

COLONIAL TRAUMA, DISPLACEMENT, AND RELATIONAL HEALING IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S *AFTERLIVES*

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Abstract

This study examines the interconnected themes of trauma, displacement, and the quest for healing in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020). Situated within the frameworks of Postcolonial Theory and Trauma Theory, complimented with Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry and hybridity. The study investigates how the novel represents the psychological, cultural, and social consequences of German colonial rule in East Africa. Using qualitative textual analysis and close reading, the research explores the experiences of major characters such as Hamza, Ilyas, Afiya, and Khalifa in order to reveal the multiple forms of suffering produced by war, forced mobility, servitude, and historical rupture. The analysis demonstrates that trauma in *Afterlives* extends beyond physical violence and persists through memory, silence, fragmented narration, nightmares, and identity crisis. The study further argues that displacement in the novel operates on physical, social, and cultural levels, disrupting family structures, communal belonging, and selfhood. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's concepts of mimicry and hybridity, the paper shows how colonial influence generates fractured and unstable identities, particularly in the character of Ilyas, while Hamza embodies a more ambivalent negotiation of colonial experience. Finally, the study establishes that healing in *Afterlives* is gradual, relational, and incomplete. Rather than offering total recovery, Gurnah presents healing as a process sustained by love, trust, storytelling, and communal care. The paper concludes that the novel is both a historical reconstruction and an ethical meditation on survival, memory, and the enduring afterlives of colonial violence in East African or Tanzanian historical experience.

Keywords: Trauma; Displacement; Healing; Postcolonialism; Abdulrazak Gurnah

Introduction

Trauma, displacement, and the search for healing have become central concerns in contemporary African literature, reflecting the continent's histories of colonial violence, war, forced migration, and postcolonial disillusionment. African writers frequently explore how historical catastrophes continue to shape individual identities and collective memory long after the events themselves have passed. This concern is particularly evident in African literatures dealing with colonialism, slavery, political violence, and displacement, where historical trauma is represented as an enduring influence on personal and communal identity (Woods, 2013; Njovane, 2025). Within trauma studies, Cathy Caruth (1996) defines trauma as an overwhelming experience that resists immediate comprehension and returns belatedly through memory, repetition, and narrative. Although Caruth's formulation emerged

from Western psychoanalytic traditions, African literary texts often extend trauma beyond the individual to encompass communal and historical dimensions.

Colonialism constitutes one of the most significant sources of collective trauma in African societies. Frantz Fanon (1963) argues that colonial domination produces not only political and economic oppression but also psychological alienation that fractures personal identity and communal consciousness. Similarly, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) emphasizes that colonialism displaced Africans from their languages, cultures, and systems of knowledge, creating enduring forms of estrangement. In this sense, displacement in African literature is not limited to physical movement; it also includes cultural, linguistic, and psychological dislocation.

The relationship between trauma and displacement is particularly evident in narratives

of slavery, exile, migration, and war. Such experiences disrupt family structures, social networks, and senses of belonging, leaving characters to negotiate fragmented identities in liminal spaces. Scholars of forced migration have shown that displacement frequently intensifies psychological distress because it involves the simultaneous loss of home, security, community, and cultural continuity (Malkki, 1995). African literary representations of displacement therefore foreground both material dislocation and emotional rupture.

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Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Afterlives* (2020) offers a compelling exploration of these concerns. Set during and after German colonial rule in East Africa, the novel follows the intertwined lives of Hamza, Afiya, Ilyas, and Khalifa, whose experiences reveal the destructive effects of colonial militarism, family separation, social dislocation, and psychological suffering. Rather than focusing solely on major historical events, Gurnah attends to the ordinary lives through which colonial violence continues to reverberate. The novel also explores the difficult possibility of rebuilding relationships, recovering memory, and imagining forms of survival after trauma. Since Gurnah received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2021, scholarly interest in his work has expanded considerably. Existing studies have

examined exile, migration, memory, and colonial history in his fiction, yet *Afterlives* remains relatively underexplored in relation to the interrelationship dynamics of trauma, displacement, and healing. This study addresses that gap by analyzing how the novel represents psychological and socio-cultural trauma, the multiple forms of displacement experienced by its characters, and the tentative processes through which healing and survival are imagined within a postcolonial context.

The study is guided by the following questions:

- How does *Afterlives* represent the traumatic experiences of its characters?
- In what ways does the novel depict physical, social, and cultural displacement?
- How does the narrative imagine healing, resilience, and survival in the aftermath of colonial violence?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to ongoing discussions in African literary criticism, postcolonial studies, and trauma studies, while highlighting Gurnah’s nuanced engagement with memory, suffering, and human endurance.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on close textual analysis of Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Afterlives* (2020). The novel serves as the primary text, and the analysis examines the representation of trauma, displacement, and healing through characterization, narrative structure, imagery, memory, and interpersonal relationships. The research is informed by two complementary theoretical perspectives: Postcolonial Theory and Trauma Theory. Postcolonial Theory provides a framework for examining the effects of colonial domination, militarism, cultural dislocation, and identity formation in East African society. Insights from Fanon (1963) and Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1986) are particularly useful for understanding the psychological and cultural consequences of colonialism. Trauma Theory, drawing on Caruth

(1996) and LaCapra (2001), enables an exploration of how traumatic experiences are remembered, narrated, repeated, and partially worked through in literary representation.

