

Intertextuality and Postcolonial Identity in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* and *Desertion*

 Dilnoza Ruzmatova

Associate Professor, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Philological Sciences, Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Received: 18 April 2026; **Accepted:** 04 May 2026; **Published:** 31 May 2026

Abstract: Intertextuality is one of the central means by which postcolonial fiction relates to the literary inheritance of empire. This research examines how Abdulrazak Gurnah uses intertextuality in *Gravel Heart* (2017) and *Desertion* (2005) to construct postcolonial identity. The most influential precedent text in *Gravel Heart* is W. Shakespeare's drama *Measure for Measure* and a similar Shakespearean grammar of justice, hypocrisy and silence shapes *Desertion*. Drawing on J. Kristeva, R. Barthes and G. Genette together with E. Said's contrapuntal reading and M. Bakhtin's notion of the unfinalizable character, it is arguable that Gurnah's decisive intertextual move is the refusal of closure: he keeps W. Shakespeare's ethical problems but refuses to impose the comic settlement. The study also analyses literary and cultural allusions: colonial, Islamic, oral-familial and hybrid as identity narratives and offers a small model of how time, place and personage together construct identity in A.Gurnah's fiction.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, *Gravel Heart*, *Desertion*, allusion, chronotope, postcolonialism.

Introduction: The issue of texts inside texts or intertextuality is a persistent concern of literary criticism. J. Kristeva, building on M. Bakhtin's dialogism and heteroglossia, introduced the term to describe how every text is a permutation of other texts. R. Barthes radicalized this by removing the author as the sole origin of meaning, and G. Genette later refined the concept by separating intertextuality, paratextuality, architextuality, metatextuality and hypertextuality. In postcolonial fiction this set of tools is particularly useful, because the colonized writer often returns to the colonizer's canon and reworks it.

Abdulrazak Gurnah is a clear case. His art turns on the dialogue between precedent and recipient texts, and his fictions are saturated with literary, religious and oral references. Although the general role of intertextuality in his novels is widely recognized, his sustained dialogue with W. Shakespeare and his fourfold use of allusion deserve closer attention.

Our research seeks answers to three questions: how does *Measure for Measure* function as a precedent text for *Gravel Heart* and *Desertion*; how do literary and cultural allusions: colonial, Islamic, oral-familial and hybrid construct identity in these novels; and how does the correlation of time, place and personage explain the writer's representation of the migrant self. The scientific novelty of the research is in extending the Shakespearean intertextual reading from *Gravel Heart* into *Desertion* and in describing allusion as identity narrative rather than ornament.

METHODS

The primary texts are Gurnah's *Gravel Heart* (2017) and *Desertion* (2005), together with W. Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* as the dominant precedent text. *Paradise* and *By the Sea* are used as supporting material. The methodology combines the intertextual method (following the line from J. Kristeva, R. Barthes, G. Genette and the Russian school of Y. Karaulov on

precedent and recipient texts), the comparative method, and the historical-cultural method. It is followed to practice of analysing precedent–recipient text relationships across three dimensions: personages, composition and time and place correlation. Allusion is read as a separate but related layer of intertextuality, distributed into four types as colonial, Islamic, oral-familial and hybrid.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Measure for Measure as precedent text for Gravel Heart and Desertion

Shakespeare's Measure for Measure is a problem play built on unresolved tensions justice and mercy, authority and hypocrisy, silence and speech, desire and betrayal which are then enclosed by a comic settlement of marriages and pardons. As our previous research demonstrated, this drama functions as the dominant precedent text for Gravel Heart through the parallel of personages (Isabella–Saida, Claudio–Amir, Lord Angelo–Hakim, Juliet–Asha, Duke–defeated Masud) and through the brother's plea that his sister yield her body to save him.

Our research argues that Desertion reworks the same precedent text from a different angle. Martin Pearce's seduction and abandonment of Rehana echo Angelo's hypocrisy, but Gurnah historicizes the consequences: where W. Shakespeare exposes and corrects hypocrisy through the Duke's interventions, Gurnah leaves the colonial betrayer unpunished. Betrayal in Desertion shifts from a personal moral failing inside a closed social world to a historical condition standing for the colonial abandonment of East Africa. The wound is not healed; it travels across two more generations into the lives of Rashid and Amin.

The refusal of closure

The decisive intertextual move A. Gurnah makes is the refusal of the comic settlement. In Gravel Heart mercy never arrives. Salim's family is not reconciled, exile is not pardoned and the father dies alone. In Desertion the novel ends not with the public exposure of the colonial betrayer but with the inherited scars carried by those who came after. In M. Bakhtin's vocabulary, Salim and Rehana are unfinalizable personages their lives resist closure not because the author has been careless, but because the form of the postcolonial novel refuses to perform the kind of restoration that

Shakespearean comedy stages.

