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### **Abstract**

We should never underestimate stories. Like the jinns<sup>1</sup> in *The Thousand and One Nights*, Gurnah tells us that stories 'are always slipping through our fingers, changing shape, wriggling to get away' (130). This essay examines some of those shape shifting stories and the material culture that attempts to anchor and strip them of their beguiling power. It does so in the context of their travelling owners in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel, *By the Sea*.

BRENDA COOPER

## Returning the Jinns to the Jar: Material Culture, Stories and Migration in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*

the England whose stories of the  
world brought us into being  
(Gurnah *Admiring Silence* 5)

We should never underestimate stories. Like the jinns<sup>1</sup> in *The Thousand and One Nights*, Gurnah tells us that stories 'are always slipping through our fingers, changing shape, wriggling to get away' (130). This essay examines some of those shape shifting stories and the material culture that attempts to anchor and strip them of their beguiling power. It does so in the context of their travelling owners in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel, *By the Sea*.

Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in Zanzibar in 1948, where his novel is partly set. He emigrated to Britain in 1968 where he both writes and teaches at the University of Kent in the English Department. African Asian writers, like M.G. Vassanji and Gurnah, do not buy into the unified project of nation and continent building. They battle with questions of their African identities and rights to citizenship. These African Asians, who have migrated to cities like Montreal, London or New York, are hybrids, juggling their multiple identities — African, Asian and European — which both liberate and perplex them.<sup>2</sup> This is particularly so in Gurnah's earlier novel, *Admiring Silence* (1996), and especially in *By the Sea* (2001) discussed here. May Joseph refers to 'inauthentic citizenship' in relation to these Asian Africans (2). She herself is a Tanzanian, whose family, eventually and sadly, felt it had to migrate. In response to the corrosive and exclusionary politics of ethnicity and so-called indigenous African nationalism, writers like Vassanji and Gurnah repeatedly construct families and affiliations, which cut across race and nation (Cooper 2004). All of this accounts for the lack of clarity or closure at the end of his possibly best known novel, *Paradise*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1994. In that novel, the protagonist, Yusuf, may be escaping to freedom from the indigenous servitude into which his family had been forced to sell him, or, perhaps into another form of subservience within the column of invading German colonisers (247).

*By the Sea* has two main protagonists, a chain of shape shifting and bartered solid objects and a multitude of stories. The first protagonist, Saleh Omar, arrives at Gatwick Airport from Zanzibar, a nomad, a deterritorialized traveller. He

arrives mute, pretending to speak no English, answering no questions and stating no causes for his migration. In his bag he carries, among his paltry bits of clothing, a mahogany casket containing a fragrance of great wonder and magnificence. The fragrance is called *ud-al-qamari*. This casket and its contents are ‘all the luggage from a life departed, the provisions of my after-life’ (31). The casket is stolen by an immigration officer, Kevin Edelman. The dispossession is immense because the casket is a ‘relic’ which is a fragment, a solid object brought from home, from the past, a treasured thing, a metonymy, a part for the whole of his life in Zanzibar, and the reason why the first part of the book is entitled ‘Relics’ (1).

This little drama at the airport, however, is not unique, but a mosaic of that ancient history of trade, plunder and greed. Gurnah has structured his narrative around travelling, metamorphosing objects. This reflects his understanding of world history that pre-dates colonialism and post-dates post-independent Africa an understanding that is global. Struggles over trade goods and trade routes, lust for exotic stuff from other places, the compelling whiff of spices and the stench of greed have fuelled history for hundreds of years. Edelman’s theft is no different.

The context for Omar’s arrival in England, thus, has to be understood in terms of the history of Zanzibar, from where he came, and where successive waves of plunderers, dreamers and story tellers had, over time, descended on the islands. The Omanis, as Gurnah describes them<sup>3</sup> removed the Portuguese ‘with the British close behind, and close behind them the Germans and the French and whoever else had the wherewithal’ (15). New maps were drawn trade was controlled and restricted and stuff, like ‘ghee and gum, cloths and crudely hammered trinkets, livestock and salted fish, dates, tobacco, perfume, rosewater, incense’, dried up (16). These ordinary and also exotic, travelling things comprised the nature of life in Zanzibar when Omar was growing up. What Gurnah is insisting upon is that we comprehend postcolonial migration, of people and things, in this historical context, rather than as a product of the more recent and publicised trend of globalisation as something new.

Omar’s arrival, his apparent inability to speak, and the theft of his precious casket, appear to reduce him to a silent victim of the Imperial gatekeeper. Or do they? In ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’, Homi Bhabha describes the English book arriving in Delhi where it is received as a marvel, but only at first sight, as the wily, crafty colonial subject, appropriates this book and turns it against the master via the back door; thus Bhabha underscores the entwined complexity of domination and resistance. Now this English Book has been packed and returned whence it came, in a new era of late twentieth-century globalisation. Migrating books transmogrify from deep Symbolic, canonical knowledge, whose tentacles squeeze the minds and tongues of colonial subjects, into melded symbolic metonymies. These are available for ritual use as travelling postcolonials take up their rights to become part of a transforming West.

