

# Trauma and the Dialectics of Recuperation in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*

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## Abstract

This article argues that Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001) is unusual in contemporary fiction in that it suggests a way in which the lost past can be recuperated, both in the sense of being reclaimed and in the sense of healing past conflicts. The primary means by which this is shown to happen is through a dialectical encounter between the hitherto opposing groups or ideologies. The novel uses migrant distancing from the African past to ameliorate the pain experienced in that past and the close encounter between the two protagonists, Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud, with long and bitter family histories, to explore how a dialectical relationship can be developed. By having to reframe past assumptions, each character must change not only his way of thinking about the other, but also about the past and himself. The theory used in the paper is mostly Hegelian, but also psychoanalytic.

**Keywords:** Gurnah; *By the Sea*; dialectic; Hegel; psychoanalysis

## Introduction

Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *By the Sea* (2001) achieves what few contemporary novels about migrancy and trauma manage. It presents a model for recuperation from trauma and for the reconciliation between opposing forces or people. It both recuperates the past "in an archaeological way" (142) and makes that recuperation a step towards recovering from the wounds of colonial and postcolonial trauma. Gurnah's approach to this recuperation is dialectical. His representation of migrancy as both painful but also containing the seeds of renewal places him alongside thinkers like Stuart Hall (1990) and Salman Rushdie (1991), for whom exile and migrancy are more creative than



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destructive. This makes the novel an important addition to current debates about postcolonial trauma, and the differences between the original trauma theorists of the 1990s and the later ones emphasising the political. The text can be read as an (indirect) demand that the separation of the psychoanalytic (individualist) approach, which dominated the early trauma theories, from the postcolonial (social/political) approach, which became the backlash, is too limiting.

Critical readings of the novel have largely focused on migrancy's dislocations (Brazzelli 2013; Helff 2009; Masterson 2010; News 2015), its narrative structure and the function of storytelling (Samuelson 2013), while other commentators have discussed aspects of Derridean "hospitality" (Farrier 2008) and Edouard Glissant's "Relation" (Steiner 2010) as ways of dealing with social and personal dislocation. As Steiner and Farrier have shown, the novel's concern with what Derrida calls "hospitality" (2000) and Levinas (1979, 194) the infinity of the face of the Other is perhaps the central motif. Glissant's concept of "Relation" (2010) is rightly used by Steiner as another way of understanding Gurnah's concern with self/other relations, and even with object relations. As she (Steiner 2010, 125) puts it, "Gurnah's narratives insist on moments of relation, of small voices affirming hospitality within the violent and hostile contexts of colonial and imperialist onslaught and the exclusionary rhetoric of new African nationalisms."

Nevertheless, if "relation" and "hospitality" are two fundamental concerns, then one must ask how exactly each of these is able to be achieved. By what mechanism are they made to be successful? Certainly, it is not merely by some mystical warm feeling of mutual acceptance. How do two people or opposing forces eventually find rapprochement or a space of integration? This article argues that an important element in the method of achieving such "relation" or "hospitality" is not to be forgotten: dialectical interaction. However anachronistic it may sound in the present day, the idea, originating with Plato but most prominently explained by Hegel, is still relevant.

Hegel's well-known triad of "Thesis—Antithesis—Synthesis" (1873) is not only an instructive paradigm for dealing with postcolonial anxieties of dislocation, but can also be read as a way of responding to trauma, a way of bridging one of the primary divides in present-day trauma theory—that between an idealist, individualist, mostly psychoanalytical approach to trauma and the "postcolonial" approach that is a response to what it sees as a too radical individualising and depoliticising of trauma. The first approach was born in the 1990s, via Cathy Caruth and colleagues like Hartman (1995), Felman and Laub (1992), all of whom endorsed the now famous definition of trauma as, in Caruth's words, "not known" and carrying a "belated address" (1996, 4). Trauma is "unspeakable." This psychoanalytic approach (focusing largely on the Jewish Shoah) had profound implications for the interpretation of history. For Caruth (1996, 3), "it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet." Extreme trauma of the kind experienced in holocausts might be so radical as to be unspeakable, and silence remains the best response. "There can be no poetry after

