Literary Forum

Gurnah

Folktales

Review
This year’s Literary Forum was a further manifestation of the fact that the Board of Directors of ZIFF is committed to the endeavour to further explore the concept of the dhow culture. Oral stories of the peoples must be documented so that our children can hear them for generations to come. They carry what we are made of and as we embed this culture we assert our identity as a people.

These stories then could form part of visual stories that we see on the screen. Change in Africa through media portrayal of our own images form the basis of the literary forum in the long run in ZIFF’s quest to establish itself into a viable cultural arts institute on the island of Zanzibar.

The fact that the renowned Zanzibar-born writers like Abdulrazak Gurnah honoured our call to be our special guest tells the story of commitment to the island’s literary world. It is telling those who set out to write that it is possible and doable. ZIFF tries to create an enabling environment as does the Zanzibar Gallery bookshop in making visible the products of this venture as we saw in this year’s ZIFF.

The literary forum became a forum of debate in which writers were asked and explained why they write and for whom. Participants took a journey exploring their own analytical perception of where we are as a people and how we are perceived and depicted in the cultural and literary world as a continent.

Untold stories like that of the pioneer of the labour movement of Kenya, Makhan Singh, authored by Zarina Patel, formed an important part of the Literary Forum, which told the story of independence of Africa from its colonial masters, and brings to the fore the debate of liberation vis-à-vis independence. Accompanied by its documentary, it created yet one more visual impact of the continent which ZIFF is committed to.

Story telling techniques adopted by Zanzibar-born Nisar Sheraly in his discussion with teachers of the island with visible products of the stories themselves is yet another achievement as we build the culture of documentation on the island and beyond.

It remains our dream within ZIFF that contribution to the cultural arts embodies our commitment to telling our own stories and empowerment of visual arts. It is in pursuit of this vision that ZIFF puts its energies into a viable literary forum, and this year we believe that this journey has begun in a concerted way forward. It is our hope that this quest is not on a yearly festival basis only but throughout the year on an ongoing basis, culminating in productions of visual forms of literaries during the festival of the dhow.
Abdulrazak Gurnah: a maestro

by Fatma Alloo

Abdulrazak Gurnah who graced the Literary Forum of this year’s Festival of the Dhow in Zanzibar, took us to yet another level of what ZIFF wants to achieve as part of its contribution to cultural arts.

The author of seven English novel, the latest being Desertion, which has been shortlisted for the 2006 Commonwealth Writer’s Prize, Gurnah is certainly a role model to up and coming writers of our region. He hails from Zanzibar where he was born in 1948, and now teaches colonial and postcolonial literatures of Africa, the Caribbean, and India at the University of Kent in England. One would have expected his would have been a household name, but few realised that he is Zanzibar’s greatest English writer.

He says that he ‘began to write casually, in some anguish….. I realised I was writing from memory, and how vivid and overwhelming that memory was, how far from the strangely weightless existence of my first years in England….’

Gurnah’s first three novels Memory of Departure (1987), Pilgrim’s Way (1988) and Dottie (1990) document the immigrant experience in contemporary Britain. His fourth novel Paradise (1994) is set in colonial East Africa during the First World War, and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction. Admiring Silence brings us more to his own experiences of leaving home. Then came By the Sea (2001). Through his novels we not only see the agony of displacement but also the writer’s coming to terms with his own destiny. Desertion (2005) is his latest novel which brings us to think through issues of identity and place and cultural environment we live in.

As we sail through the Culture of the Dhow Festival, the soul searching issues of culture and identity, of belonging, is part and parcel of what ZIFF wants to explore. The Literary
Forum is one such venue and the fact that Gurnah honoured the occasion took this debate to a higher level of exploration and questioned the myth of the land of ‘milk and honey’. Many youths and teachers attended Gurnah’s sessions and press conference. The media describes his novels as ‘haunted by abandonment, as characters rupture ties not only with their homelands but with loved ones and their sense of identity.’ (Daily Telegraph) The Guardian says ‘Gurnah’s portrait of society’s complexities is the work of a maestro.’ More humbly Gurnah explained:

Of course, I was not unique in this experience, although the details always feel unique as one frets at them. It is arguable that it is not even a contemporary or particular experience in the way I have been describing it, but one that is characteristic to all writing, that writing begins from this self-perception of marginality and difference. In that sense, the questions I am raising are not new questions, if they are not new; however, they are firmly inflected by the particular, by imperialism, by dislocation, by the realities of our times. And one of the realities of our times is the displacement of so many strangers into Europe. These questions, then, were not only my concern. While I was worrying away at them, others who were similarly strangers in Europe were working on problems just like these at the same time and with huge success. Their greatest success is that we now have a more subtle and delicate understanding of narrative and how it travels and translates, and this understanding has made the world less incomprehensible, has made it smaller. (World Literature Today vol. 78/2, 2004:26)

At the Literary Forum Gurnah explained that he first thought about writing Desertion after looking at the European type of writing about Africa. In his opinion, there were hardly any relationships between European men and native women mentioned, and those that were mentioned were usually written from the foreigner’s perspective. Very often they ended up in tragedies with the men leaving for their countries without the native women.

