

Uneven Voices: Gender, Narrative Authority, and the Global Public Sphere in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*

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Abstract

*This study examines the unequal distribution of narrative authority within the global public sphere in *Afterlives* through the intersections of colonial history and gendered power relations. The objective of this study was to examine uneven voices: gender, narrative authority, and the global public sphere in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*. The study is informed by Public Sphere Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Feminist Theory, drawing on the works of Jürgen Habermas, Homi K. Bhabha, and Judith Butler. Using a qualitative textual analysis approach, the study analyzes themes of voice, silence, memory, identity, and representation within the historical context of German colonialism in East Africa. The findings reveal that colonial history shapes narrative authority by privileging dominant historical narratives while marginalizing subaltern voices and memories. The study further demonstrates that gendered power relations determine whose voices are recognized and legitimized, with female characters frequently subjected to silencing and restricted participation within patriarchal structures. In addition, the novel portrays characters negotiating fragmented identities and contested forms of belonging under overlapping colonial and patriarchal systems of power. The study also reveals that personal memory functions as a site of resistance against colonial erasure and patriarchal domination in the construction of historical consciousness. The study concludes that *Afterlives* challenges dominant historical narratives by foregrounding marginalized experiences and recovering suppressed memories within the global public sphere, thereby contributing to postcolonial literary scholarship on representation, power, and historical memory.*

Keywords: Colonial memory, Gendered power relations, Global public sphere, Narrative authority, Postcolonialism

Introduction

The concept of the public sphere remains central to debates on communication, democracy, and representation. Jürgen Habermas defines the public sphere as a space of rational-critical debate where citizens participate equally in shaping public opinion (Habermas, 1989). However, this

model has been widely criticized for overlooking inequalities related to gender, class, race, and colonial history. Feminist and postcolonial scholars argue that the Habermasian model universalizes a Eurocentric understanding of communication while masking unequal access to voice and participation (Fraser, 1990; Fraser, 2014).

Building on this critique, Judith Butler (1997; 2015) explains that social and discursive norms determine who can appear as a legitimate speaking subject. Similarly, Homi K. Bhabha (1994) demonstrates how colonial discourse simultaneously produces and restricts marginalized voices through ambivalence and power. Recent studies in global communication further show that digital and transnational publics continue to reproduce inequalities of visibility, participation, and legitimacy (Papacharissi, 2010; Fraser, 2023).

Within literary studies, narrative analysis has become an important approach for examining questions of voice, authority, and representation. Postcolonial fiction often explores the relationship between historical memory, gendered subjectivity, and global structures of power (Loomba, 2015; Thieme, 2016; McLeod, 2021). Recent scholarship also argues that literary narratives reshape the conditions through which memory, identity, and voice are recognized within global literary systems (Gikandi, 2020; Booth, 2022; Huggan & Tiffin, 2023). Narrative form, therefore, becomes a significant site where authority and representation are negotiated.

Afterlives by Abdulrazak Gurnah engages directly with these concerns through its exploration of colonial history, war, displacement, and gendered silence in German East Africa. Scholars have noted the novel's focus on memory, fractured identities, and uneven belonging in the context of colonial violence (Gikandi, 2023; Maricocchi, 2024; Gasser, 2024). Through shifting perspectives

and multilingual memory, the novel challenges dominant colonial narratives and exposes the unequal distribution of voice and recognition.

This article positions *Afterlives* within debates on postcolonial literature and global communication to argue that the global public sphere is not neutral or universal, but historically structured by unequal relations of power. Drawing on feminist and postcolonial theory, the study examines how narrative authority, visibility, and representation are shaped through colonial memory and gendered hierarchies. In doing so, it demonstrates how literature can both reproduce and challenge communicative inequalities within global systems of representation.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study was to examine how narrative authority is unevenly distributed within the global public sphere in *Afterlives* through the intersections of colonial history and gendered power relations. Specifically, the study intended to:

1. Examine how colonial history shapes the construction and distribution of narrative authority in the novel
2. Analyze how gendered power relations influence whose voices are represented, silenced, or legitimized.
3. Investigate how characters negotiate identity, memory, and belonging within colonial and patriarchal structures of power.

Literature Review

Theorizing the Public Sphere: From Universality to Contestation

The concept of the public sphere remains important in communication and democratic theory, although it has been widely debated in recent scholarship. Jürgen Habermas defines the public sphere as a space where private individuals participate in rational and open discussion to form public opinion (Habermas, 1989). However, scholars have criticized this model for assuming equality and inclusivity while ignoring historical exclusions based on gender, class, race, and colonial power.

