



## Women Empowerment Depicted in the Novel *Afterlives* by Abdulrazak Gurnah

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### Abstract:

*Afterlives* is a historical fiction novel by Abdulrazak Gurnah. This novel also delivers how the people in Tanzania live during the circumstances of war that is ongoing under German colonization. This study focuses especially with how women cope up during that difficult time and how they live under the gender stereotypes of what they should do and should not do, with Afiya as the focus. This study aims to describe how Afiya lives as a woman with the gender stereotype during that era within the lens of feminism. With the women empowerment concept, Afiya acts on how she wants to and not let anyone's opinion getting into her choices. The data is collected from the narrative story inside the novel. The researcher identified the data and further used the qualitative descriptive through the lens of feminism to analyze the data. With the concept of women empowerment, this study reveals that Afiya manages to get what she wants in education, social, and also psychological and breakthrough the gender stereotypes in Tanzania during that era.

**Keywords:** *Afterlives*; women empowerment; gender stereotypes

### Abstrak:

*Afterlives* adalah novel dengan genre fiksi sejarah karya Abdulrazak Gurnah. Novel ini juga menggambarkan bagaimana masyarakat Tanzania hidup dalam kondisi perang yang berlangsung di bawah penjajahan Jerman. Studi ini fokus terutama pada bagaimana perempuan menghadapi masa-masa sulit tersebut dan bagaimana mereka hidup di bawah stereotip gender tentang apa yang seharusnya dan tidak seharusnya mereka lakukan, dengan Afiya sebagai fokus utama. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggambarkan bagaimana Afiya hidup sebagai perempuan dengan stereotip gender pada era tersebut melalui perspektif feminisme. Dengan konsep pemberdayaan perempuan, Afiya bertindak sesuai keinginannya dan tidak membiarkan pendapat orang lain memengaruhi pilihannya. Data dikumpulkan dari cerita naratif dalam novel. Peneliti mengidentifikasi data dan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif melalui lensa feminisme untuk menganalisis data. Dengan konsep pemberdayaan perempuan, penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa Afiya berhasil mencapai apa yang dia inginkan dalam pendidikan, sosial, dan psikologis dan melawan stereotip gender di Tanzania pada era tersebut.

**Kata kunci:** *Afterlives*; pemberdayaan perempuan



## INTRODUCTION

Gender is a different aspect between man and woman that could be seen from how they interact within a society. Some people often have an expectation on what a woman or a man should do and what they should not do because of the presence of gender roles. Hence a double standard often created within this concept. Gender is built in individual, interactional and structural ways that create environmental obstacles and opportunities, which is usually more beneficial for men rather than women (Blackstone, 2003). Women have every right to do what they desire to do. Hence, a concept of gender roles and stereotypes are a crucial and important matter for every woman so further they can have their equality.

Feminism is a movement emerged to challenge and question those gender role stereotypes that mostly see women are in a lower grade than men. This feminism movement has evolved through several waves: from the first wave's struggle for legal rights and suffrage, to the second wave's demand for workplace equality and reproductive freedom, to the third wave's emphasis on diversity and intersectionality, and finally to the digital activism and inclusivity of the fourth wave. It is important to fight for women's rights (Mohsin Yaqub et al., 2025). Furthermore, the concept of women empowerment is an important matter in social life nowadays for women to get to stand on their own rights.

Women often face social, political, religious, and economic discrimination, experiencing inequality and being denied equal participation in democratic activities compared to men (Mandal, 2013). Nowadays, women empowerment has become a main concern in discussions on social development, human rights, and also global equality. To make an equal society, women must be "empowered" by giving them opportunities and support so they can fully develop their talents, gain independence, experience equality, and make their own choices and decisions ( Gazi et al., 2025, p. 28). Empowering women does not only involve creating equal opportunities but also breaking the structural barriers that make things unequal and limit their potential.

Those concepts mentioned can be found in many aspects in our life, one of which is inside the literary works that we enjoy in our daily life. This matter can be found inside the novel entitled *Afterlives* by Abdulrazak Gurnah. Living under the rule of German colonization, women have difficulty to live with their own will inside the novel. They have to lower their gazes, wear full-covered clothes from head to toe when they go out, and even get married at a young age. Afiya is one of the women that has had a difficulty in



living properly and peacefully since she was a little. And when she grows up into a young woman, she faces many injustices and even abuse because she is able to do certain things that women are not allowed to do during that period.