Omar is a hybrid man, the complex syncretism of many cultures:

Years before, the British authorities had been good enough to pick me out of the ruck of native schoolboys eager for more of their kind of education, though I don't think we all knew what it was we were eager for. It was learning, something we revered and were instructed to revere by the teaching of the Prophet, but there was glamour in this kind of learning, something to do with being alive to the modern world. (17)

His silence at the airport is a wily strategy:

I had been told not to say anything, to pretend I could not speak any English. I was not sure why, but I knew I would do as I was told because the advice had a crafty ring to it, the kind of resourceful ruse the powerless would know. (5)

This Muslim man from Zanzibar, who has enjoyed a British colonial education, with his decision not to speak and his precious casket of exotic goods, passes through the ritual Gatwick border into that third space of nomads and migrants. The language he silently, internally, evokes, in resistance to Edelman, who stole from him, is metonymic, playful, reducing the power of the patriarchal Law of the immigration officer to the reality of the petty crook that he is.

Edelman, was that a German name? Or a Jewish name? Or a made-up name? Into a dew, jew, juju. Anyway, the name of the owner of Europe, who knew its values and had paid for them through the generations. But the whole world had paid for Europe's values already, even if a lot of the time it just paid and paid and didn't get to enjoy them. Think of me as one of those objects that Europe took away with her. (12)

The perfume implicitly acts as Omar's passport, and when we encounter him at the beginning of the novel, he is living in a little flat in a small English seaside town. His only friend is Rachel, a kind young Englishwoman who works for the refugee organisation, under whose shelter he survives and whose job it is to assist him in settling down. His real name is Saleh Omar, but he adopts another name and passport. His is an ordinary life — 'I don't know a great truth which I ache to impart, nor have I lived an exemplary experience which will illuminate our conditions and our times' (2). Ordinary it may be, and yet his life will illuminate the postcolonial migrant condition, along with the life of a younger man, the second major character, Latif, who is a scholar, also originally from Zanzibar. Latif's family and Omar had become enemies, over possessions, when Omar called in a loan that resulted in Latif's family losing their house and all its contents.

Their lives intersect again, given that Saleh Omar appears to speak no English and to need an interpreter (97). Rachel finds none other than Latif, who hates this man who he regards as having robbed his family, to play this role. The entire novel centres around the lives of these two men of different generations, both in Zanzibar and in Europe, as they come to terms with their past and thereby with each other. Latif wishes he 'could ignore it all, shrug off the endless stories behind me, but I knew I would not be able to' (97). Material objects, such as the casket of perfume, are deeply entwined in the history of their familial disputes. The perfume is linked to another precious object from home — an ebony table. The table could not be carried in his luggage, but Omar does bring with him a complex and intriguing relationship to furniture.

### TRANSMOGRIFYING FURNITURE: THE EBONY TABLE DE-FETISHISED

... a low table on three delicately bowed legs, made of ebony so highly polished that it glowed tremulously even from a distance. (22)

Once through the border post and into his new life, Omar appears to be fixated by furniture and he spends his days on the streets looking into furniture shops. He does this to anchor himself, because he is an outsider, an aged, eccentric parvenu without roots or family in this strange town by the sea. For Omar, furniture is something that ‘weighs us down and keeps us on the ground, and prevents us from clambering up trees and howling naked as the terror of our useless lives overcomes us’ (3). In the furniture shops, Omar does not experience ‘this agitation’ because ‘furniture shops in the morning are silent, expansive places, and I stroll in them in some equanimity’ (3). And so

I stroll among the beds and the sofas ... I enter a different store every day, and after the first or second time, the assistants no longer make eye-contact. I wander between the sofas and the dining tables, and the beds and the sideboards, lounging on an item for a few seconds, trying out the machinery, checking the price, comparing the fabric of this to that one. Needless to say, some of the furniture is ugly and over-decorated, but some of it is delicate and ingenious. (4)

The mad nomad roams the streets, attempting to find an anchoring point through mundane, material, solid objects. The flummoxed shop assistants stare at this strange, brown, aging man, who fingers the stuff and never buys (4). Yet, in these compelling furniture shops he feels ‘for a while a kind of content and the possibility of mercy and absolution’ (4). Why absolution? What guilt does Omar carry in relation to furniture? To answer this question, we must return to Zanzibar, before Omar migrated to England, and follow the life trajectory of the table.

Omar had been quite a prosperous Zanzibari businessman who ran a shop selling special, desirable objects. Hussein, a trader, ‘a Persian from Bahrain’ (16), lusted after, and bought, a magnificent ebony table from Omar. He paid for it half in cash and half in kind, that being the perfume and its wooden casket. Soon after the exchange, Hussein had approached Omar for a loan. The loan carried as security the house and its contents of one Rajab Shaaban Mahmud, Latif’s father, who was in debt to Hussein for the ‘exact sum of money he wished to borrow from me’ (33). Unbeknown to Rachel, Latif’s family and Omar had become deadly enemies in Zanzibar because Omar had called in the surety on the loan and Latif and his family had lost their house and its furnishings, including the ebony table, which had returned to Omar’s possession. Latif’s mother longed to retrieve at least this table, and had sent Latif to Omar to plead with him to return it. However, Omar had refused and by greedily retaining the ebony possession, he provided a catalyst for his own downfall. Latif’s mother it turned out, had a lover who was a powerful government minister at the time of the 1964 revolution in Zanzibar, and all its persecutions, terror and murder. This personal vendetta became a trumped-

up political crime and Omar himself was dispossessed of everything he owned and eventually imprisoned for eleven long, terrible years.

