

Language and power in postcolonial fictions: A study of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel heart* and *Desertion*

Osieka Osinimu Alao

Department of English

Federal University Gashua, Yobe State.

osiekaalao@gmail.com

Abstract

*The deployment of language in postcolonial fictions continues to draw diverse opinions, especially from proponents who advocate for the use of indigenous languages and those who propose the use of subverted colonial languages. Abdulrazak Gurnah seems to tilt towards the second proposition because his novels are written predominantly in English, which is inflected to bear the burden of his East African historical and cultural experiences. Hence, this essay, hinged on postcolonial theory, examines the postcolonial signposts of cultural nationalism, abrogation and appropriation in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* and *Desertion*. The method utilised is critical textual analysis and qualitative research. The essay reveals the following. First, Gurnah's fictions make capital of what is autochthonous by projecting East Africa's historical and cultural realities disrupted by Arab and European coloniality. Second, Gurnah's fictions abrogate the English language through the textual strategies of appropriation such as untranslated expressions, code-mixing and code-switching, and subversion, to accentuate aspects of East Africa's cultural heritage. The essay concludes that there should be a proliferation of postcolonial fictions which are essential*

cultural capital that condition the English language to reflect indigenous worldviews and resist linguistic and cultural hegemony and purity.

Keywords: *Language; Postcolonial fictions; Cultural Nationalism; Abrogation; Appropriation.*

Introduction

In postcolonial discourses, the language conundrum continues to fuel widespread debate. Some writers and scholars, like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, opine that post-colonial writers should birth their creative outputs in their indigenous language, as it is the only means by which indigenous cultures can be beamed and foregrounded on the global stage (16-23). In contrast, others, like Chinua Achebe, argue that since the sole purpose of postcolonial fictions is to redress Eurocentric misconceptions about the cultural heritage and traditions of indigenous peoples and represent their ways of life hitherto misrepresented by Europeans, they should be wrought in a language that has the ripple effect of a wider audience, for instance, English, which is the mainstay of the global literary scene (100). They further argue that English should not be solely deemed a colonial language since it has been remade into varieties to reflect the cultural experiences of indigenous peoples (Narasimhaiah 8, Achebe 103).

Abdulrazak Gurnah, in *Gravel Heart* and *Desertion*, seizes the colonial language and conditions it to project East Africa's cultural and historical evolution. The novels are folkloric in magnitude because they subvert the English language to convey indigenous epistemologies. Gurnah, through the novels, reaffirms his cultural nationalist commitment by asserting indigenous cultural heritage. By writing and publishing in a literary and

cultural ecosystem saturated with Western ideologies and dynamics, Gurnah makes capital of what is autochthonous. Gurnah's artistic vision undoubtedly emphasises the prestige of indigenous cultural identities. Hence, the aim of this essay is to examine the postcolonial signposts of cultural nationalism, abrogation and appropriation in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* and *Desertion*.

Theoretical Framework

Language has political implications and is central to any discussion of culture and power (Bassnett 82, Yew 145). Ngugi wa Thiong'o posits that "The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized" (16). The imposition of colonial languages on Africans engendered their subjugation because they began to see the world through Eurocentric lenses. These events reconfigured the worldview of indigenous peoples due to the enthronement of colonial cultures, ideologies and epistemologies. Hence, these have prompted Ngugi's clarion call for postcolonial writers to jettison colonial languages and utilise their indigenous languages to craft their literary works. This is because language carries the values of a people and so, the utilisation of colonial languages by postcolonial writers only serves to reinforce the colonial cultures inherent in these colonial languages (Bassnett 82).

