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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

**Post-Colonial Experiences: Based on Abdulrazak Gurnah's "Desertion" and Other Novels: Rewriting Cultural History**

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| ABSTRACT

Shelley has once rightly stated that "*Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world*", establishing the concept of a pen being mightier than the sword. The evolution of literary works has transcended beyond ages and phases of political and social developments, marking the birth of concepts like colonialism, post-colonialism, and neo-colonialism; Each having its own perspective and impact on the readers and the societies, post-colonialism took its stand at the zenith during the late 1970s, foraying its way into the sublime identities and efficacies of influencing the minds of the society. The current study is conducted as a critical review of the novel, *Desertion* by Abdulrazak Gurnah, one of the most controversial yet admired novelists from Zanzibar, Tanzania. The novel essentially opens in the backdrop of 1899 along the East African coast, wherein the story's protagonist is a white stranger, sick and wounded, staggering and deserted in a small East African town. Later the stranger is taken to home by a local shop owner Hassan Ali, to have him taken care of by his family. However, with the news of the stranger staying with the Hassan Ali family, the British Colonial officers arrive to claim him. Contradictorily, before he can surrender himself to the British colonial officers, Martin Pearce, the stranger, falls madly in love with Hassan Ali's sister, Rehanah. This paper provides a critical review of the agreements and disagreements surrounding the colonial and post-colonial experiences, concept building, and its influence on human feelings and social existences. Through the character of Martin Pearce, Gurnah wishes to represent his belief in ideating human feelings to know no boundaries. Martin's intense love for Rehanah is a way of portraying the dissuasion of the writer to break the "glass ceiling" of colonialism and post-colonialism and think beyond the social barriers and shackles.

| KEYWORDS

Colonialism, Post-colonialism, Narratives, Cross-cultural association, Social and cultural desertion

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

**ACCEPTED:** 02 September 2022

**PUBLISHED:** 30 September 2022

**DOI:** 10.32996/ijllt.2022.5.9.15

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**1. Introduction**

This paper discusses the infused triggering of post-colonial experiences, which recognize the rule and dominance of one culture, over another, stepping across several fundamentals of social identity and existence. The birth of post-colonial culture in literature could only be traced to the end of the 1970s and early years of the 1980s, wherein numerous writers and scholars had penned down their feelings and views on the post-colonial effect, representing their grievances and dissonance, shedding light on the immense mental and social pressures on the people of the society to fall apart, beyond the acceptable boundaries.

The principal focus of the review is to emphasize the fact that the novel, 'Desertion' is a manifestation of the autobiographical views of Abdulrazak Gurnah. Abdulrazak Gurnah, a writer, born in Zanzibar, Tanzania, has been a sharp observer of colonialism and immigration during the 1970s and 1980s. According to his views, East Africa, including Tanzania, was deeply affected by the atrocities of colonialism, as it introduced a dual economic structure within the African economy. It initiated a sense of dissatisfaction among the people of East Africa, reflecting upon the disarticulation in the fields of economy, trade, education, transportation, and market prospects.

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The views of Gurnah in regards to the hard hit of colonialism on East Africa are included in the review, along with the discrepancies and diverse views with respect to the post-colonial concepts, capturing the essence of the study. This comprehensive study of the colonial and post-colonial views on East Africa is discussed through the eyes of Abdulrazak Gurnah, comparing his opinions as shared in 'Admiring Silence', another novel, with a few works from his contemporaries, like, Chinua Achebe and Ama Ata Aidoo.

The findings of the study shall enable the readers to develop a comprehensive understanding of the concept of colonialism and the essential elements of post-colonialism. With the help of the essential elements of colonialism and breaking the "glass ceiling", through the characterization of Martin Pearce and Rehanah, the novel intends to portray the subdued feelings of the hard hit of colonialism and its rage across the essence of freedom and liberalism. The uncompromising effects of colonialism and its penetration deciding the fate of refugees like Martin Pearce, the novel is an excellent piece of reading to depict coarser aspects of living.