Omar's shift from the position of persecutor to victim is furthered by his discovery, on his release from prison in 1979, that his wife and daughter have died. The further revenge taken on him by Latif's family eventually forces Omar to flee the island and seek refuge in England, taking with him only the casket of exquisite perfume that he had received in part payment for the ebony table. In England, the two men from warring families and different generations are forced to confront each other and tell their own stories. From Latif's perspective, we hear how the loan was called in and the house lost. He bitterly remembers Omar 'walking among the bits and pieces of our lives, picking out something and then ordering the rest to be auctioned' (102). The inventory of objects is the chorus of Latif's litany of bitterness:

Everything was packed into three carts: the furniture, the rugs, including the Bokharra, the old wall clock with a silver face, my mother's sewing machine, the brass and stained glass goblets my father had inherited from someone, and even the framed tablets of verses from the Koran which hung on the walls. (102)

Latif's resentment about the dispossession crystallises around the ebony table. That humiliating mission, where Latif had attempted to retrieve the table from Omar on behalf of his mother, is seared in his memory again by way of an envious inventory of the possessions in Omar's house. He had seen

the comfortable chairs, the rugs, a black almira with brass chasing, the gilt mirrors. All of them were objects which had beauty and purpose, but which stood like refugees in that room, standing still because pride and dignity demanded it but none the less as if they had a fuller life elsewhere. Looking like objects in a gallery or a museum, brightly lit and roped off, to celebrate someone's cleverness and wealth. Looking like plunder. (102)

These objects are like the stolen goods smuggled by adventurers into museums. In this novel of third spaces, palimpsests and Chinese boxes, objects and their trajectories, stories and their origins and outcomes, are never clear or polarised. Omar is both perpetrator and victim, coloniser and colonised. In tracking the journey undertaken by the ebony table, and surmising about the fuller lives of the objects in Omar's house upon which their previous owner, Latif, looks with rage and resentment, what comes to mind is Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things*. Appadurai suggests that objects have 'life histories' (41) and that they may 'accumulate an idiosyncratic biography or enjoy a peculiar career' (42). He describes how these objects or commodities leave their designated paths and find themselves 'in unlikely contexts' (27). These 'diversions' are, however, 'meaningful only in relation to the paths from which they stray' (Appadurai, 28). The paths that the objects in this novel take are multiple and global. Routes include journeys to Africa, from India or Europe and back, as traders and migrants carry intriguing baggage, like Omar's casket of sublime perfume that

had travelled from Cambodia, to Bangkok, to Bahrain to Zanzibar (29), before arriving in London where it disappeared into the hands of the immigration officer. The table is reincarnated in England, stripped of its power and preciousness as Latif and Omar face each other with a 'low rectangular table of no refinement between [them]' (144). Seated at the ebony table, they have to strip themselves of the embellishments, stories and differing versions surrounding it before they can be re-made in their new country. Only the testimonies surrounding this table will enable their reconciliation:

'The little ebony table that belonged to Hassan, my brother. Do you remember it? I came to ask for it back. Do you remember it? I came to ask for it back. Do you remember it?' he said, still sitting with his chin in his hand.... 'The one that your friend Hussein gave him before he stole [Hassan] away. Thirty-four years ago. ... Why didn't you just give that table back to her? My mother. Why didn't you just give it back? You had the house, the bits of furniture, all the rubbish. You had a beautiful house of your own, a wife, a daughter.... Why did you also have to have the table?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'Greed. Meanness. It was a business. I wish I had given it back'  
(158)

Omar confesses and apologises. Why did he also have to have the table? His answer is intriguing:

When I got the ebony table back, I put it in my shop not because I thought I would be able to sell it, but because it was beautiful and it brought back to me daily the futility of friendship and ambition. (210)

It is a marvel of a table, but its function as gift, as debt, as commodity, is malevolent and negative, carrying with it all kinds of histories about destruction of friendships and the corrosiveness of driving ambition. The older, wiser Omar has little ambition other than surviving in England and will make new friends as his investment in his future life. One such friend is Rachel and later in the novel Omar describes to her his life of daily early morning visits to the furniture stores where he battles to come to terms with the strangeness of the new culture he finds himself in, expressed by way of wood:

'Thick pale wood and brutal straight lines,' I said. 'I have a fondness for little curls and filigrees, and delicate decorative borders. I can see the quality of the wood in these tables, but I am repelled by their bold utilitarian hubris, their celebration of their ugliness.' (201)

These fatal curls, filigrees and embellishments that layer things with toxic fetishised meaning, like the beautiful yet fatal ebony table, must be reduced to bold, utilitarian strokes. This wood, for all its ugliness, has de-fetishised the table and returned it to being merely an object with an unambiguous purpose. Yet this is given ambivalently, for these solid objects carry their own hubris; the abandonment of the exquisite, elaborate, emotional aesthetic from Zanzibar is the price paid for integrating, to some extent, into English culture and enables the



feuds and melodrama, pain and violence of Zanzibar to be jettisoned along with the evil ebony.

Migrants like Omar survive by embedding themselves in material realities, establishing new, everyday customs, acquiring the basic accoutrements of life and purging the bitterness of historical injustices. This process of embedding, jettisoning and divesting themselves of the luxuries, the filigrees and the pride and ambition and greed that accompany them, in Omar's case, began long ago in Zanzibar. Gurnah repeatedly and wisely refuses to polarise here and there, then and now, as he understands history to be global and places to be metamorphosing simultaneously in both space and time. We need to go back again to Zanzibar to re-visit the fancy shop where it all began, where Hussein saw the table and lusted after it and after the body of a young man, and bartered for the table to be a gift, which turned into a curse. Let us see how the shop itself shape shifts until it too, is stripped down, literally, from selling elaborate treasures to providing the basics for human survival.