Inside the novel, Gurnah portrays how the gender stereotype in that era put a woman in an unfortunate event. When the uncle and the aunt find out that Afiya is literate, he tells Afiya how strange and uncanny it is for a woman to be able to write and read during that era inside the novel "...No, someone with no sense at all. Why does a girl need to write? So she can write to a pimp?" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 46). Because of this stereotype Afiya gets a hard time just because she is able to read and write, resulting in her getting hurt. Some people find it weird and amusing to have the ability to read and write. "He stepped forward and slapped her on her temple with his left hand, then he swapped the cane and slapped her on the face and head with his right hand." (Gurnah, 2020, p. 46). Gurnah delivers how hard it is to be a woman that is literate during that era in this novel.

Furthermore, Gurnah also depicts how women should act and should not act when they interact with other people especially towards men through Afiya's character. In this novel, Afiya is not allowed to even shake hands for a greeting to a man. In addition, she is also being told by her elderly, Bi Asha, that she should keep her gaze down while she is walking down on the street and not to smile at strangers. She is even not allowed to meet her friend because of the rumor that her friend is from a troubled family. "Bi Asha policed her movements, or tried to, advising her firmly on her behaviour and who she was not to see and what she was not to do." (Gurnah, 2020, p. 93)

Studies about the concept of gender role and stereotype have been done by many researchers. A study from Tri Winarsih, Surya Sili, and Setya Ariani (2021) entitled "Gender Stereotypes Changes of Merida's Character in Disney Movie *Brave*" revealed that the main character, Merida, did not embrace the gender stereotype and she chose to live in her own will. Another study by Shamsa Iqbal and Rida Nadeem (2023) with the title "Revisiting Gender Roles: A Feministic Analysis of Pakistani movie "Bol"" showed that women's rights in Pakistan in "Bol" movie are being suppressed by men in society. A study by Hazrat Abbas, Zubaida Amin, and Ramla Ahmad (2023) entitled "Colonial Imprints on Nature: Ecocritical Explorations in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*" revealed that, through postcolonial ecocriticism lens, colonialism and historical conflicts not only disrupted human lives and identities but also damaged ecosystems. Another study in *Afterlives* by Varadha P Nair (2025) entitled "Hope in the Face of Adversity: Exploring the



Resilient Human Spirit in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*" showed that hope plays a crucial role in shaping characters' identities, relationships, and destinies under colonial oppression, with men and women experiencing and expressing it in different ways. Dr. Hafiz Kamran Farooqi, Dr. Taimur Kayani, and Muhammad Umer Rizwan (2025) study entitled "Burden of the Past: Postcolonial Silence and Intergenerational Trauma in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*" revealed that silence functions as both a force that sustains intergenerational trauma and a pathway to resistance and healing, shaping how characters rebuild identity under colonial legacies.

While these works provide insights into themes of colonialism, trauma, ecology, and resilience, none has specifically addressed how women characters in *Afterlives* negotiate the suppression of gender roles and pursue empowerment within structures patriarchy and colonization. Those studies focused either on broader historical and cultural issues such as silence, trauma, and hope, leaving how women actually lived and felt in the novel under the gender stereotypes. This gap is significant because Afiya, as one of the main female characters in *Afterlives*, depicts the tensions between oppression and resistance in a colonial society that shows restrictions on women's bodies, voices, and choices. By analyzing Afiya's journey through the lens of feminism, this study explores how women's life is depicted in Gurnah's novel and shows how women's empowerment can still appear even in very difficult times. It highlights the importance of acknowledging women's struggles within gender stereotypes. This study focuses on how Afiya as a woman maintains her choices to do what she wants under the gender stereotypes during the colonization era where women are being suppressed within the gender stereotypes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminism is a social movement. It is "a mass movement commenced by women of all groups to eradicate all forms of feminist oppressions by men that are prevailing in a patriarchal society" (Mohajan, 2022, p. 1). It aims to "seek women's equality and justice in every sphere of life and create opportunities for women to have the same access to the resources that are otherwise freely available to men" (Raina, 2017, p. 3372). It challenges the historical and structural systems that have placed women in lower positions and fights against the cultural norms that justify such inequality. Over time, feminism has evolved in different fields, each addressing different issues of women's struggles from legal rights and political participation to representation in modern media. In this study, feminism becomes



the foundation to analyze how women resist and fight against oppression through concepts such as gender roles, gender stereotypes, and women empowerment.

