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After Empire, Before Home: Negotiating Displaced Identities and Toward an Ethical Community in Gurnah's *By the Sea*

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Abstract: Published in 2001, Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* perfectly fits the context of Britain's growing refugee crisis at the beginning of the century. In the novel, diaspora is presented as a middle condition—after empire and before home. This paper attempts to present how the characters are placed in a middle condition and construct their identities in a different country through constant negotiation and continuous narrative strategies. It then argues that, within the postcolonial diasporic context, a sense of belonging may emerge from the encounter between the two protagonists, Omar and Latif, thereby opening the possibility of an ethical community in the postcolonial world.

Keywords: Middle condition; Identity, Narrative; Ethical community

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题目: 帝国之后，故园难归：论古尔纳《海边》中流散身份的重构与伦理共同体的建构

摘要: 阿卜杜勒·拉扎克·古尔纳于2001年出版的小说《海边》，其叙事背景与21世纪初英国日益严峻的难民危机高度契合。该作品将离散呈现为一种“帝国之后，故园难归”的中间状态。本文旨在探讨主人公如何深陷此种状态，并借由持续的协商与叙事策略，在异国重构其难民身份。进一步地，本文试图论证：在后殖民离散语境中，奥马尔与拉

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蒂夫这两位主角的相遇，可能催生一种归属感，从而为在后殖民世界中建构一个伦理共同体奠定基础。

关键词：中间状态；身份；叙事；伦理共同体

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1. Introduction

It's 2001. As a refugee, you are standing in a bright, busy line at the airport immigration checkpoint, holding your passport tightly as you move closer to the front. When you finally face the official, the unspoken question, "Who are you?" requires much more than just your name or nationality. It demands the production of a coherent, convincing story on the spot, and in that instant, you realize that you must edit, curate, and perform a version of yourself that satisfies the authority behind the glass, knowing that a single narrative slip could bar entry. This momentary suspension, in which you are caught between the life you left behind and the home you have yet to secure, mirrors the "refugee crisis" in Britain at the turn of the century. In the years leading up to and just after Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001)¹, the UK received exceptionally high numbers of asylum applications, prompting overloaded Home Office casework, large backlogs, and an official rhetoric framed around crisis-management rather than refuge. The media amplified that anxiety: Newspapers and comment pieces spoke in tidal metaphors and moral panic, while political debates turned on who belonged and who threatened the national order, producing policies and practices that made the immigration interview feel like a gatekeeping ritual rather than a humane procedure.

It is within this fraught terrain that *By the Sea* quietly insists we listen, making a resonance that helps explain why the novel has drawn sustained scholarly interest, especially when Gurnah was announced as the laureate of the 2021 Nobel Prize in Literature. In recent years, scholars have paid increasing attention to how refugee identity is reconstructed in *By the Sea*, particularly through the interrelated roles of memory, narrative, history, and the host society. Much of the scholarship emphasizes that identity reconstruction begins internally, through acts of remembering and storytelling. Lucinda Newns highlights the transformative power of narrative, suggesting that Omar is compelled to "purify" his identity within the asylum system and to accept the reductive label of "refugee". Through narrative exchange with Latif, however, he regains discursive agency, restores his subjectivity, and advances toward identity reconstruction (2015, p. 508, 514–515). Wang Luo then argues that refugee identity relies on the imaginative reconstruction of memory. As individuals move across different spaces and circumstances, the self reshapes its subjective consciousness, negotiating and repositioning both personal and cultural identities in response to changing contexts (2020, p. 39). Similarly, Gao Wenhui argues that Omar and Latif remain trapped in self-alienation because of their repressed pasts. By recounting their intertwined family histories from

¹ Abdulrazak Gurnah (2001). *By the Sea*. The New Press. Page numbers only will be used for subsequent quotations, without further explanation.

multiple perspectives, they gradually fill the gaps in their identities and reshape their sense of self through memory work (2022, p. 36–38). Together, these studies underscore storytelling and memory as foundational mechanisms in rebuilding refugee identity.

Beyond internal processes, scholars also examine how representations of “home” function as crucial anchors in this reconstruction. Gao also observes that objects such as the agarwood box and the ebony table carry the emotional and mnemonic weight of the homeland, and that their circulation or loss directly shapes identity formation. The theft of the box, for instance, symbolizes Omar’s rupture from his past and the destabilization of his sense of self (2022, p. 36–37). Newns describes such objects as “narrative items,” whose significance lies less in their material presence than in the life stories they contain. Even when lost, the stories attached to them can recreate a symbolic sense of home within spaces of exile, thereby resisting identity dissolution and sustaining reconstruction (2015, p. 511, 515). In this way, memory becomes materialized, and material objects become mediators in the rebuilding of refugee identity.