#### **METAMORPHOSING SHOPS, THE REVOLUTION IN ZANZIBAR AND 'INAUTHENTIC CITIZENSHIP'**

The historical moment is clear: it is 1960 and Omar is doing well, having inherited a big house and his father's halwa shop that has been 'repainted and relit to sell furniture and other beautiful things' (19). The metamorphosis, however, is only partly successful because 'despite all efforts, the smell of hot ghee still lingered in the store, and at times of despondency it seemed no different from the dingy dark cave from where my father sold halwa in small saucers' (19). Aromas, be they fragrant or pungent, do not respect boundaries and history makes itself smelt in the shop. Tentacles of both the past, redolent with Arabian stories of caves glowing in the dark with buried treasure, and the future, of furniture shops in another place and time, wind themselves around this shop: 'I knew the store looked smart and expensive, and *the objects* I displayed in there spoke for themselves. I have always had an interest in furniture' (19).

Omar has turned into the archetypal Asian shopkeeper as middleman, poised hazardously between his own countrymen and the British conquerors, plunderers and trophy seekers from the colonies. As Latif later mischievously informs him, rumour has it that Omar sold his soul to the British for their pounds sterling and people said 'you licked British arses, that you were a colonial stooge' (156). Or, as May Joseph generalises, East African Asians worked 'as middlemen at the interface of colonial subjugation and growing resentment among indigenous peoples' forging as they did so 'a precarious balance' (75). Joseph refers quite specifically to 'the stereotypical impact of Asians as a commercially successful mercantile community' (83). This situation came to a head in the 1964 revolution, which engulfed Gurnah's Omar along with many others. It was a revolution in which 'the Zanzibari African majority overthrew the sultan's constitutional monarchy' (Joseph 80); it was motivated by the complex tensions between different layers of society in Zanzibar, tensions that had been fanned by the divide-and-rule British

— ‘The uprising was precipitated by long-standing tensions between Swahilis of Arab ancestry (*muhajirina*) and those of African and Shirazi (Persian) ancestry, motivated in part by colonial constructions of ethnicity’ (Joseph 80).

On Omar’s release from prison, he returns to his shop and he has again to transform it. The concrete details of Omar’s changed circumstances are provided in code by way of the inventory of the new goods in this shop. What these goods exemplify and chart is his painful dispossession, not only of his beautiful objects, but of his African identity in post-revolutionary Zanzibar:

I lived in the store, and in time cleaned one of the back rooms and moved in there so I could start trading again, though in a different way now. I sold what items I had that were of value, and bought fruit and vegetables for sale, and gradually added other small items of a similar kind, matches, soap and some tinned fish. (235)

He later contrasts his ‘little corner shop’ where he ‘sold vegetables and sugar and razor blades’ with ‘the carefully lit emporium where I sold expensive furniture’ of the past (240). These staple things, embody the hardship wrought by the new regime in post revolutionary Zanzibar. This historian, Esmond Bradley Martin, describes the commodity shortages and the depleted shops by 1970 when the economy collapsed (60). Necessities had to be imported and inefficiency resulted in ‘such oddities as Chinese cameras which didn’t work’ and ‘extra-large sized shoes piled up, unwanted by anyone’ as well as ‘massive quantities of faulty torch batteries and fountain pens which had been imported from China’ (Martin 61–62).

The shoes and the razor blades structure the narrative shape of the novel through their interactions with people. Omar’s tins of fish, substitutions for the exotics and marvels, are the indicators of his will to survive and of his new unsettled circumstances that will lead to his own escape from captivity. These transmogrifying shops and their stripped down wares and living quarters serve as a narrative code in that they are the language in which Gurnah depicts the suffering and deprivation of those times, a suffering that Omar finds too painful to describe directly in words:

I have taught myself not to speak of the years which followed, although I have forgotten little of them. The years were written in the language of the body, and it is not a language I can speak with words. Sometimes I see photographs of people in distress, and the image of their misery and pain echoes in my body and makes me ache with them. (230–31)

Those dreadful, depleted years take their toll on the body and are represented by objects as Omar clings to furniture so as not to howl in rage. Those objects have themselves to be stripped of the toxic stories and embellishments that cling to them and to become simple, utilitarian tools. The pain invested in the old filigreed treasures, in the magnificence of the glowing ebony of the table, is the memory of the uncertainties of Omar’s African identity; Gurnah demonstrates how men like Omar, perhaps like himself, play out their painful in-between roles of being neither one thing nor another, neither Asian nor African. Joseph, in her

own Tanzanian context, emphasises that Asian African identities were contested already in Africa prior to migration to Canada or England, and so these people were doubly displaced when they migrated (2). The true reason for Omar's need for asylum is that his African identity within a Zanzibari context had always been under threat. Gurnah merely hints at this by way of people of Omani descent who are rounded up by the government and sent into detention on the same prison island as Omar until they can be deported (221–22). Omar observes bitterly that

[i]n truth, they were no more Omani than I was, except that they had an ancestor who was born there. ... In other respects they were indigenes, citizens, raiiya, and they were sons of indigenes, but after their treatment at the hands of various commanding officers, they were eager to leave, and spoke as despisingly of their persecutors as their persecutors did of them. (225)