Auschwitz,” as Adorno is famously misquoted as saying. It may seem “barbaric” (as he actually said) to write poetry after Auschwitz (Adorno 1983), but that does not mean one should not. Art must continue to respond to the horrors of history, as all writers know, so it is not easy to agree with Caruth that we must “begin to recognize the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference)” (1996, 11). Or that literature’s role is to “resituate [history] in our understanding, that is, ... permitting [it] to arise where immediate understanding may not” (11). What is the point of a literature that mystifies horror?

The attack on this notion has come from postcolonial theorists who see the idealisation of the Jewish Shoah as a way of leaving its assertions untouchable, sacred, a nationalist Ur-narrative, but at the expense of the countless other holocausts the world has seen, not the least of which are slavery and colonialism. Scholars like Craps and Buelens (2008), Luckhurst (2008), Rothberg (2008), Forter (2104), and Visser (2015) question this linguistic-deconstructive approach to trauma and memory. For them, Derridean “aporia” and Freud’s *nachträglichkeit* (usually translated as “deferral” and seen as a central element of repressed memory) from “The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence” ([1894] 2013) are inadequate tools for describing colonial experience. To “rethink the possibility of history,” as Caruth (1996, 12) argues, is to make history just another construct. To do this is, in Luckhurst’s (2008, 210) view, to hold trauma a victim “entirely under the sign of post-traumatic melancholia,” suffering the “injunction to maintain the post-traumatic condition.” Such an emphasis, as Eli Park Sorenson (2010, 14) puts it, “results in a crippling self-reflexivity,” where there is no escape from suffering. In contrast to trauma’s “unspeakableness,” the focus of this school is on “testimony,” eye-witness accounts of real events, inspired by Fanon’s incident of feeling dislocated from himself by the racialised gaze of a little girl and her fear of his “blackness” ([1967] 2008, 84), a moment replayed in Gurnah’s novel when Latif Mahmud is called “a grinning blackamoor” (2001, 71) in London.

These two approaches to trauma, however, need not be mutually exclusive. There is huge value for postcolonial trauma theory in any psychoanalytic approach, as the work of Fanon himself demonstrates. The importance of Gurnah’s novel is that it can be read as a way of adapting the two approaches to trauma into a single one that is appropriate in a postcolonial context. It explores historically specific experience, with an awareness of wider political valences, but invites psychoanalytic explanation at the same time.

The story revolves around two migrant men in the United Kingdom, both from Zanzibar, which forms part of Tanzania. The older man (Saleh Omar) is a recent refugee who has arrived using a passport in the name of the younger man’s father (Rajab Shaaban). The younger man (Latif Mahmud) has been in the United Kingdom for some years and is a lecturer at the University of London. He left Zanzibar as a young man on a dentistry scholarship to the then German Democratic Republic (East Germany) after a coup in Tanzania, when the new government became pro-communist. At that time, Saleh Omar

had been arrested for supposedly “stealing” Rajab Shaaban’s house via a trick played on both him and Shaaban by another man (Uncle Hussein), who persuaded Saleh Omar to accept the house as surety for a loan. When the loan was not repaid, Saleh was forced to take the house as payment. Latif’s mother, a seductress of sorts, forced to use herself to extract from the powerful what her husband is unable to achieve for himself, ensures that the man whom she blames for the loss of her house is arrested and imprisoned as soon as the regime changes in her favour. By the time Saleh Omar is freed decades later, his young wife and child have died, along with most of his antagonists, the regime has again changed and he himself is left with nothing of his old house and shop, except some papers, one of which is Rajab Shaaban’s birth certificate. He uses this to acquire a false passport to escape to England, just when Hassan, Latif’s older brother, returns from his northern life, seeking his inheritance. Ironically, it is Latif Mahmud, the son of the man whose name he has taken, who is asked to be a translator because he claims not to understand English. The young British social worker appointed to look after Saleh Omar is Rachel Howard, a woman young enough to be his daughter. It is Rachel who introduces the two men to each other, allowing the past to re-find itself in the present.

