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AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE FICTIONALIZATION OF AFRICA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: ABDUL RAZAK GURNAH'S ART IN *DESERTION*

Abstract

This paper maps a category of writing in twenty-first century African literature that rejects the reduction of humanity into simple racialized groups by constructing the stories of the past with its fragmented and complicated strands to form contemporary stories. It illustrates this point by critically examining the craft of Abdulrazak Gurnah in his eighth novel, *Desertion* as a novel in which the auto/biographical is underlined in order to reveal how (dis)located subjects negotiate their identities and transform themselves within and outside a multi-racial coastal region of East Africa. The paper concludes that rather than attest to a mono-racial African past and present, the novel is successful as an African production because it reconceptualizes migration and identities among others, in twenty-first century Africa.

Key words

Autobiography; Africa; Gurnah; fiction; migration

Introduction: New Visions of 'Old' Africa

African histories and experiences have been narrated from different perspectives including portraying a homogeneous, peaceful and harmonious Africa in pre-colonial times, exploring the effects of colonialism on the psyche, cultures and politics of African nations, and radically challenging colonial powers and their indigenous accomplices for the throes and woes of postcolonial Africa. However, African writers of the twenty-first century are faced with new challenges that require contemporary representation of these issues. One of the challenges is to reflect new experiences of migration and biracialism and also to connect these experiences with the complexities of the past.

This paper maps a category of writing in twenty-first century African literature that rejects the reduction of humanity into simple racialized groups by constructing the stories of the past with its fragmented and complicated strands to form contemporary stories. It illustrates this point by critically examining the craft of Abdulrazak Gurnah in his eighth novel, *Desertion* as a novel in which the auto/biographical is underlined in order to reveal how (dis)located subjects negotiate their identities and transform themselves within and outside a multi-racial coastal region of East Africa.

Derek Wright in the introductory chapter to *Contemporary African Fiction* gives a useful purview of the different perspectives from which writers have engaged African experiences in prose fiction. In the first group are works that are counter-discursive to colonial narratives. Next are those that address themselves to post-independence conditions in Africa. Then comes literature of popular African culture, and the hybrid literature (4). Interestingly, his categories also reflect some kind of movement in time, as the texts he brings together respond to specific literary as well as socio-political and cultural conditions of different periods in the history of the continent. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, for instance, belong to the first group because they speak as resistant texts to colonialism and the literary culture that it promoted before and during the early twentieth century. Chima Anyadike's "The Cracks in the Wall and the Colonial Incursion: *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* as Novels of Resistance" addresses specifically, Achebe's skilful and creative use of the English language as a major tool employed to dismantle imperial images of Africa and its peoples. He states:

... Achebe's transliteration of Igbo proverbs, maxims, myths and rituals in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* not only strengthens the English Language for the additional burden it must carry for those who have the 'burden of proof' thrust upon them by 'powers of event', it performs two other related functions. First, it beckons to the accusers, the persecutors and the cynics to come inside the Igbo world and take a look for themselves. Second, and more importantly, it infiltrates the ranks of the enemy surreptitiously and from within, challenges and destroys its hegemonic powers. (Anyadike 2008: 292)

Anyadike's reading of these texts supports the position that they are resistant to pre-existing histories and images that are contrary to the realities of African societies. His essay also attests to the fact that African writers recreate versions of history and highlight certain experiences as a means of offering a deeper understanding of the inner workings of African societies. It is in the light of this argument that this paper examines Abdulrazak Gurnah's craft in *Desertion* as he recreates an unpopular and complex past of individuals, families, and societies in East Africa in order to provide an alternative perspective of (post)colonial Africa. It discusses the novelist's use of the auto/biographical mode in the portrayal of biracialism and migration as experiences that redefine and shift the boundaries of the identity of an "African" in a twenty-first century African fiction.

