

From “Being Deserted” to “Active Desertion”: Rehana’s Memory Dilemma and Reconstruction in *Desertion* Under Spatial Narrative

Jing Shang^{1*}, Yifan Wu²

¹Professor, Department of Foreign Studies, North China Electric Power University, Baoding City, Hebei Province, China

²Postgraduate Student, Department of Foreign Studies, North China Electric Power University, Baoding City, Hebei Province, China

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36348/sijll.2026.v09i09.003>

| Received: 02.08.2026 | Accepted: 26.09.2026 | Published: 30.09.2026

*Corresponding author: Jing Shang

Professor, Department of Foreign Studies, North China Electric Power University, Baoding City, Hebei Province, China

Abstract

Desertion, a novel by Abdulrazak Gurnah, has been widely noted for its insightful examination of colonial history and its impact on individual lives. Within this novel, the central female character, Rehana, has a destiny that is very closely connected to space. Using Rehana as its focus, this study seeks to explore the memory predicament and reconstruction pathways of marginalized women within a postcolonial context. Utilizing a close reading methodology and drawing on Gabriel Zoran’s spatial narrative theory, this research undertakes an analysis structured around three key dimensions: topographical space, textual space, and chronotopic space. The findings reveal that Rehana’s spatial mobility enables her to transition from being “abandoned” to actively “abandoning,” thereby achieving memory reconstruction. This transformation underscores the subjectivity of marginalized women and provides a significant framework for comprehending individual memory predicaments and identity reconciliation within a postcolonial context.

Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah; *Desertion*; spatial narrative; memory predicament; memory reconstruction; post-colonialism.

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution **4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)** which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

1. INTRODUCTION

Abdulrazak Gurnah is a highly influential Tanzanian-born British author in contemporary literature. During his years of exile from his homeland, Gurnah frequently recorded his nostalgia in diaries, which gradually evolved into literary writing, enabling him to explore the experiences and emotions of being a refugee and living in a foreign land (Shi, 2021). Gurnah’s fiction subtly portrays hardships for individuals and communities caught within cultural rifts in the postcolonial era. Despite enduring scholarly and literary appreciation for his writings on the world stage, Gurnah did not attain broad public and academic renown worldwide until his 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature. The official citation commends his rigorous, empathetic exploration of colonial legacies and displaced lives: “uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents” (Alexandra, A. & A. Marshall, 2021, p.6). A representative work of diasporic literature, Gurnah’s novel *Desertion* (2005) interweaves the destinies of three generations, spanning Asia, Africa, and Europe, to narrate a tragic love story transcending race and culture, and to expose the

profound wounds inflicted by colonialism on individuals and communities. While scholars offer diverse interpretations of *Desertion*, existing research often emphasizes colonial critique, identity construction, trauma, or holistic analyses of spatial imagery. Further exploration is warranted regarding the central female character, Rehana, specifically concerning the dynamic relationship between spatial dimensions and individual memory. This would reveal the pivotal role of space in both solidifying and reconstructing female memory. As an East African woman in a colonial context, Rehana in the text possesses neither agency in discourse nor autonomy in spatial choice. Her traumatic memories are inextricably linked to the spaces she inhabits. Abandoned first by the Indian merchant Azad and then by the British scholar Pearce, she becomes known within the family’s collective memory as “the one who had caused all the trouble” (Gurnah, 2005, p.223). This study therefore focuses on Rehana, utilizing Zoran’s spatial narrative framework to analyze the formation of her memory dilemma and her transformation from passive abandonment to active abandonment from three dimensions including topographical space, textual space, and chronotopic space. This approach aims to uncover the means by which marginalized postcolonial women

Citation: Shang, J., & Wu, Y. (2026). From “Being Deserted” to “Active Desertion”: Rehana’s Memory Dilemma and Reconstruction in *Desertion* Under Spatial Narrative. *Sch Int J Linguist Lit*, 9(9), 201-205.

<https://doi.org/10.36348/sijll.2026.v09i09.003>

break free from the shackles of memory and achieve identity reconstruction, offering a different perspective on the spatial narrative of *Desertion* and providing insights into understanding postcolonial individual memory struggles and identity reformation.

