

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165

The Criterion



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

16 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

Vol. 16 Issue-5 october 2025

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor: Dr. Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

Out of Place: Diaspora and the Postcolonial Subject in *Afterlives* by Abdulrazak Gurnah

Khushnaaz

Research scholar,
Department of English and MEL,
University of Lucknow,
Lucknow UP, India.

Article History: Submitted-03/09/2025, Revised-26/09/2025, Accepted-03/10/2025, Published-31/10/2025.

Abstract:

Afterlives (2020) by Abdulrazak Gurnah is a poignant piece of writing about displacement, belonging, and identity in colonial and postcolonial East Africa. The novel captures a unique experience of subjects who are both forcibly displaced by acts of German and British imperial violence, but who nonetheless also contend with a more fundamental existential state of being "out of place," a condition that lies at the heart of diasporic and postcolonial subjectivity. The novel focuses on characters like Ilyas, Afiya, and Hamza, whose lives are impacted by forced migration, violence, and broken family bonds. Gurnah explores through these personalities how colonial brutality causes cultural estrangement and psychological distress in addition to shifting geopolitical borders. The present paper is an attempt to examine *Afterlives* and how it locates the postcolonial subject in between conflicting cultural, historical and personal loyalties. Gurnah captures complexity of identity in a postcolonial world, and between cultures, as people face a distance between what they have inherited and what is imposed upon them. The diasporic sensibility of the novel is evoked through not merely its physical displacement but also existential tensions which arise as a result of these same internal tensions be it ideological, hybridised, delicious or tragic. The book resists

colonial erasure through its narrative structure and language as it reclaims history and voice of the marginal. Gurnah further disrupts and complicates the idea of “home” by representing characters alienated from their own communities, divided between colonial legacies and promises of belonging. The literal and metaphorical meaning of “being out of place” is rendered as severed family relationships, a sense of shame, fragmented cultural womanhood. The novel also critiques the lingering structures of power that inform postcolonial subjectivity by drawing attention to the ongoing relevance of colonial trauma in the lives of the former subjects, long after physical independence has been achieved. In the long run the novel conveys diaspora as more than geographic scattering or displacement, but as an existential condition of longing, survival, and searching for place in a world of displacement.

Keywords: Displacement, Postcolonial Subject, Colonial Legacy, Identity, Belonging.

Introduction

Author and Nobel Prize winner Abdulrazak Gurnah is an Emeritus Professor of English and Postcolonial Literature. In 1948, he was born in Zanzibar, which is now Tanzania. During the Zanzibar Revolution, he fled to the United Kingdom at the age of eighteen. Gurnah has received recognition for his unwavering and compassionate insight into the consequences of colonialism, making him the first Black African writer to receive this honour in 35 years, after Wole Soyinka. He carefully explores East Africa's colonial past, especially during the German and British eras, in his body of work, especially *Afterlives*, which intertwines themes of pain, displacement, and resiliency. The postcolonial viewpoint used in this research article aims to show how Gurnah depicts memory, resistance, and survival in the face of systematic dehumanisation. Furthermore, by discovering lost history and highlighting underrepresented viewpoints, the book challenges dominant historical narratives. In the final stages, *Afterlives* critiques the long-lasting harm caused by colonialism while offering a poignant meditation on

resiliency and the possibility of recovery. This essay asserts that Gurnah's writings affirm colonised people's autonomy in telling their own experiences in addition to exposing the unresolved horrors of empire. The word "out of place" captures two conflicting but complementing ideas: the possibility of a new beginning and the difficulty of leaving. Being out of place is, in fact, neither an easy task nor one that is painless. People's minds become confused when they go from one setting to another. In the majority of cases, migration involves an almost perpetual sort of escape. Neither can the psyche appropriately adjust to or assimilate into the culture it encounters, nor can it entirely reject the memories of the homeland. Postcolonial theory frequently emphasizes the lived experiences of individuals who find themselves dislocated, both in a physical and psychological sense, as a consequence of colonial domination. In *Afterlives*, the motif of diaspora is rendered with greater complexity—numerous characters are not explicitly exiled to Europe or the Americas; however, they endure a significant sense of alienation within their native land, attributable to the transformation of colonial and national demarcations. Afiya's constant resistance to colonial erasure is demonstrated by her progressive empowerment through literacy and memory recall. In line with Edward Said's demand that the colonised "narrate themselves," she attempts to recover family stories in an effort to break the enforced silence. (Said 34).

