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**Interview with Abdulrazak Gurnah Conducted at  
the University of Kent, Canterbury, 15 July 2005**

Emad Mirmotahari

**Abstract**

*Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in Zanzibar, Tanzania in 1948. He is the author of acclaimed novels Memory of Departure (1987), Pilgrims Way (1988), Dottie (1990), Paradise (1994 – Shortlisted for the Booker Prize), Admiring Silence (1996), By the Sea (2001), and Desertion (2005). Gurnah's novels address exile, loss, memory, and how the political and historical intersect with the personal in an East African context. He is also editor of the two-volume Essays on African Writing (1993). He is currently the associate chief editor of the African studies journal Wasafiri and chair of the Department of English at the University of Kent, Canterbury in the United Kingdom. This interview was conducted before the publication of his recent novel, Desertion (2005). Our discussion covers the politics of defining a literary canon in East Africa, how East Africa fits into discussions of the African Diaspora (which tend to emphasize West Africa), the status of area studies and its implications, and finally, the impact of Islam in the region.*

*Q: Do you agree with the basic observation that East African prose is comparatively overlooked, Ngugi excepted, when one considers the exposure that writers from West Africa, South Africa, and the Maghreb get in the Anglo-American academy?*

A: As an observation, yeah, sure. You can see this if you look at what's published and what's taught. Fair enough!

*Q: How do you position your own work vis-a-vis those earlier Anglophone Tanzanian writers, Ruhumbika and Palangyo? Are they considered foundational writers or inaugural writers, national writers?*

A: No, I don't think so, not in Tanzania anyway. Not as far as I know. It's more likely that if people know about writing they know more the canonical African writers like Ngugi and Achebe. It's quite possible that they don't know Ruhumbika. There are quite serious problems about the teaching of literature in Tanzania. This has to do with availability, with resources, the cost of printing books. So people don't really buy books. But if they know about African writing they know about those writers, I reckon, even more so than Tanzanian writers. That's my guess!

*Q: Is there an East African canon? And if so, what gives it its canonicity?*

A: It's complicated, or rather, not straightforward. It's not particularly complicated. If you consider schools in Kenya, a few years ago when Moi was still president, seven or eight years ago, I remember he set up this review committee to look into secondary education mostly, to see if it was time to review what was being offered and to

review the structure of the whole schooling system, which was eight years in primary school and eight years in secondary school. There was a big commission to look into all dimensions of education and they came up with a proposal to reform and change and they did this both in terms of the school structure and curriculum. When they came to the teaching of English, they took out Shakespeare and instead put in more African and Caribbean writing. And Moi being the kind of president that he was, overruled this commission and said "No, you can't take Shakespeare out." He put Shakespeare back in and removed most of these strange books that had been written by African writers. So in his sense of what constitutes the canon, his canon was not too different from what one would find in a western academic institution. So that's what constitutes the canon. I don't think that there's an East African canon unless you're outside of East Africa. In other words, in East Africa it is still a contested issue and so is what you should be teaching. Should you be teaching an international canon, which is basically the canon in the western academy? Or should you be teaching something directed towards the cultural needs, which is how Moi saw it, but not necessarily their educational needs? In [Moi's] view, to teach English without teaching Shakespeare is to under-equip them. On the other hand there are other places - you're asking about East Africa, but I taught in Nigeria for a few years—many, many years ago, so things must have changed a great deal and from what everybody tells me they've changed a great deal for the worse, but I wouldn't know. I was teaching in the early 80s at a university in Kano, Bayero University, in the literature degree program and there was more or less no English literature as such, written by English or ancestrally English writers. There was one course in America

literature with Huck Finn, Faulkner, etc. No detailed rationale about why these authors, it was just American. I think in the same course there was Hawthorne, Huck Finn, Faulkner and possibly James Baldwin. The rest of it was African and that to me *did* seem like under-equipping your students. So I'm not sure the time has come to talk about the East African canon. It's still a contested matter. But if you're talking from the point of view of a western institution or an institution outside of Africa, then it is possible to come up with a list of books that we can call the 'East African canon.' In fact, the African canon itself has largely been established by such manoeuvres, by people from outside who are constructing their reading lists.

