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A POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE OF SOCIO-POLITICAL OPPRESSION AND NECROPOLITICAL POWER IN ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S *AFTERLIVES*

Atta Ul Haq[1]; Ziaullah Khan[2]; Dr. Jawad khan[3]*; Zaheer Ullah[4]*
BS Student at Department of English, University of Malakand.
Email: attaulhaq611@gmail.com
BS Student at Department of English, University of Malakand.
Email: ziaullahtall1122@gmail.com
Lecturer in the Department of English, University of Malakand.
Email: Jawad.khan103@gmial.com (Corresponding Author)
Lecturer in the Department of English, University of Malakand.
Email: zaheerullah25@gmail.com / zaheer.ullah@uom.edu.pk (Corresponding Author)

Abstract
This study analyses socio-political oppression and resistance in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Afterlives (2020) through a selected theoretical framework based on Frantz Fanon's ideas on colonial violence and Achille Mbembe's concept of Necropolitics. Using a qualitative and interpretive research methodology, the study investigates the major forms of socio-political oppression represented in Afterlives and examines how the novel's characters resist these oppressive structures. Guided by two research questions—what forms of socio-political oppression are represented in Afterlives and how the characters resist them—the analysis systematically explores the experiences of oppressed characters and communities throughout the novel, demonstrating that oppression and resistance extend across the entire fictional world rather than being confined to a single narrative. Textual evidence is interpreted through Fanon's and Mbembe's theoretical perspectives on colonial violence and necropolitics. The findings reveal that oppression in Afterlives operates through military violence, racial hierarchy, psychological trauma, social displacement, and the silencing of vulnerable people, while resistance extends beyond open rebellion to include survival, silence, memory, care, endurance, agency, and the recovery of humanity after violence. The study argues that Gurnah presents resistance as an enduring part of human existence despite the destructive legacy of colonialism. It concludes that Afterlives is a distinctive postcolonial novel that critiques socio-political oppression by exposing the material, psychological, and social realities of colonial rule while affirming the persistence of humanity, dignity, and memory under oppressive conditions.

Keywords: Socio-political oppression; resistance; necropolitics; postcolonial; colonial violence; intergenerational trauma

1. Introduction
Throughout history, powerful nations have exercised political, economic, military, and cultural dominance over weaker societies, creating enduring systems of subjugation that extend from classical imperialism to contemporary forms of neo-imperialism (Ahmad et al., 2022). Although formal colonial rule has largely ended, unequal global power relations continue to shape the lives of marginalized populations through military occupations, economic dependency, racialized governance, and securitization (Said, 1978; Fanon, 1963; Loomba, 2015). These structures of domination not only restrict political sovereignty but also determine which populations are protected, displaced, or rendered expendable (Ramzan & Khan, 2024). Achille Mbembe (2003) conceptualizes this condition through the notion of Necropolitics, arguing that sovereign power is ultimately expressed through the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Necropolitics extends beyond direct physical killing to encompass the creation of "death-worlds" in which oppressed communities are subjected to conditions of perpetual violence, dispossession, surveillance, and social death (Mbembe, 2003).
In response, marginalized nations and communities have historically resisted these oppressive structures through anti-colonial struggles, political mobilization, cultural assertion, and demands for self-determination. Such resistance challenges the sovereign mechanisms that seek to regulate life and death, exposing the unequal distribution of power that underpins global political orders (Fanon, 1963; Butler, 2004). Consequently, Necropolitics provides a valuable

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theoretical framework for understanding how socio-political oppression operates in the contemporary world and how resistance emerges as a struggle against systems that render certain lives disposable.

Similar to these ideas is a literary work *Afterlives* (2020) by Abdulrazak Gurnah that returns us to the often-overlooked history of German colonisation in East Africa and its long legacy in people's everyday experiences. A notable feature of *Afterlives* is its ability to recover African experience from a historical record dominated by colonial archives and European military reports. Most historical sources written about the period were produced by colonial administrators themselves and typically marginalised African experiences, sufferings, and forms of resistance. Gurnah's novel avoids this Eurocentric trap by concentrating on the ordinary lives of African people, emphasising that their lives were filled with memory, dignity, love, and quiet resistance (Gurnah, 2020).

This literary piece written in the contemporary era depicts a strong picture of the colonialism which is not only history to be forgotten but it relates the present day world's understanding in terms of the migration of the oppressed; the forced displacements of the subjugates against their willpower by considering the subtle forms of resistance and the brutal nature of the oppression not only affect the colonised generation but also have lingering effects on the future generation. The very title of the novel "*Afterlives*" (2020) reflects the two facts at the same time but interwoven; on one hand, it shows how colonisers hold their power to sustain colonisation and on the hand it shows the aftermaths of the colonisations on the oppressed after colonisation has ended; so the *Afterlives* does not deal colonisation effects on the subjugates are during the active period and its effects on the oppressed are ended but rather argues that its traumatic effects persist for long period even when the colonisation has practically ceased (Farooqi et al., 2025; Gurnah, 2020; Verma, 2023).

1.1. Research Objectives

The research had two major objectives: First, to identify and analyse the major forms of socio-political oppression represented in *Afterlives* through Fanon's postcolonial theory and Mbembe's necropolitics, working character by character through the text and drawing on direct quotation from the novel. This objective is deliberately textual rather than abstract: the analysis is conducted at the level of specific named scenes rather than at the level of generalisations about colonialism.

Second, to examine how the characters in *Afterlives* respond to and resist those forms of oppression, including survival, silence, memory, care, education, religious continuity, and limited agency as principal modes of resistance, again supported by direct textual evidence from the novel. The second objective is the structural mirror of the first; for every form of oppression named in the text, the analysis searches for a corresponding form of response.

