



## **Material Realities and Ideological Paradigms in *Afterlives*: A Marxist Reimagining**

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### **Abstract**

**Background:** Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020) explores the aftermath of German colonial rule in an unnamed coastal town in East Africa, shedding light on how imperial economic agendas shaped and disrupted local lives. The novel critiques the far-reaching consequences of German colonial capitalism by portraying how systems of education, law, culture, and ideology were weaponized to establish a superstructure that justified and sustained material exploitation. **Methods:** This study adopts Karl Marx's and Raymond Williams's theory of base and superstructure to analyze both the tangible and intangible dimensions of colonial domination. It investigates how material exploitation operates through forced labor, military conscription, and social hierarchies, while ideological control is exercised through educational indoctrination, the promise of "civilization," and religious authority. Character trajectories are used as lenses to examine these intersecting modes of control. **Results:** The characters—Ilyas, Afiya, Khalifa, and Hamza—serve as case studies of individuals caught within the machinery of empire. Despite appearing to benefit from German rule through employment or association, they suffered emotional detachment, cultural dislocation, and internalized oppression. The colonial system maintains power not merely through force but



through ideological instruments that obscure the nature of exploitation, leading to a distorted perception of material progress. **Conclusion:** The novel dramatizes a fundamental tension between the economic base and the ideological superstructure. It reveals how colonial institutions outlast political occupation, continuing to affect the thoughts, identities, and relationships of formerly colonized subjects. The narrative thus critiques not only colonial violence but also the lingering ideological residues that inhibit true liberation. **Novelty:** This study argues that the German colonial project in East Africa marks a period of deep psychological and socio-political trauma, where material gains such as education and employment failed to liberate the colonized. Instead, they reinforced dependence and obedience. The novel portrays a gradual awakening among the characters, suggesting that freedom only becomes possible through the decolonization of material conditions and internalized beliefs. This dual insight into structural and psychological liberation distinguishes the novel and enriches postcolonial discourse.

**Keywords:** Base structure, exploitation, political economy, power, superstructure

## **Introduction**

Gurnah's *Afterlives* depicts the underlying conflict between the natives and the German rulers in terms of political economy and sociological aspects because the natives are set to fulfill the interests of the Germans. The novel is set in a town in East Africa during the German imperial period. It highlights the impacts of war and colonial rule on the town and its citizens. It displays the hardship of working-class families in the face of war and unstable politics. The exploitation of the native people like Ilyas, Afiya, Hamza, and Khalifa is guided by the Germans' interest in resource mobilization, showing them as uncivilized and uneducated laborers. The characters of the novel, Hamza and Afiya, represent the effects of financial exploitation and war for resource mining. However, for Pujolràs-Noguer (2023), the narrative technique that captures the down-to-earth reality is significant to the novel. He analyzes the novel *Afterlives* from the point of view of the technique of storytelling. This novel deals with the "interruption-continuation design of the storytelling community that characterizes the Indian Ocean" (p.160). Hamza is given to a merchant by his father when he is a child. Later, he joins the German Schutztruppe. He works for the Germans and serves them as a soldier. However, a tiny mistake leads him to a severe situation for punishment. He is severely beaten by a German officer because a few Askari run away from the camp. This is an example of physical molestation. It took him many years to recover. After that, he comes to the town where Khalifa and Afiya live. Afiya is a victim of war, poverty, and cruelty. When Afiya is young, her parents pass away, leaving her in the care of her neighbor, who tortures her. Her brother comes to rescue her but again leaves her, for he wants to go to war and fight for Germans. She is always waiting for her brother, who never returns. She lives with Khalifa and Bi Asha, then gets married to Hamza. Khalifa works as a clerk for Amur Biashara, a wealthy merchant and money lender who is known for his crooked ways of business. Amur Biashara arranges Khalifa's marriage with his niece Asha, whose parents have already died. Her house is claimed



by Amur Biashara because her parents failed to pay the debt. The condition of these characters is heavily influenced by their economic status and politics. The base in the novel is the East African real world of Khalifa, Afiya, and others, resource extraction by the outsiders, and in totality, colonial finance management, whereas the superstructure is the ideology that Germans are civilized, educated, and well-to-do and Africa is backward.