*Q: How much of that impulse do you think is attributable to Ngugi, when he says in 'Decolonising the Mind' that you start with the local, then the African, then the larger third world, and then everything else, kind of inverting or changing the margin-centre relationships. So start with Kenya, then Africa, then the third world?*

A: Except to do this in itself, it seems to me, is to corner yourself. Let's say you start with the local, take Kenyan writing for example. You don't get very far. You start to think of literature as property of certain cultures. It's seems much more interesting to me to think of literature as something that belongs to all of us. Ngugi wants to make the case that is international, apparently so. Whereas the case he makes is narrowly parochial. "Know about yourself before you know about your neighbour." By the time you get through all of that, you hate them all. Whereas the impulse behind studying literature is a generous one.

It's one about getting news from other places. Understanding things.

*Q: Inherently so?*

A: We're most engaged when we're hearing news from other places. Of course we do not read with enough knowledge, on the whole, to understand the stuff we're reading from other places. Reading is the beginning of knowledge. We would be critical of [Ngugi's] argument if it was coming from, let's say, a British cultural position that says, "Let us understand ourselves, first of all, before we bother looking at anybody else." Whereas the great thing about studying literature in Britain, and I'm sure in the US and perhaps elsewhere too, is the way in which in the last few decades it has opened itself up to other literatures. We see how that has made it possible to re-read what we were already reading in a certain way. Take diaspora studies in the US, call it what you like, this process has meant re-reading things that had already been read and apparently understood as being fixed in its meaning or impact or whatever. This seems to me at the core both academic and other forms of pursuing literature. It's the most humane reading.

*Q: So then having said that, how do you feel about 'area studies?' African Studies, African-American Studies, Latin American Studies? On the one hand it seems that this organisational logic needs to be there to get the exposure for these literatures and cultures, and on the other hand, you're saying that it feeds itself into a form of parochialism.*

A: I do think area studies have this inclination. When I first came here we used to do a programme called 'African and Caribbean Studies' which is very much area studies. I became the chairman of that programme at some stage. It died before I stopped being chairman of that program. We got rid of it basically. It seemed to me that it was limited. We were already, within that program, tugging away from the constraints of the program, wanting do something with India, for instance, and issues that were arising there. Another colleague wanted to work on South Pacific issues. But there was an anomaly. Here we were teaching African and Caribbean studies and say we wanted to make some observations about Indian writing or history, or the South Pacific which had to do with colonialism and postcolonialism. We were defeated by the way we described ourselves. So we said 'Let's get rid of this.' In the end we called ourselves 'Post-Colonial.' I can't be bothered by all the arguments over what the term means, but it allows the expansion of the 'area studies' concept so one can get away from teaching only African and Caribbean. On the other hand, having said all of that, we're talking about literature and culture, insofar as literature overlaps with cultural studies. I can see how for people who study other disciplines, area studies works. Say you're studying climate, or geography, or economics. I can see how it's possible to talk about Africa, or African economics. Are certain problems particular to Africa? But if you're studying literature, it doesn't quite work. One will have to say that literature is produced in this area is somehow uniquely different from literature produced in this other area. And it may not be. It may be that the differences within one area are greater than the commonalties you might find between areas. Say Anita Desai and Tsitsi Dangbarengba. You might find it fruitful

to put those together rather than putting Dangbarenga and Chenjeai Hove. So why restrict yourself? Of course the problem with not restricting yourself enough is that you end up with banal observations, observations that are not sorted enough, precise enough, specific enough. You have to be aware of both things. One is not to say this is specific to Zimbabwe and make a case like that, in terms of national space or national experience, which is actually comparable to other places. On the one hand you want to avoid being too rigid about how you read about events and their outcomes. On the other hand you don't want to be in a position, and this is where a lot of the criticism against postcolonial criticism focuses, where you can say almost anything you like about any group of writers because you assume you can make general observations without taking into account the specificity of conditions of the production of a text.

