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Speaking Through the Unsaid: Memory, Silence and the Ethics of Survival in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *The Last Gift* and *Afterlives*

Nandana Sreekumar

MA English Language and Literature, Christ Nagar College, Kerala, India

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Abstract— *Literature has long served as both archive and erasure, preserving what a community remembers while registering what it cannot or will not say. For postcolonial societies shaped by displacement and effacement, this double function acquires particular urgency, since what is recollected is often matched in weight by what is withheld. Memory studies have traditionally approached such withholding as deficit, yet a different line of thought treats forgetting as a condition of memory itself. Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction has been recognized as one of the most significant contributions to postcolonial literature, distinguished by its restrained prose, its attention to displacement, and its sustained engagement with the afterlives of empire. This research paper examines how The Last Gift (2011) and Afterlives (2020) employ silence and forgetting not as failures of memory but as active ethical and aesthetic practices that shape the novels' narrative form, characterization, and historical vision. Read through Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism, polyphony, and the chronotope, the novels construct what the paper terms an architecture of silence, a deliberate structure of the unvoiced that is as meaningful as what is spoken. The study argues that Abbas's aphasia in the domestic space of an English suburb and Hamza's embodied reticence in the colonial landscape of German East Africa operate as utterances addressed to others, resisting the confessional trajectory from silence to speech that dominates Western trauma theory. Central to the analysis is the interpretive labour of those who surround the silent, including Maryam, Jamal, Hanna, and Afiya, whose divergent responses the paper reads as polyphony and as postmemory. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's ethics of forgetting, the paper demonstrates how Gurnah's refusal of retrospective illumination intertwines memory studies with postcolonial critique. It contends that silence in these novels cannot be understood independently of the colonial archive and the histories of migration that produce it. Ultimately, Gurnah's formal restraint is read as an ethics of partial knowledge, in which silence becomes a vehicle of dignity, a form of care, and a ground for postcolonial survival.*

Keywords— ***Abdulrazak Gurnah, silence, memory studies, trauma, Bakhtin, polyphony, postcolonial literature***

Literature has always borne a double obligation, to archive and to obscure. For postcolonial societies shaped by displacement and erasure, this tension is especially acute, since what a community chooses to remember is matched in weight by what it cannot bear to voice. Within this contested space, forgetting has emerged not as a passive void but as a substantive discourse—an ethical instrument through which individuals and communities navigate loss. Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction occupies this terrain with singular sophistication. *In The Last Gift*, a Zanzibari sailor's stroke-induced aphasia forces his family to confront a concealed past, in *Afterlives*, the wounds of German colonial violence in East Africa are carried somatically by an askari conscript. In both novels, silence is not

communicative failure but meaningful utterance. The research paper reframes forgetting through Bakhtin's triad of dialogism, polyphony, and the chronotope. It argues that Gurnah positions silence as a deliberate, dignified act of agency, a sovereign territory that history has otherwise attempted to erase. The analysis proceeds in three movements, first establishing the theoretical coordinates of silence, second examining familial polyphony in *The Last Gift* and third, tracing the dialogics of survival in *Afterlives*.

Friedrich Nietzsche, in *Untimely Meditations*, warned against the historical fever that paralyzes living action. For a culture to thrive, he argued, it must possess the plastic power to forget when the past becomes a hindrance to existence (Nietzsche 36). Paul Ricoeur extended this insight in Memory, History, Forgetting, positing forgetting as a condition of possibility for memory itself, to remember everything would be to collapse under unbearable weight and to forget everything would be to lose the self (Ricoeur 78). Ricoeur's concept of *juste mémoire* or right memory, demands neither obsession nor repudiation but an ethically responsible tension between past and present. Trauma theory complicates this framework. Cathy Caruth demonstrates that trauma returns in fragmented, discontinuous bursts that disrupt temporal reality (Caruth 64), while Bessel van der Kolk's work on somatic memory reveals that the survivor does not have a story to tell so much as a body that continues to react (Van der Kolk 178). Silence, in this lens, is a burdensome somatic presence—the body's recognition of what the tongue cannot assert.