The fact that 'home' was ambiguous made 'exile' even more difficult. Simon Lewis refers to writers like Gurnah as 'never-quite-indigenous natives' (226–27).<sup>4</sup>

From halwa, to expensive furniture and exotic treasures, to food and soap, these solid, yet shape shifting objects and shops provide the narrative contours of the novel as a whole. Omar learns to survive on these staples and 'I did enough business to feed and clothe myself, and as time passed I was able to live in reasonable safety and comfort' (236). However, the chain of dispossession is long and winds across the sea. Omar himself is not innocent and has dispossessed Latif's family. He in turn is robbed and imprisoned, first by indigenous Zanzibari then by Edelman, at the gate of the Western world. The driving force behind history is the lust for things which bring wealth and also war and suffering; but these material objects gain their power from the stories that attach to them with the movement of history and which they transform into myth. Along with the staples he sells in his reduced shop, Omar 'still had several of the books I had acquired all those decades ago from departing colonial officials, some of them chewed and holed by cockroaches now, and I worked my way slowly through them' (236–37). There are many stories in *By the Sea*.

Growing up in colonial Zanzibar, Omar is fed British stories — tablets of the Law — as passport to a distorted, colonised subjectivity: 'in their books I read unflattering accounts of my history, and because they were unflattering, they seemed truer than the stories we told ourselves' (18). There may have been 'little or no time for those other stories', the ones they told themselves, but Gurnah, through Omar, remembers those other stories:

The stories we knew about ourselves before they took charge of us seemed medieval and fanciful, sacred and secret myths that were liturgical metaphors and rites of adherence, a different category of knowledge which, despite our assertive observance, could not contest with theirs. (18)

#### ESCAPING STORIES: *THE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS* AND 'BARTLEBY THE SCRIVENER'

When Gurnah was asked 'what books and authors have had the greatest influence on your political beliefs?' part of his reply was 'In "proper" school

our class readers for the first few years were selections from the *Arabian Nights*' (Anon 1994 13). *The Thousand and One Nights*, however, is itself already positioned somewhere in an interstice poised to suit the purpose of a crossed-over Asian writer whose life is now played out in England. Gurnah continues to refuse simplistic polarities in relation to stories which, like smells, permeate and travel where they will. For example, Omar, newly arrived in the little English seaside town, describes his passage to England paradoxically as imagined through those stories that contest English domination:

I imagine it like this: that to get here I had wriggled through a passage that closed in behind me. Too many *A Thousand and One Nights* stories when I was younger perhaps, that image of the passage. (63)

*The Thousand and One Nights* has its own syncreticities, forgeries and violations (Mahdi 1–2). There are many direct and also indirect references to *The Thousand and One Nights* in *By the Sea* but two stories, 'The Fisherman and the Jinn' and the tale of King Shahrayar and the killing of the virgins, are re-told in some detail and are ritually connected to rites of passage in the two protagonists' lives, linking their acquisition of psychic growth to language, subjectivity and historical struggles. What these re-told stories enact is the complex melange of cultural forms that are acquired by ex-colonials in the process of developing as human subjects who are both unique and also structurally determined.

Firstly, in a laden dream-type sequence, Latif, aged nine, remembers searching for the key to a locked room of the family house. He knows that there is nothing valuable or dangerous in the room, but nonetheless it appears to be a matter of life and death to find the key and enter the room. Once inside, he finds 'two large clay jars', objects very concrete and ordinary with a mundane reason for being there — 'probably being stored for a relative or a friend, or a relative of a friend or a friend of a relative' (84). These material objects, however, are catalysts of the imagination that take the boy into the world of the *Arabian Nights*. This, readers intuit, was the reason he had to find the key and enter the room even if he did not consciously know this:

The jars made me think of stories of jinns rising out of them, of young women abducted in them, of the young prince having himself conveyed in one to his beloved's chamber. I knew stories like that: a fisherman low on luck and desperate for a good catch snares a jar in his net. (84)

He goes on to tell the well-known story of 'The Fisherman and the Jinni'. Suffice it to say that the story takes the familiar shape of a mortal struggle between the fisherman and the fierce jinn that is liberated from the jar. The fisherman outwits the jinn and tricks him into returning to the jar, which he rolls back into the sea. Then comes the interesting part. The young Latif, progressing along the informal, somewhat oblique ritual he is engaged in, now climbs into the jar, where language, repeated for its metonymic sound and texture, becomes altered:

When I spoke, which I did experimentally, saying alhamdulillah, my voice reverberated down a long tunnel and had a flatness which was unrecognisable, as if the space itself was pressing my head down on my larynx. I tried other words, imagining other worlds, and in due course I fell asleep. (Of course I didn't, but Ali Baba did and woke up to find himself in the cave of the Forty Thieves). (85–6)

Gurnah is alerting us to the unreliability of stories and storytellers, as the boy fibs himself into the already fabricated and tampered story of Ali Baba, pointing to the Chinese box of tales within stories. At the same time, however, the ritual and the discovery unveil something very true. The story links us to Uncle Hussein, who is indeed the evil jinn unleashed upon the family, who sets in train events which rob them of all their worldly goods. The new, adolescent broken voice, heard in the strangeness of the jar, is the initiation into the bitter world of adults and their feuds and disillusionments. The adult Latif has this to say about memory, such as that of the clay jars and what they conjured up of his traumatic past:

Yet when I look back, I find some objects still gleam with a bright malevolence and every memory draws blood. It is a dour place, the land of memory, a dim gutted warehouse with rotting planks and rusted ladders where you sometimes spend time rifling through abandoned goods. (86)

The objects that gleam with malevolence furnish the land of memory. It is a place stocked with old stuff, abandoned goods, everyday rubbish, which nonetheless enables Latif to re-construct his childhood in the attempt to banish the demons and jinns back into their jars and send them packing. Does he, like the fisherman, succeed and thereby re-make himself in some new rite? And what role does Omar play in Latif's ritual drama?