## **2. Key existing works**

Abdulrazak Gurnah had been a sharp observer of colonialism and the effects of post-colonialism on the social life of Africa. Born on the Indian Ocean island of Zanzibar, Tanzania, he began his writing career when he moved to Britain as a refugee. While Abdulrazak Gurnah was 21 years of age, he began his writing in the year, 2004. While living in Britain, Abdulrazak Gurnah had sensed the typical feeling of stumbling across the stages of lack of fulfillment of the plans and developed a view of overwhelming view of strangeness and difference and disassociation.

The essence of colonialism and post-colonialism, as observed by Abdulrazak Gurnah, it needs to be stated that his novel works, like "Memory in Departure" in the year, 1987, "Pilgrims Way" in 1988, and "Dottie" in 1990 emphasized the aspects of unsocial and disturbing experienced, faced by the immigrants in the then Britain, including the impact of racism and loss of social identity (Jones, 2005). Thus, it is obvious that Abdulrazak Gurnah had fundamentally focused on the plight and miseries of the refugees faced by the immigrants who had travelled to Britain to fall prey to racism and lack of social identity. Further, the criticism by Abdulrazak Gurnah took an intense turn in his novel, "Paradise", published in the year, 1994. This novel essentially focused on the experiences and social gaps that had been evident in colonial East Africa, with the impact of the first World War.

The depiction of colonial East Africa during the first World War depicted a precarious situation for the refugees of Africa and the immigrants who had taken shelter in the country during the ongoing implications of the first World War. With the ongoing impacts of the First World war, it was evident that East Africa was ripped apart in terms of its political and economic structure (Helff, 2015). The war's impacts led to a disruption in the social infrastructure, deserting thousands of people, causing suffering from dissonance, and loss of social identity.

Followed by a depression in the prices paid for African products, the supply of imported products was less, causing a severe dismemberment in the political and economic stature of the country. It was during this period that the concept of colonialism took a proper shape in the states of East Africa, impacting the colonies and colonialism by redrawing the map and creating more nation-states where colonies used to be (Moorthy, 2010). Further, the impact of the First World War led to the formation of more colonies and an increase in local autonomy. The possibility of developing a cross-cultural association seemed difficult to comply with.

Another brilliant novel by Abdulrazak Gurnah, titled "Admiring Silence," depicted the concepts of afterlives and colonial hypocrisy. In one of the interviews by Abdulrazak Gurnah with BBC, he stated that his inspiration to connect with the cross-cultural boundaries, followed by the subtle wish to develop the association, was developed when he read about the crusades of the Chinese Armadas, who had visited the coast of east Africa, allowed him to recognize the social object and develop the connection between the cross cultural boundaries. Despite having been born as a Zanzibar writer from Africa, he felt the biggest influence on him from his stay as a refugee in Britain (Steiner, 2010).

He had been wallowing in the darkness of failure, loss of social identity, nostalgic feeling of homecoming, and settling and finding the space for oneself. Similar to the contents and characterization in the Chinese poetries, Abdulrazak Gurnah presented his characters as broken, who are struggling hard to make themselves feel complete, valuable, and beautiful. Hence, his novels "Admiring Silence" and "Afterlives" aspire to depict the social issues that have been impacting the lives of Refugees from East Africa, with an aspiration to discover social identity and completeness and bring value to their identities.

The sense of dislocation and abandonment is predominant in the novels of Abdulrazak Gurnah, wherein he wishes to depict the protagonist characters to represent the sense of loss and lack of social identity and acceptance. His main characters are portrayed in broken forms and go through moments of disturbance, upheaval, and inconsistency (OMWENGA, 2017). Therefore, from the existing works of Abdulrazak Gurnah, it can be stated that the concepts in the novels are developed, with a focus on the social causes and discrepancies that the refugees in East Africa have experienced, considering the impact of the First World War.

It is this sense of subdued feeling that hit harder the sense of Abdulrazak Gurnah to bring out the masterpiece novel, "Desertion." Critics have tried to find whether the pessimistic sense of loss, grief, social absence, and insecurity is a threatened manifestation of his characterization of Martin Pearce, the stranded British traveler, and orientalist who falls madly in love with Rehanah, who is the sister of a local shop owner in the coast of East Africa. The exilic manifestation and explanation of the impacts of colonialism on the love affair of Martin and Rehanah somehow depict Abdulrazak Gurnah's submerged anger and resentment against the colonial attributes of the British, who would not accept any cross-cultural association and look down upon the people of East Africa, as the socially down trodden, whose social identity is fragmented and lack adequate recognition and respect from the society, which is otherwise a British colony (O'Connor, 2007).

