



Subaltern Voices and Agency in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion*

Dr Hafiz Kamran Farooqi¹, Dr Farrukh Hameed²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, IISAT Gujranwala

Email: kamranfarooqi10@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Chenab, Gujrat

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Keywords: Identity, Female Agency, Subaltern Silence, Postcolonial Resistance; Resilience	This study examines the dynamics of subaltern voices and silences in Abdulrazak Gurnah's <i>Desertion</i> , focusing on the female characters Rehana, Jamila, Farida, and Gray. Considering Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the subaltern and her critical inquiry "Can the Subaltern Speak?", the research investigates how Gurnah represents women's struggle to articulate their voices within patriarchal, colonial, and postcolonial power structures. In <i>Desertion</i> , silence and speech function as interdependent modes of resistance and survival, challenging the binaries of voicelessness and agency. Through Rehana's constrained expression, Jamila's emotional resilience, Farida's repressed desires, and Gray's introspective withdrawal, Gurnah constructs a layered discourse on how subaltern women navigate social and political marginalization in East Africa. The analysis reveals that silence in Gurnah's narrative is not the absence of voice but a transformative strategy of communication and defiance. Ultimately, this study underscores how Gurnah redefines subaltern voices by converting silence into an act of empowerment, thus illuminating the potential of muted expressions to resist domination and assert female subjectivity within postcolonial discourse.
Corresponding Author: Dr Hafiz Kamran Farooqi , Assistant Professor, Department of English, IISAT Gujranwala Email: kamranfarooqi10@gmail.com	

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 50 years, there has been a great change in how women are treated and seen, no matter their race, background, country, or skin color. This change also affects African women. Even though women's experiences differ from one country to another, they often face many forms of oppression and control. Women in most countries have suffered from different types of

unfair treatment and punishment. However, the rise of feminist movements has helped reduce the discrimination and lack of support that women, especially those in marginalized groups, face. On the other hand, African women have had a tough time, especially Indigenous women. In the time before colonization, these women had a certain level of respect and independence. But after colonization, their social position was greatly reduced. They are now kept in their homes, losing their freedom, their voice, and their ability to speak up. Turning Indigenous women into quiet, passive figures is a key part of the patriarchal system, especially in communities where men are in charge. Keeping women silent is a way to control them. As Almeida says, silence is "the historical way women have been suppressed in the powerful social system called patriarchy, where men hold power and put women in a lower position" (1). The feminist scholar Bell Hooks also argues that "patriarchy makes men feel superior by keeping women quiet and teaches them that their value and identity come from being in control of others" (70).

African women have gone through similar problems, made worse by both colonialism and patriarchy. They were often shown in Orientalist portrayals with exaggerated and typical roles. While the focus was on colonialism, women of color were also under patriarchy and within their own communities. Early postcolonial writings didn't pay much attention to or deeply explore the idea of "double colonialism." However, Gayatri Spivak brought attention to this idea, highlighting the importance of the subordinated. She argues that "the effect of biological differences on Indigenous women is more significant than on men" ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 83–85). African women, who have been silenced and treated unfairly, have suffered from the control of both the colonial empire and patriarchy, leading to long-term pain and lasting consequences. Even though their struggles and requests for help have been widely covered in mass media, the writing of postcolonial authors has had a strong, unique impact.

Background of the Study

The way women are shown has changed over time, but old stereotypes still exist. Usually, women are seen through the eyes of men, but African women are shown through the views of both colonial rulers and patriarchal systems (Neimneh 50). The way an African woman is viewed as an object from a male perspective often depends on her behavior and the expectations society puts on her. When looking at different portrayals of African women, the common image often focuses on their sexuality and how vulnerable they are, both emotionally and mentally, to men. Traditionally, African women have been shown as powerless, voiceless, and without control, compared to white women in the West. However, Gurnah tries to show how female characters are oppressed by both colonization and the patriarchal system, which treat them harshly. Gurnah's stories are mostly set on Zanzibar Island, where he grew up. Understanding the historical background is important to grasp the complexities of the post-colonial society in his works. Zanzibar, located on the eastern coast of Africa, has been colonized by many powerful groups, such as the Portuguese, Omani Arabs, and the British. This long period of colonization has greatly influenced the culture of the region (Ingrams 19-21). The lasting effects of Western and Arab cultures are still present in traditional gender roles and inequalities that remain in many aspects of daily life. Although African women now have better access to education and jobs than men, societal norms still keep them in roles that require modesty, and families are still expected to give dowries for their daughters' marriages.