*Q: So would there be anything fruitful, for example, about studying Garcia-Marquez, Amitav Ghosh, and Fanon, for example, or Achebe, or would that be too elastic?*

A: No. I would have thought that you could read any of these texts together as long as it is justifiable. Say, for example, you're reading Rushdie and Garcia-Marquez. Then it's really straightforward because Rushdie talks about having read Garcia-Marquez and the kind of influence he feels he had on his writing. Not only that, Garcia-Marquez talks about reading Rushdie. So there's already something about living in a world where we read each other regardless of which language or which region we're originally writing in. In the same way you wouldn't be at all surprised if somebody like Étake Ngugi, he doesn't say so now, but we know very well that Ngugi read Conrad



in his studies and in fact wrote his undergraduate dissertation on 'Under Western Eyes.' We know also that there are a lot of Conrad connections that we can pick up by reading Ngugi. So it makes sense, doesn't it, to discuss how Ngugi uses Conrad. But Ngugi didn't read just Conrad. Ngugi probably read Faulkner. He probably would've read more contemporary writers than Faulkner, perhaps Norman Mailer. That wouldn't sound strange to say Conrad and Ngugi. So why would it be at all odd to say Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, and Garcia-Marquez? The only thing that would follow would be for there to be a case, rather than the common way in which it seems to happen. Take for example gender as the issue in question using an Indian novel, a South Pacific novel, and a Caribbean novel. Gender in three postcolonial novels. That seems to me to be troublesome because gender is a cultural product. It's not taking account of that. It must mean that you're not reading those texts precisely enough.

*Q: Speaking of Conrad and Faulkner, do you feel that there's experimentation with form in African writing, or let's say East African writing? Or is it still very much anchored to realist imperatives that characterised early writing of the 50s and 60s? For example, Ngugi's 'Grain of Wheat', which might seem to be much more visibly realist, politically realist and engaged and committed in the way that Gikandi might describe - that the African novel is necessarily politically committed. Is there experimentation with genre and form?*

A: Well, in the case of Ngugi and the *Grain of Wheat* I'm not sure I would agree entirely. There are two different editions of *Grain of Wheat*. The first edition certainly is not politically committed, not as much. The second one

deliberately takes out the ambivalences within it and makes it committed. Nor do I see it as a novel in the realist method altogether. The way it works is by three or four different narrations, which don't tell the complete story. There are gaps between the narrations. Also, because they are narrations, they are self-justifications. Kihika justifies himself, and Mugo justifies himself in betraying him, and these are not commented on. So, in a way that doesn't sound like realism to me. It sounds like we as readers are placed in a position where we have to expose the egotism of both of these people. We are to understand that these are egos in conflict as well as political argument. This is the strength of the first version of *Grain of Wheat*. Although it's political, it shows that the impulse behind the political is greed and the needs of the individual. It is these ambivalences that Ngugi gets rid of when his book is revised so that it becomes a much more clearly political and committed novel. As for experimentation, I think there's plenty of experimentation in what he does. I'm not sure that the direction it leads to is a very clever one. I think it leads to flatter and flatter narrative with less and less texture. From *Grain of Wheat* onward, to *Petals of Blood*, which still has texture but its fibres are going in one direction rather being like wheat, as so as we get to *Matigari* later on. Sorry I'm waving derisively because it seems to me that they've become flat objects, without depth. Everything's on the surface, here it is! Because it's on the surface, it's rather shallow. It doesn't have the pleasure because of the possibility of interpretation like the earlier books, like a *Grain of Wheat* did. There's no other way to read. You simply have to read and obey. There's no room for engagement. So here, experimentation leads to something less complex.

*Q: You don't think experimentation compromises the political integrity of a novel? There are those, I'm thinking of the anxiety of certain Marxist critics of African literature, that argue that experimentation, taken to its logical conclusion won't yield accessible novels which will cease to be vehicles of public or political discourse.*

A: Whether you call them Marxists or whether you call them something else it seems to me there is and has been for a long time a type of African criticism which is simply bullying. Whether they call it Marxist, or whether they call themselves Marxists, or people upholding some sort of tradition or traditional way of talking about things, the criticism always seems to bully the writer into producing something uncomplicated that speaks to the masses, whoever the hell they are. Especially since the masses don't read books. But somehow there's an imperative to keep saying, "This book is elitist, this book is too obscure." Who do they like? They don't like anybody. African criticism has become an exercise, whenever a book is written, in saying "No, not like that." Who listens to them? I suspect Ngugi listened to them. There were a number of critics that came out and spoke against the first version of *Grain of Wheat* in a collection of essays called 'Marxism and African Literature' by Neil Lazarus and someone else, and the result of it was [Ngugi] revised it and, it seemed to me, made a worse book. So I'm not a person to ask about these Marxist critical positions, because they don't seem to me that they are Marxist critical positions. It seems to me that it is simply prescriptive bullying, like the position of Chinweizu and a couple of others a few decades ago who imply that there is a model for African writing. "African writers should write like this, and *this* isn't it, and that isn't it, nor is that." They haven't got their ideal

