# The Third Space: Exploring Identity Negotiation and Formation in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*

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## Abstract

Critical analyses of Gurnah's *Afterlives* have centred on its treatment of colonial violence, trauma, memory, displacement, migration and environmental concerns. However, this paper examines the concept of the third space and its influence on identity development. Using postcolonial literary theory, particularly Bhabha's idea of the third space, and the close reading method, it demonstrates that identity is continually negotiated at the complex intersections of language, culture, history, and the human psyche. The key argument is that these overlapping spaces depict identity as fluid, relational, and constantly evolving. The paper concludes that Gurnah's novel transforms Bhabha's concept into a tangible human experience, illustrating that postcolonial identity involves an ongoing negotiation of power and belonging, history and hope, thereby emphasising how literature reflects human resilience, adaptation, and agency.

**Keywords:** Third space, hybridity, negotiation, identity formation, postcolonial discourse

## Introduction

Homi K. Bhabha introduced the 'third space' in postcolonial discourse in his influential book, *The Location of Culture* (1994). He describes cultural contact zones as sites of dynamic negotiation rather than fixed boundaries, with the 'third space' challenging colonial dichotomies and fostering hybrid identities through cultural exchange. This space transcends physicality, serving as a metaphorical arena where new cultural meanings and identities emerge (p. 36). However, scholars such as Soja (1996) have treated the third space as a real or imagined lived space. For Oldenburg (1989), it signifies everyday urban communal life. By contrast, Rutherford (1990), aligning with Bhabha, emphasises that the third space is not merely a geographic or cultural location but a site of ambivalence where colonial narratives are challenged, and alternative meanings are produced (p. 11). Covarr (2015) describes it as an integrative site that helps individuals negotiate their socio-cultural and political environments (p. 128). This paper examines language, culture, history, and the human psyche in Gurnah's selected novel as examples of the third space, analysing how characters' narrative identities evolve through these intersections. Consequently, it supports

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Loomba's (2015) view that "in literature, identity is not only described but also constructed," because "texts reflect the complex interplay of culture, power, gender, class, and race in shaping subjectivity" (p. 138). This aligns with Hall's (1990) idea that identity is an ongoing process shaped by historical and representational influences. For Hall, "Cultural identity is a matter of becoming as well as being... It belongs to the future as much as to the past" (p. 225). Tajfel and Turner (1986) further argue that "The self is not a singular, fixed entity but one that shifts depending on the salience of different groups" (13). In essence, identity is a fluid, negotiated construct rather than a fixed inheritance.

In the African postcolonial context, Mbembe (2001) considers "Africa [as] a place of entanglement and not of fixed being" (p. 3). For Ngũgĩ (1986), African identity is fractured by colonialism, and healing begins with linguistic and cultural decolonisation. He argues: "Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (p. 16). Consequently, "The Language of African literature cannot be discussed meaningfully outside the context of those social forces which have made it both an issue demanding our attention and a problem calling for resolution" (p. 4). Ngũgĩ advocates for Africans to "create literary monuments in our own language" (p. 8), promoting the use of indigenous African languages to decolonise African literature. Achebe (1975) shares Ngũgĩ's view on decolonising African identity but regards colonial language as a strategic tool. Thus, rather than rejecting English outright, he advocates reshaping it: "Let no one be fooled by the fact that we may write in English, for we intend to do unheard-of things with it" (p. 103). According to Achebe, English should be a literary instrument and a form of rebellion when wielded by African writers. Appiah (1992), in agreement with Achebe, also questions ethnic authenticity, asserting that "what African intellectuals need to grasp is that trying to go back to precolonial identities is to trap ourselves in myth" (p. 178) and that "we can learn from each other without surrendering who we are" (p. 182). Gurnah's novel illustrates this evolving sense of self as characters navigate between different worlds: past and present, home and exile, colonial and postcolonial, physical and psychic. This paper explores these binary notions of identity, treating language, psychology, culture, and history as sites of ongoing negotiation and construction. Its significance lies in depicting how fractured identities are portrayed and reconstructed through literature, aligning with Bamberg's (2006) statement that "telling stories is one of the most prominent forms through which people create and communicate who they are" (p. 146). Additionally, the paper advances the broader postcolonial discourse on identity by exploring the complexities of human development within postcolonial settings.

