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Research Article

Projection of Traumatic Experience in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*

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Abtsract

The enduring legacy of colonialism continues to shape postcolonial societies not through political and economic structures but also through psychological trauma. In Abdulrazak Gurnah's Afterlives*, the psychological wounds imposed by imperial violence are realistically illustrated through the fragmented identities of male characters navigating war, loss, and cultural dislocations. This study explores the lasting psychological impact of trauma on the male characters in Gurnah's* Afterlives *through the theoretical framework of trauma studies. Focusing on Khalifa, Hamza and Iliyas, the central characters of the novel, the paper examines how personal and collective traumas that have been rooted in colonial violence, forced displacement, familial separation and cultural dislocation affect their identity formation, emotional stability, and memory. These characters encounter fragmentations, shaped by historical trauma, where the psychological wounds of enslavement and war persist long after the event themselves. This study analyses how trauma in Afterlives is not just an individual psychological experience but also a cultural and historical phenomenon that exposes the silent, long-term impact of empire. Through Gurnah's narrative it is revealed how the inter-generational transmission of pain and the silencing of traumatic memories in postcolonial trauma discourse, emphasized the complexity that existed as a link between personal suffering and structural violence.*

Keywords: *Trauma, imperial violence, legacy, colonialism, cultural dislocation, intersectionality*

Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020) masterfully depicts the deep and lasting psychological impact of trauma on individuals caught within the violent forces of colonialism, war, and displacement in early 20th-century East Africa. The novel's major male protagonists: Khalifa, Hamza, and Ilyas, each

endure layered traumas that arise from personal loss, systemic oppression, and cultural dislocation. Through the narratives of his characters, Gurnah illustrates how trauma operates on multiple levels, functioning not only as a deeply personal psychological injury but also as a reflection of broader historical and social forces. The characters' experiences reveal how individual suffering is inseparably linked to the legacies of colonial violence, displacement, and cultural disruption. By portraying the interplay between private grief and collective history, Gurnah emphasizes that trauma is both embodied and inherited, shaping identity, memory, and social relationships across generations. His work is the depiction of the ways in which personal wounds are magnified by structural injustices, highlighting the enduring impact of historical violence on both the individual psyche and the postcolonial community. Employing trauma theory, as articulated by scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, this article examines how trauma disrupts the characters' sense of self, memory, and belonging. Khalifa, a gujrati origin and working in East Africa in search of economic stability, carries guilt over loss of his father; Hamza once sold to settle debt endures brutal mistreatment as an Askari under German soldiers; and Iliyas, kidnapped by the Germans, leaves his homeland and is later conscripted as a soldier all of which draws the setting for the varied manifestations of trauma in their lives. Therefore, this paper investigates how the psychological wounds inflicted by colonial violence extend beyond individual experience, reverberating through generations and shaping identity and community in postcolonial contexts. By exploring the characters' responses to trauma, this paper reveals the ways in which *Afterlives* contributes to postcolonial trauma discourse, emphasizing the complexity that existed as a link between personal suffering and structural violence.

Research Question

In *Afterlives,* Abdulrazak Gurnah portrays the psychological aftermath of colonial violence through the fragmented lives of male characters such as Khalifa, Hamza and Iliyas. Each of these characters carries personal traumas that range from abandonment, enslavement to cultural dislocation that are deeply intertwined with the broader historical forces of imperialism. Khalifa's guilt over familial loss. Hamza's psychological scars from force servitude and war and Iliyas's identity crisis shows how personal struggles can be made worse by the shared pain of group's history, especially because of the effects of colonialism. The novel unfolds that these individual experiences are not isolated but are emblematic of wider, inherited psychological burden passed down through generations affected by empire. Significantly Gurnah uses storytelling and memory as acts of resistance and healing, illustrating how recollection and narration of painful histories which were often suppressed under colonial rule can become a means of reclaiming identity and fostering resilience in postcolonial context.

Hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that the male characters in *Afterlives* represent wider postcolonial condition where trauma is both personal psychological experience and a historical legacy of systematic violence. It also assumes that the novel uses narrative memory as methods for 'working through' trauma, offering both resistance to erasure and potential for healing.

