



Denial and Lack of Unconditional Hospitality in Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly*

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Abstract

The novel, *Sweetness in the Belly*, is a picture-perfect example of impossibility to hospitality to the refugees, namely, Lily, Amina, Yusuf, and Dr. Aziz by the people and state in Harar, and the major character Lily's denial to hospitality in different places offered by different characters in the novel. Critics depict Camilla Gibbs *Sweetness in the Belly* as a catastrophic side effect of dictatorship, civil war, colonial impact, and poor living conditions in the 1980s and 1990s Ethiopia. The novel ends up in the psychopathic refugee status of the characters and the premature tragic death of the lover of the protagonist. The novel may present dictatorial effects, deprivation of human rights, and state dominance on its citizens resulting in refugee status, but in my reading, the novel is a strong exhibition of complete denial to hospitality by the states as well as the individuals segregating the humans from humans. The firsts and foremost identity of individuals as humans are denied. The state dominance using repressive state apparatus results in the loss of characters around the protagonist and the denial of hospitality, especially unconditional hospitality, as proposed by Jacques Derrida, makes the life chances of the characters of the novel vulnerable. I, therefore, argue that the novel is a picture-perfect example of impossibility to hospitality to the refugees, namely, Lily, Amina, Yusuf, and Dr. Aziz by the people and state in Harar, and the major character Lily's denial to conditional hospitality in different places offered by different characters in the novel.

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The novel captures some of the most damaging side effects of dictatorships and war-ridden life circumstances during the dictatorship of Emperor Haile Selassie in Ethiopia. In addition, it exhibits the condition of violation of human rights depriving the refugees, stateless, and war-ridden

humans form “right to have rights” (296) as Hannah Arendt proposes in her essay “Decline of the Nation-State; End of Rights of Man”. All the protagonists are deprived of minimal human rights for survival. Deprivation, exclusion, and statelessness end up in the death of Dr. Aziz, psychological imparity of Amina due to gang rape by police, mental turbulence in Yusuf, and loss of the love of life and refugee status of the major protagonist, Lily. It is also interpreted as suffering undergone by the nation state’s hesitance of acceptance of the refugees in their land, enforcing them to live “bare life” in ancient term belonging to god and in classical term away from “political life” (116) proposed by Giorgio Agamben in “We Refugees”.

Regarding hostility and hospitality, Emmanuel Levinas proposes conditional hospitality where he concludes that ethics should be the basis to provide hospitality to the refugees and suggests that the guest should be “welcomed” and paid “attention” to. Levinas claims that “to possess the idea of infinity is to have already welcomed the other” (12). He postulates that “... the face presents itself, and demands justice” (Totality and Infinity, 294). Therefore, in “Cities of Refuge” for Levinas, to provide hospitality is the ethics (34) of a man. Emmanuel Kant moves forward regarding hospitality that the host has to welcome the guest as his duty (xxii). He argues in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History* that it is the moral duty of the host to welcome the guest. He writes, “... what may at first glance look like a naïve claim to knowledge of the actuality of progress is, in fact, a belief from a moral point of view” (Kleingeld, xxii). Kant proposes hospitality as the right of the guest.

...we are concerned here with right, not with philanthropy, and in this context hospitality (a host’s conduct to his guest) means the right of a stranger not to be treated in a hostile manner by another upon his arrival on the other’s territory. If it can be done without causing his death, the stranger can be turned away, yet as long as the stranger behaves peacefully where he happens to be, his host may not treat him with hostility. It is not the right of a guest that the stranger has a claim to ... but rather a right to visit, to which all human beings have a claim, to present oneself to society by virtue of the right of common possession of the surface of the earth. (Kant, 82)

Emmanuel Kant claims that the guest should not be treated in a hostile manner. He further states that the guest has the right to visitation only. He but puts the condition that the guest may be turned away without causing his death, and if he desires to live in the guest’s place, he has to abide by the conditions put forth by the host (82). Levinas and Kant both emphasize hospitality but with preconditions.