## Literature Review

As one of the ground-breaking works of 2021, Gurnah's *Afterlives* has attracted significant scholarly attention since its publication. The focus has largely been on the novel's portrayal of

historical colonial violence, trauma, personal relationships, language appropriation, intergenerational memory, love, and identity. For instance, in her review of the novel for *The Guardian*, Mengiste (2020) praises its exploration of East Africa's colonial history, particularly its focus on the emotional and physical toll of colonialism. According to her, Gurnah's text unearths what history has buried, decentres the European, and lets those who were there speak for themselves. In fact, for Mengiste, the novel is an act of reclamation, a refusal to let the lives of the forgotten be erased. However, she critiques the abrupt ending, particularly the underdeveloped resolution of the younger Ilyas' storyline, and expresses a desire for greater clarity on his fate. Despite this, Mengiste affirms the novel's impact as a defiant effort to reclaim marginalised histories. But we note that this reclamation does not just happen in the narrative. Mengiste fails to explore the physical and mental struggles that the characters face at the integrative level or highlight the narrative intersections where this reclamation of history occurs. This paper explores the intricacies of these struggles, identifies the intersections as third spaces, and argues that this reclamation occurs through identity negotiation. Stadler (2021) aligns with Mengiste's views, emphasising that *Afterlives* illuminates the often-overlooked history of German colonialism and its negative impact on East Africa. Also, like Mengiste, he praises Gurnah's blending of the everyday with the extraordinary, showing how colonial violence affects not only nations but ordinary people's lives. However, he notes how moments of tenderness, such as cooking, poetry, and romance, blend with trauma, reflecting how people survive even in the harshest times. Against this background, Mbue (2020) interprets the novel as a powerful blend of imperial history and love story, for, despite the brutality of war, it captures fleeting moments of beauty, especially in the love story between Afiya and Hamza. For her, the novel's ability to creatively interlace political conflict and human emotion makes Gurnah a novelist par excellence. But the survival of colonial violence in the text is not merely realised through the emotional space of love or romance, as Stadler and Mbue suggest. In fact, this space offers only temporary relief; as such, it cannot be the sole reason Gurnah's novel is an excellent read. This paper argues that the ability of some characters to interrogate colonial power structures and renegotiate individual and collective identities through third spaces constitutes a resistant way of countering colonial violence and its concomitant trauma in the novel, and that this is what grants the story postcolonial relevance.

. Nonetheless, Lucas (2021) maintains, in an intertextual analysis, that *Afterlives* echoes and amplifies the themes of war, exile, colonial violence, and the struggle for dignity in Gurnah's previous work, *Paradise*. He argues that this narrative continuity reveals Gurnah's autobiographical underpinnings as a postcolonial subject shaped by Zanzibar's (now part of Tanzania) colonial past and diaspora displacement. Gurnah, he notes, writes from within a postcolonial consciousness, and this background has tamed his narrative voice. But Luca's biographical criticism positions Gurnah's novel as an ethnographic text that offers insight into the author's postcolonial consciousness, downplaying its aesthetic and symbolic dimensions. This

