



COLONIAL HERITAGE AND ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS: AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY IN GURNAH'S DESERTION

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Abstract

The ecocritical study of the literature of commonwealth countries explores an in-depth understanding of the relationship between man and nature. It raised awareness among society about the problems with the environment. The present research paper examines Gurnah's *Desertion* ecocritically by exploring the conflicting relationship between humans and nonhumans within the environment in colonized Africa. The colonized Africa that was experiencing the destruction of its natural resources under British rule during nineteenth century serves as the backdrop for the African novel *Desertion* (2005). The British Empire, which enjoyed unprecedented success in the 1800s, was the greatest empire at that time and had a lasting influence on its colonies. The policies of British colonizers helped them in establishing their position and gaining the sovereignty of the natural heritage of their colonized. The colonizers showed a commercial interest in the natural heritage of Africa and plundered it for their monetary benefits. The British domination damaged Africa's traditional economies. Nevertheless, they contributed a great deal to ecological consciousness with significant advancements such as the introduction of the rules of wildlife conservation and the abolition of the slave trade. Thus, the aim of the study is the ecocritical investigation of the policies of British colonizers and expose how they drove changes in Africa for their vested interests.

Keywords: Ecocritical, Sovereignty, Wildlife Conservation, Ecological Consciousness

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Introduction

Ecocriticism investigates an interrelation between nature and social beings envisioned through academics research. It is characterized by several critics as an examination of literature and ecology that looks at how humans interact with the environment and its problems. As Harry Crockett states, “ecocriticism elucidates the relationship between human and non-human nature, privileging literary inscriptions of those relationships for all the usual reasons why we in this profession privilege literature” (“Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice”). William Cronon has defined ecocriticism by stating that, “human acts occur within a network of relationships, processes, and systems that are as ecological as they are cultural” (“Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice”). Critics and academics can better comprehend eco-politics with the aid of ecocriticism. Dr. Miri Lavi-Neeman, a political economist, investigates in her paper, “Political Ecologists underline that there is the ecology of politics and politics of nature” (1). Political ecology or simply eco-politics combines ecology and politics that examines the significant difficulties that the environment is facing as a result of human activity. The former is of a holistic character, whereas the latter is a study in cybernetics. It is a new strategy that aids critics and academics in creating content that connects social systems with their natural environments. Frank Thone coined the phrase "ecopolitics" for the first time in his 1935 essay "The Science Newsletter." The concept linking society and local ecosystem was briefly explained by Austrian anthropologist Eric R. Wolf in his 1972 article "Ownership and Political Ecology," but he did not elaborate on it. Like Eric, Jason Roberts writes in his article “Political Ecology”, “Emerging in the context of global neoliberalization in the 1970s and 1980s, political ecology emphasized the key role outside forces like international development and economic modernization schemes in the restructuring of local lives and environments in the Global South” (1). Later, as advanced geology and cultural ecology emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, scientists working in the fields of human science, topography, and literature began investigating the idea. Through the government’s actions, eco-politics has an immediate impact on the nation’s economic aspects, such as its natural resources.

In the modern technological era, the economic growth of a nation depends upon the abundance of natural resources which include renewable and non-renewable sources of energy, mineral wealth, its flora and fauna, its animal life, and humans too. These resources create a resource capital that highlights important areas for a nation’s development. But natural resources do not always prove to be effective for the development of a country. Many times they create some obstacles to demote the growth of a region. In support of this, Papyrakis states in his research paper (Natural Resources, Innovation, and Growth 2004), “natural resource wealth tends to impede rather than promote economic growth” (1). The resource capital of a country invites those countries which are suffering from the lack of resources. These countries exploit the resources of other countries either through exchange or forcefully. Ecopolitics highlights the areas in which one group violates the resources of another group based on its policies. Blakie and Brookfield agree with the thought and propose it in their book *Land Degradation and Society* (2016), “ecopolitics as a field which links the distress of ecology and a broadly defined political economy which, combined, encompass

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a constantly shifting dialectic between groups and natural resources.” In the 15th century, Many European countries started explorations through the globe and colonized other continental regions. This was the time of colonization when European powers such as Portuguese, Spain, France, and Britain began annexing other nations for their resource wealth. Colonization gave a great boost to resource exploitation and further led to an extensive trade of resource riches between the colonizers and the colonized.

