

Trauma and Memory in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*: Reimagining Colonial Violence and Cultural Survival

Raed Nafea Farhan 

General Directorate of Education in Al-Anbar, Ministry of Education, Iraq

Corresponding author: Raed Nafea Farhan | E-mail: raedd5095@gmail.com

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Abstract

The legacy of colonial violence is a focus increasingly taken up by contemporary postcolonial writing. Abdulrazak Gurnah's Afterlives (2020) has been progressively gaining scholarly interest, although existing studies often examine these concerns separately. This article fills that gap by exploring the novel's representation of these dimensions in the concept of cultural survival. The study employs a qualitative interpretive methodology based on thematic textual analysis and close reading and has a mixed theoretical framework that combines trauma theory, memory studies and postcolonial criticism. The analysis shows that Gurnah depicts colonial violence as more than a historical phenomenon; it is a psychological state that has continued to affect the individual and collective experience. In this way, memory becomes a means of resistance to history, and identity appears as a process of reconstruction, rather than a simple inheritance. The study argues that Afterlives transforms the colonial past into a living presence through which trauma generates remembrance, remembrance enables identity reconstruction, and identity ultimately becomes a strategy of cultural survival. It offers a broader understanding of the long-term psychological and cultural ramifications of empire in the current postcolonial literature.

Keywords: trauma; memory; colonial violence; cultural survival; postcolonial identity.

1. Introduction

The consequences of colonialism remain in the present, influencing current debates about violence, identity and cultural memory. Formal empires are a thing of the past, but their psychological, social and historical impacts remain alive in communities dealing with the effects of displacement, war and political domination. Scholars increasingly recognize that colonialism is not just a historical event, but a condition that continues to shape and organize individual and collective realities from one generation to the next. In this sense, literature serves as an important cultural archive that can help retrieve and remediate silenced histories and marginalized. Literary narratives do not just document historical facts, but also portray the emotional and psychological aspects of colonial experience, revealing the long-standing connection between memory, trauma and identity [1,2].

The growing interest in postcolonial memory then begins to emerge, and it is important to explore how the contemporary fictional texts are recollecting the "lost" colonial pasts and "ongoing" colonial present. *Afterlives* is a recent study of Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel, which questions the novel's reconstruction of neglected histories of German colonialism in East Africa, and examines war and violence's dislocated memory [4-6]. Likewise, the trauma reading of the novel is a record of the daily psychological torture

perpetrated by the colonial regime on the construction of identity and on the relationship between the people [7,8]. In general, it is part of the wider body of scholarly work on the literature that assumes memory and trauma as integral to postcolonial identity, which is negotiated through past experiences [9].

Afterlives (2020) is one of Gurnah's most important contemporary African literary works of the last few decades. It traces Hamza, Afiya, Ilyas and Khalifa's journeys to try to make sense of their lives in German East Africa before and after the First World War in an area that is still grappling with the effects of colonialism. In addition to war and violence, the novel is about post-war: remembering, losing identity and finding human connection. The title implies that the impact of colonialism is not confined to the past, but rather to the present and future and that it is individual and collective. As Branach-Kallas argues, the novel continually brings the colonial past into the present [4].

The recent criticism of *Afterlives* has begun to signal its reconstruction of the colonised past and its questioning of the psychological and cultural effects. Scholars have argued that the novel reconstructs forgotten African experiences excluded from dominant historical accounts and transforms personal memory into a form of cultural resistance [4,6].

Others emphasize that Gurnah's narrative foregrounds the long-lasting effects of trauma and displacement, revealing how colonial violence extends beyond physical destruction to affect identity, belonging, and emotional survival [7,8,10]. Consequently, *Afterlives* offers an important literary space through which the intersections of trauma, memory, and postcolonial identity can be critically examined.