Data for the study are relevant excerpts from the novel that illustrate experiences of violence, separation, loss, alienation, memory, intimacy, and recovery. These passages are subjected to interpretive analysis in order to identify recurring thematic patterns and to examine how Gurnah's narrative strategies shape the reader's understanding of trauma and healing. Secondary sources, including scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles on Gurnah, African literature, postcolonial criticism, and trauma studies, are used to contextualize the analysis and support the study's arguments. The research does not attempt a comparative survey of all Gurnah's novels; rather, it is limited to *Afterlives* as a contemporary African text that reimagines colonial history through the experiences of ordinary individuals. Through the combination of close reading and theoretically informed interpretation, the study seeks to provide a coherent and critically grounded account of how *Afterlives* represents the intertwined processes of trauma, displacement, and the quest for healing.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship on Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020) has increasingly examined the novel's representation of colonial violence, war, trauma, memory, displacement, identity, and resilience. This growing body of criticism reflects the novel's historical scope: Gurnah reconstructs the experiences of ordinary East Africans whose lives are shaped by German colonial rule, forced military recruitment, family separation, racial violence, and the disruptions produced by colonial and postcolonial transitions. Although scholars broadly agree that the consequences of colonial violence extend beyond the immediate historical events represented in the novel, they differ considerably in how they conceptualize those consequences. Some studies privilege psychological trauma and memory, while others emphasize colonial encounters, war commemoration, self-efficacy, hope, and resilience. Taken together, these approaches

demonstrate that *Afterlives* cannot be adequately understood through trauma alone. Rather, the novel presents trauma, displacement, identity formation, and the possibility of recovery as interconnected processes.

The theoretical foundations of trauma studies provide an important starting point for this discussion. Caruth (1996) conceptualizes trauma as an experience that resists complete assimilation at the moment of occurrence and consequently returns through belated memory, repetition, and disrupted narration. LaCapra (2001), meanwhile, distinguishes between "acting out," in which the subject remains caught within repetitive patterns associated with traumatic experience, and "working through," which involves a more critical engagement with the past. These formulations are useful for reading *Afterlives*, particularly its representation of silence, nightmares, fragmented recollections, and the persistence of wartime experiences. However, applying trauma theory to African postcolonial literature also raises an important methodological question: whether theories developed largely within Western psychoanalytic and historical contexts can sufficiently account for forms of trauma that are simultaneously personal, colonial, communal, and historical. This tension has encouraged postcolonial trauma scholars to move beyond exclusively individualistic models and to consider the collective dimensions of historical violence. Erikson's (1995) concept of collective trauma is particularly relevant in this regard because it shifts attention from the injured individual to the damage inflicted upon social relationships, communal structures, and shared identities.

In *Afterlives*, colonial violence operates at both levels. Characters such as Hamza experience fear, bodily violence, and psychological distress, but their suffering is inseparable from broader disruptions of family, community, cultural continuity, and belonging. The distinction between individual and collective trauma therefore becomes less rigid in the novel: personal suffering is repeatedly produced by historical and social conditions. This observation is consistent with the findings of Abbas et al. (2023), whose qualitative trauma-based reading identifies memories and

nightmares as manifestations of the continuing psychological effects of colonial and wartime violence. Their analysis is valuable in demonstrating the persistence of trauma, although its primary emphasis on psychological suffering leaves less room for examining how characters negotiate displacement, social relationships, and possible forms of recovery.

Other scholarship expands the discussion beyond psychological trauma by examining the relationship between colonial violence, military service, and historical memory. Branach-Kallas (2022), for example, approaches *Afterlives* through the representation of the Askari and postcolonial war commemoration. Rather than treating the Askari simply as victims or collaborators, she examines the complex colonial encounters through which Gurnah challenges simplified representations of African soldiers under German rule. Her approach is significant because it situates individual experiences within the political and historical structures of colonial warfare. This historical approach complements trauma-oriented readings but also exposes one of their limitations: a psychological emphasis can risk reducing colonial violence to its effects on individual characters without sufficiently examining the imperial structures that produced those effects.

