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Discontinuous homecoming and community-forging storytelling in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*

Abstract. In *By the Sea*, written by Abdulrazak Gurnah in 2001, the theme of the homecoming is of paramount importance. The trajectory of the main characters' movement is fragmented and incomplete in the sense that they end up feeling at home in a foreign country rather than choosing their birthplace, Zanzibar. By referring to selected scenes from Gurnah's narrative, the present paper aims to analyse the images of home portrayed in the novel and the discontinuous character of the homecoming it depicts. In addition, the role of storytelling is investigated so as to show its importance for two related processes: homecoming and community-forging.

Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah, storytelling, home, homecoming, community-forging.

1. Introduction

In Abdulrazak Gurnah's prose, images of home are recurring threads interweaving the past and the workings of memory. As the writer himself admits in an interview, the "negotiation between memory, loyalties and ideas of home" has been "both my lived experience and an important part of my writing subject" (Iqbal 2019: 39). The theme of home and its various images is also one of the cornerstones of the novel *By the Sea*, published in 2001. As the story unfolds, Saleh Omar and Latif Mahmud, the two main characters, succeed in shaping a new definition of home: as a physical and metaphorical place, which has a decisive impact on the process of their homecoming. Having left Zanzibar separately, in different periods of their lives, both move to the UK and after many years reunite to unravel their past and tease out the garbled story of an old, grim family feud. Their journey, as it is depicted in the narrative, is non-linear and discontinuous.

Homecoming is a theme which is present in numerous ancient literary works. One of the elements that varies, though, is the trajectory of homecoming, which is generally circular (Piciuccio 2017: 47). Most of the time, the trajectory represents the characters' development as well. For instance, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, an anonymous chivalric romance dating back to the Middle English period, the homecoming of the hero is the last step of a circular path. Having successfully overcome the challenges of the

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mysterious Green Knight, the valorous Gawain comes back to Camelot with the awareness of his fallibility, a feature which was already inside him. Odysseus's famous homecoming is similar: the hero eventually manages to return to Ithaca, but prior to that he undergoes a transformation triggered by the enriching stories he hears and the adventures he experiences during the travels. Since *The Odyssey* offers an archetypal model of homecoming, references to it tellingly feature in *By the Sea*. Sometimes, the homecoming can also take different trajectories and become a spiral, as it happens, for example, in *The Sea* by John Banville, where "the curving line comes very close to the departure point, without touching it" (Piciucco 2017: 47). In postcolonial literature, homecoming often involves the discovery of a safe place to live in. For instance, one character of Christy Lefteri's notable novel on the Syrian war, *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019), says: "Do you know why Odysseus make [*sic*] his journey? [...] To find his home again" (188-189). In Gurnah's narrative, homecoming is discontinuous to an utmost degree as its trajectory is fragmented, and this journey does not necessarily dovetail with the return to a physical place. In Kearney's opinion, "Latif has indeed in a sense come home. However, this has only become possible in England"—a country so unlike his native Zanzibar (2006: 56). This condition seems to be characteristic of many refugees' lives and postcolonial writers' experiences as well. As Gurnah points out: "The danger of the postcolonial writer, it seems, is that it might have worked, or might come to work, in the alienation and isolation of a stranger's life in Europe" (2004: 27). Nevertheless, distance is paramount to perspective and liberation, and this is also true for the main characters' of *By the Sea*, who manage to settle misunderstandings and put together the different fragments of an old family feud, thus getting relief from their excruciating past.

This paper aims to analyse two paramount themes in the novel, namely the vision of home and homecoming, and the use of storytelling to build communities. Further underlining the core role of both topics, the professions of Omar and Latif relate to the notions of home and story in the sense that the former is a furniture seller, the latter a poet and professor of literature. The present analysis will firstly revolve around the theme of home and homecoming as portrayed by Gurnah. Since in the novel stories and storytelling seem to thrive and are eventually fundamental to create homes, this paper will assess their importance in forging close-knit communities and, as a result, a sense of belonging, which sets the stage for the discontinuous character of homecoming and shapes the denouement of the whole narrative.