The continent of Africa is among such regions that have been the victims of colonization for a while. It has an abundance of natural resources that attracted the attention of several European nations. Many European countries like Spain, Portuguese, England, etc. started an exploration into the continent and established their colonies in different parts of it. But British explorers superseded all other European explorers and established their suzerainty over many parts of Africa. The African landmass offered the full supply of raw materials and other resources. That is why British colonizers set the boundaries of their resource areas and the continent of Africa is divided into many nations. The nation-building was performed by the British chancellor. Ghanaian academic A. Adu. Boahen wrote in his book *African Perspectives on Colonialism* “the process of the establishment of each’s boundaries was arbitrarily done European chancellors, so what resulted were artificial nation states” (96), the largest countries in Africa, including Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa, and others, became part of the enormous provincial domain that England acquired. But these nations have no equal boundaries so unequal distribution of resources. To handle this situation, British colonizers came up with some policies. These policies increased the limits of colonial laws. Now the whole resource wealth came under the British colonizers. Christian Lund, a professor at Roskilde University, Denmark states in his thesis about the British colonizers’ policies in the African continent, “This legislation has changed the conditions under which natural resources are accessed and controlled, but it has often done so in ways not anticipated by legislators and reformers.” With these policies, British colonizers established their control over the natural riches of Africa.

Colonization has left a serious and long-lasting effect on colonized regions. It has damaged its economic stability. It has brought socio-cultural and political changes inside a country that greatly impacted the lives of its people. The same happened to African people. Many scholars from the different states of colonized Africa recorded their personal experiences. Tanzanian author Abdulrazak Gurnah is among such writers who have chronicled their experiences in their novels. Gurnah was born when the sultanate of Zanzibar was declining and the British colonizers were finding their feet. His life has glimpses of both the rulers, the Zanzibar, and the British, so his novels. *Desertion* (2005) is one such novel as has a story with a background of the Zanzibar Sultanate having been swept away and British power was moving ahead with its reforms. The multinarrative novel is divided into many narrative sections that reflect the poor condition of natives of colonized Africa. The section which has Frederic as a narrator is about the British colonizer and the colonized Africa. Frederic and Burton are fictional characters who work at a British corporation. They usually meet every Tuesday and share their thoughts on official and unofficial matters. They were constantly willing to discuss the British Empire and the reforms they had implemented inside

the colonized area because they are profoundly affected by it. Frederic is a very settled man and keeps his words without any bias. Many times he used to criticize Bruisers by revealing the worst condition of the colonized area. Burton, on the other hand, was completely devoted to the British rulers. He always praises the British rulers and the work done by them. He says in praise of the British colonizer, "His talk was all about the Uganda Protectorate and the interior highlands and the lakes, and all the great estates that were going to be created up there when the railway was finished. According to Burton that was the whole point of the Protectorate"(31). In the year 1885, the British protectorate was declared to lead the colonial power in the colonized black continent. He seized control of the entire continent. The Zanzibar Sultan's authority was curtailed by the British protectorate, which transformed the continent of Africa into a colonial Africa. The British introduced several policies under the guise of reforms that directly transferred control of the political and economic rights of the entire continent into their hands for the plantation of their firm in Africa and the economic benefits of their nation. Reforms are a series of government measures that are directly related to the current economic change. These highlight the variations in the economic growth of a country. He shares her idea in her article that finds a connection between the reforms and economic changes, "*It puts forward the proposition that the political settlement within which specific economic reforms are formulated and implemented accounts for the variation in the growth and decline of economic sectors*" (Usman, "*The Successes and Failures of Economic Reform in Africa*" (1). *British Protectorate brought some reforms that helped in controlling the economic power of Africa. However, these reforms were linked to the deeds taking place in favor of Africa, but these were advancing only the British colonizers. Thus, this paper investigates how British authority brought about reforms in colonized Africa for either direct or indirect resource exploitation for the advancement of their nation's economic prosperity.*

The novel Desertion reflects a story of a continent that was rich in natural resources but that certain visitors had looted for their financial gain. The British colonizers left a never-ending impact on the entire continent. Based on their reforms they were exploiting the whole continent. Some of its characters, like Frederick and Burton, reveal the real motivations behind the British company's reforms. These reforms created a situation of chaos in Africa. Thus, the main themes of the novels are the political crisis and the cultural crisis. But British rule and its policies deeply wounded the African ecology. The concept of political and social underpinnings within a society is formed with an emphasis on ecology, and decisions made about resource allocation determine who will suffer the burden of ecological degradation. Ecological degradation has serious repercussions for both human and animal life. Patterson writes, "When on large scale, environmental degradation can lead to civilizational collapse." Ecological degradation can lead to less productivity and serious health hazards. It further can reduce the availability of crucial natural resources and lead to resource scarcity. Thus, politics is impacted by ecology.

