**Nobel Prize in Literature to an African writer**

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Every year in October, the Swedish Academy in Stockholm announces the prestigious Nobel Prizes, in physics, chemistry, medicine and literature, as well as the memorial prize in economics. In addition, the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded by the Norwegian Nobel Committee. I have written about the Nobel Peace Prize, which this year went to two senior journalists, Maria Ressa from the Philippines, and Dmitry Muratov from Russia. The prize can also be seen more broadly as a prize to the media for reporting about war and conflict and contributing to peace.

Today, I shall write about the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature, which only for the second time in the 120-year history of the prize, went to an African writer, namely Abdulrazak Gurnah, born in Zanzibar in the United Republic of Tanzania and now a British citizen. Of the 118 prizes, 90 have gone to European and American writers; only 16 have gone to women. The first prize to an African was the one to Wole Soyinka from Nigeria, in 1986.

[FBISE to announce SSC Part 1 result on Nov 2](https://nation.com.pk/30-Oct-2021/fbise-to-announce-ssc-part-1-result-on-nov-2)

In its justification for the prize, the Swedish Academy wrote that Gurnah was awarded the 2021 Nobel Prize for Literature “for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fates of the refugees in the gulf between cultures and continents”.

Abdulrazak Gurnah fled Zanzibar two years after the bloody Zanzibar Revolution in 1964 when the Zanzibar Sultanate, which had ruled since 1856 representing a minority of the people in the small island country, was toppled. Zanzibar was then united with the much larger main country of Tanganyika, some dozen kilometres away, which had gained independence from the UK in 1961. After the Zanzibar Revolution, individuals who were perceived to be from the Arab peninsula were often targeted by Africans, whose time to seek revenge had come. People of Arab and South Asian appearance could no longer live in security, whether they had supported the old repressive regime or not. That led to Gurnah’s family leaving Zanzibar when he was 18 and they settled in Canterbury, England, where the young Gurnah studied and later became a professor of English and Post-colonial Literature at the University of Kent. Now, at the age of 73, he is a pensioner and Professor Emeritus at his old university.

[Doctor killed over resisting dacoits in Karachi](https://nation.com.pk/30-Oct-2021/doctor-killed-over-resisting-dacoits-in-karachi)

Gurnah has written ten novels and several collections of short stories; his first book came when he was in his early twenties and the last, thus far, came a few years ago. As a university teacher, he has also written academic articles and books. Gurnah writes in English, which is his ‘second mother tongue’, while Swahili is his real mother tongue, an elegant language and a proud heritage of the people of Zanzibar and the East African coast.

The first African Nobel laureate in literature, Wole Soyinka wrote in English, and so did his countryman, Chinua Achebe, who was many times tipped as a possible winner of the prize. In Kenya, another top writer, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, also mentioned as a possible prize winner, used English in his early works, but then switched to his mother tongue of Kikuyu. But alas, his books were then seen as dangerous for the regime and he was detained in the early 1980s. I met Ngugi in 1984 when he was just out of prison. I worked in development studies at the University of Oslo, Norway, and Ngugi contemplated settling there; however, he settled in the UK and USA, perhaps because English was the language of those countries and thus easier for a refugee to settle. Like Gurnah, Soyinka, Achebe, and Ngugi, have lived most of their lives abroad. They write in English, the coloniser’s language, yet, they also criticise the coloniser, and other rulers, too.

[Shahid Afridi enjoys 'fantastic victory, fantastic coffee' in Dubai](https://nation.com.pk/30-Oct-2021/shahid-afridi-enjoys-fantastic-victory-fantastic-coffee-in-dubai)

In Zanzibar, situated in the Indian Ocean, the massive foreign influence and often sad history in the last five hundred years began with immigrants and rulers from South Asia, Oman and other Arab countries, explorers from Portugal, and then the more recent German and British colonizers. But Gurnah has written that he believes the harsh Germans were after all often better than the Portuguese. He has also written that his own memories from growing up in Zanzibar—near the main, bustling harbour, with sea and sky as far as one’s eyes could see, and a lot of people from all over the world—was mostly positive.

In his novels, he discusses the deeper philosophical, existential and cultural aspects of leaving one’s home to settle and live somewhere else, even though today, most forced and voluntary migrants can visit their country of origin, and keep in contact with relatives and friends ‘at home’ via modern media. Yet, Gurnah questions if one can really settle and be at home entirely in a new land. Kazuo Ishiguro, an English writer of Japanese origin, who came to England at the age of five, only to visit Japan for the first time some thirty years later, discusses the same issues in his works. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017.

[President Arif Alvi seeks Ulema’s help to end protests](https://nation.com.pk/30-Oct-2021/president-arif-alvi-seeks-ulema-s-help-to-end-protests)

Writing about migrants and refugees, about identity and culture, about being true to oneself and the world, Gurnah goes directly into the political debate of our time—when Europe and the rest of the West often try to keep immigrants out, well, unless they are needed for work in the ageing European populations. In his books, ‘Paradise’ (1994), ‘By the Sea’ (2001), and the latest, ‘Afterlives’ (2020), Gurnah’s characters have essential messages on these issues to all of us. He stresses that refugees and other migrants never come empty-handed to their new lands; they all bring with them knowledge, skills and energy, and more.

In certain ways, being of Gurnah’s generation myself, I feel nostalgic when reading him. His characters discuss and remind me of many of the thoughts we often had when I began visiting East Africa in the 1970s. Although Gurnah wants to remember the cosmopolitan Zanzibar, I felt it was in the backwaters when I first went there. But then I wasn’t able to dig deep enough into the culture in spite of knowing some Swahili. About mainland Tanzania, we thought for a good while that the socialist ‘ujamaa’ policies represented something new and different. Yet, we also questioned the realism and practical possibilities of implementing the radical policies, which were often scantily planned. Sometimes, I feel that Gurnah’s Zanzibar is about how he wants to remember and talk about his homeland. However, when I look back at the optimism many had at that time, I am disappointed that we in the 1980s left the country to the policies of the conservative West, the World Bank, and the rest of capitalism. It is not only Arab and colonial history that throw shade.

[Pakistan sees 10 deaths, 658 more coronavirus cases](https://nation.com.pk/30-Oct-2021/pakistan-sees-10-deaths-658-more-coronavirus-cases)

I’d suggest that Gurnah would agree with me, yet, he is not a politician, but an intellectual and a writer. His thoughts will last longer and be more universal and profound than mine. His literature will give inspiration and hope for a long time to come. Besides, things can happen unexpectedly—as it did when a woman became president in Tanzania, Samia Suluhu Hassan, from Zanzibar no less, having ascended from vice-president to president after the president passed away in March this year.