

**Reimagining Inclusivity: Abdulrazak Gurnah's Novels in the Context of
Education, Sustainability and Technology**

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Abstract

This paper intends to examine the intersections of literature, education, sustainability, and technology in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels – how his fictions promote inclusivity and interdisciplinary dialogue. Gurnah's stories set against the backdrop of slavery, colonialism, genocide, forced migration and cultural displacement demand enquiry into the issues of identity, un-belonging and belonging, cultural appropriation, and social and human rights, and political justice and education and technology as a means of upward mobility. Applying qualitative theoretical framework and critical discourse analysis as its methodology, this paper will engage in a close study of his texts including *Paradise* (1994), *By the Sea* (2001), and *Theft* (2025) to bring out the inclusivity, and diversity which also informs most of his other works of fiction. The study will attempt to show how Gurnah's novels, *Paradise* (1994) and *By the Sea* (2001) in particular, through its accurate presentation of social realities – injustice, race and gender discrimination,

othering, can reshape pedagogical practices through critical rethinking of human relationships, empathy for the ‘other’, in diverse cultural and geographical situations. The paper will also seek to examine to what extent cross-cultural dialogue and sustainable development are possible with the help of fast developing new learning tools and highlight Gurnah’s story-telling forte, its representation of marginalized voices like Badar and Fauzia in *Theft* (2025) demanding social justice. The key findings would suggest that Gurnah’s fictions facilitate insights into how modern society and nation function in a post-colonial and neo-colonial world, highlighting the need for course correction and cultural exchange through dialogue in a world shaped by migration.

Keywords: inclusivity, interdisciplinary dialogue, identity, sustainability, digital technology

Introduction:

On the subject of exile, Edward Said had commented that while exile demands a lot of thinking, to experience it is terrible. Gurnah himself emigrated to the UK in the late 1960s in the wake of a genocide of Arab community to which he belonged by the Black African Bantu community. So, he is deeply aware of the trauma and pain that a refugee in exile has to undergo in an alien land, more so if it is a white land with racist outlook. On the one hand, there is the pain of forced separation from the homeland. On the other hand, there is the insult of being treated as an unwanted outsider in the host land. Gurnah’s major diaspora novels with dual settings – Zanzibar and England - portray characters who carry in them a feeling of alienation, dislocation, belonging, and un-belonging. Omar Saleh in *By the Sea* (2001) carries this trauma inside him. Belonging to an Arab family that has its roots in Zanzibar for centuries, he now finds himself an outsider in his nation. And in his adopted country he is an outsider. There is another major strand in Gurnah’s novel – slave trade and slavery, an offshoot of Indian Ocean trade between India, Arab countries, and Zanzibar best seen in *Paradise* (1994) Gurnah is a critique of both inhuman slave trade that the Arabs forced on Black Africans and ethnic cleansing of Arabs in Zanzibar. Besides, one cannot also miss the experience of coloured immigrants in white land. Gurnah’s hugely critical but at the same time sympathetic presentation of these social issues makes his novels extremely relevant in academic and social discourse. His novels are not just historical documents of social transition in

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Zanzibar, his homeland, in the last hundred years from Arab rule to German occupation, to British colonization, and finally after a bloody Revolution of 1964, a nation taking baby steps towards a consumerist society modern methods of education – namely computers and digital technology opening up new opportunities for young people like Badar in his last novel *Theft* (2025) In a world torn by war, intolerance, and nuclear threats, in societies divided by race and ethnic strife, Gurnah's novel imperceptibly educate readers about the need for harmonious living.

Literature Review:

There is no dearth of critical texts on Abdulrazak Gurnah. Since 2021, the year of his being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the volume of criticism and research studies on his works has increased multifold. Tina Steiner and Maria Olaussen edited a volume on Gurnah's fictions titled *Critical Perspectives on Abdulrazak Gurnah* (2023) has several interesting entries on diverse issues. Emad Mirmotahari's essay "From Black Britain to Black Internationalism in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Pilgrims Way*" (2023) explores the experience of black life in the UK in the racist seventies. Nina Berman's essay in this edition "Yusuf's Choice: East African Agency during the German Colonial Period in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Novel *Paradise*" (2023), studies the text in the context of German occupation of Zanzibar and the postcolonial dilemma of choosing the right camp. Godwin Sindhu focuses on the theme of honour and shame in *Paradise* (1994) in the essay, "Honour and Shame in the Construction of Difference in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Novels" (2023). Meg Samuelson's article in this edition, "Narrative Cartographies" (2023) explores the influence of Indian Ocean trade and the migration involved therein on East African sea coast in the novel *By the Sea* (2001).

