EXPLORING THE INTERSTICES OF AGING AND NARRATIVE AGENCY IN M.G. VASSANJI'S *THE BOOK OF SECRETS* AND ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S *BY THE SEA*

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Abstract

Indian Ocean literature has captured the porousness and fluidity that configure the Indian Ocean space through narrations in which history and memory, both individual and collective, blend to voice the uninhabited silence forged by unsettled colonialism. M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* (1994) and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001) are perspicuous exponents of the undertows that lurk behind the troubled existence of uprooted individuals for whom the act of telling stories becomes their means of survival. Given the old age of the protagonists of both novels, Pius Fernandes in *The Book of Secrets* and Saleh Omar in *By the Sea,* this article examines the power of narration from the perspective of narrative gerontology. Imbued with the spirit of Scheherazade's *The Arabian Nights,* itself an Indian Ocean literary reference, Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar biographical accounts become the source of their *literal / literary* survival.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, Narrative Gerontology, M.G. Vassanji, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Exile.

ANÁLISIS DE LOS INTERSTICIOS DEL PROCESO DE ENVEJECIMIENTO Y LA ACCIÓN NARRATIVA EN *THE BOOK OF SECRETS* DE M.G. VASSANJI Y *BY THE SEA* DE ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

Resumen

La literatura indoceánica ha integrado la porosidad y fluidez que caracteriza el espacio del Océano Índico en narraciones donde la historia y la memoria, tanto individual como colectiva, se funden para dar voz al silencio infructuoso forjado dentro de una herencia colonial perturbadora. *The Book of Secrets* (1994) de M.G. Vassanji y *By the Sea* de Adbulrazak Gurnah ofrecen, mediante la biografía de sus dos protagonistas, Pius Fernandes y Saleh Omar, dos ejemplos perspicaces de la importancia de la narración como medio de supervivencia para seres desarraigados. Teniendo en cuenta que ambos protagonistas son personas mayores, este artículo examina el poder de la narración desde una perspectiva de narrativa gerontológica. Poseídos por el espíritu indoceánico que emana de *Las mil y una noches,* Pius Fernandes y Saleh Omar emergen cual Scheherezades que encuentran en la capacidad de contar historias la fuente *literal y literaria* de su supervivencia.

Palabras clave: Océano Índico, narrativa gerontológica, M.G. Vassanji, Abdulrazak Gurnah, exilio.

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Irony is the unforgiving register which gives everything back to us
Gurnah, *Desertion* (230)

The bulk of our existence goes virtually unnoticed, and to that extent unstoried.
Awareness of this gap –between existence and *texistence,* between
raw life and *story* of life– is the entry point for irony
Randall, "Aging, Irony, and Wisdom" (168)

What is in dispute is whether history has a meaning as 'History'
Young, *White Mythologies* (54)

INTRODUCTION. THE POSTCOLONIAL IRONIST. NARRATIVE, HISTORY AND HUMAN AGING

M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* (1994) and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001) present the fictional autobiographies of two elderly men, Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar, who recount their respective life stories. For different reasons, both characters are prompted to look back upon their lives from their present situation of destitution, vulnerability and dependence –Pius Fernandes is a retired teacher in Dar-es-Salaam and Saleh Omar a refugee in England. The biographical character of both narratives and the specific geographical and historical context in which they occur thus positions them as significant examples of narrative agency in Indian Ocean textualities.

The particularity and the complexity of the specific social and national contexts where the novels take place (Tanganyika/Tanzania and Zanzibar)[1] thus intertwine (life)story and history: both life narratives not only take place alongside –but are intimately connected with the collapse of colonialism in East Africa, since the homelessness of exile that both characters experience in their later years is itself a direct consequence of the dismantling of the British Empire. Although the relevance of narration in the novels has already been analysed within the context of "unresolved imperialisms" (Hipchen and Chansky 147) surrounding the Indian Ocean (Hand 2010; Samuelson 2013; Helff 2015; Pujolràs-Noguer 2018), we believe the nuances of narrative agency in postcolonial texts from the perspective of narrative gerontology have not yet been examined in depth. This article is concerned with the ways in which the aging process intersects with both characters' life narratives as postcolonial texts that negotiate identity within the uprootedness of exile. Hence

