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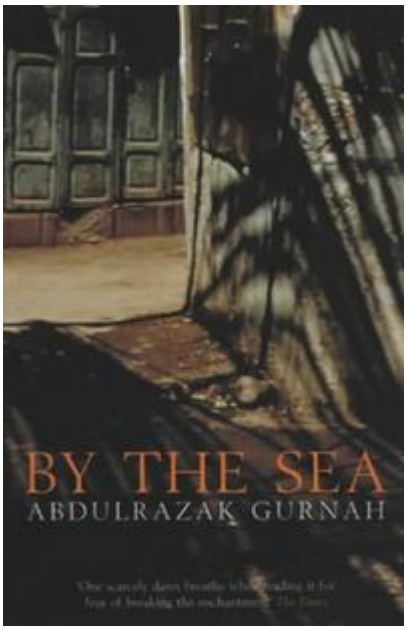

BY THE SEA BY ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

Many important scholars, thinkers, and novelists have emerged from the continent of Africa since the postcolonial period. Gaining independence gave them the freedom to raise voices and express their ideas, mainly as a counter-discourse to the histories written from them by colonialists. These writers began to write their own history rather than letting their colonialists do it for them. While they tended to use the language of the colonialists, they wrote their own histories including bloody colonial experiences, traditions, culture and the geography in which they live. Contrary to the unreliable accounts given by the colonizers, postcolonial writers wanted to expose their true experiences. However, in time, the issues that postcolonial scholars address began to change with the migration of masses from their homeland to other places such as Europe, Great Britain and the United States. Now, their discourse expresses the process of their adaptation to the host country which includes economic struggles, integration with the locals, and enduring racism. While diaspora literature typically describes the experiences of immigrants in their host countries, it (diaspora literature is a singular concept) also represents a kind of nostalgia for their homeland.

Abdulrazak Gurnah is among those diaspora literacies from Africa, although he differs from others in some respects. Gurnah is from Zanzibar, East Africa and the beautifully portrays his country's past in his novels. In his novel, *By the Sea*, which was listed for the Booker Prize in 2001, he constructs the past of his country through the memories of his main characters Salah and Latif. "*By the Sea* contains a multi-layered series of flashbacks provided by two narrators, both Zanzibari men, who will finally meet again in England after a

thirty-five-year gap of misunderstandings and dramatic changes of fortune" (Hand, 2010:75). Unlike other novelists, Gurnah did not construct his narrative stereotypically on the common issues of post-colonial and diaspora studies. Sissy Helff claims that "such reductive imagery and labelling are exactly what Gurnah avoids and seeks to overcome in this novel" (2009:74). Through Salah's narrative, the basic conflict of the novel-the inheritance case with Rajab Shaaban Mahmud unfolds, but the history of Zanzibar from the beginning of the nineteenth century through to its independence is also recounted. Moreover, the novel represents the lives of Saleh and Latif as refugees in the UK. Apart from the history of Zanzibar, Gurnah shows us important features of Zanzibar's harmonious culture and ethnicity through descriptions of Omanis and Indian businessmen and traditions. He makes Islamic references, such as prayers, Koran schools, and the law of inheritance. There are also literary references to the Arabian works of *A Thousand and One Nights* and *Sinbad* as well as a European reference to Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*.

By the Sea explores various issues, although they come and go during the storytelling of Saleh. Beginning with the title, the novel also has many symbols. In addition to these various issues, *By the Sea* contains an abundance of symbolism beginning with the novel's title. The novel opens with the arrival of Saleh Omar, an asylum-seeker, at Gatwick airport in Great Britain. While fleeing Zanzibar, Saleh changes his name to Rajab Shabaan. He also intentionally decides not to disclose that he speaks English. Thus, Saleh arrives in Great Britain without an identity or language. The man who sold him his ticket in Zanzibar had advised him not to speak English in Great Britain, so he pretends not to know English. Saleh silences himself intentionally without really understanding why he does this. After a few days, he becomes bored by his silence because he hears and understands what other people say about him, but he cannot respond. Saleh breaks his silence in order to integrate his new home. When he speaks, everything becomes easier for him in his settlement process. Upon learning this event, Latif claims that "Without English, you are even more a stranger, a refugee […] You're just a condition, without even a story" (Gurnah, 2002:143). However, Gurnah presents an unconventional kind of protagonist here who is not silenced by the Powerful, but rather himself.

As a refugee who leads an illegal diasporic life, Saleh confronts some difficulties in Britain. Since he is quite elderly, he is unable to adapt to the different climate of Britain. He does not want to eat when Celia offers pork, which is forbidden in Islam. He always looks for clean surroundings, refusing to sleep in the bed Celia offers. The detention centre represents a transitional space for Saleh since it is full of asylum seekers from various parts of the world, especially Africa. So, the towel given to him by the Algerian makes him feel closer to his own land and people. Like many other refugees, he is seen as an alien in the host country due to his colour. The immigration officer Kevin Edelman generalizes the reason for asylum seeking to find "jobs and prosperity in Europe" (Gurnah,2002:11). He tries to find excuses to send him back. Although Edelman has a Romanian Jewish refugee background, he too discriminates between Europeans and non-Europeans:

> "*My parents were refugees, from Romania. I would tell you about that if we had more time, but what I mean is, I know something about uprooting yourself and going to live somewhere else. I know about the hardships of being alien and poor, because that is what they went through when they came here, and I know about the rewards. But my parents are European, they have a right, they're part of the family […] People like you come pouring in here without any thought of the damage they cause. You don't belong here; you don't value any of the things we value, you haven't paid for them through generations, and we don't want you here"* (12).

