

## “Arriving at writing”: A Conversation with Abdulrazak Gurnah

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The following is a two-part interview conducted by Anupama Mohan and Sreya M. Datta with Abdulrazak Gurnah, the well-known novelist from Zanzibar, Tanzania, now living in the UK. Gurnah is also Emeritus Professor of English and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Kent. He has edited two volumes of Essays on African Writing and has published articles on a number of contemporary postcolonial writers, including Naipaul, Rushdie, and Wicomb. He is the editor of *A Companion to Salman Rushdie* (Cambridge UP, 2007). He is a prolific novelist, and his first book, *Memory of Departure*, was published in 1987. His fourth novel, *Paradise* (1994), was shortlisted for the Booker and Whitbread Prizes. His 2001 book *By the Sea* was longlisted for the Booker and shortlisted for the Los Angeles Times Book Award. His most recent work is *Gravel Heart*, which was published in 2017.

In this interview, we wanted to explore Gurnah’s work in light of this Special Issue’s general thrust on the Indian Ocean as providing important insights into the limitations and possibilities of postcolonial studies and perspectives upon the world in the twenty-first century. At the same time, we wanted to understand how Gurnah’s novels probe the figures of asylum-seekers, migrants, vagrants, and nomads in a time of great political upheaval in Europe with its repercussions also marking out spaces and cultures that seem to be at a great remove from Europe but that are integrally tied to European developments through time, history, trade, and cultural contact.

Gurnah responds to questions that Sreya and I posed to him via email over several months. We have left in the flowing, unpredictable nature of this triangular exchange and as is best, in our opinion, while conversing with creative writers, we allowed a narrowly teleological method of interviewing to be superseded by the more open-ended and kinetic mode of conversation.

SD: Many of your novels, Professor Gurnah, deal with the condition of asylum seeking, something which you vividly show in the immigration scene in *By The Sea*. In *Desertion*, however, we find a more subtle explanation of the theme of asylum when Amin advises his younger brother Rashid to never let grief and homesickness envelop him, and to carry on in his life abroad. How do you relay postcolonial aspiration not as a choice, but as coercion, even though the choice to emigrate may be technically unforced? How does this tie in with your philosophy of migration in an asymmetrical world system?

AG: *By the Sea* is about asylum from several perspectives, Saleh Omar, Latif, Jan and Elleke, in most cases, being driven by events. *Desertion* is concerned with the choices people make, or at least what appears as choice. I don't think it is concerned with asylum as that act of desperation in crisis. Rashid chooses to leave, is indeed passionate to leave, and only later realises what he has given up or lost. Amin has selected himself as the faithful one and cannot leave. His advice to Rashid to persevere is therefore part of his sense of himself as a man of faith and as also rising to his brother's need. Both are novels which reflect on the consequences of colonialism, which is what I assume you mean by "an asymmetrical world system." They are also novels of how people sustain themselves and their ways despite the disruption colonialism brought to their lives.

AM: Would you be unhappy if your novels were called "ocean novels" instead of "world literature"? Do you think that world literature is an unsuitable category to convey what oceanic literature/s can?

AG: I am guessing that by "ocean novels" you mean the connections between littoral cultures which I refer to repeatedly in my writing. I am not certain if this is plausible as a category or form, more likely it is an organising description. What I mean is that if the rationale of the narrative wants to see connections, then the term will work, so its weight is really in the narrative focus rather than in culture or location. As for "world literature," I cannot overcome the sense that it refers to an attempt by the academic discipline of comparative literature to reposition itself beyond its Eurocentric tradition. I am aware that there is an interest in the idea of a "world literature from the global south," and while I sympathise with the

impulse to affirm this writing, I am not sure I understand why it is necessary to return to the term “world literature.”

SD: Your novels are distinctive in their absence of comic relief, or even moments of happiness and light-heartedness, which are not overshadowed by the prospect of impending despair or paralysing loneliness. Would you agree? Is this kind of melancholia a deliberate or functional novelistic strategy?

AG: I would not agree about the absence of what you call “comic relief.” No doubt you have a different idea of comedy from me, but I think there is comedy both in events as well as in the language. As for the overshadow of pain and loneliness, I believe that is the condition of human existence.

SD: In your latest novel, *Gravel Heart*, the sea appears to almost fade into the background as you concentrate on family history and relationships. Salim’s relationship with his father Masud governs the direction of the novel. Moreover, Salim does return home briefly, a choice that seems closed for most of your other characters. How do you relate histories of the family with histories of the ocean, the two themes you develop continuously in all your novels?