[1] Tanganyika gained independence in 1961 under the leadership of Julius Nyerere. Zanzibar gained its independence in 1963 which, due to the outbreak of the Zanzibari Revolution, lasted only 11 months. The Zanzibari Revolution came to an end when in 1964 Zanzibar joined Tanganyika and, as a result, the Republic of Tanzania was formed. The novels under discussion capture this historical moment and, therefore, the respective experiences of their protagonists are modelled around this fluctuation of national identities.

our analysis will focus on the interstices between aging and narrative agency within the framework of narrative gerontology.

> Narratives originate in our culture, and through the language and symbols lifestories provide, we can understand each other, ourselves, and our social environment. Therefore, the narratives of individuals in different life situations, in different cultures and even in different time periods will constitute the most important data sources in this new psychology. (Ruth and Kenyon in Birren et al. 20)

Narrative gerontology "provides a lens through which to see the storied nature of aging" (Kenyon 965). While literary gerontology is concerned with the meanings of growing older beyond physiology and chronological age –that is, culturally, socially, politically, etc.– narrative gerontology refers to lifestories and the power of narrative in understanding the "cognitive, affective and motivational dimensions" (Ruth and Kenyon in Birren et al. 5-7) of the aging individual. Narrative gerontology therefore constitutes a useful tool for the study and understanding of the aging process from a lifecourse perspective, as has been documented by gerontologists such as Jan-Erik Ruth, Gary Kenyon and James E. Birren (1996) among others. Already in 1996, Ruth and Kenyon establish that "biographical approaches, such as narratives, life stories and autobiographical material, provide an excellent medium for investigating both the idiosyncratic and shared aspects of human aging over the life span" (2).

Contesting the stereotypical view of aging as a more or less homogeneous process towards decline and death, narrative gerontology not only allows us to understand the shared experience of the aging process, but also to account for the multifaceted aspects that may interact in each individual's life story, thus offering a less limiting and more meaningful approach to aging. As Ruth and Kenyon state, "by employing biographical approaches we are also able to describe how cultures, subcultures, or family patterns are reflected in individual lives, and how particular people adapt to or expand the possibilities and limits set by the historical time period in which we live" (2). Aside from constituting a valuable tool to understand not only the aging process in general but the aging individual as well, life stories also capture the creative quality of life narratives as encompassing the constant formulation and reformulation of the individual's identity since "lifestories are theorized to involve the whole person" (Ruth and Kenyon 5-7). Otherwise put, in narrative gerontology, human beings are approached as emotionally-constituted bodies and so, "as we grow, mature and age in time," Ruth and Kenyon infer, "we gradually form and reform ourselves and the stories we tell about ourselves" (5-7). Thus, narrative gerontology focuses on the value of lifestories as a powerful medium through which both the person retelling his/her own story as well as the collective in which he/she is inserted can make sense of the individual's story and aging process within a specific historical and social context.

Telling one's own narrative and attaining a better understanding of one's own life story constitutes a way of keeping personal integrity and being able to negotiate the constant development of one's identity, thus bringing about fulfilment and

happiness. As Cohler and Cole state, "within contemporary society, maintenance of a sense of coherence or personal integrity, making sense of unpredictable life changes is essential for moral and positive well-being" (Cohler and Cole in Birren 63). Several studies in gerontology (Baars 2012; Edmondson 2015) have engaged with the question of wisdom in later life. In these studies, and as Plato narrates in *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, wisdom is not a quality that the older individual attains by virtue of having merely accumulated knowledge and experience, but rather it resides in the ability to put it into practice for the sake of one's own happiness as well as for the common good (Baars 93). Recent studies (Domínguez-Rué 2018; Casado-Gual et al. 2019; Oró-Piqueras 2019) have similarly used narratives to establish a correlation between creativity, wisdom and an enhanced quality of life in old age by remarking on the contribution of narrative and creativity to the development of a sense of wisdom through a deeper understanding of one's life. As Randall and Kenyon assert, "we access our wisdom only 'by telling the story of my life', that is, by getting it out and then stepping back from it to investigate and interpret it." (Randall and Kenyon 34).

