

## The Zanzibari Author, Abdulrazak Gurnah

# Refuge in a Cold Climate

Helen Fallon

In 1969, at the age of eighteen, Abdulrazak Gurnah escaped with his brother from Zanzibar, the East African island which, five years earlier, had experienced a violent uprising after the Arab government was overthrown. (Subsequently Zanzibar and Tanganyika merged and the resulting republic is Tanzania.)

In 2001, in an interview in *The Guardian*, Gurnah talked about coming to England as an asylum seeker: "I did not cling to the side of a ferry or wedge myself under a train to enter Britain. My brother and I arrived on a Sabena flight and were courteously interrogated by an immigration official...I don't think we gave much thought to what we would find when we arrived. Yes, we should have done, but that is what I mean by terror. I thought about what I was escaping from and a lot less about what I was escaping to."

### BORN FREE BUT...

Gurnah's novel, *Paradise*, is set in the years before the First World War in the country he left behind. It tells the story of Yusef who is given, at the age of twelve, to the wealthy merchant Abdul Aziz in payment for a debt his father cannot meet. Abdul takes an interest in the boy's welfare and frequently enjoins him, and the others that make up the trading caravan he leads, to trust in God.

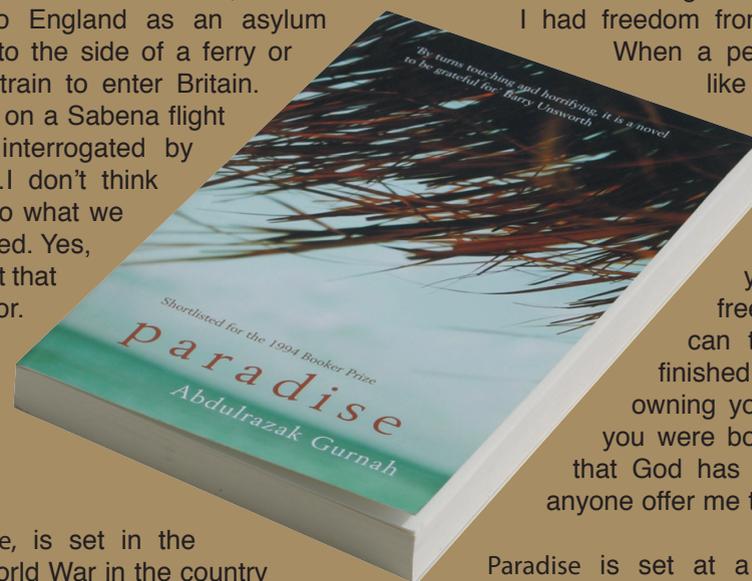
There is an old gardener, Hamdani, withered and almost toothless, at Abdul's house in Zanzibar. Yusef learns that Hamdani was also sold as a child to repay a debt. On her wedding, Abdul's wife had offered Hamdani his freedom in honour of the occasion. He

refused it and went with her to her new home and began to create a garden around some old trees. When Yusef meets him he is an old man nurturing a beautiful garden of trees, shrubs, flowers and water pools. As he works he recites prayers from the Koran.

Yusef asks him why he did not take his freedom when it was offered. The old man responds, "She offered me freedom as a gift. Who said she had it to offer.

I had freedom from the moment I was born.

When a person says 'I own you' it is like the passing of the rain or the setting of the sun at the end of the day. The following morning the sun will rise. They can put you in chains, abuse all your small belongings, but freedom is not something they can take away. When they are finished with you they are as far from owning you as they were on the day you were born. This garden is the work that God has given me to do. What can anyone offer me that is freer than that?"



*Paradise* is set at a time when the European presence in East Africa was becoming more evident and the delicate balance of coastal society was being gradually destroyed. Talking of writing the book Gurnah said, "I wanted the moment when these cultures of the coast finally understood they were dominated, the moment when you couldn't mistake that the real power in the place was imperial."

### EVERYWHERE A STRANGER

*Admiring Silence*, published two years after *Paradise*, deals with the experience of exile. A college student's escape from terror in his native Zanzibar to the safety