The novel’s freshness resides in the nature of its telling. The truths about what really happened in the past are revealed only slowly, both to the reader and the two men separately. Years of anger and trauma have been the result of ego-driven misunderstandings, blind refusals to see the other side of the story. It takes the confinement of a personal encounter between the two men, in a small flat “by the sea” in the alien United Kingdom, for the intricate complexities of family histories and grievances, spawned on another continent, exacerbated by colonial power struggles, to be unravelled.

Gurnah’s dialectical narrative technique allows each person to speak for himself and then to be forced to listen to the other. He adopts it, this paper argues, as one of the most fruitful and tested ways of dealing with conflict. It is Socratic but also Hegelian (1873) and uses the triad of “Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis” (§79) throughout. For Hegel, existence is a battle of opposing forces looking for some kind of synthesis. This is not unlike Coleridge’s understanding in *Biographia Literaria* of the imagination as “the reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities” ([1817] 2013) or Blake’s “without contraries is no progression” from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* ([1868] 2014). Like Gurnah, Hegel is not a moral relativist. He assumes history to be progressive. Human life and relations have a purpose, one which must be asserted as the first position in any argument—the “thesis.” This is a “moment of fixity,” an understanding of what something is or means. The second moment, the “antithesis,” is “negatively rational” (§79 and §81), in which there is “instability” before a change takes place and the ideas previously taken as “truth” are opened to question. The third moment (a movement towards “synthesis”) happens via what he terms “self-sublation” (*aufhebung*). The religious (self-sacrificial) allusion is hard to miss. Self-sublation here means two opposing things simultaneously: to cancel or negate, and to preserve. It means giving up previously fixed positions, but also preserving some of their value, in a reframing

brought on by encountering the position of the Other. This is not, one might say, necessarily mystical or beyond reason. This is the process of most decision-making—the weighing up of possibilities between opposing ideas and blending of both. Hegel does turn to metaphysics when he explains this process in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* ([1807] 2018), ideas both Husserl and Heidegger would later use. He suggests the triad Being—Nothing—Becoming as ways of interpreting the progression towards synthesis. Being is a fixity, and as such is limited. It must become Nothing before it can discover the requisite openness of Becoming, or “Becoming for itself” ([1807] 2018, 220). Only by giving up fast-held beliefs or prejudices, the experience of emptiness in all its complexity, can such a synthesis be discovered, or what he later terms “mutual recognition” or “intersubjectivity,” ideas used by later phenomenologists and foreshadowing thinkers such as Levinas.

These ideas are also an important antecedent to the psychoanalytical method, especially the one Freud refers to as “working through” (Freud and Breuer 1895, 164). This is the process Freudian patients undergo in therapy in their “talking cure” (1895, 21) and especially in the Freudian “transference” (to be discussed below), which is an important element of the psychoanalytic focus in trauma theory and which Gurnah’s method can be seen to mirror. Hegel’s three elements are particularly important in this “working through.” All are hermeneutic. The first is the nature of memory and forgetting. The second is the function of narrative itself in the experience of loss. And the third is intertextuality’s role in reframing how the traumatised subject interprets the past.

