



Culture, Memory, and Colonial Modernity: A Cultural Studies Reading of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*

Mousumi Paul

Swami Vivekananda Institute of Science and Technology, West Bengal, India

Abstract:

This paper explores the connection between colonial history, cultural identity, memory and daily life in East Africa in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020) using the theoretical perspective of Cultural Studies. The novel is set in German East Africa in the first decades of the twentieth century, and depicts a society shaped by colonial violence, and the resilience and adaptability of local cultural practices. Employing some of the main ideas associated with Cultural Studies, including representation, identity, cultural power, hybridity and resistance, the paper examines how Gurnah deconstructs the dominant colonial discourses and reconstructs history from the perspective of the lives of people still marginal to the official version of history.

The study examines the experiences of characters like Ilyas, Hamza and Afiya to demonstrate how colonial institutions change language, education, labor, family structures and personal identities. The novel presents culture not as a stable, monolithic category, but as a fluid site of negotiation in which African subjects are always adjusting to and resisting colonial power structures. *Afterlives* shows how East African identity is hybrid and fragmented, shaped by the intersections of German colonialism, local traditions, Islamic cultural practices, and new forms of modernity. The paper also discusses memory as a cultural practice that resists and transmits suppressed histories from one generation to another.

The paper argues, with reference to Cultural Studies Theory, that *Afterlives* becomes a site of cultural resistance and historical recovery for the novel. Gurnah's narrative disrupts Eurocentric representations of East Africa by foregrounding ordinary lives, cultural negotiations and subaltern experiences. The study thus contributes to the contemporary debates on East African literature by demonstrating how fiction can be a potent medium for the recuperation of cultural memory and contestation of the enduring legacies of colonial power.

Keywords:

Cultural Studies, East African Literature, Cultural Identity, Colonial Memory, Hybridity; Abdulrazak Gurnah.