

Postmemory and the Ethics of Remembering in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between postmemory and the ethics of remembering in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*, arguing that the novel reimagines colonial history through the fragmented memories, silences, and inherited emotional burdens carried by individuals and communities in German East Africa. Rather than presenting history as a complete and objective record, Gurnah constructs memory as a dynamic process shaped by loss, displacement, violence, and everyday acts of survival. Drawing primarily on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, while engaging with contemporary memory studies, the paper explores how characters inherit experiences that they have not directly lived but continue to carry through stories, absences, emotional attachments, and the enduring effects of colonial violence. In *Afterlives*, the legacy of war extends beyond the battlefield and persists within families, relationships, and social life, demonstrating that the consequences of empire are transmitted across generations even when historical events remain only partially remembered or deliberately forgotten.

The paper further argues that Gurnah develops an ethics of remembering that neither seeks to recover a complete past nor transforms historical suffering into heroic nationalist narratives. Instead, the novel foregrounds ordinary lives, interrupted histories, and marginalized voices that have often remained absent from official colonial archives. Through close textual analysis, this study demonstrates that remembering in *Afterlives* is an ethical practice grounded in listening, witnessing, and acknowledging historical wounds without reducing them to fixed meanings. Such an approach challenges dominant historical narratives while resisting both nostalgic reconstruction and absolute closure. By locating memory within intimate human relationships rather than institutional records alone, Gurnah presents remembrance as a continuing responsibility that shapes individual identity and collective belonging. Ultimately, the paper argues that *Afterlives* expands contemporary postcolonial memory discourse by illustrating how inherited memories, silences, and affective connections become essential to recovering overlooked colonial histories and imagining more ethical ways of engaging with the past.

Keywords: Postmemory, Ethics of Remembering, Cultural Memory, Colonial Violence, German East Africa

Introduction

The relationship between memory and the past has undergone a significant transformation in contemporary literary and cultural studies. Rather than treating memory as a passive storehouse of historical facts, scholars increasingly understand it as a dynamic and interpretative process through which individuals and communities continually reconstruct their understanding of the past. This shift has become central to memory studies, particularly in examining

histories marked by violence, displacement, and colonialism, where official archives often remain incomplete or ideologically shaped. As Astrid Erll observes, “memory is not a storehouse of the past, but a process of ongoing reconstruction” (Erll 8). Remembering, therefore, is not the recovery of an unchanged past but an act of interpretation shaped by present circumstances, cultural frameworks, and social relations. Similarly, Jan Assmann argues that “the past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present” (Assmann 9), emphasizing that collective remembrance continually negotiates the relationship between historical experience and contemporary identity. Such perspectives move memory beyond the limits of personal recollection and establish it as a cultural practice through which societies produce meaning from historical experience. This theoretical shift becomes particularly important in postcolonial literature, where narratives frequently recover lives and experiences omitted from imperial historiography. Instead of reproducing official versions of history, postcolonial texts expose the gaps, silences, and fragmented recollections that shape historical consciousness. Consequently, memory functions not only as a means of recalling the past but also as an ethical and political practice that questions dominant historical narratives while restoring visibility to marginalized histories. This understanding provides the theoretical foundation for reading Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*, a novel that represents colonial history not as a complete historical record but as a living process of remembrance, silence, and inherited experience.

Abdulrazak Gurnah occupies a distinctive position in contemporary postcolonial literature for his sustained exploration of memory, displacement, migration, and the enduring consequences of colonialism. Born in Zanzibar in 1948 and later settling in Britain as a refugee, Gurnah has consistently examined how imperial histories continue to shape individual lives long after the formal end of colonial rule. His novels—including *Memory of Departure* (1987), *Pilgrims Way* (1988), *Dottie* (1990), *Paradise* (1994), *By the Sea* (2001), *Desertion* (2005), *Gravel Heart* (2017), and *Afterlives* (2020)—return repeatedly to questions of exile, belonging, historical silence, and cultural memory. The Swedish Academy, in awarding him the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature, recognized him “for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents.” Gurnah's fiction, however, extends beyond documenting colonial oppression; it is equally concerned with recovering overlooked lives and exposing the emotional and ethical complexities that accompany historical violence. As Elleke Boehmer observes, Gurnah's narratives “challenge simplified understandings of migration, home, and identity by foregrounding the layered histories through which these experiences are produced” (Boehmer 156). Likewise, Tina Steiner argues that Gurnah's fiction “consistently interrogates the relationship between personal memory and larger historical processes, revealing how intimate lives are shaped by colonial histories” (Steiner 145). These critical perspectives are especially relevant to *Afterlives*, where the history of German colonial rule in East Africa is narrated not through official historical accounts but through fragmented memories, silences, and the everyday experiences of ordinary people. By foregrounding inherited memories rather than monumental historical events, the novel invites an examination of how the colonial past survives across generations and how acts of remembering become ethical responses to histories that have remained marginalized. It is within this intersection of postmemory, historical silence, and ethical remembrance that the present study locates its central argument.

