

## An Analysis of Abdulrazak Gurnah's Novel "*Desertion*" as a Historiographic Metafiction

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### Abstracts

*This study aims at taking a critical approach at subject formation in the fiction of contemporary postcolonial author Abdulrazak Gurnah. It focuses on Gurnah's novel Desertion published in 2005. Gurnah's fictions depict the complex narratives that form subjectivity multicultural social reality. Thematic concerns of his novels are based on the issues of migration, culture, social and religious history. This paper intends to analyse Gurnah's Desertion against a background of Zanzibari history. With the approach of historical criticism, this research has an aim to describe the specific historical establishments that cast the individual identity. It also investigates the narrative strategy that is used by Gurnah to create a sense of historiographic metafiction. Gurnah's fiction induces a transcontinental Indian Ocean and British world that highlights cultural interaction in the background of history.*

**Keywords:** Historical Metafiction, East African Literature, Indian Ocean, Coastal history.

Postmodernism in art and literature today is regarded as extreme parody of intertextuality. In literature it is usually metafiction associated with the postmodern. The term postmodernism can be best described in term to juxtapose metafictional and historical texts in the contexts of the past. Hutcheon in her study posits a clear notion that "the postmodern relationship between fiction and history is an even more complex one of interaction and mutual implication. Historiographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction"(3). In the light of the novel under study here, I intend to analyse it in this context.

Gurnah's novels depict the stories of human migration. These stories are part of the demographical movement in history initiated by British imperialism. Gurnah's *Desertion* is divided into two parts. The very first part of the text offers the readers a historical description by portraying events social and political situation from the early twentieth century. The novel moves towards the history of Tanzania's independence from the colonial rule by and large

during second part that portrays the history after Tanzania independence to the present daysocio-political situation of the country. This history of cultural encounters due to migration is at the centre of Gurnah's *Desertion*. It narrates the story of social instability as well as multiple corresponding identities. First part of *Desertion* allows readers to look back to the history of colonial East Africa. Gurnah in present novel expands his narrative power and depicts European characters by providing symbolical voice to their dogmas. The reader is presented with the narrations of the surroundings with unexpected arrival of Martin Pearce in an unknown East African town. Gurnah engaged four narrators in first part of the text and propagation of narrative outlooks allow him to portray an archetypal postcolonial notion of history.

Gurnah's literary skill negotiates with African nationalism in the context of its historical struggle. In *Desertion* Gurnah tries to speculate the long history of cultural relations to bring element of diaspora of migrants and residents in the east African coastal regions. This diasporic awareness offers readers the basis to create more modes of social existence. Gurnah spots a few reasons behind the conception of *Desertion* that can be traceable through the some thematic gaps he identifies in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century colonial and settler writing. The narrative maintains the focus on two important phases in the history of Tanzania. it narrates the aftermath of the struggle for Africa and the nation's independence in the 1960s. Gurnah highlights in an interview with Nisha Jones how European states were facing challenges by native populations:

Returning to those particular periods, I also wanted to look at a very interesting moment in European imperialism, the moment of its greater expansion, but unbeknown to us and to them, also the beginning of its decline. The new millennium – 1899 going to 1900 – gives it a sense of drama and I wanted to look not only at how the imperialists thought the world might look but also how we might be able to imagine their own self questioning at the time (Interview with Nisha Jones, 2005).

The idea that lies behind the writing of *Desertion* an investigation of the moment in which the colonial empire was getting success in this regions and how it fell down after the second world war. The binary of coloniser and colonised is further interrogated by using different ethnic groups based in the East African space.

The levels of conventionalities are equipped with a distinct tool of depiction that attracts the attention of the critics for their realistic accounts of history of East African coastal regions. With the intention to classify the boundless narratives, we should focus on linguistic principles of the narration. We can notice that the narrative voice in relation to the narrative structure in *Desertion* particularly emphasises on characters as determining factor of the historical incidents narrated by omniscient narrators. Mieke Bal in *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of Narrative* (2009) expounds that the narrator who tells the story of past is the most important aspect in the narrative. "The identity of the narrator, the degree to which and the manner in which that identity is indicated in the text and the choices that are implied lend

the text its specific character" (18). So, the narrator plays a vital role in a text and the voice articulated by the narrator allows us to understand the relation between imagined and real history through the text. Therefore by engaging Rashid and Amin as first person narrators in the novel, Gurnah tries to explore a cultural, colonial, and postcolonial event that provides structural metafiction in the text.

