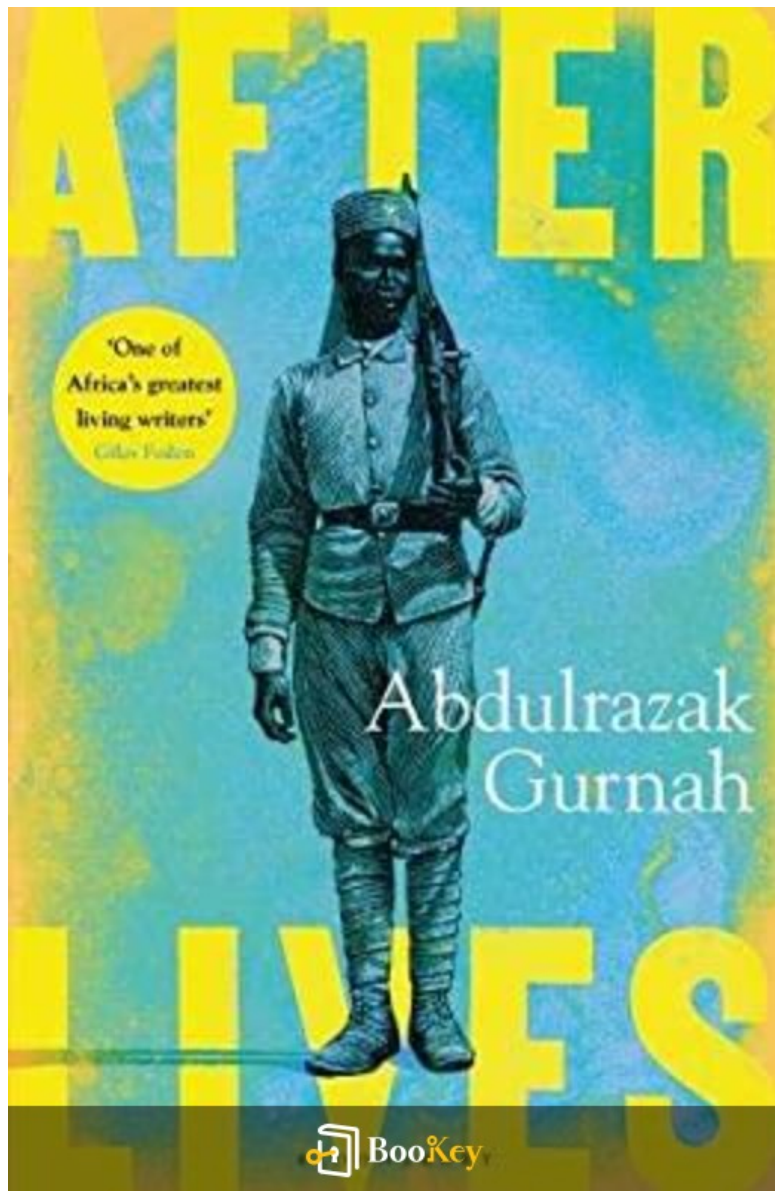


# Afterlives PDF

Abdulrazak Gurnah



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# About the book

Title: Exploring Identity in Gurnah's "Afterlives"

Overview:

In "Afterlives," Abdulrazak Gurnah presents a profound exploration of the impact of colonialism and the enduring quest for identity through the lives of four interconnected characters in German-occupied East Africa.

Key Themes:

- Colonial Legacy: The novel delves into the lingering scars left by historical injustices, showcasing the profound effects on individual lives.
- Personal Struggles: It highlights the resilience and personal battles of the characters, each navigating their own path amidst chaos and turmoil.
- Hope and Humanity: Despite the conflict, Gurnah's writing encapsulates flashes of hope and warmth within a richly portrayed, yet turbulent world.

Narrative Style:

Gurnah's lyrical prose, set against vividly drawn backdrops, invites readers to immerse themselves in a complex narrative woven with themes of love and loss. The story intricately illustrates how the past continues to influence the present, ultimately shaping the characters' destinies as they attempt to reconstruct their lives.

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## Conclusion:

"Afterlives" serves as a poignant meditation on the human spirit amidst cultural upheaval, making it an essential read for those interested in the intricate dynamics of history and identity.