Literature Review

Trauma studies which combines insights from multiple disciplines, is now vital for analyzing literary texts that deal with lasting psychological effects of past violence. Cathy Caruth's seminal work *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) remains foundational in this regard. Caruth conceptualizes trauma as an event that is not fully understood at the moment it occurs but instead returns rapidly in the form of intrusive memories and fragmented narratives, disrupting the victim's sense of self and temporality (Caruth 4). This conceptualization is crucial for understanding *Afterlives,* where the characters' identities and memories are deeply fractured by their colonial pasts and personal losses. Gurnah depicts Hamza as a man scarred by the brutality

of colonial war where his psyche is forever haunted by the violence endured and witnessed. Even after the war and his marriage to Afiya, Hamza remains deeply disturbed; nightmares and memories of war time horrors continue to plague his nights. Caruth's insights that trauma defies immediate narrative integration explains why Khalifa, Hamza and Iliyas each struggle to fully assimilate their experiences, resulting in delayed psychological wounds that permeate their lives longer after the traumatic events. Gurnah writes, "His face was wet and his body was drenched in sweat. There was a sob in his throat as he came awake*"* (220). This description vividly illustrates how trauma permits even the most intimate spaces of Hamza's nights holding the past inescapably closed even as he struggles to build a semblance of normal life. The physical imager of sweat-drenched and the involuntarily sobbing expressed how trauma is not merely a psychological burden but also an embodied experience. The reoccurrences of the nightmares reveal how the brutality Hamza endured and being beaten and humiliated by German soldiers was forced to witness relentless violence which continued to haunt him long after the events themselves. This moment illustrates Cathy Caruth's idea that trauma returns belatedly and intrusively, erupting in fragments that mind cannot fully assimilate.

LaCapra's framework allows for an exquisite reading of *Afterlives* that captures the ongoing psychological struggle of characters caught between unresolved pain and possibility of recovery. The postcolonial context adds additional layers of complexity to trauma theory. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's decolonizing methodology (1999) sheds light on how colonial regimes authorizes collective trauma systematically erasing indigenous histories and identities, creating a cultural and epistemic violence that compounds individual sufferings (Smith 42). Smith's call for reclaiming indigenous voices and histories are echoed in *Afterlives* particularly in Iliyas's story of forced incorporation into German Colonial institutions, which leads to intense identity fragmentations. As a child Iliyas is abducted and educated under German authority, a process that severs his ties to his family and community. Gurnah describes, how the boy once taken by the soldiers is shaped into someone who begins to view the Germans as 'honorable and civilized' people in compared to his own people. His expertise exemplifies the colonial strategy of cultural erasure, where education and military service serve as tool for internalizing colonial values and serving ties with indigenous heritage. Smith sees these experiences as a part of larger kind of knowledge related trauma that postcolonial literature tries to heal by bringing hidden histories to light offering different stories.

Recent contributions to postcolonial theory also emphasizes the intersectionality of trauma experiences. Kimberly Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality(1991) offers a critical tool for understanding how multiple forms of oppressions, colonialism, patriarchy, economic exploitation intersect to shape the trauma endured by characters like Khalifa, Hamza and Iliyas (Crenshaw, 1241). The colonial trauma in *Afterlives* is not undiversified but deeply interwoven with social hierarchies and gendered expectations such as Khalifa's constrained agency within patriarchal and colonial structures. This intersectional lens allows the analysis to consider the heterogeneous method of trauma, revealing how identity, power and historical violence combine to produce complex psychological outcomes. Stef Crap's *Post Colonial Witnessing (2013)* offers a vital critique of Eurocentric trauma paradigm that often fails to fully account for the specificity of colonial histories and experiences: " 'I am a man of honor.' 'You are swine until I teach you bil-askari' (Gurnah 58)" reflects a moment when a German soldier humiliates Hamza, reducing him to an animal-like status and asserting the colonial authority by framing himself as the 'teacher' who must civilized the supposedly inferior native. This verbal abuse expresses the cultural and structural violence system where domination is enforced not only through physical brutality but also through degrading language that strips away dignity paving the way for the psychological trauma resulted as not only by physical beatings but also the persistent humiliation embedded in colonial discourse. Trauma theory's frameworks recognizing the cultural and structural dimensions of colonial violence

also attends to personal narratives (Crap 15), and such approach is highly relevant to *Afterlives* which situates trauma at the intersection of personal memory and collective historical witnessing. Thus, Gurnah's novel attests Crap's call for literature as postcolonial site of suppressed histories and articulation of psychic wounds. The characters' fragmented memories and storytelling practice exemplify how trauma literature can function as both testimony and resistance challenging colonial amnesia.

Critical reception of *Afterlives* has increasingly focused on its contributions to trauma discourse in post-colonial literature. Abbas et al. *Echoes of Haunted Memories and nightmares: Understanding Trauma's in Gurnah's Afterlives (2023)* offer a detailed psychological analysis of Hamza, interpreting these recurring nightmares and fragmented recollections as symbolic of intergenerational trauma borne from forced servitude and war. Their paper highlights Gurnah's skill in portraying trauma as multilayered phenomenon that implicates both individual psychology and historical violence.