When the issues of hospitality become the burning issue in the context of refugees, they are always conditioned as Levinas and Kant claim. Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher, proposes unconditional hospitality standing on Levinas's ethics and Kant's morality and believes that "there would be a new order of law and democracy to come to be put to test (experimentation)" (Derrida, 23). He asserts that such cosmopolitanism providing unconditional hospitality "has not yet arrived" and "If it has (indeed) arrived... then, one has perhaps not yet recognized it" (23). He further argues that the guest should be welcomed without questioning and should be treated and given space without depositing any conditions, even if the host has to move away from his own home (18). This concept of hospitality, proposed by Derrida, is an unconditional one that Gibbs attempts to find for the characters in the novel but uncovers it to be baffling to find such hospitality even in the novel, which is next to impossible to find in real-life situations. I will, therefore, look at the novel using the theories of Emmanuel Levinas, Emmanuel Kant, and Jacques Derrida to look at the denial of hospitality in Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly*.

Gibbs gives the childhood account of Lily where she calls herself a nomad. She was born in Yugoslavia, breast-fed in Ukraine, weaned in Corsica, freed from diapers in Sicily, and walking by the time they got to the Algrave. When she starts speaking French, she was off to Spain and finally lands in Africa where her new journey starts. The Great Abdal of the Sufi shrine of Bilal al Habash receives her when her parents went off forever. The Great Abdal accepts her and welcomes to Tangier. The hospitality provided to her appears like the unconditional one. He starts teaching Qur'an and acknowledges her as daughter and student. If the Great Abdal had known that she would be living with her for long, he would not have accepted her parent's request to take care of her. "The saint's disciple, the Great Abdal, received us with some initial reservation, but softened once he'd placed his hand on my mother's stomach ... It would only be for three days"(Gibbs 8). The hospitality provided to the daughter of a nomads, the wanderers, was conditioned for three days only as ethics proposed by Levinas. It depicts that the hospitality she entertains is an ethical obligation to the Great Abdal.

Lily becomes the nurse when she lands as a refugee in London, she comes across Amina, whom she readily accepts as her roommate. Despite the fact they are from the opposing tribes of high land and low land of Egypt, Lily embraces her and supports her to give birth to the baby. Even other refugee inhabitants help her in delivery and in raising the child, Lily demands nothing from Amina. She welcomes her with open arms and adjusts herself on the sofa giving Amina her bed. This is what Jacques Derrida calls unconditional

hospitality. Derrida claims that the hospitality should be provided without any conditions and should be welcomed even if the host has to leave his residence. Amina receives the hospitality with full gratifications. Derrida asserts that to provide hospitality, the host must also accept the hospitality offered. Amina is in a situation where she is deprived of other options. So for Amina, it's not the hospitality but, it is a compulsion to live with Lily. She is relieved in the host's (Lily's) room and leads a better and comfortable life at the time of her desperate need of asylum. She accepts the hospitality provided by Lily, which we can perceive as unconditional hospitality. Lily, on the one hand, seems to provide unconditional hospitality, on the other hand, it's conditioned to seeking escape from refugee status. Whenever she comes across any Ethiopian, she loves to have coffee and talk to them for a reason that she could inquire about her lost love, Aziz. Lily does the same with Amina as well. She possess inner instincts to find Aziz and since Amina is an Ethiopian, she expects to get some clue to find her forlorn love. When Amina asks Lily, why she has been so kind to Amina, Lily explains, "Because you remind me of people . . . people I love," I finally said. "And none of them are here" (Gibb, 15). Later they together opens an organization sensing the increasing need for an office in London, where people could exchange names in the hopes of locating family members. The main motive was to find their lost people. Lily and Amina, both have a common job, Lily to search for her missing love, Aziz and Amina to search her husband, Yusuf. Both are guided by their self-interests, making their bonding a conditional one.