paper underscores these dimensions by exploring the linguistic and psychological third spaces. Following Lucas, Edwards (2023) compares Gurnah's voice with that of Morrison (1970; 1987), stressing that both traverse an ocean of stylistic difference yet converge in their determination to translate the historical into the personal by drawing attention away from broader themes of slavery, war, colonialism, and migration toward individual lives. Drawing on Morrison's concept of memory and Hartman's notion of the "afterlife of slavery," Edwards contends that *Afterlives* resists historical closure. He underscores Gurnah's multilingualism in the text not just as a stylistic device but as a challenge to singular narratives and colonial linguistic hierarchies. Hence, he sees the novel's characters as bearers of intergenerational memory, whose stories and voices would otherwise have been erased by history. While this paper aligns with Lucas's and Edwards' views on the issue of characters' identity struggles and their roles as bearers of cultural memory, it goes deeper to show how some of the characters' struggles are resolved within the third spaces and how the memory they bear is not only about the traumas of colonial violence but also their ability to survive them. Hazrat et al. (2023) fail to integrate this quest for survival in their postcolonial ecocritical study of the novel. Rather, they contend that Askari's scorched-earth tactics symbolise the link between "colonial subjugation and environmental degradation." They view Askari as a symbol of colonial authority, leaving a trail of destruction and land exploitation for wealth. Considering the ecological effects of war and displacement depicted in the novel, they argue that it explores the complex relationships among identity, war, colonialism, and economic chaos. But, again, they fail to show how this complexity prompts identity negotiation, the processes or spaces in which it occurs, as this paper does. Devi and Naqvi (2025) further examine identity in their postcolonial reading of the novel, focusing on the effects of violence on postcolonial identity formation. For them, the novel exposes neglected histories through characters like Hamza, Afiya, and Ilyas, and, in doing so, blurs the lines between reality and fiction. This resonates with the views of Mengiste (2020) and Kavinkumar and Selvam (2025), who maintain that *Afterlives* foregrounds marginalised voices. But this study argues that Gurnah also foregrounds "the intersubjective realm" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 191), where the marginalised reclaim their agency by seeking revision and inscription. Of course, it agrees with Devi and Naqvi's (2025) take that Gurnah's experiences as an immigrant postcolonial subject enable him to use fiction to deconstruct fixed notions of cultural identity. But while they maintain that this deconstruction occurs when characters confront colonial binaries, revealing cultures as fluid and in contestation with other cultures, we argue that this deconstruction occurs in third spaces (historical, cultural, psychological, linguistic), which for us are not just hybrid spaces but symbolic realms where revisionary, renegotiated identity "begins its presencing" (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 4–5). Also engaging in an intertextual reading of Gurnah's works, Okenwa and Nyambe (2026) focus on the characters' fractured identities resulting from forced migration and cultural erasure. For them, the characters' efforts to reconstruct their identities in *Afterlives* are evident in "memory, resilience, love, and acts of self-determination". But this

paper examines the effusiveness of these efforts in third spaces and, by doing so, demonstrates that identity in postcolonial settings is not a fixed category but rather fluid.

Language is one of the major lenses through which *Afterlives* has been critically analysed. Kazinja and Xu (2023) apply Uriel Weinreich's Languages in Contact theory to show that Gurnah employs code-mixing, code-switching, and translation to Africanise English. They argue that these techniques reflect the everyday interactions of Tanzanians. Tiwade and Masram (2025) likewise examine language in *Afterlives,* identifying it as both a colonial tool of domination and a weapon of resistance for the colonial subject. However, while these studies resonate with the linguistic third space analysed in this paper, they share a common limitation: the failure to explicitly identify this space as a site of identity negotiation and inscription. Thus, while existing research rightly focuses, among other things, on Gurnah's depiction of colonial violence and its damaging effects on personal and collective identities, it overlooks his use of the third space through narrative diversity to forge liminal identities that challenge or transcend colonial "politics of binary opposition" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 179). This research aims to address this gap by offering a detailed third-space analysis of character arcs, settings, and narrative structure. This approach adds a new dimension to Gurnah's work and broadens postcolonial theory's scope from trauma and memory to the negotiation of identity within cultural interstices.

**Theoretical Framework**

This paper applies postcolonial literary theory, particularly Bhabha's concept of the third space, to analyse the selected novel. Bhabha (1994) explains that postcolonial criticism uncovers the unequal and pervasive forces of cultural representation in the struggle for political and social power within the modern world order. Therefore, it should "intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to impose hegemonic 'normality' on the uneven development and often disadvantaged histories of nations, races, communities, and peoples" (p.171). Gandhi (1998) affirms that "Postcolonial theory recognises that colonial discourses typically rationalise themselves through rigid oppositions such as maturity/immaturity, civilisation/barbarism, developed/developing, progressive/primitive" (p.32). To challenge these oppositions, Bhabha introduces the third space as a dynamic zone of translation in which cultural signs transform and new meanings emerge through interactions among diverse cultural elements (1994, p. 21). He states that "it is in the emergence of the interstices, the overlap, and displacement of domains of difference, that... cultural values are negotiated" (p.2). Bhabha emphasises that culture is not static or "pure," but constantly reshaped through intercultural interaction. "It is that third space... which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity" (p.55). Thus, Bhandari (2015) views Bhabha's third space as a means of resisting colonial domination by creating an in-between space for cultural negotiation and fostering hybrid identities (p. 45). However, she critiques its limitations, including

