

Voyage Stories

The Natural and Supernatural on the Deck of a Dhow

FAHAD AHMAD BISHARA

University of Virginia and Doha Institute of Graduate Studies

In his tenth-century compendium of tales, *The Book of the Marvels of India*, the writer Buzurg b. Shahriyar relates the following:

A sailor, native of the seaports of Iraq, tells me the following story, which he heard from an old ship's-captain. His ship left Siraf, and he had a man on board who, during the voyage, fell out with one of the passengers, swore at him, and transgressed all the limits of decency. The passenger made no reply; he was a foreigner; there was no one to take his side, and, besides, the aggressor had been allowed on board as a favor, and at his own special request. The quarrelsome fellow was standing on the deck. Well, hardly three minutes after the altercation, a *kaba'da* jumped out of the sea, struck the fellow with its head, and jumped back again on the other side. The man was picked up dead, and his corpse was thrown into the sea.¹

At what point does a narrative of the past shade into a narrative of a different kind—a kind of fiction? After all, historians and fiction writers are both storytellers, and those who write in historical fiction attempt to conjure up the same worlds as their more academic counterparts do. And though the writer of fiction is permitted more liberties when it comes to inventing dialogue and action and is less bound by rules of citation, the best historical fiction stays grounded in the record and paints a picture of a world that emerges from it.² So then what about death by flying fish?

1. Buzurg b. Shahriyar, *The Book of the Marvels of India*, trans. Peter Quennell (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1928), 31.

2. For very useful reflections on history and historical fiction, see Sue Peabody, "Microhistory, Biography, Fiction," *Transatlantica*, 2 (2012).

© 2025 Fahad Bishara. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, which allows users to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only, for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the original authors and source.

I'm not a medievalist, nor have I written anything on magic or the fantastical. I have, however, written about the Indian Ocean—and more specifically about dhow voyages. I've also had the honor of reading Shannon Chakraborty's book while it was still in manuscript form, in large part to give her feedback on the elements that made up the dhow's journey. And so, if I'm to say anything at all—and why shouldn't I? I already have!—I might as well stick to the voyage.

Because to write historical fiction is one thing; to write it from the deck of a medieval Indian Ocean dhow is something else altogether. This is no Daevabad; though the supernatural abounds in Amina al-Sirafi's world, there is also a grounding in a world that is (or at least was) quite real. And yet, it's a world that is exceedingly difficult to grasp. Unlike the Indian Ocean of Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy, there is no colonial enterprise here to dominate the seascape, generating enormous amounts of paperwork along the way. To sketch out the contours of the medieval Indian Ocean, historians rely on literary sources—chronicles, travelogues, legal treatises, and other scholarly materials. For the most part, only those who work on the Cairo Geniza, a subsection of specialists on the medieval Indian Ocean, have been able to draw on archival materials to write the histories of non-elite (though no less extraordinary) figures.

Where Chakraborty truly distinguishes herself, however, is in her decision to set much of the story on a traveling ship, the *Marawati*. For there is something truly special about what the voyage narrative can do. Unlike its terrestrial siblings, the voyage narrative conjures up broad vistas of connected worlds—of global communities being carved (or, in the case of the Indian Ocean, perhaps reinscribed) onto the map. Through the voyage, the reader is immediately placed upon a broad, open stage: the sea, with its endless possibilities. Seen from the deck of a ship, the world looks different: water ringed by broken chains of coastlines that, like Homer's Sirens, taunt the mariner with both promise and danger. From Captain Cook's explorations as captain of *The Endeavour* to less daring sea journeys like Charles Darwin's trip aboard *The Beagle*, the voyage gives a reader a sense of an open-ended world, freed of the continental and civilizational containers that often constrain the historical imagination. The voyage narrative is, in a sense, a genre of world history.

So too with the *Marawati*. Before Amina even boards her vessel, we already get a sense of her world in motion, with the rhythm of trade and maritime work forming the novel's backdrop. But unlike the Pacific of *The Endeavour*, *The Beagle*, and many other vessels, the world of the *Marawati* is infused with a sense of familiarity. The port cities, coasts, and islands—Mogadishu, Kilwa, Aden, Calicut—are all among the greatest hits of the medieval Indian Ocean world; Amina already knows these places, having visited them many times before. The actors, too, are familiar ones: there are traders, scholars, governors, mariners, all of whom Amina has had some sort of interaction with in the past. If part of what makes the sea narrative genre compelling is the structure of voyage and return, this is less so in the Indian Ocean, where comings and goings are woven into the routines of everyday life. There is no discovery, no empire building; just sustained contact.

Part of what makes readers so invested in the genre, though, is the promise of triumph at the end of a long journey of struggle. If the voyage is a platform for worldmaking, it is not a world without danger. And for the world-maker, these are real challenges, ones that

a reader can easily imagine. The ship and its crew are constantly up against the elements of nature: winds, storms, adverse currents, and hostile natives all combine to create an environment of treachery, setting the stage for the crew's ultimate triumph (and triumph it must, for without it the genre betrays its reader's expectations).

