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# Representation of Hybridity, Language and the Politics of Translation in Afterlives by Abdulrazak Gurnah

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**Abstract:**
The present research paper is an endeavour to examine the representation of hybridity, language, and politics of translation in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel titled Afterlives. Through close textual analysis of the novel, it is noticed that Gurnah has portrayed hybridity not as a passive colonial condition but as an active process of identity formation that challenges binary frameworks. The study systematically analyzes various important scenes from the novel where characters are engaged in a multilingual scenario, and languages like Kiswahili, German, Arabic, and English are used for interaction. It is the reflection of colonial power structures. The strategic translation practices of Hamza about his deliberate "pretence of struggling to understand" documents written in German while working as an interpreter reveal translation as a medium of resistance rather than neutral communication. The research discusses Gurnah's depiction of language acquisition as both a tool of colonial domination and a means of personal connection, as seen in the translation of Schiller's poetry for Afiya by Hamza. The present research shows that Afterlives is the representation of hybrid identities and linguistic interactions as continuous processes through which colonized people assert their power within oppressive systems. It offers vital insights into postcolonial identity formation that remain relevant in our globalized world.

**Keywords:** Hybridity, Translation politics, Multilingualism, Colonial discourse, Postcolonial identity, Linguistic power, Cultural negotiation, East African literature.

## INTRODUCTION:

Afterlives by Abdulrazak Gurnah is an exploration of East African history during the German colonial period and its aftermath. Present research is an examination of identity formation in the contexts of colonialism and postcolonialism. The novel is set against the backdrop of German East Africa (present-day Tanzania). It is about the characters who confront the cultural collision, linguistic interaction, and political transformation. The relationship between language, identity, and power is the dominant theme of Gurnah's novel. This relationship is shown through the novel's representation of hybridity, multilingualism, and the politics of translation. This paper argues that Afterlives presents hybridity not merely as a condition of colonial existence but as an active and dynamic process of identity formation that challenges binary colonial frameworks. The novel also demonstrates the function of the language as a medium of colonial domination and a site of resistance, with translation emerging as a politically charged act that helps in both bridging and reinforcing cultural divides in various cultures. Through close textual

analysis of the novel, this study examines the systematic portrayal of psychological and cultural legacies of colonialism in Afterlives by Gurnah.

**Hybridity as Active Identity Formation:**

In Afterlives, Gurnah presents hybridity through the complex lived experiences of the characters rather than merely as a theoretical concept. The characters of the novel are from multiple cultural backgrounds, and they challenge simplistic colonial binaries of colonizer and colonized or civilized and savage. Hamza is one of the central characters in the novel, who is the best example of this hybrid existence. He worked in the colonial administration of Germany as an askari (soldier) and later worked as a carpenter under the supervision of Germany. He occupies an ambiguous position, which neither fully belongs to the colonizers' world nor is completely integrated into his own community of origin. His experience defies Edward Said's observation that "the exile must either produce a counterstatement or fall silent" (Said 187), as Hamza has developed an ambivalent identity that has assimilated elements from both cultures without fully adopting either culture.

The hybridity is described in the novel through Hamza's understanding of his own positionality. When someone questioned him about his German language skills, he explains, "I didn't go to school. I picked it up here and there" (Gurnah 78). This seemingly casual remark has a great significance, as it indicates his acquisition of the language of colonizer through lived experiences in his life rather than formal colonial education. His subsequent clarification, "They are very poor translations. I do my best", demonstrates his awareness of his own limitations and politics inherent in translation between cultural contexts (79). This self-awareness of Hamza positions him not as a passive recipient of colonial influence but as an active agent who is trying to assimilate different cultural aspects within.

Gurnah complicates notions of hybridity through the character of Hamza's brother, Ilyas, who returns from war. He has experienced multiple cultural contexts in the war. When Afiya, a woman Hamza loves, is asked about Ilyas, she reveals, "I don't know. I haven't seen him or heard from him since he went to the war" (85). This separation and subsequent return with transformed identity is a reflection of what Homi Bhabha describes as "the ambivalence of colonial discourse", where "the dominant discourse is not simply a 'reflection' of dominion; it is the dominant discourse because it is also constitutive of dominion" (Bhabha 294). The absence and potential return of Ilyas represent the fragmented nature of colonial subjectivity.

The novel's treatment of hybridity moves beyond individual characters to encompass entire communities. Maalim Abdalla is a teacher who "had not had the luxury of being able to attend school," became a respected community figure who "expressed delight and admiration for Hamza's skills, especially for the additional fact that he had learned to do this without going to school" (82). This acceptance of a community of hybrid knowledge of Hamza challenges colonial hierarchies of education and expertise, and suggests that the production of knowledge also exists beyond formal colonial institutions. In this context, Topasi declares, "I have always said school is a waste of time... You can learn just as well by not going to school" (82). This statement reveals an alternative epistemology that validates the importance of experiential learning over colonial education systems.

