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RECALCITRANT MATERIALITY

An Analysis of Things' Agency and Human
Objectification in *By the Sea* by Abdulrazak Gurnah

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Abstract

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Abstract: This essay analyzes the interactions between characters and objects in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel, *By the Sea*, through the theoretical frameworks of Bill Brown's thing theory and Jane Bennett's thing-power. The present study focuses on the distinction between "objects" and "things", and the moments of disjunction between these states of being within the colonial and postcolonial contexts of the Indian Ocean. In this analysis, attention is paid to matter-energy formations of entities such as the maps and the *ud-al-qamari* in their different states. Specifically, the maps' influence on the interconnected lives of Jaafar Musa and Saleh Omar is analyzed. Furthermore, through the lens of assemblage, the transformation of the *ud-al-qamari* from an aloe tree into a powerful actant is explored. This investigation is not limited to objects; drawing on Bennett's framework of instrumentalism, the analysis illustrates how the characters like Rajab Shaaban and Saleh Omar lose their own vitality and agency, adopting a passive manner that reduces them to objects to be used by others. By analyzing these interactions in *By the Sea*, this research aims to trace the transition of materiality across the depiction of different states of being, demonstrating how "things" take over the characters' lives and shape the novel's tragic outcome.

Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah, *By the Sea*, thing theory, thing-power, Material Agency, Assemblage, Vibrant Matter, Bill Brown, Jane Bennett

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Theory and Method	4
The Great World.....	7
The Odour of the Fantasy	11
The Endless Catalogue of Objects	17
Conclusion.....	19
References	21

Introduction

“A new, simpler history was being constructed, transforming and even obliterating what had happened, re-structuring it to suit the verities of the moment . . . It became necessary then to refuse such a history, one that disregarded the material objects that testified to an earlier time, the buildings, the achievements and the tenderness that had made life possible” (Gurnah, “writing” 3).

Narrating through the eyes of a single character may silence other voices. *By the Sea*, a novel by Abdulrazak Gurnah, narrates a shared history through two distinct protagonists: Saleh Omar, who lived in a small town in Zanzibar for most of his life, and Latif, who migrates to Europe as a talented student. Gurnah does not remain within this binary. In *By the Sea*, he interweaves pre-colonial pasts with post-colonial presents, connecting the waves of the Indian Ocean to its coasts, and presenting interactions between the characters from Asia, Africa, and Europe. Even *One Thousand and One Nights*, from a thousand years ago, flows through the novel, alongside *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. Through these intertwined worlds, the agency of change is handed over to “objects”. Abdulrazak Gurnah, the 2021 Nobel Prize laureate in literature, elaborately extends *By the Sea* in different aspects by applying this capacity to the novel. That is to say, *By the Sea* does not depict the characters as powerful doers, merely as a feature of being human. Instead, the novel represents a connected web that includes humans and nonhumans, whereby tracing the journey of a small “object” leads to a dense connection of materiality; therefore, “objects” are not mere tools in the service of the characters, but, as Bennett demonstrates, they perform as “actant[s]” (355) possessing their own voice and life.

The extensive concepts in *By the Sea* led previous studies to focus on diverse aspects such as intertextuality, migration, and the role of “objects”. For instance, Cooppan suggests the notion of circulation to explore the function of “objects” within the Indian Ocean world. In addition, this study analyzes how history and memory adhere to the surface of “objects”, moving with them across distinct times and places (172). Drawing on Bakhtin’s theoretical framework, the chronotope, Steiner indicates that the ship in *By the Sea* functions as a marker of movement and transnational connection across time and space. A broader perspective has been adopted by Samuelson in her analysis of *By the Sea*, who confirms the agency of “objects” in two separate studies. In her earlier analysis, Samuelson develops the perspective of an “amphibian aesthetic” (“Abdulrazak Gurnah's Fictions” 500), demonstrating the fluid relationship between land and sea, while identifying the Swahili Coast as a historical connector between these two spaces. In a later study on narrative cartography, Samuelson convincingly

argues that *Zanzibar* maps the Indian Ocean world through storytelling in the novel. Furthermore, the study indicates the intertextual relationship between *By the Sea* and *One Thousand and One Nights* (“Narrative Cartographies” 78). While these studies effectively establish the significance of “objects” in *By the Sea*, the process through which “objects” appear to actively shape characters’ lives has not yet been fully analyzed. It is hoped that this essay will contribute to a deeper understanding of this matter; therefore, in this essay, I seek to demonstrate that “objects” in *By the Sea* are not merely passive or inanimate entities. Rather, I argue that certain “objects” possess agency that enables them to change characters’ lives; thereby, reversing the common dynamic between human subjects and material “objects”. Empowered by their histories, memories, and natures, these “objects” transform into “things”. This enriched entity reinforces the agency of these “things” to influence the characters’ choices and desires. Consequently, the novel illustrates characters who are unable to exercise full control over their own lives. Thus, the analysis will focus on two matters: 1) the process of some “objects” transformation into “things” which will be discussed in greater detail, and 2) the objectification of the characters in their confrontation with those “things”.

This perspective on characterization certainly aligns with Abdulrazak Gurnah’s viewpoint, as expressed in his Nobel Prize interview, where he states his preference for writing about ordinary characters rather than “heroes, gods, kings, and superpower protagonists” (“Abdulrazak Gurnah” 00:21:22). He declares that the characters like heroes and gods have “firmed ground” (Steiner, “A Conversation” 161) under their feet, which enables them to “speak authoritatively” and “produce one powerful narrative” (161) of their lives. By contrast, the characters in *By the Sea* are notably in the “position of weakness” (161) regarding their ability to fully control their lives. In other words, the capacity of “things” to direct characters’ desires and influence their choices is elaborately depicted in the novel, through the encounters between empowered “objects” and the ordinary characters.