There are several other critics independently writing on the Indian Ocean influence in Gurnah's novels, one being Charne Lavery who in her Ph.D thesis titled *Writing the Indian Ocean in Selected Fiction by Joseph Conrad, Amitav Ghosh, Abdulrazak Gurnah and Lindsey Collen* (2013) refers to *By the Sea* (2001). Others have mostly focused on migration theme, another important area in Gurnah studies. Lucindia Newns in her *Domestic Intersections in Contemporary Migration Fiction* (2018) writes a chapter titled "Homelessness and the Refugee" with reference

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to Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001). Anne Ajulu Okungu has her take on Bildungsroman in *Paradise* (1994) and themes of betrayal, desertion, sexuality and power in *By the Sea* (2001) in her Ph.D thesis *Reading Abdulrazak Gurnah: Narrating Power and Human Relationships* published in 2016; and there are specific postcolonial discourses, one important Ph.D thesis being, *Exploited Eden: Paradise Discourse in Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (2007) where Sharare Grace Deckard writes on the novel, *Paradise* (1994) "Paradise Rejected: Swahili Histories and Economics". The list goes on. But there has hardly been any discussion on *Theft* published in 2025, as yet, except in an article by Ritashree Pal in *New Literaria* journal, on the theme of bildungsroman, "Imagining the Nation through Multiple Bildungsroaman: Badar, Fauzia, and Karim in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Theft*".

And yet, Gurnah is first and foremost a humanist, a novelist, who writes with feeling and empathy for the deprived and the strugglers, in particular the marginalized immigrant population in alien states and in alien culture, desperate for an identity. The empathy could be for the fact that he is himself a diaspora subject in the UK. This conference theme "Inclusivity Through Interdisciplinary Dialogues: Literature Education Sustainability and Technology", under the aegis of JAIN Deemed-to-be-University, opens up a new territory, hitherto unexplored in the field of Gurnah studies and research – reading Gurnah's novels as vehicles of educating people on harmonious social living, especially in the context of the scale of migration that has been taking place since World War II, and decolonization of colonized states in Africa and Asia. Besides, the rise of rightist forces in the West voicing virulent anti-immigrant, anti- diaspora rhetoric makes Gurnah's novels even more relevant for educating cosmopolitanism for world peace.

It follows that Gurnah's novels require a fresh re-look at the core issues in them and their re-interpretation in humanistic terms. There is thus the need to explore them in their human context much like the humanism in Renaissance and Enlightenment literature. As with the Renaissance literature, at the centre of Gurnah's fictions is man, and how man can survive in this world through love and understanding, and how education, traditional and modern, are key to this harmonious existence. This research paper attempts to fill up this lacunae in Gurnah studies with reference to three of his books – *Paradise* (1994), *By the Sea* (2001), and *Theft* (2025) by trying to highlight

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how these three texts by their critiquing of social and political systems can educate the readers about world peace and global harmony. It will re-imagine inclusivity in three novels of Gurnah in the context of education, sustainability and technology. Education, women's education in particular, technology in education, enable a pre-colonial, patriarchal, primitive Afro-Arabic society to graduate toward neo-colonial modern society. *Paradise* (1994), *By the Sea* (2001) and *Theft* (2025) are sites of this social revolution.

Intersection of Themes: Slavery, Colonization, Decolonization, Neo-colonialism:

The intersection of themes in Gurnah's works is a kaleidoscope of cultural, socio-political historical, and racial elements. His novels *Paradise* (1994), *By the Sea* (2001) and *Theft* (2025), not only reflect the struggles for identity in a postcolonial world, where the characters navigate multiple cultural and ecological affiliations, negotiate their sense of belonging, and confront the legacies of slavery and colonialism, but also reflect the socio-historical-political transition of Zanzibar from Arab to German occupation, British colonization, decolonization, genocide and civil war, migration and a new Zanzibar of the 1980s adopting modern educational tools for economic revival.

