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Thing Narrative and the Refugee Theme in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*

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Abstract: Throughout Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*, a constellation of materially resonant objects recurs with insistent symbolic weight—the ud-al-qamari, the ebony table, the map, the house, articles of food and clothing, the telephone, among others. To examine these objects through the lens of new materialism is to uncover the manifold operations of thing-narrative within the text. Such an approach accomplishes three critical interventions. First, it foregrounds the agency of things and the materiality of human subjects, thereby dismantling the conventional binary opposition between persons and objects. Second, the actor-network formed by the entanglement of human and nonhuman entities not only propels the novel's narrative momentum but also deepens the complexity of characterization. Finally, things assume an indispensable role in the constitution of refugee identity: they function as vessels of affective memory and as instruments of cross-cultural negotiation. Attending to the thing-narrative in *By the Sea* thus sharpens our understanding of the novel's central preoccupations—the reciprocally constitutive relation between persons and their material world, and the lived textures of the refugee experience.

Keywords: *By the Sea*; thing narrative; new materialism; Actor-Network; refugee theme

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Introduction

By the Sea (2001), by the 2021 Nobel laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah, enacts a narrative of reconciliation through its interwoven perspectives and nonlinear chronology. The novel traces the converging paths of two sworn enemies—Latif Mahmud and Saleh Omar—who, in the aftermath of the Zanzibar Revolution (1964), find themselves exiled in Britain, where the labor of recollection gradually undoes a lifetime of estrangement. Rooted in the commercial and cultural networks of the Indian Ocean world, the text bears the imprint of monsoon trade routes, which lend its imaginative geography a distinctive regional texture. Throughout the novel, a constellation of recurrent objects—the ud-al-qamari, the ebony table, the map, the house, food, clothing, the telephone—functions as a narrative apparatus, binding the characters’ fates and registering the pressures of historical transformation. Critics have approached these material presences from a range of interpretive angles: Ruberto (2009) examines the relation between Saleh’s luggage and the constitution of refugee identity (pp. 201–214); Kaigai (2014) traces the circulation of objects as an index of hospitality (pp. 181–199); Newns (2020) reads objects and houses as emblems of

identity and belonging (pp. 119–136); Samuelson (2013) considers the map's role within Indian Ocean narrative frameworks (pp. 78–82); and Cooper (2008) attends to the social life and valuation of things (pp. 86–87). Yet for all their insight, these studies tend to treat objects as passive repositories of meaning, leaving comparatively unexplored the question of thingly agency and the intersubjective entanglements between persons and material forms. A more capacious framework for understanding the narrative operations of things is offered by Yin and Tang (2019), who propose a tripartite model: “Things may play three roles in literary narrative: as cultural symbols that reflect or influence human culture; as agents with subjectivity that act upon characters and drive the plot forward; and as ontological entities that transcend human language and cultural representations to reveal ‘ontological thingness’” (p. 78).

Within the field of refugee literature, these functions assume heightened significance. For displaced persons, material objects frequently serve as crucial mediators: they sustain ties to a lost past, enable negotiation with an unfamiliar present, and participate in the fashioning of new forms of identity under conditions of duress. Drawing on this theoretical groundwork, the present article offers a new materialist reading of thing narrative in *By the Sea*. It investigates how Gurnah's novel works to dissolve the conventional subject-object dichotomy, while attending to the specific operations of things in advancing narrative momentum, complicating characterological depth, and amplifying the novel's meditation on the textures of refugee experience.

