

Remembering Home After Empire: Postcolonial Memory, Material Privilege, and Diasporic Estrangement in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* and *Desertion*

¹A. Haseena Bai, ²Dr. R. Subramania Pillai

¹PhD Research Scholar Department of English Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education

Kumaracoil, Thuckalay Tamil Nadu, India

Email: haseenasamad82@gmail.com

²Professor and Research Supervisor Department of English Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education

Kumaracoil, Thuckalay Tamil Nadu, India

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Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction repeatedly returns to migration, exile, memory, colonial encounter, and the difficult search for belonging. This article offers a comparative reading of *The Last Gift* (2011) and *Desertion* (2005), focusing particularly on the relationship between material security and diasporic estrangement. While migration is frequently associated with the pursuit of economic stability and social mobility, Gurnah complicates this assumption by portraying characters whose relative security does not free them from the emotional and historical consequences of displacement. Material comfort, in these novels, cannot compensate for fractured memories, uncertain origins, inherited silences, or unequal colonial histories.

Drawing primarily on postcolonial theory and diaspora studies, the article examines how memory, nostalgia, cultural hybridity, colonial privilege, and family history shape the characters' experiences of home and displacement. In *The Last Gift*, Abbas's settled family life in Britain remains shadowed by his concealed past in Zanzibar and by the consequences of prolonged silence. In *Desertion*, intimate relationships unfold within structures of colonial inequality, demonstrating that affection and mobility cannot be separated from questions of race, power, privilege, and historical circumstance. Read together, the novels reveal that belonging cannot be measured simply through property, professional stability, citizenship, or economic achievement. Gurnah instead presents home as an unstable emotional and historical space continually reconstructed through memory and narration. The article argues that material security in these novels often makes unresolved displacement more visible rather than bringing it to an end. By bringing questions of material privilege into dialogue with memory and diasporic estrangement, the study

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of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). contributes to critical discussions of Gurnah's representation of migration and the continuing afterlives of empire.

Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah; *The Last Gift*; *Desertion*; diaspora; displacement; memory; nostalgia; postcolonialism; belonging

Introduction

Migration in Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction is rarely represented as a simple movement from one geographical location to another. Departure may provide safety, employment, education, or the possibility of beginning again, but it also creates new forms of uncertainty. The migrant carries memories, losses, silences, and unfinished relationships across borders. Consequently, arrival does not necessarily produce belonging, just as material security does not necessarily bring emotional stability. Gurnah's characters often inhabit places in which they have established lives while remaining psychologically connected to places from which they have departed. Home, therefore, becomes less a fixed geographical location than a contested relationship between memory, history, family, and the present.

This complexity is particularly evident in *The Last Gift* and *Desertion*. Although the novels differ considerably in narrative structure, historical setting, and characterisation, both explore lives shaped by movement between East Africa and Europe and by the continuing consequences of colonial history. They also question the assumption that mobility or material advancement can overcome the experience of displacement. Characters may acquire homes, occupations, education, social status, or access to new cultural spaces, yet these forms of stability remain vulnerable to memories of abandonment, colonial inequality, racial difference, family secrecy, and uncertain belonging.

The Last Gift places these tensions within the intimate space of a migrant family living in Britain. Abbas has spent many years away from Zanzibar and has created a family life with Maryam and their children. From an external perspective, the family possesses many signs of settlement: a home, employment, education, and

participation in British social life. Yet this apparent stability conceals an unresolved past. Abbas has withheld much of his earlier life from his wife and children, and his silence has consequences not only for himself but also for the identities of the next generation. His illness creates the conditions in which fragments of this concealed history begin to emerge.

The significance of Abbas's story lies not simply in the fact that he is an immigrant remembering a lost homeland. His experience demonstrates the difficulty of separating material settlement from emotional displacement. A person may establish a secure life in a new country without resolving the historical and psychological circumstances that produced migration. Abbas's British home therefore functions simultaneously as a place of shelter and as a reminder of what remains unspoken. His relative security cannot restore relationships that have disappeared, reconstruct an uncomplicated past, or provide his children with a complete account of their inheritance.

Maryam's experience adds another dimension to the novel's treatment of belonging. Her uncertain origins and childhood abandonment demonstrate that displacement need not always begin with international migration. A person may experience estrangement within the country in which she lives when family history and ancestry remain incomplete. The experiences of Abbas and Maryam intersect in the family they establish, but their children inherit questions that material stability alone cannot answer. In this respect, *The Last Gift* presents displacement as intergenerational. Silence travels across generations just as memories, cultural practices, and family stories do.

Desertion, by contrast, situates questions of intimacy and belonging more explicitly within

the unequal structures of colonial encounter. The relationship between Martin Pearce and Rehana develops in a world organised by differences of race, mobility, political authority, and cultural privilege. Their personal relationship cannot be understood independently of the colonial environment in which it occurs. Gurnah thereby complicates romantic narratives of intercultural encounter. Desire may cross boundaries, but the individuals involved do not possess equal power to cross geographical, social, or political boundaries.

The later generations represented in *Desertion* extend these questions beyond the immediate colonial encounter. Migration, education, family separation, and memory connect apparently private decisions to broader histories of empire. Departure may offer new possibilities, yet it may simultaneously produce another form of loss. Gurnah therefore refuses a simple opposition between mobility and confinement or between prosperity and deprivation. The freedom to move may itself be historically unequal, and the advantages created through movement can remain connected to earlier structures of privilege.

Reading the two novels together makes it possible to reconsider the relationship between displacement and material security. Much scholarship on Gurnah has understandably concentrated on exile, migration, refugees, colonial history, identity, memory, silence, and cultural belonging. These approaches have established the importance of displacement to his fiction. Yet the relationship between material stability and continuing estrangement deserves closer attention. Economic security is sometimes implicitly treated as evidence that migration has reached a successful conclusion. Gurnah's fiction challenges such an assumption.

Material comfort in these novels does not erase historical memory. Nor does it guarantee cultural recognition, emotional reconciliation, or a secure sense of home. Instead, possessions, domestic spaces, educational opportunities, and social mobility frequently exist beside unresolved forms of loss. The

contradiction is particularly significant because it shifts the discussion of displacement beyond physical homelessness or economic deprivation. A character may possess a house and nevertheless remain uncertain about home; may achieve professional stability while carrying an unresolved history of departure; or may acquire the outward signs of settlement while remaining estranged from family memory.

Memory consequently becomes central to the relationship between material security and belonging. Remembering is not merely the recovery of information about the past. It is an unstable process through which individuals reconstruct relationships with places, people, and identities that are no longer immediately available to them. Memory may offer continuity, but it can also expose painful discontinuities. Similarly, nostalgia may preserve an emotional attachment to home while simplifying or idealising the conditions that made departure necessary. Gurnah's treatment of the past is therefore neither purely restorative nor purely traumatic. His characters repeatedly negotiate between the desire to remember and the need to survive what memory contains.

Postcolonial theory provides an important framework for understanding these tensions because the migrations represented in the novels cannot be separated from histories of colonialism. Empire shaped routes of movement, racial hierarchies, economic relationships, educational systems, cultural representations, and access to mobility. Its consequences therefore continue beyond formal decolonisation. Said's critique of colonial representation and Bhabha's discussions of cultural hybridity provide useful ways of examining how identities are produced within unequal intercultural encounters. Diaspora studies further illuminate the ways in which migrants negotiate attachments to more than one place while belonging completely to neither.

The present study consequently approaches *The Last Gift* and *Desertion* through a comparative qualitative reading informed by postcolonial theory and diaspora studies. Particular attention is given to episodes involving

migration, domestic space, family history, memory, silence, colonial relationships, mobility, and material security. Rather than treating wealth as an independent economic category, the study examines material privilege in relation to the characters' ability—or inability—to establish a stable sense of belonging.