II. Topographical Space: The Home as a Memory Prison

Gabriel Zoran considers “the topographical space as a static entity. It is on the highest level of reconstruction” (1984, p. 315). He believes that it can be a series of spaces with opposite relationships such as inside and outside, center and periphery. Within *Desertion*, Rehana’s house exemplifies the opposition between “inside” and “outside.” The home, where Rehana is situated, confines her to the interior, while the streets and shops outside represent mobility and the unknown. Consequently, Rehana is consistently excluded from this external realm.

According to Chinese professor Long Diyong (2015), among all spaces, the house is the most used image to depict a character. Within *Desertion*, the physical fabric of the house embodies a pronounced sense of bounded order: “It was a large yard, running the full length of the house. There were plants in pots... a paved platform for washing clothes, a cluster of seredani for cooking and at one end of the yard the washroom and the room for necessities” (Gurnah, 2005, p.13). This well-organized space, which should have offered peace, instead becomes a cage of memories for Rehana. It is here that her marriage to Azad begins, and it is also here that the marriage solidifies into a source of lasting pain. Within Rehana’s Muslim cultural context, she had reached a marriageable age, yet she had refused three marriage proposals. Hassanali, anxious about her future, worried that remaining unmarried would damage their reputation. When Azad, an Indian merchant, arrived in town for trade and befriended Hassanali, he was frequently invited to the family’s home. Over the course of these shared meals, a subtle romance blossomed between Rehana and Azad. Thus, the family thought it was great when Azad came; “it was like an unexpected gift, a blessing” (Gurnah, 2005, p.76). The courtyard of their home, the carefully laid placemats, and the fragrant food all momentarily became associated with a budding romance and optimistic expectations. However, their understanding of Azad remained incomplete. Ultimately, during a sea trading voyage, Azad vanished without a trace. Abandoned, Rehana remained deeply entrenched in grief. Her state of existence and the domestic space created a painful resonance, depicted in the text as: “Her life became a muddle in this way, resentful, depressed, sleeping late, missing him... and part of her congealed into something heavy and sour” (Gurnah, 2005, p.78). Human emotions are invariably linked to the spaces. Factors such as the perceived location, size, boundaries and direction influence a range of emotional responses, including anxiety, comfort, foreignness and disorientation (Fang, 2017). The crux of Rehana’s

enduring tribulations is rooted in her spatial immobility, a condition rendering her unable to extricate herself from this circumscribed environment, saturated as it is with agonizing memories. With particular attention to “the lushness of the pot-plants, among them a red rose, a lavender in bloom and a bristling aloe” (Gurnah, 2005, p.13), the novel presents these plants as symbols of Rehana’s earlier emotional vitality. However, they are confined within flower containers, just like her memories locked inside the courtyard. Through her daily cycle of repetitive domestic chores, from setting meals on the same placemats to caring for the same plants, Rehana continually re-stages moments of the past. Rather than fading with time, her memories are reinforced through this daily repetition.

When Pearce arrives five years later, the repetition of familiar spatial features alongside his appearance pushes Rehana to confront the layered overlap of past and recent memories. The traveler’s sudden and unfamiliar entry into their lives reawakened deeply suppressed painful memories for Rehana. “She had felt terror and anger, and the beginnings of elation, all in an instant. Now that she thought of that moment she remembered that she also thought of him, Then she saw that it wasn’t him, and drew back in relief and disgust.” (Gurnah, 2005, p.60-61). It is precisely within the bounds of the domestic sphere that this acute affective dissonance is sparked. The home continues to feature the same flourishing potted plants: “lush bushes growing in pots: roses and lavender and a pale green bush with leaves like geraniums” (Gurnah, 2005, p.104). These plants, which grew and blossomed with each passing year, embodied the stability of the home, but also served as a constant visual and olfactory reminder of a history that began with tenderness and culminated in heartbreak. Ultimately, Rehana and Pearce developed a romantic relationship and begin a life together. Ultimately, when she was abandoned by Pearce, old wounds were reopened, creating another period of intense suffering for Rehana. The confining character of her home space is deepened still further by both the traditional patriarchal structure and the colonial context. As a woman, Rehana was subject to the prevailing social norms: “A woman always had to have a guardian: her father, her husband, and in the absence of both, the eldest of her brothers” (Gurnah, 2005, p.224). This prevented her from leaving her brother, Hassanali, and escaping the constraints of her home.

