

# COLONIAL DIFFUSION AND ITS EFFECTS ON CULTURE IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S *AFTERLIVES*

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## ABSTRACT

*This research paper focuses on the arrival and expansion of colonial powers and the effect of colonialism on the culture of the Eastern Coast of Africa, particularly the Swahili-speaking areas in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*. The rulers and the political structure of a place shape the culture of that place, and hence, after the establishment of European rule, the centuries-old traditions and rules of African society were affected by the new ways of the new rulers. The colonial rule greatly affected the culture of the Eastern Coast of Africa as they introduced many of the things which were not part of the culture of African society. Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020) analyzes the reason behind the expansion of colonialism and how colonialism affected the culture that was centuries old in the Swahili-speaking areas of the Eastern Coast of Africa. Before the arrival of colonial powers, African society was divided into different tribes, and the tribal leaders were running the system according to their whims and fancies. There was no central government to control anything, and there were no marked boundaries. The arrival of Europeans changed everything. As a result, the centuries-old traditions of the Eastern Coast of Africa were changed, which ultimately affected the culture to a great extent. According to Lyotard (qtd. in Bhabha), "Tradition is that which concerns time" (81). It takes a considerable amount of time to build the traditions and culture of a place, but with the expansion of colonial rule, the centuries-old traditions and culture underwent significant changes.*

**Keywords:** Abdulrazak Gurnah, colonialism, tradition, culture, expansion.

## Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah, the 2021 Nobel Prize winner in Literature, was born in Zanzibar, now part of Tanzania. Zanzibar was a British protectorate when Gurnah was born on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1948. Before the British arrived in Zanzibar and established their presence in the late nineteenth century, Zanzibar was under the rule of Arab Omani rulers. The Arab rulers had governed and managed Zanzibar's affairs for many centuries. Due to Arab rule, Arabic had become the language of the elite in Zanzibar, and Islam had become the predominant religion among the people of Zanzibar. Many Mosques also appeared in various places in Zanzibar due to the spread of Islam. The education provided in Zanzibar's schools was also heavily influenced by religion, with the teachings of the Koran forming a significant part of the educational system. Many Arabs and people of Persian origin had settled down in Zanzibar, and most of the trade was also in the hands of the Arab population. Historically, Arabs had trading relations with traders from the Indian Subcontinent. Hence, Indian traders were also part of Zanzibar's trading culture.

The culture of Zanzibar was highly influenced by the rule of Omani rulers of Arab origin. Since the trade of slaves was part of the culture of the Arabian world, the slavery system also became part of the culture of Zanzibar along with the trade of slaves. Abdulrazak has also mentioned the veiled slavery in Zanzibar in two of his novels, *Paradise* and *Afterlives*. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the European powers arrived on the Eastern Coast of Africa and demonstrated their interest in controlling it in every way. The arrival of Germans and British on the Swahili-speaking coast occurred almost simultaneously, and these two powerful forces of the European world also confronted each other to gain control of various territories. With the arrival of European powers, European ways were also introduced to the Eastern Coast of

Africa, and many of the natives of Swahili-speaking areas also adopted the religion of the Europeans.

Abdulrazak Gurnah was born and raised in a time when the British were still in control of Zanzibar, and hence, the culture of Zanzibar was heavily influenced by British ways. The Educational system had also been affected by the presence of the British in Zanzibar, and Abdulrazak Gurnah had witnessed the period when the British left Zanzibar and how the departure of the British impacted the politics and culture of Zanzibar. As a result, Abdulrazak Gurnah has written extensively about the events that occurred in less than a century in the cultures in which he was raised and the one to which he migrated, in all his novels. However, all his stories are distinct from one another, despite drawing inspiration from the events that occurred in Zanzibar and his own life to write his novels. In his conversation with Nisha Jones, Gurnah states, "One book doesn't necessarily follow the last one logically, although it does come out of the same pool where all the books have come from. There are several different starting points for the novel." (37).

*Afterlives*, the tenth novel of Abdulrazak Gurnah, was published in 2020. This novel discusses how the colonial powers successfully established and expanded their rule in the Swahili-speaking areas of the East African coast. The Europeans were able to establish their control because they were superior in science and technology, and they possessed better weapons and equipment. Moreover, their forces were well-versed in war tactics and highly trained. The European powers were advanced and powerful, and the tribal and backward forces of the tribal rulers of Zanzibar and other places on the Swahili-speaking coast could do nothing in the face of the strong European powers. Most of the tribal kings remained silent looking at the strength and power of European powers. "It is the silence that turns imperial triumphalism" (Bhabha 176). Gurnah, through his novel *Afterlives*, also explores how the age-old traditions and culture of the Eastern coast of Africa were transformed under the rule established by European powers. It is not easy to change the culture as it takes centuries to build the culture of a place, but since the European powers were ruling that part of the world, they introduced many things which ultimately changed the centuries-old traditions of the Swahili-speaking areas of the Eastern Coast of Africa to a larger extent.