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# About the author

### Profile: Abdulrazak Gurnah

Nationality: Tanzanian-British

Born: 1948, Zanzibar

Background:

Abdulrazak Gurnah is a prominent writer and academic, recognized for his impactful storytelling that delves into themes of displacement, identity, and the ramifications of colonialism. As a refugee who relocated to England in the 1960s due to political turmoil in Zanzibar, Gurnah's personal experiences heavily influence his literary voice.

Career Highlights:

- Academic Role: Gurnah served as a professor of English at the University of Kent until his recent retirement, where he made notable contributions to the field of post-colonial literature.
- Literary Contributions: His works, such as the Booker Prize-shortlisted novel "Paradise" and his latest offering, "Afterlives," showcase a deep exploration of cultural conflict and the emotional toll of migration and historical trauma.

Impact:

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Gurnah's narratives have established him as a significant figure in contemporary literature, providing a critical perspective on the complexities faced by individuals living at the intersection of cultural and historical transformations.

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# Afterlives Summary

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# Afterlives Summary Chapter List

1. Introduction: Unraveling the Tapestry of Colonial Legacy and Personal Journeys
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# 1. Introduction: Unraveling the Tapestry of Colonial Legacy and Personal Journeys

In "Afterlives," Abdulrazak Gurnah explores the profound intricacies of identity, belonging, and the enduring impacts of colonialism through the lives of his characters, set against the backdrop of East Africa during the late colonial period and its aftermath. The novel intricately weaves together individual narratives and collective histories, illustrating how colonial legacies shape personal destinies and cultural identities in significant ways.

At its core, the book examines the intergenerational trauma and displacement caused by colonial encounters, which reverberate through the lives of its characters. Gurnah highlights that colonialism is not merely a political or economic phenomenon; it profoundly affects the psychological landscapes of those it touches. Characters such as Ilyas, Asha, and Hamza navigate their existence amid a cacophony of social change and upheaval, grappling with their pasts while yearning for a sense of belonging in a swiftly changing world.

For instance, Gurnah paints a poignant picture of Ilyas, a character who is forcibly displaced from his homeland, facing not only the loss of geographical roots but also the severing of personal connections and cultural identity. His journey epitomizes the broader experience of countless individuals whose lives were radically altered by colonial rule, leading to a

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struggle to reconcile their origins with their present realities. This theme resonates with historical episodes of displacement seen in various parts of the world, such as the Partition of India in 1947, where millions were uprooted, leading to a complex mix of identity crises and cultural transformation.

Moreover, through Gurnah's lens, we gain insight into the role of family and community amidst the mounting pressures of colonial rule. The interplay of familial bonds and the impact of external forces create a turbulent yet rich narrative tapestry. Characters are depicted forming connections that both protect and complicate their survival in this chaotic context; thus embodying the universal struggles for love and security in times of conflict. The attachment to family resonates deeply, as seen historically in communities experiencing enforced migration like the African diasporas during the transatlantic slave trade, highlighting the enduring quest for kinship and the preservation of cultural heritage in the face of systemic oppression.

In addition, Gurnah's narrative emphasizes the notion of identity not as a fixed attribute but rather as an evolving construct deeply influenced by one's experiences and socio-political landscapes. This fluidity reflects real-world dynamics where individuals grapple with multicultural identities in post-colonial societies. For example, the identity struggles faced by postcolonial countries often echo through their literature and art, as seen in

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the works of figures like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie or Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who similarly interrogate the intersections of culture, history, and personal identity.

Ultimately, through the voyage of his characters, Gurnah crafts a meditation on survival, resilience, and the quest for meaning in a world marked by disruption and loss. The colonial legacy remains a potent force, shaping not just the physical landscapes but also the emotional and psychological terrains of individuals. In this way, "Afterlives" serves not only as a narrative of personal journeys but also as a poignant commentary on the collective aftermath of colonialism, suggesting that every personal story is embedded in a larger historical framework that continues to resonate with contemporary issues related to identity, belonging, and reconciliation.

In summary, the introduction to "Afterlives" sets the stage for a profound exploration of how colonial histories manifest in personal realities, urging readers to reflect on the interconnectedness of individual lives within the broader tapestry of historical experience. Gurnah's work invites us to recognize that colonial legacies linger in the lives of those who lived through them, deeply influencing their perceptions of self and place in a world still grappling with the shadows of its past.