Back in time, Hussein takes Lily to Harar. The youngest wife of Seikh Jami, Gista, takes Lily to her cousin's home to live. Seikh Jami, mumbles to Gishta after which she leads to provide shelter to Lily. When all were calling her Farenji and when she has nowhere to go, she feels that she would be free in Harar and lead a happy life. When Gista leads Lily to Nouria's house, Gishta expects to make some amount of money to her cousin as a source of income in the form of rent for the space catered.

Gishta, I suddenly realized, looked at me as a source of income for this woman, her cousin, expecting me to pay rent, and pay well. . . .whereas I was an enigma and a threat. I surrendered to my new landlady a portion of the money the Great Abdal had given us for the journey. (Gibbs, 33)

Finances always play a significant role in providing refuge to the refugees. Nouria provides her shelter with the expectation of some money as rent. This city of refuge becomes the city of exile to Lily since she is expected to pay the rent in the land she dwells. Lily, from the very first encounter with the people of Harar, takes herself as a threat to the people of Harar as Hararis called her

farenji. This indoctrination gave her psychological positioning to be a refugee. She uses the word “Enigma” (33) which means problem, mystery, and riddle for herself. Her first experience in search of hospitality seems to be hostility for herself. Lily uses the words “my new landlady” (33) to denote Nouria that connotes the existence of hierarchy between them. The landlady is the master of the house where Lily, will somehow live under the terms and conditions directed by her new master. George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a German philosopher, who developed a dialectical scheme that emphasized the progress of history and ideas writes in his “Master-Slave dialectic” the story of two independent “self-consciousnesses” that encounter one another and engage in a life-and-death struggle. Each self-consciousness must struggle with all its might to realize the extent of its strength with the other (1). This struggle is evident in Lily as she enters Harar. “Master morality” dominates “slave morality” which turns out to be hostile for Lily psychologically. This psychological inferiority is further strengthened by the symbolic dominance of the demand for money and bodily gestures of Nouria.

Nouria gets some money and provides the space to reside. Lily hopes for survival. Nouria gives some hope to Lily. Emmanuel Levinas calls for offering hope when he writes “ “make the sunrise for (innocent) manslayer!” and the word sun would not figure in this verse to locate the place of the city or to indicate the direction it faces. It is mentioned to affirm that life must have some sun” (Levinas 42). Lily can be compared to an “innocent manslayer” as suggested by Levinas. Emmanuel Levinas presents the concept of innocent manslayer as half guilty and half innocent in his essay “Beyond the Verse Talmudic Readings and Lectures”. Lily is guilty of being born of a nomad whose parents disappeared when she was too young and she is half innocent because she has committed no crime except born as a daughter of wanderers. Levinas claims that such manslayers should be protected from the “blood Avengers” and should be provided security because they are half guilty and half innocent.

The cities in which we live and the protection that, legitimately, because of our subjective innocence, we find in our liberal society (even if we find it a little less than before) against so many threats of vengeance fearing neither God nor man, against so many heated forces; is not such protection, in fact, the protection of a half-innocence or a half-guilt, which is innocence but nevertheless also guilt - does not all this make our cities of refuge or cities of exiles? (Levinas 40)

Cities of the refuge provide hospitality, but at the same time, refugees have to live inside the four walls that again is an exile. This applies to Lily’s status as

well. Lily's Security and acceptance in the house is assured because she can pay some sum of money to her new landlady, a master-slave relationship, where she is supposed to live in the house and inside the city build within the walls with the condition that she pays and rules she obeys. This is well presented in Alan Gratz's *Refugee* as well, where Mahmoud's, one among the three families, had to pay even to spend a night in a deserted container, not belonging to whom they paid. Hospitality without any financial or other sorts of reward is practically not found.