Branach-Kallas suggests that *Afterlives* is re-imagining East African colonial history in the voices of the marginalized, not in the official narrative [4]. Likewise, Brazzelli calls attention to the ways in which the novel acts as a cultural "remembrance," reestablishing voices that have been marginalized by the dominant colonial archive [6]. These studies show that *Afterlives* upsets the established ideas of history, introducing a new method of historical reconstruction and memory. Another line of criticism concerns identity and belonging. The characters presented in Gurnah's work are in liminal spaces, both within and between cultures, languages, and historical contexts [5]. Similarly, Banu and Talukdar argue that displacement in the novel functions not only as geographical dislocation but also as a psychological condition that reshapes both individual and collective consciousness [7]. Khan, similarly, contends that identity in the novel emerges through continuous negotiation between colonial power structures and individual agency [11]. The readings emphasize memory and identity formation but tend to explore these themes in isolation and not as mutually dependent reactions to colonial violence.

The themes of loss, silence and emotional fragmentation suggest that colonialism goes beyond the physical trauma into a psychological impact. Often, however, trauma is only a secondary issue in the context of other concerns of history or migration, rather than the primary analytical focus. Moreover, while scholars have examined memory, identity, and colonial history separately, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how these elements interact to produce forms of cultural survival in the aftermath of empire. Recent studies by Abdelaziz and Aladylah and Ahmad have begun to address this relationship, yet an integrated analytical model remains insufficiently developed [12,13].

Hence, there is a significant gap in the current scholarship. Studies on the literature do not involve a holistic approach that can bring together trauma theory, memory studies, and postcolonial criticism to explain how *Afterlives* reconstructs colonial violence and its legacy. This study argues that reading the novel through these lenses, as a historical account of German East Africa as well as a literary examination of trauma, memory, identity and cultural survival, is more than just a recent development in postcolonial trauma studies.

The present study aims to offer a holistic interpretation of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* by examining how trauma, memory and postcolonial identity are interrelated. It does not treat colonial violence as just a thing of the past, but rather a psychological and cultural legacy of colonial violence that reverberates in individual lives and collective experiences.

The paper is focused on how memory not only evokes the past but also serves as a form of survival for displaced communities that engage in processes of belonging and continuity.

Hence, the study aims at three main objectives. First, it examines the representation of colonial trauma and its psychological consequences in *Afterlives*. Second, it explores how memory and reconstruction of identity are related in the context of violence and displacement. Third, it investigates how Gurnah reimagines cultural survival through the intersection of trauma, memory, and postcolonial experience. To achieve these purposes, the following research questions have been formulated: How does Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* reconstruct colonial violence through the intertwined dynamics of trauma and memory, and what does it reveal about cultural survival and postcolonial identity?

This study has three important implications. Literarily, it contributes to the growing body of scholarship on Gurnah by offering a comprehensive interpretation that brings together themes often examined separately. Theoretically, it demonstrates the possibility of bringing together trauma studies, memory studies and postcolonial theory in a single analytical perspective that can account for the long-lasting impact of colonial trauma [2,14,1]. Finally, at a broader cultural level, the study contributes to the ongoing discussion on historical justice, displacement, and belonging. It shows how literature captures the histories of the margins and makes them into stories of survival and resilience [5,4].

2. Literature Review

2.1 Colonial Violence and Historical Representation

Over the last few years, postcolonial scholarship has increasingly pointed to the recovery of marginalized histories which have been excluded from the official colonial archive. Colonialism is not seen as a historical chapter that has been closed but as an ongoing reality which influences politics, social relations and cultural identities in the present-day societies of the former colonies. In African studies, fiction has emerged as a medium of expression in which the forgotten history can be re-created, from the point of view of those who were subject to colonial domination [1,3]. A recurring theme in critical discussions of Abdulrazak Gurnah's works of fiction is his dedication to the task of uncovering unrecorded facets of East African history. According to Branach-Kallas, Gurnah challenges the conventional historical narratives by prioritizing the voices of ordinary people, over the voices of imperial institutions [4].

