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"It is one about all of us": Memory and Identity in Gurnah's *Desertion*

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Abstract:

Abdulrazak Gurnah challenges these established (post)colonial narratives by subtly revealing the impact of colonialism on individuals who were not actively engaged in the struggle for freedom. In his novel *Desertion*, Gurnah explores a colonial romance between Rehana Zakariya, a native woman, and Martin Pearce, an Englishman, highlighting how cultural and historical dislocation profoundly affects women's lives and their subsequent generations. This paper examines themes of memory, remembrance, and legacy in *Desertion*, focusing on how Rehana's romantic life is remembered, constructed, and transmitted within society, evolving from personal to collective memory through Rashid's narration. Further, it analyzes how Rehana's memory shapes her identity and choices. Women in the novel are portrayed not only as vessels for memory but also as bearers of cultural trauma. Additionally, the paper will focus on Rashid's mother, Mwana, who, despite not being explicitly involved in any colonial struggle, experiences its profound impact on her life and family.

Keywords: Desertion, Gurnah, memory, remembrance, women.

Introduction

Historically, (post)colonial narratives have tended to heroize those directly involved in and subjected to imperial violence, with many such stories dominating the literature. Initially, these narratives centered on male victims of colonialism. Over time, women's stories began to surface as subaltern narratives, shedding light on female struggles that had previously been neglected. However, there remains a section of colonial society whose stories have yet to be told because they were not direct recipients of colonial violence. As a result, these stories are often forgotten, deemed less important than those of the explicit bearers of trauma. This oversight reinforces the notion that only those who directly experienced violence are deserving of commemoration, perpetuating a limited understanding of (post)colonial experiences. Consequently, the subtle effects of colonialism on daily life are frequently disregarded or marginalised. *For Spivak, subalternity is a position without identity, it is the position of marginality and includes those who are marginal, the female and urban sub-proletariat* (Rajeev 297). Similarly, the stories of ordinary people in colonial narrative are ignored leaving them to the position of subalternity.

Abdulrazak Gurnah addresses the overlooked narratives of ordinary lives during the (post)colonial era, shedding light on the profound effects of colonialism on the characters in *Desertion*, particularly women. These women, already marginalized within a hierarchy of victimhood and trauma, become doubly subaltern due to their gender. Therefore, telling their stories is crucial for achieving a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the impact of colonialism. The romantic involvement between Rehana and the white man, Martin Pearce, forms the central narrative of the novel, not only profoundly shaping their lives and the lives of those around them but also embedding their experiences into the collective memory of future generations. Their story underscores how memories of colonial trauma and identity struggles are inherited, highlighting the enduring consequences of their relationship as they ripple

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through time. Hence, this paper attempts to unfold how Rehana's romantic life is remembered, constructed, and transmitted within society, evolving from personal to collective memory through Rashid's narration. Secondly, this paper will examine how Rehana's relationship with Pearce influences the love story between Jamila and Amin. The collective memory of Rehana's relationship, when transformed into post-memory, carries the lingering effects of colonial injustices. Rehana's romantic journey disrupts the colonial power dynamics. As A Result, the cultural stigma attached to her and her lineage, marked by the term "chotara," meaning bastard, exemplifies this enduring impact. Lastly, the paper will explore the character of Rashid's mother, Mwana, who, despite not being directly involved in the colonial struggle, experiences its profound effects on her life and family.

Personal Memory and Identity

The novel starts with third-person narration, utilizing a non-linear narrative that shifts in time and perspective. The story begins with a gothic dramatization of the moment when Hassanali discovers the injured Martin Pearce, an Englishman. This scene metaphorically represents the arrival of colonial power in Zanzibar, signalling a bad omen for both the country and for Rehana Zakariya. For Hassanali and Rehana, Pearce is their first and closest encounter with colonial power. Although Rehana has already experienced the complex legacies of colonialism through her mixed heritage—being the product of a union between her Indian Gujarati father, Zakariya, and her African mother, Zubeyba—her encounter with Pearce brings these dynamics into sharper focus. Her miscegenetic roots carry the weight of social memory, encapsulating the history of racial and cultural mixing that colonialism often brought with it. While relationships between different race men and African women were not uncommon at the time, African women were often dehumanized and viewed as mere objects of desire rather than as equals (Iliffe 17). This deeply ingrained racial and gender prejudice led to the devaluation of

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their offspring and lovers, even within their own communities, perpetuating the social stigma and marginalization within these mixed-heritage individuals. "*She remembered as a child how sometimes these Indians came past the shop and how they treated their father disdainfully. […] she heard him ranting about the children being called chotara […] Later she understood that the word meant 'bastard', an improper child of an Indian man with an African woman*" (Gurnah 66-67).

