



ISSN Print: 2664-8717
ISSN Online: 2664-8725
Impact Factor (RJIF): 8.36
IJRE 2025; 7(2): 162-165
www.englishjournal.net
Received: 22-05-2024
Accepted: 26-06-2024

Pooja Devi
Research Scholar, Baba
Mastnath University, Rohtak,
Haryana, India

Dr. SZH Naqvi
Professor, Baba Mastnath
University, Rohtak, Haryana,
India

Unveiling the Unspoken: Colonial Violence and Identity in Abdulrazak Gurnah's 'Afterlives'

Pooja Devi and SZH Naqvi

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2025.v7.i2c.451>

Abstract

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020) examines the persistent repercussions of colonial violence and its influence on personal and communal identities in East Africa. The novel examines the suppressed narratives of oppression, relocation, and cultural erasure experienced by colonised individuals within the context of German colonialism in Tanganyika. Gurnah reveals the psychological and social cracks resulting from imperial dominance via the interconnected lives of people like Khalifa, Ilyas, and Afiya, illustrating how colonial cruelty alters personal and community narratives. This paper analyses the mechanisms of both physical and epistemic violence inherent in colonial systems and their enduring impact on postcolonial identity formation. The research employs a postcolonial perspective to highlight Gurnah's portrayal of resistance, remembrance, and survival in the context of systemic dehumanisation. Moreover, it examines how the novel contests prevailing historical narratives by prioritising marginalised perspectives and recuperating overlooked histories. Ultimately, *Afterlives* functions as an indictment of the lasting pain of colonialism while providing a moving reflection on resilience and the potential for restoration. The paper contends that Gurnah's work not only reveals the unacknowledged crimes of empire but also reaffirms the agency of the colonised in articulating their narratives.

Keywords: Colonial violence, identity, postcolonialism, empire, resistance

Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah, the Zanzibar-born Nobel Prize-winning novelist in Literature in 2021, is renowned for his incisive examination of the lasting impacts of colonialism and the refugee experience. Gurnah has been honoured for his steadfast and empathetic understanding of the effects of colonialism, making him the first Black African author in 35 years, following Wole Soyinka, to earn this accolade. His oeuvre, notably *Afterlives*, rigorously scrutinises East Africa's colonial past, especially during German and British governance, while interlacing motifs of displacement, trauma, and resilience. Born in 1948, Gurnah escaped the 1964 revolution in Zanzibar and shifted to the UK, where his experiences of exile and racial marginalisation profoundly shaped his creative expression.

Afterlives is set in early 20th-century Tanzania, depicting the harsh realities of German colonisation and its consequences via interwoven narratives. Characters such as Khalifa, a commercial clerk of Gujarati-African descent, Hamza, a conscripted soldier in the German Schutztruppe; and Afiya, an orphaned lady, exemplify the destruction caused by war and injustice. Gurnah elucidates the obscured atrocities of Deutsch-Ostafrika, encompassing coerced labour, brutality, and cultural obliteration, while portraying the fortitude of common individuals. Critics, including David Pilling, commend the novel's subtle beauty and melancholy, emphasising its depiction of generational grief. Maaza Mengiste highlights Gurnah's emphasis on what endures post-devastation, accentuating the persistent psychological and societal rifts caused by colonialism.

The story addresses Germany's colonial misdeeds, notably the 1904 Namibian massacre, and draws similarities to its brutal methods in East Africa. Gurnah elucidates the systemic dehumanisation of Africans through vivid storytelling, simultaneously recovering buried histories. *Afterlives* transcends mere historical narration, serving as a contemplation on identity, resilience, and the implicit legacies of empire. By prioritising marginalised perspectives, Gurnah contests prevailing history, providing criticism of the lasting violence of colonialism and the tenuous yet everlasting aspiration for redemption. His work serves as

Corresponding Author:
Pooja Devi
Research Scholar, Baba
Mastnath University, Rohtak,
Haryana, India

a testament to literature's capacity to reveal concealed realities and restore communal memory.