1.2. Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it makes a contribution to the growing body of analyses of *Afterlives*. While historical retelling, trauma, memory, askari experience, and survival have been discussed in connection with the novel, a focused analysis of *Afterlives* as a work dedicated to socio-political oppression and resistance is still required. This study combined the results obtained in previous studies with its own integrated interpretation. Secondly, this study is significant due to its application of a clear and coherent theoretical framework. Instead of drawing on theories of various postcolonial thinkers, it drew primarily upon the works of Fanon and Mbembe. By using two thinkers whose ideas interact, the study aims to achieve analytical depth without obscuring the literary text under excessive layers of theory.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

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The present study uses a qualitative and interpretive approach. Qualitative refers to the nature of the research material, as the analysis uses literary texts rather than numerical data. Interpretive means that the aim of the study is to interpret meanings rather than verify hypotheses or test variables. The research belongs to the field of literary analysis, in which researchers read literary text closely, employ relevant theories to interpret it, and develop arguments based on textual analysis. The research is library-based, as the materials analysed include the literary text (*Afterlives*, 2020), the two main theoretical frameworks by Fanon and Mbembe (Fanon, 1963; Mbembe, 2003), and the secondary relevant scholarships. Fanon provides the analysis of colonial violence and its psychological effects, while Mbembe proposes the concept of Necropolitics, which helps explain how colonial powers exert power by claiming the right to inflict death on others. The two scholars together provide a focused conceptual framework for analysing socio-political oppression and resistance in this literary text. This approach fits the research objectives of this study, which concern forms of oppression in *Afterlives* and the resulting forms of resistance. Only close reading of the novel, supplemented by theoretical literature, can help to achieve these objectives. A quantitative or experimental design cannot be applied, since oppression and resistance cannot be quantified.

3. Analysis

By interaction with Khalifa, Bi Asha, Ilyas, Afiya, Hamza, the askari Komba and Fulani, the ombasha Haidar Al-Hamad, the catechist Pascal, the carriers and porters, the Wahehe, the Maji Maji people, and the younger generation of Ilyas, the chapter shows that oppression in *Afterlives* works together through military force, racism, psychological damage, family and patriarchal abuse, and normal damage to safe belongings. On the other hand, response takes place through survival, careful internal conversation, writing letters for help, family work in order to protect someone, religious and educational support, community protection in the mission, storytelling work, and long historical efforts to find lost members. The reading process takes place in terms of the language used in Gurnah's book (Gurnah, 2020).

3.1. What Are the Major Forms of Socio-Political Oppression Represented in *Afterlives*?

The story sets up a pattern of oppression that would endure right from the start, with the identity of the oppressor being clearly spelled out. It refers to the colonial army as the Schutztruppe, which comprised Africans who were mercenaries called askari, and was under the control of Colonel Wissmann and his German soldiers, and whose members were from the southern part of Portuguese East Africa (Gurnah, 2020). The narrator goes on to indicate that the Schutztruppe had gained enough experience to be a powerful and destructive force (Gurnah, 2020), and also that those who belonged to the Schutztruppe, who were proud of their reputation for brutality, never hid or denied it but cherished it (Gurnah, 2020). Cruelty here is not a side-effect of colonial discipline but the very purpose for which the Schutztruppe were recruited; it was not deviation from the colonial system but the fulfilment of the colonisers' objectives. Mbembe's account of necropolitics, in which the sovereign coloniser decides who may live and who must die, clarifies this (Mbembe, 2003). The Schutztruppe are depicted as the deciding institution through which sparing and killing of the oppressed were conducted, and the novel introduces this with a precision rare in postcolonial fiction.

The oppressed in this opening movement are the African peoples of the interior — first the Wahehe, then the Maji Maji peoples, then the wider population of the colony — who appear not as individual characters but as collective populations subjected to mass violence. The narrator makes no effort to distinguish such acts as exceptional. The Wahehe campaign is summed up in a single sentence: the Germans "finally subdued the Wahehe after eight years of war, starving and crushing and burning out their resistance," and then, "in their triumph, the Germans cut off the head of the Wahehe leader Mkwawa and sent it to Germany as a trophy" (Gurnah, 2020). The decapitation, its transfer from Africa to Europe, and its presentation to the

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German administration all appear in one clause. The Maji Maji rebellion is mentioned only as the event that "was to turn into the worst rebellion of all and elicit even greater ferocity from the Germans and their askari army" (Gurnah, 2020) — phrases that gesture toward historians' estimates of up to 75,000 or even 300,000 African deaths.

This restraint is the most important aspect of Gurnah's style here. He does not downplay these events to mitigate them; his stylistics match those of the colonial bureaucracy, which would record the decapitation of Mkwawa as it would record the capture of arms, and which tallied Maji Maji deaths beside dead livestock. By adopting the same devices, the narrator holds the bureaucratic record against itself, and the reader who feels discomfort at this prose is meant to. The same indifference to local life pervades every level of society: when Maji Maji enters its final stage, "in the regions that had risen, the schutztruppe treated everyone as combatants. They burned villages and trampled fields and plundered food stores" (Gurnah, 2020). The sentence names villages, fields, food stores, bodies, gibbets, and landscape without elaboration, conveying the systematic stripping of the land of anything valuable to the colonists — a scene to which Mbembe's description of the death-world applies directly (Gurnah, 2020; Mbembe, 2019).

