

Refugee and Imagined Families

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Abstract

Abdulrazak Gurnah records stories of lived experiences. He uses history as a brush to paint his plot and people his novels. His work illustrates the responses to decolonisation and independence of Zanzibar. The impact of the historical events is made visible through the social and political positioning of each character. Gurnah tries to understand situations that defy understanding and portrays characters that traverse vast geographical areas where the human network involves the Arab legacy, the African nativity and the British diaspora. Informed by his personal experience of being a refugee, his novels graphically present the displacement and subsequent struggle for survival. A citizen becomes a refugee when his government fails to protect him and he has no recourse but to seek international assistance "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted" for reasons of race, religion, and nationality. Refugees are positioned at the margins of society and are now perceived as a sociological category whose prior experience involves violence, fight, and exile. Gurnah's novels capture the displacement, exile, alienation, and loneliness experienced by the refugees, who ultimately cultivate awareness and empower themselves, moving away from the margins of society. In his novels, and through his characters, he affords agency to subjects that act beyond their particular constrained circumstances. From psychologically unsettled refugees, they become migrants who have developed or honed their skills and are contributing to the host society. Gurnah's work is cosmopolitan as well as a social commentary that delves into "the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents" (Swedish Academy).

Keywords: gurnah, refugee, social, political, positioning.

Abdulrazak Gurnah records stories of lived experiences. He uses history as a brush to paint his plot and people his novels. Zanzibar is a region with a confluence of cultures and traditions. The legacy of the Arab traders, the heritage of mainland Africa and the British colonisation, come together to form the society of Zanzibar until it became free in 1948. Gurnah's work illustrates the responses to decolonisation and independence of Zanzibar. He migrated to Britain after the Bloody Revolution of 1964. He entered Britain as a student along with his brother and the experiences of his student days are duly recorded in the novels revealing the loneliness and the pressure of the family's expectations on the young students, who have virtually been exiled.

Gurnah's novels were relatively unknown and print copy of a few of his novels unavailable a decade ago, when this author had commenced her research on the social and political positioning of the refugees in Britain as revealed through the selected works of Gurnah. His work has now been recognised "for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and

continents" by the Swedish Academy while conferring on Gurnah the Nobel Prize for Literature 2021.

Gurnah was one of the first black British writers to represent the plight of the refugees arriving in Britain in novels. Informed by his personal experience of being a refugee, his novels graphically present the displacement and subsequent struggle for survival. The novels *Pilgrims Way*, *Admiring Silence* and *By the Sea* can be construed as journal records of the refugee experience in different settings. A refugee is defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as a person who has crossed an international border and seeks protection from a host country. He is unwilling to return to his native country "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted" on the basis of race, religion or nationality. When such people are out of their country of origin and have "no recourse other than to seek international restitution" (Shacknové), they then become stateless and unprotected.

Refugees are also created when immigrants who enter a country with a valid and legal visa, continue to stay in that country after the expiry of the visa. Under such circumstances, they also become refugees from the

immigration authorities of that country. Depending on the immigration policies of the host country, the overstaying immigrant may be deported summarily. In some desperate cases, persons who enter developed countries such as the United Kingdom, enter using false passports and documents. When their visa expires, they disappear into the throng of the city and fall under the category of refugees, because their passports from their native country are not original and they have crossed international borders.

Gurnah tries to understand situations that defy understanding and portrays characters that traverse geographical regions where the human network involves the Arab legacy, the African nativity leading finally to the British diaspora. The novel *By the Sea* (2001) is one such canvas that spreads over this vast area. Omar is a prosperous businessman in Zanzibar who is defrauded by an unscrupulous merchant from Persia. As escrow, he gives Omar documents and the deeds to the house of Rajab Shaaban Mahmud and borrows money, after which he disappears. When Omar tries to claim the house, he loses his business, his family and eleven years of his life as he is thrown in prison by Shaaban's manipulations. After release from the prison also, his life is in danger as the son of Shaaban is out to seek revenge. This forces Omar to use the birth certificate of Shaaban to procure a passport and passage to Britain. On landing in England he is instructed not to speak in English, even though he has received a British colonial education. This untranslatability allows Omar to obliterate his past in one stroke – he relinquishes his family name in order to claim a new identity by transitioning into a refugee. He is sent to a detention centre and has to await further orders from the Immigration department. In the centre, Omar is still careful not to speak in English and learns to cohabit with the others who are already there from various countries. Even within this controlled and monitored atmosphere, in this liminal space, there is bonding between the men as they find a common ground in the religion of Islam.

A lawyer is assigned to investigate if Omar qualifies as an asylum seeker and if he does, to explore avenues to induct him into society. The lawyer finds that the only person who can speak the language of Omar is Latif

Muhammad, who as it transpires is the son of Shaaban whose identity Omar has stolen. Latif had been drafted to pursue his higher education in mainland Europe, and after a circuitous route, finds himself entering the port city of Plymouth, England, in the 1960s. He declares to the police officer "I am a refugee" and receives the question "From where?", in return. The absence of the hostility, distrust and anger towards a refugee three decades earlier is juxtaposed with the treatment of a refugee in contemporary times. Gurnah artfully weaves in the fact that the workforce in Britain is multiethnic and there is a possibility of foreign blood in the ancestry of an average Caucasian British citizen, through the character of the Immigration officer Edelman. While going through the belongings of Omar, Edelman comes across the incense. He states that the scent seems 'familiar' to him. Omar infers that the ancestry of Edelman could be Jewish, for him to be able to recognise the incense from Persia.