Zanzibar's post-colonial feminism is focused on showing how colonialism and deep-rooted patriarchal traditions have affected women's lives. Its goal is not just to recognize and support the varied experiences of women, but also to actively empower them and work toward gender equality. By addressing the lasting influences of colonial rule and the norms from Arab

and Western cultures, this movement challenges patriarchal practices and aims to bring meaningful change to Zanzibar. *By the Sea* shows how female characters are constantly oppressed and ignored under colonial rule. The book shows their lower position and explains how they deal with their relationships within the strict systems of patriarchy and colonization. The female characters use silence as a form of smart resistance against both colonial and patriarchal control. This silence challenges authority and shows their strength and ability to adapt in a post-colonial setting. The research looks at the protagonist's ability to face and deal with problems caused by social and political issues, such as being abandoned by her family, having big family responsibilities, and the challenges of raising children in difficult conditions. The protagonist's decisions are influenced by several things, such as the need to give up her virginity and the financial struggles of managing home life.

Abdulrazak Gurnah is a Tanzanian-born British writer, born in Zanzibar in 1948. He moved to England in the late 1960s and became a professor of English and Postcolonial Literature at the University of Kent. Gurnah's works explore themes of migration, colonialism, identity, and displacement. His notable novels include *Paradise* (1994), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and *Desertion* (2005). His writing often focuses on the emotional and psychological effects of colonialism and the experience of refugees. In 2021, Gurnah was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for his profound exploration of colonialism and its legacy.

Desertion began in a small Moslem village south of Mombasa in what would later become Kenya, in 1899 when it was still a British colony. A British "orientalist", Martin Pearce, abandoned and robbed by his guides, has managed to reach the village and is rescued by Hasanili, a shopkeeper. Pearce falls in love with Hasanili's sister, Rehana, and they live together for a while in Mombasa and have a daughter named Asmah. Pearce then deserts her and returns to England. In the second part of the novel, we are on an island off the African coast, presumably Zanzibar, in the mid-1950s, just before independence. We are introduced to a family of five, the parents who are both teachers, a daughter Farida, and two sons, Amin and Rahid. The main story here turns on the relationship between Amin and a woman named Jamila, who turns out to be Asmah's daughter. Anil in obedience to his parents breaks off his relationship, the second "desertion" of the novel. The third part takes place in England, where Rashid (like Gurnah) has gone to study and remains a professor. He marries an English woman named Grace, who later leaves him. In the final pages, he meets a granddaughter of Martin Pearce by his English wife and we learn more of the details of the first part.

Research Questions

- How does *Desertion* by Abdulrazak Gurnah portray subaltern voices, and in what ways do the silences of marginalized characters function as a mode of resistance and agency within the novel's postcolonial framework?
- In what ways does *Desertion* interrogate the complexities of subaltern agency by depicting gendered and racialized experiences of colonialism, displacement, and historical silencing?

Revisiting the Discourse on Subalternity and Agency

The literature review is a vital component of any research project as it identifies existing gaps in knowledge and provides a strong rationale for the present study. This research examines the work of thirteen scholars who have explored Abdulrazak Gurnah's writings, with a particular focus on his use of narrative voice in *Desertion*. The review underscores the significance of postcolonial feminism and its relevance to the novel. Postcolonialism, a broad and complex field

encompassing religion, anthropology, politics, feminism, and literature, primarily investigates the enduring effects of colonization. Emerging in the 1980s as both a development and critique of mainstream Western feminism, postcolonial feminism highlights the unique struggles faced by women in formerly colonized societies. The theoretical foundation of this study draws on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential analysis of how colonial and patriarchal systems marginalize women's voices.