If we may return to Wright's categories, the fourth consists of the works of migrant writers that constitutes a tradition of polyphonic voices which moves African fiction "away from a cultural homogeneity" (Wright 2001: 10). Ben Okri, Biyi Bandele-Thomas, Laing, Cheney Coker, Calixthe Beyala, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Abdulrazak Gurnah are named in this group (11). Migration has not only affected socio-economic spheres in Africa but has birthed into the world of its literature, writers that offer new visions about the past, present, and future of the continent. Paul Whites summarises the dynamism that migration stimulates:

Migration therefore changes people and mentalities. New experiences result from the coming together of multiple influences and peoples, and these new experiences lead to altered or evolving representations of experience and of self-identity. Such representations are then manifest in cultural artefacts of many kinds—new forms of dress, of food cultures and of consumerism, new styles of music and of poetry, new political ideologies, new forms of literary production. (Whites 1995: 1)

As Whites points out, migration forestalls staleness in human experience since it occasions dynamic interactions which in turn offer some kinds of alternative culture be it literary or otherwise. Gurnah and others in his group are African writers who are writing Africa in new ways. His works can be said to be,

A counter-history to earlier African fiction, notably, to the 1960s novel of national identity in its armophous, atomized precolonialism; to the later Armah, in its savagely anti-mythic portrait of indigenous Africa; and to Ngugi in its presentation of East Africans as passively conditioned to domination and self-betrayal by long exposure to outside influence and therefore receptively docile before the colonial onslaught. (Wright 2001: 11)

Exploring the Auto/biographical in Gurnah's *Desertion*

Gurnah, in his novels, probes into the unusual and less known terrains in African experience to provide new visions of fictional writing. Africa's image in his canvases would not be balanced without the interrogation of the identities which contact with different continents has produced. In Gurnah's oeuvre, *Desertion* occupies a special place for certain reasons. It is not in doubt that issues of displacement, migration, mixed race, and the negotiation of identities have always drawn his attention as shown in all his works, but in this novel, these issues are portrayed from the auto/biographical perspectives of a migrant African, who explores the complications that these issues produce in his life and the lives of other characters. Auto/biographical because the novel, to a certain extent, is predicated on the experiences of Gurnah as a migrant writer/scholar and also in the way the narrative voice moves from the third person omniscient narrator to the first

person. Another reason is that the period the novel covers, more than eight decades from the late nineteenth century to twentieth century, is longer than the periods covered in the other eight novels. For example, *Memories of Departure* is set in the mid-twentieth century while *Paradise* spans only about three decades between the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

One of the implications of the wide historical spread of *Desertion* in contrast with other novels is that it reads as a novel of origins or beginnings which unravels unspeakable details of the lives of some of the central characters in the novel, which challenge simplistic constructions of the African identity. *Paradise* is a novel which Gurnah also uses to map out an unpopular past but not in the way he does in *Desertion*. Jacqueline Bardolph describes *Paradise* as a novel which “recreates a bygone era which has romance but does not sentimentalise the past. It is harsher than most historical novels from the continent” (Bardolph 1997: 78). It is harsh because it challenges romantic perspectives about a peaceful and homogeneous Africa by presenting bloody rivalries between different ethnic and socio-economic formations in East Africa. In *Desertion*, it seems his interest in the past goes beyond experiences of ethnic groups and moves into a micro level where individuals’ struggles with established biases within ethnic and even racial groups are mirrored. He draws from his childhood experience in multi-racial Zanzibar and his experience in Britain as the materials for expressing this condition, just as the protagonist in *Admiring Silence* remembers “his youth in Zanzibar”, amidst a recollection of the hardship he faced as a migrant twenty years earlier (Bardolph 1997: 82).

Moreover, in line with Wright’s inclusion of Gurnah in the group of migrant writers of “pluralist mode of fiction” (Wright 2001: 10), is Dan Odhiambo Ojwang’s submission that, “Gurnah’s novels meditate sensitively, in the tradition of the best diasporic fiction, on questions of exile, memory, and cosmopolitanism” (Ojwang 2003: 212). His background as an East African writer has tremendous impact on his concept of heterogeneous Africa. In the novel, Gurnah obliterates the blackness of these characters by endowing them with white/European, yellow/Asian or Arab patrilineages. Moreover, the key to his treatment of race can be found in his response to Susheila Nasta’s question on his reason for depicting complex racial identities in his novels as against the homogenous identity in canonical African fictions:

