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Abstract

Today literary prizes are the arbiters of excellence. This is both good and bad; often, in fact more bad than good, but in the case of the Danish literary prize for Third World literature, the ALOA prize it would seem to be good. It is, of course always possible to question the separation of 'Third World', 'Commonwealth' or 'post-colonial literature' from other varieties of literature, ghettoizing it in this way, but in this connection it must be important to look at the reasons for doing this. The purpose of the ALOA prize is to attract attention to literature from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania, which has been translated into Danish. The committee finds that there IS a number of excellent books in this category, but they do not get the attention they deserve, due to the large number of books that are translated into Danish every year. As a second principle, the committee also wishes to introduce new and

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'Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in 1948 in Zanzibar, and he now teaches literature at the University of Kent'. This short bio in the Penguin edition of *Paradise* predicts the movement of his up to now

four novels. *Memories of Departure*, 1987, describes the childhood, early adolescence and both personal and political reasons for leaving Zanzibar; *Pilgrims Way*, 1988, is a love story which deals with the problems of racism and personal adjustment of a hospital orderly and failed student of literature from Zanzibar, trying to adjust to life in Canterbury. With *Dottie*, 1990, Gurnah departs from what appears to be the autobiographical tradition of first novels of departure and arrival, which he shares with other immigrant writers like Buchi Emecheta and David Dabydeen. With this novel, like Dabydeen, he branches out into a completely fictional work, in this case with a female protagonist, creating an impelling main character on the background of a wide screen of immigrant social conditions. With *Paradise*, 1994, he returns, fictionally, to East Africa, and setting his story at the beginning of the 20th century he creates a mosaic of cultures, incidents and characters, bringing to life East Africa's rich inheritance of African, Arab, Indian and European traditions. On this background one could discuss whether he is an African or an immigrant British writer, but this seems to me futile. The contents of the novels is derived from both his African and his immigrant experiences, and the style is very much that of the Victorian novel, with traces of Dickens in the wide scope of characters and abundance of incidents, but held together by the personal development of a central consciousness in the manner of a bildungsroman.

There is a curious distinction between the novels set in East Africa and England: Whilst the East African novels are concerned with social injustice and personal failures, a concern Gurnah shares with Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the immigrant novels, whilst also depicting gross social injustices, portray small, but carefully outlined personal victories. There is an overall movement of initial destruction of the individual in his African environment and a gradual regaining of a personal foothold and a new sense of integrity, even if this had to wait for several generations. Gurnah's Africa, both past and present, is a harsh place, full of cruelty and betrayals. Like the writer Yambo Ouologuem he seems to claim Africa's right to a violent past.

The paradise of the novel of the same name is a violent place. Paradise is originally a Farsi word which simply means a walled garden', says Gurnah. Via Greek it came to mean what we associate with it today: a cool and pleasant place where both righteous Christians and Muslim men go after death. 'But', continues Gurnah, 'somebody has to look after the place. And then there are the women: their place is inside the house, rather like prisoners. Paradise isn't just paradise, in fact, at times, it is more like hell' (*Weekendavisen*, 1 -7 December, 1995). The garden in question is situated in a small town on the Tanzanian coast during the time of the Arab sultany of Zanzibar and the expansion of Arab trade into the interior. It is owned by Aziz, a rich Arab merchant, looked after by a gardener who is a slave and inhabited by Aziz' wife who is confined to the house according to the Muslim rules of purdah and slowly going mad from a mixture of mental and