If the first form of oppression is mass military violence, the second is abduction, operating at the scale of an individual child. Ilyas, looking back, tells Afiya what happened at the railway station: "A Shangaan askari pushed me on the train …. when they marched. You will like it, he said" (Gurnah, 2020). Three details collapse the colonial pretext entirely. The askari laughs while the child struggles, converting violence into entertainment; he describes the abduction as service, converting coercion into a gift; and he forecasts the child's pleasure, demanding consent in advance to what is being done. The grammar of "You will like it" (Gurnah, 2020) is the grammar of every colonial system that asks the colonised to authorise their own subjection. The system's official response is equally revealing. When the German farmer who later employs Ilyas learns the truth, "When he found out that I was stolen by an askari he was angry"(Gurnah, 2020), and Ilyas, framing his words in the colonisers' perspective, recalls him saying "We don't have to act like savages, he said. That is not what we have come here to do… The Germans did not come here to make slaves, he said" (Gurnah, 2020). The farmer's resentment is real, but its grammar is colonial: he locates savagery in the askari rather than in the system that produced him. As Fanon argues, colonialism is sustained not only by direct force but by a managerial discourse that constantly relocates its own violence onto the bodies and habits of the colonised (Fanon, 1963).

Once Hamza joins the Schutztruppe, the analysis narrows to a single oppressor oppressed pair, and here the oppressor does not hide behind any mask of "mission, development or civilizing" (Gurnah, 2020). The Oberleutnant tells Hamza bluntly that he "has the right to be here because revealing him the hard reality of life that he rightfully possess because all these belong to him because he has power and gun and is stronger" (Gurnah, 2020). The justification is the right of conquest, nothing more: "We are dealing with backward …….. and pummel all of them into obedience" (Gurnah, 2020). The same passage clarifies what kind of soldier the army is built to produce. "We want you to be disciplined and obedient and cruel beyond our imagining," the Oberleutnant tells Hamza, "We want you ..…. without hesitation" (Gurnah, 2020). Fanon's account of the colonial subject forced to view himself through the coloniser's eyes captures exactly this conscription of personhood (Fanon, 2008); the Oberleutnant requires Hamza to become unrecognisable to himself in order to be useful to the empire. The interview ends with one of the novel's most pointed scenes: "The officer stepped forward and slapped Hamza on the left cheek then slapped him with the back of his hand on the right cheek" (Gurnah, 2020), and asks, "Did that hurt you? Your suffering does not concern me" (Gurnah, 2020). The first sentence acknowledges Hamza as a feeling body; the second cancels the moral implications of

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that fact. This is the racial logic Fanon describes most directly — the colonised body sentient enough to be hurt yet disqualified from having that hurt count (Fanon, 1963) — and the cold structure of necropolitical recognition (Mbembe, 2003). The domination is sustained by smaller humiliations across Hamza's time in the boma: the Oberleutnant calls him a "slow witted baboon" (Gurnah, 2020), and the other officers fold him into a parlour game in which "the officers were making a monkey out of him" (Gurnah, 2020), as Julius observes. Care and cruelty are two faces of the same racial relation.

Racial hierarchy is not only spoken but built into the choreography of the army, enforced most violently by the Feldwebel (Ramzan & Javaid, 2025). When the carrier corps deserts during the retreat from the British, the officers face a crisis the novel describes in political terms. "There is no choice. The askari will have to do the carriers' work," the Feldwebel says, yet the officers "all understood the iron protocol that an askari did not carry loads. This was about dignity, in a very literal sense; just as the Europeans would not budge when it came to their dignity, neither would the askari" (Gurnah, 2020). The word "iron protocol" (Gurnah, 2020) names a vertical hierarchy of prestige in which Europeans never work, askaris cannot carry, and the carrier corps can be consigned to death while working and carrying. This hierarchy is bodily, depending on the freedoms and restraints each member is allowed; but standing higher in it does not save the askari from the zone of expendable life, only changes where he stands within it. The carriers, poorly fed and clothed, mostly barefoot, wear "whatever rags they could loot or steal. They died from disease and lack of care" (Gurnah, 2020) — Mbembe's death-world made literal (Mbembe, 2019).

The most intense expression of necropolitics follows when the Feldwebel suspects Hamza of having advised the carriers against deserting. "This traitor whore of yours betrayed us," he accuses the Oberleutnant. "He incited them to go. He told them lies and they deserted," and "Then he stepped forward …… ripped through flesh and bone" (Gurnah, 2020). The verbs — steps, slashes, rips — render the violence an act of administration. Its slowest form comes afterward, as the column marches on with the half-conscious Hamza carried on a stretcher in the rain: "He knew now that the wetness was not only rain, ….. and he did not have the strength to wave them away" (Gurnah, 2020). The wounded askari is neither saved nor abandoned but carried at the pace the column sets — precisely Mbembe's capacity to subject some bodies to "suffering, injury, abandonment, and death" (Mbembe, 2003).

Before the wound on the retreat there was the camp, itself a small death-world exercised on every askari from the first day. The Nubi ombasha Haidar Al-Hamad greets the recruits with the army's daily grammar: "You are swine until I teach you bil-askari. You are washenzi like all civilians …… you will see" (Gurnah, 2020). The threats are not abstract; he names the instruments: "If is not clean you will suffer kiboko na matusi in front of everyone, hamsa ishirin… Twenty-five strokes of the cane on your fat buttocks" (Gurnah, 2020). The body is the unit of correction, and Komba, Fulani, and the other recruits become the oppressed here as much as Hamza. Even before the first cane falls, the medical inspection announces what kind of subject the recruit is to be: the German medical officer "leaned forward with some difficulty and took a good look at Hamza's genitals, then …… and repeatedly squeezed Hamza's penis in his hand until it began to stiffen" (Gurnah, 2020). The form of oppression is the violence of unaccountable inspection, Fanon's colonised body that may be touched without consent narrated almost without comment (Fanon, 1963; Gurnah, 2020). The same logic appears laterally once the Oberleutnant chooses Hamza as his servant and the other recruits fold him into colonial mockery: "You are a shoga," Komba says, "that's why he picked you. He wants someone sweet and pretty to massage his back and serve his dinner for him" (Gurnah, 2020). Oppression is reproduced from one colonised body to another, exactly as Fanon predicts (Fanon, 1963; Gurnah, 2020).

