SANDRA RICHTER

FRIEDRICH SCHILLER IN ZANZIBAR. ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S »AFTERLIVES«

In Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Afterlives*, an »Oberleutnant«, a high-ranking German officer from the occupying forces of the Reich stationed in East Africa, makes a bet with the other officers in his unit: he wants to teach German to an askari, an East African soldier from the so-called »Schutztruppe«, so well that he will be able to read Schiller.[1] The Oberleutnant's choice of Schiller is deliberate. Serious, slim, of medium height, carefully shaven, thin-lipped, with hard, steel-blue eyes, the Oberleutnant wants to be feared, for only when he knows himself to be feared does he feel strong – and yet, he is also a hurt and disappointed man: »What is a man from the lovely little town of Marbach doing in this shithole? I was born into a military tradition and this is my duty.«[2] Just like Schiller, Gurnah's Oberleutnant comes from the German periphery and from a small town in which the less than well-to-do population lived, many of whom had a background in military service. Teaching Schiller to an askari seems to hold significance for the Oberleutnant: as a reminder to himself about his origins, as a way to overcome the East African reality and to progress backwards, to an inner and outer beauty.

Gurnah's Oberleutnant lost his beloved brother Hermann when a fire broke out in the army barracks. Hermann was 18 years old, the same age as the handsome, intelligent, soft-natured askari Hamza – a character modelled after the stories of Gurnah's so-called grandfather[3] – whom the Oberleutnant chooses as his personal servant because Hamza reminds him of his brother. The Oberleutnant beats Hamza, embraces him, loves him in a sardonic, sarcastic way, thus destroying an illusion that Hamza shares with many askari: They admire the Germans who ended the slave trade, who bring education and order (or so the propaganda goes). The askari want to resemble them and even adopt German names. In the colonial troops, however, they are anything but equal, even though they make up 90 % of the force.

1 Abdulrazak Gurnah, Afterlives, London et al. 2020, p. 5.
2 Gurnah, Afterlives, p. 85. – This article is based on my opening speech to Gurnah's Schiller Address at the German Literature Archive Marbach, 2023, and the oral form was retained.
3 Abdulrazak Gurnah, Schiller. Schiller Address, German Literature Archive Marbach, November 2023; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvOZgcxVglM (10.5.2025).

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»Exerzierplatz«, »schwein«, »schnapps«: The askari learn German words on the battleground.[4] Only Hamza receives private lessons, learns quickly, speaks excellent German and is drawn into a more or less explicit sado-masochistic, homosexual relationship with the Oberleutnant. The troop has soon worn itself out, and a resentful, subordinate »Feldwebel«, a German from Hamza's own unit, grievously injures Hamza.[5]

Disillusioned by the war, which he cynically calls a »Zivilisierungsmission« (»civilising mission«),[6] the Oberleutnant takes Hamza to the German mission, leaves him in the care of the curative pastor and gives him Schiller's *Musenalmanach für das Jahr 1798* as a parting gift. Hamza reads in the evening, by lamplight, and enjoys leafing through the small book. The Almanac of 1798 brings together the results of the ›year of the ballad‹ 1797. Schiller himself, Goethe, Matthisson, August Wilhelm Schlegel – they all contributed their texts. Schiller's ballads are among his folkloric poems; they are intended to convey ideas of morality. Think of the *Cranes of Ibycus*: no one, they show, escapes divine justice, not even the poet Ibycus's two murderers; the flock of cranes, which flies past at the moment of the killing and thus becomes an »eyewitness«, spies the murderers in the theatre that Ibycus intended to visit and leaves them to the furies' cries of revenge. It is similar to the *Ring of Polycrates*, Schiller's ballad that shows the tyrant Polycrates in all his hubris. He is captured by a satrap and crucified. This Schiller does not proclaim joy and universalism. He wants justice, at any cost.

In the German mission, Hamza is confronted with even more German texts. The pastor's easy-going wife gives him another German-language text: Heinrich Heine's *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*. Heine praises Enlightenment thinking – Luther, Spinoza, Mendelssohn, Kant. Motivated by the Jewish Enlightenment of the 19th century, the so-called Haskalah, Heine criticises the revolution, doubts that the upheaval will lead to better things, and praises – ironically – the clumsy Germans who are idealistically lagging behind history.