AG: Salim returns to re-engage with his father, but the choice to return is not closed to others I have written about. The narrator of *Admiring Silence* returns. Rashid at the end of *Desertion* is contemplating a return. The important part of their experiences is the leaving or the rupture with their lives which makes the return a complicated choice. In the case of asylum seekers, the return is not always possible for legal reasons or from fear of violence. I would have said that *Gravel Heart* was also, and in an important way, about power and its capacity to distort the intimate reaches of relationships.

AM: In some familiar way, your writing reminds me of Conrad, who, really, in all his oeuvre had one single tale in mind to tell, and in story after story, he refined and honed that one single tale: the tale of a haunted man trying to escape his past, but in vain. The plot is merely incidental to Conrad’s works; the *how* and *why* occupies the reader almost completely. Your novels too point me towards the idea that perhaps in all your work,

you are really impelled by one spectral tale which you want to refine, nuance, parse until ... well, until some goal you have in mind is achieved. Would you be happy with such a characterization? Could you elaborate how your narrative focus has evolved in your novels?

AG: I don't know if there is "one spectral tale" I want to refine; I am sure there is more than one. I have referred above to the choices people make to stay or to leave. I have written repeatedly about that, also about the experience of living on arrival in Europe. So there is one focus of what I write about: belonging, rupture, dislocation. Perhaps that is already more than one focus, and within those three, there are already many other issues to do with loss and pain and recovery. I write about the resourcefulness with which people engage with these experiences.

SD: In some of your non-fiction essays, you have spoken about how your journey towards becoming an author has been a complicated one. In "Writing & Place," for instance, you have spoken about how writing was something you "stumbled into rather than the fulfillment of a plan." You speak about the time you left home for England and started writing out of the sense of a vivid memory you had of Zanzibar in contrast to the "weightless existence" of your early years in a new country. In "Learning to Read," you write about how the contradictory cultural influences of your childhood in Malindi fed into your overall cultural vision that had to actively navigate contradictions and complications within itself, which, in a sense, means that you were already "writing" before you formally started out as an author. Is this still your sense of your journey towards authorship or has it undergone any degree of revision in retrospect? Could you tell us a bit more about whether this complicated journey also translates into some of the complicated journeys your characters embark upon?

AG: It has not undergone revision in retrospect. It still seems an adequate description of what you call "my journey towards authorship." Perhaps I would not have used that phrase but something like "the process of arriving at writing." I write about complicated journeys as a way of demonstrating the complex interconnectedness of experience, biographies and cultures.

SD: Could you talk a bit about your latest novel, *Gravel Heart*? The epigraph is a quote from Abu Said Ahmad ibn Isa-al-Kharraz which says: “The beginning of love is the recollection of blessings.” Why did you choose to begin with this? Does it relate, in any way, to Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, where the title of the novel comes from? How do you envision intimacy in your works?

AG: It seems to me the epigraph speaks for itself in a novel that has recollection as a central idea. I liked the enigmatic imperative of the advice it offers, which to elaborate on would be to narrow its meaning. *Measure for Measure* is also an enigmatic play in some senses but above all, it is about the abuse of a rhetoric of righteousness for self-gratification. In that sense, it is the other side of the sufi’s exhortation, the other side of the coin that the novel spins. I envision intimacy as it appears in the novels, as a continuous process of engagement and negotiation.

AM: Do you carry out any kind of specific historical research when you are writing, say, about the Zanzibar revolution or its aftermath in your novels? Or do you write from memory, or from a sense of events as they happened in the past? Would you say that your novels are impressions rather than realistic portraits of East African life?

AG: The ground my novels cover has been profoundly interesting to me throughout my life and so in a way I am always researching the material. There is always a need to check or to read in more detail about specific moments, but I write about what I know and care about. I am not sure why you position “impressions rather than realistic portraits” as if they are polarities or contradictory processes. I imagine that fiction unavoidably does both.

AM: Finally, given the vitality of the littoral and regional in your works, how do you see your work vis-à-vis postcolonial studies? In what ways does your scholarly work intersect with and/or challenge your creative work? Naipaul (in)famously said that he chose to be a full-time writer because any other profession would have killed him as a writer. I wondered, therefore, how your twin roles as writer and academic interplay.

AG: The value of the postcolonial idea as a discursive concept is appealing to me because it allows me to see common ground between writings from different cultures and histories. It is a much more demanding methodology than it might seem if practised without an adequate interest in context. I found no conflict in the roles of academic and writer. They were quite unlike activities, and if anything were mutually beneficial in a small way.