

Nicoletta Brazzelli

Rewriting history: colonial encounters and forbidden love stories in Gurnah's *Desertion*

Abstract I: In *Desertion* (2005) Abdulrazak Gurnah rewrites the history of colonial encounters and the issue of the 'contamination' between colonizers and colonized is put at the centre of the narration; the Zanzibari novelist moves beyond traditional historical patterns, unburying private stories of forbidden relationships and thus developing a new consciousness of the colonial experience located at the margins of official history. The representation of colonial entanglements implies the revisitation of the master narrative in the light of contemporary diasporic cultures. Forbidden love affairs and cultural collisions reverberate generation after generation and across continents, from the heyday of the empire to the aftermath of decolonization. Gurnah's novel tentatively traces the danger of an interracial relationship and, at the same time, its inevitability.

Abstract II: Nel romanzo *Desertion* (2005) Abdulrazak Gurnah riscrive la storia dell'incontro coloniale mentre il tema della 'contaminazione' tra colonizzatore e colonizzato viene posto al centro della narrazione; lo scrittore originario di Zanzibar va al di là degli schemi storici tradizionali e rivela storie di relazioni proibite, sviluppando una consapevolezza nuova dell'esperienza coloniale collocata ai margini della storia ufficiale. La rappresentazione delle complesse e intricate relazioni coloniali implica la rivisitazione della narrativa imperiale alla luce delle culture diasporiche contemporanee. Relazioni d'amore proibite dalle differenze razziali e collisioni culturali si riverberano generazione su generazione, dal culmine dell'impero al periodo successivo alla

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decolonizzazione. Il romanzo di Gurnah mette in luce il pericolo delle relazioni interrazziali e, nello stesso tempo, la loro inevitabilità.

Postcolonial perspectives seek to deconstruct the grand narratives of imperial and national histories deriving from a vision of continuous progress, in order to reveal suppressed, defeated and negated historical events and private, marginal stories (Duana 2002: 417-431). Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels try to explore 'alternative histories', thus disclosing a personal point of view on the colonial past and the postcolonial present: the contemporary writer lives in a complex world of entanglements where familiar relationships and love stories are the main connection between space and time (Steiner 2010). In his narrations, Gurnah, born in 1948 in Zanzibar, living in Great Britain since 1968, both a novelist and a literary critic, explores the issue of the 'contamination' between colonizer and colonized. His works include the East African traditions and the Muslim contribution to them, because his native Zanzibar has a long history of encounters of different peoples, cultures and idioms. Arabs, Indians and Europeans have lived and mixed for centuries on the island and on the East African coast, a site of ethnic contacts, negotiations and exchanges. Gurnah draws attention to the entangled histories of East Africa, but also figures a 'wider world', where, through wider interconnections and entanglements, different people discover their common humanity and ethics of relation.

From the publication of his first novel, *Memory of Departure* (1987), through *Paradise* (1994), *Admiring Silence* (1996) and *By the Sea* (2001), to *Desertion* (2005), Gurnah develops the theme of the migrant's displacement, estrangement and dispossession, as his characters move – voluntarily or not – from Zanzibar to England (Whyte 2004): cut off from their roots, their land, their past, they embody the 'paradigm' of exile and cultural difference. What strongly distinguishes Gurnah's novels are the themes of racial violence and the cultural definition of the British black subject, together with the migrant's search for a new home: these

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issues are embodied in Gurnah's many-layered narratives of encounters and marriages, reworking the domestic novel and its traditional materials (Blake and Gandhi and Thomas 2001: 51).

Gurnah's stories of cultural encounters explore the social instability and multiple overlapping identities that are the main features of East African coastal societies (Wilson and von Maltzan 2001). Heterogeneity and hybridity are inscribed into the postcolonial experience, establishing a relation of historical continuity between colonialism and contemporary diasporic movements towards the old colonial centre. The abandonment of home and the condition of homelessness imply a constant and often desperate territorial struggle for another home. The logic of diaspora discourse, which has foregrounded the deterritorialized itinerant nature of migrant cultures, seems in direct opposition to the theme of 'dwelling places', but diaspora is inseparable and depends upon dwelling, and this consciousness marks the limits of a dislocated diaspora poetics (Procter 2003).

