

Anti/Post/Neocolonial Continuities in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Novels

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Abstract: Colonial rule has ended in its formal political shape, but its effects continue to define how people in former colonies remember, narrate and live their lives. Abdulrazak Gurnah's fiction is one of the most powerful records of this continuation and his two novels *Afterlives* (2020) and *Admiring Silence* (1996) bring it into clear view. In the existing scholarship, anti-, post- and neocolonial elements are usually discussed separately as if they belong to three different periods. Our research argues otherwise: in A.Gurnah's novels these three are not stages following one another, but parts of one structure working at the same time. The study combines close textual analysis with a small quantitative observation of silence-related words in *Admiring Silence*, and applies the postcolonial framework of F. Fanon, E. Said, A. Memmi and A. Césaire together with M. Bakhtin's chronotope, dialogism and polyphony. We aim to demonstrate three things: that *Afterlives* spiritually and narratively continues *Paradise*; that renaming, suppression of native identity, language and silence operate as common technologies of dislocation across both novels; and that the namelessness of the narrator in *Admiring Silence* is supported by the lexical dominance of silence-words and works as a deliberate refusal of colonial classification.

Keywords: Gurnah, *Afterlives*, *Admiring Silence*, anti-colonialism, postcolonialism, neocolonialism, chronotope, silence, identity, diaspora.

Introduction: Postcolonial literature continues to be one of the central fields in modern world literature, since the cultural, ideological and psychological effects of colonialism outlast its formal ending. The borders drawn by the empire, the languages it imposed and the hierarchies it installed continue to shape both nations and individuals. As our previous research has shown in the study of historical, cultural and religious aspects of Gurnah's fiction, his main concern is the search for an ideal place and time for the protagonists in the conditions of social and political pressure.

Abdulrazak Gurnah, awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2021 "for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fates of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents", was born in Zanzibar in 1948 and has lived in England since the late

1960s. Writing from the position of an exile, he treats migration as a deep human and historical condition. *Afterlives* and *Admiring Silence* show two angles of this condition: the first traces colonial violence into the next generation and the second shows what happens to a migrant when he tries to settle in the colonizer's country.

Our research starts from the observation that critics usually study Abdulrazak Gurnah's anti-colonial resistance, his postcolonial condition of exile and his neocolonial economic dependency as three different topics. This separation is convenient, but it does not fit Abdulrazak Gurnah's texts, where the same scene can show resistance, aftermath and continued domination at once. We will follow these three concepts as one interconnected system. The work seeks answers to three questions: how does *Afterlives* spiritually and

narratively continue Paradise; how do renaming, suppression, language and silence work in *Afterlives* and *Admiring Silence* as shared technologies of dislocation; and what does the namelessness of the narrator together with the frequency of silence-words tell us about the architecture of *Admiring Silence*. The significance of our research is in offering an integrated reading of these three colonial categories in A. Gurnah's two novels.

METHODS

The primary materials are A. Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020) and *Admiring Silence* (1996); *Paradise* (1994) is used as the precedent text for our continuity argument, and Z. Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) is brought in for comparison. The methodology is qualitative and is based on close textual analysis, comparative method and contextual interpretation. The postcolonial framework of F. Fanon, E. Said, A. Memmi and A. Césaire is used to read power, and M. Bakhtin's chronotope, dialogism and polyphony are used to read form. To strengthen the reading of *Admiring Silence*, we add a small quantitative observation of how often silence-related words and named characters appear in the novel. The three methods close reading, comparison and small lexical counting combine to justify the claim that silence in A. Gurnah is structural and not only thematic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From Paradise to Afterlives: a spiritual and narrative continuation

Afterlives completes what *Paradise* leaves silent. In *Paradise*, Yusuf is a rehani, a child pawned for his father's debts, and his captivity is endured almost without speech. His dreams of a predatory creature are symbolic and never voiced. The Edenic imagery around him, including Hamid's pigeons called the Birds of Paradise, makes paradise look like a beautiful enclosure where difference is dangerous. Yusuf's beauty echoes the Quranic prophet Yusuf, and this religious intertext is one of the central keys to *Paradise*.

In *Afterlives* the same constellation returns, but transformed. Hamza occupies the structural place Yusuf left empty, young, beautiful, bound to a merchant, friend of someone we recognize from the earlier novel, yet Hamza speaks where Yusuf was silent. His dreams are no longer symbolic; they are saturated

with blood and fallen bodies, the marks of war trauma. His beauty is no longer admired in silence; it is racialized and weaponized by German officers. Where Yusuf endured ownership without protest, Hamza states plainly that the merchant did not own him in body and spirit. The garden motif seals the continuation: the spiritual paradise of the first novel is torn down in the second. What was a sign of divine favour in *Paradise* becomes a mark of vulnerability in *Afterlives*. This trajectory from muted submission to articulate resistance is, in our reading, the clearest sign that A. Gurnah treats colonial harm as transgenerational.

Dislocation: renaming, suppression, language, silence

Across *Afterlives* and *Admiring Silence*, A. Gurnah uses a small set of devices to show how migrant identity is dislocated. The first is renaming. In *Afterlives*, Ilyas remakes himself as Elias Essen and performs an askari identity in German cabarets; in *Admiring Silence*, great-aunt Salma becomes Emily to escape family dishonour. In both cases the new name is not a fresh start but a compromise that requires suppressing the original.