a narrow focus on material exploitation and neocolonial power structures. Again, Dirlik (1997) questions the third space as an abstract idea that may obscure concrete material inequalities, suggesting that "the third space may inadvertently serve elite diasporic intellectuals based in Western academia rather than those in the formerly colonised regions" (p. 56). Spivak (1988) shares this perspective, arguing that "disciplinary discourse often reproduces hegemonic power," even within radical ambivalence, and risks becoming "epistemic violence" if it neglects marginalised voices (p. 283). Against this background, Ashcroft (2001) situates Bhabha's third space within a constructive postcolonial framework, emphasising its role in transformation rather than merely hybridity. Because he contends that while the third space enables negotiation, it might conceal power disparities by prioritising hybrid exchanges over addressing structural inequalities (pp. 12-15). Gandhi (1998) values the third space's emphasis on translation and exchange but advocates shifting from "liminal hybridity" to "affective intersubjectivity" (p. 131). Her critique encourages incorporating "ethical entanglement," focusing on trauma and shared aspirations in postcolonial identity formation (p. 134).

Ashcroft's and Gandhi's views are essential to this study, which interprets Bhabha's third space not merely as a hybrid space but as an 'intersubjective' realm where postcolonial identities are negotiated and transformed. The study also integrates Gandhi's concept of 'ethical entanglement,' demonstrating how A*fterlives* transcends mere storytelling to reveal characters living in a world where German colonial rule has fallen, yet its scars remain. They speak languages that are not entirely theirs, belong to homelands that no longer exist as they remember them, and navigate traditions that colonialism has both preserved and altered. Therefore, through the third-space postcolonial framework, this study shows that identity in Gurnah's novel is fluid, shaped by history, culture, language, and the human psyche. It highlights how characters inhabit liminal spaces, existing between the past and present, between colonial rule and independence, and between African traditions and foreign influences. Ultimately, the study emphasises the struggles, transformations, and choices involved in navigating multiple identities.

The study employs a close reading to examine how identity is shaped within the third space through the interplay of linguistic, cultural, historical, and psychological factors. In the linguistic third space, it examines characters' use of multiple languages, untranslated terms, and unspoken words. By showing how English interacts with, or struggles to contain, influences from Swahili, Arabic, and German, the study shows that language itself becomes a battleground for identity negotiation. In the psychological third space, it explores characters' internal conflicts, trauma, and memories, such as those of Hamza, Afiya, and Ilyas, as zones of complex identity formation. In the cultural/religious third space, it highlights hybrid customs and belief systems as intersections, while in the historical third space, it analyses the tension between past and present as spaces for storytelling and identity development. Each section uses characters, settings, and narrative techniques to pinpoint these third-space moments, demonstrating how these interconnected spaces

shape postcolonial identity in the novel. Overall, the close reading reveals that meaning in *Afterlives d*epends not only on the story but also on its presentation.

## The Linguistic Third Space in *Afterlives*

The question of language choice is among the most enduring debates in African literary discourse. The fundamental question remains: Should African writers write in indigenous tongues or in colonial languages? Is language merely a means of communication in literature, or a voice that carries the weight of the culture, history, and experience of the speakers? What is the significance of the language used in literature in relation to the African experience? Ngũgĩ (1986) and Achebe (1975), both contemporaries, are widely regarded as pioneers of this debate, with Ngũgĩ arguably the most vocal. As noted earlier in this paper, Ngũgĩ believes that adopting the coloniser's language is a form of perpetual mental colonisation, whereas Achebe holds that the colonial language can be bent to serve the former colony. No where is Achebe's view more evident than in the linguistic textures of Gurnah's narrative.