Other scholars, however, situate identity reconstruction within a broader historical and geopolitical framework. Liu Xinran places the novel in the context of East African history, arguing that *Gurnah* connects contemporary refugee displacement with earlier patterns of mobility in the Indian Ocean trade world. As Liu states, by embedding modern exile within a longer history of circulation and exchange, *Gurnah* challenges rigid binaries of home and abroad and reveals displacement as historically embedded rather than exceptional (2025, p. 96–97). According to Liu, this historical recontextualization opens possibilities for refugees to reinterpret their condition, reconcile inherited conflicts, and imagine new forms of diasporic community (2025, p. 100). From this perspective, identity reconstruction is not only personal but also historically grounded.

In addition to this, scholars also emphasize that refugee identity is shaped by the constraints of the host society. Zhou Qing’an and Wu Yanni argue that European public discourse often frames refugees as security threats, reinforcing exclusion and complicating the process of identity reconstruction (2017, p. 9, 16). Newns also critiques the UK asylum system, noting that it compels refugees to perform a simplified and legible version of their suffering, which suppresses complex memories and produces further alienation (2015, p. 510–512). Gao then points out that Eurocentric cultural hierarchies position African refugees as “others,” intensifying their identity crisis. Silence and name changes become strategic responses, allowing refugees to negotiate exclusion and attempt partial integration (2022, p. 38–39). In response, storytelling becomes a means of resisting imposed labels and reclaiming agency. Gao additionally observes that the novel’s tentative reconciliation at the end gestures toward dialogue and mutual understanding as possible pathways for reconstructing refugee identity within a fractured world (2022, p. 40).

Undeniably, previous studies on the reconstruction of identity in *By the Sea* have provided valuable frameworks for interpreting the novel and have clarified the identity crises migrants experience within diasporic contexts. Scholars have examined identity reconstruction through memory, narrative, historical background, and institutional constraints, often treating it as either an internal psychological process or a

response to external social pressures. However, these approaches leave an important question insufficiently explored: how do refugees rebuild their identities when confronted with a profound identity crisis, and does the novel suggest a viable path for such reconstruction? In particular, little attention has been paid to the ethical dimension of this process, especially to the possibility that personal storytelling may function not only as self-recovery but also as an appeal addressed to another. This paper, therefore, argues that *By the Sea* presents identity reconstruction as a relational and ethical process, in which personal narrative becomes a call for recognition and response. Through this exchange, a meaningful ethical relationship is formed, allowing both protagonists to reconstruct their identities within an emerging ethical community.

2. After Empire and Before Home: The Middle Condition and Identity

2.1. The State of “In-Betweenness” in the Novel

By the Sea opens at a customs checkpoint. Saleh Omar, an elderly man from Zanzibar, arrives in Britain with a forged passport and a small ebony box, subjected to questioning by immigration officials. This setting is not incidental but situates the narrative within a Britain shaped by anxieties over borders, asylum, and national identity, while simultaneously staging a more enduring existential condition. Rather than simply documenting a historical moment, the novel transforms the border into a theoretical and symbolic space.

Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of the “Third Space” in *The Location of Culture* (2005) provides a useful framework here. According to Bhabha (2005), meaning does not originate from fixed positions but is produced in the movement between them, through what he calls a “Third Space.” This space functions as the enabling condition of language itself, shaping how utterances acquire significance within broader performative and institutional contexts that speakers may not fully perceive. The customs counter is precisely such a threshold. It is not merely the point of Omar’s physical entry but a site where identity is demanded, articulated, and strategically regulated within an institutional framework. In this interstitial space, Omar’s identity cannot simply be declared but must be negotiated under the authority of the state. Suspended between departure and arrival, legality and illegibility, Omar occupies a zone that is neither fully outside nor securely inside authority. The scene thus dramatizes in-betweenness as an existential condition rather than a temporary administrative delay. As Bhabha (2005, p. 13) observes, “To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the ‘unhomely’ be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres”. The “unhomely” condition describes a state in which one inhabits space without experiencing belonging, where the boundaries between inside and outside, private and public, become unstable. Omar exemplifies this condition. Although he has left Zanzibar, he cannot fully detach himself from it; yet in Britain, he is not recognized as an insider either. He occupies a liminal position that unsettles the very categories meant to contain him. Even when provided with accommodation, he does not participate in social life but “lives the half-life of a stranger, glimpsing interiors through the television screen” (p. 2), a spectator to a world that remains closed to him. The term “refugee” offers limited protection while fixing him within a provisional identity. The interrogation of Kevin Edelman, the customs official, therefore,

functions not only as a bureaucratic procedure but as a challenge to Omar's ontological legitimacy.

