



LOVE AS PARABOLIC THEME IN GURNAH'S *BY THE SEA*

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ABSTRACT

The article examines what is parable in literature and how parable appears in the contemporary literature with the novel of postcolonial writer Abdulrazak Gurnah.

This work arranges parabolic theme that author uses in his novel to encourage the reader the process of interpreting the meaning with indirect communication.

Introduction

Parable is a term which is difficult to explain in exact definition. Initially parable was accepted as illustration and most of the scholars interpreted it as allegory. A Glossary Literary Terms defines parable as *a short narrative about human beings presented so as to stress the tacit analogy, or parallel, with a general thesis or lesson that the narrator is trying to bring home to his audience*¹. Thus, parable uses human characters unlikely fable² and the story is told to emphasize a comparison without implying it directly. It shows more in the analogy they draw between a particular instance of human behaviour and human behaviour at large. There are also well-known definitions deserve to mention,

for example, T.W. Manson suggested *a parable is a literary creation in narrative form designed either to portray a type of character for warning or example or to embody a principle of God's governance of the world and men*³. This definition proves that not all the characters are narrative in the story but parables do tell about God and humanity. C. H. Dodd, moreover, said parables *"are the natural expression of a mind that sees the truth in concrete pictures rather than conceive it in abstractions"*⁴ and he also mentioned *"at the simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from the nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise*

¹ M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. A Glossary of Literary Terms. Cengage Learning, 2009. –p.9

² Fable is also short and simple story which usually is about who are personified with trees, winds, stream, stones and other natural objects.

<https://www.britannica.com/art/fable-parable-and-allegory>

³ Thomas Walter Manson. The Teaching of Jesus. – Cambridge University Press, 1939. –p.65

⁴ C. H. Dodd. The Parable of the Kingdom. London: Nisbet, 1936. – pp.15-16



application to tease it into active thought."⁵

This perspective makes parable is rooted in ordinary life and attract people through strangeness or vividness and it encourage reader to be active in the process of interpreting the meaning of the story. Snodgrass, however, gives his perspective to the Dodd's definition in his book *Stories with Intent*⁶ via arguing this definition may not work all parables, he portrays a parable is much more than a metaphor or simile and some are neither vivid nor strange. It is deserve to mention that Soren Kierkegaard's treatments of indirect communication intended to "*deceive the hearer into the truth*"⁷. He helps us to understand direct communication makes people defensive, for example, if people are told that they are wrong or should behave differently, they will resist. But with the help of story told indirectly the listener follows an interesting narrative about someone else's situation and afterward realize it was story actually about them. This quote gives why actually parable is important in real life and it is the main reason why teachers, prophets and religious figures used parable as effective delivery mechanism for difficult truth. It means that initially parable was a teaching tool. In Nathan and King David, one of the biblical parable, the prophet Nathan tell the story the king David who planned for a man's death to achieve man's wife because the prophet does not

tell David directly he is wrong. The story is about a rich man who steals a poor man's beloved pet lamb to feed his guest. After listening the story, David gets angry at the injustice in the story and he admits that the rich man deserves to die and must repay the lamb of poor man. Then Nathan mentions, simply, *you are that man*.⁸ With the help of this story David understand his mistake after judging the situation honestly without knowing it is actually about him. If prophet used direct communication with the king, he would be under danger or executed for judging the king's decision. However, the parable lets king's own moral judgment.

Before parable was written down, it was oral, told to a listening group by the prophets or teachers. As Dodd mentioned in his definition, a short and vivid story rooted in everyday life was memorable and easy to retell about fairness, debt, family duty. The parables of the Sower about a farmer of sowing seed⁹, it is common theme every listener knows from their daily life, they can imagine easily, it is simple and uses repeated words that is why it can be remembered easily by everyone. Also, it leaves interpretation to the hearer, encourage them process of thinking and discussion. In the other hand parables keep reappearing in the contemporary literature with a rise of written form of literature like novels. Some novelists give the life oral storytelling in the fiction

⁵ C. H. Dodd. *The Parable of the Kingdom*. London: Nisbet, 1936. –p.16

⁶ K. R. Snodgrass. *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. – p. 22

⁷ Charles E. Carlston, *The Parables of the Triple Tradition*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975. –pp. 98-99.

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<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2%20Samuel%2012%3A1-7&version=NIV>

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<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2013%3A3-9%2CMark%204%3A3-9%2CLuke%208%3A5-8&version=NIV>



including characters telling the stories each other. It is proved by Walter Benjamin with the quote: *"storytelling survives as resistance"*¹⁰, that means contemporary writers bring oral storytelling to the literature by their works as an act of resistance against that isolation. Parable lives in modern literature because writer uses the old and communal function in their works. Stephen Slemon support that idea with his answer *"it is a tool for the powerless to write back"*¹¹, particularly, postcolonial writers use oral storytelling or parables in order to avoid face directly to the political situations and issues. They portray their justice about exile, displacement, refugee with the help of indirect communication through story.

