

CALAMITOUS IMPACTS OF COLONIALISM IN ABDUL RAZAK

GURNAH'S AFTER LIVES

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Abstract

Abdul Razak Gurnah, a novelist from Zanzibar, recently received the prestigious "Noble Prize in Literature" for his "unwavering and sympathetic comprehension of the impacts of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the abyss between cultures and continents." He is the first black African author to win this esteemed award in 35 years since Wole Soyinka. The disastrous impacts of colonialism in East Africa have been repeatedly examined by Gurnah, and the theme of "refugee's disruption" permeates all of his writing. Gurnah's *Afterlives* is an intriguing book that primarily takes place during the first part of the 20th century. It skillfully addresses the issues of oppression, genocidal acts, resistance, and retaliation brought about by German colonial control in Africa. It concentrates on the ruthless, oppressive, and violent German colonial authority in East Africa at the beginning of the 20th century. The first chapter of *Afterlives* begins immediately before World War One. The action of the narrative takes place in East Africa, today known as Tanzania, when Germany was still a colonial power. It navigates through both World Wars, the downfall of German Imperialism, British colonisation, and ultimately Independence. The focus of the book is on the effects of colonialism on people as it follows the characters cautiously through times of instability and warfare. The novel's central theme deals with the trauma and its psychological effects on characters in the years that follow.

Keywords: Colonialization, Decolonization, Aftermath, Violence, Identity Crisis

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Introduction

Abdul Razak Gurnah, a novelist from Zanzibar, recently received the prestigious "Noble Prize in Literature" for his "unwavering and sympathetic comprehension of the impacts of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the abyss between cultures and continents." He becomes, after Woe Soyinka, the first black African author in 35 years to get this illustrious honour. Gurnah has repeatedly investigated the destructive repercussions of colonialism in East Africa, and the theme of "refugee's disruption" permeates all of his writing. According to Maya Jaggi, a critic and judge for the 2021 Costa Prize, The cruel inadequacies of the mercantile culture he left behind are as robustly discussed in subtle oeuvre as the horrors of British and German colonisation, especially during the First World War, and the "random acts of terror" he encountered as a black person in Britain.

Abdul Razak Gurnah, an East African Nobel laureate for literature in 2021, was born in Zanzibar in 1948 but later moved to the United Kingdom in 1968 due to the extreme upheaval brought on by a revolution in that country in 1964. His early traumatising experiences served as creative fuel for his writing, which is mirrored in his novels' themes of exile and devastation. He has penned many short stories, essays and ten novels so far. Some of them are *Memory of Departure* (1987), *by the Sea* (2001), *Desertion* (2005), *Paradise* (1994) and his most recent historical fiction, *Afterlives* (2020). He worked as professor of English and Postcolonial literature at University of Kent. He presently lives in Canterbury, England.

The colonisers and the colonised have a composite relationship, as shown in *Afterlives* (2020). Gurnah tells a tale that takes place in an unnamed town in Tanzania (East Africa), which includes Kenya and Uganda, at a time when a significant portion of East Africa was influenced by German colonial rule. It is a work of historical fiction that depicts the colonisation of East Africa at the turn of the 20th century, just before, during, and after World War I, first by Germany and then by Great Britain. In addition, the story describes

novel characters' fate and experiences during uprisings, WW2 and aftermath of it. Gurnah's main focus is on the under-reported history of Deutsch-Ostafrika (German East-Africa) exhibiting destruction, bloodshed and displacement along with its effects on ordinary human hearts and lives.

The book illustrates the brutality and barbarism of battle, dread, devastation, and exploitation via a number of notable significant characters, including Khalifa (the merchant clerk of Gujrati African heritage), his wife Asha, Ilyas and Hamza who voluntarily joined the Schutztruppe (German colonial army), and Afiya, Ilyas's orphaned sister. He makes an effort to help his readers comprehend the circumstances that led to colonialism and war, as well as how common people—the worst victims of colonialism and war—handle such challenging situations.

Gurnah's *Afterlives* is an intriguing book that primarily takes place in the first part of the 20th century. Numerous favourable reviews of the book have been published. It was dubbed a "novel of quiet beauty and sadness" by David Pilling of the Financial Times, and Maaza is full of praise for the rich narrative elements and portrayal of psychologically complex relationships. In *Afterlives* Gurnah, she claims, "considers the generational impacts of colonialism and war, and invites us to consider what remains in the aftermath of so much devastation."

