering assistance operates alongside nuanced forms of discipline and expectation. This duality allows Theft to emphasize the tensions implicit in generosity, obligation, and social order, both of which show how postcolonial domesticity and friendship are inextricably caught up in forms of power.

Servitude and the Affective Economy of Labor

The notion of servitude in Theft operates on different levels: economic, social and affective. Characters such as young labourers and household labourers engage in physical work that is paid for, but the expectation of emotional attention, loyalty, and moral propriety is just as important. Gurnah represents labour as an affective practice whereby obedience, attentiveness and conscientiousness are also valued, alongside efficiency or skill. This tension reflects a larger postcolonial reality whereby the legacy of hierarchical social formations continues to shape dynamics within domestic, professional and neighbourhood settings.

The text illustrates that servitude is a bounded relational. Those with relative power of position, such as employers, elders, or heads of a household, shape expectations and impose moral obligations. However, servitude is not

just unethical coercion. Characters assume agency in their roles and negotiate, resist, and reframe obligations. This illustrates a more complex structure of power relations. A young worker may, for example, exercise agency by undertaking a specified set of responsibilities with fidelity but may also sneak away only at the last moment or with little more than an expectation of notice to assert personal priorities at another event. The interaction illustrates the point that servitude is not solely a function of power; it is, in fact, observed in a complicated dynamic of reciprocal attentiveness and social expectation.

Gurnah's engagement with labour is not simply on its physical dimension, but also on affective and moral labour dimensions as well. Providing care - cooking for others, minding children, mediating conflicts - creates an emotional economy that exists in conjunction with wage remuneration. Affective work is also imbued with moral significance: the labourer's mindful attention implies a form of ethical engagement, while audiences (in this case, employers) reward or acknowledge that care but understand it to support established frameworks of social hierarchy, relationally entrenching one another with obligation. The novel thus depicts those bound to serve as combining physical as well as abstract negotiations of power, care, and moral obligation, where mixes of affect, attention, or obedience are as paradoxically potent as material exchange. Gurnah also demonstrates how structural constraints raise the stakes of servitude. Economic precarity, social norms, and historical legacies of hierarchy shape expectations and opportunities for resistance; characters are regularly put in positions of having to navigate their responses to these conditions, constantly balancing the obligations of accountability, survivability, and self-interest. Servitude serves as the magnifying glass for the novel's examination of broader social and moral architectures. It explicates the entanglements of obligation, generosity, and subjugation; it echoes that labour must not be approached as a purely transactional or economic activity, but that it, must be read in relation to any affective, ethical, and historical dimensions of lived conditions.

Friendship as Fragile Reciprocity

Friendship in Theft presents itself as an arena of moral and social significance where notions of generosity, indebtedness, and the collaborative work of a relationship emerge. Friendship does not occupy the same kinds of spaces or obligations as hospitality does, but rather flows between engagement in shared experiences, practical aid, and emotional support. Gurnah depicts these kinds of bonds as precarious: they serve as a source of genuine relief and solidarity, all the same, they are suffused with prior obligations, social norms of expectation, and moral accountability.

Friendship does not exist in a perfect balance, nor is it free from complications. When a character extends help, guidance, or company to another character, that act results in subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle indebtedness that has moral implications affecting behaviour, social allegiance, and decision-making. It is worth noting that Gurnah's representation finds the relationship dynamic to be ethically loaded: friends pay attention not only to their own moral obligations, but also to the possibility of social advantage or dependency. Friendship, in that respect, is a complicated form of moral economy, where affective, social, and moral obligations are always intertwined.

Gurnah also portrays the precariousness of friendship through instances of friction and disconcert. Disputes, unfulfilled expectations, or differing means of capacity to act create ethical and emotional complexity in relationships. Characters navigate the various circumstances with sensitivity, as they must contend with the balance of individual autonomy against the weight of moral and social obligation. Friendship illustrates an additional terrain of conflict, both moral support and subtle coercion.

Ultimately, the novel's main theme outlines that generosity is always relationally and ethically entangled. The novel also highlights that friendships are bound up with structural and historical contexts. The post-colonial sociocultural realities, economic precarity, social stratification, and historical legacy frame the possibilities and limits of friendship. Generosity in these friendships is exercised as ethical, relational, and political. By tracking these dynamics, Theft represents friendship as morally consequential but always precarious, illustrating the interrelations of care, obligation, and autonomy in private social networks.

Discussion

The previous debates about hospitality, servitude, and friendship show that Abdulrazak Gurnah's Theft deals with the behavioural, social, and relational complexities of postcolonial Tanzania in a very detailed manner. In all three cases, generosity is not a straightforward or purely selfless act; on the contrary, it is entangled with anticipation, duty, and delicate power relations. Gurnah will not romanticize the protagonists' gestures of care or support. Rather, he reveals the situations where the most common ethical acts are affected, sometimes in a negative way, by the past of inequality, colonialism, and the constant struggle for survival.