The relationship between trauma and memory is further complicated by scholarship on silence and intergenerational transmission. Farooqi, Kayani, and Rizwan's study of *Afterlives* examines postcolonial silence through Judith Herman's trauma theory and argues that silence may function simultaneously as an expression of trauma and as a possible route toward resistance and healing. Their analysis is particularly significant because it challenges the assumption that silence represents only the absence of memory or communication. Instead, silence may preserve traumatic histories while also becoming part of the characters' attempts to negotiate fractured identities. The study therefore brings trauma, memory, identity, and healing into a single analytical framework. However, its principal focus on silence means that other narrative strategies through which Gurnah represents displacement—

such as temporal movement, shifts in perspective, and spatial dislocation—remain comparatively underexplored. The bibliographic record currently available identifies this study as a 2025 publication rather than 2024, so the year should be verified against the copy used in the thesis before final submission.

Displacement constitutes another important dimension of *Afterlives* that has not received the same sustained attention as trauma. The novel presents displacement in several interconnected forms: forced military recruitment, geographical movement, separation from family, exile, migration, and the loss of a stable sense of belonging. Branach-Kallas's analysis of the Askari is important here because military recruitment does not simply expose characters to physical danger; it also separates them from their communities and places them within the coercive structures of the colonial state. Displacement should therefore not be treated merely as a consequence of trauma. It can itself become a formative condition that reshapes identity, relationships, memory, and belonging. This distinction is important because a trauma-centred approach may explain why characters suffer, whereas a displacement-centred approach can additionally explain how their social identities and relationships are reorganized after separation from home and community.

Recent scholarship on *Afterlives* also begins to complicate the dominant emphasis on suffering by considering agency, resilience, and recovery. Salama (2024), for instance, reads the novel through social cognitive theory and specifically Bandura's concept of perceived self-efficacy. The study argues that Hamza's ability to exercise some degree of control over his circumstances contributes to his post-traumatic recovery. This approach represents a significant shift from readings that primarily emphasize victimhood because it asks how a traumatized character attempts to regain agency rather than merely documenting his suffering. At the same time, the self-efficacy framework risks placing considerable emphasis on individual psychological capacity. In a novel where colonial violence, poverty, war, and social structures

constrain individual choices, recovery cannot be explained entirely through personal agency. Salama's contribution is therefore most productive when placed alongside approaches that emphasize social relationships and historical structures.

Nair (2024) similarly shifts the critical emphasis from trauma to hope and resilience. Using Hope Theory alongside postcolonial feminist perspectives, Nair argues that hope shapes the identities, relationships, and future aspirations of characters such as Hamza, Afiya, Asha, Khalifa, and Ilyas. Significantly, the study does not regard hope simply as an optimistic emotional response; rather, it examines hope as a mechanism through which characters imagine alternative futures within conditions of colonial oppression and personal loss. This approach provides an important corrective to trauma-centred criticism because it draws attention to what characters do after violence as well as what violence has done to them. Nevertheless, hope and resilience should not be interpreted as evidence that trauma has been overcome. Indeed, the coexistence of persistent trauma and renewed hope in *Afterlives* suggests that recovery is partial, relational, and unstable rather than a straightforward movement from suffering to restoration.

The significance of this tension becomes clearer when the different methodologies employed in existing scholarship are considered together. Trauma-oriented studies such as Abbas et al. (2023) rely primarily on qualitative textual analysis informed by trauma theory, emphasizing psychological symptoms, memory, and nightmares. Branach-Kallas (2022), by contrast, combines literary analysis with historical and postcolonial perspectives to examine colonial warfare and the representation of the Askari. Salama (2024) introduces a psychological and social-cognitive framework centred on self-efficacy, while Nair (2024) employs Hope Theory and postcolonial feminist perspectives to examine resilience and future-oriented agency. These methodological differences are productive because they reveal different dimensions of the novel; however, they also produce a fragmented critical field in which trauma, historical memory, displacement, agency, and healing are frequently

analysed as separate phenomena.

The major unresolved issue, therefore, is not simply the absence of scholarship on any one of these themes but the limited integration of them. Existing studies establish that colonial violence produces psychological trauma, that traumatic experiences persist through memory and silence, and that characters nevertheless develop forms of agency, hope, and resilience. What remains insufficiently examined is how these processes operate together. In particular, displacement has not been adequately theorized as a condition that mediates the relationship between historical violence and the reconstruction of identity. Similarly, healing has often been approached through individual psychological recovery or hope without sufficient attention to the relational and communal dimensions of recovery. This is especially important in *Afterlives*, where characters repeatedly negotiate suffering through family relationships, intimate attachments, work, community, and attempts to establish a sense of belonging.

A further gap concerns narrative form. Existing scholarship has identified silence, memory, nightmares, and fragmented recollection as significant features of Gurnah's representation of trauma, but less attention has been given to how this narrative strategy simultaneously represent displacement and the possibility of recovery. Gurnah's movement across different periods, characters, and locations does more than reproduce traumatic fragmentation; it enables the novel to connect individual lives to broader histories of colonialism, war, migration, and postcolonial reconstruction. Consequently, the formal structure of *Afterlives* deserves to be considered not merely as a representation of trauma but as a means through which the novel negotiates the relationship between historical memory, identity, displacement, and healing.