Against this theoretical and literary background, the present study argues that *Afterlives* offers a powerful representation of postmemory by demonstrating how the legacies of colonial violence survive through fragmented memories, emotional inheritances, and enduring silences rather than through complete historical narratives. Set during and after German colonial rule in East Africa, the novel foregrounds the lives of ordinary individuals whose experiences have largely remained absent from official histories. The narrative repeatedly suggests that the effects of colonialism continue long after political domination has ended, as the past persists within intimate relationships and everyday life. Reflecting on the long-lasting consequences of violence, Ilyas remarks, “Some things never leave you” (Gurnah). This seemingly simple statement captures the novel's central concern with the persistence of traumatic memory across time. Recent scholarship has likewise emphasized that *Afterlives* reconstructs colonial history by linking personal remembrance with collective historical consciousness. Nicoletta Brazzelli argues that the novel “fills traumatic historical gaps” and develops “a poetics of memory” through the interconnected dynamics of memory,

postmemory, and oblivion, thereby shifting attention from official colonial archives to the emotional lives of those marked by empire. Similarly, Lukas Lammers contends that *Afterlives* functions as “a commemorative event in its own right,” bringing different histories of violence into dialogue through what Michael Rothberg calls multidirectional memory. Building upon these critical interventions, this paper reads Gurnah’s novel through Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory to demonstrate that remembrance in *Afterlives* is not confined to those who directly experienced colonialism. Instead, memory circulates through stories, absences, inherited emotions, and acts of witnessing, transforming the ethical responsibility to remember into an essential means of recovering neglected colonial histories and restoring dignity to lives excluded from imperial historical discourse.

While *Afterlives* is deeply rooted in the historical context of German East Africa, its significance extends beyond the recovery of a neglected colonial past to an exploration of the ethical implications of remembrance itself. Gurnah avoids presenting memory as a transparent path to historical truth; instead, he depicts it as fragmented, selective, and often shaped by silence. Characters remember through interrupted conversations, bodily scars, recurring absences, and inherited emotions, suggesting that the past continues to exist not only in documented events but also in the affective lives of later generations. This narrative strategy closely aligns with Marianne Hirsch’s understanding of postmemory as the relationship that later generations bear to experiences they “remember” only through the stories, images, and behaviors that surrounded their upbringing (Hirsch 5). In *Afterlives*, the emotional consequences of colonial violence are transmitted through familial and social relationships, making remembrance an ethical engagement rather than a mere recollection of historical facts. As Hamza reflects upon the lingering effects of his experiences, “There are things that cannot be forgotten” (Gurnah). The statement encapsulates the novel’s insistence that traumatic histories resist closure and continue to shape present identities. Recent criticism similarly recognizes this ethical dimension of Gurnah’s narrative. Stephanie Newell argues that *Afterlives* restores visibility to East African experiences that have long remained peripheral to dominant accounts of colonial history, demonstrating how fiction can challenge historical erasure by foregrounding ordinary lives rather than imperial archives (Newell 214). Likewise, Nicoletta Brazzelli observes that Gurnah’s narrative practice resists both historical amnesia and nostalgic recovery by emphasizing the fragile and unfinished nature of remembrance, where memory remains inseparable from silence and loss (Brazzelli). Read from this perspective, *Afterlives* transforms remembering into an ethical act of witnessing that neither resolves historical trauma nor claims complete knowledge of the past. Instead, it encourages readers to confront the continuing presence of colonial violence through attentive engagement with those voices and experiences that history has repeatedly neglected.