Similarly, Brazzelli argues that *Afterlives* constructs memory of the colonial era by constructing fragmented personal accounts, which challenge the official historical story [6]. Also, Maricocchi has stated that the novel highlights the continued presence of the colonial structures [5] in postcolonial societies and that the power of the empire exists outside of the battlefield, in social and psychological relations as well. Further, Soni and Singh suggest that the novel challenges colonial narratives through a process of "historiographic reconstruction [22] and Abbas et al. show how colonial hegemony affects human relations

as well as the natural and cultural environment [23]. However, much of the current scholarship treats the novel as a piece of historical recovery, much less as a work that foregrounds the psychological effects of colonial violence and how those effects relate to the novel and to memory and identity formation.

2.2 Trauma and Memory in Postcolonial Fiction

Trauma is a central topic of contemporary literary criticism, particularly in the areas of war studies and displacement/historical violence. Caruth theorizes that trauma is an event that is not fully processed at the time of the event and thus comes back later through memory and repetition [9]. From this perspective, LaCapra further differentiates between the processes of "acting out" and "working through" [22], while Herman highlights the social and communal aspects of trauma [19]. In literary research, Whitehead and Luckhurst contend that trauma stories frequently use a non-linear, fragmented chronology, use silence, and/or disrupted temporality to depict experiences that are difficult to articulate [31, 23]. Formal features become particularly significant in postcolonial fiction in which individual recollections often intersect with collective memory of violence and displacement [14]. Recent studies recognize the psychological aspects of *Afterlives*, but trauma has not been a primary focus. Banu and Talukdar examine colonial trauma in the novel [4], Farooqi et al. focus on intergenerational trauma [16], while Yusuf and Srivastava explore the interrelationship between trauma, memory, and identity across Gurnah's fiction [32]. Likewise, Abdelaziz argues that memory in *Afterlives* extends beyond the human subject, functioning as a posthuman archive of loss and remembrance [2]. Nevertheless, these studies do not consistently employ trauma theory as their principal interpretive framework. Consequently, the relationship between colonial violence, traumatic memory, and the reconstruction of postcolonial identity remains insufficiently theorized [15].

2.3 Identity, Displacement, and Cultural Survival

Issues of identity and belonging are central to contemporary postcolonial criticism. Some critics, however, take a postcolonial approach and suggest that Gurnah's characters live in liminal spaces where past and present are not separate realities, but rather a way of life.

Maricocchi speaks of how identity is continuously reconstructed through colonial memory and its lingering effects [10], while Banu and Talukdar associate displacement with the ongoing reconstruction of the self under conditions of historical violence [9]. Similarly, Khan argues that *Afterlives* presents identity as a continuous negotiation between colonial power structures and individual agency [11]. Cultural survival has likewise been conceptualized as a form of postcolonial identity sustained through remembrance and adaptation to the colonial past [18,19]. Farhan further argues that memory and identity function as mutually reinforcing processes through which displaced individuals reconstruct a sense of belonging and cultural continuity [20].

While important, the available scholarship generally focuses on identity, trauma, and memory as separate analytical categories. Few studies examine how these dimensions interact to explain broader processes of cultural survival in the aftermath of colonialism.

2.4 Research Gap

There are three main findings. First, in *Afterlives*, critics have made their point about the significance of colonial history and of historical recovery. Second, memory, identity and displacement have been recognized as important elements in Gurnah's story world in many studies. Third, more recent work has started to consider the psychological impacts of colonial violence.

However, they are typically disjointed. Research on colonial history tends to de-emphasize trauma theory, and research on identity and memory often fails to connect them with the lingering legacy of historical trauma. Furthermore, little research has focused on the intersection of trauma, memory and postcolonial identity as a way of surviving culturally [13].

The present study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that brings together the theories of trauma, memory studies and postcolonial criticism. This is the way the novel *Afterlives* is explored not only as a historical novel, but as a literary investigation of the continued interplay between colonial violence, traumatic memory, identity reconstruction and cultural survival.