This article argues that Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* demands a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between persons and objects, one that moves beyond the interpretive limits of conventional symbolic readings. It contends, first, that the novel systematically dismantles the subject-object binary by investing material things with a vitality and agency that rival those of its human characters. The ud-al-qamari, the ebony table, the suitcase, the house—these are not inert props but active forces that shape, resist, and endure alongside the displaced persons who encounter them. Second, the article demonstrates how Gurnah's narrative constructs what actor-network theory would recognize as intricate webs of association, wherein humans and nonhumans alike function as nodes within networks that generate the conditions for memory, storytelling, and reconciliation. The map and the telephone, in particular, emerge as agents that chart trajectories of exile and enable the fragile work of connection across

vast distances. Finally, this reading contends that refugee identity in the novel is irreducibly material—forged not in the solitary recesses of consciousness but through ongoing transactions with a world of things. Saleh’s ud-al-qamari anchors his fractured history; food and clothing mediate the precarious negotiations between cultures; the withheld or confiscated object marks the violence of exclusion. In tracing these material entanglements, the article illuminates how *By the Sea* offers a profound meditation on identity as constitutively bound to the things we carry, lose, and recover in the aftermath of displacement.

The Dissolution of the Subject-Object Binary Between Humans and Things

New materialism posits that things possess inherent properties and agency, resisting reduction to mere extensions of human subjects. When objects exceed their functional roles, they disclose their essential “thingness” (Brown, 2001, p. 4). Moreover, as they actively shape human experience, emotion, and social relations, they emerge as “hybrid objects” endowed with a form of subjectivity (Brown, 2015, p. 372). In *By the Sea*, things not only perform utilitarian functions but also operate as agents bearing distinct meanings and values. At the same time, the material qualities manifested by the characters suggest a corresponding dissolution of human subjectivity. Saleh’s engagement with objects, particularly the ud-al-qamari, exemplifies the acquisition of subjectivity by things. The tree releases its distinctive fragrance only upon being damaged, a quality that enriches it with considerable commercial value. This scent attracts the Persian merchant Hussein and provokes the greed of Kevin Edelman, a British customs officer whose unlawful confiscation of Saleh’s ud-al-qamari reflects the predatory logic of European colonial rule. Colonizers, as Gurnah (2001) observes, often “acquire the world’s beautiful things so they could take them home and possess them” (p. 20), thereby reducing objects to symbols of status and instruments of dominion. Saleh, though equally drawn to the fragrance, seeks instead to comprehend the ud-al-qamari’s intrinsic and cultural significance. He approaches it with scholarly care, tracing the etymology of its name: “ud-al-qimari, the wood of the Khmers,” correcting the common misnomer “ud-al-qamari, the wood of the moon” (Gurnah, 2001, p. 29). In doing so, he transcends the paradigm of human mastery and affirms the object’s autonomous thingness.

Saleh's engagement with maps further illustrates the according of subjectivity to things. The term "map" appears twenty-nine times in the novel, signaling its significance. For Saleh, maps are not merely instruments of navigation but objects worthy of collection and exchange. When Hussein gifts him his grandfather's old map, the gesture deepens their bond, facilitates trade, and sets the stage for subsequent events. Saleh regards maps as representations of world order, rendering chaotic space intelligible (Gurnah, 2001, p. 35). To him, they are not inert objects but equal subjects capable of imparting understanding: "I speak to maps. And sometimes they say something back to me" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 35). This reciprocal engagement indicates that maps exceed their traditional passive function, acquiring attributes of communication and agency. From a new materialist standpoint, the relationship between Saleh and maps dissolves conventional subject-object dichotomies, revealing a distinct intersubjectivity. Concurrently, human subjectivity undergoes a corresponding dissolution. As Jane Bennett (2010) contends, human materiality renders us susceptible to objectification (p. 10). In *By the Sea*, this dynamic is pronounced among marginalized figures, manifesting in the experiences of Saleh's family servant Nuhu, Zanzibaris under British colonial rule, and Saleh himself as a refugee in Britain. Nuhu's objectification is most evident in his reduction to an instrument. Owing to his exceptional physical strength, Saleh's father bestows upon him the nickname "Faru" (rhinoceros). He performs all manual labor in the shop and is valued for his obedience and brawn. The master's frequent remark, "Look at him, like a rhinoceros" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 154), encapsulates his degradation to a mere tool of labor.

