

# LITERATURE AS A VEHICLE FOR INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

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## ABSTRACT

This lecture proposes that literature can be used as a practical basis for developing intercultural understanding in our conflict-ridden globalized world. It was some 30 years ago that literature was described as a form of social discourse (e.g. Roger Fowler 1982). This demonstrated that a great deal of cooperation is required between writer and reader before a literary text can acquire the three-dimensional quality which has more recently been described as world-making (Joanna Gavins 2007). However the social dimension of a poem or a novel goes far beyond the shared definition of the individual components of language: words, phrases, concepts, grammar. They certainly play a seminal role in the ways by which text refers to context, in order to enable the reader to visualize, or imagine, fictional spaces and characters. But more than this, literary descriptions also convey a sense of what the places and events described mean within a particular cultural context; furthermore they establish bonds between the reader and fictional characters, especially narrators, even if the imaginary characters are reclusive and exist under extreme conditions of isolation. I will apply the theoretical premises of this approach to literary meaning to the analysis of Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *By the Sea* (2001). In the practical part of my talk, I want to draw attention to the linguistic elements that do not only familiarize the reader with the thought processes and experiences of the writer but which also generate a deep sense of understanding for characters from different cultural backgrounds. I will argue that an approach to the analysis of fiction which emphasizes the capacity of literary language to forge solidarities is a valuable vehicle for generating tolerance and respect between people from different cultural communities.

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