Research Gap

Existing discussions of Gurnah have substantially illuminated his representation of exile, migration, colonial encounters, silence, cultural identity, and memory. However, comparatively less attention has been given to the paradoxical relationship between material security and persistent displacement, particularly through a sustained comparison of *The Last Gift* and *Desertion*. This distinction is important because displacement in Gurnah does not disappear when immediate economic insecurity is reduced.

The article therefore asks how material and social forms of security interact with memory, colonial history, and diasporic identity in the two novels. It argues that Gurnah presents material stability not as the opposite of displacement but as one of the conditions through which displacement may become newly visible. A house cannot by itself constitute home; mobility cannot guarantee freedom from colonial history; and economic stability cannot recover interrupted memory. By examining these contradictions comparatively, the study seeks to extend discussions of Gurnah's diasporic imagination beyond the conventional opposition between exile and settlement.

The central argument of this article is that material security in *The Last Gift* and *Desertion* does not resolve displacement; rather, it reveals how deeply displacement is embedded in memory, family history, colonial inequality, and the continuing search for belonging after empire.

Review of Literature

Critical scholarship on Abdulrazak Gurnah has expanded considerably since he received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2021, with increasing attention to migration, colonial

violence, memory, silence, identity, displacement, and the uncertain meanings of home. Recent studies are particularly relevant to *The Last Gift* and *Desertion*, two novels in which Gurnah links private histories to the larger structures of empire and migration. Although critics have extensively examined diasporic identity and postcolonial displacement in his fiction, the intersection of postcolonial memory, material privilege, and diasporic estrangement remains comparatively underexplored. This gap provides the basis for a comparative reconsideration of these novels.

Earlier responses to *The Last Gift* already recognised the importance of family history and migration. Giles Foden (2011) observed that the novel is centrally concerned with immigrant experience, identity, roots, family, and the role of storytelling in confronting the past. Abbas's long concealment of his history creates an emotional absence within the family, making the eventual disclosure of his past more than an individual confession. It becomes an attempt to reconnect the migrant present with an inaccessible homeland. The Kent Academic Repository's account of Gurnah's novel similarly foregrounds its multi-generational treatment of dislocation and social marginalisation and identifies family secrets and untold stories as corrosive forces within migrant life.

The relationship between colonialism and the private lives represented in *Desertion* has likewise received sustained attention. Rather than treating colonialism merely as the historical background of the novel, critics have increasingly recognised that Gurnah represents empire as a force penetrating intimate relationships, cultural encounters, and individual memories. A critical study of the postcolonial experiences represented in *Desertion* emphasises the novel's location within the colonial East African context and examines the relationship between Martin Pearce and Rehana as a site where cultural history, colonial difference, and human intimacy converge. Such readings establish the importance of colonial power in the novel but leave further scope for examining how the consequences of these

encounters survive through memory and intergenerational narration.

A more recent phase of Gurnah scholarship has concentrated specifically on exile and identity. Xinyi Liu (2024) examines *The Last Gift* through the concept of exile, identifying geographical, racial, psychological, and cultural forms of estrangement. Liu argues that the Abbas family illustrates the complex condition of African diaspora and shows how displacement produces continuing struggles over personal identity. This approach importantly moves beyond migration as geographical movement and treats exile as a psychological and cultural condition. Nevertheless, its emphasis remains principally on identity reconstruction rather than on the material differences that determine how particular characters experience mobility, settlement, security, and belonging.

Similarly, A. Harrin Ashney and S. Felicia Gladys Sathiadevi (2024) examine migrant experience in *The Last Gift*, concentrating on displacement, transnational migration, racial experience, social isolation, and identity formation. Their study highlights the distinction between first- and second-generation immigrant experiences and demonstrates how Abbas's movement from East Africa to England generates psychological as well as cultural dislocation. Their analysis confirms that relocation does not automatically produce belonging: migrants may obtain a physical place in the host country while continuing to experience emotional and cultural insecurity.

Particularly significant to a comparative analysis of *Desertion* and *The Last Gift* is Othman Majid Obaid Al-Jumaili's (2024) study of immigrant identity crisis in the two novels through hybridity and liminality. As subsequently noted in scholarship reviewing Gurnah studies, Al-Jumaili examines the relationship between marginalisation, cultural hybridity, and identity crises in both texts. This comparative direction is valuable because it places the two novels within a shared conceptual field. However, the primary concern with hybridity and liminality leaves room for a more historically grounded examination of

how remembered colonial relationships intersect with class, economic resources, social status, education, gender, and differential access to mobility.

Recent criticism has increasingly foregrounded memory. Manshi and Mandvi Singh (2025) examine memory and identity in *Desertion*, focusing particularly on Rehana's remembered history and the manner in which personal experience becomes collective and intergenerational memory through Rashid's narration. They argue that Gurnah demonstrates how colonialism affects not only those immediately involved in colonial encounters but also subsequent generations. Their attention to Rehana and Rashid's mother, Mwana, is particularly important because it identifies women as carriers of cultural memory and colonial trauma. In this reading, memory does not merely recover historical experience; it determines how the past is transmitted, modified, and understood by later generations.

This growing interest in memory is complemented by Miaomiao Wang and Muzi Liu (2025), who examine diasporic identity across Gurnah's works. They understand diasporic identity as dynamic rather than fixed, shaped by changing relations among time, place, and culture. Their survey identifies memory and identity, cultural hybridity, otherness, marginalisation, and gendered diasporic experience as important directions in contemporary Gurnah scholarship. They also call for broader cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approaches. Such an observation is relevant to the present study because Gurnah's representations of diaspora cannot be understood solely through psychological alienation; economic position, cultural capital, colonial history, and the material possibilities of migration must also be considered.

Jacinta Matheka (2025) offers one of the most relevant recent studies of *The Last Gift*. Reading the novel through second-generation memory, Matheka examines the relationship among trauma, migrant memory, silence, and identity. Her focus on Hanna and Jamal

demonstrates that Abbas's refusal to disclose his history does not erase the past. Instead, parental silence intensifies the younger generation's desire to understand its origins. Memory therefore becomes an intergenerational archive in which what has been withheld can be as significant as what has been narrated. Matheka's study is especially useful in showing that traumatic memory is not confined to the generation that directly experiences migration; its silences and absences shape the identities of descendants.

Likewise, Mohd. Yusuf and Shalini Srivastava (2025) examine intersections among colonial trauma, memory, migration, and identity in Gurnah's fiction. They regard memory as one of the principal means through which postcolonial subjects engage with histories that colonial discourse has obscured or displaced. Although their analysis focuses substantially on *By the Sea*, their broader argument helps locate *The Last Gift* and *Desertion* within Gurnah's recurring concern with the persistence of colonial history in migrant consciousness.

A different dimension is provided by Costanza Mondo (2025), whose study of postcolonial ekphrasis places *Desertion* in comparative dialogue with Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. Mondo's work indicates the continuing expansion of critical approaches to *Desertion* beyond conventional analyses of migration and colonial encounter and demonstrates the importance of representation itself in postcolonial narratives. This broader formal interest is useful because Gurnah's recovery of colonial history depends not only upon what is remembered but upon the narrative forms through which incomplete histories become visible.

The most recent scholarship of 2026 further strengthens the critical emphasis on memory and silence. Mohamed Jaffar and S. Syed Shaw (2026) analyse cultural displacement, silence, and belonging in *The Last Gift*. Drawing on trauma, cultural identity, hybridity, unhomeliness, and hospitality, they interpret Abbas's silence as simultaneously connected with oppression, survival, and fractured belonging.

Their study shows how the migrant's relationship with the past remains unstable: silence may protect the individual temporarily, yet it also prevents meaningful intergenerational understanding.

Similarly, S. Sangeetha and T. Ganga Parameswari (2026) examine memory, trauma, and identity in *The Last Gift*, arguing that recollection allows suppressed histories to re-enter the migrant present. Their analysis highlights intergenerational trauma and the search for identity, stressing that migration separates individuals from the remembered world of their origins while simultaneously making that remembered world necessary for self-understanding.