Nancy Fraser challenges the idea of a single universal public sphere by arguing that marginalized groups often create alternative “subaltern counterpublics” where they can express their experiences and interests (Fraser, 1990). She further explains that publics are shaped by unequal power relations rather than by consensus alone (Fraser, 2014). Recent communication studies also show that digital and global public spheres continue to reproduce inequalities through algorithmic control, unequal visibility, and restricted access to voice (Fuchs, 2021; Dean, 2023).

Postcolonial scholars further question the universality of the public sphere. Homi K. Bhabha argues that cultural authority is produced through hybridity, negotiation, and ambivalence within colonial relations of power (Bhabha, 1994). Similarly, Bhambra (2022) and Mignolo (2020) demonstrate that global communication systems remain influenced by colonial epistemologies that privilege Western knowledge and marginalize other voices.

Feminist theory strengthens this critique by focusing on gendered forms of recognition and exclusion. Judith Butler argues that social norms determine who can appear as a legitimate

speaking subject (Butler, 1997). Intersectional scholars such as Crenshaw (2019) further show how race, gender, and colonial histories shape communicative visibility and legitimacy.

Drawing from these perspectives, this study understands the public sphere not as a neutral space of equal participation but as a contested and unequal communicative structure shaped by power, history, and representation.

Postcolonial Critiques of Global Communication and Representation

Postcolonial theory provides an important framework for understanding how global communication is shaped by colonial histories and unequal power relations. Bhabha (1994) argues that communication and cultural meaning emerge through negotiation and hybridity rather than through fixed identities. From this perspective, communication is always influenced by unequal relations of power.

Recent postcolonial scholarship shows that colonial systems established hierarchies of language, culture, and knowledge that still influence contemporary global discourse. Bhabha (2022) and Mignolo (2020) argue that modern communication systems continue to privilege Western forms of knowledge while marginalizing others. As a result, some histories and voices are treated as universal, while others remain peripheral or fragmented.

These arguments demonstrate that global communication cannot be viewed as neutral or equally accessible. Instead, participation and recognition are historically produced through colonial and epistemic inequalities. This perspective helps explain how voice, authority, and representation remain unevenly distributed within global communicative spaces.

Gender, Voice, and the Politics of Subject Formation

Gender theory helps explain how voice and subjectivity are shaped through social and discursive norms. Judith Butler's theory of performativity argues that gender is not natural or fixed but produced through repeated social practices and norms (Butler, 1997). These norms determine who can appear as a recognizable and legitimate speaking subject.

Butler's theory is important because it shifts attention from the individual speaker to the conditions that make speaking possible. Subjectivity is therefore shaped by power relations that regulate which voices are heard and which are marginalized or silenced. Recent studies further explain that performativity is shaped by institutional, social, and technological systems (Dichman, 2023; Schlichter, 2011).

Contemporary feminist scholarship also shows that gendered visibility is influenced by digital systems and institutional structures that classify and regulate identity (Hafner et al., 2025; Netzorg et al., 2024). Intersectional theorists such as Crenshaw (2019) emphasize that gender cannot be separated from race, class, and colonial history. Fraser (2023) similarly links gendered exclusion to broader systems of recognition and misrecognition.

From this perspective, silence is not simply the absence of speech but a result of unequal power relations that limit narrative authority and communicative legitimacy. This idea is central to the present study, which examines how voice and silence are unevenly distributed in *Afterlives*.

Narrative Authority in Postcolonial Fiction

Narrative authority has become an important issue in postcolonial literary studies, especially in discussions of voice, memory, and representation. Traditional narratology, particularly the work

of Genette (1980), has been expanded by postcolonial scholars who argue that narrative structure is closely connected to history, power, and colonial representation.

Recent narratological studies emphasize focalization as a key element in shaping authority and credibility within a narrative (Alam et al., 2026). Narrative perspective determines how readers access information and interprets events, making narration a political as well as literary process.

In postcolonial fiction, narrative authority is often connected to memory and testimony. Scholars argue that postcolonial texts reconstruct histories of trauma, war, and displacement through fragmented and multi-layered storytelling (Adebayo, 2024; Maricocchi, 2024). Competing memories and voices, therefore, struggle for recognition and legitimacy within the narrative.

Studies on *Afterlives* show that the novel uses shifting perspectives and multilingual memory to reconstruct German colonial history in East Africa (Maricocchi, 2024). Gasser (2024) further explains that Gurnah challenges colonial discourse by exposing the relationship between language, naming, and power.