In the novel he tries to show how such a relationship worked out from the native’s perspective, and deals with the ordeal undergone by the native especially if a child was involved. Set on the eve of the twentieth century, Gurnah writes about intercultural relationship that spanned three generations, moving from Mombasa on the coast of Kenya to Zanzibar. He brings out the cultural and religious conflicts, touching on the historical significance of the island during that time, and its impact on the people while still highlighting the pains and sorrows caused by the relationships and the changes in time. (Morris Mwavizo, ‘Gurnah’s made it but for the writers in Zanzibar, its an uphill task’, Citizen, 19th July, 2006)

It is our sincere hope that the ZIFF Literary Forum this year has honoured a native son and played its role in raising the debates while providing a role model in the form of the author Gurnah. With this contribution to the island of Zanzibar we can say that the umbilical cord remains. It is not by accident that the land one comes from is called motherland.
Folktales for Character Building

By Nisar Sheraly M.Ed.

Under the Literary Forum, I conducted a workshop on recording and using folktales for character building of the students in the classroom, which was well attended. We discussed the importance of recording the oral tradition of Zanzibar as it is an endangered genre at the mercy of time available to those Zanzibaris who are now in the Departure Lounge. The inevitable would deprive future generations of a wealth of stories of our glorious past, which would be interred with the generation that had heard them from their parents and grandparents under the open skies of the backyards. No longer do families spend evenings after dinner and isha with neighbours under the canopy of a clear sky illuminated by sparkling stars, when the grandparents sitting on a stool or a mkeka mat, would pass on what they had heard and had thought about their experience in life. Stories that had a moral, stories that talked about the struggle with the land, the sea and the elements, stories of wars between kingdoms and tribes, stories about bravery, stories about honesty, importance of unity and hard work. Epic poems were sung in the coolness of the evening as children started to doze off for the night’s rest. Some would dream about them, and others would retain them to emerge at a later date and appropriate time. All in all, ethics and ethical values were encouraged and enhanced.

With the onslaught of TV and computer games and a new culture of work ethics, parents and grandparents have been denied the time and opportunity to pass on to their children what they had gained from their ancestors. As a result, our children are quite familiar with foreign culture that is relentlessly eroding our own rich Zanzibari culture, heritage and traditions.

The advancing time is threatening with merciless certainty the extinction of our oral tradition. In the merciful interim, we are accorded an opportunity to record while there is still time. The material could then be kept in a repository to be worked on for future publication for the benefit of future generations. They can permeate our schools and they teach virtues. Virtues unlike values, never change. Our stories inculcate respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, fairness, equity, diligence, perseverance, self-control, caring and sharing.

In the workshop, teachers brought with them stories that they had heard as children. They were divided into five groups where they shared their stories and picked on one that they worked on and presented to the main group. They employed some of the storytelling techniques such as special effects, props, variation of tone and intonation, that were discussed in the course of the workshop, but, importantly, they also talked about the moral of the story and how to subtly present to the students who would feel that they were badgered with the message if they were preached to.
The work does not stop here. This is just the beginning for the teachers and the stakeholders who hopefully have started collecting and recording their stories for posterity. Zanzibar will be even richer with their publication. The time is now. Wakati ni huu.

Hereunder are the five stories in brief that were presented at the workshop:

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The Hyena and the Cock
Once upon a time there were two very close friends. They were the hyena and the cock. However the hyena felt that the cock was very foolish.

The cock devised a way to see who was cleverer. He suggested that they should go to a ng'oma celebration without their heads. The hyena agreed.

At night the cock went to the hyena’s house and knocked at the door. He then hid his head under the left wing. The hyena on seeing this, assumed that the cock had already chopped off his head according to their agreement. He then asked his wife to cut off his head so that they could go to the dance without their heads.

The other animals saw what was happening. They were astonished. The hyena died and the cock lifted its head and said he won and he was cleverer.

The moral of the story:
Don’t be foolish to follow whatever your friends tell you.

By: Aziza Saidi Hussein
Fatma Bakari Muhammad Zaituni Abdalla Haji
Fatma Abubakar Mtawa Mwajuma Haji Muhammad.

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The Cat and the Rat
The cat and the rat were good friends. They decided to go on a trip. They had to have a vehicle to travel in. So they decided to build a vessel made from cassava.

The started on their journey. After a while, the rat became hungry. So he started to nibble at the cassava. They continued with their journey. Again the rat felt hungry. Again he gnawed at the cassava.

After a while as they travelled, the boat began to develop a leak and they started to drown. They swam ashore. The cat asked the rat why he made a hole in their vessel. The rat had no plausible answer.

The cat started chasing the rat to beat him up.

And so up to today, the cat remembers what the rat did and chases him as soon as he sees him. And the rat also remembers the mistake he made.

The moral: Don’t be selfish.

By: Asha Mohammed Omar M. Omar Haji Gora Haji.

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The Monkey and the Shark
Once upon a time, there were two friends, the Monkey and the Shark. The monkey would sit on a tree by the shore and the shark would come and talk to him. The monkey would pick fruits and give to the shark to take home to his family.