In E. Said's sense this is contrapuntal reading enacted in fiction. The canonical text is not discarded; it is recast to expose the histories it ignored. Gurnah keeps the Shakespearean ethical grammar: the painful questions about justice, hypocrisy and silence but denies it the formal mercy that, in W. Shakespeare, distinguishes the problem comedy from tragedy.

Four kinds of allusion as identity narrative

In Gurnah's prose, smaller-scale references are not ornament. They are the main technology by which the personage is located inside cultural memory. We distinguish four interrelated types.

- 1) Colonial allusions visas, scholarships, bureaucratic documents and the rhetoric of orientalist travel writing place the personages inside structures of surveillance and abandonment. Salim is isolated by bureaucratic silence; Pearce's scholarly orientalism echoes a wider history of imperial irresponsibility.
- 2) Islamic allusions: Quranic parables of mercy and sin, the ethic of hospitality to the stranger, Sufi imagery affirm East African Muslim heritage as part of postcolonial identity. Rehana's hospitality to Martin Pearce invokes a Quranic injunction that his betrayal then renders ironic.
- 3) Oral and familial allusions transmit memory and trauma indirectly, through silence and Swahili proverb.
- 4) Hybrid allusions combine these registers within a single narrative, producing identity in what H.K. Bhabha calls the third space layered, fragmented and dynamic, not unitary.

Time, place and personages

Synthesizing the analysis, we offer a small model of identity in Gurnah's fiction. Time is not a smooth chronology but a rupture marked by colonial violence, intergenerational memory and recursive retelling. Place is ambivalent: Zanzibar is both home and site of betrayal, England is a space of exile rather than belonging, and airports, embassies and rented rooms are liminal third spaces where identity is suspended. Personage is relational and unfinalizable. Two chronotopes dominate the texts. The first is the betrayal chronotope, in which a single scene of abandonment carries historical resonance. The second

is the exile chronotope, in which mobility intensifies rather than resolves displacement. The personage's identity emerges at the meeting point of these axes. Silence is best understood as a negative chronotope that halts narrative time, and emotion: shame, nostalgia, is temporally and spatially embedded rather than merely psychological.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

We have focused on two novels and one main precedent text, leaving aside the sub-intertexts that our previous research rightly notes in Gravel Heart: Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, Arabian Nights, A. Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard, Riders of the Purple Sage and others. A further investigation may be devoted to the epistolary genre features of Gravel Heart where Salim's letters to his mother can be grouped as sent, unsent, unfinished and rewritten. The Quranic intertext in Paradise and Afterlives, discussed by us partially, would also enrich the comparative picture. These directions are left for further research.

CONCLUSION

Our research shows that intertextuality in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Gravel Heart and Desertion is the means by which postcolonial identity is constructed. William Shakespeare's Measure for Measure functions as a dialogic precedent text, but Gurnah's decisive move is to keep its ethical problems while refusing the comic settlement. The fourfold field of allusion: colonial, Islamic, oral-familial and hybrid places the personages inside overlapping archives of cultural memory. Identity itself is shown to be chronotopic, constituted at the intersection of ruptured time, contested place and dialogic personage. Referring to Shakespeare, Gurnah does not imitate; he intermingles traditional literary forms with his postcolonial writing approaches. The reader who comes to Gravel Heart and Desertion aware of Measure for Measure will understand more deeply the artistic peculiarities of Gurnah's art.

REFERENCES

1. Allen, G. (2011). Intertextuality (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
2. Bakhtin, M.M. (1981). The dialogic imagination: Four essays. Austin: University of Texas Press.
3. Barthes, R. (1977). The death of the author. In Image–Music–Text (S.Heath, Trans., pp. 142–148). London: Fontana Press.
4. Bhabha, H.K. (1994). The location of culture. London: Routledge.
5. Genette, G. (1997). Palimpsests: Literature in the second degree. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
6. Gikandi, S. (1987). Reading the African novel. London: James Currey; Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
7. Gurnah, A. (1994). Paradise. London: Hamish Hamilton.
8. Gurnah, A. (2005). Desertion. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
9. Gurnah, A. (2017). Gravel heart. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
10. Kristeva, J. (1986). The Kristeva reader (T.Moi, Ed.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
11. Loomba, A. (2002). Shakespeare, race, and colonialism. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
12. Ruzmatova, D. (2023). Color and number symbolism in the novel "Paradise" by Abdulrazak Gurnah. Nizhnevartovsk Philological Bulletin, 8(1), 132–141.
13. Ruzmatova, D. (2023). Historical, cultural and religious aspects of Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels. In The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2023: Official conference proceedings (pp. 337–345). Nagoya: IAFOR.
14. Ruzmatova, D. (2025). Intertextuality and its function in Abdulrazak Gurnah's "Gravel Heart": Exploring literary influences and dialogues. Philology Matters, 53(2), 155–169. <https://doi.org/10.36078/987655529>
15. Said, E.W. (1993). Culture and imperialism. New York: Knopf.
16. Shakespeare, W. (2015). Measure for measure. London: Penguin Press.