Gurnah has also systematically explored hybridity through spatial relationships in his novel titled Afterlives. When Hamza returns to his hometown after years away, he finds it completely transformed: "It was then a town of Deutsch-Ostafrika and was now a British colony, but that alone did not explain the disappearance of a house with a walled garden and a shop at the front. It was as if the town had grown beyond itself and some of its neighbourhoods had disappeared" (123). This physical transformation of his

town is the reflection of the psychological and cultural transformations experienced by the characters and illustrates the physical and mental transformation of the people and places due to colonialism. The town itself is transformed into a hybrid space where German colonial architecture coexists with British administration, and creates what Bhabha would call a "third space" where cultural meanings are negotiated (Bhabha 54).

**Language as Power and Identity:**

Language in Afterlives is simultaneously used as a tool of colonial domination and a site of resistance, which reveals the relationship between the power of language and the formation of identity. Gurnah meticulously documents the multilingual aspects of colonial East Africa, where Kiswahili, German, Arabic, and English coexist in a hierarchy that is the reflection of colonial power structures. The German language represents colonial authority as witnessed in the military camps where "the ombasha said, waving his cane in the air at them. 'Shabash. This is the language of the camp, unafahamu... If you don't understand something, this will explain'" (72). In this statement, the language is explicitly linked with physical punishment, which demonstrates the functioning nature of colonial power through the imposition of language on the colonized people.

However, Gurnah has systematically complicated this power dynamic by showing appropriation and transformation of the colonizer's language by the colonized people. The journey of Hamza with the German exemplifies this process. Initially, he is ordered to "copy a few lines so that he could familiarise himself with writing German words. Every day he wrote a few which he then had to read aloud without at first knowing what they meant" (89). This forced acquisition of the language represents the colonial project of linguistic domination on the colonized people. Yet, Hamza gradually transforms the imposed language of colonizer into a tool of his own rebellion. His ability to translate between languages like German and Kiswahili gives him a unique position of relative power, as evidenced when he reads a letter for an officer: "Tell me what it says," the officer said. Hamza read it silently through, and then read the letter again. It was a long letter, two pages, and he took his time, making a pretence of struggling to understand it all. "It says he is alive and in Germany," he said (87-88).

This scene reveals the subversive types of power within translation, where the translator has power in determining what is communicated and in what manner. Hamza's "pretence of struggling" is a reflection of his awareness of this power and his ability to manipulate the context of the letter even if only temporarily. As Spivak notes in her discussion of translation, "The translator occupies a position of enunciation that is never transparent" (Spivak 179), and Gurnah has illustrated this opacity through the strategic performance of limited comprehension by Hamza.

The novel is also an exploration of language as a marker of identity and community. The desire of Afiya to learn German poetry, "So you can read and write in German... Can you find me a good poem and translate it for me? I can't read German" (80), represents a different relationship to the language of the colonizer, which one is driven by personal connection rather than colonial imposition of the language. Her request initiates a tender exchange where Hamza translates the poem of Schiller, which creates what Ngũgĩ calls "a space of resistance" within the colonial linguistic framework (Ngũgĩ 15). The translated poem, "My eye can see for certain/ the language her eye is speaking", is a medium for close connection that moves beyond the colonial power structure (91).

Gurnah has developed this theme through the character of Ilyas, who, upon returning from Germany, has "spent the first six months in Bonn in an intensive course in the German language. He enjoyed his time

there, attended every class, practised for hours, and walked the streets every day to see whatever there was to see" (124). Positive engagement of Ilyas with German language and culture challenges the notion that colonized subjects must reject the language of colonizer entirely. Instead, this novel suggests that the acquisition of language can be a complex process that can be used for multiple purposes, which include survival, connection, and even pleasure, without necessarily implying cultural assimilation or acceptance of colonial ideology.

The multilingual environment of the novel is also a space where alternative knowledge systems coexist. The paper describes how "several new ones had appeared in recent years: in Kiswahili, in English and even in German for the settlers who chose to remain after the war" (83). This diversity of language is a reflection of what Bakhtin describes as the "heteroglossia" of language, which is the presence of multiple voices and perspectives within any linguistic system (Bakhtin 263). Gurnah has used this heteroglossia to challenge monologic colonial narratives by showing the coexistence and interaction of multiple languages and perspectives in diverse ways.

