



“A Landscape Scorched and Terrorised”: Counter Memory and German Colonial Violence in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Afterlives*

Manali Kajal¹, Dr. Rashmi Verma²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra, Haryana, India
Email: manalikajal2000@gmail.com

²Professor, Department of English, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra, Haryana, India

Received: 26 May 2026; Received in revised form: 24 Jun 2026; Accepted: 27 Jun 2026; Available online: 30 Jun 2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Dominant groups have often written official histories to justify their power. Those in power shape versions of the past that silence local voices and marginalize their lived experience. In this sense, the act of memory brings counter-perspectives that challenge the hegemonic ideology. Michael Foucault’s concept of counter-memory describes an oppositional engagement with the past. It opposes the official version of historical continuity. However, it does not reject history but reconstruct it by looking from alternative perspectives. In *Afterlives* (2020), Abdulrazak Gurnah provides a counter-hegemonic account of the East African history. The novel restores the silenced lives of individuals and communities subjected to German colonial violence. Through the intersecting lives of Khalifa, Hamza, Afiya, and Ilyas, the novel shows the brutality, displacement, and trauma caused by German rule in Tanganyika. The story focuses on ordinary people and their survival amid suffering. In this way, the novel resists colonial representations. Through a close textual analysis of the novel, this paper argues that Gurnah presents counter-memory both a narrative practice and an ethical act. Ultimately, it becomes a refusal on behalf of the dead and the dispossessed to let their histories disappear.



Keywords— counter-memory, displacement, colonial violence, historical memory, identity, storytelling, trauma.

Introduction: The Scorched Landscape as Mnemonic Site

In one of the most striking passages of Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Afterlives* (2020), the narrator describes the German *Schutztruppe*’s brutal retaliation during the Maji Maji Rebellion, “burned villages and trampled fields and plundered food stores. African bodies were left hanging on roadside gibbets in a landscape that was scorched and terrorised.” (Gurnah 15). The violence described in these lines is more than physical destruction. Colonial warfare destroyed communities and also the traces of their existence. These acts of destruction are considered by scholars to be part of a broader pattern of Germany’s “colonial amnesia” (Perraudin and Zimmerer 1). The memories of colonial violence mostly survived outside the

histories that Germany chose to remember. *Afterlives* intervenes in this collective forgetting and revisits the German colonial domination in East Africa. The novel brings into focus the personal narratives of characters who endured these historical turmoils. Through their lives, history emerges as a terrain of struggle, loss, and remembrance.

Afterlives is a historical fiction by the 2021 Nobel prize-winning author Abdulrazak Gurnah. It was first published by Bloomsbury in 2020. The novel was later shortlisted for the Orwell prize for political fiction. It is set primarily in German East Africa (present-day Tanzania). The narrative spans from the early years of twentieth century to the period following independence. The novel

follows life experiences of characters caught between violent war, displacement and consequences of European colonialism via interwoven narratives. It centres on characters such as Hamza, a former askari in the German colonial army; his wife Afiya, who survived childhood filled with displacement and exploitation due to war; her brother Ilyas, whose disappearance during military recruitment casts a long shadow over the lives of people around him; and Khalifa, a clerk of Gujrati-african descent who binds disparate lives of all characters. Through these characters Gurnah constructs a counter-memorial archive. The title itself signifies that the afterlives shown in the novel are not triumphant survivals but scarred and partial continuation that bear marks of loss.

This paper reads *Afterlives* through Michel Foucault's concept of counter-memory. It emerges as a broader critique of history as a discourse aligned with power. Foucault contends that traditional historiography presents the past as a singular and continuous narrative. Thereby, it naturalizes present power relations which silence those on the margins. Against this, Foucault proposes a genealogical approach that reveals discontinuities, ruptures and buried histories. It asserts that the past is always a contested terrain. As Foucault argues, "history is only possible against the backdrop of the absence of history, in the midst of great space of murmuring, that silence watches like its vocation and its truth" (*History of Sexuality*, xxxi). Counter-memory breaks into this silence. Taking Foucault's insights further, George Lipsitz defines counter-memory as work that "looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narrative" (162). In the process, it represents the past and simultaneously transform present's relation to the past.

The relevance of this framework is important in the context of German colonialism. Jürgen Zimmerer has traced the ways in which Germany's colonial history has been systematically forgotten. He argues that this history has been neglected through an ideological operation. He observes, "the knowledge about Germany's colonial past had been forgotten, had been ignored" This process manoeuvres German memory toward the Nazi period and to look away from the horrors of Deutsch-Ostafrika (Zimmerer 00:30-00:37). Scholars describe this development as an *erinnerungspolitisches* Instrument. It is an instrument of the politics of remembrance in which the colonial past has been pushed into the background of the national identity of Germany. This amnesia is maintained by the continuous production of knowledge that positions German colonialism as a predominantly white domain of memory and reinforce its historical authority. This suggests that counter-memory must withstand forgetting of the

historical incidents. It must also challenge the stranglehold over how those incidents can be known at all.