In the concept of gender roles, it is an aspect of expected behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics on the concepts of masculinity and femininity determined by the social and cultural aspects (Matthias, 2024). Therefore, it can lead to the appearance of gender stereotypes in society. Many people give their opinions on what a man or a woman should do and not do. Gender stereotypes show up as a general behavior of what a person does or has (Jones, 2024). Manzi et al. (2024) argued if women act confident or showing a good quality in doing a masculine job that most people think are for men, they often get judged or punished for not following the expected gender roles. Strict gender roles limit women's chances for education and public involvement, while supporting and normalizing a male-dominated system that keeps women unequal and unheard.

As women's existence is often getting so many boundaries on what should or should not do, feminism exists to get their rights (Mohsin Yaqub et al., 2025). Feminism is a movement to question and challenge those gender stereotypes, breaking down the patriarchal systems, promoting equality between men and women in society, politics, the economy, and culture. Bell Hooks, a social critic and also a feminist, argued that feminism is "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (Hooks, 2000, p. 1). From those theoretical fundamentals, women empowerment can be understood as the practical realization of feminist ideals in daily life.

Women empowerment is an important concept for a woman so they can improve and grow just like how they want. The meaning of women empowerment can be described as helping women to appreciate themselves more, have the right to choose their own paths, and also have the right to speak in the society for changes in the future (Mamgain, 2022). It is a way to make women able to make their own choices in their life for their personal, professional, and societal growth (Mamgain, 2022; World Bank Group, 2023). Women should not be burdened with the social stereotypes on what they should do and what they should not do. This concept showed that women have every right to choose the path that they want to take in living their life without getting discriminated against or even degraded because they are the opposite sex. Whether it is in educational fields or the right to speak up their opinion in society. Women empowerment can be classified into few types, including in educational, social and psychological (Mandal, 2013).



## RESEARCH METHODS

Analyzed through the lens of feminism, this study is a qualitative descriptive study to define how Afiya lives her life under the gender stereotype and how she should get every right to do what she wants to do as a woman. The source of the data in this study are taken from the novel *Afterlives* by Abdulrazak Gurnah as the primary data, and the secondary data from related books, journal articles, and credible online sources. The form of the data in this study is the narrative text of the novel, focusing on how Afiya as a woman tried to keep on her choices within the gender stereotype during that period of time. In order to collect the data, the researcher read the novel and then identified the narrative texts. The data then further analyzed based on the concept of empowerment. In analyzing the data, the researcher made the interpretation and then the conclusion of the data.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section reveals the findings of the study based on the analysis of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020), focusing on how the character Afiya experiences difficulty and how she manages to break through the gender stereotypes within women empowerment lens. Through women empowerment lens, it highlights the inequality between gender and discrimination that Afiya receives. By examining Afiya's experiences, the study reveals how she lives under gender roles and stereotypes, and how she maintains her choices despite the oppression. The findings are divided into several fields that reflect Afiya's transformation from a girl that is treated poorly to a woman who gains confidence and the ability to make and maintain her own choices, while also get a support from the people that care about her during the process.

### **Educational empowerment**

Education is an important matters and everyone should have every right to pursue their education no matter what sex and gender that they have, as Mandal (2013, p. 20) argues that "if one male child is literate personally he alone becomes educated but if one girl child is educated the whole family becomes benefited." This statement shows that when women get a proper education, they not only educate themselves but also their family since they will be a mother if they want to in the future.

In *Afterlives*, the women are not able to read let alone write something in that time. And when Afiya gets the curiosity, the desire to learn, she has to do it where no one can see her. This is shown in chapter two where Afiya starts to show her interest in education.

And when her brother, Ilyas, comes to Afiya, he immediately tells Afiya that she needs to learn how to read and write so she will now about the world and how to look after herself which Afiya obliges even though she is not ready yet to think about her future.

“She did not think she would be able to learn a book that holy but her brother laughed at her and made her sit beside him while he wrote out the letters and made her say them after him. Later she practised writing the letters herself.” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 37).

