

Unraveling Personal Journeys: Autobiographical Narratives of Migration and Relationships in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion*

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“Autobiography is awfully seductive; it’s wonderful. Once I got into it, I realized I was following a tradition established by Frederick Douglass – the slave narrative – speaking in the first person singular, talking about the first-person plural, always saying ‘I,’ meaning ‘we’.”

Maya Angelou

Abstract

In an autobiographical book, the author draws inspiration directly from their own experiences. Although the circumstances of the story are constructed dramatically, its inherent essence is based on the author's own life. The writers, however, add in certain fresh developments to the narrative for aesthetic or thematic reasons. As a consequence, it discovers a harmonious blend of reality and fiction that has the intended impact on the reader. Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion* engages with the multifaceted experiences of migration. It captures the sociocultural complexities that migrants encounter, unraveling the symbiotic relationship between individual journeys and the broader migratory phenomena. Meanwhile, it deftly demonstrates the mutual influence of migration narratives and interpersonal dynamics by intertwining them. In it, he emphasises the significance of relationships, showing how these bonds serve as both a source of stability and a driving force in the lives of migrants. This paper examines how Gurnah weaves his personal experiences into *Desertion*, creating a profound exploration of migration and the collision of cultures across the continents. Through the lens of autobiographical elements, it also attempts to unravel the complexities of human relationships and the impact of migration experiences in the narrative.

Keywords: autobiography, desertion, harmonious, memoir, migration.

Introduction

In an autobiographical book, the author draws inspiration directly from their own experiences. It's not an autobiography or memoir, but rather a different kind of writing altogether. Although the circumstances of the story are constructed dramatically, its inherent essence is based on the author's own life. The writers, however, add in certain fresh developments to the narrative for aesthetic or thematic reasons. As a consequence, it discovers a harmonious blend of reality and fiction that has the intended impact on the reader. The protagonist in an autobiographical work is often a representation of the author, and the plot often incorporates real-life events and experiences. Meanwhile, the narrative trajectory of the book shall be derived from the author's experiences, thereby imparting a distinct autobiographical dimension. This narrative construct is poised to be articulated through the prism of the first person perspective, a deliberate narrative choice serving to accentuate the intimate and subjective nature inherent in the unfolding events. This class of books chronicles the author's profoundly sensitive or insensitive experiences, such as those they had during the war, with their families, or in their relationships. This kind of book is authored when the author has an overwhelming, want to release their pent-up thoughts, emotions, and difficulties onto the page. James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) has a protagonist named Stephen Dedalus who, like Joyce, is a fictionalised version of the author. Using Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion* (2005), this paper examines how Gurnah weaves his personal experiences into the text, creating a profound exploration of migration and the collision of cultures across the continents. Through the lens of autobiographical elements, it also attempts to unravel the complexities of human relationships and the impact of migration experiences in the narrative.

The literary subgenre known as "autobiographical fiction" combines elements of fiction with those of nonfiction, memoir, and satire. The author's experiences inform the character's experiences, and vice versa. Rather than being an autobiography, it reads more like a book. It's more of a work of fiction, and like any fiction, it reflects the author's imagination to some extent. In his autobiography, the author relies only on factual information to paint a picture of his background. The author is allowed to provide just those details from his life that he thinks are significant. He is at liberty to use a screening procedure if he so chooses. The value of autobiography as a kind of creative nonfictional storytelling is emphasised. For the sake of telling the 'truth' about his life, the author has decided to write his autobiography. While he is telling the truth about his life, he might choose to highlight some events and gloss over others. He conveys the stuff he has chosen to include in his autobiography creatively so that it is engaging and genuine.