While Edelman is making Saleh "the other", he sees himself as a part of Britain because of the shared history of Europe. However, in his inner thoughts, Saleh is against Edelman's expressions of "alienation", and he ironically analyses Edelman's origin while he claims his very right to live in Europe:

> "*Edelman, was that a German name? Or a Jewish name? Or a made-up name? Into a dew, jew, juju. Anyway, the name of the owner of Europe, who knew its values and had paid for them through generations. But the whole world had paid for Europe's values already, even if a lot of the time it just paid and paid and didn't get to enjoy them*" (12).

Apart from Edelman, Ibrahim and Georgy, other refugees in Celia's house, also do not see Saleh as their equal. Ibrahim and Georgy, from Kosovo and the Czech Republic respectively, make fun of him: "Muslim man, he

doesn't eat pig, he doesn't piss alcohol. Clean clean clean, wash wash wash. Black man" (53). While Saleh is unaware of whether they are making fun of him for his colour his religion, he is certain that he is being discriminated against.

Despite his relatively longer legal refugee condition, Latif Mahmud faces the same issues. He first experiences racism during his college days in Germany when a group of German boys mock him by calling him "Afrikernische" (119). Then while he is walking in the streets of London, someone calls him "a grinning blackamoor" (71). He is shocked by the strangeness of the word which he cannot define. He is aware of the "construction of black as other, as wicked, as some evil dark place" and feels a kind of terror when he thinks about England: "This is the house I live in […] a language which barks and scorns at me behind every third corner" (72-73). Although the British do not want to accept him as one of their own, he self-identifies as an Englishman so much so that he does not want to meet someone from his native continent for fear of revealing his alienation. Like Saleh, he also changed his name, but not as a way of escape. He did not want to be called by his great-grandfather's, grandfather's, and father's name as in his homeland, so he renamed himself "in yearning for a quality of gentleness" (133). Latif also questions the issue of Englishness in his memories referring to his school teacher, and creates a new definition for it: "I mean the teacher of English at school, who was as English as you and I, who came to work in a kanzu and kofia, and who was a pious Muslim and ardent Anglophile without contradiction and anxiety" (78).

What Gurnah achieves in *By the Sea* is that he is able to construct the history of Zanzibar by defining its cultural, political and social characteristics. The narrator Saleh is stimulated by his senses, such as the scent of *ud-al-qamari*, and then his memory intertwines with history. Saleh tells us the glorious days of Zanzibar, which was an important harbour for trade in the Indian Ocean, life during the colonial period, and lastly the conflict and chaos after its independence. In nostalgia for his homeland, Saleh feels happy when he is close to the sea. The longing for Zanzibar is so strong that it is even apparent in the title of the novel.

Zanzibar, this busy harbour of East Africa, brings the concept of cosmopolitanism to our minds. Although cosmopolitanism seems like a modern concept with the recent studies of scholars such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, it dates back to ancient Greece with the Cynics who coined the expression "citizen of the cosmos" (Appiah, 2006: xiv). In the broadest definition of cosmopolitanism, there is a rejection of the view that a person just belongs to one community and culture. Michael Lambek, in the foreword of *Struggling with the History*, discusses the mobility of the Indian Ocean and the region's inhabitants as a quality of their cosmopolitanism: "Their fluency in multiple languages, familiarity with and acknowledgement of alternate modes of religiosity and social practices, and their easy mobility between sites where one or another of these languages, modes, and the practices are dominant" (2008: xiv). Saleh justifies Lambek's statement of region's cosmopolitanism when he recounts the history of his country which was a very active trading route in the Indian Ocean: "They brought with them their goods and their God and their way of looking at the world, their stories and their songs and prayers, and just a glimpse of the learning which was the jewel of their endeavours" (15). The people who live in Zanzibar learnt how to accept these people and merge with them through trade. They interacted with various languages, respected their religions and contributed to their culture by creating a cosmopolitan world view. In the novel, Saleh introduces Hussein, a Persian trader full of stories and adventures. Hussein cuts the figure of a man of the world; he studied in India, travelled to many countries, and speaks different languages. Not only Saleh but also Latif's brother Hassan are greatly affected by his cosmopolitan personality. With his aura, he succeeds in convincing Saleh to loan him money, and Saleh expresses the reason of his seduction as: "Asking me for a loan was like anointing me as a man of the world too, an offer of his trust, an embrace" (160). Saleh uses the same statement as the Cynics when he calls Hussein a 'man of the world'. He even accepts Hussein's gift map with happiness since it offers the world in his hands. Both Saleh and Latif strive for cosmopolitanism in their attempts. Saleh goes to Kampala away from his home to study, he learns English, and he interacts with many tourists from all around the world in his furniture store. Then, in his sixties, he travels to Britain as a refugee and achieves integration into his new surroundings. Latif also goes to Germany to study, learns their language, travels around Europe, and ends up in England to become a world citizen by merging with other cultures.

Consequently, Gurnah presents the intertwined story of Saleh and Latif which is constructed through memory. And through this memory, we are able to grasp details about the history of Zanzibar with its culture, politics, society and traditions. However, although Gurnah writes about the typical issues of postcolonial writing, he enriches his story with the main conflict of the novel and directs our attention to the story of Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud with the story of colonial, postcolonial and independent Zanzibar, with the hardships of refugee life in the background.

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