By the Sea is a novel about ordinary people who are surrounded by the forces of history, colonialism, and “objects”. These surroundings are not passive and actively contribute to shaping the characters’ lives. Building on this observation of the novel, this analysis is structured to address the following matters. Firstly, the essay demonstrates how “objects”, specifically maps and the *ud-al-qamari* (a rare aloe wood incense), function as mere tools in the novel, highlighting their meaning in the characters’ memory and imagination. Answering this question reveals how the characters are seduced in their confrontation with “objects”. Secondly, this essay tries to show the “thingness of objects” (Brown 4) when they assert their own “matter-energy” (Bennett 352) in the moments of “disjunction”. While this claim seeks

the link between the agency of “things” that interacts with the historical and colonial context of the Indian Ocean, it also considers to what extent the concept of “assemblage” (Bennett 355) reduces characters’ agency. In other words, this matter raises the question of why certain characters, such as Saleh Omar and Rajab Shaaban Mahmud, choose a passive manner and become “objects” when confronting the agency of “things”, leading them to be possessed or used by others.

In this essay, I apply Bill Brown’s thing theory and Jane Bennett’s theoretical framework of thing-power to analyze “objects” agency in the novel *By the Sea* by Abdulrazak Gurnah. My thesis is composed of three analytical chapters. It begins by analyzing the journey of maps entitled “The Great World.” The second chapter, entitled “The Odour of the Fantasy,” focuses on metamorphosis of the *ud-al-qamari*. Finally, the third analytical section, entitled “The Endless Catalogue of Objects,” explores the converse possessive relationship between characters and “things”. Specifically, it explores the encounters of Rajab Shaaban Mahmud and Saleh Omar with “things”. In addition, the chapter considers the characters’ ignorance of their agency in their relationship with “things”. Consequently, it analyzes the characters’ reduction to “objects”.

Theory and Method

Bill Brown's thing theory challenges the traditional relationship between subject and "object". Based on thing theory, the human subject was often considered as the sole authority possessing the ability to narrate or influence the material world. This theory offers a theoretical framework where, in a moment of disjunction, an "object" becomes a "thing", changing its relationship with the human subject. It is necessary here to clarify exactly what is meant by "object" and "thing" to fully understand thing theory.

The fundamental distinction between an "object" and a "thing" forms the core of thing theory. In this framework, the term "object" refers to a material entity that derives its definition from its function within human systems. In this view, the human subject, by looking through "objects", can see "what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about" themselves (Brown 4). Thus, the "object" functions as a code in the human world where the subject's interpretive attention makes it meaningful, allowing it to be used as a fact within a discourse of objectivity (4).

In contrast, a "thing" can hardly function as a tool for humans. The "thingness" (4) of "objects" is revealed "when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily" (4).

In this moment of disjunction, the human's encounter with the transformed "object", when the "object" asserts itself as a "thing", breaks the totality of the human subject. This means that the human subject encounters an "object" that is no longer a passive tool and does not bear the "splendor of the subject" (8). Consequently, this assertion of the "thing" brings the subject "to accept the otherness of thing[s]" (15), altering the subject-object relationship.

While thing theory draws a distinction between "object" and "thing" within a moment of disjunction, it is insufficient for analyzing the agency of "things" in *By the Sea*. To do so, I utilize Jane Bennett's thing-power, as a complementary theoretical framework, to emphasize the inherent vitality of "things" in the novel. Thing-power depicts a connection of matter-energy between humans and nonhumans, where there is no strict line between different states of being, such as the animate and the inanimate (Bennett 352). One aspect of this connection, termed "assemblage" (355) refers to the vitality in diverse groups of elements, both human and nonhuman, that are in a dense web of connection. This relation reinforces their function as a

group, meaning that agency is not the power of an individual but of an assemblage that dictates its desires through the movement of material that can make a difference in the whole (355).

Another significant aspect of this “assemblage” (355) is raising questions about the capacity for action of “things” and humans within this theoretical framework. Thing-power suggests a shift away from considering agency as an exclusively human property. To do so, Bennett introduces the term “actant” to maintain that action and agency are no longer performed exclusively by humans. An “actant” describes a nonhuman entity that performs actions and produces effects (355). Consequently, agency is not an exclusive property of humans, and “objects” can function as “actant[s]” (355) in human lives, changing their desires, affecting their ways of thinking, and finally taking over their lives. In other words, thing-power affirms that inanimate “things” have their own lives, independent of humans (358), possessing “willfulness and recalcitrance” (347) that enable them to “make a difference in a situation” (355).

Another significant aspect of thing-power is the risk of instrumentalism and commodification, involving the reduction of persons to “mere objects” (360). Bennett explains that this view creates an ethical tension that can result in the use of persons as tools for other persons’ desires and goals. However, Bennett argues that this danger does not stem from the recognition of shared materiality between humans and nonhumans, but from an inadequate understanding of the nature of an “object”. In a broader sense, the perspective that defines an “object” as a code or tool in the human system has the capacity to define persons as “mere objects” (360). In addition, as previously stated, it is crucial to note that while thing-power considers “things” as “powers of life, resistance, and even a kind of will” (360), some humans may ignore this power and lack the “awareness of the vitality of the world with which one is enmesh[ed]” (361), reducing the burden of responsibility. This aspect provides a theoretical framework for analyzing the passivity of some characters in *By the Sea*, the characters who do not rely on their power to take over their lives but instead play a role in the “assemblage” (355) of another character’s plan, choosing a passive manner like an “object”. This passivity builds a character who can be possessed by other people and be used as an instrument and commodity for others’ desires and goals. I use this theoretical framework to explain why some characters in *By the Sea* are unable to resist the agency of “things” or the agency of other characters: their ignorance of their responsibility and lack of “awareness of the vitality of the world” (361) predisposes them to be possessed, as it is easier than exercising agency.