In her famous essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak points out how the voices of those who are oppressed are ignored and calls on scholars to listen to and support these voices in feminist discussions. Using this approach, the study looks at themes like power, control, and how people are seen, both in academic and cultural settings. Postcolonial feminism differs from the gendered stories told during colonial times by showing how non-Western, non-white women were exploited in the past. Chandra Talpade Mohanty talks about "double colonialism," where women face both colonial rule and patriarchy (p. 57). These women have to fight against foreign control and the unfair treatment they face because of their gender. Postcolonial feminism aims to tell these women's stories, honor their identities, and resist the way mainstream feminist ideas try to make all women the same. It also challenges the idea that there is a single female experience and instead focuses on the different experiences of women in various cultures and times. As Tyagi points out, it supports the representation of women from both former colonies and within Western countries (p. 45).

Desertion provides a nuanced portrayal of marginalized voices and the complexities of power and control within colonial and postcolonial contexts. Borrowing insight from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion that the subaltern cannot effectively speak or be heard within dominant discourses (Spivak, 1988a), Gurnah challenges this perspective by foregrounding the lived experiences of characters such as Hassan and Rehana. These often-overlooked figures illustrate how individuals negotiate power relations, construct selfhood, and resist both cultural and colonial constraints. The narrative exposes the tension between personal agency and social expectation, revealing how the marginalized navigate intersecting cultural and social pressures. Gurnah's engagement with subalternity is crucial in restoring visibility to voices omitted from conventional historical narratives. As Graham Huggan observes, Gurnah frequently interrogates the "postcolonial exotic," examining questions of identity, displacement, and cultural hybridity (2007, p. 4).

Charne Lavery (2013), in "White-washed Minarets and Slimy Gutters: Abdulrazak Gurnah, Narrative Form and Indian Ocean Space," examines the complex narrative structure of *By the Sea* (2001) through its two narrators, Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud. She argues that Gurnah's use of conflicting perspectives reflects the fragmented nature of the Indian Ocean world. The narrative alternates between Omar, an elderly refugee once known as Rajab Shaaban, and Latif, a younger academic in exile, before merging their voices in dialogic exchanges that blur memory and time. She notes that Omar's calm, reflective tone contrasts with Latif's direct and emotional voice, creating a sense of unresolved uncertainty. Through shifts in space and temporality, Gurnah deliberately unsettles the reader, emphasizing exile and dislocation. She also highlights the role of silence, suggesting that Gurnah's multiple viewpoints expose the gaps between stories and the unspoken spaces beyond words (2013, pp. 8–9).

A previous study presents a novel perspective, as Pujolrás-Noguer (2018) asserts that miscegenation was a major source of anxiety within the British Empire, since interracial relationships directly challenged the colonial association of whiteness with civilization and purity. From Rashid's perspective, Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion* centers on the colonial

romance between the Englishman Martin Pearce and Rehana Zakariya – a union that indirectly disrupts the later relationship between their granddaughter Jamila and Rashid’s brother, Amin. In response to imperial fears, Gurnah constructs a narrative where cultural mixing signifies enduring connection, whiteness emerges as a destructive colonial ideal, and women’s bodies embody both desire and agency. This analysis seeks to move beyond reductive postcolonial readings that privilege race over gender by examining Rehana and Jamila as complex figures who are simultaneously desired and desiring, revealing how female characters navigate both freedom and constraint within colonial and postcolonial contexts (p. 596).

Building on this, Anne Ajulu Okungu (2016), in her thesis “Reading Abdulrazak Gurnah: *Desertion*, Power and Human Relationships,” offers a comprehensive analysis of Gurnah’s fiction, focusing on how power operates within human relationships across his eight published novels. Okungu examines the acquisition, exercise, resistance, and preservation of power in interpersonal dynamics, situating them within contexts that range from precolonial to postcolonial East Africa and the broader global sphere. Her study reveals how Gurnah’s portrayal of everyday interactions exposes subtle and complex forms of authority that extend beyond conventional narratives of colonial domination and decolonization (p. 13).

