



# Settler Colonialism, Genocide, Language Appropriation and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*

## Correspondence:

Ishfaq Ullah  
<Ishfaqullah@gmail.com>

M.Phil. Scholar, Department of English, The University of Lahore, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Dr. Hafiz Muhammad Zahid Iqbal  
<zahidiqbal.litt@gmail.com>

Assistant Professor, Department of English, The University of Lahore, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

## Publication details:

Received: April 10, 2023

Accepted: May 28, 2023

Published: June 30, 2023

## Abstract

This study explores how Abdulrazak Gurnah's (2020) novel, *Afterlives* engages itself with the themes of settler colonialism, genocide and oppression, and language appropriation. Using settler colonialism as a theoretical framework, we aim to trace the oppression and genocide faced by the native Africans as a result of settler colonialism. As Gurnah (2020) has also appropriated the dominant language of the colonizers to foreground the role of the local language in the transmission of indigenous cultural values, Bill Ashcroft et al.'s (2002) ideas on language appropriation and abrogation have been taken into account to find out how the novel becomes an illustration of a postcolonial text in terms of its strategic use of the colonizers' language with a fresh signification. Patrick Wolfe (2006) who proposed the theory of 'settler colonialism and the elimination of the natives' argues that German and British settlers used various strategies to eliminate the native Africans' history, language, and culture. Following Wolfe's (2006) insights on settler colonialism, this study will highlight how the novel delineates European colonialism as affecting the socio-economic life of the African people by imposing linguistic and religious hegemonies and forced exile. The infliction of European policies was unacceptable to the African people, and it, therefore, caused a clash between colonizers and colonized in colonial settings.

**Keywords:** settler colonialism, language appropriation, genocide, oppression, colonialism

## 1. Introduction

Gurnah, born in 1948 in Zanzibar, is a Tanzanian-British novelist and academic renowned for his works of fiction that delve into themes of migration, identity crises, and colonialism. His upbringing in a society deeply impacted by colonialism and his own migration to Britain in the 1960s have significantly influenced his writing. Gurnah's literary works explore the intricate relationships between colonizers and the colonized, shedding light on the enduring effects of colonialism on individuals and societies. His writing style is distinguished by elegant prose, well-developed characters, and a nuanced examination of complex themes. His contributions to postcolonial literature and world literature have earned widespread recognition.

Gurnah's novel "Afterlives" (2020) has garnered praise for its exploration of the impact of colonialism on African societies. The novel weaves together the stories of various characters, including Hamza, Ilyas, and Afiya, who have all been exploited by settler colonialism. This exploitation is facilitated through the imposition of foreign languages, education, religion, and economic systems on the native population. Through the characters' reflections, the novel delves into themes of language appropriation, identity, genocide, and the consequences of these strategies on the colonized.

While Gurnah has authored nine acclaimed novels, including "Paradise" (1994), "By the Sea" (2001), and "Desertion" (2005), which revolve around the themes of migration and identity crises in colonial and postcolonial contexts, this study specifically examines East Africa through the political and colonial lens of genocide as articulated in his renowned work, "Afterlives." To contribute to recent trends in genocide studies, this research engages with Patrick Wolfe's (2006) article, "Settler Colonialism and Elimination of the Native." Wolfe, a significant figure in the field of settler colonialism, is known for his analysis of the link between the settler colonial logic of elimination and the exploitation and genocide of indigenous peoples.

Wolfe introduced a groundbreaking approach to the study of settler colonialism by linking it to genocide studies, particularly in the context of settler colonial societies and how it negatively impacted the lives of colonized races. Wolfe argued that settler colonialism and genocide are closely intertwined, as settler colonialism is a land-focused endeavor that seeks to eradicate indigenous cultures and replace them with those of the settlers. The logic of elimination is central to the guiding ideology of settler colonialism. Indigenous people could resist this ideology simply by remaining on their land, highlighting that colonization is never an innocent and apolitical project; the act of land acquisition itself is viewed as genocidal. Wolfe noted that land is essential for life, and disputes over land often escalate into life-or-death struggles. Consequently, settler colonialism has been associated with European expansion and colonization, involving violence, forced relocation, and the suppression or assimilation of indigenous peoples.

Genocide, a term coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1944, refers to the deliberate and systematic extermination of a specific group based on factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality. Lemkin called on the international community in 1933 to prohibit the destruction of human groups, encompassing both physical and cultural aspects. He identified eight strategies of genocidal destruction, including political, social, cultural, economic, biological, physical, religious, and moral dimensions. The United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) defines genocide as acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. This definition specifically prohibits forced transfer of children, forced exile, banning the use of national languages, destruction of books and documents, monuments, and objects of historical, artistic, or religious value.

Acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. The Convention specifically prohibits forced transfer of children, forced exile, banning the use of national language, destruction of books and documents, monuments, and objects of historical, artistic, or religious value. (UN, 1948)



Despite the widespread acknowledgment of genocidal atrocities, including the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust, some countries and governments persist in refusing to recognize them as acts of genocide. The historical development of genocide literature traces back to the emergence of Holocaust studies. Claudia Card's concept of "Genocide and Social Death," articulated in 2003, contends that genocide encompasses not only the physical deaths of groups but also necessitates the social and psychological death of the affected people. Card (2003) further asserts that the prevalent framing of genocide as solely physical extermination poses problems as it risks overlooking the perspectives and lived experiences of victims who may not have lost their lives but have suffered the loss of loved ones, leading to the breakdown of the social bonds on which their relationships depended. Card concludes that the social marginalization of groups should also be regarded as an act of genocide, coining the term 'social death' to describe such occurrences.

In contrast, Wolfe (2006) presents a distinctive perspective on the relationship between settler colonialism and genocide. He argues that while settler colonialism is the root cause of genocide, it is not inherently genocidal, as it is fundamentally eliminative in nature. The eradication of indigenous cultures constitutes a central tenet of settler colonialism's guiding ideology, which may involve the removal of indigenous peoples from official records but does not always necessitate their physical extermination. Whitt and Clarke (2019) further expound that settler colonialism is not a static or consistent phenomenon; its genocidal tendencies may become more pronounced when its ambitions for land acquisition are contested. Therefore, settler colonialism is not inherently genocidal but creates conditions that increase the likelihood of genocide occurring. In this context, this study explores the brutal and genocidal actions of German settlers in the African colonies, with a particular focus on Gurnah's (2020) novel, "Afterlives." This literary work portrays the actual events that transpired during these horrific acts of violence and genocide, offering an authentic depiction of settler colonialism. This research not only addresses the concepts of oppression and genocide but also sheds light on the lives of Africans in the aftermath of the devastation wrought by imperial powers.

Language appropriation, also known as linguistic appropriation, refers to the phenomenon wherein one group takes over, either wholly or partially, the language of another group. Appropriation often involves the use of language to explore one's own cultural experiences. As Ashcroft et al. (2002) observe, "Appropriation is a process by which language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience" (p. 38). They further elucidate that language is a versatile tool that can be adapted and utilized in various ways to express diverse cultural experiences. In his novel "Afterlives," Gurnah (2020), while delving into the postcolonial history of Africa, incorporates and appropriates various languages such as Swahili and German alongside English, the predominant language of the novel. This linguistic diversity captures the hybridized cultural associations of the African characters within the narrative.

## 2. Literature Review

Genocide has tragically marred human history throughout different epochs. Mass killings and exploitation have exhibited both internal and external dimensions across time. Leaders, nationalists, and tribes have committed genocidal acts against their political and religious adversaries throughout history. Similar to ancient empires, modern nation-states have engaged in mass killings, driven by real or imagined enemies. Wolfe (2006) underscores the profound link between settler colonialism and genocide, a connection that is vital to acknowledge when assessing the destructive nature of settler colonial societies. This is because settlers may perpetrate genocide, even if it is not an explicit state policy.

Veracini (2011), in his article "Introducing Settler Colonial Studies," differentiates between colonialism and settler colonialism. Veracini (2011) argues that various groups of colonizers demand different things from the colonized. Settlers require labor, including physical, spiritual, consumption, sexual, and reproductive labor, while simultaneously seeking the elimination of the native populations through methods such as evasion, conversion, absorption, assimilation, and amalgamation. Kauanui (2016) further distinguishes between settler colonialism and genocide, contrasting settler colonialism with traditional colonialism.

Kauanui (2016) contends that the concept of "structural genocide" sheds light on the interplay between spatial displacement, mass killings, and bio-cultural assimilation, without getting bogged down in evaluating degrees of severity. Furthermore, he posits that settler colonialism is fundamentally focused on land acquisition, necessitating the elimination of indigenous populations. To delve into the logic of elimination in settler-colonial theory concerning indigenous peoples, Whitt and Clarke (2019) highlight that settler colonialism necessitates the erasure of indigenous populations to establish their own communities on the land, inevitably leading to genocide and violence in the affected territories. They apply Wolfe's (2006) "logic of elimination" as a theoretical lens to expound upon and broaden the scope of settler colonialism within the context of genocidal studies. Whitt and Clarke (2019) assert that settler-colonizers seek to permanently settle in a specific area, with their primary objective being the acquisition and control of the land itself. Therefore, the territorial project prioritizes the displacement of indigenous peoples from their land rather than merely exploiting the land for economic gain through labor.

