



The Attachment to Woman's Virtue in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion* (2005)

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Abstract— *By the mid-nineteenth century up to 1910, stories of a love affair between a European colonial and a native woman were missing in European settler writing. The point is that these stories were not allowed any more. The reasons for which they were no longer allowed and the way the European imperialists and the colonized people viewed these interracial romances were among the things which motivated Abdulrazak Gurnah to write Desertion (2005). In this novel, he explores the love relationship between a British colonial, Martin Pearce, and a Zanzibari woman, Rehana Zakariya, and how this affair was determinant in the failure of Amin and Jamila's romance. One may wonder whether Rehana's bad reputation is simply due to the fact that she was in love with a European man. One may also wonder whether Jamila's tarnished name is only caused by the fact that she is Rehana's granddaughter. From a cultural and postcolonial perspective, the paper will deal with Woman's Virtue in Gurnah's Desertion. Based on postcolonialism, racism and culture as theories, the study will analyze, on the one hand, the way the two main female protagonists in Desertion are viewed in their community and, on the other hand, the sad end of the love relationship between Amin and Jamila.*

Keywords— *failure , interracial , postcolonialism , romance , virtue.*

INTRODUCTION

The absence of stories of a love affair between a European colonial and a native woman from European settler writing by the mid-nineteenth century up to 1910 drew the attention of Abdulrazak Gurnah. The point is that these stories were common before that period according to the Tanzanian writer. In effect, during an interview with Nisha Jones, Gurnah remarks :

But what's interesting is that before the high period of the nineteenth century, there is a version of the encounter with women, in the

South Pacific or the Caribbean for example, a romanticised and eroticised one, and many of these became popular stories. But by the mid to late nineteenth century these stories had disappeared...¹

Still, according to Abdulrazak Gurnah, the obliteration of these stories from European settler writing is justified by the fact that they were not allowed any more. British empire, for instance, stood against the mixing of British colonizers

¹ Nisha Jones. Abdulrazak Gurnah in Conversation, 2005, p. 38 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02690050508589982>

and the natives in marriage or breeding in order to preserve their whiteness and therefore their 'racial superiority.' The reasons for which these stories were no longer allowed and the way the European imperialists and the colonized people viewed these interracial romances were among the things which motivated Abdulrazak Gurnah to write *Desertion* (2005). This novel reminds of Moyez G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* (1994) where an East African young woman gives birth to a child with fair skin and grey eyes after working for a British colonial officer and nursing him when he catches blackwater fever. Gurnah's seventh novel is also reminiscent of William Dalrymple's *White Mughals* (2002) in which Dalrymple tells the love story between the British Resident at Hyderabad, James Achilles Kirkpatrick, and an Indian young woman, Khair un-Nissa Begum.

The article is going to focus on *Desertion* where Abdulrazak Gurnah explores the love relationship between a British colonial, Martin Pearce, and a Zanzibari woman, Rehana Zakariya, and how this affair was determinant in the failure of Amin and Jamila's romance.

One may wonder whether Rehana's bad reputation is simply due to the fact that she was in love with a European man. One may also wonder whether Jamila's tarnished name is only caused by the fact that she is Rehana's granddaughter.

From a cultural and postcolonial perspective, the paper will deal with *The Attachment to Woman's Virtue* in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion* (2005). Cultural theory "examines a text within the context of its socio-cultural environment."² As for postcolonialism, it is "a theoretical approach in various disciplines that is concerned with the lasting impact of colonization in former colonies."³ According to James Daniel Elam, postcolonial theory "is a body of thought primarily concerned with accounting for the political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impact of European colonial rule around the world in the 18th through the 20th century."⁴

Based on postcolonialism, racism and culture as theories, the study will analyze, on the one hand, the way the two main female protagonists in *Desertion* are viewed in their community and, on the other hand, the sad end of the love relationship between Amin and Jamila.