model. This is a stupid way of doing criticism. The impact is to prevent the production of not only experimentation but to move towards some already-prescribed list of things that make up what a proper text would be. We have to give literature space. Where would we be if we followed that way of thinking?

*Q: I think it's a really important point that you made about the 'masses.' Who are they exactly? People tend to lose sight of how nebulous this term really is.*

A: The 'masses' is the trick, what we now call, I suppose, the virtual signifier, the transcendental signifier, that justifies argument, especially when using a bullying argument. You can say, "This is not accessible to the masses." Who are you to know what is and what is not accessible to the masses? How did you come to be the representative of these masses? How do you know what is and what is not accessible to them? Sometimes people speak as representatives of others when they've not been chosen to do so. They are in a position of fake authority, which unfortunately Ngugi often occupies. He often occupies this position as if he's speaking for all of us when in fact he's a writer and writers only speak for themselves.

*Q: But do you think that representation happens anyway?*

A: You can't assume it does. People have to take you on. When people take you on and say, "That's exactly how I feel too", then you might be in a position to say people agree with you. But most writers in their periods, in their time, actually are not in this position. More often than not, at best they're in a position of contention. Some people agree with them, some people don't. Very often they're

in a position where very many people disagree with them but are nonetheless prepared to read them and engage them. You might think of Naipaul. Many of us don't agree with what he's saying. We all read him. In the time to come many people will say, "This was how we was received, and we can now see the sense in what he was saying." Or the opposite may happen. They might say "He was an interesting writer about such and such but we now know he was writing rubbish." Rushdie, for example, or other writers wouldn't be expecting, at their time, to be representing people of their time. They will be speaking about things as they see them. They'll say, "Even if you don't agree with me, but this is how I see them."

*Q: Would you then characterise writing more as a personal or a cultural act? It seems to me that within the academic context, the implication of reading, transmitting, and negotiating literature is that it is a social and collective act. Is that a fair assumption to make? I'm speaking of the institutionality of literature, the fact that it is taught, read, critiqued, and debated, whether or not the author wants it to be a representational or cultural moment, doesn't this happen anyway?*

A: One has to distinguish between two things. First is the writing dimension of literature and second is the interpretation of literature. Obviously when you pick up a text you place it in context. But that context may vary. This is the interesting thing about institutionalising writing. Say you're putting literature in a course. You might call it 'African literature', you might call it 'postcolonial literature', you might call the course 'The Novel', you might call it something else. When you do that, you're already putting literature in a certain context

of interpretation and you ask certain questions of it. When you write a book, you don't write a book thinking which course it will fit into. So you're not writing it with certain questions pre-organised that will be then addressed. So the only way you can write is to write about things that interest you, concern you, and engage you, things that you've thought about and want to write about. Perhaps you are interested in things that are more abstract. Say you want to describe how it is, like in *By the Sea*, that you remember different things and how this is different for different people and compare stories. And then you want to write this as beautifully as you can, as interestingly as you can. These are the primary considerations. If somebody has a story to tell, and another person has another story to tell, and these stories intersect in particular ways, say one has been living in England for forty years, another one has just arrived, how does this all work out? How do you work out the particular circumstances and the many details?

*Q: How vital, or prevalent, is the use of Swahili in East African prose today, and more generally, translation?*

A: There's a fair amount of writing in Kiswahili. There's some translation. They are translations from other languages into Swahili. As far as I know there's almost no translation from Swahili into other languages. There may well be some translation of nineteenth century Swahili poetry, for example, but not much contemporary material into other languages.

