

The Politics of Power and Resistance in Gurnah's 'Afterlives'

Dr Pallavi Saxena

Associate Professor, Department of English, DGC Gurugram

Abstract

Abdulrazak Gurnah's 'Afterlives' is a thought-provoking novel that delves into the themes of power and resistance, offering a deep commentary on the intricate dynamics of politics and its impact on individual lives. Set in post-colonial Zanzibar, the novel follows the struggles of its characters as they navigate the complex web of power relations that shape their world. Gurnah's masterful weaving of the personal and political illuminates how the exercise of power and the resistance it elicits can shape the trajectories of entire communities. Through nuanced portrayals of power dynamics, 'Afterlives' offers a powerful reflection on the enduring legacy of colonialism and the challenges of forging a just and equitable society. The novel is an important exploration of the interplay between power and resistance, highlighting the impact on individuals and communities alike.

The present paper is an attempt to explore the politics of power and resistance in 'Afterlives'. It strives to examine the various strategies employed by both the colonizers and the colonized for dominion and power. It also delves deep into the ethical implications of these power struggles, particularly in relation to the legacy of colonialism and its ongoing impact on contemporary African society. It aims to assert that 'Afterlives' is a powerful testament to the resilience and creativity of the colonized, and a compelling critique of the oppressive power structures of colonialism.

Keywords: Resistance, power-dynamics, displacement, exploitation, identity, resilience, colonialism.

This novel has won wide acclaims. David Pilling of the Financial Times lauds it as a "book of quiet beauty and tragedy" whereas Maya Jaggi, critic and judge for the 2021 Costa Prize extols it for shedding light on the "random acts of terror" experienced by black individuals in Britain".

Gurnah belongs to a group of Black British writers who have migrated from previously colonized regions, and share a remarkable talent for exploring themes of migration and assimilation in their literary works. His own personal experiences of the oppressive political climate in Zanzibar and Tanzania, as well as the trauma of being a refugee in the UK, are reflected in his writing with great poignancy. In an interview with Tina Steiner, Gurnah highlights the complex issues addressed in his work, stating that it delves into "the history of violence, of exploitation, of people coming from elsewhere, particularly the part of the East African Coast that I come from".

The politics of power and resistance are central to Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel 'Afterlives', which explores the enduring legacies of colonialism on the development of societies and cultures. The novel focuses on characters living on the margins of society, offering a nuanced portrayal of the impact of colonialism on identity formation. Through their stories, Gurnah highlights the complex and multifaceted effects of colonialism on the formation of identity, and the ways in which the characters navigate their sense of self in the face of oppression.

Gurnah's works revolve around the themes of 'identity and displacement' and how colonial legacies shape them. His characters grapple with various identities, attempting to forge a new identity to assimilate into their new surroundings while constantly oscillating between their present and past lives. Gurnah confronts the devastating effects of migration on immigrants, drawing from his own experience of displacement from his hometown in Zanzibar. Identity, for Gurnah, is an ever-changing aspect. Paul Gilroy observes that "Crossing as mixture and movement must be guarded against" (105), as national and ethnic identities, projected as pure, are threatened by exposure to difference and the possibility of contamination compromising their prized purities.

The novel maintains that the rulers exercise a significant impact on the identity formation of the characters. It highlights how the colonial powers' imposition of their values, beliefs, and social norms on the indigenous population leads to a fragmentation and loss of cultural identity.

One of the ways in which colonialism impacts identity formation is through the imposition of Western education and language. The narrator reflects on how attending school and learning English was seen as a means to escape poverty and gain social mobility. However, this education also led to a loss of cultural identity, as the narrator notes, "we learned the language of our oppressors and were taught their ways of thinking and seeing the world. We became strangers to our own traditions and cultures (75)". This passage illustrates how the colonial powers' education system undermined the cultural identity of the colonized population.

Moreover, the novel portrays how colonialism leads to a loss of connection to the land and environment. The British's exploitation of natural resources and control of land leads to the displacement of the local population, severing their ties to their ancestral lands. The author notes, "The British took our land and resources, disrupting the delicate balance between people and nature. We lost our connection to the land and with it, our sense of self and identity (109)". This passage highlights how colonialism disrupts the relationship between people and the environment, leading to a loss of cultural identity and sense of self.

The novel also explores how colonialism leads to a loss of cultural practices and traditions. The imposition of British values and norms on the natives leads to the erasure of local customs and traditions. One of the most significant effects of colonialism portrayed in the novel is the way it disrupts traditional cultural values and practices, leading to a loss of identity and a sense of displacement for many individuals. This is exemplified in the character of Ilyas's mother, who, having been raised in a traditional Swahili household, struggles to come to terms with the changes brought about by colonialism:

"She had always felt the discomfort of the school she had been sent to as a child, with its focus on things that were not hers, its unfamiliar smells and sounds and tastes, its religion and language and ways of seeing the world." (19)

Similarly, the banning of local religious practices led to the loss of important cultural traditions. The narrator bemoans that "British banned our religious practices and customs, erasing our culture and traditions in the process (82)". The novel highlights how colonialism leads to a fragmentation and loss of cultural identity.