Rehana and Jamila : women of tarnished reputation :

In many traditional African societies, women in particular were expected to behave in a virtuous manner. Otherwise,

they were likely to have a bad reputation. Besides, women did their best to conform to this societal expectation. For example, they avoided going to places where they were liable to tarnish their reputation. Thus, among Rehana's people, on the East African coast, "women only went out to visit each other or to go to the market when they had to, or to go to a function: to a wedding or a reading after a funeral, to commiserate and congratulate a neighbour after childbirth, or to wheedle a loan in time of need." (Gurnah, 2005, 99). However, Rehana is an exception. Embittered by the deception which she is victim of on the part of Azad who deserts her and goes back home to India soon after marrying her, Rehana becomes "stubborn, less sensitive to what others thought best for her, slightly more indifferent to opinion." (100). She falls in love with a British orientalist, Martin Pearce, who was robbed of some of his belongings and abandoned by his Somali guides while they were on their way to the East African coast. He was found in a pitiful state by Rehana's younger brother, Hassanali, who welcomed him in the family house.

Rehana goes every afternoon to see Martin at the residence of the District Officer, Frederick Turner. She goes to visit her lover, which is not tolerated in her community insofar as it is improper and contrary to feminine virtue. Worse, the lover happens to be an English, that is to say a White and Christian whereas she is a Black and Muslim. This explains why "someone shouted something from the darkness of a lane as she walked past one evening." (196). Whatever the person said, their intention was to punish Rehana for her nonconformist attitude, judging from the fact that her people were "... in the grip of an anxious ethos about women's sexual honour. [...]. They were not people who had any knowledge or interest in clandestine love affairs, and who punished each other mercilessly for any indiscretions in such matters, with ridicule and shame and worse." (99). Rehana is so angered by what was shouted at her that she confides in her sister-in-law, Malika. Yet, she pretends she does not care : "I won't soil my mind with their filth." (196). By using the possessive adjective *their* filth instead of *his* or *her*, one can see that Rehana refers to her community and not only to the person who shouted at her. In effect, from the voice of the person, she must know if it was a man or a woman.

The rumours about Rehana and Pearce also push someone to complain to the District Officer. If the narrator thinks that

² MasterClass staff. "15 Types of Literary Criticism." <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/literary-theory-explained#what-is-the-importance-of-literary-theory>

³ Postcolonialism. <https://www.google.com/search?q=postcolonialism+definition>

⁴ Jean D. Elam. "Postcolonial Theory." In *Oxford Bibliographies in Literary and Critical Theory*, edited by Eugene O'Brien. New York : Oxford University Press, 2019.

the complaint probably came from the noble Omanis, it is not because they represented the second authority after the British colonizers but it is rather because : *"The Omanis had strong views on scruples and propriety."* (196). Consequently, Pearce moves to Mombasa where he rents a flat. Rehana soon joins him over there and they live openly together. As a Muslim woman, Islam forbids Rehana to marry a non-Muslim man. The Muslim religion also forbids a woman to live as wife and husband with a man whom she is not married to. But Rehana does not care. She later gives Martin a daughter, Asmah (The one without sin). Thus, she is shunned by her relatives : *"no one went to visit her."* (139). Worse, when Pearce leaves her and goes back to England for good, a friend of his, a Scottish man called Andrew Mills, who visited the couple often, moves in and takes charge of the rent.

At this stage, Rehana's reputation as the mistress of a white man, a *mzungu*, changes into a courtesan, which is illustrated by the following words of her granddaughter, Jamila : *"That is what everyone thought,"* (198). As if she had not tarnished her image enough, Rehana takes to drinking, which is not allowed either in the Muslim religion. It is noteworthy here that Rehana's younger brother, Hassanali, is the one who opens the mosque of their neighbourhood and makes the call to prayer. Through Rehana's servant and the man who collects her refuse and sells the empty bottles to shopkeepers, Rehana's drinking becomes an open secret : *"All those things made everyone understand now that Rehana too was a drinker,"* (199). As could be expected, Asmah pays the price for her mother's disapproved behaviour. She is considered a daughter in sin and according to Farida, one of the main female characters of the novel, if Asmah left Mombasa to come and marry on her mother's native coast, it was : *"... probably to escape people's talk in Mombasa. ... I expect everyone talked to her about her mother's scandalous life."* (139).