Contrastively, Chinua Achebe argues that since the germane agency of postcolonial literature is to write back to the metropolis, it should be written in the colonisers' language for the sake of universal intelligibility and reach, but the language must be made to project indigenous experiences by Africanising it (100). Achebe further asserts that the English language must be

subjected “to carry the weight of [the] African experience” and “altered to suit its new African surroundings” (103). Robert Young also concurs that postcolonial writers should continually subvert the English language by inflecting it towards local idioms and that English is no longer regarded as a colonial language but operates as the accommodating lingua franca in which all cultures meet (159-160). Likewise, Closepet Dasappa Narasimhaiah asserts that “English is not a pure language but a fascinating combination of tongues welded into a fresh unity” (8). That is, the potentiality of English lies in its adoption as a malleable tool for the expression of diverse cultural experiences, therefore, postcolonial writers should recast, refashion and recondition the English language to reflect their vast cultural heritage (Ashcroft et al. 38-39).

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin have posited that postcolonial fictions should adopt the metropolitan language and condition it to represent indigenous history and culture (37). Colonial languages such as English should be subverted to reflect indigenous historical and cultural realities. The two modes through which these ideas can be realised are abrogation and appropriation (Ashcroft et al. 37). Abrogation is “a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or ‘correct’ usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning ‘inscribed’ in the words,” while appropriation is “the process by which the language is taken and made to ‘bear the burden’ of one’s own cultural experience” (Ashcroft et al. 37).

On the one hand, abrogation comprises rejecting the norms of the colonial language, that is, refusing to deploy the colonial language in its standard form, and, on the other, appropriation is subjecting the colonial language to project the cultural values of

the colonised. While abrogation is the rejection of the standard usage of the colonial language, appropriation provides the textual strategies through which this rejection can be realised in postcolonial fictions. Ashcroft et al. have identified a variety of appropriative textual strategies, but this essay focuses on untranslated expressions, code-mixing and code-switching, and subversion.

Untranslated expressions are indigenous words, phrases and clauses drawn from a particular culture and used in a narrative without necessarily translating them into the colonial language. The terminus ad quem of untranslated terms is to “forge a decolonized English” (Mwangi 67). That is, untranslated expressions are interpolated in postcolonial fictions to strip English of its linguistic and cultural dominance by foregrounding the indigenous culture. Untranslated expressions also resist linguistic purity because they are placed side by side with English expressions in the same narrative.

Ashcroft et al. have described the phenomenon of untranslated expressions in postcolonial texts as “metonymic gap” which is the cultural gap formed when appropriations of a colonial language insert unglossed words, phrases or passages from a first language, or concepts, allusions or references that may be unknown to the reader. Such words become synecdochic of the writer’s culture – the part that stands for the whole – rather than representations of the world, as the colonial language might. Thus, the inserted language ‘stands for’ the colonized culture in a metonymic way, and its very resistance to interpretation constructs a ‘gap’ between the writer’s culture and the colonial culture. (122-123).

Unglossed expressions are representative of the African writer’s culture and their injection in postcolonial fictions

projects indigenous historical and cultural realities which are differentiated from the colonial culture inherent in the metropolitan language.

Furthermore, Judith Misrahi-Barak and Srilata Ravi identify the phenomenon of the “transfer of languages,” which addresses the impact of “multiple migrations, traumatic relocations and forced adjustments to new linguistic locales” on postcolonial writers and their literary works. That is, many postcolonial writers have experienced multiple migrations, traumatic relocations and the forced adjustment to new linguistic terrains, all of which have affected their use of language in their fictions. Abdulrazak Gurnah, for instance, was born in the Sultanate of Zanzibar, which was agog with Arab coloniality. Definitely, while growing up, Gurnah must have learnt some Arabic, side by side with his first language, Swahili. Subsequently, Zanzibar became a British protectorate occasioned by the European colonial invasion of East Africa, which implied that English was enthroned over all other languages. In addition, during the Zanzibar Revolution, Gurnah fled as a refugee to England, where he still lives as an immigrant. All these, no doubt, have impacted Gurnah’s diction in his fictions. Gurnah’s novels are predominantly written in English but embroidered with a truckload of Swahili expressions and a sprinkling of Arabic, German, and Indian terms. In light of these, Francesca Orsini and Neelam Srivastava posit that postcolonial writers are “often bi- or trilingual,” and they “constantly negotiate their use of the metropolitan literary language by drawing on the rich substratum of their other linguistic knowledge in a process of semantic widening” (325). The infusion of unglossed expressions in postcolonial fictions engenders semantic widening because there

is an imposition of new meanings drawn from the indigenous culture.