This essay analyzes the interactions between characters and “objects” in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s novel *By the Sea* through the theoretical frameworks of Bill Brown’s thing theory and

Jane Bennett's thing-power. This study is conducted using a close textual analysis of the novel, focusing on the distinction between an "object" and a "thing", and the moments of disjunction between these states of being within the colonial and postcolonial contexts of the Indian Ocean. In this analysis, attention is paid to "matter-energy" (Bennett 352) formations such as the maps and the *ud-al-qamari* in their different states. Specifically, the maps' influence on the interconnected lives of Jaafar Musa and Saleh is analyzed. Furthermore, through the lens of "assemblage" (355), the transformation of the *ud-al-qamari* from an aloe tree into a powerful actant is explored. This investigation is not limited to "objects"; drawing on Bennett's framework of instrumentalism, the analysis illustrates how characters like Shaaban and Saleh lose their own vitality and agency, adopting a passive manner that reduces them to "objects" to be used by others. By analyzing these interactions in *By the Sea*, this research aims to trace the transition of materiality across the depiction of different states of being, demonstrating how "things" take over the characters' lives and shape the novel's tragic outcome.

The Great World

“I wanted to get away, to see the great world” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 120), Latif Mahmud says while talking with his friend Ali during the GDR scholarship program in Germany. For the characters in *By the Sea*, the great world is not limited to a specific geographic location, such as a particular town or country. Instead, it is an imagined space of somewhere else, defined primarily by its difference from Zanzibar. As Latif explains, he “would have agreed to go almost anywhere” (119). Similarly, the other narrator, Saleh Omar, defines the great world as the “places hard to reach and therefore beautiful because of that” (39). Saleh and Latif, the novel’s co-narrators, both migrate from Zanzibar to England, Latif as a talented student and Saleh as an asylum seeker. Their narration reveals that the great world functions less as a specific destination than as “anywhere” (119). Rather, this desire stems from the narrators’ origin in Stone Town, Zanzibar. The longing for the great world is thus constructed as a rejection of their home. The characters’ seeking for the great world conveys an unbearable atmosphere in their town, leading them to imagine unknown places as a landscape of salvation. To grasp this concept, it is crucial to consider that the novel is set in colonial and postcolonial Zanzibar. While the narration focuses primarily on the characters’ personal lives, it also portrays the political and social forces that shape them.

Building on this concept of the great world, this section examines how maps function as “objects” for Saleh before they are transformed into “things” through his interactions with Hussein. Within the colonial setting of Zanzibar, the maps serve a specific purpose, they enable Saleh to materialize the “anywhere” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 119) that exists beyond the restrictive boundaries of his immediate reality. As Saleh says, “maps made places on the edge of the imagination seem graspable and placeable” (35). Although Saleh is unable to access those destinations where people’s lives seem to be thriving, the maps serve as a confirmation that such a great world exists. According to Brown’s thing theory, the maps are depicted as “objects” in Saleh’s world, where his “interpretive attention makes them meaningful, allowing [them] . . . to be used as a fact within a discourse of objectivity” (Brown 4). Consequently, they stand as one of the most significant “objects” in the novel; Saleh describes them as beautiful “objects”, as “something that could be possessed” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 35). Moreover, the maps are a substitute for his loss of a better life, a desire that extends to his profession as a merchant of antiques, as he says, “I have always had an interest in furniture. Furniture and maps. Beautiful, intricate things” (19). However, Saleh’s deep connection with maps is about more than the

possession of a beautiful “object”. Indeed, the concept of the great world materializes through the function of maps as a psychological tool for survival. Moreover, the maps represent an imagination escape that helps Saleh endure the novel’s historical setting of Zanzibar. This dynamic is further highlighted by Saleh’s description of the colonial effects on the Swahili Coast through the term “new maps”, “new maps were made, complete maps, every inch was accounted for, and everyone now knew who they were, or at least who they belonged [to]” (15). As Samuelson interprets it, “adopting the ‘new maps’ produced by European powers to carve the continent up between them” (“Narrative Cartographies” 85) creates a world where “every inch was accounted for” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 15). While these colonial “new maps” (15), as “objects” for colonizers, represent a system of control and limitation for colonized people like Saleh on the Swahili Coast, they simultaneously materialize a world beyond the limitations the colonizers have imposed on their lives. Thus, for Saleh, the maps remain “objects” until his interactions with Hussein, when they transform into “things”, revealing their agency and lively matter.

Saleh describes Hussein as an affluent trader who was “always clean and perfumed and faultlessly courteous, which was not the case with all the traders who came with the musim” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 16). However, for Saleh, the core of Hussein’s charisma lies in the fascinating forebears’ maritime and trading history, along with his own travel experience. In addition, Hussein is an idealized figure who stands in contrast to the environment and individuals of Saleh’s everyday life, a setting he describes as “the puny, ragged, small place” (160). As Saleh narrates,

“Here was a man who had stories to tell of those distant beautiful places that were only marks on a map for me, those places that were beautiful because they were so distant and fabled. Even if he had not been to all these places himself, the stories involved him and made him seem part of the great world” (159).