Nicoletta Brazzelli (2026) develops the significance of silence still further by treating it as a central paradigm of Gurnah's diasporic fiction. Comparing *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift*, Brazzelli connects silence with displacement, trauma, fragmented identity, postcolonial shame, selective remembrance, and imagined homelands. Importantly, the study suggests that storytelling and reticence coexist rather than functioning as simple opposites. The migrant subject both remembers and withholds, producing a version of home that is inevitably mediated by loss, distance, and imagination.

Most recently, Xiyue Wang (2026) examines media and intergenerational memory in *The Last Gift*. Wang conceptualises media as a mnemonic apparatus and shows how the colonial radio, generational differences, and later forms of mediation participate in the production and recovery of memory. The study is particularly valuable because it moves memory beyond the idea of an individual storehouse of past experience and treats it as relational and mediated. Abbas's silence becomes connected to colonial trauma, while the second generation develops different means of interpreting the histories it has inherited.

Finally, Mafunda Salum Ali and Zainab Ali Iddi (2026) comparatively examine Swahili cultural elements in *Desertion*, *The Last Gift*, and

Paradise. Their findings emphasise the persistence of Swahili cultural practices—including marriage, occupations, belief systems, greetings, and burial customs—within Gurnah's fictional worlds. Their work demonstrates that cultural memory remains embedded in everyday practices even when characters have entered diasporic environments.

Research Gap

Taken together, scholarship from 2024–2026 demonstrates a clear critical movement toward diasporic identity, trauma, silence, memory, hybridity, intergenerational transmission, and cultural belonging in Gurnah's fiction. Yet three areas have not been sufficiently integrated. First, memory is often discussed primarily as psychological trauma or identity recovery rather than as a specifically postcolonial practice through which the lost or inaccessible home is reconstructed. Second, relatively little sustained attention has been paid to material privilege—the unequal economic, educational, racial, gendered, and social conditions that determine who can travel, settle, speak, remember, return, or imagine return. Third, although *Desertion* and *The Last Gift* have individually attracted substantial attention, there remains scope for a sustained comparison of how colonial memory moves across generations and produces different forms of diasporic estrangement.

The present study therefore brings postcolonial memory, material privilege, and diasporic estrangement into a single comparative framework. By reading *Desertion* alongside *The Last Gift*, it proposes that Gurnah's idea of “home” is neither a recoverable geographical origin nor a purely nostalgic memory. Rather, home emerges as an unstable historical and affective construction shaped by empire, family silence, unequal mobility, material circumstances, and intergenerational acts of remembering. This approach extends existing scholarship by asking not only how Gurnah's characters remember home, but also how colonial and material inequalities determine what kind of home they are able to remember, inherit, inhabit, or lose.

3. Theoretical And Conceptual Framework

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion* and *The Last Gift* explore the lasting consequences of migration, colonial history, memory, and uncertain belonging. In both novels, leaving home does not end an individual's relationship with the past. Instead, migration produces new ways of remembering and interpreting places that have become distant. This study therefore combines theories of postcolonial memory, cultural identity, diaspora, intergenerational memory, and material privilege to examine how Gurnah's characters negotiate home after empire.

3.1 Postcolonial Memory and Exile

Postcolonial memory is central to the study because Gurnah does not represent empire as a completed historical episode. Its effects remain visible in migration, family relationships, silence, and unequal opportunities. Edward Said (2000) views exile as an enduring separation between individuals and the places to which they feel attached. This idea helps explain Abbas in *The Last Gift*, whose settled life in England cannot erase his East African past. His silence indicates that geographical distance does not necessarily bring emotional separation. In *Desertion*, colonial history operates more directly through the relationship between Martin Pearce and Rehana, whose intimacy develops within unequal imperial circumstances.

3.2 Cultural Identity and Diasporic Belonging

Stuart Hall (1990) understands cultural identity not as a fixed inheritance but as something continually shaped by history and changing circumstances. This perspective is useful for Gurnah's migrants, whose identities develop between remembered origins and present environments. Abbas's children illustrate this transformation particularly well. Unlike their father, they cannot remember East Africa directly and must approach it through incomplete family stories and silences.

Avtar Brah's (1996) idea of “homing desire” further clarifies this experience. Desire for home does not necessarily imply a wish for

literal return. Diasporic subjects may long for belonging even when returning cannot restore what has been lost. Gurnah consequently presents estrangement as a gap between physical location and emotional belonging. His migrants may become distant from their homeland while never feeling completely rooted elsewhere.

3.3 Hybridity, Unhomeliness and Postmemory

Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) concepts of hybridity and unhomeliness illuminate the unstable cultural positions occupied by Gurnah's characters. Unhomeliness occurs when private life becomes inseparable from wider historical forces. In *Desertion*, colonial relations enter intimate relationships; in *The Last Gift*, migration and colonial history remain present within Abbas's family through his silence. Cultural mixture, however, does not remove inequality. Some characters possess considerably greater freedom to cross boundaries than others.

Marianne Hirsch's (2012) concept of postmemory is useful for understanding the transmission of an earlier generation's experiences to its descendants. Hanna and Jamal inherit a history they have not personally experienced. Abbas's silence itself becomes part of this inheritance. Similarly, Rashid in *Desertion* reconstructs family histories belonging to an earlier generation. Gurnah therefore shows that memory can travel through stories, omissions, and family relationships.

3.4 Nostalgia and the Remembered Home

Svetlana Boym's (2001) distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia helps explain Gurnah's treatment of home. His fiction is closer to reflective nostalgia because characters recognise that the past cannot simply be rebuilt. Home survives through selective recollection, longing, regret, and sometimes deliberate silence. Colonialism, migration, and the passage of time have already transformed the places being remembered. Remembering home is therefore an act of reconstruction rather than exact recovery.

3.5 Material Privilege and Unequal Mobility

Material privilege is equally important because mobility is never equally available. Economic resources, education, race, gender, employment, colonial position, and social networks influence who can travel and under what circumstances. In *Desertion*, Martin Pearce's mobility is enabled by the colonial structure within which he travels, whereas Rehana occupies a more restricted social position. In *The Last Gift*, Abbas achieves material stability in Britain, yet economic and domestic security do not remove his emotional estrangement.

This framework therefore understands diasporic estrangement as a condition created by the interaction of memory, historical rupture, unequal mobility, and incomplete belonging. Said's exile, Hall's cultural identity, Brah's homing desire, Bhabha's unhomeliness, Hirsch's postmemory, and Boym's reflective nostalgia collectively illuminate different dimensions of Gurnah's fictional world. Read through these perspectives, *Desertion* and *The Last Gift* reveal home not as a fixed place that can simply be recovered, but as an unfinished postcolonial construction continually reshaped by memory, migration, material circumstances, and the unequal inheritances of empire.

4. Memory, Silence, And The Lost Home In *The Last Gift*

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* presents migration as more than movement from one country to another. It is also an encounter with memories that remain active long after physical departure. Abbas, an ageing migrant who has built his life in England, carries an East African past that he has largely concealed from his wife and children. His silence does not remove that past; instead, it gives memory a hidden presence within the family. Gurnah consequently portrays home as both remembered and lost, emotionally significant yet increasingly difficult to recover.

4.1 Abbas, Silence, and the Burden of Memory

Abbas's reluctance to discuss his earlier life is central to the novel. For many years, his

family receives only fragments of information about his origins. His silence arises from a complicated mixture of displacement, guilt, abandonment, and anxiety about revealing a history that might disturb the identity he has established in Britain. The effort to suppress the past ironically confirms its continuing importance.

For Abbas, remembering home does not produce simple nostalgia. His earlier world is connected not only with familiarity and attachment but also with difficult decisions and relationships left behind. Home therefore carries moral as well as emotional significance. He cannot remember where he came from without also confronting the circumstances under which he departed.

