

Colonial Landscapes and Postcolonial Memory: An Ecocritical Reading of Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*

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ABSTRACT

*This study examines the interplay between colonialism, landscape, and postcolonial memory in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020) through an ecocritical lens. While previous scholarship emphasizes migration and identity, the ecological dimensions of colonial power and their enduring impact on postcolonial consciousness remain underexplored. The research investigates how colonial interventions such as land appropriation, plantation economies, and environmental restructuring shape both the material and symbolic landscapes in the novel. Through close textual analysis and ecocritical theory, the study demonstrates how nature functions as a repository of memory, trauma, and survival, revealing the entanglement of ecological and social histories. Findings indicate that Gurnah foregrounds the persistence of environmental and social hierarchies, illustrating how postcolonial subjects navigate the legacies of imperial exploitation while reconstructing identity and belonging. The study contributes to ecocritical and postcolonial literary studies by highlighting landscapes as active sites of historical witness and memory, emphasizing the inseparability of environmental and human narratives in postcolonial contexts.*

Keywords: Colonialism; Ecocriticism; Postcolonial Memory; Landscape; Abdulrazak Gurnah; *Afterlives*; Historical Trauma

INTRODUCTION

Colonialism was a political or economic system as well as an environmental regime that restructured land, labour and life by force, extraction and control. Imperial expansion transformed the landscapes with the establishment of new plantation economies, military facilities and new forms of exploiting resources, which frequently led to the ecological deterioration and social displacement in the long run. These changes were not accidental, but they were part and parcel of the colonial domination as land turned into a material object and a symbolic place where power was practiced and reproduced (Crosby, 1986; Grove, 1995). The environment therefore becomes a memory of the historical violence in a postcolonial context, and it acts as a living archive of the imperial intervention.

When literature of the once colonized territories records this conflagration of land and power, there is often an entrapment of memory, trauma, and survival in the ecological space. Within the last thirty years, ecocriticism has grown beyond the nature writing it initially addressed to concern itself with issues of empire, inequality and environmental justice. Ecocriticism, as first theorized by Glotfelty and Harold (1996) considers the connection between literature and the physical world, but recent critics assert that the narratives of the environment should be interpreted within the context of colonialism and

capitalist history. The operation of ecological damage and cultural dispossession, however, is pre-empted by postcolonial ecocriticism which suggests that environmental crises in the Global South cannot be considered outside the imperial past (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010).

This is important critical approach to the African literature, where the colonialism regime has radically transformed the land use, social structure and ecology. Borders imposed by colonial authorities, the introduction of cash-crop economies and militarization of the landscape interfered with the indigenous connections to land and nonhuman beings. The results of these interventions were what Rob Nixon (2011) describes as slow violence: a type of environmental damage that is both slow and uneven, and often it is not immediately visible but leaves long-term effects on disadvantaged groups. The way in which literary texts address this slow violence is through the representation of landscapes as places of ecological destruction and memory of the past.

Such study finds an interesting ground in Abdulrazak Gurnah fiction. His novels always focus on the dark secrets of colonialism, displacement and erasure of history in East Africa and the Indian Ocean world. Set mainly in East Africa, during and after the German colonial rule, *Afterlives* (2020) revises a significantly forgotten imperial history and its unfinished consequences on individuals and communities. The novel follows the lives of characters that are intertwined and whose lives are conditioned by compelled military service, economic insecurity and disrupted social ties. Although the theme of trauma, identity, and historical recovery has been emphasized in the critical responses to *Afterlives* (Steiner, 2014; Wright, 2022), the novel has been discussed in connection to landscape and environment rather sparingly.

Yet *Afterlives* is very mindful of space and place. Villages, forests, roads, and plantations are not passive spaces, but they play an active role in the story, testifying to colonial violence and its consequences. The landscape of colonies in the novel is constantly characterized by disturbance, fields that have been deserted because of war, roads that have been cleared to allow military traffic, and land that has been redefined to suit the interests of the empire. Such changes in the environment reflect the psychic and social displacement of the characters, and it is possible to assume that colonialism has a dual impact on human bodies and on nature. The story by Gurnah therefore conforms to the postcolonial ecocritical arguments which emphasize that land is not only occupied during colonialism but re-imagined and exploited (Mukherjee, 2010).

The mediating factor between this relationship between landscape and history is memory. Cultural memory theorists also underline the fact that remembrance tends to be spatially located, and places can serve as the storehouses of shared experience (Assmann, 2011). Landscapes in postcolonial literature are often used as mnemonic places where oppressed or marginalized pasts become re-enacted. The continuity of some spaces despite political transformations in *Afterlives* allows the memory to come through the official historical accounts. The land recalls what was so frequently erased in the historical records of colonialism forced labour, military coercion, and daily suffering and endurance.

