



Interest Convergence and Realist Determinism through the lens of Critical Race Theory: Emphasizing the importance of Listening to the oppressed voices in Gurnah's *Afterlives*

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Abstract

'Your topography dictated your Identity, Destiny, and History'. Generally, this definition alludes as the race, culture, heritage and the place where the people live in. While delineating it in an African Diasporic Context, these terms, identity, destiny and race undergo a drastic scrutiny. Memory Studies began as an enduring movement in transcending individual memory to collective memory. The study expresses and remains the culture about the cynical characterization towards the dominant claims of whites over blacks. This research article brings out the acceptable meritocratic ideological claims of white over black through the study of memory in connection with a series of randomly appearing concepts - interest convergence and realist structural determinism to showcase the individualized acts to define his race. Abdulrazak Gurnah, Tanzanian born British writer believes that racism exists to uphold economic, political and social inequalities between whites and non-white people, and continues to create impact in the lives of Black People in terms of both idealist and realist viewpoints. To balance the theory of critical Race with Memory studies, this article renders Gurnah's power of eradicating the theme of racial oppression in his novel *Afterlives* (2020). The novel is focusses on the four central characters who stand as an example for their sole race as Cultural Preservationists.

Keywords: Race, Memory Studies, Individual memory, Collective memory, Interest Convergence, Realist determinism, Cultural Preservationist, Identity.

Race is a Human Invention. Although the subject of ethnicity was explored in classical Greece and Rome, the concept of 'race' as it is understood today only emerged within the past four centuries. The word "race" itself is a distorted version of the Italian word "razza", which refers to people who have shared a common descent. Francois Bernier, a French Physician and explorer, in his article *New Division of the Earth* published in 1684, divided mankind into four different races according to their geographic origins and physical traits. Consequently, he singled out the term "Blackness" to refer to the sub-Saharan Africans as an immutable trait.

Critical Race Theory (CRT), invented by an American Scholar Derrick Bell, emerged in the United States in the late 20th century. It focuses on analyzing and criticizing about how racism and racial inequality interact with the law, politics, culture and other facets of society. Like any other literatures, African literature was readily studied along

with Critical Race Theory to explore how race and racism were depicted in different forms of literary and non-literary writings. African writers typically tackle racial, colonial, and post-colonial themes in their writings. In recent times, Critical Race Theorists and writers believe that racism exists to uphold economic, political and social inequalities between whites and non-white people, and continues to create impact in the lives of Black People.

One such writer is Zanzibar novelist Abdulrazak Gurnah who has been awarded the most prestigious ‘2021 Nobel Prize in literature’ for his “uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents”. Throughout his career, Gurnah has received numerous accolades and awards for his literary achievements, solidifying his reputation as a prominent figure in contemporary literature which has made him a significant voice in the world of literature. Gurnah’s *Afterlives* was bestowed with accolades for its evocative prose and its potential to illuminate the profound human experiences within the concept of a postcolonial world. It sheds light on the complexity of relationships which was formed in the midst of turmoil as well as the long-lasting effects of historical events on human lives. Thus, it can be analyzed through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to gain a deeper understanding of how race, colonialism and power dynamics shape the character’s experience in the postcolonial context of Zanzibar.

“THE WHITE MAN is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.” (Achebe 130)

The interrogation of colonial legacies prevailed till the advent of Critical Race Theory. CRT redefines the lasting impact of colonialism that “Racism is ordinary” – not aberrational (Delgado and Stefancic 7). Gurnah portrayed the concept of interest convergence with one of the central characters Ilyas, who had run away from his home as a child and had been kidnapped by his own race men called Schutztruppe Askari, who were indigenous African soldiers who brutally treated their own race and they were crucial in maintaining German Colonial rule in the Zanzibar. According to Ilyas, the presence of Askari troops served as a symbol of the colonial oppression. The thoughts of Ilyas travelled on the contrast path to which he himself volunteered to serve in Schutztruppe Askari. He married German woman as a result of the Interest Convergence.