### Memory and Forgetting—The Hermeneutics of Baggage

“Working through” trauma begins with the archaeological recuperation of repressed memory, digging up the past to find the original “thesis” as it were. It relies on special symbolic moments or objects for its digging. Telling the past requires a hermeneutics that relies on such symbolism. Saleh Omar calls it “the hermeneutics of baggage,” the “secret codes of what people like to hide” which, when used to decipher something, is “like following an archaeological trail or examining lines on a shipping map” (Gurnah 2001, 7). But the author is also making a point about epistemology. Hermeneutics works on both the ideal and the material levels. Objects are not to be separated from the ideas that make up their use. The primary “idea” about the symbolic value of objects in Gurnah’s text is that of ownership. Trauma resides in the loss of ownership but also of meaning and connection to others. Recovery from trauma can only come from a new hermeneutics about one’s “baggage.” Warner’s point (Samuelson 2013, 82) about *A Thousand and One Nights* being tales in which things are “literally alive and sentient and efficacious,” as if property has a life of its own, is insightful here when applied to Gurnah, as Samuelson does. In the discursive frames of traditional African-Eastern trade and its accompanying stories, objects carry more significance than merely as means of barter. They bear the weight of power relations and identities. As relics (the title of the first part of the novel) they represent both the history of ownership, and also of plunder. This is Latif’s thought when, as a boy, he is asked to request the return from Saleh Omar

of Hassan's ebony table, a sentimental object for the mother. The objects he sees in Saleh's house "looked like refugees" in "a gallery or museum," celebrating "plunder" (Gurnah 2001, 102).

Saleh Omar, now denuded of his past riches, is the carrier of physical and emotional baggage when he enters the United Kingdom as a refugee. The only important physical baggage is the *ud-al-qamari* he brings as a memento of his previous life. The customs officer, Kevin Edelman, himself the son of refugees, appropriates the *ud-al-qamari* (14–16). It is one of the important physical symbols in the novel that have a complex valency. For Saleh, it is "like a fragment of a voice or the memory of my beloved's arm on my neck" (14). It keeps him in memory of his lost wife and child, his time in prison and his final escape to England. To have it "stolen" in England is to be forced to let go, finally, of all the physical reminders of the past. It is the third of a triad of symbolic "thefts" in the novel. The first two are the houses that Saleh Omar is accused of "stealing" and the ebony table that was given by Uncle Hussein to Hassan, the older brother of Latif Mahmud. We have gone from houses to a table to a small piece of *ud*. Ownership is changed over time, but the loss is undiminished.

The intricacies of the island (and Stone Town) histories are reflected in the suitably maze-like intricacy of the telling and the plot. The laws of lineage and ownership require microscopic unravelling, hermeneutic rigour. Layer of history is added to layer, as is the case in Stone Town itself. Not only is Rajab Shaaban's house "stolen," but Saleh Omar is also left the house of an aunt (Bi-Maryam) who is his father's second wife, protecting it in her will from her first husband's male family members who come in search of their claim when she dies (190–91). They, too, accuse Saleh of "stealing" from his stepmother, duping her out of what they see as their property. The ebony table (103) is the only object left to remind Hassan's mother of him. This table also finds its way back into Saleh Omar's shop (from whence it was acquired and partly paid for by the *ud*) after the appropriation of Rajab Shaaban's house.

The objects all carry the weight of finality about them, living histories rather than mere objects, metonymies, contiguous with the histories they represent. Ownership, for Gurnah, is both material and psychological. Object loss invites psychoanalytic readings of the "lost object," a Lacanian *objet petit a*, the lost relic which is never forgotten. As a result they become fetishised as emblems of the personal and political lack fostered by "plunder" (102). Colonial trauma does not end with postcolonialism, where the objects change hands like governments, yet the plunder continues.

Despite this, in the dialectical context of the novel's "working through," object loss is also the second prong of Hegel's triad of Being—Nothing—Becoming. Their removal is shown to be a necessary step for both men, a Hegelian *aufhebung*, which is the beginning of a reframing of knowledge. If their identities had been tied to historical ownership, it is only the loss of ownership that inaugurates a re-alignment of identities and begins the process of healing.

This allows migrancy to become at least a partially positive experience. Without the loss it implies, there is no progression into a new way of seeing the past (and hence the future), just as there is no way of escaping the fixations of past antagonisms. England is not a home, and perhaps never will be; it is an ambiguous place of refuge where neither one feels comfortable. But it is an alternative space in which the migrant can find fresh ways of interpreting identity and history.