Silence becomes a means of protecting the present from the past. By refusing to explain his history, Abbas maintains a division between his former life and the family identity he has created in England. Yet this protection comes at a price. His wife and children know only part of him, and the missing history gradually becomes an absence within their own understanding of family.

4.2 Illness, Maryam, and the Question of Origins

Abbas's illness weakens the boundary he has maintained between memory and disclosure. Physical vulnerability makes secrecy more difficult to sustain and raises the possibility that his history may disappear with him. Under these circumstances, narration becomes a form of belated responsibility. What Abbas can finally offer his family is not the recovery of the world he left behind but knowledge of the life that preceded them.

His disclosures cannot reverse migration or restore abandoned relationships. They can, however, provide a framework through which his family begins to understand previously unexplained aspects of his identity. Memory thus repairs gaps in knowledge without overcoming historical distance.

Maryam's experience broadens this concern with origins. Her uncertainties arise from disruptions within her own family history, demonstrating that a troubled relationship with home need not originate solely in international migration. While Abbas possesses memories he refuses to communicate, Maryam confronts absences that cannot easily be filled. Their marriage brings together two different forms of disconnection.

The home they establish in Britain offers affection and stability, but Gurnah does not present domestic security as a complete answer to earlier displacement. Their household contains both present attachments and unresolved histories. Maryam's experience also demonstrates that knowing one's ancestry and experiencing belonging are not necessarily the same. Home develops through lived relationships as well as geographical or biological origins.

4.3 Hanna, Jamal, and Inherited Memory

The experiences of Hanna and Jamal reveal how migration changes across generations. They grow up in Britain without direct knowledge of the East African world that formed their father. Abbas remembers that world through personal experience, whereas his children can approach it only through stories, fragments, and eventual disclosures. The distinction between remembered home and inherited home is therefore crucial.

For the first-generation migrant, home may remain a place personally remembered. For descendants, the same place becomes part of family history. Hanna and Jamal inherit a connection to East Africa without possessing Abbas's memories of living there. His silence consequently creates a genealogical gap.

When Abbas's past gradually becomes available, the children acquire more than additional information. They must reconsider the identity of their father and recognise that his life began within relationships and circumstances that existed long before their own. They become interpreters of a history transmitted imperfectly.

Gurnah thereby demonstrates that intergenerational memory can be communicated through absence as well as speech. What parents refuse to explain may still influence their children by creating questions about origin and identity. Silence itself becomes part of the family inheritance.

4.4 Material Settlement and Diasporic Estrangement

Abbas's life also complicates any simple relationship between material success and belonging. He has worked, maintained a household, married, and raised children in Britain. His life therefore possesses significant forms of stability. Yet these achievements do not eliminate emotional estrangement.

This distinction is important because migration cannot be evaluated only in terms of employment, housing, or economic security. Material settlement may make a new life sustainable without creating complete continuity between past and present. Abbas's unresolved memories demonstrate that a person can become practically established while remaining emotionally divided.

Material security may even strengthen the desire to preserve silence. Once Abbas has created a respectable and stable identity, revealing a difficult past threatens the coherence of what he has built. The present becomes something that must be protected from histories that might unsettle it.

Gurnah therefore separates the possession of a house from the experience of being fully at home. Abbas's British household is genuinely meaningful, but it cannot absorb every part of his earlier identity. At the same time, his East African homeland cannot simply be reclaimed. The self that remembers it has been altered by migration and the passage of time.

4.5 Storytelling and the Reconstruction of Home

Home in *The Last Gift* ultimately exists in several forms: the geographical place Abbas left, the British household he created, the past concealed from his children, and the emotional sense of belonging that neither location completely satisfies. Migration creates not only spatial distance but also temporal distance. Even literal return could not recreate the world remembered from an earlier period.

Storytelling consequently becomes the most meaningful form of return available to Abbas. He cannot give Hanna and Jamal the home he once knew, but he can give them its history. His narrative becomes an alternative inheritance through which private memory enters the shared consciousness of the family.

This gift remains incomplete because memory is selective. Abbas cannot provide an objective record of his past, and narration cannot restore everything that has been lost. Nevertheless, speaking changes the relationship between generations. What had existed as silence becomes available for questioning and reinterpretation.

The title *The Last Gift* can therefore be understood in relation to the transmission of memory. Abbas's final gift is the possibility of allowing his family to know the history that shaped him. It is less a recovery of home than an opportunity to remember it collectively.

Gurnah ultimately refuses both sentimental nostalgia and uncomplicated assimilation. Abbas belongs to the family he has created in Britain while remaining connected to the world he left behind. Neither place alone provides a complete definition of home. His children inherit this divided history in a different form, knowing the ancestral homeland primarily through narrative.

The Last Gift thus transforms home from a fixed geographical location into a continuing relationship among memory, silence, migration, and family. The past cannot be fully recovered, but it can be narrated and passed on. Through Abbas's movement from concealment towards disclosure, Gurnah shows that home after empire

survives not as an unchanged territory awaiting return but as a fragmented inheritance reconstructed across generations.

5. Colonial Intimacy, Desertion, And The Memory Of Home In *Desertion*

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion* approaches displacement through the intertwined histories of colonialism, intimacy, migration, and memory. Unlike *The Last Gift*, which concentrates on a migrant family settled in Britain, *Desertion* returns to colonial East Africa and examines how personal relationships develop within unequal historical circumstances. Through Martin Pearce and Rehana, followed by Amin, Jamila, and Rashid, Gurnah expands desertion beyond individual abandonment. It becomes a condition of separation in which people are distanced from lovers, families, places, and earlier versions of themselves. The novel consequently demonstrates that colonial history enters private life through relationships, social expectations, mobility, and inherited memory.

5.1 Colonial Intimacy and Unequal Mobility

The relationship between Martin Pearce and Rehana develops within a colonial society structured by differences of race, gender, culture, and power. Martin's presence in East Africa is connected to an imperial system that makes European movement across colonial territories possible. Although Gurnah does not reduce their relationship to a simple opposition between coloniser and colonised, their intimacy cannot be separated from the historical circumstances surrounding it.

Martin and Rehana experience attraction and emotional vulnerability as individuals, yet they do not possess equal freedom. Martin can enter and leave spaces with greater ease, while Rehana remains more closely bound to local social expectations and family structures. Their relationship therefore demonstrates that crossing cultural boundaries does not necessarily remove existing inequalities.

Martin's dependence upon Hassanali's hospitality briefly complicates this hierarchy. The European traveller becomes dependent upon

local knowledge, shelter, and care. Nevertheless, temporary vulnerability does not eliminate Martin's wider privilege. Once he regains the ability to move, the larger inequality remains. Gurnah thus distinguishes personal vulnerability from structural advantage.

Mobility itself becomes a form of privilege. The ability to leave can protect an individual from consequences that remain with those who cannot depart so easily. Martin's movement therefore carries implications extending beyond his personal freedom. His departure enters the lives and memories of those who remain.

5.2 Rehana, Gender, and the Unequal Cost of Intimacy

Rehana occupies a central position in the novel because her experience brings together gender, colonial difference, social judgement, and personal desire. She is not merely presented as an object of European attraction. Her relationship with Martin develops within a complex world of family obligations, cultural expectations, and social reputation.

The consequences of crossing established boundaries are not equally distributed between the two characters. As a local woman involved with a European man, Rehana faces social pressures different from those experienced by Martin. Gender therefore deepens the inequality already present within the colonial encounter.

Her experience also broadens the meaning of material privilege. Privilege is not limited to money or property; it includes freedom of movement, social protection, access to supportive networks, and the ability to survive reputational consequences. Martin possesses greater freedom to transform the relationship into a part of his past, whereas Rehana remains more exposed to its continuing social effects.

Rehana's story consequently becomes more than a private romance. It enters family history and survives through later recollection.

Significantly, the reader encounters aspects of her life through retrospective narration rather than complete historical access. Gurnah thereby emphasises the difference between an event and what later generations are able to know about it.