Pujolràs-Noguer highlights miscegenation as a central anxiety of the British Empire, where interracial relationships challenged the colonial association of whiteness with civilization and purity. Extending this discussion, Anne Ajulu Okungu, in “Reading Abdulrazak Gurnah: *Desertion*, Power and Human Relationships,” examines how power is acquired, exercised, and resisted within Gurnah’s portrayal of human relationships across colonial and postcolonial contexts. Similarly, Nicoletta Brazzelli, in “Rewriting History: Colonial Encounters and Forbidden Love Stories in Gurnah’s *Desertion*,” argues that Gurnah reimagines colonial history through the theme of “contamination” between colonizer and colonized, uncovering hidden stories of forbidden love that challenge official historical narratives. Together, these scholars illuminate how *Desertion* exposes the entanglement of race, power, and desire across generations, redefining the colonial encounter through intimate human experiences (2011, p. 177).

Observing on these perspectives, Alfred Oyaró Omwenga, in “Silence as a Strategy of Enunciation in Selected Fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah: *Paradise* (1994) and *Desertion* (2005),” investigates silence as a narrative and symbolic strategy to articulate trauma. He demonstrates how displacement, racial difference, and historical rupture shape the characters’ silence, transforming it into a mode of resistance and self-expression within colonial and postcolonial contexts. Together, these scholars illuminate *Desertion* as a text that not only reconfigures power, race, and intimacy but also foregrounds silence and desire as intertwined forces that complicate colonial and gendered hierarchies (2017, p. 13).

Scholars have explored *Desertion* (2005) through various critical lenses, including colonial history, gender, race, and silence. Pujolràs-Noguer (2017) views miscegenation as a central anxiety in the British Empire, where interracial relationships challenge colonial ideals of whiteness and civilization. Anne Ajulu Okungu examines Gurnah’s portrayal of power and human relationships across precolonial and postcolonial East Africa. Nicoletta Brazzelli (2016) argues that Gurnah reimagines colonial history through forbidden love stories that expose hidden, personal dimensions of empire. Alfred Oyaró Omwenga highlights silence as a narrative strategy for expressing trauma and displacement, while Tine Steiner (2018) interprets *Desertion* through relational theories, showing how Gurnah envisions Africa as a space of connection that resists fixed national or ethnic boundaries (2013).

While these studies richly illuminate the intersections of power, race, and silence in *Desertion*, few have explored how subaltern voices emerge, transform, or are constrained within these relational and historical spaces. This study fills that gap by examining the dynamics of subaltern voices in Gurnah's *Desertion*, investigating how the marginalized articulate agency and resistance through silence, fragmented memory, and narrative displacement within the novel's postcolonial framework.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design, focusing on a close textual analysis of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion* (2005). Following Creswell's (2014) framework for qualitative inquiry, the analysis identifies and interprets key themes, narrative patterns, and character developments that reveal the dynamics of marginalized voices and subaltern agency within the novel. This method allows for a detailed examination of Gurnah's narrative structure, character portrayal, and use of language to represent postcolonial experiences. The research is theoretically grounded in postcolonial studies, particularly drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the *subaltern* (1988) and Homi K. Bhabha's concept of *cultural hybridity* (1994). Spivak's framework provides insight into how silenced or marginalized figures navigate structures of colonial and patriarchal domination, while Bhabha's ideas illuminate the negotiation of identity and belonging within hybrid cultural spaces. Through this interpretive and theory-informed approach, the study seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of subaltern voices in *Desertion*, contributing to ongoing discussions in postcolonial literary and cultural studies.

