

Interview with Abdulrazak Gurnah

Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in 1948 and raised in Zanzibar. In 1968, he migrated to another island, the UK, for studies. After a two years stay at Bayero University Kano in Nigeria, he came back to Britain and obtained his PhD in 1982 at the University of Kent, where he has worked until now as a Professor of English and Postcolonial Literature and as the Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of English.

By now, he has written seven novels and many academic publications, mainly in the field of postcolonial studies, literature in the Indian Ocean area and Caribbean literature. He has edited two volumes of essays on African Writing and has published articles on a number of contemporary postcolonial writers. He is the editor of *A Companion to Salman Rushdie* (Cambridge University Press 2007) and an associate editor of the journal *Wasafiri*. He was nominated twice for the important Booker Prize.

His novels often deal with migration experiences (mainly to the UK), displacement, memory and transcultural identities. His book topics and language use (English and Kiswahili) are an example of transcultural encounters and hybrid identities (as are his life and work as an academic and novelist in general, and his books and stories themselves). The narrative of the sea seems an important one – not only because of his own migration background from Zanzibar to the UK, but as a general image of East African/Indian Ocean/European/Caribbean migration journeys.

What do you think about categories or labels like world literature, postcolonial literature and literature from the Global South? Do you think that they are necessary and/or important or useful for characterizing literature in general or your writing? Would you consider yourself as an author described by these labels?

Of course, they are useful. In the first place they are useful for institutional reasons. One can use them for comparison within scholarly programs, for marketing purposes and for publication, because you can signal to people that this might be something they are interested in. However, I am not sure whether they are useful in themselves beside their organizational purpose. I wouldn't use these labels to describe myself as they are not an aspect of quality or the process of producing culture. They are useful to describe literature to be able to organize it, to enable postcolonial critiques, to say something about it and identify certain patterns in it. On the other hand they limit the interpretation of this kind of literature somehow, because it contains more than that description.

So would you call yourself an author of postcolonial and/or world literature?

I would not use any of those words. I wouldn't call myself a something writer of any kind. In fact, I am not sure that I would call myself anything apart from my name. I guess, if somebody challenges me, that would be another way of saying „Are you a ...one of these...?“ I would probably say “no”. Precisely, I don't want that part of me having a reductive name. On the other hand it depends on how this question would be asked, for example if a journalist asks in an interview “Are you a world literature writer”, what is he going to put down when he goes away from here? But I am not that. I'm a complicated something of that.

Is this description essential?

It is not in an essential way in which I think of myself, but for the journalist it might be, he might pin me to his board and say, this is a world literature writer. I call him that. There are natural inclinations to resist those kinds of groups to give a complicated answer like I am giving you now.

Our next question is closely connected to the previous one: world culture is often separated into culture from the Southern and the Northern hemisphere. How do you see these labels, especially with regard to literature?

The world is not devised into North and South really, but it seems to be fashionable to describe it like that. There had been previous attempts to use different words like the "Third World" or "Underdeveloped World", and North and South seem to sound more gentle than some of these others. However, it tries to describe reality, historical differences and it finally gets rid of another ugly world, "colonialism", so it's better to use North-South to talk about these topics. Historic Imperialism actually consolidated these differences between the so called North and South and continued to do so because of the legacy, I suppose, of those colonial differences, all the differences established and consolidated by colonialism. So I'd like to say that there are differences, and while North and South are not totally accurate, they seem to be the latest and most neutral way of describing these differences. You should not see these terms as spaces: it has to do with attitudes, understanding, expectations etc. So you might very well have parts of China that are as rich as the West and parts which are not. It's not really a matter of space. When you try to stay in-between, it's still thinking a bit in terms of space, when the in-between is not really "between" the North and South but some kind of intermediate or indeterminate position between these two labels. That's where, I suppose, you put yourselves as liberal people, trying to see yourselves as people of the world and therefore human. However, there are real differences, let's say in terms of the kind of life you have, whoever you are, whether you are from the North or from the South, our lives will be different if you want that or not. In this culture the state, society and culture provide things for you without you needing to do anything, hospitals, schools, well-fare payments among these things. In other countries they do not have anything like that, so there's an actual concrete difference between these places, resulting from many things, from all kinds of historical events that produced the different societies.