Code-mixing and code-switching are textual strategies of appropriation in postcolonial texts. Critics have argued several times that there is no significant difference between code-mixing and code-switching. However, on the one hand, Richard Hudson defines code-mixing as “a kind of linguistic cocktail” (53). That is, it is the mixing of linguistic units (words, phrases, clauses) from two or more languages. On the other, code-switching, according to Laura Callahan, is “the use of words and structures from more than one language or linguistic variety by the same speaker within the same speech situation, conversation or utterance” (5). It entails a speaker switching from one language to another during a conversation. The end goals of code-mixing and code-switching are to communicate, to serve as an act of identity, and to signify cultural solidarity or distance (Richards and Schmidt 89).

Subversion entails adapting the English language to accentuate indigenous cultural heritage. It is conditioning the English language to reflect aspects of the indigenous culture. It involves making the English language to bear the weight of indigenous historical and cultural experiences. Subversion takes place when the colonial language is deployed to portray indigenous cultural elements such as dress codes, folkways, political structures, foods, authentic places and identities, norms, et cetera. In postcolonial texts, the colonial language used should be subjected to embody indigenous epistemologies, existentialities and thought patterns. Suffice it to say that the main function of subversion as a linguistic tool is cultural projection and valorisation.

The postcolonial idea of cultural nationalism, an ideology originally attributed to German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, deals with “the idea that a shared consciousness of cultural identity based on a common language constitutes a valid, if not compelling, reason for claiming the right to political self-government” (Barnard 17). One of the focal points of Herder’s cultural nationalist ideology is language. Herder, in what would later be referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or linguistic relativity theory, opines that a people’s language mediates the way they conceptualise the world, and makes them view the world from certain perceptions and values. That is, on the one hand, language is central to culture, and culture influences one’s worldview, and on the other, language is central to literature, and consequently, the literature a people produce is influenced by their worldview.

In light of this, Herder identifies folklore (lore of the *volk*) as a people’s specific culture that springs in coherence with their language. This folklore, as highlighted by Herder, encompasses the people’s values, traditions, customs, folktales, myths, legends, proverbs, festivals, dances, folksongs, dress codes, dishes, art, and so on, preserved and passed down from generation to generation. Therefore, postcolonial fictions are folkloric because they embody indigenous cultures and epistemologies. This is in tandem with Charles Nnolim’s definition of cultural nationalism, or cultural assertion, as a literary tradition which takes its roots from folkways and is given ballast by vigorous and robust recourse to folk culture (40). It entails creatively deploying local proverbs, legends, folktales, local myths, et cetera, to give expression to the national culture (Nnolim 40). It centres on the imagery of the indigenous culture and political landscape and addresses how colonial intrusion has disrupted the pristine and

cohesive system of existence in indigenous communities (Nnolim 40). On the political front, cultural nationalism pays attention to the quality of leadership in the postcolony. It considers the postcolonial writer's demonstration of political commitment in their works (Nnolim 42). That is, how their works treat the destiny of indigenous peoples, especially regarding their collective encounter with Europe (Nnolim 42).

Furthermore, the underlying ideological thrust of cultural nationalism is resistance, which manifests as a reaction against colonial or imperial powers that have repressed a people's culture. In the Western-dominated literary ecosystem, resistance can be achieved through what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu refers to as "cultural capital" (17). Cultural capital are creative works by African writers crafted to challenge Eurocentric epistemologies and colonial thought patterns and to reclaim and re-present repressed indigenous cultures. Cultural capital is generated through "cultural production" (Bourdieu 20). Cultural production entails the writing and publishing of stories that centre indigenous characters and realities in a globalised world. Cultural capital is a sine qua non for the projection of indigenous cultures on the global scene. Suffice it to say that in a globalised world saturated with Eurocentric ideologies, cultural capital realised through cultural production are effective countermeasures. In sum, quality fictions on indigenous peoples and their realities have to continually be released to flesh out the value of indigenous cultures in global cultural discourses.