When money is one of the major reasons for Lily to be accepted in the family, she expects that she would also be accepted in the shrine. When her students started singing a section of the Qur'an favored in Harar which refers to seeking refuge in sympathetic lands, Sheikh Jami uttered "very good" but when he comes to know that the students are taught by some "farenji" he gets disappointed. The attitude and behavior shown by Sheikh Jami gives the picture that Sheikh as the leader of the religious group is against accepting Lily though she has done a fantastic job by teaching the kids. In fact, for Muslims, the idea of hospitality derives first from the Qur'an itself, which requires that hospitality or charity be offered to travelers: "It is righteous to believe in God; [and] to spend of your substance, out of love for Him. For Muslims, the entire world is their home as for stoics" (226). Pnina Werbner in her book *Islamic Studies in the Twenty-First Century: Transformations and Continuities* also claims that Muslims, consider the entire world as their home and if that is so, other people living on the earth should have the same right to call the entire world their home, but it is not accepted. Werbner writes:

... She responded, "this is what we believe in Islam." She quoted a saying from the poet Muhammad Iqbal. "Muslim hey, ham wathan hey, sara jehan humara" (as Muslims our homeland is the whole world). "We believe that Allah is the god of all people," she added. Literally "world citizen" translates as *aalmi shahri*, but this expression is seldom used, I was told. (Werbner 226)

Werbner argues that Muslims are world citizens as stoics claim. John Sellers writes: "...cosmos is a city, the only true city, and that it is to this cosmic city that the stoic will have his primary affiliation. Consequently, he will reject, or at least be indifferent to the conventional city in which he was born" (Seller 1). For stoics, the entire cosmos is one city and they are free to live the way they desire without any rule of law formulated by a bounded city. Despite the fact, that it is written in Qur'an that hospitality should be offered, Lily is not accepted as Muslim since she is a white foreigner. Hannah Arendt claims that "refugees were persecuted not because of what they had done or thought, but because of what they unchangeably were- born into the wrong kind of race or

the wrong kind of class or drafted by the wrong kind of government” (Arendt 294). Lily faces the denial not because of other reasons but because she is of a different race, a foreigner. Her student’s performance in the shrine is overlooked just because they are the students of a Farenji. Sheikh Jami considers that foreigners as liars, thieves, and useless. “She spoke timidly through the door. “The students have come for a blessing,” she said. “But with a farenji? We do not learn our Islam from farenjis! These people are useless! Liars! Thieves!” he shouted” (Gibbs 136). Lily taught Qur’an for livelihood and the scriptural authority says that the refugee is to be treated justly and “provide him with whatever he needs so that he may (truly) live (Levinas, 34). Lily is completely denied hospitality and her life chances evaporate since her students are not recognized in the shrine as well.

Authorities, may it be social, religious, or political, hold the control over hospitality. Lily is denied and mistreated in the shrine through the authority of the shrine. Amina, Yusuf’s wife, who is alleged Oromo agitator, faces the hostility through the sexual harassment of state clouts. The novel presents the pathetic condition of Amina and Yousuf as a result of the Emperor’s sole intentions to elongate his regime and dominate the agitation in the form of civil war. Police rape and discards her when she goes to a refugee camp to escape the civil war.

Before and during the civil war police harasses the people and migrants/ refugees. After Yusuf was taken they began interrogating all the Oromo in the camp. Amina, as the wife of an alleged Oromo agitator, ... The only way to protect her son was to yield to their demands. She lay down, spread her legs and let the first officer charge into her. The second officer, dismissing her as a prostitute because she was not infibulated, and demanding a tighter hole, heaved himself into her anus. (Gibb 151)

Amina’s only chance of survival is to accept the sexual raid to save her son from state police. She anticipates getting hospitality and acceptance in the camp, but for that, she had to succumb herself physically and sexually to the militia. Despite her innocence, she is penetrated by police as she is the wife of an alleged Oromo agitator. “Alleged” is just doubtful and suspected, declared but not proved, still, then Yusuf is tortured.

Amina is raped and decried a prostitute. Her “right to have right” to speak for herself and protection from the police is refuted. She is denationalized and hence dehumanized.