Hussein’s persona, combined with the stories of his forebears’ trade in the Indian Ocean, constructs him as a trustworthy figure, lastly convincing Saleh to extend a loan to him. As security, he offers Saleh “the deeds of the house of Rajab Shaaban (the father of Latif and Hassan)” (Samuelson, “Narrative Cartographies” 82). Hussein subsequently fails to return the loan, alternatively sending a gift during the next monsoon, that reminds Saleh of the great world, a “mariner’s map of South Asia” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 34), belonging to Hussein’s grandfather, Jaafar Musa. Upon receiving the gift, Saleh notes, “the gift made me smile. He remembered how much I liked maps. Such a fine map. The money could wait until next year” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 34).

Drawing on the concept of thing theory, this analysis identifies a disjunction in this scene. The disjunction occurs when Saleh encounters Jaafar Musa's map, an "object" originating from a different historical era, sent by Hussein as an alternative to the loan. This encounter represents the moment of disjunction where the map transforms from being an "object" into a "thing" in Saleh's world. In essence, at this moment, the map "stop[s] working" (Brown 4) as a "code" of freedom and asserts itself as a "thing" in Saleh's world. Before this scene, the map is a transparent window through which Saleh can see the great world. That is to say, before the disjunction, the map functions as an "object" in Saleh's world; therefore, he cannot see the paper, the ink, or the materiality of the map. However, upon seeing Jaafar Musa's map, he smiles and accepts that "the money could wait until next year" (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 34). This interaction shows how the map forces Saleh to "look at" (Brown 4) it as a "thing" and accept its "thingness" (4) by accepting the map as a substitute for the unpaid loan. The map is no longer a tool in Saleh's world. Instead, at this moment, as the moment of the map's disjunction, the map releases its inherent "recalcitrant" power (Bennett 347), rooted in historical context, which ultimately leads it to take over Saleh's life and cause tragedy for the characters in *By the Sea*.

To understand the link between Jaafar Musa's map and its inherent "recalcitrant" (Bennett 347) power, it is crucial to compare the characterization of Jaafar Musa and Saleh, as well as the historical contexts they inhabit. Jaafar Musa, Hussein's grandfather, is an illustrious merchant who refuses to bow down to Britain's ambition to establish itself as the dominant ruler of trade in the Indian Ocean in the 1880s. Jaafar Musa's death in 1899, in the arms of Abdulrazak, his gardener, represents the end of the Indian Ocean's independence. As Samuelson demonstrates, "Abdulrazak Gurnah's grief for what dies along with Jaafar Musa: the Indian Ocean as an autonomous trading zone . . . controlled by none" ("Narrative Cartographies" 81). By contrast, Saleh's identity as a merchant is defined by his complicity with the colonial system. Unlike Jaafar Musa, who resists foreign hegemony, Saleh survives by selling "the antiques and the exquisites" (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 20) to "European tourists and the resident British colonials" (20). He acquires these beautiful "things" from Stone Town's "auction lots of house contents" (19), items belonging to the people of his hometown who cannot afford to purchase them from his store. As Saleh describes, "they would not, could not, pay the prices I was asking for them" (20). While Saleh's business depends on the colonial system, Jaafar Musa represents autonomy and the flow of trade in the Indian Ocean.

The transition of the map from Jaafar Musa's legacy to Saleh Omar's hands activates its agency. Jaafar Musa's map is embedded in a network of independent, autonomous trade and resistance in the Indian Ocean, whereas it arrives as a gift in Saleh's world of colonial

dependency and dispossession. This shift of ownership is crucial. Drawing on Bennett's framework, the map possesses the matter-energy of a connected group of humans and nonhumans. Thus, it is empowered by "assemblage" (Bennett 355) it once inhabited, which includes Jaafar Musa's world, his "willfulness and recalcitrance" (347), and the ability to "make a difference in a situation" (355). The map brings its agency to Saleh's world, not as a tool in the service of his desires, but as a "thing" imbued with the "matter-energy" (352) of its historical context, which differs significantly from any map Saleh has previously possessed.

This chapter has demonstrated the transformation of the map from an "object" into a "thing"; it is now necessary to analyze the agency of other "objects" within the novel. According to the theoretical framework of thing-power, the map's agency is not the power of an individual "thing", rather exists in an "assemblage" (355) with other entities in the novel that dictates their desires to take over Saleh's life. Thus far, the following section will trace the journey of another significant "thing" in the novel, the *ud-al-qamari*, to explore its role in shaping the greatest tragedy of the novel, the loss of the house.

The Odour of the Fantasy

In Gurnah's narrative, the concept of fantasy is far from being a mere imagination, it materializes into a sensory entity, attracts the characters' gaze, and announces its presence through the lingering fragments of its odour. Instead of a fleeting mental abstraction, the novel introduces a sensory entity, the *ud-al-qamari*, that is able to capture the nature of the Indian Ocean. Saleh's description of the fantasy evidences the interwoven nature of this concept and the Indian Ocean in the characters' minds, as he narrates, "the odour of the fantasy of those distant places" (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 30). A closer analysis of the *ud-al-qamari*'s performance in the novel suggests that it summons the characters' memories into existence, even those they have not yet lived. Hand elaborately describes this feature, noting that the *ud-al-qamari* is the "threshold of an enigma" (76) where the incense "unlocks a series of past memories that come flooding back and trigger" (76) the characters' souls.

