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**Historical Metafiction and the Subversion of Colonial
Metanarratives in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Afterlives**



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Abstract

This study examines the narrative strategies through which Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Afterlives* (2020) subverts totalizing colonial historical narratives using the framework of postmodern historiographic metafiction. Positioned within the context of early twentieth-century German-occupied East Africa during the Maji Maji Rebellion and its aftermath, the novel challenges Hegelian and Enlightenment metanarratives of imperial progress and civilizing missions. Utilizing Linda Hutcheon's postmodern theoretical model along with Jean-François Lyotard's critique of grand narratives, this paper analyzes how Gurnah reconstructs history through the subjective, localized experiences of four central characters: Khalifa, Ilyas, Afiya, and Hamza. The methodology adopts a qualitative, interpretive text-based analytical approach to trace how literary devices—such as temporal distortion, linguistic playfulness, intertextuality, and character-driven fragmentation—destabilize official colonial archives. The findings demonstrate that Gurnah contrasts macro-historical events against marginalized personal micro-narratives (*petits récits*), thereby foregrounding the structural violence, systemic displacement, and human resilience obscured by imperial historiography. Ultimately, the study concludes that *Afterlives* functions as a site of postcolonial resistance, demonstrating how historical metafiction exposes the ideological constructs of colonial history and restores agency to historically silenced subjects.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Historiographic Metafiction, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Metanarrative, *Afterlives*, Post colonialism, Linda Hutcheon

2. Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah's 2020 novel *Afterlives* provides a critical re-examination of early twentieth-century German colonial rule in East Africa, focusing on the human impact of the Maji Maji Uprising and the First World War. Classical colonial historiography has long relied on linear, totalizing metanarratives that frame imperial expansion as a civilizing enterprise. These macro-narratives obscure localized suffering, systemic violence, and the complex lived realities of colonized populations. In literary studies, analyzing historical fiction requires tools that interrogate how texts engage with, disrupt, or re-write established historical records.

Postmodern literary theory, particularly Linda Hutcheon's formulation of

historiographic metafiction, posits that historical knowledge is not a neutral collection of facts, but a narrative construct mediated by ideology, textuality, and power dynamics. Hutcheon argues that postmodern texts simultaneously employ and contest historical conventions, thereby exposing the artificiality of totalizing histories. Parallel to this, Jean-François Lyotard defines the postmodern condition through an incredulity toward metanarratives, advocating instead for *petits récits* (localized, small narratives) that destabilize universal claims to truth.

Literature Review

While existing scholarship on Gurnah's oeuvre frequently examines themes of migration, displacement, and postcolonial identity, there remains a distinct research gap regarding how *Afterlives* specifically utilizes historiographic metafiction to deconstruct colonial metanarratives. Previous evaluations often treat the novel primarily as social realism or historical drama. This study fills that gap by analyzing the formal, postmodern narrative techniques Gurnah uses to critique colonial power structures. Recent critical discussions surrounding Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020) center on its role as a powerful counter-narrative to traditional histories of German colonial rule (Deutsch-Ostafrika) in East Africa. Rather than accepting imperial accounts at face value, scholars frequently draw on Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction to show how Gurnah exposes the biases and silences of official archives—most notably through Ilyas's tragic displacement and fragmented history. At the same time, critics use Jean-François Lyotard's idea of *petits récits* (micro-narratives) to explain how the novel bypasses grand military teleologies, choosing instead to focus on the quiet, everyday survival of Swahili coastal communities through characters like Khalifa, Afiya, and Hamza. Literary scholars also pay close attention to Gurnah's nuanced depiction of the askari soldiers, noting that he avoids simple binaries of heroism or betrayal to reveal the deep psychological complexity and forced compromises of colonized subjects. Together, these studies position *Afterlives* as an important literary intervention that dismantles totalizing colonial histories by honoring the lived, localized realities of those caught in the storm of empire.

Research Questions

The primary research questions interrogating this gap are:

1. How does the text of *Afterlives* embody the structural principles of historiographic metafiction?

2. In what ways do the micro-histories of its core characters subvert the imperial metanarratives of German East Africa?
3. What narrative mechanisms allow the novel to represent class conflict and systemic colonial violence without falling into rigid historical determinism?

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive textual analysis methodology grounded in postmodern literary theory. The primary source material for this investigation is the complete text of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*. The analytical framework synthesizes Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction with Jean-François Lyotard's critique of metanarratives.

