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‘I didn’t bring my heart with me’: Unfeeling as a mode of resistance in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Afterlives*

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Once upon a time, a monkey who lived in a palm tree by the sea befriended a shark. One day, the shark offered to take the monkey on a trip to Sharkland. Part of the way through the journey, the shark admitted that he was only taking the monkey to visit Sharkland because ‘the king is ill, and the doctor said that only a monkey’s heart will make him better’.¹ Upon hearing this, the monkey exclaimed, ‘I didn’t bring my heart with me’, and so the shark returned the monkey to his tree to fetch it (240). The shark never saw the monkey again.

A retelling of this old Swahili fable appears towards the end of Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Afterlives*, a novel which recounts the lives of four men during the German colonial occupation of East Africa (Deutsch-Ostafrika), which stretched from 1885 to 1918.² The fable is told by Khalifa, a young man of Gujarati heritage who begins to work as a clerk around the time that the German occupation began to intensify, following the bloody quelling of the al Bushiri uprising in 1888 by the German

¹ Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Afterlives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), p. 240. Subsequent quotations will be cited parenthetically in the text.

² A version of this story can be found in Edward Steere’s collection of stories *Swahili Tales: As Told By Natives Of Zanzibar* (London : Bell & Daldy, 1870).
<<https://archive.org/details/swahilitalesastoostee>> [Accessed 22 March 2022].

colonial forces, or Schutztruppe. The fable is one of the many tales Khalifa teaches to the young Ilyas—the son of Afiya, a young girl under Khalifa’s care, and Hamza, an askari member of the Schutztruppe who finds refuge in Khalifa’s home after suffering life-changing injuries at the hands of a German officer.

Although light-hearted, the fable harbours an important lesson for the young Ilyas. The novel ends not with his story but with details of the life of his namesake, Uncle Ilyas, the brother of Ayifa, who ran away from home as a child, was ‘kidnapped by a Schutztruppe askari’ and then ‘sent to a German [...] mission school’ (22). Despite later returning to his hometown to be reunited with his sister, Uncle Ilyas decides to volunteer to fight for the Schutztruppe askari, in contrast to Hamza who was captured by the troop as a young man and forced to fight for them and subjected to the relentless radicalised violence of the German officers. Thus, the fable, appearing where it does in the narrative, provides a useful analogy to the differing fates of these two men. It is a cautionary tale, exposing the potential dangers of offering wholehearted support to a colonial regime while also subtly advocating for ‘heartlessness’ as a mode of survival. ‘Don’t you think that was a clever little monkey?’, Khalifa asks Ilyas (240). The story suggests that, when faced with abuses of power, Ilyas might learn not to ‘bring his heart’ with him; to be disaffected, or ‘unfeeling’.

In her book *Disaffected*, Xine Yao shows how ‘unfeeling’ might not only be useful for self-preservation, but also a powerful political strategy;³ ‘a quotidian

³ Xine Yao, *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Duke University Press, 2021). p. 11: ‘I use “unfeeling” as a broad term for a range of affective modes, performances, moments, patterns, and practices that fall outside of or are not legible using dominant regimes of expression.’

tactic of survival' that might also function as a method of resistance.⁴ Although Yao is concerned with acts of resistance by native and migrant communities to a dominant group as opposed to a colonising force, Gurnah's novel helpfully reveals the relevance of Yao's notion of 'unfeeling' in colonial contexts. Indeed, the devastating turns of Uncle Ilyas' story reveals the possible consequences of not 'detaching from hegemonic feelings' through modes of unfeeling which, Yao claims, can be 'necessary for [oppressed people to] flourish'.⁵ Just as Uncle Ilyas' story envisions the result of consuming and being consumed by the hegemonic structure of the German Empire, the story of Hamza reveals how 'unfeeling' can be used to scrutinise and decentre the power dynamics of colonialism. Offering a unique insight into what life was like for East African people on the peripheries of the Deutsch-Ostafrika occupation—an especially valuable contribution, considering that the Schutztruppe 'destroyed, hid, or lost significant archival materials during the East African campaign'—Gurnah, much like Yao, tells lost stories of racial violence and anti-colonial resistance to encourage his readers to decolonise their understanding of feeling and recognise the complex and thoroughly racialized politics of empathy.⁶

Prior to joining the Schutztruppe, Uncle Ilyas' conversations with Khalifa and his friends reveal the extent of the German colonial propaganda he was fed throughout his youth. Explaining and defending the German occupation, Uncle Ilyas' claims that Khalifa and his friends 'haven't heard half of what [the East Africans] did to the Germans' as 'they had to be harsh in retaliation because that's the only way

⁴ Yao, p. 6.