In the historical and cultural setting of German-occupied East Africa, Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Afterlives* (2020) provides a thorough analysis of diaspora and the conflicted identity of the postcolonial subject. Based in the first half of the 20th Century, the novel follows the life experience of characters caught up in the violent determinants of European colonialism and is also about war and displacement. Gurnah poignantly illustrates the psychological and emotional turmoil of characters who are "out of place" both literally and metaphorically, torn between colonialist ideologies and forms of social and cultural identity. Dislocation is pervasively a state of being "in between," and, therefore, is a central experience of the diaspora,

and "a crucial factor in what is referred to by postcolonial theorist as the liminal or hybrid subject, who can occupy the margins of history without being able to lay claim to being either the colonised or the coloniser." (Bhabha 38).

Diaspora not only deals with a physical change of address but also a deeply cultural and spiritual exile in the novel. Ilyas and Hamza represent the struggle of those whose identity has been colonised, distorted, and reformed by imperial power. Ilyas, captured as a child by the Germans and brainwashed with colonial propaganda, returns home with a new perspective that ostracizes him from his people. His struggle signifies a loss of cultural memory and a fractured identity, torn between fealty to a colonial system and a past that is ultimately unattainable. Hamza is also enlisted in the German colonial army, the Schutztruppe, where he faces brutality and degradation, only to come back to a community that cannot grasp the severity of his suffering. In their travels, Gurnah reveals the inner conflict faced by colonized individuals who feel "out of place" both in terms of location and existence (Said 139).

Khalifa, Ilyas, Afiya, and other characters' stories are neatly interwoven throughout the novel. Hamza, whose fates are inextricably linked. The story takes place in an unnamed town on from the period of German colonial administration until today, the Swahili coast of modern-day Tanzania few years following independence. It follows four main characters: Ilyas, Afiya, Hamza, and The Khalifa. Even though Khalifa married Asha, a lady struggling with a life full of. Despite the obstacles, his natural empathy attracts him to people who are facing financial difficulties. The misery of his home is what causes Ilyas to run away, but he soon finds himself in the clutches of an Askari. Ilyas and Khalifa's routes cross here. In the end, Ilyas goes through a twist of fate where a generous German farmer takes him under his wing, teaches him and supports him get a job (Eman 121).

Furthermore, the novel looks at the missing parts and quiet spaces in the stories of colonial history. Gurnah's work tries to bring back the voices that were left out of the main

historical stories. The novel is a way of getting back control of the story, focusing on African viewpoints and real experiences that go against the usual European view of empire (Nayar 101). Through this, Gurnah questions the idea that colonialism was always kind and helpful, and instead shows the lasting damage from exploitation, military actions, and loss of culture. The characters' personal lives reflect larger historical issues, showing the real harm caused by imperial rule and what came after.

Gurnah's engagement with the diaspora is profoundly anchored in his personal experiences, cultural heritage, and literary inquiries. As a representative of the diaspora, the author's journey from Zanzibar to the United Kingdom has significantly shaped his novels, which meticulously investigate the intricacies of diasporic identity, displacement, and cultural assimilation. His literary works serve as a nexus between historical and contemporary aspects of diaspora, illuminating the emotional and psychological ramifications of migration. Because of his academic and creative contributions, Gurnah has become an integral figure in the discussion of postcolonial literature and diaspora studies, highlighting the long-lasting impact of diaspora on humankind. (Monisha 24).

