



Abdulrazak Gurnah (1948-)

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Novelist; Cultural Theorist/ Critic; Teacher/ Professor.
Active 1987- in Tanzania; United Kingdom

The work of remembering is central to Abdulrazak Gurnah's literary art, much of which is based on a desire to recuperate the history/ies of the Swahili Coast, and, more specifically, of the people of his native Zanzibar. He draws on innovative ways of using memory as a tool for deconstructing historical narratives, enacting in his fiction the tension between the individual's perception of history and that of the collectivity. He captures the sense of uprooting that exile etches on those people who are either compelled by circumstance or voluntarily choose to abandon their homelands. His work has no doubt been greatly inspired by his own experience as an African migrant in 1960s Britain, which filters in the loneliness his characters suffer from. Daud in *Pilgrim's Way* (1988), the eponymous heroine of *Dottie* (1990), the narrator of *Admiring Silence* (1996), Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud in *By the Sea* (2001) and Rashid in *Desertion* (2005) all have first-hand experience of both this sense of alienation and of the often thinly-veiled racism they have to confront.

Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in Zanzibar, then a British colony, in 1948. After a traditional colonial education, he migrated to Britain three years after the 1964 revolution in September 1967. He studied at Christ Church College, Canterbury, whose degrees were then awarded by the University of London. He lectured at the Bayero University Kano in Nigeria from 1980 to 1982 and was appointed professor at the University of Kent in 2004, where he is still based. Well established as an academic, a literary critic and a creative writer, his creative work is only beginning to receive the critical attention it deserves – despite the positive reviews his books always receive. *Memory of Departure* (1987) narrates a young man's growth to maturity in a small East African town around the time of the Zanzibari Revolution. Hassan Omar's memoir commences when he reaches the age of 15, traces his school years, his frustrated attempts to study abroad, his visit to his mother's affluent brother in Nairobi in search of financial support, his budding romance with his cousin Salma, the betrayal of his uncle's trust and his return home. The narrative ends with the letter he writes to his cousin Salma, on board ship en route to Madras, where he has found work as a medical orderly – the profession of the protagonist in Gurnah's second novel, *Pilgrim's Way*. In this debut novel, Gurnah introduces many of the issues he will return to in his later work. Two of the concerns that resonate throughout his novels are the heterogeneity of East African coastal cultures and the excesses of Afrocentricity – illustrated by the immense hatred that the rest of Zanzibar feels towards the people of Arab descent, unleashed by the removal of the common enemy, the British. This critique of the irrational despotism of African nationalist discourses, and in particular the post-revolutionary madness of Zanzibar, is a constant feature of Gurnah's later fiction (Gurnah 2001). Moreover, this novel, like most of Gurnah's oeuvre, is underpinned by Muslim cultural codes as his characters are influenced by the customs, behaviour and worldviews of the part of East Africa where Islam is the dominant religion (Hand,

2010). Gurnah's second novel, *Pilgrim's Way* (1988) may well have been inspired by the author's own experience as a youthful Tanzanian student in late sixties Britain. Daud, who works as a hospital orderly in a thinly disguised Canterbury, home of Gurnah's own university and great heritage site, incarnates the misrepresented black man, forced to live out the stereotypes constructed by decades of imperial historiography. He takes his literary vengeance in the endless letters he writes to Catherine, a white student nurse. Gurnah has endowed Daud, as he does many of his subsequent characters, with his own quandary as a writer, as suggested in an essay published in *World Literature Today*: "I was aware that I would be representing myself to readers who perhaps saw themselves as the normative, free from culture or ethnicity, free from difference" (2004: 28).

Similar racial tensions, questions of belonging, and the making of identity are addressed in *Dottie* (1990), the story of a young black British girl. After a long, painful struggle to bring her family together, find herself a home and a niche in society, Dottie will feel able to trace her own roots. Early in the novel, an elderly black man Dottie frequently saw in the library and had unconsciously idealized as a kind of grandfather figure, dies. The absence of an obituary in the newspaper, despite the fact that the man had been an eminent doctor, proves that the past histories of Britain's black population will only be unearthed and retrieved by black people themselves. In *Dottie* Gurnah has created a determined young woman – to date this is the only novel to feature a sole female protagonist – who, like Daud, has to come to terms with the distrust and resentment of the white British population in the 1960s.

Paradise (1994), shortlisted for the Booker Prize, is another bildungsroman narrating, like *Memory of Departure*, the coming to maturity of a young boy. This time the novel is set at the turn of the twentieth century with Europeans just beginning to encroach on the East African coast. This is a novel that does not shy from telling the truth about Swahili involvement in the slave trade. Many of Gurnah's novels, especially *Memory of Departure* and *Paradise*, show pre-independence Zanzibar, with its internal strifes and contradictions, to be a far cry from a harmonious, egalitarian Eden. The boy Yusuf is sold into slavery by his father as payment to the rich merchant Aziz. Yusuf comes to understand his position in the hybrid Swahili society where myth, storytelling and religious identities jostle together. Gurnah has argued that post-colonial writing often falls into the trap of glossing over the fragmentations within indigenous cultures, in its concern to denounce European colonization and extol native resistance (2002). The ironically titled *Paradise* portrays Africa – both past and present – as a harsh place. In *Admiring Silence* (1996) a Zanzibari man marries an English woman and writes romantic tales of the Africa he remembers. Only when he returns to Zanzibar does he discover the uncomfortable truths about his country and himself. As is true of all his novels, Gurnah is particularly interested in rejected characters and the psychological processes by which migrants construct their identity. The Zanzibar that they left for educational or political reasons has evolved on its own terms and in no way resembles the country that they have imaginatively cherished over the years. The reconstitution of traditions and cultural boundaries is common to practically any culture and one of the strategies employed is deception and falsification. The nameless narrator of *Admiring Silence*, together with Saleh Omar of Gurnah's sixth novel, are possibly Gurnah's most accomplished liars as they use deception to bridge the gap between form and substance, even though it is a false solution to the problem. The reinvention of the past may downplay pre-immigrant circumstances, or may serve as a cover-up of present ambivalences.