While Hand provides valuable insights, this perspective fails to address the broader, multifaceted nature of the *ud-al-qamari* in the novel. Evidence of the *ud-al-qamari*'s layered nature as an entity can be clearly seen in the case of the discrepancy between its biological constitution and the meaning of its name in Saleh's linguistic framework. While Saleh believes the *ud-al-qamari* means "the wood of the moon" (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 14), Hussein explains that "qamari" is a linguistic corruption "of qimari, Khmer, Cambodia, because that was one of the few places in the whole world where the right kind of aloe wood was to be found" (14). It is crucial to note that the term "qamar" means moon in the Arabic language; therefore, this linguistic corruption allows the "object" to integrate into Saleh's subjective world, while simultaneously maintaining its material role. In other words, the *ud-al-qamari* under the guise of Saleh's subjective conceptualization, finds its way through his life, awaiting the opportune moment to reveal its agency.

Nevertheless, the *ud-al-qamari*'s function in the novel is not confined to this point. This complexity is further clarified by tracing its interactions with the characters across other scenes. For instance, in the scene where Hussein brings the *ud-al-qamari*, Saleh describes it as the odour of the places that Hussein and his father had visited. Later, when Saleh lives in England and no longer possesses the *ud-al-qamari*, he buys a book entitled "*Herat* by G.B Malleison, 1880" (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 202), which makes him nostalgic for the *ud-al-qamari* and "for the incense of perfumed gum" (202). In another scene, he says,

“Every Idd I used to prepare an incense-burner and walk around my house with it, waving clouds of perfume into its deepest corners, pacing the labours it had taken me to possess such beautiful things, rejoicing in the pleasure they brought to me and to my loved ones incense-burner in one hand and a brass dish filled with ud in the other” (14).

An analysis of these interactions suggests a pattern in the *ud-al-qamari*'s engagement with characters such as Saleh, Latif, and Kevin Edelman.

At the threshold of the *ud-al-qamari*'s interaction with the characters, it interweaves with their memories and desires; therefore, its essence integrates with the characters' fantasies, afterwards, once the characters have been seduced by the fantasy of the *ud-al-qamari*'s essence, the “object” reveals its agency, taking over their lives. While this dominant position is not permanent, the *ud-al-qamari*, at a suitable time, finds its way into a new cycle of the characters' existence. Although not all stages of this pattern are depicted in the novel for every character, they can be interpreted based on its consistent nature in interactions with the characters.

For instance, Latif's memory of the juncture when Uncle Hussein lives with them and talks with his father at night provides a clear illustration of how the *ud-al-qamari* interweaves with his childhood. This narration demonstrates the pattern of the *ud-al-qamari*, “while the incense-burner gently fumed by the side of the bed” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 90). A further point to consider is that even the casket of the *ud-al-qamari*, when it no longer contains the incense itself, reveals a similar pattern in its interactions with Kevin Edelman, “the gatekeeper” (31) of Europe. Saleh narrates that when Kevin Edelman encounters the casket in Saleh's bag, although Kevin Edelman is unsure of its identity, the scent prompts him to smile and take “a deep sniff” (13). In other words, Saleh observes that Kevin Edelman is seduced by the remaining odour and speculates that the odour evokes a Jewish memory, “some ceremony in his youth perhaps when his parents still expected him to participate in prayers and holy days” (13).

These instances are closely aligned with Brown's theoretical framework. According to thing theory, the *ud-al-qamari* functions as a code within the characters' world systems (Brown 4). More specifically, it establishes a link between lost or distant memories and the present. It seduces the characters by performing as a beautiful “object”; by “looking through” it (Brown 4) the characters perceive what the *ud-al-qamari* discloses about their fantasies of distant places and times, something hard or impossible to reach; therefore, highly desirable. As Saleh reflects, “I thought I could catch the odour of the fantasy of those distant places in the dense body of that perfume, although that was only because Hussein had bound the two things together for me with his stories” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 30). This definition parallels Saleh's description of the “great world” as “places hard to reach and therefore beautiful because of that” (39).

However, the *ud-al-qamari*, as the material illustration of the fantasy of the “great world” (39), traverses time and place, thereby, it shifts beyond its status as a mere “object” or a simple trigger for memory. In order to understand the origins of the *ud-al-qamari*’s agency, it is necessary to consider its material production.

The capacity of the *ud-al-qamari* to transform from being an “object” into a “thing” is deeply rooted in its physical origins. The production process of the *ud-al-qamari* represents a natural disjunction, a metamorphosis from a tree to the ud that occurs during an infection of the aloe tree. Hussein quotes his father, Reza, stating that the ud is the resin of the aloe wood, but not from a healthy tree. Instead, “the infected one produced this beautiful fragrance” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 14). In other words, the tree undergoes a transformative loss that results in a new entity: the *ud-al-qamari*. This view is supported by Brown, who writes that the aloe tree “stop[s] working” (4) as a tree or an “object”, thereby breaking its previous form of being, and revealing its “thingness” (4). This transition represents a shift from acting as a functional “object” within nature to becoming a “thing”. In this context, the infection acts as the cause of disjunction. The wood’s altered form of being transforms it from a rooted, static entity into one that possesses the capacity for physical mobility. This mobility empowers the *ud-al-qamari* to exercise its agency and make a difference in the lives of other entities. This quality renders the *ud-al-qamari* one of the most powerful “things” in the novel. As its nature is defined by metamorphosis, it reproduces the “assemblage” (Bennett 355) of this feature in its interactions with the characters. Thus, the *ud-al-qamari* transports the affective force and the “assemblage” (355) of its vanished world to its current setting. In this way, it exercises its agency to take over the lives of those who desire beautiful “things”. The following paragraphs of this essay move on to analyze in greater details how the *ud-al-qamari*, acting as a “thing”, makes a difference in the characters’ lives through its interactions with them in *By the Sea*.

