

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Fresh Pastures Emily Sutherland

Gool was returning to Afghanistan, as poor as he had left. The old men of his village would mock him for returning without having made his fortune. Let them! They had no idea what it was like to be treated as even lower than the camels he tended; to be called a black heathen, dirty and stupid, and paid a pittance for his labours. Despite the fact that he had worked hard, trudging across dry lands, tending moody camels, bringing supplies to the stations and miners, he had been cheated and despised. The fortune he sought proved to be a chimera.

The ship Gool boarded in Fremantle was the s.s.Orient, which had been lauded as a 'floating palace' when it was launched. Palatial it may have been for the first and second-class passengers but Gool, returning to Afghanistan after three years working as a cameleer in Australia, could only afford steerage. It was impossible to sleep in such cramped conditions where privacy was at a minimum and where his senses were assailed by snores and grunts, night smells and unclean air. He chose to sleep on the upper deck, wrapped in his coat, using a coil of rope as a pillow. It was warmer than the desert at night and he could be at ease with himself because he felt free.

Taking a ship to Melbourne, sailing via Adelaide, which even he knew was not the direct route, was not as foolish as it might seem at first. He had a good chance of picking up a sailing ship from Melbourne taking wool to India, working his passage. Gool was too restless, too anxious to return to his family, too despondent, to wait around for another ship going directly from Fremantle to Karachi, so the Orient it was.

He had another reason for sailing without delay. It was the month of Ramadan, and it would be easier to observe the fast on a ship, saving his food until after sunset. On the first day at sea it became clear to him that keeping the fast of Ramadan might just as well be a hunger strike. Luckily, in his wanderings about the ship he discovered that the sailors coming off watch before dawn would stop for a warm drink and some bread or biscuits before retiring to their hammocks. Ghani the cook was a Muslim and he understood Gool's situation, and welcomed him into his galley before daybreak where he could drink water or tea, and eat fruit and bread, refusing the meat, which was not halal. Ghani saved him some food to take to the deck at night when he could break his fast again after nightfall. Those who followed Allah and his Prophet should support each other, Ghani said. Thus the followers of Allah would have integrity, power and the respect of all other nations. As they broke bread together they talked of the time when the Sultan of Turkey would rule all Islamic countries in one great religious empire.

Ghani, Gool knew, found Ramadan difficult, because he was handling food all day. He carried a quotation from the Koran in his pocket, so that he could read it from time to time when he found the smell of food too tempting. 'Here,' he said showing the paper to Gool, who read: *The month of Ramadan, wherein the Koran was sent down to be a guidance to the people, and as clear signs of the Guidance and the Salvation. So let those of you, who are present at the month, fast it.*

'He wasn't thinking of working on board a ship, preparing meals, when he wrote that,' said Ghani.

'Fresh Pastures.' Emily Sutherland.
Transnational Literature Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

‘He wasn’t thinking of walking all day in the full heat of summer, loading and unloading camels either,’ said Gool.

During the holy month he spent most of his time on the deck, looking at the flying-fish and the patterns and changing colour of the water rippled by the gusts of wind. He could appreciate why some men came to love the sea, but he remained a man of the mountains and the valleys, yearning for the feel of the desert air, crisp and clean, and the sight of the night sky imploding in stars. The sea was never still; the mountains never moved and the desert sands revealed the depth and breadth of life’s spirit. Sailing through the Bight he saw whales, spouting fountains of water towards the sky. He imagined himself being lifted on a column of water, stirred by a sense of adventure and danger. He would have much to talk about in the village when he returned.

Gool had had little to do with women apart from his mother or his sister who used to play with him when they were little. Now she was married and living with her husband’s family. He assumed that one day he would marry, and often thought about the sort of wife he would like. A nice looking woman, not too fat but certainly not skinny, with long hair that would hang down her back at night, when they were together; a woman who smiled rather than chattered. Rather like the young woman he was looking at right at that moment, as she stood against the deck holding the hands of two small boys. Gool guessed that they were not her children because she looked too young to be their mother. Probably they were her brothers, or maybe she was a nursemaid. As he watched out of the corner of his eye he saw her reach down and ruffle the hair of one of the boys. Yes, he decided, they were her brothers. His sister used to do that to him when he asked too many questions and his father too, when he became impatient. Was this little boy asking questions to which his sister had no answers? Gool wished he could move closer, could talk to her, but of course, that was out of the question.

She must have sensed his interest for she turned her head and before he could look away she smiled and nodded in greeting. The only women who had acknowledged him since he left his home had been the tarts who worked the gold fields, and these he shunned. Certainly this young woman was not a prostitute. Her smile had been one of friendly greeting, not solicitation. Gool wondered what would happen if he approached her, but when he glanced back to the place where she had been standing she was gone.

