



Voices From The Margins: Colonialism And Identity In Gurnah's 'Afterlives'

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Colonialism is a historical phenomenon that has left an indelible mark on the world. It has influenced the development of societies and cultures both during and after the colonial era. Its effects can still be felt today, not only in the former colonies but also in the countries that once colonized them. These legacies, while complex and varied, continue to shape the political, economic, and social landscape of our global community. In 'Afterlives', Abdulrazak Gurnah delves into the themes of colonialism and identity, focusing on characters living on the fringes of society. Through their stories, Gurnah sheds light on the multifaceted and enduring effects of colonialism on the formation of identity. The novel serves as a poignant reminder of the need to confront the past in order to understand the present and build a better future.

The present paper is an attempt to examine how the novel portrays the impact of colonialism on identity formation and the ways in which the characters navigate their sense of self in the face of oppression. It also hopes to explore how Gurnah uses the stories of marginalized characters to shed light on the broader impact of colonialism on society.

Abdul Razak Gurnah, the noble laureate from Zanzibar became the first black African writer in 35 years to win this coveted award, following in the footsteps of Wole Soyinka. Throughout his body of work, Gurnah consistently examines the devastating impacts of colonialism in East Africa, with the theme of refugee experiences and upheaval featuring prominently. According to Maya Jaggi, a critic and judge for the 2021 Costa Prize, Gurnah's writing presents a nuanced portrayal of the flaws of mercantile culture and the atrocities committed during British and German colonialism, including during the First World War. His work also addresses the "random acts of terror" experienced by black individuals in Britain. Notably, Gurnah's fourth novel, *Paradise*, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1994, and his sixth, *By the Sea*, was longlisted in 2001.

Gurnah is among a cohort of Black British writers who emigrated from previously colonized regions and share a common talent for exploring themes of migration and assimilation in their literary works. Having arrived in the UK without a visa, Gurnah's experience of the oppressive political environment in Zanzibar and Tanzania, from which he fled, as well as the loneliness, dislocation, and trauma he experienced as a refugee in the UK, has been channelled into his writing with great poignancy. In an interview with Tina Steiner, Gurnah highlights the complex issues that his work addresses, stating, "It is the history of violence; it is a history of exploitation, of people coming from elsewhere, particularly the part of the East African Coast that I come from." Similarly, in an Interview with BBC he recalls that "When I left, [it] was a very dangerous place then. People were being jailed".

Set mainly against the backdrop of the first half of the 20th century, Gurnah's 'Afterlives' is a captivating novel that has garnered an abundance of positive reviews. David Pilling of the Financial Times lauds it as a "book of quiet beauty and tragedy," while Maaza Mengiste praises its narrative details of colonialism and depiction of psychologically complex relationships. He is all praise for Gurnah's "generational effects of colonialism and war, and asks us to consider what remains in the aftermath of so much devastation."

Gurnah's 'Afterlives' offers a powerful exploration of the intricate relationship between colonialism and identity. The novel is set in Zanzibar, a place that was once ruled by the British Empire. It follows the life of Hamza, a man struggling to find his place in a world shaped by colonialism. Gurnah's novel provides a platform for the marginalized voices that have been silenced by colonialism, shedding light on their unique experiences and the challenges they faced. The theme of colonialism and identity is at the forefront of the novel, examining the impact of colonialism on individuals' perception of themselves and their place in society.

This research paper aims to further explore the theme of colonialism in 'Afterlives' by examining the perspectives of characters from marginalized backgrounds. Through analysis of their experiences, this paper aims to gain insight into how colonialism has impacted the construction of identity and how individuals navigate their personal histories within a larger historical context. Ultimately, this paper emphasizes the enduring effects of colonialism and the importance of amplifying the voices of those who have been historically silenced.