Under British colonial rule, Zanzibaris were subjected to systemic objectification. Colonial schools, unlike traditional Zanzibari institutions, imposed rigid age restrictions, barring overage students from enrollment (Gurnah, 2001, p. 35). Such administrative mechanisms effectively categorized students as objects. Those deemed too old are likened to "a coconut that had overripened and become undrinkable, or cloves that had been left too long on the tree and had swollen into seeds" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 35), while pupils compelled to repeat grades "lived with their shame throughout their school life" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 36). This metaphorical reduction of persons to expired or defective commodities starkly illustrates the dehumanizing logic of colonial governance. The objectifying gaze follows Saleh to Britain, where he is

assessed primarily in terms of utility. Kevin Edelman, the customs officer, perceives the elderly, non-English-speaking Saleh as unlikely to contribute to the British economy—an appraisal that treats refugees as commodities to be evaluated for their productive potential. Saleh is deemed “too old to work in a hospital, too old to produce a future England cricketer, too old for anything much except Social Security, assisted housing and a subsidized cremation” (Gurnah, 2001, pp. 48–49). This utilitarian calculus subjects him to relentless scrutiny during his asylum application and provokes a pointed self-characterization: “Think of me as one of those objects that Europe took away with her. [...] I am fragile and precious too, a sacred work, too delicate to be left in the hands of natives, so now you’d better take me too” (Gurnah, 2001, p. 12). In this ironic reversal, Saleh appropriates the logic of colonial plunder to expose its absurdity. In *By the Sea*, things transcend their conventional status as inert objects, acquiring agency and subjectivity, while human figures confront the predicament of being rendered thing-like. This mutual crossing dissolves the entrenched subject-object opposition that has long structured human relations with the material world.

Humans and Things in Actor-Networks

Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT) posits that things can be mobilized and activated within their native environments, performing a range of social functions (Latour, 1990, p. 74). As “actants,” they possess the capacity to influence human choices and behaviors (Latour, 2011, pp. 800–801). The term denotes agents capable of initiating action, whether human or non-human (Zielke, 2022, p. 630); an actant “has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events” (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 2010, p. viii). Such actants do not operate in isolation but interact and co-act within networks constituted as “assemblages.” Actor-Network Theory offers a salient framework for apprehending the narrative architecture of *By the Sea*. Though the novel opens with Saleh’s arrival in Britain, it deploys things as narrative threads, unraveling the intertwined family histories of both men in Zanzibar through the interwoven dual perspectives of Saleh and Latif. This technique not only discloses plot development and affective shifts but also underscores the constitutive role of material objects in the story. In Gurnah’s text, things and humans act conjointly to propel the narrative forward. Objects profoundly

shape characters' choices and conduct, emerging as pivotal agents in the reconfiguration of destinies. Through the intervention of specific things, the fates of Saleh and Latif—initially unconnected—become entangled, generating enduring effects within each other's actor-networks and weaving a complex web of relationality.