Pallavi Saxena's *Voices from the Margins: Colonialism and Identity in Gurnah's* s *Afterlives* (2023) extends this discussion on Gurnah amplifies marginalized perspectives silenced by colonial domination. Saxena argues that the novel situates its characters on the periphery of both colonial and indigenous structures, thereby exposing the fractured and hybrid identities that emerge under imperial rule. By giving narrative space to figures such as Hamza, Iliyas and Afiya Gurnah not only critiques the erasure of indigenous subjectivities but also reclaims their suppresses histories through storytelling. Saxena emphasizes that *Afterlives* becomes a site where the trauma of dispossession intersects with struggle for self-definition, making visible the lingering wounds of colonial violence while simultaneously resisting historical amnesia. Her reading complements trauma theorists like Smith and Craps, adding the importance of recovering marginalized voices as part of broader work of postcolonial witnessing.

Other scholars, such as Anjali Prabhu(2021), explore the psychological impact of displacement and diaspora in *Afterlives*, arguing that the novel reflects a global postcolonial condition where trauma is transmitted across space and generations. Prabhu connects Gurnah's narrative to wider body of postcolonial literature concerned with the psyche costs of migration, exile and cultural dislocation, thereby broadening the scope of trauma studies to incorporate diasporic experiences. This perspective complements the focus and Khalifa's and Hamza's forced movements and disrupted familial ties, highlighting how trauma transcends individual boundaries to affect communal and transnational identities.

Justification of the Study

This study is justified by the need to deepen scholarly understanding of how literature can illuminate the enduring psychological consequences of colonial violence, particularly through the lens of male experiences in postcolonial contexts. While most postcolonial criticism has focused on political, economic or cultural repercussions of imperialism, the psychological dimension especially the ways trauma shapes identity, memory and interpersonal relationships remains underexplored. Gurnah's *Afterlives* provides a rich narrative site to investigate these dimensions, as it foregrounds the intimate often painful legacies of colonialism on individuals caught between historical forces and personal loss.

Focusing on male protagonists Khalifa, Hamza and Iliyas is especially important because their stories reveal varied and complex representations of trauma shaped by gendered expectations, social roles and historical conditions. Men's psychological sufferings under colonialism has often been marginalized or simplified in postcolonial studies which frequently center on political resistance or collective histories. This study addresses the gap by analyzing how male characters negotiate fragmented identities, displacement and cultural dislocation, thus contributing to

intersectional understanding of trauma in postcolonial literature. And contributes to trauma studies applying key theoretical framework such as Dominick LaCapra in postcolonial literary context. It advances the discourse on how trauma is not merely an individual psychological event but a cultural and historical phenomenon that has lasting impact across generations. In broader cultural and academic sense, this study aligns with growing global interest in decolonizing knowledge and methodologies. It challenges dominant Eurocentric trauma models by integrating postcolonial perspectives offering a critical framework for understanding the psychological impact of empire on formerly colonized people. It documents and honors the psychological realities of colonized individuals and communities while advocating for the power of fiction to resist erasure and promote healing.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis methodology grounded in trauma theory and postcolonial studies to examine the psychological aftermath of colonial violence in Abdulrazak Gurna's *Afterlives* The research involve a close reading of the novel's key male characters, Khalifa, Hamza and Iliyas focusing on their psychological states, narratives arcs and interactions to uncover how trauma manifests in their identities, memories and experiences. This textual analysis is supported by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that bridges literary criticism, trauma studies, and postcolonial theory, enabling a varied understanding of the novel's portrayal of trauma.

The methodology involves contextualizing the novel's narrative within these theoretical constructs, examining textual evidence such as character development, symbolism and narrative structure, Secondary sources from trauma studies and postcolonial criticism further support the analysis by providing scholarly perspectives on memory, identity and resistance in contexts of historical violence.

