

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Abdulrazak Gurnah

The Last Gift

Presented by: Ante Andabak

The Last Gift is Zanzibari-British author and Nobel-prize-winner Abdulrazak Gurnah's eighth novel from 2011. It takes place in the early 2000s, against the backdrop of 9/11 and the illegal invasion of the Iraq War led by the USA and the UK, and is told from the perspective of a non-observant British Muslim family. The novel probes with remarkable precision and acuity at the effects of colonialism on the British psyche, exposing deep-seated racism and the hardships immigrants face there. At the same time as Gurnah paints an accurate and harrowing picture of the rabid Islamophobia which swept the West in the early aughts, he also criticises traditional Muslim societies, like the one in Zanzibar, for their strongly patriarchal character.

The novel is for the most part, written in the third person (only 23 pages out of 279 are in first person), yet the narrator is never omniscient but is always bound with – that is focalised on – one of the four family members: father, mother or siblings. Despite being split into five parts, shifts in focalisation aren't marked by a new chapter but only with a new paragraph within each chapter, and they happen quite frequently. Different perspectives are thrown together and forced to be in the closest proximity.

Somewhat unusually for Gurnah's oeuvre, rather than on the direct migrant experience of the father, it places more of an emphasis on the lives of the second-generation immigrants in England, brother Jamal and sister Hannah, who changed her name to Anna all the better to fit in and to mark her difference from the rest of her outsider, 'vagabond family,' (47) perennially at odds with the only country she ever lived in.

Their father, Abbas, came from somewhere in East Africa but has always refused to say anything more specific because of the terrible secret he carried with him. Only after he suffered a diabetic crisis and a debilitating stroke at the beginning of the book did he slowly begin to open up and admit that he came from Zanzibar and that as a nineteen-year-old in 1959, he fled the country, leaving behind his wife, who was a rich merchant's daughter, once he began suspecting that they married her off to him just because she had already been pregnant. The situation by itself wouldn't be intolerable, but he was certain that others would come to know about it and that he would live in constant mockery for the rest of his life. So he fled as a stowaway on a ship, running away 'from his country and from everything and everyone he knew.' (143)

Their mother, Maryam, was abandoned as a newborn baby and knew nothing of her heritage, though the fact that she was a black baby in Britain meant that the police didn't go into any real trouble to find out what happened to her or where she came from. Though she only ever lived in the UK, going through foster homes as a black orphan made her feel like a stranger, a feeling which she didn't shake off even in her mature age; 'now she feels like an old servant in a large household, allowed to go about her business so long as she is not a nuisance.' (242)

Jamal and Anna deal with this legacy of radical deracination in diametrically opposed ways. Anna just wants to belong where she is and is delighted with her English boyfriend Nick and their way of

being together, meaning 'laughing at each other whenever one of them became solemn about *life's tragedies*' and keeping 'things light between them' which gave Anna 'a mature sense of proportion that she could refuse to see her pain as exceptional.' (90) The apogee of her derisive attitude employed in her attempts to adopt a stiff upper lip as a manner best suited for successful navigation through emotional maelstroms was when she called her family history a 'shitty, vile immigrant tragedy' (194) upon learning her father's secret and telling her brother 'I just wish their stories were not so pathetic and sordid,' and going on to bitterly conclude: 'My dad is a bigamist and my mum is a foundling. Can you imagine telling anybody that and not sounding like a character out of a comic melodrama?' (196)

But once she becomes familiar with her boyfriend's family, who came from officer class, she slowly begins to fully comprehend that to become a so-called model minority and to fit in perfectly, she would have to not only behave like them but allow them, once in a while, to be racist just for a lark. During the meal with Nick's extended family, she gets asked what she was before she was British. 'They were all looking at her, waiting for her to speak, to tell them what her real nation was. She wished she could get up and leave, and walk quickly to the train station and travel to wherever her real nation was.' (116) When she admits she doesn't know, the uncle who is pursuing this line of questioning is shocked and goes on a tirade about 'host and stranger' and how they need to know each other and where they come from, not simply allow anyone to say '*I am British.*' (117)

Some months later, her prospective father-in-law was bonding with her, as usual, through their shared passion for literature, of which she was a student. After reciting Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper" out loud, he pats Anna on her belly and expresses his joy that one day she will give them 'a little jungle bunny' (227) of their own. Her boyfriend, despite being liberal and taking part with her and the rest of her family in the big anti-war protests, doesn't see anything truly problematic in his parents' behaviour and instead blames Anna for making them 'feel ashamed' and her family for what befell them. He says in a break-up row 'I feel sorry for people like you because you don't know how to look after yourselves', meaning her family, and further characterising them as 'the whole crowd of you in the grip of a hopeless melodrama, acting like immigrants.' Anna didn't respond to that, reflecting instead that those were her thoughts as well, only it 'jolted her the way he said that word, immigrants, exactly as she would have said it, with the same degree of disdain.' (235)

Jamal, Anna's brother, opted, on the other hand, for a completely different approach; instead of disdain, he was devoted to exploring and understanding it, doing his PhD on migration movements to Europe, and gaining, through academic research, a detailed and a very meaningful understanding of migration as 'a clutter of ambition and fear and desperation and incomprehension that brought people so far and enabled them to put up with so much. And that they could no more resist the coming than they could the tide or the electric storm. So much had to be given up for life to go on.' (87)

In the novel, there is a very good, feminist reason why Anna, rather than Jamal, was the one who felt the need to throw the baggage of her immigrant background overboard and be defined solely by her actions. 'She loved sex, had loved it since she went to university and discovered its absorbing pleasure and its easy availability. The experience liberated her from the fears she had absorbed from her parents, from her Ba and his immigrant anxieties, his obsessive desire to escape notice, his secretiveness. Her pleasure in sex made her feel sophisticated and worldly, and somehow that she belonged here.' (170-1)

Her father couldn't help but pass down to her the trauma hailing from a traditional, close-knit society to which he belonged and which obsessively monitored sexuality, especially women's. These same

parochial forces made him run away, but he couldn't escape their effect on his own conduct and it cost him a lot, damaging almost irreparably the relationship he had with his daughter, but the last gift of the title is the tape he made just before dying in which he recounted his life with 'unforgiving honesty.' (262) This is the only part of the novel where the narration switches to the first person (239-262), following Abbas's stream of consciousness as he is recording his voice and recounting stories of his life, urged on by his caring and persistent wife who wanted for him to leave behind to his children something he hid for so long. Anna listened to the tape and was overcome with grief, realising her father 'had lived so long with such a feeling of wrong and such an expectation of disgrace.' (263)

The Last Gift received a warm, but muted response at the time, and in the post-Nobel recognition of Gurnah's body of work wasn't especially singled out. While Gurnah's fourth novel *Paradise* (1994) was shortlisted for the Booker, *By the Sea* (2001) longlisted for the Booker and shortlisted for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize and *Desertion* (2005) shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, *The Last Gift* didn't get that kind of recognition, but it definitely deserves to stand next to those other justly celebrated Gurnah's novels as some of the best this consistently terrific author of political novels has written.

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