2. Images of home and homecoming

By the Sea has been labeled as a novel of "departures and tentative arrivals," providing as it does numerous examples of unsatisfactory homecomings (Steiner 2009: 113). Even in *Afterlives*, Gurnah's latest novel focusing on the devastation caused by German colonial rule in East Africa in the early 20th century, the topic of homecoming looms large. Hamza, one of its main characters, finally comes home after a long period spent among the "askari" (African soldiers). "He [...] found himself unexpectedly on the shore road. He followed that with a small thrill of recognition and walked on to look for the house where he had lived his youth, but he could not find it" (2020: 169). Hamza's homecoming takes place halfway through the novel. On the other hand, at the very beginning of *By the Sea*, the two main characters do not consider going back to their

birthplaces; they are living in or arriving in a foreign country (even though they do not feel at home there).

The novel opens with Omar's interview at the airport and his request for asylum. That he does not consider England his home is clear from a very evocative image which Gurnah weaves through Omar's consultation with Rachel, his legal adviser: "Then she spread her papers on the table and sat down, facing the door. [...] I sat opposite her, facing the window with a view of a brick wall" (2001: 63). While the door represents a world of possibilities open to Rachel (a British citizen), the only future awaiting Omar and other refugees like him is portrayed by an oppressive brick wall, which can either stand for his otherness from British citizens or his decision to live isolated, as he is doing when Latif visits him. Latif has been living in the UK for a long time. However, it is clear that he does not feel at home there, notwithstanding his prestigious position of university professor. Both internal and external elements help to strengthen this impression. Although Latif has "spent over half his life in England and has carved himself a comfortable niche in academia" (Hand 2010: 79), something worries him when he thinks that other Zanzibari migrants could deem him forgetful of his roots—a behaviour which quickly takes on the hues of a betrayal, a "treacherous absence from nativity" (2001: 74). While Omar is bluntly asked to provide his passport and exhibit the permit to stay in England, Latif is eager to "confirm [his] credentials as a teacher of literature", and he longs to be considered a fully-fledged "member of the tribe" (2001: 74). Apart from an unusual choice of words, though, his behaviour tells a lot about his feelings. Most importantly, he gets touchy when he recalls the way he managed to strike up a friendship at the college in Germany: "I don't know why I feel defensive about being ingratiating and deferential. It was a wise move, all the more so for being unreflected upon" (2001: 114). Evidently, this is a soft spot for him since deep down he knows that his integration in England depends on the same attitude.

As if his internal conflict and split identity were not visible enough—upon reaching England as a boy he even decided to change his name from Ismail to Latif—external circumstances further heighten and worsen his sense of uprootedness. When upon seeing him, a passer-by mutters "grinning blackamoor," Latif is extremely puzzled and starts to reflect on the etymology of the term, as if dissecting it to bits and pieces could make it more neutral or less harmful: "that a between black and moor bothered me at once, and habit or training made me start thinking about when it came into use" (2001: 72). Instead, by riffling through dictionaries, he discovers the racial hostility is inherent in the English language (Steiner 2009: 119). This episode parallels, perhaps even in an intertextual manner, Frantz Fanon's experience described in his classic *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) as it accentuates the suddenness of being identified as Other due to a different skin colour and the painful reflections it triggers (Hand 80). It could even be read as an autobiographical reference to the verbal abuse Gurnah had to endure in England:

The rudeness—people felt they could say really quite unpleasant things to your face, their refusal even to try and pronounce your name and, of course more obviously negative encounters in public places, shops, etc. (Iqbal 2019: 35)

More generally, in the novel the concept of home, an important trope of postcolonial literature, is ambiguous and by no means unequivocally positive. Far from being only a physical place, in postcolonial literature home is also metaphorical space, where characters seek shelter and find home to live in. Postcolonial scholarship is

suspicious of the term itself and its potential ties with nationalism and anti-immigrant bias (Newns 2020: 119). In a similar vein, the English language (the speech of ex-colonizers) takes on problematic contours in postcolonial literature and is the object of mixed feelings among authors. For example, while the notable Kenyan prose writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o deserted his English and turned to Gikuyu, his native language, to address his Third World readers in the first place (his novel *Caitani Mutharaba-Ini*, self-translated as *Devil on the Cross*, was published in 1980, i.e., after a fourteen-year long period of the author's career of writing solely in English), many scholars still disagree on the status of African literature and its potential to find adequate expression to the indigenous experience using native rather than European languages (Adejunmobi 1999: 581; Bertinetti 2010: 318; Deckard 2010: 2085). By imbuing the concept of home with alternative meanings, the singular condition of refugees and their uprootedness prompt us to re-evaluate their place within the frame of migration “especially with regard to readings of home” (Newns 2020: 120). In this sense, *By the Sea* is particularly illuminating, inasmuch as “Gurnah’s text about forced exile obviously undermines such a positive view of ‘home’” (Steiner 2009: 114). Before discussing the diverse features of homecoming in the novel, however, it is necessary to shed light on the image of home itself portrayed in it.