Central to the theoretical framework is Cathy Caruth's conceptualization of trauma as an experience that is not fully processed at the moment of occurrence but re-emerges belatedly through intrusive memories, fragmented narratives, and disruptions of identity. Her insights allow the study to explore how *Afterlives* represents trauma as a complex, often unconscious psychological phenomenon that shapes the characters' ongoing struggles with memory and selfhood. She notes, "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past but rather in the way that its unassimilated nature returns to haunt" (4). Also Dominick LaCapra's distinction between 'acting out' and 'working through' trauma informs the analysis of how Gurnah's characters negotiate their traumatic histories. 'Acting out' is evident in compulsive behaviors and reenactments of trauma, while 'working through' involves conscious reflection and narrative engagement that facilitate healing and resistance. This dialectical framework illuminates the tension between trauma's persistence and the possibility of recovery through storytelling in the novel. He distinguishes between 'acting out' marked by compulsive repetition, and 'working through' which involves critical engagement and possible transformation (142-144), and that helps to show how Gurnah's characters move between being stuck in their pain and finding ways to act. Hamza's haunted nights show how trauma keeps him trapped, while other moments suggest efforts towards healing 'acting out'; Khalifa's attempts to narrate and rebuild community suggest 'working through'. The postcolonial dimension of the analysis draws on Linda Tuhiwai Smith's critique of colonial erasure and imposed amnesia, situating the characters' psychological trauma within broader systems of imperial violence, cultural dislocation, and economic exploitation. Postcolonial trauma theory also addresses the intersectionality of trauma by acknowledging how race, class, gender, and colonial histories intertwine to shape the lived experiences of colonized individuals.

By combining close textual analysis with trauma and postcolonial theoretical approaches, this study seeks to reveal how *Afterlives* not only depicts the psychological legacies of colonialism

but also offers a narrative space for healing and reclamation. The methodology thus facilitates an exploration of trauma as both individual psychological reality and a collective cultural condition that transcends the boundaries of the novel.

Textual Analysis:

Abdulrazak *Afterlives* elaborately weaves the psychological and historical dimensions of trauma through the experiences of its male characters, revealing how colonial violence continues to haunt both individual psyches and collective identities. The novel's portrayal of Khalifa, Hamza and Iliyas exemplifies that varied nature of trauma, encompassing personal loss, forced displacement, cultural dislocation, and the enduring legacies of imperial oppression. Khalifa one of the main characters, represents and depicts psychological scars of displacement and loss under the colonial rule. His trauma stems from poverty, familial separation and the violent socio-political disturbances surrounding him. Gurnah narrates Khalifa's anguish over his father's death due to malaria which was a personal loss worsened by his inability to care for him due to economic hardship and colonial disruption (11). This layered trauma fractures Khalifa's identity, forcing him into a liminal space between belonging and alienation: The author says, "Khalifa felt alone in the world, an ungrateful and worthless son" (11).

Khalifa's narrative stresses the intimate effects of trauma shaped by family loss and economic hardship intensified by colonialism. His fragmented identity and pervasive guilt over his father's death reflect trauma's 'delayed' nature as theorized by Cathy Caruth, where the emotional toll unfolds long after the initial traumatic events. Khalifa's forced marriage to Bi Asha symbolizes the intersection of socio-economic pressures and colonial patriarchy, further complicating his psychological burden. His role as a 'savior' of a family name masks a deeper vulnerability and ongoing psychological struggle to reconcile his past and present. This fragmented identity has directed trauma's capacity to destabilize selfhood in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Through Khalifa, Gurnah exposes how trauma disrupts not only memory but also social roles and expectations, illustrating a fractured self, caught between tradition and colonial modernity. His internal conflict reflects how individuals are often forced to navigate inherited cultural responsibilities while simultaneously contending with the disruptive pressures of foreign domination. In this way, Khalifa's character becomes a site where personal loss, historical violence, and cultural dislocation intersect, demonstrating the far-reaching effects of trauma on both the psyche and the social fabric.

Hamza's story digs into trauma inflicted through forced servitude and economic exploitation, revealing the structural dimensions of colonial violence. His experience as an enslaved child sold to repay debts, followed by his forceful participation in colonial military service, represents trauma as a repetitive cycle of loss and alienation, aligning with LaCapra's concept of 'acting out' trauma. Hamza's restless search for belongingness and identity represents the disorienting effects of displacement and the struggle to reclaim agency amid oppressive systems, that further evidences in Hamza's restless movement and attempts to reconnect with roots that no longer exist (27). His participation in military service as an Askari reflects both resistance and complicity and attempts to reclaim agency amid structural violence. Yet his psychological wounds remain unresolved, manifesting in feelings of alienation and displacement. Hamza's narrative also reflects the broader colonial trauma of forced labor and economic exploitation, depicting how individual suffering is inseparable from systemic oppression. The narrator says, "He wandered the streets for a while looking for places he knew, but he recognized very little and often did not know where he was. (149)

His loss and search for belongingness highlight trauma's enduring effects on identity and community in postcolonial settings. For Hamza, this disorientation reflects the deep psychological

impact of displacement and violence, as colonial disruption has severed his connection to familiar spaces and memories. His inability to recognize the streets mirrors the fractured nature of his identity, showing how trauma not only destabilizes the self but also reshapes one's relationship with the world. The streets themselves become unfamiliar, symbolizing the lasting effects of colonial violence on both personal and collective senses of home and belongingness; the author reflects, "Hamza was numb with hunger and exhaustion, his heart racing with a distress he could not control" (54). This brings to the light the inextricable link between personal trauma and colonial political economy, demonstrating how trauma is embedded within historical and social frameworks.