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Oppression goes beyond the military frontiers or the frontier itself to become an everyday violence committed against Afiya by the kinfolk who take care of her after the demise of her parents. The environment is domestic instead of being military; however, the category is still the same as a child suffers from violence inflicted by people who are responsible for her safety while the colonial-patriarchal system recognizes such violence because it falls under the umbrella of personal matters.

The narrator does not downplay the seriousness of what happens: “Sometimes they beat her up deliberately not because she provokes them but because she cannot fight back” (Gurnah, 2020). The blows are neither corrective nor survivable through compliance. Afiya's own reaction reveals the gravity of the abuse: "She did not feel very sad that they beat her and pinched her and stole her food. It did not hurt very much and other things made her feel sadder, made her feel small and a stranger in this world" (Gurnah, 2020). The physical pain hurts too little to matter beside the profound sorrow of being unwanted — recalling Fanon's account of the wound inflicted on the colonised individual (Fanon, 2008) and revealing the parallel between colonial and domestic-patriarchal violence. The violence then escalates with clear necropolitical undertones: "She managed somehow to learn to read and write on her own… He saw what she was doing and locked her in a tiny room where she had nothing else to do but sit, tied, and started beating her…" (Gurnah, 2020). He "stepped forward and slapped her on her temple with his left hand, ….. missing at first but coming ever closer…" until "the stick landed on it with crushing force… She lay at his feet, screaming and sobbing, while he raged at her and no one came to stop him" (Gurnah, 2020). Afiya is sure that "if her Baba had not come, her uncle would have killed her sooner or later, or if not him then his son" (Gurnah, 2020). In the context of unequal kinship, the life of a child has become an expendable life (Gurnah, 2020; Mbembe, 2003).

Bi Asha's story shows subjugation taking a quieter form — the patriarchal order that keeps the system of power intact. The merchant Amur Biashara lends money to Bi Asha's father against their home, and when the father dies, marries his clerk Khalifa to Bi Asha to keep both property and name in the family. Bi Asha narrates: "My Uncle Amur lent money to my father, not once but several times… It is an evil practice, lending money to borrowers who cannot afford to repay it and then taking their houses from them. It's theft" (Gurnah, 2020). The marriage that follows is stripped of romance; in the early years Khalifa "tried to make her want him as he wanted her, but she was self-contained and reluctant and he thought she merely tolerated him and submitted to his ardour and embraces dutifully at best" (Gurnah, 2020). The verbs — tolerated, submitted, dutifully — describe a structure rather than a damaged marriage. Read alongside Fanon's account of the colonised subject forced to live within frames not of her own making, Bi Asha's submission is a political condition expressed in domestic vocabulary (Fanon, 2008; Gurnah, 2020). Khalifa is the novel's most patient illustration of how an ordinary man can be both agent and casualty of these arrangements: the colonial clerk who reads the German decrees and fills in the customs forms, and the man who married Bi Asha not by choice but by gift. His oppression is the slow, structural form by which colonial-era networks of patronage and debt take a clerk's adult life and arrange it for him.

The clearest illustration of how this layered violence enters the psyche is the scene of Hamza's nightmares at the Kilemba mission, where he has been left after the Feldwebel's assault. Surfacing from a fever, he discovers he has been weeping in his sleep: "He woke up one night in utter darkness and realised he was the one who was sobbing in his nightmare. The ground was covered in blood …… and shouting at a demented and terrified pitch" (Gurnah, 2020). Hamza has left the active war zone, but the trauma has been translated so deeply into his subconscious that he relives the war in sleep, when his conscious mind cannot intervene and no physical escape is possible; only on waking does he grasp the reason for his grief. The scene

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shows how trauma traps and controls body and mind entirely outside conscious awareness. Fanon's description of how colonial violence damages the inner life of the colonised — producing fragmentation, recurring fear, and the inability to speak openly — fits this precisely (Fanon, 2008), as does Mbembe's necropolitical idea of the living dead, those whose lives have been so reduced that they continue only as a kind of survival (Mbembe, 2019). The nightmare is the form Hamza's recovery has been forced to take, because there is no language in his colonial present that can fully receive what happened to him.

Between the railway station and Khalifa's porch, the child Ilyas spends years on a German farmer's coffee plantation. The farmer is neither soldier nor administrator but a settler with a particular ideology of African childhood: the African child has been damaged by his own backward upbringing and can only be repaired by German labour, discipline, and schooling. He was angry to hear that an askari had stolen the boy, yet he sets the rescued child to work for years and sends him to the mission school to become a useful, partially Germanised labourer. The savagery he disavows is the askari's; the routine economic appropriation of the child's body and time is, in his eyes, civilisation. Ilyas never quite recovers from this earliest socialisation. When Khalifa's friends argue that the Germans should be opposed, Ilyas replies that "I have met with nothing but kindness from them" (Gurnah, 2020), and Khalifa retorts sharply: "This is between two violent and vicious invaders, …… of mercenaries renowned for their cruelty and brutality" (Gurnah, 2020). Ilyas remains true to his position and joins the Schutztruppe, thus being separated from his family members. The thesis by Branach-Kallas according to which askari must not be understood as an isolated moral category but rather as a disturbed character is first expressed in the story about coffee farm apprenticeship (Branach-Kallas, 2022; Gurnah, 2020).

