Scientific and Social Research, 2026, Volume 8, Issue 10
https://bbwpublisher.com/journal/SSR
Online ISSN: 2981-9946
Print ISSN: 2661-4332

Epistemic Violence and Interpretive Justice in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives*

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Abstract: Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* reconsiders German colonial rule in East Africa through people largely marginal to imperial histories. This article examines how colonial power determines which experiences may be recognized as knowledge, and how the novel contests that power without claiming to restore an undamaged past. Combining close reading with the concepts of epistemic violence, hermeneutical injustice and decolonial memory, it analyses military classifications, the rhetoric of civilization, embodied trauma, women's literacy and incomplete archives. Hamza's painful recollections, Afiya's written appeal and the intergenerational search for Ilyas reveal distinct obstacles to interpretation. Their stories also demonstrate that recognition emerges through listening, practical care and the critical use of evidence. Read from a Global South perspective, the novel makes ordinary East African lives central to colonial history while refusing to present their experiences or political loyalties as uniform.

Keywords: Epistemic violence; Interpretive justice; Collective memory; Global South

Online publication: November 25, 2026

1. Introduction

German colonial rule and the First World War provide the historical horizon of *Afterlives*, but Gurnah does not organize the narrative around a sequence of imperial victories and defeats. He begins with the working lives, precarious homes, and entangled relationships of East Africans, Indians, and Europeans on the coast. Khalifa's dealings with merchants, Hamza's experience as an *askari,* and Afiya's struggle to find security register the consequences of conquest at a scale that official military history often neglects. War survives not simply as a dated event but as a wound, a silence or an unanswered family question. This perspective does not replace public history with private feeling; it asks why the latter has so often been treated as historically secondary [1].

Scholarship has clarified several dimensions of this narrative. Yu considers the meeting of large historical events and ordinary lives in Gurnah's account of East Africa [2]. Ling examines how material

things mediate experiences of trauma and colonial power [3]. Maricocchi places the novel within multilingual memories and the continuing politics of German colonial amnesia, while Lammers investigates silence and memory across different historical contexts [4–5]. These approaches help disclose what imperial histories overlook, but the question of *interpretive authority* deserves sustained attention. Colonized people are not merely left out of records: their actions are classified through systems of naming, discipline, and education whose standards they did not establish. The present article therefore asks how colonial domination constrains what can be understood or believed, how characters reclaim the conditions of testimony, and how personal memories become available to later generations. Reading bodily detail beside fragments of paperwork prevents a false choice between oral memory and documentary truth. The novel tests one kind of evidence against another, asking not merely whether information survives but how it becomes meaningful to those seeking it. Its central claim is qualified rather than restorative: the novel does not produce a complete counter-archive, but reveals forms of knowledge and moral difficulty that imperial categories cannot contain.

2. Epistemic power and colonial rule

Epistemic violence is not limited to suppressing speech. It also involves the unequal authority to name people, determine legitimate explanations, and decide which accounts enter accepted history. Fricker distinguishes the denial of credibility from hermeneutical injustice, in which disadvantaged participation in collective meaning-making leaves some experiences inadequately understood within dominant frameworks [6]. Although her account is not a complete theory of empire, it helps explain why a person can remember an event clearly yet still lack a recognized place from which to explain it. Posholi makes the colonial dimension more explicit by connecting epistemic decolonization to the hermeneutical injustice of Eurocentrism [7]. Mignolo similarly calls attention to the historical privilege accorded to European ways of knowing [8]. Here *interpretive justice* means neither speaking on behalf of every colonized person nor establishing an unquestionable alternative history. It refers to a fairer encounter between lived experience, local explanation and institutions that claim the authority to interpret both.

The first chapter establishes the political force of naming. European states have already “drawn their maps and signed their treaties” while people on the East African coast resist German rule. Later, the Germans defeat the Wahehe by “starving and crushing and burning out their resistance.” The movement from a map to organized starvation is revealing: the claim that a territory has been settled on paper helps disqualify the people who refuse to recognize that settlement. An imperial map has practical uses, but it also presents a disputed conquest as an accomplished legal order. The novel asks readers to notice the bodies and destroyed livelihoods that such a description leaves outside its frame.