3. Theoretical Framework

The present research adopts a theoretical framework that is a hybrid of trauma theory, memory studies and postcolonial theory. While all these approaches are situated in their own intellectual traditions, their interplay allows a fuller understanding of the complex relationship between colonial violence, historical remembrance and identity formation in *Afterlives* by Abdulrazak Gurnah. The novel is not just about the history of colonial violence by the Germans in East Africa; it is about the ongoing power of violence to define both individual and collective identity. Hence, one theoretical lens would not be enough to encompass the psychological, cultural and political aspects of the narrative.

The first pillar in this framework is trauma theory. Cathy Caruth suggests that trauma is not fully lived at the moment of its occurrence, but comes back later by way of memory, repetition, and 'what she calls' fragmented recollection [2]. Trauma is not experienced as a fully completed event, but continues to haunt the individual long after its occurrence. In the same way, LaCapra speaks of "acting out," in which the subject continues to live in the traumatic past, and "working through," which involves a slow process of negotiating and integration of painful memories [19]. Trauma is not only a personal experience, but can also impact the dynamics of relationships, communities, and collective identity [15]. Other recent analyses of Gurnah's fiction also highlight the personal and collective impact of colonial trauma on issues of identity construction and cultural continuity [8,17].

In addition to trauma theory, a framework of memory studies allows for the analysis of the way history is captured, reconstructed, and passed on to future generations. In postcolonial writing, memory can serve as another archive, a way of reclaiming histories which have been overlooked and forgotten by the official colonial history. This study challenges the passive notion of memory as something that is recalled, and sees it as a process in which individuals and communities construct and work through their sense of identity and sense of belonging. Colonial pasts continue to shape the present here, with the fragmented pasts of the novel's characters, the novel's silences, and the novel's acts of remembrance. Abdelaziz argues that memory in *Afterlives* functions as a form of remembrance that challenges historical forgetting [10].

The third aspect of the framework is postcolonial theory. Edward Said's critique of Orientalism draws our attention to the fact that the formation of identity within the colonial discourse is through a system of representations that attempts to distance the self from the other [1]. Additionally, the concept of 'hybridity' suggested by Homi Bhabha questions a notion of cultural identity as it draws attention to the new modes of identification which are formed in colonial and postcolonial settings [4]. The novel does not take for granted an "essentialist" or "static" notion of identity but rather a "fluid, complex, constantly evolving" one that is shaped by history and culture. This aligns with recent scholarship which holds that Gurnah's characters are engaged in a negotiation of a hybrid identity in a negotiation of colonial power [20, 22].

The integration of these theoretical approaches enables the present study to examine *Afterlives* from multiple interconnected perspectives. Trauma theory explains the long-term effects of colonial violence, memory studies illuminate how these experiences are remembered and reconstructed, and postcolonial theory situates them within broader structures of power and identity. Together, these approaches provide a coherent analytical framework for examining Gurnah's representation of colonial violence through the interconnected dynamics of trauma, memory, and cultural survival.

4. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative and interpretive research design with a thematic textual analysis method using a close reading approach. It is especially suitable for research in literary studies which aim to understand the connection between the form of the story, the history of experience and the cultural significance of the story. Literary criticism does more than describe a text; as Eagleton explains, it discerns the ideology, psychology and social realities that lie within it [24]. The present study investigates the *Afterlives'* reconstruction of the violence of the colonial past in relation to the intertwined elements of trauma, memory and postcolonial identity.

4.1 Research Design

This approach involves an intimate familiarity with the literary work, coupled with the recognition of theme, which can be used to shed light on the wider

historical, psychological, and cultural issues. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate when investigating meaning, interpretation and human experience [13]. The novel is symbolically rich and uses a fragmented memory and historical reconstruction to drive the narrative, making a methodological approach of interpretation the most appropriate to explore the literary and cultural complexities of the novel.