In 'Afterlives', Abdulrazak Gurnah explores the theme of power and resistance within the context of colonialism. The novel is set in the 19th century, during the height of European imperialism, and follows the lives of a group of characters living on the East African coast. The novel is a powerful exploration of the ways in which colonialism impacted African society and the various strategies of resistance that

were employed by the colonized. Maaza Mengiste is all praise for the portrayal of “the horrifying consequences of resistance to German rule” in this novel.

The novel portrays how the colonial powers use various strategies to assert their dominance over the indigenous population. One of the most significant of these strategies was economic exploitation. The colonial powers established economic systems that benefited them at the expense of the local populations. This included the forced extraction of resources such as ivory, rubber, and other valuable commodities. For example Hamza is forced to work for the British, extracting cloves from trees that are then sold for profit. These resources were then exported to the colonial powers' home countries, where they were used to fuel the industrial revolution. The novel depicts how this economic exploitation led to the impoverishment of the local populations and the concentration of wealth in the hands of the colonizers.

Moreover, the novel illustrates how political power is also used by the colonial powers to maintain control. The local elites are often manipulated by the colonizers, as seen when Hamza's father becomes a loyal supporter of the British and is appointed to a position of power. This enables him to maintain his status and control over the local population, ultimately benefiting the colonial powers. As the narrator reflects on his father's role, he notes that "he had not only become a power in his own right, but he had also become a necessary support for the British in their rule of the country" (Gurnah, 63).

In *Afterlives*, the colonial powers also use political power as a means to establish control over the indigenous population. One of the key themes in the novel is the way in which the colonial powers sought to maintain their power through a combination of coercion and collaboration with local elites. For example, in one scene, a British colonial officer tells a local chief: "We need men like you to keep the others in line" (33).

This quote highlights the way in which the colonial powers relied on the support of local elites to help maintain their control over the colonized population.

Use of political power is also seen in the appointment of Hamza's father as a chief by the British. The narrator reflects that "the British wanted someone to represent them among the locals, and so they appointed Hamza's father to be a chief (55)". This appointment not only gave Hamza's father a position of power and influence, but it also served the interests of the British by providing them with a local representative who could help maintain control over the colonized population.

Moreover, the novel shows how the British use political power to divide and conquer the local population. The narrator recounts how the British would play different groups against each other, exploiting existing tensions and conflicts for their own benefit. He observes, "the British would sow discord between the different tribes, playing them off against each other to keep them weak and divided" (102)". This strategy not only helped the British maintain their control over the region, but it also allowed them to avoid any potential resistance or rebellion from the colonized population.

Furthermore, the novel highlights how political power is used to control access to resources and opportunities. The narrator reflects on how the British would restrict access to education, for instance, only allowing a select few to attend schools and universities. The British used their control over education to maintain their dominance over the colonized population and prevent any potential challenges to their rule.

In addition to economic and political power, military power is another crucial tool used by the colonial powers to dominate and control in ‘*Afterlives*’. The novel portrays the British as using military force to

establish their authority and suppress any resistance to their rule. The German empire is depicted as a living organism with a relentless desire to expand and reproduce, willing to fight for its survival at all costs. The white man's racism is depicted plainly, as a German officer tells Hamza: "We are dealing with backward and savage people, and the only way to rule them is to strike terror into them."

One example of the use of military power is seen when the British bomb Zanzibar in 1896, killing thousands of people and destroying much of the city. This event is referred to as the "Anglo-Zanzibar War," and it demonstrates the brutal and violent means used by the British to maintain their control over the region. As the narrator recalls the incident, he notes that "the sound of the bombardment could be heard for miles around, the earth shaking with each explosion (119)". This scene vividly depicts the devastating impact of military power on the colonized population.

The novel also exposes the brutal system of "*Schutztruppe askari*" which was employed by the Germans as an experienced and devastating force across their empire. The author notes that "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*, left the land in ruins, drenched in the blood of countless individuals senselessly and mercilessly killed.

Moreover, the novel shows how military power is used to intimidate and subjugate the local population. The narrator recounts how the British soldiers would conduct raids on villages, searching for any signs of resistance or rebellion. He recalls that, "the soldiers would storm in and begin to ransack the houses, pulling down everything that stood in their way (79)". This violent and invasive act demonstrates the extent to which the British were willing to go to maintain their dominance over the natives.

Furthermore, the novel highlights how military power is used to enforce compliance with colonial rule. The narrator reflects on how the British would use their military might to coerce the local population into following their orders. It highlights the power dynamic at play, in which the colonizers use fear and violence to maintain their control over the colonized.

The portrayal of the *Shutztruppe Askari* in the novel is even more haunting. The Germans employ African recruits called the askari to do their bidding, torturing villagers and slaughtering local chiefs who resist. The askari are portrayed as merciless in pursuing their white masters' cause, leaving the land devastated and its people starving and dying in the hundreds of thousands.

'Afterlives' is a powerful exploration of the themes of power and resistance, which are central to the novel's multi-dimensional narrative. The novel presents a nuanced exploration of the power dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized, as well as the various tactics used by both sides to exert and resist power.