Perhaps the most abstract form of oppression takes place in the next generation, in the body of a child carrying the uncompleted history of his ancestors without knowledge of his own history. Afiya and Hamza name their son Ilyas after an uncle they never knew, but in the process, they bestow something much deeper on him. In his teens, he suffers from voices within himself that do not belong to him, voices that whisper to him and cause him nocturnal unrest, along with speaking to others that no one else can see. Afiya seeks a shekhiya who confirms that the child has taken on a spirit that shares his suffering, a problem that is only solvable in knowing the history of Uncle Ilyas. While this may not literally be the case, the essential fact of the matter becomes clear: the unspoken history of the family lives on in the body of the youngest family member (Farooqi et al., 2025; Gurnah, 2020). As Farooqi, Kayani, and Rizwan argue, intergenerational trauma is a structural reality after colonisation: "Silenced past trauma haunts the new generations and manifests itself in their psychophysical suffering" (Farooqi et al., 2025). The boy inherits not a story but the absence of a story, and the absence speaks through him. In Mbembe's terms, the subject who survives the immediate destruction of colonisation does not leave the death-world behind: "The violence of colonial rule thus leaves in its wake the 'afterlife' of its power and the spectres of its history in the form of necropolitical death-worlds" (Gurnah, 2020; Mbembe, 2019).

3.2. How Do the Characters in *Afterlives* Resist Those Forms of Oppression?

This section relates to the second research objective. Unlike many colonial novels, *Afterlives* offers no riots, strikes, or armed rebellions. The novel is less interested in the dramatic moments when the oppressed turn against their oppressors than in the daily practices that allow them to endure: survival; the thoughtful use of language and silence; written and spoken petitions for help; the quiet intimacy of healing and comfort; the maintenance of religion and education; the communal defence of vulnerable people; the labour of storytelling; and the long work of recovering erased histories. These quieter forms are no less significant for being gentle, and the novel gives them weight equal to the more easily recognised dramatic actions. The analysis

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follows the responses of every oppressed character to make sure nothing is left unnoticed (Gurnah, 2020).

To survive is the main form of resistance. Living in a world where some lives are valuable and some are dispensable, simply existing itself is an act of withdrawal from this evaluation process; Hamza is the one who stands up for it. After the attack, he spends weeks suffering from feverish delirium, but later is discovered and laughed at by the Oberleutnant: “I see that you will survive after all," says the soldier, "How much trouble you give" (Gurnah, 2020). Even though it is an insulting statement, it carries an important truth – Hamza survived. The camp had no place for him to bleed to death on a stretcher, and the column had enough reasons to leave him in peace; however, he is alive in the surrounding world. Being able to decide which lives are worth of salvation is what sovereignty implies; thus, survival despite this decision can be regarded as a challenge to the sovereignty (Gurnah, 2020; Mbembe, 2003). Also, his survival is the reconstruction of the life after colonizers had gone – he goes back to the coast, finds a job in Nassor Biashara's company, gets the little back room behind the shop, and rebuilds the pieces of his disrupted life. Being marked as "to be dead" (Gurnah, 2020) after necropolitics, Hamza chooses survival as a form of confrontation with them, and this choice saves him (Gurnah, 2020).

Another way of resisting in this book is in Hamza's silence and defiance in the camp. Oberleutnant wants to dominate Hamza by using the literacy – "Soon you'll be reading Schiller", his eyes "alight with mischief"(Gurnah, 2020) – but Hamza turns the weapon against the master, writing down instructions, learning words, reading aloud, and understanding the language that surrounds him; the colonial tool became the mean for the reconstruction of the life that colonizers tried to control (Fanon, 2008; Gurnah, 2020). While beaten for not answering "Yes, Herr Oberleutnant" (Gurnah, 2020) instantly, he replies aloud and mutters inwardly "Scheißer" (Gurnah, 2020). One word that cannot be spoken turns out to be crucial: although Hamza had to be obedient and thick-skinned, he agrees with his mouth and curses in his mind. The mouth was taken away; the mind stayed free (Fanon, 2008; Gurnah, 2020).

The decisive act of resistance is the shortest one. It is impossible to use anything else except desperate actions in a world where dominance belongs to men and impunity is their privilege. After being hurt and abused, Afiya writes a short note in Kiswahili and gives it to her brother's friend – "Kaniumiza" (Gurnah, 2020), "He has hurt me. Help me. Afiya" (Gurnah, 2020). Using just three words, she subverts the story of power that makes her powerless and voiceless. With the use of Kiswahili language to compose the letter and signing her name, she defines the harm that has been done to her and also identifies an ally by naming him, thus creating some level of autonomy for herself (Gurnah, 2020). Interestingly, it makes the uncle angry: "I hear you have learned to write. Don't have to ask who has taught you to do this... Why does a girl need to write? So that she can write to a pimp?" (Gurnah, 2020). The act that he wanted to eliminate becomes the means of liberation. As Verma explains, resistance in "*Afterlives*" lies in recovering voice and historical agency; and in Afiya's note, we can find both of these aspects (Gurnah, 2020; Verma, 2023).

Khalifa's reaction to the note is the example of care as counter-violence. He does not preach and does not appeal to the law or to the justice; instead, he takes the hand of the abused girl, leads her to the cart, and takes her away from the environment that puts her in danger (Gurnah, 2020). It is clear what is at stake here: "She knew she would be killed sooner or later if her Baba had not come, either by her uncle or his son. But Baba Khalifa came" (Gurnah, 2020). The family evaluated her as dispensable; Khalifa's intervention changes this evaluation in a non-state and non military way. Khalifa's resistance also lies in the rejection of corruption. "Are you mad?" he asks when Ilyas declares his intention to enlist in the Schutztruppe. "What has it

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to do with you? This is between … to the north. They fight for who shall swallow us whole" (Gurnah, 2020). This refusal stays unwavering even as Ilyas ignores it (Gurnah, 2020).