Desertion is Gurnah's seventh novel: the theme this narrative develops is that of the painful experience of immigration, according to the perspective of the African intellectual who is forced to move from his own country to find better conditions of living in England, where it is difficult for him to feel at home. The motif of arrival, the feeling of nervousness, difference, estrangement of the foreigner, when faced by the challenges of English society, the bitter experience of migration of Gurnah's characters mirror the personal experience of the author.

However, according to Gurnah himself interviewed by Nisha Jones, the heart of *Desertion* is the representation of a series of love affairs; the writer wants to explore and dramatize the tragic, unforeseen consequences of love when mutual attraction overcomes racial and cultural boundaries. In European settler writing, particularly around the end of the nineteenth century, certain exclusions are embedded in the narrative texture, one of which is white men's relationships with native women (Jones 2005).

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The diasporic awareness emphasized by Gurnah offers the basis for the reimagination of the family as a network with the potential to generate better modes of social existence. In Gurnah's disjointed framework, national belonging is less important as the arena for subject formation than small-scale yet often global familial networks (Falk 2007: 60-63). Dislocation often produces migration from one nation to another, but what causes anxiety and a sense of loss is mostly the alienation from home in a geographically and socially restricted sense. An exploration of the psychological and emotional aspects of diaspora, as well as of the role of familial webs, is provided in *Desertion* through the character of Rashid, the narrator, exiled from Zanzibar to be educated in England. Rashid weaves together stories of failed hopes and disappointments, cruelty and betrayal, although the reader becomes aware of his voice only in the second part of the novel. Rashid is obviously the author's double, an ironical narrator probing into the past and the present, speaking both of his own country and the experience of exile.

Desertion develops a fragmented narration, including different eras of the history of Zanzibar. It is divided into three parts, set in different times and places; the first one occurs at the end of the nineteenth century, in a colonial town along the East African coast, when a dying European is found on the beach by a Muslim family: this event gives rise to the most fateful development of the plot. The second part focuses on the ambitions and frustrations of Rashid, his brother Amin and his sister Farida, during the tumultuous years heading towards the independence of Zanzibar, while the third one takes place in England during the post-independence period: only after settling down in an academic life, Rashid is ready to face his own demons and return to Zanzibar. Thus Rashid, on his difficult route towards a new identity, puts together the fragments of remote and different stories belonging to his family, shaped by departures, arrivals, tragic love affairs. *Desertion*, in a sense, mainly recollects two doomed love affairs, at first seemingly very different, but deeply connected to each other.

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Everything starts in 1899, in a bright morning: Martin Pearce, a British orientalist and traveller, appears half starved and wounded in an unnamed town between Bagamoyo and Mombasa, abandoned by his Somali guides. Hassanali, an Indian shopkeeper and a *dukawallah*, brings the *mzungu* home and nurses him back to strength with the help of his wife Malika and his sister Rehana. The appearance of Pearce is the beginning of the story, though it is the combination of many other stories:

There was a story of his first sighting. In fact, there was more than one, but elements of the stories merged into one with time and telling. In all of them he appeared at dawn, like a figure out of the myth. [...] What was undisputed – although there was no real dispute between these stories as they all added to the strangeness of his appearance – was that it was Hassanali the shopseller who found him, or was found by him (Gurnah 2005: 3).

Soon the local British District Officer, Frederick Turner, breaks in and takes Pearce to his home, charging the Indian family with robbery. However, Pearce's return to Hassanali's house to thank his hosts leads to a love affair between Pearce and the beautiful Rehana; the Englishman is bewitched by Rehana. The relationship between them causes a scandal that forces them to move to Mombasa, where they openly live together; but, when Rehana is pregnant, Pearce betrays her and returns to England.

The fatal attraction between Martin and Rehana is described in few lines: the English traveller and the African woman become lovers; the relationship between Pearce and Rehana is "unimaginable", precisely because it runs against the social codes shaping social behaviour on both sides of colonial encounters. The narrator's ironical voice gives a historical perspective to the event:

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This was 1899, not the age of Pocahontas when a romantic fling with a savage princess could be described as an adventure. The imperial world observed some rigidity about sexual proprieties. The empire had become an extension of British civic respectability (Gurnah 2005: 116-117).