5.3 Intergenerational Desertion and Family Memory

The later relationship between Amin and Jamila creates an important echo of Martin and Rehana. Gurnah does not simply repeat the earlier relationship; instead, he demonstrates how inherited histories influence later personal choices. Amin and Jamila's attachment develops within a social environment shaped by family reputation, class assumptions, cultural expectations, and memories of earlier relationships.

Jamila is therefore judged not only as an individual but through narratives attached to her family. Memory becomes socially powerful because it can preserve suspicion, shame, prejudice, and hierarchy alongside affection and belonging. Amin discovers that private emotion cannot always escape stories created before his own relationship began.

The title *Desertion* thus acquires an intergenerational significance. Desertion is not confined to a single person leaving another. It describes repeated experiences of separation produced by personal decisions as well as historical and social pressures. Individuals may leave, but they may also experience abandonment in other aspects of their lives.

Gurnah avoids reducing these experiences to simple moral categories. Departure may involve personal agency while simultaneously producing loss. What matters is not merely identifying who deserts whom, but examining the conditions that make separation possible and determining why its consequences are distributed unequally.

5.4 Rashid, Diaspora, and the Reconstruction of Home

Rashid introduces a distinctly diasporic perspective. His movement away from East Africa creates both geographical distance and a new position from which family history can be reconsidered. Migration enables retrospective understanding, but it also creates estrangement.

For the migrant, familiar places gradually become remembered places. Houses, streets, family routines, voices, and relationships survive through selective recollection. Home is transformed from everyday surroundings into a mental and emotional landscape reconstructed from a distance.

Rashid's movement differs fundamentally from Martin's. Martin travels through a colonial world in which European mobility is structurally enabled, whereas Rashid moves towards Britain as a postcolonial subject. The journeys occur within historically connected geographical routes, but their meanings are different. By placing them within the same narrative, Gurnah reveals how routes established during empire continue into the postcolonial period.

Rashid's distance also affects his access to family history. He must reconstruct experiences that he did not fully witness. The fragmented narrative structure of *Desertion* reflects this process. Memories do not necessarily emerge chronologically, and later knowledge can transform the meaning of earlier events. The past therefore becomes an act of interpretation rather than a complete record.

Gurnah preserves uncertainty within this reconstruction. Some motives remain inaccessible, while certain events survive only through stories passed between people. Memory can recover connections, but it cannot fully possess the past. Rashid's narration accordingly becomes an attempt to create continuity across the disruptions of migration, family separation, and historical change.

5.5 Remembering Home after Empire

Home in *Desertion* cannot finally be understood as a fixed geographical origin. For some characters, it provides familiarity and attachment; for others, it also imposes expectations, reputations, and restrictions. Rehana's experience demonstrates that remaining geographically at home does not guarantee secure belonging. Social judgement can make familiar surroundings estranging. Rashid experiences the reverse condition: physical distance intensifies the importance of home as memory.

This distinction explains why geographical return alone cannot resolve diasporic estrangement. The place remembered by the migrant belongs partly to an earlier historical moment. Time changes people, relationships, and communities, making complete recovery impossible.

The novel therefore presents colonial memory as something carried through family stories and intimate relationships. Empire survives not merely as political history but through its effects on who can travel, who remains, whose relationships become vulnerable, and whose stories are preserved. Martin and Rehana's intimacy, Amin and Jamila's relationship, and Rashid's retrospective narration belong to different generations, yet each reveals the continuing relationship between movement and separation.

Desertion ultimately transforms the personal language of love and abandonment into a meditation on colonial inheritance. Remembering home involves remembering not only places but also the unequal circumstances under which individuals were able to leave, remain, or return. Gurnah thus presents home as both an emotional attachment and a historically conditioned possibility. It survives after empire through fragmented memories, inherited stories, unresolved relationships, and the continuing consequences of unequal mobility.

6. Material Privilege And Unequal Mobilities

Mobility in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion* and *The Last Gift* is never simply a matter of travelling from one geographical location to

another. Movement is shaped by access to money, education, employment, social position, race, gender, and historically produced forms of privilege. By placing colonial journeys beside later diasporic migrations, Gurnah demonstrates that the freedom to leave, settle, and return has never been equally available. Material privilege therefore provides an important means of distinguishing different experiences of displacement within the two novels.

In *Desertion*, Martin Pearce's mobility is inseparable from the colonial order. As a European moving through East Africa, he occupies a historical position that enables geographical movement across spaces controlled by empire. Although Martin experiences moments of physical vulnerability and dependence, particularly when he requires local assistance, such vulnerability does not erase the structural advantages attached to his position. His ability to enter another cultural world and subsequently depart from it reflects a wider imperial freedom of movement. Rehana, by contrast, occupies a more restricted position. Her gender, social environment, and location within the colonised society mean that the consequences of their relationship cannot be escaped with comparable ease.

This inequality reveals that mobility itself may operate as a form of privilege. The individual who can leave possesses an option unavailable to the person who must remain and confront the social consequences of an intimate relationship. Gurnah consequently complicates the apparent romance of cross-cultural encounter. Love may cross boundaries emotionally, but the material conditions governing the lovers remain unequal.

The later movement of Rashid provides an important contrast. His migration towards Britain reverses the geographical direction associated with colonial travel, but it does not erase the historical relationship between the two locations. The former imperial centre becomes a destination for the postcolonial migrant. Rashid's journey is therefore part of the afterlife of empire: colonial histories have already created political,

linguistic, educational, and cultural connections between East Africa and Britain.

The Last Gift extends this question into the lives of migrants who have achieved a degree of material stability in Britain. Abbas has employment, a family, and a settled domestic existence. On the surface, such stability may suggest successful migration. Gurnah, however, separates material settlement from emotional belonging. Abbas's ability to establish a household does not free him from the unresolved history of his departure. The life he has built in England offers security, but it cannot erase memory, guilt, or estrangement from the world he left behind.

The distinction is important because migrant experience is sometimes narrated primarily through material advancement. Gurnah resists the assumption that economic security necessarily produces cultural or psychological integration. A person may possess the practical features of home—a house, employment, family life and social stability—while continuing to experience a divided relationship with place and identity. Material privilege can reduce certain forms of vulnerability without eliminating the emotional consequences of displacement.

Gender further complicates these patterns. Rehana in *Desertion* and Maryam in *The Last Gift* demonstrate in different ways that access to belonging is influenced by social expectations surrounding women, family, respectability, and dependence. Mobility that appears liberating for one character may expose another to judgement or insecurity. Gurnah therefore refuses to present migration as an equally available form of individual freedom.

A comparison of the novels ultimately reveals two historically connected patterns of movement. *Desertion* exposes the unequal mobility embedded within colonialism, whereas *The Last Gift* examines the more complicated forms of settlement that emerge after empire. Martin can move through colonial space with advantages unavailable to Rehana; Rashid later travels towards the imperial centre from a

different historical position; Abbas settles there but discovers that settlement does not automatically produce belonging.

Gurnah thus shifts attention from the simple question of who moves to the more important questions of who is able to move, under what conditions, at whose cost, and with what consequences. Material privilege determines possibilities of departure and settlement, while memory records what mobility leaves unresolved. In both novels, the freedom to cross borders is unequally distributed, and the possession of material security cannot by itself transform displacement into home. The unequal routes created by empire consequently survive within the intimate experiences of postcolonial diaspora.

7. Diasporic Estrangement And The Impossibility Of Return

Diasporic estrangement in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* and *Desertion* arises from a fundamental contradiction: the migrant remains attached to home precisely when home can no longer be recovered in its earlier form. Distance preserves certain memories while time alters the places, relationships, and identities associated with them. Consequently, return in Gurnah's fiction cannot be understood merely as travelling back to a geographical point of origin. The migrant may revisit a place, reconstruct a family history, or narrate an earlier life, but none of these acts can restore the world that existed before departure.