One is made into a certain kind of ‘African’ so when you ask the question ‘What is an African?’ an African becomes somebody ‘who looks like me’. Not someone who has some kind of citizen rights to the place. So these two things made me uncomfortable with some of these fictions. ... Making it seem that a citizen could be described in terms of their appearance or in terms of their claimed or, in some cases, foisted ancestry. (Gurnah 2005: 360)

By deliberately presenting characters of mixed races, Gurnah hopes to problematise the easy classification of characters according to their skin colour and repre-

sent Africa as not only a confluence of cultures but also of colours where “black” is only a shade among the different shades that are obtainable.

Desertion is about Rashid, a young man from Zanzibar who leaves his homeland for Britain in the mid-nineteen sixties in pursuit of his life-long dream of becoming an academic. Shortly after his departure, the politics of Zanzibar becomes chaotic, the economy deteriorates, and life becomes difficult for his family back home. At first, he is in regular contact with his family, but this is terminated as a result of the official censorship of correspondence to overseas countries. Series of mishap disintegrates his once ideal family, and even his brother Amin, the chief correspondent, becomes blind. While his family faces these throes in Africa, Rashid makes good progress and within two decades of residence in Britain, he becomes established as an academic. He presents a paper on settler writing in Kenya at a conference, where he meets Barbara Frederick who takes interest in the story of a woman called Rehana and her European lover, which he cites as an example of sexual relationships that are usually misrepresented in settler writing in Kenya. Barbara introduces him to her mother who provides clues to certain aspects of the love story unknown to Rashid and by extension, his family back in Africa. While this can be considered the main plot of the novel, it is not revealed until the third and final part where the two chapters that constitute this part are titled “Rashid” and “Amin” respectively.

The first part has four chapters where each presents stories about the person after whom the chapter is named, and a section titled “An Interruption”. These stories are set in the close of the nineteenth century while the second part has two chapters with stories set in the late nineteen fifties. The third part is in the present where Rashid tries to recollect some events in his life and his family’s in a way that questions that are posed in the first two parts are answered. The first four chapters of the novel contain stories about Hassanali, Frederick, Rehana, and Martin. Hassanali is the younger brother of Rehana and both are the products of an interracial marriage between an Indian and an African woman. He is married and lives with his sister, Rehana, and being the only male child of the family, manages the family business. One morning, while Hassanali performs one of his pious duties of opening the mosque for the usual dawn prayer, he finds a half-dead white man, Martin Pearce, at the door of the mosque. Martin is a British historian on animal hunting expedition with some British hunters, who had to discontinue his journey because of the disgust he felt towards the wanton killing of animals by these men. He is entrusted into the hands of two Somali guides who contemplate killing him but is lucky to have been abandoned only after they have robbed him of every possession he has except a small diary. As a true Muslim, Hassanali takes him in and cares for him with the cooperation of his sister, wife and other locals until the colonial official, Frederick, comes and rudely takes Martin away.

Rehana’s story is that of an intelligent and beautiful young woman abandoned by her first love and husband for whom she waits in hope. She is a victim of an unsympathetic patriarchal society, which stigmatized her for being “single” at

the age of twenty-nine. It is in this state that Martin comes into her life as a lover in the midst of serious disapproval from members of her family and the community. She relocates to the city where she cohabits with Martin who deserts her after a few years of blissful life together. Their relationship produces a daughter, Asmil, who is adopted by Hassanali and his wife to save the child and her mother from ridicule. The story moves to the nineteen fifties when Rashid's brother, Amin, falls in love with Jamila, Asmil's daughter, who has now grown to become a public figure.