In *Afterlives*, language is more than a communicative tool; it is a battlefield and a third space where colonial and indigenous identities are negotiated. Bhabha (1994) reminds us that the third space is "the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space that carries the burden of meaning" (p.38). A major linguistic tool carrying this burden is code-switching. The novel often inserts Swahili words into the English text without translation—words such as askari, shauri, bibi, and mtu wa bahari. These intrusions resist colonial domestication. As Shringarpure (2021) observes, "the refusal to translate indigenous words is itself a political statement; it denies the colonial reader total access and privileges the native linguistic community" (p.412). Gurnah crafts a third space in this manner, destabilising English and asserting Swahili cultural sovereignty. For example, in Khalifa's speech advising Afiya on her marriage prospects, a hybrid structure emerges: "Unajua, my child, a woman must be patient. Life is made of endurance" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 147). The unmarked Swahili opening, Unajua ("you know"), enacts precisely the third space. Here, English syntax is infiltrated by Swahili cadence, producing what Bhabha calls "a hybrid utterance" that "denies the binary of coloniser/colonised" (1994, p.55). As Msiska (2009, p.23) argues, Gurnah "deploys English against itself, allowing Swahili to inscribe its rhythms and thereby provincialise the colonial language". For Nasta (2021), Gurnah's "deliberate embedding of Swahili without gloss captures the intimacy of an African worldview that English alone cannot hold" (p.9). By implication, he foregrounds the refusal to allow language to be adulterated as a weapon of resistance (Shringarpure, 2021) and of identity negotiation.

Another aspect of the novel's linguistic third space is translation, which the colonial authority relies on heavily. For instance, after Hamza joins the German colonial army, he receives orders through interpreters: "Commands came in harsh gutturals, passed through Kiswahili before reaching his ears" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 82). This chain of linguistic mediation symbolises the fragility

of colonial power. As Attridge (2004) observes, "translation is never neutral; it carries the weight of asymmetry and betrayal" (p. 91). Hamza's sense of alienation manifests precisely in this linguistic limbo; his identity is formed in a third space between German commands, Swahili mediation, and his inner voice. This echoes Bhabha's assertion that culture emerges through translation: "It is in the act of cultural translation that the hybrid condition is most forcefully articulated" (1994, p. 224). Swahili persists because it is translated, reinterpreted, and re-signified within colonial structures. In fact, Yusuf and later Hamza embody this linguistic struggle, speaking German in the barracks, Swahili at home, and Arabic in prayer. As the narrator notes: "The words were foreign in his mouth, harsh like stones, but they gave him bread. At night, he whispered in Swahili, the tongue that still made sense of his heart" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 178). The phrase "the tongue that still made sense of his heart' shows that Swahili remains a resilient cultural foundation, even as German and later English enter schooling, commerce, and politics. The narrator further notes that children are punished for speaking Swahili in colonial schools, yet the language continues to thrive in homes and markets (p. 213). The most evident linguistic third space is embodied in the character of Khalifa, first introduced in the novel: "Khalifa was a man of mixed race who worked for an Indian merchant, his ability to speak German making him valuable to the bank in Tanga" (p. 12). Khalifa's German proficiency enables him to engage with colonial economic systems, yet his use of Swahili in community interactions reflects Bhabha's ambivalence, in which he mimics colonial language without fully assimilating. His collaboration with Amur and Nassor further demonstrates this: "Khalifa showed Nassor how to work with a blockade runner, using his linguistic skills to keep the business alive" (p. 87). Thus, he is a living third space—Afro-Indian with multiple languages at his disposal, which he uses to his advantage.

Beyond mere code-switching and translation, silence also functions as a linguistic third space. Afiya, traumatised by childhood abuse, frequently defies expected responses: "She said nothing, and in that nothing was the power to withhold" (p. 119). Here, silence is not the absence of speech but a form of speech and resistance, echoing Spivak's (1988) provocative question about whether refusing to speak can be a counter-discursive act. In *Afterlives*, Gurnah depicts silence as a counter-discourse, establishing a non-verbal third space in which the colonised neither accept nor reproduce colonial discourse but instead reassert their agency through silence.