Gurnah begins *Afterlives* by situating private lives within the violent machinery of German colonial rule, suggesting that memory emerges not from isolated individual experiences but from a collective history of dispossession and survival. Instead of presenting colonialism as a distant political event, the narrator foregrounds its everyday consequences, recording how “the response of the colonial administration became more relentless and brutal” as “they burned villages and trampled fields and plundered food stores,” leaving “African bodies... hanging on roadside gibbets in a landscape that was scorched and terrorized” (Gurnah 21). The narrative further exposes the ideological logic of imperial domination by observing that “the empire had to make the Africans feel the clenched fist of German power in order that they should learn to bear the yoke of their servitude compliantly” (Gurnah 21). These descriptions establish violence not merely as an episode of conquest but as the foundation upon which colonial memory is constructed. Yet Gurnah refuses to confine history to military campaigns or administrative records. Instead, he shifts the narrative towards ordinary individuals such as Ilyas, whose fragmented recollections reveal the enduring psychological consequences of colonial intervention. When Ilyas confesses, “I’ve never been back to the village where we used to live... I tried not to think about it” (Gurnah 28), his hesitation reflects not only personal estrangement but also the emotional distance produced by forced displacement and colonial disruption. His eventual return exposes the irreversible losses that history has left behind as the village woman tells him, “Your mother is dead. Your father is dead. Your sister is given away” (Gurnah 31). Rather than presenting these revelations as isolated family tragedies, Gurnah portrays them as the intimate afterlives of empire, where historical violence survives in fractured kinship,

interrupted memory, and inherited absence. In doing so, the novel exemplifies Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, demonstrating that the ethical imperative of remembering lies not in recovering a complete historical record but in acknowledging the enduring human consequences of lives fragmented by colonial power.

Ilyas's return to his native village marks one of the earliest moments in the novel where memory becomes an ethical confrontation with the past rather than a simple act of recollection. Having spent ten years away, he approaches his home with uncertainty, only to discover that the life he once knew has disappeared beyond recovery. The villagers remind him that they had believed he was dead, recalling, "We thought you were kidnapped by the *ruga ruga* or the *wamanga*. We thought the *Mdachi* killed you" (Gurnah 31). Their memories reveal how colonial violence had become so pervasive that disappearance itself appeared ordinary. More devastatingly, Ilyas learns that his parents have died and that his sister Afiya "was given away" because their father was "very poor" and "very ill" (Gurnah 32). These revelations transform memory into an encounter with inherited loss rather than personal nostalgia. Gurnah thus suggests that the consequences of colonial rule are preserved not only in historical records but also in fractured families and interrupted lives, where remembrance becomes an ethical responsibility to acknowledge those whose histories have been erased by the violence of empire.

The reunion between Ilyas and Afiya further demonstrates that memory in *Afterlives* is mediated through absence, silence, and fragmented recognition rather than continuous familial bonds. When Ilyas finally reaches the house where Afiya has been raised, he gently tells her, "I am your brother. I have been looking for you for so long. I did not know if you lived" (Gurnah 37). His words reveal not only the uncertainty created by colonial disruption but also the emotional burden of searching for a past that has almost disappeared. For Afiya, however, this revelation does not immediately restore a lost identity because she has grown up detached from her biological family and knows them only through fragmented stories. The siblings' reunion therefore illustrates Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory, where family history is transmitted through narratives, absences, and emotional inheritances rather than direct experience. Gurnah suggests that remembrance cannot undo historical violence, but it can recover relationships that colonialism attempted to erase, making the act of remembering an ethical affirmation of kinship, identity, and belonging.

Afiya's childhood further illustrates how postmemory is shaped by silence and emotional deprivation rather than by direct knowledge of the past. Growing up in the household of her foster parents, she gradually becomes aware that she does not fully belong there. Her aunt eventually reveals, "We took you in because you were orphaned and your father was sickening... Since then you have been our burden" (Gurnah 35). Although these words provide Afiya with fragments of her family history, they also expose the emotional distance that has defined her upbringing. She inherits the consequences of colonial loss without possessing memories of the events themselves. The deaths of her parents and her separation from her brother exist only as stories narrated by others, making her identity dependent upon inherited recollections rather than lived experience. In this sense, Gurnah demonstrates that postmemory is not merely the transmission of historical knowledge but also the inheritance of emotional wounds, where silence, absence, and incomplete narratives become integral to the formation of personal identity.