It is important that the novel opens on a biographical note, where a third-person omniscient narrator introduces the reader to Martin's accidental entrance into the home of Hassanali and his sister. This first chapter is captioned "Hassanali" as a pointer to the role this character plays both as the contact person for Rehana and Martin and his position as a classic example of the effects of biracialism on the psyche of an African. It is notable that another tells the life story of Hassanali because the hidden thoughts and struggles in the recesses of his mind are not only made known but they are considered simultaneously with those of Rehana who shares the biracial status with him. Gurnah uses this biographical mode to explore the biases and rejection that trail conditions of mixed marriages in nineteenth century East Africa. The reader meets a devout Muslim in Hassanali who opens the mosques in the early hours, cleans the steps, and makes the call to prayer, duties which he performs as a "plea that his marriage should prosper, and a prayer for his sister's grief to end" (4). However, a deeper probe into his life reveals that his religiousity is actually an attempt to fill a void which the reality of his mixed race has brought to his life. He performs his religious duties hoping for acceptance, respect and some sort of atonement for a sin he never committed – being an Asian African. The omniscient narrator lets the reader into Hassanali's mind and life later in the chapter:

He thought of himself as small and a bit ridiculous in other people's eyes, round and overweight. When the banter started he always struggled against the flow of jibes and jokes, and kept quiet to stay out of trouble. He lived in this state of self-absorbed timidity, expecting mockery and inevitably suffering it. He could not disguise the anxiety and people who had known him all his life knew this about him, and made a joke out of it. They said it was something to do with his jinsi, his ancestry. Indian people are cowardly, they said, hopping about like nervous butterflies. (17)

His Indian ancestry deprives him of full participation and even membership of a society where he was born and which he has continued to serve. He is considered "Indian" not African even though he does not have much knowledge or contact with his supposed Indian ancestry.

For him and his sister, Rehana, having an Indian father places them in the margin where they are "part of the whole but outside the main body" (Hooks 1984). Being outside has implications for the identity imposed on them by the

society. Despite the fact that the birth of Hassanali and Rehana is not outside wedlock, they are called “chotara”, which means bastards because of their mixed race (66). Rehana cannot forget the rejection and humiliation their father, Zakariya, suffers for his choice of a black African woman as wife. Their father leaves Mombasa, a place he described as a “home-town”, to settle down with his native wife in a quiet town where he feels they will be safe from the attacks of his Indian friends. She remembers how “Indians came past the shop and how they treated their father disdainfully” (66). She also remembers her father’s remarks:

‘I don’t want anything to do with these high-handed, sneering-mouthed chewers of betel-nut badam and drinkers of sour milk,’ their father said. ‘See their mouths, red and twisted with ugly thoughts, sneering and sneering all the time. I had enough of people like them in India, always better than anyone else, always pure, always right... they don’t bring their families because they think the natives will eat them. Who cares about them? What do you mean don’t use such words in front of children? The children should know that these are sneering worthless goat-fuckers’. (67)

Their father tries to let his children know that it is the discriminating community of Indians that are in the wrong. Based on the knowledge Rehana has about this discrimination against their mother and the rejection of their father, she cannot understand her brother’s excitement and acceptance of the Indian’s marriage proposal to her. She considers this “a silliness” as she cannot understand why her brother cares about India “when their father, who was the only Indian among them, had nothing to do with it, and the only Indians they knew treated them with disdain” (68). Unfortunately the marriage is deserted by Azad the Indian and Hassanali’s hope of reconnecting with India is dashed.

Rehana and Hassanali are therefore, obviously cut off from their extended family from India. It is only members of their mother’s family that attempt to connect with them in anyway. This sort of estrangement is not desirable in African societies where the extended family system is operational. It is no wonder then that their father tries to redirect their attention to other type of extended family fostered by religious ties. Zakariya therefore reshapes his identity along religious persuasion, “he was a Muslim living among Muslims, and that was enough for him. Where he was born or came from was neither here or there, they all lived in the house of God, dar-al-Islam, which stretched across mountains and forests and deserts and oceans, and where all were the same in submission to God” (62). He seeks an alternative identity which he believes transcends racial and ethnic boundaries.