Army language performs related work while exposing distinctions the category *askari* conceals. Recruits may volunteer, be put forward by elders, or be taken on the road; the narrative refuses to describe their arrival as one uniform choice. Hamza enlists because his circumstances have become intolerable, yet his initial decision cannot be treated as consent to everything that follows. Training subjects men to racial humiliation and bodily discipline, even as military service provides wages, status, or escape from an earlier dependence. Ilyas offers another complication. Educated at a mission school after being taken from his home as a child, he learns German and gains work through colonial connections. He speaks admiringly about farms, roads and schools, suggesting that education can expand an individual’s opportunities while narrowing the terms in

which that individual reads colonial conflict. When Hamza's officer presents mathematics and other learning as gifts brought by Europeans, the problem is not the value of mathematics itself. It is his assumption that African intelligence becomes visible only after European instruction. Gurnah refuses the easy judgment that a colonized person either rejects colonial authority or has no independent agency at all.

The language of civilization comes closest to undoing itself when the wounded German officer admits, "We lied and killed for this empire," before recalling how its violence was called a *Zivilisierungmission*. Awareness of the contradiction has not prevented him from serving the same imperial project. The missionary who later cares for Hamza is capable of genuine medical attention, yet he describes the surrounding landscape as a place where nothing historically important has happened. These figures cannot be made into identical villains, which is precisely why their attitudes matter. Protection, learning, and medical help coexist with a presumption that Europeans possess the measure of historical significance. The violence lies partly in deciding that African lives are outside history even while those lives sustain the colony and endure its wars.

3. Embodied memory and testimony

Hamza returns from military service with an injury inflicted by a German non-commissioned officer. When he is alone, he touches the "ugly scar on his hip" and massages the muscle beneath it. The gesture offers no coherent military chronicle. It does, however, register a past that persists after the change of government and the apparent return of ordinary routines. A colonial archive could list a soldier, a unit or a command, but it would struggle to convey the pain of movement or the humiliation attached to the injury. The scar should not be romanticized as a perfect witness: bodily suffering cannot, by itself, tell another person who was responsible or what circumstances made the violence possible. Its significance lies in resisting the idea that history belongs only to documents produced by those who controlled the war. When Afiya first explores the injury, Hamza asks, "Not now." His refusal does not empty the experience of meaning. It signals that speech requires a time and an audience in which he can bear to give an account.

Afiya eventually hears his recollections of recruitment, battle, injury and recovery. Her questions and pauses allow him to tell a difficult story in his own order rather than according to an officer's report. She neither demands an exhaustive confession nor treats his silence as a deficiency to be corrected. This small scene clarifies the limits of an exclusively archival model of justice. Interpretation may begin before a fully articulated statement is available, when another person acknowledges fear, hesitation, and the survivor's right to determine what can be said. Yet the narrative does not claim that intimacy makes the wound disappear. Care changes the conditions of testimony without undoing the violence that made testimony necessary.

4. Afiya's literacy and care

Afiya's childhood moves the struggle over interpretive power from the army to the household. Her brother teaches her to read and write, a skill that promises communication beyond the people who control her labor. Returned to relatives who exploit her, she is beaten when her uncle discovers her writing and demands, "Why does a girl need to write?" His question connects knowledge to gendered obedience: literacy is dangerous because it allows the child to describe her treatment to someone outside his authority. Despite her injured hand, Afiya sends a message in Kiswahili: "Kaniumiza. Nisaidie. Afiya." The novel gives its meaning as "He has hurt me. Help me." Khalifa responds and comes to remove her from the household. The note is both a

record and an intervention; it matters because a reader believes it and acts. What rescues Afiya is not literacy understood as an abstract civilizing gift, but a fragile social relation among a writer, a messenger and a listener.

Her later experiences also complicate any simple opposition between European medicine and supposedly traditional female knowledge. When she gives birth, she chooses a midwife familiar to local women instead of delivering at a new clinic. This preference concerns trust and the wish to be surrounded by people she knows; it should not be read as an absolute rejection of modern treatment. In time she works at the maternity clinic herself. The service seeks assistants who can read basic materials, write notes and speak Kiswahili, while also recognizing the practical experience of women who attend births at home. Afiya therefore moves between overlapping kinds of knowledge, rather than from ignorance into enlightenment. Her history brings out a further distinction: a skill made dangerous by a patriarchal household can become useful in public care without losing its roots in the local community. The clinic is not outside colonial administration, and employment does not erase its inequalities. Nevertheless, the scene permits women to become practitioners and interpreters of bodily experience, rather than passive subjects of a policy devised elsewhere. Gurnah treats their daily acts of care as historically consequential because those acts preserve relations, skills, and memories through political change.

5. Colonial archives and the missing

The loss of Afiya's brother tests whether written records can answer the questions they produce. Hamza initially tells her that the Germans are skilled at keeping records, yet he later doubts anyone would care about a missing *schutztruppe* soldier. These statements need not be understood as opposing views of archival accuracy. A bureaucracy may preserve detailed accounts of service while having no obligation to explain a former soldier's life to the family waiting for news. The problem is whose questions the institution was established to answer. Records are organized around service, eligibility, and discharge, whereas a family seeks an explanation for a human absence. These are not equivalent demands. Even a meticulous military bureaucracy may provide no category for a sister's grief or her continuing need to know.