Hamza's experiences as an askari reveal another dimension of postmemory by demonstrating how colonial violence continues to inhabit the body and mind long after the physical conflict has ended. Recruited into the German colonial army, he survives not only the brutality of war but also the psychological scars it leaves behind. Even after returning to civilian life, his silence and emotional restraint indicate that traumatic experiences resist easy narration. Gurnah captures this burden through Hamza's awareness that "he had learned to keep quiet" (Gurnah 129), suggesting that silence itself becomes a survival strategy shaped by colonial oppression. His memories remain fragmented and largely unspoken, yet they profoundly influence his relationships, particularly with Afiya, whose own life has been marked by loss and abuse. Their shared experiences create an ethical space where understanding emerges not through complete disclosure but through mutual recognition of suffering. In portraying Hamza's quiet endurance, Gurnah emphasizes

that the afterlife of colonialism resides as much in the unspoken memories of survivors as in the documented history of war, reinforcing the novel's central concern with the ethical responsibility of remembering lives fractured by imperial violence.

The relationship between Hamza and Afiya gradually transforms memory from a source of isolation into a possibility of healing. Both characters carry histories of violence that they rarely articulate in full, yet their shared experiences enable them to recognize each other's suffering without demanding complete explanation. Their intimacy is therefore built not upon forgetting the past but upon accepting its continuing presence. As the narrator observes, they gradually “learned to live with each other,” discovering a fragile sense of companionship amid the lingering effects of loss (Gurnah 201). Their relationship suggests that ethical remembrance does not require the complete recovery of traumatic experience; instead, it depends upon empathy, patience, and the willingness to acknowledge another person's invisible wounds. In this way, Gurnah shifts the focus from historical catastrophe to ordinary acts of care, demonstrating that the afterlives of colonialism can be confronted through human solidarity as much as through historical narration. Such moments affirm that memory, although marked by pain, can also become a means of restoring dignity and rebuilding fractured lives.

The novel also suggests that storytelling itself is an ethical act of remembrance through which forgotten lives are restored to history. Throughout *Afterlives*, memories are preserved not in official archives but in conversations, personal testimonies, and family narratives. The truth about Afiya's childhood, Ilyas's disappearance, and Hamza's wartime experiences gradually emerges through fragments shared among the characters, indicating that the past survives because someone chooses to remember and narrate it. When Ilyas introduces himself to Afiya's foster family, he says, “I am your brother... I have been looking for you for so long. I did not know if you lived” (Gurnah 37). This declaration is more than a family reunion; it is an act of recovering a history that had almost vanished. By allowing such personal stories to challenge the silences of colonial history, Gurnah demonstrates that memory is sustained through human relationships rather than institutional records. Consequently, *Afterlives* presents storytelling as an ethical responsibility that resists historical erasure and restores dignity to those whose lives have been overlooked by imperial narratives.

Conclusion

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* offers a profound exploration of the enduring effects of German colonialism by locating history within the intimate lives of ordinary people rather than within official archives or political narratives. Through the interconnected experiences of Ilyas, Afiya, Hamza, and Khalifa, the novel demonstrates that colonial violence does not end with the withdrawal of imperial power; instead, it continues to shape identities, relationships, and collective consciousness across generations. Read through Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, *Afterlives* reveals that historical trauma is transmitted not only through direct experience but also through inherited stories, emotional absences, fragmented recollections, and persistent silences. The characters inherit memories they have never fully lived, yet these memories profoundly influence their understanding of themselves and of the world they inhabit.

More significantly, Gurnah transforms remembrance into an ethical practice. The novel neither seeks to reconstruct a complete historical truth nor romanticizes the colonial past. Instead, it acknowledges the impossibility of fully recovering lives disrupted by war, displacement, and loss while insisting that these forgotten histories deserve recognition. Storytelling, listening, and witnessing emerge as acts of ethical responsibility through which marginalized voices are restored to historical consciousness. By privileging everyday experiences over monumental historical events, *Afterlives* challenges colonial historiography and expose the human cost concealed beneath imperial narratives. In doing so, Gurnah demonstrates that remembering is not simply an act of recalling the past but a moral commitment to those whose lives have been erased, silenced, or excluded from official history.

Ultimately, *Afterlives* expand contemporary discussions of memory within postcolonial studies by illustrating that the afterlife of empire survives through both memory and silence. The novel proposes that postmemory is not merely the inheritance of trauma but also the inheritance of ethical responsibility. Through its compassionate portrayal of fractured families, interrupted histories, and resilient human relationships, Gurnah redefines remembrance as a means of preserving dignity, resisting historical erasure, and imagining a more inclusive understanding of the colonial past. In this sense, *Afterlives* stands as an important contribution to postcolonial memory studies, demonstrating that the ethical act of remembering remains essential for confronting historical injustice and for recovering those lives that history has long neglected.

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