

Book Reviews

The 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to author Abdulrazak Gurnah “for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents.” Born in Zanzibar in 1948, Gurnah came to England after the revolution of 1964, as a student. Gurnah has retired as a professor of English at the University of Kent.

In the current issue of *Refugee Watch*, we have included two reviews of Gurnah's novels—as his works carry experiences of migration and displacement at their core, engaging with issues of colonialism, racism, immigrant experience, refugeehood, asylum, search for identity, and for home. Through novels such as *Memory of Departure* (1987), *Paradise* (1994), *Admiring Silence* (1996), *Desertion* (2005), etc., Gurnah's East African protagonists unsettle fixed identities—and received ideas about migrants and migrations.

Reading Gurnah is of seminal importance to those interested in migration and forced migration, the Nobel a recognition of migration as central to our present history.

Sukanya Bhattacharya *

Gravel Heart by Abdulrazak Gurnah, London/Oxford/New York/New Delhi/Sydney: Bloomsbury Publishing 2017, pp. 272, ₹270. ISBN 978-1526603692 (Paperback).

Nobel laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Gravel Heart* is a tale of migration and exile, portraying the first three decades of a young man's life. It centres around the life of Salim, a young man from Zanzibar who, at seventeen years of age, leaves his country to go to the United Kingdom. In the first part of the novel, Salim muses about his rosy childhood which is abruptly broken when his father moves out of their house and starts living elsewhere. As a child, Salim is bewildered and later disgusted at his father who seems to be battling invisible demons but cannot overcome them. His loving relationship with his mother starts to deteriorate when he realizes that she has given birth to his

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half-sister with a powerful man who happens to be a minister in the national government.

To escape his feelings of jealousy, hurt, and betrayal, he goes to London to study business with the financial support of his uncle Amir who holds an important position. What follows is a universal tale of a young boy and his first taste of freedom in another country far from his parents. Feeling homesick and guilty for enjoying himself while his parents are suffering, he simultaneously undergoes emotional turmoil at the hands of his overbearing uncle and aunt who want him to act as they want because of his financial dependence on them.

The theme of migration is never overtly stated but it is implicit in every page of the novel. While Salim's grandfather could easily leave his country for better financial prospects, his father stayed back as he had fallen in love. The other African-origin people he meets in the novel also have their own unique stories of migration and want to return home but are never really able to.

Salim himself returns to his home once his mother dies, and comes face to face with his father and his mother's lover. As a grown man with his own experiences involving life, death, love, and shame, he listens to the story of why his father had left their home in his childhood and untangles a complex event that had a tremendous impact on his parents.

The women in the novel are hardly given a voice except as nosy neighbours, dutiful sisters, or potential love interests. Told through the eyes of a young man growing into adulthood, the different kinds of women Salim encounters are all mostly one-dimensional characters even though he searches for love and companionship in all of them. The most important voice that seems to be missing at a crucial point in the novel is that of Salim's mother. Perhaps, the author deliberately keeps her silent to keep the reader guessing about her actions and intentions.

Some of the characters in the novel also show how life in a newly independent, post-revolution, and postcolonial state in Africa was like. While the postcolonial state as a concept is never directly spoken about in the novel, it is still omnipresent as different members of Salim's family interact with the state and its laws in a variety of ways while trying to live their life.

The beauty of the story lies in the vivid imagery of the vibrant personalities of the people Salim meets in his journey from Zanzibar to the United Kingdom. His experience of living with other men who have emigrated from Africa provides a rich description of the life of young, male African emigrants who came to the United Kingdom in the 1980s and 1990s.

Trevor Noah in his autobiography *Born A Crime* also writes about growing up in poverty in an African nation during the same period. Salim's description of his childhood in *Gravel Heart* might remind one of Noah's writings. However, while Noah writes about each person and grants them a space in his story no matter how insignificant they are, Gurnah uses the people in his novel to create a strong background through which Salim's parents and uncle can stand out. Even though the events they undergo as a family have immense repercussions that last through time and space, Salim's

unaffected reminiscence never turns them into larger-than-life characters but simple, flesh-and-blood human beings who keep living their lives. The triumph of this novel lies in showing the universality of certain human feelings, emotions, and sentiments, regardless of one's geographical location. The novel ends with the establishment of a tragic correlation between the title of the novel and the Shakespearean play that Salim's father had tried to read. As Salim reminds his father, human stories sometimes resemble fiction but the oppressors, unlike their fictional counterparts, hardly ever meet justice.