Theoretical Framework

Applying Spivak's Lens to Women's Exploitation in Zanzibar

This study employs Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988b) as its theoretical framework to examine the exploitation and marginalization of women in Zanzibari society. Spivak's work interrogates the historical, social, and ideological mechanisms through which certain groups – particularly women, minorities, and indigenous populations—are rendered voiceless within colonial and patriarchal systems. As a leading figure in Subaltern Studies, Spivak adopts a postcolonial feminist perspective, exposing how structures of power and representation silence marginalized groups such as displaced farmers, laborers, and women living on the peripheries of dominant discourse. Her concept of the subaltern refers to those who are systematically excluded from political and cultural representation. Within this framework, women's oppression in Zanzibar can be understood as a result of intersecting forces of colonial domination, patriarchal authority, and class hierarchy, which collectively deny them agency and voice. By applying Spivak's perspective, this study seeks to uncover the complex dynamics of power, alienation, and resistance that shape women lived experiences, emphasizing how silence operates both as a condition of subjugation and a subtle form of resistance within the postcolonial context.

Spivak (1988) primarily examines the historical subjugation of women and the ways in which they internalize dominant colonial and patriarchal narratives. However, Subaltern Studies challenges the notion that women should be viewed merely as passive victims of ideological oppression, rejecting simplified interpretations of subalternity (Subaltern Studies: Dismantling of Historical Studies, p. 4). Considering on Spivak's argument, this study contends that if marginalized voices can effectively engage with dominant discourse, they are no longer truly alienated. The term *subaltern* thus refers to those who are systematically suppressed, marginalized, and denied agency.

From this perspective, the study analyzes the unequal social hierarchies depicted in Gurnah's Indian Ocean world, where women live on the peripheries and their voices are often silenced or overshadowed. Spivak emphasizes that women in colonial contexts, lacking recorded narratives, are unable to fully articulate their own experiences. This alienation is compounded by the dual pressures of colonial domination and patriarchal subjection. For Spivak, women's presence is not entirely erased but exists in a tense oscillation between being recognized as individuals and being reduced to objects of exchange. This condition is particularly evident among Third World women, who remain caught between the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity (Spivak, 1988, pp. 279–306).

Both postcolonial and feminist theories seek to challenge structures of oppression and envision a more equitable society that values the experiences and perspectives of all individuals, irrespective of colonial or gendered histories. Postcolonial feminism, in particular, offers a critical framework for understanding how gender, race, and colonialism intersect to shape the lives of women in formerly colonized societies (Mohanty, 1988, p. 63). This theoretical approach investigates the lasting effects of colonialism on women's identities and experiences, as well as their strategies of resistance against oppressive institutions during and after colonial rule (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 5). The integration of feminist and postcolonial perspectives exposes the overlapping systems of domination embedded in colonial and patriarchal structures, emphasizing how these intersecting forces uniquely condition women's positions, voices, and modes of resistance.

Negotiating Voices and Agency: An Interpretive Reading of *Desertion*

The dynamics of subaltern voices in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion* reveal the complex intersections of gender, power, and colonial history. Through the portrayal of female characters such as Rehana and Mwana, Gurnah exposes how colonialism and patriarchy operate in tandem to suppress women's voices and limit their agency. Rehana's mixed heritage becomes a site of tension, as she endures shame, exclusion, and cultural judgment—her relationship with Martin Pearce symbolizing how women in colonial contexts are objectified within systems of racial and gendered desire. In this way, silence in *Desertion* becomes both a symptom of oppression and a strategic mode of self-preservation and defiance.

Viewed through the lens of subaltern theory, as articulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), the silence of women in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion* emerges from the socio-cultural structures that determine whose voices are valued and whose are suppressed. Their inability to speak within these dominant systems underscores the importance of listening to marginalized voices rather than attempting to speak on their behalf. Set against the backdrop of colonial Zanzibar and the ensuing cultural transitions, Gurnah's narrative explores the intricate lives of women negotiating identity, desire, and power. At the center stands Rehana, a strong yet socially constrained woman whose life reflects the intersections of gender, colonialism, and social hierarchy. Her family's history of intermarriage and her own experience as a divorced woman complicate her position within Zanzibari society. Rehana's relationship with Martin Pearce, a British colonial officer, becomes a pivotal moment that exposes the entangled dynamics of race, gender, and desire, with consequences that echo through subsequent generations. Her granddaughter Jamila inherits these tensions, embodying the lingering effects of colonial domination and patriarchal expectations on women's lives and identities.