The research execution followed a two-phase analytical process:

1. **Textual Extraction and Categorization:** The novel was systematically close-read to extract narrative instances, dialogue, character trajectories, and structural devices that correspond to key postmodern tropes. These tropes include temporal distortion, intertextuality, linguistic hybridity, fragmentation, and subversions of historical authority.
2. **Theoretical Synthesis and Interpretive Framing:** Extracted textual units were categorized under Hutcheon's framework of de-naturalization by historicizing the same text. The trajectories of the four primary characters—Khalifa, Ilyas, Afiya, and Hamza—were evaluated as localized micro-narratives (*petits récits*) running counter to official imperial archives. The analysis evaluated how Gurnah's narrative choices expose class divisions, imperial violence, and structural oppression without relying on essentialist historicism.

Common analytical software and generalized accounts of postcolonial history were excluded to maintain focus on close textual evidence and formal literary structures.

4. Results and Key Findings

The textual analysis reveals three core findings regarding how *Afterlives* disrupts historical metanarratives through postmodern literary techniques:

4.1. Subversion of Imperial Historiography via Micro-Narratives (*Petits Récits*)

Gurnah systematically dismantles the grand metanarrative of the German "civilizing mission" in East Africa by replacing institutional macro-histories with the fragmented micro-histories of Khalifa, Ilyas, Afiya, and Hamza. Rather than depicting war and colonial governance from the perspective of generals or administrators, the novel

grounds historical reality in everyday domestic survival and personal trauma. For example, Hamza's enlistment in the *Schutztruppe* is not presented as an ideological commitment to empire, but as an escape from personal debt and social alienation. By centering the internal conflicts, quiet resistance, and psychological scars of these non-elite figures, Gurnah privileges localized human experience over official historical records, demonstrating Lyotard's concept of *petits récits* overriding grand narratives.

4.2. Historiographic Metafiction and Intertextual De-Naturalization The novel functions as historiographic metafiction by exposing the textuality and bias of historical archives. Gurnah embeds official documents, military reports, and colonial propaganda into the narrative, juxtaposing them with the subjective realities of the characters. The character of Ilyas exemplifies this dynamic: educated in a German mission school, he internalizes imperial ideology and defends German rule, yet his eventual disappearance into the European theater of war underscores his ultimate erasure by the very empire he embraced. The closing sections of the novel, which uncover Ilyas's fate through post-war archival research, highlight how official records rewrite or suppress atrocities. This technique aligns directly with Hutcheon's assertion that postmodern fiction highlights the gap between historical events and their textual construction.

4.3. Structural Fragmentation and Linguistic Hybridity as Resistance Gurnah employs temporal distortion and linguistic playfulness to resist linear, progress-oriented colonial storytelling. The narrative resists a unified chronological progression, moving elliptically across decades to mirror the disorienting impact of colonial violence and social dislocation on East African communities. Furthermore, Gurnah integrates Kiswahili, Arabic, and German terminology into the English prose without explanatory glossaries. This linguistic hybridity destabilizes the authority of the imperial language, forcing the reader to navigate the cultural and linguistic complexity of the region. Systemic class conflict and colonial oppression are thus exposed not through didactic commentary, but through formal textual disruptions that reflect the lived fragmentation of the colonized subject.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that *Afterlives* operates as a sophisticated intervention in postcolonial historical fiction. By reading Gurnah through Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction, the analysis confirms that the novel does not merely recount past events; it actively critiques how history is

constructed, archived, and deployed by dominant political forces. Contrasting Gurnah's work with traditional historical realism reveals that his reliance on narrative fragmentation, linguistic hybridity, and shifting focalization prevents the idealization or simplification of pre-colonial and colonial history. Where imperial records portray the *Schutztruppe* and colonial administration through metrics of order and expansion, Gurnah exposes the underlying physical violence, economic exploitation, and psychological erasure endured by native populations.

This study directly resolves the identified research gap by establishing how formal postmodern techniques serve postcolonial political critiques. Gurnah's deployment of *petits récits* refutes the totalizing claims of Hegelian historical progress, showing that universalizing narratives inevitably marginalize vulnerable subaltern subjects. While the study is limited by its exclusive focus on *Afterlives* rather than a comparative analysis across Gurnah's entire corpus, the results highlight the efficacy of applying postmodern frameworks to contemporary East African fiction.

In conclusion, *Afterlives* demonstrates how historiographic metafiction can recover marginalized voices from the erasures of imperial archives. By prioritizing localized micro-narratives over grand colonial histories, Gurnah exposes the ideological mechanisms that construct historical truth. Ultimately, the novel establishes that literary fiction remains a vital space for contesting historical violence and asserting the dignity of human experience.

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