Textual analysis

Cultural nationalism in *Gravel heart*

Gravel Heart portrays how culture is integrated into the strife for independence and how the struggle becomes the national culture.

Ahmed Musa Ibrahim is a cultural nationalist and liberation catalyst who actively participates in the anticolonial movement to oust colonial rule. Ahmed Musa Ibrahim is one of the many who unite under the umbrella of their indigenous culture to resist the colonialists. Their culture becomes a weapon of resistance.

Like many of the nationalists who fought for African independence, Ahmed Musa Ibrahim is educated in Europe. Many indigenes undergo colonial education and become Westernised. Ahmed Musa Ibrahim's education transforms him into an enlightened and intellectual individual. He then channels his intellectuality into the liberation struggle. He, alongside other nationalists, organises anticolonial protests, rallies, and campaigns. The British vehemently try to suppress the revolution, but the culture of resistance prevails, and so they are forced to exit Zanzibar in 1963.

Subsequently, the post-independence era is fraught with endless catastrophes. The cultural spirit of the liberation movement seems to have been buried. The postcolonial national culture is a culture of corruption, decadence and avarice. Arab coloniality plays a major role in igniting the Zanzibar Revolution, which leads to wanton death and destruction. Cultural nationalists like Ahmed Musa Ibrahim are killed and their legacies jettisoned. The political class that assumes control of the polity fosters a culture of incompetence and indiscipline. Characters like Saida, Hakim and Amir all exhibit social vices that have become more prominent in the post-independence era. Saida, a married woman, chooses to have an affair with Hakim, the Vice President's son, because she wants her brother Amir, who has been accused of raping Hakim's underage sister, released from prison. It is Hakim who, instead of charging Amir in court, takes the law into his hands and locks up Amir. Saida's shameful action disintegrates

her family, infuriates her son Salim and sends her husband into depression.

In *Gravel Heart*, the Afrodiasporic national culture is a culture of struggle and navigating cultural boundaries. After some years, Amir gets an opportunity to migrate to Ireland where he studies International Relations at University College Dublin. Unlike Ahmed Musa Ibrahim, Uncle Amir becomes Westernised. He allows his Western education transform him into a white man. He secures a job as an envoy to England where he settles with his family. He and his wife despise and jettison their cultural roots and cling to Westernisation.

Amir rewards Saida's *kindness* towards him by facilitating Salim's migration to England to study business. Later on, Uncle Amir and Salim have a falling out because Salim abandons business to study literature. Salim is forced to leave Uncle Amir's house and fend for himself. In the course of Salim's sojourn in England, he meets many African immigrants who are preoccupied with survival and manoeuvring cultural interspaces that shrink and marginalise them. Eventually, Salim meets a half-English, half-Indian lady, Billie, whom he falls in love with. Billie's real name is Bindiya. Billie is the anglicised form. Salim's relationship with Bindiya hits the rocks when her family discovers that he is a Muslim from Africa. Salim is called a "Muslim nigger" (147). In sum, *Gravel Heart* shows how Africa's national culture has undergone corrosion, from the colonial era to the post-independence period and the emergence of a vibrant African diaspora.

Abrogation and appropriation in *Gravel heart* Untranslated expressions

Untranslated expressions are distinguishing and decolonial elements in postcolonial fictions. *Gravel Heart* deploys untranslated expressions drawn from Swahili, Arabic, and Indian. The Swahili terms foreground the Swahili culture and worldview, the Arabic expressions are reminiscent of Arab coloniality and its impact on East Africa, while the Indian expressions reflect the influence of the Gujarati Indians on the socioeconomic evolution of East Africa.