Autobiographical narratives inherently possess a subjective nature, as they encapsulate the life account of their respective authors. Such compositions pivot upon the processes of self reflection and introspection, diverging from a mere chronological recitation of life events. The author, in this context, assumes the role of an impartial observer, delineating their own persona to the reader with an equanimous perspective. Notably, the author functions dually as both the narrative's creator and its central character, yet this coexistence results in a distinct separation of these roles within the confines of autobiographical narration. Even when the author and the principal character coalesce into the same individual, the autobiographical context enkindles their manifestation as discrete entities. In assuming the mantle of the principal character, the author artfully transcribes personal experiences, all the while maintaining the detached stance characteristic of an

objective chronicler. This dynamic interplay of roles engenders autobiography as a potent amalgamation of both subjective and objective vantage points, facilitating a nuanced exploration of the author's life. The lives of Lawrence, Dickens, and R. K. Narayan are imaginatively and emotionally transcribed in their works; *Sons and Lovers* (1913), *David Copperfield* (1850), and *The English Teacher* (1945). Narayan expresses the joy of his marriage and the crushing sorrow of losing his best friend and soul mate through the fictitious character Krishna in his novel *The English Teacher*.

When writing an autobiography, an autobiographer attempts to accurately portray the author's life, whereas autofiction authors only draw inspiration from their own experiences. However, unlike autobiographers, authors of autofiction are not held to the same standards of historical accuracy. Autofiction is a kind of writing that is based on the author's real life experiences but also incorporates fictitious elements. The author-reader connection is another important one. The narrative also features the narrator's connections with many other fictional characters. To put it another way, this affords the speaker the opportunity to portray the self as "an experiencer or recipient of actions, where the self is seen as an objective static entity" (Quigley 152). It is possible for the storyteller to frame events in a manner that absolves the narrator from any culpability for the result.

The preeminent elucidation provided by Philip Lejeune is widely acknowledged within the discourse. In his explication, an autobiography is characterized as "a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality" (4). He identifies several defining traits that collectively demarcate the genre of autobiography, encompassing elements such as the utilization of prose as the narrative medium, a reflective examination of past experiences, the involvement of an authentic human subject, a concentration on the particulars of individual life, and a deliberate exploration of personality development.

In the seminal work, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960) by Roy Pascal, a concerted effort is made to establish a framework for the classification of autobiographical works. Pascal advances the argument that a rigorous differentiation must be made between genuine autobiographical compositions and other literary forms that incorporate autobiographical elements. He also contends that an autobiography is distinguished not only by its content but also by the distinct disposition assumed by the author and the unique mode of presentation employed (3). The fundamental aspect underlying this distinctiveness lies in the proactive endeavor of the writer to construct a coherent narrative. This cohesiveness is forged through the writer's "particular standpoint, the standpoint of the moment at which he reviews his life, and interprets his life from it" (9).

Smith and Watson undertake an exploration of the nature of autobiographical works as understood within the context of phenomenological contemplation. Their investigation reveals that autobiographical expression conceived through the lens of phenomenology is intricately woven from the threads of 'memory, experience, identity, space, embodiment, and agency' (21-62). The material manifestation of autobiographical reality takes the form of narrative discourse, wherein the process of storytelling serves as a conduit for the embodiment of the self. Olney's perspective aligns with this notion, emphasizing the paramount role of memory in shaping the trajectory of autobiographical narratives. He also posits that memory functions as the linchpin that guides the "narrative course," enabling "the reflective, retrospective gathering up of that past-in-becoming into this present-as-being" (241). Memory's impact on the fabric of 'bios,' or life, is threefold: it acts as a creative force,

remains dormant in instances devoid of autobiographical intent, and takes on a transformative role (240). The creative and transformative dimensions of memory's influence harmoniously adhere to the structural coherence inherent in autobiographical texts. This coherent compositional structure stands as the defining characteristic of autobiography, setting it apart from both memoir and historical accounts by virtue of its exclusive preoccupation with self-exploration.