Together with the concept of wisdom, the life stories in the two novels under discussion engage with irony as a distinctive trait of postmodern writing, as the narratives both subvert and rewrite the certainties, among others, of chronological sequence, omniscient narrator, colonial discourse, and history –more ostensibly, history viewed as univocal, as a fixed categorisation of events, history with a capital "H", that is, the history of Western Imperialism. As Randall contends, "in contrast to modernity, with its implicit commitment to certainty and control, irony concerns the acceptance (if not embracing) of ambiguity and relativity, contingency and contradiction, plus the mistrust of the grand master narratives of politics, science and religion" (Randall 166). Both postmodernism and postcolonialism, in their attempts at deconstructing the master narratives of Western civilisation, use irony as a significant component of their narratives. In that sense, life stories intersect with postmodern / postcolonial narratives in their use of irony in a similar way they engage with the concept of wisdom, since, as Randall observes, "the possibility [...] that old age is not just 'the age of irony' (Gibbs 370) but 'the narrative phase par excellence' (Freeman 394) [...] invites us to look at irony from a narrative perspective as well" (Randall 167). Interestingly enough, in the historical development of the figure of the foreigner that Kristeva embarks on in *Strangers to Ourselves,* foreigners are described as "the best of ironists" (Kristeva 10). Although Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves* is not directly concerned with either postcolonialism –her search for the foreigner starts in classical times and ends with Freud– or gerontology, her examination of "foreignness" resonates powerfully with the strangeness that envelops the postcolonial/old-age experience of Vassanji's Pius Fernandes and Gurnah's Saleh Omar. Henceforth, narrative gerontology provides the connecting thread between irony, wisdom and lifestory in postcolonial texts as a valuable means to understand the aging process by offering a more meaningful approach to the life lived as it is.

Despite the fact that both postmodernism and postcolonialism share a common distrust of master narratives, a cautionary remark on the differing starting points of these two "post-" mindsets should be made: whereas postmodernist

discourses are exaltations of disaffected subjectivities upon the individual's discovery of the inexistence of a coherent self, postcolonial discourses must first of all work, as Linda Hutcheon concedes, "to assert and affirm a denied or alienated subjectivity" (quoted in Mishra and Hodge 281). The fundamental difference between the postmodern and the postcolonial fragmented self is that the latter has never enjoyed a coherent, if fraudulent, subjectivity in the first place due to colonialism.

As narrators, both Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar become postcolonial ironists, since they treat history as a category of representation that results in the conflation of "history" and "story" (Young 2004: 55). Their biographies take an ironic stand towards some of the epistemological foundations of Western thought –individual/collective, story/history and past/present– their life narratives thus becoming exponents of wisdom. As gerontologist Ruth Ray contends, "a person is truly 'wise' when she is able to see life as an evolving story and to create some distance between self and story by reflecting on it from multiple perspectives" (Randall 167). In this respect, the postcolonial texts by Gurnah and Vassanji display "the storied complexity of [their] lives" (Randall 167).

The memoirs of Saleh Omar and Pius Fernandes are composed of a collection of individual memories, fragments of stories and historical accounts that merge the individual and the collective, thus dismantling the unified discourse of the colonial history of the Indian Ocean. The pieces resulting from these narrations construct a postcolonial map of the Indian Ocean where the life stories of individual characters conflate with the collective memories of a people and rewrite a history that is increasingly marked by the affective motivations of the characters in charge of the narration (Ruth and Kenyon in Birren et al. 1996). The cask of *ud-al-qamari* in *By the Sea* and Alfred Corbin's diary, "the book of secrets" in Vassanji's eponymous novel thus act as both recipients and generators of the characters' biographies as well as becoming metaphors of the history of East Africa. Very significantly, the trauma of exile and the bereavement of uprootedness is the starting point of the narrative in both novels. For Saleh Omar as well as for Pius Fernandes, old age is empty of the comfort and wellbeing of home. While their later lives are forcefully transformed into painful openings rather than becoming comfortable endings, this new, albeit arduous, beginning grants them the possibility of making their lives meaningful and, therefore, humanly and socially valuable.

Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* and Gurnah's *By the Sea* are two books about East African history and the devastating effects of (de)colonization and exile, but they are also about personal and family tragedies and the healing potential of narrative. This article aims at analysing the interaction of aging and narrative agency in the East African context. In this light, the memoirs of Alfred Corbin and Pius Fernandes in *The Book of Secrets* and of Saleh Omar / Rajab Shaaban and Latif Mahmud in *By the Sea* become, we contend, acts of self-definition and resistance against the destructive potential of exile and oblivion, which in turn provide further nuances to the interaction between fictional memoirs and historical accounts.

The current mythology surrounding old age in the West is grounded upon an ideal of placid and solid rootedness. The ending is near but this is, up to a certain extent, reassuring, since you no longer have to worry about the ordeals of starting once again. The fact of becoming old in a familiar and well-known environment when one has his/her own home and is surrounded by objects, photographs and mementoes that are part of one's story as well as family members, neighbours, friends and acquaintances that have shared one's life story and history is related to quality of life in old age. When referring to the house where her grandmother's family lived for a century and where she spent part of her childhood and early adulthood, Penelope Lively explains "I can move around my memory house and focus upon different objects. The house itself becomes a prompt –a system of reference, an assemblage of coded signs. Its contents conjure up a story; they are not the stations of an oratorical argument, but signifiers for the century" (x). This is precisely where Lively's grandmother died, surrounded by the space and objects that defined her. Needless to say, this comforting old-age experience that Lively's grandmother enjoyed must be placed alongside those other old-age experiences that are framed within existential quagmires that *defer* the coveted "rooted ending".

As a matter of fact, the "rooted ending" ideal absolutely escapes our narrators; what we are witnessing in *By the Sea* and *The Book of Secrets* are two people whose aging process is stamped by uprootedness and their alleged endings forcibly encoded in beginnings. This turns their aging experience into a fascinating case of gerontologist narrative because, in a way, and no matter how tragic the circumstances are, they "begin" again and so their narratives challenge the forceful sense of closure habitually imposed on the aging process. Needless to say, their beginnings are infused with the irreversible pulse of experience, an experience shaped by the conflation of "history" and "personal stories" –the individual and the communal– and written with the mood of the *wise* postcolonial ironist. This individual-cum-communal experience is contained in the objects upon which their biographies are built, namely, the book of secrets and the casket of ud-al-qamari which resonate with Lively's proposition of the close connection between memory and objects (Lively 2001). When memory is thus adhered to objects, life narrations are automatically endowed with a metaphorical dimension. As Ruth and Kenyon state, "meaning in biography is manifested through metaphors" (3). In this case, Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar's precious objects symbolise the clash between their personal stories and the official historical account of their respective homelands. The destruction of "History" –the unilateral, univocal history of Western Imperialism– is manifested through these objects which complicate historical discourse by presenting history as a metaphor modulated by the cognitive, affective, and emotional dimensions (Kenyon 1997) of the life stories of two old-age narrators whose respective homelessness forces them to start again.

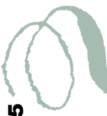
Said's apprehension of exile is a calculated definition of homelessness and fragmentation and, as such, it captures the essence of Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar's profound uprootedness. As the author states,

> Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever. (Said 2001: 173)

This indeed describes the sadness, fragmentation and irretrievable sense of loss that befall Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar, but, as we shall later prove, in the narration of their life stories they find a textual space whereby they will assuage "this crippling sorrow of estrangement" (200, 173), this throbbing sadness that is embedded in the fragmented self. And this is because this "unhealable rift" (Said 2001: 173) between themselves and their true homes will find a meaning inasmuch as their stories are integrated in historical discourse and accounted for as valuable explorations of uprootedness in old age.

