

## **BURSTING THE BUBBLE OF COLONIALISM IN GURNAH'S 'AFTERLIVES'**

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### **Abstract**

Zanzibar novelist Abdul Razak Gurnah has recently been bestowed upon the most coveted award 'Noble prize in literature' for his "uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents" After Woe Soyinka, he becomes the first black African writer to win this prestigious award in 35 years. Gurnah has consistently explored the devastating effects of colonialism in East Africa and the theme of 'refugee's disruption' runs throughout his work. Gurnah's 'Afterlives' is a compelling novel which is set mainly against the backdrop of the first half of the 20th century. It deals effectively with the themes of oppression, genocide, rebellion and retribution perpetrated by German colonial rule in Africa. It focuses on the colonial rule of Germany in East Africa in the early 20th century which was infamous for its brutality, oppression and violence. 'Afterlives' opens just before the First World War. The story takes place in East Africa now known as Tanzania suffering under the colonial rule of Germany. It wades through the two world wars, the defeat of German Imperialism, colonisation by the British, and eventual Independence. The novel traces the characters tiptoe through episodes of upheavals and conflict: The focus is on the impact of colonialism on individuals. At its heart, the novel addresses the trauma and its psychological effect on characters in the aftermath.

Zanzibar novelist Abdul Razak Gurnah has recently been bestowed upon the most coveted award 'Noble prize in literature' for his "uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents" After Woe Soyinka, he becomes the first black African writer to win this prestigious award in 35 years. Gurnah has consistently explored the devastating effects of colonialism in East Africa and the theme of 'refugee's disruption' runs throughout his work. Maya Jaggi, critic and 2021 Costa Prize judge is of the view that his "subtle oeuvre is as robust about the brutal flaws of the mercantile culture he left as the atrocities of British and German colonialism, not least during the first world war, and the 'random acts of terror' he experienced as a black person in Britain".

Gurnah's fourth novel *Paradise*, was shortlisted for the Booker prize in 1994 and his sixth 'By the Sea', was longlisted in 2001.

Gurnah belongs to a group of Black British writers who migrated to the UK from the erstwhile colonised regions and share a common flair for exploring themes of migration and assimilation in their works. Gurnah arrived in the UK without a visa. In an interview with Tina Steiner Gurnah avers, "But then these other things that are to do really with more complicated matters. 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." The oppressive political environment in Zanzibar and Tanzania from where he fled and the experience of loneliness, dislocation and trauma which he experienced as a refugee in UK channelled into his writing very poignantly

In an Interview with BBC Gurnah recalls the repressive atmosphere of the colonial empire in Tanzania which was combined with economic insecurity and restrictions on speech and protest, 'When I left, [it] was very dangerous place then. People were being jailed. There was very little room for manoeuvre, for people to work, to prosper, or even to speak and to speak openly about their discontent.'

Gurnah's *Afterlives* is a compelling novel which is set mainly against the backdrop of the first half of the 20th century. The novel has garnered copious positive reviews. David Pilling of the Financial Times described it as a "book of quiet beauty and tragedy" and Maaza is all praise for the narrative details of colonialism and depiction of psychologically complicated relationships. She asserts that in *Afterlives* Gurnah "considers the generational effects of colonialism and war, and asks us to consider what remains in the aftermath of so much devastation."

'*Afterlives*' deals effectively with the themes of oppression, genocide, rebellion and retribution perpetrated by German colonial rule in Africa. It focuses on the colonial rule of Germany in East Africa in the early 20th century which was infamous for its brutality, oppression and violence. Germany perpetrated the first genocide of the 20th century in the 1904 extermination campaign to suppress the uprising in Namibia. Germany's military tactics were equally deadly across the continent in East Africa or *Deutsch-Ostafrika*. Gurnah's magnum opus '*Afterlives*' unfolds the streak of terror unleashed in Tanzania and its effects on the lives of uprooted and migrating individuals

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Set in colonized Africa, '*Afterlives*' is the story of Ilyas, a child who was taken away by the German colonial troops. The book captures one of the most prominent consequences of the imminent First World War and colonization -the life and struggles of African citizens who were stolen or bought to fight for Europe. Ilyas returns home after several years, only to find his sister Afiya given away and parents gone. Afiya and Hamza are the two other central characters but their stories remain completely separate throughout the first half of the book. When the war

comes to an end, Hamza returns home to the same place where Ilyas lived and is on the lookout for a job. Eventually, he finds solace, security and love- in Ilyas' sister Afiya.

Through Hamza, Gurnah shows the impact of war on the soldiers who were either forced or volunteered to fight for the Germans. However, Afiya depicts the traumatic effects of the war on innocent civilians.

Khalifa marries Biashara's niece, Asha, in 1907. Gurnah narrates the horrifying consequences of resistance to German rule but then moves back to the lives of the young married couple. By the time the assertive, congenial and German-speaking Ilyas arrives at the coastal town where Khalifa and Asha live, the uprisings and colonial retributions have faded away. Gurnah focuses on the lives of those who have managed to carve out a relatively serene existence.