This brings me to the second re-told *Thousand and One Nights* story, that of King Shahrayar and the killing of the virgins, which takes place on the island prison where Omar camouflages his land of memory and pain, populated by bloodshed and anguish through codes. Omar had been imprisoned for eleven years. Part of that time he was incarcerated on a prison island and this *Nights*' story is told to him by the old caretaker on the island who is a surviving servant of the defunct British Empire and has overtones of Edelman, doorkeepers and bawabs of old, who are everywhere. He maintains the prison building which had fallen into disuse after the island had been turned into a sanatorium for tuberculosis victims, and he tends the graves of three British naval officers who died there. The caretaker is 'living a secret life of imperial duties and hoarded stores, tending the monuments of an empire which had retreated to the safety of its own ramparts and forgotten him' (224). No clichéd wise old indigenous griot, this relic of empire is the storyteller of syncretised tales from here and there, Europe and the East. He tells the story of King Shahrayar who had discovered the treachery of his wife, and then later on his travels is confirmed in his distrust of women by this beautiful finger-licking woman.

Once, he said, he saw a column of spray race across the surface of the sea and stop on the island. When he went nearer to investigate he found a large black figure, a jinn, sleeping under a tree with a large casket open beside his head. In the large casket was a woman, stroking her hair and singing to herself, and then licking her jewelled fingers one by one, as if something sweet still remained on them. ... Did I know why she was licking her jewelled fingers like that? He asked me. Because while the jinn slept, she seduced any man that was nearby and took a ring as a token of her pleasure. (229–30)

After seeing this, he returns to his kingdom and begins killing all the virgins, until he encounters the magnificent Shahrazad, who tells him stories so compelling that in order to hear their end he delays her execution — narrative as literally a matter of life or death. For Omar, the caretaker's story is a cacophony of cultures, histories and narratives:

Then I saw that for the old man the island was crowded with enchanted life, with British naval officers and British doctors and convalescing patients, and serpents and imprisoned women singing in the night air, and dark jinns that raced across the sea to rest from their immortal questing for mischief. (230)

The structure of *The Thousand and One Nights* organises and contains the story that Gurnah is telling. *By the Sea* is a cask, a suitcase, a trunk, that enables layer upon layer of story to be contained and transported, and within this framework it echoes and also contains *The Thousand and One Nights*, with its embedded stories — 'that narrative structure', explains Sandra Naddaff, 'by which one tale contains another tale that in turn contains a third' (41). In other words, Naddaff contrasts the realistic, concrete linear sequences of *The Nights* with the twirling arabesques of their supernatural, imaginary cycles and 'their ever-shifting fashion' (121). And so, 'the magical palaces and bottled jinn' (Naddaff 120) alternate with 'the objective presentation of the object' (Naddaff 121), which could be everyday items such as curtains or 'the ten pounds of mutton bought by the girl from Baghdad' (Haddawy, xi). All of this echoes the spirit of Gurnah's own complex narrative stratigraphy of stories and ordinary material goods in supermarkets.

In other words, *By the Sea*, with its own repetitions and embeddings, including the incorporation of *The Nights*, is itself a ritual gesture to migrant translations into new persona within the constraints of old, painful and unresolved issues. These tales of migrating jinns and princes, magic carpets and enchanted fish, fill the holes in the stories that the British brought in order to tell the colonised about themselves. This is, I think, what Maya Jaggi fails to understand when she suggests that 'the novel meanders into incidental histories' (3). These 'incidental histories' are, in fact, a veritable palimpsest of stories, histories and cultures. One of these embedded stories is about another character, who like Omar at Gatwick, is in his own way refusing to speak. I am referring to Bartleby, the character in Herman Melville's tale of *Bartleby the Scrivener*, a story that plays its own significant part in Gurnah's tale of many stories.

Incorporating and transforming a foreign tale in this way, is entirely within the syncretising, boundlessly capacious spirit of *The Thousand and One Nights*:

‘storytellers handled inherited models and reshaped them into new narratives’ (Mahdi 165). Likewise, *By the Sea* has no difficulty in layering the mid-nineteenth-century American Herman Melville story into its midst. Melville’s story is a code embedded in Gurnah’s novel in order to chart the process whereby Omar frees himself. It charts how Omar ‘journeys from mute invisibility to possessing his own tale’ (Jaggi 3). To trace this journey, we have to follow the life-story of Melville’s book in Gurnah’s novel and see how this tale is expelled from Gurnah’s text.

Initially, Latif finds reading Melville is liberating, opening up an alternative to stuffy British arrogance. In Zanzibar, the library of the English Club was ‘strictly for members only, with wire grilles on the windows and a doorkeeper sitting at a desk by the entrance who granted or withheld admission’ (105). This exclusive pompous British site is contrasted to the library and reading room of the United States Information Service, in the novel’s Zanzibar, where a person could read newspapers and magazines and even borrow books. As Latif enthuses, these included titles by ‘Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Frederick Douglass, Edgar Allan Poe, names that excited a noble curiosity because they were not contaminated by a discourse of tutelage and hierarchy’ (106). These new world authors appeared to offer Latif an escape from the contamination of British racism, exclusion and cultural imperialism.