In *The Last Gift*, Abbas embodies this condition through his prolonged separation from his East African past. Britain becomes the location of his adult life, marriage, employment, and children, yet material settlement does not entirely resolve his relationship with the place he has left. His silence reveals the continuing pressure of that earlier existence. The past remains present precisely because it has never been adequately incorporated into his family life.

Abbas's estrangement therefore operates in two directions. He is separated from his place of origin, but he is also prevented from fully belonging to his present because an important

part of his identity remains concealed. This double displacement challenges the assumption that migration follows a simple movement from one home to another. Gurnah instead presents the migrant as living between different temporal and emotional worlds.

Return cannot resolve this division because the remembered home belongs partly to another time. The person who departed has changed, just as the society left behind has undergone its own transformations. What survives most powerfully is not the original place itself but the migrant's remembered version of it. Home becomes an internal landscape constructed from recollection, regret, affection, and loss.

Desertion approaches the same problem through a broader historical pattern. Its movements between colonial East Africa and later diasporic experience demonstrate how individuals become separated not only from places but also from relationships and possibilities that cannot subsequently be recovered. Martin Pearce's departure, Rehana's experience, the later relationship between Amin and Jamila, and Rashid's migration all contribute to a narrative in which separation repeatedly exceeds the moment of physical departure.

Rashid's distance from East Africa is especially important. Migration enables him to look backwards and reconstruct family histories, but his retrospective understanding is necessarily incomplete. The home he remembers is filtered through distance, later knowledge, and stories about lives that preceded his own. Remembering therefore becomes an attempt to approach what cannot be fully regained.

This condition distinguishes return from recovery. Physical return may sometimes be imaginable, but recovery of the earlier self, relationships, and historical moment is impossible. Gurnah's migrants are estranged not simply because they are far from home but because time has made the home of memory unavailable.

The second generation in *The Last Gift* intensifies this problem. Hanna and Jamal cannot return to their father's past because they never inhabited it. For them, East Africa belongs to an inherited history rather than personal recollection. Abbas's eventual disclosures provide access to that history, but storytelling cannot transform inherited memory into lived experience. Their ancestral home therefore occupies an ambiguous position: it belongs to their identity while remaining outside their own memory.

Gurnah thus distinguishes between remembered home and imagined home. First-generation migrants may preserve sensory and emotional memories of places they once knew, whereas later generations often reconstruct those places through family narratives, photographs, cultural practices, names, and silences. Diaspora gradually transforms geography into narrative.

Such transformation does not mean that ancestral belonging becomes meaningless. On the contrary, the absence of direct experience can intensify the desire to know. Yet the search for origins does not necessarily produce a complete or stable identity. Discovering a family history may answer some questions while creating others.

Both novels consequently resist idealised notions of homecoming. Home is neither a permanently preserved origin nor a destination capable of repairing every rupture caused by migration. It changes as the migrant changes. The idea of return may therefore contain nostalgia for a historical moment rather than simply a geographical location.

This explains the importance of memory in Gurnah's representation of diaspora. Memory allows displaced characters to maintain connections across geographical separation, but it simultaneously reminds them of what has become inaccessible. Remembering is therefore both an act of preservation and an acknowledgement of loss.

Estrangement also extends to the host country. Material security, education, employment, and long residence can produce

forms of attachment without guaranteeing complete acceptance or psychological belonging. Abbas's life demonstrates this clearly. Britain is not merely a temporary refuge; it is the place where much of his adult identity has been formed. Yet the existence of a settled life does not erase the unresolved relationship between his present and his concealed past.

Rashid similarly complicates the distinction between home and abroad. Once migration has altered his perspective, neither geographical location can be understood independently of the other. The country left behind is reconsidered from the distance of migration, while the country of settlement is interpreted through the historical relationship created by empire.

Diasporic estrangement therefore emerges not from belonging nowhere in an absolute sense but from belonging incompletely to several places at once. The migrant carries earlier attachments into new environments, while new experiences reshape the meaning of those earlier attachments.

This condition also exposes the continuing presence of empire. The geographical routes connecting East Africa and Britain are not accidental. Colonial history produced political, linguistic, educational, economic, and cultural relationships that continued to influence postcolonial migration. Movement towards Britain after independence consequently takes place along routes already marked by imperial history.

The impossibility of return in Gurnah should therefore not be interpreted as a purely personal tragedy. It is connected to historical transformations that have changed both individuals and places. Empire, decolonisation, migration, family separation, and generational change intervene between the remembered homeland and the migrant present.

The Last Gift and *Desertion* ultimately suggest that the deepest form of diasporic estrangement is temporal as much as geographical. Characters are separated not only

from **where** they once belonged but also from **when** they belonged there. No journey can return them to an earlier historical moment.

For this reason, storytelling becomes more important than literal homecoming. Narration cannot reverse displacement, but it can establish connections between past and present. Abbas's disclosures make his hidden history available to his children, while Rashid's retrospective narration reconstructs relationships that might otherwise disappear from family memory. Both acts preserve what physical return cannot restore.

Gurnah consequently relocates home within memory without reducing it to nostalgia. The remembered home remains unstable, selective, and open to reinterpretation. It may contain affection as well as shame, security as well as conflict, and belonging as well as exclusion.

In both novels, therefore, home survives after empire as an unfinished relationship rather than a recoverable territory. The migrant can remember, narrate, reinterpret, and transmit the past, but cannot simply step back into it. Diasporic estrangement emerges from this recognition. The impossibility of complete return does not destroy attachment to home; instead, it makes that attachment more complex. Gurnah's characters must learn to inhabit the distance between the home that was lived, the home that is remembered, and the home that later generations can know only through stories.

8. Remembering Home After Empire: A Comparative Discussion

Reading *Desertion* and *The Last Gift* together reveals that Abdulrazak Gurnah's idea of home cannot be separated from the historical consequences of empire. Although the novels occupy different temporal settings and approach migration from different directions, both question the assumption that home is a stable geographical origin to which displaced individuals can simply return. Gurnah instead presents home as something reconstructed through memory, family narratives, silence, material circumstances, and changing

relationships. Displacement may begin with geographical separation, but its deeper consequences become visible in the ways characters remember themselves, understand their histories, and transmit those histories to later generations.

The principal difference between the two novels lies in their historical perspective. *Desertion* looks towards colonial East Africa and examines how imperial structures enter intimate relationships, whereas *The Last Gift* concentrates more directly on a postcolonial migrant family living in Britain. When the novels are considered together, however, this difference creates a meaningful historical continuity. The colonial mobility represented in *Desertion* provides part of the historical background against which the later movement of East African subjects towards Britain can be understood. Gurnah thereby connects the colonial past with the diasporic present without suggesting that the experiences of colonial travellers and postcolonial migrants are equivalent.

This connection is significant because migration between East Africa and Britain does not occur between two historically unrelated spaces. Colonialism had already produced political, linguistic, educational, economic, and cultural links between them. The geographical direction of movement changes across the novels, but the earlier relationship remains embedded within these journeys. Postcolonial migration therefore becomes one of the ways in which the history of empire continues beyond the formal end of colonial rule.

Memory provides the bridge between this larger history and the private lives of Gurnah's characters. In *Desertion*, the relationship between Martin Pearce and Rehana belongs at once to personal and colonial history. Their attraction has emotional meaning that cannot simply be reduced to politics, yet it develops within a world organised by differences of race, gender, mobility, and imperial power. What begins as an intimate encounter consequently produces effects that survive beyond the immediate relationship and become part of family

history. In *The Last Gift*, Abbas's past initially appears to belong exclusively to his private life. His decision to withhold it from his family, however, gradually reveals how individual secrecy is connected to larger histories of migration, departure, and postcolonial settlement.

Both novels therefore demonstrate that memory is never entirely private. Characters remember lovers, relatives, homes, departures, failures, and missed possibilities, but these recollections also preserve traces of historical conditions. Empire enters memory through the ordinary experiences of individuals rather than appearing only as an external political structure. Gurnah's achievement lies in showing how large historical processes survive within intimate acts of remembering.