Though their lives seem outwardly quiet, it doesn't imply that they have escaped the physical and emotional ravages of colonialism. One character remarks painfully that "the Germans have killed so many people that the country is littered with skulls and bones and the earth is soggy with blood (p.51). When Ilyas tried to speak in defence of the colonisers, "His listeners were silent in the face of such vehemence. 'My friend, they have eaten you,'" someone eventually replies (p.52)".

'Afterlives' has been widely appreciated for its depiction of a pertinent but rarely explored theme of 'the lives of soldiers who fight for the colonizer'. What makes this historical novel a 'tour de force' is the blatant portrayal of reality of colonialism about which most of the people in Germany show little awareness. The brutalising system of the 'Schutztruppe askari' described as a highly experienced force of destructive power is deployed by German colonial authorities across 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)".

Throughout East Africa, known as Deutsch-Ostafrika, German military forces leave the land ravaged and drenched in the blood of those who have been killed senselessly and mercilessly. Even more chilling is the description of the Schutztruppe Askari, native soldiers who are trained by their colonial oppressors to kill and brutalise their fellow African brethren on command. Gurnah explains that the colonised fought for complex reasons:

"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 number of people willingly chose to be on the side of the Germans and fight for them. Gurnah explores the complicated relationship between the 'oppressor and the oppressed 'through the harrowing story of Hamza who was sold as a bonded labourer by his father in order to get rid of his crippling debt. However, Hamza manages to escape and volunteers to join the Askari only to realise what a terrible mistake he has made. Assigned to be the Oberleutenant's personal assistant, Hamza is forced to endure the ridicule of his fellow troops who inform playfully that the Germans 'like playing with pretty young men'. His officer, who is determined to teach him to read 'Schiller' simultaneously insist that the Germans have taken up the task of civilising such a 'backward and savage people and the only way to rule them is to strike terror into them.'

The characters of Gurnah speak of different identities. His works are dominated by the issues of ‘identity and displacement’ and how they are designed by the legacies of colonialism. His characters are constantly manoeuvring a newer identity for themselves so that they can gel with their new environment. They are constantly oscillating between their new lives and their past existences. Gurnah’s novels invariably deal with the devastating impact that migration exerts on the immigrants. For Gurnah, who himself experienced displacement from his native Zanzibar, identity is a matter of constant change. Paul Gilroy has points out:

‘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)’.

The main characters in ‘Afterlives’ pretend not to speak English in hope of getting asylum. One is forced to lie in order to comply with the system. Moreover, people who had been in the German Schutztruppe (the colonial army) are treated with doubt and suspicion by their new British colonizers in spite of the fact many of them have been coerced in the army and the British have been doing the same in their colonies as well.

Gurnah often uses Swahili words and phrases in his books which find a fair space in ‘Afterlives’ too. His writing gently cajoles the reader into acknowledging the role of colonisation in language use and its effect on literature. However, he often makes use of German words also in the military setting to demonstrate the colonial presence.

In the later part of ‘Afterlives’ one can see the advent of ‘re-colonisation’ movement that flourished under Nazi rule which drew in several former askaris who had fought in the Schutztruppe during the First World War. The most prominent amongst them is Mohamed Husen who migrated to Germany in the late 1920s married and had children with a German woman. Later on, he became involved with ‘re-colonisation’ movement. He worked as an actor into the early 1940s but was sent to a concentration camp for having an extramarital affair with a white woman.

Ilyas’ tragic journey reflects the life journey of Husen. His fascination for power, status and identity accrued upon by his association with Germany is unpalatable despite the rise of Nazism. The second abandonment of his sister Afiya in quest of reconstructing the past is nothing but a blatant act of neglect and shame which can’t be condoned.

‘Afterlives’ is a soul- stirring saga of hope as well. Afiya, who is sent back to her persecutors is rescued by Khalifa in the end. However, she finds it difficult to reconcile with the inexplicable silence of her brother. Hamza is also benefitted by Khalifa’s compassion. Afiya’s love and devotion brings about the much-needed restoration to his bruised and battered psyche. The eminent critic Maaza Mengiste also feels that “.through Hamza and Afiya, he provides a window on the restorative potential of trust and love.”

By recounting the simple and unassuming stories of the oppressed and their small victories in the face of overpowering adversity, Gurnah tries to counter the erasure of those who have been brutalised and rendered voiceless.

Towards the end of the novel, the setting changes to enable Hamza and Afiya’s son to travel to the post II World War Germany. It is envisioned that he will study there and seek answers to why Ilyas left and about his predicament. The ending of Afterlives brings together the themes of choice incites us to examine our own choices and where they have led us today.

It can plausibly be stated that Gurnah’s ‘Afterlives’ presents is a very powerful and evocative manner the different ways in which colonialism has impacted the native people who

were coerced by their oppressors to wage wars that had nothing to do with them. It also exposes the gaping wounds for the families of those left behind who had no idea what happened to their dear ones and had no way of finding them out.

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