Denzin and Lincoln also recommend that qualitative methods are well suited to examine cultural texts because they provide the opportunity to analyze the interplay between language, power, memory and identity [25]. The present study is a continuation of interpretive literary studies that aim to interpret not only the reflection of colonial history on *Afterlives* but also the reconstruction of colonial history's ongoing psychological and cultural impact.

4.2 Corpus of the Study

This research comprises only Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* [9]. The work is particularly relevant as it has a direct engagement with the questions of colonial violence, memory, displacement, identity and cultural survival that form the key concerns of the present study.

According to Flick, qualitative research tends to be more in-depth than wide-ranging, and there is a greater emphasis on analyzing in greater detail instead of generalizing [26]. Therefore, the novel is analyzed in relation to the relevant secondary works from the fields of postcolonial studies, trauma theory and memory studies for a wider critical background.

4.3 Data Collection

Data collection in the field of literature is the systematic process of taking and studying primary and secondary literary sources. Bowen suggests that document analysis is a method of interpreting written texts in qualitative inquiry [6]. This research relies mainly on the primary sources found in *Afterlives*, and the secondary sources, which include books and journal articles from postcolonial literature, trauma studies, and memory studies, are scholarly works that have been published in these areas. Google Scholar, JSTOR, and other known scholarly databases were consulted for information that was relevant and reliable.

4.4 Analytical Procedures

This analysis is based on close reading and thematic textual analysis, both of which have firmly established positions in literary criticism [27]. The study examines the narrative structure, symbolism, imagery, characterization and recurring themes, to relate the textual details to the wider theoretical issues.

The analytical process consists of four stages:

4.4.1 Thematic Coding: The key events in the story, significant moments, and character dynamics are highlighted and arranged by the themes of colonial violence, memory, trauma, identity, and cultural survival.

4.4.2 Interpretive Analysis: The chosen text materials are explained under the hybrid theoretical framework of the previous part. Trauma theory helps to analyse psychological rupture and the after-effects of violence; memory theory brings to the fore acts of remembering, forgetting and reconstructing histories, while postcolonial theory reflects the politics of identity and representation and cultural negotiation.

4.4.3 Trauma and Memory Analysis: Special focus is given to "fragmented temporality", "silence", "recurring memories", and "representations of the loss", which are central features of trauma narratives [21,23]. The key textual components are explored and analyzed to discover how Gurnah transfigures isolated episodes of suffering into larger-than-life reminders of collective memory and cultural survival.

4.4.4 Synthesis with Secondary Scholarship: The analysis of the text is contextualized against the prevailing academic criticism, looking for points of agreement, disagreements, and new contributions. Thematic analysis helps to develop symbolic interpretations and also cultural ones, as described by Ryan and Bernard [28].

5. Analysis and Discussion

This analysis examines *Afterlives* by engaging in a thematic reading of the text, employing trauma theory, memory theory, and postcolonial criticism. The impact of colonialism on memory, identity and belonging is explored through the experiences of Hamza, Afiya, Ilyas and Khalifa and how they all cope with the historical event of colonialism and its effects.

5.1 Colonial Violence and Traumatic Experience

An important theme in *Afterlives* is the attempt to understand colonial violence as less a period of military conquest and more a system of violence that is ever-present. Engaging with war, Gurnah does not treat it as a singular historical event, but rather a force that continues to be felt in the psychological lives of people and communities. Violence in his characters is not only physical but also emotional and existential, impacting on their ability to remember, belong and rebuild themselves following a period of violence.

Hamza's experiences have been one of the best illustrations of this process. He becomes a victim and a tool of the German colonizer, when he is forced to join the German colonial army. Military discipline, humiliation and coercion obliterate the distinction between personal agency and institutional power. Gurnah doesn't dwell on scenes of spectacular warfare, but on the everyday nature of domination, and how it works through fear, silence and psychological submission.