Latif uses the ambiguous metaphor of a warehouse when talking of traumatic memory:

I want to look forward, but I always find myself looking back, poking about in times so long ago [...] tyrant events which loom large over me and dictate every ordinary action. Yet when I look back, I find some objects still gleam with a bright malevolence and every memory draws blood. It's 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. (Gurnah 2001, 86)

It is a dour place because the objects upon which memory depends have been gutted. Yet the memory of loss makes them shine with a bright malevolence. It is only through the dialectical encounter with the “thief” of that time that the objects might lose their malevolent shine, and become mere objects. This is not to silence the past or empty it of meaning, in the way that Caruth’s ideas may be interpreted. It is the first step in psychotherapy and the beginning of breaking the shackles of neurosis, the reframing of the past from a new perspective. It allows the subject to escape what Saleh Omar describes migrant life to be: “I feel that I am an involuntary instrument of another’s design, a figure in a story told by someone else. Not I. Can an I ever speak of itself without making itself heroic, without making itself seem hemmed in, arguing against an unarguable, rancoring with an implacable?” (68–69).

### Narrative Loss—Shriven, Not Forgiven

The *aufhebung* that begins the process of releasing the past is an idea common to most teleological readings of history, from Christianity to Marxism. Hegel, the orthodox Lutheran, argues that history does have a purpose and an end, and its dialectical encounters between opposing forces are necessary to reach that end. Consequently, the final (third) step in his development of history is unsurprisingly spiritual. It is “the elevation of the soul from this still limited and special form of freedom to its pure universal form; that state in which the spiritual essence attains the consciousness and feeling of itself” (2001, 72–73). The narrative rewriting of histories Gurnah chooses has spiritual or quasi-spiritual elements, as much as it does anti-colonialist ones. By “putting the stories alongside each other” (2001, 207) in a spatial confinement in the seaside flat, both Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud must face repressed versions of their pasts and themselves. They can either listen to the other or not, allow the other to “fill the gaps” or not. It is a remaking, as Samuelson (2013) and Farrier (2008) have suggested, of *A Thousand and One Nights* (170), an emotional wait for the next episode in the story:

Anyway, all week I've been thinking about the things you spoke about last time, trying to make them agree with what I remember and what I thought I knew. I know something in me resisted what you were saying, even though I was gripped by it. So I've been thinking about that and putting the stories alongside each other, and seeing the gaps that I will never fill, and the ones we managed to avoid last time. I feel worn out after all this time, after all these years of thinking about that time and that place. And living here [...] through hostilities and contempt and superciliousness. [...] So I was looking forward to coming here, to hear you talk, for both of us to find relief. (Gurnah 2001, 207)

Latif Mahmud's words would not be out of place at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission or in a therapy session, and they indicate a willingness to face the horrors of his own past and to share some of them too. They are an explanation of Freud's "talking cure," but they are also a way of showing that identities and histories, postcolonial or otherwise, are neither fixed nor "unspeakable." Victims are not condemned to live with destructively repressed memories.

Latif's experience in the United Kingdom mirrors Saleh Omar's, both as a refugee and an outcast in his home country after release from prison. From Saleh, Latif learns about his own family history after he left the island and lost contact. He learns the other side of the narrative about the ownership of the houses (146–51); he begins to understand better Saleh's self-confessed pettiness in refusing to return the ebony table he was sent as a boy to request (158); he sees his own father's and mother's actions in a different, more generous light; he understands why Saleh had to steal his father's name, and why such a swop was ironically justified by the parallelism of the two older men's lives in terms of lost accomplishments, lost families, and lost identities.