As a result, the walls, courtyard, and inhabitants of the home are saturated with this indelible memory, constantly reminding Rehana of all she has lost. The home is not merely a passive backdrop, but actively participates in and exacerbates the creation of Rehana’s mnemonic predicament through its material constancy and the repetition of familiar settings.

III. Textual Space: Fragmented Love Memories

Zoran states that textual space is “imposed on space by the fact that it is signified within the verbal text.” (1984, p. 315). Textual space and the text itself are linked in three primary ways: the selectivity of language, the non-linear narrative and the narrative perspectives. Zoran believes that “text can be described in the order in which things exist in real space, and can also be described in terms of classification, relationship, and hierarchy” (1984, p. 321).

Within *Desertion*, Rehana’s amorous history is predominantly shaped by two key relationships: a fleeting and treacherous union with Azad, an Indian trader, characterized by infidelity; and a transient yet intensely meaningful intercultural romance with Martin Pearce, a British. Mickelson (1981) pointed that juxtaposition, backtracking, flashback and repetitive image are effective techniques to interrupt and destroy the chronological order of the text. In *Desertion*, Gurnah utilizes flashbacks in depicting Rehana’s recollections of love, thereby disrupting the traditional linear narrative and amplifying the sense of space within the text. The novel does not narrate Rehana’s stories with Azad and Pearce in chronological order. Instead, from the very intrusion of Pearce as a stranger into her home, reconfigures her past into a collection of dislocated memories dispersed across the text. When Hassanali brought the injured stranger into the courtyard, Rehana’s initial reaction was: “Her first thought was that it was him, her husband” (Gurnah, 2005, p.60). Consequently, she experienced “terror and anger,” (Gurnah, 2005, p.60). Soon afterwards, the narrative swiftly shifts back to reality. “Then she saw that it wasn’t him, and drew back in relief and disgust.” (Gurnah, 2005, p.61). This flashback breaks out suddenly triggered by the intrusion of a stranger. Readers experience the sudden impact of memories together with Rehana. The story therefore raises suspense and leaves people questioning the identity of this figure. Thereafter, Gurnah persistently integrates flashbacks, juxtaposing fragments of memory with the present narrative. While Rehana and Malika are engaged in sewing, the narrative segues into her memory: “He had brought him home too, Azad” (Gurnah, 2005, p.61). The narrative then fluidly transitions into her history with Azad, from their first meeting to the moment of her desertion. Having concluded the flashback concerning Azad, the narrative eschews further exploration and abruptly reverts to Rehana’s immediate situation, sewing in the courtyard: “She folded the dress and sat down again, and as she did so she felt the book she had taken from the wounded man bump against her thigh” (80). In this sentence, the book’s accidental and unintentional contact with Rehana’s thigh immediately activates memories of Pearce. The text proceeds to recount the narrative of Rehana and Pearce’s illicit romance, charting its development from initial spark to intense emotional climax. Readers, following the perspectives of Hassanali and Rehana, gradually become immersed in the details

of this secret liaison. Yet the narrative breaks off abruptly at the very moment when emotions are about to reach their height and the hidden truth on the point of coming to light. The narrator’s metanarrative draws time back to the present, as evidenced by the independent chapter, “An Interruption,” inserted immediately afterward. This chapter, narrated from the first-person perspective of Rashid, the narrator, creates a distinct narrative rupture in the novel’s structure. Rather than advancing the plot chronologically, this chapter juxtaposes multiple possibilities from different timelines within the same narrative space through the narrator’s repeated speculations, hypotheses, negations, and self-questioning regarding Rehana and Martin Pearce’s affair. The narrator confesses: “I DON’T KNOW HOW it would have happened. The unlikeliness of it defeats me. Yet I know it did happen, that Martin and Rehana became lovers. Imagination fails me and that fills me with sorrow” (Gurnah, 2005, p.108). The narrator does not present a cohesive account of love memories from an omniscient perspective. Instead, by interjecting his own confusion and hesitation, the narrator disrupts the reader’s expectation of a linear plot, juxtaposing Rehana’s past, Rashid’s present recollections, and the reader’s attempt to reconstruct the story within the same narrative space. This disruption to the text’s linear flow mirrors the inherently fragmented quality of Rehana’s amorous recollections. As Rashid himself concedes: “I find that in the case of Martin and Rehana I cannot settle on a sequence of events that seems likeliest” (Gurnah, 2005, p.108). This very impasse encapsulates not merely the narrator’s own quandary, but also the irreparable rift that defines the fractured state of Rehana’s romantic memories.