Despite these oppressive power structures of the colonials, the colonized employed a range of tactics to resist them. The novel portrays both passive and active resistance by the colonized. Passive resistance involved the use of non-violent tactics, such as boycotting colonial products or refusing to pay taxes. Active resistance involved armed rebellion, such as the uprising depicted in the novel.

The use of passive resistance is demonstrated through characters that refuse to comply with the colonizers' demands. Hamza's statement, "I do not work for the British" (43), illustrates his rejection of involvement in the economic exploitation carried out by the colonial powers. This demonstrates how passive resistance can be a powerful tool in challenging the power dynamics of colonialism.

Additionally, the novel portrays armed resistance as another strategy employed by the colonized. Yusuf joins the resistance movement and fights against the British colonizers, risking his life in the struggle for freedom. By stating that "We are fighting for our land and our people (210)," he expresses the driving force behind his actions, emphasizing the importance of protecting their community. Through Yusuf's character, the novel highlights the willingness of the colonized to take extreme measures in their fight for self-determination and liberation.

Overall, 'Afterlives' portrays a complex exploration of power and resistance, showcasing the oppressive nature of colonialism and the resilience of the colonized. Through the portrayal of the various tactics used by both the colonizers and the colonized, the novel highlights the ongoing struggle for power and resistance.

Another form of resistance which was employed by them was cultural resistance. For instance, in one scene, a group of young men refuse to abandon their traditional dress despite the colonial authorities' efforts to impose Western clothing on them. One of the young men explains: "We will not give up our dress, which is our identity, just because it does not please the whites" (p. 67). This quote highlights the way in which the colonized people used cultural practices as a means of resisting the imposition of colonial culture.

Another form of resistance was political organization. The novel depicts the formation of political organizations among the colonized people, such as the Nationalist Party, which aimed to challenge the colonial authorities' power. In one scene, a character reflects on the importance of political organization, stating: "Our only hope was in organization, in being able to speak with one voice, in showing the world that we were a people united in our struggle (121)". This quote emphasizes the importance of political organization as a means of challenging the power structures of colonialism.

Armed struggle was also used as a tactic of resistance. The novel depicts the formation of guerrilla groups that waged armed struggle against the colonial powers. In one scene, a guerrilla fighter reflects on the need for armed struggle, stating: "We had to fight, because there was no other way. The quote "The colonialists would never give up their power willingly" (210) emphasizes the perception that armed resistance was essential in opposing colonial authority.

'Afterlives' also explores the psychological effects that wars have on individuals and their relationships. The novel is set in Zanzibar where the indigenous population becomes entangled in the complexities of war.

The war has caused a feeling of displacement among the people, resulting in further disruption to the island and its inhabitants. Ilyas's relationship with his childhood friend, Saleh, is a prime example of this, as the war forces them apart. Saleh joins the rebel forces while Ilyas is conscripted into the army. The novel delves into the psychological effects of this separation, with Ilyas grappling with the loss of his friend and struggling with feelings of waste, longing, and fear of never seeing Saleh again.

The way Ilyas's wife, Afiya, grapples with her husband's participation in the war is also indicative of the psychological impact of conflict, as she finds it difficult to accept that the man she loves is now a soldier, capable of killing and destroying homes and families.

The impact of war on relationships is also explored through the character of Yusuf, Ilyas's uncle, who has experienced the full force of colonialism and its legacy. Yusuf's relationship with his wife, Mariamu, is strained by his past experiences, with Yusuf struggling to come to terms with the fact that Mariamu is the daughter of a former colonial officer:

"Yusuf had always seen himself as a victim of the colonial system, and he could not escape the feeling that Mariamu was a symbol of that system (27)".

This sense of resentment and bitterness is a common theme throughout the novel, with many characters struggling to come to terms with the impact of colonialism and war on their lives and relationships. The novel's exploration of these themes is powerful and thought-provoking, highlighting the complex psychological effects of historical events on individuals and their relationships.

Throughout *Afterlives*, Gurnah's humanistic approach is evident, compensating for the novel's lack of engagement with the possibility of resistance to imperialism, a notable absence. Although the characters are deeply unhappy with the European world system that has disrupted their lives, there is no mention of anti-colonialism, which played a critical role in Africa's liberation from formal colonial rule. Even when the novel approaches decolonization, resistance is barely mentioned, with the *Mau Mau* uprising in Kenya and the British state's brutal response serving primarily as a backdrop. This absence may reflect Gurnah's experiences of being forced to leave a newly liberated Tanzania and his mixed feelings towards the postcolonial states that emerged.

Nonetheless, in a time where political resistance appears impossible, love and loyalty become essential, conveying a powerful contemporary message. While collective possibilities for resistance and solidarity may not be present in the novel, the novel's emphasis on love and loyalty reflects the importance of human relationships in a time of political turmoil.

Anuja feels that, "By telling these stories of the oppressed and their small triumphs in the face of overwhelming adversity, Gurnah takes an important step to counter the erasure of those who have been brutalised and left voiceless".

'*Afterlives*' is a thought-provoking novel that offers valuable insights into the politics of power and resistance, reminding us of the importance of standing up against oppression and fighting for freedom and justice. 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.

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