By the time Hamza reads about this, however, the Germans have caught up with history, and their thinking does not prevent them from committing the worst of actions. On the contrary, in the Maji Maji War, the colonial troops massacre the indigenous population. Only at the end of the First World War do the scattered troops surrender. One of them, Ilyas, who is no less proficient in German than Hamza and a member of similar family networks, has not had

4 Gurnah, Afterlives, pp. 55, 56, 75.
5 Gurnah, Afterlives, pp. 59, 200 f.
6 Gurnah, Afterlives, p. 65.

enough: despite the fighting and bloodshed, he travels to Germany out of admiration for the culture of his warlords – and, years later, falls victim to the Shoah in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

Afterlives is many things at once, a finely spun novel in parallel stories, a novel about the ambivalent relationships between colonial masters and the colonised and about the multiple injustices of German history, about broken families, the abuse of girls and boys, even a love story about the affection among survivors. Furthermore, the novel is ›unique‹ in not only spanning from German colonial rule to National Socialism, but also in featuring a member of the next generation of the family who travels to Germany in order to study the fate of Iliyas, thereby demonstrating ways in which the family trauma could be confronted and – maybe – overcome.[7] *Afterlives* is extraordinary in another aspect, too: Building on Gurnah's previous novel *Paradise* (1994), a postcolonial ›Bildungsroman‹, which already depicts the cruelty of German colonialism,[8] *Afterlives* engages with German literary and cultural heritage such that the novel could also be called meta-literature. The text explores the complex relationships between colonisers and the colonised through the lens of literature and with the help of literature.

In November 2023, Gurnah gave the Schiller Address at the German Literature Archive Marbach, focusing on his relationship to Schiller in general and his relevance for *Afterlives* in particular. Gurnah mentioned that he first encountered Schiller's writing in 1964, after the revolution in Zanzibar that turned the country from an English colony into a communist partner state. The German Democratic Republic sent teachers and opened up a library; among its holdings was an edition of Schiller's works in elegant grey binding with a golden spine.[9] In this edition, Gurnah said he found the poem *Das Geheimnis / The secret*, and this amazing encounter remained in his memory.

7 Dirk Göttsche, German Colonialism in East Africa and its Aftermath in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novels ›Paradise‹ and ›Afterlives‹ and in Contemporary German Literature, in: German Life and Letter 76/2 (2023), pp. 269–284, here pp. 277, 279.

8 Nina Berman, Yusuf's Choice: east African Agency during the German Colonial Period in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Novel ›Paradise‹, in: English Studies in Africa 56/1 (2013), pp. 41–64; Dirk Göttsche, Afrisian Prisms of Postcolonial Memory: German Colonialism in East Africa and the Indian Ocean Universe in Contemporary Anglophone and German Literature, in: Postcolonialism Cross-Examined: Multidirectional Perspectives on Imperial and Colonial Pasts and the Neocolonial Present, ed. Monika Albrecht. London, New York 2020, pp. 217–238, here 219–224; Dirk Göttsche, German Colonialism in East Africa and its Aftermath, pp. 270 f.

9 It could have been the Cotta edition from 1930: Schillers Werke in sechzehn Bänden. Stuttgart 1930.

Hamza, having recuperated somewhat and escaped the colonial troops and the mission, wants to write a letter to Ilyas's beautiful sister. Her brother has taught her to read and she asks Hamza for a poem. Unsure whether she is already taken, Hamza makes use of the first strophe of Schiller's poem *Das Geheimnis* to deliver his message of love unobtrusively, as a quotation from the *Musenalmanach* (in German and Kiswahili):

> Sie konnte mir kein Wörtchen sagen,
> Zu viele Lauscher waren wach,
> Den Blick nur durft ich schüchtern fragen,
> Und wohl verstand ich, was er sprach.[10]

The German form is simple: quatrefoil iamb, cross-rhymed with changing cadence. Afiya, who is addressed as the quiet female character in the poem, understands Hamza immediately and falls into the arms of her lover, with Schiller disguised as her shy admirer. Schiller makes for a ›Postillon d'amour‹ – a messenger of love, allowing lovers to recognise one another.

Admiring Silence is the telling title of another novel by Gurnah. When the expectations and differences of opinion are too great, only silence remains. Gurnah's *Afterlives* succeeds in overcoming silence, also with the help of Schiller. In his earlier works and essays, Gurnah refers to seminal works such as John Keats's *On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer* as a piece of artistic revelation. He engages with V. S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur* and with the works of James Baldwin because he recognises his own story in them. He looks up to Derek Walcott, among others, who captured the complicated relationship between coloniser and the colonised, and to Amitav Gosh, who impressively depicts the long history of Indian Ocean trade, to which the Europeans were only latecomers. Like Gosh, Gurnah »lament[s] the loss, ›the dissolution of centuries of dialogue that had linked us‹.«[11]

Gurnah's relationship to Schiller is more difficult even if he admires the man who, more than just a »great poet«, is »a symbol«.[12] For Gurnah, it is the simple poem *The Secret* in particular, in which Schiller's »lament against the materialist ascendancy in human life« and his »amicable melancholy« unfold.[13] Hence the poem makes »the machinery of the narrative« of *Afterlives* work.[14] Through the

10 Gurnah, Afterlives, p. 192.
11 Abdulrazak Gurnah, Indian Ocean Journeys, in: A. G., Map Reading. The Nobel Lecture and Other Writings, London et al. 2022, pp. 31–48, here p. 48.
12 Gurnah, Schiller.
13 Gurnah, Schiller.
14 Gurnah, Schiller.

reference to Schiller and the close link to his hometown Marbach, the German officer in *Afterlives* becomes a fully-fledged, ambivalent character, »a figure of silent inarticulate division«.[15] On the one hand, he cannot emancipate himself from his duties; on the other hand, even this representative of the cruel German colonial rule appears as a sensitive character.

