

# *Memories of Departure* and other Stories in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Writings

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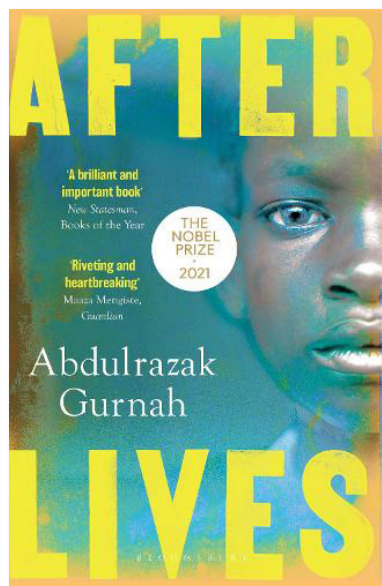


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Abdulrazak Gurnah, a Tanzanian born in Zanzibar in 1948 is a renowned and reputed writer. The Nobel laureate for literature in 2021 is a prolific writer who holds ten novels published till date, to his credit: *Memory of Departure* (1987), *Pilgrim's Way* (1988), *Dottie* (1990), *Paradise* (1994), *Admiring Silence* (1996), *By the Sea* (2001), *Desertion* (2005), *The Last Gift* (2011), *Gravel Heart* (2017) and *Afterlives* (2020). As an academic, Gurnah is a professor of English and Postcolonial literature at Kent University. He is metaphorically referred to as a sea turtle because sea turtles are renowned for their ability to return to the same nesting grounds where they were born, even after migrating thousands of miles. This character trait illustrates the idea of natural wisdom and an innate sense of direction, which invites individuals to connect with their roots, values, and knowledge gained through experience, emphasizing the importance of finding one's path and staying true to oneself.

Gurnah's works are graced with the themes of exile, migration and Childhood suffering and abandonment. The novelist, himself, was constrained to leave his hometown as a youth; and thereof representing children and teens who are abandoned, sold to slavery or auctioned off to early and forced marriages. Amina in *Paradise* (1994) is a perfect example of someone who is nominally free from slavery but is unable to make life-altering decisions for herself. The protagonist's mother in



*After Lives* – PAGE Book Connoisseurs ([pagebookstore.com](http://pagebookstore.com))

*Memory of Departure* (1987), meanwhile is married off at the age of sixteen, practically a child herself: "My mother was married to my father when she was sixteen... she was never consulted" (p. 21). This is also comparable to selling her off because her preferences are not taken into account during the transaction; instead, she is simply given to a man who "[w]as unfaithful from the start. She knew of his unfaithfulness" (p.21). In order to represent this distorted childhood experience, Gurnah uses

children, who are mainly protagonists as narrators. *Memory of Departure, Paradise, Dottie and Pilgrim's way* are four of his novels in which children act as both the main characters and narrators.

Reminiscing through his vivid and overwhelming traumatic memory of his early days in England, Gurnah writes extensively about migration. Having escaped the hardship, anxiety, state terror and calculated humiliations in Zanzibar for the UK in 1967, was according to him "(...) the feeling of strangeness and difference in the new country that demanded literary working through." (Gurnah, 2004:26). Writing about his personal case or the experiences of those close to him, helped him relieve his sad experience, and that is why his narratives are centered on problems encountered by his people. As such, the author narrator pours out his emotions in representing the matters of human existence which helps him to clear his mind. In clearing his mind, he tends to become a militant who fights for his people even in a foreign land. Gurnah further complicates the concept of localized experience and delocalized identity by providing a contrastive and hazy reconstruction of a time and place through various, partially conflicting recollections. Streaming through his past, he un/consciously goes back to his root to criticize the leaders of the Tanzanian post-independence government through the narrator, as the leaders are referred to as "organs of consumption and penetration, prehensile fools of self-gratification" (Gurnah, 2001:202). This shows that he doesn't mince words in criticizing the society as it is.

One strategy that this heroic and great writer applies successfully in his literary texts is that of the application of a variety of narrative voices. In *By the Sea*, the narrator is the protagonist who, arriving at the Gatwick airport as a refugee, has been advised not to speak English by the people who arranged for his escape. In *Memory*

*of Departure, Paradise, Dottie and Pilgrim's way*, the author portrays children as the main protagonists and employs them as the storytellers. In most of his literary texts, Gurnah continuously uses an invincible narrator, alongside multiple other narrators. As an articulate and meticulous writer, Gurnah chronicles the struggles of postcolonial Zanzibar residents, articulates the underlying constraints of the British migrant experience, and demonstrates how people in these two cultural contexts find paths into their subjectivities by going on philosophic and subjective excursions that his literary works design. With great artistic write-ups mentioned in this short review of his works, Abdulrazak Gurnah remains an African writer whose name and literary prowess can never be forgotten in the world at large. He has really shown himself as a sea turtle who represents longevity, wisdom, and resilience. Sea turtles are known for their long lifespan, sometimes reaching over 100 years, which symbolizes the concept of longevity and endurance. This metaphor suggests that Gurnah as a prolific writer has scribbled his name in the sands of time as an author whose works will reign from generation to generation and, therefore, merits to be read and reread. ■

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