The Zanzibar Sultanate's declining power allowed the British to expand their influence across Africa and establish their import and export trade in many nations. The British established their business and obtained the ability to utilize the resources of the colonized – thanks to a

historical decision to abolish slavery. Slavery was introduced in Africa a long time ago. "Slavery in Africa has existed from time immemorial" Jerome Dowd, a Negro sociologist, continues to comment about the starting of slavery in Africa, "It has arisen, not from any outside influence, but from the very nature of the local conditions." (Slavery and the Slave Trade in Africa,--) The poor condition of the natives of Africa let them work as slave. African people were captured and supplied to the inside and outside areas of the continent. But first supply of African people to distant countries was performed in colonial period. The Portuguese exported approximately 12 million of slaves from West Africa at the end of 19th century. Frederick expresses regret over the shameful moment and told Burton, "the Atlantic trade was started by Portuguese in the 16th century, in the African continent, approximately took up 12 million slaves at the end of the 19th century" (50-53). This colonial act was unacceptable and criticized by the whole world. The British Protectorate forced the Sultan to abolish slavery. Frederick further enlightens his knowledge over the ending of slavery in Africa by saying, "Since the declaration of the Protectorate, there was no longer any question of slavery" (Gurnah, *Desertion* 33). The act of abolition of slavery let the British fortified their base in Africa. British brought a reform for the people of Africa who were willing to work as waged labour. They offered African liberty to choose their work on a fixed pay. Frederick recounted a tale of British employer who offered a fixed pay to the workers in return for working at British company. He told Burton, "The Company sent a gentleman called Tinkle-Smith, some such name, who immediately freed all the slaves on the plantations and then reemployed as many as were willing as waged labor. He fixed the price for a slave's freedom and offered to lend it to any slave who agreed to work on company plantations afterwards" (44). The ending of slavery and fixing the pay for work the corruption involved. The slavery has a huge corruption in itself. It involves theft and bribery. The words of Patrick Manning in his book *Slavery and African Life* give a clear justification on slavery, "Slavery was corruption: it involved theft, bribery, and exercise of brute forces as well as ruses". Thus, the reforms of British colonizers helped reduce the corruption. But the colonizers have in no manner fulfilled any moral obligation that was intended for the wellbeing of the colonized and would result in their economic benefit; rather, their reforms are linked to the growth of their nation's economy. The British colonizers wanted to leave behind other European powers and capture the entire business of export-import of the resources inside and outside of the continent. That's why by abolishing the slave trade they earned the favour of African people. They could convince them to work only for them on a fixed pay.

The abolition of slavery gave the control over African resources to the Britishers. Africa's economy incorporated unrefined agricultural products, minerals, wild beasts, and crude oil. They had solely their economic progress in mind. They wanted to raise a prospective market for their import and export. They started exporting resources from the continent to the different parts of the globe. They introduced industrial infrastructure like railroads, transportation, communication to carry the exportation of resources from the origin place to market, and market to Atlantic countries. The colonizers had setup a commercial route that made transportation to major cities easy. The British market had become the hub of unrefined products and minerals, cereals grains, and cash

crops. They had a private holding over the cereals grains and cash crops. They promoted commercial cropping. The cereals grains were transported from Kenyan side. The consumption demand for Kenyan cereal grains was continuously increasing worldwide. Thus, Britishers promoted the cropping of Kenyan grains. This led huge decline of habitat of natives to clear the land for agriculture. Paul Robbins exposes in his book, "Rainfall, human population, and livestock numbers do not differ significantly. Rather, private holdings and investment in export cereal grains on the Kenyan side of the border have led to intensive cropping and the decline of habitat. These cereals are consumed around the world, as part of an increasingly globalized food economy" (12). Moreover, for increasing the economic growth rate, the British colonizers promoted cash crops. The cash crops included cotton, minerals, and tea. These cash crops were grown in many Caribbean nations but were sold to continents like Europe and America. These too were increasing the global consumption. Paul Robbins further demonstrates about the increase of cash crop, "Export crops from Kenya, including tea and coffee in other parts of Kenya beyond the Central Rift Valley, continue to find their way to consumers in the first world, even as their global prices fall, constraining producers who must increase production, planting more often and over greater areas, further changing local ecological conditions" (12). The cash crops and Kenyan grains were increasing the demand of British market. Thus, even in times of global economic crises, this added a great jump in the economy of British Empire.