The second is suppression of native identity. In *Afterlives*, the German officer's sardonic invocation of the Zivilisierungsmission shows the paternalistic logic that frames African knowledge as deficient. In *Admiring Silence*, the narrator faces a version of history that recasts the colonized as the barbarians. Crucially, suppression becomes internal: the narrator's respectful silence before a condescending English doctor shows the colonized subject policing himself according to colonial expectation.

The third is language. In *Admiring Silence* the narrator feels his own voice as foreign and goes tongue-tied among his partner's family; in *Afterlives*, Hamza's ability to read German provokes official suspicion, competence in the colonizer's language brings punishment, not reward.

The fourth is silence. For Hamza's son silence is an inherited refuge that carries trauma without words. For the narrator of *Admiring Silence* "silence" is a calculated, ironic respectability, a way to survive in a hostile setting. Internalized hierarchy completes the picture: Ilyas celebrates the empire that destroyed him, and the narrator of *Admiring Silence* excuses an Englishman's racism by blaming himself. The reader

sees that postcolonial identity is shaped by inner consent as much as by outer force. Reading these scenes against Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* where second-generation characters likewise reconstruct identity from fragmented archives confirms that A. Gurnah's repertoire is not limited to East African fiction but is shared across diaspora writing.

Namelessness and the lexical profile of silence in *Admiring Silence*

In *Admiring Silence* the colonizing and metropolitan figures around the narrator are consistently named Emma, her parents the Willoughbys, the daughter Amelia, the friend Akbar while the narrator himself is never named. Because naming historically fixes a person inside a colonial taxonomy, this asymmetry reads as a deliberate refusal: visibility is given to the colonizer, while the colonized voice keeps the one thing colonial classification cannot capture.

A small lexical observation supports this. The words silence and silent, together with their semantic neighbour lost, occur in the novel more often than competing thematic terms such as exile, memory or home. The distribution is indicative rather than statistical, but it confirms that silence is lexically as well as structurally dominant in the text. In M. Bakhtin's vocabulary, silence here functions as a chronotope: a temporal-spatial framework, a time of permanent deferral and a space of withheld dialogue, within which the narrator's alienation, his severed home and his unfinished correspondence with Akbar are constituted. The reader is enlisted to construct meaning from what is left unsaid. The novel's title, on this reading, names its method.

Character, dialogism and double-voicing

A. Gurnah's personages are constructed relationally, through the triangulation of self, other and observer. Read through A. Memmi, the novels stage the colonizer's unearned institutional privilege and the colonized subject's narrow choice between exile and resistance. Racism is the ideological core of this relation and tellingly it also circulates inside the colonized community itself, when one subordinate figure asserts a small dominance over an even more vulnerable one. Three personage-types recur across the novels: the figure who chooses silence as resistance or trauma; the teacher German or English who transmits colonial

authority through pedagogy; and the Odyssean traveller whose journey ends in fractured return rather than homecoming. The teacher type is particularly revealing. The narrator of *Admiring Silence* teaches English literature in Britain, his father taught in a colonial school, Hamza learns German under an officer's supervision, and Ilyas passes his colonially shaped literacy to his sister. Pedagogy works here as a relay of ideology not a neutral transfer of skill.

In *Admiring Silence* conversations where the narrator's reply is neither awaited nor required show silence operating as an active dialogic position. In *Afterlives*, Afiya's refusal to search the German records is not ignorance but a considered ethical stance. Polyphony preserves opposing voices, as in the debate where Mangungu condemns German cruelty while Ilyas defends German civility, with no authorial verdict. Heteroglossia surfaces in the collisions of German, Swahili, Arabic and English, especially in the officer's drills. And double-voicing allows the characters to comply and resist at the same moment, as when Hamza's outward respect hides his inner detachment or when the narrator's ironic gratitude toward Emma both accepts kindness and registers distance.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

This research focuses on only two of A. Gurnah's novels and on a small lexical observation rather than a full corpus count. The same Anti/Post/Neocolonial framework could be tested on *By the Sea* and *Gravel Heart*, where silence and self-policing are also structural. A larger lexical study, ideally one that includes the Swahili and German strata of A. Gurnah's prose, would strengthen our claim about the dominance of silence-words. These directions are left for further investigation.

CONCLUSION

The research demonstrates that *Afterlives* and *Admiring Silence* are best understood when anti-, post- and neocolonial elements are read as one interconnected system. *Afterlives* completes the silenced trajectory of *Paradise* by turning Yusuf's muted captivity into Hamza's articulate resistance. Renaming, suppression of native identity, language and silence work as shared technologies of dislocation across both novels. The narrator's namelessness in *Admiring Silence*, supported by the lexical dominance

of silence-words, is a deliberate refusal of colonial classification. Reading these features through M. Bakhtin's chronotope, dialogism, polyphony and double-voicing shows that A. Gurnah's form is itself dialogic. The wound of colonialism, in his work, is not left behind but carried forward reshaped across names, bodies and time.

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