**The Psychological Third Space**

In the psychological third space, characters in *Afterlives* grapple with fractured identities as they navigate trauma, memory, and their need for belonging. Gurnah offers close portraits of characters such as Hamza, Afiya, and Ilyas, whose minds bear the scars of colonialism. Fanon (1963) states that colonial rule "distorts, disfigures, and destroys" the inner life of the colonised (p. 250). Thus, the third space in *Afterlives* becomes not only a site of cultural hybridity but also, as Freud (1961) suggests, "a psychic terrain where repression and the return of the traumatic mark identity itself"

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(p. 12). In chapter three, Hamza is introduced as a man with physical scars from German military service, but his psychological scars are even more significant, creating a third space of identity: he returns from war with "a body that had been used and broken" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 55) and "a heart that still quaked at remembered commands" (p. 56). He lives between victimhood and complicity, being both the colonised African soldier brutalised by Germans and a tool of their violence. His mind is never fully his own, filled with intrusive memories of commands shouted in German—an alien language that colonises thought itself, as Ngugi (1986) notes. This aligns with Bhabha's idea that the third space destabilises fixed identities: Hamza is neither purely victim nor agent, neither wholly African nor colonial. His psyche is a battleground where contradictory roles coexist. Fanon (1967) would describe this as "the muscular tension of the colonised" (p.110), the body and mind caught in the routines of command and subjugation. Similarly, Afiya's psychology is shaped by abandonment, abuse, and resilience. The story describes: "Her childhood was a story of bruises, some on the skin, others tucked into silence" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 83). The metaphor of bruises—both visible and hidden—illustrates her psychological third space. She embodies both vulnerability and fierce resilience. As she begins reading and attending school, she gains a sense of empowerment. Thus, literacy—originally a colonial tool—becomes both a wound (denied by kin who saw her as inferior and physically punished her for reading) and a healing source (a way to assert her worth). Her mind straddles a borderland: accepting colonial education as a tool against oppression, yet recognising it is not part of her cultural heritage. Freud (1958) would interpret her resilience as "working through" trauma—transforming suffering into psychic resistance (p. 154). Afiya balances these influences, navigating between internalised injury and dignity. Ilyas, taken as a child by Germans, perhaps embodies the deepest psychological third space: he is alienated from both his origins and his adoptive culture. Upon return, he is "a man without a past, who had learned to walk like them, talk like them, and think like them, but who did not belong to them" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 102). His dislocation—the rupture of his Africanness through European indoctrination and his lack of full acceptance into Germanness—traps his identity in cracks. This reflects Bhabha's concept of "unhomeliness," the feeling of not fully belonging to either culture (1994, p. 9). Lacan's (2006) psychoanalytic theory of the mirror stage, where the gaze of the "Other" traps an individual in a misconstrued or confused sense of self, also resonates here: Ilyas sees himself through the coloniser's gaze, but his reflection remains misrecognised and fractured, making him a victim of postcolonial trauma. Fanon (1967) refers to this as "epidermalization" (p. 92): the imposition of an identity that is never truly his own. Still, his "willpower and determined optimism" (Wright, 1995, p. 19) in rescuing his sister from violence and empowering her through education demonstrate that, despite succumbing to the coloniser's gaze, he possesses a "human spirit" open to "new possibilities" (Benneth, 1998, p. 364).

In *Afterlives,* colonialism also creates a collective psychological third space. Characters' minds are shaped by what Caruth (1996) describes as the "insistent return of the traumatic past"

(p. 4). For example, when Hamza and Afiya seek intimacy, Hamza's scars reappear: "His body flinched at the touch of kindness, as if expecting a blow" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 211). This shows that even love is disrupted by trauma; the psyche cannot return to innocence. This aligns with Freud's (1961) idea of trauma as a compulsive repetition of what the mind cannot master. According to Fanon (1967), colonial trauma is not only personal but also historical: the colonised individual is "overdetermined from without" (p. 87), pushed to live in a psychic space shaped by violence. This third space becomes a psychological middle ground, an ambivalent zone where individuals are neither fully broken by trauma nor completely healed—they remain in ongoing negotiation with memory, adapting to circumstances as they arise.