This study builds on these arguments by viewing narrative authority as unevenly distributed across different characters and perspectives. Through this approach, narrative form becomes closely linked to broader questions of communicative inequality and representation.

Literary Representations of Colonial Memory and War in East Africa

Recent scholarship on East African literature emphasizes that fiction plays an important role in reconstructing and challenging colonial history. Studies show that colonial memory is often preserved through fragmented narratives, oral histories, and intergenerational storytelling rather than through official historical accounts (Thieme, 2016; McLeod, 2021).

German colonialism in East Africa has received renewed attention because of its lasting effects on identity, memory, and postcolonial experience (Maricocchi, 2024; Gasser, 2024). Scholars argue that literary texts help recover marginalized voices and challenge dominant historical narratives.

Within this context, *Afterlives* revisits German colonial rule, war, and displacement in East Africa. Maricocchi (2024) explains that the novel presents memory as fragmented and contested rather than stable or unified. Similarly, Gasser (2024) argues that the novel questions colonial forms of representation through language and narrative positioning.

Recent postcolonial literary studies, therefore, view such texts not only as historical reflections but also as interventions in the politics of memory and representation. In this sense, *Afterlives* functions both as a historical narrative and as a critique of how colonial histories are remembered, narrated, and legitimized in postcolonial East Africa.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that combines Public Sphere Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Feminist Theory to examine how *Afterlives* constructs unequal patterns of voice, memory, identity, and narrative authority within the global public sphere. The framework supports the study objectives by explaining how colonial history and gendered power relations shape representation, legitimacy, exclusion, and belonging in the novel.

Public Sphere Theory, associated with Jürgen Habermas, particularly in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), conceptualizes the public sphere as a space where individuals participate in rational-critical debate on matters of common concern. Habermas assumes that this sphere should ideally be inclusive and accessible to all participants. However,

the theory has been criticized for overlooking inequalities based on gender, class, race, and colonial history. Nancy Fraser challenges this universalist view by arguing that the public sphere is shaped by unequal power relations that exclude marginalized groups. Her concept of “subaltern counterpublics” demonstrates how alternative spaces of expression emerge in response to exclusion. In this study, Public Sphere Theory helps explain how narrative authority is distributed and contested in *Afterlives*, particularly in relation to colonial memory and recognition.

The second component is Postcolonial Theory, strongly associated with Homi K. Bhabha and his work *The Location of Culture* (1994). Postcolonial theory examines how colonialism continues to shape identity, culture, and systems of knowledge even after formal colonial rule. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity explains how colonial encounters produce fluid and complex identities that resist fixed distinctions between colonizer and colonized. Scholars such as Mignolo (2020) and Bhabha (2022) further argue that global knowledge systems continue to privilege Western perspectives while marginalizing non-Western histories and experiences. Although some forms of postcolonial theory have been criticized for giving limited attention to gender and material inequalities, the theory remains central to this study because *Afterlives* explores colonial violence, displacement, memory, and cultural domination within German East Africa.

The third strand is Feminist Theory, particularly informed by Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Excitable Speech* (1997). Butler argues that gender is socially constructed through repeated norms and practices that determine recognition and legitimacy. This perspective is strengthened by intersectional feminist theory, especially the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (2019), which emphasizes that gender intersects with race, class, and historical conditions. Feminist theory helps this study examine how gendered power relations shape voice, silence, legitimacy, and representation in *Afterlives*. While early feminist theory was

often criticized for centering Western experiences, intersectional approaches have expanded feminist analysis to include postcolonial and culturally diverse contexts.

Together, Public Sphere Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Feminist Theory provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing how narrative authority, memory, identity, and belonging are unevenly distributed in *Afterlives*. Public Sphere Theory explains the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in communication, Postcolonial Theory reveals how colonial histories shape identity and authority, and Feminist Theory demonstrates how gender structures voice and recognition within colonial and patriarchal systems of power.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive design grounded in postcolonial and feminist critical approaches to examine how *Afterlives* constructs gendered narrative authority, colonial memory, and uneven regimes of voice. The approach is suitable for analyzing textual meaning, context, and complexity rather than measurable variables. The primary method is close reading, which focuses on language, narrative structure, focalization, and representations of voice and silence in selected sections of the novel to show how narrative meaning and authority are produced through literary form.