This paper employs a qualitative technique to examine Gurnah's *Afterlives* through postcolonial and historical perspectives. The principal method of research employed is a meticulous textual examination of the narrative architecture of the novel, character evolution, and symbolic depictions to reveal its indictment of German colonisation in East Africa. The study contextualises the narrative by analysing colonial documents and academic literature about German East Africa, with special emphasis on the Maji Maji Rebellion and the effects of World War I. The theoretical framework utilises postcolonial theory, namely the contributions of Fanon, Said, and Bhabha, to examine issues of identity, trauma, and resistance. Moreover, trauma studies enhance the examination of intergenerational pain and recollection following colonial brutality. Critical discourse analysis enhances this by examining literary critiques and Gurnah's interviews to comprehend his authorial viewpoint. This study integrates literary analysis with historical and theoretical frameworks to demonstrate how *Afterlives* reconstructs marginalised colonial histories while providing a sophisticated depiction of survival and resilience. The technique underscores Gurnah's impact on postcolonial writing and his critique of prevailing historical narratives.

Afterlives illustrates the German colonial empire and its repercussions for a diverse group of six colonial-era Tanzanians residing in the coastal settlement of Tanga. The novel attempts to reconstruct the German cultural memory of colonialism through a fictitious narrative that intertwines with actual events in East Africa, exposing the several layers of historical trajectories repressed by Germans since the conclusion of World War I. The interaction between actual historical events, such as the Maji-Maji insurrection and the Battle of Mahiwa, and fictitious characters is a crucial aspect of historiographic metafiction, which aims to obscure the distinctions between history and fiction. The distinction between the literary and the historical is now, "being challenged in postmodern theory and art, and recent critical readings of both history and fiction have focused more on what the two modes of writing share than on how they differ" (Hutcheon 105). In *Afterlives*, Gurnah's narrator confronts the historical impediment of the German cultural recollection of colonialism in East Africa, leading to violent colonial conflicts, "founded on a belief in cultural superiority and, later, on Social Darwinist theories" (Conrad 165). This unnamed third-person narrator reveals the lives of characters Khalifa, Afiya, Uncle Ilyas, and Hamza, and subsequently, Hamza and Afiya's kid, Ilyas, who is named after his uncle.

The story centres on Ilyas, a youngster coerced into military service by German forces, whose homecoming uncovers a fractured family, his parents missing, and his sister, Afiya, uprooted. Gurnah elucidates the two tragedies of colonialism via Ilyas, Afiya, and Hamza, a soldier who endures the war, the brutalisation of conscripted soldiers and the quiet anguish of civilians. Hamza's postwar quest for stability directs him to Afiya, whose connection provides a tenuous respite from grief. Afiya's experience exemplifies the collateral harm suffered by women and families, her tenacity reflecting the silent perseverance of colonised populations. The narrative also interweaves Khalifa and Asha's marriage in 1907, contrasting domestic tranquillity with the context of German savagery. Despite the serene

appearance of their beach community following repressed uprisings, Gurnah uncovers the persistent anguish that lies under the surface. People who have escaped direct violence nonetheless carry unseen scars, reflecting the extensive impact of colonisation.

Afterlives intertwines personal experiences with historical turmoil, contesting singular narratives of empire and instead illuminating the fragmented yet resilient essence of its survivors. The country is strewn with skulls and bones, and the soil is drenched in blood, as noted by one character's lamentation that "the Germans have slaughtered so many people" (Gurnah 41). Ilyas attempted to justify the colonisers; nevertheless, his audience remained silent in response to such fervour. At a certain moment, an individual states, "My friend, they have eaten you" (42). The depiction of the significant yet little-examined topic of the lives of soldiers who fight for the coloniser in *Afterlives* has garnered much acclaim. The explicit depiction of colonialism, of which most Germans seem oblivious, is what sets this historical fiction apart as a *tour de force*.

Gurnah's *Afterlives* has received significant appreciation for its stark depiction of the harsh reality of German colonialism in East Africa, especially via its candid representation of the Schutztruppe askari, indigenous warriors trained to perpetuate imperial subjugation. Gurnah observes, "They took pride in their reputation for brutality, and their officers and the administrators of Deutsch-Ostafrika appreciated them for it" (8). This mercenary contingent, stationed across Germany's empire, saturated the territory with blood, exposing the dehumanising apparatus of colonial governance. The novel's compelling force is in its portrayal of Africans compelled or enticed to serve their oppressors, some attracted by imperial allure, others by the necessity of survival. However, Gurnah complicates this story by illustrating how individuals such as Hamza volunteered only to recognise their catastrophic misjudgment.