The present study responds to these limitations by bringing trauma, displacement, and healing into an integrated analytical framework. Rather than treating these themes as independent categories, it examines how colonial violence produces traumatic memories and experiences of displacement, how displacement disrupts

individual and communal identities, and how characters subsequently seek forms of agency, belonging, and human connection. Such an approach also allows healing to be understood more cautiously, not as the complete erasure of trauma, but as a fragile process through which characters attempt to live with the past, rebuild relationships, and imagine forms of continuity after historical rupture. The study therefore contributes to existing scholarship by connecting psychological, historical, spatial, and relational dimensions of *Afterlives*, with particular attention to the ways Gurnah's narrative strategies mediate both suffering and the possibility of recovery.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Postcolonial Theory as its primary analytical framework, supplemented by selected insights from Trauma Theory. The combination is deliberate rather than merely additive. Postcolonial Theory provides the historical, political, and cultural framework for explaining how colonial domination produces structures of racial hierarchy, violence, displacement, and fractured identity, while Trauma Theory helps explain how the effects of such historical violence persist psychologically and become encoded in memory, silence, repetition, and narrative form. The two approaches therefore operate at different but interconnected levels: Postcolonial Theory explains the historical and structural production of suffering, while Trauma Theory examines the psychological and representational consequences of that suffering. This distinction is particularly appropriate to Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020), a novel in which German colonial violence is experienced not only as a historical event but also as an enduring force shaping memory, identity, relationships, displacement, and attempts at recovery.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial Theory examines the political, cultural, psychological, and social consequences of colonialism and imperialism. Its central concerns include power, domination, identity, representation, resistance, cultural displacement, and the continuing effects of colonial histories after formal colonial rule. For

this study, the framework is particularly useful because *Afterlives* does not represent colonialism as a closed historical episode. Rather, colonial structures continue to shape the characters' identities, relationships, social positions, and memories. The theory therefore provides the historical context necessary for interpreting individual suffering without detaching that suffering from the structures that produced it.

Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* provides an important foundation for this aspect of the study. Fanon examines colonialism as a system that operates through both material domination and psychological effects, linking colonial violence to the formation of cultural and political identities. His analysis is particularly useful because it prevents colonial violence from being reduced to isolated acts of physical brutality; instead, violence is understood as embedded within the wider organization of colonial society. In *Afterlives*, this perspective allows the experiences of characters such as Hamza, Ilyas, and Afiya to be read in relation to the colonial institutions and racial hierarchies that structure their lives. Their suffering is therefore not simply personal misfortune but is connected to a wider system of imperial power.

Fanon's contribution, however, has to be used critically. His analysis is rooted primarily in the experience of French colonialism in Algeria and in the revolutionary struggle against colonial domination. *Afterlives*, by contrast, represents German colonial rule in East Africa and gives considerable attention to ordinary civilians, soldiers, families, and postcolonial subjects whose responses to colonial violence are not reducible to revolutionary resistance. Fanon therefore provides the study with a theory of colonial domination and psychological consequence, but the novel requires this framework to be extended toward questions of memory, displacement, family, and everyday survival. In this sense, Fanon establishes the structural dimension of the analysis without determining in advance how Gurnah's characters must respond to colonial violence.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* further develops the cultural dimension of postcolonial analysis. Ngugi emphasizes the

relationship between language, culture, history, and identity and argues for the importance of recovering African linguistic and cultural forms from the effects of colonial domination. His intervention is useful for this study because colonial displacement in *Afterlives* involves more than geographical movement. Colonialism disrupts relationships with history, community, social structures, and inherited forms of belonging. Ngugi therefore helps broaden the meaning of displacement from physical relocation to cultural and psychological dislocation.

Nevertheless, Ngugi's emphasis on linguistic decolonization is not transferred mechanically to *Afterlives*. Gurnah writes in English and constructs a narrative about a historically multilingual East African society through a language associated with the colonial and global literary sphere. The relevance of Ngugi's theory therefore lies less in determining whether Gurnah writes in an African or European language and more in drawing attention to the relationship between language, cultural memory, historical representation, and power. The framework consequently enables the study to ask how Gurnah represents histories that colonial discourse has marginalized or distorted.

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and unhomeliness provides a further dimension to the analysis. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha challenges fixed understandings of cultural identity and emphasizes the ambivalence, hybridity, and instability produced by colonial encounters. His account of cultural hybridity is concerned with identities formed in the "in-between" spaces of colonial and postcolonial encounters rather than identities that remain completely indigenous or completely colonial. Bhabha's notion of unhomeliness is particularly relevant to *Afterlives* because the novel repeatedly associates displacement with an unstable relationship to home and belonging. Characters may return to familiar physical spaces while nevertheless experiencing psychological or social estrangement. Home, consequently, cannot be understood simply as a geographical location. It is also a psychological and relational condition shaped by memory, loss, violence, and changing

social relationships. Bhabha's framework therefore complements Fanon and Ngugi: while Fanon foregrounds the psychological and political effects of colonial domination and Ngugi emphasizes cultural and linguistic displacement, Bhabha helps explain the unstable identities and experiences of belonging that emerge from colonial encounters.