The study also employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how power relations are embedded in textual representation. CDA helps identify how colonial discourse and gendered hierarchies shape patterns of visibility, legitimacy, and exclusion within the narrative (Fairclough, 2015). These methods are guided by feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, where

feminist theory explains how gender structures access to voice, while postcolonial theory situates these dynamics within broader histories of colonial power and epistemic inequality.

The study is limited to textual analysis of *Afterlives*, focusing on key narrative moments related to gender, memory, war, displacement, and authority. No empirical data is collected. Together, these approaches enable a layered reading of the novel, showing how literary form participates in producing and sustaining uneven communicative and narrative structures in a postcolonial context.

Findings and Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the novel consistently rejects the Habermasian conception of the public sphere as an open and inclusive space of rational-critical debate (Habermas, 1989). Instead, communication in the novel is structured through hierarchy, coercion, exclusion, and unequal access to recognition. In this way, the novel supports Nancy Fraser's (1990, 2014) argument that publics are stratified and internally unequal rather than universally accessible. The analysis further aligns with postcolonial critiques that colonial modernity operates through unequal regimes of visibility, participation, and epistemic authority (Bhabra, 2022, 2024; Stoler, 2010). Through its representation of war, memory, displacement, labour, and intimate social relations, the novel reveals how colonial and patriarchal structures shape both public recognition and private forms of belonging.

Colonial History and the Construction of Narrative Authority in *Afterlives*

Coercion, Spatial Ordering, and the Colonial Public Sphere

The findings demonstrate that participation in colonial public life is never equal but continuously regulated through asymmetrical power relations that determine who is visible, audible, and legitimate. The *Afterlives* reveals that access to voice and movement is fundamentally coercive and hierarchically enforced. In military and recruitment contexts, authority operates through intimidation and command, as shown in “*You’re a bunch of washenzi... Straighten your shoulders*” (p. 55). Similarly, Hamza’s mobility is externally controlled: “*He is wanted at HQ, and I have to take him there*” (p. 55), reflecting Mbembe’s (2017) argument that colonial governance functions through the regulation of bodies and enforced circulation. Even apparently neutral directives such as “*Sit down,*” *the officer said more mildly* (p. 258), reproduce asymmetrical communicative authority, reinforcing Fraser’s (1990) claim that public participation is structured by unequal access to legitimacy rather than deliberative equality.

Spatial organization further consolidates colonial exclusion by encoding power into geography and visibility. The abandonment of public space, “*The market had been abandoned in a hurry*” (p. 57), reflects what Bhabha (1994) describes as colonial spatial anxiety, where surveillance produces withdrawal and fragmentation. The hierarchical arrangement of authority, “*There was a hierarchy to the arrangement...*” (p. 78), demonstrates how space becomes an instrument of governance. Meanwhile, the invisibility of subordinate labour, “*they seemed unaware the servants were even there...*” (p. 83), illustrates Spivak’s (1988) epistemic silencing, where subaltern presence is structurally unacknowledged.

The findings demonstrate that Gender intensifies spatial exclusion within the colonial public sphere. Male characters such as Hamza occupy partial visibility, “*People greeted him...*” (p. 187), yet remain constrained by surveillance and institutional mediation. Female participation is even more restricted, as “*speaking to a man was equivalent to making an arrangement for a secret meeting*” (p. 184), reflecting Fraser’s (2014, 2023) concept of stratified visibility, where recognition is conditional and unevenly distributed.

Overall, the colonial public sphere in *Afterlives* emerges as a regulated space of controlled visibility, where coercion, spatial ordering, and gendered exclusion determine access to narrative authority and communicative legitimacy.

Language, Knowledge, and the Production of the Colonial Subject

The findings show that language functions not merely as a medium of communication but as a technology of power that produces regulated, fragmented, and hierarchically positioned subjects.

Colonial language regimes determine who may speak, in what language, and with what authority (Makoni & Pennycook, 2020). This is evident in the interrogation, “*Hamza?*” “*Who do you know in Germany?*” (p. 258), where linguistic competence becomes surveillance. Literacy itself becomes a site of suspicion through repeated questioning, “*Can you read?*” (pp. 67, 127, 152, 258), transforming knowledge into risk. This culminates in epistemic denial: “*For security reasons... you will not see this letter, ever*” (p. 158), reflecting Mbembe’s (2021, 2024) argument that colonial systems convert knowledge into mechanisms of control and exclusion.