Material reality and ideological consciousness are the theoretical underpinnings. Superstructures depend on the base; therefore, the base determines the superstructure. Manipulation of the base frames the ideology. In his analysis of society, Karl Marx defined the economy as a base and other aspects of society, like culture, ideology, and politics, as superstructures. He exhibits the power dynamics of society. According to Marx and Engels (1932), “Political economy expresses in general, abstract formulae the material process through which private property already passes and their formulae it then takes for laws” (p.656). Law attains the form of social acceptance and thereby begins to operate to exploit the workers. In the same way, Althusser (1971) discourses about the nature of ideology as “a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (p.693). Marx opines that the economic base is a state or condition that determines the superstructure. Based on Marxist thought Weber (1996) asserts the nature of the capitalist, “The capitalist was an ascetic—a rational miser who was devoted to the task of making money not to enjoy its fruits but to reinvest it to make more money.” (p.72) The other aspects of society are culture, economy, and means. He interprets the relationship between base and superstructure as deterministic or one-way. On the contrary, Raymond Williams evaluates Marx’s theory and advocates for a revaluation of the base-superstructure relationship. He argues that base should not be understood as a static entity; rather, it should be defined as a dynamic aspect of society that influences other aspects and, in turn, gets influenced by them as well. According to Williams (1973), “The base has come to include a strong and limiting sense of basic industry (p.1340), and he further points out that “the base is a mode of production at a particular stage of its development” (p.1339), whereas superstructure, according to Williams (1873), is the “laws, constitutions, theories, and ideologies reflecting the expressions of the domination of a particular class (p.1341). Therefore, the base and the superstructure represent the diverse aspects of the society. The base represents the basic realities of the society and the modes of production, but the superstructure deals with the common paradigms of the society in terms of rules, regulations, and common practices imposed by the interest of the few. Constitution, rules, and ideology assigned by the superstructure play a significant role in shaping social consciousness. Terry Eagleton emphasizes the role of ideology in shaping people’s consciousness. This research paper attempts to explore material reality as the base and ideological structure as the superstructure to explicate the relationship among characters in Gurnah’s *Afterlives*.

## **Literature Review**

Gurnah’s *Afterlives* draws critical remarks from the writers due to multilayered themes and narrative voices. This study deals with the relationship between the down-to-earth reality of



society and the ideological impact on the society due to social, cultural, and financial influences.

In an academic conversation, the novelist discusses the crisis and its consequences. Gurnah and Hadfield (2024) discuss Gurnah's creative writing journey and express the pain and suffering of the refugee. This conversation indicates the realities of an antagonistic situation and the process of adaptation. The writer confesses the refugee problem in the novel. In the same way, Liu (2024) studies the novel from the traumatic situation of the refugee and asserts to "grasp the destructive impact of colonialism on the colonized people and the plight of the refugee community after fleeing from their own country (p.10). Distancing from the homeland develops pain and suffering. However, Jiarui (2023) studies Gurnah's work, highlighting the real condition of refugees, "This is of great social significance for the study of the living conditions of refugees in the postcolonial era and the reflection on immigration issues" (p.154). Jauri disseminates the realities of the postcolonial situation of Africa. However, Xinyi (2024) points out the concept of exile in Gurnah's work as encompassing "regional, racial, psychological, and cultural ones" and further formulates "the image of the African diaspora represented in his work" (p. 49). Diasporic experience is the main issue for him. Similarly, colonial impact and enslavement are the other issues of the novel. Saxena (2021) states that Gurnah analyzes "the devastating impacts of colonialism in East Africa, with the theme of refugee experiences and upheaval featuring prominently" (p. 52). The colonized people suffered "physical and psychological dislocation" and "a painful series of abandonments and enslavements" (Noguer p.162). They note the physical and psychological impacts of colonization in the novel. The critics also highlight the impact of colonialism on the people, as well as the consequences of extreme exploitation and slavery. The traumatic experience of the characters draws the attention of the scholars because of the physical and psychological exploitation. Other scholars have critiqued the depiction of traumatic experiences for characters in the novel. As mentioned by Salama (2024), "Gurnah explores themes of trauma, identity, and exile in an unnamed coastal town in present-day Tanzania, chronicling colonialism's brutality and the characters' resuscitation of life after their traumatic experiences" (p.106). Similarly, Abbas et al. (2023) write, "*Afterlives* stands out as an exceptional portrayal of trauma in literature, emphasizing the long-lasting impact on the human psyche" (p.99). It is a fictionalized presentation of "terror unleashed in Tanzania and its effects on the lives of uprooted and migrating individuals" (Saxena, 18). The traumatic experiences of war haunt survivors throughout their lives. The novel speaks to ordinary people who suffer the consequences of war and oppression through the characters for other readers. The characters represent multiple types of personalities and depict various aspects of a colonized town.