As Pujolràs-Noguer observes, the union of Rehana's parents represents an act of defiance against the rigid cultural and racial boundaries imposed by both their community and colonial rule (602). This resistance act becomes part of the social and collective memory passed down to their children, significantly shaping 'how Rehana perceives herself' and 'how others perceive her'. This inherited anxiety manifests when Azad enters her life: "*At first, she is reluctant to welcome Azad, the Indian merchant Hassanali meets at the port who claims to have known their deceased father*" (Pujolràs-Noguer 602). The personal memory of Zakariya becomes both a source of identity as well as a burden on Rehana. This burden began to fade when Rehana accepted Azad's marriage proposal as a means to escape the prospect of becoming the second or third wife of an undesirable older man.

Although Azad decided "to go back with the captain" (Gurnah 77) to continue his trade, Rehana's attempts to stop him from leaving reflected her lingering anxieties, rooted in the memory of her grandfather's death. Azad promised to either send word or return within five years- "when he didn't Rehana feared that the ship had met disaster" (78) a fear that mirrored the stories her father, Zakariya, had told her about how his own father had died. As the absence of any communication from Azad continues, Rehana's initial optimism eventually transforms into a state of hopelessness. The apprehension that he may have died while at sea is replaced with a more acrimonious understanding that he may have merely deserted her. She experiences

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conflicting feelings, alternating between a desire for the love she previously had and the resentment of being betrayed. Rehana's despondency finally transforms into profound resentment. She develops a strong feeling of bitterness against both Azad and her brother Hassanali, whom she holds responsible for persuading her to marry Azad initially. Rehana's emotional turmoil is rooted in her unresolved feelings about her father, who never came back to Mombasa. She often finds herself wondering if something happened to make him hesitant to return—"an argument or a disgrace" (66). Disgrace among the Indian community living in Mombasa, which forced him to abandon his family. Aligning with Rehana's current sentiments of betrayal and abandonment, the memory of her father's disappearance further intensifies her feelings. She is struggling to come to terms with the similarities between her father's absence and Azad's act of abandoning her.

The feeling of abandonment is a major theme of the novel which eventually manifested in its title "Desertion". Not only abandonment but the memory of her desertion also played a major part in the life of Rehana. Being abandoned by her closest people twice in her life she grew up having a memory of detached associations, which made her an intuitive human when it comes to judging people on their sight. First reaction of Rehana, when she notices Hassanali bringing a *mzungu*, mirrors the same sensibility. "What have you brought us, you and your antics? A sick man turns up from who knows where, with who knows what disease, and you bring him straight to our house so we can all die of what he is dying of? You're a man of affairs, you are. You're a man of the world, without a doubt. Have you touched him?" (12). Gurnah, when recounting the story of Rehana and Pearce's affair, consistently chooses to narrate it through the perspectives of other characters. This narrative gap mirrors the societal taboo surrounding their relationship, emphasizing how their story is filtered through the collective memory and judgments of others. While Gurnah subtly depicts the desire and mutual attraction between Rehana and Pearce—such as Rehana's longing for Pearce's white body, paralleling her earlier

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desire for Azad, and Pearce's fascination with her "beautiful glowing brown eyes" (107)—he deliberately avoids offering a direct portrayal of their affair.