At the same time, Bhabha's emphasis on hybridity and ambivalence introduces a productive tension into the framework. Concepts such as hybridity can illuminate the instability of postcolonial identity, but they may also risk making colonial differences appear primarily cultural while underemphasizing the material violence and unequal power relations of colonial rule. For this reason, the study places Bhabha within a broader postcolonial framework rather than treating hybridity as a sufficient explanation of the characters' experiences. Fanon supplies a stronger account of structural violence and psychological domination, while Bhabha helps explain the unstable identities and senses of belonging that emerge within and after those structures.

Trauma Theory

While Postcolonial Theory establishes the historical and structural conditions of violence, Trauma Theory provides a complementary framework for examining how those experiences persist within individual and collective memory. Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) conceptualizes trauma in terms of an experience that cannot be completely assimilated when it occurs and that consequently returns belatedly through memory, repetition, and disrupted forms of representation. This perspective is useful for interpreting Gurnah's use of silence, emotional restraint, recollection, and retrospective narration in *Afterlives*.

However, Caruth's formulation also presents a limitation when applied to a postcolonial text. Her model has often been associated with an emphasis on the individual subject and the belated psychological experience of an overwhelming event. Such an approach can become insufficient when the trauma under examination is produced by a prolonged historical

system such as colonialism. In *Afterlives*, violence does not affect isolated individuals alone; it restructures families, communities, social relationships, and collective understandings of the past. Trauma must therefore be read not only as an individual psychological condition but also as an effect of historical and social structures.

Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" provides an important corrective. LaCapra associates acting out with the repetitive return or reliving of traumatic experience, whereas working through involves developing a more critically mediated relationship with the past. His approach is particularly useful because it does not require recovery to mean complete transcendence of trauma. Instead, working through may involve achieving some degree of distance, agency, and ethical engagement while acknowledging that the past cannot simply be erased. This distinction is particularly valuable for the present study because *Afterlives* does not offer a simple narrative in which characters experience trauma, recover from it, and leave the past behind. The novel instead presents recovery as partial and uneven. Characters continue to live with memories of violence while simultaneously forming relationships, establishing families, working, and attempting to construct meaningful futures. LaCapra's framework therefore provides a way of interpreting healing not as the disappearance of trauma but as a changing relationship to traumatic history.

Integrating Postcolonial and Trauma Theories

The central methodological principle of this study is that colonial trauma cannot be adequately interpreted when its psychological effects are separated from the historical structures that produced them. Trauma Theory explains how violence persists in memory and behaviour, but Postcolonial Theory explains why particular forms of violence occurred, how power was organized, and why their consequences extend beyond individual experience. Conversely, Postcolonial Theory alone may identify colonial domination and displacement without sufficiently explaining the psychological and narrative forms through which historical violence continues to affect

individuals.

The two frameworks therefore address a significant interpretive gap when used together. For example, Hamza's experiences cannot be understood solely as instances of psychological trauma. His suffering emerges from the colonial military system, racial hierarchy, forced recruitment, and wartime violence. Yet identifying these structures does not by itself explain the persistence of fear, silence, memory, emotional withdrawal, and difficulty in forming a stable sense of self. Trauma Theory provides the concepts necessary to examine these psychological and narrative effects. The integration of the two perspectives consequently enables the study to move from cause to consequence: Postcolonial Theory identifies the structures of colonial violence, while Trauma Theory examines how those structures become lived, remembered, narrated, and negotiated.

The combined framework also makes it possible to treat displacement as more than a geographical condition. From a postcolonial perspective, displacement is produced through colonial conquest, military recruitment, racial hierarchy, and the disruption of existing social structures. From a trauma perspective, displacement can intensify the psychological effects of violence by separating individuals from familiar relationships, places, and systems of belonging. Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness further explains why physical return does not necessarily restore a stable sense of home, while Ngugi's emphasis on culture and history draws attention to the broader forms of continuity disrupted by colonialism. The resulting analytical model therefore understands displacement as simultaneously spatial, psychological, cultural, and relational.

The same integrated approach is applied to healing. The study does not conceptualize healing as a complete restoration of a pre-traumatic identity or as the disappearance of historical memory. Instead, healing is understood as a fragile process through which characters negotiate the continuing presence of the past while rebuilding relationships, agency, belonging, and social connection. LaCapra's concept of working

through is useful in explaining the possibility of developing a more mediated relationship with traumatic history, while Postcolonial Theory ensures that recovery is not detached from the historical and social conditions in which it occurs. Healing is consequently interpreted as a relational and historically situated process rather than simply an individual psychological achievement.