The following are some Swahili expressions used in *Gravel Heart*. The expression “Abdalla kichwa wazi” loosely translates to “Abdalla’s head is clear” (5). “Abdalla” here is not the name of a person, but rather it means “penis”. So, the expression “Abdalla kichwa wazi” means “the penis head is clear.” It is a local idiom used to describe the circumcision that Salim undergoes when he is five years old. Another word used is “babu,” which means “grandfather,” but in this context it is used figuratively as an adjective to mean “old” or “ancient”; hence, “babu stories” could mean “old/ancient stories” (17). “Mabeberu” is another word used, and it is derived from the root word “beberu,” which means “a male goat”. East Africans use “mabeberu” to refer to “imperialists,” especially in regard to their unwanted presence in Africa (17). Another Swahili word used is “kufuru,” which means “blasphemy” (182). Maalim Yahaya uses it to describe the cinema as corrupt and immoral when disapproving of Salim’s love for the cinema. In the novel, “mtandio” is a Swahili word which means “scarf,” and it is used to refer to Saida’s veil (188).

Gravel Heart is also sprinkled with Arabic expressions. The following are some of them. The word “al-fajiri” is used to describe the morning prayers in Islam (9). It is used emphatically to show the religion of the character Mahsen, a devout Muslim, who never misses a single one of his five prayers every day. The

words “Idd” and “Maulid” describe the Islamic celebrations marking the end of Ramadan and the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, respectively (12). Another Arabic word, “khabithi,” which means “corrupt,” is used to qualify immigration officials fond of stealing passengers’ items (192).

Code-mixing and code-switching

Code-mixing and code-switching are appropriative techniques deployed in the following expressions drawn from *Gravel Heart*:

1. “**Wallahi**, she would say, that woman is an angel” (22). “Wallahi” is an Arabic word which means “I swear to God,” and it is used in the sentence alongside other English words.
2. “We were to say **alhamdulillah** and do what we could” (22). “Alhamdulillah” is an Arabic word that means “praise be to God,” and it is used alongside English words.
3. “**Salamu na baada ya salamu**, I hope you are well and sister Munira is well” (62). “Salamu na baada ya salamu” is a Swahili expression that may loosely translate to “greetings and more greetings,” which Salim uses in a letter sent from London to his mother.
4. “**Ahlan wa sahlán**, my old friend” (96). “Ahlan wa sahlán” is an Arabic expression which means “Welcome,” and it is used by the Sudanese lawyer Jafar Mustafa Hilal when he meets with Mr Mgeni and Salim to help with Salim’s residential papers.
5. “... I will be in touch. **Maasalama ya habibi**” (97). “Maasalama ya habibi” is an Arabic expression that means “Peace be with you my beloved,” and it is used by the Sudanese lawyer Jafar Mustafa Hilal to bid Mr Mgeni and Salim farewell.

Subversion

In *Gravel Heart*, the English language is conditioned to convey East African cultural heritage. The colonisers claimed that Africans had no culture before the advent of colonialism. Contrarily, the novel counters this fallacious notion by portraying aspects of East African culture, such as foods, dress codes, traditional medicine, circumcision, political structure, and so on, that existed even before colonialists set foot on African soil.

Gravel Heart portrays East Africa's unique foods. They include vitumbua, which is coconut rice pancake; katlesi, which is spiced minced beef and crispy mashed potato; and sambusa which is spring rolls filled with seasoned ground beef or vegetables with blended Somali spices. These delicacies are prepared and packed by Salim's mother as part of their picnic (5). Additionally, *Gravel Heart* portrays East African dress codes. The East African men usually don kanzu and kofia. A kanzu is a long garment with long sleeves and usually white or pastel in colour. Kofia is a braided cap or hat. When Salim starts Koran school at the age of five, he is required to put on a calf-length kanzu and a kofia (6). It also implies that the children grow up wearing it, and so it becomes engrained in their nature. The East African women usually put on kangas which are garments made of thin cotton cloth with printed designs. Saida is shown wearing a kanga when the news of her brother Amir's abduction reaches her (221).

Gravel Heart also portrays circumcision as a cultural practice. Circumcision is a common practice among African men. Salim is circumcised shortly before he turns five. When Salim is circumcised, it feels like a thing of pride and acceptance: "For days after [the circumcision] I had to sit with my legs wide apart, exposing my turbaned penis to the healing air while my mother

and my father and the neighbours came to look on me with big smiles on their faces” (5).