In this part, Afiya starts to show her interest in the fundamentals of education. She starts to learn how to write and read with her brother’s help. As it mentions in the previous part that Afiya already realized her surroundings, “She had not seen anyone read or write although she knew what writing was because it was on the tins and boxes in the village shop, and she had seen a book on a shelf above the shopkeeper’s stool.” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 37). It shows that Afiya feels the spark of curiosity in learning. She knows what is a writing but not yet can read the writing that she finds. Those parts show the beginning and the process that Afiya slowly becomes a literate woman despite the condition during that time where not many women were literate inside the novel.

Furthermore, Afiya despite the countless abuse that she receives from the uncle and the aunt she forced to live with discover that she is actually literate, it does not stop Afiya and she continues with learning to write and read. In addition, Bi Asha also supports her education. She teaches Afiya how to read the Koran and sends her to learn with a neighbor.

“Bi Asha prayed for her and taught her to read the Koran. If we read together then you will not be thinking so much about your pain and God will bless you and reward you, she said. It took several weeks of daily effort for Afiya to advance enough in her learning to manage the small suras, but when she did, Bi Asha sent her to one of the neighbours, Bi Habiba, who gave lessons in her home to four other girls every morning.”(Gurnah, 2020, p. 63)

Bi Asha also teaches her how to shop in the market when Afiya accompanies her for a shopping. “After that Afiya accompanied her to the market to buy vegetables and fruit, and perhaps meat on meat eating days. Bi Asha taught her the cost of produce and how to pay for it, how to handle the money.” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 64). Furthermore, Bi Asha also expects that Afiya will be the one doing the shopping once she is old enough to go to the market on her own. Those parts show that Afiya gets support to keep on improving to be a well-educated woman. Not only in learning how to read and write, but also in daily life as simply as going to a market.

In religious context, Afiya not only gets to learn how to read the Koran, Afiya also gets to learn how to pray. When Bi Asha about to pray in the midday, she expects Afiya to accompany her. Bi Asha teaches Afiya how to pray not through explanation but by example and repetition, letting her learn by observing and copying her actions.

“In prayer, she explained to her, a person is speaking directly to God and cannot break off to address someone else or do something else. So she could not stop to explain and instruct during the prayer and Afiya would have to learn by example and repetition.” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 65)

Despite the abuses she gets when she lives with the aunt and uncle before, this support makes Afiya feels confident to keep on learning. It is proven that Afiya becomes a well-educated young maiden during that era as Khalifa talks about her to Hamza in chapter 11, ““She can read and write too,”” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 171). Those parts show that Afiya still holds onto her choice to keep learning.

### **Social empowerment**

In this empowerment, it refers that women are able to have social relations with each other, support each other, and feel confident to connect with other people (Mandal, 2013). A woman can have any social relation with anyone they want. Inside the novel Afiya starts to show her desire in having a social relationship This can be found in chapter 2 inside the novel.

“The brother Issa and sister Zawadi were older than her, maybe five or six years older. They were not her brother and sister, of course, but she still thought of them like that even though they teased her and hurt her as part of their games.” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 32)

That part shows that Afiya wants to have a relationship with the children of the uncle and aunt that took her in, even though they are not even related by blood. She still thinks of them as brother and sister even though at the end Afiya gets nothing but kindness as a return from them. In this part, it shows the desire of Afiya to have a good social relation despite being treated harshly. Furthermore, this leads into the growth of Afiya’s determination into having a good social relation with other people. She eventually bonds with the daughters of the owner of the family house where Ilyas and Afiya stay there, Jamila and Saada. Afiya finally has a good social relationship on good terms with other people after being treated like a slave before her brother, Ilyas, finds her. The three become good friends and often spend time together.

“Their names were Jamila and Saada and they became her friends from the start. Later, she had her meal with them when their father came home. She

was told to call their father Uncle Omari, which made her feel she was part of the family.” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 37)

This part shows that Afiya is able to make a good social relation with other people. This relationship between the three lasted for a long time until they eventually grew old together. It shows how a woman is able to have a social relation with anyone they want. In addition, Jamila and Saada also support and care for Afiya. They feel in awe when they know that Afiya can write and read. “...she went upstairs and practised reading and writing her letters under the sisters’ admiring eyes. Neither of them could read, nor could their mother” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 38). They support Afiya and not judge her or even hurt her just because they are illeterate. Moreover, when Afiya visits them after she came back from the house of the aunt and uncle. They also share their stories how their life is after Afiya left, and show their consent when Afiya tells them she gets an abuse from the aunt and the uncle.

