

Wounded Masculinities and Silenced Femininities: Humiliation in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*

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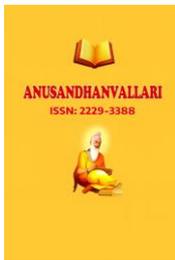
Abstract

Postcolonial Criticism has long been invested in themes of violence, resistance, displacement, and identity, but the very concept of humiliation remains untouched and overlooked. Often subsumed under terms like oppression, suppression, exploitation, and others, the concept of humiliation is disregarded. Humiliation matters and requires special attention because it addresses not only the physical harm but also the systematic erosion of dignity, agency, and self-recognition. Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* offers a compelling literary site for examining humiliation as both a colonial strategy and a gendered experience. This paper argues that humiliation in *Afterlives* is profoundly gendered, shaped by the intersection of colonial power and indigenous patriarchy. Male humiliation is enacted through militarized discipline, bodily punishment, and coerced complicity with the empire, while female humiliation manifests through social erasure, sexual vulnerability, and affective dispossession. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory, the paper demonstrates that Gurnah's work complicates nationalist and masculinist narratives of colonial history by foregrounding quiet suffering and intimate degradation, particularly among women.

Keywords: Humiliation, Colonialism, Violence, Subjugation, Subaltern, Dignity, Degradation

Introduction:

Abdulrazak Gurnah, a Tanzanian-born British writer and recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, consistently foregrounds humiliation as the most enduring and intimate legacy of colonialism. Unlike other postcolonial writers who emphasize resistance, revolt, or nationalist recovery, Gurnah attends to quiet suffering, minor lives, and unheroic endurance. His fiction reframes colonial history not as spectacle, but as a slow erosion of dignity enacted in homes, workplaces, and intimate relationships. Gurnah's novel *Afterlives*, set in colonial East Africa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, traces the intertwined lives of Afia, Asha, Hamza, Ilyas, and Khalifa against the backdrop of colonial intrusion, imperial militarism, forced labor, and political upheaval. Instead of dwelling on anti-colonial rebellion, Gurnah focuses on ordinary lives marked by silence, endurance, and constrained choices. This narrative strategy allows humiliation to emerge not as an episodic brutality but as a structural condition of colonial existence. *Afterlives* by Gurnah offers a profoundly textured exploration of colonial East Africa, foregrounding the intimate and structural forms of humiliation produced under German Rule and its enduring aftermath. The novel examines how colonial power operates not merely through overt violence or economic exploitation, but through systematic practices of degradation that assault dignity, agency, and self-worth. The characters encounter humiliation in varied ways, like physical subjugation, psychological erasure, familial denial, and social marginalization, revealing how colonialism infiltrates the most private domains of life. These cumulative experiences produce long-lasting internal scars.

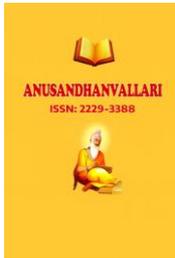


Gurnah situates humiliation within a broader ethical and historical framework. He does not represent humiliation solely as abjection; rather, he traces how individuals negotiate, absorb, resist, and occasionally transform humiliating conditions into modes of survival and “mutated” defiance. In doing so, the novel aligns with postcolonial critiques that view humiliation as central to the maintenance of empire, while also emphasizing its afterlives, how the memory and residue of humiliation persist across generations, relationships, and postcolonial futures. Humiliation enables a nuanced reading of *Afterlives* that moves beyond binaries of victimhood and resistance. It illuminates the subtle mechanisms through which colonial power dehumanizes, and equally the fragile, often compromised forms of dignity that characters strive to reclaim. Hence, humiliation functions as a critical category through which Gurnah interrogates history, memory, and the moral cost of empire.

Sanjay Palwekar defines humiliation as “the abasement of pride, which creates mortification or leads to a state of being humbled or reduced to lowliness or submission.” It is an emotion felt by a person whose social status, either by force or willingly, has decreased. Also, E Linder defines humiliation as “the enforced lowering of a person or group in ways that violate dignity and self-respect.” In colonial contexts, humiliation is not only incidental but also institutionalized, embedded within administrative, military, and social structures. Colonial regimes humiliate not merely through violence but through normalizing inequality. Frantz Fanon’s work remains foundational in understanding humiliation as a colonial technology. In *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon identifies humiliation as central to racial domination, arguing that colonialism produces a fractured self through constant symbolic and bodily degradation. The colonized subject internalizes inferiority, leading to alienation from both self and community. Ashish Nandy extends this argument by emphasizing the psychological dimensions of colonialism. In *The Intimate Enemy*, he contends that colonial power humiliates by reshaping desire, morality, and self-perception. Humiliation, for Nandy, is effective precisely because it operates invisibly, infiltrating everyday life.