In *Paradise* (1994), the journey of the central character, Yusuf, pushed to slavery to pay off his father's debt, marks a society on the threshold of German occupation. Yusuf must make his choice – where should his allegiance belong. *By the Sea* (2001) shows how the euphoria of decolonization is quickly overwhelmed by bloody genocide and ethnic divide. *Theft* (2025) holds the prospect of Zanzibar, now part of Tanganyika, emerging as a modern society where modern methods of education are key to progress.

Implications for Education: Text as a Message for Social Criticism and Social Harmony- *Paradise* and *By the Sea*:

Gurnah's novels offer insightful inputs into pedagogical practices, facilitating inclusivity and cross-cultural understanding. His narratives can be used to promote discussions on identity, belonging, and social justice, and finally, in *Theft* (2025) for example, upward social mobility in

educational settings. By incorporating Gurnah's works into academic curricula and syllabuses, teachers and mentors can encourage their students to engage with diverse perspectives and develop empathy for marginalized communities, and diaspora subjects.

The use of Gurnah's novels in the field of education should also inculcate in his readers critical thinking and develop cultural competence. For example, educators can use *Paradise* (1994) to explore themes of slavery, and colonialism, while *By the Sea* (2001) can be used to discuss issues of displacement, migration, un –belonging, belonging, and social justice.

By the Sea published in 2001 is one of the most educative texts in the genre of diaspora and race fictions. The central protagonists in the text, both Arabs, from Zanzibar, Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud, victims of family feuds in their homeland of Zanzibar, are now diaspora subjects in the UK, where they face the trauma of being outsiders. Omar, for example, is the victim of taunts and abuse in the house where he is accommodated as a refugee. The landlady, Celia, deliberately mispronounces his sur name Shabaan, by calling him Showboat. The other two white inmates, Ibrahim and Gregory, ironically themselves refugees from Kosovo and Rumania respectively, addresses him as 'black man'. Latif, a university professor of English Literature, is called 'blackamoor' in the streets. Their trauma is compounded by the fact that Omar in particular had been a victim of racist violence by the black Bantu community on Arabs. He had been subjected to imprisonment, torture on false charges. He had lost his wife and infant daughter during his imprisonment. The novel has a happy ending in terms of race relations when, Omar and Latif meet. Their interface makes them realize that they had all along misunderstood each other. Prejudiced by his parents that Omar had wrongly appropriated their house and property, Latif had wrongly bore a bitter grudge against Omar. Now in an alien land when the two meet and unravel their family history to each other, Latif realizes that it was his father's greed that had destroyed their home. Further, his mother had used her illicit relationship with a minister to destroy the life of Omar and his family. Very significantly, it is a white lawyer and counselor, Rachel, who is responsible for bringing them together. In the final scene of the novel set in Latif's London apartment, Omar who is a guest there watches in a fatherly way, Latif animatedly talking on the phone with Rachel.

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Gurnah has a message through this relationship of the three, one white female, Rachel, and the other two, Omar and Latif, Arab and Black. It is not nationality, culture, race, class and religion but human values that teaches us to live with one another. It is literature that teaches such human values the best. Both Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud are college educated. Latif happens to be a professor of English literature. An important motif in the novel is silence and both connect each other emotionally through their reading of Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby: the Scrivener", a story about isolation and passive resistance.

Sustainability and Technology in Gurnah's *Theft* (2025):

The themes of slavery, marginalization, patriarchy, in Gurnah's works highlight the importance of sustainability and responsible technology use. Technology can amplify Gurnah's themes of social justice and cross-cultural dialogue, promoting global understanding and inclusivity. With western technological tools arriving in Zanzibar as depicted by Gurnah in his latest novel *Theft* (2025), digital platforms can be used to share Gurnah's works and facilitate discussions on postcolonial themes, reaching a wider audience and promoting cultural exchange.