It could be stated that the characters’ lives—if not the entire novel—gravitate around a house, most specifically about the issue of its ownership. Being a solid presence, the house is symbolically associated with loss not only because as result of a certain trickery Latif’s father, Shaaban, is forced to cede it to Omar, but most importantly because a negative aura shrouds it. Apart from the fact that when Shaaban is violent and drunk, he shouts abuse at his wife in the rooms of the house, the house is linked to characters’ death, since many of them die while the feud over the ownership goes on. The abusive man himself is found dead in his bedroom: “Living alone in that house which was always shuttered and locked, he was not discovered until two or three days after his death” (2001: 237). Apart from adding a gothic detail to the novel, Shaaban’s horrible death exemplifies his morbid isolation and obsessive attachment to the house. In addition, it is in his parents’ house that Latif’s brother, Hassan, is seduced and corrupted by the ruthless merchant, Hussein, during the English lessons the merchant holds in his room. Therefore, far from being imbued with heart-warming and positive feelings, the house seems oppressive and stifling, as if it were much more than a mere background to the story. As Newns contends, “[i]n the novel, houses do not serve as mere settings for stories but form an integral part of their narrative machinery” (2020: 125).

Apart from material homes, *By the Sea* features examples of the so-called “non-home,” which is engrained in the concept of asylum. Newns considers the detention centre in which Omar is held upon reaching England a “non-home,” which obviously fails to evoke warm feelings or even the pretence of such intimate space (2022: 130-131). Arguably, the term can be enlarged to include the college in Kampala, which young Latif attends, or even the island on which Omar is imprisoned, since he is held there against his will. Before managing to finally come home, both Omar and Latif have to pass through these different non-homes. Storytelling is a recurring feature in the non-homes, and it represents a means of community-forging, the element that should not be underestimated in the present analysis.

Given the deleterious and chilling atmosphere surrounding houses in this novel, it comes as no surprise that homecomings are not associated with bliss and joy. One of the first examples is provided by Latif's stay in Kampala, during which he befriends Sefu and Jamal, two of his peers. After having finished their studies, the three friends decide to spend some time in each other's houses, starting with Jamal's. Rather than strengthening their friendship, though, this homecoming eventually disrupts the close-knit group since Jamal's family is extremely impolite to his friends. Even in this case, the house is not used as a mere setting but rather as an active tool to humiliate Sefu and Latif and to underline their condition of unwelcome guests:

[I]t distressed Jamal that we were housed in one of the stores [...]. They were not really stores, the toilet in between them made that obvious, but rooms intended for the servant or the gardener. (2001: 174)

The last straw is a joke in bad taste: Jamal's cousins throw a bucket of water on Sefu and Latif while they are passing under a window. As a consequence, Sefu and Jamal have an argument and the three friends fall out. Since Sefu moves to America shortly afterwards, they never reunite again.

Omar's experience of homecoming is even more traumatic and heart-rending. After having been imprisoned for years, he comes home with the long-held desire of seeing his wife Salha and his little daughter Ruqiya again, only to be informed that they died one year after his arrest. As if that were not enough, Hassan's homecoming jeopardizes his own life in Zanzibar—the callous man asks Omar to pay off a debt and threatens him with imprisonment. Arguably, it is precisely Hassan's homecoming that triggers Omar's home-leaving. On the last pages, the novel seems to suggest the possibility of a *traditional* homecoming, inasmuch as Latif ponders the idea of returning to Zanzibar to meet his recently-returned brother Hassan again. Although Gurnah has argued that some characters of his other novels are not prevented from the possibility of coming home (Mohan & Datta 2019: 3), this seems unlikely to happen for Latif.