This representation is similar to Caruth's definition of trauma as an event that is not fully processed as it is happening [2]. Trauma is returned indirectly via memory, silence and fragments of memory. The delayed nature of trauma becomes evident in Hamza's struggle to articulate his experience because trauma is not a historic event that has already passed, but instead is a past that continues to live in the present moment.

LaCapra's concept of 'acting out' and 'working through' gives another dimension to the story [19]. Violence haunts several characters, who are psychologically stuck in the past and who repeatedly face stings from memories that are not easily brought into the present. Others try to construct meaning in their relationships with each other and through the slow process of reconstruction. Trauma is not a fixed state; rather, it is a process of negotiation between remembering and recovering.

The disappearance of Ilyas provides another indication of the destructive logic of colonial violence. Gurnah does not resolve the story's conflict; indeed, he leaves it unresolved, letting the characters' fates remain all but undefined and a symbolic absence that lingers in his characters' emotionality. Without closure, loss becomes chronic, showing how trauma is not just personal, but familial, communal and collective [15].

Recent scholarship supports this interpretation. Branach-Kallas argues that *Afterlives* should be understood primarily as a literary exploration of colonial conflict rather than a conventional imperial historical narrative [7]. Likewise, Farooqi and colleagues demonstrate that colonial violence generates forms of intergenerational trauma that continue long after the historical events themselves [8]. Yusuf and Srivastava similarly contend that memory functions as a form of collective remembrance through which personal suffering becomes connected to broader histories of colonial injustice [17]. Colonial violence is not only a historical setting, but a catalyst to the novel's deeper examination of memory and identity. Colonialism is a psychological disposition and a political arrangement which persists once the colonial empires have ceased to exist.

5.2 Memory as Cultural Survival

In *Afterlives*, memory is a means whereby people try to move beyond the rupture created by colonial violence. The past is intruding on the present, as survival seems to be contingent on memory as well as strength. In the novel's constant focus on absence and loss, this connection between memory and survival is represented. Families are broken apart, lives are torn away, and histories are unfinished. They remain present in the consciousness of the characters who survive, whose identities are formed by memories, rather than by historical continuity. In this respect, memory can also be seen as another archive, holding onto experiences that are either ignored or overlooked by official colonial histories.

This process can be explained with the help of the theory of trauma. Caruth contends that traumatic events are remembered with a delay and usually not in a linear fashion [2]. Similarly, Whitehead notes that traumatic literature often utilizes ellipses, silences and time shifts to signify situations that cannot be readily described in words [20]. You can see how Gurnah does just that. *Afterlives* does not provide a linear historical reconstruction but rather allows memory to rise slowly and piece by piece from reflections and emotional echoes. Luckhurst also suggests that trauma stories throw out of kilter the accepted timeline and cause the past to intrude and

influence the present [21].

Memory, however, plays a collective and an individual part in the novel as well. Memories of colonial history can be kept alive when the histories otherwise would be lost. Memory is an act of resistance in postcolonial contexts, in that it restores people who have been pushed to the margins to voice their experiences and stories. Memory is not just psychological but also cultural, and it is this way that communities can be consolidated in the face of change and upheaval.

Brazzelli argues that *Afterlives* reconstructs neglected colonial narratives [10], while Maricocchi emphasizes memory as a means of recovering suppressed East African histories [25]. Similarly, Abdelaziz maintains that the novel extends beyond personal remembrance toward cultural continuity and collective preservation [9].

These research works point to the historical importance of remembrance, but rather than being focused on memory as a function of archive, they tend to deal with memory as a historical event. The present study adds to these already existing interpretations, memory is also a mechanism of cultural survival. Learning from the past isn't just about keeping history alive, it's a way of negotiating loss without giving up on who they are as a person or community.

Therefore, *Afterlives* proposes memory as a means of refusing the erasure of history. Within the form of remembrance, Gurnah allows for trauma, identity and the survival of culture, which in turn leads to the reconstruction of belonging in the postcolonial world.