According to Maricocchi (2024), "The focus on the various individual characters that is maintained throughout the novel facilitates acts of remembering German colonialism from the perspectives of the colonized" (p. 5). Branach-Kallas (2022) analyzes the novel from the standpoint of war trauma: "Gurnah's representation of war trauma, the phantomatic



presence/absence of the Askari in collective memory “(p.468) is the crux of the writer. Afiya, one of the characters, suffers “the traumatic effects of the war on innocent civilians” (Saxena, p.19). Trauma hooks the critical attention because of the distressing situation of the characters and their relationship in the novel.

For Ullah, the novel leaves the cultural impact of colonization as the dominant theme. Regarding the cultural impact of colonization, Ullah and Iqbal (2023) write about the novel, “The process of colonizing the continent involved forcibly separating Indigenous children from their families and implementing policies aimed at eradicating Indigenous cultures and languages” (p.48). Saxena (2021) has critically observed the presentation of power dynamics, as she states that “the novel is an important exploration of the interplay between power and resistance, highlighting the impact on individuals and communities alike” (p.17). The impact of power and ideology on culture is an important issue in the novel.

Eminent critics evaluate Gurnah’s *Afterlives*, prioritizing the refugee problem, native people’s war trauma, postcolonial issues, the African diaspora, the impact of colonization, and the cultural impact of colonization on society. However, the most substantial point of the novel is the colonial economy exercised by the Germans on the East Africans. This study examines the novel from a financial standpoint, applying Marxist philosophy. The novelty of the study rests on the way Khalifa, Hamza, and other characters suffer due to their weak financial position. Western civilization, education, and financial status function as the ideological frames to exploit the material reality. This study analyzes the role of ideology and the interplay between material reality and ideological framework in the text regarding the theories of Karl Marx, Raymond Williams, and Terry Eagleton.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This is a qualitative study that underscores the application of Marxist philosophy in *Afterlives* to explore the physical and psychological exploitation of the Germans and the East Africans to accomplish financial motives. The researchers have adopted philosophical insights to analyze the text, highlighting the contrast between material reality and ideological framing. This analysis reveals recurring themes about the base and superstructure. This study is qualitative in nature, incorporating textual analysis. It employs Marxist theory as a theoretical tool and Gurnah’s *Afterlives* as the text for the justification of the argument that material reality is positioned and framed through ideological framing of the superstructure. This study adopts content analysis as an interpretative technique, applying the theory of base and superstructure.

### **Analytical Framework**

This research paper is a hermeneutic interpretation of a literary piece, *Afterlives*, written by a Nobel Prize winner in literature, Gurnah. The thematic analysis encompasses textual evidence that discusses material reality and ideological framing. To do so, the researcher employs Karl Marx and Raymond Williams’ theory of base and superstructure and Marx and Engels’ concept of political economy. For these issues, themes of the novel, the relationship between characters, and German treatment of the natives of the unnamed city of East Africa are the primary aspects.





Along with these, the maltreatment of the native people in the name of education, civilization, financial depravity, color, military, and control are the signposts for the validity. Quotes from Marxist theory and the text's evidence are the justifying parameters.

## **Analysis and Interpretation**

### **Material Reality and Ideological Paradigm in *Afterlives***

Material reality and ideological paradigm are the two significant aspects of the novel because the novel deals with the whites at the top and Africans at the bottom. Africans are positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy. In the same way, German as the parameters for civilization, colonial law, and financial status as the status marker as the superstructure. While analyzing base and superstructure in *Afterlives*, the characters represent deprived economic status.