⁵ Yao, p. 208.

⁶ Michelle Moyd, 'Radical potentials, conservative realities: African veterans of the German colonial army in post-World War I Tanganyika,' *First World War Studies*, 10:1, (2019) 88-107: 'Finding sources that provide access to African soldiers' perspectives in their own words is challenging. They are scant and dispersed, a situation exacerbated by the transition in authority from German to British occupation and proto-governance in Tanganyika beginning in 1916, in the midst of the campaign.'

savage people can be made to understand order and obedience' (42). In comparison, Uncle Ilyas labels the German officers as 'honourable and civilised' (42), reinforcing the hegemonic discourse that the Empire depended on. Here, Gurnah highlights the impact of colonial discourse when it is not met with resistance from the colonised subject. In this discussion, Ilyas reveals that he has adopted the role of self-policing, and as a result, become an extension of the colonial gaze. Crucially, Khalifa and his friends challenge Ilyas' pro-colonial stance. One friend declares: 'My friend, they have eaten you' (42). Ilyas' consumption of this discourse is part of the process of assimilation the "civilising" mission initiates—a demand for imitation that falls squarely and solely on the shoulders of those who have been colonised. Such acts of imitation can be a useful destabilising tactic. As Homi Bhabha states in *The Location of Culture*, 'the menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority.'⁷ However, Ilyas' total support of the German colonial regime does not uncover complex routes to overthrow the coloniser but, rather, leads to some devastating consequences. Without the desire to resist, Ilyas is totally trapped and absorbed by colonialism.

Hamza's experience of, and attitude towards the German colonisers differs sharply from Uncle Ilyas'. Not only is Hamza forced to join the Schutztruppe askari, and so forced to inflict violence, but he is made subject to physical and psychic violence himself. In his military training, we are told, 'punishment was constant and public' and, 'every few days', the whole troop would watch 'a public flogging for one misdemeanour or another, which often did not seem deserving of such humiliation' (60). This violence is perpetrated with the intention of making the soldiers 'obedient and fearless' (60). However, unlike Ilyas, Hamza does not uphold the colonial

⁷ Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. (London: Routledge, 2004). p. 126.

discourse that is violently impressed upon him. In fact, his response to the abuse he receives is characterised by the modes of ‘unfeeling’ suggested by Yao: ‘growing a thick skin’, ‘refusing to care,’ and ‘desensitization’.⁸ By reacting to colonial violence in this way, Hamza illustrates Yao’s claim that people can ‘signal skepticism and reluctance to signify the appropriate expressions of affect that are socially legible as human, which can rise to the refusal to care and sympathise as part of the expected cues of deference that maintain and structure biopolitical hierarchies of oppression’.⁹ In other words, being disaffected is a method through which people can resist oppressive agendas.

Although Hamza does not physically act out against the German officers, his mental reaction to the abuse demonstrates an active refusal to accept the colonial power structure. After repeated abuse from the other troops, Hamza ‘no longer winced at the shouts of schwein and washenzi’ (61), derogatory terms used frequently by the German occupiers for East Africans. Crucially, Gurnah does not romanticise Hamza’s relationship with resistance as something which is completely one-directional and empowering. Hamza, for instance, is not consistently resentful of the Schutztruppe. At one point, he is even said to ‘feel pride at being part of the group’ as he was ‘not rejected and mocked as he had feared’ (63). However, this pride does not last long as the continued abuse leads Hamza to the conclusion that ‘there was nothing to do but endure’ (63). Coming from the French ‘endurer’, meaning to make hard, endurance can be understood as a form of ‘growing a thick skin’. Here, Hamza physically abides by the rules of the German officers while refusing to accept and normalise his treatment and the colonial regime as a whole. According to Yao, such refusals can function as a ‘defensive tactic of everyday psychic survival in a

⁸ Yao, p. 11.

⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

world predicated upon racial and sexual violences.¹⁰ She adds that ‘the callousness of insensitivity may be a development of an affective callus, a protective hardening of the sensitive psyche against the wear and tear of everyday life and the repetitive tasks of racialized and gendered emotional labor’.¹¹ Throughout the novel, Hamza builds a callousness to his treatment in the Schutztruppe askari which challenges understandings of resistance as a physical and tangible act, and helps to reveal that acts of resistance can be mental and intimate.

Gurnah also explores the oppressor’s response to the practice of unfeeling. Through Hamza’s story, we can see the complications that arise when keenly scrutinised racialised subjects refuse to express their feelings in a visible or easily intelligible way. In line with Yao’s observations, Gurnah presents Hamza’s experience of unfeeling as difficult and humiliating at times. When explaining the Zivilisierungsmision (the ‘civilising mission’ of the Deutsch-Ostafrika colonial regime), a German officer tells Hamza that he has failed to react to the Schutztruppe’s tactics to strengthen him. The Oberleutnant explains:

We want you to be disciplined and obedient and cruel beyond our imagining.
We want you to be thick-skinned heartless braggarts [...] Except – you are not one of them. You tremble and look and listen to every heartbeat as if it all torments you. (86)

Here, Gurnah reveals the disconnect between the inner and outer manifestations of unfeeling. Being an internal and intimate form of resistance, it can be expected that

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 15-16.

unfeeling might be (mis)read as hypersensitivity. Yao confirms this, suggesting that unfeeling as a ‘tactic runs the risk of being misread and vilified’.¹² However, the perceived fearfulness of Hamza infuriates the Oberleutnant as such visible signs of weakness threaten the image of the Schutztruppe askari as ‘heartless braggarts’. Unlike Hamza’s internal and unseen attempts to grow a thick skin to the violence he experiences, the Oberleutnant reveals a desire for a different kind of ‘thick-skinnedness’ from Hamza. Without a willingness to be violent, Hamza’s mental fortitude is miscalculated by the coloniser as an inability to act rather than a refusal to act in support of colonial regime. In exposing this misreading, Gurnah highlights the failure of the colonial project to grasp certain unarticulated and unreadable mental modes of resistance. However, the Oberleutnant immediately exposes his lack of certainty over Hamza’s weakness, anxiously asking: ‘Are you frightened of me? I like people to be frightened of me. It makes me strong’ (86). Without an acknowledgement or reaction from Hamza, the Oberleutnant cannot comprehend whether, and to what extent, his violent behaviours are impacting Hamza. As Yao puts it, such subtle modes of disaffectedness enable the ‘immediate safety of people and denies aggressors the satisfaction of seeing [...] affectability’.¹³ As the secrecy of Hamza’s feelings haunts the German officer, Gurnah reveals the fragility of the power dynamics on which the colonial project depended. Unable to see Hamza’s affectedness, the Oberleutnant is left disturbed and frustrated, denied the full extent of the powers he expects to possess.

Though represented as ‘uncomplicated, loyal, and even heroic’ in colonial apologist narratives, the Schutztruppe askari are represented in Gurnah’s historical fiction in a way that manages to capture the vast, often obscured complexities of their

¹² Yao, p. 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

lives and roles in East Africa.¹⁴ Gurnah's two askari characters—Uncle Ilyas and Hamza—take opposing approaches to the German colonial regime. Whereas Uncle Ilyas impetuously obeys every request from the German colonisers, fulfilling the descriptors used in colonial apologist narratives as relayed above, Hamza privately rejects the occupation and the power relations it relies on. While Uncle Ilyas' story reminds us of the askari who were complicit in the violence and upholding of the German occupation of East Africa, Hamza's narrative highlights the possibility and the power of disaffectedness as a method of anti-colonial resistance. And his commitment to remaining unfeeling or disaffected—his decision to remain hard-hearted, or not to bring his heart with him at all—ultimately saves his life.

¹⁴ Michelle Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014). p. 8.