*Q: I'm concerned with the omission of East Africa from discussions of diaspora. How do you feel about Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic' in this capacity?*

A: Well it doesn't have very much to do with East Africa and it has nothing to do with Africa, really. It has to do with Britain and the US. I think it is very good but I think that its argument has to do with the Atlantic, or, the North Atlantic I should say. And that's fine. That's fair enough. But it isn't really about diaspora. Because if it was an argument about diaspora, the African diaspora, for practical purposes it's quite horrendous that it ignores the Caribbean and that it ignores South America.

*Q: Spanish-speaking, French speaking, Portuguese speaking?*

A: The largest African diaspora of course is Brazil and it is not at all part of the argument. It's clear. If it's an argument about the African diaspora, it's one for the African diaspora in the US and to some extent in Europe. If you take all of these limitations then it is a fine book.

*Q: Also discussions of cultural heterogeneity in an African context always seem to entail the West. One of the problems I've had with Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic' upon reading 'By the Sea' was that there's a whole 'contact zone' that entails a different cultural sphere in Africa – African cosmopolitanism that is not necessarily predicated on contact with the West. There's a whole different sphere of contact with the Islamic world, India, and East Asia. Do you see this as a limitation of the discussions of cultural miscegenation so celebrated by diaspora studies? It always seems to harken back to mixing with the West and never this other sphere or region of Africa which has had a long history of contact with other cultures.*

A: I think this is partly driven by African-American anxieties, which have to do with the encounter with the West, both in West Africa and in the US itself. They need to explain themselves in terms of their perception in western writing and in western culture. The translation of diaspora studies - it has different meanings elsewhere, in the western institution, mostly in the US and a lesser extent Europe and Britain - is that the gaze is turned inwards, and there's a need to 'explain ourselves to ourselves.' It's a reasonable place to begin, especially if you're a powerful culture. If you're not then you tend to look away and try to explain ourselves in relation to the West but the West wants to explain itself to itself. Therefore it is particularly interested in how it encounters other cultures and how this encounter has been written about. So diaspora studies has very much become like the beginnings of postcolonial studies. We have the colonial discourse line of thinking. Let's look again at how the colonial encounter was written about, to some extent an archival definition. One has to go back and read 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction, travel writing, scientific writing. So that's where postcolonial studies began, Orientalism, colonial discourse activity. The other region of the world, the other diaspora, the Indian Ocean diaspora, is barely written about in any significance by Europeans. The Portuguese didn't write much apart from the *Luciads* about this encounter. By the time the British came to write about it, there was a genre established in which people like Livingstone and Burton wrote. That was the explorer journal. And that already had certain overdeterminations. One was writing about empty landscape, one was writing about degraded people, you're writing about their victimizers - who in this case were Arabs - and you're writing about yourself. All of this is not really revealing, really. The genre is so pronounced that there



isn't very much to say about East African writing. There's plenty of missionary writing which has not been studied but there's no Europeans encountering this culture in the way that they are writing about South Africa and West Africa. Part of the reason for this is that a lot of the encounters have been local. Local cultures encountering each other. Indians and Arabs, for instance, were coming and going. There the diaspora is non-western. And this is one of the reasons that it wasn't interesting to write about. Maybe there were Persians also in Zanzibar and along the East African coast. In some conceptions this is so far away that it's like fable, even though some of these culture are in fact nearer. They are in some way like a story telling tradition, like *Arabian Nights*, rather than real events. That's why the western diaspora, particularly the north Atlantic diaspora, because of the wealth of archives available in English is real and concrete and can be looked at, but the other diaspora, because they are mostly stories, is not quite as comprehensible in the same way.

*Q: How intrinsic or derelict is Islam seen by the East African literary community and the political edifice today? 'By the Sea' captures both tendencies, it shows it as very integral through the story tellings about empires and its integration of literatures, and on the other hand there's this really acerbic anti-Omani or anti-Arab policies such as repatriations at the moment of national birth. In West African literature there is a similar bipolarity. You have people like Armah who are writing anti-Islamic works like in *Two Thousand Seasons* and then you have people like Cheikh Hamidou Kane who are embracing Islam and saying that this is very much a part of our culture. How would you characterise the relationship between Islam and East Africa? Is it seen as invasive?*