With the establishment of the British corporation and market, the colonizers were expanding their economy by driving massive resource exploitation with no positive consequences. However, as it fell victim to British colonization later in the 20th century, numerous aspects of its economy were negatively impacted. Some British officials led huge economic scams. They robbed their own company. Gurnah's narrator reveals the fact through his narrative part, "There are notorious examples to prompt suspicion, of course – Clive, Hastings and Thackeray's nabobs – but those gentlemen robbed state treasuries and emptied warehouses." (33) However, he praises Frederick for his work in legal procedure, "Whereas Frederick had merely expedited some procedures" (33) Frederick is a highly honest man with a nice heart, despite being an Englishman and working for a British firm. He is aware of the plight of Africans and gives consideration to their growth and welfare. Unlike Burton, he never uses harsh language. Similar to other British officers who had plundered Africa before him, Frederick made several efforts that may in the near future be helpful for the development of the African people. Frederick frequently bragged about how the British Empire's policies will benefit Africans greatly. Their measures will help the nation's economy grow. With their trains, modes of transportation, and communication, the British have introduced several groundbreaking innovations that will boost global economic growth but they were not thinking about the growth and development of their colonies. Their colonies were still in horrible conditions. The villages were still standing undeveloped. Frederick and Burton visit some villages of colonial Africa. They find that people are living in ruined areas. Villages are still mud areas. Frederick also exposes in his narrative, "As soon as they entered into the gloom, he was surrounded by a hum, a noise without words, as if he had entered an enclosed space where many people were muttering in

an undertone. It was a heap, smelling of garbage and drains.” (35) Frederick wants to improve the condition of people in villages. He wants to knock down the mud stage of village and sweep it away but for such works he has no even received any money from the company. He confesses in his narrative, “The whole place needed to be knocked down and swept away, but he had no funds for such works” (35). The British colonizers did not want to improve the conditions of its colonies and people. They were only demanding their and their nation’s economic grow.

The supply of unrefined agricultural products and cash crops was the primary trade between British colonizers and the Atlantic countries. Similarly, there was a growing market for African wildlife. Animals and their parts were also transported to many countries. The transportation of wild animals was more political in Africa. Paul Robbins also confess it in his book *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*, “The wildlife crisis in East Africa is more political and economic than demographic”(12). However, Africa experienced a wildlife catastrophe throughout the time of British administration. The more and more land had to be occupied in order to meet the demand for ever-increasing agricultural production. This resulted in the removal of human population and wildlife from the farming area. Several land laws set the relationship of African land and wild beasts’ removal to politics. These land laws forced to clear the land for agriculture, relocate humanlife and wildlife, and cut the forests. The process of relocating the wildanimals gave rise to the hunting. Aristocracy class promoted hunting. The process of hunting by aristocracy was accelerated by the eradication of wild animals from their natural habitat. Many British people developed a hobby of hunting. Frederick is among such British people who have interest in hunting. He confesses hunting of wild animals such as lions, leopards, rhino etc. in his narrative. He told Burton, “We killed every day, sometimes as many as four or five lions in a day, and leopards and rhino and antelope. We all reeked of blood and guts. And slaughtered meat and drying hides”(50). But soon hunting quickly reduced the number of wild animals. British rulers started their conservation and banned hunting. This led the transfer of living wild beasts to safe place. But later, British colonizers discovered the economic benefits with wild animals. They started a transportation of meat, and their parts to the global scale. Frederick further exposes about the killing of wild animals for their meat and other benefits. He says in his narrative. “We all reeked of blood and guts. And slaughtered meat and drying hides”(50). This led a significance growth in economic growth with the trade of their parts like jaws, ivory.

This leads one to the conclusion that Gurnah's book *Desertion* is a portrayal of colonized Africa at the time the British were setting up their business. The business implemented certain changes in the impacted area, but only they benefited. Slavery was only abolished as a result of colonial ideas. British introduced some contemporary facilities, such as railroads, communication systems, and transportation, which led to improved production but were only practical for their empire. Land was being used for the cultivation of natural resources and agriculture on an increasing scale. Cash crops including cotton, tea, and coffee were encouraged as exports to Europe. Wild animals were removed from their natural habitat and brought to distant nations. Later, however, they fall prey to the illegal importation of animal parts and the trafficking in wild animals.

The colonizer corporation carried out all of these tasks with the intention of improving their country's economic situation by utilizing the resources of the colonized. As a result, it is argued that the book *Desertion* can be examined via the prism of eco-politics, which deals with the impact of colonized Africa's ecological on the politics of the British Empire.

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