This network originates with a transaction involving an ebony table. As an actant, the table alters the trajectories of both the Saleh and Mahmud families. In Zanzibar, Saleh's furniture shop contains an exquisitely crafted ebony table, which he later sells to Hussein. In the exchange, Hussein offers cash and "a twenty-pound packet of the *ud-al-qamari*" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 31). Both men are drawn to the other's possessions: Hussein admires the table's workmanship, while Saleh values the quality of the *ud-al-qamari* and the trading stories Hussein shares. This transaction, mediated by things, establishes the foundation for subsequent exchanges between them; the *ud-al-qamari* later confiscated originates from this very deal. As the ebony table circulates, the network of relations surrounding it expands. Hussein uses the table to court Latif's elder brother Hassan, ultimately taking him to Bahrain. For the Mahmud family, the table initially signifies shame. When Hussein presents it to Hassan, Rajab Shaaban Mahmud furiously sequesters it in the warehouse downstairs, attempting to conceal what he perceives as a "sinful" relationship. Yet after Hassan's departure, the table's meaning undergoes transformation. Asha's attachment to it becomes an expression of her longing for her son: "[...] when she started to talk about the table, the misery and recriminations of his departure all came back. All of a sudden it became so important for my mother to get that table back" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 104). For the Mahmud family, the table now serves as a substitute for Hassan, assuaging the grief of his loss. Within this network, whether Hussein deploys the table to pursue Hassan or Asha channels her yearning through it, both scenarios underscore the centrality of Hassan and the table as pivotal nodes in the actor-network. More significantly, the table facilitates the first encounter between Latif and Saleh. Asha's insistence on reclaiming it compels Latif to seek Saleh out. Saleh's refusal becomes an enduring wound for Latif, one he revisits when they reunite in Britain years later. Ultimately, after affecting the fates of two families, the table returns to Saleh's furniture shop. The ebony table has long transcended its instrumental properties—its very existence becomes a driving force in the narrative's progression.

The furniture shop where the ebony table was sold also serves as the backdrop for Saleh's marriage. In the spring of 1963, Salha accompanies her mother to the shop to order velvet sofa covers, and it is there that Saleh first sees her. He falls in love at first sight, proposes on the day the covers are completed, and they marry soon after. In this romance, objects carry particular weight. Though Saleh struggles to articulate his feelings for Salha, he describes the dark green velvet with vivid precision: "[...] a beautiful piece of material, feel the softness of the fabric, and how the color ripples when you run your hand through it" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 146). The fabric not only witnesses their first meeting but also becomes a medium through which Saleh expresses his affection. The ebony table also marks the beginning of a commercial partnership between Hussein and Saleh, one that extends the novel's actor-network and ultimately draws houses into its orbit. Early in their collaboration, Hussein borrows a substantial sum from Saleh and persuades Rajab to invest in his ventures. Rajab secures the loan by using his house and its contents as collateral. This agreement precipitates a blood feud between the Mahmud family and Saleh, setting in motion a chain of events that leads both Latif and Saleh to leave Zanzibar and eventually reunite in Britain.

In this intricate network, houses assume a pivotal role. The novel centers on two dwellings: the seaside house Saleh inherits from his stepmother Maryam, and the Mahmud family home that Hussein offers as collateral. Complicating matters further, Saleh and the Mahmud family are not merely economic adversaries but also distant relatives: Maryam is Rajab's aunt, while the collateralized property is what Rajab inherits from another aunt, Sara. Both houses originate from their respective former husbands' legacies, and their histories not only expose a tangled web of kinship but also bind the fates of several families together. This property dispute profoundly shapes the lives of both protagonists. In Latif's eyes, Saleh is a grasping aggressor, the architect of his family's nightmares. Yet Saleh is himself a victim—duped by Hussein and ensnared in a bitter contest over property. In the course of debt collection, he endures Rajab's provocations, is framed and imprisoned through Asha's machinations, and ultimately loses everything before fleeing to Britain. Shortly after being driven from the house by Saleh, Latif too departs Zanzibar to study in East Germany. Even abroad, the past remains an unhealed wound: "[...] it's as if I went on from Saleh Omar's house and right out of the country, and through the years I have