Considered one of the best story tellers of his time, Abdulrazak Gurnah tried to depict the connection between social insecurity, the threats colonialism, economic uncertainties, restrictions on speech, and protest. The subdued love for Rehanah and the inability to express the same by Martin can be considered to be a manifestation of the social danger that the Africans are going through, along with the added culmination of cross cultural dissonance, denouncements, atrocities, social humiliation, and lack of social identity.

### 3. Proposed solution

The concept of colonialism and viewing the different perspectives of post-colonial experiences, it needs to be stated that apart from the works of Abdulrazak Gurnah, the same theme can be seen in the works of stalwarts like Chinua Achebe and Ama Ata Aidoo. Although Chinua Achebe is rightly labeled as the "father of African literature" and is considered to be exaggerated and hyperbolic, his works do create a figurative sense of closeness, nostalgia, and loss of social identity, in the colonial world (Hunsu, 2014). The most successful work of Chinua Achebe, "Things Fall Apart," portrays the cross-cultural connection by creating counter-discursive literature and identifies the instances and essences of the Western literary tradition.

He admitted to mixing the two diverse concepts of intra-African authorial dialogues with the essences of the Western literary culture to demonstrate the impacts of colonialism and post-colonialism, along with the dominance of the patriarchal society and African spirituality. Hence, it is obvious that the proposed solution, as reflected upon by Chinua Achebe, induces the sense of creating a connection between the two cultures, wherein the plight of the African people is shown through the characterization of Okonkwo's father, Unoka. On the other hand, the works of Ama Ata Aidoo, likely, "Our Sister Killjoy", depicts the aspects of post-colonialism, as it is represented in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (Achebe, 1965).

The novel "Our Sister Killjoy", has been badly criticized by critics, considering it to be blatantly racist in approach by depicting the darker side of colonialism and its severe impacts on the characters that are shown in the novel. Thus, it can be deciphered that Ama Ata Aidoo, unlike Chinua Achebe, had been blunt in his approach and clearly depicted the impact of colonialism and post-colonialism on the sufferers, who faced severe impacts due to the ongoing condition (Falk, 2007).

From the analysis of the writings of Chinua Achebe and Ama Ata Aidoo, it needs to be stated that not only did Abdulrazak Gurnah get inspired by his stay as a refugee, but he also got influenced by the works of Chinua Achebe and Ama Ata Aidoo. In regards to developing the connection between Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel, "Desertion" with the works of Chinua Achebe and Ama Ata Aidoo, the fundamental concept revolves around the elements of identifying the diverse post-colonial experiences, personalized with real-time staying experiences of Abdulrazak Gurnah, in Britain, during the First World War, as a refugee (Pujolràs-Noguer, 2018).

He tried to unfold the precariousness and shocking images of the human tragedy revolving around the aspect of embedding the impacts of the First World War. The tragedy revolving around the implications of depicting the negative influences of colonialism and post-colonialism concepts scored higher, with the African refugees trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea (Mudanya, 2013). Developing a congruence between the contemporary works on colonialism and post-colonialism in East Africa during the First World War, the novel "Desertion" provides proposed solutions, considering the interconnection between the white men getting deserted on the island of Africa and falling with the African women, with Muslim men deserting the liberated partners along with the young and educated men of Zanzibar, deserting for gaining the comforts of Britain.

From the novel content, Abdulrazak Gurnah represents the fact that Britain deserted its colonies, like the islands of Zanzibar, much before the time was right. Therefore, through the novel, Abdulrazak Gurnah tries to depict the ruthlessness of the British, and British officials have not lived up to their responsibilities of taking care of the colonies (Lavery, 2017). Hence, the aspect blatantly reflects upon the aspects of disrupting the social order without being asked and then allowing the results to have an impact on the issues that spoke about the negative impacts of the colonialism and post-colonialism elements of British officials.