Similarly, Iliyas's character offers a powerful exploration of how colonial systems force individuals to abandon their native cultures and adapt foreign identities, leading to a loss of self and belonging. Iliyas's trauma is rooted in kidnapping by colonial forces and enforced incorporation into German culture. His separation from family and community, followed by education in colonial school, produces an intense identity crisis (22). Iliyas's story exemplifies the colonial strategy of erasing indigenous identity to facilitate control:

"They had to be harsh in retaliation because that's the only way savage people can be made to understand order and obedience. The Germans are honourable and civilized people and have done so much good since they have been here" (42). His initial inclination towards German culture reflects the ambivalence inherit in colonial subjectivity which is caught between internalized colonial values and indigenous roots. Iliyas's eventual death under German protocol also symbolized the fatal consequences of colonial trauma as well as the erasure of alternative identities.

Collective and Individual Trauma: Intersectional Dimension

The psychological traumas of Khalifa, Hamza, and Ilyas are not isolated personal tragedies but are deeply entwined with collective histories of colonial violence, poverty, and displacement. As Ange-Marie Hancock's concept of intersectionality suggests, multiple axes of oppression intersect to shape experience (1241). In *Afterlives*, colonialism intersects with class, culture, and gender to produce complex trauma. For example, while Khalifa's trauma is heavily shaped by economic marginalization and colonial violence, Hamza's and Ilyas's experiences foreground the roles of servitude, kidnapping, and forced cultural incorporation. Together, their stories illustrate the multidimensional nature of trauma in postcolonial contexts. Despite the deep wounds depicted, *Afterlives* also gestures towards the possibilities of resistance and healing. The act of narrating trauma itself becomes a form of 'working through' (LaCapra 27), enabling characters to reclaim fragmented memories and identities. Khalifa's attempts to reconnect with family, Hamza's quest for roots, and Ilyas's narrative voice testify to the persistence of human resilience amid systemic violence.

Conclusion:

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* offers an exploration of the lasting psychological impact of colonial trauma on male characters living through unrestrained history of early 20th century in East Africa. Through the intertwined narratives of Khalifa, Hamza and Iliyas, the novel distinctly illustrates how personal trauma, created because of loss, displacement, enslavement, and cultural erasure is deeply connected to collective historical violence inflicted by imperialism. This study, based on trauma theory reveals how the psychological wound of colonialism transcends individual experience, molding fractured identities and disrupted memories. Gurnah's work moves beyond depicting trauma solely as debilitating force; rather it presents storytelling and memory as essential tools for resistance and healing. By giving voice to silenced histories and personal suffering, *Afterlives* challenges the colonial erasure of traumatic experience and affirms the importance of narrative in reclaiming agency and fostering resilience in postcolonial societies. The novel therefore occupies a critical space in postcolonial trauma literature, showing how fiction can document,

interrogate, and help readdress the psychological legacies of empire. Thus, *Afterlives* contributes to postcolonial trauma literature by affirming memory as both a site of pain and empowerment. It challenges colonial amnesia and erasure by insisting on the representation of traumatic histories, facilitating a space where the psychological wounds of trauma might be acknowledged and addressed.

Further Contribution of the study:

The study opens several avenues for further scholarly exploration within the realms of postcolonial trauma literature and psychological analysis of colonial legacies. While this paper focuses primarily on the male characters in *Afterlives* and their experiences of trauma, future research can be extended to include female characters to explore gendered dimensions of colonial violence and psychological aftermath. An investigation on how women in the novel navigate trauma differently, would deepen understanding of intersectional identities and broaden the discourse on colonial and postcolonial suffering. Also, this study's trauma-related theoretical framework could be applied comparatively across Abdulrazak Gurna's broader body of work or other postcolonial texts delineating similar themes of memory, displacement, and identity fragmentation. Such comparative study might reveal commonalities and divergences in the representation of trauma, enhancing knowledge about regional and thematic variations in postcolonial narratives. This project can be employed from interdisciplinary approaches that interrogate the socio-political conditions producing trauma and the ways in which art and literature function as sites of healing and resistance. In doing so, the study can contribute to ongoing dialogues about reparative justice, memory politics and the role of storytelling in the postcolonial healing process.

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