But the voyage—or, more precisely, the “voyage and return”—is also one of the standard plot forms in fiction writing. Put in its simplest terms, the plot form calls for a protagonist, mired in some form of existential dissatisfaction, who then journeys into a fantastical world that appears to hold the antidote to their ennui. There, they (often) encounter their antagonist, setting in motion a nightmarish conflict, from which the protagonist emerges victorious. The protagonist then returns home having experienced some form of personal growth. Well-known examples of this plot form include *Alice in Wonderland*, *Back to the Future*, and *The Matrix*.³ Readers of *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi* will immediately recognize how well the book fits the form.

Thinking with the voyage-and-return form might help readers make sense of the moment when the *Marawati* departs from the known world and into the unknown. Halfway through the book, the recognizable oceanic world that Chakraborty painstakingly recreates suddenly inverts into a world of sea monsters, talking birds, magical objects, and the undead. Here, the “fantasy” in fantasy fiction forcefully asserts itself, and the historian reader finds themselves feeling unmoored from what they know to be true. So too with other voyages. This is why we have the mythical creatures that populate *The Odyssey*, the game of dice between Death and the Nightmare Life-in-Death in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and the pantheon of gods and demigods that populate Polynesian mythology (and also *Moana* and its less compelling sequel). As a site of history, the voyage is almost incomprehensible without the intertwined ontological terrain of the supernatural.

But perhaps it is more than a plot device that allows Amina to go down the path to self-discovery. For what is the truth in voyage narratives? Even in voyage stories grounded in the natural world, accounts of what happened are often embellished for self-serving purposes; though nature is ever-present, there is little about these narratives that seems “natural” to their readers. Thus, it is precisely because this is a voyage narrative that the world of the supernatural can be ever-present. The genre, at least in its literary form, almost demands it, if only to underscore the majesty of the open water and the perils of the voyage.

This is no less true of voyages across the Indian Ocean, which brim with the very sorts of supernatural phenomena that Chakraborty celebrates in her novel. One need look no further than Buzurg b. Shahriyar's *The Book of the Marvels of India*, a collection of stories shared by sea captains, in which references to the fantastical—vengeful fish!—sit alongside the mundane in ways that challenge any strictly materialist outlook on the past. Early modern voyage narratives like Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim's *Safina-ye Solaymani* or Sidi Ali Reis's Homeric *Mir'atul-Memalik* (at least some of which takes place on a ship) similarly blend the mythical and the material, with visions and dreams sharing the page with kings and diplomats. All of these, too, defy modern readers' expectations of the arc of the voyage-

3. Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 87–106.

and-return genre; the endless tangents will drive anyone crazy (incidentally, another theme in these narratives). And then of course there are the voyages of Sindbad, which involve so many instances of the supernatural it would take a whole essay just to recount them all. Chakraborty draws on all of these and more in creating the world of the *Marawati*—a world in which the journey of a ship and all its risks invariably call forth the realm of the unseen; in which passengers and captains pray for the intercession of Allah, the Prophet Muhammad, and the saints to ease their hardships; and in which shipbuilders adorn dhows with amulets, painted protective oculi on their stem-pieces and transoms, and carved supplications to Allah on their sterns, even well into the twentieth century.

To sail this rickety ship back to where it began—the voyage. If we insist on a rigidly materialist, disenchanting view of the past, there is no making sense of the place of the supernatural in voyage narratives, let alone fantastical ones like *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi*. And yet, the very fact that it abounds in the genre tells us that we ought to take it seriously as an ontological element of the past. Put differently, we don't have to believe that demons are real to believe that people believed that demons were real. And if we are going to tell the story of a past world that would be recognizable to its inhabitants, then perhaps we as historians must confront the own limits of our imagination—flying fish and all.

I was tasked with reflecting on how Chakraborty's book helps readers understand Indian Ocean history, and I'm afraid that I've sailed too far off course here. The point, insofar as I'm making one, is this: like writers of historical fiction (fantasy-inflected or otherwise), historians are storytellers. More than that, they are world-makers. And if the aim is to tell a story of a world, then the practice ought to be to embrace it in its multidimensionality, rather than to reduce it to its strictly material elements. Whether we are writing on land or at sea—but especially at sea—the craft of history calls for something more than detached analysis. We can dismiss *The Adventures of Amina al-Sirafi* as a work of fantasy fiction that tells us little about the past, but in doing so we'd risk elevating the tangible over the intangible. And ultimately, it is this sense of the intangible—the unseen—that marks out the Indian Ocean world most sharply, a world of layered pasts in which forces both visible and invisible animate the voyage (and return) of the ship, its crew, and the fish that happen to fly over it, occasionally striking its passengers dead.