The novel effectively explores themes of oppression, genocide, rebellion, and retribution perpetrated by German colonial rule in Africa. Specifically, it focuses on the brutal colonial rule of Germany in East Africa in the early 20th century, infamous for its cruelty, oppression, and violence. Germany committed the first genocide of the 20th century in the 1904 extermination campaign to quash the uprising in Namibia. Germany's deadly military tactics were also implemented across the continent in East Africa or Deutsch-Ostafrika. Gurnah's masterpiece 'Afterlives' delves into the terror that was unleashed in Tanzania and its profound impact on the lives of uprooted and migrating individuals.

'Afterlives' by Abdulrazak Gurnah is set in East Africa, specifically Tanzania, during the colonial rule of Germany before the First World War. The novel follows the characters as they navigate through the tumultuous times of two world wars, the defeat of German imperialism, colonization by the British, and eventual independence. The novel emphasizes the impact of colonialism on individuals, and how it has affected them psychologically. As Maya Jaggi notes, "the theme of 'refugee's disruption' runs throughout his work." The novel delves into the various responses of different characters to the trauma and upheaval caused by colonialism. While some characters, such as Bi Asha, hold onto bitterness and resentment, others, like Hamza, find a way to come to terms with their circumstances and forge their own path in life, building families and making choices that align with their own desires.

'Afterlives' by Abdulrazak Gurnah is set in Africa during the colonial era and follows the story of Ilyas, a child who is taken away by German colonial troops. The novel explores the consequences of colonization and the impending First World War on the lives of African citizens who were either stolen or bought to fight for Europe. Upon his return home after many years, Ilyas discovers that his sister Afiya has been given away and their parents are nowhere to be found. While Afiya and Hamza are both central characters, their stories remain separate for the first half of the book. After the war ends, Hamza returns to Ilyas' hometown in search of a job and eventually finds solace, security, and love with Afiya.

Through Hamza's character, Gurnah depicts the impact of war on soldiers who were either forced or volunteered to fight for the Germans. On the other hand, Afiya's character portrays the traumatic effects of the war on innocent civilians.

In 1907, Khalifa weds Asha, the niece of Biashara, and although the aftermath of the struggle against German dominion is recounted, Gurnah also highlights the experiences of the newlywed duo. When Ilyas arrives in the coastal town where Khalifa and Asha reside, the revolts and colonial repercussions have subsided. Gurnah depicts the lives of those who have managed to discover some serenity amidst the turbulence of colonialism. Nonetheless, their ostensibly tranquil existence does not imply that they have eluded the physical and emotional ramifications of colonialism. As one character painfully asserts, 'the Germans have killed so many people that the country is littered with skulls and bones and the earth is soggy with blood'(51)." When Ilyas attempts to defend the colonizers, nobody is convinced. Someone replies "My friend, they have eaten you (52)."

The book 'Afterlives' has received widespread acclaim for illuminating a scarcely examined topic of 'the experiences of soldiers who fight for the colonizing power' and for its unwavering depiction of the brutal reality of colonialism that most Germans are unaware of. The German colonial authorities employ a brutal system of "*Schutztruppe askari*," a highly experienced force of destructive power, which is deployed across their empire. As the author notes, "They were proud of their reputation for viciousness, and their officers and the administrators of Deutsch-Ostafrika loved them to be just like that" (8). The German military's presence in East Africa, known as Deutsch-Ostafrika, leaves the land ravaged and soaked in the blood of countless senselessly and mercilessly killed individuals.

The novel becomes even more haunting with its portrayal of the *Shutztruppe Askari*, local soldiers trained by their colonial oppressors to slaughter and oppress their fellow Africans on command. Gurnah elucidates that the colonized people fought for various reasons, such as the attraction of imperial power and prestige, as well as the prospect of sustenance, standing within their own society, and security in their lives. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that some individuals voluntarily opted to fight for the Germans.