The text of *By the Sea* is interspersed with literary references, whose value goes beyond being mere quotations as they, in fact, have a profound impact on the development of the whole story. Steiner places particular emphasis on two of them, Herman Melville's short prose "Bartleby, the Scrivener. A Story of Wall-Street" (1853) and a few folk tales from *Thousand and One Nights*: "These stories are important, as they allow us to draw direct links to the issue of migrancy, translation and the centrality of storytelling" (2009: 121). While this is certainly true, there are two other important literary references which bear the same importance when discussing the theme of homecoming, namely *The Odyssey* and *The Tempest*. Shakespeare's play is evoked in Latif's pensive thoughts upon discovering that someone with his father's name has reached England and needs an interpreter: "Those are pearls that were his eyes" (2001: 76). In the play, this expression is uttered by Ariel, who leads one character, Ferdinand, to think that his father died in the shipwreck and that his body lies at the bottom of the sea:

Full fadom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change

Into something rich and strange. (Act I, Scene II)

Yet, Ferdinand's father is still alive and Ariel is lying on Prospero's orders. In a similar vein, hearing his father's name again induces Latif to briefly entertain the thought that he might be still alive. Interestingly enough, *The Tempest* involves the homecoming of Prospero and Miranda as legitimate sovereigns of the Dukedom of Milan, from which they had been chased away years and years before. Latif's hinted-at homecoming at the end of the novel is very unlikely to take place, as evidenced by his reaction to this proposal: "Are you suggesting I should go back too? To claim my share?" he asked, a broad derisive grin on his face" (2001: 239). His painful childhood and the choices he has made deny him the possibility of a similar blissful and full-hearted homecoming.

The novel provides readers with yet another unmistakable intertextual reference. Homer's epic poem hinges upon the much-yearned-for homecoming of Odysseus, who manages to overcome perils and reach the shores of Ithaca. In the scene that later inspired Gurnah, Odysseus, pretending to be an elderly beggar, Odysseus is hosted by Penelope, who orders Euryclea to wash the man's feet. An old nurse sees a scar on his leg that a boar had inflicted on him when he was young, and reveals the beggar's true identity:

as the old nurse cradled his leg and her hands passed down
she felt it, knew it, suddenly let his foot fall—
down it dropped in the basin—the bronze clanged,
tipping over, spilling water across the floor.
Joy and torment gripped her heart at once,
tears rushed to her eyes—voice choked in her throat
she reached for Odysseus' chin and whispered quickly,
"Yes, yes! you are *Odysseus* [...]. (*The Odyssey* 2006: 405)

This episode of Odysseus' undercover homecoming is echoed in *By the Sea*, although the contextual meaning is different. Young Latif is hosted by two friends in Germany and, after entering the house, he realizes that he has a bleeding cut on the sole of his foot. For this reason, his friend's mother, Elleke, washes his foot to clean the blood from it and avoid infection. This could be one of the "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" (Steiner 2010: 125), which Gurnah's narratives frequently depict. While washing his foot, Elleke asks Latif:

Do you remember when Odysseus comes home, after twenty years, and does not announce himself, and his wife Penelope does not recognise him. Do you remember? It is an old woman who recognizes him, Eureclita or something like that, because she washes his feet to welcome him to the house. (2001: 127)

According to Steiner, "this kind of storytelling always leads to human connections and cross-cultural relationships, because of its nature of complicity in the telling and hearing of the tale" (2009: 113), thus touching on the subject of community-forging which will be analysed in depth in the next section of the present paper.

Contrary to what happens in *The Tempest* and *The Odyssey*, homecoming is denied to Latif, who has decided to leave his family and their petty squabbles over goods. While the Homeric hero hankers for Ithaca, Latif is eager to reach England and does not seek Zanzibar homecoming. Despite the fact that Latif knows the episode from the ancient

epic story, he quickly dismisses any sympathy towards the Homeric hero, now observed from a postcolonial perspective: “Wasn’t it his idea that the Greeks should build a wooden horse and trick their way into Troy, and once in there to kill and maim and rape and set fire to the city?” (2001: 128). Rather than blindly accepting Western models, Latif rejects a one-sided vision of Odysseus, who in his eyes takes on the characteristics of a ruthless colonizer.