This discrimination resurfaces several decades after when Amin, the protagonist’s brother, falls in love with Rehana’s granddaughter. Amin’s mother warns, “Do you know who she is? Do you know her people? Do you know what kind of people they are? Her grandmother was a chotara, a child of sin by an Indian man, a bastard” (204). Rehana remains untouchable until her death just because she is Indian African. Biracial women in the novel seem to have experienced a deeper

form of exclusion as a result of their gender because unlike their male counterparts who at least have some measure of access to the public where they attempt to redeem their image, the women are shut out and are expected to remain in the margin of margins. Silvia Critina Bettez sheds more light on the implications of mixed-race for women in a study she conducted among women of colour at a large public institution in the United States of America. She submits:

These women's stories of (dis)identification disrupt essentialized notions of family, reveal oppressive patriarchal norms, overtly destabilize constructions of fixed racial categories, and highlight epistemologies of belonging and exclusion... (Bettez 2010)

In *Desertion*, while Hassanali succeeds in establishing a stable married life, the same proves elusive for his sister, her daughter and granddaughter. The society pushes these women to the margins by the negative reception given them in public places and so making union with them undesirable for men who want to maintain their “dignity” in the society. This in fact accounts for the extremes in which Jamila finds herself. The man she dates before getting involved with Amin is older while Amin is younger than she is. No mention is made of her mother's husband but we know that her grandmother's life was plagued by constant rejection and abandonment by the men she loved.

The character of Martin is strategically portrayed in order to set up a platform for the introduction of a reality that is often glossed over in African fiction – the romantic involvement of colonial Europeans with Africans and the consequent presence of “half-white” Africans. First, as a different way of representing Africa's contact with Europe, Martin is not a trader neither is he a government official. He enters the scene “exhausted, lost, his body worn out and his face and arms covered with cuts and bites” (6). He is clearly vulnerable and in need of help; an image which nullifies the strength and invincibility of an adventurous European that we are most likely to find in colonialist travelogues. He is only a historian and orientalist who seems to be against the business of colonisation and the cultural hegemony promoted by the enterprise. While recuperating in the home of the District Officer, Frederick, he listens to the provocative arguments between Frederick and another official, Burton about the Empire. Contrary to expectations about a British character, he does not defend colonialism and is rather nauseated by the manner in which the two men leisurely chat about the unsavoury effect of colonialism on the continent. The reader is let into his thoughts, “He had a reaction to this kind of talk. It made him feel ill” (85), and when Burton demands to know what he thinks of the prospect of turning Africa into another America where natives are displaced, he replies, “I think in time we'll come to see what we're doing in places like these less heroically, I think we'll come to see ourselves less charmingly. I think in time we'll come to be ashamed of some of the things we have done” (85).

We are not surprised then that Martin is appalled at the harsh and suspicious treatment Frederick metes out to the kind and hospitable Hassanali and his fam-

ily. After his recovery, his move to go and show appreciation to the natives is, in Frederick's judgement, unbecoming of a white man in this context. Going to visit the natives as one who has received a favour from them opposes and undermines Frederick's position as the agent of the Empire to whom the natives must look up to for favours. It is clear as shown in his first contact with Hassanali that he is not visiting that home as a friend but as a master with the rights and powers to demand from the natives-subjects the non-existent property of the half-dead Martin. Frederick's pride and hostility contrast with Martin's humility and friendliness. He is named "a thief" by Malika, Hassanali's wife and "a conqueror" by Rehana because he fails to return the mat and locally made stretcher-cum-rug in which Martin was taken away. This discussion by members of Hassanali's family passes for a critique of colonialism. Both Rehana and Malika engage this discourse in order to show the reception of the coloniser by the colonised. The latter's comment are particularly sharp: "And then after that they didn't even bring the mat back,' ... 'Or the shuka. What need does that European have with our mat when he has perfumed rugs on his floors? He is a thief, that's all.'" (59). Martin speaks Arabic and understands at least to certain extent, the moral and cultural codes that guard an Islamic society. Gurnah shows that apart from origin, Martin and Frederick do not share the same ideologies. Unlike Frederick who violates cultural codes of the natives intentionally with an air of superiority, Martin respects them and is granted access into their lives. This access paves the way for his relationship with Rehana and an opportunity for the conception and birth of another set of biracial Africans in the novel.