However, critics have pointed out that the proposed solution, suggested by Abdulrazak Gurnah, emphasizes acknowledging the formation of a disjointed narrative, which is quite deliberate, in response to the content of the study (Murray, 2013). The depiction of the characters of Martin Pearce and Rehanah, his love interest, reflects upon developing the intricacies of the complicated love

relationship, depicting the cross-cultural association between the two nations, bestowing upon the fundamentals of transcending beyond the cross-cultural borders.

Therefore, it is obvious that the novel accounts for the recognition of ideas that transcend beyond the implications of cross-cultural impacts. Torn between fundamentals of economic uncertainty, social insecurity, and social dissonance, the romantic relationship between Martin Pearce and Rehanah tries to throb in life and struggles to make its existence within the colonial condition of East Africa.

Abdulrazak Gurnah, one of the leading names in controversial literature, had penned down the novel content against the backdrop of colonial Africa. The writer emphasizes sketching the dense, decade-straddling story of cross-cultural love and its repercussions, which began in Zanzibar, Tanzania, in the year 1899 (Pujolràs-Noguer, 2019). The story depicts the plight and misery of Martin Pearce, who is stranded on an island in East Africa; he is otherwise an English orientalist and is ultimately rescued and cared for by the Indian Muslims community, represented through the character of Hassanali.

Once, he is taken to Hassanali's home to be taken care of by Rehanah. His sister turns out to be a sympathetic hero who seems to be more enlightened than the British colonialists. His characterization as an enlightened hero tries to deliver the concept of transcending beyond the shackles of colonialism and acting in a more rational way compared to the other British colonial officials (Datta, 2019). As he pays his gratitude to Hassanali, he falls for Rehanah, who is his sister of Hassanali and their intense romantic relationship reflects on the aspect of initiating a transgressive affair.

This transgressive affair between Rehanah and Martin, - narrates the cross-cultural association between the two races, which are significantly different from each other, and an association between them seem to be next to impossible. The story is developed into a few stages of facing colonial rule to undergoing the experiences of the post-colonial condition in Africa. Beginning with the depiction of the romantic relationship of Martin and Rehanah, the first part of the novel shows the plight of Martin, as he is stranded on the heap in the square and needs to be rescued (Mohan & Datta, 2019).

Transcending beyond the intricacies of racism, it needs to be stated that the novel is an excellent piece, showing the kind-heartedness of Hassanali to rescue Martin, despite him being British. The story also depicts the intense misery of the Africans and Indian Muslims as they are colonized by British colonial officers (Samuelson, 2012). The characterization of Hassanali shows that the act of kindness and greatness does not only limit to white people but is attributed to Muslims, also. Martin, while thanking Hassanali for helping him save his life and survive the crisis, falls in love with Rehanah, Hassanali's sister.

Rehanah is shown to be a divorcee at the age of 22 and considered old for remarriage. Such traditions and orthodox behaviours typically reflect on the quirky aspects of colonial rule in Zanzibar and reflect upon the aspect wherein women are considered to be the ruled out, while the men are the rulers and decision makers (Allen, 2012). Once they start a romantic relationship between Martin and Rehanah, it shows their daring attitude to flout the rules of Islam and engage in an affair against the backdrop of colonial Africa. Both of them move out to Mombasa, where they start living together, which is also much against the orthodoxy and conventional traditions, were marrying a divorcee woman is considered to be a social taboo (Olatunji, 2010).

Not only do Martin and Rehanah move out to Mombasa, but they also do not marry, yet Rehanah becomes pregnant, wherein Martin gives Rehanah some money and goes back to England. This move of Martin reminds us of the indifferent attitude of the British colonial officers, who did not pay any heed to the betterment of the colonies in Africa during that time. Martin being British by origin, somehow possesses the typical quality of befriending and lack of responsibility for the lady who he had promised to be with all along (Thomas, 2006).

#### **4. Experimental result**

In congruence to the above discussion, it needs to be stated that the baleful story of Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel "Desertion" presides over the elements of contradicting the perspectives of identifying the need for independence against the backdrop of colonial Africa and engages in developing the aspects of cross-cultural dissociation with the presence of social and cultural desertion. The characterization of Martin is specifically developed based on the sense of irresponsibility and indifferences of the British officials, showing the inconsideration of his love interest, Rehanah, who is an Indian Muslim. The arrangement of the syntax, with the style of writing by Abdulrazak Gurnah, shows that the novel is written, avoiding the use of words that are artificially accessible.