Colonial institutions further reinforce epistemic hierarchy through archives and bureaucratic classification. The insult “*Dummkopf*” (pp. 190, 268) signals linguistic domination, while the

archival system itself functions as what Stoler (2010, 2024) terms a “technology of imperial rule,” structuring what can be known and remembered. Similarly, colonial schooling produces disciplined subjects through repetition and mimicry, as seen in “*They sometimes pointed him out to others as an example: Look at Ilyas...*” (p. 237), reflecting Bhabha’s (1994) concept of ambivalent mimicry, where subjects are visible yet never fully autonomous.

Everyday speech also becomes a mechanism of classification and narrative authority. Hamza’s cautious request, “*I am looking for work, please...*” (p. 137), demonstrates how voice must conform to institutional expectations to gain recognition. Nassor Biashara’s interrogation, “*What kind of work?*” “*Can you keep a book?*” (p. 137) links legitimacy to administrative literacy, while Khalifa’s remark, “*What are you? Some kind of hooligan?*” (p. 150), illustrates classificatory violence in ordinary discourse.

Gendered linguistic regulation further structures access to voice. Female literacy is actively suppressed, as in “*He broke it because he said it was wrong for me to know how to write*” (p. 196), reflecting Spivak’s (1988, 2010) argument on subaltern silencing and Butler’s (2024) notion of regulated intelligibility. At the same time, domestic spaces offer limited counter-epistemologies, as embodied knowledge and communal networks emerge in “*Afiya preferred to go into labour...*” (p. 230), aligning with Fraser’s (1990) concept of subaltern counterpublics and Stoler’s (2010) idea of intimate colonial governance.

Finally, colonial communication systems extend into military and technological infrastructures, where voice is absorbed into imperial machinery. Ilyas’s disappearance, marked by “*they heard nothing from him*” (p. 98), underscores the fragility of colonial subject formation, where identity is erased within administrative and communicative systems.

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that narrative authority in *Afterlives* is produced through intertwined systems of coercion, spatial control, linguistic discipline, and epistemic regulation. The colonial public sphere is therefore not a neutral communicative space but a structured field of power where visibility, voice, and knowledge are unevenly distributed. At the same time, the novel reveals fragmented yet meaningful forms of resistance through silence, domestic counter-spaces, and linguistic disruption, which challenge the stability of colonial narrative authority.

Gendered Power Relations, Voice, and Narrative Silencing in *Afterlives*

This section examines how gender structures shape representation in *Afterlives*, particularly how male and female characters are positioned in relation to voice, recognition, legitimacy, and silence. The findings show that gender is a performative and socially regulated system shaped by colonial, military, and domestic power relations. Consistent with Nancy Fraser's (2014, 2023) critique of the public sphere, access to voice is unevenly distributed, whereas Judith Butler's (1990, 2004, 2024) theory of performativity conceptualizes gender as produced through repeated acts of speech, silence, and embodiment. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used as a complementary lens to show how language reproduces gendered power relations by revealing how voice and silence are constructed through discourse, linguistic choices, and narrative patterns, thereby exposing embedded inequalities in representation.

Masculinities, Authority, and the Regulation of Male Voice

Masculinity in *Afterlives* emerges as a fragile, performative, and socially regulated construct produced through voice, authority, and institutional discourse rather than innate dominance. From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, the text reveals how language functions as a site

where power is enacted, reproduced, and contested through everyday speech, institutional narratives, and embodied practices. Hamza's experience demonstrates that masculine recognition is discursively constructed and conditional, shaped by what Butler (1990) describes as regulatory norms of intelligibility that determine who can speak and be recognized as a legitimate subject. His restrained articulation, "*Not now... not after love*" (p. 195), illustrates how masculinity is sustained through both utterance and strategic silence, each embedded within broader discursive constraints.

Colonial and military discourses intensify this instability by producing masculinity through regimes of discipline, vulnerability, and surveillance. CDA highlights how institutional language normalizes domination while simultaneously exposing its emotional costs. Hamza's internalized shame, "*It shamed me... as if I had done something to deserve it*" (p. 200), reflects what Mbembe (2021, 2024) conceptualizes as the affective interiorization of colonial power, where domination is linguistically and emotionally inscribed within the subject. In contrast, hegemonic masculinity is discursively performed through militarized speech that legitimizes violence: "*We are merciless, angry bastards... to bully and mutilate washenzi civilians*" (p. 111), aligning with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) notion of hegemonic masculinity as a socially exalted but unstable configuration of dominance. Yet CDA also reveals the instability of this discourse, as emotional rupture disrupts militarized subject formation: "*He woke up... sobbing in his nightmare*" (p. 122), exposing the contradiction between authoritative military language and embodied psychological fragility.