Latif's position, though legally more secure, is similarly unstable. When he is mocked as a "grinning blackamoor" (p. 71), a historical archive of racial discourse is activated. The word "blackamoor," rooted in medieval European taxonomy, collapses colonial fantasy and racial categorization into a derogatory stereotype. Latif is inserted into a discursive space he neither authored nor controls. His reflection that he has been "grinning through the canon for centuries" (p. 73) exposes how literary and cultural traditions perpetuate this confinement. Though formally accepted in Britain, he is denied unmarked belonging, fixed instead within a racialized representation that sustains his middle condition.

The state of "after empire", then, is more than a simple result of migration. Colonial power has formally receded, yet its epistemic and administrative structures persist. Omar recalls how "new maps were made, complete maps, so that every inch was accounted for" (p. 15), suggesting that cartography itself functioned as identity regulation. Through colonial education, he internalizes British narratives, admitting that "in their books I read unflattering accounts of my history", and that seemed more authoritative than local stories (p. 18). When those narratives later "fray and unravel" (p. 18), they leave fragmentation rather than liberation. His exile thus emerges from unresolved tensions intensified by colonial rule.

As for Latif, his state of "after empire" is reflected in his postcolonial dislocation. Raised during Zanzibar's turbulent transition, later exiled to East Germany, and eventually settled in England, he crosses both ideological and geographical boundaries shaped by the politics of the Cold War. His scholarship to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) is entangled in unequal familial relations, and the revelation that his pen pal "Elleke" is fictional underscores the instability of identity under global power structures. When British authorities dismiss his departure from the GDR as youthful folly (p. 137), they trivialize political exile, revealing the marginal status of postcolonial experience within Western systems of recognition. Even as a university professor publishing poetry in English, Latif remains unsettled. His denial of being a "distinguished poet" (p. 144–145) exposes anxiety about cultural translation and authenticity. Mastery of the colonizer's language does not secure belonging.

The prolonged suspension of the two protagonists can be illuminated through Derrida's concept of hauntology. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida (2006, p. 3) writes that haunting is historical but not confined to linear chronology: "Haunting is historical... but it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents". As Derrida (2006) states, the specter returns as a "revenant," appearing again and again without resolution. The condition of being "before home" can therefore be understood as hauntological. It is a state in which the past has not disappeared, yet cannot be fully recovered. It intrudes upon the present while preventing any stable projection into the future. Belonging is neither restored nor entirely relinquished, but endlessly deferred.

For Omar, this condition begins with the confiscation of his house in Zanzibar. The house signifies far more than material property: it embodies lineage, social reputation, and continuity across generations. Its loss does not simply displace him spatially but fractures his temporal grounding, reducing him from a respected proprietor to a dependent figure stripped of recognition. This dispossession produces not closure

but a lingering presence of what has been taken. In this sense, Omar's exile begins before he physically leaves Zanzibar; he becomes "before home" at the moment his past can no longer anchor his present. His arrival in Britain does not resolve this rupture. The detention center offers shelter, yet withholds recognition. Although "there were no locked gates" (p. 42), Harold's remark that no one would look for them if they disappeared (p. 43) exposes a deeper indifference. The refugees exist as administrative subjects but not as socially visible persons. Even in Celia's apartment, domestic space fails to generate hospitality. The dust, the discomfort, and the repeated mispronunciation of his assumed name undermine any sense of acknowledgment. As a result, Omar inhabits a suspended interval between an irrecoverable past and an unattainable future. He is not at home in Zanzibar, nor at home in Britain, but remains in the hauntological condition of "before home."

While Latif's experience of "before home" unfolds differently, emerging from refusal rather than dispossession. Haunted by family scandals and personal shame, he chooses departure as an act of severance: "I wanted nothing to do with them" (p. 239). Yet this deliberate break does not free him from the past. Instead, what is repressed returns in spectral form. His change of name signals an attempt at symbolic self-renewal, but the abandonment of "Ismail Rajab Shaaban Mahmud" does not erase history; it marks its absence. The lost name lingers as a silent trace of genealogical rupture. Zanzibar remains a site of unresolved trauma, while Britain, despite offering professional stability, never becomes fully inhabitable. His remark, "We are in a strange land" (p. 195), articulates this shared predicament. Both men dwell in physical spaces, yet neither can translate residence into belonging. To live "before home" is thus to inhabit the present as a threshold, suspended between what cannot be restored and what cannot yet be secured.

