



Narrative Techniques in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Afterlives: Reconstructing Memory, Identity, Colonial Trauma

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Abstract

Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* explores the legacy of German colonial rule in East Africa through a rich array of narrative techniques. This paper examines how Gurnah employs non-linear structure, polyphonic voices, flashbacks, symbolism, metaphor, multilingualism, stream of consciousness, and historical intertextuality to convey the fractured identities and enduring traumas of colonial subjects. Through these methods, *Afterlives* dismantles the monolithic colonial narrative and offers a more intimate, multifaceted view of history, memory, and resistance.

Keywords: multilingualism, metaphor, dismantles, intimate

Introduction

Narrative, as a literary mode, serves as a vehicle for writers to communicate complex human experiences, including trauma, memory, and identity. Abdulrazak Gurnah, the Nobel Laureate in Literature, uses narrative form not just as a storytelling device but as a method of historical reclamation in his novel *Afterlives*. Set during and after German colonial rule in East Africa, *Afterlives* reimagines the colonial past from the perspectives of its victims. This paper explores how Gurnah's use of various narrative techniques contributes to a powerful representation of colonial violence and its psychological aftermath.

Non-Linear Narrative Structure

Gurnah employs a non-linear narrative to reflect the disruption and disorientation caused by colonialism. The novel does not adhere to chronological order but instead shifts fluidly across different time periods and characters' memories.

For example, Hamza's return from war is not presented as a singular, cohesive event. Rather, his traumatic experiences are revealed gradually through fragmented memories and scattered recollections. This technique mirrors how trauma operates in the human psyche—non-sequential and often involuntarily recalled. The disrupted structure

emphasizes the instability of identity and memory in post-colonial subjects whose histories have been interrupted or erased

Multiple Perspectives (Polyphony)

A central technique in *Afterlives* is polyphony—the presentation of multiple narrative voices. Through the characters of Khalifa, Hamza, Afiya, Ilyas, and others, Gurnah offers diverse perspectives on colonial life. Each character embodies a unique response to colonialism, shaped by personal experience, social status, and gender.

Khalifa, of mixed heritage, navigates colonial society with cautious pragmatism. Ilyas, initially rescued and educated by German missionaries, eventually internalizes colonial ideologies and defends the German presence. In stark contrast, Afiya, who suffers abuse in her uncle's home, experiences both gendered and racial oppression. Mahmudu, an ordinary man, offers a raw critique of colonial atrocities, describing a land “littered with skulls and bones” (p. 41). These contrasting voices prevent a singular, reductive interpretation of colonialism, instead showcasing its complexity and moral ambiguity.

Flashbacks as Historical Memory

Flashbacks in *Afterlives* serve as a tool to excavate hidden histories and underscore the lingering presence of colonial trauma. Characters such as Hamza and Julius revisit their pasts through involuntary memories, often triggered by physical or emotional stimuli.

Hamza, for instance, recalls his time as a bonded laborer and later as a conscripted servant in the German army. His reflections reveal how colonial violence leaves permanent marks—both physical and psychological. Julius, another soldier, recounts his missionary education and wartime service, emphasizing the long shadow cast by colonial institutions on individual lives. These flashbacks offer a counter-narrative to official histories, privileging personal memory over institutional record.

Symbolism

Symbolism in *Afterlives* deepens the emotional and thematic resonance of the narrative. Gurnah uses objects, landscapes, and physical scars to represent cultural erasure, loss, and survival.

Hamza's scar becomes a permanent reminder of servitude and the dehumanizing effects of colonialism.

The destruction of a garden symbolizes the erasure of local histories and aesthetics for economic profit.

The post office and swagger stick (cane) signify colonial power, bureaucracy, and coercion.

The repetition of the phrase “Ndio, Bwana” (Yes, Master) reflects linguistic domination and forced

submission. These symbols collectively highlight the material and psychological costs of empire, showing how colonial power reshapes not just spaces, but identities and relationships.

Metaphor

Metaphors in *Afterlives* are instrumental in portraying the emotional residues of colonialism. One recurring metaphor is the past as an inescapable shadow, suggesting that trauma is not confined to the historical past but lingers into the present.

The sea, another potent metaphor, oscillates between being a symbol of freedom and entrapment. For displaced characters like Hamza, it represents both escape from and return to a painful history. The sea's vastness and unpredictability parallel the dislocation experienced by individuals whose lives were torn apart by colonial wars and forced migrations.

Stream of Consciousness

Gurnah uses stream of consciousness to access the inner lives of characters grappling with unprocessed trauma. This technique renders the psychological impact of colonial violence in a visceral, intimate manner.

In one notable passage, Hamza reflects on his scar:

“The wound had healed, but the scar remained, a mark of ownership he would never erase. He had thought that once he left, once he put distance between himself and that world, it would no longer have power over him. But it did always” (p. 55).

Such introspective moments capture the persistent, haunting nature of colonial suffering—one that defies simple resolution.

Multilingualism and Linguistic

Fragmentation Language in *Afterlives* operates as both a tool of domination and a marker of identity confusion. The novel incorporates Swahili, German, and Arabic, reflecting the multilingual reality of colonial East Africa.

Characters like Ilyas and Hamza struggle to navigate these overlapping linguistic systems. The imposition of German, both in military and educational settings, symbolizes cultural erasure. At the same time, the characters' hesitance or inability to speak their native languages reinforces their alienation. This multilingualism emphasizes the fractured selfhood that colonial subjects must contend with.

Historical Intertextuality

Gurnah interweaves real historical events—such as the Maji Maji Rebellion (1905–1907) and the use of askari (African soldiers)—into the fictional world of *Afterlives*. This historical intertextuality lends authenticity and depth to the novel, blurring the line between fact and fiction.

By embedding these events within the lives of his characters, Gurnah situates personal trauma within a broader colonial context. The result is a narrative that reclaims silenced African histories and challenges the dominant Eurocentric discourse.

Conclusion

Through a masterful use of narrative techniques, Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* presents a nuanced exploration of colonialism's enduring impact. The non-linear structure, multiple viewpoints, flashbacks, symbolism, metaphor, and multilingualism collectively construct a tapestry of trauma, memory, and survival. These narrative strategies do not merely enhance the aesthetic quality of the novel but serve as a political act—recovering erased histories, humanizing the colonized, and interrogating the legacy of empire.

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