Cultural nationalism in *Desertion*

Desertion portrays how, in the colonial period, indigenes imbibe the national culture of inferiority. Africans seem to be unperturbed by the colonial agenda of the Arabs and Europeans, and they act as though they have accepted the status of the inferior other. When Hassanali encounters the injured Englishman Pearce and takes him to his house for treatment, the attitude of the villagers tells a lot about how they view the Europeans. Some of Hassanali’s friends even argue over who should take Pearce to their house for catering. At some point, because of Pearce, a large crowd throngs Hassanali’s house, as though a festivity. Apparently, it is as though the indigenes have been brainwashed into accepting the false superiority of the colonialists.

In many colonies, the national culture of inferiority lingers. The Arabs, led by the Al Busaid sultans, hire Baluchi mercenaries (indigenous soldiers) to capture their fellow indigenes and force them to work on their plantations. This national culture of inferiority is undergirded by the colonialists’ wielding of sophisticated weapons, the indigenes’ willingness to work for the colonialists and protect their interests, and the Africans’ willingness and eagerness to sell their kith and kin into slavery.

Eventually, the indigenous people awaken from their slumber of subservience and unite under the umbrella of their indigeneity to repel the colonialists. The liberation struggle becomes their national culture. Their anticolonial and

anti-imperial mobilisations are met with colonial brute aggression, but because their culture is the weapon of resistance, they, despite the protracted struggle, clinch victory. Europeans and Arabs must end their occupation of indigenous lands. Although the British depart Zanzibar in 1963, the Omani Arabs are, through the bloody Zanzibar Revolution, forced out in 1964. After colonial departures, Zanzibar is thrust into a national culture of corruption and chaos.

The life of the African immigrant Rashid spotlights the Afrodiasporic national culture of survivalism and the navigation of cultural boundaries. Rashid migrates to England in 1963 to study at the University of London. He suffers estrangement and racial hostilities. He marries the Englishwoman Grace, but she eventually divorces him. Although he communicates with his family in Zanzibar via letters, he does not inform them about Grace because he knows their desire for him is to return home and marry a Zanzibari woman. At the end of the novel, Rashid decides to travel back to Zanzibar in a bid to re-establish a connection with his ancestral roots. In sum, *Desertion* brings to the fore how the national character of indigenous peoples has been impacted by colonialism.

Abrogation and appropriation in *Desertion*

Untranslated expressions

The following are Swahili expressions used in *Desertion*. “Seredani” means “charcoal cooker,” and it is used to foreground the Swahili culture and to show it is an element of Swahili civilisation even before the advent of colonialism (8). “Duka” means “shop,” but it is not just any type of shop; it is a crowded merchandise store which is common in Indian cities and which

Indian traders have brought to East Africa (39). The word “chotara” means “half-caste” or “a person of mixed race” and it is used to describe Rehana, who is fathered by an Indian man who allegedly abandoned her as a baby (204). The Swahili word “mzungu” means a “European,” and it is used to describe the Englishman Pearce (204).

Desertion also integrates some Indian terms to show the influence of the Gujarati Indians in opening up East Africa to trade opportunities. There is the use of the word “dukawallah” (40). The term “dukawallah” refers to “mainly Khoja/Gujarati migrants who, during the Swahili, Omani and European rule in the 19th and 20th centuries, opened the African hinterland from the coast to the Congo, linking the indigenous inhabitants to the ancient Indian Ocean trade and exports” (Dewji). In Hassanali’s town, most of the shops are owned by dukawallahs. Another Indian word used is “jamadar,” which means “junior officer” (8). It is used to describe the self-important Hamza, who sees himself as the head of the group of friends, which includes Hassanali, Ali Kipara and Jumaane.