In *Afterlives*, colonial domination operates less through spectacular violence than through a sustained practice of humiliation that functions as “a weapon of the mind”. Gurnah reveals how the empire disciplines its subjects not only by controlling land and bodies but by reconfiguring interior life, training the colonized to anticipate inferiority, accept disposability, and internalize silence. Humiliation in the novel is neither episodic nor incidental; it is a deliberate psychological technology that precedes and outlasts physical coercion. By embedding shame, dependency, and self-doubt into everyday relations like military service, labor, gender roles, and post war survival, colonial power ensures that domination persists even in the absence of overt force. *Afterlives* thus expose humiliation as an invisible but enduring instrument of empire, one that corrodes dignity from within and transforms survival itself into a compromised condition.

The internalization of humiliation in *Afterlives* is most poignantly articulated through Khalifa’s existential crisis following the loss of his parents and his subsequent displacement. Orphaned by disease and severed from familial anchorage, Khalifa inhabits a condition of profound psychological diminishment that precedes any explicit encounter with colonial authority. His sense of worthlessness is inseparable from his spatial and political alienation as “he was living a useless life in a town that was not his home, in a country that seemed to be constantly at war, with reports of yet another uprising in the south and west” (Gurnah 11). This moment encapsulates how humiliation functions as a weapon of the mind, operating through loss, instability, and the erosion of belonging. Khalifa’s crisis is not merely personal grief; it is a colonial effect in which displacement renders the subject superfluous to both place and history. It is more important to mention that the association with the merchant Amur Biashara and the secretive nature of the shrewd merchant have led to the fate and culmination of modest Khalifa into a repugnant slave. The process of (de)education has marginalized him within a structured colonial practice. For Kalifa, education becomes a promise without fulfillment. He is trained to read and write to perform certain limited tasks, so he acquires basic literacy, but this learning does not lead to mobility, recognition, or authority. He is trained rather than being forced to be a part of a (colonial) system that limits and ensures



marginality. This condition generates humiliation because knowledge, instead of empowering him, sharpens his awareness of exclusion. He knows what is possible, yet understands that it is not meant for him, though he resists and dares to slam the merchant's son Nasoor, by asserting him, "Nothing came out of your cleverness but ruin" (96), but in vain. Thus, humiliation is a condition in which the self is trained to perceive itself as unnecessary, suspended in a space where neither home nor future nor education appears attainable.

Other characters, such as Hamza and Afiya, whose lives are irrevocably shaped by experiences of colonial violence, domestic violence, coercion, and intimate forms of domination. Before analyzing humiliation as a structural and ideological force, it is essential to examine the preconditions that make humiliation possible and enduring. Just like the formation of psychologically wounded subjects whose inner voices are marked by trauma and unresolved memory. The trajectories of Hamza and Afiya are particularly significant in this regard, as both characters endure injuries that exceed the physical and enter the realm of deep psychological scarring, leaving impressions that resist healing, narration, and erasure.

Hamza's life is primarily shaped by a sustained exposure to institutional and bodily violence under German colonial authority. His physical suffering, such as whippings, exhaustion, and bodily discipline, initially appears as a finite experience, one that the body might eventually recover from. However, Gurnah carefully illustrates that the true damage inflicted upon Hamza is psychic rather than corporeal. Colonial discipline does not merely punish his body; it recognizes his sense of self, agency, and moral worth.

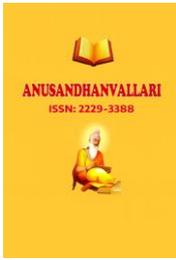
Hamza's silence, obedience, and emotional restraint indicate the formation of a traumatic internalization, where violence no longer needs to be externally administered to exert control. His attachment to authority figures and his ambivalent loyalty to colonial structures suggest a subject who has absorbed domination as a condition of survival. The trauma he carries is cumulative, embedded in his memory and behavior. Even moments of care or recognition fail to undo the conditioning of fear and submission that has shaped him.