Themes of oppression, genocide, revolt, and retaliation committed by German colonial rule in Africa are eloquently addressed in "*Afterlives*." It concentrates on the ruthless, oppressive, and violent German colonial authority in East Africa at the beginning of the 20th century. When Germany launched an extermination campaign in 1904 to put an end to the revolt in Namibia, it committed the first genocide of the 20th century. Both in Deutsch-Ostafrika and East Africa on the continent, Germany's military strategies were equally lethal. The horror wave that was unleashed in Tanzania and its impact on the lives of displaced and migrant people are detailed in Gurnah's magnum work, "*Afterlives*."

The first chapter of *Afterlives* begins immediately before World War One. The action of the narrative takes place in East Africa, today known as Tanzania, when Germany was still a colonial power. It navigates through both World Wars, the downfall of German Imperialism, British colonisation, and ultimately Independence. The focus of the book is on the effects of colonialism on people as it follows the characters cautiously through times of instability and warfare. The novel's central theme deals with the trauma and its psychological effects on characters in the years that follow. While some characters, like Bi Asha, are bitter and harbour grudges, other characters, like Hamza, are able to come to terms with their situation and move forward while creating a life and a family of their own.

"*Afterlives*," which is set in colonised Africa, tells the tale of Ilyas, a little boy who was abducted by German colonial forces. The life and tribulations of African nationals who were either taken or paid to fight for Europe are depicted in the novel as one of the most notable effects of the impending First World War and colonisation. After a long absence, Ilyas finds his parents gone and his sister Afiya taken away when he comes home. The other two key characters are Afiya and Hamza, however their stories are told in completely different parts in the first half of the novel. When the battle is over, Hamza goes back to the house where Ilyas formerly lived and starts looking for a job. In Ilyas' sister Afiya, he eventually finds comfort, safety, and love. *Gurnah* illustrates the effects of war on the men who either volunteered or were coerced into fighting for the Germans through Hamza. Afiya, on the other hand, illustrates the terrible effects of war on helpless civilians.

In 1907, Khalifa weds Asha, the niece of Biashara. *Gurnah* describes the horrible repercussions of resisting German power before returning to the life of the newlyweds. The uprisings and colonial retaliation have subsided by the time the aggressive, affable, and German-speaking Ilyas arrives to the coastal village where Khalifa and Asha reside. *Gurnah* focuses on the lives of people who have been able to lead relatively peaceful lives. Although their lives appear to be tranquil on the surface, this does not mean that they have been spared

the psychological and physical effects of colonisation. The nation is covered in skulls and bones, and the ground is saturated with blood, according to one character's sorrowful observation that "the Germans have slaughtered so many people" (p. 51). Ilyas attempted to defend the colonisers, but when he did, "His listeners were mute in the face of such vehemence. At some point, someone says, "My friend, they have eaten you" (p. 52).

The portrayal of the important but rarely examined issue of "the lives of soldiers who fight for the coloniser" in the film *Afterlives* has received high praise. The overt representation of colonialism, which most Germans appear to be unaware of, is what distinguishes this historical fiction as a "tour de force." German colonial authorities used the brutalising system of the "Schutztruppe askari," a highly skilled force of destructive power, throughout their empire:

They were proud of their reputation for viciousness, and their officers and the administrators of Deutsch-Ostafrika loved them to be just like that (p.8).

German armed forces leave the land ruined and covered in the blood of individuals who have been senselessly and ruthlessly slaughtered throughout East Africa, also known as Deutsch-Ostafrika. The portrayal of the Schutztruppe Askari, native soldiers who were taught to kill and abuse their own African brothers and sisters on command by their colonial overlords, is even more horrifying. Gurnah describes the complicated motivations behind the colonized's conflicts:

Some were impressed by the imperial power they were being associated with and the prestige and those were the people who volunteered to join colonial police forces and colonial armies. They were provided a livelihood, status within their own community and with some stability in their lives (p.121).

However, a lot of people voluntarily decided to fight for and be on the side of the Germans. Gurnah examines the complex relationship between the "oppressor" and the "oppressed" through the tragic tale of Hamza, whose father sold him as a slave to pay off his

severe debt. Nevertheless, Hamza is able to flee and offers to join the Askari before realising his horrible error. When Hamza is given the responsibility of serving as the Oberleutenant's personal assistant, his fellow soldiers make fun of him by joking that the Germans "enjoy toying with handsome young men."