As for Jamila, she is pointed at not only because of her notorious grandmother but also because of her own immodest behaviour. As a young girl, she chooses to live separately from the rest of her family. While her parents, her two elder brothers and their families stay upstairs, Jamila lives alone downstairs. Her marriage does not change anything about it : *"Well, she insisted on having the flat with its own front door..."* (138). This is an attitude which her people have difficulty in understanding. Hence, their suspicion : *"people said she was secretive and arrogant or worse."* (138). Even after her second marriage which resulted in a divorce like the first one, Jamila would not join her family upstairs. Not only does she live alone downstairs but she also has her own front door, strengthening thus the negative image which people have of her : *"... then people*

started to say she must be getting up to something, living there alone with her own front door." (138).

It is Jamila who proposes to Farida's younger brother, Amin. She sends him a note through Farida in which she writes : *"I long for you, beloved"* (155). In their community, it should have been the other way round. A woman should show restraint when she is in love and let the man come to her. Otherwise, she is likely to be viewed as a loose woman. That is the reason why Farida tells Amin : *"When she came today and she asked about you, she was exposing herself to insult and rejection."* (154-155). Amin is dubious when he listens to his elder sister tell him what people say about Jamila. He gives the impression that Farida is exaggerating : *'I've seen her pass by, and then heard people say who she was, what her name was. But I don't remember hearing anything bad about her, if that's what you mean. Only that her grandmother was a European man's woman, you know, his mistress,'* (139).

Yet, Amin should wonder why Jamila tells him to come to her flat at 9 p.m. and not to knock if he finds the door locked, but rather *"to go away and wait to hear from her."* (157). In effect, it is also Jamila who, via Farida, invited Amin to meet her on the fringes of the Sikukuu fair where they embraced and kissed in the dark. Then she suggested that he should come and see her at her flat : *"At nine exactly. Then she would leave the door unlocked so he would not have to knock."* (156-157). Jamila justifies thus the suspicion of those who find curious that she should choose to live downstairs alone with her own front door. So Amin may be mistaken if he believes that he is the only man whom Jamila welcomes in her flat. In any case, there is *"a rumour that she's seeing someone, a politician."* (154).

If Amin's aunt, Halima, hurried to inform Amin's mother about his relationship with Jamila, the justification is the latter's bad reputation. Halima is the elder sister of Amin's mother. As soon as the rumour got to Aunt Halima through her husband, Uncle Ali, she *"sent word for Farida to come and visit."* (194). The invitation was just a pretext to get a confirmation from Farida who ended up spilling the beans not only because her aunt pressed her but also because she thought that Halima would keep it secret in the same way as she kept silent about her love affair with Abbas. In fact, Farida made the acquaintance of Abbas during her stay in Mombasa for her studies and they fell in love with each other. Farida had spent only one school year in Mombasa and came back home in her town on the East African coast. She and Abbas have been writing to each other ever since and only her uncle Ali, her aunt Halima and Amin know about this relationship. Contrary to what Farida thought, Aunt Halima did not keep Jamila and Amin's secret. Amin states in this regard : *"Aunt Halima thought Jamila so*

hateful, a whore she called her, that she hurried to tell Ma straight away, with Farida hurrying beside her begging and pleading until the last moment. Farida blamed herself." (194).

Amin's mother does not think better of Jamila : *"She has been seen in a politician's car. She has no sense of shame."* (193). As for Rashid, Amin's younger brother, he cannot believe his ears when he is informed about his brother's love affair. On the one hand, Amin is not the kind to adopt an attitude that can hurt his parents, he is *"the trustworthy."* This is one of the reasons why he is respected and loved by his parents. On the other hand, Rashid is also surprised that Amin should choose such a notorious woman. This is what Rashid thinks about her : *"I thought her glamorous and part of the adult world, more than that, part of the sinning adult world of mistresses and scandals,"* (170). Amin himself ended up seeing Jamila with the politician who had become a minister although, when he saw her, Amin had given up his affair with Jamila : *"I saw her in the minister's car. He is the politician about whom there were rumours before. He has children and a wife already, but he does not mind everyone knowing that he is courting. Will she become his courtesan? That is what everyone thinks."* (201).

Although Amin and Jamila love each other passionately, the young man has to renounce his love, in spite of himself.