Other references to Homer feature throughout the plotline, ranging from hospitality to storytelling; however, the relevance given to the sea is particularly noteworthy. Embodying an angered divinity—Poseidon—and the means through which Odysseus has to travel to have his adventures in far-off islands, the sea is of paramount importance. On a more general level of critical reflection, let us add that the notions and imagery of sea and aquatic bodies play an important role in postcolonial studies. According to Gilroy, the “black Atlantic” world is “the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering” (1993: 3). In *By the Sea*, the aquatic element is present in the very title and features in surprisingly different places, ranging from Shaaban Mahmud’s house to the island in which Omar is held captive. Interestingly, in both cases the sea is framed by and can be seen from a veranda overlooking it. Not to mention the fact that the final confrontation between Mahmud and Latif takes place near the sea, where Omar reveals to him his brother Hassan’s return to Zanzibar and the reasons which prompted him to abandon his country of origin. In this case, rather than being framed, the sea itself is the frame of the discussion and may represent home. As a result, it tidally brings back a surge of memories related to Zanzibar, some of them particularly painful. After having recalled Hassan’s homecoming and the reasons which led him to flee, Omar says that:

The wind off the sea was beating strongly now, and perhaps I staggered a little, because Latif Mahmud took me by the elbow and turned me away from the sea-front towards one of the side-streets that led back into the centre of the town. (2001: 240)

The very act of leading Omar away from the sea and heading together for the inner city could be read as a powerful metaphor signalling Latif’s desire to subtract his interlocutor from his harrowing memories.

The previously-mentioned Homeric reference is a perfect cesura to introduce the second section, which is concerned with storytelling as a means that enables the discontinuous homecoming of the two main characters and as a community-forging feature. Indeed, the beginning of *The Odyssey* consists of a long flashback: Odysseus is at the court of the Phaeacians and is asked by king Alcinous to recount his adventures and relate why he was found washed up on the shores of their island. Although at first he hides his true identity (as Omar does by adopting the name of Latif’s father, namely Shaaban Mahmud), he eventually reveals his name before telling his chequered story, which creates a connection with the Phaeacians, who eventually agree to escort him to Ithaca. From this derives the importance of storytelling in *The Odyssey* for the hero’s homecoming. Playing a similar role in *By the Sea* as well, storytelling allows the novel to reach its denouement.

3. The discontinuous homecoming through storytelling

In *By the Sea*, storytelling has been analysed as conducive to shaping transnational identities (Steiner 2009: 122). Historically speaking, stories have accomplished this aim in various ways: among the most famous figures the circulation of African-American newspapers in the 19th century, which helped to forge a shared identity and identification in a community which was scattered throughout the country. As far as migrants are concerned, though, written stories seem to be a more effective means to create bonds, since migrants are constantly travelling and not necessarily planning to settle in a determined place. While in *By the Sea* stories certainly fulfil the aim of building transnational identities (Steiner 2009: 122), it ought to be noted that their presence is not limited to Omar's or Latif's final dialogue, which develops through the recollection of the stories of their families and their feud over the house. Indeed, the narration is peppered with numerous stories, which mostly figure as tools to create communities.

Far from being linear and straightforward, Omar's storytelling is fragmented and takes a while before gaining narrative fluency. According to Steiner, the non-chronological order of the novel exemplifies "the interruption and disconnection inflicted by dispossession, persecution and exile" (2009: 112). Thus, interrupted stories seem to characterise migrants and the dispossessed. Apart from being fragmented, though, the narration paradoxically begins with a man who refuses to recount his real story. Saleh's silence has been interpreted in different ways, for example, as a refusal to use English because it might hinder his application for refugee status (Steiner 2009: 118). Another plausible reason is that he does not relish the prospect of opening up and reliving the painful, heart-breaking story of his life under the cool gaze of the airport officer, who is not interested in listening. Since Abdulrazak Gurnah cooperated with the Refugee Tales Project, it is not inappropriate to quote a brief passage from *Refugee Tales* which perfectly exemplifies the point just made: "You're not really going to listen. No one listens. You're not really going to hear. No one hears. You're not really going to care. No one cares" ("The Fisherman's Tale" 2019: 94). In line with this, Omar has packed his baggage with items which will be able to convey a concocted, pre-packaged story when examined: "It was not my life that lay spread there, just what I had selected as signals of a story I hoped to convey" (2001: 8). Summarising both interpretations, Gurnah argues that "remaining silent is a way of preserving dignity and at the same time not putting yourself into harm's way. Silence is ambivalent. It is also powerful and can be far more eloquent" (Jones 2005: 39).

