

Negotiating healing and identity: Postcolonial study of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*

Abhipsa Behera¹, Dr. Madhumita Das²

¹ Research Scholar, School of Languages and Social Science, Faculty of Arts, Communication and Indic Studies, Sri Sri University, Cuttack, Odisha, India

² Assistant. Professor, School of Languages and Social Science, Faculty of Arts, Communication and Indic Studies, Sri Sri University, Cuttack, Odisha, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66856/english.2026.12.3.12090>

Abstract

The paper examines how the novel negotiates healing and identity in the aftermath of colonial trauma, focusing on the interplay between memory, resilience and cultural reconstruction. Drawing on postcolonial theory of Homi Bhaba, trauma and memory studies of J. Assmann and identity theory of Stuart Hall, the research explores the characters in the Gurnah's, *Afterlives* embody hybrid identities negotiated in the liminal 'third space' between colonial disruption and indigenous survival. The analysis highlights how storytelling and narrative strategies function as acts of healing, reclaiming silenced histories and enabling intergenerational reconciliation. The paper at the same time argues that identity is not fixed but continually reconstructed through memory, trauma and cultural negotiation. By situating *Afterlives*, within the broader discourse of postcolonial trauma and identity, the paper argues that Gurnah transforms colonial wounds into a narrative of resilience, offering a vision of healing that is both personal and collective.

Keywords: Trauma, memory, hybridity, healing, identity.

Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020) ^[3] is a compelling novel that examines the brutal legacy of German colonialism in East Africa, highlighting the persistent wounds of displacement, cultural upheaval, and intergenerational trauma. The story illustrates how individuals and communities navigate healing while recreating fragmented identities in the wake of empire through the experiences of numerous characters. The novel profoundly explores themes of memory, resilience, belonging, and the contextualization of personal challenges within wider historical and cultural frameworks. This study utilizes postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and identity formation to assert that *Afterlives* convert colonial injuries into narratives of survival and cultural rejuvenation, presenting a view of postcolonial subjectivity that is simultaneously fragmented and resilient. This study argues that in *Afterlives*, Abdulrazak Gurnah explores healing and identity through storytelling, memory, and hybridity, illustrating how literature serves as a crucial medium for reclaiming marginalised histories and recreating postcolonial identity.

Gurnah reconstructs the historical depth and cultural entanglements of East Africa under German colonialism. The novel not only demonstrates how colonial violence fractured communities, but it emphasizes how cultural resilience and memory permitted healing and identity restoration. It situates East African experiences within a global trauma narrative, highlighting narratives that are frequently silenced in dominant accounts. It concentrates on colonial rule, which was characterized by harsh violence, including the repression of uprisings such as the coastal insurrection of 1889-1890 and the Maji Maji Rebellion of 1905-1907, which resulted in mass deaths from famine and scorched earth techniques. The usage of askari under

German leadership caused splits in local communities, with some being co-opted into colonial military organizations. Furthermore, the novels center on the aftermath of World War I, when East Africa becomes a significant battlefield, demonstrating how colonial brutality continues to influence lives long after the war is over. Colonialism established linguistic and cultural dominance, with German and then British officials attempting to eradicate indigenous languages and traditions. Missionary activity and European schools established new religious and cultural frameworks that frequently clashed with indigenous norms. The narrative explores multidirectional memory, linking colonial violence in East Africa to global histories of war, slavery, and genocide, placing African trauma within a larger human context and emphasizing how memory and storytelling became tools of survival, preserving cultural identity despite colonial erasure.

Story telling in Gurnah's narrative emerges as a crucial mechanism for healing, particularly in the way characters preserve fragments of collective memory amid colonial disruption. According to Zhdanov, "J. Assmann believes that human memory as a cultural phenomenon is always socially conditioned. Memory as a basis of human history and culture can never be solely individual. It must also be collective" (Zhdanov 422) "all I have are fragments which are snagged by troubling gaps, things I would have asked about if I could, moments that ended too soon or were inconclusive." (Gurnah 185) Hamza narrating his stories in fragments in the narrative exemplifies all askaris who have once left home to participate in the war and could not get back to his family. "After the war I tried to find them but I couldn't." (Gurnah 185) Hamza's, recollections of family histories and local customs when he says, "I was bonded to him to secure my father's debts." (Gurnah 185), function as a communicative memory, sustaining identity in the face of

colonial erasure. According to Assmann, communicative memory is the everyday recollections passed orally within a community and cultural memory is the most enduring narrative embedded in traditions and texts. The personal stories shared between Hamza and Alfiya during the time they spent together. When asked by Hamza regarding her broken hand, Alfiya replied that her uncle broke her hand, "He broke it because he said it was wrong for me to know how to write." (Gurnah 177) When sharing his experience Hamza said about the Feldwebel, "He was a cruel man" (Gurnah 180) and later added, "he slapped me once." (Gurnah 181) Through the characters, Gurnah situates these memories within a broader cultural framework, where the act of narrating colonial violence transforms personal trauma into collective memory. "In Assmann's opinion, suppose historical memory can equally effectively fulfill its role in society in its individual and collective forms. In that case, the realization of the forms of cultural memory is almost always collective." (Zhdanov 422) This process underscores how memory is actively reconstructive rather than being only retrospective and enables characters to negotiate healing by embedding their suffering within a shared cultural narrative.