It is precisely within their respective narratives of displacement in old age that *their* objects act as powerful metaphors of stories and as treasures to be kept. The casket of ud-al-qamari is Saleh Omar's sole connection with his origins, with his past, with his subjectivity. We should remember at this point that Saleh Omar travels with a false passport which identifies him as Rajab Shaaban Mahmud. This enforced impersonation should be apprehended as the most extreme manifestation of subject fragmentation and, in this view, the significance of the casket of ud-al-qamari in phrasing Saleh Omar's life narrative is intensified: the casket of ud-al-qamari contains his true self, as opposed to his identity as Rajab Shaaban. As far as Pius Fernandes is concerned, the book of secrets, Alfred Corbin's diary, turns him, an English teacher, into the historian he had always wanted to be. This direct incursion in history, in other words, this dissection of the diary of a colonial officer grants him, we may add, *ironically*, the opportunity to reflect upon and find meaning in his own life.

As recipients of individual memoirs as well as collective memory and national history, both objects bring to the fore the complex question of historical responsibility. Enshrouded in history as Saleh Omar and Pius Fernandes's individual life stories are, their narrative agency can only be successful as long as they position themselves as subjects-in-history (Falk 52-56) who, after Vico's fashion, make, and thus participate and have the capacity to transform historical narrative (Vico 2020; Said 1978 & 1993). Ownership of the object, which means ownership of the stories contained in the object, becomes an act of historical responsibility. Whoever owns the object, owns the story and hence both the casket of ud-al-qamari and Corbin's diary –the book of secrets– are infused with an aura of sacredness that upgrade them both to a worshipping status. Corbin's diary is literally turned into an object of worship in the shrine that Pipa builds in honour of his deceased wife, Mariamu. The love



triangle embodied by Pipa, the *dukawallah*,[2] Mariamu, the indigenous girl, and Corbin, the colonial officer, resides inside the book of secrets and so the communal force involved in the act of unveiling the object necessarily leads to the disclosing of other stories linked with other characters. Ud-al-qamari is likewise sanctified as its inclusion in the chapter entitled "Relics" testifies to. The religious connotations evolving around the word "relic" convert the object –the casket of ud-al-qamari– into a powerful metaphor of historical resilience. Actually, ud-al-qamari's potent yet volatile fragrance epitomizes the narrative force that charts both the life of Saleh Omar and the history of Zanzibar.

Saleh Omar and Pius Fernandes's life histories are henceforth impregnated with the sacredness of the objects wherein their narratives are trapped. The validity of their lives is therefore consolidated through the meaning that emanates from their metaphorically-constructed narrations. The very act of narrating their stories is what makes their lives valuable and meaningful. Considering they are, to all extents and purposes, old men visibly defeated by homelessness and uprootedness, their metamorphosis into Scheherazades that survive because of their capacity to tell stories is a pungent reminder of the power of the *storied* self before the process of aging (Randall 2013). Contravening what Mishra calls "the linear flow of historical narrative" (118), Gurnah's Saleh Omar and Vassanji's Pius Fernandes engage in a narrative mode more attuned to Jan Assman's "communicative memory" (1995). The result is an intentionally disrupted narration moulded around "non-specialization, reciprocity of roles, thematic instability, and disorganizations" (Assman 126) whereby past and present, speaker and listener fuse to lay bare the incompleteness and fragility of history. This is a history metaphorically fabricated and once the genius of history is released from its lamp –the book of secrets and the casket of ud-al-qamari– history, as Pius Fernandes puts it, "drifts about in the sands" (BS 189).[3]

The Book of Secrets' opening scene offers readers a view of Pius Fernandes as an old man, a retired teacher roaming the streets of Dar es Salaam in search of a shop that sells cheap, second-hand shoes. His meagre pension does not allow him to lead a dignified, uncomplicated and reassuring old-age. At this point in his life, and despite the fact that he migrated to "Tanganyika Territory" (BS 260) in 1950, when he was in his early twenties, the "essential homelessness" (BS 301) he felt upon his return from England where he went to complete an MA, envelops his aging performance. A Goan Indian by birth, the deep-seated feeling of estrangement that marks his existence has only been intermittently alleviated through his work at "the Shamsi Boys' School"[4] (BS 262) where he meets Gregory and Rita, the two pillars of his emotional subsistence. With the former, a homosexual English teacher, Fernandes develops an enduring, if peculiar, friendship, whereas onto the

[2] "Dukawallah" is the name whereby shopkeepers of Indian origin in East Africa are known.