Gurnah's propensity towards *Desertion* has nothing to do with the challenges he has as a result of his mixed racial heritage or the difficulties he faces negotiating his own identity. The book is written from an autobiographical point of view, which allows the author to examine the difficulties that they have caused in his own life and in the life of the narrative's protagonist. The book hinges, in part, on Gurnah's own experiences as a migrant novelist, and this is reflected in the switch from an omniscient third-person narrator to a first-person point of view. His concentration, in contrast to his *Paradise*, the narration in the *Desertion*, delves deeper into the past, taking us beyond his experiences where the sufferings of people ethnically and racially are recorded. Like the protagonist in *Admiring Silence* (1996) looks back on his toddlerhood in Zanzibar, the author relies on his own experiences growing up in Zanzibar and subsequently in Britain. According to Gikandi, "Gurnah's novels meditate sensitively, in the tradition of the best diasporic fiction, on questions of exile, memory, and cosmopolitanism" (212). As one may expect from a Black African author, his work mostly focuses on multifaceted Africa. In *Desertion*, he erases the characters' blackness by giving them European features.

Autobiographical Elements in *Desertion*

Desertion, Gurnah's seventh work, is recounted mostly by a first-person narrator who, due to the author's careful concealment of his identity, may be read as the novel's omniscient narrator. A second voice, relayed to him through the secret notebooks, helps him to interact with the reader. The initial segment of the novel comprises four chapters, each meticulously focusing on a specific character whose identity is synonymous with the corresponding section's title. The narrative encapsulated within this segment unfolds against the backdrop of the late nineteenth century. The second section comprises two chapters, delving into events that transpire during the late 1950s. The narrative chronicle advances to the third section, which is firmly situated within the contemporary temporal sphere. This section is distinguished by Rashid's endeavour to recollect and reflect upon pivotal events from his personal life and that of his familial milieu. Such introspective recollection is orchestrated in a manner that effectively resolves the thematic and narrative concerns introduced in the preceding two sections. Hassanali, Frederick, Rehana, and Martin, all make appearances in the novel's first four chapters. Hassanali is Rehana's younger brother; they were both born to an Indian man and an African lady. He settled down with his sister, Rehana, and got hitched. He runs the family company since he is the only son in the family.

One day, Hassanali, amid his religious responsibilities; opens the mosque for the daily dawn prayer and discovers a white guy named Martin Pearce lying at the entrance, half-dead. While on an animal shooting excursion with three British hunters, British historian Martin had to cut short his trip because he was so appalled by the hunters' senseless slaughter of the animals' lives. Two Somali escorts are entrusted with his safety, but they end up abandoning him and his little diary after they steal everything from him. Hassanali, a devout Muslim, takes Martin to his home and looks for the cooperation of his sister, wife, and other villagers

to nurse him until the arrival of the obnoxious colonial officer, Frederick, who takes Martin away.

Each of the three main characters; Hassanali, the shopkeeper, Rehana, and Martin, play an important part in the novel. The tale depicts a family that works well together, united by their affection for one another. However, treachery and abandonment are evident throughout this passionately weaved, multi-voiced narrative. The tale takes place during two pivotal periods of European colonisation in East Africa. Set in the 1890s, the first part of the novel explores the difficulties that arise when a European man named Martin Pearce and a local woman named Rehana Zakariya fall in love despite the domineering imperial discourses about the inferiority of the natives and the barriers that exist between different cultures and religions. In the second half, which takes place during the “imperial decline” of the 1950s, where we see how Martin and Rehana’s love story has left its mark on their granddaughter Jamila and a local schoolteacher named Amin.