The findings show that the content of the novel also develops a rustic feeling, which clearly depicts the simplicity of the Africans, who belong to the colonial and post-colonial times of Africa, by using the words like 'simsim' and 'jamadar.' Critics have found that the characterization of Martin happens to be a subdued wish to bridge the gaps in the cross-cultural association. Martin is shown to fall in love with Rehanah and even become the father of her child by daringly moving out to Mombasa. Martin is shown

to be a historian and linguist and is shown to speak Arabic and become one with the cultures of the Indian Muslim community, represented through the characters of Rehanah and Hassanali.

The views of colonialism and post-colonialism, as depicted by Abdulrazak Gurnah, refuse to adapt to the temptation to contrast this enlightened traveller with a more boorish British element. The depiction of the Britishers in the form of colonial officers seems to be irresponsible and does not take care of the African colonies and the people associated with the colonies. The second part of the study jumps straight into the 1950s, just the years before Zanzibar gained its independence from colonial rule. Within the second part of the novel, it needs to be stated that the story is depicted in the voice of Rashid, who is the younger brother of Amin (Akoh, 2008).

This characterization of Rashid is often considered by Critics to be a literary transformation of the lurking wishes of the novelist Abdulrazak Gurnah himself. Rashid is scheduled to receive his scholarship and plans to move out to England, and he plans to write a story on the same. This intention and planning of Rashid connect with the author Gurnah, moving to Britain as a refugee. It was during these days of his life that Abdulrazak Gurnah started writing, sensing his feelings and views on the experiences faced by the Africans, depicted through the character of Rashid facing difficulties and challenges.

Further, the romantic relationship between Martin and Rehanah is taken forward through the depiction of the love affair between Amin, Rashid's brother, and Jamila, who is also a divorcee, just like Rehanah used to be. These intricacies in the relationships between Amin, Rashid, and Jamila depict the relationship crisis that is evident and shows that the relationship is broken off (Garuba, 2013). These broken relationships seem to be a key aspect in the writings of Abdulrazak Gurnah, as he is significantly influenced by the broken character depiction in the Chinese poetries. With repeated episodes of flashbacks, it needs to be stated that the author tries to interpret the aspects of understanding the sense of interruption and its contribution to social and cultural desertion.

Many critics have stated that the depiction of the characters, as developed by Abdulrazak Gurnah, reflects upon his hidden desires to deal with the challenges and acknowledges the human demands and wishes that are characterized by irresistibility, unthinkable, and a strong desire to become intense lovers. The second part of the novel introduces a fresh batch of characters having no immediate connection with the first part of the book. This is intentionally done to the impacts of the colonial and post-colonial impacts on the intensities of human experiences and views.

Further, with the progress of the novel, it needs to be stated that the sententious note does come to the forefront, wherein the risks are the same and common in all aspects. The depiction of the characters of Martin, Rehanah, Rashid, Hassanali, Jamila, and Amin is conveniently and comfortably drawn to reflect upon the impacts of the colonial and post-colonial implications.

On the other hand, it has been stated by critics that the content of the novel reflects upon the intricacies of having experiences of colonialism and post-colonialism by using multiple narrative voices. It has been stated by critics that the novel includes multiple narrative voices to present his personalized ideas about the experiences of colonialism and post-colonialism e concepts. In defining a narrative voice, it needs to be stated that the concept recognizes the fundamental complexities wherein the ideas and views in the book or novel are represented through the perspective from which the events in a story are observed and recounted.

It is also evident from the content of the novel that the narrative structural framework of the story underpins the order and the manner in which a narrative is presented to the reader. Hence, assessing the narrative structure, it is evident from the novel that the sophisticated narrative approach, as applied by Abdulrazak Gurnah, had been multiple and illustrated. Use of the multiple narratives, as used in the novel by Abdulrazak Gurnah, it needs to be stated that the use of the multiple narrative approaches is presented through literary scholarship by exploring the roles of the different concepts and narrative voices to form the essence of the novel.