In creative writing, authors' language choices hold a profound connection to the intended meanings they wish to convey (Iqbal, 2022). With this perspective in mind, this study conducts a textual analysis of Abdulrazak Gurnah's (2020) "Afterlives," employing the theoretical lens of settler colonialism and the elimination of indigenous populations. Additionally, the study examines the language appropriation strategies employed by the author in the novel. The objective is to scrutinize both the violent and non-violent conflicts and interactions between Africans and settlers in eastern and southern Africa during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as depicted in the novel under discussion.

## 3. Methodology

The theoretical framework consists of settler colonialism as espoused in Wolfe's (2006) article, "Settler Colonialism and Elimination of the Native" and his seminal book, "Settler Colonialism and The Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of Ethnographic Event". It is a text-based study and the selected novel serves as the primary source of data, for which textual analysis is used as an analytical method. To be more precise in approach, the 'content analysis' or in the case of this research 'literary content analysis which is a technique of textual analysis, is quite useful to explore the written texts. Krippendorff (2004) defines content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (p. 18). Thus, the technique provides effective means through which the novel may be given a new interpretation as the study not only investigates how Germans engaged themselves in genocide against indigenous populations but also examines the aftermath of war and colonialism on the lives of the colonized.

## 4. Discussion and Analysis

In his exploration of the connection between colonialism and genocide, Wolfe (2006) astutely remarks that "the issue of genocide is never far from settler colonialism discussions" (p. 393). While colonialism itself does not necessarily equate to genocide, extensive research reveals a profound and intrinsic link between the two. Wolfe (2006) defines settler colonialism as a distinct form of colonialism that involves the mass migration and settlement of a considerable number of people in an occupied territory, often with the objective of establishing a new way of life. This process typically entails the displacement and marginalization of indigenous populations, who are viewed as impediments to be either subjugated or eradicated in pursuit of the colonizers' objectives.

In "Afterlives," Gurnah (2020) narrates the story of Ilyas, a young boy from Zanzibar who is forcibly taken from his village and sold into the Schutztruppe, the official name of the colonial troops in the African territories of the German colonial empire during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to 1918. The novel delves into Ilyas's journey across diverse cultures and his struggle to find his place in the world.

Gurnah's (2020) novel unequivocally highlights that such displacement and marginalization within colonial settings frequently lead to violence and genocide. The history of settler colonialism in Africa bears witness to a long and brutal legacy of violence against indigenous peoples. This history includes the forced relocation of entire communities, the spread of diseases, and direct acts of violence and massacre. The process of colonizing the continent involved forcibly separating Indigenous children from their families and implementing policies aimed at eradicating Indigenous cultures and languages. As Wolfe (2006) notes, colonizers believed that they were the sole rightful owners of the land and could exploit it more effectively than the native inhabitants. Gurnah's (2020) novel vividly portrays this dynamic.

Those were the years of the al Bushiri uprising, during which Arab and Waswahili coastal and caravan traders resisted the German claim that they were the rulers of the land. The Germans and the British and the French and the Belgians and the Portuguese and the Italians and whoever else had already had their congress and drawn their maps and signed their treaties, so this resistance was neither here nor there. (p. 11)

Gurnah's (2020) novel underscores a pivotal moment in East African history, particularly within the context of the colonial era. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, European powers began to exert increasing influence in the region, marking the onset of a period characterized by colonial conquest and dominance. However, the local population, particularly those engaged in trade along the coast and caravan routes, fiercely resisted this foreign rule.

Historical accounts reveal that settlers often held the belief that they were inherently superior to the indigenous people of the lands they had colonized. This sentiment was no different among the Germans, who regarded themselves as superior and Africans as inferior. Settler colonial ideologies are fundamentally rooted in the conviction of the settlers' superiority and the perceived inferiority of indigenous peoples. This frequently resulted in the imposition of dehumanizing conditions and the perpetration of cultural genocide against the native population, including the suppression of their languages, cultural practices, and religious beliefs. Additionally, the portrayal of indigenous culture and governance as inherently flawed and unsuccessful further contributed to the marginalization of indigenous peoples. In Gurnah's (2020) novel, this aspect is aptly depicted when it references the Germans boasting about their racial superiority and scholarship.