Amin and Jamila : the sad end of a love relationship :

The events leading to the end of the love affair between Amin and Jamila and the effects that this end of relationship has had on Amin are among the most memorable episodes of *Desertion*. Rashid, telling the story of Amin and Jamila, shows how Jamila's tarnished reputation pushed Amin's parents to ask their son to renounce his love. He also indicates how Amin, not wanting to disobey his parents, accepts to give Jamila up, to his greatest unhappiness. All starts when Aunt Halima informs her younger sister (Ma) about Amin and Jamila. To convince her son that he has run into the wrong woman, Ma first makes it clear that Jamila's grandmother was not a virtuous woman : *"... she was the mistress of an Englishman for many years, and before that another mzungu gave her a child of sin too, her own bastard. That was her life, living dirty with European men."* (169). Ma also points out that Jamila is not innocent either : *"This woman that you say you love, she is like her grandmother, living a life of secrets and sin. She has been married and divorced already. No one knows where she comes and where she goes, or who she goes to see."* (169).

Amin's mother rejects not only Jamila but also her mother and grandmother. According to Ma (Nuru), they are not a dignified family : *"They are not our kind of people. They are shameless, they don't think of anyone else but themselves."* (169). Furthermore, Nuru relies on her

children's relationships with their father to dissuade Amin from continuing with Jamila. Feisal is so respected by his children that they do not want at all to defy him for fear of hurting him. Not that they do not respect their mother but Rashid explains that their father *"... took such petty defiance so much to heart that I did not dare disobey him, but with her, orders came in a steady and relentless flow and so could at times be disregarded."* (168). This is the reason why, when Ma tells Amin that she and Feisal trusted him and that he has broken his father's heart, a *"... shudder went through Amin."* (169). What is more, for his parents, Amin is the trustworthy and he has built his personality in accordance with the confidence which his parents have in him. He sees to it that he lives up to the expectations of his family. Hence, his mother's repetitive appreciation : *"He's a good boy."* (121)

The mother went as far as slapping his son, asking him to stop going to his lover and whether he wanted to kill his father. Through Amin who prefers to keep quiet rather than promise anything, one can see to what extent he loves Jamila. This is how the young man brought his parents to hold a conversation with him so as to put an end to this relationship which they consider impossible. Their main reason is Jamila, like her grandmother, has a bad reputation because she is not a virtuous woman, she is not a chaste woman. His parents' other reasons are Jamila is older (five or six years) than Amin and a divorced woman. Thus, the mother advises : *"Think of her reputation"* and then the father : *"Think of your good name, he said. You're nothing without a name."* (193). Feisal and his wife firmly believe that their family will be the laughing stock of their neighbourhood if they allow the love affair of their son to go further. Amin's father also evokes religion in order to rid his son of Jamila : *"We regard everyone as equal except in their piety, as al-Biruni has said."* (193). In effect, Jamila behaves in such a way that Feisal, as a practising Muslim who has raised his children in his faith, believes that Amin deserves a better woman. For him, Jamila's is not a pious family and therefore he does not want his son to get involved with this family.

Thus, Amin finds himself in the situation which he feared so much just after he and Jamila embraced and kissed for the first time. He felt so happy with this first experience that he was *"... imagining, now that he knew, how terrible it would be to love and to be spurned, to crave to touch and to be denied."* (157). Amin should not be surprised by his parents' reaction in the sense that Farida had warned him about Jamila and the obstacles which were liable to prevent their relationship. There were Rehana's unvirtuous life and her granddaughter's bad reputation and age. He knows that when their affair is disclosed, it is likely to be ended. This explains why he was stressed whenever he and Jamila were

not together : “*When he was not with her he was afraid of losing her, afraid of words that would take her away.*” (162). Through these words, one can also notice how much Amin loves Jamila. The latter too has the same fear as her lover. So she cautions him affectionately : “*We have to be careful, habibi, otherwise . . .*” (161). Since Amin wanted her to continue the sentence, she adds : “*Otherwise they will make us stop... They will say ugly things and they will make us stop. You're so young, still at school, and I am a divorced woman in my twenties.*” (161).