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## 2. Chapter 1: The Lives of Characters Before and During the Impacts of Colonialism

In "Afterlives" by Abdulrazak Gurnah, the narrative intricately weaves together the lives of several characters, setting the stage for a profound exploration of the impacts of colonialism. To understand the profound effects on personal identities and relationships, it is essential to first examine the lives of these characters before colonial influences began to disrupt their traditional ways of living.

The novel introduces us to the coastal town of Zanzibar, a place steeped in history and cultural richness long before the arrival of colonial forces. The characters engage in their daily lives, shaped by a complex tapestry of family connections, local customs, and economic interactions largely untouched by foreign dominion. For instance, we are introduced to characters like Ilyas and Asha, whose lives revolve around local trading practices and the community's deeply ingrained social structures. Their existence reflects a world governed by communal ties and mutual dependence, a stark contrast to the looming presence of European powers that would soon upend this society.

As colonial forces begin to encroach upon Zanzibar, the characters' lives are irrevocably altered. Gurnah illustrates how the arrival of these external powers not only disrupts the socio-economic landscape but also deeply

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affects interpersonal relationships within the community. Families that once thrived together face displacement and fragmentation, bringing about a sense of disillusionment. For example, the story highlights the struggles of families losing their lands and livelihoods, demonstrating how the colonial agenda creates an undercurrent of resentment and longing among the populace.

The character of Ilyas serves as a focal point for examining these personal transformations against the backdrop of colonialism. As colonial rule imposes new structures and hierarchies, Ilyas finds himself caught between his traditional upbringing and the allure of a new world promised by the colonizers. His journey towards understanding his place in this rapidly changing environment highlights the internal struggle of many individuals who grapple with conflicting identities shaped by colonial power dynamics.

Furthermore, Gurnah uses the lives of women in the novel to showcase how colonialism exacerbates existing gender inequalities. For Asha, her previous autonomy begins to diminish as colonial structures marginalize her status and limit her agency within both family and community contexts. Her struggles encapsulate the female experience in a colonial setting—where societal roles are redefined and often constraints are applied, leading to new forms of resistance and adaptation.

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Gurnah's portrayal of these characters also underscores the transitional period marked by a blend of hope and despair. The imposed changes lead to some individuals seeking refuge in traditional practices, while others attempt to navigate a new identity shaped by colonial influences. Through characters like Ilyas and Asha, the narrative explores the resistance to these changes and the enduring strength of cultural identities, even in the face of overwhelming challenges.

The impact of colonialism in "Afterlives" is not presented solely as an external force; it seeps into every facet of the characters' lives—altering their relationships, aspirations, and even their understanding of self. As we delve deeper into the narrative, we begin to see how these early experiences set the stage for complex interactions with family and society amidst war and displacement. Gurnah masterfully illustrates the slow unfolding of a world transformed—reflecting the broader themes of identity and survival that characterize the post-colonial landscape.

In essence, chapter one serves as an exploration of how the characters' lives are irrevocably shaped by the impending forces of colonialism. The juxtaposition of their traditional lives against the backdrop of colonial disruption reinforces the complexity of their journeys. Through Gurnah's lens, readers come to realize that the personal stories within the larger historical narrative are irrevocably intertwined, revealing the deep scars and

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enduring legacies left in the wake of colonial violence.

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### 3. Chapter 2: The Complex Interactions of Family, Love, and War in a Turbulent Era

In Abdulrazak Gurnah's "Afterlives," the intricate relationships among family members, alongside the themes of love and conflict, are pivotal in illustrating the profound impact of war in a colonial context. The narrative deftly interweaves personal relationships with the harsh realities of a turbulent era marked by colonial violence and the struggle for identity, creating a rich tableau of the human condition.

The characters in "Afterlives" are often caught in a web of familial expectations and the harshness of their environment. For instance, the relationship between the protagonist, Ilyas, and his family members highlights the complexities of loyalty, love, and the painful distances created by colonial strife. As Ilyas navigates his desire for freedom and his obligations to his family, readers witness how war disrupts familial bonds, forcing individuals to make heart-wrenching choices that forever alter their connections. The tension between individual desires and familial obligations is a recurring theme that resonates throughout the narrative.