### The Cultural/Religious Third Space

Gurnah's *Afterlives* is haunted by the clash of cultures—indigenous Swahili traditions, Islamic influences, German colonial power, and later British imperial structures. It is within these intersections that characters must carve meaning, neither wholly surrendering to tradition nor completely assimilating into colonial dictates. Bhabha reminds us that "the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity… culture must be seen as the production of hybrid sites" (1994, p.37). Said (1993) underscores this, arguing that, under colonialism, culture is never neutral but always contested, a "terrain of struggle where domination and resistance are fought out" (p. xxv). Gurnah's narrative inhabits precisely this liminal terrain. Marriage in the novel becomes a site of cultural hybridisation. Khalifa's union with Asha represents not only personal intimacy but also the merging of Indian and Swahili traditions with colonial urban modernity. Asha brings traditional expectations of kinship and community, but she must also adapt to the fractured postcolonial economy, where women increasingly take on roles beyond the domestic sphere. This recalls Bhabha's notion of the "interstitial passage"—a space where "the border becomes the place from which something begins its presencing" (1994, p. 5). Asha's household is one such interstitial passage: neither fully bound to tradition nor entirely liberated into Western individualism, but a negotiation zone: "She held on to the ways of her mother, but she was not blind to the changes around her. Asha laughed at the absurdities of both worlds, making her own rules in between" (Gurnah, 2020, p.152). Ahmed (1992) observes that women in colonial and postcolonial societies often find themselves "bearing the contradictions of two worlds, forced to reconcile tradition with modernity in the most intimate spaces of life" (p. 145). Asha embodies this role precisely. She becomes a symbol of a feminine cultural third space alongside Afiya, quietly challenging both patriarchal tradition and colonial gender hierarchies. Said's (1993) observation that "cultural resistance often begins in the small spaces of everyday life" (p.59) captures the significance of Asha's agency. Her household negotiations and subtle defiance enact hybridity at the cultural level—showing that culture, like history, is always an unfinished, contested process.

Also, religion in the *Afterlives* vividly portrays the cultural third space. Khalifa, embodying the influence of Islam, constantly negotiates his identity between traditional Swahili-Islamic practices and the encroaching colonial Christianity. In the text, Khalifa critiques the colonial dismissal of Islam as "backwards," yet he himself adapts Western practices in trade and administration (Gurnah, 2020, p. 45). This tension embodies what Bhabha calls the "ambivalence of cultural authority" (1994, p. 112). Neither colonial Christianity nor indigenous Islam is wholly victorious; rather, a religious third space emerges where prayer, commerce, and survival intermingle: "They called us heathens, idolaters, as if our prayers meant nothing. Yet, when they wanted us to work, suddenly we were brothers in Christ" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 47). Asad's (1993) reminder that "religion is not a timeless essence but a historical construct, reshaped by power relations" (p. 29) resonates here: Khalifa embodies how colonial power sought to redefine faith itself. Fanon (1967) would add that such forced religious assimilation fractures the psyche, demanding outward mimicry while producing inner revolt (p. 116). Thus, Gurnah demonstrates the hypocrisy of colonial religion and, more importantly, how it forces colonised subjects into a liminal space, outwardly adopting European forms while inwardly rejecting them.

## The Historical Third Space

Gurnah's *Afterlives* explores the turbulent history of German colonial rule in East Africa, characterised by violence, resistance, and coercion. Here, history becomes hybridised—neither purely colonial nor solely indigenous, but a blend of both. Bhabha (1994) emphasises that colonial history is always complex, marked by ambivalence and negotiation: "The border is not a ready-made division between cultures. It is a place where things begin their presencing, a place of hybridity and translation" (p.224). This shows that colonial history isn't a straightforward narrative created by the empire; it's a palimpsest in which silenced voices emerge, resist, and reshape collective memory. The novel illustrates this through German narratives of "civilisation" that are frequently challenged by African accounts of suffering and resilience. Hamza's scarred body symbolises a living record of German brutality, as when "his back was a parchment of lashings" (p.103). These scars are both personal and historical—marks of violence that resist colonial erasure. Fanon (1963) notes that colonialism "is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it" (p.169). Hamza's body becomes, in Foucault's (1977) terms, a "counter-archive", an embodied text in which violence is inscribed but resistance also resonates through scars. Afiya's literacy, acquired through colonial schooling, places her between two epistemologies. She studies a German curriculum but uses her knowledge to affirm her dignity in a society that devalues her. For example, when she "read words that were not meant for her to know" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 189), she challenges the colonial control of knowledge, positioning herself in a space neither that of a submissive pupil nor of a pure resister.