One day, the shark asked the monkey to visit his family in the deep sea. The monkey agreed but said that he could not swim. The shark said that he could perch on his back and he would take him home.

Midway, the shark told the monkey that he was taking him so that they could have his heart as his mother was sick and needed it to cure her.

The monkey did quick thinking and told the shark that he did not take his heart with him as monkeys always leave their hearts at home. So they will have turn back so that he could go and get it for the shark’s grandmother. The shark brought the monkey back to the shore.

The monkey climbed the tree and told the shark that they were no longer friends.

The moral:
Never cheat your best friend/ Not all friends can be trusted/ Deal with situations diplomatically.

By: Mohammed Bajubeir Ali Mwalimu Ndiye Mwalimu Hasan Fadhila Daud Hasan Fatma Mohamed Issa Sharifa Khakis Seif.

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The War between the Bee and the Black Ant

Both insects like sweet things. Once, the bee saw a lot of ants in a beautiful flower. They were sucking honey. The bee wanted the honey too and chased away the small black ants. Some of the ants got stuck in his belly, legs and around the bee’s body.

They told him that they were the first to reach the flower. The bee said that he was the king and had a right to get the honey. They were adamant. So the bee started flapping its wings but the ants were united in their resolve and stuck to the bee. They started biting him all over his body. With pain, he fell on the ground.

The moral:
United, the impossible tasks can be achieved.

By: Khadija Yussuf Mussa Mwanaidi Ibrahim Sultani Hadiya Juma Ramadhani Ridhvana Abdalla Khamis Aziza Amour Masoud Sofia Adliano Mussa.

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The Tortoise and his Son

There was once a lazy tortoise. He did not like to farm. However, there was a monkey who loved to plant various crops. He used to pass by his friend the tortoise as he headed for his plantation. The tortoise became very hungry and went to his neighbour to borrow some food
Fig. 1. ZIFF Folktales Workshop, 2006

Fig. 2. One of the groups discussing a folktale.

Fig. 3. A participant making a presentation of a groups’ story.
with a promise to replace it the next day. He went again and promised to return in the evening. When the tortoise did not arrive in the evening, the monkey went to visit him.

The tortoise said that he did not have anything yet to deliver but was going to his birthday party where he would have plenty of gifts and food and would bring back some for the monkey.

The next day, the tortoise asked his son to take a stone and grind it as if he was grinding millet. He went away and when the monkey came he saw the son of the tortoise grinding. He asked for his father and was told that he was away as his sister was bereaved. Getting angry, he picked up the stone and threw it far away.

In the evening, the tortoise came back and asked his son to bring the stone. The son said that the monkey had thrown it away. The tortoise told him that he had hidden his money in the stone and now the monkey had thrown it away. The monkey called his friends to search for the stone and he dug everywhere to locate the stone.

And that is why up to today, the monkey pecks and looks for the stone.

The moral:
Never cheat others who are kind to you.

By: Afiya Hussein Said Safia Mohd Said Hemed Ali Massoud
    Tifli Mustafa Hahoda Khadija Seif Salum Sara Ibrahim Othman.

A really unique story has no end.

Nisar Sheraly: sheraly@aol.com
Nisar Sheraly with the artist of the story, Jacob Francis
Nisar Sheraly’s story is appropriately dedicated, in the first instance, to those who remember the fire at the Majestic Cinema in 1954, appropriately because it is they (and I include myself among them) who will enjoy the story the fullest. The narrative certainly evokes the memory of the event itself, and, as most of us who remember the fire were probably teenagers at the time, the drama that accompanied it would have occupied our minds for days on end, eventually lodging itself firmly in our memories (especially as fire in public buildings - like murders - were rare in the Zanzibar of the early 1950s). That Nisar should have published this story over half a century later is testament to its endurance.

The story, like the fire itself, is fast-moving and gripping. It is told largely through the perspective of a self-centred, cantankerous and loquacious character called ‘Professa’, a satirical nickname as he presumes to know a lot. As he is on the scene even before the arrival of the Fire Brigade, he takes the opportunity of throwing his weight around by marshalling people and issuing instructions; but he does demonstrate his bravery by going into the burning building to save a man. The Fire Brigade does eventually put out the fire which was apparently caused by an electric fault. The building, designed by John Sinclair (a former British Resident of Zanzibar), was rebuilt and replaced not by a building with an aesthetic style close to the original in its grandeur, but, to quote Abdul Sheriff from his introduction to the story, ‘by an ugly and featureless modern building’.

In a sense, just as the drama has transcended the passing years, the story too goes beyond the drama of that day. It is about the memory of belonging, and of the places and characters who contributed to it (and hence to one’s identity). We belonged to a place where language was used in a particular way, where people knew and respected one another (despite pockets of appearances to the contrary), and where they accommodated a cosmopolitan populace which included characters such as the Professa (the likes of whom still do exist today!). There are perhaps many places in the world which might fit this description, but this story is about Zanzibar, and about ordinary people like Chepe and others whose words and acts influenced us more than we knew at the time. We thank Nisar for bringing it to us now, and we urge him to continue to delve even deeper into the Zanzibari chest of cherished memories.