been finding my way to his other house by the sea” (Gurnah, 2001, p. 104). Tracing the trajectories of the ebony table and the houses reveals how things actively participate in shaping human destinies. The intervention of things not only alters modes of life and relations between people but also inflects emotional experience, ultimately reconfiguring human subjectivity itself (Brown, 2004, p. 39). This influence is especially pronounced in Saleh. Drawn to exquisite objects, he converts his father’s halwa shop into a furniture store, confessing: “I have always had an interest in furniture. Furniture and maps. Beautiful, intricate things” (Gurnah, 2001, p. 19). Such things not only satisfy material needs but also offer spiritual sustenance. In Britain, the furniture shop becomes Saleh’s refuge, granting him “a kind of content and the possibility of mercy and absolution” in a foreign land (Gurnah, 2001, p. 4). Yet the pursuit of things also enmeshes him in complex social networks. In Zanzibar, commerce brings wealth and status but also breeds resentment. He reflects: “A life of business is a cruel one, merciless, preying, open to misunderstanding and gossip” (Gurnah, 2001, p. 17). Saleh recognizes that his desire for things is no different from that of men like Edelman (Gurnah, 2001, p. 21), a realization that exposes humanity’s universal greed when confronted with enticing objects. For Saleh, the ebony table is more than furniture; it is a symbol. It awakens latent desire and ambition, impelling him toward a series of morally dubious transactions. Yet when the table finally returns to the shop, his reluctance to part with it arises from the object’s intrinsic allure rather than its commercial worth. The table becomes a mirror, reflecting Saleh’s ambition and desire, and in doing so, prompts a reckoning with his past.

Similarly, the ebony table’s significance within the Mahmud household undergoes a profound transformation: from a symbol of family shame to a vessel for longing for Hassan. Objects, as Turkle (2007) observes, can carry emotions, sustain memories, maintain relationships, and inspire new thoughts (p. 3). Hussein pursues Hassan by giving him “a wrist-watch, a fountain pen, a notebook, expensive things” (Gurnah, 2001, p. 89), rendering these gifts as carriers of affection. The ebony table, among them, is initially concealed but later becomes a medium through which Asha channels her longing after Hassan leaves home. The materiality of space likewise shapes human perception. The large room downstairs in Latif’s home, by virtue of its peculiar purpose and accumulated history, becomes a place saturated with fear and darkness. Once Hussein’s dwelling and the hiding place of the ebony table, it

provokes in Latif an enduring dread: “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, p. 86). These objects, stripped of function, seem to arrest time, evoking painful recollections. They not only generate a gloomy atmosphere but also symbolize the decline of the Mahmud family.

Finally, ud-al-qamari exemplifies the profound entanglement of things and human emotion. From Saleh’s delicate evocation of the scent at the novel’s opening, it is clear that this spice was already woven into the fabric of his Zanzibar life. The fragrance is more than an olfactory sensation; it is a key that unlocks depths of feeling. Saleh confesses: “Ud-al-qamari: its fragrance comes back to me at odd times, unexpectedly, like a fragment of a voice or the memory of my beloved’s arm on my neck” (Gurnah, 2001, p. 14). As Brown (2015) observes, memory “revolves around small things” (p. 279). The scent of ud-al-qamari stirs in Saleh a vivid constellation of recollections—of family, of festival, of a world lost. This long accretion of sensation and sentiment renders the spice a kind of habitual object, one that subtly shapes his inner life. The fragrance, intimately bound to happiness, becomes his private emblem. To inhale it is involuntarily to recover joy. And for the exile, such sensory memory possesses a singular healing power: the scent of ud-al-qamari not only soothes but also sustains, offering solace in a strange land.

Things and the Construction of Refugee Identity

In *By the Sea*, objects function not merely as inert, passive presences but as active agents in the construction of the characters’ social and cultural identities. They inscribe the traumatic memories of the Zanzibar Revolution, encode the protagonists’ experiences of displacement, and materially shape the contours of their refugee identities. Food, as a special category of object, transcends its basic physiological function to become a potent signifier of mental state and social belonging. In the Zanzibar detention camp, the debilitating quality of the food administered to Saleh and other prisoners enacts a form of corporeal and psychological erosion: “[...] we became weak and worn out from malnutrition and disease and tedium. [...] Our bowels tormented us all the time, with hunger, with constipation and wind from the