Desertion is embroidered with the following Arabic expressions. The expression “Salla, salla” means “Pray, pray,” and Hassanali uses it to call the people to prayer (4). The Arabic expression “As-salatu khayra minannawn” (4) means “Prayer is better than sleep.” The word “adhan,” which is the “Islamic call to prayer” is used when the muezzin, who happens to be Hassanali is calling the people to prayer (4). The word “rakaa” means “a routine of prescribed movements and supplications performed by a Muslim during prayers” (205). Lastly, the Arabic word “muadhin” refers to the person who, from a minaret, summons the Muslim faithful to prayer five times a day (6).

Code-mixing and code-switching

Code-mixing and code-switching are textual strategies of appropriation deployed in the following expressions drawn from *Desertion*:

1. “**Subhanallah**, who are you? Are you human or spirit?” (6). “Subhanallah” is an Arabic expression which means “Glory be to Allah.” This utterance is made by Hassanali who is shocked to see the exhausted and wounded Martin Pearce gasping for breath.
2. “**Masikini**,” ... “Poor you” (14). “Masikini” is a Swahili word that means “poor” and in the expression, it is code-mixed with its English translation.
3. “**Mzungu**, Mamake Zaituni said while speaking to herself. A European” (16). “Mzungu” is a Swahili word used to refer to a “European” and in the expression, it is code-mixed with its English translation.
4. “No fever, rash, bad smells or diarrhoea. It may be the sun has dried him out and made him dizzy. **Limemekausha na kumtia kizunguzungu**. I’ll come back later after you’ve given him the honey, and after Legbreaker has seen him. I’m going back to my bread now” (17). “Limemekausha na kumtia kizunguzungu” is the Swahili translation of the preceding sentence, “It may be the sun has dried him out and made him dizzy.” The speaker Mamake Zaituni code-switches to Swahili to emphasise what she says, and also to repel linguistic hegemony by showing that there is nothing that is said in English that cannot be said in Swahili which is her first language.
5. “Don’t shout at the good man when he was only trying to help another poor son of Adam, they called out, don’t abuse him for no reason. Take your mzungu and get out of here, **fidhuli we**” (57). The Swahili expression “fidhuli we” means “rude you,” and it is used by the townspeople to refer to the Bohra man who

accuses them of robbing Martin Pearce, and so they tell him to take Pearce and leave.

Subversion

Desertion adapts the English language to project aspects of East Africa's culture. The novel portrays the East African dress codes. The East African women usually wear a buibui which is a long black gown with a head covering. Mamake Zaituni wears a buibui when she visits Hassanali's house to treat Martin Pearce (15). The men, such as Yahya the bonesetter and Amin, can also be seen wearing kanzus (23, 181).

While circumcision is commonplace in Africa, Europeans seem to be widely uncircumcised, as portrayed in *Desertion*. When the healer Mamake Zaituni is inspecting Pearce's body, they discover that he is uncircumcised, which serves as a confirmation of his origins: "At first Hassanali had thought he was one of those fair-skinned Arabs from the north... but when they took his sandals and trousers off, they saw that he was uncircumcised. Mzungu, Mamake Zaituni said, speaking to herself. A European" (16).

Before the colonialists invaded Africa and imposed colonial rule, Africans had their own political structure. Towns and clans had representatives, and in *Desertion*, there is the wakil, who is a representative of the people. Although with the presence of the colonialists, his influence is diminished, and his level of importance is tied to how well he can serve the colonialists, such as Frederick Turner and Burton. It is the wakil who goes to inform Frederick of Martin Pearce's recuperation in Hassanali's house and lead him to the shop: "The wakil stepped inside and beckoned Federick in after him. One of the elderly men kept the

crowd back with his stick, but they thronged the doorway, and some clambered to the top of the yard wall” (40). Although the wakil’s role has been diminished because of the Europeans’ takeover, he is still considered as the people’s representative. The notion that Africans were ungoverned and disorderly before the advent of colonialism is false and misleading.