Bi Asha extends this resistance in another direction. Once Afiya arrives, the narrator describes in intimate detail the process of restoring her to life. Bi Asha prays for the child and teaches her the Koran — "she said, then you will not be thinking so much about your pain and God will bless you and reward you" (Gurnah, 2020) — and sends her to school "so she might learn together with other children" (Gurnah, 2020). Nothing is remarkable here except as patient restoration: Bi Asha heals the body and re-establishes the language, learning, and social relations from which Afiya had been stripped. Such actions take place in the domestic setting, but the struggle of Bi Asha to preserve the religious and educational traditions of her people is a significant resistance to the colonial-patriarchal assertion that Afiya must be humiliated, subordinated, and finally eliminated (Gurnah, 2020; Naz et al., 2022).

Care of the community works towards restoration of Hamza. After the attack on Hamza by the Feldwebel, he finds himself in the Kilemba mission, where the pastor together with his community nurses him despite the risks that accompany taking care of an injured askari in times of war. When questioned regarding the expense, the pastor speaks clearly: “The war came very close to us. Then it went away. We … we have lost no one here at the mission” (Gurnah, 2020). The mission takes in askaris from all sides of the conflict, and the only requirement is their need and nothing else. The moral discourse of the colonial conflict assumes the racial and political divide—the German versus the English, the askari versus the carrier, the settlers versus the natives—and this decision by the mission not to take sides is a form of opposition, further underscored by the language of the pastor. Pascal, the askari who directly cares for Hamza, opposes violence through bodily action, coming at once when Hamza wakes crying: "Pascal heard him and came in with a lamp. Without saying a word, he lifted ….. and then cleaned the mucus from his nostrils and his lips and made him drink some water" (Gurnah, 2020). Each gesture answers a colonial wound — the soothing touch replaces the strike; hydration heals what the sword opened. His words matter too: "You are safe here, my brother" (Gurnah, 2020), and then he names each person of the household — the pastor, the Frau pastor, the two girls, Witness and his wife Subiri, Jeremiah-Juma — declaring without doubt "Hawa Warungu watu wema" (Gurnah, 2020), "These Europeans are good people" (Gurnah, 2020). He makes no generalisation about Europeans, naming only those he knows, and so embodies Fanon's argument about the necessity of an intimate, long repair of colonial violence (Fanon, 2008; Gurnah, 2020; Naz et al., 2022).

The wider mission community deepens this counter-society. The Frau pastor, "a slim blonde-haired woman who looked used to hard work and perhaps a little weary but smiled easily" (Gurnah, 2020), brings Hamza a tray most days — "biscuits and a tin mug of coffee or a small bowl of figs or sliced cucumber" (Gurnah, 2020) — and "when she left Hamza always felt better than he really was" (Gurnah, 2020); Witness tends the animals and gardens, Subiri the house, with Jeremiah-Juma the third worker, and when the Frau pastor cannot come, "Witness's wife Subiri came over with the tin tray, which she put down on the bedside table with a small benign murmur" (Gurnah, 2020). Read against the Oberleutnant's racial sorting, this mixed household — a German pastor and his wife, three African workers with their families, and an injured Muslim askari — is a small counter society refusing the colonial principle of separation. Verma argues that *Afterlives* "highlights such problems as colonial violence, destruction of indigenous histories, and the power of memory as a tool of resilience" (Verma, 2023); the mission scenes add the power of a deliberately mixed household to that list (Gurnah, 2020; Naz et al., 2022).

Storytelling is another mode of resistance. Telling Afiya of his abduction, Ilyas does not complain but renders the event as a story with characters and gestures, presented to her as a

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gift: "He held Afiya's hand while he said this, smiling at her like the Indian man and rising to his feet"(Gurnah, 2020). Describing his captivity, his voice changes and he begins to sing: "He paused and sang a few verses of what must have been a German song. She thought his voice was beautiful and stood up to applaud him when he ceased singing. He smiled happily. He enjoyed singing" (Gurnah, 2020). Ilyas teaches Afiya how to convey a hard story with affection, and storytelling becomes an inherited tradition. His narration supports the novel's larger plot as a recovery of colonised African memory (Verma, 2023), and bears out Branach-Kallas's claim that Gurnah builds a complex askari rather than a monolithic one (Branach-Kallas, 2022).

Resistance inside the army takes the form of disobedience and its limits. The carriers — "poorly fed and badly equipped, most of them barefoot" (Gurnah, 2020) — finally desert in a group at night, signalling that "it is clear that the Schutztruppe could no longer ensure their safety or wellbeing" (Gurnah, 2020). The scene is not heroic, but it is rebellion. When the askaris are ordered to do the carriers' work, they erupt: "there was silence for a while followed by the breaking up of ranks and an outbreak of noise" (Gurnah, 2020). They ultimately comply, but the moment of refusal marks the limits of colonial control. Even Ombasha Haidar al-Hamad, who had drilled and cursed Hamza, kneels at his stretcher after the stabbing: "Shush wacha kelele" (Gurnah, 2020), he says, wiping Hamza's face with his rain-soaked palm, "his lips puckered as if hushing a child… Shush shush alhamdulillah. Not so much crying, askari" (Gurnah, 2020). This is no redemption — the same man wielded the cane — but in it he recognises the fellow soldiering body not as a fragment of the colonial machine but as something else (Branach-Kallas, 2022; Gurnah, 2020).