unvarying diet of starch and beans, with diarrhea from the bad water and from infections” (Gurnah, 2001, p. 231). Upon his arrival in England, Saleh’s first meal at the refugee hostel—comprising “toasted bread, baked beans, and tinned ham” (Gurnah, 2001, p. 53)—becomes the site of a painful cultural confrontation. His refusal to eat ham, grounded in his Muslim identity, is met with derision from Ibrahim, a fellow refugee from Kosovo, who mocks him with the racialized taunt: “Muslim man, he don’t eat pig, he don’t piss alcohol. Clean clean clean, wash wash wash. Black man” (Gurnah, 2001, p. 53). In this scene, dietary observance—an expression of faith—is weaponized as an instrument of cultural discrimination and racial prejudice, turning a private act of piety into a public marker of otherness.

Clothing, as the object most intimately bound to the body, exerts a similarly profound influence on the formation of social identity and cultural affiliation. For Latif, shoes acquire an extraordinary symbolic weight, serving as a lens through which his experience of exile is refracted. They are more than mere footwear; they become a synecdoche for his fraught process of integration into an alien society. Visiting Elleke’s family in East Germany, Latif discovers that his Zanzibari shoes, so suited to the “tropical streets” of home, are utterly inadequate for the “slippery pavements” of Germany (Gurnah, 2001, p. 125). The physical pain and numbness they cause render tangible his estrangement from the new environment. In this context, the shoes become a medium through which the relationship between self and world is negotiated. The kindness extended by Elleke, and the replacement shoes offered by his friend Ali, gesture toward human solidarity, yet they also underscore the profound dislocation that marks Latif’s passage through foreign space. The shoe thus operates as a key object in the narrative of displacement, mediating between the embodied self and the inhospitable geographies of exile.

In contrast, Saleh’s resistance to wearing trainers constitutes a form of quiet defiance that registers his profound alienation from British society. The trainers given to him by Rachel Howard, a worker at the refugee organization, are unremarkable objects in the British everyday, yet wearing them while walking by the sea—a landscape laden with personal memory—induces in him a visceral discomfort (Gurnah, 2001, pp. 119–120). The unfamiliar footwear not only intensifies his sense of estrangement but also deepens his longing for home. Although he accepts Rachel’s

gift out of politeness, his inward disposition remains one of vigilance and tacit rejection toward the material culture of his host country.

Beyond food and clothing, the transformation of domestic space in the protagonists' lives offers a still more stark register of displacement. Latif's trajectory moves from East Germany to England, but Saleh's journey is marked by a series of radical spatial ruptures. In Zanzibar, Saleh had owned a spacious house by the sea, built in the Islamic style—a dwelling that not only held the memories of a contented past but also signified his social standing. The Zanzibar Revolution, however, brought about the imprisonment of tens of thousands of Arabs. The cells into which Saleh was thrown were overcrowded and dark, their wretched conditions devastating his body and mind, and twisting his spirit. Upon his arrival in England, he is confined once more, this time to a cold and dilapidated detention center, a converted warehouse whose previous function is made chillingly explicit: "The sheds that accommodated us could once just as easily have contained sacks of cereals or bags of cement or some other valuable commodity that needed to be kept secure and out of the rain. Now they contained us, a casual and valueless nuisance that had to be kept in restraint" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 43). This bitter self-deprecation equates refugees with stored goods, laying bare the callous instrumentality with which they are treated by the British asylum system. The trajectory from a spacious mansion to a dark prison cell and finally to a cold detention shed maps the precipitous collapse of Saleh's status and identity, each shift in dwelling mirroring the turbulent upheavals of his inner world. Together, the degradation of living conditions and the inhospitality of material culture—unfit food, alien shoes, soulless shelters—underscore the predicament of the displaced refugee. This predicament is not merely one of material deprivation; it is, more fundamentally, a crisis of identity. Stripped of the familiar environments and objects that once anchored their sense of self, refugees in foreign lands are plunged into a state of profound anxiety and psychological distress.