Yet, what both Amin and Jamila feared happened : tearfully, the young man finally yielded to the will of his parents who wanted him to promise to stop seeing his girlfriend. According to him, he could not disobey his parents, which can be understood if one refers to the religious upbringing he has received from them : “*Defiance is a sin for people who are required by God to Submit, first to Him and then to their Fathers and their Mothers.*” (116). From then on, began what Rashid called “*the tragedy of Amin's life, and perhaps Jamila's too.*” (189). As a matter of fact, no sooner did he begin to experience the happiness of love for the first time than his parents made him renounce this happiness because of the bad reputation and behaviour of Jamila and her grandmother, but also because he is unwilling to defy his parents.

Consequently, he is suffering : “*I crave to touch her*” (194) and he cannot touch her any more. On account of the respect which he has for his parents, he will not go to Jamila any more, to his greatest suffering. Yet, his girlfriend told him, through Farida, that she would like to see him so that they could discuss about the problem. But he is unwilling to break his promise : “*I said I could not. I promised them that I would never see her again.*” (201). However, Amin is troubled and pained when he thinks about the way Jamila will interpret his attitude. He has no doubt that she will be ashamed of him, angry at him. She will also think that Amin now views her like his family and above all she will doubt his love for her : “*She would think I did not love her enough, but I do. Or that I was too faint-hearted to fight for her*” (194). But the point is Amin knows that, according to his parents, he is the reliable one. This has always been the case and it is not now that he is going to disappoint them : “*I could not disobey them, not after all these years.*” (194).

His suffering is physical too. At night he has difficulty in sleeping. Referring to Rashid with whom he sleeps on the same bed, he narrates : “*I expect him to wake because of my sleeplessness. I expect him to stir, at least, from my involuntary groans and sighs as I fidget to rest a sore hip or*

shoulder.” (194). As confiding in others allays pain,⁵ Amin wants his younger brother to make him speak about Jamila, for he will not take the initiative, preferring to suffer in silence : “*I almost wish he would wake and force me to speak about her.*” (195). In vain. Rashid is totally ignorant of what his elder brother is enduring. Amin is abruptly separated by his parents from a woman who had begun to play an important role in his life; Jamila gave him the joy of living : “*She filled my life with happiness, always gay.*” (197). Amin may have chosen the wrong woman because he is immature and innocent according to his mother and Jamila may be subjected to public scorn, but their affair has only been a happy experience for him : “*I have loved unwisely, but it has not been an oppression on me. I have been fortunate in my foolishness.*” (193).

Rashid had to go through a similar experience in England twenty years later to understand what Amin endured and is enduring. His English wife, Grace, has abandoned him and he feels wretched after her departure : “*I realised that... I had fitted something of my mental life to hers. Suddenly, in her absence, I could not keep pace with my own life. I wrote to Amin in my wretchedness.*” (189). Facing his younger brother's distress, Amin deems it necessary to talk to him about Jamila. By writing a letter of commiseration to Rashid in which he speaks about Jamila, Amin is not only confiding in his brother but he also wants to show him that he is not the only one to suffer from such a loss and has to hold on.

Thanks to the letter Amin has written to him, Rashid sees now the love affair between his brother and Jamila differently. The comparison of his pain to Amin's makes him feel distress for his elder brother : “*... it made me understand something more of what he had given up.*” (189). Whereas when he first heard about Amin and Jamila, Rashid was just surprised by Amin's skills at seduction : “*I had thought then that he was the dashing young man who had carried out a daring seduction...*” (189). Twenty years later, Amin has not got involved with another woman. His separation from Jamila has affected him to such an extent that he seems unwilling to get married. He even admitted to Rashid who often urged him to get married that he enjoyed being a bachelor. It is impossible for Amin to forget his first love even if that is what his parents and his sister want : “*I can't forget her. I imagine myself with her. For hours on end sometimes.*” (207).