The depiction of this agency as a “thing” is clearly evidenced in the case of Reza, whose colonial history of the Indian Ocean leads to his business bankruptcy. In this context, the *ud-al-qamari* has a profound influence on Reza’s life, which can be interpreted as “the infected” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 14) nature of colonialism. Put simply, the *ud-al-qamari* carries the “matter-energy” (Bennett 352) of its previous “assemblage” (355) into Reza’s world. In addition, the *ud-al-qamari* represents a material link to the geography of Jaafar Musa’s era. As Hussein describes, following his grandfather’s death, Reza makes changes to the family business. He ceases his partnership with Britain as an act of resistance against colonialism. After a while, British intervention in Malaya causes the bankruptcy of Reza’s “great company” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 27), leading to his relocation to Bahrain, where he begins the business of rare wood.

“When Hussein was ten years old” (28), Reza decides to travel to Malaya with his son to settle his father’s remaining business affairs. He purchases “a consignment of the best quality *ud-al-qamari* from Cambodia” (29) to be shipped to Bahrain, which, due to the Japanese war and the shortage of the *ud-al-qamari*, yields a “healthy profit” (29) for Reza and revitalizes his business. In so doing, the *ud-al-qamari* transforms the power of Reza’s father geographical trade from Malaya to Reza’s new life in Bahrain. As Cooppan suggests, there is a distinct capacity within *By the Sea*’s “objects to condense large-scale and small-scale histories” (174). Indeed, Reza’s story reveals that Jaafar Musa’s death does not mark the end of his agency or his resistance to colonialism. Instead, the *ud-al-qamari*, as an “assemblage” (Bennett 355) of its geographical origins and its inherent nature, “make[s] a difference” (355) in Reza’s life, which was infected by colonial forces. In addition, this is not the only representation of the *ud-al-qamari*’s agency in Reza’s life. In fact, the *ud-al-qamari* reproduces its metamorphic nature, that formed in its “assemblage” (Bennett 355) process of production in Bahrain; however, its agency is not limited to Reza’s individual experience. Rather, its influence moves into a new historical context: Saleh’s life.

Thirty years after the metamorphosis of Reza’s business, the *ud-al-qamari* arrives in Stone Town in 1960, “with the musim, the winds of the monsoons” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 14). This arrival marks a series of tragedies in Saleh’s life. As occurred previously with Reza, the *ud-al-qamari* repeats its pattern of agency in its interactions with Saleh, bringing its nature of metamorphosis to the new setting that takes over Saleh’s life. The *ud-al-qamari*, which now has the experience of being in “assemblage” (Bennett 355) with Reza’s world and is more empowered by its “matter-energy” (352), reveals its agency immediately in Saleh’s world. In first place, Hussein utilizes the scent, intertwining the odour of the *ud-al-qamari* with the narrative of his forebears’ history of maritime trade. Although Saleh recognizes Hussein’s attempt to manipulate his emotions, he cannot resist the immediate effects of the *ud-al-qamari* on his situation. This interpretation is illustrated when Hussein brings “a small mahogany casket with the most beautiful *ud-al-qamari*” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 30) to Saleh’s store. Saleh describes the incense as the best he had ever had the “good fortune to inhale” (30). Here, the agency of the *ud-al-qamari* immediately reveals itself at the store not as a mere aesthetic “object”, but as a powerful odour capable of displacing the “smell of hot ghee” (19) lingering from Saleh’s father’s business. Despite Saleh’s prior efforts to dispel the remains of the past, only the *ud-al-qamari* possesses the ability to overcome the lingering history of the store. As he notes, “despite all efforts, the smell of hot ghee still lingered in the store” (19). The agency of the *ud-al-qamari*

is evident even to sellers in the neighborhood, as Saleh observes, “people walking along the street stopped in their tracks and came to sit by the glowing scent” (30).

Furthermore, the fragment of scent manipulates Saleh into entering a detrimental agreement regarding the ebony table (Samuelson, “Narrative Cartographies” 81). He agrees to exchange a “gleaming ebony table” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 96) at half price for “twenty-pound of the *ud-al-qamari*” (31). As Samuelson notes, “Hussein then presents the table to Latif’s brother Hassan as a gift in yet another strategy of seduction” (“Narrative Cartographies” 81). Not only does the *ud-al-qamari* efface the smell of ghee, but it also reintroduces the properties of its previous “assemblage” (Bennett 355) from the Indian Ocean trade networks to Saleh’s life, specifically the practice of lending money to merchants to make a profit while keeping trade alive. Saleh explains, shortly thereafter, “Hussein approaches Saleh for a loan” (Samuelson “Narrative Cartographies” 81). Saleh describes that he “was in the gloatingly happy position to lend Hussein the money he needed” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 32). “Such loans” (33), Saleh recalls in retrospect, “used to be frequent between traders, especially traders across the ocean, although no one would dream of doing it these days” (33) He explains that in this circulation of trust, “honor and trust prevailed between merchants . . . and business prospered” (33). If a problem arose, “scholars of law and scholars of religion . . . would be called in to arbitrate” (33). This practice of trust is one of the properties of the *ud-al-qamari*’s original “assemblage” (Bennett 355), a vanished world destroyed by British rule and the Omani sultanate (Samuelson, “Narrative Cartographies” 81). The destruction results in “the breaking point [of] the ‘networks of affinity’ reaching inland and across the ocean that comprised the vectors of trade” (81).