Colonial History and Suppressed Uprisings

Within this terrain of managed forgetting, *Afterlives* makes its intervention. The opening sections of the novel open with a third-person narrator who brings historical events back into focus. The novel revisits the al-Bushiri Revolt of 1888–1889, the Wahehe Rebellion, the Maji-Maji Uprising of 1905–1907, and the Battle of Mahiwa. They events are introduced not just as background context but also as social and political reality that shape the world the novel occupies,

"the revolt was suppressed by Colonel Wissmann and his newly formed schutztruppe. Three years after the defeat of the al Bushiri revolt [...] the Germans were engaged in another war, this time with the Wahehe a long way in the south. They too were reluctant to accept German rule and proved more stubborn than al Bushiri, inflicting unexpectedly heavy casualties on the schutztruppe who responded with great determination and ruthlessness" (Gurnah 5).

The tone of the narration is precise and unadorned. It is the voice of counter-history which does not idealize or mourn the circumstances. Instead, it insists on the factual detail of what official memory has forgotten. The description of Wahehe as 'reluctant to accept German rule' is significant. It attributes agency to the colonized people who have chosen resistance as a conscious political choice. These oppressed groups emerge as historical actors capable of judgement, refusal and collective action. This particular representation is the recovery of marginalized subjectivities.

The Maji-Maji rebellion is the fulcrum of Gurnah's counter-historical reconstruction. The novel describes the savage scorched-earth campaign of the German Schutztruppe in the way that resists the sanitizing language of colonial documents. The landscapes bear the marks of violence inflicted by German colonizers. This violence includes the burning of villages, the devastated crops and the public execution of Africans, along with other forms of brutality. The "yukame", or the great hunger and famine followed the rebellion which draw attention to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. In doing so, Gurnah transforms the statistical facts of history into a lived human catastrophe. At the same time, the narrator presents the colonial administration's justification for such destruction. He notes that such violence was considered "unavoidable" by some rulers of Deutsch-Ostafrika (Gurnah 16). The novel places these claims alongside evidence of extreme

violence to expose the ideological mechanism used by colonial power to normalize and excuse its actions.

The recovery of these histories of resistance is the demand for a revision of existing histories. This helps in giving new perspectives to the past. Communities such as the Wahehe in the south, the Wanyamwezi, the Wachagga, and the Wameru, peoples who were "reluctant to become German subjects" (Gurnah 8), are presented as active agents of resistance. The narrator, in clear terms, noted steadfastness of their resistance which replaced the myth of African passivity and primitive submission.

The Askari and Ideology of Loyal Service

Afterlives challenges colonial memory through its portrayal of *Askari*, the African soldiers who served in the German *schutztruppe* during First World War. It refuses to accept the idealized image of the 'loyal Askari' that German military created. Gurnah dismantles this simplified image. The characters Hamza and Ilyas illustrate the experience of serving in colonial army. However, the novel does not reduce their experiences to simple categories of collaboration, coercion, and heroism. Instead, it traces the conditions and power relations under which their choices and lives have been shaped.

Ilyas's initial admiration for Germans is presented as an ideological effect rather than an objective assessment of their character. He thinks of the Germans as "gifted and clever people. They know how to organise, they know how to fight [...] and on top of that they are much kinder than the British" (Gurnah 41). The others in the conversation immediately counter him by describing the true nature of German activities. They recall the violence inflicted by the Germans and remind him that the country is filled with traces of people who were killed during colonial occupation. In doing so, the novel exposes the gap between the colonial rhetoric of civilization and the reality of conquest. The critique reaches its highest point when one character tells Ilyas, "my friend, they have eaten you"(42). This statement clearly suggests that the colonial mentality has deeply infiltrated Ilyas's mind. He has begun to see the world through the eyes of the colonizers. His praise for German domination serves as evidence of the triumph of colonial ideology. In this way, the novel reveals how imperial power regulates both space and bodies. It also shapes the way people think about themselves and their histories.

Hamza's experiences present a more complex understanding of colonial power. He serves in the German army and becomes the personal aide of an Oberleutnant. The officer treats him with a mixture of care, coercion, and abuse. Their relationship reveals one of the central contradictions of colonialism. It exposes the paradox of a

so-called civilizing mission carried out through violent systems. The officer repeatedly presents German culture as a force that can educate and civilize African people. He encourages Hamza to read Schiller. However, the officer's physical violence toward Hamza shows the hypocrisy of his claims. This contradiction is key function of counter-memory because it does not accept colonial narrative of humanitarian civilizing mission. Instead, it shows violence on which these narratives were constructed and made visible by *Kulturmission*.