Bakhtin provides the analytic vocabulary for reframing silence as dialogic. For Bakhtin, existence itself is dialogic that is to be means to be addressed... Absolute death is the state of being unheard, unrecognized, unremembered (Bakhtin 287). The polyphonic novel orchestrates multiple, equally weighted consciousnesses, none subordinate to authorial authority. Silence within such a structure becomes a boundary phenomenon, an utterance addressed to others, shaped by relational context. The chronotope, the intrinsic connectedness of time and space in narrative further illuminates how silence operates. The threshold chronotope, representing crisis and radical transition, is central to Gurnah's architecture, moments where the past presses violently against the present, forcing interpretive reckoning.

The *Last Gift* opens not with declaration but collapse. Abbas, whose life has been constructed through careful omission, falls ill. His silence, until now a personal fortress becomes a shared ruin each family member must inhabit differently. This is Gurnah's formal statement that silence, like meaning, is never singular but always a conversation between those who withhold and those who wait. Abbas's stroke transforms his body into a threshold chronotope. The hospital bed becomes a highly charged zone where the past presses against the present. His aphasia does not terminate communication but alters its format, the sighs, shifting gazes, laboured breathing function as double-voiced utterances carrying both his internal torment and his refusal to be consumed by historical wounds. "He wanted to tell them… not everything, never everything, but something that would let them know he had not always been this empty shadow. But the words were heavy, like stones in his throat" (Gurnah 42). His silence operates on three registers: somatic symptom, ethical refusal, and dialogic invitation. Van der Kolk's framework illuminates the first:, the stroke is not merely medical event but traumatic return, the body's ultimate insistence on speaking what the tongue refused. The second register is ethical, to demand Abbas smoothly narrate his trauma would violate the defensive armour he constructed to survive. His silence asserts his right to remain unconsumed by a world that already stripped him of home, name, and citizenship. The third register is relational, his silence summons others into interpretive motion.

Maryam reads his silent body through decades of conjugal expertise. Her interpretive labor of tracking micro-expressions, reading hand movements as gestures toward the sea constitutes what Bakhtin would recognize as a dialogic encounter with a voice that cannot speak conventionally. Meaning in *The Last Gift* is never monologic but created between people, in the space where one person's silence encounters another's loving interpretation. Maryam's counter-narrative enacts Ricoeur's hermeneutical insight, to remember is always to interpret. Her memories are punctuated by gaps, the moments when Abbas deflected questions or offered polished surfaces where she sensed complexity beneath. These gaps constitute her narration's most honest dimension. Her willingness to sit with uncertainty is itself ethical fidelity to Abbas's irreducible complexity.

The novel's polyphony crystallizes along generational lines. Jamal, an academic, adopts analytical distance, viewing his father's silence as symptom of postcolonial condition, part of an unrecorded history of Indian Ocean sailors. Hanna, by contrast, reflects bourgeois individualism, perceiving silence as embarrassing obstacle to self-actualization: "What I want from them is a story that has a beginning that is tolerable and open, and not one that is tripped with hesitations and silences… I want some simple boring details" (Gurnah 44).

This clash illustrates the polyphonic nature of Gurnah's domestic world where competing views remain in dialogic tension, modelling post-traumatic families where loss's inheritance is distributed unevenly across generations. Marianne Hirsch's concept of Postmemory illuminates their condition, the second generation inherits not memories but the structure of trauma, the psychic organization of a wound

