

ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

MEMORY OF DEPARTURE

Questions for Discussion

1. How does the extensive detailed description of Kenge and the life of the Omar family as squalid, depraved and dysfunctional in the opening chapter affect your view of the book? Do you see it as off-putting or a sign of literary merit?
2. How do the races of residents of Kenge and Nairobi establish a hierarchy of power among African, Arab, Indian and European persons after the end of British colonization? Where does the hierarchy place those of mixed race, such as the Omar family?
3. Why do you think Hassan's first name is not mentioned until he meets Moses Mwinyi on the train?
4. How does Hassan's "friend" Moses represent the choices available to a young person of mixed race in Nairobi? Why does he refer to Hassan as a "customer?"
5. Miriam states on page 146, "I think things out, as soon as I sit down to write, all that comes out is the same competent, safe crap. I want to argue the link between art in Africa and the social reality of its context. And all that comes out is the same pseudo-religious bullshit. I'm just not good enough to do it." Is this a goal of Gurnah as well?

6. How do the relationships in Uncle Ahmed's family and family history mirror those of Hassan's family? Does relative wealth affect the similarities? Consider the relationships between Ahmed and Ali, and between him and his managers. How do family "secrets" play a role?
7. How does the term "Middle Passage" relate to the overarching theme of the book?
8. How does the title reflect the theme of the book? Does the fact that this was Gurnah's first novel make it more salient?
9. Having just read Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*, what do you think of the reference to Paton on page 82, when Moses says of another writer, "He doesn't write like an African. Do you know what this book reminds me of? Alan Paton. It has the same kind of liberal preaching, soft-nosed and confused. ...There is no sense of identification with the mass of oppressed Africans."
10. **Extra credit:** What is a plimsoll? Where does the word come from?