In his recent novel *Theft*, published in 2025, and set in Zanzibar, now part of Tanganyika, a country emerging from the worst fallouts of decolonization and racial and ethnic rivalry, Gurnah uses education, and technology education in particular, to break class barriers. In his major novels like *Paradise*, for example, Gurnah has shown how wealthy Arab merchants in Zanzibar had exploited both the black Bantu people from African mainland, and the poor Arabs from their own community, for their monetary profit. *Paradise* (1994), now a canonical text in Western Universities, is an awareness novel, a lesson for the global readers in exposing the slavery that was practised in Zanzibar during the Arab colonization of the island till the nineteenth century when the British took over and abolished slavery. Gurnah, a victim of Black genocide of Arabs in the wake of decolonization which forced him to migrate to the UK in the late sixties, is equally critical of the Arab trading community, and accepts that the Arabs must take the blame for the revenge perpetrated on them by the blacks after the British left in December, 1963. In *Paradise*, the two young protagonists, Yusuf and Khalil, are pawned off as slaves to a rich Arab trader Uncle Aziz

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to pay off family debts. Gurnah critiques this Arab slave trade practice, exposes the atrocities perpetrated on the marginalized people by the rich merchants. Amina, Khalil's young sister, is forced into marriage with a much elderly Uncle Aziz when she is not in a marriageable age, for the same reason. Besides, Gurnah critiques the patriarchal system prevalent among the Arabs. There are references to girls married off to their cousin brothers, to keep their property within the family, so that there are "feeble offspring locked away and never spoken about" in rich "sprawling fortresses". (Gurnah, 2025, p.49).

Sometimes you can see the faces of the poor creatures pressed against the bar of the windows at the top of the houses. God only knows with what confusion they look on our miserable world. Or perhaps they understand that it is God's punishment for their father's sins. (Gurnah, 2025, p.49).

The time and setting for *Theft* (2025) is neo-colonial Zanzibar of the nineteen eighties where foreign investment in tourism, especially, is turning the nascent state from communist, socialist system to capitalist system, throwing up new opportunities for the under-privileged. Badar, the central character in the story, is a servant boy in a rich Arab family. The well-educated young member in the family, Karim takes a fascination for him and sees to his well-being, including his education. This is approved by Karim's father Haji and his wife. But as ill-luck would have it, he is falsely accused of stealing money from the weekly market purchase by Uncle Othman, the patriarch in the family, a charge that would be proved false later. Karim uses his good offices to resettle Badar in the town of Zanzibar with a job in the Tamarind Hotel. In neo-colonial Zanzibar tourism saw a booming hotel business. Badar joins as a trainee receptionist in Tamarind Hotel and the new capitalist system where merit counted more than family background, a servant boy Badar grabs the opportunity to rise in the social ladder. He learns the use of computer from his immediate boss, assistant manager Issa, after fumbling with the machine in the first few days in office -.

That afternoon he had his first lesson in logging on and accessing the hotel inbox. Issa explained that was how the guests made reservations, so it was important to keep a regular

check on the inbox. He showed him how to open the website page, ... how to search the internet. He did not take it all in at once, but he knew it was the beginning of something exciting. (Gurnah, 2025, p.160).

Badar had spent only eight years in school, but picked up his English language skill from discarded magazines in his master's household, from listening to radio played by Uncle Othman. he now slowly picked up communication skill by conversing with his foreign guests. New technology, Gurnah shows in his last novel, has opened up in his homeland of Zanzibar opportunities for the earlier deprived slave or servant boys to climb up the social ladder.

While *Paradise* (1994) exposes the evils of slavery through the exploitation of children like Khalil and Yusuf from poor families caught in debt, both *By the Sea* (2001) and *Theft* (2025) highlight how humanistic education supported by new methods of education like computer and internet, can improve the quality of social living. Technology in a neo-liberal society has its flip side and Gurnah is not blind towards it. Karim, an educated young man with human qualities, is sucked by the lure of money and women. His extra-marital relationship with a white woman, Geraldine Bruno destroys his family life. He deserts his wife Fauzia whom he had once married for love. But humanity triumphs in the end when Fauzia and Badar find solace in their relationship with each other. Their relationship is facilitated by Hawa, a childhood friend of Fauzia, who is a liberated woman living single in a free society, something unthinkable pre-colonial times in Zanzibar, something unthinkable in the society depicted in *Paradise* (1994). Gurnah charts the transition from a primitive society to a racially divided society during civil war, and ultimately maturing into a neo-liberal society. The key to this successful transition is western methods of education, especially in the field digital technology which socially marginalized characters like Badar are taking advantage of for social identity and economic success. His success is underscored by Fauzia's acceptance of him as her partner in life at the end of the story.