### **Exploration of Colonial Expansion in *Afterlives***

Abdulrazak Gurnah has spoken about the arrival and the establishment of European powers in his tenth novel, *Afterlives*. In *Afterlives*, Gurnah discusses the methods and strategies employed by the Germans and British to establish their rule on the Eastern Coast of Africa, particularly in the Swahili-speaking belt. Germans adopted their military force to establish their rule. Moreover, the Germans were ruthless, and they instilled fear in the hearts and minds of the local population to establish their rule. On the other hand, the British were successful in establishing their rule by introducing welfare schemes for the native populations of the lands they conquered.

The European powers went to Africa and other oriental places because these places were weak, weak in every sense. The oriental places were weak because they were "isolated from the mainstream of European progress" (Said 206). Hence, no progress had taken place in these places, and the people were still living in medieval times. The society was divided into different tribes, and the tribal leaders continued to employ medieval methods to govern the territories under their control. There was no question of any introduction to the new ways of life, and the

advancements that had taken place in the European world were not known to the Oriental world. As a result, the army of tribal leaders was unaware of the new technologies of war; hence, it was easy for European powers to establish their rule. Edward W. Said, in his book *Orientalism*, states, “The space of weaker or underdeveloped regions like the Orient was viewed as something inviting” (219). The weakness of Africa and other Oriental places was an open invitation for European powers to come and conquer the Oriental lands.

In Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*, the Local tribal rulers were not happy with the arrival of Germans, as it posed a significant challenge to the supremacy and authority of the local tribal kings. The local kings tried to stop the advancement of German forces, but as they were no match to the German technological advancement, they remained unsuccessful. Moreover Germans “responded with great determination and ruthlessness” (Gurnah 5). Moreover, the Germans knew that the rule of tribal leaders had made the local population and the tribal army a subject race. Hence, it would not be able for the local military to stand in front of the superior European forces. The lack of self-governance also played a significant role in the defeat of the local tribal leaders. Edward Said says:

You may look through the whole history of the Orientals in what is called, broadly speaking, the East, and you never find traces of self-government. All their great centuries – and they have been very great – have been passed under despotisms, under absolute government. All their great contributions to civilization – and they have been great – have been made under that form of government. Conqueror has succeeded conqueror; one domination has followed another, but never in all the revolutions of fate and fortune have you seen one of those nations of its own motion establish what we, from a Western point of view, call self-government. (32-33)

Because of the concept of no self-governance and the involvement of the local leaders in their self-pleasure, the local population was ignored, which led to poverty. The Germans took advantage of this situation and gave jobs to locals in the German army and named them “The schutztruppe, the army of African mercenaries known as askari” (8). These local soldiers, who now were part of the German military, fought for the Germans against the local kings and helped Germans win many battles against the local rulers.

In the process of establishing their rule, Germans showed how ruthless they were in establishing their fear in the hearts and minds of local rulers. “The Germans cut off the head of the Wahehe leader Mkwawa and sent it to Germany as a trophy. The schutztruppe askari, aided by local recruits from among the defeated people, were by then a highly experienced force of destructive power. They were proud of their reputation for viciousness” (Gurnah 8). Not only this, but the German forces crossed all limits, and “in the regions that had risen, the schutztruppe treated everyone as combatants. They burned villages, trampled fields, and plundered food stores. African bodies were left hanging on roadside gibbets in a landscape that was scorched and terrorized” (Gurnah 15). Talking about the ruthlessness of German forces, Pallavi Saxena says, “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” (354).

Christianity, the religion of Europeans, also helped establish colonial rule. “Christianity in some colonial cases is viewed as the religious arm of colonialism because both of them have

almost the same mission which works side by side” (Iskarna 184). Christianity came as a religion of reforms and the Christian missionaries opened many schools and health institutions. Christian missionaries came as reformers and had nothing to do with power, but it was under the influence of Christianity that the locals were exploited and conquered by the European powers.

Colonial forces also made the local population realize that the colonial powers are superior and the locals are inferior. As a result, the colonial powers made the local population realize that the local culture is inferior. Igboin says, “Colonial rule disrupted the traditional machinery of moral homogeneity and practice. The method of moral inculcation was vitiated, which resulted in the abandonment of traditional norms and values through a systematic depersonalisation of the African and paganisation of its values” (101). Moreover, the European powers also used violence to have control over culture, “Everything will be done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute our language for theirs and to destroy their culture without giving them ours” (Fanon 13). To establish their rule, the European powers also targeted the culture of the local people and disrupted their centuries-old traditions by imposing their own culture and traditions.