This "synthesis" of opposites supersedes the two characters. It includes the reading community, since we learn many of the details that Latif is learning as we read. The reader is able to share the sense of surprise and regret and final rapprochement and therefore recuperation. Deferral, we discover, has been an important tool in this process. Without our being caught up in one man's story before hearing the other's, we would not acknowledge the significance of changing our judgement and bias. Saleh does not seek forgiveness: "I knew I would tell him. I needed to be shriven. Not to be forgiven or to be cleansed of my sins, which were ones of pettiness and vanity [...] Little could be done to lighten those sins, I needed to be shriven of the burden of events and stories which I have never been able to tell" (171). Saleh's telling of repressed stories becomes his way of "shriving," a confessional step towards self-sublation. Latif's stories do much the same thing, but they of necessity must change once he hears the version from Saleh, reframing his own past in ways he had not imagined. This, too, is a kind of shriving, and a losing of the self to become another self. But it also changes the way the reader understands the "facts" of the narrative. History is not a set of uncontestable facts, but versions of stories which must be put together before any kind of "truth" can be reached. This is not to make all history a mere construction. It is to assert that there are "facts," and the job of the writer and historian is to interpret the facts based on as much evidence as possible.

Sharing their stories reveals misunderstandings that have become the foundation of family histories as if they were unquestionable fact. Now it becomes possible to reframe that history. While the cruel ruse played by Uncle Hussein and the postcolonial government's machinations are partly responsible for the destruction of the families, it is really selfish pride on both sides that is finally responsible. There is no simplistic political blame here that does not include the self. This is Gurnah's all-important point for postcolonial literature generally, which all too readily slips into monolithic accusations against colonial or postcolonial power.

How does the "reframing" in the "talking cure" work? The first instrument of reframing is Freud's theory of "transference." It can be applied on the individual and the socio-political levels. The second, closely related one, is what might be called "mirroring"—of which only one example is the postcolonial sub-plot of European dislocation that mirrors colonialist dislocation, and which, like transference, can be a means towards healing.

In Freud's understanding of "transference," the patient passes the "blame" for their neuroses onto the therapist because of a resistance to accepting self-blame. Positive (love) or negative (hate) libidinal attachment ([1912] 2001, 105) between therapist and patient is the first step in the undoing of the transference and so the beginning of healing. The patient must project onto another what is paining him/her, and make the other a scapegoat, to be set free by finally recognising the "distortions" they have created. This process relies on *nachträglichkeit*, the deferral over time, because there is resistance to accepting what has been repressed, and it is only through the deferral that sufficient distance between event and a coherent interpretation can be achieved.

The two men's trauma has been "unspeakable" because they have not had the correct audience for their speech, until now. To be "shriven," as Saleh Omar wishes to be, is to remove the preconceptions that have prevented full disclosure, even to themselves, their *aufhebung*. But it is also to give up a singular selfhood (as he has already done by taking another's identity, literally transferring himself into another). This is the lesson Latif must learn, eventually discarding much of the historical narrative about his past that has sustained him, but also paralysed him.

The second instrument important in this healing dialectic is the reworking of the standard story of postcolonial trauma by mirroring—a realisation that the trauma suffered by any one person or group is not unique. Even the so-called "colonialist aggressor" can suffer traumas and until this is clearly understood with a degree of sympathy no real healing can happen, no "humanisation" of the Other. Perhaps the most striking example of mirroring is the sub-plot involving Elleke and her German family in Kenya—a colonial diaspora of its own, and a later dislocation that proves just as painful as any African one. The story, told to Latif when he first meets Elleke and Jan (Gurnah 2001, 127–34), shows that Western colonialism is not the only form of social repression, and it does not only affect Africans or the poor. Elleke and her son Jan, a

little like Izak Dinesen with her “I had a farm in Africa” (121), near the Ngong hills, are forced off the land that has become their home. Germany is no longer home. It is not the place of one’s birth, Gurnah is suggesting, that makes for home, but where one feels most spiritually and emotionally at rest. The transference of blame for colonialist expropriations must be dismantled if any peace is to be achieved, and people cease to be Homeric wanderers. Real home is not expropriation, but mutual self-respect and self-sublation.

This is the message of the foot-washing scene (126–28), a version of mirroring—a Christian washing the feet of a Moslem, a white madam washing the feet of a black boy, a European washing the feet of an African migrant, all of which are reminiscent not only of Mary Magdalene but also of Eurycleia rediscovering Odysseus finally returned home. It is mirrored again when Saleh is given a towel by a stranger, Alfonso, in the half-way house for refugees and uses it later for a prayer mat (58).