[3] References to this book are indicated as "BS" plus page number.

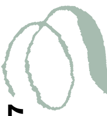
[4] The Shamsis of *The Book of Secrets* are actually the Ismailis, an Indian community whose spiritual leader is Aga Khan and to which Vassanji himself belongs.

latter, a former student of his, he pours his romantic delusions. Gregory's death and Rita's migration to London leave Fernandes in a state of heartfelt disaffection, an individual utterly alone amid a community he fails to acknowledge as his own. When his sense of displacement is felt most severely and his desire to belong –and thus mitigate his distressing homelessness– is most urgently wanted, his former student Feroz appears and offers him Corbin's diary, the book of secrets. Feroz's gesture, his offering of Corbin's diary to Fernandes, should be read as a communal token whereby Fernandes's belonging is reinstated and, consequently, his membership recognized. In short, what Feroz offers Fernandes is the opportunity to make his life meaningful by precisely infusing meaning in the lives of all those "trapped" in the *mzungu*'s diary,[5] the book of secrets. The communal force that lurks behind the object is unobtrusively inserted in the opening lines:

> They called it the book of our secrets, kitabu cha siri zetu. Of its writer they said: He steals our souls and locks them away; it is a magic bottle, this book, full of captured spirits; see how he keeps his eyes skinned, this mzungu, observing everything we do; look how meticulously this magician with the hat writes in it, attending to it more regularly than he does to nature, with more passion than he expends on a woman. He takes it with him into forest and on mountain, in war and in peace, hunting a lion or sitting in judgement, and when he sleeps he places one eye upon it, shuts the other. Yes, we should steal this book, if we could, take back our souls, our secrets from him. But the punishment for stealing such a book is harsh –ai!– we have seen it. (BS 1)

Fernandes identifies the diary as "a record of an early posting, one forgotten fragment of an addendum to a well-documented history" (BS 8) which he is determined to unravel because "like a snoop I must follow the threads, expose them in all their connections and possibilities, weave them together" (BS 99) since, as he rather categorically puts it, "the story is all that matters" (BS 251). The telling of the story, the re-creation of the world ensnared inside the book of secrets gives meaning to his life since, as he learns, the desire that bound Corbin, Pipa and Mariamu is contingent upon the desire that binds *him* to Rita, Ali –Rita's husband– and Gregory. Ali is the embodiment of that first secret, the alleged sexual relationship between Mariamu and Corbin. Born to Mariamu immediately after his marriage to Pipa, Ali's paternity remains a secret which resists disclosure. Actually, the novel ends without certifying Ali's paternity. Fernandes's desire for Rita and his emotional attachment to Gregory are therefore entangled in a larger communal structure which Robert C. Young in *Colonial Desire* calls the "desiring machine" (98) of empire. It is, after all, "the book of *our* secrets" (BS 1; authors' italics).

Gurnah's *By the Sea* confronts readers with the ultimate version of homelessness, the one experienced by Saleh Omar, the old man who decides to emigrate



[5] "Mzungu" is a Kiswahili word which literally means "aimless wanderer." This is the word used by East Africans to refer to white, European people.

to the UK as an asylum seeker. Behind his fake identity as Rajab Shaaban there lies the crudest manifestation of forced displacement, the one perpetrated by one's own homeland. It is his native land, Zanzibar, that repudiates Saleh Omar by imperilling his life and forcing him to emigrate with a passport that deliberately misidentifies him. We should remember at this point that Rajab Shaaban is regarded as Saleh Omar's arch-enemy and so this polarization intensifies the fragmentation of his homeless self. Saleh Omar's uprootedness is painfully asserted through his recognition that his own homeland community concocted the disappearance of his family. History, as epitomized through the Zanzibari Revolution, serves the interests of small family feuds that foreground the bigger feuds of the national family. But History, once again, fails to unilaterally coordinate the multiple voices that configure the stories that emanate from the casket of ud-al-qamari. Where History fails, Saleh Omar's life narration succeeds. Not only will his narration give meaning to his own life but to the life of Latif Mahmud, the actual son of Rajab Shaaban, his arch-enemy, with whom, in an ironic turn of events, he becomes emotionally attached.