Hospitality in Theft, for example, is a double-edged practice. Kindness or moral virtue seems to be the case on the surface by providing food, shelter, and safety. On the contrary, Gurnah points out that there is usually a lot of power behind such generosity. Implicit rules about gratitude, behaviour, and loyalty are set up through domestic hospitality. The care receiver has to bear the social and moral responsibilities, the host's norms have to be internalized and the expectations of the host subtly conformed to. This power struggle reflects Derrida's (1992) assertion: unconditional hospitality is a concept that cannot be realized because every physical act of welcome entails limitations, borders, and conditions. Gradually, the moments in Theft that are apparently gracious are actually the means of reinforcing the social stratification more and more. The power of the host is still there, even when it is covered up by kindness, and the guest is in an ethical situation where refusal, critique, or non-compliance feels like a breach of the moral order; thus, the moral order is the power of the host.

The issue of servitude complicates the moral panorama even more by disclosing the role of economic and affective labour in the power dynamics between individuals. The characters do not just perform household duties, menial tasks, or emotional caregiving as a matter of routine, but rather as negotiations within the limited social structures. These actions reveal the struggle between power and constraint: on the one hand, people manage to create tiny areas of resistance or freedom, and on the other hand, the choices of the whole society are still dictated by poverty, dependence, and the remaining impacts of colonial economic arrangements. Levinas's (1969) concept of ethical responsibility to the Other directly gets involved with the structural realities: the moral call in the personal encounter is never divorced from the burden of the socioeconomic conditions. Gurnah underscores that work, especially domestic and affective labour, is not morally neutral. It enmeshes people into relationships characterized by obligation and appreciation, mostly in ways that support the existing hierarchy. Acts of service may indeed convey caring, but at the same time, they also place moral burdens and expectations upon the individuals involved that are hard to separate. Once more, the thing called generosity proves to be costly, not only for the one who gives.

Friendship, usually seen as a place of trust and warmth, gets transformed in Theft into a very shaky ethical space. Gurnah displays connections that provide emotional support and practical alliance, but still insists on demonstrating their insecurity. The bonds

among the characters are held together by unvoiced mutual obligations, a kind of tacit moral accounting system. Support has to be equal, loyalty has to be proven, and emotional relation has to be kept. When those balances are disturbed, friendship gets strained, which shows how much social hierarchy, economic hardships, and historical factors that come with it can even infiltrate the most intimate ties. The novel proposes that friendship is never cut off from material reality; on the contrary, it always gets its shape from it. The scarcity, insecurities, and unequal power distribution act as a backdrop to the negotiations of what is considered care or justification.

When hospitality, servitude, and friendship are considered together, they particularly highlight a moral economy characterized by the concepts of generosity, obligation, and even domination as inseparable. Gurnah's moral universe is always human-cantered yet very realistic: individuals support one another, nevertheless, they do it in the context of the limitations put on the purity of their motives. The moral feelings characters have for each other are not artificial, yet the circumstances through which they perform these obligations are interwoven with social practices, historical memories, and economic insecurity. Gurnah is not offering any simplistic interpretation of compassion. On the contrary, he illustrates how the moral action is constantly performed under the world's limitations and how those limitations determine what is possible, allowed, or even morally required.

Theft, in a way, shows and at the same time compels the audience to rethink about the ethical aspects of common interactions. The writer nonetheless argues that the little daily actions, such as care, hospitality, and friendship, are not simply individual manners of expression but are events that happen within larger webs of relationships and histories. Gurnah, in the end, points out that real moral clarity means being able to see the personal side intertwined with the systemic one and that understanding the concept of giving requires being aware of the factors that influence it and sometimes distort it.

Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's Theft shows strongly that various forms of generosity yield complicating obligations, moral negotiations, and excuses for failing to fulfil obligations. This novel employs hospitality, servitude, and friendship, all interconnected and interdependent, to examine complex moral economies that shape domestic, social and intimate life in Tanzania after colonization. Characters demonstrate their agency, care, and negotiation in their ethical lives and their identities and relationships while also acting within the parameters that historical, social, and economic conditions set for them.

Hospitality exists as a relational and ethical practice in which caring is intertwined with giving. Those that offer hospitality simultaneously police behaviour and enforce standards, embodying Gurnah's postcolonial idea of generosity as a space of ambivalence. Servitude, whether economic or affective, displays labour, emotional labour, and moral accountability as an entangled process. Characters are traversing some notion of autonomy and obligation, illustrating the murky moral texture of service as an everyday performance. Finally, friendship highlights the fragility and contingency of human connection; where solidarity and debt exist, there is ethics as well.

From a technical perspective, the novel highlights the ethical ambivalence of relational life by linking these three realms to one another. Gurnah's representation of generosity, care, and ethical responsibility in relation to one another teaches us that we cannot separate them from the social, historical, and structural aspects of reality. The moral attentiveness of relational life in relation to structural restraint reveals the postcolonial ethical terrain, where even ordinary acts take on ethical and relational, social dimensions.

To sum up, Theft deals with the complexities of human relations and the ethics behind generosity. It illustrates how the simultaneous acts of care may enable and constrain agency, and moral responsibility may be enacted with respect to both relational and structural constraints. By examining the complexities of hospitality, servitude and friendship, the novel takes up broader conversations about ethicality, postcolonial relationality, and moral economies of everyday life. Therefore, Gurnah's narrative enables one to examine the interactions of generosity, obligation, and subordination in literature and real life richly and interestingly.

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