He looked for her the following day. Searching for her distracted him, until his stomach rumbled and feeling miserable and hungry, he gave up hope. Then he spied her, sitting with two other women, sewing. Her brothers sat nearby with an older man, probably their father. He was, Gool noted, a large man, running to girth, and not too steady on his feet. At first she did not look his way directly nor greet him but then she dropped a reel of cotton and, as she bent to pick it up, she turned her face to him and smiled. Smiling in return he moved away quickly before the other women, or more importantly her father, could notice his interest.

That evening he took particular care with his ablutions, before going up to the deck where he would eat his meal once the sun had gone down. Ramadan was not so difficult on the ship, in one way, because he did not have to work during the day. On the other hand it was difficult to distract himself during daylight hours from thoughts of how he had failed and he was very pleased when the time came when he could

drink some water and break his fast even if the food was not always to his liking. In a few months, he thought, he would be back home where the food was very much to his taste.

‘Is it a picnic you’re having? Can I join you? I’m Brigid, by the way.’

Only when she spoke did Gool become aware that the young woman was standing just behind him. He leapt to his feet, swallowed the food in his mouth too quickly, and began to cough. Finally he was able to speak. ‘It is my meal. I do not eat during the day. Not during Ramadan. I’m Gool Badsha Mohammed,’ he replied.

Brigid motioned him to sit down again and then sat beside him, putting her sewing basket between them.

He became acutely aware of her dark hair hanging down her back like a bell rope and tied with a green ribbon

‘This Ramadan, is it something like Lent?’ she asked.

‘Lent? I don’t know. Is that a month when you do not eat or drink during the day?’ Gool did not like to mention that sex was also forbidden.

‘Heavens no! We do eat during the day but not much, for six weeks, so it’s more than a month.’

Gool divined that Brigid was trying to balance the length of their privation against the severity of his fast. He still felt that Islam won.

‘Even when it’s not Lent we abstain from meat on Fridays. That’s Catholics, not Proddies. They eat meat all the time,’ continued Brigid.

Gool had some idea about ‘proddies’ from his Irish friends in shantytown, and he knew about fish on Friday, not that they often had any, but they always excused themselves to the Almighty on those Fridays when they did eat meat.

‘You’re a Muslim then?’ Brigid asked.

‘I am,’ he replied. He could think of nothing to add so to keep the conversation going he changed the subject, ‘Where are you from?’

‘From County Wicklow, Ireland,’ she replied. ‘And where are you from?’

‘The Khyber area in Afghanistan. I’m going home. Where are you going?’

‘We’re getting off at Adelaide. South Australia will be our new home. But I’d better go inside now. Me da is a heavy sleeper but if he finds me gone there’ll be the devil to pay.’ She moved lightly on her feet. All that remained was the brush of air as her skirts swung around, and the faintest scent of lavender water.

His sister would never have talked to any man like that, but Brigid did not seem immodest. In fact she had told him that really she was very shy, yet, somehow, she had felt totally at home with him. ‘At home’ puzzled him, until she explained what it meant. Then he told her that he had felt at home with the Irish diggers at Kalgoorlie, and her face lit up. His thoughts, as he sat on deck well into the early hours of the morning, were joyous. Was it her bright open smile that pleased him most, or the soft skin and pink glow of her cheeks? Like pomegranates, he thought. Smoother than apples. Or was it the easy way in which she talked? He wondered if she thought about him before she went to sleep in her cabin. Restlessly he waited for her on the upper deck the following evening, and was not disappointed.

‘Tell me of Ireland,’ he said.

‘It’s a beautiful country, but most people are poor. My mother and many of our family died during the Great Hunger when the potato crop was blighted. It was desperate. My father says this could never happen in Australia. He’s sure good

fortune will rain on us until we are drowning in gold.’

‘Australia is only dry land. Never rains.’

‘It must rain sometimes.’

‘Not much. Sometimes. Then it makes mud. Australia is a desert. On the goldfields they live in tents.’

Gool told her what he could about travelling with the camels and all he had learned of this alien country. He wished his command of English were better so he could explain more fully that the cities, like Adelaide and Perth, seemed imposing enough and there were green fields, but once you went away from the coast the land was savage, and the people lived rough. There was a sense of emptiness. Sometimes the only sounds to be heard were the cawing of crows and the footsteps of silent men, too exhausted to talk and resigned to their drudgery. At night the stars spread themselves across the sky, cold and indifferent, and the moon cast contorted shadows in the spinifex and shrubbery. The stars were unfamiliar, not like those he had known as a boy. There were black men and women who materialised like spirit people, watching, sometimes friendly, more often fearful for the degradation and draining of their waterholes after a string of camels had drunk their fill. He would have told her of people, those who came from England at least, who treated those who were not of their culture and religion as though they were inferior aliens. There was no respect shown to the Afghanis’ religion even though they were far more devout and assiduous in their duties than most of the Australians. He would have said that Muslims did not drink alcohol so there were no drunken brawls and violence in the Ghantowns, but they were criticised for peacefully smoking their *narghiles*. There was no way he could have explained their longing for family, for wives and children, for the sense of belonging. Neither could he adequately express his hope that Brigid’s father did not plan to go looking for gold or silver, making his daughter live in a skimpy tent and cart water from a creek or water carrier, trying to keep her two brothers out of mischief while her father dug for disappointment.