Gurnah explores how love can be both a source of strength and a burden in times of conflict. The love stories within the novel, particularly between Ilyas and his beloved, are fraught with challenges imposed by the societal context of war. Their love is a refuge against the backdrop of chaos, yet it is

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also threatened by the realities of displacement and conflict. The author skillfully presents the duality of love in such environments: it nurtures hope but also amplifies the pain of separation and loss. For example, when Ilyas is forced to flee due to violence, the disruption of their relationship not only signifies personal loss but also represents the larger disintegration of families and communities under colonial rule. This creates a poignant commentary on how war reshapes personal relationships by instilling a harrowing sense of uncertainty and fear.

Moreover, Gurnah utilizes his characters to showcase the generational impact of war on familial interactions. The trauma experienced by one generation often reverberates into the next, altering the dynamics of love and support within families. The struggles faced by Ilyas's siblings encompass themes of betrayal and fractured trust, as they deal with the fallout of decisions made under duress. The war influences not just their physical surroundings but also their emotional landscapes. This portrayal echoes historical realities in many contexts where families are split apart and individuals must confront their identities amidst shifting allegiances, often resulting in complex emotional scars.

Gurnah illustrates these dynamics vividly through various characters, such as Asha, who embodies resilience in the face of adversity. Her journey through love and loss amidst the chaos of war signifies the broader struggles

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of women in such turbulent landscapes. Asha's relationships, both with her family and romantic interests, highlight how women often bear the brunt of conflict, yet simultaneously emerge as pillars of support and resilience. In her, Gurnah captures the essence of feminine strength in navigating the conflicts that threaten to fracture familial bonds, showcasing the multifaceted role of women during wartime.

The influence of colonialism further complicates these dynamics. As external powers impose their will upon the local populace, families must navigate the intricate dance of survival and adaptability. This external conflict seeps into the private lives of the characters, affecting their relationships in profound ways. The colonial narrative is not just a backdrop but an active participant in shaping the protagonists' choices and interactions. By illustrating how colonial powers exploit familial ties—often pitting relatives against one another in the struggle for power and survival—Gurnah reveals the insidious ways in which war and colonization can fragment human connections.

In summary, Chapter 2 of “Afterlives” poignantly captures the intricate interactions between family, love, and war during a turbulent era. Gurnah's characters embody the struggles of human connection amidst the chaos of colonial violence, showcasing how love can be a beacon of hope while simultaneously serving as a reminder of what is lost. The author's

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exploration of these themes not only enriches the narrative but also invites readers to reflect on the universal experiences of loss, resilience, and the indomitable spirit of love in the face of adversity.

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## 4. Chapter 3: The Transformative Power of Displacement and Yearning for Home

In Abdulrazak Gurnah's "Afterlives," the theme of displacement plays a vital role in shaping the lives of its characters, influencing their identities and relationships in profound ways. Throughout the narrative, Gurnah explores how displacement transforms individuals and communities, fostering a deep yearning for home that often evokes both sweet nostalgia and painful realizations of lost ties.

The concept of displacement goes beyond mere geographical movement; it encapsulates emotional and psychological dislocation as well. Characters such as Asha and Ilyas intricately portray how the colonial experience—and the resulting upheaval—can fracture one's sense of belonging. The longing for home, therefore, becomes a dual-edged sword; it serves as a source of hope and comfort, yet it also highlights the irretrievability of a past that can never be fully recaptured.

For instance, Asha's journey reflects the deep scars left by physical and emotional dislocation. As she navigates her life away from her homeland, her experiences are colored by memory, a bittersweet echo that constantly reminds her of the life she once knew. Her yearning for the familiar, the smells and sounds of her childhood, blurs the lines between the comfort of nostalgia and the pain of absence. Gurnah beautifully captures this paradox

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through Asha's reflections: there are moments when she finds solace in her memories, yet they simultaneously serve as reminders of her estrangement.

Ilyas, another pivotal character, undergoes a similar transformation. His displacement not only alters his physical surroundings but also disrupts his social identity. As he struggles with his feeling of alienation in a foreign land, his longing for home becomes a critical aspect of his self-understanding. Ilyas's reminiscences about his childhood and family shape his worldview, illustrating how the pull of home can anchor individuals amidst chaos, guiding their sense of purpose even in unfamiliar settings. Gurnah highlights that displacement does not merely signify loss; it can also initiate a process of reinvention, as characters learn to adapt to their new realities while holding onto the essence of their past.