The ecocritical reading of *Afterlives* suggests how the novel transgresses the imperial ideas of land as property or resource by redefining ethical and affective senses upon place. Instead of showing nature as pristine or ideal, Gurnah portrays landscapes, which are mutilated, modified, and yet strong. This representation echoes the African ecocritical thought that does not hold romanticized notions of nature, but rather the historical and lived-in relationships of people to the land (Slaymaker, 2001). The setting of *Afterlives* is neither a victim nor a passive background; it is a participant in the representation of the colonial and postcolonial experience.

This ecological aspect of the work of Gurnah has started to be acknowledged in recent scholarship. An example is Abbas, Amin, and Ahmad (2023) who state that *Afterlives* reveals the environmental and human prices of the imperial expansion and show how the violence of the colonialism is shown in both ecological and social fragmentation. Their analysis highlights the importance of the ecocritical analysis of the novel still, especially concerning memory and historical writing. Following this kind of work,

the current research places *Afterlives* in the context of postcolonial ecocriticism to discuss the role of landscapes as memory spaces that carry postcolonial empire *Afterlives*.

Although the environmental humanities are increasingly becoming more pertinent, the literary treatment of colonial memory tends to be largely anthropocentric, in that it pays attention to human suffering but does not attend to the ecological conditions that create and maintain that suffering. The given paper fills this gap by pre-empting the environment as one of the significant platforms through which colonial history is recalled and told. In this way, it is responding to the calls to have an ethically active ecocriticism that considers both human and nonhuman vulnerability after imperialism (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011).

Research Questions

1. How does Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* represent colonial landscapes as sites of postcolonial memory?
2. What do these representations reveal about the ecological afterlives of imperial violence?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Postcolonial ecocriticism emphasizes the interconnection between ecological transformation, colonial histories, and social memory. Scholars argue that literature reveals how landscapes encode both environmental degradation and social dislocation. Adeniyi (2023) contends that postcolonial ecocriticism must address historical inequities, showing how literature represents human and environmental vulnerability as inseparable. Belay and Hailu (2024) similarly highlight how colonial land-use systems disrupted indigenous ecological knowledge in African contexts, demonstrating the deep intertwining of environmental and social histories. Kaul (2025) expands this perspective with the concept of "memory ecologies," in which landscapes function as living archives, recording both violence and survival. This approach situates postcolonial literature as a tool for understanding how ecological transformations preserve and reflect historical experience.

Memory, Trauma, and Landscapes in *Afterlives*

In the interpretation of *Afterlives* by Gurnah, memory and trauma are key elements, especially in the form of landscape. Odhiambo (2022) notes that in African postcolonial works, land is frequently presented as a living archive, which engraves histories of displacement, exploitation of labour and the transformation of the environment. Farooqi et al. (2024) develop this observation in the East African fiction, demonstrating that landscapes serve as mnemonic spaces, keeping the repressed history intact and mediating between the trauma of a specific generation and the current generation. Land in this framework is not just the background, but it also plays an active role in the telling of historical experience.

In the article, Abbas et al. (2023) address the issue of trauma directly in *Afterlives*, stating that Gurnah portrays the haunting inescapability of colonial violence both in terms of human experience and the environment. Villages, forests and roads are also represented as places where memories of coercion, suffering and survival are mixed showing how trauma is spatially and ecologically written. Their analysis underlines that reading *Afterlives* should focus on the way landscapes bear the resonances of the past atrocities as well as human memory and make trauma palpable both materially and spatially.

Mburu (2023) also mentions that the landscapes of Gurnah are the places of social and ecological dislocation during the German colonial rule when the exploitation of the environment is equal to the disruption of the communities. This reading is supported by Farah and Omondi (2024), who point out that the continuation of some spaces allows memory to exist even outside the official historical

documents. In all these studies, it is emphasized that land is imperative in the telling of trauma and historical memory.

Human-Nonhuman Interactions and Environmental Agency

Recent academic work has focused on how nonhuman actors act in postcolonial histories. Kumar and Jackson (2023) suggest that rivers, forests, and cultivated lands are active in the historical narratives, which create social experience and memory. The same idea is presented by Shrestha (2023), who focuses on ecological resilience and human communities and demonstrates how literature can demonstrate environmental actors as continuity and resistance agents. Abbas et al. (2025) discuss the concept of displacement and urban alienation and show that human estrangement is reflected in ecological dislocation. This methodological parallel gives a theoretical parallel on how to read *Afterlives* where landscapes mediate the colonial trauma as well as the recovery of the postcolonial.