According to Tina Steiner (2008) Gurnah's story is an indirect satire on how the native population of the region were entrapped. This notion is well demonstrated in novel through the depiction of Rehana's character. Steiner further explains the process that influences her psychological character (51). Through personal analysis of the national politics of post-independence East Africa, Gurnah scrutinises the multilevel junctures of the historical incidents. Gurnah narrative strategy is employed in the way that it tries to justify the title of the novel. Rehana and Pearce start connecting with their root when it is exposed to the reader as well as the characters that they had lost their real identity. Such realisation instigates them to find out the history of their ancestors. The narrators go on to shout at the idiosyncrasy can only be constructed, not retrieved, "I have no choice but to give an account of how their affair *might* have happened" (*Desertion*, 111).

The main characters on which the narrative develops are Rehana, Amin, Jamila and Hassanali. When Hassanali brings a white man Pearce into their social community that have different religious values, it is symbolically as an acceptance of colonial power. It can also be considered as a gesture of kindness towards to a fellow human being: "You can't expect me to leave a suffering son of Adam out there when we can offer him kindness and care" (*Desertion*, 12). At the same time, Rehana considers Whiteman as responsible for destroying the legacy of African nativity. She shows bitterness towards the white stranger. The beginning of Rehana's hatred can be marked out back to obstructive socio-cultural structures in past. Rehanna's betrayal therefore is based on social behaviour. Even Hassanali is the younger than Rehana, he has to take decision for his sister. His provoking her into marriage is like a sense of duty as the male head of the family. So, he is very much eager to accept Azad's proposal:

She understood why Hassanali was so anxious, so eager for her to accept. She was twenty two, old for a woman to be unmarried. She was sure he worried for her and for his honour in case her unattachment made her vulnerable to impropriety. In his eyes and in everyone else's opinion, he would have failed to protect her if she succumbed to something unseemly and then both of them would be dishonoured (*Desertion*, 72).

Here a dual sense of forbidden love can be traced that reveal the situation of women in the conservative society. Her love with Azad is shown in the way in which he culminates up deserting her without any second thought.

*Desertion* recaptures the colonial activities at the coast of East Africa during the past. It recounts the story of struggle for independence against European supported Omani

dominance. It also talks about different events of mass migration and racism in the past. Certainly the narrator says about his early experiences:

I realise I did not know very much about England, that all the books I had studied and the maps I had pored over had taught me nothing of how England thought of the world and of people like me. I think when we talked, we simplified the complex sense of hurt and diminishing that we felt, the sense of injustice and incomprehension about being both misused and despised (*Desertion*, 215)

The whole novel is like a historical document of social, cultural and linguistic history. Through memorising the oral past the characters have heard from their parents plays an important resource for the characters to relate themselves with their past.

In order to form a historiographic metafiction, the narrative of the text contains multilayered intertextuality. Gurnah uses intertextuality as a useful narrative tool of inclusion of the characters in colonial era. The outcome of such techniques according to Derrida is “break with every given context, engendering infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable” (185). The relevance of intertextuality can be further elaborated through the notion of Leitch as it “posits both an uncentered historical enclosure and an abysmal decentered foundation for language and textuality; in so doing, it exposes all contextualizations as limited and limiting, arbitrary and confining, self-serving and authoritarian, theological and political. However paradoxically formulated, intertextuality offers a liberating determinism” (162). Textual journeys portrayed in the novel replicate the old cultural and political history connecting the old coastal towns and its present condition. In the novel, the recovery of an earlier muzzled inter-racial love story between a white man and a black native woman from coastal East Africa offers the pre-text for narrating the complicated racial history of a family of post-independence period. Gurnah’s expansive and informative bond with history is not envisioned as memory tool but in the words of Bhabha, it “renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent in-between space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (7).