Hannah Arendt designates the positioning of refuge when she inscribes, “once they left their homeland they remained homeless, once they had left their state they became stateless: once they had been deprived of their human rights they

were rightless, the scum of the earth” (267). Arendt’s postulation stands evident in *Sweetness in the Belly*, where Amina is deprived of even minimum human rights since she attempts to leave her home. The state law is no more supportive to demand justice for her. Amina becomes entirely rightless to raise her voice against the hostility on her. Though the violence on her is because of the power bestowed to police by the dictator, police violence is “faceless and formless” (Derrida 14). The identities of those, who raped, remained unidentified. The state showed no concern over the policy dominance. The political status of the migrant Amina, if compared with the concept of Thomas Nail’s Migrant cosmopolitanism, is in between that of the human and the animal, in the city but not belonging to the city (Nail 189). They were never inquired or punished for their deeds. Hostility is what she faces for the expectation of hospitality.

When Jacques Derrida talks about unconditional hospitality in his essay “On Cosmopolitanism” he claims that for such hospitality to be in real practice, police must be provided with the limited power under the control of the political authorities. If the police is provided with the excess power to deal with the migrants, they might be ruthless and may cause the death of the migrant as well and are not answerable to anybody.

... it will be necessary to restrict the legal powers and scope of the police by giving them a purely administrative role under the strict control and regulation of certain political authorities, who will see to it that human rights and a more broadly defined right to asylum are respected (Derrida, 15)

For hospitality to asylum seekers to be possible, the asylum seeker should be able to have free movements which are restricted at borders and everywhere else exercising state laws. When Amina tries to escape poverty, she is detained at the concentration camp. Free movement is denied, which is against hospitality. This does not just give the victim a temporal effect but also long-term impacts, which are illustrated in the novel. The situation of Amina in London is a clear representation of refugees and victims of civil war and other form of wars. Amina is “ruptured, she was pregnant, she was free. A man in a police uniform scares her far more than some drunken neo-Nazi bigot on a tear”(Gibb 151).

Amina pretends to assimilate with the English culture and remain happy but still torments the reminiscence that creates a psycho-traumatic effect. Yusuf’s condition is even more awful. Once when they were in London, a car backfired in the street below, and Yusuf hurled himself on the floor and tried to crawl under the sofa. The brutality of torture he has undergone in the concentration camp can be predicted by his pretense. The psychological and

mental trauma they go through is the outcome of the hostility of police who were supposed to provide hospitality to the refugees. Additionally, according to Levinas, political asylum is the right of the refugee, but that right of Amina and Yousuf is snatched away, turning them to live “bare life” referring then to a conception of the life, in which the sheer biological fact of life is given priority over the way life lived, by which Giorgio Agamben means its possibilities and potentialities are all sacked.

The entire novel revolves around Lily, who is loved by Aziz. He helps her to escape after the decline of Dictator Haile Selassie. Lily loves Aziz and wants to have settled life with Aziz but Aziz, as a member of rebels, is put to death in the refugee camp by the state for his disapproval of what the state was offering him. The place Aziz and Lily mostly meet is the room where people gather to watch television. Aziz shows the desire for intimacy every time the people in the room leaves. One mouth to the finger is an appeal to sexual plea in body language, so he is more attracted to her body than providing hospitality to her than genuine respect to embracing her. In Dire Dawa, Aziz knows that Lily is supposed to leave Harar for London but, he comes to her room and gets sensual with her.

He pressed his lean body into mine, his tongue still deep in my mouth, his hand slowly circling my back through the thin fabric of my diri, lulling me into something as tingling and drifting as mirqana. The movement of his hand kept me afloat as we rocked back and forth. He rolled me over, my back to his front. His fingertips circled my navel and he breathed heavily into my neck. I shivered and felt the hardness of him against the small of my back. (209)

They spend the night together, and later Lily is forced to travel to London, and Aziz stays back. Had it been the genuine acceptance, Aziz would have either moved away with Lily or asked Lily to stay back. Aziz seems to have been with Lily just for sexual instinct. Hospitality is, therefore, driven by sexual instinct.