5.3 Identity Reconstruction and Postcolonial Belonging

Colonial violence has had one of its most profound impacts in *Afterlives*: the change of identity. In Gurnah, identity is not a stable, ethnic or national essence, but a process and a state of becoming, generated by displacement, memory and history. The characters constantly struggle between the loss and the becoming of the self.

The case of Hamza is illustrative; he has changed so much after his military service in the German colonial army. The violence he faces and experiences wrenches his life from its usual equilibrium, and he can no longer find his sense of self in his pre-colonial state. Similarly, Afiya's experience reflects the lives of those affected by systems of domination and social fragmentation. As their relationship unfolds, they slowly start creating a space where new ways of being can develop, thereby showing that identity is not simply another thing we are born with and carry out without change.

This process is very similar to postcolonial theory. Said believes that in colonial discourse, identity is formed through a system of representation that produces a binary division of the world between self and other [1]. Bhabha, however contests such binary oppositions with his notion of "hybridity," proposing that hybrid identities are new and unstable; hybridity in the colonial setting cannot be categorized as colonizer or colonized [4]. In *Afterlives*, the characters inhabit just these transitional zones, navigating the conflicts between indigenous culture, colonial structures, and evolving social dynamics.

Recent scholarship supports this interpretation. Khan argues that the novel presents identity as a continuous negotiation between colonial power and individual agency [19]. Likewise, Jani demonstrates that postcolonial East African identity is dynamic and historically contingent rather than fixed [18]. Usman and Siddiqui similarly emphasize that contemporary African literature redefines identity through experiences of displacement and cultural transformation instead of inherited notions of belonging [28].

Memory is a key component of this reconstruction of identity process. The characters are not merely recalling the past but reinterpreting it in order to create the continuity between past and future. Memory is the link between trauma and belonging. Remembrance is enduring, enabling people to hold on to parts of their personal and cultural lives and adjust to new social circumstances.

Banu and Talukdar associate *Afterlives* with the continuous reconstruction of identity through traumatic experience [7], while Maricocchi links displacement with the emergence of new forms of belonging [25]. Similarly, Farhan argues that memory and identity operate as interconnected and generational processes through which marginalized communities renegotiate belonging and cultural continuity [15]. Collectively, these studies reinforce the view that identity in Gurnah's novel is not inherited passively but is continually negotiated through the interaction of history, trauma, and memory.

Finally, *Afterlives* offers identity as if it were a process of becoming, not a state of being. While the novel is premised on the rupturing of existing belonging, it also proposes more potentialities for new identifications to be created in gestures of memory, social community, and cultural adjustment. The act of reconstructing identity is one of the main instruments for cultural survival: the past is linked to the potential of the future.

5.4 Discussion and Synthesis

This analysis above shows that an *Afterlives* cannot be fully captured by only one perspective of interpretation. Instead, the novel creates a complex connection between colonial violence, traumatic memory, identity reconstruction and cultural survival. This study suggests that these are processes which operate together to create the postcolonial condition that is depicted in Gurnah's novel.

Previous scholarship has provided important insights into the novel's historical dimension. Branach-Kallas argues that *Afterlives* recovers the neglected experiences of African subjects under German colonial rule [6], while Maricocchi highlights the novel's capacity to reclaim marginalized historical narratives [25]. Similarly, Soni and Singh maintain that Gurnah challenges official historical discourse by transforming individual experience into an alternative form of historical knowledge [27].

Trauma constitutes the central mechanism connecting history with memory.

Caruth conceptualizes trauma as an experience that remains unresolved and repeatedly returns through fragmented recollections [2], whereas LaCapra describes trauma as a movement between "acting out" and the gradual process of "working through" [17]. Throughout *Afterlives*, memories of war, disappearance, displacement, and silence continually interrupt the present, suggesting that colonial violence persists long after the historical events themselves have ended. This study therefore argues that trauma should not be regarded merely as one literary theme among many; rather, it serves as the interpretive center through which both memory and identity become intelligible.