### The Healing Hermeneutics of Intertextuality

This transference and mirroring are not limited to actions within the novel itself, but extend, perhaps most importantly, beyond its bounds into an intertextual life. The “talking cure” is intertextual (as Freud and Jung knew all too well) and taps into deeper unconscious cultural accretions. How to interpret that intertextuality becomes a dominant question in Gurnah’s novel. It is a response to the hermeneutics of baggage, making one’s cultural baggage a tool of transformation rather than an unwanted weight.

Cartography is the first textual referent in the formation of national identities. The colonial project begins with mapping: “New maps were made, complete maps, so that every inch was accounted for, and everyone knew who they were, or at least who they belonged to” (15). Saleh Omar’s interest in colonial narratives begins with an interest in colonial cartography: “I speak to maps. And sometimes they say something back to me” (35). Maps create littoral states (Samuelson 2013); they give the world a shape to be possessed, but also create division and displacement. Maps inaugurated colonialism, turned swathes of open land into nation states, separated people into owners and tenants, and created hierarchies “in which to place the people who lived in their inaccessibility and primitiveness in other places on the map” (35). The dialogue between self and other is therefore one with maps and territories.

The ideological inflections of mapping are its destructive element. In his colonial school education, the young Saleh read “unflattering accounts of my history, and because they were unflattering, they seemed truer. [...] It was as if they had remade us and in ways that we no longer had any recourse but to accept” (Gurnah 2001, 18). These maps became the basis for a mythologised account of identity, “Orientalist” myths about Africa and the West that remained fixed in the minds of the colonised. But if myths are created by false or only partially accurate narratives, it is narrative that can break mythologised “fixing.” It can do this, firstly, by reinterpreting the value of the myths of both coloniser and colonised. “De-Orientalising” stories such as *A Thousand and One*

*Nights*, and reappropriating them for the use of those whose Moslem culture created it, is the first step (100, 152). The two men's stories are postcolonial rewritings of the ancient function of storytelling, a way of remapping their own pasts, ordered by powers outside their authority. Orientalism mythologised Shahrazade as heroic but largely Other.

The story of Nuhu is a prime example. The young Latif can only interpret Nuhu, the ugly man guarding the door to his appropriated house when he returns to ask for the ebony table, as a literalisation of the image of eunuchs from *A Thousand and One Nights* (152), dehumanising him. Latif reads with Western eyes. Saleh's more intimate knowledge of the giant man as one who simply does his master's bidding, but who himself has a tragic history, humanises him, and in the process raises a question about the function of mythical narratives themselves. Latif's memories are of a brutish man who terrorised young boys into submission. We, the readers, easily accept the stereotype on first hearing of him. But Saleh's knowledge is of a man upon whom his father relied for his halwa business and who sacrificed himself to allow Saleh to attend school. The interactive dialectic here opens the space for alternative but complementary views of the same person.

The many other references to colonial literature in the novel suggest colonialist impositions both from the West and the East (after communist rule). Saleh finds books in homes abandoned by the colonisers: ancient Greek, British, American and later even Russian (106, 118) literature. Latif, too, is a man of letters versed in Western culture, which he now teaches. But few of these carry the importance in the narrative accorded to Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (65, 75, 156, 168, 198, 201). Both men know the work well, particularly the famous, sloganised, words: "I would prefer not to." They are not words familiar to Rachel Howard or any other locals in the United Kingdom with whom Saleh comes into contact. Their repetition and use by the two outsiders, one might say "Ishmaels" in Melville's context, suggest that colonised outsiders are those most likely to appreciate Bartleby's refusal to abide by the rules of the capitalist legal system he is meant to "copy" as a scrivener. He is the individual "I" asserting his right, however futilely, against faceless authority that denies individuality. In Melville's story, the lawyer/narrator is a representative of the system he takes for granted as being beneficent, in the way that Rachel may see herself as the helper of refugees. He is nonplussed by an employee simply refusing to work, and even leaves the premises he occupies when Bartleby refuses to decamp after his eventual dismissal. The macabre humour of Melville's text is not meant to divert our attention from its socio-political statement of opposition to the capitalist hypocrisy, symbolised by Wall Street, which appears welcoming but is really enslaving. Bartleby spends most of his time "facing walls," literal and figurative, and he dies in "The Tombs," a New York prison. The only response to a capitalist system which demeans human life is to stop copying it—which is what Bartleby literally does. But the system is so pervasive that to opt out of it is to die. There is no ultimate transformation of the system in any Ghandi-like idealism. The Melville who worked most of his later life in a customs