The chapter titled "An Interruption" in *Desertion* is where Rashid narrates the story of Rehana and Martin Pearce. In this chapter, Rashid begins by expressing his uncertainty and disbelief about how their relationship could have happened: "I don't know how it would have happened. The unlikeliness of it defeats me. Yet I know it did happen, that Martin and Rehana became lovers. (110)" Rashid reflects on the idea that imagination can serve as a kind of truth, allowing us to reconstruct events even with incomplete knowledge. This narrative choice reinforces the fragmented and elusive nature of memory in the novel. The true essence of their relationship is obscured by the layers of societal stigma and collective rumor, rather than being openly acknowledged or understood. This aligns with Ray's observation that "as the past is made into story, memories are simplified and 'prepared, planned and rehearsed socially and individually'" (Misztal 11). The relationship in the novel is filtered through these processes, including societal stigma, collective rumors, and selective narration, which results in a fragmented and distorted collective memory that fails to capture the entire complications of their experiences. Whenever Rashid narrates the story of Rehana, he primarily relies on the letters he receives from Amin, in which Amin shares stories passed down by Jamila. Jamila's lineage connection to Rehana fosters a sense of kindness and acceptance towards her, influencing how these stories are conveyed and remembered. Jamila's version of the story influences Rashid's perception of the romance from a '*zinah*' (237) to a "tragic excess" (258).

The chapter "A Continuation" in the novel captures Rashid's evolving understanding of Rehana's story. During the conference in Cardiff, Rashid decided to voice Rehana's story on the scholarly platform. He observed that in both fiction and memoirs, there was a noticeable "absence of sexual encounters in this writing or their sublimation into gestures of pained patronage or rumours of tragic excess" (Gurnah 258). After hearing Rashid's observations,

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Frederick Turner's granddaughter, Barbara Turner, approached him and shared her version of Rehana's story, referring to it as the "affair between a *native woman* and an English traveller" (258). Her use of the term "native woman" highlights the imperial perspective of the story, reducing Rehana's identity to that of a mere colonial subject. This choice of words reflects the colonial mindset, where Rehana's individuality and personal story are overshadowed by her categorization as simply a "native woman," reinforcing the power dynamics and dehumanization inherent in colonial discourse. In contrast, Rashid reclaims Rehana's identity by asserting, "*her name was Rehana, I told her. Rehana Zakariya, not native lover*" (260). This act of reclaiming her name serves as a counter-narrative to the dehumanizing effects of colonial discourse, affirming Rehana's individuality and significance beyond the confines of colonial categorization. Barbara's account of the story originates from her white grandfather Frederick's memoir, which he abandoned following the birth of his son, John. Frederick, a close friend of Pearce, had witnessed the romance between Rehana and Martin Pearce firsthand, but his version of the story remains biased. His decision to abandon the memoir represents an interruption in the process of documenting and preserving both personal and collective narratives. This act illustrates the process of forgetting in a post-colonial context, where the significance of certain narratives can diminish as the focus shifts to present and future concerns.

Post- Memory and Legacy

Post-memory, the term was first used by Art Spriegelman in his work *Maus*, defines the relationship between the personal, cultural and collective memory with the 'generation after'. All incidents they remember by the means of photographs, stories, rituals and traditions is considered as post-memory (Hirsch). In Rehana's case, she carries the post-memory of colonial trauma and the guilt experienced by her father, who faced societal condemnation for his interracial marriage. His community interpreted this marriage as a betrayal of his Indian

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identity, as seen in the notion that he "disavows his Indianness when marrying Zubeyda" (Noguer 602). This collective judgment transformed his story into a collective memory that was passed down through societal rumors. However, Rehana did not pass down her father Zakariya's story to the next generation, as it stigmatized her with the label of ‘chotara,’ a term that marks her as mixed-race and thus socially inferior. De Saint-Laurent’s idea that “the past is always a construction, not a copy of what happened” (12) is evident here, as Gurnah uses the word ‘chotara’ to highlight how colonialism introduced and reinforced racial hierarchies and social divisions. The term encapsulates the internalization of collective trauma and the colonial mindset that values pure bloodlines while demeaning mixed ones. This racial prejudice was not only perpetuated by Europeans but also by native communities, who viewed mixed heritage as degrading. In this colonial framework, African women were not seen as equal human beings but rather as objects of desire or slaves. “Zakariya and Zubeyda’s matrimony authenticates a mixed-raced tale of intimacy that they adorned and transformed into “a kind of myth”” (Noguer 602). Hence, their offspring are seen as bastards or children out of wedlock, as society does not approve their marriage. White over blacks and Indians over Africans are considered as better off each other as being interracial terminates their societal status. Color has been a huge parameter of judgement for centuries and mixing your so-called lighter shade with a person of color makes you a degraded status human in the society.