Both Hamza and Alfiya are the victims of cultural practice of slavery. While Hamza was sold to a merchant in exchange of a debt and Alfiya was left to her aunt where she was abused and treated like a slave. *Afterlives* demonstrates Assmann's claim that cultural memory provides continuity across generations, allowing communities fractured by colonialism to reclaim agency through remembrance.

Afterlives, delves deeply into the character's negotiation of identity, characterized by hybridity, a condition crucial to postcolonial subjectivity according to Homi Bhaba. The character Hamza is both a victim of colonial violence and a participant in colonial processes, exemplifying the ambivalence of identity formation in the 'third space'. Bhaba in *The Location of Culture* argues, "These in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the ideas of society itself." (Bhaba 2) According to Bhaba this space, is neither completely Indigenous nor completely colonial rather is a site of negotiation where cultural meanings are constantly redefined. "The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation." (Bhaba 3) Hamza's struggle to reconcile his military past and with his desire for belonging illustrates how hybridity destabilizes fixed notions of identity. "On many occasions he walked the shore road in the direction of the house where he once lived." (Gurnah 317) Rather than presenting identity as a stable essence, *Afterlives* portray it as fluid notions of identity. Hamza's condition as portrayed by Gurnah qualifies for, "identities within the calcification of colonial cultures to recommend that 'roots' be struck in the celebratory romance of the past or by homogenizing the history of the present." (Bhaba 13) Through this lens, hybridity becomes not only a marker of trauma but also a potential site of resilience, where characters resist erasure by reconfiguring identity in ways that acknowledge both loss and survival. The constant negotiations mentioned in Gurnah's narrative justifies Edward Said's depiction of identity negotiation mentioned in Bhaba's essay, "of mimicry and man", "the demand for

identity, stasis- and the counter- pressure of the diachrony of history- change, difference- mimicry represents an *ironic compromise*." (Bhaba 122)

The concept of shifting identities in *Afterlives* resonate strongly with Stuart Hall's conception of cultural identity as described in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, where he argues identity, "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture." (Hall 225) Gurnah's characters embody this fluidity by being stuck between colonial impositions and indigenous traditions, navigating who they are in respect to both. In *Afterlives*, identity is not retrieved as a solid essence, but is constantly reinvented through memory, storytelling, and lived experience. Younger generation such Hamza who denies to serve himself as a slave, "I lacked the wisdom and the skill to run away, only even then I did not know enough to keep myself safe and ran away to war." (Gurnah 186) and Alfiya's acceptance to read and write, "she practiced writing the letters herself." (Gurnah 38) shows their attempts to reconcile inherited trauma with aspirations for autonomy which for Hall argues in, "Who needs identity?", "identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions." (Hall 4) Gurnah's description of Ilyas, "I worked on the farm and went to school and learned to read and write and to sing and speak German." (Gurnah 41) suggests Hall's argument, "identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies." (Hall 4) Hall's idea reflects that identity is never singular but always multiple, contingent, and in flux which resonates with the idea mentioned in Avtar Brah's *Cartographies of diaspora: Contesting Identities 1996*, "Avtar Brah's view of identity as being "neither fixed nor singular; rather it is a constantly changing relational multiplicity" (Al- Janabi & Az- Zubaidy 3) mentioned by Janabi and Zubaidy in the research paper, "Identity and Belonging in Na'ima B. Robert's Boys Vs Girls". This perspective highlights how Gurnah portrays identity formation as an ongoing negotiation, where healing is inseparable from the recognition that identity itself is dynamic, fractured, and historically conditioned.

Conclusion

Gurnah illustrates how memory, hybridity and cultural reconstruction interact to negotiate identity and healing in *Afterlives*. The narratives used to preserve collective trauma and turn it into a resource for resilience is highlighted by Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory. The ambivalence of identity creation in colonial contexts is highlighted by Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity, where characters live in a "third space" that upends established categories while providing opportunities for survival and rejuvenation. Stuart Hall's idea of identification as a process of "becoming" rather than "being," on the other hand, represents Gurnah's characters as dynamic subjects that are constantly changing due to historical upheaval and cultural struggle. Collectively, these viewpoints indicate that healing in *Afterlives* is not a restoration of an intact past but a progressive act of redefinition, wherein identity arises through memory and

hybridity as a dynamic, communal process. Gurnah's novel contributes to postcolonial discourse by demonstrating that the negotiation of identity is inextricably linked to the process of healing, for both people and communities fragmented by colonial brutality.

References

1. Bhaba HK. "Introduction". *The Location of Culture*. Routledge Classics, 2004, 2.
2. Bhaba HK. "of mimicry and man". *The Location of Culture*. Routledge Classics, 2004, 122.
3. Gurnah A. *Afterlives*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020.
4. Hall S. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, 225.
5. Hall S. "Who Needs 'Identity'?" *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, SAGE Publications, 1996, 4.
6. Al-Janabi HKA, Az-Zubaidy TRS. "Identity and Belonging in Na'ima B. Robert's Boys Vs Girls (2010)". *Journal of Ecohumanism*, 2024;3(7):4880.
7. Zhdanov VV. "Theory of "Cultural Memory" by J. Assmann and Reflection of Multiculturalism: Myth, Memory and Remembrance in Cultures of "Axial Age"". *RUDN Journal of Philosophy*, 2023;27(2):422.