

## Editorial

### A world of refugees made visible: in honour of Abdulrazak Gurnah

The news came as a wonderful surprise and it felt like an unexpectedly bold decision on the part of the Swedish Nobel Prize Committee, who awarded Abdulrazak Gurnah the Nobel Prize in Literature on 7 October 2021. For all of us who have cultivated a long-standing interest in postcolonial writing, and for this journal, ideally positioned in a European South that looks closely at Africa and its diasporas, it was a joyful, enthusiastic moment. This Nobel Prize is a welcome act of recognition of the work of a great writer, of the places and cultures Gurnah has traversed in his lifetime, of the complexities of where he comes from, and of the consequences of colonialism for Africa and its migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, seeking shelter and a future in Europe and around the globe.

One of the great questions in postcolonial literatures and critical theory is the dialectics between visibility and invisibility at work in the processes of producing knowledge (historical, cultural, linguistic, sociological...) in and about colonial and postcolonial contexts. The postcolonial has always been concerned with a politics of invisibility, and one of its great cultural and political achievements has been to make the invisible visible. In its original impulse, postcolonialism was a programmatic effort to represent areas, nations, cultures of the world which were notionally acknowledged, technically there, but which were not there in many other senses, as Edward Said eloquently put it in his *Orientalism* (1978). “So the politics of invisibility involves not actual invisibility – Robert Young argues – but a refusal of those in power to see who or what is there. The task of the postcolonial is to make the invisible, in this sense, visible.”<sup>1</sup>

The motivation of the Nobel Prize committee, praising Gurnah’s “uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents,”<sup>2</sup> acknowledges the core of his literary and academic endeavours. His works have indeed mobilized a plurality of stories that span over a century of colonial encounters, postcolonial travels and border crossings, and have opened up a vast continental and oceanic narrative space for us to traverse: in this way, he has traced and made accessible a variety of local African discourses, transcultural contacts and transnational flows, which have made Africa and its diasporas visible. The imagination that sustains his writing is

far from replicating the certainties of the powerful master narratives of colonialism, patriarchy, racism and xenophobia, responsible for centuries of violence and exploitation that persist in the present. Gurnah does believe in the power of storytelling to connect people and geopolitical scenarios, and to offer forms of accommodation and even hospitality to human beings wandering in hostile places; but his stories thrive on provisional representations of characters and experiences, which come out of fluctuating imaginaries and claim no certainties: in his ten novels and many short stories, impermanence and precarity are strategically functional to illuminating the predicaments of people who are displaced, unmoored, endlessly on the move and changing.

Thus Gurnah questions ideas of purity and fixity related to cultures and people's identities. He does so by leading us into the complexity of centuries of intermingling along the East African shores of the Indian Ocean, which become paradigmatic examples of the heterogeneity and hybridity subtending the experiences of all human beings, of places and languages in all times. Interestingly, he focuses on the ocean as a space through which relationships, affects, histories and politics are brought into being; and on the Swahili coast of the continent as the cradle of overlapping African, Asian and Arab heritages. But in his references to this long narrative of continental and transoceanic exchanges there is neither idealism nor nostalgia. Firmly ingrained in it are the Eastern African slave trade and indenture system, German and British occupation, as well as forms of pervasive socio-economic exclusion connected to abject poverty and migration. His characters – powerless outcasts often caught in violent situations for which they are not responsible and which they cannot control – live in the interstices of societies. Sometimes, as happens to the protagonist of the novel *Paradise* (1994), which was nominated for both the Booker Prize and the Whitbread Prize for Fiction, they find respite from the harshness of hostile circumstances thanks to the welcoming embrace of other men and other women – an embrace that gestures towards the possibility of alternative social imaginaries, if only we cared more for people, kindness, and a life in common.

Such moments of warmth and shared humanity rarely occur in the current hostile immigration climate, Gurnah tells us. The asylum seeker, the refugee and the migrant are seldom granted the dignity which the recognition of a common humanity would enable, and are endlessly condemned to displacement, indifference and racial aggression. In a passage in *By the Sea*, Gurnah's sixth novel, Saleh Omar, one of the protagonists and narrators, comes to this blunt realization: "I am a refugee, an asylum seeker. These are not simple words" (2001, 4). In this way, he identifies part of the difficulties of an illegal immigrant in 21<sup>st</sup> century England. Forced to clash with the 'legal' language that reflects and defines the political borders of the nation, Saleh realizes that the labels of refugee or asylum seeker are not just mere words, but tools with which the distinctions between those who are citizens and those who are not are produced. Saleh embodies a 'disturbing' element for the ordering of contemporary western

societies: he is truly, as Hannah Arendt suggests, “the man of rights,” the human being who should be entitled to rights precisely because of his/her humanity, and who instead is considered “bare life” by state organizations who only give rights and grant belonging to their citizens.<sup>3</sup> In his incantatory narratives, Gurnah looks for languages and finds words for characters who are non-persons, and whose position of illegality forces them into experiences of victimization. His main gift to us is the vision and the voice of an insider, whose writing succeeds in making visible – to all those who care to read, listen and finally see – the daily growing crowd of refugees who are slowly making a world of borders untenable.

Thank you Razak, this issue of *From the European South* is dedicated to you.

Annalisa Oboe

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Young, “Postcolonial Remains,” *New Literary History* 43, no. 1 (2012): 23.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2021/summary/>. Accessed October 27, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 126.