Much less radical is Amin's and Jamila's relationship, in the late 1950s, but both characters, too, challenge social rules and expectations: indeed, Rashid's older brother Amin embarks on another similarly difficult liaison with Jamila, a fascinating divorced woman; it is later revealed that Jamila is Rehana's granddaughter (Jamila's grandmother was "a European man's woman, his mistress"), and this is the reason why Amin's parents force him to end the affair. A third love affair, not tragic though unusual, is narrated at the end of the novel: at a conference in Cardiff, Rashid delivers a paper on "race and sexuality in settler writing in Kenya" and there he meets Barbara Turner, whose grandfather was Frederick Turner; they discuss about doomed love affairs during the British empire, and, after a short time, she decides to visit Zanzibar with Rashid, in search of Jamila's story.

The narrative construction, often interrupted, reflects a world where the relationships between characters and places are fragmentary; the political events of the decolonization have a direct influence on the lives of the characters. A sense of fatality, of loss, of pain hovers on the whole narration: the last sequence shows Rashid and Barbara leaving for Zanzibar, where they will face obsolete social and ethnic conventions. According to the different perspectives revealing the racial tension of the colonial past, the theme of the construction of contemporary identities is fully developed: identities are produced by desertions, refusals, losses; acquiring the growing awareness of oneself and of one's past seems to be the only way out of the labyrinth constituted by the contradictions of the past.

Desertion also includes a series of historical reflections on the British empire and its postcolonial effects on East Africa. The ethnic, cultural and linguistic hybridity, the

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interaction between natives, settlers and traders created a complex, unsafe world, often crossed by ethnical tensions, which exploded after the independence. In 1964 a bloody revolution interrupted the process towards autonomy and peace in Zanzibar. The narrator Rashid understands neither the events he knew only indirectly nor the facts he witnessed himself about the history of his country. Once living in England, he cannot but imagine the turmoil following the independence of Zanzibar; his British scholarship, after the 1964 riots in Zanzibar, is transformed into the radical condition of exile.

The question of 'entanglements' runs through Gurnah's novel; his stories of empire and migration are bound to unsettle previous beliefs: they cannot be controlled, because they overlap in an inexplicable way (Nasta 2004: 352-363). On the one hand, entangled stories include the representations of previous sequences of events; on the other, they re-construct the 'reality' in which these events occur. In this sense, the writer plays with his reader, surprised and bewildered by a work full of secret histories that finally emerge and are connected to each other. *Desertion* is a story that entangles subjectivity in new ways: the alternative past the novel offers is questioned; Rashid does not believe about the love story of Rehana and Pearce because it goes against common sense, its improbability is tied to a disenchanted view of the world. In the depiction of love across cultural barriers, *Desertion* strives to represent a dubious 'miracle'.

In the context of very private events, Gurnah explores the imperial takeover of Zanzibar by the British, although his main character Martin Pearce is a very doubtful colonizer. He speaks Arabic, he wants to understand native culture and history and he does not regard imperial rule as a gift handed to its subjects; he seems disgusted with the colonial enterprise. Thus, he denies the ethos of the British responsibility towards the colonized, strongly asserted by Frederick Turner, a colonial administrator who loves to quote Romantic poets and thinks that the British empire is different from other empires, because of its morality. The third representative of the British empire in the novel is Burton, a Kurtz-like Conradian

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character who joins the natives "in their drumming and dancing": he runs a great property at Bondeni, and always underlines the relevance of the economic exploitation of the African continent; he foresees the future disappearance of all African populations, who will be gradually replaced by the settlers.

The love stories in the novel unfold in defiance of the webs of social positioning. The 'unimaginable', yet far-reaching relationship between Pearce and Rehana emphasizes the connection between historical social constrictions and the power of imagination:

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 (Gurnah 2005: 110).