We have come here to civilize you. You don't even know what mathematics is, do you? We have come here to bring you this, mathematics, and many other clever things that you would not have without us. 'Only I don't think you will ever learn mathematics. It requires a mental discipline you people are not capable of. (p. 63)

This reflects a common colonial belief that European knowledge and practices were superior to those of colonized peoples. This self-proclaimed belief was used to justify the foreign occupation of the land and the imposition of European educational systems and knowledge on the colonized populations, often with the aim of assimilating them into European culture and erasing their own cultural practices and knowledge. In fact, in colonial settings, those who resisted the colonizers' tyrannical rule were met with exemplary death sentences as a warning to others not to interfere in the smooth functioning of colonial institutions (Iqbal & Abbas, 2022, p. 209).

This illustrates how genocide and settler colonialism in Africa are closely intertwined. Settlers' claims of supremacy have been used as tools of exploitation, oppression, genocide, and violence against indigenous people. The Germans, under the guise of executing developmental projects in Africa, actively encouraged Europeans to settle in the region. The expulsion of Africans from their homeland was a deliberate tactic used to facilitate European settler colonial expansion. This tactic involved the destruction and burning of villages, as well as the mass killing of civilians, with the aim of not only acquiring territory but also disrupting the people's connection to their land and culture. Gurnah (2020) therefore views the German colonizers' developmental zeal with suspicion, as he remarks: "The railway from Mombasa to Kisumu was under construction and the colonial policy of encouraging Europeans to settle in British East Africa, as they called it at the time, was approved and launched" (p. 13). This policy aimed to create a permanent European presence in the region and establish German control over the land and resources, often at the expense of displacing local communities.

Furthermore, scholars in Genocide studies have affirmed the idea that settlers solidified their control of the occupied territories through wars and violence against the natives. We argue that settler colonialism is a structure that utilizes violence as a tool to perpetuate its ideology. Although settler colonial narratives often celebrate violence against indigenous peoples as defensive, this violence ultimately leads to genocide. Wolfe (2006) elaborates that settlers' primary means of expansion are the murderous acts of the frontier rabble. East Africa shared similar violent activities committed by Germans and British on its soil, including the killing of rebellion leaders, burning of villages, and torture of civilians. Gurnah's (2020) novel foregrounds the atrocities of Germans in Africa, noting that after killing rebel leaders, the Germans would send their heads to Germany as a sign of their victory against the indigenous people. Gurnah (2020) exemplifies resistance against the Germans through the audacious Wahehe leader, Mkwawa, who resisted the colonizing regime until his last breath, with his head eventually severed and sent to Germany as a symbol of victory. Additionally, Gurnah (2020) notes that German officers were vicious and took pride in their viciousness, and their administration encouraged such behavior: "They have experienced the force of destructive power. They were proud of their reputation for viciousness, and their officers and the administrators ... loved them to be just like that" (p. 14).

Furthermore, Gurnah (2020) portrays the colonizers' atrocities and massacres by referencing another real event during World War I, where the British Royal Navy attacked a hospital where Germans were treating their wounded soldiers. During this war, several hundred troops were killed, and no one bothered to count them. By referring to the world war in the novel, Gurnah (2020) aims to illustrate the barbarity of the Europeans, committed against humanity in the name of spreading their civilizational values to distant lands. The ferocity they unleashed upon the natives and among themselves defies any justification, as they dehumanized the entire world. They killed thousands of people, burned the natives' crops, cattle, and villages: "They burned villages and trampled fields and plundered food stores. African bodies were left hanging on roadside gibbets in a landscape that was scorched and terrorized" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 20). The novel thus illustrates that settler colonialism has operated on the premise of eliminating the natives to quell any fear of revolt against the occupiers. In the novel, when Ilyas, the protagonist, praises the Germans for their occasional acts of kindness, another character, Mahmudu, instantly interrupts him and says:

Listen, just because one German man has been kind to you does not change what has happened here over the years... In the thirty years or so that they have occupied this land, the Germans have killed so many people that the country is littered with skulls and bones and the earth is soggy with blood. I am not exaggerating. (p. 43)

The preceding lines clearly convey that, for Gurnah (2020), colonialism is never benevolent for humankind, as it often incites violence and leads to genocide in the conquered lands, resulting in the extermination of the perceived "uncivilized" or "barbaric" indigenous populations. Settlers typically brought wholesale slaughter and forced displacement of indigenous peoples from their settled lands, and Africa was no exception to such a colonial policy.