house, alienated from his natural self, more Schopenhauerian pessimist than a romantic, understood this all too well. It may be that both men in Gurnah's story romanticise Bartleby somewhat, something Rachel Howard's suspicion of him as self-destructive divines. But it seems that Gurnah's important postcolonial point here is that the men are invoking a canonical Western text to express their own sense of alienation. If there are such texts, then the self/other divide between the West and Africa/the East is not to be seen as absolute. Ideological maps can be broken. This allows a reluctant acceptance of the Western state as a place where the refugee can yet find ideological and emotional accommodation.

But Gurnah's offering implies that Rachel's reading of Bartleby as a potential "abuser" (198) is not necessarily to be discounted as only that of colonialist do-gooder. Even Saleh takes her reading seriously. If the only option left the refugee is self-abuse and death by hunger-strike, there can be no progression. Dialogue and dialectic are futile. "I would prefer not to" becomes a wall of its own. There is more than one reading of the text, and interpretations are closely aligned to social backgrounds. But without the dialogue between readings, there is no way of escaping the wall. Like all refugees, Bartleby can be seen as in need of "hospitality" (Farrier 2008), unquestioning acceptance. But as a member of a society, he must also be seen to play his part, not only be an objector. The dialectic between these two positions is the foundation on which all postcolonial relations have to be built, and the start of a "working through" differences that lead to the healing of trauma.

There is a power in literature, Gurnah suggests, where intertextuality offers a version of dialectical engagement with the culture of the author(itarian)'s regime which, if used correctly, can change power relations, over time, at least in the psyche of the victim. But it depends on the kind of engagement seen in the transference between opposing forces. It is only in what Fanon ([1967] 2008) would call "unmasking" of the fixed identities imposed by ideology and history that the dialectical relation between opposites can be an instrument of healing.

## Conclusion—Waiting for a Takeaway

The novel ends with a humorous example of *nachträglichkeit*. Saleh, still mostly ignorant of Western culture outside his reading about it, must wait for his "surreptitious taste of [the] famed dish" called a "takeaway" (Gurnah 2001, 245). The joke has symbolic resonance in the context of trauma and its healing. He must wait because Latif and Rachel are on the phone in what is perhaps the beginning of a deeper relationship. But he must wait, too, because the healing of trauma does not have a cut-off point, just as stories continue to live beyond their endings. Healing is never final and closure never full. In the Hegelian terms in which we have examined the novel, the process after *aufhebung* is a movement towards "Becoming," itself dynamic, and histories are being constantly rewritten. The two men will continue their dynamic rewriting long after the novel is read. What we as readers take away from the final, partial beginnings of a rapprochement between Saleh and Latif is that after the loss of all material objects, the

two might begin to accept both the other and themselves, sins and all. From the point of view of the postcolonial writer, Gurnah is offering a particular reading of the global future: That it is not by separating cultures and people into enclaves that transformation can happen. Such a movement is retrogressive, a position which places Gurnah in opposition to those writers who argue for a rejection of the coloniser's language because it is still chained to colonialism. The sea of dislocation that is symbolised by the journey between Africa and Europe can, in his view, become the sea of discovery, past the edges of the maps, and into the sea of Becoming.

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