The resistance of Khalifa and Bi Asha continues across their lives. Old enough to know he cannot maintain the household alone, and watching Bi Asha die, Khalifa rejects the shekhiya ritual for his grandson: "What nonsense! All the perfume and drumming and stupid wailing!" (Gurnah, 2020). He is not above his world but does not believe it’s every aspect. The whole Khalifa–Bi Asha–Afiya–Hamza household is itself a resistance to oppressive colonisation of the kind Naz et al. describe (Gurnah, 2020; Naz et al., 2022). Long before this household, another shows that a life can be preserved despite colonial power. When Ilyas brings Afiya from the country, the family upstairs — "Their names were Jamila and Saada and they became her friends" (Gurnah, 2020) — invites her up "whenever she wished" (Gurnah, 2020); later, hearing of her broken hand, the mother calls the beating "sinful" (Gurnah, 2020). Jamila, Saada, and their mother embody "surviving through love and kindness" (Naz et al., 2022) and prove that protecting a vulnerable person needs no biological tie.

Resistance by Afiya transcends the letters that she writes. Growing up in the home of Khalifa and Bi Asha, Afiya learns how to read from the Koran and becomes part of its little community, and when Hamza reaches the coast, she perceives him as a moral being separate from his askari history. The homecoming of Hamza is not celebrated as a victory but as the coming back of a person who does not know where he is going; Nassor Biashara hires him as an apprentice carpenter and starts rebuilding himself “in the benign company of the carpenter” (Gurnah, 2020). It is within this household that recognition becomes marriage. When Hamza finally manages to ask, "Are you his wife?" (Gurnah, 2020), Afiya pulls back, and then, as his meaning becomes clear, "the alarm in her eyes turned to mischief and she smiled as she sank back into his arms. 'I'm nobody's wife … yet,' she said before freeing herself and leaving" (Gurnah, 2020). The mischief is exact. Read alongside Verma's argument that the novel recovers African memory from imperial archives, the Hamza–Afiya marriage is recovery at the level of two lives: a former askari and a rescued child build a household of their own, the most concrete possible refusal of necropolitical disposability (Gurnah, 2020; Mbembe, 2003; Verma, 2023).

The next generation carries the unfinished story, and the novel treats its episode with the seriousness Gurnah reserves for things that have travelled across a generation. Afiya, frantic,

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calls in a shekhiya, who arrives "in a cloud of incense, so it seemed, holding a perfume burner in her hand" (Gurnah, 2020) and offers her diagnosis: "There is no doubt that your son has been visited" (Gurnah, 2020). The visiting spirit, she says, is in anguish, searching for Uncle Ilyas, and "there will be no cure until you find him or find out about him" (Gurnah, 2020). One need not share the shekhiya's metaphysics to see what the ceremony accomplishes socially: the family is drawn together, the boy is placed at the centre of their care, the long suppressed question of Uncle Ilyas is reopened, and Hamza soon decides to write to the Frau pastor in Berlin for help finding his lost brother-in-law. The ceremony is where the family's intergenerational silence breaks. Read through Farooqi, Kayani, and Rizwan's account of silence as both traumatic and redemptive, this is the moment the redemptive form takes over from the traumatic (Farooqi et al., 2025; Gurnah, 2020).

The novel ends with a large-scale, memory-based resistance: the recovery of lost lives. The son, named Ilyas after the missing uncle, traces him for a year in the German archives in Bonn and reconstructs his existence. Uncle Ilyas did not leave Germany after the war and "married a German woman in 1933. He used to appear at gatherings of the Reichskolonialbund singing Nazi songs and waving the schutztruppe flag in marches demanding the return of the colonies" (Gurnah, 2020). In 1938 he was arrested for violating Nazi race laws and sent to Sachsenhausen; "His only surviving son, who had been given the name Paul after the General in the Ostafrika war, volunteered to join his father… both Uncle Ilyas and Paul died in Sachsenhausen in 1942" (Gurnah, 2020). The son brings home a conclusion: "Someone loved Uncle Ilyas enough to follow him to certain death in a concentration camp in order to keep him company" (Gurnah, 2020). The recovered fragment is minor; it neither redeems the camp nor repairs the colonial wars. Those lives died and remained dead. Yet by reconstructing their memory and telling a story erased from the records, the novel turns the unknown burial site into a place of remembrance. Through Verma's reading of *Afterlives* as the recovery of African life from colonial archives, and Branach-Kallas's argument against the stereotypical askari, this recovery becomes the ultimate example of resistance in the novel (Branach-Kallas, 2022; Gurnah, 2020; Verma, 2023).

3.3. Synthesis of Oppression and Resistance

In *Afterlives*, oppression and resistance are not two distinct forces but interrelated components of the colonised reality. Oppression operates through violence, military subjugation, racial hierarchy, trauma, social displacement, and the silencing of the vulnerable; resistance is born not outside these oppressions but in their midst. This is Gurnah's greatest achievement — depicting colonised reality in all its complexity without drawing simplistic distinctions between oppression and resistance (Gurnah, 2020). Theoretical aspects reveal the consistency of the book in accordance with the theories of Mbembe and Fanon. In the perspective of Mbembe, oppression is one of the components of the colonial system in which the distribution of vulnerability and the possibility of getting hurt and dying takes place. According to Fanon, colonial oppression is psychological in nature as it creates feelings of fear and alienation as well as contributes to the destruction of personality (Fanon, 1963, 2008; Mbembe, 2003).

Gurnah does not, however, leave his characters trapped. Survival becomes a protest against disposability, silence a form of self-protection, memory a refusal of erasure, and care, intimacy, and new human relationships an ethical resistance to colonial harm. The author thus expands the concept of resistance beyond revolution: in the postcolonial condition, staying human, remembering, and recreating oneself become genuine ways of resisting colonial violence (Gurnah, 2020). The title accordingly gains added meaning. The novel reflects the colonial period directly, but offers more than that period itself; war, military domination, and colonial ideology do not vanish at an episode's end but persist in memory, trauma, family breakage, and the reconstruction of selfhood (Branach-Kallas, 2022; Farooqi et al., 2025; Verma, 2023).