Hussein approaches Saleh “for a sizeable loan” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 32) offering as security the deeds of Rajab Shaaban’s house. When Hussein subsequently leaves and does “not come back” (34), Saleh becomes entangled in a legal dispute to possess the house, which initiates a chain of tragedies in the characters’ lives. This suggests that the *ud-al-qamari* manifests its agency and power by taking over Saleh’s life. The *ud-al-qamari* reactivates the “assemblage” (Bennett 355) of Reza’s father era within the setting of the novel by compelling Saleh to trust Hussein, by considering that Saleh, in a sense, knows that Hussein will not repay the loan, since he does not know Hussein well and recognizes that such a loan is no longer common in his era, he is nonetheless “flattered” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 159) to be part of this relationship. More specifically, he is drawn to the *ud-al-qamari*, the “thing” and the emotions it evokes. Maybe the decision of accepting the deeds of Rajab Shaaban’s house seems minor, but the *ud-al-qamari*’s dictation of its “assemblage” (Bennett 355) leads to the conflict over the house, Saleh’s imprisonment, the loss of his family, and his eventual status as an asylum seeker.

The *ud-al-qamari* remains with Saleh for “more than thirty years” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 14) within the setting of colonialism in Zanzibar. Finally, it is the only “thing” that travels with him to a new setting in England. As Saleh narrates, it was “all that remained of a consignment I had acquired more than thirty years ago” (14).

The *ud-al-qamari*'s agency resonates throughout the novel. It internalizes the “vitality” (Bennett 348) of the socio-political dynamics of the characters' lives and subsequently moves forward into new contexts to find a new individual, a new life, where it can activate its affective force. Just as it carries the metamorphosis of the aloe tree in Cambodia to Reza's life in Bahrain, it transitions to Saleh's life in Zanzibar, and finally reaches Kevin Edelman, “the gatekeeper” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 31) of Europe, whose parents “were refugees, from Romania” (12). The seductive power of the *ud-al-qamari* reveals itself immediately, even when only a lingering fragment of the odour remains within the casket. Kevin Edelman cannot resist the seduction of the *ud-al-qamari*; as Saleh observes, “he remembered something, and it made him smile. He went back to my bag and took out the casket. As he had done before, he opened it and sniffed” (13).

While the novel does not depict the performance of the *ud-al-qamari* within Kevin Edelman's life, it is predictable through a reading between the lines how the *ud-al-qamari*, which is already in an “assemblage” (Bennett 355) with Saleh's life, will activate the agency of its vanished world. This colonial world of Stone Town thus reasserts itself within the life of the European gatekeeper. Put another way, the scent, which Saleh “could not bear to leave behind” (14) when he embarks on his “journey into a new life” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 14), continues to reveal its power, intertwining personal tragedies with the past and the broader history of colonization.

The Endless Catalogue of Objects

While the *ud-al-qamari* performs as an “actant” (Bennett 355) that takes over the characters’ lives in distinct places and historical contexts, certain characters like Saleh undergo a process of objectification, being reduced to entities that lack the agency to make a change in their situation. It is necessary here to clarify exactly what is meant by analyzing through the lens of the thing-power theoretical framework. It suggests that not only can “objects” exert their agency on humans’ lives, but that individuals can also lose their agency and resistance in specific contexts, becoming “objects” or possessions. In *By the Sea*, “the border between persons and things” (Samuelson, “Narrative Cartographies” 82) is continually diminished to the point that Saleh begins to perceive himself as an “object”. At the airport, when Kevin Edelman rejects his asylum claim, Saleh responds, “think of me as one of those “objects” that Europe took away with her” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 12). This self-perception is rooted in his past, as his previous job involved rifling “through other people's belongings to find trinkets for the British to take home as booty of their conquests” (101). Consequently, he becomes part of those “objects” himself, joining the “endless catalogue of objects that were taken away to Europe because they were too fragile and delicate to be left in the clumsy and careless hands of natives” (12). As Samuelson argues, the characters in the novel are “reduced to things, to chattels – are omnipresent’ and ‘it is not always clear which way possession runs” (“Narrative Cartographies” 82). Eventually, Saleh, after spending his entire life as a man living in a colonized country, paying the price for “Europe’s values” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 12) in Zanzibar, finds that the only way of survival lies in reducing himself to an “object”, denying his agency by ceasing to speak, and waiting in silence for those who have the “right” (12) in Europe to decide his fate.

Furthermore, Shaaban’s characterization can be analyzed through Bennett's theoretical framework of objectification, wherein a person is reduced to a mere tool (360), thereby diminishing the characters’ agency to “make a difference in a situation” (355). In a manner similar to the seductive performance of the *ud-al-qamari* or the maps, Hussein manipulates Shaaban to fulfill his own desires. Latif, Shaaban’s son, reflecting upon to his childhood, narrates that Hussein and his father meet in a cafe and converse until “they became good friends” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 82). Shortly thereafter, Hussein moves into Shaaban’s house, bringing a lively atmosphere to the household. Indeed, Hussein’s personality is depicted in a contrast characterization to Shaaban’s. As Latif observes, “Hussein was a man of appetite and

relish, a proper grinning blackmoor, who nevertheless brought my father happiness and vigour when he came to live with us. My father, on the other hand, was afraid of the dark” (87).

Hussein's presence facilitates a more positive environment, even improving Shaaban's social standing in Stone Town. This shift is evidenced in Latif's narration, “sometimes people called to sit with them and listen and chat, people I didn't know were friendly with my father at all” (87). This depiction contrasts sharply with Shaaban's previous state as a man “with his head lowered” and “silent for days”(90).