Keeping with the autobiographical tone, as established above, the book opens with the third-person omniscient narrator narrating of Martin’s first meeting with Hassanali. Hassanali’s role as that of a liaison between Rehana and Martin is introduced in the opening chapter. Gurnah uses a biographical approach to investigate prejudice against interethnic couples in East Africa all through the nineteenth century. Within the narrative of Hassanali’s character, readers are presented with a portrayal of an ardent of the Islamic faith, dutifully engaged in the quotidian practices of tending to mosque opening, staircase maintenance, and issuing calls to prayer as a “plea that his marriage should prosper, and a prayer for his sister’s grief to end” (Gurnah 4). Nevertheless, upon closer examination of his historical antecedents, an intricate layer emerges, revealing that his zealous commitment to religiosity serves as an endeavour to bridge a palpable lacuna in his existence that is irrevocably linked to the complex implications of his “mixed-race” (257) heritage, as eloquently expounded upon in Gurnah’s narrative. The only sin he has ever done is being African, so he carries out his religious responsibilities in the hopes of gaining acceptance, respect, and atonement. And then, in the chapter’s second half, the omniscient narrator opens Hassanali’s thoughts and experiences to the readers:

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 (17).

Rashid describes his connections at a period of widespread bigotry and anti-foreigner feeling in the book. Thus, the tales of Martin Pearce, Rehana, and, later, Amin and Rashid, become the primary instruments for articulating many events that are happening that the various ‘illicit’ love stories strive to fuse together. Destabilizing the dominant discourses on both sides, Rehana and Martin exist on the periphery of their respective cultures. At first, Martin and Rehana’s romance is stymied by cultural and imperial nationalism, but those on the periphery end up subverting the “transcendental ideas of culture”. Their connection may serve as an example for finding the few ambiguous spots where good potential might be cultivated in spite of challenging cultural and ideological environments.

Hassanali and Rehana feel marginalised since their father is Indian, which positions them “part of the whole but outside the main body” (Hooks). Despite being born to legally married parents, their classification as “chotara” (Gurnah 66), casts them as social outliers. It further carries connotations of being considered a “bastard,” a discriminatory label firmly rooted in their “mixed-race” (257) background. A poignant reflection emerges as Rehana grapples with the mistreatment of her father, Zakaria, endures due to his marriage to an African-American woman. The emotional turmoil that ensues for Rehana underscores the pervasive racial biases and prejudices that cast a shadow over Zakariya’s life. His association with Mombasa, described as his “home-town,” (66) prompts him to seek solace away from the affronts and disdain that he faces from his Indian acquaintances. This decision resonates with a desire to establish a tranquil dwelling alongside his wife, thereby distancing themselves from the judgemental attitudes of his fellow Indian compatriots. The memory of how “Indians came past the shop and how they treated their father disdainfully” (66) lingers in Rehana’s recollections. This reminiscence encapsulates the discriminatory attitudes prevalent within the Indian community towards those with ‘mixed-race’ backgrounds.

To Rehana, who is aware of the prejudice against Indian people, it is befuddling that her brother would be so enthusiastic about India and accept the Indian’s proposal of marriage to her “when their father, who was the only Indian among them, had wanted nothing to do with it, and the only Indians they knew treated them with disdain” (68). Hassanali coerces her into marrying Azad: “Why don’t you accept him and then we can ask him any questions you like? I don’t want to offend him. I think he’s a good man, I don’t think you’ll find another one better” (71). But unfortunately, the marriage proposal with him gets cancelled.

Several decades later, when Rashid’s elder brother Amin finds love with Rehana’s granddaughter Jamila, the bigotry flares up again. Amin’s mother rebukes him, not to fall in love with a “divorced woman” (193). In a warning tone, she asks: “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). For no other reason than her race, Rehana is treated with disrespect right up until her death. The novel’s biracial women seem to have been subjected to worse forms of discrimination because of their gender. Women are excluded and expected to keep to the periphery. Keeping view on “mixed-race” for women, Bettez observes: “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” (143).

The author writes of Martin’s entrance: “exhausted, lost, his body worn out and his face and arms covered with cuts and bites” (Gurnah 6). Unlike the typical strong and invincible European hero, we see in imperialist travelogues, he is obviously weak and in need of assistance. Even though he is a historian and orientalist, he appears to be against the colonial industry and the cultural dominance it promotes. While resting at Frederick’s house, he overhears Frederick and another officer, Burton, engaging in heated debate about the Empire. He does not advocate colonialism, as one would assume of a British character, and is really sickened by the two men’s casual conversation about the vile legacy of colonization on the African continent. The author gives the reader insight into his mind by saying: “He had a reaction to this kind of talk. It made him feel ill” (85). The thought of Africa becoming another America with displaced indigenous made him sick, and when Burton asks what he thinks, he tells him, “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).