Moreover, Gurnah artfully illustrates how displacement breeds interaction—between cultures, ideas, and people. The characters' narratives intersect against a backdrop of colonialism, showcasing that displacement can foster a dialogue between disparate identities. This interplay often leads to new understandings and relationships, albeit tinged with complexities resulting from their historical context. This dynamic is vividly portrayed in the interactions among the characters in the diaspora, where cultural exchanges can lead to newfound affinities but may also provoke tensions rooted in their shared histories.

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The yearning for home serves as a driving force that shapes encounters and conflicts, revealing both the resilience and vulnerability of Gurnah's characters. In many ways, this tension reflects the broader experience of communities affected by exile, war, and colonial legacy, where a collective sense of loss permeates their existence. The longing for home becomes a narrative thread that binds the characters together; it reflects their shared histories and the ongoing struggle to reconcile their past with their present.

Through the lens of displacement, Gurnah poignantly addresses broader themes of identity and belonging. He challenges the reader to consider how, in the face of dislocation, individuals grapple with their own narratives and histories. The transformative power of displacement thus emerges as a central theme in "Afterlives," illustrating how both the quest for home and the aftermath of colonization profoundly shape the human experience.

In conclusion, the transformative power of displacement not only redefines individual identities but also weaves a complex tapestry of human connection, loss, and resilience. Gurnah's exploration of these themes invites readers to reflect on their interpretations of home and belonging, ultimately underscoring the enduring impact of colonial histories on personal journeys. The yearning for home becomes an integral part of the narrative fabric in "Afterlives," mirroring the struggles and triumphs of those

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navigating through the echoes of their past.

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## 5. Chapter 4: The Return to Familiar Grounds and the Echoes of the Past

In Chapter 4, "The Return to Familiar Grounds and the Echoes of the Past," of Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel "Afterlives," the narrative poignantly delves into the emotional complexities and psychological repercussions that accompany the return of characters to their homeland after periods of turbulence, disconnection, and displacement. This chapter serves as a crucial juncture in the journey of the characters, illuminating both the weight of memory and the stark realities they confront as they attempt to reconcile their past with their present.

The protagonist, Ilyas, embodies a figure caught between the nostalgia for a home he remembers fondly and the stark reality of a country irrevocably changed by colonialism and conflict. Upon returning, the once-familiar landscapes evoke a sense of loss rather than comfort, as they remind him of people and places that no longer exist in the same way. Ilyas's journey back is laden with an expectation of familiarity, yet this expectation is met with disillusionment as he navigates through a transformed space that has been marked by violence and division. The lush descriptions of the coastal town, once vibrant and full of life, now stand as a testament to the scars of colonialism, resonating with the echoes of the past.

Gurnah paints a vivid picture of the haunting ghosts of memory that linger in

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every corner of Ilyas's homeland. As he encounters remnants of his childhood—a childhood spent amidst family and simplicity—these sights unleash a torrent of memories, leaving him pondering how much has been lost. It becomes evident that the charm of one's upbringing does not guarantee an unchanged reality; rather, geographical and personal distances reshape identities and alter perceptions. For instance, Ilyas reflects on the growing chasm between him and the community he once belonged to, illustrating the struggles of reintegration into a society that feels alien to him, a stark juxtaposition enriched by Gurnah's lyrical prose.

The chapter further highlights the experiences of other characters, such as Asha and Hamza, as they too return to their roots, each carrying their unique burdens. Through their interactions and shared stories, Gurnah emphasizes the universal significance of return and how it often serves as a catalyst for self-discovery and existential inquiry. Asha's return is infused with hope for reconnection, yet she grapples with the harsh realities of her altered relationships and societal changes. Her journey underscores the theme of resilience and the pursuit of belonging amidst a backdrop of change, echoing the sentiments of many who return to a homeland that no longer feels like home.

As the characters sift through the remnants of their lives, Gurnah draws attention to the permanence of loss. The stark recollections of the violence

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and trauma experienced haunt their daily interactions, manifesting in the form of silence, unspoken words, and a collective longing for understanding. The novel echoes the historical narratives of many post-colonial societies where the echoes of the past resound through the generations. It raises profound questions regarding identity, belonging, and the complexities of reconstructing a sense of self in the face of displacement and the scars left by historical oppression.