The contrast between Hamza's and Ilyas's experiences shows two different responses to German colonialism. On the one hand, Hamza returns to his home and rebuild life within his community. On the other hand, Ilyas holds on to German ideology and eventually leaves for Europe where he dies in Sachsenhausen concentration camp. Side by side, their stories reveal diverse and contradictory ways in which Africans engaged with colonial power. The fate of Ilyas is evocative of Bayume Mohamed Husen. He was a former askari who migrated to Germany to be subsumed by Nazi persecution. Gurnah incorporates history into fiction. He recovers the largely forgotten connection between German colonialism and the racial ideologies that continued into the Nazi period.

Silence, Trauma and the Unspeakable Past

In *Afterlives*, counter-memory operates at the level of collective and political history. It also operates at the intimate realm of body. At this level, the effects of violence continue to exist even when they cannot be fully expressed through conscious narration. Hamza's experience under the German officer is narrated with vivid physicality. It turns the body into a form of archival record. During the East African campaign of the First World War, Hamza is accused of encouraging fellow askaris to desert the army. In response, Feldwebel Walther, a German officer, denounces hamza as a traitor and brutally attacks him. Gurnah describes the resulting injury from the attack, "It caught him on his hip and ripped through flesh and bone. He heard someone screaming and then his head hit the ground with jarring force" (Gurnah 116). This graphic description shows how colonial authority is inscribed directly onto the body. These wounds endure long after the violent event itself. In this sense, scarred body of Hamza becomes a testament of colonial mayhem.

The novel does not dramatize Hamza's trauma through direct confession. Instead, the continuous effects are revealed through fragmented memories and recurring nightmares. He returns from the war irrevocably changed. The effects of hamza's injury do not end with the physical wound. The trauma returns in his sleep even after the physical recovery of the wound. As the narrator observes,

Hamza, "woke up one night in utter darkness and realized he was the one who was sobbing in his nightmare" (Gurnah 120). The delayed return of the traumatic experience reflects what Caruth terms as "belatedness" (4). It is a phenomenon which can not be fully processed at the moment of its occurrence. Instead, it comes back later in the form of dreams, flashbacks and other modes of recognition and asks to be recognised. In the novel, Hamza's nightmare is not simply a psychological experience. It becomes a form of embodied counter-memory. The body preserves what histories have obliterated. His recurring distress shows the continuation of colonial violence beyond the historical moment. Hamza's pain breaks the silence of the colonial archive. It testifies to another history. It is a history which keep the wound open to signify the violence through body and memory.

The somatic counter-memory is equally evident in Afiya's silences. She is separated from her brother when he leaves to join the German army. She is left behind and become vulnerable to exploitation. Her physical injury bears witness to her early displacement, her left hand crippled during a period of slavery-like servitude. This wound is the embodied residue of a history shaped by colonial dislocation and neglect. Her body preserves the memories which colonial structures have overlooked. Throughout the novel, Gurnah foregrounds such embodied testimonies. Both Hamza and Afiya endure suffering and move through the world. When they meet, their connection is built on shared silences. Their mutual recognition becomes a way of honouring experiences that have never been acknowledged. By their story, Gurnah shows that violence survives beyond historical events and continues to shape personal and collective memory.

Ordinary life as historical record

Gurnah draws attention to the details of everyday life. It includes domestic routines, market transactions, relations and the everyday negotiations of work and friendship. He goes against the abstract nature of colonial histories which only show language of campaign, territories and administrative decisions. In doing so, he transforms ordinary East African life into a form of historical record. This is a profound political act. Khalifa's character is the clear example of this idea. His story does not revolve solely around war and rebellions. He is neither a soldier nor a resistance leader. Yet, his life is directly affected by the turbulent period created by German rule. He is an ordinary clerk employed by a merchant who observes the world change around him. He adapts to these changes but never embraced them. Khalifa's daily life centres on his work, his marriage to Asha, his care for orphaned Afiya and his disgust with the colonial order. Here, Gurnah shifts the

focus away from the figures who usually dominate the historical record. In this way, Khalifa's life becomes a record of what colonialism felt like from the perspective of ordinary people.