As though reading his thoughts she said, ‘We’re going on from Adelaide to the Clare Valley.’ Her father had heard that Irish people had settled there, and they preferred to be with their own people. There had been too much strife with the British in Ireland for them to want to settle amongst them in Australia.

‘My father wants to set up a hotel there,’ she continued. ‘He says that whether people are happy or sad they’ll always want to drink. He should know.’

‘We follow our Prophet. We are forbidden to drink alcohol,’ said Gool more primly than he intended.

‘Well, let’s hope there aren’t too many of your lot there, or my father will be disappointed. Mind you, I think a man who doesn’t drink mightn’t be such a bad thing.’ Brigid smiled up at him.

He noticed the dimples on her cheeks then and her long dark eyelashes. On impulse he reached out and took her hand. Brigid pulled it away, but not as quickly as she might have. It was a hand that knew work but was not as rough and calloused as his. He glanced to see if she was offended, but she smiled freely and then said that she would have to go back to her cabin. If her father found her talking to him ...

‘The devil plays up?’ finished Gool. Brigid’s laughter rang out and he feared her father would appear at any moment.

‘Brigid,’ he called to her, ‘come back for a moment.’

She approached him cautiously. 'Yes?'

'Here. This will protect you from harm. I don't need it any more. I'm going home.' Gool handed her the horsehair amulet that he had brought from Afghanistan and always wore around his neck on a leather thong. 'It's not a gem, but it's precious,' he assured her.

Brigid held it, still warm from his body, in the palm of her hand. Her eyes were suddenly serious, almost tearful for a moment, until she smiled. Such a smile. It encompassed him. They were the only two people alive at that moment. He moved towards her.

'Thank you,' she said. 'I'll keep it always. Do you mind if I pray that you will still be protected?' Without waiting for a reply she stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek, before hurrying away.

To Gool that kiss was the most beautiful thing that had ever happened to him and it was a long time before he could settle to sleep. The next day, the day before the ship would stop to unload and reload at Adelaide, Gool was sitting on the deck near the bow of the ship, warming himself in the sun like a lazy cat. He heard footsteps then sensed a shadow. Those footsteps were too heavy for Brigid, so he assumed it must be one of the sailors. None of the other passengers had ever bothered to speak to him. Or they hadn't until now, and what the scowling man with the florid face who swayed above him had to say was not friendly.

'If you so much as think about my daughter, or lay a finger on her or defile her in any way I'll have you horsewhipped.'

There was no language barrier. Gool understood exactly what Brigid's father meant even if he didn't understand each individual word. He stood up and faced the man. 'Your daughter, I have never met. I am an Afridi, a man of honour.' Having just lied he wondered how honourable he really was, but he wasn't going to betray Brigid to this man with the red angry face who talked of horsewhipping.

'You're a bloody heathen! What do you know of honour? I've heard stories about you fellows. You'll not ruin her life.'

Gool shook his head in denial of the desire to ruin anyone's life. He turned away to lean against the deck rail, unsure of what to do or say. The man stood next to him. Two men radiating hostility, one tall, lithe, with olive skin and dark eyes, the other shorter, unshaven, beer belly, florid, hair more grey than brown. Gool could smell liquor on this man's breath. They both gazed at the water. Unseen Brigid watched them, her face fearful.

'Might be I were a bit hasty,' Brigid's father then said, more quietly. 'One of the women warned me she was up to no good, and I thought it might be with you, seeing as how you're always on deck. I should have known she wouldn't be wasting her time on your lot. Anyway I've taught her a lesson she won't forget in a hurry. Lord knows it's hard to raise a motherless daughter. Here, have a drink. No hard feelings?' as he handed Gool a hip flask.

'No. No thank you. I do not drink and I am fasting. Sorry,' said Gool waving the flask away as though its proximity would contaminate him.

'Suit yerself. I'll have a drop and shake your hand. You might be a good lad, but stay away from Brigid.'

That night Brigid did not come to talk to him, and he was hard put to say if he was

disappointed or relieved. The ship docked at Largs Bay, near the mouth of the Port River. The long L shaped jetty, along which a railway line had been built, was designed for the loading and unloading of both goods and passengers. Looking across to shore Gool saw an imposing stone building with arched balconies, reminiscent of Islamic architecture. There were no minarets, so he knew it wasn't the mosque, but he was surprised to learn that it was a hotel and office for the railway company. On the other side of the road were the stone Customs offices. Gool was to have a short break in Adelaide before returning to the ship and continuing on to Melbourne. Climbing into the tender, which was to take him to the jetty, he glanced back at the ship to catch a glimpse of Brigid, waiting to disembark, her face half hidden by a scarf. Her little brothers stood on either side, but he did not know if it was to guard or protect her. The amulet had not protected her, he thought. He fervently hoped that Australia would bring her the golden rain that had eluded him.