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The Nobel Prize in Literature 2021: Abdulrazak Gurnah

Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in 1948 and grew up on the island of Zanzibar in the Indian Ocean but arrived in England as a refugee in the end of the 1960s. After the peaceful liberation from British colonial rule in December 1963 Zanzibar went through a revolution which, under President Abeid Karume's regime, led to oppression and persecution of citizens of Arab origin; massacres occurred. Gurnah belonged to the victimised ethnic group and after finishing school was forced to leave his family and flee the country, by then the newly formed Republic of Tanzania. He was eighteen years old. Not until 1984 was it possible for him to return to Zanzibar, allowing him to see his father shortly before the father's death. Gurnah has until his recent retirement been Professor of English and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Kent in Canterbury, focusing principally on writers such as Wole Soyinka, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Salman Rushdie.

Gurnah has published ten novels and a number of short stories. The theme of the refugee's disruption runs throughout his work. He began writing as a 21-year-old in English exile, and even though Swahili was his first language, English became his literary tool. He has said that in Zanzibar, his access to literature in Swahili was virtually nil and his earliest writing could not strictly be counted as literature. Arabic and Persian poetry, especially *The Arabian Nights*, were an early and significant wellspring for him, as were the Quran's surahs. But the English-language tradition, from Shakespeare to V. S. Naipaul, would especially mark his work. That said, it must be stressed that he consciously breaks with convention, upending the colonial perspective to highlight that of the indigenous populations. Thus, his novel *Desertion* (2005) about a love affair becomes a blunt contradiction to what he has called "the imperial romance", where a conventionally European hero returns home from romantic escapades abroad, upon which the story reaches its inevitable, tragic resolution. In Gurnah, the tale continues on African soil and never actually ends.

In all his work, Gurnah has striven to avoid the ubiquitous nostalgia for a more pristine pre-colonial Africa. His own background is a culturally diversified island in the Indian Ocean, with a history of slave trade and various forms of oppression under a number of colonial powers –

Portuguese, Arab, German and British – and with trade connections with the entire world. Zanzibar was a cosmopolitan society before globalisation.

Gurnah's writing is from his time in exile but pertains to his relationship with the place he had left, which means that memory is of vital importance for the genesis of his work. His debut novel, *Memory of Departure*, from 1987, is about a failed uprising and keeps us on the African continent. The gifted young protagonist attempts to disengage from the social blight of the coast, hoping to be taken under the wing of a prosperous uncle in Nairobi. Instead he is humiliated and returned to his broken family, the alcoholic and violent father and a sister forced into prostitution.

In the second work, *Pilgrims Way* from 1988, Gurnah explores the multifaceted reality of life in exile. The protagonist, Daud, is confronted with the racist climate of his new homeland, England. After having tried to hide his past, love for a woman entices Daud to tell his story. He can then recount what happened in his tragic upbringing and the traumatic memories of the political turmoil in Tanzania that forced him into flight. The novel ends with Daud's visit to Canterbury cathedral where he meditates on the parallels between the Christian pilgrims who visited the place in past times and his own journey to England. He had previously defiantly resisted everything the former colonial power had exulted over, but suddenly, beauty was attainable. The novel shapes into a secular version of a classic pilgrimage, using historical and literary antecedents as interlocutors in issues of identity, memory and kinship.

Gurnah often allows his carefully constructed narratives to lead up to a hard-won insight. A good example is the third novel, *Dottie* (1990), a portrait of a Black woman of immigrant background growing up in harsh conditions in racially charged 1950's England, and because of her mother's silence lacking connection with her own family history. At the same time, she feels rootless in England, the country she was born and grew up in. The novel's protagonist attempts to create her own space and identity through books and stories; reading gives her a chance to reconstruct herself. Not least names and name changes play a central role in a novel that shows Gurnah's deep compassion and psychological adroitness, completely without sentimentality.

Gurnah's fourth novel, *Paradise* (1994), his breakthrough as a writer, evolved from a research trip to East Africa around 1990. The novel has obvious reference to Joseph Conrad in its portrayal of the innocent young hero Yusuf's journey to the heart of darkness. But it is also a coming of age account and a sad love story in which different worlds and belief systems collide. We are given a retelling of the Quran's story of Joseph, against the background of a violent and detailed description of the colonisation of East Africa in the late 19th century. In a reversal of the Quran story's optimistic ending, where Joseph is rewarded for the strength of his faith, Gurnah's Yusuf feels forced to abandon Amina, the woman he loves, to join the German army he had

previously despised. It is characteristic of Gurnah to frustrate the reader's expectations of a happy ending, or an ending conforming to genre.