physical violence. The garden, however, is exceptionally beautiful and peaceful, secluded and lush in contrast to the world outside it. This somewhat tainted paradise is set in the wider context of East Africa at the point in history when the European powers were occupying the territory. The novel paints a wide screen of Arab-Muslim, traditional African, Sikh-Indian and German white life and interaction. The picture is not just one of violence and betrayal, it seems to write directly into existing stereotypes of the population groups in question: The Arabs are exploiters, slave owners and sodomists; the inland Africans are primitive, cruel and treacherous; the Germans are violent and cruel; only the Sikh seems to get off lightly. In view of the fact that one of the main concerns of African (admittedly mainly West African) writers since the 1950s has been to endeavour to dispel negative images of Africa this is surprising. Gurnah says that he has never believed the history books' version that the European imperialists brought order to a chaotic situation; therefore he wanted to look at it from the other side. This sounds like the first part of Achebe's agenda to show the value, dignity etc., of his African past, but it ends up as the diametrically opposite view. If his book was just a description of a pre-European paradise it would 'just be a new lie to substitute for the old one.' (*Politikken*, 24-12, 1995). Achebe's African past was not perfect, either, but the point was to show that it was more perfect, or less imperfect than generally believed. Gurnah has moved beyond this necessity and is ready to shoulder an ambiguous cultural heritage. One reason for this could be that he is less concerned with 'roots' than earlier African writers have been. 'I believe that the importance of having roots has been overemphasized', he says, and with an ironic twist which owes something to Said he observes: 'It is as if having roots is considered to be more important for people who come from outside Europe. If a Dane went to Argentina nobody would suspect that she lost her "Danishness". But if you come from East Africa and live for 15 years in London everybody immediately thinks that you have lost something essential. You haven't.' (*Weekendavisen*). Cultural nationalism is not the agenda for this writer. What then is?

Among other things Gurnah wishes to demonstrate the complexity of East African society, dispelling any (British or European) ideas of a uniform or monolithic or authentic 'Africa'. There is also a strong sense of a writer tapping a virtually untapped source of fiction, creating scenarios and characters who have not found themselves seriously discussed in fiction. Walcott's sense of the 'adamic'! Finally there is a search for the reason why people make the choices they do. The main character, a young boy called Yusuf, is handed over as a slave to the rich Arab trader Aziz as compensation for his father's debt. He travels with the trader and ends up working in his shop on the coast, and here he encounters the walled garden. He is immediately attracted to it and obtains permission to work in it after shop hours. Here he is spied upon by the virtually imprisoned wife of the trader, and as he is a

beautiful youth she falls in love with him. The ensuing story follows the Old testament story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Unlike his biblical namesake, Yusuf is not jailed, nor is he made an overseer of the jail, but metaphorically, he follows the same pattern.

Falling in love with the trader's younger wife (a slave, like himself) his choice of action is so severely circumscribed that he might as well have been in prison. He dreams of escape, seems to accept his lowly lot, but finds that he has no reason to stay where he is. At this point a German column marches into the town, and he joins it on the spur of a desperate moment, thus echoing Joseph's defection to the Egyptian jail authorities. Yusuf's locked situation would seem to be a good reason to escape through the Germans, but his confused state of mind does not add up to a deliberate choice. 'If anyone asked Yusuf in the book why he ran after the army he would probably say that it was just something that happened. It was not a deliberate choice'. This is how Gurnah explains the action of his main character (*Weekendavisen*). This intuitive and inexplicable aspect of choice is partly to explain why the Africans did not resist colonisation more strongly than they did, and partly to explain, or cast light on present day immigration, including his own. 'It is an idea which interests me very much, because it also concerns people who choose to leave one place and move to another. Not until afterwards do you realise that you can't step back and say, "I'd rather stay". That moment has passed.' (*Weekendavisen*).

Yusuf's situation, both his lack of options and his confused state of mind is paralleled by the main character in Gurnah's first, seemingly autobiographical novel *Memory of Departure*.

Set in Zanzibar in the period just before and after independence and union with Tanganyika as from 1964 Tanzania this novel describes yet another violent period in African history. The erstwhile Arab ruling class not only lost its privileged position, but found itself the subject of discrimination and violence. The first person narrator of the novel, Hassan, finds himself the victim of new quota systems which effectively bar him from entrance to higher education, and after an unsuccessful trip to visit a rich uncle in Nairobi he leaves Africa. This violent environment is again paralleled by an incredibly violent and loveless home situation of the main character. With an alcoholic father who has been to jail for sexually assaulting a young boy, a suffering and ineffectual mother, a sister who becomes a prostitute and a vicious live-in grandmother there is no space for affection, and the boy is sensitive, introspective and guilt-ridden about the death by fire of an older brother, for which he is blamed. He blames himself for what he calls 'a failure of generosity' and finds that he spends his time 'in a state of shocked amazement at the way I have spent my brief life, all that endless malice, that incapacity to be warm'. (*Memories of Departure*, p.159). The novel amply justifies this feeling, but again the decision to leave is not a clear cut, logical reaction, but rather an intuitive and emotional one, and it is his intention to return after a period of working

on a ship, but if the novel is autobiographical, this is not what happens, and the autobiographical story is continued in *Pilgrim's Way*.