The Germans have taken on the responsibility of civilising such a "backward and primitive people," and the only way to dominate them is to instil terror into them, insists his officer, who is also keen to teach him to read "Schiller." Gurnah's characters discuss a variety of identities. The themes of "identity and displacement" and how they are shaped by the remnants of colonialism predominate in his works. His characters are always assuming a novel identity so they can fit in with their new surroundings. They alternate between their present lives and their prior selves all the time. Gurnah's novels always discuss the terrible effects that immigration has on the immigrants. Identity is a fluid concept for Gurnah, who was uprooted from his home Zanzibar as a child. Paul Gilroy has highlighted:

When national and ethnic identities are represented and projected as pure, exposure to difference threatens them with dilution and compromises their prized purities with the ever-present possibility of contamination. Crossing as mixture and movement must be guarded against (p.105)".

In "Afterlives," the main characters pretend as non-English speakers in an effort to gain refuge. To fit within the system, one is compelled to lie. Additionally, despite the fact that many of them were pushed into joining the German Schutztruppe and the British have been doing the same in their colonies, persons who had served in the colonial army are viewed with distrust and doubt by their new British occupiers.

Gurnah frequently incorporates Swahili words and phrases into his writing, and "Afterlives" is no exception. His prose subtly nudges the reader to acknowledge the colonial influence on language use and literature. To emphasise the colonial presence, he frequently uses German terminology in the military context as well. In the later chapters of "Afterlives,"

it is possible to observe the emergence of the "re-colonization" movement, which grew under Nazi authority and attracted many former Askari soldiers who had served in the Schutztruppe during the First World War. The most well-known of them is Mohamed Husen, who immigrated to Germany in the late 1920s, married a German woman, and had kids with her. He eventually joined the "re-colonization" campaign. He continued to work as an actor until the first decade of the 1940s before being transported to a concentration camp for having an adulterous relationship with a white lady.

Ilyas' terrible journey parallels Husen's life journey. Despite the onset of Nazism, his infatuation with the power, status, and identity earned by his relationship with Germany is revolting. Afiya's second abandonment by him in his effort to piece together the past is nothing more than a flagrant act of shame and negligence that cannot be excused. "Afterlives" is also a really moving story of hope. Khalifa ultimately saves Afiya when she is returned to her captors. She struggles to come to terms with her brother's strange silence, though. Khalifa's generosity benefits Hamza as well. His shattered and bruised psyche receives the much-needed repair thanks to Afiya's love and dedication. Afiya and Hamza, in the opinion of renowned critic Maaza Mengiste, "he opens a window on the curative possibilities of trust and love." Gurnah strives to fight against the erasure of people who have been brutalised and left without a voice by retelling the straightforward and unassuming tales of the downtrodden and their modest successes in the face of overwhelming adversity.

In order for Hamza and Afiya's son to visit post-World War II Germany, the location of the book is altered toward the end. He is expected to study there while looking for explanations for both his dilemma and why Ilyas left. The conclusion of *Afterlives* unites the themes of choice and challenges us to reflect on our own decisions and where they have brought us. Gurnah's "Afterlives" shows the many effects of colonialism on native people who were forced by their oppressors to fight in battles that had nothing to do with them in a very potent and vivid way, it might be said to be. Additionally, it reveals the enormous

wounds suffered by the relatives of those who were left behind, as they had no idea what had happened to their loved ones and no method of finding out.

Although the native people of East Africa had no involvement in the world struggle, Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* is unquestionably a shocking work of postcolonial fiction that exposes the harsh realities of German colonisation and World War I there. Gurnah is well recognised for decentering European history, just as Fanon disproves colonial gaze. In his work *Afterlives*, Gurnah carefully examines the generational effects of colonialism and conflict, prompting readers to consider whether they are oppressed or colonised. What can be saved when the deliberate exclusion of an African perspective from the archives is one of colonialism's side effects, Gurnah pondered? He believes that because the colonisers see themselves as history-makers, the Eurocentric perspective will never truly give Africans a sense of identity.

Gurnah supports Fanon's remark that the colonised are not as brutish and uncivilised as the colonisers portrayed them to be. As we see in *Afterlives*, colonialization and conflict wreaked havoc on the landscape, yet life goes on thanks to love, trust, hard labour, and prayers. Both sexes have made the decision to find comfort in community—whether it be via birth or death, religious rites or traditional beliefs, romance or marriage, providing security or extending kindness. Gurnah contrasts his four characters, Khalifa, Ilyas, Hamza, and Afiya, with a story from ancient history to demonstrate two sides of a coin. With brutal colonial government and a merciless German army on one side, an ordinary African recruit was battling his own people while attempting to survive in the aftermath. Gurnah's characters have endured the brutalities of war; they have sustained severe and profound physical and psychological harm, but they have never given up; instead, they have found methods to recover from their injuries and rebuild their lives. We see this strange contrast in *Afterlives* as well—violence on the one hand, determination to advance agriculture, health, and education on the other.

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