Moreover, Gurnah cleverly intertwines personal narratives with broader historical contexts, offering readers insights into the socio-political landscapes that shape individual lives. The historical legacies that Ilyas, Asha, and Hamza confront upon their return are not isolated incidents but part of a larger tapestry of colonial history—a narrative that continues to influence contemporary issues of identity and belonging. Their struggles become emblematic of the experiences of countless others who have faced similar challenges, making the story relatable and poignant across cultural and geographical boundaries.

In this chapter, "The Return to Familiar Grounds and the Echoes of the Past," Gurnah deftly illustrates the duality of returning home—the bittersweet intertwining of memory and reality. It is a journey filled with both promise and pain, where the past shapes their present but does not dictate their future. By embracing the complexities of their experiences,

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Gurnah invites readers to contemplate the nature of home, identity, and the enduring impacts of colonial legacies. This reflection serves as a reminder of the intricate layers of human experience, beckoning us to explore our connections to our histories, ourselves, and each other.

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## 6. Conclusion: Reflection on Identity, Survival, and the Quest for Meaning in Afterlives

In the novel "Afterlives," Abdulrazak Gurnah intricately weaves a narrative that confronts the complexities of identity in the wake of colonialism. The book's conclusion offers profound reflections on survival and the quest for meaning within the characters' experiences, where their identities are constantly negotiated against a backdrop of upheaval, loss, and the intricate tapestry of personal and collective histories.

The characters in "Afterlives" navigate their lives amid the legacies of colonial rule and the resultant societal changes that reshape their identities. One of the most striking elements is how colonialism does not merely alter geographic and socio-economic landscapes but also deeply impacts individual and communal identities. The narrative invites readers to consider the multiplicity of identities people assume in their quest for belonging and survival amidst displacement. For instance, characters like Ilyas and Hamza showcase different reactions to the colonial and post-colonial environments. Ilyas embraces a more integrated identity, navigating the cultural complexities of his colonial experience, while Hamza's yearning for a sense of belonging leads to his conflict-laden choices that reflect a struggle against his multifaceted identity.

Moreover, the concept of survival in "Afterlives" is not limited to the

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physical existence but extends to emotional and psychological resilience in the face of trauma and loss. The survival strategies employed by the characters highlight not only their personal fortitude but also the generational effects of colonialism that shape their perspectives and life choices. The longing for home, a recurrent theme throughout the novel, serves as a poignant reminder of how the past informs identity. The characters grapple with the memories of their homeland, which offer both comfort and pain, showing how survival is intertwined with the preservation of one's past amidst the quest for meaning.

Gurnah's exploration of identity is deeply connected to the notion of meaning-making in a world that often appears fragmented and chaotic. As characters reflect on their experiences, they are engaged in an ongoing search for understanding their place in a world defined by colonial legacies and continuing socio-political turbulence. This is evident in the character of Asha, who seeks to reclaim her autonomy and redefine her identity after experiencing personal loss and societal dislocation. Her journey illustrates the broader human desire to find meaning in suffering and to reclaim one's identity in the wake of existential challenges.

The quest for meaning is not a linear path in "Afterlives" but rather a complex interplay of historical context, personal experience, and societal expectations. Characters often face moral ambiguities and conflicting desires

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that provoke questions about loyalty, family, and selfhood. This mirrors real-life struggles many face in post-colonial societies, where historical narratives are still contending to define present identities. The novel reminds us that meaning is crafted not only through personal practices but also through collective understandings of history and culture.

In closing, Gurnah's "Afterlives" offers a poignant reflection on identity, survival, and the quest for meaning amidst the shadows of colonialism. The characters' journeys compel readers to acknowledge the resilience of the human spirit and to appreciate how identities are formed, transformed, and reclaimed in the cycles of loss and recovery. The narrative underscores the idea that identity is neither fixed nor entirely dictated by historical circumstances; rather, it is dynamic, continually shaped by our choices, relationships, and the relentless pursuit of belonging and understanding in an ever-evolving world. As readers engage with these themes, they are encouraged to reflect on their own identities and the larger human condition within the spectrum of individual and shared histories.

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### The Wisdom Of Life

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  - Know yourself.
    - Gain insight into human nature
    - Our lives are shaped by temperament
    - Personal development demands loneliness and solitude
- Key Insight 2**
  - Have a good grasp of the subject-object relationship.
    - Riches are like seawater; what suit us is the most important