Analytical Application of the Framework

For analytical clarity, the study applies the combined framework through four interconnected dimensions. First, colonial power and violence are examined through Fanon and broader postcolonial concepts of domination, racial hierarchy, and colonial subject formation. Second, cultural displacement and unstable belonging are examined through Ngugi's emphasis on culture and history and Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and unhomeliness. Third, traumatic memory and narrative representation are examined through Caruth and LaCapra, with particular attention to silence, repetition, fragmented recollection, retrospective narration, and the persistence of the past. Fourth, healing and reconstruction are examined through the intersection of these perspectives, focusing on agency, relationships, community, belonging, and the possibility of living with, not erasing the consequences of historical violence.

Accordingly, Postcolonial Theory remains the primary framework because the central problem of the study concerns the historical relationship between colonial violence, displacement, identity, and social disruption. Trauma Theory functions as a complementary framework, providing the conceptual tools required to explain the psychological and narrative consequences of that history. The purpose of combining the two is therefore not to treat them as interchangeable theories but to preserve the explanatory strengths of each while addressing their limitations when used independently. The integrated framework ultimately positions *Afterlives* as a narrative in which historical violence, psychological trauma, displacement, identity, and healing are mutually constitutive rather than separate themes. It enables the study to examine how colonial structures produce

conditions of suffering, how those conditions persist through memory and disrupted belonging, and how characters attempt to reconstruct meaningful lives within the continuing presence of historical damage. Such an approach is particularly appropriate to Gurnah's novel because it recognizes both the structural origins of suffering and the human agency involved in negotiating its aftermath.

Textual Analysis

Trauma as Lived and Remembered Experience

Trauma in *Afterlives* is not confined to spectacular scenes of violence; it persists in memory, silence, dreams, and everyday behavior. Gurnah's narrative method reflects what Caruth (1996) describes as the belated nature of trauma, where the traumatic event is not fully understood at the moment of occurrence but returns repeatedly through fragmented recollection. The novel's title itself, *Afterlives*, suggests that the characters continue living in the aftermath of experiences that have fundamentally altered them. The most striking example is Hamza, whose war experiences continue to invade his present. After being injured, he wakes in the missionary hospital from a nightmare in which "the ground was covered in blood... and his body was drenched in it. Limbs and broken torsos were pressed against him, and voices were screaming" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 111). The imagery is intensely corporeal: blood, severed limbs, and suffocating proximity to death. The nightmare functions not merely as recollection but as a re-experiencing. Gurnah avoids heroic war narration and instead foregrounds sensory fragmentation, thereby aligning the novel with trauma narratives in which memory appears as disjointed images rather than coherent chronology:

Years later, Hamza remains haunted by recurring dreams involving the Feldwebel, the Oberleutnant, and the pastor. He tells Afiya that the feeling comes upon him "like what is coming at me will crush me with great pain... I will drown in my own blood. I can feel it filling my throat" (pp. 195–196).

The metaphor of drowning in one's own blood collapses past and present, suggesting that trauma is experienced as an ongoing bodily threat.

LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" is useful here: Hamza repeatedly relives the emotional intensity of the war, indicating that the traumatic past has not yet been fully integrated into narrative memory. Gurnah's representation of trauma recalls other African war narratives, particularly Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, where bodily suffering and emotional numbness become the primary language of historical catastrophe. In both novels, national violence penetrates intimate life, demonstrating that trauma is not only political but deeply personal.

Ilyas embodies a different form of trauma: one rooted in colonial mimicry and identity loss. Having been raised by a German farmer, educated in a Christian school, and integrated into German cultural life, he gradually internalizes the values of the colonizer. His later life in Germany reveals the depth of this transformation. The younger Ilyas discovers that his uncle had changed his name from Ilyas to Elias and became a stage performer remembered as "Elias Essen, a performer" who appeared in askari uniform with the Imperial eagle badge (p. 242). The performance is symbolically significant: Ilyas publicly reenacts the colonial military identity that once subordinated him.

Bhabha's concept of mimicry illuminates this trajectory. The colonial subject becomes "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86), adopting the language and symbols of the colonizer while remaining marked by difference. Ilyas's tragedy lies in the impossibility of complete colonial assimilation. Despite his identification with German society, he is ultimately imprisoned under Nazi racial laws and dies in a concentration camp. Gurnah thus exposes the fatal contradiction of colonial mimicry: the colonized subject may internalize the colonizer's identity, but racialized structures continue to deny full belonging. This tragic arc recalls Fanon's analysis in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where the Black subject seeks recognition through identification with whiteness yet encounters an insurmountable racial barrier. Ilyas's fate demonstrates that colonial trauma can manifest not only through physical suffering but through the gradual estrangement from one's own history, family, and cultural memory.