While analyzing base and superstructure in *Afterlives* from a Marxist perspective, the characters represent different economic statuses. We divide the town's inhabitants into wealthy owners and poor workers. It shows a vast difference between the wealthy and the poor. Marx and Engels argue that “the existing stage in the division of labor also determines the relations of individuals to one another concerning the material, instrument, and product of labor” (38). Khalifa, Hamza, Bi Asha, Ilyas, and Afiya belong to the working-class group. They do not hold anything that belongs to them except for their body and labor. At an early age, his father sent Khalifa to work with merchants. Similarly, Hamza and Ilyas ran away from their home when they were still boys. Afiya and Bi Asha are orphaned girls who were left helpless and empty-handed by their parents. These characters do not possess any property. They were born from poor parents and remain poor. Khalifa and Hamza end up working for Amur Biashara, one of the few wealthy merchants in the town. Unlike the aforementioned characters, Amur Biashara was born to a rich father who was a merchant and moneylender. He inherits his father's property and trade after his father's death. He is the employer of Khalifa, Hamza, and many others in the town. In this way, the economic system of the town is depicted in the novel.

The town has been operating alongside the economy and generates false consciousness. The novel explicates other systems of society like culture, politics, religion, education, and ideology. These components of society are defined as superstructures by Marx. In the same way, Williams (2018) asserts the nature of superstructure: “In any society, in any particular period, there is a central system of practices, meanings, and values, which we can properly call dominant and effective...it is central” (p.1342). The people living in the town follow their own culture and religion. Separate from the economic system, they have a particular way of living guided by their cultural beliefs and values. The inhabitants of the town follow Islam. There are certain norms of society that the inhabitants should follow. Furthermore, the ideologies of the native people and colonizers govern their thoughts and actions. Culture, religion, ideology, and politics are integral parts of town.

Material reality exposes that the African is poor, uncivilized, and uneducated, whereas the ideological paradigm indicates the impact of colonial law, the legal system, and priority to colonial force due to financial status, and Africans as the subject to change from barbarians to civilized.



### **Base-Superstructure in *Afterlives***

Base is the foundation to expose the reality of the common ground whereas superstructure frames the lives of the people based on the financial position, education, culture, color, and civilization. Gurnah's novel *Afterlives* effectively portrays the plight of the impoverished. The type of lifestyle adopted by the characters depends on their economic background. Educational and financial status mar the position of the people in society as a means for dominating them. The Germans frame this through their colonial economic policy.

Financial policy provision relegates a group due to the deprived financial position because it indicates the deprived position even for better education, as depicted in the novel. Khalifa's father sends him away at a young age, even though he was their only child, so that he could build a better life for himself. His father is described as "weary and feeble" (Gurnah, 2021, p. 10); when Khalifa goes to meet his father after his mother's death, he finds him sitting "on the porch of his two-roomed shack on the landowner's estate, staring blankly all day" (Gurnah, p. 10). Later, he works as a bookkeeper for Nasoor Biasahra and his son Amur Biashara for his sustenance even though he disliked them for they had "a cut-throat reputation" in the town (Gurnah, p. 7). Similarly, Ilyas "had run away from home as a child and wandered around" (p. 22) because his family also suffered from poverty and hunger. "His father had been ill with diabetes... his mother was often unwell from unnamable ailments that afflicted women" (Gurnah, p. 27). His parents could not feed him well, so he left his family. Similarly, Hamza says, "My father gave me away to a merchant to cover his debts" (Gurnah, p.205). This is the extreme point for commodification of the humans. Their parents worked throughout their lives but could not secure a comfortable life for their children because they belonged to the working class. They worked but failed to gain economic power. Marx and Engels (1932) assert how the "worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched commodity" (p.656). Workers fail to raise them above the level of the workers. Similarly, Saxena (2021) states, "Gurnah explores the complicated relationship between the 'oppressor and the oppressed' through the harrowing story of Hamza, who was sold as a bonded laborer by his father to get rid of his crippling debt (p. 19). In Marx's terms, they are "the propertyless workers" who function according to the orders of "the property-owners" (p.656). The reality is the poverty of the workers, whereas the ideological standpoint is the financial policy for exploitation. Marx and Engels (1998) further argue that "the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men—the language of real life" (p.42). One of the factors that fills the lives of these characters with hardships is their poor financial condition. Children like Biassara, who belong to financially well-to-do families, get the opportunity to read and write well without any difficulty, whereas children from poor families do not get access to education easily. Khalifa, Ilyas, Hamza, and Afiya, who belong to poor working-class families, do not get a child-friendly academic environment. All of them manage to read and write a little bit with the help of their employers. It demonstrates the crucial role of the economic base in shaping the lives of the people.