Yet objects are not solely instruments of estrangement; they also play a vital, constructive role in the refugee's project of identity reconstruction. The shift from initial refusal to gradual acceptance of foreign material culture is not a mere matter of material substitution; it constitutes a process of spiritual self-redemption and reconciliation. Identity reconstruction, in this context, does not entail the wholesale negation of the past, but rather the forging of a means to coexist with that past in

exile—preserving ethnic and cultural identity while simultaneously cultivating new forms of cultural belonging. In *By the Sea*, the persistence or substitution of homeland objects in foreign settings vividly illuminates how emotional attachments to home and cultural heritage become entangled in the protagonists' efforts to remake themselves. This process finds embodiment in several resonant objects. In Saleh's childhood, his father's halva shop represented the locus of his most cherished memories. When, in England, he converses with Latif, the recollection of halva-making transports him back to pre-revolutionary Zanzibar—a time of familial wholeness when the taste of halva was intimately bound to the sweetness of youth. Now, in exile, Saleh's diet has contracted to a monotonous and flavorless routine of beans, bread, and tea. Yet his longing for halva has never diminished; it is not the craving for a confection, but a profound and aching nostalgia for home and for the life he has lost.

In similar fashion, ud-al-qamari—a fragrance laden with personal and cultural memory, becomes a crucial medium for sustaining continuity with the past. Its loss upon his arrival in England severs a sensory link to home and deepens the identity crisis of the "Other." Saleh seeks refuge in books, and a passing mention of ud-al-qamari in his reading allows him, momentarily, to recover something of the warmth of home (Gurnah, 2001, p. 211). To compensate for its absence, he lingers at perfume counters in department stores, drawn by "the astringent scents in the air" (Gurnah, 2001, p. 200). Fragrance thus becomes his means of seeking belonging in a foreign land—at once an invocation of home and a tentative mode of engagement with the new environment. Through these olfactory and gustatory traces, Saleh negotiates the fraught passage between loss and survival, between the irrecoverable past and the possibility of a reconfigured present.

In this process, certain objects acquire an exceptional significance, becoming vessels for memory, dignity, and the fragile possibility of renewal. The towel that Alfonso, a fellow refugee, gives to Saleh upon their parting in the detention center is one such object. Seemingly mundane, it comes to embody the deep friendship between the two men and the hope that sustains Saleh through the ordeal of displacement. Alfonso's gift enables Saleh to maintain a measure of cleanliness, but its function quickly transcends the practical. It becomes a source of warmth and security, a symbolic refuge: "I ran away to Alfonso's towel, and once on it I felt as if I was in an invisible place" (Gurnah, 2001, pp. 58–59). At the novel's end, Saleh

returns to the towel once more, its presence a quiet reassurance: “[...] I had Alfonso’s towel with me if the worst came to the worst” (Gurnah, 2001, p. 245). The understatement of this remark belies the towel’s profound emotional weight; it has accompanied him through the harshest years and now stands as a token of survival and the resolve to begin anew. In Saleh’s enduring relation to this object, we witness how an ordinary piece of cloth transcends its materiality to become an anchor for the self—a locus of emotional continuity and spiritual support in the flux of exile.

The telephone, by contrast, functions as a link to the social world, and Saleh’s evolving attitude toward it charts his gradual integration into British society. His initial refusal is categorical and resonant: “I’d prefer not.” This negation signals a deeper resistance to the outside world, a willed maintenance of the barrier that separates him from the society that now houses him. Yet the resolution of his long-standing grievance with Latif precipitates a shift. The refusal softens, modulating from “I’d prefer not” to the more provisional “I have no urge to do so”—a change that marks the beginnings of an openness to connection, a tentative willingness to engage. Latif himself plays a crucial mediating role in this process, encouraging Saleh to install a telephone and helping him to navigate the psychological obstacles that had kept him isolated. Their interaction exemplifies the forms of mutual assistance that sustain immigrant communities and facilitate the slow, uneven work of integration.