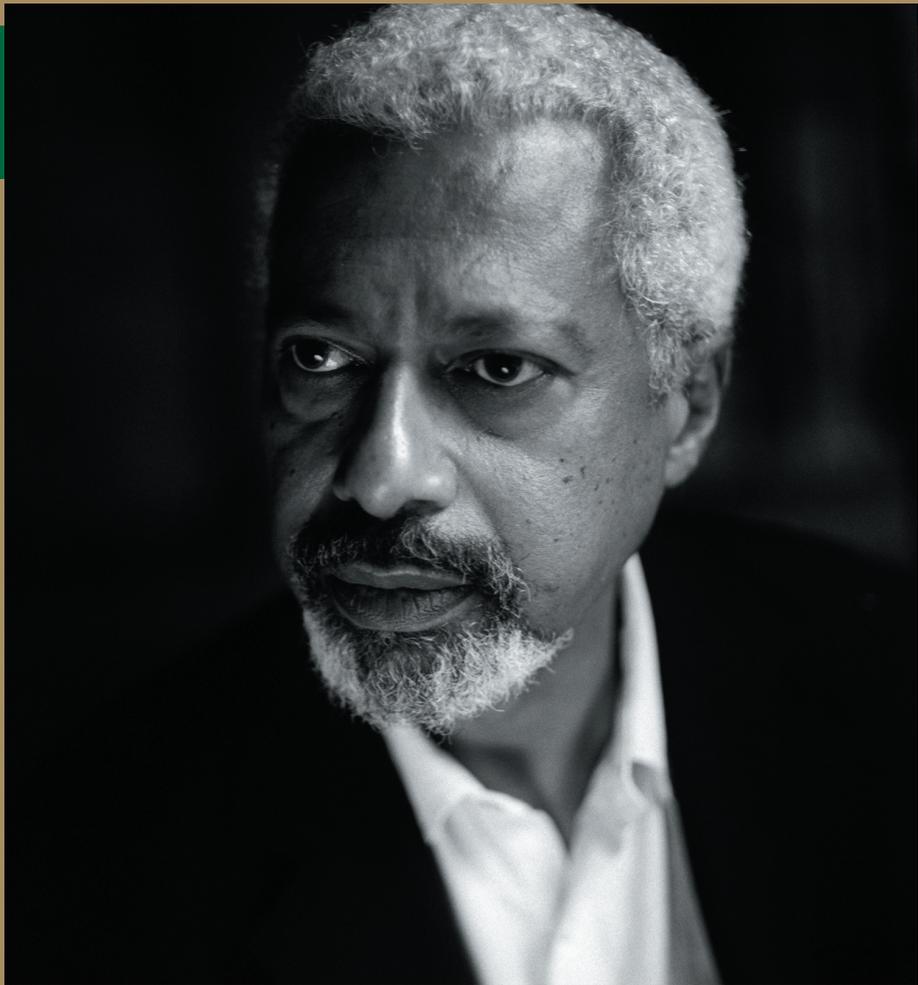
of England leaves him a free man in an alien culture. However, twenty years later, assimilation still remains elusive despite having an English wife and daughter and a job teaching in a London school. He returns on a visit to his home country and finds himself caught between an adopted country that excludes him and a postcolonial homeland that repels him.

The corruption and decay of his home country, the confusing legacy of colonialism, the consequences of Marxist upheaval, and the history of the Arab, Persian and Indian traders who made their way to Zanzibar are explored in *By the Sea*, Gurnah's most recent novel. Exile and alienation are, again, major concerns.

The novel tells the story of two men, from Zanzibar, who live in Britain. The opening pages portray the isolation of sixty-five year old Saleh Omar, who walks the streets of an English town and "lives the half-life of a stranger, glimpsing interiors through the television screen and guessing at the tireless alarms which afflict people I see in my strolls". He states simply. "I am a refugee, an asylum seeker." Latif Mahmud is a younger man from Zanzibar who came to Britain, via college in the German Democratic Republic, as an asylum seeker. Now a university lecturer and poet, he lives alone in London.

Through a multi-layered plot, weaving its way between events in Malaysia, Oman, Zanzibar and Britain, the story gradually unfolds through the first-person narratives of the two men. The intricate strands of the novel mesh and the "cruel and complex sequence of events that has brought him (Saleh) to seek refuge in a cold climate" are revealed.

Abdulrazak Gurnah believes that stories of migration and displacement are the major narratives of our time.



**Novelist Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in 1948 on the island of Zanzibar off the coast of East Africa. He went to Britain as a student in 1968 and now teaches literature at the University of Kent.** (photo: Bloomsbury)

Unlike in colonial times, when Europeans travelled to Africa and brought back stories about the people, now African people are travelling to the West and telling their own stories; stories which, according to Gurnah "unsettle previous understandings".

In an interview in *Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Speak* he says, "You read things by others which give you access – even if one's understanding is slight – to different ways of thinking and understanding. In that sense the world actually becomes a smaller place where we can make connections."

Abdulrazak Gurnah now lectures in literature at the University of Kent. ■

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. She has taught at the University of Sierra Leone. *Paradise* is published by Bloomsbury.