Through Hamza's narrative, Gurnah portrays the intricate relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, marked by power differentials and contradictory objectives. Hamza was sold into bonded labour by his father to pay off his debt. He manages to escape and volunteers to join the Askari, only to soon realize his grave mistake. Assigned to be the personal assistant to the Oberleutenant, Hamza endures the taunts of his fellow troops who playfully inform him that the Germans "like playing with pretty young men." Meanwhile, his officer, determined to teach him to read "Schiller," insists that the Germans are engaged in the civilizing mission of ruling over a "backward and savage people," and that the only way to do so is to strike terror into them.

Gurnah's characters grapple with various identities, and his work predominantly revolves around the themes of 'identity and displacement' and how colonial legacies shape them. They strive to forge a new identity to assimilate into their new surroundings, constantly oscillating between their present and past lives. Gurnah's novels invariably confront the devastating effects of migration on immigrants. For Gurnah, who himself experienced displacement from his hometown in Zanzibar, identity is an ever-changing aspect. Paul Gilroy highlights this, stating, "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)".

The primary characters in 'Afterlives' feign ignorance of English language in the hope of securing asylum. One of them is compelled to lie in order to conform to the system. Additionally, those who served in the German *Schutztruppe* (colonial army) are met with scepticism and mistrust by their new British colonizers, despite the fact that many of them were coerced into joining the army, and the British had done the same in their colonies.

Gurnah frequently incorporates Swahili words and phrases in his novels, which also feature prominently in 'Afterlives'. Through his writing, he subtly prompts readers to recognize the impact of colonization on language use and its effects on literature. However, he also incorporates German words in military settings to underscore the colonial presence.

The latter part of 'Afterlives' portrays the emergence of the 're-colonization' movement during the Nazi era, which attracted former askaris who had fought in the Schutztruppe during World War I. Among them was Mohamed Hussein, who migrated to Germany in the late 1920s, married a German woman, and had children with her. He later joined the 're-colonization' movement and worked as an actor until the early 1940s when he was sent to a concentration camp for having an extramarital affair with a white woman. Ilyas' tragic journey parallels Hussein's, with his yearning for power, status, and identity linked to his association with Germany, despite the rise of Nazism. However, Ilyas' abandonment of his sister Afiya to reconstruct the past is an appalling act of neglect and shame that cannot be justified.

'Afterlives' is not just a tale of despair, but also a touching narrative of hope. Khalifa comes to the rescue of Afiya, who was sent back to her oppressors, and Hamza also benefits from Khalifa's kindness. Afiya's love and care help heal Hamza's emotional wounds. As the renowned critic Maaza Mengiste notes, "Through Hamza and Afiya, he provides a window on the restorative potential of trust and love". Gurnah's stories of the marginalized and their small triumphs in the face of overwhelming adversity aim to counteract the erasure of their voices and experiences caused by brutalization.

In the latter part of the book, the location shifts to allow Hamza and Afiya's son to embark on a journey to post-World War II Germany, where he intends to study and uncover the reasons behind Ilyas' departure and his subsequent fate. The conclusion of 'Afterlives' amalgamates the motifs of choice, provoking us to scrutinize our own decisions and the paths they have led us down in the present day.

In a compelling and poignant way, Gurnah's 'Afterlives' presents the profound impact of colonialism on native people who were compelled by their oppressors to participate in wars that were not their own. The novel also highlights the enduring pain and confusion experienced by the families of those who were left behind, with no knowledge of their loved ones' fate and no means of discovering the truth.

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel 'Afterlives' is a significant work that delves into themes of colonialism, displacement, and identity. It provides a nuanced relationship between colonialism and identity. Through his characters, Gurnah presents the intricate and often traumatic experiences of those who were colonized, forced into serving colonial armies, and abandoned by their loved ones. The novel illustrates how colonialism has caused deep wounds that continue to affect generations, not just the colonized, but their families and communities. Gurnah's incorporation of Swahili and German language and his use of historical events add an authentic touch to the novel. Additionally, the emphasis on trust, love, and compassion as restorative forces provides a hopeful outlook amidst a bleak narrative. Gurnah's 'Afterlives' serves as a powerful reminder to listen to and amplify the voices of those who have been marginalized and silenced by history.

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