Silence is equally important. The past does not reach later generations as a complete and reliable record. It travels through fragments, delayed disclosures, family stories, partial recollections, and things deliberately left unsaid. Abbas's silence in *The Last Gift* creates a significant gap between generations. Hanna and Jamal know their father within the context of their British family life but remain largely separated from the history that preceded their birth. When Abbas begins to disclose his past, they must reconsider not merely a set of facts but their understanding of their father's identity.

A comparable process operates in *Desertion*. Rashid's retrospective narration draws attention to the difficulty of reconstructing lives that belong partly to an earlier generation. Family history cannot simply be retrieved as though it were an untouched archive. It must be assembled from available memories, stories, impressions, and uncertainties. Gurnah consequently presents remembering as an interpretive activity. The past is recovered only partially, and every act of narration inevitably reflects the position of the person who remembers or retells it.

Silence, from this perspective, is not the opposite of memory. It may itself be one of the forms through which memory survives. What a family refuses to discuss can continue to

influence later generations through unexplained emotions, missing information, inherited assumptions, and unanswered questions. Such silences are particularly important in postcolonial narratives because the histories of ordinary migrants, women, families, and socially marginal figures do not always appear fully within official historical records. Family memory becomes an alternative archive, though one characterised by incompleteness.

The comparison between the novels also reveals that mobility is unequally distributed. Martin Pearce's movement through colonial East Africa is enabled by structures that position him differently from Rehana. His moments of dependence and vulnerability do not cancel the broader advantages associated with his European identity within a colonial world. Most importantly, he possesses a capacity for movement that Rehana cannot exercise under comparable conditions. The ability to enter a relationship and subsequently leave is therefore connected to material and historical privilege.

Rashid's later journey towards Britain creates a striking reversal of geographical direction. The postcolonial subject now travels towards the former imperial centre. Yet this reversal does not eliminate the history connecting the two locations. Instead, it reveals how colonial routes continue to structure postcolonial movement. Rashid's journey and Martin's earlier mobility occur within connected geographical spaces but emerge from markedly different historical positions.

Abbas represents another stage in this development. He has settled in Britain, worked, raised a family, and achieved a measure of domestic and material stability. His experience nevertheless demonstrates that settlement and belonging cannot be treated as identical. Material security may make life sustainable, but it cannot automatically reconcile an individual with an unresolved past. Gurnah thus separates mobility, settlement, and belonging. A person may possess the means to travel without escaping history, or acquire a home without achieving a complete sense of being at home.

Gender makes these inequalities still more visible. Rehana experiences the consequences of crossing social and cultural boundaries differently from Martin because her position is shaped by expectations concerning women, family reputation, sexuality, and social respectability. Her vulnerability demonstrates that the apparent freedom associated with cross-cultural intimacy is not shared equally by all participants. Maryam's experience in *The Last Gift* develops the question of belonging differently, showing that uncertainty about origins can unsettle identity even outside the precise circumstances of international migration.

Through these women, Gurnah also challenges the assumption that home is always a secure space. Home may provide affection, protection, and continuity, but it can also impose expectations and restrictions. Remaining geographically in place does not guarantee belonging, just as leaving does not necessarily destroy every connection with home. Displacement can therefore be social and emotional as well as geographical.

The generational dimension of the two novels further complicates the meaning of home. For Abbas, East Africa belongs to lived memory. For Hanna and Jamal, it belongs largely to inherited history. They cannot remember what their father remembers because they did not experience it. Their access to that world depends upon what he chooses to narrate. The migrant's geographical home consequently becomes the descendant's narrative inheritance.

Rashid's engagement with earlier family histories involves a related process. He must interpret relationships and events that are separated from him by time and incomplete knowledge. In both novels, the movement from one generation to another transforms experience into narrative. Places once inhabited become places described; private recollections become family stories; direct memory gradually becomes inherited knowledge.

This transformation does not make second-generation attachment less meaningful.

Rather, it gives that attachment a different form. An ancestral homeland may contribute to identity even when it has never been personally experienced. The difficulty is that descendants inherit both stories and silences. Their understanding of the past depends upon what previous generations remember, suppress, distort, or decide to reveal.

Both novels therefore distinguish between the material home and the remembered home. Abbas's British household is not an artificial substitute for an authentic homeland. It is a genuine home created through years of family life. Nevertheless, it cannot contain the entirety of his history. The East African home preserved in his memory is equally incomplete because recollection does not reproduce the past exactly. Memory selects, modifies, suppresses, and rearranges experience.

The same process shapes Rashid's relationship with the world he has left. Distance transforms familiar places into objects of reflection. What once belonged to everyday experience acquires new meaning when remembered from elsewhere. Gurnah therefore avoids establishing a simple opposition between an authentic homeland and an alien host country. Both places participate in diasporic identity, but neither provides an entirely complete form of belonging.

Diasporic estrangement in these novels consequently does not mean absolute homelessness. Gurnah's characters are often attached to several places, relationships, and histories simultaneously. Their estrangement arises because these attachments cannot always be reconciled. Abbas belongs to his family in Britain while remaining connected to a concealed East African past. Rashid's movement away from home changes his understanding of it without erasing its emotional significance. Rehana demonstrates that even those who remain can experience forms of social and emotional displacement.

This condition may be understood as one of the intimate afterlives of empire.

Colonialism survives not only through political institutions but also through routes of migration, unequal opportunities, cultural encounters, family memories, and unresolved histories. The characters do not need to speak continuously about empire for its effects to remain present. Historical power becomes visible in who can travel, who must remain, whose relationships carry greater social consequences, and whose stories are eventually remembered.

Remembering consequently acquires an ethical dimension in both novels. Abbas's eventual disclosures matter because his children have become participants in a history that he has long treated as private. Rashid's reconstruction of earlier lives similarly preserves experiences that might otherwise disappear from family memory. Storytelling becomes a way of acknowledging relationships across generations.

Gurnah does not suggest that narration provides perfect recovery. Stories are selective, memories are unstable, and some experiences remain inaccessible. Nor does disclosure automatically heal every family rupture. The importance of narration lies instead in its capacity to make the hidden past available for interpretation. It allows later generations to recognise that their present lives have histories extending beyond their own direct experience.

The comparison between *Desertion* and *The Last Gift* therefore reveals home as a distinctly postcolonial construction. It is not an untouched origin preserved outside history but something continually reshaped by movement, memory, material circumstances, family relationships, and narrative transmission. *Desertion* exposes the unequal forms of mobility operating within the colonial world, while *The Last Gift* examines how earlier histories of movement persist within established diasporic lives in Britain. Read together, the novels trace a movement from colonial encounter to postcolonial settlement without presenting the latter as a resolution of the former.

This is also where material privilege and postcolonial memory intersect most clearly.

People do not remember or experience displacement from identical positions. Race, gender, economic security, education, family status, and access to mobility shape the conditions under which individuals can leave, settle, remain, or return. Material privilege may protect individuals from particular forms of insecurity, but it cannot guarantee freedom from memory or emotional estrangement.

Gurnah thus avoids both romantic nostalgia and celebratory narratives of migration. The homeland is not presented as a perfect space of original belonging, while the host country is not simply a place of alienation. Likewise, migration may offer opportunity without erasing loss. The complexity of these novels arises from the coexistence of such apparently contradictory experiences.

Ultimately, the most important connection between *Desertion* and *The Last Gift* lies in their presentation of home as a relationship continually revised by history. Empire determines unequal possibilities of movement; migration alters how places are remembered; family silence influences what descendants can know; and the passage of time makes complete return impossible. Remembering home after empire therefore involves recognising that the object of memory has itself changed.