Masculinity is further regulated through spatial and social discourses that reproduce exclusion and normative belonging. Hamza's absence from childbirth, "*It was not seemly for the husband to be sitting so expectantly by*" (p. 230), reveals how gender norms are naturalized through everyday

language, reinforcing what CDA identifies as the ideological reproduction of the gendered public/private divide (Fraser, 2014; Connell, 2023). Similarly, public authority figures such as Nassor Biashara and Khalifa demonstrate how masculine legitimacy is constructed through discursive practices of speech control, classification, and economic authority, echoing Habermas's (1989) notion of communicative authority but revealing its distortion under colonial hierarchies where access to voice is unequal and stratified.

Everyday discourse further polices masculinity through embodied linguistic constructions of strength and assertiveness. Expressions such as “*You need skill... and the strength of an ox*” and “*Watchmen have bulging thighs... big testicles*” (p. 144) function as normative statements that encode masculinity as physical dominance. Through a CDA lens, such utterances are not neutral descriptions but ideological statements that reproduce hegemonic masculinity as commonsense reality, reinforcing Connell's (2023) argument that masculinity is sustained through repeated discursive and bodily performances. Within this framework, silence is discursively positioned as weakness, marginalizing Hamza's injured body and subdued voice as non-normative within dominant gender regimes.

At the same time, Ilyas introduces a mobile and institutionally validated masculinity shaped by education, mobility, and transnational circulation. CDA reveals how institutional discourse confers legitimacy through recognition structures embedded in education and empire: “*He was awarded a scholarship... He had never travelled anywhere...*” (p. 264). This reflects Ratele's (2021) conception of globally reconfigured masculinities shaped by mobility and institutional capital. However, this discourse remains unstable within colonial epistemic hierarchies (Bhambra, 2022; Mignolo, 2020), as evidenced in “*Uncle Ilyas was dancing and singing in German cities and*

waving the Schutztruppe flag...” (p. 271), where masculinity becomes performative within imperial spectacle rather than autonomous agency.

Ilyas’s disrupted voice, “*He was calling out his name... but in a woman’s voice*” (p. 248), ultimately destabilizes the coherence of gendered identity, foregrounding its constructed and contingent nature. This moment reinforces Judith Butler’s (2004, 2024) argument that gender is produced through repetition, rupture, and instability rather than fixed essence. Khalifa’s corrective response operates as a disciplinary discourse that reasserts normative intelligibility, illustrating how deviations from gender norms are actively policed through social sanction and interpretive control. Collectively, this episode underscores that gender coherence in the novel is not inherent but continually produced and enforced through discursive regulation and power.

Femininity, Domesticity, and the Politics of Silenced Voice

Femininity in *Afterlives* is constructed through discursive regulation, surveillance, and affective discipline. From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, feminine identity is not merely represented in the text but actively produced through everyday language practices, moral codes, and interpretive frameworks that structure how women’s speech and behavior are understood. Feminist public sphere theory conceptualizes this condition as stratified visibility, where women’s access to voice is structurally limited and socially conditional (Fraser, 2014, 2023). Butler’s (1997, 2004, 2024) theory of performativity further clarifies that femininity is discursively produced through repeated acts of restraint, modesty, and controlled expression, rather than any essential or natural disposition.

Afiya's self-regulation, "*She suppressed [her smile] in case she seemed eager and flurried*" (p. 184), illustrates how feminine subjectivity is constructed through the internalized discourse of emotional control and social surveillance. A CDA reading reveals that such expressions are not neutral descriptions of behavior but ideological productions of femininity that normalize restraint as socially intelligible conduct. This aligns with feminist scholarship that emphasizes how postcolonial femininity is shaped through affective governance and visibility management under intersecting patriarchal and colonial regimes (Butler, 2024; Fraser, 2023).

Women's speech is further regulated through discursive mechanisms of moral surveillance and social interpretation. The statement that "*speaking to a man was equivalent to making an arrangement for a secret meeting*" (p. 184) demonstrates how everyday language encodes suspicion into female communicative acts. Through CDA, this reflects a broader ideological process in which women's speech is recontextualized as morally transgressive, thereby reinforcing Crenshaw's (2019) intersectional argument that gendered oppression is compounded by interlocking systems of social control, cultural norms, and historical inequality. In this sense, female voice is not absent but systematically reframed, monitored, and delegitimized within patriarchal discourse.