Silence is another crucial marker of trauma. When Hamza returns home, Khalifa repeatedly notices his reluctance to speak about his past, describing him as a "tight-lipped man" (p. 136). His silence is merely an act of secrecy; it is a defensive strategy. Trauma often resists direct articulation, and Gurnah represents this resistance through omissions, evasions, and fragmented storytelling. The most revealing moment occurs when Hamza finally tells Khalifa, "You want me to tell you about myself as if I have a complete story but all I have are fragments which are snagged by troubling gaps" (p. 183). This confession is metanarrative: it describes not only Hamza's life but the structure of traumatic memory. The self is experienced as discontinuous, interrupted by "gaps" that cannot be fully recovered. Gurnah thereby transforms trauma into a problem of narration and identity.

Displacement and the Fragmentation of Identity

Displacement in *Afterlives* operates simultaneously on physical, social, and cultural levels. The novel demonstrates that colonialism dislocates people not only from geographical space but also from kinship, language, and selfhood. Ilyas's displacement begins with childhood separation from his family. Raised by a German farmer, he later recalls, "He was like a father to me, that man" (p. 40). The statement reveals an emotional transfer of paternal authority from the African family to the colonial household. Education, language, and religion become instruments of cultural reorientation. Ilyas's defense of German rule, "The Germans are honourable and civilized people and have done much good since they have been here" (p. 43) shows the extent to which colonial discourse has been internalized.

This internalization recalls Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where colonial power works not only through force but through the reconfiguration of values and loyalties. However, whereas Achebe emphasizes the communal collapse of Igbo society, Gurnah focuses on the intimate psychological consequences of cultural displacement. Hamza's displacement is initially economic and social. Sold into servitude by his father, he later joins the Schutztruppe as a means of escape. He recalls that the merchant "treated me

like I was his property” (p. 183). Colonial military service therefore appears not as free choice but as movement from one form of subordination to another.

Yet Hamza’s experience is more ambivalent than Ilyas’s. During training, he discovers “unexpected satisfaction in his own growing strength and skills... he began to feel pride at being part of the group” (p. 58). The colonial institution simultaneously empowers and exploits him, producing an ambivalent subject position. This ambivalence is characteristic of Bhabha’s notion of hybridity, in which identity emerges in a “Third Space” produced by the interaction of conflicting cultural forces.

The Oberleutnant’s “watchful light” (p. 61) symbolizes the colonial gaze that seeks to classify and shape the subject. Fanon’s observation that the colonized person feels “fixed” under white eyes is particularly relevant here. Hamza is constantly observed, evaluated, and disciplined, yet he never becomes a fully stable colonial subject. His later rejection of military life indicates that colonial identity remains incomplete and contested. Khalifa offers a contrasting model of displacement. He is not deeply absorbed into colonial institutions and therefore retains a stronger sense of moral and cultural autonomy. His warning to Ilyas, “They are fighting over who should swallow us whole” (p. 42) reveals political clarity rather than colonial fascination. Khalifa recognizes that imperial conflicts are struggles for domination, not for African liberation. That displacement can occur without physical migration. Characters who remain in familiar places still experience estrangement because the social world around them has been transformed by colonialism. Families are broken, loyalties are altered, and traditional structures lose coherence. Home becomes psychologically unstable: a condition Bhabha describes as unhomeliness.

More importantly, language further intensifies this instability. German enters the characters’ lives as a language of command, education, and power. For Ilyas, it becomes the medium of self-identification; for Hamza, it remains associated with both violence and intimacy. The same language that disciplined him

later becomes the language through which he expresses affection to Afiya, illustrating how colonial signs can be reappropriated and resignified.

The Quest for Healing: Relational and Incomplete

Healing in *Afterlives* is neither sudden nor complete. Gurnah rejects the consoling closure common to redemptive narratives and instead presents recovery as partial, relational, and historically burdened. The central movement toward healing occurs through Hamza’s relationship with Afiya. When she asks him to translate a German poem, the language of colonial authority is transformed into a language of intimacy. This moment exemplifies Bhabha’s argument that hybrid subjects can rework inherited symbols rather than merely submit to them. More significant is the mutual exchange of trauma between Hamza and Afiya. After Afiya reveals the abuse she suffered in her uncle’s house, Hamza speaks openly about the Feldwebel’s violence: “He was a cruel man... He struck me down in a rage” (p. 177). The scene is structured around reciprocity rather than confession alone. Each character’s vulnerability creates the conditions for the other’s speech. Herman’s model of trauma recovery emphasizes remembrance, reconnection, and the restoration of agency. Hamza’s willingness to narrate his experience marks the beginning of reconnection. He does not erase the past; instead, he integrates it into a relationship founded on trust.

Khalifa’s role extends this relational model of healing. His rescue of Afiya from abuse, “I went and got her and she has lived here for the last eight years” (p. 176) demonstrates that care is an ethical act with material consequences. Healing begins not with abstract reconciliation but with concrete protection, shelter, and companionship. Khalifa’s moral independence is equally important. He rejects colonial wars while remaining open to useful forms of knowledge, such as Western medicine. Gurnah avoids romanticizing either tradition or modernity; instead, he presents healing as a pragmatic negotiation of available resources.