Hamza's narrative exemplifies the complex interactions between the coloniser and the colonised. Enslaved in bonded labour by his father, he escapes and aligns with the Askari, serving as the personal aide of an Oberleutnant who epitomises imperial duplicity. The officer asserts that Hamza Schiller needs instruction, alleging that German civilise backwards and savage people by intimidation, whereas Hamza withstands the sexualised mockery of his peers, who jest that Germans enjoy engaging with attractive young men. This disturbing closeness highlights the aberration of colonial authority, where brutality and paternalism are interwoven. Identity and relocation are crucial to Gurnah's examination of colonial legacies. His characters, akin to the author, a Zanzibari refugee, contend with fragmented identities, fluctuating between past and present.

Paul Gilroy notes

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 (105)

This contradiction is evident in the novel's linguistic hybridity: Gurnah incorporates Swahili terms into the narrative, reclaiming local language while integrating German military terminology to highlight imperial

oppression. The British, who succeed the Germans as colonisers, regard former Schutztruppe troops with scepticism, despite their own dependence on analogous forces, a duplicity that exacerbates the characters' isolation. The latter sections of *Afterlives* explore the interwar period, with individuals such as Mohamed Hussein, a former Askari who relocates to Germany, weds a German lady, and participates in the Nazi-era re-colonisation movement, epitomising the fatal appeal of colonial identity. Hussein's subsequent incarceration in a concentration camp for miscegenation reflects Ilyas's futile pursuit of belonging. Ilyas exemplifies the self-destructive repercussions of internalised colonialism by forsaking his sister Afiya in pursuit of German membership. However, *Afterlives* is not only a narrative of desolation. Amid destruction, Gurnah presents glimpses of salvation. Khalifa's benevolence liberates Afiya from her tormentors, while her affection aids in mending Hamza's injuries. These little acts of defiance, individual rather than political, oppose the obliteration of marginalised voices.

The novel's last segment, in which Hamza and Afiya's son journeys to post-WWII Germany to discover Ilyas's fate, connects colonial anguish with postwar reflection, compelling readers to confront the enduring wounds of history. Gurnah's magnum opus compels an examination of the enduring scars of colonialism, affecting not just the colonised but also their families and communities. *Afterlives* confronts historical amnesia by foregrounding African viewpoints on German violence, a narrative frequently marginalised in Europe. Its amalgamation of Swahili and German, its unyielding depiction of brutality, and its assertion of love as a countervailing force render it an essential tribute to survival. Gurnah emphasises that the muted past requires not just recollection but also attentive listening.

Gurnah's *Afterlives* is a compelling postcolonial narrative that reveals the brutal truths of German colonisation and World War I in East Africa, a territory ensnared in a conflict that was not of its own making. Gurnah examines the profound and enduring scars left by war and tyranny via the experiences of Khalifa, Ilyas, Hamza, and Afiya, highlighting how colonial authorities compelled indigenous communities to engage in conflicts that held no benefit for them. The novel interrogates Eurocentric historical narratives, examining what persists when African viewpoints are consistently excluded from official accounts. Gurnah posits that the brutality of colonialism transcends mere physical control; it also distorts history, silencing those intended to be subjects rather than narrators. The climax of the book centres on Hamza and Afiya's son, who journeys to post-World War II Germany to uncover the truths of his family's disjointed history. This voyage represents the overarching struggle of colonised populations to regain their past in a society that has denied them autonomy. The narrative not only focuses on pain but also emphasises resiliency. Notwithstanding the ravages of war and colonial domination, Gurnah's characters discover means of resilience through affection, toil, belief, and solidarity. Their lives exemplify a subtle resistance, an unwillingness to be entirely shattered by external forces.