One of the postcolonial writer in contemporary literature is Abdulrazak Gurnah. He was born on December 20, 1948, in Zanzibar, which was then a British protectorate and later became part of Tanzania. He grew up in a Muslim family of Yemeni-Arab descent, part of Zanzibar's small but established Arab community. In January 1964, because of the persecution of Arab communities after the revolution, Gurnah and his family were forced to leave his homeland and flee the country at the age of eighteen and seek refuge in the United Kingdom.¹² He would not see his homeland again until 1984, when he returned to see his

dying father.¹³ This life experience is not incidental but it creates his own account in literature. He himself identified with his words, *"losing your place in the world"* when asked what had encouraged his writing.¹⁴ This quote may serve as a working definition of a recurring condition in his major novels: the experience of refugee who is stranger in both worlds, Zanzibar and England. When Abdulrazak Gurnah was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2021 and the Swedish Academy praised him for his major themes such as colonialism, displacement and exile and, he represented it one of his quote *"the fate of the refugee in the gulf between culture and continents"*.¹⁵

After settling in Britain, Gurnah continued his education and developed a strong academic interest in literature. He initially studied in Canterbury, England and completed a PhD in literature at the University of Kent, where he later built his career and retired as Professor of English and Postcolonial Literatures. His scholarly work, together with his fiction, has made an important contribution to the understanding of migration, colonial history, and cultural identity. He started writing at the age of 21 in English exile, and even though Swahili was his first language, English became his literary tool. Gurnah's literary career began with the publication of *Memory of Departure*

¹⁰ Benjamin Walter. *The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov* edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. –pp.83-109.

¹¹ Slemon Stephen. *Monuments of Empire: Allegory/Counter-Discourse/Post-Colonial Writing*. Kunapipi9. No.3.1987. –p.16

¹² <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2021/bio-bibliography/>

¹³ <https://theconversation.com/abdulrazak-gurnah-what-you-need-to-know-about-the-nobel-prize-winning-author-169484>

¹⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abdulrazak-Gurnah>

¹⁵ <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2021/bio-bibliography/>



in 1987, which is about a young man's struggle in post-independence East Africa, hoping to be taken under the wing of uncle in Nairobi. Instead he is humiliated and returned to his broken family, the alcoholic and violent father and a sister forced into prostitution.¹⁶ This was followed by Pilgrims Way in 1990, which explores racism and alienation in Britain. His international reputation grew with Paradise, a novel set in colonial East Africa that was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Later works such as Admiring Silence, By the Sea, Desertion, and Gravel Heart further examine exile, silence, memory, and fractured identity. His recent novel Afterlives returns to the history of colonial violence in East Africa and its lasting effects on individuals and communities. Through his novels, Gurnah gives voice to those who have been displaced by history, revealing the emotional and psychological consequences of migration, colonialism, and belonging in a changing world.

In "By the Sea" there are two main characters Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud and their experience form of displacement such as longing, memory and disidentification. This novel constructs a parabolic narration by employing the parallel voices of two male protagonists. These two protagonist travel to the past in order to construct the present. Readers, unconsciously, can face understanding of love as parabolic method author used. Saleh Omar for example never tells readers his feelings

to his wife Salha and his daughter Ruqiya directly. Instead readers can observe his true feelings through his actions, sacrifices and his story. Gurnah emphasizes this through *"I fell in love with her there in the shop, though I would have been too calloused and naïve to know that that was what happened to me. I don't protest too much over this, but I would not have had the language then to describe what happened to me. The only words I knew would have made me feel childish and bashful. I was thirty-two years old at the time, the same age as Nabi Isa the Nazarene when he was about to complete ministry of compassion and love on earth, but I did not even know the syllables to imagine the uncomplicated affection between a man and a woman."*¹⁷ This extract reveals how true love is deeper than beautiful words or possession without saying it directly. Because Saleh admits he has lack of words to describe what is going on his inside in the simple furniture shop. Moreover, Gurnah portrays love lives not only depend on human existence but it live in the memory of people who love *"I knew her for such a short time, and now it seems always with a knowledge of losing her, that sometimes I fear that I imagined her or dreamed her."*¹⁸ After losing his wife and his daughter Ruqiya, Saleh story shows he remember them every time because he save them not only his heart but in his memory. Also one evidence that: *"She seems more real when other people speak of her and mention something she did, some moment they*

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<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2021/bio-bibliography/>

¹⁷ Abdulrazak Gurnah. By the Sea. The New York Press: New York. 2001. –p.146.

¹⁸ Abdulrazak Gurnah. By the Sea. The New York Press: New York. 2001. –p.159.



remember of her in those years when I knew her."¹⁹ Latif as an example remembers his brother Hassan who was source of everything when Latif needed. He says, *"He was my existential warrior, my desperado, yes, I loved him like a brother, like a father, like a beloved."*²⁰ This extract proves that, Latif never says his love for his brother directly when he is with him, the readers can assume that his love to his brother also survives in his memory and remind him through memory.

In conclusion, Parables has been essential role in oral and written form in the literature for hundreds of years. It survives in contemporary literature as a function of short story which give moral lesson to the listeners by encouraging them to the process without direct communication. As we noticed Gurnah's "By the Sea" represents the love as thematic parable which depicts love is deeper than any charming words or possession, it survives not only in human existence but after losing them in the narration of Saleh and Latif.

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¹⁹ Abdulrazak Gurnah. By the Sea. The New York Press: New York. 2001. –p.159.

²⁰ Abdulrazak Gurnah. By the Sea. The New York Press: New York. 2001. –p.80.