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It is worth considering what kind of postcolonial novel this makes *Afterlives*. Many canonical postcolonial novels — Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* — focus on the moment of colonial arrival or of decolonial struggle, treating the colonial period as a brief encounter or a prelude. Gurnah does something different, focusing on the long middle: the decades when colonialism is no longer arriving and not yet departing, but simply present as the routine condition of life. The novel begins in the established machinery of German colonial administration, moves through the catastrophe of the First World War, ends in the British mandate on the eve of the Second, and closes with a coda in the Federal Republic of Germany of the 1960s. Its forms of resistance are accordingly those that long inhabitance produces — survival, care, memory, education, household, marriage, religious continuity, and at last the recovery of erased names from the archive (Gurnah, 2020).

When seen through this comparative light, *Afterlives* makes a distinct contribution to the postcolonial canon. It expands the temporal scope of the field by showing that the long middle of colonial occupation deserves the same narrative care given to arrival and departure; it expands the geographical and historical scope by treating German colonial East Africa with the seriousness more often reserved for British India and French Algeria; and it expands the conceptual repertoire of resistance by demonstrating that the household, the workshop, the mission, and the small mixed community can be sites of meaningful refusal even where no organised political movement is available. The close readings above have aimed to show that these three expansions are central to Gurnah's project, not incidental to it (Branach-Kallas, 2022; Göttsche, 2023; Gurnah, 2020; Verma, 2023).

4. Findings and conclusion

Primarily, two research objectives guided this study. As a result, through analysis of the selected text, the study showed that the oppression in *Afterlives* is represented not as a single, but as a layered colonial system of domination. The character-by character analysis provided proof of this oppression via certain scenes: the brutality of the Schutztruppe; the capture of Ilyas by a Shangaan askari, who was laughing while he was struggling and said that Ilyas was to be a gun boy; the demeaning examination of new recruits carried out by the German medical officer; Haidar al-Hamad's ombasha's threat of hamsa ishirin in the camp; the declaration of the Oberleutnant that he came there to appropriate what belonged to Germans, as they were physically more powerful; his slap at Hamza's face accompanied by his statement "Your suffering does not concern me" (Gurnah, 2020); the iron rules of the colony, which placed prestige above all else; the Feldwebel's swinging of his sword that slashed through Hamza's flesh and bone; the beatings administered to Afiya, such as one that broke her hand; the forced marriage of Bi Asha; and Hamza's nightmares of ground covered with blood, severed limbs and broken bodies. The oppression in *Afterlives* concerns institutional, personal, bodily, and emotional existence all at once. By reading Fanon and Mbembe together, the thesis suggests that the layered nature of this oppression is significant for the novel's politics (Brian & Monanti, 2026; Castelli, 2022; Fanon, 1963; Göttsche, 2023; Gurnah, 2020; Maricocchi, 2025; Mbembe, 2003).

The second main finding is that Mbembe's conceptual tool of necropolitics greatly facilitated reading the novel. In *Afterlives*, colonial oppression continually subjected African people to the possibility of injury, disposability, and death through war and askari exploitation. The colonial regime depicted in the novel is not merely exploitative but necropolitical: the power to decide whose life to save and whose to sacrifice belongs to colonialism and its representatives. Especially the wounding of Hamza, the bleeding stretcher march in which "he knew now that the wetness was not only rain, that he was bleeding heavily," (Gurnah, 2020) and the iron protocol that ranked European prestige above African lives — showed necropolitics not as an

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imported concept but as the daily texture of the colonial army (D'Cruz, 2026; Gurnah, 2020; Mbembe, 2003, 2019).

Another significant finding regards the role of silence. Silence in *Afterlives* appears in two main forms. Sometimes it results from trauma, shame, or difficulty articulating atrocities. In other cases, however, silence becomes a calculated reaction that helps the oppressed maintain dignity and identity without exposing themselves to potential harm. Hamza's silent inner reply to the Oberleutnant — speaking the required "Jawohl, herr Oberleutnant" (Gurnah, 2020) aloud and then saying "Scheißer" (Gurnah, 2020) to himself — illustrates this strategic silence at its sharpest, since the gap between what is spoken and what is felt is precisely the space in which the colonised self refuses interior consent (Fanon, 1963, 2008; Farooqi et al., 2025; Gurnah, 2020; Maricocchi, 2025).

5. Limitations of the Study

This research has some limitations. First, it is a study of a single piece of literature, *Afterlives*. Thus, the findings cannot be used to make claims regarding all the books written by Gurnah. While some patterns observed in this novel might also occur in the author's other literary works, it would require further investigation using a comparative method to prove this statement (Gurnah, 2020). The second limitation is intrinsic to the chosen theoretical framework. Due to the limited scope of the research, the discussion is confined to Fanon and Mbembe. Other scholars who could have contributed to the analysis include gender theorists, ecologists, representatives of the trauma studies movement, and experts on language and translation. The ideas related to these topics were mentioned wherever they helped illustrate some points but were not investigated (Fanon, 1963; Mbembe, 2003). The third limitation is associated with the limited availability of scientific literature devoted to *Afterlives*. The novel appeared relatively recently, and the existing body of academic literature is not as large as it might have been for some other books. However, in this study, the available scholarly sources were expanded significantly. Nonetheless, the problem still remains valid. New studies will likely come in the near future, and some of the interpretations proposed here may have to be revised.

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