Gurnah arrived in England in 1968 at the age of 18. He then worked for three years which at that time earned him the right to a student's grant in England. His main character Daud is a belated pilgrim to the shrine of Canterbury where he works as a hospital orderly. Chaucer would not have recognized him, and what was worse, British society in the late 60s would not either. It was the time of Enoch Powell and the National Front, and the racism and violence which the main character experiences are both excessive and relentless. It permeates all human relations, except possibly one, that of love. The novel is a love story, and although it is open ended it is positive about the capacity of love to both transform the main character's own destructive self-pity and help his English girlfriend to withstand incipient racism. Towards the end of the novel they are beaten up badly by a gang of white boys, but the love survives, literally blooded. The novel is far from a rags-to-riches story, but it does record small, personal victories on the background of violent racism.

This view is given flesh and blood in the next novel *Dottie*. The main character of this novel, the young girl Dottie, is born in Britain of immigrant parents. Her grandfather was a Parthian who made it to England after having served in the army during the First World War; her grandmother was the daughter of a Lebanese shopkeeper. Her mother continued her parent's physical journey to England by making the cultural leap, refusing an arranged marriage, running away and changing her name from Bilkisu to Sharon. She lived as a prostitute and died of some horrible unnamed disease in a tenement room, leaving three children, our main character and her younger sister and brother, all of unknown fathers. At the starting point of the novel the three children thus find themselves in the emptiness of cast moorings and no landing. They have no cultural roots to fall back upon, and there is no place for them in British society. They are second generation black British, left to prosper or perish without any of the props which are normally taken for granted, such as home, family, tradition, religion, moral guidance or love. Predictably, two of them perish; the brother becomes a violent drug addict, a '16 year old wreck' and drowns in the Hudson river, searching for his black G.I. father.

In this connection Gurnah takes a controversial part in the discussion of the adoption of black children by white, middle class parents. The boy is initially adopted by such a family and is happy, but Dottie, acting on a strong feeling that the most important thing in her world is to keep the three of them (the family) persuades the social worker to effect his return; this violent shift from being accepted in a middle class environment to becoming an outcast at the bottom of society with virtually nowhere to go is held mainly responsible for his violent anti-white racism and eventual self-destruction. The sister is retarded and succumbs to prostitution, and she becomes one of the obstacles in

Dottie's slow, painful climb into both self-respect and a decent living.

Other obstacles, apart from the racist and class-ridden environment are the men she meets. Gurnah gives them short shrift; in particular, his portrayal of a white, middle class, self-pitying, pseudo rebel who takes his obligatory period of slumming out on Dottie and of course exploits her is pitiless. More destructive, however, is the black drug dealer who initially helps, but later brutalizes Dottie and her sister. Dottie's means of self preservation and advancement are traditional. Borrowing books from the library to read, evening classes and female friendships, a move from the assembly line to the typing pool. She is eventually rewarded by love, or the possibility of love, in the shape of a man who both respects her and thinks along the lines she is battling to carve out for herself. Her changing moods of traditional self sacrifice, through bitterness and self doubt and occasional outbursts of violence towards a realization of her own potentials and a desire to fulfil them are chartered very carefully and movingly, and Dottie seems to me a magnificent tribute to the survivors of the transition into black Englishmen and women. There is no unrealistic gloss on the story, but it does bear out Gurnah's own contention that he is a 'cautious optimist.' (*Weekendavisen*). It will be interesting to see how this 'cautious optimism' fares in his next novel which describes a person who returns from England to Zanzibar.