By the Sea (2001) begins in 1960 when Omar, aged thirty-one and the owner of a prosperous furniture business, is befriended by an unscrupulous Persian merchant, Hussein. Omar agrees to lend him a large sum of money, for which he is given a surprising document as security: the deeds to the house of Rajab Shaaban Mahmud, Hussein's landlord. The merchant had himself lent a similar sum of money to his landlord the previous year and had received the latter's house as his security. As Omar suspects, Hussein never returns and in due course he is forced to claim repayment of the loan. Rajab Shaaban is enraged by what he sees as Omar's double dealing. Shaaban's wife, who is involved in an affair with a minister, orchestrates a campaign to discredit Omar and have him put into prison. He is sent to various detention camps and is finally released in 1979, eleven years

later, following an amnesty. He manages to eke out a living in relative peace until Rajab Shaaban's elder son, Hassan, who had run away with Hussein the merchant thirty years before, returns determined to claim his father's house from Omar. The thought of another prison sentence proves too much for the latter, who sees flight from Zanzibar as his only hope. He uses Rajab Shaaban's birth certificate in order to obtain a passport as his own had been confiscated. Omar, masquerading as Rajab Shaaban Mahmud, obtains political asylum in Britain and receives a visit from Latif Mahmud, curious about the man who has borrowed his father's name. The novel ends with the two men, Omar and Mahmud, each coming to terms with the other's version of their own family history and, by extension, with the conflicting narratives of Zanzibar's post-revolutionary identity.

Desertion (2005) opens with the sensational arrival of the *mzungu*, Martin Pearce, in a small East African town in 1899, having been abandoned by his Somali guides on the way to the coast. Fate has it that he is found by a *dukawallah*, Hassanali, who takes him in as common humanity requires. Pearce, who is an amateur historian and linguist, returns to the shop to thank his benefactors for their kindness. The Englishman is captivated by Hassanali's sister, Rehana, and the first part of the novel ends with a socially frowned upon love affair, that of a European and a 'native woman'. Part II leaps forward to the momentous events leading to Zanzibar's independence and is centred on the ambitions and frustrations of Amin, Rashid and Farida, the children of two former radical school-teachers. Rashid, who turns out to be the narrator of the novel, busily swots for the entrance examination which will allow him to leave the island and study in a British university. Amin, the perfect son who excels in everything, opts to stay in Zanzibar and train to be a teacher. Fate, in the shape of his dressmaker sister, Farida, brings him in contact with Jamila, the granddaughter of Pearce and Rehana. Parental pressure acts as ruthlessly on Amin as social approval had on Pearce, as both men desert their lovers. Part III focuses on Rashid's life in England far away from the violence and mass slaughters following the overthrow of the new government in Zanzibar. He carves out a new, successful niche for himself, having completed his studies and settled down to academic life with an English wife. It is only when Grace, his wife, finally leaves him, that he is drawn to confide in his older brother. Amin, in turn, makes Rashid repository of his most guarded secret, the unravelling of his love affair with Jamila. In the epilogue of the novel, entitled "A Continuation", Rashid is able to piece the jigsaw together and confront his own demons on a long overdue return to Zanzibar.

Gurnah's latest novel, *The Last Gift* (2011), reveals the failure of the main male character, Abbas, an elderly migrant Zanzibari now resident in England, to come to terms with a changing sociopolitical landscape together with newly acquired adult responsibilities which lead him to voluntary exile. Now in his sixties, Abbas is suddenly taken ill and the novel unravels his past life and the unexpected family cohesion that his illness and death bring about. In the opening section of the novel, which describes Abbas's collapse in detail, the reader gradually discovers that he was formerly a merchant navy sailor and that he comes from the Indian Ocean coast of East Africa. As Abbas slowly wastes away, he comes to terms with his own murky past and the East African coast is narrowed down to Zanzibar. The degeneration of his physical body – what starts as a diabetic crisis develops into a series of strokes – urges him to "come clean" and tell the truth that he has spent years hiding. As Gurnah has stated in an interview, "Places don't live just where they are, they live within you" (Nair). On his deathbed, Abbas, who turns out to be the errant father of the narrator of Gurnah's fifth novel, *Admiring Silence*, discloses his shameful secret of the wife, Sharifa, and unborn child he had abandoned forty-four years earlier. Curiously, his wife Maryam's attainment of personal agency comes about at the demise of her husband's, while his disclosure opens up the possibility of his children reclaiming their lost heritage, Zanzibar.

Gurnah's poised, reflexive prose steadily but unremittingly unfolds tales of cruelty and betrayal, failed hopes and disappointments. His works add more colourful threads to the tapestry of East African history and explore the power of memory and the role it plays in the construction of our identities with brushstrokes of humour, pathos and sympathy. He uses the western secularized space to imagine Muslim identity on his own terms for, despite the focus on transnational human values such as kindness and generosity, his work benefits from being read with its Muslim heritage in view. His narratives focus on Muslim men and their search for a new kind of

masculinity, while his women characters create for themselves new and highly contingent subject positions. Gurnah is thus a writer concerned with the evolution of gender categories and calls for new configurations of space in multiethnic and multicultural societies such as both his native East Africa and contemporary Britain.

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