Identity reconstruction represents another major contribution of the novel. Postcolonial theory rejects essentialist understandings of identity and instead conceptualizes identity as negotiated, fluid, and historically contingent [14]. Similarly, Khan et al. argue that Gurnah's characters inhabit unstable spaces shaped by colonial power and personal agency [19], while Jani demonstrates that postcolonial identity remains historically dynamic and continuously evolving [18]. The present analysis further suggests that identity reconstruction cannot occur independently of traumatic memory. In *Afterlives*, identity emerges through the continuous negotiation of loss, remembrance, resilience, and survival.

The main value of this study is thus to help show that trauma, memory and identity cannot be isolated as analytical categories. Instead, they create a seamless process that converts colonial violence into colonial culture as a means of cultural survival. Trauma creates the rupture, memory holds onto the experience of the rupture, and identity reconstruction helps individuals and communities to navigate the future beyond the rupture.

Combining trauma theory, memory studies and postcolonial criticism in to analytical framework, the study provides a more solid understanding of *Afterlives* and its representation of the long shadow of empire. In this way, the study contributes to recent discussions of colonial memory and identity reconstruction by showing that trauma is the mechanism that transforms historical violence into cultural survival.

The novel thus does not just describe German East Africa, but is a deep reflection on the power of memory, endurance and reconstruction in the wake of colonial catastrophe.

6. Conclusion

In this study, Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* is understood as a re-imagining of colonial violence in relation to the entangled issues of trauma, memory, identity and cultural survival. He examines how colonialism continues to live on in the thoughts of individuals, collective memory, and the formation of postcolonial identity.

Based on the findings in this study, it can be concluded that colonial violence in *Afterlives* is not only a historical fact, but is a psychological rupture that continues to exist. The novel's characters' experiences show the impact of war and imperialism in the form of divided memory, ruptured emotional

worlds, and attempts to build viable social networks anew. Trauma appears as an interpersonal, communal or collective phenomenon affecting a community well after the violence has ceased.

The analysis has also shown that memory plays a pivotal role in Gurnah's novel. Remembrance is not just a memory of past events, but an act of resistance in the face of historical erasure and a way of remembering marginalized experiences.

Similarly, the study has revealed that *Afterlives'* identity, too, is not set or predetermined. Rather, it is continually created in a process of trauma, memory, and historical experience. Gurnah's critique of essentialist notions of identity makes belonging a constant process of negotiation and adaptation in the unstable situations imposed by colonialism and its legacy. Identity is not regained or recovered by going back to the past, but by revisiting the past in a different manner that allows survival into the future.

The principal contribution of this study lies in its integrated reading of *Afterlives*. Previous scholarship has tended to deal with colonial history and memory, with trauma or with identity as its own specific focus, rather than with them as layers of the same story. Specifically, it suggests that colonial violence creates a traumatic rupture, the traumatic rupture creates acts of remembrance, and remembrance can lead to the reconstruction of identity and cultural survival. Combining trauma theory, memory studies, and postcolonial criticism into a single analytical framework provides a broader comprehension of Gurnah's novel, and thus demonstrates the benefit of interdisciplinary work in modern postcolonial studies.

Similar analytical frameworks may be applied to other postcolonial narratives that engage with war, displacement, and historical trauma, particularly works that examine the long-term cultural consequences of colonial violence. Future studies may also explore works that would deal with the intersections of gender, memory and postcolonial identity in Gurnah's fiction which will continue to perpetuate the discussion of trauma and cultural survival in African literary studies. In this way, *Afterlives* continues to demonstrate that literature is not merely a record of historical suffering but a vital space through which marginalized communities preserve memory, reconstruct identity, and imagine the possibility of survival beyond colonial catastrophe.

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