In *Theft* (2025) -

Fauzia is a new woman, who unlike her comrade, Hawa, refuses to respond to the glitz of Western culture, and yet responds to western education that allows her to find an identity

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– a teacher which has been her ambition all along, not a doctor as suggested by her mother, and by Hawa. Her ‘falling sickness’, is a metaphor for a nation emerging from the slough of decolonization but negotiating the threat of neo-colonialism. She shows a quiet courage in leaving her trauma of illness behind and deciding to have a child. She faces the pitfalls of life with stoicism as must the nation. In taking the hand of Badar she once again asserts her individual identity as she had earlier done in choosing teaching as a career and having a child. (Pal, 2026)

Both Badar and Fauzia are examples of cultural hybridity, enlightened by western modes of education. Significantly, from the social point of view both are marginalized. Badar was once a servant boy with little education. Fauzia is a woman in a society dominated by patriarchy. While not abandoning their cultural roots – (Badar is a foil to Karim who is seduced by a white woman; Fauzia is a foil to Hawa, a thoroughly westernized woman who refuses to marry) – both Badar and Fauzia in different ways embrace modern texts and methods. In the case of Fauzia it is history and mathematics. With Badar, it is computer and English language.

The dangers of cultural hybridity, the intervention of western modes of education and living, are expressed in the words of Khadija, Fauzia’s mother, who laments at the desertion of Fauzia by her husband Karim – “What do these people want with us? Why do they come here? They come here with their filth and money and interfere with us and ruin our lives for their pleasure” (Gurnah, 2025, p. 230). Fauzia’s reply to her mother’s complaint shows the dilemma of a post-colonial nation – “Anyway a lot of people make a living out of tourists Fauzia said. It seems ungrateful to complain” (Gurnah, 2025, p. 230).

There is no doubt that Badar’s success lies in the cultural churning that was taking place in Zanzibar of the nineteen eighties – cafes, beach resorts, restaurants, star hotels, all these opening up job opportunities for those who could communicate in English and use computers.

In Fauzia, Gurnah shows the need for educating women in third world countries of Global South, and how education can empower women not just economically, but socially so that they

have the strength to take decisions on their own. Gurnah's Fauzia in *Theft* (2025) has come a long way from Amenia in *Paradise* (1994). Education is the key to this change.

Research Methodology:

This paper has made a close study of the three texts of Gurnah, namely *Paradise* (1994), *By the Sea* (2001), and *Theft* (2025) and made a qualitative study of the same locating in their central protagonists the desire for a growth, breaking the barriers of patriarchy, slavery, class, race, ethnicity and gender. The humanism of the writer Gurnah that these characters reflect comes from their education and experience of peripatetic life. In *Theft* (2025) when Karim in rage tells Badar that he has learned nothing from life, Badar thought to himself, he had 'learned to endure'. Most importantly, in locating the transition of society from patriarchy and slave system to the modern consumerist where education forms the cornerstone, the paper has made a close study of the history of Zanzibar from the time of Arab Omani occupation through independence and Revolution of 1964 to the present as recorded in the books of Amrit Wilson, Don Petterson and Michael Lofchie.

Conclusion:

There is no doubt that Gurnah's novels are rich site for race and ethnicity studies, sea trade studies, bildungsroman studies. But it is also a site for the study of bildungsroman of a nation, of the people of Zanzibar – how they emerge from the slough of primitivity to building a nation, combining humanistic principles with modern consumerist outlook. Study of literature, learning from its humanistic approach to life and living, and responding and adapting to changing modern techniques of education combine to help the people move forward. There are references to Arabic literature - *Arabian Nights*, and Western literature, "Bartleby: the Scrivener" in *By the Sea* (2001). Both the central characters, Omar and Latif connect their life stories with their reading of these texts. In *Theft* (2025), while Fauzia learns modern history, modern mathematics, and becomes a teacher – she is a classic example of women's empowerment through education - Badar quickly picks up computer skills. He remains an example of what technological education can do to facilitate upward mobility. Thus, through the stories of their protagonists, Gurnah's novels, with

its representation of holistic and inclusive education, humanities and technology, show the power of literature in educating its readers.

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