without the wound's specific history (Hirsch 5). Abbas has not forgotten his past but arranged a complex psychological settlement with it. His silence is not repression but considered judgment that disclosure's costs outweigh its benefits. This is what Ricoeur identifies as forgetting of deliberate choice—simultaneously self-protective and ethically compromised. The novel resists simple condemnation where sections inhabiting Abbas's perspective reveal the weight of internalized shame shaping self-perception. His silence, interpreted from outside as evasion, is revealed from inside as painful self-management. Neither interpretation is entirely wrong but both are partial, and the novel refuses adjudication of the same. The title carries deliberate irony. Abbas's last gift is not material legacy but the gift of his silence, the structured absence around which future interpretive efforts will organize. By refusing to settle his past definitively, he leaves not an answer but a permanently productive question. This reading finds support in Gurnah's ethical poetics of the unfinished that is the narrative resists closure, refusing retrospective illumination. The reader, like the family, must learn to inhabit a narrative that does not entirely satisfy the interpretive desire it arouses.

Aleida Assmann's distinction between functional and stored memory clarifies the ethical stakes. What Abbas bequeaths is stored memory, the vast reserve of what is known but not currently in use, set aside rather than integrated. His family must decide whether to attempt retrieval, let it remain stored, or accept permanent inaccessibility. The novel frames these questions with sufficient complexity that the reader sits with their difficulty rather than resolving them prematurely. The collective narrative achieved exemplifies Ricoeur's ethical forgetting. This is not erasure but conscious, loving choice to release Abbas from being perpetual witness to his suffering. If Jamal and Hanna had remained permanently obsessed with unearthing every secret, they would have remained trapped in paralyzing grief. By choosing to let unrecorded parts remain unsaid, they practice ethical forgetting enabling forward momentum. The art of silence therefore proves not passive failure but highly active strategy for ethical renewal.

If *The Last Gift* locates silence within a single family, *Afterlives* situates it within the vastly larger architecture of colonial history. The novel ranges across German colonial rule in East Africa, the Maji Maji rebellion's violent suppression, and its aftermath as violence settles into bodies and social formations. The silence organizing the novel is collective and historical, imposed upon the colonized through systematic erasure of histories, denial of voices in imperial archives, and ongoing legacy of violence perpetrators had little interest in commemorating. Achille Mbembe's analysis of the colonial archive provides essential framework. The archive is not neutral repository but site of power as it speaks abundantly about colonizer activities while maintaining systematic silence about colonized experiences except as they required administrative management (Mbembe 25). The colonized subject here appears not as full human being but as unit of labor or problem requiring solution.

Gurnah takes this archival silence as explicit subject. The Maji Maji rebellion, crushed with extreme violence including deliberate destruction of food supplies, resulting in famine killing hundreds of thousands, entered the colonial archive primarily as military operation. The lives of those who died were not preserved because the archive had no use for such preservation. *Afterlives* undertakes imaginative recovery through what might be called a poetics of the fragment—careful reconstruction of partial lives from partial evidence. Hamza, the novel's most psychologically complex figure, carries colonial violence in his body. His wound, never fully explained, functions as somatic archive, a physical inscription of history that cannot be verbally articulated but speaks through the body to those attentive enough to read it. Frantz Fanon's analysis illuminates this condition, that colonial violence is ontological, seeking to annihilate subjectivity and reduce the colonized to a body serving colonial purposes (Fanon 43). Yet Gurnah resists the Fanonian framework in crucial respect. Hamza does not reclaim his body through violence but through disciplined restraint, the refusal to be entirely consumed by the system that marked him. His survival strategy is dignified endurance, performing required functions while maintaining, in interior recesses, a self the colonial system cannot entirely colonize. Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry applies in transformed register where Hamza mimics compliance while preserving, in silence, witness to what the system required him to endure (Bhabha 86). Here his silence is the space where his non-mimetic self survives.

