

## **Narrating Colonial Trauma through Language, Literature, and Media in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Afterlives**

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### **Abstract**

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* intricately portrays the colonial trauma experienced by individuals and communities in East Africa, illustrating the deep scars left by imperial rule. Through the lens of language, literature, and media, the novel reveals how colonialism disrupts identities, suppresses indigenous voices, and manipulates historical narratives. Language serves as both an instrument of oppression and a means of survival, as characters struggle to assert their agency within colonial hierarchies. Literature functions as a space for reclaiming lost histories, providing a counter-narrative to dominant colonial discourse. Media, particularly colonial propaganda and selective historiography, shapes perceptions of power and resistance, often distorting the realities of the colonized. By analyzing *Afterlives* through this framework, this paper explores how Gurnah challenges historical erasure and reclaims the voices of the marginalized. The novel not only documents colonial trauma but also asserts the enduring strength of cultural memory and storytelling in shaping postcolonial identity.

**Keywords:** Colonial Trauma, Language and Power, Literary Resistance, Media Manipulation, Postcolonial Identity

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*Abdulrazak Gurnah's Afterlives* is a poignant exploration of colonial trauma, depicting the psychological and cultural upheaval caused by German and British imperial rule in East Africa. Set against the backdrop of the early twentieth century, the novel follows characters whose lives are shaped by war, displacement, and the struggle to reclaim identity in a world dominated by colonial power. Through the lens of language, literature, and media, *Afterlives* critiques the mechanisms of colonial control while also highlighting the resilience of those affected by it. Language functions as both a tool of subjugation and adaptation, literature becomes a means of reclaiming lost histories, and media distorts or erases the voices of the colonized. By analyzing these three elements, this paper examines how Gurnah's novel not only narrates colonial trauma but also challenges historical erasure through storytelling.

In *Afterlives*, language plays a crucial role in shaping power dynamics between the colonizers and the colonized. The German colonial administration

imposes its language on the local population, reinforcing European authority while silencing indigenous voices. Hamza, one of the novel's central characters, is forced to learn German to survive within the colonial military structure. His linguistic adaptation reflects the duality of language as both a means of subjugation and a path to agency. Gurnah illustrates how colonial languages often serve as barriers that exclude indigenous people from power while simultaneously forcing them to assimilate.

The colonial imposition of language also disrupts cultural identity. Many of the characters must navigate between their native tongues and the languages of their oppressors, leading to a fragmented sense of self. Hamza's fluency in German gives him access to certain privileges but does not protect him from racialized violence and systemic discrimination. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues, "language is a carrier of culture" (Wa Thiong'o 13), and when a dominant power controls language, it can manipulate cultural narratives. Gurnah's depiction of linguistic hierarchies underscores how colonial trauma extends beyond physical violence, affecting the very means by which individuals express themselves.

*Afterlives* also shows language as a tool for survival and resistance. Characters like Afiya, who have been denied formal education, still preserve cultural knowledge through oral traditions. The novel emphasizes the power of storytelling and indigenous languages in maintaining history and identity, even in the face of colonial suppression.

Gurnah's novel itself functions as an act of literary resistance, challenging the Eurocentric narratives that have long dominated historical accounts of colonialism. By focusing on the personal histories of those often left out of mainstream historical discourse, *Afterlives* reclaims the voices of the colonized. The novel presents history not as a fixed record but as a contested space where multiple perspectives must be acknowledged.

Literature within the novel also reflects this struggle for narrative control. Colonial officers and European administrators document history through their own biased perspectives, often framing resistance movements as acts of savagery rather than liberation. In contrast, Gurnah centers the experiences of those who suffer under imperial rule, exposing the brutality of the colonial system. As Edward Said notes in *Culture and Imperialism*, "stories are a way of redrawing the map of imperial control" (Said 81). By telling the stories of Hamza, Afiya, and others, Gurnah disrupts the dominant colonial discourse and offers a counter-narrative that acknowledges the complexities of colonial trauma.

The significance of storytelling is further emphasized through the oral traditions present in the novel. Afiya's memories, passed down through familial narratives, highlight how indigenous knowledge is preserved outside written records. Gurnah underscores that literature does not only exist in books but also in

the spoken word, reinforcing the idea that history must be told from multiple perspectives.

Media, both as propaganda and selective historiography, plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of colonial rule in *Afterlives*. The novel illustrates how colonial powers use media to justify their control, portraying themselves as civilizers while erasing the atrocities they commit. Newspapers, official reports, and military records often serve as instruments of misinformation, framing European imperialism as a noble mission rather than an exploitative system.

This manipulation of history is evident in how colonial violence is documented. The German authorities portray their suppression of rebellions as necessary acts of discipline, ignoring the human cost of their actions. The real-life Maji Maji Rebellion, one of the historical events that inform the novel, was presented in European media as a minor disturbance rather than a large-scale resistance against colonial oppression (Iliffe 209). Gurnah's narrative exposes these distortions, urging readers to question the legitimacy of historical records produced by colonial institutions.

The novel highlights how media influence extends beyond the colonial period. The erasure of African voices in historical narratives continues in the postcolonial era, as many official accounts still prioritize European perspectives. Gurnah's decision to focus on ordinary individuals rather than historical figures challenges the notion that only those in power shape history. By amplifying marginalized voices, *Afterlives* disrupts the conventional narratives perpetuated by mainstream media and academia.

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* offers a profound exploration of colonial trauma through the interconnected lenses of language, literature, and media. The novel demonstrates how colonial powers weaponize language to maintain control, how literature can serve as a form of resistance, and how media distorts history to uphold imperial narratives. Through these elements, Gurnah critiques the legacy of colonialism and highlights the resilience of those who have been historically marginalized.

By challenging dominant narratives and reclaiming lost histories, *Afterlives* becomes more than just a novel; it is a powerful act of storytelling that preserves cultural memory. Gurnah's work urges readers to reconsider how history is recorded and who gets to tell it. In doing so, he not only documents colonial trauma but also provides a literary space for healing and resistance, ensuring that the voices of the past are not forgotten.

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