The novel's biographical recounting to most of his characters' narratives enlightens to the readers that the colonised "other" shares some of the colonisers' doubts and reservations. Despite Hassanali's reputation for naivety in the community, his life experience reveals that he is well aware of the ripple effects that hosting a European may have. The omniscient narrator reveals that when he first reaches the half-dead Martin, he has to decide where to place him: "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). He, too, can see behind the Europeans' supposed civilising mission in Africa, as can his sister and wife.

Rashid, the auto/biographer, focuses on the past to provide insight on the present, and his perspective illuminates the storyline. The novel's narrative structure, which is episodic and somewhat staggered, makes it credible as a collection of life narratives. The novel's narrative flows chronologically at first, but then it gets fragmented just when the reader is anticipating the next step in the romance between Rehana and Martins. In "Interruption," Rashid conveys the reader that he is the representative of the present, as that of the person whose quest to fill in the gaps in his family's history has led him to unearth and reconstruct tales. Rashid, the protagonist, is described as a "dreamer," (134) and the story takes place in his imagination. In this view, the present serves as the connecting point between the past, the future, and one's own self-actualization, with the imagination being given top billing for its role in uncovering the secrets of the past and the future.

Since Farida is introduced earlier and about her inability in her career, she is relegated to the domestic sphere; however, after finding happiness in working in garments, she goes on to become a successful poet, gaining international recognition and acclaim as a result of the volume of poetry, she writes after falling in love and communicating with her partner. In contrast to Amin's teaching prowess, her imagination gives her the upper hand, and it also allows her to triumph over the challenges that have plagued post-independence Zanzibar.

Rashid retells the incidents from the past in a dispassionate and impartial third person till he brings up "Interruption." He is the author's inspiration, and as the main character, his journey determines how the plot unfolds and where the other characters are placed. Some of the previous chapters, especially those involving Rehana and her partner Martin, are revealed to the reader to be Rashid's invention. The chapter serves to highlight Rashid's position as auto/biographer. He is the only family member to have been outside the island of Zanzibar, both literally and metaphorically, and it is through his interactions with Frederick's relatives that he is able to fill in the gaps in Rehana's biography. To offer his readers a more complete picture of the people he is writing about, he does research as their biographer. The pains and sufferings that different characters faced because of cross cultural association is representative of the cultural stereotype prevailing at that time. The characters in the novel have intricate relationship that gets highlighted through multiple narratives. The influence of colonialism and post-colonialism has its adverse effect on the personal lives and gets beautifully delineated through characters like Rashid, Rehana, Jamila, Amin, and Martin.

Conclusion

An in-depth study of the text reflects the transitional changes and their influence on the community and the individual during colonial and post-colonial Africa. Through the fictional characters, Gurnah throws light on the plight and predicament of people especially the migrants and the refugees of that time. Gurnah spent the early years of his life in Tanzania and observed the various upheavals of the time. Through the novel, the writer sheds light on the socio-cultural and economic realities of Africa during the colonial and post-colonial regimes. A glimpse into the personal life journey of the author reflects a strong semblance with the various developments that take place in the text. The narratives in the text are an interpretation of the author's observation reflecting on the insecurities and challenges faced both by the natives and the settlers. Gurnah's novelistic experimentation hinges on the autobiographical approach and ends up lending the text, the character of a mixed genre. Through the interplay of auto/biographical elements, Gurnah succeeds in presenting a nuanced exploration of migration, cultural complexities, and interpersonal dynamics, thereby contributing to the genre of autobiographical fiction in a compelling and thought-provoking manner.

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