It is Saleh Omar as postcolonial ironist that Kevin Edelman, UK customs officer, meets at Gatwick airport. Aware of the need to be identified as "asylum seeker" by the British authorities in order to be allowed entrance in the UK, Saleh Omar performs his refugee-ness by pretending not to speak English. This fact encourages Kevin Edelman to freely articulate the discriminating undertows of the laws for asylum seekers while exposing in a transparent manner the discrimination ascribed to age:

> 'Mr Shaaban, why do you want to do this, a man of your age?' [...] How much danger is your life really in? Do you realise what you're doing? [...] You don't even speak the language, and you probably never will. [...] No one will give you a job. You'll be lonely and miserable and poor, and when you fall ill there'll be no one here to look after you. Why didn't you stay in your own country, where you could grow old in peace? This is a young man's game, this asylum business, because it is really just looking for jobs and prosperity in Europe and all that, isn't it? There is nothing moral in it, just greed. No fear of life and safety, just greed. Mr Shaaban, a man of your age should know better.' (*Sea* 11)[6]

Kevin Edelman is oblivious to the fact that Saleh Omar is denied the right to "grow old in peace" (*Sea* 11), just as he is oblivious to the fact that Saleh Omar speaks English and can understand everything he is saying to him. The postcolonial ironist is obviously lost to Kevin Edelman. What Kevin Edelman sees in front of him is merely another "asylum seeker".

However, Kevin Edelman misses a more insidious aspect of the life of Saleh Omar when he unabashedly neglects the powerful narration contained in the casket of ud-al-qamari. After having ceremoniously displayed Saleh Omar's scanty belongings, taking "one item out at a time, laying each one out carefully on

[6] References to this book are indicated as "*Sea*" plus page number.

the bench, as if he was unpacking clothing of some delicacy" (*Sea* 8), he "sighed" (*Sea* 8) when seeing "the small wooden casket" (*Sea* 8), as if *sensing* the importance concealed in this small item but failing altogether to fully grasp the stories that emanate from the "glorious perfume" (*Sea* 8) he sets free when opening the box. Ud-al-qamari, the fragrance Kevin Edelman unproductively lets loose, Saleh Omar productively captures through an empowering remembrance act that leads him to the person who gave him the casket in the first place, Hussein, who, incidentally, is the connection between himself and Rajab Shaaban's family. Saleh Omar's old-age life narration is set forth and his survival is thus safeguarded.

The post/colonial import of the objects that materialize Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar's old-age narrations deserves to be stressed. The book of secrets, as has been indicated throughout, is the diary of a colonial officer and, as such, the stories contained in it are delineated against the complexities and unresolved conundrums of the colonial past and the postcolonial present. The casket of ud-al-qamari is in the same manner enmeshed in the quandaries of pending post/colonial resolutions. More intriguing is the fact that the objects are coveted by the various protagonists whose lives fill up the text. Corbin's diary is stolen, lost and finally recovered by Feroz who gives it to Pius Fernandes in the hope that he will transcribe its contents. But prior to this, Corbin himself attempted to recuperate his lost diary thus inscribing the fight over possession of the object in a colonizer/colonized framework. It is not surprising that Saleh Omar describes Kevin Edelman's act of dispossession as a plundering act whereby "the casket which I had brought with me as all the luggage from a life departed, the provisions of my after-life" (*Sea* 31) is ruthlessly taken away from him. Kevin Edelman's action evokes the colonialist drive to annihilate the identities of those with, as Joseph Conrad incisively puts it, "a different complexion or slightly flatter noses" (11). Ownership of the object truly means ownership of the story, and, in a further twist, it also means ownership of history, but this is a *hi/story* in which the individual and the communal, the colonized and the colonizers conflate with each other and, in the end, the *wise* thing to do is to give the narration away. In the words of Pius Fernandes:

> What I can never disclose, give to the world, is mine only in trust. The constant reminding presence of a world which I created, a history without the relief of an outlet, can only serve to oppress. And so I have decided to relinquish it. Only then can I begin to look towards the rest of my life and do the best with the new opportunity that has come my way. (BS 363)

In a similar manner, Saleh Omar relinquishes his story the moment he shares it with Latif Mahmud. He, like Pius Fernandes, knows that "a history without the relief of an outlet" (BS 263) is meaningless. Only by phrasing their respective "textistences" (Randall 2013: 165) can they "look towards the rest of [their lives]" (BS 363), even if –and that is the instant when narrative gerontology becomes crucial –this future is consciously carved in old age.

CONCLUSION.
THE SURVIVAL OF THE STORIED SELF

Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar, the narrators of *The Book of Secrets* and *By the Sea* respectively, must face later life without the calm comfort of home generally attributed to the aging experience. However, it is expressly their experience of uprootedness that impels them to forge a new beginning in a foreign landscape against which, paradoxically, the story of their lives is rendered meaningful. In other words, the unravelling of their respective life stories –which in turn both disrupt and re-inscribe historical narratives and the discourse of colonialism– precludes their textual (and literal) disappearance as older exiles. Their sense of homelessness is hence dissipated at the same time that their lives are provided with a meaning. In *The Book of Secrets*, Pius Fernandes embarks on an interpretation of Alfred Corbin's diary, and so he fulfils his vocation as a historian while recovering a decisive chapter of family and national history. His later life is infused with a sense of purpose. In turn, Saleh Omar's painful experience as an exile in England in *By the Sea* paradoxically grants him the chance of accommodating the sorrows of his past and coming to terms with the deeds committed against Latif Mahmud's family. By adopting the identity of Rajab Shaaban, Latif Mahmud's father, and later welcoming the son into his life, Saleh Omar is able to find both peace of mind and an appropriate consistency to his life story. In both novels, the life stories of the main characters provide a liminal space that weaves a net of entanglements between self, home, identity, nation and history. The outcome is a narrative which, although (necessarily) unfinished, is capable of compensating the irreparable loss signified by exile, on the one hand, and bestowing meaning on their lives, on the other:

> A book as incomplete as the old one was, incomplete as any book must be. A book of half lies, partial truths, conjecture, interpretation, and perhaps even some mistakes. What better homage to the past than to acknowledge it thus, rescue it and recreate it, without presumption of judgment, and as honestly, though perhaps as incompletely as we know ourselves, as part of the life of which we all are a part? (BS 364)

In this respect, both novels illustrate Ruth and Kenyon's view that

> ... by employing biographical approaches we are also able to describe how cultures, subcultures, or family patterns are reflected in individual lives, and how particular people adapt to or expand the possibilities and limits set by the historical time period in which we live (Ruth and Kenyon 2)

Even if loneliness and loss have stamped their lives, the characters find significance (both discursive and literal) to their individual life stories and provide cohesion to their identity as postcolonial individualities/textualities, while giving further texture to family accounts and national history. By narrating their individual experiences, inevitably entangled with the historical background in which they lived a good part of their lives, the two protagonists not only make sense of their life

stories from the perspective of old age, but they also add meaning to Indian Ocean communal histories. Narrative, once again, becomes a healing element by which the characters resist the potential oblivion that exile brings with it, enhanced in this case by the social exclusion old age may also entail, while simultaneously they enrich historical accounts with their storytelling ability and personal memories.[7] Imbricated as they are in *The Arabian Nights'* scent of the Indian Ocean imaginary, Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar emerge as powerful old age Scheherazades determined to survive.

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[7] Class plays a decisive role in the stories of Saleh Omar and Pius Fernandes. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the intricacies of "class" in the lives of both characters but suffice it to say that in their respective cases, their growing old is concomitant with their becoming poor. To put it differently, both Saleh Omar and Pius Fernandes enjoyed a good social standing in their youth which temporally coincided with the colonial period, but they lost this privileged position as their lives were approaching old age and the times entered the postcolonial era.

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