Colonial power operates through the implementation of new laws, economic restrictions, and forced labour. The German administration introduced "new regulations and rules for doing business" (Gurnah 9). Also, they extended forced labour to build roads and gardens "for the leisure of the colonists" (16). Their schools reshaped what children learn and in which language. All of these appears in *Afterlives* through experience of ordinary characters who had to live inside these changes. The same function is served by the relationship between Khalifa and Asha, and between Hamza and Afiya. Gurnah traces the bond between characters that shows how colonialism disrupted familial and social continuity. He shows that through the acts of care and solidarity people manage under oppressive conditions. In doing so, the novel restores to memory the lives of people who existed as full human beings which colonialism reduced to labour, statistics and administrative categories.

Storytelling and Transmission of Suppressed Memory

In *Afterlives*, storytelling function as a medium through which the ordinary lives of the characters are remembered and transmitted. Gurnah shows how suppressed knowledge is passed from one generation to another. It survives through oral narrative, family stories and passed down across generations. The novel foregrounds everyday acts of remembrance. These acts are performed by characters to show the ways communities preserve their own histories. Afiya, for instance, learns about her own family through the accounts that others share with her. She comes to know about what happened to her brother, Ilyas, before she was old enough to remember. These accounts are fragmentary, partial, and sometimes contradictory. Even so, they are all she has about her family story. The novel treats these accounts as legitimate forms of historical knowledge rather than rumours. When Ilyas returns to his village, a woman recognizes him and asks, "are you the one who was lost?" (Gurnah 27). This question highlights how the community has preserved his story even after his long disappearance. This suggests that the testimony of colonized should be regarded as a valid form of historical evidence, even when it challenges written records.

Similarly, the act of naming carries transmitted memory. Hamza and Afiya name their son after Ilyas, the uncle who disappeared and never returned. The name keeps alive the question of who he was, what happened to him and why did he never returned. With the name of younger Ilyas,

his uncle's absence is remembered. This is how the novel suggests that memory survives in communities. It survives through the obligation that the living feel toward those who have disappeared.

Later in the novel, younger Ilyas goes to west Germany in search of his uncle Ilyas. This journey brings together two key sources of memory in the novel. These are family narratives and historical records. The elder Ilyas continues to live in the family memory. He becomes the figure defined by absence and uncertainty. The archives later reveal what happened to him. The record shows that he was "wounded at the battle of Mahiwa in October 1917... taken prisoner and held in detention" (274) by the British before later migrating to Germany, where he passed away in Sachsenhausen concentration camp. The family story was incomplete about him, in the way all memories of violence are. It is because violence destroys the conditions under which full understanding of past is possible. Nevertheless, the family's memories preserved that Ilyas mattered to his people, that his absence was a wound, and that he deserved to be found. The younger Ilyas manages to make this discovery after independence of Tanzania. This highlights that decolonization does not automatically restore memories of suppressed. Instead, it creates conditions in which restoration is possible. The younger Ilyas's journey symbolizes what postcolonial memory requires. It requires active and deliberate research in archives by someone with the will to read against official grain.

CONCLUSION

Afterlives stands as an act of counter-memory that operates at multiple levels. At the level of political history, it recovers African resistance movements and restores agency to communities such as the Wahehe and the Maji-Maji rebels. At the level of individual experience, it restores humanity of characters whose lives are shaped by imperial violence by tracing contradictory paths of Hamza and Ilyas. At the level of body, it also shows that the colonial wounds do not disappear even after political independence. They return through nightmares, physical scars, and the silence of characters when language fails to describe their trauma. Taken together, these narratives allow Gurnah to construct an archive that colonial historiography never intend to produce. He does not offer heroism of resistance literature. Alternatively, he exposes techniques of colonial power through Ilyas's tragic absorption in German ideology, Afiya's troubled childhood, and Hamza wordless nightmares of the horrors he has experienced. These characters' experiences testify to the uneven situations of survival under colonial rule. The novel insists that the dispossessed should be remembered as human beings than

victims. By recovering these afterlives, Gurnah accomplishes the representation of forgotten histories within literary and historical memory.

REFERENCES

- [1] Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- [2] Foucault, Michel. *History of Sexuality Vol. 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Vintage Books, 1990.
- [3] —. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Cornell University Press, 1977.
- [4] Gurnah, Abdulrazak. *Afterlives*. Bloomsbury, 2021.
- [5] Lipsitz, George. "Myth, History, and Counter-Memory." *Politics and the Muse: Studies in the Politics of Recent American Literature*, edited by Adam J. Sorkin, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1989, pp. 161–178.
- [6] Perraudin, Michael, and Jürgen Zimmerer, editors. *German Colonialism and National Identity*. Routledge, 2011.
- [7] Zimmerer, Jürgen. "Between Forgetting and Suppressing: Colonialism, Holocaust and National Identity." *Academyspace*, 7 Apr. 2016.