Unlikely stories of that kind exist on the threshold between scholarly novel and fanciful romance, between history and fantasy. The events happening during Rashid's lecture at the conference illustrate this dilemma, because he suggests that the story of Rehana and Pearce is indeed almost impossible to believe. According to him, this strange instance of interracial involvement cannot become the basis of a historical research. Rashid's own narration places the plot of the love story into the academic forum, and, at the same time, relegates it to the margins of historical reconstruction. It is anecdotal evidence, and speaks to the imagination rather than to a simple knowledge of the past. *Desertion* conveys the passionate and transgressive love story between an Englishman and an African Muslim woman not only as an alternative version of the past; it employs it as a source of narrative 'entanglement'.

Thus, in *Desertion* Rehana's and Pearce's story becomes both an example and a past record for the younger couple constituted by Amin and Jamila, entangling them in its implications and offering them consolation as well as giving a sense of fatefulness to their predicament. In his turn, after the breakup of his marriage to

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Grace, Rashid identifies himself with the sorrows of other lovers belonging to his lineage: he feels that the acts of love and desertion are doomed to be repeated generation after generation. Full, rational narratives *per se* do not capture and entangle individuals, as physical meetings and chance encounters do.

The entanglements of modernity imply geo-historical connections and also the link with the past. The awareness of the multi-faceted complexity of colonial encounters, with their variable mixtures of attraction and repulsion, of benefit and exploitation, of sincerity and hypocrisy, and their many-sided institutional and cultural effects are strongly underlined (Therborn 2003). In *Desertion* the spaces of entanglement imply the revisitation of the master narrative in the light of contemporary diasporic cultures. Zanzibar is depicted as a kind of crossroads of human destinies: single stories achieve a meaning in the larger frame in which diaspora movements, changes of identity and culture reshape the life of single characters and their perception of the world. Forbidden love affairs and cultural collisions reverberate generation after generation and across continents, from the heyday of the empire to the aftermath of decolonization. Thus, Gurnah's fiction crosses the borders of time and space.

Miscegenation – a negative colonial accident – is one of the main issues explored in *Desertion*: the whole novel tentatively traces the danger of an interracial relationship and, at the same time, its inevitability. Single individuals are willing to step outside the cultural domains of family and religion and pursue their deeper desires: unfortunately their effort do not translate into happiness, although they open the way to the future. Gurnah also suggests that the attitudes of families and communities hardly change over the course of the years.

Desertion also represents migration and exile as related to a 'home' that is not conceived as a national entity. When Rashid is aware that his journey is over, and that he is bound to live in England forever, he begins an affair with Barbara Turner, finding a new sense of belonging to the former colonial nation. The family, not the home country, is the sphere where a sense of belonging can be re-created; in this

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sense, Gurnah presents a transcultural and global re-imagination of the family and of love relationships.

The double relations of past and present created by *Desertion* – an implausible past presented as fact within the fictional frame, and metafictionally through a web of intertextual links – dramatizes the social function of imagination. Memory is seen as a refuge from the unsettling diasporic experience; it is an essential part of contemporary identities, and for the migrant author the act of writing stories becomes a form of therapy; thanks to his literary efforts, he is able to tie up loose threads and give them a somewhat coherent, although unstable and problematic order.

In conclusion, Gurnah's interpretation of the history of colonization is double-faced. On one hand, the motif of the conquest includes the issue of desire; male desire of appropriating and exploiting the remote and fascinating lands of the dark continent moves colonial history. On the other hand, desire is represented through the encounter of two (male and female) identities, denying the rules of colonial ideology. In this sense, Gurnah goes beyond the traditional historical pattern, unburying stories of forbidden relationships and thus developing a new consciousness of the colonial experience. He emphasizes the importance of the relationships between individuals: it is the encounter of different peoples that definitely changes the perspectives of the world. The revisitation of the imperial 'going native' theme encompasses the final refusal of the myth of the empire.

At the same time, Gurnah portrays a complex and 'deterritorialized' society; the consequence is a state of permanent disorientation and loss, tempered through narrative attempts to create a minimum of coherence in the shift from the past to the present. Love constitutes a crucial aspect, it is the bond that holds strangers together within different communities. Paradoxically, in *Desertion* transgressive (i.e. cross-cultural) love is the power providing a sense of continuity in history.

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