The fact that Martin has travelled to several places around the globe gives him a more tolerant and informed attitude to cultures outside Europe. Despite his near-death experience in the hands of the Somali guards, he defends the Somali image. Frederick calls them "bandits" but he says, "I don't know about that, ... There are people who will swear on the loyalty of a Somali. Weatherhill almost did, on his word of honour or one of those declarations. Those poor young men let him down though. Maybe they will become notorious among their people for abandoning me... (53). Martin does not in any way feel superior to the natives but rather grateful that they have welcomed him into their lives, even in the most unlikely circumstances. In the case of both men, travel, an integral part of migration, produces separate notions of the identity of the coloniser.

The biographical narration of most of the lives of the characters in the novel helps us to see that the colonised "other" also has misgivings about the coloniser. Hassanali's life story shows that as naive as Hassanali is reputed to be in the community, he is not ignorant of potential effect of accommodating a European. When he comes in contact with the half-dead Martin, he considers where to put him and the omniscient narrator shares, "They only had two rooms and Hassanali would have to share his room with him. From what he had heard about them, the European was bound to ask to have the room to himself, or even the whole house" (22). Just like his sister and wife, he can see beyond the civilising mission of Europe to Africa. The *mzungus*, as the natives call them, are in the danger of

being ridiculed if they ever venture into the area of the locals. As demonstrated in Hassanali's mindset, the feeling of suspicion between the natives and Europeans is mutual so that each group constructs the image of the "other" in its own terms.

The Art of a Fictional Auto/biographer

Desertion displays the use to which recollections and recreation of the past can be put to explain the present. Rashid is the auto/biographer whose engagement with the past underlines the possible complexities that are inherent in a plot that appears to be linear and simple. The episodic and somewhat staggered narrative style lends credence to the novel as a volume on life stories. The novel begins with a chronological narration and suddenly becomes disjointed just as the reader awaits the progression of the love story of Rehana and Martins. Rashid in "Interruption" introduces himself in the first person pronoun as the voice of the present whose search for missing links in the story of a family has led him to discover and recreate stories to make up the fragmented whole. Gurnah does not shy away from the fact that getting or attempting to fix together seemingly unrelated pieces of events in people's lives has far-reaching implications for the present. The novel's protagonist, Rashid, is called a dreamer and the reader is invited into his dream world. Imagination is privileged as the key to unlocking mysteries of the past while it is the key to self-actualisation in the future, and the present centres the story/narration as the link to the three phases of temporal existence. From these three positions, fiction or writing is indeed the mediating art that has the capacity to provide answers, remove gaps, and advance knowledge about Africa. It is interesting to note that it is the dreamer, Rashid, and his sister, Farida who survive the socio-political ruptures that are experienced by the family in the novel. Farida is initially portrayed as a failure who is unable to pass any examination and is at first condemned to the domestic sphere until she finds solace in sewing and the becomes a successful poet because she finds love and freely communicates with her love, the result of which is the volume of poetry that wins her international recognition and applause. Farida's creativity, as opposed to Amin's teaching skill, gives her the edge above him and also helps her to overcome the difficulties that characterised the post-independence Zanzibar.

It is noteworthy that Rashid, a migrant scholar in the West, is the only person who is able to find answers to and unravel the long standing mystery that has characterised the history of Jamila's family/generations. Gurnah places the character as the producer of knowledge for those in Zanzibar and also a link to a past for those in Britain. This role privileges travel/immigration as a kind of answer or solution to certain things. Until his travel to Britain, Rashid was like the others, one-eyed or blind. Vision is enabled by his location outside Zanzibar and dislocation becomes an advantage not a disadvantage. The argument here is that on the part of Gurnah as migrant writer, he advances a position that disentangles and that can see beyond essentialised racial issues.