When Gurnah was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2021, he emphasised in his speech the special, unique revelatory possibilities of literature. It does not simply depict history, he said, but shifts the dominant perspectives, »so that both the ugliness and the virtue come through, and the human being appears out of the simplification and stereotype«[16] – as Schiller might say, a »beautiful semblance« (»schöner Schein«).[17]

The ugliness that Gurnah aims at exploring in *Afterlives* is due to German colonialism: a »myth«, as he writes, »a myth of implacability and cruelty«.[18] Schiller had given his voice to robbers and oppressed women, and beautifully expressed his views on justice and universal humanity – and it is exactly this universal humanity that is being called into question by German colonialism. On the one hand, Schiller and his works are exempt from this cruelty, on the other hand they symbolise a German literary heritage cultivated by the colonisers. Consequently, Gurnah is careful when he includes Schiller in his work; there is no direct aemulatio or imitation of the poet's writings. Schiller's works are quoted and stand for themselves: Schiller's universalism and his morals were deformed by his German admirers, the colonisers; the original intentions need to be unlocked anew, and it is up to the colonised to do so. *Afterlives* presents careful first steps in this direction.

Gurnah describes, as if in passing, what it means to grow up in a melting pot where Africans, Indians and Arabs meet, in the sultanate, in the colony under the Germans, under the British, in the republic. At the same time, Gurnah's books depict the other side, Europe, as they are also set in a foggy, often arrogant England that confronts its migrants with mixed feelings, even if they show great enthusiasm for the Empire. Nevertheless, there is no turning back for Gurnah's migrant protagonists; East Africa, despite its familiarity, has become

15 Gurnah, Schiller.

16 Abdulrazak Gurnah, Writing. The 2021 Nobel Lecture in Literature, in: A. G., Map Reading. The Nobel Lecture and Other Writings, London et al. 2022, pp. 1–9, here p. 8.

17 Friedrich Schiller, Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen, in: Schiller, Philosophische Schriften, Weimar 1962 (Schillers Werke. Nationalausgabe 20. Bd., 1. Teil), Brief 26, 309–412, p. 400.

18 Gurnah, Schiller.

alien to them. Diaspora, displacement, migration and homelessness have become the human condition in Gurnah's works.[19]

The experience of diaspora is one that Gurnah shares with Schiller, who had to flee Württemberg, the country in which he was born, and migrate to Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach. Schiller, however, thrived in a more or less homogeneous and monolingual German society, and he did not even see the sea. Hence, while Schiller's *Diver* is searching for a golden cup in an abstract sea in the European tradition of maritime writing, Gurnah's ocean proves to be much wider and more current. Across this ocean come traders from Somalia, South Arabia and the West Indies, the coastal winds wash their ships ashore. The harbour of Dar es Salaam is a place of opportunity, difficult to control, and at the same time the setting of naval operations and the target of naval blockades. And from the boat at night, you can see one thing above all: the moonlit warehouses on the shore.

Gurnah does not celebrate Indian Ocean cosmopolitanism, rather it seems that everything seems to be negotiable here, in the space where the whole world meets.[20] In contrast to this, Schiller's humble Neckar Valley looks vastly more narrow, a lot smaller and morally more rigid, a difficult and serious heritage that did not allow Gurnah to invent humour as he does in other stories.[21] In *Afterlives*, however, he manages to attain literary sovereignty over the colonial past. It is the characteristic contribution of the novel to both, the history of literature and the history of German colonialism, that it engages not only with the cruel past but also with the ambivalent feelings of all parties, thus countering phenomena described as »white supremacy«,[22] avoiding the victimisation of his own people. Through the careful inclusion of Schiller (and Heine), Gurnah brings together seemingly incongruous perspectives, thus enabling dialogue in and across those cultures that are separated by a common but very different past.[23]

19 Sean James Bosman, Rejection of Victimhood in Literature. By Abdulrazak Gurnah, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Luis Alberto Urrea, Leiden, Boston 2021, p. 37.

20 Berman, p. 54.

21 Tina Steiner, Convivial Worlds. Writing Relation from Africa, London, New York 2021, pp. 123–125.

22 Henning Melber, The Long Shadow of German Colonialism. Amnesia, Denialism and Revisionism, London 2024, p. 110.

23 Sally-Ann Murray, Locating Abdulrazak Gurnah: Margins, Mainstreams, Mobilities, in: Critical Perspectives on Abdulrazak Gurnah, eds. Tina Steiner, Maria Olaussen London, New York 2023, pp. 141–157, here p. 152.