Another widespread Eurocentric misrepresentation of Africans is that they had no form of medicine before the advent of colonialism. Africans had their forms of traditional medicine before the arrival of the colonialists. In fact, traditional medicine has been corroded by Westernisation. *Desertion* mirrors the existence of traditional medicine even before the advent of colonialism. When Hassanali discovers the wounded and famished Pearce and takes him to his house, the first person he reaches out to is the healer Mamake Zaituni. Mamake Zaituni is a traditional medical practitioner who inspects Pearce and is able to diagnose that he does not have any disease and is only suffering from exhaustion and dehydration (17). In addition, Hassanali invites Yahya the bonesetter to diagnose if Pearce has any broken bones or fractures (24). Both Mamake Zaituni are revered traditional medical practitioners who diagnose the Englishman Pearce.

Conclusion

Gurnah’s *Gravel Heart and Desertion* refashion the English language to portray indigenous historical and cultural existentiality. The novels interpolate untranslated Swahili, Arabic, and Indian terms. The Swahili terms project the Swahili worldview, while the Arabic and Indian terms highlight the influence of Arab coloniality and the Gujarati Indians’ trade expeditions on East Africa, respectively. These untranslated

terms, together with their task of cultural projection, decolonise the English language and resist linguistic and cultural dominance and purity.

The novels, through linguistic subversion, beam aspects of East Africa's cultural and historical experiences, such as food varieties, dress codes, circumcision, political structure, traditional medicine, and so on. These cultures portrayed were in existence before the advent of colonialism. Furthermore, the majority of the novel's indigenous characters use code-mixing and code-switching in their utterances as a testament to their fluency in two or more languages resulting from the language contact with the Europeans and Arabs. In sum, *Gravel Heart* and *Desertion* are essential cultural capital crafted to accentuate the prestige and positioning of indigenous identities on the world stage.

Works cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. Anchor Press, 1975.
- Ashcroft, Bill et al. *The Empire Writes Back* (2nd ed.). Routledge, 2002.
- Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (2nd ed.). Routledge, 2007.
- Barnard, Frederick Mechner. *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003.
- Bassnett Susan. "Postcolonial Translations." *A Concise Companion to Postcolonial Literature*, edited by Shirley

- Chew and David Richards, Wiley Blackwell, 2010, pp. 78-96.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Forms of Capital." *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by Richardson, J., Greenwood, 1986, pp. 241-58 (15-29).
- Callahan, Laura. *Spanish/English Codeswitching in a Written Corpus*. John Benjamins, 2004.
- Dewji, Iqbal. "The Intrepid East African Dukawalla." *Khojawiki*, 2019, www.khojawiki.org.
- Gurnah, Abdulrazak. *Desertion*. Bloomsbury, 2005.
- Gravel Heart*. Bloomsbury, 2017.
- Hudson, Richard Anthony. *Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge University Press, 1980.
- Misrahi-Barak, Judith, and Ravi, Srilata. "Translating the Postcolonial in Multilingual Contexts: Disruptive Transfers on the Borders." *Translating the Postcolonial in Multilingual Contexts*, edited by Judith Misrahi-Barak and Srilata Ravi, Presses universitaires de la Mediterranee, 2017, pp. 9-18. *Open Edition Books*, www.openedition.org.
- Mwangi, Evan. "The Gendered Politics of Untranslated Language and Aporia in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2004, pp. 66-

74. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3821204>. Accessed 25 Nov. 2023.
- Narasimhaiah, Closepet Dasappa. *The Swan and the Eagle*. Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1969.
- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o. *Decolonizing the Mind*. Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1987.
- Nnolim, Charles. "Chinua Achebe: A re-assessment." *Tydskrif vir letterkunde*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2011, pp. 39-50. *AJOL*, www.ajol.info.
- Orsini, Francesca and Neelam Srivastava. "Translation and the Postcolonial." *Interventions*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2013, pp. 323-331.
- Richards, Jack, and Schmidt, Richard. *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics* (4th ed.). Pearson, 2010.
- Yew, Kuan Lee. *From Third World to First World: The Singapore Story: 1965-2000*. Harper Collins, 2000.

Osiaka Osinimu Alao is a lecturer in the Department of English, Federal University, Gashua, Yobe State