In Gurnah's treatment of the refugee experience, focus is on identity and self-image, apparent not least in *Admiring Silence* (1996) and *By the Sea* (2001). In both these first-person novels silence is presented as the refugee's strategy to shield his identity from racism and prejudice, but also as a means of avoiding a collision between past and present, producing disappointment and disastrous self-deception. In the first of these two novels, the prejudiced narrator chooses to hide his past from his English family and invent a life story better suited to their commonly constructed world. But it is a twinned silence since he is also hiding his life in exile from his family in Zanzibar, who are unaware that he has a new family in England and a seventeen-year-old daughter. In *By the Sea*, another drama of disappointment and self-deception ensues. Saleh, the narrator of the first part, is an old Muslim from Zanzibar applying for asylum in England with a visa forged in the name of a bitter enemy. When he meets the enemy's son, Latif, the narrator of the book's second part, it is only because Latif has coincidentally been delegated to help Saleh adjust to his new home country. In their impassioned quarrels, Saleh's suppressed past in Zanzibar rears up within him. But where Saleh despite all tries to remember, Latif does everything to forget. It creates a peculiar tension in the novel, where the choice of two narrators dissolves the fiction's plotted path and direction, as well as the narrators' authority and self-perception.

Gurnah's itinerant characters find themselves in a hiatus between cultures and continents, between a life that was and a life emerging; it is an insecure state that can never be resolved. We find a new version of this hiatus in Gurnah's above-mentioned seventh novel, *Desertion*, where a tragic passion is employed to illuminate the vast cultural differences in colonised East Africa. The long first part is masterfully forged. Set around the turn of the 20th century it describes how Englishman Martin Pearce, collapsing unconscious in the street, is helped by a local merchant and taken through the city's labyrinths into a world where the culture and religion are alien. But Pearce speaks Arabic, one of the preconditions for closer contact with the family and for him to fall in love with their daughter Rehana. Gurnah knows full well that the era he is portraying is not, as said in the novel, "the age of Pocahontas when a romantic fling with a savage princess could be described as an adventure" and is uninterested in a melodrama about Martin and Rehana's scandalous life in Mombasa with inevitable separation as a consequence. Instead, he lets the subsequent parts of the novel revolve around a completely different story of forbidden love a half-century later, but just as marked by the cultural barriers that endure. Perhaps nowhere else does Gurnah so clearly articulate his mission as a writer than in the end of the first section, in a meta-fictitious "interruption", where the grandson of Rehana, surfaces as the narrator of the

novel. He is, by his existence, proof that Rehana's life did not end in catastrophe but had a continuation, and he now says that the story is not about him: "It is about how one story contains many and how they belong not to us but are part of the random currents of our time, and about how stories capture us and entangle us for all time."

Underpinning the novel is Gurnah's own youth in Zanzibar, where for centuries a number of different languages, cultures and religions have existed side by side but also fought each other for hegemony. Even if his novels are written in an intriguing alliance with an Anglo-Saxon tradition, the cosmopolitan backdrop provides their distinctiveness. Dialogue and the spoken word play an important role, with noticeable elements of Swahili, Arabic, Hindi and German.

The Last Gift, from 2011, relates thematically to *Pilgrims Way* and ends with something of the same bitter brew when the ailing refugee Abbas dies and bequeaths the gift of the book's title, consisting of a tape recording of a cruel history unknown to the surviving family.

In *Gravel Heart* (2017) Gurnah further develops his theme of a young person's confrontation with evil and uncomprehending surroundings. This exciting and austere recounted first-person narrative depicts the fate of the young Salim up until the conclusion's terrifying revelation of a family secret kept from him but decisive for his entire trajectory as a rootless individual in exile. The book's first sentence is a brutal declaration: "My father did not want me." The title is a reference to Shakespeare's drama *Measure for Measure* and the Duke's words in the third scene of the fourth act: "Unfit to live or die! O gravel heart." It is this double incapability that has become Salim's fate.

Gurnah's latest novel, the magnificent *Afterlives* from 2020, takes up where *Paradise* ends. And as in that work, the setting is the beginning of the 20th century, a time before the end of German colonisation of East Africa in 1919. Hamza, a youth reminiscent of Yusuf in *Paradise*, is forced to go to war on the Germans' side and becomes dependent on an officer who sexually exploits him. He is wounded in an internal clash between German soldiers and is left at a field hospital for care. But when he returns to his birthplace on the coast he finds neither family nor friends. History's capricious winds rule and as in *Desertion* we follow the plot through several generations, up until the Nazis' unrealised plan for the recolonisation of East Africa. Gurnah again uses name-changing when the story shifts course and Hamza's son Ilias becomes Elias under German rule. The denouement is shocking and as unexpected as it is alarming. But in fact the same thought recurs constantly in the book: the individual is defenceless if the reigning ideology – here, racism – demands submission and sacrifice.

Gurnah's dedication to truth and his aversion to simplification are striking. This can make him bleak and uncompromising, at the same time as he follows the fates of individuals with great compassion and unbending commitment. His novels recoil from stereotypical descriptions and

open our gaze to a culturally diversified East Africa unfamiliar to many in other parts of the world. In Gurnah's literary universe, everything is shifting – memories, names, identities. This is probably because his project cannot reach completion in any definitive sense. An unending exploration driven by intellectual passion is present in all his books, and equally prominent now, in *Afterlives*, as when he began writing as a 21-year-old refugee.

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