However, domestic space simultaneously emerges as a counter-discursive site where alternative forms of meaning-making and epistemic authority are produced. The moment "*Afiya preferred to go into labour...*" (p. 230) signals not only embodied agency but also the emergence of informal female communicative networks that function as subaltern counterpublics (Fraser, 1990). From a CDA perspective, domesticity operates as a semi-autonomous discursive sphere where dominant public authority is partially suspended and renegotiated. This aligns with Stoler's (2010, 2024) concept of intimate colonial governance, which highlights how domestic spaces become sites of

both regulation and subtle resistance. Contemporary feminist scholarship further emphasizes that such spaces may generate alternative epistemologies that challenge dominant patriarchal and colonial knowledge systems (Crenshaw, 2019; Fraser, 2023).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that masculinity and femininity in *Afterlives* are produced through performative, discursive, and institutional mechanisms that regulate voice, silence, embodiment, and recognition. Gender, therefore, emerges not as a fixed identity but as a relational discursive system shaped by intersecting colonial, patriarchal, and communicative structures. Masculinity is constructed through fragile authority, disciplinary speech, and continual negotiation of legitimacy, while femininity is produced through controlled silence, affective regulation, and domestically mediated visibility. Together, these dynamics reveal a deeply uneven yet interconnected gendered public sphere in which voice and silence function as effects of structured power relations rather than natural expressions of identity.

Negotiation of Identity, Memory, and Belonging under Colonial and Patriarchal Power

Fragmented Identities and the Politics of Memory under Colonial Rule

The findings demonstrate that memory in the novel is neither stable nor linear but rather fragmented, selective, and structured by colonial regimes of knowledge. Instead of producing historical clarity, colonial systems generate epistemic gaps, emotional dislocation, and fractured subjectivities.

The archival encounter illustrates the ambivalence of colonial knowledge production. Ilyas's engagement with the archive reveals that historical records are not neutral repositories but instruments of classification and authority. The term "*Gleichschaltung*... means coordination,

control” (p. 267) signals how knowledge is structured through ideological regulation, aligning with Mbembe’s (2021, 2023) argument that colonial power persists through regimes of epistemic control. However, the novel shifts from archival certainty to affective reconstruction, as “*Someone loved Uncle Ilyas enough to follow him to certain death...*” (p. 272) reclaims history through memory and ethical imagination rather than empirical completeness, reflecting contemporary cultural memory approaches that emphasize post-archival reconstruction (Bhambra, 2022).

Colonial violence is further internalized through trauma and fragmented recollection. Ilyas’s disembodied question, “*Where is Ilyas?*” (p. 248), alongside “*There were so many unaccounted dead...*” (p. 239), reflects unresolved historical rupture and the persistence of loss. Similarly, Hamza’s experience of disorientation, “*perhaps he had lost part of his memory*” (p. 149), and traumatic imagery of “*falling through dark emptiness... crawling over fallen bodies*” (p. 150), demonstrates how violence disrupts narrative coherence and embeds itself in bodily memory. These fragmented recollections align with trauma theory’s emphasis on repetition, absence, and narrative instability.

Memory is also shaped by epistemic exclusion and everyday colonial knowledge systems. The absence of formal documentation, “*no one had bothered to record her birth*” (p. 107), highlights archival erasure, while Afiya’s self-assigned birth date represents a subtle act of narrative self-inscription. Similarly, competing knowledge systems are evident in Bi Asha’s rejection of literacy as “*words of unbelievers*” (p. 105), demonstrating how colonial and local epistemologies collide in shaping memory and identity. Gender further structures memory internalization, as Afiya’s belief that “*All a woman had was her honour...*” (p. 185) reflects how patriarchal norms become embodied through self-regulation, consistent with Butler’s theory of performativity.

Overall, the findings show that colonial memory in *Afterlives* is fragmented, contested, and emotionally embedded, producing identities that are unstable and continuously reconstructed under the weight of historical violence.

Belonging, Mobility, and Negotiation of Subject Positioning

This section explores how characters negotiate belonging, mobility, and social positioning within intersecting colonial and patriarchal systems in *Afterlives*. The findings demonstrate that belonging is not fixed but continuously negotiated through recognition, movement, language, and social legibility.

Belonging in the novel is structured through epistemic recognition and social classification. Questions such as “*Who are your people?*” (p. 151) and suspicions that “*He is a complete stranger... trouble*” (p. 157) illustrate how identity is validated or denied through social and institutional recognition. These processes reveal that belonging is conditional and regulated by both colonial and local systems of authority.