“Our system of race is like a two-headed hydra. One head consists of outright racism – the oppression of some people on grounds of who they are. The other head consists of white privilege – a system by which whites help and buoy each other up.” (Delgado 4)

On the other hand, Gurnah portrayed Hamza, who also formerly served as an Askari, later became a victim of his traumatic experience during First World War. By incorporating the Interest Convergence of Schutztruppe Askari, Gurnah provided a nuanced portrayal of the colonial experience in East Africa and offered an interpretation of colonial legacies of World war. This type of legal storytelling urged Gurnah to recount the experiences with racism and endured unique perspectives to assess solid narratives.

Critical Race Theory upholds the theme of Realist narrative in opposition to Idealist narrative. Idealists hold the concept that racism and discrimination are social construction – not a biological reality and so they readily accept the theory of colonizer and colonized. They never try to come out of their comfort zones. A contrasting concept – Realists or economic determinists hold that ‘Racism is a means by which society allocates privilege and status. To attain such heights, Gurnah practiced his four central characters to break their shield of Idealists zone. Black Poverty is different from almost any other race. It signifies culture of poverty.

Khalifa, 26 years old, Indo-African man stood out for his deterministic attitude in order to escape from his extreme poverty. Critical Race Theory highlights European poverty and black poverty where White Poverty usually lasts for only a generation or two; even for immigrant families. Gurnah exemplifies the oppressed race who had unwrapped themselves from Idealist approach to realist attitude, through Khalifa’s positive displacement from India to East Africa. This realist attitude of Khalifa was echoed by the words of Gurnah as “Khalifa was eager to leave the family home on the landowner’s state where his father was the book-keeper” (Gurnah 6), through his realistic approach he shined as a clerk, ledger etc. The best part was that, he became the whole protector for the rest of the characters in the novel. “Education leads to enlightenment. Enlightenment opens the way to empathy. Empathy

foreshadows reform.” (Bell 4). It was evident in Doris Lessing’s novel *The Grass is Singing* in which the White Protagonist Mary Turner fell into the circle of poverty due to her husband’s inability of breaking the web on the characteristics of idiosyncrasy. Even though they experienced the state of poverty, still they could afford Black servants to serve for them. This framework was not similar in case of oppressed race as defined by Critical Race Theorists.

Ilyas, after he had been kidnapped by the Schutztruppe Askari, was set out in mountain. One of his German Officers had taught him German language. After his education, he was invited to work in sisal plantation at Zanzibar as a privilege. There he met Khalifa and developed good friendship. Through Khalifa, Gurnah has revealed both narratives of realist and idealist life of Ilyas. In order to become educated, the characters were bestowed for which they tussle to overcome against the circle of racism. The stoicism was rewarded at the end of the novel, when Younger Ilyas, son of Hamza and Afiya gifted with good education which made him to succeed in Research sector aftermath of war. To substantiate the realist characters in the theory of Critical Race, color and innocence of black people welcomed the rude power of Whites. Essentially, Africans privilege and status in society was treated far more than white-people. Not everyone gets the chance to prove themselves as realist; if everyone does, then it would be the massive representation for their race as Younger Ilyas did.

Everyone has heard the story about Eskimos who have 26-words for different kinds of snow. Similarly, for racism it had been hailed as intentional racism; unintentional racism; unconscious racism; institutional racism; racism tinged with homophobia or sexism. (Delgado 25)

‘When did you last eat?’ (Gurnah 151). Gurnah detailed the condition of starvation endured by people living in the midst of colonized western powers with the concept of racism tinged with homophobia. The natives were exploited for resources by introducing new crops and farming practices that were unfamiliar and unsustainable to local cultures, leading to lack of food. In addition to that, German Imperial had also imposed taxes on foods and goods, which promoted exacerbating the problem. Ilyas had been employed in the large German sisal estate. ‘Our brother Ilyas has come to work at the big sisal estate’, Maalim Abdalla announced” (Gurnah 21). In these circumstances, Ilyas witnessed the harsh working conditions of individuals who were often treated as commodities rather than human beings. Gurnah, here implicitly explains the African subalterns who were forced to labour in the oppressor sisal plantation only to defeat their starvation. This might have caused Ilyas to return to serve in the Schutztruppe Askari which proved his stern determinism.