Therefore, the employment of flashbacks disrupts the conventional linear narrative, interweaving past and present timelines to create a unified and spatial structure within the novel (Cheng, 2009). This novel utilizes a non-linear narrative structure, with flashbacks as a key component, to effectively represent the fragmented essence of Rehana’s memories concerning love. This deliberate fragmentation of the narrative acts as an external representation of the inherent dilemma faced in retrieving and articulating individual memories.

IV. Chronotopic Space: Active Desertion of Old Emotions

Zoran defines chronotopic space as the space “imposed by events and movement” (1984, p.315). This framework encompasses two spatial types, that is, synchronic relation and diachronic relation. “Space is structured as a network of axes having definite directions and a definite character” (1984, p.319). This perspective underscores how diachronic relationships emphasize directions, axes, and powers of movements. The axis emerges from a range of dynamic elements, encompassing individual will, external constraints, aspirational goals, and character intentions. This

diachronic axis of movement, and the driving forces behind it, are particularly evident in the individual journeys of characters within the novel.

For Rehana, the geographic shift of travelling to Mombasa undoes the emotional limitations of her previous state and works to reconstitute her sense of personal agency. This decision allows Rehana to subvert the predetermined narratives of female existence dictated by family and community, thereby accomplishing a re-authoring of her personal history and life's course. Rehana's starting point before embarking on her journey is the old space of Zanzibar, a location that serves both as her home and her prison. It is within this space, filled with repression and stagnation, that Rehana's subjectivity is confined by the memories of the past. She spent years waiting passively for Azad to come back and maintained her regular life all the while. She lived in "bright yard behind the shop, making clothes for women who only paid her a pittance, or only offered her affection and promises in return" (Gurnah, 2005, p.115). Her life seemed calm outwardly, but it reflected the passive state and limited living scope of women. As stated in the novel, "Men left while women stayed behind and died after a lifetime of wheedling and scraping" (Gurnah, 2005, p.115). This sums up the fundamental rule behind old emotional relationships. Men could leave freely whenever they wanted, while women had to remain in the same place and wear out their whole life in trivial and difficult survival. Yet even trapped in difficult circumstances, Rehana's subjectivity never faded away entirely and existed in a unmanifested presence. "Azad's abandonment had made her stubborn, less sensitive to what others thought best for her, slightly more indifferent to opinion" (Gurnah, 2005, p.115). This change reflects the budding of her subjective consciousness and foreshadows her decision to leave in the later part of the story.

The arrival of Pearce creates a critical juncture at which Rehana can throw off the shackles that structure her experience of time and space. "What would have made an Englishman of his background--university, colonial official, a scholar -- begin something like that with the sister of a shopkeeper in a small town on the East African coast? Perhaps he wasn't the one who began it at all. Perhaps she was the one who followed up their first meeting" (Gurnah, 2005, p.114). Far from casting Rehana as a passive receiver of affective experience, this narrative frames her as an autonomous actor who acts on and pursues her innermost desires. She headed to Pearce's house alone to give back his notebook. The novel writes, "So when she reached out with the notebook, and Martin took it and then grinned, and then after that held out his hand to invite her into the house, she took his hand and followed him in" (Gurnah, 2005, p.115-116). Encoded in the phrases "took his hand" and "followed him in" is her wilful rejection of her prior affective ties. She is neither a victim left behind by Azad's desertion, nor a passive figure who resigns