Lastly, Gurnah's (2020) novel simultaneously exhibits various linguistic influences, reflecting the linguistic diversity of Zanzibar. One of the ways in which Gurnah (2020) employs language appropriation is through the use of Swahili words and phrases in the novel. Gurnah's (2020) inclusion of Swahili words like "wanyamwezi," "wachagga," "wameru," "mnafiki," and "kanga," among others from the novel, highlights his desire to showcase his hybrid identity by incorporating Swahili into a predominantly English-written novel. The novel employs techniques such as code-switching and translation of local language expressions as methods of language appropriation. Swahili is a Bantu language widely spoken in East Africa and serves as a marker of cultural identity for the characters. By including Swahili terms in the dialogue and narrative, Gurnah (2020) enriches the cultural context of the story and captures the linguistic realities of the characters' lives. Ren and Han (2023) noted that individual Kiswahili languages are scattered throughout Gurnah's novels. In Gurnah's narratives, language is used as an inherent symbol of cultural memory for his characters to authenticate themselves while maintaining an independent yet hybrid identity in a

foreign environment. Gurnah (2020) occasionally uses Kiswahili while writing in English to remind the diaspora of the value of speaking Kiswahili and preserving their connection to their culture. Additionally, Gurnah's prose style incorporates a lyrical quality, with vivid descriptions and metaphors that draw on local imagery and cultural references. This use of figurative language contributes to the immersive experience of the novel and adds depth to the cultural and emotional landscapes explored within the story.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Gurnah's (2020) novel forcefully conveys the role of German settlers in East Africa in perpetuating the repression and genocide of indigenous peoples and cultures. According to Gurnah (2020), settler colonialism has had a profoundly hegemonic impact, normalizing the occupation of East Africa by the Germans and exploiting resources and lands to which indigenous peoples have deep spiritual and genealogical connections. Furthermore, Gurnah's (2020) novel utilizes colonialism as a textual backdrop to depict the lives of African people entangled with oppression and genocide perpetrated by the Germans in the region. Through the incorporation of language appropriation in "Afterlives," Gurnah (2020) not only captures the linguistic diversity of the settings but also delves into the power dynamics, historical legacies, and cultural complexities that arise from cultural and linguistic interactions in colonial settings.

**Funding:** This study was not funded in any shape or form by any party.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

## Bio-note:

**Ishfaq Ullah** is a dedicated scholar currently pursuing an M.Phil. degree in the Department of English at The University of Lahore, located in Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan. With a passion for literature and language, Ishfaq is actively engaged in academic research and contributes to the academic community with his scholarly work.

**Dr. Hafiz Muhammad Zahid Iqbal** is an accomplished academic serving as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at The University of Lahore, situated in Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan. With extensive experience in the field of English literature, Dr. Iqbal is a valuable asset to both his institution and the academic community, contributing to the advancement of knowledge in the realm of English studies.

## References

- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, T. (2022). *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Routledge.
- Card, C. (2003). Genocide and social death. *Hypatia*, 18(1), 63–79. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2003.tb00735.x>.
- Gurnah, A. (2020). *Afterlives*. Bloomsbury.
- Han, W., & Ren, Z. (2023). Postcolonial, intellectual, and identity: Three aspects of Abdul Razak Gurnah's novel. *Journal of East-West Thought*. <https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/concern/publications/sq87c220t>
- Iqbal, H. M. Z., & Abbas, A. (2022). Slavery, racism and colonial ambivalence: A postcolonial perspective on Aphra Behn's oroonoko, or the royal slave: A true history. *Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review*, 6(2), 201-211.
- Iqbal, H. M. Z. (2022). Lexical choice and crazy-wisdom: A usage-based interpretation of Bāhū's abyāt. *SAGE Open*, 12(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221078312>
- Kauanui, J. K. (2016). A structure, not an event: Settler colonialism and enduring indigeneity. *Lateral*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.25158/L5.1.7>.
- Lemkin, R. (2008). *Axis rule in occupied Europe, laws of occupation analysis government, proposals for redress*. (2nd ed.). The Lawbook Exchange.
- Veracini, L. (2011). Introducing settler colonial studies. *Settler Colonial Studies*, 1(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2011.10648799>.
- Whitt, L., & Clarke, A. W. (2019). *North American genocides: Indigenous nations, settler colonialism, and international law*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wolfe, P. (1999). *Settler colonialism and the transformation of anthropology: The politics and poetics of ethnographic event*. Cassell.
- Wolfe, P. (2006). Settler colonialism and elimination of the native. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8(4), 387-409. <http://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>.