When feminism does not explicitly oppose racism and when anti-racism does not incorporate opposition to the patriarchy, race and gender politics often end up being antagonistic to each other and both interests lose. (Crenshaw 7)

The voices of women, particularly those who face intersecting forms of marginalization are significant in the novel. This includes women who grapple with the challenges of being both colonized and subjugated within their own race. Asha, Khalifa’s wife had undergone such silenced trauma when she was married at very young age. During her childhood, she was under the control of Amur Biashara, who was well concerned with materialistic approach. This made him to signify the term ‘Black Guilt’ person. To qualify from the core of masculinity and color determination suppressed Asha’s identity and forced her to be his slave. Shelby Steele, an American author, columnist in his book entitled ***White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era (2006)*** argues that Black guilt happens when Black people felt inferior to white people, and they get anxious because whatever they do, they cannot reach the status of white people. This caused him to act as an agent of intentional racism over Asha. On the other hand, Afiya’s will power made her to become a first native woman to serve her own race and she became a guarding angel in her region. Similar protagonists can be traced in Indian literature in the writings of Shashi Deshpande, Gita Hariharan etc. In the novel *Subharanalatha* by Ashapura Devi, the protagonist Subharanalatha had undergone such silenced oppression in the hands of her own family. Later on, she broke all the obstacles and became an independent woman.

Throughout the narrative, Gurnah has scrutinized the Critical Race Theory from the theme of Benevolence perspectives. The story of Hamza was the most gripping and unsettling one, which had been exposed to the harsh and complicated action that built the close bond between oppressors and oppressed. ‘One of the Askaris’ cautions Hamza

that these Germans, they like playing with pretty young men' (Gurnah 112), when he was chosen to be the Oberleutnant's personal servant. To help Hamza by understanding the novel Schiller, the officer is keen to teach him German, but he also warned Hamza that he was "dealing with backward and savage people and the only way to rule them is to strike terror into them". Even though Hamza did not like to be a servant in the hands of other race, he accepted all the vigorous actions of his officer, only to become literate. This resonated the words of Newt Gingrich – 'If you're black, you have to work harder, and if you're black and poor, you have to work twice as hard' (Delgado 203) Hamza's tolerance had been evident during the time of battle when he was torn and put to death's bed. When he recovered from the state of unconscious with the help of his White Patron, he returned to his homeland. This underscores the theme of benevolence that took friendship towards the state of transcending racial and cultural boundaries. These relationships were often characterized by mutual respect and genuine care for one another's well-being, showcasing benevolence in its purest form.

Here, Gurnah shapes a new door for Hamza when he returned to his homeland. He became the product of intentional racism and had started to serve in Nasoor Biashara's warehouse, where he led his life peacefully with the powers of love. Hamza married Afiya, sister of Ilyas after the festive of Ramadhan. They believe that the month of Ramadhan cultivates in them the virtues of self-control, sacrifice, and empathy for the less fortunate, which in turn promoted the acts of generosity and the payment of the obligatory charity (zakat). They also believed that fasting helps to instill compassion for the food-insecure poor. Thus, Hamza for the first-time experienced two kinds of love – the one (Ramadhan feast – 'Ramadhan food was always special as the cooks took greater trouble and more time to plan and prepare' (Gurnah 195) which made him physically strong; and other the love that Afiya showered on him which was everlasting. This made him to become an iconic figure to represent his own race as Cultural Preservationist. I am certain that the solution to racism lies in our ability to see its ubiquity but not to concede its inevitability. (Patricia 6)

Critical Race Theory asserts that racism is not just a matter of individual prejudice, but has embeds extremely in the basic structures and systems of society, and to set lights on how we perceive to see and construct it. This novel *Afterlives* instills the end of eliminating racial oppression as well as the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. It also calls for an introspection of multiple ways of analyzing a novel or any other literary forms of writing to unwrap the racial disparities judged by the color of their skins rather than the content of their character that operate within the society. Gurnah remembers the readers about the lived experiences of colonized community (i.e., black), emphasizing the importance of listening to the voices of those who have been historically oppressed by which the Black gets pleasure and honor in this 21st century despite all odds.

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