herself helplessly to the unfolding of fate. She has turned into an independent person who makes her own choice in emotional relationships. Thereafter, her decisive choice to accompany him to Mombasa marks Rehana's evolution from a deserted spatio-temporal construct of the past to a nascent and uncharted spatio-temporal domain controlled by her own volition. This geographical displacement engenders a reconfiguration of social dynamics. Unlike the insular town of Zanzibar, where "no neighbour was that distant nor were any acquaintances that vague, and everyone knew who everyone was" (Gurnah, 2005, p.120), and where the conduct of women was subject to intense communal scrutiny, what Mombasa afforded was a socio-physical space marked by relative anonymity and emancipatory potential. In Mombasa, she divests herself of all former designations, relinquishing her roles as Hassanali's sibling and the forsaken lover. She exists simply as an unremarkable, unidentified person. Even Pearce's subsequent desertion never amounts to the culmination of Rehana's life journey; quite the opposite, it further fuels her robust sense of self-determination and independence. There is no return journey to Zanzibar for her; instead, she opts to settle in Mombasa as an assertion of her individual agency. Supported by Andrew Mills, a friend from Pearce's circle, she sets out on an independent entrepreneurial undertaking, "making and selling curtains and bed-covers and other such items" (Gurnah, 2005, p.227). This resoluteness is equally apparent in her arrangements concerning her daughter: "She asked her brother Hassanali and his wife Malika to take Asmah for a while, until she had organized her life better. It was only to be for a short while, but Asmah stayed with them all her young life" (Gurnah, 2005, p.226). This outwardly perceived act of desertion is, in actuality, the arduous decision Rehana undertakes to definitively sever ties with past sentiments and attain autonomous agency. She elects to forgo the immediate presence of her daughter rather than succumb to a renewed cycle of reliance and degradation.

Therefore, by means of her geographical relocation from Zanzibar to Mombasa, Rehana transforms her identity from that of a "victim of abandonment" to an "agent who deliberately discards her past fate". This deliberate act of renunciation empowers her to transcend the confines of memory, thereby establishing her own sphere of being within the fissures of historical narrative.

V. CONCLUSION

To summarize, Gurnah's *Desertion* transcends a simplistic portrayal of a woman forsaken by both historical forces and individual destiny. By means of the character Rehana, the novel offers a profound insight into the active role of space in the formation and re-assemblage of memory. The domestic space in Zanzibar, characterized by its inherent confinement, becomes a metaphorical cage for Rehana's memories, while the

non-linear narrative externalizes the inherent fractures within her romantic recollections. Yet, Gurnah refrains from trapping Rehana within this circumscribed reality. Her geographical shift from Zanzibar to Mombasa represents a proactive disavowal of previous emotional attachments. In the end, Rehana evolves from a subject passively enduring destiny to an actor actively selecting and constructing her own existential domain.

Consequently, Gurnah, through Rehana's narrative, elucidates not only the indelible marks of colonial history etched upon the individual psyche but also investigates the means by which peripheral women in challenging situations can accomplish a reconstruction of their personal histories through engagement with space. This shift from a state of "being abandoned" to one of "active abandoning" constitutes a potential path, proposed by Gurnah, for individuals within postcolonial settings to reassert agency over their own trajectories.

REFERENCES

- Alexandra, A. & A. (2021). Marshall. Abdulrazak Gurnah is awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. *The New York Times*, 10(07), 6.
- Gurnah, Abdulrazak. (2005). *Desertion*. New York: Pantheon.
- Michelson, D. (1981). Types of spatial structure in narrative. Jefferson R. & A, Smitten. (Eds.), *Spatial Form in Narrative*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Zoran, Gabriel. (1984). Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative. *Poetics Today* 5. 2, 315-321.
- 程锡麟. (2009). 论《了不起的盖茨比》的空间叙事. *江西社会科学*, 30(11), 28-32.
- 方英. (2007). *小说空间叙事论*. 上海: 上海交通大学出版社, 174.
- 龙迪勇. (2015). *空间叙事学*. 北京: 三联书店, 51.
- 石平萍. (2021). 非洲裔异乡人在英国: 诺贝尔文学奖得主古尔纳其人其作. *文艺理论与批评* (6), 104.