Similarly, culture is the other framing superstructure to promote and minimize the position of the characters. Their daily activities, religious rituals, and beliefs are governed by their culture. “Ethnicity, social class, language, and religion, among others, have always played an important role in the destinations and the hospitality available to the individual” (Neumann and Bach, 2023, p. 109). Although Marx and Engels emphasize that “morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology, as well as the forms of consciousness corresponding to these, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence” (p.42). Williams (2018) highlights that “we have to revalue ‘superstructure’ towards a related range of cultural practices and away from a reflected, reproduced, or specifically dependent content” (p.1339). Cultural practices are not determined by modes of production but rather as shared practices. The people of the town follow Islam as their religion and do things according to Islamic tradition. For instance, the funeral rituals carried out by Khalifa for his dead father symbolize his culture. The ritual practices accomplished by him are an example: “Khalifa washed him as required by custom, assisted by people who were familiar with the rituals” (Gurnah, p. 11). The characters are bound by familial and social responsibilities. Their thoughts are deeply influenced by their religious beliefs and cultural norms. When Afiya grows to adulthood, “Afiya was even required to cover herself with a kanga when Baba was around, leaving only her face uncovered” (Gurnah, p. 104). Afiya, as an unmarried young girl, was not allowed to walk around the town without covering her face and body because it was the tradition of that town. Furthermore, they celebrate their festivals in a particular way according to their culture. Even though there is a British hospital, the natives still seek traditional remedies and local treatment, which is deeply rooted in their culture. When Ilyas lives with the Germans, they make them pray like a Christian. At that time, Ilyas pretended to pray because “it was either that or leave school” (Gurnah, p. 22). He believed that being a Musulman, it was “sin” (p. 22) to pray to the Christian God. Their rituals symbolize their faith in God. Culture is deeply embedded in society; thus, it affects people's thoughts and behaviors. Family activities, culture, and religion frame the thought process of the public.

Ideology, as a guiding principle, plays an essential role in shaping the lives of the characters, just as it does in the novel. In every society, there exists an ideology as an underlying governing force that determines people's thoughts and actions. Eagleton (1976) asserts that a relatively coherent set of values, representations, and beliefs constitutes a dominant ideological formation (p.54). It serves for the transmission of values and beliefs of a powerful class, through which they expand their domination. Ideology serves as a tool for power dissemination. Williams (2018) exhibits the connection between ideology and power as he states, “laws, constitutions, theories, ideologies...have to be seen as expressing and ratifying the domination of a particular class” (p.1341). The embedded ideology is manifested in their perception and actions. The German officers are guided by their ruling ideology. They believed that they were superior to the native Africans because they set German models and frames for the ideological framing. Gurnah mentions, “The officers made sure to maintain European prestige... they kept their





distance, eating separately, demanding deference wherever they could” (p.92). They are guided by imperialist ideology to control and rule over native people.

Education is a form of superstructure that develops the ideology based on the interest of a limited few Germans. The Germans asserted that they were the role model of education to make the Africans realize that they were not as civilized as Germans. The German officer’s statement to Askaris, “It’s to teach you discipline” (Gurnah, p. 53), illustrates their belief that they came “to bring you this, mathematics and many other clever things that you would not have without us” (Gurnah, p. 65). They tried to impose Western education and language (Saxena 21). They exploit, humiliate, and torture native people. Colonizers’ perception of native Africans becomes clear from this statement of Oberleutnant, “You have no civilization; that is why you are savage” (Gurnah, p.64). Neumann and Bach (2023) critique German officers: “Without those rituals, what would be left to differentiate them from the Africans who fought next to them, side by side?” (Gurnah, p.103). Their arrival in East Africa affected the socio-economic system of that place.