Mobility emerges as a key axis of identity formation, particularly for Ilyas. His transnational movement and educational recognition position him within what Connell (2005) and Ratele (2021) describe as globally reconfigured masculinities tied to institutional and spatial mobility. However, this mobility is deeply ambivalent, as colonial epistemic systems continue to structure visibility and legitimacy (Bhabra, 2022). Ilyas’s participation in imperial spectacle, “*Uncle Ilyas was dancing and singing in German cities and waving the Schutztruppe flag...*” (p. 271), illustrates how mobility can reproduce rather than transcend colonial power, aligning with Bhabha’s (1994) concept of hybridity and ambivalent identification.

Hamza, by contrast, represents marginal and unstable belonging. His partial integration into social spaces is always mediated and conditional, reflecting a form of precarious subject positioning within colonial and patriarchal hierarchies. His identity is neither fully excluded nor fully included but constantly negotiated through surveillance, labour, and recognition, aligning with the notion of precarious masculinity as discussed by Michael Kimmel (2013).

Gender further shapes belonging by structuring access to recognition and legitimacy. Female identity is particularly constrained by patriarchal norms that regulate visibility and honour. Afiya's internalized belief that "*All a woman had was her honour...*" (p. 185) demonstrates how belonging is tied to moral discipline and gendered self-surveillance, consistent with Crenshaw's (2019) intersectional framework and Butler's (2024) theory of regulated subjectivity. These dynamics show that women's belonging is not public or freely negotiated but deeply embedded in moral and domestic regulation.

In conclusion, the findings reveal that belonging in *Afterlives* is fluid, conditional, and shaped by intersecting systems of colonial authority and patriarchal control. Identity is continuously negotiated through mobility, recognition, and exclusion, producing hybrid and unstable subject positions within a stratified social order.

Across the findings, it becomes evident that identity, memory, and belonging in *Afterlives* are not fixed categories but dynamic processes shaped by colonial violence, epistemic control, and gendered power relations. Characters continually negotiate fragmented memories and unstable identities while seeking recognition and belonging within unequal structures of authority. Ultimately, the novel presents subjectivity as relational, contested, and historically embedded within overlapping colonial and patriarchal regimes of power.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Taken together, *Afterlives* demonstrates that narrative authority within the colonial public sphere is unevenly distributed and structurally produced through intersecting regimes of colonial power, gendered norms, and epistemic governance. In relation to the first objective, the analysis indicates that colonial history is not merely a thematic backdrop but a constitutive force in the production of narrative authority, as voice is systematically embedded within coercive infrastructures of surveillance, labour extraction, and linguistic regulation. This configuration produces a hierarchically stratified public sphere in which access to articulation, recognition, and interpretive legitimacy is differentially allocated.

With respect to the second objective, the findings establish that gendered power relations play a decisive role in structuring regimes of audibility and silence. Masculinity is constructed as a performative yet inherently unstable mode of authority, sustained through disciplinary practices of restraint and social expectation, yet persistently disrupted by vulnerability, trauma, and precarious social positioning. Femininity, conversely, is predominantly constituted through regimes of containment, affective regulation, and enforced silence, although women intermittently articulate constrained yet meaningful forms of agency through embodied epistemologies and informal communicative circuits.

Regarding the third objective, the novel foreground's identity, memory, and belonging as contingent and contested processes produced within the entanglements of colonial and patriarchal

power. Subject formation is revealed as non-coherent and processual, as evidenced in Hamza's partial linguistic incorporation, Ilyas's transnational mobility and epistemic marginality, and Afia's embodied negotiation of social visibility. These trajectories collectively underscore that subjectivity is continually reconfigured through differential access to mobility, recognition, and symbolic inclusion.

At the level of narrative form, the study demonstrates that restricted focalization and epistemic fragmentation operate as formal correlates of structural inequality, constraining access to narrative knowledge while destabilizing historical coherence. Archival authority, linguistic hierarchies, and representational regimes function as mechanisms through which epistemic inclusion and exclusion are regulated. Simultaneously, the text resists totalizing closure through dispersed, affective, and fragmentary modes of remembrance that foreground the unresolved temporalities of colonial violence.

Ultimately, *Afterlives* destabilizes normative assumptions of a unified, deliberative public sphere by demonstrating that voice, memory, and historical narration are not neutral communicative acts but socially produced outcomes of power. Narrative authority is thus revealed as a politically mediated formation, constituted through asymmetrical relations that determine who is authorized to speak, whose experiences attain legibility, and how historical meaning is circulated and stabilized.

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