**The Politics of Translation:**

Translation in Afterlives is a politically charged act that both bridges and reinforces cultural divides. It exposes the dynamics of power deeply rooted in cross-cultural communication. In this novel, Gurnah has presented translation not as a neutral transfer of meaning but as a site of negotiation, manipulation, and potential resistance to various oppressive forces. The novel's numerous translation scenes show that the meaning is inevitably transformed, lost, or strategically changed and used in the process of moving between different languages.

One of the most significant translation scenes occurs when Hamza translates a letter for an officer. As he reads the German letter given by the officer, he "took his time, making a pretence of struggling to understand it all" before delivering his translation (87). This moment illustrates what Venuti calls the "translator's invisibility", which is considered as the way translators must always conceal their interventions to maintain the illusion of transparent communication (Venuti 11). Hamza's strategic performance of limited comprehension is an indication of his awareness of the power he holds in this moment; as the sole conduit of information between the text written in German and the Kiswahili-speaking officer, he controls what is communicated to the next person.

The politics of translation is evident in the depiction of colonial administration in Afterlives. The officer "spoke Kiswahili carefully, searching for the right vocabulary, but it was as if he was performing a language he had no control over, as if he had the words but not their emotion, wanting them to speak in a way they were not suited to" (86). This description highlights the limitations of colonial translation efforts, which is shown through the inability of colonizer to fully understand the emotional and cultural aspects of the colonized language. It results in what Spivak terms "epistemic violence" (Spivak 206). The officer's "watchful light" that "wavered between curiosity and scorn" underscores the power imbalance inherent in colonial translation (86).

Gurnah has also explored translation as a form of cultural preservation and resistance to the influence of colonizer. When Afiya requests a German poem, she initiates a process that transforms the language of colonizer into a vehicle for personal connection rather than resistance. Hamza's translation of Schiller's work, "My eye can see for certain/ the language her eye is speaking," is a shared secret between them, which is a moment of intimacy that exists outside colonial power structures (91). This scene signifies what Niranjana describes as the potential of translation to "create new meanings and new subject positions"

(Niranjana 145), as the German poem is reinterpreted and recontextualized within a Swahili cultural framework to express a specifically African experience of love and understanding.

The novel also complicates the politics of translation through its portrayal of hybridity of language. Characters frequently mix various languages in their speech. It creates what Canagarajah calls "translingual practice," which is the strategic use of multiple languages to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries (Canagarajah 190). When the officer gives instructions, he "spoke harshly in different languages, Kiswahili, Arabic and some German, his utterances broken and incomplete" (72). This hybridity of language is the reflection of the reality of colonial contact zones, where pure linguistic boundaries rarely exist and communication occurs through creative adaptation and improvisation in the languages.

Perhaps most significantly, Gurnah has presented translation as a process that influences historical memory and narrative. When Ilyas tries to search for information about his past, he comes to know about archival materials with limited contextual information about it: "Among the papers was a brief cutting from a newspaper or magazine about the mission in Kilemba, just a couple of paragraphs about a clinic and a school and the pastor's name. There was no photograph and the title and date of the publication had been cut off" (118). This fragmented or limited historical record illustrates that the translation and archival practices are greatly influenced by determining which stories are preserved and how they are understood over the years. The comment of the archivist that the cutting likely came from "Kolonie und Heimat, the old one before it was taken over by the Reichskolonialbund" is the reflection of the influence of political agendas on historical narratives (118).

The treatment of translation in the novel also extends to the body as a site of translation. The war injury of Hamza becomes a physical marker of his experience that requires translation: "'Did you get that in the war?' 'Yes,' he said. 'During the war'" (85). This brief exchange signifies how physical trauma becomes a language of its own, which requires interpretation and translation across generational and experiential divides. The body becomes a text that must be read and understood within specific cultural and historical contexts like language.

**Conclusion:**

Afterlives by Abdulrazak Gurnah is a precise exploration and investigation of hybridity, language, and translation by moving beyond simplistic colonial and postcolonial narratives heavily practiced by other authors. The novel portrays hybridity not as a passive colonial imposition but as an active, continuous process of identity formation, where characters like Hamza and Ilyas face varied cultural spaces without full belonging and embody Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural negotiation. Language like German is shown not just as a tool of colonial power but as something appropriated and transformed by the colonized by creating a Bakhtinian "dialogic" space through the interaction of Kiswahili, German, Arabic, and English languages. Most importantly, the novel presents translation as a deeply political act, far more than linguistic conversion; it involves cultural interpretation, strategic manipulation, and the mediation of power relations to subvert the colonizer's power. These themes have a deep contemporary relevance. In an era of globalization and migration, Afterlives gives essential insights into how individuals and communities confront cultural differences in various cultures, and suggests that hybrid identities, linguistic adaptation, and the practice of translation are continuous and vital processes for constructing meaning, forging connections, and confronting our interconnected world.

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