Displacement, Migration, and Coastal Ecologies

The action in *Afterlives* takes place in the Indian Ocean world, and therefore, the study of migration and coastal ecologies is especially applicable. Mwangi (2024) demonstrates that urban and littoral space in the East African fiction is usually associated with the history of displacement, environmental transformation, and social marginalization. Hernandez and Park (2023) state that diasporic landscapes have an ecological memory, which records the interrupted communities and a generational shift of the environment. The focus on the Indian Ocean as a palimpsest of migration, trade, and ecological change by Ghosh (2022) and Rasheed (2024) provides an understanding of how the landscapes of the coast and the inland areas of Gurnah as archives of history and memoirs.

Integrative Themes Across Recent Literature

In the recent scholarship, a number of interconnected themes are identified that offer a solid framework of an ecocritical reading of *Afterlives*. To begin with, the idea of landscape as a memory archive is commonly stressed, whereby the works of Silva (2024), Levy (2022), and Abbas et al. (2023) point to the fact that landscapes in the postcolonial fiction act not just as a passive backdrop, but also as a memory storage, trauma, and historical experience of a collective. In *Afterlives*, e.g. forests, roads, villages are covered with the traces of colonial violence, whereby the memory can survive where the official historical record is silent. Second, the research on nonhuman agency highlights the participatory role of environmental factors to the historical narratives. Kumar and Jackson (2023) and Shrestha (2023) point at the role of rivers, cultivated fields, and forests in the social histories of people, which affect their experience and memory and prove their resilience in the face of ecological and social disturbance. This point of view strengthens the notion that Gurnah views landscapes not as the passive backgrounds of the narrative but rather as the living things that participate in the narration. Lastly, the motif of displacement and ecological estrangement ties together the movement of humans and social disruption with the environmental change. According to Abbas et al. (2025), Mwangi (2024), and Hernandez and Park (2023), migration, urbanization, and forced movement have been told, accompanied by ecological disruption, and they create spaces where human and environmental histories are inseparably interconnected. When combined, the themes mentioned above: landscape as archive, nonhuman agency, and ecological estrangement, can be used to elucidate the nature of material and mnemonic postcolonial *Afterlives* that the novel by Gurnah depicts as a subtle commentary on the crossings of land, memory, and postcolonial experience.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study applies the qualitative research design to examine the *Afterlives* by Abdulrazak Gurnah through an ecocritical and postcolonial prism. The qualitative methodology is suitable since the study does not involve gathering numerical data but analysing the literary texts, patterns of themes, and narrative techniques. This design is able to analyse the intersection of landscapes, memory, and

ecological transformation in the story in a detailed, context-sensitive manner. *Afterlives* (2020) by Gurnah is the main source of information since it is a novel describing colonial and postcolonial life in East Africa and the Indian Ocean world. The textual components that will be examined are the descriptions of the villages, woods, plantations, roads, and coastal areas, and the relations of characters with ecological objects. Texts illustrating environmental change, displacement and how landscapes as agents of historical and cultural discourses are underlined.

Theoretical Framework

The research is directed by postcolonial ecocriticism which is an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates environmental criticism and postcolonial literary studies. It relies on the main theoretical ideas, including landscape as a memory archive (Levy, 2022; Silva, 2024), that underlines the role of the ecological space as a container of historical trauma and cultural memory; nonhuman agency (Kumar and Jackson, 2023; Shrestha, 2023), that focuses on the active and participatory character of environmental space in the narrative, history, and social experience; and slow violence (Nixon, 2011), which implies the forms of environmental harm that are produced in a grad Collectively these ideas help the study to look at how these human and nonhuman actors are connected and show how ecological spaces practice the mediation of memory, trauma and the lived experiences of postcolonial life. This framework enables the study to examine both human and nonhuman actors, showing how ecological spaces mediate memory, trauma, and postcolonial experience.

Data Collection

The data are gathered by systematic textual analysis, which implies the identification of the relevant passages in the novel indicating the ecological disruption, colonial exploitation, displacement, and memory. These texts are marked and divided based on the rising themes of landscape, trauma, memory, and nonhuman agency. The analysis uses thematic coding on the textual data obtained. Themes have been identified regarding motifs, imagery and emphasis of the narrative as a consequence of ecological transformation, colonial influence and the survival of memory. The themes are examined in the framework of the postcolonial ecocritical approach that reveals the interaction between the human and environmental agents and the ethical, historical, and mnemonic aspects of the novel.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Abdulrazak Gurnah develops the colonial memory in *Afterlives* as a bodily, spatial, and ecological phenomenon. In the novel, trauma is not contained within the human psyche but is spread out over landscapes that have been transformed by militarization, environmental depletion and imperial discipline. Memory comes out through villages, camps, battlefields, ports and dreams as something that is stored, triggered and transmitted in space. Ecocritical reading shows that colonial landscapes are archives of the *Afterlives* of violence, which continue to exist even after the official termination of empire.