Gurnah portrays how this colonial social memory is passed down through generations by weaving two failures of central romances into the novel: the first between Rehana and Pearce, and the second involving her granddaughter Jamila and Amin. Through these relationships, Gurnah illustrates the enduring impact of colonialism on the lives of ordinary people in Tanzania, showing how the legacies of racial hierarchies and social divisions continue to shape personal and collective experiences. In Jamila's case, her family history is weaponized to undermine her relationship with Amin, as she inherits not only the physical traits of her mixed

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heritage but also the collective memory of colonialism's impact on identity and social status. These memories, particularly the stigma attached to her "chotara" identity, become a central element in her romance with Amin. Despite his genuine love for her, Amin's internal conflict reveals how the post-memory of Jamila's grandparents, especially, the societal judgments surrounding their interracial relationships, continues to shape her identity in a post-colonial society. "He knew now that he could not simply say to his parents that this is the woman I love and wish to live with. *There was the mzungu grandfather and the years her grandmother lived in flagrant sin"* (Gurnah 194).

Amin's anxiety is further highlighted by his mother, Mwana, who vehemently objects to his feelings for Jamila. She vehemently criticizes Jamila's family background, saying:

> "Do you know what kind of people they are? Her grandmother was a chotara, a child of sin by an Indian man, a bastard. When she grew into a woman, she was the mistress of an Englishman for many years, and before that another mzungu gave her a child of sin too, her own bastard. That was her life, living dirty with European men. Her mother, that same one in their big house there, the one who thinks she is someone with her silks and her perfumes and her gold jewellery, is the child of that mzungu. She doesn't even know who her father is, except that he is some English drunk that her mother took home. When her husband brought her back from Mombasa, he knew all this, but they are a rich family, so they don't care what anybody thinks. They've always done as they wished. This woman that you say you love, she is like her grandmother, living a life of secrets and sin. She has been married and divorced already. No one knows where she comes and where she goes, or who she goes to see. They are not our kind of people. They are shameless, they don't think of anyone else but themselves." (204)

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Mwana's critique of Jamila's family represents an evolved and distorted version of colonial romance, reflecting how historical narratives are reshaped over time. As Goody notes, "*oral transmission accumulates actual alterations unconsciously, continually readjusting the past to fit the present*" (Misztal 28). This concept is evident in Mwana's condemnation, where the colonial past is reinterpreted through the lens of current prejudices and social anxieties. Her portrayal of Jamila's family as morally corrupt and tainted by their colonial past is a reflection of how oral and cultural transmissions can distort and exaggerate historical narratives. Consequently, this altered version of colonial romance impacts post-memory—the way subsequent generations, who did not directly experience the original events, interact with and perceive these events. Initially, Rashid, like others, is influenced by the fragmented and emotionally charged versions of Rehana and Martin Pearce's story. His understanding is shaped by incomplete and sensationalized accounts, reflecting the societal distortion of history of actual events. Gurnah subtly addresses the complexities of the colonial romance narrative through Rashid's experience. As Rashid confesses, "I could not begin without imagining how Rehana and Martin might have come together, and all I had of that were a few scraps of gossip and scandal" (120). In Rashid's perspective, his elder brother Amin knew that "story because it had consequences for him" (119). Farida also wrote a poem about Amin and Jamila in her book "Kijulikano. That Which is Known" (231), which again intensifies the effect of a post-memory on the current lives of the characters. However, that story doesn't belong entirely to two people but that story captured the whole nerve of the colonial struggle
reflecting the temporal aspect of a memory.