Hamza's story highlights the complex interactions between colonisers and colonised. After being enslaved by his father, he escapes and joins the resistance. Askari is the personal aide to an Oberle tenant who exemplifies imperial deception. The officer accuses Hamza Schiller of needing education, claiming that Germans use intimidation to civilize backward and barbarian people. Hamza, on the other hand, withstands sexualized mockery from his classmates, who joke that Germans like interacting with gorgeous young guys. The disconcerting intimacy underlines the aberration of colonial authority, which combines cruelty and paternalism. Gurnah examines colonial legacies through the lens of identity and relocation. His characters, like the author, a Zanzibari immigrant, struggle with shattered identities that shift between the past and present (ZH Naqvi and Pooja Devi 153).

Paul Gilroy argues that when national and ethnic identities are presented as pure with dilution, exposure to diversity puts them in peril because of the ongoing risk of contamination, which compromises their prized purity. Avoiding crossing as a mixing and mobility is essential (105). The linguistic hybridity of the book makes this conflict clear: Gurnah uses Swahili words in the story, reclaiming the local tongue while incorporating German military jargon to emphasize tyranny by imperialism. Despite their own reliance on similar forces, the British, who replace the Germans as colonizers, see former Schutztruppe troops with suspicious a deceit that furthers the characters' sense of isolation. Another crucial figure in Gurnah's *Afterlives* is Ilyas, who illuminates the complex reasons why the colonized struggle and defend their conquerors. Ilyas was abducted as a toddler by a Schutztruppe askari (22), who later sent him to work on a German coffee field. He became a Christian after attending a mission school. "He didn't know how to pray, didn't know the words, had never been inside mosque" (Gurnah 25). After that, he went back to the town to work in a German-owned plant. He enthusiastically joined the Schutztruppe (German East-African army) because he sympathized with Germany when World War I broke out. He consistently backed German colonists and justified their brutality, "they had to be harsh in retaliation because that's the only way savage people can be made to understand order and obedience" (40). A major issue in *Afterlives* is the difficulties diasporic groups encounter when forming new communities and figuring out how to fit in in strange places. Intriguingly, the book examines the intricacies and challenges that when people are forced to leave their native countries and must figure out how to fit in with new cultures while maintaining their identity.

The narrative interwove into deep issues of oppression, genocide, rebellion, and revenge in the German colonial empire in Africa. Set in the first decades of the 20th century, it sheds light on the bloody colonial exploitation by Germans in East Africa, notorious for its brutality, cruelty and slaughter. Germany orchestrated the very first genocide of the 20th

century with the 1904 extermination campaign, a brutal attempt to quash the rebellion in Namibia. The deadly military tactics utilized by Germany were also unleashed across the continent in East Africa, or Deutsch-Ostafrika. Gurnah's extraordinary work, "Afterlives," tackles the suffering endured in Tanzania and its significant impact on the lives of displaced and migratory people. (Saxena 353).

The difficult duty of making connections and fostering relationships in an unusual setting is given to Afiya, Hamza, and Khalifa. They are required to navigate the inherent contradictions that arise from reconciling the cultural norms of their newfound environment with the preservation of elements of their Indian heritage. The negotiation of this process might be an unnecessary psychological burden for them to bear as they engage in the precarious task of balancing the adjustability of their Northern climate with the preservation of their ethnic groups. Afiya has the other struggle as she actually suffers not knowing whether she should long for a sense of belonging within her new surroundings or worry about giving up important family traditions. While Khalifa strives to make an inclusive space for others through building rapport and showing concern, he also struggles to hold onto his individuality. The protagonists' struggles to form new social circles and determine where they fit in a larger world are remarkably parallel to the complicated experiences faced by members of the diaspora in modern day. The stories of Afiya, Hamza, and Khalifa in the novel mirror the genuine struggles of people who leave their homeland in search of a better life as cultural aliens in other lands (Eman 136).