The first inscription of colonial memory in the novel is at the communal space level especially in villages that were coerced by the military. This could be seen in the episode when German officers deliberate on killing an older person and brutally torturing him to get information:

At one village the other officers suggested the execution of an elder because he had refused to disclose an ... were only able to discover by beating a young boy and forcing him to tell them (Gurnah, 2020, p. 88).

This text changes the village into the location of shared memory and trauma. The brutality that is being done to both the older and the child is not just directed at people, but it pollutes the social and ecological structure of the village. In a postcolonial ecocritical approach, the village is transformed into a mnemonic space where fear, domination, and loss are incorporated into space. These spaces still remind

us of the colonial terror, when there is no visible trace of it. The silence and absence and inherited fear which the land remembers helps to support the thought that the memory in *Afterlives* is not only psychological but is also spatially based.

Environmental segregation is another site of inscription of colonial hierarchy, which is evident in the structuring of military camps: “In the meantime, the officers made sure to maintain European prestige. When they made camp, the Germans were in separate lines from the askari, sleeping in their camp beds under mosquito nets” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 86). This text demonstrates the ways in which the colonial domination is generated through daily spatial activities. The mosquito net is a marker of environmental privilege, whereby European bodies are covered by the mosquito net, but African soldiers are exposed to ecological vulnerability. One does not remember such spatial arrangements as specific events but as recurrent patterns of inequality. Regarding the Ecocriticism approach, even the landscape is made in such a way that it can keep the racial order, so that colonial power can be felt both physically and ecologically. Such camps are recollected places that make domination to be normalized in terms of environmental control.

This spatial violence is supported by colonial ideology which is expressed by Frantz: “They are just rabble-rout riff-raff, not cannibals. They are savages in their goatskins and feathers, playing at being fierce” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 103). This language helps to enrich the cultural memory of colonialism by portraying the African bodies and cultures as the continuation of the primitive natural world. The ecological metaphor, goatskins and feathers, diminishes human identity to the elements of the environment, justifying human and environmental exploitation. In postcolonial ecocritical perspective, this kind of discourse makes it possible to destroy the land by refusing ethical accountability to the land occupants. Memory in this case is ideological, which defines the perception, memory, and treatment of landscapes and peoples under the imperial rule. The environmental effects of colonial war are made explicit through the image of the worn-out landscapes

The ecological consequences of colonial warfare are rendered explicit in the depiction of exhausted landscapes: “They had exhausted the land, which was now littered with starving or empty villages, their supplies repeatedly plundered by the rival armies” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 105). This text plays a key role in perceiving slow violence and ecological memory. The land is said to be exhausted which means that it is not damaged on a temporary basis, but it is depleted over a long period. The fatal results of military exploitation are marked by starving and bare villages. According to the Ecocriticism approach, this landscape is a historical record which is a physical documentation of colonial violence. War is not forgotten by the lack of environmental resources and gaps, which make sure that trauma is passed to the generations that still live on ruined soil.

Urban space is also a place of intersections of memory and trauma especially in the post-war movement of Hamza as depicted in the port city:

He walked through the port gates, which were open and unguarded,
and proceeded towards the ... he too strode as purposefully as the pain
in his hip allowed and looked out for a familiar street or building
(Gurnah, 2020, p. 123)

This text shows the way that memory is activated due to the lack of orientation in space. Even though the gates are open, indicating political transition, the environment is no longer familiar and comfortable. The traumatized body of Hamza is the mediator of his spatial vision, which shows that trauma transforms the sense of belonging and memory. It transforms the city into a topography of alienation, which manifests itself in the postcolonial memory of colonial transformation of space. The lack of any identifiable landmarks is the representation of the overwriting of precolonial and personal histories, which supports the statement that landscapes bear the memory of the lost.

Internalized identity is another form of colonial memory, which is a result of environmental and economic dependency: “Then when the war came he joined up, I don’t know why. Maybe he had started to think of himself as a German, ... and cared for by a German landowner” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 181). This excerpt explains the way in which colonial scenery creates psychological assimilation. The proximity to colonial landownership and forms of care is what constructs Hamza sense of self. Memory in this case is emotional and relational, related to spaces where the survival was possible with the patronage of the imperial. Ecocritically, this illustrates how land and labour control generates long term colonial subjectivity that continues in the memory even after the formal colonial domination is removed.