“She went to see the family with whom she used to lodge when she lived with Ilyas, the sisters Jamila and Saada and their mother. They were pleased to see her and welcomed her as kindly as they had done before.” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 64)

This part shows that Gurnah portrays the women in his novel as individuals who support and care for one another despite the difficulty they face with a moment of warmth. Their friendship becomes a source of emotional strength, helping them endure the social and cultural pressures around them. Through this portrayal, Gurnah highlights the importance of women’s relationships as a form of empowerment in Afiya’s character. Gurnah emphasizes that women’s unity and compassion become silent acts of empowerment through empathy.

### **Psychological empowerment**

When a woman is able to be a part of a social relation or educational field, they will get a “psychologically powered” feeling when they achieve those succession and get a “self-confidence” (Mandal, 2013, pp. 23-24). In this novel, Afiya succeeded in the fundamentals of education and also the social relation. When Afiya about to return the house of the uncle and aunt because Ilyas needs to left for the war because he joins the schutztruppe, Khalifa tells her to send a message to his workplace in case she needs anything. “Listen to me, Afiya, until he returns, you must let us know if ever you need anything. Send a messageto me at my workplace, care of the merchant Biashara. Will you remember that?” (Gurnah, 2020, pp. 44-45). Later, Ilyas telss Khalifa that Afiya can write.

Hence, Khalifa tells Afiya to send him a note. This shows that Afiya can lean on someone else. Despite she does not notice it, it gives her the confidence, that she is psychologically powered, now that she can write and she can ask for a help to Khalifa.

The moment when Afiya receives the punishment from the uncle because she can read and write, Afiya immediately writes to contact Khalifa and try to get help from him.

“She wrote: Kaniumiza. Nisaidie. Afiya. He has hurt me. Help me. She gave the note to the shopkeeper, who read it and folded it in half and gave it to a cart driver headed for the coast. Her brother’s friend came back with the cart driver who delivered her note.” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 47)

In this part shows that Afiya had the self-confidence that Khalifa will somehow come and get her. Because Afiya able to write and read, and she also managed to have a social relation with other people, she gets the power in her psychology and she is sure that her message will be delivered to Khalifa and later he will pick her up from the house of the uncle and aunt that did nothing but torture her and made her suffer. Furthermore, Afiya is even able to create a romantical relationship with a man because of the psychologically powered that she gets in social relations.

When Afiya meets Hamza, she gets the interest to know him and spend time with him. This, leads into a growing feeling that Afiya has for him. As the time passes by Afiya eventually expresses her feelings for him, as it is shown in chapter 10 where Afiya starts to serve him food more often than before, resulting in them spend times together, “She passed him a mug of water and a dish of rice and spinach. When she did not shut the door immediately as she usually did, he sat down on the porch by the door and started to eat.” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 161). And in chapter 12, Hamza eventually asks for her hand in a marriage, “Afiya was in his arms when he said, ‘Will it suit you if we marry?’” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 188). Afiya is exhilarated with his proposal and immediately accepts it. Afiya gets the psychological empower after she able to have a social relation with other people. Hence she is confident that she can also create a relationship in a romantic way with Hamza.

## CONCLUSION

The gender stereotype in the novel entitled *Afterlives* by Abdulrazak Gurnah truly depicts what it is like to live under the gender stereotypes during that era in Tanzania. Women do not have any freedom to do what they want to do. They have to live under the impression of being powerless as it is shown with how they barely literate, and demand to be married at a young age with men they barely know. Afiya is the woman character in

this novel that shows how she is able to live under those impressions mentioned before. She manages to break free from the gender stereotype and get empowerment in certain fields despite those circumstances, including in education, social, and psychological empowerment. The people around her supports her and makes her feel empowered to continue growing into a better woman. Afiya shows what she wanted to do and then acts on it even though some other people tell her that she should not have done things that are strange for a woman to do. Furthermore, this shows that Afiya lives her life with her own choices without paying any mind to what other people say to her. And with the support from the people that care around her, Afiya grows into a better woman that is confident with the choices she makes in her life.

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