Once Latif and Omar meet and communication is established, they each explain their positions and reach an uneasy truce as they explore their budding friendship focusing on the future. This meeting initiates a relationship between Latif and the immigration lawyer, who is again the bridge between the refugees and the host society.

In the novel *Pilgrim's Way* (1988), Gurnah shows the precariousness of the political situation in Tanzania before the independence. As a result of the common enemy, the British, being ousted, the internal strife ravages the country. The protagonist Daud, quits his country and reaches Britain to continue his higher education. As there is not enough money for his tuition and living expenses, he discontinues his studies. Rather than disappoint his parents and face his failure, he does not communicate to them the reality of the situation and starts to earn a living, as the floor cleaner in the hospital saddled with night duty. As per the immigration laws of the country, he has to return to his motherland if he is not a student, his visa expires and he is not eligible to work.

This pushes him to the status of a refugee as he is forced to live in fear of the immigration authorities who will deport him, if they find him. This night life affects him and Daud suffers from loneliness, alienation and fear. Daud cannot negotiate any terms with regard to his work, due to

his lack of agency. Gurnah gives agency to Daud, the mute 'pilgrim' who cannot react to any of the slurs hurled at him or subtly directed at him, in an interesting way. Daud writes imaginary letters to all those who cross him. Through these letters, that are merely composed and never posted, Daud voices out his feelings and protests the treatment meted out to him.

Daud is without a state and he is without protection as he left his country using a false passport in order to escape the revolution. The impact of the historical events is made visible through the social and political positioning in Britain. Socially he is marginalised and politically he exists in the space of 'non-existence' (Coutin). A migrant has the option of returning to his country of origin, whereas a refugee does not have that option.

When his friendship with Catherine Mason, a new staff nurse in the hospital he works in, matures, the relationship allows him a little freedom. He feels connected to humanity through Catherine and hope is rekindled in him, he hopes to break free of the "neurosis and fears" (232) that have held him back. He hopes to build a family of his own. On Catherine's urging, he decides to reveal all to his parents and attempt reconciliation as well as to continue his education. A liaison between the refugee and the host society is facilitated in the form of Catherine Mason. This is indicative of how Gurnah sees the integration of the refugees into the British society.

In the novel *Admiring Silence* (1996), Gurnah's personal experience as a student who completed his higher education with the aid of grants offered by the institution is integrated into the action of the novel. The living together with students, working in menial jobs to pay for food and necessities, discourages the student from attempting mentally strenuous work. The protagonist becomes an illegal resident when he discontinues his studies and takes to hiding from the authorities for fear of being deported. The fear of the future predominates and it takes longer for the refugees to overcome uncertainty and diffidence in order to achieve their potential. The homodiegetic protagonist is a "non-status immigrant", someone who does not possess the legal status that would allow them to live in a country. Peter Nyers says that "non-status immigrants are often defined as being invisible,

marginalized and superfluous to the nation-state" (127). Similar to Daud, this protagonist also, chooses to live in the margins of society, without challenging the social order that has placed him there.

The homodiegetic narrator marries his classmate, a white girl whose father had previously worked for the colonial regime in Africa. He is now a qualified teacher, suffering the racial insults from his students, in whom he is called upon ironically, to instil discipline and knowledge. The agency that Gurnah affords this character is the invention of rich tales about his native land. Not only are they imaginative, but also stereotypical, fashioned to satisfy the pre-constructed imagery of the colonies of Britain. This recounting gives immense satisfaction to his father-in-law, who clings to the opinion that Britain should not have given over the governing of the country to the 'natives'. Gurnah does not completely hold the colonial regime responsible for the evils of the country nor does he find fault with the government of the newly independent country. He takes a middle path in the recounting of such tales by the narrator. Until he revisits his native land, to avail the amnesty declared by the new government, the homodiegetic narrator is politically positioned as an illegal resident, a refugee hiding from the authorities.

The refugees create a family in the adopted land and essay to continue with their lives. Starting from the Immigration Officer's ancestry, Gurnah interlocks the people finding some commonality between them, a shared sense of regionalism that is triggered by a scent. The interpreter and the immigration lawyer of Omar, in the novel *By the Sea* embark on relationship that might progress. In the *Pilgrim's Way*, the friendly nurse turned muse leads Daud towards a future wherein his stay could be legalised and documentation filed. *Admiring Silence* has the anchoring wife and her family of the homodiegetic narrator increasing the family of the refugee and moving them towards a position closer to normal citizens. The refugees achieve agency when they are able to shed their dual existence and focus only on the future, rather than their traumatic past.

Thus, Gurnah has refashioned the lives of the refugees and positioned them politically and socially in an acceptable situation. Their lives include cruelty, betrayal,

failed hopes, and disappointments. From psychologically unsettled refugees, they become migrants who have developed or honed their skills and are contributing to the host society. Gurnah presents it all with humour, pathos, and sympathy, foregrounding transnational human values such as kindness and generosity (Hand). Gurnah's work is cosmopolitan as well as a social commentary that delves into "the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents" (Swedish Academy).

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