Shaaban is seduced by Hussein's persona, transforming into a man of “self-assurance” and becoming “assured and opinionated” (90). However, it can be argued that these transformations are interwoven with Hussein's presence, which empowers Hussein to make an “instrumental use of” (Bennett 360) Shaaban for his own desires. In other words, Hussein does not empower Shaaban as the “good friend” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 82) as Shaaban believes him to be; rather, Hussein transforms him into an “object” in service of his own desires. This transformation in Shaaban's character suggests that he is no longer a subject in his own life; rather, he has been integrated into Hussein world's “assemblage” (Bennett 355) as a functional “object”. This instrumental treatment is most clearly illustrated when Hussein convinces Shaaban to pledge the deeds to his house as security for the loan from Saleh. Consequently, this agreement comes to an end in tragedy, resulting in the loss of Shaaban's house, his son, and his wife.

Conclusion

This study has sought to gain a better understanding of the interactions between characters and “objects” in the novel *By the Sea* by Abdulrazak Gurnah, where the traditional hierarchy between human subjects and material “objects” is significantly subverted. To do so, I have applied Bill Brown’s thing theory and Jane Bennett’s theoretical framework of thing-power to analyze this relationship. Thus, this essay identified how “objects” such as maps and the *ud-al-qamari* transform from mere tools into active actants, entitled “thing”. This essay, by tracing the journey of “objects” in the novel, has shown that they are empowered by history, memory, and imagination, which enable them to captivate the characters; afterwards, they perform their agency to influence the characters’ lives. In connection with this agency, the novel does not depict characters as the powerful doers. Instead, it elaborately presents a world where the journey of small “objects” reveals a dense connection of materiality that actively shapes, and often, takes over human lives.

The most obvious suggestion to emerge from this study is that the maps within the colonial setting of Zanzibar function as a code in Saleh’s mind, materializing “the great world” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 120), an imagined place of salvation and freedom. Through the lens of thing theory, however, a moment of “disjunction” (Brown 16) occurs when Saleh accepts Jaafar Musa’s mariner’s map as a substitute for Hussein’s unpaid loan. In this moment, the map “stop[s] working” (Brown 4) as “a code” (4) for materializing Saleh’s imagination, transforming into a “thing”, and asserting its own “thingness” (4). This essay has identified that the Jaafar Musa’s map transfers the recalcitrant power of resistance against British hegemony in the Indian Ocean into Saleh’s colonial and era of dependency, leading to tragic changes in his life. This analysis has sought to confirm that the maps’ agency is deeply rooted in its presence within Jaafar Musa’s network of independent trade, empowered by “assemblage” (Bennett 355) of the historical era it inhabits.

Similarly, tracing the *ud-al-qamari*’s journey in the novel, as “the odour of the fantasy” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 30), has shown that it is beyond a mere “object”. This study has analyzed how the *ud-al-qamari* serves as the odour of the fantasy, another form of materialization of the distinct places. This study has also demonstrated that the inherent nature of recalcitrance in the *ud-al-qamari* is rooted in its physical origins, characterized by a metamorphosis from being a healthy tree to an infected one in order to produce a specific resin which is the best quality of the ud in the world. This alteration allows the *ud-al-qamari* to possess the ability of mobility to

traverse time and place. This metamorphosis mirrors a moment of disjunction which occurs naturally, transforming the aloe tree into a “thing”, an actant. Furthermore, the *ud-al-qamari* actively seduces characters such as Saleh Omar and Kevin Edelman in order to dictate its metamorphic nature into their lives. The analysis has found that the *ud-al-qamari* performs as the most noticeable “object” in the novel, actively taking over characters’ lives and leading to tragic outcomes, including the legal disputes over the house, Saleh’s imprisonment, and his eventual status as an asylum seeker.

Furthermore, the findings of this essay have provided insights into the process of characters’ objectification experienced by characters such as Saleh Omar and Rajab Shaaban Mahmud, where they are reduced to “objects” and lose their human vitality. By adopting the thing-power theoretical framework of instrumentalism, this study has illustrated how these characters confront with the seduction and agency of the *ud-al-qamari* and maps, becoming items in “an endless catalogue of objects” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 12). This loss of agency is evidenced by Saleh’s self-perception as a “booty” (101) taken by Europe, and Shaaban’s acceptance of becoming a functional tool for Hussein’s desires. The insights of this evidence supports the idea that in the context of colonialism, the border between persons and “things” is continuously diminished.

While this study tried to capture the influence of “things” “assemblage” (Bennett 355) within the characters’ lives, it is limited in its scope of analyzing other “objects” in the novel, such as ships, the house, and the jars. Analyzing the testimony of these material “objects” within the context of the Indian Ocean would be a fruitful area for further work. For instance, exploring the intertextuality of “objects” between *By the Sea* and *The Tale of Qamar Al-Zaman* from *One Thousand and One Nights*.

In closing, “objects” in *By the Sea* are not silent, as Gurnah sheds light on them in the novel, they act as warriors of earlier times that traverse time to challenge the “simpler history” preferred by “the victors, who are always at liberty to construct a narrative of their choice” (Gurnah, “writing” 3). This study has tried to show that in *By the Sea*, “things” do not merely exist in the service of humans; rather, they possess a recalcitrant nature that enables them to manifest, shape and take over the narratives of those who attempt to possess them. By tracing these material journeys, this study has hopes to contribute to a broader analysis of how the materiality of the novel ensures that the past is never truly diminished but remains vibrantly present in the “objects” that surround the characters.

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