Through the analysis of such objects, we discern the multiple dimensions in which things participate in the shaping of refugee identity. They bear witness to the trajectory from displacement to the tentative reconstruction of life; they serve as vital media for the preservation of cultural memory and the continuity of identity; and they register the complex, often contradictory process of seeking recognition and belonging in a foreign society. These dimensions intertwine, constructing the layered and ambivalent texture of refugee experience. In its attentive depiction of everyday things, the novel reveals the dynamism and the tensions inherent in refugee identity formation: objects simultaneously carry the longing for a lost home and the adherence to cultural tradition, even as they become instruments for adapting to a new environment and rebuilding a viable self. This very contradiction—this productive tension, illuminates the predicament of refugee communities, caught between memory and survival, between the irrecoverable past and the still-unfolding present.

Conclusion

This article examines the recurring objects in Gurnah's *By the Sea*, exploring the novel's refugee theme through a new materialist lens. These objects serve three key functions: First, they drive plot development—triggering the conflict between Latif's and Saleh's families while facilitating their eventual reconciliation. Second, they shape refugee identity, linking the protagonists to their homeland while witnessing their adaptation to new environments. Finally, they reveal the psychological states of refugees, evoking warm memories of home and deepening feelings of alienation in foreign lands. By examining thing narrative in *By the Sea*, we gain deeper insight into the relationship between humans and things and the predicaments facing transnational refugees.

By the Sea reveals a complex relationship between humans and things that extends far beyond simple possession or utility. Things in the novel actively shape consciousness, memory, and identity. They demonstrate how material culture operates as embodied knowledge—carrying histories, encoding social relations, and mediating emotional experiences that transcend their physical properties. This challenges conventional humanist narratives that position humans as sovereign subjects acting upon inert matter. Instead, Gurnah's novel suggests a more entangled reality where human subjectivity emerges through ongoing encounters with the material world.

For transnational refugees, this human-object relationship takes on heightened significance and profound vulnerability. Displacement severs the intricate web of material connections that anchor identity and belonging. When Saleh loses his house, his *ud-al-qamari*, and the familiar objects of Zanzibar, he loses more than possessions—he loses the material scaffolding through which his selfhood is constituted and maintained. The refugee predicament involves not only geographical dislocation but also a fundamental disruption of the material conditions that enable coherent identity.

However, the novel also reveals resilience and adaptability in human-thing relationships. Saleh's journey from rejecting the telephone to accepting it, his treasuring of Alfonso's towel, and his persistent seeking of familiar fragrances in British department stores all demonstrate how refugees actively negotiate their material circumstances. They neither passively accept imposed material cultures nor

rigidly cling to lost pasts. Instead, they engage in creative bricolage—repurposing, substituting, and reimagining objects to reconstruct meaning and belonging in hostile environments. The towel becomes far more than hygiene equipment; it transforms into a portable sanctuary, a material anchor of dignity and hope. This creative agency suggests that while displacement inflicts profound material and psychological wounds, the human capacity to forge meaningful relationships with objects—even unfamiliar or substitute objects—offers pathways toward healing and reconstruction.

Ultimately, *By the Sea* demonstrates that understanding refugee experience requires close attention to the material dimension of displacement and resettlement. Abstract discussions of identity, belonging, and trauma must be grounded in the concrete realities of everyday objects and their profound influence on human consciousness. Thing narrative in *By the Sea* offers a methodological model for refugee studies and migration literature: by tracing how objects circulate, get lost, get substituted, and get reimagined across borders and through time, we can map the complex processes through which displaced persons negotiate between past and present, homeland and host country, loss and reconstruction. In this sense, things become narrative agents that tell stories of survival, resistance, adaptation, and the possibility of reconciliation—not only between former enemies like Saleh and Latif, but between refugees and their fragmented, dispersed, yet persistently meaningful material worlds.

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