The British established their rule with the help of welfare schemes. These welfare schemes were beneficial for the local population's betterment and also generated employment opportunities for those living in poverty. “The British mandate government had announced an expansion in school-building and literacy drive” (Gurnah 218). Not only this, but “the administration was also expanding its activities in agriculture, public works and health care” (Gurnah 218). The British also understood the importance of trade and business, and “When they took over from the Germans, the British brought in their own people to do business here. They brought them from India and from Kenya, and those new Indians sank their teeth in here fast” (Gurnah 208). The methods of expanding their rule were completely different for the British than those of the Germans. Germans used force to establish their rule, while the British introduced welfare schemes to win the hearts and minds of the local population and establish their own rule.

### **Analyzing the Effects of Colonialism on Culture in *Afterlives***

The system that guides the functioning of a society is referred to as its culture. Culture is not developed in a day or a decade; it takes generations and centuries to develop a place's unique culture. The Swahili-speaking areas of the Eastern Coast of Africa had a culture that was built up over centuries by different generations. The local rulers and the religion of the rulers contributed a lot to building the culture. After the arrival of the European powers, the culture of the colonized territories was greatly affected by the ways of the colonisers. The colonizers had projected themselves as a superior race. Hence, the local population started copying the ways and traditions of the Europeans. The new politics that came into the limelight after the European powers took control affected the local culture as “Politics and culture has always been an interdisciplinary” (Berezin 376).

Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, writes, “In disavowing the culturally differentiated condition of the colonial world – in demanding ‘Turn white or disappear’ – the colonizer is himself caught in the ambivalence of paranoid identification” (87-88). The colonizers wanted the local population to follow their culture as it is easy to control the society if culture is controlled. The Europeans had gained supremacy, so it was easy for the whites to impose their culture on the local population. The local population had no option but to follow what they

were told to follow. “In that uncertainty lurks the white-masked black man; and from such ambivalent identification – black skin, white masks – it is possible, I believe, to redeem the pathos of cultural confusion into a strategy of political subversion” (Bhabha 88-89). The local population started following the culture of whites and slowly moved away from their original culture.

In *Afterlives*, while discussing the expansion of Germans, Abdulrazak Gurnah notes that after the Germans had demonstrated their supremacy, everything related to them was elite and was highly regarded in society. German language had become the language of the influential and the powerful, and all those who could speak German had a respectable position in the society. It was easy for Ilyas to get a job as he could speak “German as if it’s his native language” (Gurnah 21). Ilyas lived in the company of German missionaries, as he was kidnapped by a German soldier who handed him to the Christian missionaries. Ilyas had forgotten how to pray like Muslims because he was in a Christian missionary school and was made to pray like a Christian. “There was a mosque in the nearby mountain town but no one at the farm or the school told him he should go there. Then at some point it was too late to learn, too shaming” (Gurnah 25). The cultural change that Ilyas underwent was a result of colonialism. Many natives of the colonised world adopted and accepted the religion of Europeans as it was “the religion of the European sahibs” (Bhabha 146).

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha, states that religion “teaches that it does not signify what a man eats or drinks. EATING is nothing before God. Not that which entereth into a man’s mouth defileth him” (147). As a result, the eating habits of those converted to the religion of Europeans also changed. Pascal, a native of Africa who had accepted Christianity as he was given a job in the German mission, had started eating all that is eaten by Christians. Pascal was a born Muslim, and many things are prohibited to eat in Islam, but after accepting Christianity, Pascal started eating everything that are eaten by Christians. Eating habits are an important part of any culture. With the adaptation of new eating habits, the culture of the local population was also changing slowly.

After the departure of the Germans, the British arrived. Abdulrazak Gurnah says that the British brought their system and culture with them. The British ways were different than that of the Germans. “The British mandate government had announced an expansion in school-building and literacy drive” (Gurnah 218). The establishment of the welfare schemes was the way for the Britishers to establish themselves. “The administration was also expanding its activities in agriculture, public works and health care” (Gurnah 218). The expansion of welfare schemes also created the opportunities of employment to the local population. There were no opportunities of mass employment before the British had come. The British created new job opportunities with the introduction of modern education and modern healthcare. Such schemes created a new culture that was new to the natives.