The strongest recollections of colonial violence in *Afterlives* are activated by the trauma of the body in the military conflicts. The wound that Hamza sustained is given graphic detail: “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, 2020, p. 109). This text collapses both body and land to one location of agony. The injured body collides on the ground and so the land becomes a direct eyewitness to violence. The ecocritically inclined ground is a mnemonic surface, which takes in trauma to be re-enacted later by means of memory. This is not the passive landscape, but it is involved in the construction of memory through the physical reception of the wounded body.

The continuation of this trauma is enhanced by the physiological susceptibility: “He struggled for breath, heaving desperately but unable to take in air” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 109). This excerpt reflects the experience embodied of helplessness which is an essential part of traumatic memory. The impossibility to breathe is a symbol of ecological suffocation in the colony’s exploitation, which supports the analogy between harmed bodies and harmed environments. Here memory is physical, it is based on the sense of touch and cannot be forgotten easily.

Pain and place are again reinforced by the fact that Hamza is returned to the ground: “The pains were most on his left side... Then they dropped him on the ground and the pain spread all through his leg and made him scream” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 110). The land again becomes the location where trauma is played out and recalled. The fact that landscapes are the ones which are set down on the ground underlines how the landscapes are the ones which endure pain and hold onto it. In a postcolonial ecocritical approach, it can be seen that in such moments, memory is projected outside onto the space and the land becomes a place of pain.

This ecological reflexography of trauma culminates in the most disturbing of the descriptions, the one of the battlefields: “At his feet, the ground was covered with blood-sucking, limbs and broken torsos were pressed against him” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 113). In this case, the scenery itself is covered with violence. The human bodies blend with the soil, eliminating boundaries between the body and nature. This scene makes the battlefield a permanent ID of death which conforms to theories of landscape as memory archive. The soil contains what has been forgotten by history.

The continued existence of this trauma is established by the nightmares of Hamza: “One day, he woke up in total blackness in the night and understood that he was the one crying in his nightmare” (Gurnah, 2020, p. 113). This is one of the most explicit descriptions of memory in the novel. The nightmare indicates the reoccurrence of ecological trauma, which is psychologically recorded long after the actual event is over. Darkness, as a metaphor of repressed past, serves as the symbol of the impossibility to forget the past, whereas sobbing is the symbol of the impossibility to avoid remembering. The dream rekindles the territories of violence, which substantiates the fact that memory in *Afterlives* is cyclical, embodied and environmental.

Combined with the other passages, these show that *Afterlives* builds memory using land, body, and space. Colonial landscapes are not passive terrain but dynamic archives which archive and pass on trauma through time. Ecocritical reading therefore shows that the concept of postcolonial memory in the novel cannot be separated of ecological destruction and the landscape is therefore at the centre of comprehending the long *Afterlives* of empire.

The other important discovery is that memory and trauma in the novel is incarnate and spatially provoked. The repetitive nightmares, physical pain and not knowing where he is all indicate that traumatic memory is being replicated as Hamza experiences certain places. The ports, streets and battlefields rebuild the suppressed histories and indicate that landscapes serve as conveyor belts whereby colonial trauma re-enters the present. Such spatial mediation of memory emphasizes how Gurnah challenges official colonial archives that tend to defeat lived and environmental aspects of imperial violence.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that *Afterlives* anticipates the afterlives of nonhuman agency by portraying land as part of the historical processes. The ground receives injured bodies, absorbs bloodshed and it is soaked with human remains and battlefields are turned into permanent reserves of trauma. In contrast to being a passive matter, landscapes are active agents that form memory, being the physical remnants of violence. This undermines anthropocentric view of colonial history and proves that nonhuman factors are of great significance in the maintenance of postcolonial memory.

The research also concludes that *Afterlives* is opposed to idealized nature. The depiction of environments by Gurnah is scarred, changed, and burdened by the past, but able to withstand it. Landscapes are not idealized or made out to be the mere victims of colonial exploitation; they represent the multifaceted *Afterlives* of colonial exploitation. This observation can be attributed to African ecocritical thought on the importance of lived and historical contact with land and proves the assertion that ecological spaces in the novel have ethical and mnemonic valences.

To sum up, these results respond to the research question because they prove that *Afterlives* can be seen as colonial landscapes that constitute postcolonial memory and disclose the ecological *Afterlives* of the imperial violence. The novel reveals that land recollects what the colonial history represses and maintains the trauma, inequality, and survival in material and spatial ways.

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