When language proves inadequate to convey historical violence's magnitude, the subaltern body becomes primary archive. Hamza's slow movements and stubborn quietness speak volumes to those around him. His limp is constant reminder of war the community is trying to forget. Through Bakhtin's lens, his silent body enters continuous dialogue with environment where he need not recount campaign details rather his scarred flesh and avoidance of military rhetoric function as powerful critique of the colonial machine that used his youth as disposable fuel. The novel's polyphony presents historical trauma through multiple independent voices. The ideological clash between Hamza and the older askari Sergeant illustrates that the Sergeant's voice represents extreme colonial mimicry, saturated with Prussian military jargon and uncritical adoption of

colonizer's racial hierarchy. His loud assertions of loyalty create intense dialogic friction with Hamza's quiet isolation. While the Sergeant uses speech to align with oppressor's power, Hamza uses silence to preserve independent humanity. Gurnah refuses to resolve the moral question of collaboration, modelling instead how shared history is distributed unevenly across survivors.

On the contrary, Afiya occupies radical epistemic disadvantage, her origins entirely erased by colonial violence. She does not rage against absence but constructs identity through present relationships, attending to the world with alertness suggesting both compensation for lost interiority and clarity of one who has learned not to take presence for granted. Her parallel with the Maji Maji dead, both deprived of narrative continuity by violence exceeding capacity to resist is among the novel's most powerful structural gestures. Their histories survive only in fragments, in the absence their presence once occupied. Ilyas's arc of disappearance into colonial conscription and return as partially incomprehensible figure dramatizes how colonial violence disrupts dialogic relationships through which lives have meaning. Before disappearance, he exists within network of mutual recognition, a conscription tears him out and inserts him into system recognizing him only as function. His return is not simple restoration but complex negotiation between self he was and self colonial violence made him. The danger of refusing silence is tragically embodied in Ilyas. Educated in German mission school, he develops absolute identification with colonial state, surrendering identity to imperial machine. His tragic blindness—"The Germans are a civilized people, Afiya. They brought us schools, they brought us roads" (Gurnah 67) reveals colonial education's devastating power, replacing historical memory with false consciousness serving victor's interests. His eventual death in a Nazi concentration camp serves as cautionary tale, total transparent speech within oppressor's framework leads not to liberation but absolute historical erasure.

The novel's formal daring includes the German soldier Heinrich's perspective. Dominick LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through illuminates his situation that the perpetrator silence is often self-protective refusal, resistance to confrontation with complicity (LaCapra 112). Heinrich has not repressed knowledge but found ways of narrating experience that minimize agency and maximize structural necessity. The novel invites understanding without absolution, precisely the ethical position Bakhtin's dialogism demands. A pivotal moment occurs when Hamza possesses a leather-bound book of German poetry left by the officer who wounded him. This object bridges European metropolis and East African war zone. The book contains sublime verses by Schiller and Goethe, written in elegant script contrasting with horrific violence its owner executed. "It was strange to think that the hand that had written these gentle verses about the evening sky was the same hand that had held the sword that cut into his thigh" (Gurnah 92). Hamza reads not to assimilate but to understand power's exact mechanics. By holding the book on his own terms, he transforms colonizer's text into site for intellectual survival by proving the subaltern can navigate oppressor's archive without soul erasure.

The title's ambiguity, referring to lives continuing after violence, historical afterlife in memory, and literary afterlife narrative provides is held in productive tension. The novel does not pretend to restore silenced dead to completeness as it works within constraints of what can honestly be known, allowing incompleteness to be felt as ethical honesty. This makes its dialogic space genuine and not monologue of literary authority but invitation to participate in difficult, necessarily incomplete work of imagining silenced into presence. The reconciliation achieved can be understood through Ricoeur's writing on collective mourning. The town's quiet transition from German to British rule without publicly interrogating askari actions is not failure of memory but tactical choice prioritizing social survival. "The world always moves on despite the chaos and waste in its midst" (Gurnah 202). This tactical silence allows Hamza and Afiya to construct protective space. By choosing not to saturate their home with war's horrific details, they practice ethical forgetting protecting the next generation from inherited grief's paralyzing weight. Memory is transmitted sideways, through quiet affection, shared work, gentle routines rather than through loud confessional forms Western trauma theory valorises.