Though the British had introduced many new things, the local population was still not ready to accept the changes as it is not easy to change the centuries-old culture in one go. Bi Asha, Khalifa’s wife, was still not ready to go to the hospital and see a doctor as it was not the culture of the local population to go to healthcare facilities. “Khalifa pleaded with her to go to the hospital or at least to see the Indian doctor, but Bi Asha said no, she did not need that kind of attention” (Gurnah 226). Instead of going to the hospital, Bi Asha wanted to see Hakim, the local priest. Hakim gave “a small porcelain plate with a gilded border on which were written

lines of the Koran in a dark brown ink. He explained that the ink was an extract of the flesh of the walnut, which itself has medicinal qualities” (Gurnah 227-228). Hakim’s method had no science and practicality of modern healthcare, and hence, there was no improvement in the condition of Bi Asha.

Another example of staying with the traditions is seen when Afiya was pregnant, and she also “preferred to go into the labour in the presence of the women she knew than to suffer the attentions of complete strangers, so despite the administration’s Maternity Health campaign she did not go to the new clinic for birth” (233). Afiya had decided to go with the old traditional ways, but she and her husband, Hamza, decided to get their son vaccinated and follow modern healthcare facilities. “Hamza took him to the hospital for the recommended vaccinations and watched diligently over his health. Child deaths were not uncommon but many of the illnesses that took them away were avoidable” (Gurnah 237). The local population had begun adopting the ways of the British and started drifting away from their traditions, embracing the new culture. The introduction of new things by the British changed the local culture to a great extent. “Education and public health became their priorities. They made a big effort to inform people about health issues, to train medical assistants and to open dispensaries in far-flung parts of the colony. They distributed information leaflets and conducted tours by medical teams to instruct people on malaria prevention and good childcare” (238).

The introduction of new things also created job opportunities for the local population. Traditionally, women stayed at home and rarely went out to work, but the introduction of new welfare schemes required the participation of women employees as well. Women going out for work was a significant change in the local culture. It also helped their families economically, and women also felt important as they came to a position where they could contribute to the development of their families. Afiya heard from Khalifa about a campaign to recruit young mothers to train as midwife assistants. The new maternity clinic was a big success, although expectant mothers only went for the antenatal events, and most of them refused to deliver there. They wanted to recruit more midwife assistants to provide a comprehensive service, including visiting mothers at home. The candidates were required to be literate enough to write basic notes and read simple manuals, and to be fluent in Kiswahili. It was thought their experience of childbirth would benefit other expectant mothers to whom they would also be able to communicate with nuance rather than just issuing instructions and prohibitions. When she told Hamza he was enthusiastic. You fit all the requirements, he said. There is such a need for it, and you yourself will learn new skills. (Gurnah 242-243)

The English administration also introduced newspapers to the local population. As a result any newspapers “had appeared in recent years: in Kiswahili, in English and even in German for the settlers who chose to remain after the war” (Gurnah 245). The British also did the introduction of radio. “It aired news and music programmes and features on improvements in health, agriculture and education” (266). The culture was changing gradually as society adopted the changes introduced by the colonial powers.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Afterlives* focuses on the expansion of colonialism and its impact on the culture of the Eastern Coast of Africa. Before the arrival of European powers in the Swahili-speaking areas, the society was governed by an age-old tribal system. The tribal style of governance had also influenced the culture, and people were ages away from what was

happening in the European world. The European world had witnessed the advent of modernity due to the Industrial Revolution, but the African population was still living in times when there was no provision for self-governance. Most of the population was living in poverty, and there was no employment. There was no proper education system, and schools primarily taught religious teachings. In the name of healthcare, local priests who also worked as doctors for society were the only pillar of support.

The arrival of colonial powers provided employment opportunities for the local population, as European powers sought to recruit local people into the Army and various organisations, which were necessary for maintaining control over the masses. The employment opportunities created by the colonial forces helped the local population escape poverty. Christianity also reached the Eastern Coast of Africa, and many individuals educated at missionary schools and working at Christian missions were converted to Christianity. The adoption of new religions not only helped European powers strengthen their control over the natives but also significantly altered the culture. Religion is a way of life. When religion changes, so does the way of life. With the change in lifestyle, the culture of that place also changes.

The introduction of modern education also significantly changed the culture. The use of foreign languages increased, and those who could speak the languages of the colonisers began to gain respect in society. People who had never seen a doctor in their lives and were primarily dependent on the local priest in case of a medical emergency began going to hospitals for health facilities. It marked a significant shift in the culture of the East African coast. The introduction of newspapers and radio introduced the local population to the broader world, allowing people to learn about all that was happening on the rest of the planet. It significantly changed the culture. People got to know about the outer world and started going out of country for higher education and other purposes. The culture altered by the presence of colonial powers persisted among the local population even after the colonial powers had departed. According to Said (qtd. in Klikauer), "Although the "age of empire" ended mainly after the Second World War, when most colonies gained independence, imperialism continues to exert considerable cultural influence" (151). The influence of colonial powers on the local culture remained, and it "did not end with independence" (Escosura 2).

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