2.2. Reconstruction of identity: narratives and objects

Omar and Latif, who are thrown into a middle condition where they are both "after empire" and "before home", struggle to reconstruct their identities through the interaction of narrative and objects, within the gap between exile and memory. For Omar, the ebony box is not merely a material relic but a condensed and symbolic embodiment of his past life. As he recalls, "In Bangkok his father purchased a consignment of the best quality ud-al-qamari from Cambodia for a good price, and had it shipped to Bahrain on the same boat that they took back" (p. 29). Originating in the Arab world and circulating through the historical trade networks of Zanzibar, the box evokes the Indian Ocean cultural traditions that have shaped Omar's identity. Under the violence of colonial and postcolonial disruption, this cultural inheritance has been steadily eroded. Yet by preserving the box, Omar quietly upholds a sense of personal dignity and cultural continuity that exceeds the reach of political persecution.

After imprisonment and the loss of his wife and daughter, Omar ultimately flees Zanzibar with the ebony box as one of the few remnants of his former life. Even after arriving in England, he continues to burn the ebony incense in his residence, attempting to recreate a familiar sensory space within an alien environment. The scent thus becomes a means of resisting forgetting and sustaining a connection to the past. Containing not only spices but also memories of home, love, and loss, the box represents one of the few

private histories Omar manages to preserve amid violence, displacement, and historical rupture.

During the customs interrogation, when Kevin Edelman picks up the box, sniffs it, and asks, “What’s this?” before shutting the casket and placing it on the bench with “his tired eyes sparkling with amusement” (p. 8), Omar chooses to respond with silence. By refusing to explain, Omar protects the private memories and emotional world carried by the special box, thereby defending the integrity of his own narrative against the pressure of official discourse. The later confiscation of the box by Edelman symbolizes the objectification and regulation of immigrant identity in Europe; nevertheless, through repeated recollections of the box’s origin and scent, Omar continues to reconstruct a self-rooted in homeland, trade, and friendship, thereby resisting the flattening of identity imposed by the label of “refugee.”

Omar’s narrative practice also unfolds through the gradual tracing of his past life. During the refugee review process, he initially pretends not to understand English, repeating only the words “refugee” and “asylum.” This performance functions both as a survival strategy and as a silent critique of the European bureaucratic system. It is not until he encounters Rachel that he begins to gradually reveal the truth: “When I bought my ticket, I was advised not to admit to speaking English when I arrived here,” I said. “I didn’t know why, but I thought I would wait and see. I’m not wiser now, but I thought I had better speak. Everything was becoming complicated and uncomfortable at Celia’s house, so I thought I’d better speak before I created an impossible situation. Even though I would’ve preferred not to.” (p. 65)

This process of narration is not simply the transmission of information but a rearticulation of identity. By controlling the pace and content of his story, Omar gradually regains the authority to interpret his own life. As he later tells Rachel, “My life has been at risk for a long time. It is only now that the Government of Her Majesty the Queen of England has recognized it and has offered me sanctuary” (p. 67). This statement simultaneously satirizes the logic of the asylum system and actively shapes his refugee identity, weaving personal experience into a broader historical narrative of colonial legacy and political persecution. In doing so, Omar endows exile with a sense of legitimacy and historical continuity.

Latif’s reconstruction of identity, however, relies less on stable inheritance than on the narrative excavation of family history and on emotional investments in particular objects that come to bear this fragmented past. He attempts to locate his own position within a broken lineage by recalling the entanglements among his father, Rajah Shaaban Mahmud, his brother Hassan, and the Persian merchant Hussein—relationships marked by betrayal, dependency, and loss. It is precisely from within this web of relations that the small ebony table emerges as a significant object. As Latif notes, the table “belongs to Hassan. It was a gift” (p. 103) and thus carries the trace of a bond that has been violently disrupted. Latif’s mother’s insistence on retrieving the table derives from its symbolic function as a material remainder of Hassan’s existence and of a familial dignity not yet entirely extinguished. When Latif negotiates on her behalf, he experiences not merely the loss of an object but the humiliation of seeing family history appropriated and rewritten, particularly in response to Omar’s detached assertion that “I took possession of the house and whatever contents were abandoned there” (p. 103). Within Latif’s narrative, the table is

therefore transformed into a condensed metaphor, pointing simultaneously to the confiscated house, the separation of brothers, and the disintegration of traditional interpersonal networks under colonial and commercial pressures.

While the table functions as a material condensation of fractured familial relations, Latif's efforts to reconstruct his identity are not confined to physical objects alone. During his period of study in the GDR, Latif corresponds with a pen pal named Elleke, and the photograph he sends becomes a site of emotional projection and cultural imagination. When it is later revealed that Elleke is a fictional identity jointly constructed by Jan and his mother, this disclosure does not undermine Latif's narrative coherence; instead, it prompts a deeper reflection on the plasticity of identity itself. Rather than feeling deceived, Latif is drawn into the family's narrative world. As Jan explains, his mother's stories are never quite the same, and Latif comes to experience firsthand the instability of names and identities. Quoting *Romeo and Juliet*, he reflects that "Elleke becomes Jan, and Ismail turns out to be Latif, and they both probably smell as sweet" (p. 134). This realization does not precipitate a narrative breakdown but enables Latif to engage more fully with Jan's family history and ultimately to flee together with him. The experience becomes central to Latif's later understanding of identity as mobile and contingent, laying the groundwork for his eventual acceptance of self-restructuring as both necessary and affirmative.