In terms of current affairs – would you say the "refugee crisis" does change a lot? If people from the so-called Southern countries come to Germany, for example, they also change Germany, as many other countries are in the process of change.

Well, I'm not suggesting things are fixed like this forever, so of course, things are changing. On the other hand, what or who do you think will be changed more, if, let's say, one million refugees come to Germany, who is more likely to be changed, Germany or the refugees? So that's my answer to this question: to some extent of course it will make a difference. For example the British Prime Minister said that one condition of entry to any future refuges was that they committed to learning English straight away. While there's no problem with that, to make it a condition already states they needed to become like us when they come here.

What do you think makes World Literature important for contemporary society? Do you think authors of world literature need to fulfill a certain duty? If so, how would you define this duty?

I don't think it is a convincing category. First I would want to argue, what do we mean by that? Does it mean English, French and German Literature, maybe including Old Persian and Old Chinese Literature, or another Old Literature or does it mean *any* literature in the world? How important is literature overall in the world? Of course, in this case World Literature is important to everybody, as they produce it, consume it and learn from it.

I do know only tiny little bits of the literature in the world, so I would not like to make a general statement about it. I know nothing about Chinese Literature for example and there might even be languages I do not even know they exist that have their own literature. So in this respect I do not think the phrase World Literature is as useful as for example "money", because we use money every day, it is part of life, while World Literature is not. Of course you can take out a book from the shelf and ask "what do you think of this?" but World Literature cannot be as comparative as it sounds.

What is the duty of "World Literature"? Again it depends on what you mean by the phrase, the question also has a moral dimension. The role of literature in the world is to progress the community, but it might vary dependent on the specific community. One might say writers need to challenge ideas within the community. This challenge can be to the ideas of spectability, to the ideas of family or appropriateness, sexual morality and so on. On the other hand people might also see that as indiscipline, unnecessary and destructive. The role of writers can be judged only by their readers. It is difficult. You need to leave it to the writer before you can make your assessments.

What is your personal aim when you write and publish your novels? Do you have a special aim or is it just that you have your stories in mind and really have to tell them?

If one says aim, it'll sound pompous. I just want to write as trustfully as I can, without trying to say "something noble". However, there are certain things I'm worried about and then I want to explore them and write about them. But I could not say I want to write, for example, about the place of women in the world, although this might be one of the things that concerns me. A theoretical example would be if I wrote about my sister's marriage, which is not to tell you really something about my sister. Another possibly better example for how I come to write about something is my novel *By the Sea*. It started with various impulses. When the war of Afghanistan reached a climax in the late 1990s, a plane arrived in London that had been hijacked by one of the passengers. It had been an internal flight, maybe from Kabul to Herat, but the hijacker made it fly to London, maybe made a stop to refuel. In the TV news one could see the passengers, dressed not as if they had planned travelling to Europe but to maybe see family within their country, children, families, different persons, and the hijacker told the authorities they wanted asylum, even if that had not been what the majority of them had wanted. One day later, all of them asked for asylum and I asked myself what that old man there really wanted. Did he understand what he was asking for? Asylum had been for me something for young people, in case of the refugees even families, but not for old people. I started to think about his reasons, about general reasons to leave the native country and ask for asylum, although of

course I had thought about that in general before. But in this context, an old man asking for asylum, I wanted to know what kind of desperation would be necessary, what would make you do that. A couple of days later I watched a program on TV, a documentary on the work of an immigration officer, who was followed by the cameras at his work. One could see this immigration officer interrogating an applicant, somebody who was arriving for asylum, and I got interested in what he did. It can make you think some more about the topic, then you reach for a book if you hadn't been interested in the topic before, and when your mind is focused and you're your hands on the material you gradually build a case, and then finally you start to write. Well, I'm saying that's basically this kind of thing that happens in *By the Sea*. And then more details accumulate in your mind. And it takes maybe another year also for me. Meanwhile you are doing other things, this stuff is turning over and you make a little note here and there and you begin to write and then more details come and then things just come spontaneously as well. So you are writing as you are working. "Ah, I can see a connection here between this and that, just bring this in...", and things begin to develop in this way. So that's a long answer to your question.