The search nevertheless yields evidence, and that discovery prevents the novel from equating archives with pure erasure. Through correspondence with a German acquaintance, Hamza learns that Ilyas Hassan applied for a pension in 1929 and a campaign medal in 1934. Both applications failed: one for want of discharge papers, the other because the decoration was not available to African *askari*. Here an institution records the petition while preserving the distinction that defeats it. The correspondence also becomes vulnerable to imperial surveillance and the interruption of postal services during another European war. Years later, Afiya and Hamza's son, likewise named Ilyas, investigates the missing uncle in Germany. A photograph printed in a colonial-revival magazine omits the African man's identity; the original photograph preserves the name Elias Essen, and Afiya recognizes her brother. In the subsequent investigation, the younger Ilyas finds a history that the family could not have anticipated: his uncle had worked as a performer in Germany, joined colonial-revival activities, and marched for the return of the empire. He was then imprisoned under Nazi racial laws and died in Sachsenhausen in 1942, as did his son Paul. The narrative explicitly leaves the cause of the older Ilyas's death unrecorded. Each discovery corrects an earlier silence, but the completed story remains partial, compiled across different institutions and through the recognition of a relative whom

the archive alone could not replace.

The discovery also makes moral interpretation harder. The missing man had supported an organization committed to colonial restoration; he cannot be described only as someone erased by European memory. At the same time, the racial regime he lived under violently excluded him. Wiegandt's discussion of complicated implication offers a useful warning against placing every character permanently in the category of perpetrator, victim, or innocent bystander [9]. Gurnah's ending demands that an African life be taken seriously even when its choices resist an uncomplicated story of anti-colonial virtue. Interpretive justice does not mean making the past morally comfortable. It means recognizing the full person, including contradictions that a consoling family legend might rather omit.

6. Collective memory in the Global South

The novel's movement between generations changes the scale of historical explanation. Hamza's painful leg, Afiya's childhood letter and the long investigation of Ilyas do not originate in one experience, yet they become related through family conversation and acts of care. This connection makes memory more than a store of private suffering. The younger Ilyas has access to institutions and technologies his parents lacked; they, in turn, can recognize faces, names, and feelings that would otherwise remain obscure to researchers. His investigation therefore joins written evidence with the remembered knowledge of those still living. A Global South perspective is helpful here because the term can mark shared structures of unequal power, rather than simply designate a group of countries on a map [10]. It would be misleading, however, to present East Africans in the novel as an undifferentiated community of victims. Class position, religious belonging, gender, and access to education shape how the characters respond to empire. Soldiers participate in colonial force under different degrees of constraint, while European officials may both assist individuals and reproduce imperial assumptions. Afiya's everyday negotiations reveal divisions inside local society as well as those imposed from outside. Smith's account of decolonizing knowledge supports the need to challenge dominant explanations without imagining that any community speaks with a single voice [11].

Literature cannot supply the missing papers, undo a wartime injury or decide who should speak for an entire society. Its work is interpretive: it restores significance to relationships that official accounts reduce to background detail and shows the uncertainty involved in reconstructing lives. In *Afterlives*, collective memory is consequently a practice rather than an inherited consensus. It takes shape in the difficulty of listening to the living, locating the absent and allowing evidence to disturb a story that once seemed settled. This makes the return to ordinary life historically significant. Work, home, nursing and correspondence do not stand outside politics; they are places where people preserve, contest or lose the ability to narrate what has happened to them.

7. Conclusion

Afterlives presents colonial domination as a struggle over meaning as well as territory and bodies. Military labels conceal unequal conditions of service; the civilizing mission redescribes coercion as progress; and administrative records register African lives according to imperial priorities. Against these arrangements, Gurnah gives historical weight to a scar that has not ceased to hurt, a girl's written request for rescue and the incomplete documents recovered by a later generation. These forms of knowledge are not interchangeable.

Afiya's note succeeds because someone acts, Hamza's testimony depends on trust, and the archives concerning Ilyas illuminate his fate while unsettling any simple account of his loyalty. Interpretive justice in the novel is therefore neither the triumph of memory over evidence nor the recovery of an innocent collective voice. It is an ongoing process of making room for difficult experiences and responsible disagreement. The particular East African lives at its center become indispensable to the history of colonial modernity, not an illustration appended to a European narrative.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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