Throughout his escape across Europe, he continues to carry these letters and memories with him, eventually beginning anew in Britain under the name "Latif." This act of self-naming constitutes an affirmative reconstruction of identity. By abandoning the weight of his inherited name, "Ismail Rajab Shaaban Mahmud", he chooses "Latif" for "its gentleness and the softness of its modulations, God's name, which I would take with respect, meaning no outrage or blasphemy" (p. 133). Furthermore, after being insulted on the streets of England as a "grinning blackamoor" (p. 71), Latif "looked it up in my *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as soon as I got in my office" (p. 72) in order to trace the term's historical meanings. This act itself functions as a form of narrative resistance: through linguistic excavation, Latif situates the violence of racial insult within a broader historical discourse, thereby reclaiming a degree of interpretive authority over his degraded identity.

2.3. The Dilemma of Exiles: The Weakness of Narratives

Although both Omar and Latif strive to reconstruct their identities and assimilate into British society, their efforts unfold within a postimperial structure that continues to produce fragmentation and uncertainty. Colonialism has formally ended, yet its epistemic and cultural legacies persist. Omar remains alienated by the colonial narratives through which he learned to read his own history, and he is stripped of the material sites, such as his house and possessions, that once anchored his memory. Latif, in contrast, deliberately severs his family ties in exile, only to find himself confined within the racialized label of the "blackamoor." Their middle condition, therefore, signifies more than geographical displacement. It reflects a deeper spiritual and historical dislocation in which past and present fail to cohere.

From this emerges a fundamental paradox in their attempts at self-narration. If identity is reconstructed

solely through the repetition of one's past, that narrative remains vulnerable to suspicion, appropriation, or dismissal as unreliable. This vulnerability does not arise from the weakness of individual memory but from the historical structure of the postimperial world. Colonialism not only dispossessed people of their homelands; it also undermined the legitimacy of the languages through which those homelands could be described. Likewise, the modern nation-state not only produces refugees but also renders their stories difficult to accommodate within official discourse. Under such conditions, any effort to reconstruct identity through monologue encounters a structural limitation. The narrator cannot function simultaneously as sole author, witness, and guarantor of truth. Omar may recount the histories of Hussein, agarwood, and the furniture shop, yet he cannot independently authenticate these memories within the bureaucratic logic that judges him. Latif can narrate the intertwined stories of Hassan, Hussein, and the ebony table, but his testimony alone cannot restore authority to what has been lost or erased. Both men require recognition that exceeds self-assertion. Belief cannot be self-generated but must be conferred.

For this reason, the narrative crisis of exile cannot be resolved in isolation. The impossibility of return deprives the exilic narrative of self-sufficiency and demands the presence of an other. The other functions not merely as a passive listener but as a participant who offers dialogue, acknowledgment, and verification. Through such relational exchange, narrative gaps can be bridged, and personal experiences affirmed as meaningful rather than suspect. Only when their stories are received and recognized by others can Omar and Latif move beyond narrative paralysis and begin to reconstruct a viable sense of identity. It is this need for recognition that pushes the protagonists beyond individual acts of self-definition and toward the creation of an ethical community, a shared space in which experiences of loss, trauma, and exile can be voiced and understood together.

3. Toward an Ethical Community: Sense of Belonging in the Encounter with the Other

3.1. Narratives as the Summoning of the Other

Situated in a state of in-betweenness within an unfamiliar country, it is not difficult to see why both Omar and Latif, as figures of exile, seek to establish a sense of belonging, despite the feud between their families. As Arthur W. Frank (1997) elaborates in *The Wounded Storyteller*, the ill person feels compelled to reaffirm that his story is worthy of being heard by others and, through this act of narration, to confirm his own continued existence as both a speaking subject and a listener to himself. Through storytelling, the ill also create empathic bonds with their listeners; as these stories are retold and shared, such bonds deepen and extend beyond the immediate encounter, allowing the experience to circulate among a widening community of listeners. Taking Frank's insight as a critical framework, the narratives of the two protagonists can be understood as a means of evoking lived experience. Through storytelling, they draw upon memory to articulate how they perceive, interpret, and relate to the world around them. In this sense, narrative moves beyond the simple recording of events and brings experiences and imaginative worlds into presence, shaping how stories are lived, remembered, and understood, and thereby enabling the protagonists to forge a sense of

belonging.