Silenced Voices and Memory

Women have been silenced for much of their existence, and this silence was also a significant aspect of Mwana's life. Mwana's character, introduced only around 130 pages before the novel

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concludes, embodies endurance and tradition as the narrative shifts into the post-colonial period. Her silence and personal suffering are poignantly illustrated when she collapses at work and is diagnosed with glaucoma and suspected hypertension. At thirty-nine, Mwana's distress is compounded by her fear of becoming a burden, leading her to weep silently and express her anguish through the phrase, “I will go blind and you will have to look after my useless body,” followed by the resigned, “O yallah, alhamdulillah” (Gurnah 154). Mwana's silent weeping metaphorically reflects broader cultural and colonial tendencies to suppress women's voices, contributing to the erasure of their experiences and struggles. Unlike Rehana, who directly confronts the consequences of colonialism through her relationship with Pearce, Mwana symbolizes the silenced voices within the context of post-colonial struggle.

Her diagnosis with glaucoma and suspected hypertension not only portrays her physical suffering but also symbolizes the cultural and psychological fatigue she endures. The prospect of going blind represents a loss of connection to the present, overshadowed by the weight of past atrocities and ongoing struggles. When she went completely blind, all she did was sit quietly in the room and “look at the photograph album” (252). A Photographic album is a tangible site of memory which “preserves the memory of time and of chronological evolution” (Bates 246). Through the act of touching and describing the photographs, Mwana engages with her past, seeking solace and continuity despite her physical inability to see. However, the nature of her memories are quite selective as “she only speaks of Rashid as a child” (Gurnah 252).

Mwana's constant running of her fingers over the photographs evokes a profound sense of nostalgia. In memory terms, this selective recollection allows her to focus on the happy memories from her past while deliberately overlooking the disturbing social backdrop of her life. Her loss of vision parallels the country's loss of vision following prolonged exploitation by colonial powers. Just as Mwana's physical blindness obscures her connection to the present

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and limits her perspective, the nation’s prolonged colonial oppression has metaphorically blinded it to a clear and untainted view of its own history and future. To preserve and construct a new national identity, newly independent countries often attempt to control or temper the news. This process can result in a reshaping of the nation's collective memory, where certain events or narratives are downplayed or altered to fit the new national agenda. A notable example in East Africa is the silencing of the Mau Mau movement, where the colonial and post-colonial governments sought to suppress the memory of this resistance to maintain social order and promote a specific national narrative (Baggallay 554). Gurnah highlights a similar phenomenon in his novel through the character of Mwana. As she listens to the news, she "spars with the announcers, challenging their news and catching them out on the lies." Her response, "In the country of the blind, who needs eyes," is a sharp critique of how information is manipulated, reflecting the broader issue of how official narratives can obscure or distort reality. Mwana's skepticism toward the news symbolizes a resistance to the imposed collective memory, revealing the tension between individual memory and state-controlled narratives in the post-colonial context. The author also accentuates that her personal struggles and memories are irrelevant or unacknowledged. Additionally, the colonial past did not directly impact her life, its effects are felt indirectly through the romantic relationships of her children with individuals of mixed-race and white heritage. This indirect influence underscores the lingering consequences of colonialism on personal and familial dynamics, even for those who may not have experienced its effects directly.

Conclusion

Rehana's emotional odyssey in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion* is a comprehensive examination of love, forsaking, and fortitude, characterised by a sequence of powerful and fluctuating emotions as she navigates the intricacies of her existence. The author employs

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various narrative techniques, including third-person narration, character self-narration, and Rashid's perspective, to illustrate the multifaceted nature of the story. This approach also emphasizes the fragmented nature of memory within the narrative. This fragmentation is evident in the dialogues of Rashid's mother, Mwana, when she angrily scolds Amin for loving Jamila. Rehana's individual memory, once transformed into collective memory through rumors, loses its original essence in the process of spreading. As a result, colonial society perpetuates the anxiety, trauma, and racial hierarchy of the colonial era rather than focusing on the actual injustices faced by individuals like Rehana. Instead of showing compassion, society attaches a social stigma to Rehana's identity—a stigma that is passed down like a legacy to her subsequent generations. The consequences of this stigma are felt not only by Rehana but also by her descendants. Mwana played a significant role in the novel as a vessel of both colonial memory and anxiety. Her blindness is metaphorical for the loss of the present due to the overburden of the past. In contrast to Rehana, she also reflects the silenced woman voices and struggles during the colonial era.

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