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Reading Abdulrazak Gurnah: narrating power and human relationships

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Abstract

This thesis is interested in the fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah, bringing into consideration all the eight novels he has published to date. It explores the representation of human relations, focussing on the theme of power and how it is attained, consolidated, used and contested in the human relations depicted in the novels. A close reading of pre to postcolonial East Africa as well as the regions outside of East Africa in which Gurnah's novels are also set, through quotidian interactions in micro-spaces, this thesis argues, presents power dealings alternative to one that emphasizes the effect of colonial domination and the failed project of decolonization. The thesis further suggests that inherent in everyday human interactions – whether at home in East Africa or in migrant spaces – are power dealings far removed from macro-political power plays. The interactions to be brought under scrutiny here are those occurring between children and adults, family members, as they interact not only with each other but also with the various environments they occupy. Through a skilful narrative strategy that employs complex narrative perspectives, vivid descriptions, imagery, symbolism and credible characterization, Gurnah affords the reader an opportunity to read East Africa through the basic units of the community, focussing on ordinary everyday lives and interactions. This thesis therefore investigates the different ways in which Gurnah employs narrative strategy in order to depict the various avenues through which power comes into play in diverse areas of human interactions. The focus is on his application of implied authors in the form of multiple narrators and how this technique helps to draw readers in to his texts. It is important to also examine symbolism used especially in the relationship between characters and (mis)use of the spaces they occupy, the significance of rot, filth and squalor in the said spaces as well as the use of irony, coincidences, silences and suppressions. To be specifically interrogated is relations between individuals and the society, parents and children, lovers, employers and employees among others. Even though the dominant theme in Gurnah's the entire oeuvre is that of migrancy, of characters attempting to construct ideas of home away from home, his treatment of the varied power relationships inherent in the texts warrants investigation.