The household formed by Khalifa, Afiya, and Hamza becomes a fragile counter-space to

colonial fragmentation. Shared meals, conversation, work, and mutual concern gradually reconstruct a sense of belonging. This communal dimension distinguishes Gurnah's vision from purely individualistic models of recovery. Yet the novel insists on the incompleteness of healing. Hamza's nightmares do not disappear, and Ilyas's absence remains an open wound. Ilyas's childhood search for his uncle uncovers not restoration but tragic knowledge. Memory therefore remains double-edged: necessary for understanding, but incapable of undoing loss. This refusal of total closure aligns with LaCapra's argument that trauma can be worked through but not entirely overcome. Gurnah's ending is hopeful without being redemptive. The characters achieve moments of peace, intimacy, and continuity, yet the historical violence of colonialism continues to cast a shadow over their lives.

Intertextual and Ethical Dimensions

Gurnah's treatment of trauma and displacement enters into dialogue with a broader tradition of African postcolonial writing. Like Achebe, he rewrites colonial history from African perspectives; like Ngugi, he attends to the cultural consequences of imperial domination; like Adichie, he links national catastrophe to intimate suffering. However, Gurnah's distinctive contribution lies in his ethics of quietness. Rather than emphasizing spectacular resistance, he focuses on ordinary endurance: caring for a child, translating a poem, offering shelter, listening to another person's pain. These small acts acquire profound ethical significance because they resist the dehumanization produced by colonial violence. The novel also complicates binary oppositions between colonizer and colonized. The pastor who cares for Hamza exists alongside the Feldwebel who brutalizes him; kindness and violence emerge from the same imperial structure. Gurnah therefore refuses simplistic moral categorization and instead examines the uneven, contradictory textures of colonial experience.

This analysis has demonstrated that *Afterlives* represents trauma, displacement, and healing as deeply interconnected processes. Trauma is portrayed not only through physical violence but through memory, silence, fragmented

narration, and identity rupture. Ilyas embodies the tragic consequences of colonial mimicry, while Hamza reveals the lingering psychological burden of war and the difficult movement toward relational recovery. Khalifa provides a contrasting model of moral resilience grounded in care, responsibility, and independent judgment.

The analysis has also shown that displacement in the novel is simultaneously physical, social, cultural, and psychological. Colonialism uproots individuals from families, languages, and systems of belonging, producing forms of unhomeliness that persist even after geographical movement ends. Through Bhabha's concepts of mimicry and hybridity, the chapter has illustrated how colonial power fragments identity while also generating unstable and contested forms of selfhood. Finally, this analysis has argued that healing in *Afterlives* is gradual, relational, and incomplete. Gurnah does not offer a triumphant overcoming of trauma; instead, he locates the possibility of survival in love, friendship, trust, and communal care. The characters learn not to forget the past but to live with its wounds while creating fragile spaces of connection and hope. In this way, *Afterlives* emerges as both a historical novel and an ethical meditation on how human beings endure the *Afterlives* of colonial violence.

Conclusion

This study has examined Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* through an integrated framework of Postcolonial Theory and Trauma Theory to demonstrate how colonial violence continues to shape identity, memory, displacement, and the possibility of healing. The analysis establishes that the consequences of colonialism in the novel extend beyond physical violence and historical events into the psychological, cultural, and relational lives of individuals and communities.

The study's central finding is that trauma, displacement, and healing are interconnected rather than separate experiences. Colonial violence generates traumatic memories and fractured identities, while forced movement, military recruitment, separation, and cultural dislocation intensify characters' sense of instability and loss of belonging. At the same time, *Afterlives* does not

reduce its characters to victims of history. Through relationships, family, work, compassion, and renewed social connections, Gurnah presents forms of agency through which individuals attempt to reconstruct meaningful lives. Healing therefore emerges not as the erasure of trauma but as a partial, relational, and continuing process of living with the consequences of the past.

The study also demonstrates that Gurnah's narrative techniques are central to this representation. Silence, retrospective narration, fragmented memory, temporal shifts, and multiple perspectives connect private suffering with wider histories of colonial violence and displacement. These techniques allow suppressed experiences to

enter the narrative while resisting the notion that historical trauma can be completely resolved or narrated as a closed past. The study contributes to existing scholarship by bringing historical violence, psychological trauma, displacement, and healing into a single analytical framework. It consequently shifts attention from trauma as the dominant category toward a broader understanding of how displaced subjects negotiate identity, belonging, and recovery. Ultimately, *Afterlives* presents colonial history as an enduring presence whose effects remain embedded in memory and human relationships, while simultaneously affirming the fragile possibilities of dignity, connection, resilience, and hope.

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