Gurnah deconstructs colonial preconceptions that depicted Africans as uncivilised or savage, instead portraying them as multifaceted humans capable of significant hardship and remarkable endurance. The narrative juxtaposes the

savagery of German military occupation with the resolve of ordinary individuals to reconstruct. Hamza, a soldier coerced into aggression, pursues atonement via labour and interpersonal connections. Afiya, like other abandoned women, personifies the anguish of uncertainty over the fate of her loved ones, yet she endures. The narrative does not provide simple solutions; rather, it compels readers to grapple with the enduring consequences of colonialism, its impact on people, the disintegration of families, and the distortion of history. Therefore, *Afterlives* serves as a contemplation on endurance and recollection. It prompts readers to reflect on the construction of history, the preservation of narratives, and the implications of recovering from a past intended to obliterate one's existence. Gurnah's characters, despite their traumas, persist in their existence. Their challenges and minor victories exemplify the resilience of the human spirit against systematic injustice.

Gurnah's *Afterlives* serves as a significant literary intervention that reveals the suppressed history of German colonialism in East Africa, highlighting its persistent cruelty while honouring the tenacity of its survivors. Gurnah deconstructs the idea of colonial kindness via the intertwined narratives of Khalifa, Ilyas, Hamza, and Afiya, exposing a framework founded on dehumanisation, cultural obliteration, and institutional violence. The novel's strength is in its reluctance to depict characters just as victims; rather, it presents them as multifaceted beings grappling with fragmented identities, trauma, and the tenuous prospect of recovery. By prioritising African viewpoints, Gurnah contests the Eurocentric narratives that have historically prevailed, compelling an acknowledgement of the unrecognised atrocities of colonialism. The novel examines resistance, manifested through subtle solidarity, language blending, or the reclamation of personal stories, illustrating that survival is a type of defiance. Characters such as Hamza and Afiya exemplify this duality: marked by violence yet persevering in their quest for dignity and connection.

Gurnah's emphasis on love and community as antidotes to colonial devastation highlights a basic truth: that humanity persists even under institutional obliteration. The intergenerational narrative, culminating in Hamza and Afiya's son's travel to postwar Germany, connects colonial trauma with modern memory, compelling readers to confront the unsolved legacy of empire. Therefore, *Afterlives* transcends the genre of historical fiction, serving as a moral examination of the dynamics of tyranny and the fortitude of the subjugated. Gurnah urges us to heed the narratives that history has sought to suppress, to comprehend the complete toll of colonialism, and to recognise the autonomy of people who reconstructed their societies from its devastation. In doing so, the story transcends its locale, addressing overarching issues of displacement, identity, and the persistent need for justice.

Afterlives serves as both a criticism of colonial aggression and a monument to the resilient human spirit, affirming literature's ability to reclaim what empires aimed to obliterate: the voices, memories, and dignity of the colonised. Gurnah's oeuvre illustrates that the past is not a concluded narrative but a dynamic influence, moulding contemporary circumstances and necessitating accountability. By reclaiming these overlooked histories, *Afterlives* transcends mere testimony, it underscores the imperative of recollection as a pathway to healing and,

potentially, salvation. In a world currently contending with the remnants of colonialism, Gurnah's novel acts as both a cautionary tale and a guiding light, urging us to address historical injustices while commemorating the tenacity of survivors.

References

1. Conrad S. German colonialism: a short history. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2012. p. 1-200.
2. Gilroy P. The Western colonialism and slavery in the novels of Nobel Prize winner Gurnah [Internet]. UCL.ac.uk; 2021 Oct 12 [cited 2025 Jul 31]. Available from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk>
3. Gurnah A. Afterlives: by the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature 2021. London: Bloomsbury Publishing; 2020. p. 1-288.
4. Hutcheon L. A poetics of postmodernism: history, theory, fiction. London: Routledge; 2003. p. 1-288.
5. Mengiste M. Afterlives by Abdulrazak Gurnah review - living through colonialism [Internet]. The Guardian. 2020 Sep 30 [cited 2025 Jul 31]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/sep/30/afterlives-by-abdulrazak-gurnah-review-living-through-colonialism>
6. Pilling D. The growth delusion: the wealth and well-being of nations. London: Bloomsbury Publishing; 2018. p. 1-352.