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Foucault's (1977) insight into the "regimes of truth" is instructive here: knowledge is never neutral but is always bound up with power. By appropriating literacy, Afiya transforms a tool of domination into a form of self-assertion. Ricoeur (2004) adds that memory and history are intertwined and that storytelling helps silenced identities reclaim dignity (p. 85). Afiya's act of reading symbolises this negotiation—resisting erasure by narrating herself into history. Similarly, Gurnah highlights African soldiers, the askari, whose contributions are erased from colonial and postcolonial archives. Khalifa bitterly comments that "the war was theirs, but the bodies were ours" (Gurnah, 2020, p.211), challenging the tidy colonial archive and opening room for counter-memory. Mbembe (2019) describes colonialism in Africa as necropolitics—a politics of death in which African lives were considered expendable in imperial wars. By telling the stories of the forgotten askari, Gurnah breaks the silence of necropolitics and creates a third space where marginalised subaltern voices become central.

One of the most powerful examples of the historical third space in *Afterlives* is the unnamed coastal town Gurnah describes. At first, it may seem strange—why omit such an essential detail? But this silence is likely intentional. By leaving the town unnamed, Gurnah challenges the colonial practice of "naming to own," in which empires mapped, pinned, and claimed territories. Instead, the nameless town becomes a site of haunting memory. Khalifa remembers it as lively— "boats that came and went, carrying languages, goods, and strangers" (Gurnah, 2020, p. 42)—yet it is also remembered in darker terms, as a place where "soldiers marched through the streets, and people disappeared" (p. 89). Consequently, the town embodies two histories at once: its vibrant trade and cosmopolitan exchanges, alongside the brutal scars inflicted by German colonial violence. From Derrida (1994), we learn that presence is always haunted by absence; what remains unsaid shapes our perception. The town's anonymity doesn't make it empty; instead, its namelessness highlights what is missing—colonial violence, erasures, silences. Gurnah illustrates that history isn't just stored in monuments, archives, or maps; it also exists in gaps, shadows, and ghostly traces that defy disappearance. This makes the town a third space—an in-between zone of memory and oblivion, presence and absence, home and exile. By keeping it open-ended, Gurnah ensures history remains alive, unsettled, and resistant to complete control. He also shows that history isn't monolithic but a battleground of competing narratives. Gurnah rejects both the coloniser's official archive and the romanticised view of indigenous memory. Instead, he creates a space where fractured memories, bodily scars, silenced voices, and acts of love form a complex, layered identity. Bhabha's insight resonates here: in *Afterlives*, history's in-betweenness is not a weakness but a creative force—a process of becoming. It is important to note that the four loci of third space in the novel do not function independently; rather, they intersect to forge a postcolonial identity characterised by ongoing negotiation and resistance. Thus, Gurnah's work makes an important contribution to postcolonial thought: after the empire's collapse, identity is neither a

simple return to the precolonial self nor complete conformity to colonial modernity. Instead, it is continually reshaped within overlapping third spaces.

## Conclusion

Analysing *Afterlives* through the third space theoretical framework reveals that Gurnah's novel goes beyond simple portrayals of colonial encounters. It redefines identity as a fluid, adaptable, and negotiated construct. This paper illustrates this by placing characters in hybrid spaces where language, culture, history, and psychology intersect as interconnected sites for continuous identity reshaping. The linguistic space shows how multilingual exchanges involving Swahili, German, and local dialects challenge the coloniser/colonised binary, promoting resistance and self-assertion. The cultural/religious space shows how traditions, kinship, and marriage practices help characters maintain and evolve their identities within a colonial setting. The historical space emphasises war, displacement, and colonial violence, illustrating how memory and collective trauma generate new forms of belonging. The psychological space focuses on love, loss, grief, and resilience as key factors in strengthening personal and community identities against oppressive forces. Overall, the paper indicates that Gurnah's narrative suggests that surviving colonial and postcolonial contexts involves actively inhabiting in-between spaces that question fixed ideas of self and other. Thus, the paper advances postcolonial discourse by highlighting that *Afterlives* extends Bhabha's theories into real-world storytelling. It underscores that the third space is a lived experience in which individuals constantly reconfigure meaning, belonging, and selfhood amid oppression and change. It affirms that Gurnah's work exemplifies Bhabha's third space as both a survival strategy and a vision for more inclusive futures beyond colonial legacies.

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