It is important that we see other characters, hear stories from Rashid's perspective. He reconstructs the past, as an independent and objective third-person, until he introduces "Interruption" and then uncovers his involvement or complicity in the scheme as he assumes the subjective position as the "eye/I" of the story. Either as the 'eye' as in third person omniscient narrator or the "I", he is the vision of the author and as the protagonist, his life-course dictates the pace of the story and the space of the other characters. The reader gets to know that some of the beautifully crafted details of the preceding chapters are the creation of Rashid, particularly aspects that concern Rehana and Martin, her lover. He defends himself for not reaching a progressive and linear conclusion on their relationship:

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. Imagination fails me and that fills me with sorrow. I had thought that even without knowing the details of their affair I would be able to get the truth of it, for imagination is a kind of truth. I do not mean that as a Romantic solipsism: it is only what I am able to imagine that is true... None the less, whether I am able to imagine it or not, I know that Rehana Zakariya and Martin Pearce became lovers. I have no choice but to try and give an account of how their affair might have happened. (110, 111)

It is indeed through this "Interruption" that Rashid's role as the auto/biographer is underlined. He becomes a more authentic source than any other member of his family because he is the one who has moved both physically and intellectually beyond the borders of Zanzibar into the outside world where he meets the relations of Federick, the providers of the missing links to Rehana's life story. As the biographer, he gathers information about the subjects of his narration in order to give the reader a better view of their lives.

In the novel, the term "desertion" is both a state and a comment on a condition. As a state of being, it describes the successive but varied experiences of abandonment suffered by almost all the characters that we meet in the novel. It is a one word summary of the narrated lives in the text that is closely tied to migration and racial issues. Through death, Rehana and her brother become deserted by their parents while they are yet to find their footing as adults in a society that discriminate against the marriage of their parents. In the second instance, Rehana is deserted by her Indian merchant-husband, after a very brief life together as a couple. She gets into another relationship and is again abandoned or deserted by the man. She enters into yet another relationship and this time it its death separates her from the man and she inherits his fortunes. Rashid leaves his country and family in pursuit of higher education and to certain extent, is forced by the government at home to desert his family who informs him that there is no home to come back to. Grace, his partner in Britain also deserts him on the claims that he is a self-centred man who cares less for the other person. In a sense, desertion is a unitary factor or commonality found n the lives of the characters portrayed in the novel.

Conclusion

There are other things that stand Gurnah's novel out as a work of fiction in the twenty-first century. The first is the attention he pays to the romantic aspect of colonial Africa. The novel will almost pass for a romance novel if not for the pungent presence of the negatives. Certainly, it does not end the way most romance novels would end because we are not sure that Rashid and his new found love would live happily ever after. Apart from this, only one love story ends well: that is Farida's and Abass' relationship. Amin's attempt to love is prevented from blossoming because of the complications involved and the drowning voice of the society that kicks against marriages between black Africans and those who are not.

The second is that Islam is also shown as a religion of peace and Muslims as hospitable and generous. Hassanali is a God-fearing, submissive Muslim and an epitome of kindness. He ruminates on the fateful meeting with Martin:

It was God's chance that made things happen as they did, and God did nothing by chance. This was a burden that had been chosen for him, perhaps to try him or punish him or test him, according to a wisdom which was not yet apparent to him. How could he even consider refusing the wounded man hospitality and succour? Having satisfied himself that it would be offensive to God for him to give up the European... (23)

Hassanali's act of kindness is not out of place for a Muslim but not common for a colonised subject toward a member of the colonising race. The novelist underscores the primacy of religion over the political for a Muslim, using Hassanali as an example. *Desertion* was published four years after the terrorist attack in the United States of America and it seems Gurnah's portrait of Muslims and Islam is to defray the negative reception of same in the twenty-first century. Even before Rashid departs for Britain in the post-independence Zanzibar, Christians and Muslims coexisted without any trace of violence or animosity, practitioners of each religion respected each other's space. There are both Christian and Muslim schools, parents are free to choose which schools their children will attend and there is no reason for clashes. Jamila attends both types of schools and still remains a Muslim. Moreover, unlike the popular image of polygamous Muslim families, not one of the three families portrayed in the novel fits into this stereotype and they all look like Western families living in colonial Africa. Finally, there are two major (overlapping) contributions that Gurnah makes to the fictionalizing of Africa in the twenty-first century through the novel. First is the way he shows that migration is an issue that should be understood as a very strong factor in defining who an African is. Second is that it could be advantageous in the construction and understanding of familial and communal histories. He uses his characters, especially Martin and Rashid, to show that racial identities sometimes defy simple classifications and that a mono-racial Africa is neither tenable nor feasible in twenty-first century Africa.

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