On the other hand, Hamza's wife, Afiya, also suffers from traumatic distress. Her childhood suffering operates within a different but equally devastating register. As an orphaned girl subjected to neglect, domestic cruelty, and gendered violence, her wounds are rarely spectacular or publicly visible. Yet, Gurnah emphasizes that Afiya's trauma is profound precisely because it is normalized and intimate. Her experiences of beating, verbal degradation, social exclusion, and sexual threat are woven into the fabric of everyday life, making them difficult to isolate as exceptional acts of violence.

Although Afiya's physical injuries heal with time, the psychological damage remains enduring. She develops a persistent sense of lowliness, disposability, and unbelonging – what can be understood as existential trauma. Her inability to articulate her suffering does not indicate its absence; rather, it underscores how trauma in her life is structural and chronic, sustained through silence and repetition.

Importantly, Afiya's trauma is gendered. Her vulnerability is intensified by patriarchal surveillance and regulation of female bodies and desires. Even acts associated with empowerment, such as her reading and writing, become triggers for violent punishment. This establishes trauma as a condition that shapes her relationship with knowledge, autonomy, and self-expression.

What unites Hamza and Afiya is not the similarity of their experiences but the "afterlife" of trauma they both carry. Gurnah presents memory as a site where violence persists long after its physical manifestation has ended. Their suffering does not resolve into closure or catharsis; instead, it remains embedded in gestures, silences, fears, and fractured self-perceptions. This persistence of traumatic memory suggests that the damage inflicted upon colonial and socially marginalized subjects is irreversible in ethical and psychological terms. Trauma becomes formative rather than transitional; it does not merely interrupt life but recognizes it permanently.



Colonial (un)ambition: A mystic humiliation of Hamza

When people like me, they tell me it is despite my color.
When they dislike me they point out that it is not because of my color.
Either way, I am locked into the infernal cycle.

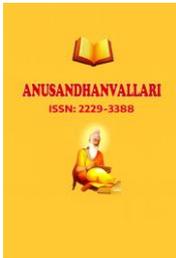
(Frantz Fanon, 116)

In *Afterlives*, Gurnah offers a postcolonial reconfiguration of ambition, masculinity, and dignity through the character of Hamza. Captivated by the gaze of the German officer, Oberleutnant, and becoming his personal servant or *shoga*, Hamza presents colonial ambivalence, as for him colonial authority appears rational and stabilizing when contrasted with the arbitrary cruelty of his earlier life. Gurnah foregrounds a subtler psychic economy in which humiliation reshapes desire itself. Hamza's trajectory exemplifies what can be termed as colonial (un)ambition- a condition in which aspiration is produced by empire only to be systematically neutralized. His humiliation is mystic not because it is spiritual but because it operates inwardly, silently, and without spectacle, disciplining the imagination rather than merely the body.

Hamza's voluntary entry "to learn a new skill and to serve the schutztruppe" (64) into the German colonial military structure appears to offer a form of upward mobility. His attempt to escape from an undignified life into military service promises order, purpose, and a sense of belonging. Within this framework, ambition is carefully manufactured: obedience is framed as dignity, discipline as self-worth, and loyalty as elevation above social insignificance. Hamza internalizes these colonial values, mistaking proximity to authority for agency. Yet this ambition is never intended to mature into autonomy. It is provisional and instrumental, designed to extract labor and loyalty while maintaining racial hierarchy. Colonial power thus creates aspiration only to foreclose its fulfillment. As Hamza becomes increasingly exposed to the realities of colonial military life- arbitrary punishment, "the twenty -five lashes, a public flogging for one misdemeanour or another, which often did not seem deserving of such humiliation" (60), racialized humiliation, and absolute vulnerability before German officers, ambition begins to collapse into its negation. What replaces it is not rebellion but restraint. Hamza learns that visibility is dangerous, that desire attracts punishment, and that survival depends on self-effacement. This transformation marks the emergence of (un)ambition: ambition that survives only in muted, carefully regulated form. Hamza does not cease to desire dignity, but he learns to desire less, to want cautiously, and to limit his expectations to what colonial structures allow. In this sense, (un)ambition is not personal failure but a colonial-induced adaptation.

The humiliation Hamza experiences is best described as mystic because it does not rely on continuous physical brutality. Though physical brutality was exercised by the subaltern Feldwebel Walther as he "stepped forward and with a wild swing slashed at Hamza... It caught him on his hip and ripped through flesh and bone" (116). Its most enduring force lies in its invisibility. Over time, Hamza begins to police his own thoughts and aspirations. He moderates his expectations without external coercion and accepts diminishment as natural when he arrives at the coastal region and begins his search for a job- "older, half-broken, empty-handed" (141). Colonial power succeeds here not by constant enforcement, but by reshaping Hamza's inner life. Ambition is unlearned quietly, without confrontation, making humiliation appear almost voluntary. This inward disciplining of desire represents colonial domination at its most effective.