Eventually, deciding to open up and relieve himself of the burden of his past, Omar designates Latif as his interlocutor in a process which is beneficial for both: "Storytelling is a cathartic experience: Latif comes to grips with his bitterness and Saleh overcomes his reclusive and threatening silence" (Steiner 2009: 116). Nevertheless, starting the conversation proves to be difficult and fraught with misunderstandings, since Latif deems Omar responsible for the loss of his home and still holds a grudge about it. In order to ease the tension, another kind of storytelling promptly comes to the rescue to establish a connection between them, namely a reference to *Bartleby*, the protagonist of Melville's short story, which makes Latif's eyes sparkle: "'Bartleby the Scrivener,' he said, grinning all over his face, the skin round his eyes creased in lines of surprised pleasure, suddenly happy" (2001: 156). In this case, storytelling lends itself to overcoming misunderstandings and fostering kinship, in that the mutually-shared literary reference

locates both in the same horizon of knowledge. Far from binding only the two characters, this intertextual reference—like the many others scattered through the plot—goes beyond the borders of the novel and has the effect of forging a connection between readers as well, as Gurnah underlined: “That recognition of intertextualities to some extent reintroduces us to each other as readers. We are reading the same thing, and this gives a sense of a shared textuality, and I think that’s pleasing, just in itself” (*A Conversation with Abdulrazak Gurnah* 2013: 166).

Nevertheless, the binding action of storytelling is not limited to the final dialogue between the two main characters, but features in other meaningful passages. In his ground-breaking *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson gives a definition of an imagined community, which

is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (2006: 6)

Similarly, the novel provides thought-provoking examples of *recounted communities*, which are not tethered to a physical place, and whose members recognize themselves in a horizon based on stories and mutually-shared literary references. A meaningful example of these is represented by Elleke, Latif’s German pen friend, who turns out never to have existed. He was all a concoction, the product of Jan’s and his mother’s invention, nothing more than a story:

When I wrote to Elleke at their home address in Altonstadt, he was delighted, overwhelmed. His mother read the letter and was thrilled by it too. After he wrote his reply to me, he got his mother to check over the tone, because he was so afraid that he would get the voice of Elleke wrong. Then the mother too became part of the conspiracy. She read Jan’s letters before he posted them, and sometimes added something, and she read my letters to Elleke. (2001: 124)

Nonetheless, Latif bonded with Elleke when he thought he was a German girl, and in a similar way he bonds equally with Jan and his mother, since the story brought them together. When Elleke makes an allusion to *Romeo and Juliet*, Latif chuckles with the aim of making it clear that he has caught the reference and “to make sure that she knew” (2001: 134), thereby highlighting again the importance of storytelling in community-forging.

Building communities becomes particularly pressing in dire situations, when people need to stick together and muster their strength to live through difficulties. While recounting his story, Omar recalls how he used to spend time with other prisoners: “we told stories, some remembered, some invented, laughing as if we were once again the same age as when we first heard them” (2001: 232). This is particularly revealing first and foremost because it shows that stories of life cement a connection between people who were previously strangers to each other, who end up laughing together even in the excruciating experience of imprisonment. Secondly, it puts the emphasis on the fact that some of those stories used to be recounted in childhood or youth, thereby implying that they are shared and ingrained in their culture, which increases the sense of belonging and community. During his imprisonment on the island, Omar even witnesses storytelling as a strategy of survival. Before, the British had built a sanatorium on the island which was tended and kept in order by an old caretaker, who had been living there ever since.

Although the sanatorium has been closed and the British doctors will never set foot on the island again, he still hopes that one day they will return. When Omar engages into conversation with him, the man tells him stories of the djinn he claims to have seen dozing on the shore. It suddenly dawns on Omar 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 djinns that raced across the sea to rest from their immortal questing for mischief. (2001: 230)

By the same token, stories are not always a force for the good, since they are used by the devious Hussein to con unwary people and take advantage of them. In fact, both Shaaban Mahmud and Omar are fascinated and charmed by his stories, which they buy entirely. Eventually, it can be guessed that Hussein's stories managed to seduce Hassan, so much so that they become the boy's own and only stories: "All his stories now were Uncle Hussein this and Uncle Hussein that. Did you know he's done this or seen that or been there, and look what he gave me today?" (2001: 89).