A: *Two Thousand Seasons* was written in Dar-es-Salam, while Armah was living there. He had absorbed all that anti-Arab and anti-Islam rhetoric that was then existent in the late 70s. He wrote *Two Thousand Seasons* at the same time as all these liberation movements in Mozambique and elsewhere and the Black Panthers as well. And that was the type of rhetorical bullshit that was prevalent then. First the Arabs invaded and then the Europeans invaded. Armah wrote that nasty racist book while he was in Dar-es-Salam in a climate that was talking like that. As far as Islam and now is concerned, the true geographical, cultural picture of East Africa isn't describable by the maps. If you talk about the Islam in East Africa you're largely talking about the coasts. That's not to say there aren't Muslims in the interior. As far as the coast is concerned, Islam is not seen as passe, something that's finished. In fact, it is very much the opposite. It is actually dangerously radical, the Islam in East Africa.

*Q: What was the impact of 9-11 and the previous embassy bombings in East Africa?*

A: Indeed, the first bombing of the World Trade Center, several of those people came from Zanzibar and Pemba, three or so of them. At least those who have been accused. Amongst the embassy bombing crowd, the majority of them were people who came from the coast. The Israeli hotel bombing, the Paradise Hotel bombing, the people have just been acquitted, but those who were tried, were also from the coast. I also have a feeling that one of the 9-11 men was originally from Zanzibar or Pemba. So there's a frightening radicalization of Islam. In addition to that, the mosques are always full along the coast. There are

two reasons for this. One reason is the corrupt malice, these two things, of the current states, the governments. They're not simply incompetent, they're also malicious. Part of this malice is because of pressures from elsewhere. There's a party in Kenya, which calls itself the Islamic Party of Kenya. It has not been allowed to contest the last three elections. Each time they go to court to seek permission to register their candidates. They're refused because they're told they're a religious party *and* not a political party. They then go back the next election and reregister as the National Party of Kenya, but all know that they're the Islamic Party. That itself makes them radical in who they are and how they want to engage the political process. They thus continue to see themselves as being victimized and not given a voice, so this radicalises them. They are funded by Iran and Saudi Arabia. They do evening classes, extracurricular activities, fund mosques, distribute literature. This is another dimension of this radicalization. The third is the international situation. They see the pressuring and bullying of Islamic communities around the world. Another thing is poverty, and religion gives them a meaning. For all of these reasons, Islam is not passe at all but is really relevant to people's lives.

*Q: I'd like to change gears for this last question. What, if any, has been the impact of Francophone West African writing, say its treatments of Islam on your writing, figures like Sembene, Kane, and Camara Laye, for example?*

*A: I've read all of those people of course and I remember reading Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* and I'd have to say I felt distance from those experiences*

when I read about them. I've also lived and worked in West Africa in Kano, which is [a] Hausa area. I felt that the concerns and anxieties were, and maybe it was because of the time they were writing, about assimilation and being part of or not part of western culture. I didn't have this. I didn't grow up with this particular dilemma. This particular dilemma never really impacted me at all. By the time I came here my mind was formed, I was more or less an adult. Of course this doesn't mean that I didn't have experiences that surprised and shook me to pieces, but how I thought of myself was already formed. And I think that possibly the people who went through the Francophone experience and educated in a certain way, in that assimilationist sort of way, thought of themselves as versions of Europe. This must've played a big part in the way these things play out. *The Dark Child* is a sort of affirmation of how these things play out. I suppose what I think I'm trying to say is that the three you've mentioned, Sembene excepted, feature beautiful writing but there's a certain deadness about the argument which freezes things. "This is what it was like." There's something quite wooden about these kinds of engagements. There was a philosophical depth, but for me it seemed rather staged. And what I enjoyed was the beauty of the writing and not so much the fact they drilled rather deep into my way of thinking. This is not dismiss them but to say that they seemed kind of stiff.

\*This essay is based on research conducted in Morocco, Spain from September 2001 to August 2002. Many thanks go to Charlotte Solt who gave me a lot of feedback and guidance as I conducted this research project. Research for this project was funded by the HHF/Daewoo Commission (2001-2002).

## ESSAYS

As I've said all of these people are now dead and I remember reading Cheikh Fakhriou Kapsa's *Archaic Adventure* and I'd have to say I got a sense from those experiences