Afterlives is essentially a reflection on memory, surviving, and trying to find a place in a society where people are always moving. Gurnah challenges readers to think about how people are physically, emotionally, and spiritually uprooted by history. Although the novel never entirely addresses the issue of home or identity, the individuals' attempts to rebuild their

lives through love, community, and storytelling raise the prospect of healing. Rather, it emphasizes the postcolonial subject's continuous quest to locate a position in a reality that is still influenced by colonial violence (Fanon 250). In this way, *Afterlives* offers a compelling analysis of what it means to be "out of place" in one's own history and identity. Africans' trajectory and the intricacies of German colonial narratives are both deftly shown in the book. The German rulers see native Africans as violent, vicious, and fundamentally inferior, constantly engaged in conflict with the developing structures of their expanding empire, the German Empire. This illustrates the perspective that Edward Said advanced, according to which the French and British Empires were "the other."

The novel culminates in the journey of Hamza and Afiya's offspring to post-World War II Germany to find out what happened to Ilyas, and this unavoidable entanglement of colonial suffering with the signifiers of postwar experience forces readers to confront the ghosts of history. We have delved into the lasting impact of colonialism beyond the individual who is colonised to their family lineage and the community. Engaging with the historical amnesia systematically found in Europe histories of violence, "*Afterlives*" locates topics on German violence beyond the conceptual horizon of European discussions, giving priority to African perspectives. With its blend of Swahili and German, its unapologetic depiction of bloodshed and its championing of love as an essential control, it is a tribute to survive Gurnah brings out that this erasure is asking for not just a remembering but for a listening that is awake and alert

Conclusion

The novel's final part presents a moving picture of colonialism's terrible legacies and the psychological upheaval it caused in its wake. Gurnah illustrates the profound ways in which colonial brutality shatters identities, communities, and the whole concept of belonging through characters such as Ilyas, Afiya, and Hamza. Through each character, the diasporic experience

is revealed as more than simply an exile from a physical space; it is an out-of-placeness that exists even in one's homeland, an alienation rooted in emotional and cultural dislocation. Through its character development, the novel demonstrates that transformation through journeys to new physical locations is not the only impact of colonialism, and even people who maintain a relationship with the place where they were born can be internally displaced by colonial forces. In this layering of the external, we find not simply the external pressures of the German or British occupations, the rise of local nationalist movements, forces of power and loss and survival, but the pressures these exert on the individual subject, constantly required to renegotiate identity within the context of these forces. Where Hamza fights for his life, having been used and discarded by colonial military machinery, and Afiya silently protests against gendered oppression and historical erasure, together they paint the postcolonial subject as resilient, but decidedly fractured. The conventional understanding of diaspora as migration is therefore expanded in Gurnah's work; diasporic movement is not just physical movement but also a psychological exiling, a disconnection from past, voice and agency. The postcolonial subjects of the novel bear great trauma, scars that cannot simply be sutured, and efforts at re-establishing meaning and intimacy become acts of resistance to colonial and patriarchal hegemony.

Works Cited:

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Debayan, Banerjee. "Out of Place a Study of Trauma of Dislocation in the Novels of Abdulrazak Gurnah" PhD Dissertation, University of Gour Banga, 2022.

Eman, AI Masry. "Diaspora, Displacement, and Disruption in Abdulrazak Gurnah's selected novels" PhD Dissertation, Shoolini University, 2024.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington, Grove Press, 1963.

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>.

Gurnah, Abdulrazak. *Afterlives*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020.

Monisha, P." Exploration of diasporic concepts in the select novels of Abdulrazak Gurnah" PhD Dissertation, St. Peter's Institute of Higher Education and research, 2024.

Naqvi and Pooja Devi. "Unveiling the Unspoken: Colonial Violence and Identity in Abdulrazak Gurnah's '*Afterlives*'" *International Journal of Research in English*, Vol.7, Issue 2, Part C 2025; 7(2): 162-165.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. Pearson Education India, 2015.

Said, Edward W. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press, 2000.

Saxena, Dr Pallavi. "Voices from the Margins: Colonialism and Identity in Gurnah's *Afterlives*" *International journal of creative research thoughts*. 2023,11 (3),52-55.

Verma, Dr Rashmi. "Narratives of survival: A Postcolonial Retelling of History in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*", (www.JETNR.org), ISSN:2984-9276, Vol.1, Issue 3, page No. a47-a52, March-2023.