In addition, Melville’s character of Bartleby is harnessed by Gurnah in order to provide a role model for wily postcolonial resistance through language. We have to understand the importance of the coincidence that both Latif and Omar identify with the line of passive resistance from Melville’s novel that characterises the whole of Bartleby’s limited capacity for speech: “‘I would prefer not to,” he said’ (156). We also have to suspend our proverbial disbelief that this novella coincidentally could mean so much to both of these characters:

“‘Bartleby the Scrivener’,’ he [Latif] said, grinning all over his face, the skin round his eyes creased in lines of surprised pleasure, suddenly happy. ‘You know the story! It’s a beautiful story. Do you like it? You like it too, I can tell. I love the impassive authority of that man’s defeat, the noble futility of his life.’ (156)

In the Melville story, Bartleby begins as a ‘scrivener’. Scriveners are, Melville tells us, ‘law-copyists’ (109). Bartleby may faithfully reproduce the Law to begin with, but he ends as a silent inanimate object as he refuses to copy out or submit to the Law. This must be his attraction for these postcolonials. But what is the manner of the resistance, and what is the outcome of the struggle? In his essay, ‘Bartleby; or, The Formula’, Gilles Deleuze suggests that Bartleby is ‘a pure outsider [*exclu*] to whom no social position can be attributed’ (73). He becomes the parvenu, the nomad, the postcolonial migrant. Linking the issue of the American writer struggling to be heard against the thundering British traditions and the resistance open to this outsider, Deleuze questions: ‘Is this not the schizophrenic vocation of American literature: to make the English language, by means of driftings, deviations, ... (as opposed to the standard syntax), slip in this manner?’ (72). This

is an example, par excellence, of what Deleuze and Felix Guattari called ‘minor literature’, or one, that inserted another language within the dominant one, in order to interrogate its power (16). In this fashion, Deleuze describes Melville as inventing ‘a foreign language that runs beneath English and carries it off: it is the OUTLANDISH or Deterritorialized, the language of the Whale’ (72).

However, this form of resistance is dangerous, unless it leads to an alternative form of speech. For how long and in what manner would the muteness of Omar at the airport have served his purpose? Bartleby himself slowly but surely declines from the human to a silent object, ‘a fixture in my chamber’, a ‘millstone’ as ‘useless as a necklace’ (Melville 136). Eventually, he is imprisoned where he becomes known as ‘the silent man’ (Melville 153) a position Omar echoes in his refugee camp. However, whereas Bartleby dies, Omar recovers language, his own stories and acquires new social identity. In the process, he has to reject the role model of Bartleby; and the catalyst for this recovery of his own voice is Rachel, whose job it is to settle and integrate refugees like Omar. She dislikes the Melville story, which Omar had told her about, and rejects what she calls Omar’s ‘Bartleby act’: ‘too much gloom and resignation in it, she thought’ and ‘perhaps she was afraid that I saw myself as a kind of Bartleby, as someone with a secret and burdensome history who sought to expiate it with silence’ (198). Bartleby makes Rachel ‘think of someone dangerous, someone capable of small, sustained cruelties on himself and others weaker than himself, an abuser’ (198). This brings about an important shift in Omar: ‘I had never thought of Bartleby like that although he was cruel to himself, that was true’ (198). Omar slowly realises that Bartleby’s desire to efface himself is indeed a meagre and soul-less absence. This results in a change in Omar’s language when he speaks to Latif:

‘You must get a telephone,’ [Latif] said, ...

‘I have no urge to do so,’ I said, and saw him smile. I thought I knew what he was thinking. He would have preferred me to say, *I prefer not to*. But I had been thinking of what Rachel said, and thought I would read ‘Bartleby’ again before speaking his words as the utterings of an admired desperado. (244)

In a ritual reversal of Omar’s Bartleby-like mute arrival and the theft of his treasure, we see the beginnings of his initiation into sociability, once again enacted by way of the objects, which are stolen or bartered or bought or sold or given as gifts. It is on the same page of the novel where Rachel rejects Bartleby that Omar describes how Rachel ‘had bought me a pair of trainers as a gift, which I have managed to persuade myself to wear once but I felt gaudy and clownish as I walked on the waterfront with them, and so have not worn them again, yet’ (200). With the tantalising ‘yet’ ringing in our ears, we see how these laden stories, of mutes and jinns and dark caves packed with malevolent, glowing objects, are cleansed by simple gifts of friendship. Gurnah is proposing that the complex gleaming web of stories, like the filigrees and curls that adorn ebony tables, should be translated into simple everyday material objects that sustain social life. This is reminiscent



of Gurnah's earlier novel, *Admiring Silence*, when the rather sad protagonist, who is mired in an entanglement of stories and lies, understands in a moment of truth that 'there were stories, in the first place, stories to fill the hours and the mind in the contest with life, to lift the ordinary into metaphor' (119–120). These stories are in competition with life and this transformation from the metonymies of the everyday to the metaphors, which embellish and beguile, are problematic. And so, says this protagonist 'that is what stories can do, they can push the feeble disorders we live with out of sight' (120). These feeble disorders are the stuff of daily realities and become the anchoring point for migrants in search of a new sense of home and family.