In *Desertion*, Gurnah portrays the struggles of women like Rehana, Jamila, and Farida, who navigate the tension between cultural identity, familial obligations, and personal aspirations. Through these characters, Gurnah brings to light the often-overlooked experiences of women

during and after colonial rule, revealing how silence becomes both a condition imposed by patriarchy and a subtle form of resistance. The novel's exploration of identity, belonging, and cultural heritage underscores how colonial and patriarchal structures intersect to define—and confine—female subjectivity in postcolonial East Africa. Rashid himself concedes his inability to comprehend the relationship, remarking, “I don’t know how it would have happened. The unlikeliness of it defeats me. Yet I know it did happen, that Martin and Rehana became lovers” (2005, p. 140).

After Pearce leaves her, promising to return but never doing so, Rehana’s silence takes on a symbolic and historical meaning. She never voices her betrayal directly, nor does the narrative allow her to process or reflect upon it. Her story gradually fades into the background, and subsequent generations—particularly her granddaughter Jamila—inherit not only its emotional consequences but also the social shame and moral judgment surrounding it. When others discuss Rehana, their focus remains on notions of disgrace and transgression rather than on her suffering or motivations. This absence of empathy reveals how women’s experiences are often interpreted through patriarchal and moralistic lenses, stripping them of agency and emotional complexity.

Even when Rehana is accused of stealing Pearce’s book, she remains silent—not out of guilt, but because she lacks the social or moral space to defend herself within the restrictive world she inhabits. Gurnah’s portrayal transforms this silence from mere muteness into a powerful symbol of systemic exclusion. It represents the broader condition of subaltern women whose voices are effaced from history, narrative, and collective memory. Rehana’s silence thus becomes not a void but a form of testimony, echoing what Gayatri Spivak calls the “epistemic violence” of erasure, where the subaltern’s voice is structurally unheard. Her silence, then, is not absence—it is the echo of resistance within the ruins of oppression.

Another moment that deepens Jamila’s silence occurs when she and Amin confront the social risks of their relationship, shaped by her status as a divorced woman and her family’s contentious reputation. In a moment of vulnerability, Jamila cautions Amin: “We have to be careful, habibi, otherwise...” When he presses her to continue, she adds, “Otherwise they will make us stop... They will say ugly things and they will make us stop. You’re so young, still at school, and I am a divorced woman in my twenties.”

This exchange underscores Jamila’s acute awareness of the restrictive moral codes governing female behavior and desire within her society. Her hesitation and fragmented speech convey both fear and resignation, reflecting how patriarchal structures police women’s bodies and choices. Jamila’s words reveal that her silence is not born of ignorance but of strategic self-protection, anticipating the violence of public shame. Through her, Gurnah exposes how social judgment becomes a tool of silencing—turning women’s personal desires into grounds for moral exclusion.

The community’s judgment weighs heavily on Jamila, and her pursuit of independence is constantly tested by shame and social stigma. This condemnation reveals how her silence—what she cannot or dares not contest—is both socially and emotionally enforced. A similar dynamic appears in Farida’s quiet restraint when she visits her brother Rashid after their mother’s death. Farida, an intelligent and introspective poet, communicates indirectly through her writing rather than speech. When Rashid remarks, “Finally, I get to read her poems,” it becomes clear that her poetry had long been hidden from others. Her decision to confine her voice to private expression, and her hesitation to share it, demonstrates how she negotiates emotion and identity through controlled silence. Even in mourning, Farida channels her grief inward, letting it surface only in her verse. This internalized silence underscores the limits placed on articulate women within

patriarchal and postcolonial structures, where their intellectual and emotional expression remains circumscribed by gendered expectations

Another moment of voice appears when Rashid reflects on his distance from the family after going overseas. Farida never openly challenges their father's authority or questions the injustice that allows Rashid to pursue freedom while she remains bound by duty and expectation. Though the inequality is clear, her silence is not submission but a form of endurance. When she does speak, it is to explain or mediate rather than to confront. As the dutiful daughter who manages the household and cares for their mother, she embodies the quiet acceptance expected of women within patriarchal structures.