This examination of silence as dynamic literary and ethical force in Gurnah's *The Last Gift* and *Afterlives* brings out that the architecture of silence in these novels is not articulation's failure but its most consequential form. Through Bakhtin's dialogism, polyphony, and chronotope, enriched by Ricoeur, Caruth, and Assmann, the research paper has shown that forgetting in Gurnah's fiction is an active, aesthetically sophisticated, ethically complex practice and not absence of meaning but its most charged presence. The traditional Western therapeutic paradigm mandating total transparent confession as sole pathway to healing is destabilized by Gurnah's narrative practice. Within these texts, the absolute demand for speech often functions as invasive interpretive violence reducing subaltern suffering to legible story for external consumption. Gurnah's characters demonstrate that selective withholding is sophisticated self-preservation protecting the displaced individual's internal sovereign territory.

The conjunction of Bakhtinian framework with postcolonial literary analysis proves productive in ways extending beyond either framework independently. The most significant insight is that postcolonial silence is not monologic condition but dialogic one. Conventional accounts frame colonial silencing as imposition of monologic authority drowning out colonized voices. This is incomplete as it attends to silencing without adequately attending to complex life continuing within silence as dialogic activities of resistance, adaptation, self-preservation and cultural continuity. Bakhtin's dialogism provides conceptual tools for attending to this interior life because it insists consciousness is irreducibly dialogic, that even the most constrained subject maintains internal conversation no external authority can entirely colonize. Equally significant is the contribution postcolonial analysis makes to Bakhtinian framework. Bakhtin's optimistic dialogism requires qualification when applied to texts emerging from extreme violence and systematic erasure. The dialogic encounter between colonizer and colonized is not equal exchange but profoundly asymmetrical. Polyphony must therefore be understood not as description of harmonious plurality but as normative aspiration but the ideal of equal dialogic dignity that colonial power relations systematically violated and that postcolonial literature struggles to recover. Gurnah's formal choices are ethical statements enacting at narrative level commitments his fiction thematically expresses. Most significant is his consistent refusal of retrospective illumination, maintaining incompleteness and ambiguity rather than providing conventional resolution. This is not narrative generosity's failure but its highest expression: Gurnah respects irreducible opacity of characters' inner lives by refusing to penetrate it more fully than epistemological conditions permit.

The onset observation that literature serves as both archive and erasure, preservation and silencing, finds sophisticated engagement in Gurnah's fiction. The architecture of silence he constructs is not monument to unspeakable but living space where relationship between remembered and forgotten is continuously negotiated. The art of forgetting in Gurnah's fiction is not art of loss but art of ethical survival, the practice by which characters maintain dignity against forces denying it, preserve interiority against colonizing impulses of history and power, and transmit to those who come after not complete comfortable truth but productive demanding question. The question, what do we owe to the past we have not been permitted to know, how do we live forward from histories withheld from us, what ethical relationship can we maintain to what we cannot fully remember is among the defining ethical questions of the postcolonial world. Literature is uniquely equipped to engage it not because it can answer definitively but because it can inhabit it honestly, creating spaces where irreducibility is felt rather than argued. The architecture of silence in these novels creates in the reader the experience of living alongside what cannot be fully known but a form of ethical attention extending beyond fiction itself, a way of being present to silences of others, recognizing in spaces between words the claims of lives not permitted full articulation. Thus Gurnah's literary art is not the stories it tells but the silences it makes audible but the architecture of forgetting revealing itself, upon careful attention, as the most honest and ethically demanding form of memory. The art of silence, as practiced in these extraordinary novels, is not avoidance of truth but its most rigorous pursuit, a truth acknowledging its own limits, honouring what cannot be recovered, and insisting, against all history has done to silence them, on the irreducible value of the lives it seeks to remember.

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