

Raising the dead

Nadifa Mohamed

Tombstones read like small novels, or flash fiction to use a more modern format. The drama, tragedy and triumphs of a person's life cut into stone for anonymous readers to glance at as they pass by. They were a favoured motif of Shakespeare who, in his sonnets, constantly measures the longevity of his words against the timelessness of tombs, crypts, and mausoleums. While many of the inscriptions and statues placed over graves in the seventeenth century have eroded or broken apart, his words live brightly and declare the mystical power that printed words have over us.

It was in a war cemetery in Keren, Eritrea that my first novel, *Black Mamba Boy*, really came alive; its entire skeleton, sinews, muscles, veins knitting together. *Ascaro Ignoto, Ascaro Ignoto, Ascaro Ignoto*. Nearly all of the Somali, Eritrean and Libyan soldiers lie in graves that describe them as 'unknown', and they rest to one side of an invisible line separating them from the Italian troops, the vast majority of whom are 'known' and named. If a tombstone is a work of literature, what does it mean if it can only tell you that the body that lies beneath is 'unknown'? We can imagine what we like about that soldier – we can grieve for the loss of them, we can place another body in their place and grieve for that, we can rewrite their story altogether. So, that is what I did; I took the wraiths and ghosts whispering in my mind and placed them in these graves, in this gritty soil overlooking the steep escarpments and camel caravans of highland Eritrea. These were my father's brothers-in-arms, the young men he had fought beside, slept beside, laughed, eaten and cried beside as a child soldier in the Italian army during the Second World War. These graves gave his life story a deeper

meaning and significance to me, and made the writing of that story not just a personal project, but one that would stand in memoriam of all these men, who had lost even their names.

When crossing one of London's broad bridges, I feel with a racing heart how central this concrete and glass city has been to the fate of billions around the world. This port once heaved with the sugar, gold, tea, textiles, metals, monuments, relics and bones of its conquered peoples, destined for our factories, shops and museums. After surviving the carnage of World War Two in East Africa, my Somali father trekked north to Egypt to join the British merchant navy and boarded the vessels that brought all those treasures here, working in engine rooms from his early twenties into his sixties. Somalis, Yemenis and Bengalis were at first sought out to fill boiler room jobs on the eastern routes that were too hot and onerous for British sailors. Paid a quarter less than white colleagues and unable to rise up in the ranks, these furnace stokers were part of the raw machinery of empire, no less important than the coal the ships were powered by, but no more consulted. When they settled in Britain, it was in a handful of port cities – Cardiff, Newport, Liverpool, Hull, South Shields, London – and they roomed together in overcrowded, impermanent boarding houses, human flotsam and jetsam. It is difficult to know what these men thought about their lives as most of them were illiterate and died in obscurity, their particular experience of historical events and social change now excised from history. But I pursued them into the shadows where they left small traces – in citizenship applications, newspaper clippings, police statements, family letters and cassettes; an important unofficial history emerging from everyday moments and acts that had been recorded almost incidentally.

Then came a new scandal: that this country also dishonoured its colonial dead. Reports emerged that in Kenya and Tanzania, where hundreds of thousands of Africans were conscripted into the Carrier Corps during the

First World War, the graves of porters are mostly unmarked or abandoned, one mass grave even lying under a busy roundabout in Dar es Salaam. History is often what is recorded by the winners, but where do the Carrier Corps fit in to that paradigm? Are they winners or losers? They fought on the victorious side but lost their lives, land and even the dignity of a burial near their families. There is something about the way in which people die, even more than the way they live, that hits me emotionally. In 1923, one of the reasons Lord Browne, who led the Imperial War Graves Commission, gave to the Governor of Nigeria for scrimping on memorials for the African dead was 'that the stage of civilization reached by most of the...African tribes was not such as would enable them to appreciate commemoration in this manner.' Their lack of formal cemeteries, as opposed to burials within family compounds or shrines to ancestors, was seen as a sign of African unfeelingness and barbarity, in the same way that an absence of written language was seen as evidence of ignorance; that people might communicate and grieve just as profoundly, but in different ways was an unacknowledged, or if so inconvenient proposition. When I write, I think about how I can traverse these different worlds that I know – the written as against the oral, the remembered versus the forgotten – and try to illustrate that a marginalized history is just as rich as the official.

The British Empire was built on the myth of a shared identity, lived under a *Pax Britannica* that papered over the exploitive nature of colonialism by using the analogy of a family of nations under the protection of a 'mother country'. I am a product of this dysfunctional family; reared both in what was the periphery of empire and in its imperial heart. In rural Shropshire, I met an English woman who was born in the same Hargeisa hospital as me, the British Empire meaning different things to us but this small connection created a charge of unexpected intimacy many years later. I meet many English people who were born or raised in British colonies; they are

often sheepish about sharing the information as if I might judge or blame them for the world they were born into, with its segregation, violence and racial hierarchies. But what is interesting to me are the relics of that shared history – the photographs, Qur’ans, incense burners, textiles – that can be found in my home as well as theirs. The British Empire was one of the chief architects of the world we live in now, the networks it forged or ruptured still important in our daily lives. A family member, on moving to London, tracked down the Indian family that had lived beside hers in Somaliland before they left for England in the 1980s. At their home she found photos of her father and grandfather, and the older generation could still converse with her in Somali. It is this cosmopolitan world that inspires my writing. These tenacious bonds that cut across time and space – beyond the official permanence marked by gravestones or books – allow me to believe that certain things are universal, that pieces of us can be found in other people and other places.

Now, with my current novel, I have turned my attention to London and the different ways that the city manoeuvres around its global past – its inhabitants, street names, statues, markets – and I am finding a greater peace with the instability of my own history and its contradictions. Creatively, I had to face everything and everyone I had lost before I could think about the present. My second novel, *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, tried to raise the dead of the Somali civil war and to tell the stories of the civilians whose bodies are washed out of mass graves every rainy season, while my third tackles the story of a Somali sailor executed in 1952 and the way that his real identity was lost after his burial in an unmarked grave in Cardiff Prison. Novels seek to impose some order on all that we don’t understand; what we can never know we can re-imagine. There are many ways to remember

and to forget, and they are dependent on the forms of memory and forgetting that you are given by your culture. By writing in print those stories that I know will never be carved into official memorials, I have made my leap at posterity.

Nadifa Mohammed

Nadifa Mohammed was born in Hargeisa, Somaliland, in 1981. Her first novel, *Black Mamba Boy*, won the Betty Trask Prize; it was longlisted for the Orange Prize and shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award, the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, the Dylan Thomas Prize and the PEN Open Book Award. In 2013 she was selected as one of Granta's Best of Young British Novelists and has recently been awarded an Arts and Literary Arts Fellowship by the Rockefeller Foundation. Her second novel, *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, won a Somerset Maugham Award and the Prix Albert Bernard. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and her new novel, *The Fortune Men*, will be published by Viking UK in May 2021.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

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