How long did you work on By the Sea, in total? We know of your other duties, of course, but from your first ideas for that novel to actually publishing it, how long was that period?

It was published in 2001... I think I finished writing it at the end of 1999. I'd say the writing process took about a year or so, a year and a bit and then it takes about a year from when a publisher says, yes, okay, I want this book and you sign a contract and all that, to when it actually appears in the stores, if there is nothing the publishers want to change about it, if it does not need further revision. So in the case of *By the Sea* it was about a year, but sometimes it takes longer, especially for someone like me who was living in Brighton and teaching in Canterbury, I was commuting back and forth every day, more or less. I think there was about one day I didn't need to go to work and I could not work and write at the same time, during term time, because there was not enough energy to do so. So writing needed to wait for the occasion, but the writing itself doesn't necessarily take a long time once you've got all the preliminary things done. It takes more time to become ready, to organize the ideas in your mind. Once you reach the point when you are sure you can start writing, or at least from my personal experience, it takes usually about a year and a bit, then you start hoping that the publisher and the editor don't come back to you and want you to change parts of your writing, because that might take another year depending on the time you can find to do so, if you've got other commitments... There might be so many other things that you cannot find time slots longer than just a couple of hours, time you need to get back into that thing and start again. Revision can be a lengthy process, as well as the writing process itself.

While you are thinking about the ideas you have in mind, which roles does memory play within the creative process, your personal memory, maybe also your family's memory, or any kind of collective memory?

Gurnah: Well, it has to do with memory but not necessarily with memory in the sense of remembering things that happened to me or members of my family. I don't think I've actually written any kind of story depicting truth according to a particular memory, but little fragments might refer to something that actually happened to a relative or someone I know. Finally, the story does not depict the truth, but a small detail might be something I actually experienced or have heard of, one might see

parallels, connections, although that might depend on the kind of story one writes. A writer of stories with specific formal structures like a writer of detective novels, dramatic novels where you have necessary things that need to happen, might do this differently from a writer who does not follow certain formal structures. It doesn't happen as if you think "that's a nice story, I will use that", but you might see a connection to your ideas, something might explain another thing in your mind or expand your understanding of it and things move on. The problem is, during that process it might happen you lose the sense for what happened actually or what you just imagined to have happened and sometimes you think of things as if they did happen but in fact they didn't - you had just made them up, or people tell you of things that happened and you tell them they didn't because you've already changed your memory on that. It might be comparable to dreams: if you imagined something and it became true to you and nobody challenges that, six years later, it's the truth. You forgot the real story, and that's how imagination and memory work, memory is very important, it makes things real, but not in the kind of way that it gives you a complete story you could insert into a text.

How would you describe South-South relations in literature?

The description of South-South relations in literature isn't something new. When one says that my work is interested in the Indian Ocean, for example, that already is a South-South topic, the idea of an interconnected history and culture in the Indian Ocean area, I've been writing about this topic in my fiction from the beginning and more recently in some of my academic works. It's something ongoing, mostly for the ideas of us as cosmopolitans who are not centered in the west, so while it suddenly appears to be a useful phrase to some people, in truth it's something that's been going on a long time.

Finally - Is there something or someone you'd say influenced your style of writing or your interests in writing fiction in particular?

I wouldn't say it like this. It's probably not something I had said I wanted to do at a certain age, I simply arrived at a certain age and thought to myself that this was something I'd like to do, as for example going to England with the difficulties of being of that age and moving from one place to another. Being a stranger, living through the difficulties of finding my way, having kind of abandoned home, things like that influenced me. I'm not like Virginia Wolf, who knew at the age of ten she wanted to be a writer. I just found myself writing things down one day, as people usually do, and found new pages that built up on these ideas and then came to the point at which I thought: What is this? What am I doing with this? And there you reach the difference between writing things down and writing. I write something, then I have to organize it, so it's more than simply writing because you need to speak it from your own body. At some point it started to look like a novel, it might come as a process like that, and then you have to try and improve things and once one is committed to it, there's no way out, you try to become better and you try to find a publisher and so on... And then you are a writer.

Q: Thank you very much for your time. It was a very nice interview! Thanks a lot.

Interview conducted by Fabienne Roth, Mara Holzenthal and Lisa Zingel (Frankfurt, 21 January, 2016).