As if Amin was not grieved enough, glaucoma caused him to lose the sight of one eye. Worse, the sight in the other eye has begun to fail. It is this pathology which has blinded completely his mother and has brought about her early

⁵ Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, Translated from the French by Modupé Bodé-Thomas, Heinemann AWS, 1981, p. 1

retirement at age thirty-nine. Rashid who had completed his Ph.D. in England and had recently found a teaching job in a university over there was ready to take out a loan and have him treated in Britain, but Amin turned down the offer : "... he said it was too late, the infection could not be cut out any more. That's what the doctor he went to see in Dar es Salaam said." (190). One may wonder whether Amin would join his brother if he had a chance to be cured. It can be sensed that he has lost taste for life : "*It makes me happy to think I will die.*" (209). He has lost his lover, his mother cannot see any more and his father has lost his employment as a consequence of the coup-d'état. Besides, with the coup, people of Arab descent like his family are being victimized. Therefore, Amin is unwilling to leave his parents alone now that Farida has got married and joined her husband in Mombasa. His loss of taste for life can also be seen in his satisfaction with his present situation characterized by his silent suffering and his failing sight : "*I am beginning to think that the dark and the silence are a kind of bliss. If our rulers forbade us music and banished the radio and the television, I don't think I would mourn.*" (210)

CONCLUSION

Through the love affair between Martin Pearce and Rehana Zakariya and the one between Amin and Jamila, Abdulrazak Gurnah shows the consequences of the arrival of a British colonial on an East African coast. Gurnah has also shed light on the importance which the natives grant to woman's chastity. Because of the relationship between Martin and Rehana, the latter and her granddaughter, Jamila, are pointed at in their community where women see to the preservation of their good name. Among Rehana's people, a woman is not expected to visit a lover, this is viewed as improper. It should be the other way round. Rehana, a Black and Muslim, has fallen in love with a White and Christian. Not only does she go to visit him but later she also lives openly with him in Mombasa whereas they are not married. Thus, she is shunned by her relatives and is referred to as the mistress of a European man, a *mzungu*. After Pearce deserts her to go back to England for good, leaving her with their daughter, his friend, Andrew Mills, moves in and takes charge of the rent. So everyone think Rehana a courtesan. As if she had not tarnished her reputation enough, she starts to drink.

Regarding, Jamila, her light skin reminds people of her grandmother's scandalous life. People talk about her, saying her grandmother was a European man's mistress. Another reason why people single Jamila out is her unchaste behaviour. As a young girl, she would not live with the rest of her family, preferring to stay on the ground floor and not upstairs. For her neighbours, this is all the more curious as

Jamila was keen on having a front door instead of using the main door of the house. Therefore, people began to talk, saying that she was secretive, she must be getting up to something. Her neighbours' suspicions were justifiable in the sense that she repetitively welcomed Amin in her flat where they made love. Besides, there were indications that she was not seeing Amin only. For example, she suggested that Amin come to her flat at 9 p.m. yet she told him not to knock if the door was locked but rather to go away and wait to hear from her. Furthermore, there was a rumour that she was seeing a politician in whose car she has been seen. Even Amin saw her in the politician's car.

Gurnah shows that if the love affair between Amin and Jamila has been ended abruptly, it is because of the relationship between Jamila's grandmother and Pearce on the one hand, and because of Jamila's bad reputation on the other hand. Halima could not keep Amin and his girlfriend's secret, for she is among those who are too frustrated by Jamila's behaviour. So when she was informed by Farida about Amin and Jamila, she went straightaway to inform the young man's parents who feel the same as her towards Jamila. Amin's mother rejects her son's relationship with Jamila, for the latter's grandmother led a life of sin with a European man. Nuru blames her son's girlfriend owing to her unvirtuous behaviour. Amin's father, for his part, wants the young man to think of his good name. For Feisal, Amin cannot preserve his good name if he marries a granddaughter of Rehana. Consequently, it is out of the question that he lets his son get involved with such a woman.

Therefore, the love affair of Jamila's grandparents has fundamentally contributed to the victimization of Amin and Jamila. Concerning Amin, he is paying the price for the romance between Pearce and Rehana and for Jamila's tarnished reputation. He is thus compelled by his parents to renounce his love. According to his mother, Jamila and her family are not their kind of people. The young man, with a heavy heart, submits to his parents' will, for he cannot disobey them, he does not want to disappoint them insofar as he has always been the reliable son. He turns down Jamila's suggestion that they meet in order to talk about their relationship because he will not break his promise towards his parents. The separation affects him not a little. Twenty years later, he is still not married and still imagines himself with Jamila, he cannot forget her. In addition to the void left in his life by the loss of Jamila, one of his eyes cannot see any more and, worse, the sight in the other eye is failing. Amin's loss of taste for life is evidenced by the fact that it makes him happy to think he will die.

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