The first meeting between Omar and Latif is marked by tension and mutual probing. Latif's blunt remark, "I thought it would be you" (p. 144), functions not only as a speculation about Omar's identity but also as a narrative call: by situating himself within the other's story, Latif implicitly invites a response. Omar's subsequent extended narration, therefore, is not merely an act of self-defense but also an invitation addressed to Latif, urging him to enter a life story shaped by historical entanglements, misunderstandings, and shared suffering. When Omar recounts his involvement in the property dispute with Rajab, which arose from Hussein's deception and eventually sparked a feud between the two families, he does more than narrate the past events. His pointed question, "What made you think that it would be me?" (p. 144), actively summons Latif into dialogue, compelling him to move beyond inherited moral judgments and to consider the complex motivations and historical circumstances that produced the conflict. As the addressee of this narrative, Latif can no longer remain merely indifferent or hostile. Now he is drawn into Omar's emotional logic and historical memory.

As the conversation unfolds, Omar's account of his imprisonment further intensifies the ethical force of this narrative call. He describes his repeated transfers between detention sites, his experience that he "suffered no hardship on the island" (p. 226), and his eventual release under amnesty in 1979, eleven years after his arrest at the Party headquarters (p. 233). These details reinforce the transformative potential of his storytelling. Omar recounts how he was stripped of dignity, subjected to physical and psychological torment, and sustained only by prayer, storytelling, and solidarity with fellow prisoners. Such narratives do not simply display suffering. They seek to make Latif, both the son of the enemy and a fellow exile, feel the weight of these experiences. When Omar reflects that "the years were written in the language of the body, and it is not a language I can speak with words" (p. 230), he nevertheless persists in addressing Latif through language, striving to render his trauma communicable. In doing so, he attempts to draw Latif into an embodied understanding of life under systematic violence. This narrative call gradually unsettles the initial opposition between them, enabling Latif to recognize that Omar is not the greedy persecutor he once imagined but an ordinary individual crushed by historical forces and enduring deep trauma. In this way, the novel demonstrates how narrative can make the experiences of others perceptible, thereby cultivating empathy and a sense of moral responsibility.

Latif's own storytelling likewise functions as a form of narrative summoning directed toward Omar. He recounts his experiences in East Germany, his correspondence with his pen pal Elleke, his troubled family life, and his eventual arrival in England at Plymouth, where he feels as though he has "circumnavigated the world's oceans" (p. 137). These narrative fragments not only flesh out Latif's character but also allow Omar to see that this "son of the enemy" is himself a lonely figure, searching for a sense of belonging amid displacement and separation. In particular, Latif's recollections of family conflict—his father's alcoholism, his mother's infidelity, and his brother's disappearance—intersect with Omar's own memories, revealing shared patterns of familial trauma and historical burden. When Latif reflects that "When I read *Bartleby* for

the first time I realised that that was how I thought of my father, resigned in his futility and you his persecutor” (p. 168), he is not simply assigning blame. Rather, he invites Omar to reconsider the power relations and moral ambiguities embedded in that historical moment. Through this reciprocal exchange of stories, the initial hostility between them begins to dissolve, giving way to an ethical connection grounded in shared vulnerability and mutual recognition.

Ultimately, this process of narrative summoning leads to the formation of a genuine sense of belonging. Through repeated conversations, Omar and Latif not only come to terms with their families’ past conflicts but also develop an emotional bond as compatriots and eventually, as kins living in a foreign land. Latif’s invitation for Omar to visit his home in London marks a decisive shift in their relationship, and Omar’s response, “It made me feel younger” (p. 243), signals his renewed sense of connection and companionship. This affiliation is not rooted in blood ties or geographic origin, but in an ethical community forged through narrative exchange: a relational space sustained by empathy, recognition, and responsibility. In the novel’s closing scene, when Latif asks Omar what he would like to eat, the gesture quietly affirms that they are no longer divided by history and conflicts. Through storytelling, they have summoned one another into a shared present and found a form of spiritual refuge.

Seen in this light, the reconciliation between Omar and Latif is not merely a personal healing but also an ethical event structured through storytelling. Their gradual movement toward mutual recognition exemplifies how narrative exchange transforms private suffering into a shared moral space, where listening itself becomes an act of responsibility. It is precisely at this juncture that Arthur W. Frank’s theoretical reflection on testimony and witnessing offers a useful framework for understanding the ethical depth of their relationship. As Arthur W. Frank (1997, p. 137) further argues, “the witness offers testimony to a truth that is generally unrecognized or suppressed. People who tell stories of illness are witnesses, turning illness into moral responsibility”. In this sense, the narration of trauma constitutes a moral appeal addressed to “capable witnesses.” Such witnesses are not only required to acknowledge suppressed truths but are also entrusted with the responsibility of carrying them forward, allowing individual fragility to become a shared ethical concern rather than an isolated burden. From this perspective, Latif, whose family history is directly entangled with Omar’s, becomes a witness to Omar’s trauma and is therefore placed in a position where listening is no longer optional but ethically necessary.