The fictional treatise of Gurnah is intended to convert the past into a complex occurrence to review the course by which unambiguous accounts of the history would gain authenticity. Gurnah’s composition eventually appears to adapt Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s view of the realist strand of the African novel: “it pulls apart and it puts together; it is both analytic and synthetic” (Quoted in Smith, 12). It must be remembered that the historical experiences of the African continent repeatedly command the author to engage with the history in its different epochs. Therefore dealing a political nature of a white man in contrast with native woman becomes certain. The early East African writers have recounted diverse features of political infidelity and Gurnah is not exception in this regard. The novels written after the end of the colonial rule are characterized by what Gikandi refers to as the “confusing world ushered in, or unleashed by independence” (101). He goes on to explain it further:

In effect, the African writer was trapped in a political impasse, caught between a colonial culture he thought independence would transcend and a new political culture which seemed to magnify the worst of the colonial inheritance. (103)

While dealing with a political history the African is deceived and the writer has no choice left except to attempt to recapture their past through their imaginative skills.

Scholars of pan-Africanism and colonialism in Africa outline a relationship based on the predator-prey relationship in which the African is the victim. *Desertion* rejects these principles clearly in the manner that could be the dominant vision of Gurnah. There were some regions on African land that did not come in the imposition of European superiority on the native. I show how *desertion* offers an opportunity to evaluate colonialism, not just as hostile cultural contact, but also as a contact that implies a hospitable negotiation and not just an imposition. Such relationships are reported by Rashid from the United Kingdom in the 1950s when racism and anti-foreign sentiments are on the agenda. It is illustrated in text through the voice of the characters recounted memory of past that how hospitality ostensibly opens to foreigners by coastal citizens. It becomes at the same time a source of happiness and sadness. It is argued that the stated purpose of the imperial discourse was to civilize the native population. Ironically, the civilizing mission of the Europeans is not able to impose the non-interaction between Europeans and Africans. The narrative explains this failed mission of past by showing how the interactions created binary divisions anticipate a lack of action by the native coastal. I find Simon Gikandi question very relevant for my analysis of *Desertion*: “How could a space in which traditional authority had been relegated to the margins of the dominant ever have the authority to transform the centre”(15)? Such question is an indication to counter the ability of the despised native civilization to transform into the imperial civility. I find the answer to this question in *Desertion* where Rehana and Martin both on the margins of their respective cultural imaginaries undermine the dominant colonial discourses.

Through a historical exploration of the nexus between hosts and foreigners, *Desertion* shows the reality of past when the natives were ready to welcome Europeans and negotiate with them against the Arab dominance. As a result the narrative voice of *Desertion* allows readers to peep into the complex patterns of relationships in past that exist between regions and the people from Asian and European countries. The Swahili coasts had been a crucial geographical location in Indian Ocean and it has economic relation with the outside world since the Portuguese came here during beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Gurnah uses the time of 1890s of the European imperial accumulation. The narrative depiction of the coming and going of the Europeans as travellers as well as invaders throws the reader into a complex situation. In an encounter between a “shadow” of Martin Pearce and Hassanali at dawn reasons that if he “turned his back, the ghost would devour him” (*Desertion*, 5). Hassanali distinguishes that Martin is “human without doubt” (7), and so he decides to help him on humanitarian ground even by knowing the fact that he is European.



**Conclusion:**

Through the above discussion based on textual and critical references, it can be perceived that *Desertion* is a perfect example of historical metafiction. Gurnah's *Desertion* in their depiction of African history under the auspices of Empire is based on a long history of interactions between *natives* and *foreigners* across the Indian Ocean. It can also be comprehend that Gurnah does not romanticize this long history of interaction. Gurnah's *Desertion* shows a positive prospective towards the crucial historical events of the past. He also elaborates its impacts on the contemporary society. By using co-narration, historical reference, and symbolism, Gurnah's narrative skill draws the attention towards the lost history of East African coasts. It gives us an opportunity to take a voyage in the history of Swahili coasts. This novel also shows how the narratives of Gurnah catch the reader's attention to peep into the diverse intercultural relations between the Indian Ocean coast of East Africa and the outside world. It recounts the history of displacement of people caused during post-independence period that creates the feeling of nationhood in East African regions.

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