Further, it has been stated by many critics that the depiction of the colonial and post-colonial views, as depicted through the different characters by Abdulrazak Gurnah, reflects upon the auto-biographical and biographical approach, teamed with the personalized feeling of Abdulrazak Gurnah. The depiction of Africa, during the colonial and post-colonial ages, after the impact of the First World War, shows an imbalance between the interrogation of the identities that contact with different continents, which are canvased through the dismantlement and fragmentation of the characters.

Considering the fundamental of cross-cultural dissociation with social and cultural desertion, the novel essentially provides an interpretation of the fundamental elements of displacement, migration, mixed race, and the negotiation of identities. Eyed through the personalized experiences of Abdulrazak Gurnah, an African refugee in Britain, the novel easily provides real time experiences and incidences that are observed and experienced by the refugees facing stress and pressure. The study is considered to be both auto-biographical and biographical in approach. It somehow depicts the perspectives and views that are developed by Abdulrazak Gurnah, as he was working and moving out, as a migrant African, who explores the complications that these issues produce in his life and the lives of other characters.

Thus, the depiction of the auto-biographical and biographical approaches in regards to the depiction of the Africans who are facing the issues and challenges of colonialism and post-colonialism also transcends beyond the limitations of depicting the restrictions and complications of the migrant Africans due to the colonial and post-colonial views. The broader view of the novel is developed based on the aspects of depicting the image of Africa against the backdrop of colonial and post-colonial experiences.

Further, it is evident that the interest of the author, Abdulrazak Gurnah, while writing the novel, emphasizes the colonial and post-colonial experiences of the past for the ethnic groups and moves beyond cross-cultural limits to interpret the condition, wherein the individuals' struggles with established biases within ethnic and even racial groups as mirrored. Additionally, the personal experiences of Abdulrazak Gurnah, in terms of depicting the fundamentals of the colonial experiences, write down a complete cultural modification, countering the essence of teaming the personalized experiences of the author, Abdulrazak Gurnah, in projecting the experiences of multi-racial Zanzibar.

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)

Extract from the novel "*Desertion*" by Abdulrazak Gurnah

The above quotation from the novel shows that presenting the key characters in the novel from mixed cultures deliberately shows the presence of mixed races, and their association depicts the possibilities of gaining social and cultural identity and recognition through encouraging and developing the cross-cultural association between two different cultures.

## **5. Conclusion**

In light of the above discussion, it needs to be stated that Abdulrazak Gurnah's literary corpus is predominantly dependent on exploring the impacts of colonialism and post-colonialism on the social existences of the refugees and the people of East Africa, who underwent the anomalies of the First World War. It is obvious from his writings and the novel content that Abdulrazak Gurnah's interest in writing literary works is broader in approach and transcends beyond the borders of Zanzibar and connects personal experiences with the historical existences of the people of the island.

The novels of Abdulrazak Gurnah show the presence of broken characterization, as he was influenced by the Chinese poetries, and reflect upon the fundamentals of describing the varied historical shifts and phase developments in colonialism and post-colonialism. The novel "*Desertion*" by Abdulrazak Gurnah represents the formation of the characters like Martin Pearce and Rehanah, who are broken apart in love, as both of them belong to two different cultures and backgrounds. However, the love between the two seems to be difficult, as it talks about the social dissociation between the British colonial regulations, with the lives of the people of East Africa, like Rehanah. The subdued feelings of Abdul Razak Gurnah, in search of social acceptance and security within the society, have been manifested in the content of the novel. The essence of the novel, "*Desertion*," lies in its ability to reflect upon the romantic aspect of colonial Africa. However, digging deeper into the content of the romantic aspect of colonial Africa, it has been further found that the novel is unique with respect to the pungent presence of negatives, which does mark the broken characterization and the sense of loss, and social insecurity.

Further, the novel finds that the act of kindness of Hassanali is not unexpected regarding Muslims; however, it is quite strange for Muslims living within the fragments of colonized Africa and colonial living. Thus, it is evident that the depiction of colonialism and post-colonialism by Abdulrazak Gurnah, in his novel, "*Desertion*," is evidentiary about the subtle narrative of lack of social identity and acceptance, with the sense of insecurity as depicted through the characters of Martin and Rehanah.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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**Publisher's Note:** All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

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