When Omar and Latif first meet, however, Latif’s listening is marked by resistance and selectivity. He approaches the encounter as a judge, seeking inconsistencies and evidence that might confirm his inherited grievances. His expectation is to hear factual details about the property dispute between the two families; instead, Omar leads him into a broader narrative of imprisonment, state violence, and systemic persecution. At this point, listening ceases to function as a means of gathering information and becomes an ethical burden. Latif can no longer isolate his family’s suffering from the larger historical context Omar reveals, and the accusations he has carried from his father begin to lose their moral certainty. Omar’s narrative pulls Latif away from the singular story of his own injury and forces him to confront a more expansive and unsettling

structure of suffering, destabilizing his original moral position.

The ethical weight of listening becomes even clearer as it intrudes upon Latif's own memory and emotional life. Omar's account of the family feud offers Latif no safe distance; instead, it awakens memories Latif has deliberately suppressed. When Omar recalls an incident involving Latif's father's drunken behavior, Latif initially insists, "I'd forgotten so much" (p. 193). Yet he is soon drawn back into the scene: "I remember that, my father shouting abuse and sobbing... and if you had not said it I probably would not have been able to bring it to mind" (p. 193). Omar's narration thus becomes the catalyst that unlocks Latif's sealed memories, compelling him to confront the shame and trauma embedded in his own family history. Listening here is no longer directed solely at the other; it entangles the listener's identity in the act of witnessing. Latif can no longer sustain a detached, judgmental stance, as listening exposes him to a renewed and painful self-recognition.

This unavoidable form of listening eventually leads to a quiet ethical transformation. At several crucial moments in the novel, Latif responds to Omar's most painful stories with silence or by physically withdrawing. Yet this silence does not signal refusal but marks the difficulty of absorbing what has been heard. When Omar reveals the deaths of his wife and daughter, Latif offers no immediate response, but subsequent interactions make clear that this knowledge profoundly reshapes his judgment of Omar. Silence here functions as a pause in which former frameworks of understanding collapse, allowing space for a different ethical response to emerge. Rather than offering explicit forgiveness or condemnation, Latif responds through action: he invites Omar into his home and begins to share daily life with him. In this shift, listening moves from a passive obligation to an active form of relationship-building.

Therefore, in *By the Sea*, listening emerges as an indispensable ethical response that follows the narrative call. It is not a neutral act of reception, but a process that unsettles the listener's sense of self and compels a reassessment of moral position. Through the figure of Latif, Gurnah illustrates both the difficulty and the inevitability of listening. Once the victim's story is spoken, those who share the same historical context can no longer claim distance or indifference. Listening thus becomes a foundational practice for rebuilding ethical connections in a fractured world. It does not offer easy reconciliation, but through sustained witnessing and understanding, it opens a shared emotional space for two individuals who were once separated by hatred. Within this space, belonging no longer rests on common bloodlines or an untroubled past, but on the weight of shared memories and the ongoing responsibility for one another's wounds that listening entails.

3.2. A Narrative-Ethical Community

Benedict Anderson (2006) famously proposed the concept of the "imagined community." In *Imagined Communities*, he defines the nation as "an imagined political community" that is conceived as both limited and sovereign (Anderson, 2006, p. 5–6). As Anderson (2006) explains, even in the smallest nations, members will never know most of their fellow citizens, yet they imagine a bond with them through shared memories, histories, and cultural references. Although conflict and inequality exist within any nation, it is

nonetheless imagined as a form of deep, horizontal comradeship. If Anderson's concept explains how a sense of belonging is produced at the macro level, then the narratives of Omar and Latif illustrate how a similar process unfolds on a micro level, forming fragile yet meaningful ethical connections amid fragmented histories and memories.

At the outset, Omar's and Latif's stories are isolated and mutually opposed. Omar's narrative is shaped by loss, betrayal, and imprisonment, while Latif's memories are haunted by family shame and the dispossession of property. Although they come from the same place, Zanzibar, they inhabit conflicting imagined pasts marked by hostility and misunderstanding. Their encounter in Britain gradually transforms into a shared narrative space. As Omar recounts Hassan's fate and Latif speaks of his experiences in East Germany, their separate monologues begin to turn into a dialogue. Latif captures this process when he reflects, "Well, I remember now that you remind me, now that you force me to remember... I hated to hear you speak about it" (p. 194). Out of this difficult act of shared remembering, the first form of community begins to emerge. Narrative ceases to belong to either individual alone and instead becomes a collective process through which gaps are filled and perspectives revised, which echoes Anderson's model of community formation.