However, storytelling is therapeutic not only for the old caretaker, it is a strategy of survival for Latif and Omar as well (Steiner 2009: 122). Apart from creating continuity between their past and present—thus granting them a future—the act of telling a story enables the foreign and the familiar to be bound together, which literally happens to the two characters (99). Indeed, halfway through the telling of the story, Latif discovers that he is related to Omar, albeit "only by marriage." Furthermore, storytelling cannot happen in isolation, inasmuch as the presence of a listener is paramount (112). Alone in a foreign country, Omar and Latif are drawn to one another through their story, which takes more than one day to be fully unravelled, thus contributing to cementing their kinship. However, storytelling goes one step further, by involving human kindness as well. In fact, friendship is possible even far away from home, since storytelling allows the two men to overcome the binary distinction of victim and perpetrator (97). By the same token, though, young Latif himself acknowledged the need for a friend when he was in Germany: "I had already seen that everyone had a friend, and that those who did not looked languishing and afraid" (*By the Sea* 2001: 114). No longer at Zanzibar among known relatives and friends, both men find succour and solace in their cathartic storytelling, which draws them close to the point of becoming friends.

In order to imagine a future to inhabit and to come home once and for all, the two men need to overcome the past through the narration of their shared story, by filling the voids and settling misunderstandings. In this sense, storytelling becomes a translation of their experiences, which takes on the hues of self-affirmation: "the narrators are equally traumatized yet they refuse, through re-translating their experiences of past and departure, to be defined solely by others, be it as non-citizens after independence or as immigrants in the UK" (Steiner 2009: 99). As a consequence, they use storytelling not only to establish their identity and dignity—an element of no slight importance in order to feel at home—but also to pre-empt the "danger of a single story" (Adichie) which generally presents immigrants with monolithic, anonymous entities. If misused, "well-fitting" stories (*By the Sea* 2001: 18) can be tightly knitted on people, a variation on Fanonian white masks. While commenting on Young's conception of homemaking as narrative practice, Newns uses *By the Sea* to provide further clarification on the topic (2020: 125). Indeed, it can be said that through the recollection of their past Omar and

Latif are finally able to come home, which had not happened until their encounter. Although Latif has been living in England for several years, he was curdled with bitterness and “worn out and raw, livid with sores” (2001: 207), as he poignantly confesses to Omar. As far as homecoming is concerned, the ending of the novel is exemplary in portraying the two men’s changed lives and their newly-found solace. Centred on the powerful image of the home, the final pages have the warm atmosphere of a cosy home and are filled with the tenderness of a hard-won friendship. Rather than marking the ending of the novel, this conclusion has the flavour of a new beginning. As if to underline the physical dimension of the home, and not only its abstract meaning, Omar literally guides readers through Latif’s flat:

I [Omar] wandered around the flat, looking into nooks and crannies, opening cupboards and doors, trying out the windows to see if they opened, locating the place where he worked and wrote, looking to see if I could recognize the place where I would sleep, and while I was about it, researching the possibility of clean sheets and warm bedding. (2001: 245)

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, homecoming and storytelling are of paramount importance in *By the Sea*. The author of the narrative provides readers with an interesting perspective of home—as a daunting physical presence exerting gravity, non-homes and negative homecomings—and with a discontinuous homecoming, which is ultimately possible through the therapeutic power of storytelling. This last feature becomes extremely important to give expression to past wounds and analyse them—as it did for Gurnah himself, who, like his characters, experienced the cathartic power of storytelling: “It became clearer to me that there was something I needed to say, that there was a task to be done, regrets and grievances to be drawn out and considered” (*Nobel Lecture* 2021: 2). By telling the story of their lives, the migrants Omar and Saleh come home through a homecoming process which is fragmented and discontinuous, involving back and forth movements between past and present. Considered physically, their condition of migrants enables them homecoming which can paradoxically take place only in England. Therefore, the reasons for Gurnah’s Nobel Prize can be seen already in *By the Sea*, as he was awarded the prize in 2021 “for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents” (nobelprize.org).

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