Hamza's body further reinforces this psychic condition. Trained, injured, commanded, and rendered expendable, his body is never heroic; it is utilitarian. He learns to preserve it through compliance rather than assertiveness. Bodily endurance replaces agency, and strength is redefined as the ability to withstand rather than to act. The body thus becomes a site where humiliation and (un)ambition converge: fear moderates desire, caution replaces confidence, and survival becomes the ultimate horizon of aspiration.



Importantly, Hamza's response to colonial humiliation complicates conventional postcolonial models of masculinity. Unlike nationalist or revolutionary figures who seek dignity through resistance, Hamza embodies a masculinity shaped by restraint, emotional economy, and ethical quietude. Gurnah refuses to romanticize rebellion or endurance. Instead, he presents Hamza's subdued life as a historically conditioned mode of survival, where dignity persists only through limited desire. "There is no choice. The askari will have to do the carriers' work" (113). Hamza, including others being askari, are forced to do the menial work of carriers, which is, for them, below dignity.

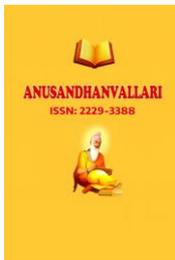
Even after Hamza exits the colonial military structure, the effects of humiliation remain. His entry into and exit from the colonial regime failed to efface the humiliating existence. Rather, colonialism's deepest work has already been accomplished. His future is governed by caution, emotional self-regulation, and fear of excess aspiration. This persistence confirms Gurnah's broader postcolonial insight: colonial violence is not confined to the moment of domination but survives in the psychic afterlives of the colonized. The end of formal control does not restore ambition, because ambition itself has been restructured.

Domestic Subjugation and Dehumanization of Afiya

Afiya, an orphaned girl whose early life is defined by a lack of personal autonomy, lack of parental love and affection, died early. But when alive, her father had "left her for other people" when she was sixteen months old (Gurnah, 27). He sold her to a family living nearby. Her mother passed away a long way back. She is treated as a commodity or as a "burden" rather than a family member. French feminist Simone de Beauvoir pertinently describes and gives voice in her epoch-making book, *The Second Sex* (1949). She writes, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (Beauvoir 457). The hypocrisy of her aunt is explicitly seen when she slams her own biological children, not to hurt Afiya, while suggesting that she is 'your sister' and provokes her husband to beat her black and blue when found 'writing'. Her uncle says, "I hear you have learned to write. I don't have to ask who has taught you to do this. I know exactly who it is- someone with no sense of responsibility. No, someone with no sense at all. Why does a girl need to write? So she can write to a pimp?" (Gurnah 45). The only crime she committed that she could read and write, and a subaltern has no autonomy to practice, and is devoid of any choice. Hence, one has to endure -

"He stepped forward and slapped her on her temple with his left hand, then he swapped the cane and slapped her on the face and head with his right hand. The blows made her stagger and she reeled back as he shouted and snarled at her. Then after a long silent pause he lashed at her with the cane, deliberately missing at first but coming even closer. She yelled with terror and did her best to escape but it was a small room and he had bolted the door. There was nowhere for her to hide so she ran and ducked and took what blows she had to. Most of them landed on her back and shoulders and made her shudder and cry out, and in the end stumbled and fell. As she did so she put out her left hand to protect her face, and the stick landed on it with crushing force. The pain took her breath away and she gasped with shock before a scream tore through her. She lay at his feet, screaming and sobbing, while he raged at her and no one came to stop him." (45)

It highlights the tension between voice and silence, agency and subjugation, and ultimately challenges readers to confront the gendered injustice embedded in colonial lives. The mentioned action of Afiya's uncle exposes his insecurity and need to reinforce patriarchal authority. Afiya has no voice. Her eventual silence is at first place is submission but later it turns out to be resistance out of violence and humiliation.