The home reconstructed through recollection can never be identical to the home that was once inhabited. Yet this does not make remembering futile. Memory allows displaced individuals and their descendants to establish connections across historical ruptures, even when those connections remain incomplete. In both novels, Gurnah locates postcolonial belonging within this unresolved space between recovery and loss. His characters cannot return fully to the past, but neither can they live entirely outside it. Home survives as an unfinished inheritance carried through stories, silences, intimate relationships, material inequalities, and the unequal routes produced by empire.

9. Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion* and *The Last Gift* offer two historically distinct but closely connected explorations of what it means to remember home after empire. Across the two novels, home emerges neither as a secure geographical origin nor as a place that migration simply leaves behind. It is continually reconstructed through memory, silence, family relationships, movement, material circumstances, and the passage of time. Gurnah's characters may leave particular places, but departure does not free them from the emotional and historical worlds associated with those places. Instead, migration changes the form in which home continues to exist. What was once a lived environment gradually becomes memory, story, absence, inheritance, and sometimes regret.

The comparison of the two novels demonstrates that Gurnah's treatment of displacement cannot be separated from colonial history. *Desertion* returns to colonial East Africa and reveals how imperial power enters the intimate lives of individuals. The relationship between Martin Pearce and Rehana is personal in its emotional intensity, yet it develops within unequal conditions of race, gender, social position, and mobility. Martin's ability to move through colonial space and eventually depart cannot be understood independently of the structures that make such movement possible. Rehana experiences the consequences of intimacy from a considerably different social position. Through this imbalance, Gurnah reveals that mobility is never merely geographical; it is also connected to privilege and the unequal ability to escape the consequences of departure.

The Last Gift shifts the historical focus towards postcolonial Britain and explores what happens when migration has developed into a settled family life. Abbas possesses many of the material features normally associated with successful settlement: employment, domestic stability, marriage, and children. Yet his long silence concerning his East African past exposes the limits of material security as a measure of belonging. His life demonstrates that one may

establish a home without completely resolving the memory of another. Material settlement can provide security, but it cannot erase the emotional and moral consequences of departure.

Memory is therefore central to both novels. Gurnah does not present it as a transparent record through which the past can simply be recovered. Memory is selective, delayed, mediated, and sometimes deliberately suppressed. Abbas's refusal to narrate his earlier life does not mean that the past has disappeared. On the contrary, his silence indicates its continuing emotional force. Similarly, the retrospective structure of *Desertion* demonstrates that family history reaches later generations through partial knowledge and acts of reconstruction. Remembering becomes a process of interpreting fragments rather than retrieving an intact past.

The intergenerational dimension of this process is particularly significant. Hanna and Jamal cannot remember the East African world known by Abbas because it lies outside their personal experience. What they can inherit is the narrative of that world. Their father's homeland therefore changes from geographical experience into family history. A comparable transformation occurs through Rashid's engagement with earlier relationships and events in *Desertion*. Later generations encounter the past through stories whose meanings have already been altered by distance and time. Gurnah consequently shows how diaspora converts lived places into narrated places and personal memory into cultural and familial inheritance.

Such transmission also reveals the importance of silence. Family history is constituted not only by what is remembered but by what is withheld. Abbas's secrecy produces gaps in the identities available to his children, while the retrospective reconstruction of relationships in *Desertion* repeatedly reminds the reader that the past cannot speak entirely for itself. Silence can protect individuals from painful recollection, shame, or responsibility, but it can also transfer uncertainty to those who follow. Gurnah's fiction therefore treats storytelling as an

important, though imperfect, form of intergenerational responsibility.

The analysis of material privilege adds another dimension to existing discussions of memory and diaspora in Gurnah's fiction. The novels demonstrate that displacement is experienced differently according to the resources and social positions available to particular individuals. Race, gender, class, education, employment, family reputation, and historical location affect the possibilities of movement and settlement. Martin's colonial mobility, Rehana's restricted position, Rashid's postcolonial migration, and Abbas's later material stability cannot be placed within a single undifferentiated category of movement. Each belongs to a particular structure of opportunity and constraint.

This recognition prevents diaspora from being romanticised as unrestricted mobility. The ability to cross borders may represent opportunity for some, necessity for others, and a privilege unavailable to those who remain. Moreover, the person who leaves and the person who is left behind do not necessarily bear equal consequences. *Desertion* makes this inequality especially visible, while *The Last Gift* demonstrates that even relative material success cannot entirely overcome the psychological and historical effects of displacement.

Diasporic estrangement in the two novels therefore emerges as a condition of incomplete and divided belonging. Gurnah's characters are not necessarily without home. Rather, they are connected to several versions of home that cannot be perfectly reconciled. Abbas belongs to the family and life he has created in Britain while remaining bound to an earlier history he has attempted to conceal. Rashid's movement away from East Africa changes his relationship with the place without eliminating its significance. Rehana's experience further demonstrates that estrangement can occur within familiar geographical surroundings when social conditions weaken an individual's sense of belonging.

The impossibility of complete return follows from this understanding. Returning geographically cannot restore the historical moment that existed before departure. Places change, relationships change, and migrants themselves are transformed by the lives they construct elsewhere. The lost home is therefore not simply a distant territory; it belongs partly to an earlier time. This temporal dimension is one of the most important features of Gurnah's representation of displacement. His characters are separated not only from where they once belonged but also from the period in which that belonging was possible.

Yet the impossibility of recovering the past does not make remembrance meaningless. Storytelling provides a different form of return. Abbas cannot give Hanna and Jamal direct access to the East African world of his earlier life, but he can give them its story. Rashid cannot restore the lives and relationships that precede his own migration, but narration can preserve their traces. Memory therefore becomes a means of establishing continuity without pretending that historical rupture can be undone.

The comparative reading of *Desertion* and *The Last Gift* consequently extends existing scholarship by bringing postcolonial memory into sustained conversation with material privilege and diasporic estrangement. Studies of Gurnah have productively explored exile, hybridity, identity, trauma, silence, and belonging, but the two novels also invite closer attention to the unequal material conditions under which people move and remember. The meaning of home is shaped not only by emotional attachment but by the historical ability to leave, remain, settle, speak, and transmit one's past.

Gurnah ultimately refuses to offer either return or assimilation as a simple answer to postcolonial displacement. The homeland cannot be recovered in its original form, while settlement elsewhere does not require the complete disappearance of earlier attachments. His characters inhabit the difficult space between these possibilities. Their identities are produced through the coexistence of several histories rather than through the recovery of a single, uncontested origin.

In this sense, *Desertion* and *The Last Gift* transform home from a fixed location into an ongoing relationship with the past. Empire alters the conditions of movement; migration alters the experience of belonging; material inequality determines who can move and under what circumstances; silence interrupts the transmission of history; and memory attempts to connect what displacement has separated. Home survives these processes, but it survives in changed form.

Remembering home after empire is therefore neither a purely nostalgic act nor a straightforward recovery of origins. It is an attempt to live with histories that remain unfinished. Gurnah's fiction suggests that the diasporic subject cannot fully return to the world that has been left behind, but neither must that world disappear. It continues through memory, narrative, inherited questions, cultural traces, and intimate relationships. *Desertion* and *The Last Gift* finally locate the meaning of home within this tension between presence and absence, privilege and vulnerability, departure and attachment. Home is not simply where the characters began or where they eventually settle; it is the changing field of memory through which they continue to negotiate who they were, who they have become, and what parts of their histories can still be passed on.

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Ethical Declarations

Ethical Approval

This study is based exclusively on the textual and critical analysis of published literary works and secondary scholarly sources. It does not involve human participants, animals, clinical data, personal data, interviews, surveys, or experiments. Therefore, approval from an Institutional Ethics Committee was not required.

Informed Consent

Not applicable. The study did not involve human participants or the collection of personal or identifiable information.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable. No personal data, images, case records, or information relating to individual participants are included in this article.

Conflict of Interest

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Author Contributions

Both authors contributed to the conceptualisation, literary analysis, interpretation of the selected texts, review of relevant scholarship, preparation of the manuscript, and revision of the article. Both authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Research Integrity Statement

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