Manipulation of consciousness is a critical factor in exploiting the public. German colonizers manipulated the native people’s consciousness. The natives have divided opinions about the German invasion in their country. The majority of people in the town express their rage against colonialism because the colonizers bring war and violence to their land. Germans, on the other hand, have a much more positive influence on Afiya's brother Ilyas. He expresses that “Germans had not come to make slaves (Gurnah, p.39). This is the manipulation of mindfulness in society. Germans capture him and force him to live with them, where he absorbs their language. He is awed by German intelligence and power. He says, “The Germans are gifted and clever people. They know how to organize... They are much kinder than the British” (Gurnah, p.41). This is the way superstructure manipulates the consciousness of the public and divides them so that they fail to understand the reality. Despite Khalifa’s advice not to join, Ilyas decides to volunteer for the German schutztruppe in the upcoming war. He is assured that with the “powerful and invincible army” (p.43), they will defeat their enemies. Here, ideology works as a dominant governing force. Ilyas’s decision to join the schutztruppe is solely based on the manipulation of his thoughts rather than monetary benefit. Hamza, too, is influenced by his involvement with the Germans. “He began to feel pride at being part of the group” (p. 61). This is the other example of manipulation of ideological consciousness. While Ilyas and Hamza go voluntarily, many other young boys are forcefully compelled to go to war. As Pallavi Saxena (2021) writes, “In addition to economic and political power, military power is another crucial tool used by the colonial powers to dominate and control” (p. 3). These incidents in the novel exhibit the substantial role of power and ideology for consciousness formation.

Financial position guides the social and psychological consciousness of the public. During the period of war between German and British troops, the town suffered an economic crisis. The "Royal Navy blockade" (p. 95) of the coast followed the German defeat of the British. Some people face difficulties and economic crises after losing jobs in times of war and political instability. Meanwhile, others try to take financial advantage of such crises. After the blockade,



trade between the town and other towns stopped. The businessmen created an overnight shortage of goods as soon as they cut off the supply. The merchants “hurried to hoard their merchandise, both to conserve supplies and to wait for prices to rise” (Gurnah, p.95) so that they could sell their goods at higher prices later on. The town could not grow economically due to the war. On the other hand, there was the exploitation of the resources of the land by colonizers. Due to their control of the resources, native people could not use them for the uplift of their economy. The effects of politics and war become apparent in the novel. Here, it becomes evident that society consists of financial, cultural, religious, and ideological structures to guide the consciousness of the public, due to which the underlying interest gets inserted as policy. Each structure functions on its own and appears to be dominant at certain times and contexts. However, one does not remain dominant all the time, as claimed by Marx. Williams (2018) challenges Marx’s idea of base-superstructure by saying, “We need to rethink ‘superstructure’ to include a variety of cultural practices, rather than just seeing it as something that reflects or depends on the base” (p.1339). Neither base nor structure stays the same. Neither base nor structure remains static. Williams (2018) redirects the definition of base towards “the specific activities of men in real social and economic relationships, containing fundamental contradictions and variations...a dynamic process” (p.1339). Therefore, the relationship of base and superstructure is dynamic and reciprocal.

Therefore, Gurnah’s demonstration of the consequences of financial crisis, educational depravity, and so-called civilization explains the interplay of superstructures of society. The evidence in the novel reveals the interdependence between economy, politics, culture, and ideology for social consciousness development. The characters’ lives are shaped by these structures. Their state of consciousness and actions reflect their economic status, cultural values, societal norms, and political ideology. It depicts the dynamic nature of ideology to frame the base structure of society.

## **Conclusion**

The novel's core is the exploitation of East Africans and the colonial economy's goals. This study asserts that material reality gets blurred in the presence of ideological framing. Education policy, financial policy, cultural invasion, and Western parameter-based civilization distort the material reality and develop consciousness designed by the ideological paradigm. This study infers that ideological design muddles material reality, as the Germans do in the novel *Afterlives* to Ilyas, Khalifa, and other characters. Therefore, this study asserts that political economy in the capitalist culture employs diverse means to manipulate the social consciousness and execute it to handle the interest of the mass. Material reality blurs when superstructure generates false consciousness in the public.



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