Gurnah's work resonates strongly with the goals of feminist theory, particularly the strands that focus on how language, power, and social norms intersect to oppress women. Feminism, at its core, seeks to interrogate the systemic inequalities that prevent women from fully realizing their autonomy- whether in the realms of family, law, religion, or culture. In this context, *Afterlives* is a rich text that explores how personal lives are politicized, how female bodies are a site of control, and how patriarchal norms are maintained under the guise of tradition and morality. Afiya's story mirrors the lived realities of countless women/girls in East Africa and across, making the novel a critical contribution to feminist discourse in literature.

Furthermore, *Afterlives* critiques not only male-dominated systems but also examines the role of women in upholding patriarchal values. Altogether, because other children are also beaten every day, she is accustomed to her daily humiliating experiences, so that at a certain point, things "did not hurt her very much." Yet, she is "more sad, made her feel small and a stranger in this world" (Gurnah 35). This feeling of strangeness is nothing but the estranged crisis of self-worth and an assault on dignity that ultimately results in humiliation.

Judith Butler argues that gender is not a stable identity but rather a series of repeated acts and performances that conform to societal expectations. Asha condemns Afiya for not getting exposed to any men around exposes how patriarchy weaponizes morality to silence and shame women. Her ultimate silencing functions as a re-inscription of gender norms, warning other women of the consequences of non-conformity.

Afiya's eventual silence raises questions. In her silence, a sign of defeat, or is it a form of resistance? I believe every woman is a victim of a deeply misogynistic society.

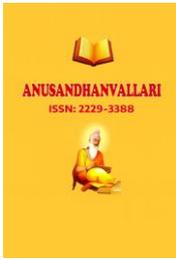
Afterlives is a deeply unsettling, profoundly moving exploration of gendered injustice. Afiya's struggle is not just personal experience; it is a universal one, echoing across time and space where women's voices are denied and their truths dismissed.

But my argument is based on Friedrich Nietzsche's formulation in *Beyond Good and Evil*, particularly his assertion that "he who despises himself, nevertheless esteems himself thereby, as a despiser" (67). This argument foregrounds the paradoxical persistence of the self even at moments of extreme self-contempt. Nietzsche suggests that humiliation does not annihilate subjectivity; rather, it allows the self to survive in the diminished yet resistant position of the one who despises. This conceptual insight is crucial to understanding Afiya's condition. Although she is habituated to her daily struggles and systemic marginalization, her humiliation is intensified through the imposed practice of "reading and writing" – an act not initiated by her own desire but mediated through colonial ambitions internalized by Ilyas and subsequently transferred to her. Literacy, instead of functioning as empowerment, becomes an instrument of psychic subjugation. Yet Afiya does not fully surrender to this condition. Her decisive act of writing a letter to Kalifa – "he has hurt me. Help me" (46) – marks a critical rupture in the economy of humiliation. This moment of articulation signals a refusal of silent submission and reclaims agency within constraint. Baba Khalifa's intervention and his decision to take Afiya with him further underscore how her act of self-expression transforms humiliation into a moment of ethical recognition and escape.

Conclusion:

Gurnah uses Khalifa to demonstrate that colonial humiliation does not always announce itself through violence or exclusion. It can emerge through failed promises. Khalifa's (de)education and crisis of belonging produce a subject who survives ethically but suffers existentially.

Hamza's mystic humiliation demonstrates that colonial power does not merely dominate bodies or territories; it disciplines desires. Colonial (un)ambition emerges as a condition in which aspiration is not destroyed but rendered



dangerous, forcing the subject to survive through restraint rather than self-assertion. By centering this quiet recalibration of inner life, Gurnah reframes postcolonial suffering as an ethical and psychological condition rather than a purely political one. Hamza's story thus reveals that the most enduring legacy of empire lies not in overt defeat, but in the silent erosion of what the colonized believe they are allowed to want.

Similarly, Gurnah's portrayal of Afiya underscores how patriarchal violence operates quietly and persistently, normalized within everyday life rather than through spectacular acts alone. Her silence, withdrawal, and bodily suffering signify the internalization of humiliation, aligning private suffering with the wider histories of colonial domination that structure the novel. Importantly, Afiya's later recovery, facilitated by Khalifa's compassion and her gradual reintegration into social life, does not erase the scars of her earlier dehumanization. Instead, it reveals Gurnah's ethical insistence that survival under oppression is neither heroic nor redemptive, but fragile and contingent. Through Afiya, *Afterlives* exposes how colonial histories are reproduced within domestic hierarchies, particularly along gendered lines. Her subjugation illustrates that postcolonial trauma is not confined to public or political arenas; it persists within households, shaping women's lives through normalized practices of domination and erasure.

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