Silence plays a big part in shaping Farida's life and who she is, showing both her own and her family's struggles over time. Her life is filled with stories that aren't spoken out loud, emotions that are held back, and the weight of family secrets. As the sister of Rashid and Amin, she stays in the background of their more talkative stories, but her silence has a lot of meaning. Farida doesn't go after education or public success like her brothers do. Instead, she focuses on taking care of others, managing the household, and quietly watching the world around her. Her way of expressing herself is through poetry, which becomes a gentle form of standing up for herself and sharing feelings that aren't usually said out loud. This use of poetry shows how silence isn't just about not speaking—it's a place where hidden sadness, memories, and identity live on. Farida's silence also shows the bigger rules of society, especially for women in a world that's controlled by men and has a history of colonial rule. She has to follow strict ideas of proper behavior and honor, especially because of the bad reputation of her family's past. The trouble with Rehana, their ancestor, still hangs over them like a shadow, affecting how Farida sees herself and keeping the family's silence alive. But Farida's silence isn't always weak. Sometimes, it helps her survive, and it shows she has her own strength even when the world doesn't let her speak up. Through Farida, Gurnah shows how silence can mean a lot, hold pain, and keep dignity even when there is loss, judgment, and forgetting of the past.

Grey's character is defined by a silence that is both involved and planned, influenced by his role as a colonial official and his ties to Martin Pearce. He moves through the systems of colonial rule, and his silence often shows the careful restraint of someone trying to stay within both authority and social limits. Although he is aware of Pearce's connection to Rehana and what that means, Grey does not speak out about it or take a stand against the larger issues of colonial relationships. His voice isn't driven by emotional pain like Rehana's or by guilt like Jamila's, but instead by a conscious decision not to deal with the moral issues around him. This silence supports the colonial system, keeping distance and control while avoiding any direct conflict with the moral problems of empire. Grey's emotional distance also shows the gap between colonizers and the local people; he watches but doesn't act, knows but doesn't feel. Through Grey, Gurnah shows how silence can be a kind of quiet control—an unwillingness to change the situation or recognize the impact of imperial choices. Grey's quiet role in the story shows how silence, when used by those in power, can be just as harmful as direct action, keeping unfair systems in place through not acting and cutting off emotional connections.

The Resonance of the Subaltern Voice

Desertion intricately examines the dynamics of subaltern silences through its female characters – Rehana, Jamila, Farida, and Gray – whose muted voices and quiet endurance reveal layered modes of resistance, vulnerability, and transformation. Their silences do not merely signify suppression or compliance; rather, they evolve as distinct forms of strategic, traumatic, and redemptive silence that articulate complex negotiations of agency within postcolonial and

patriarchal frameworks. Through these women, Gurnah reconstructs silence as an active discourse that challenges dominant structures of power and redefines the boundaries of female subjectivity.

Through these interwoven silences, Gurnah constructs a nuanced landscape of subaltern subjectivity. Silence in *Desertion* is dynamic: it conceals and reveals, resists and reconciles, suffers and heals. It becomes the mode through which women who cannot openly speak still assert meaning, memory, and moral depth. Gurnah's portrayal of female silence therefore challenges the assumption that voicelessness equates to powerlessness; instead, silence emerges as a language of endurance and a tool of subversive articulation.

Ultimately, *Desertion* redefines silence as an evolving continuum—from the strategic, to the traumatic, to the redemptive – reflecting the shifting emotional and psychological states of the subaltern woman. Through Rehana, Jamila, Farida, and Gray, Gurnah illuminates how silence can serve as a site of suffering and healing, repression and renewal. In doing so, he expands the postcolonial discourse on gender and agency by foregrounding silence not as absence, but as an alternative epistemology of resistance and selfhood.

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