The community that gradually forms between Omar and Latif is thus fundamentally ethical in nature. It is grounded in a mutual recognition of suffering and in a refusal to reduce either man to a fixed, victimized identity. Their bond does not arise from blood ties or prior friendship, but from a shared commitment to confronting the truth of their intertwined histories. As Latif admits, "So I was looking forward to coming here, to hear you talk, for both of us to find relief" (p. 46), to which Omar responds, "Yes, to find relief" (p. 46). This "relief" does not suggest forgetting or easy reconciliation. Rather, it signals the possibility of reconstituting the self through the act of facing history together. Within this narrative exchange, both men undergo transformation. Omar moves from being an isolated victim of circumstance to becoming a witness who orders the past through storytelling. His narration becomes an ethical act, one that assumes responsibility for memory. Latif, in turn, shifts from a passive inheritor of resentment to an active listener whose willingness to hear and question opens space for renewed understanding. Their new identities emerge only within this shared space: without Latif's attentive listening, Omar's words would remain a private murmur; without Omar's account, Latif could not reexamine the history he has inherited. Through this reciprocal process, Omar is reconstructed as a flawed yet courageous narrator, while Latif becomes a listener capable of holding complex and uncomfortable truths. It is within this ethical community of narrative exchange that identity can be reshaped. Community provides the ethical space for transformation, and the emergence of renewed identities, in turn, sustains the community itself. Identity and community thus exist in a relationship of mutual dependence.

Whereas Anderson's imagined communities often rely on a shared opposition to an external other, the bond between Omar and Latif is formed through an inward movement toward each other's perspectives. Through sustained conversation, they come to recognize that both are shaped by forces larger than

themselves, including colonial legacies, post-independence violence, and family dysfunction. Their long-standing feud thus appears not as an isolated conflict but as one expression of a broader historical fragmentation. This ethical awareness is crystallized in their discussion of *Bartleby*, which becomes a shared interpretive frame for thinking about endurance, silence, and human vulnerability. Literary reference here functions as a common cultural language that deepens their understanding of one another and of themselves.

This narrative-based ethical community ultimately reshapes the meaning of belonging. Rather than offering a return to a lost homeland or a simple resolution of family conflict, it produces a new and portable form of affiliation grounded in shared testimony and attentive listening. After one of their conversations, Omar observes, “It was strange, after so many years, to have someone sleeping nearby. It made me feel younger” (p. 243). Their growing closeness eases his loneliness of exile and displacement. In this sense, their bond represents the most intimate form of an imagined community. Despite decades of separation and mutual ignorance, they now share a dense web of memories created through storytelling. This is reflected in their outings together to Water Valley and London, which function not merely as social activities but as tentative rituals of kinship. Sustained by the possibility of continued narrative exchange, as Latif suggests when he says, “Then I’ll just have to descend on you without warning next weekend” (p. 244), this small community offers a compelling alternative to the rigid identities that once kept them apart. Within this ongoing relationship, both Omar and Latif are finally able to complete the reconstruction of their identities. The encounter between Omar and Latif begins by chance, yet this harmonious relationship endures because of their mutual sincerity. The ethical community formed through their narrative exchange is therefore more than a passing moment. It emerges quietly from the ruins of displacement and trauma and, though modest, offers enough light to guide the course of their remaining lives.

4. Conclusion

In *By the Sea*, Gurnah represents diaspora not as a temporary stage on the way to settlement, but as an ongoing condition shaped by the aftermath of empire. Through the intersecting lives of Omar and Latif, the novel depicts identity in exile as something continually negotiated through memory, silence, and narrative exchange, rather than anchored in a stable origin. As this paper has argued, the protagonists reconstruct their fragmented selves through acts of storytelling and engagement with the past, and these narrative practices also create the conditions for ethical relations. Storytelling here is not merely self-expressive but relational, requiring recognition from another and gradually transforming antagonism into cautious understanding.

Seen in this light, *By the Sea* offers more than a representation of displacement in contemporary Britain. It gestures toward an ethical vision of community grounded in attentiveness, vulnerability, and shared responsibility. Gurnah suggests that belonging does not lie in the recovery of a lost homeland but in the ongoing effort to live with others through listening and acknowledgment. In a world still marked by the uneven legacies of empire, the novel proposes a fragile yet meaningful way of imagining connection in the present.

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