In London Robin, a doctor in the same hospital where Lily works, tries to get near Lily and expresses love. He is hospitable to Lily and wants to help her in every possible way. Lily denies getting near to Robin, but Robin wants to get near to Lily and says “I just want to get to know you better,”(Gibbs 174). But before Robin wants to accept her as a part of his life, before he could cuddle her with her open arms, he wishes to know who and what sort of a woman Lily is. Furthermore, he tries to enquire about her parents and her roots. Lily’s expression that “Robin was asking me about my guardian today,”(164) distinctly demonstrates that Robin did not welcome Lily unconditionally. These lines of *Sweetness in the Belly* further support that Robin is more interested to know where Lily has arrived from before accepting

her. "But how can I get to know you if you won't even let me see where you live?" ... "I just want to get to know you better," he says.(173,174)

Robin gives the impression that he has an intense desire to come close to Lily, but that desire to be near is more inclined to know whom he is going to accept as his guest, rather than welcoming her without any question. In His book, *Paper Machine*, Derrida questions, "Does hospitality consist in interrogating the new arrival?" in the first place by asking their name, "or does hospitality begin with the unquestioning welcome?" Is the second of these attitudes more in keeping with the principle of "unlimited hospitality" that you are talking about?" (67). Derrida is against interrogating the new arrival and suggests that unconditional hospitality is possible only when someone accepts the guest without even asking the name but Robin tries to question Lily before he embrace him completely. Robin welcomes Lily, but along with the open arm welcome, he questions about the past of Lily which for Derrida is not unconditional hospitality. If Robin had unconditional hospitality for Lily, he should have unquestioning unlimited hospitality. Furthermore, for the hospitality to be unconditional hospitality, according to Derrida, the guest must accept the hospitality provided by the host.

... which must lead, according to a necessity we will often put to the test, to the reversal in which the master of this house, the master in his own home, the host*, can only accomplish his task as host, that is, hospitality, in becoming invited by the other into his home, in being welcomed by him whom he welcomes, in receiving the hospitality he gives. (Derrida on Kant 9)

If the master of the house wants the guest to welcome the guest, the guest must not be reluctant to accept the hospitality provided to the guest. If the host forces to receive the hospitality, it is just like welcoming someone into the prison where the guest feels that he is locked and forced into it. He does not enjoy his freedom, not only physical also mental and emotional. Lily, though welcomed into the life of Robin, feels the same. Hospitality must emerge out of the free will of the guest and the host, but here Lily is not interested in Robin's life. Robin's hospitality is therefore conditional hospitality which is not acceptable for Lily. Hospitality is expected in the novel to the refugees, but the form of hospitality they expect is not achieved or is not acceptable either because of the state's repression or their desire for unconditional hospitality. Hospitality that the characters in the novels try to provide are not unconditional as Jacques Derrida imagines. The conditional hospitality, initiated as ethical, proposed by Emmanuel Levinas and duty, as proposed by Emmanuel Kant, seems to be attained by the refugees to some degree, but the present status of refugees demand unconditional hospitality so that they can

lead a happy, prosperous, and most importantly humanly life which the novel depicts that it lacks which is the real-life situation of the refugees as well.

Camella Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly* is, therefore, a portrayal of the call for hospitality for the refugees and justice to them. Gibbs presents Lily, Amina, Yusuf, Aziz, and other characters who expected hospitality from the hosts, but they only get hostility and though in some of the cases they get the hospitality, they don't get complete hospitality. The unconditional hospitality proposed by Jacques Derrida is nowhere to be witnessed. He keeps hospitality at the core of cities of refuge, not forcing to assimilate, limited work and power to police under political authorities, and hospitality as the law must remain unconditional. Derrida's concept of such cosmopolitanism demands unconditional hospitality that lacks in the novels as well as, in real-life situations. It is, therefore, clear that this novel, *Sweetness in the Belly*, presents the absence of unconditional hospitality proposed by Derrida and such hospitality has not yet been witnessed and indeed if witnessed, not yet recognized.

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