#### THE RED TRAINERS AND THE PILFERED TOWEL: NEW FRIENDS AND EVERYDAY REALITIES

Rachel's gift of the red trainers make Omar self conscious, as if he is acting in a circus. The assumption of a new persona is strange and difficult, but the little word 'yet' — he has not 'yet' worn the red trainers again — is a powerful reminder of the transformations that are still possible in the aged Omar. The suggestion, moreover, is subtly made that the ordinary, everyday trainers are trade goods exchanged for the expensive, exotic lost perfume, the *ud-al-qamari*. This trade is suggested by the fact that in shopping for the trainers in a large department store, Omar tells us 'I always walk through the perfume sections for the astringent scents in the air' (200). However, today it is not in the precincts of the perfume section that he will linger. Today he is being whisked along by Rachel to buy bright red trainers, so that he may eventually walk along the windswept waterfront, more anchored and less threatened by the gales of uncertainty.

The gift of the red trainers links to an earlier ordinary, humble gift from a new friend — Alfonso's towel. To trace the life story of this towel, we must return yet again to Omar's mute arrival at the Gatwick contact zone. Alfonso, the Angolan, a fellow refugee, had befriended Omar in the worst days of his life in the detention centre where Omar still had refused to speak. There he encountered Alfonso and other uprooted and desperate migrants, nomads and strangers from different parts of the world that had been colonised. When Omar leaves, he takes with him a towel, a gift Alfonso has pilfered for him from the refugee centre. It, like the trainers, appears to be in exchange for the stolen perfume:

I sat in the back seat with the little bag that Kevin Edelman had rummaged in beside me, now missing the casket of *ud-al-qamari* which he had stolen from me, *but* containing a camp towel that Alfonso had shoved into it at the last moment. (48 emphasis mine)

The 'but' confirms the exchange. The Imperial gatekeeper has thieved his casket, but the new life of cunning survival and diasporic allegiance subversively opposes this theft in the form of the cunning Angolan, who steals a replacement object in order to assist the mute new arrival. At the miserable bed-and-breakfast establishment to which Omar is transported Alfonso's towel becomes a comfort blanket. He sits on the floor of his room 'with Alfonso's towel spread under

[him]' (57) and resolves to 'wait for Rachel on Alfonso's magic carpet, safe from disregard' (57). This meagre little towel becomes a magic carpet but one that is material and grounded, not flying in arabesques and filigrees, but on the floor where Omar sits waiting for rescue. He flees from his racist landlady to his room, where a safe, anchoring place has been conjured up by Alfonso's towel, whose special properties enable him to metamorphose: 'I ran away to Alfonso's towel, and once on it I felt as if I was in an invisible place. I stayed on it all afternoon' (58–59).

The towel is one of those small gifts that may not be expensive or valuable, but which merge with the human body to become empathetic pillars of support and break into the damaging cycle of greed, stories and embellishments. Elaine Scarry describes these ordinary, magnificent gifts such as 'the handkerchief, blanket, and bucket of white paint' as capable of speaking in a special language that says "'Don't cry; be warm; watch now, in a few minutes even these constricting walls will look more spacious'" (292). This is precisely the role played by Alfonso's towel in the early days of Omar's migration, when he is alienated, lonely and friendless: 'I got into bed without changing my clothes, though I folded Alfonso's towel and kept it draped over the back of a chair. I did so out of gratitude to Alfonso, and as a gesture of respect for his instinct for self-preservation (62)'.

It all began with a table and ends with a towel. The table has wreaked its way from Omar to Hussein to Hassan, back to Omar. It lingers in Latif's 'land of memory' in that 'dim gutted warehouse' of 'abandoned goods' (86) wherein Latif and Omar painfully seek release and redemption. It is appropriated by the plundering British in the form of the casket of priceless perfume for which it had been bartered. It is magically transposed into the furniture shops of a little English seaside town and then purged by way of red trainers and a flying carpet — Alfonso's towel — with which the novel ends. Within these fluid shape-shifting boundaries, nothing is pure. England is both the coloniser and the new family; Zanzibar is both home and prison; *The Thousand and One Nights* is both Arabian and mongrel, appropriated, stolen, adapted and available for boundless manipulation. Caught between the African new nation, where dictators flourish in the fetid soil of postcolonial grabbing, and the cold English ocean, Gurnah's protagonists struggle with their stories in order to make flesh, bone and marrow out of crushing allegories.

In the weighty last lines of the novel, Omar wonders whether Latif will remember to get a takeaway for their dinner. This takeaway is an indicator of the migrant making a new home through a small, yet big, detail of everyday life. If it does not materialise, it would not be disastrous because, as Omar comforts himself, 'I had Alfonso's towel with me if the worst came to the worst' (245). This humble object heralds an end to magic carpets and the beguiling nonsense of jinns, whose return to the jar signals the possibilities for migrants to become everyday citizens anchored by material daily realities in their new lives.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I have retained Gurnah's usage of 'jinn' as singular, and 'jinns' as plural.
- <sup>2</sup> See also, for example, M.G. Vasanji's *The Gunny Sack* (1989); *No New Land* (1991); *Amrika* (1999); and the tellingly entitled, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003)
- <sup>3</sup> I am referring to 'Omanis' in the way that Gurnah does, probably for his English readership, who would not distinguish them from 'South East Asians', albeit that these two groups have a very different historical context in Africa.
- <sup>4</sup> See Cooper 2004 for an analysis of a similar complex set of identities expressed by the writer, M.G. Vasanji.

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