

**Kaha Mohamed Aden**  
**Open Sesame**

Translated by Simone Brioni

By courtesy of Edizioni Nottetempo

Originally published in Italian as “Apriti Sesamo,” in *Fra-intendimenti*. Roma: Nottetempo, 2010: 61- 66.

Kaha Mohamed Aden’s collection of short stories, *Fra-intendimenti*, was published in 2010 by Nottetempo. As Alessandra Marino points out, this title “introduces the central theme of the precariousness of intercultural communication as a border practice. The deconstruction of the Italian word *fra-intendimenti*, literally meaning ‘misunderstandings’, refers both to the migrants’ condition of living in-between (fra) languages and discourses (intendimenti), and to the risk of failure that is embedded in the exercise of cultural negotiation” (Rev. of *Fra-intendimenti* by Kaha Mohamed Aden, *Anglistica*, 15. 1, 2011: 139).

“The main character of ‘Apriti sesamo’ [Open Sesame] invites several young Italian people who ask her for water to come into her home. As soon as the guests enter, they reveal themselves to be racists who want her to leave her home, by claiming that she is not in her country. As the story unfolds, the main character calls the police, who ask for her residence permit instead of arresting the aggressors; as she does not have this document, she is taken to jail. The ending of ‘Apriti sesamo’ reveals that this story was a dream and claims that the reality of immigrants in Italy is a worse nightmare.

In this story the metaphor of home is explicitly used in order to criticize the Bossi-Fini law, which penalized immigrants for the simple fact of existing, by introducing controversial sanctions towards irregular migrants and presenting immigration as a latent crime or an aggravation. The racist intrusion into a domestic space in ‘Apriti Sesamo’ recalls that of the Somali soldiers of the dictator Mohamed Siad Barre [Kaha Mohamed Aden’s] short story ‘1982. Fuga da casa’ [1982. Escape from Home] who broke into Kaha’s home in Mogadishu. This intertextual association creates an implicit connection between the dictatorship in Somalia and the institutional discrimination against immigrants at the time of the Bossi-Fini law.” [From Simone Brioni’s ‘Memory, Belonging and the Right for Representation: Questions of “Home” in Kaha Mohamed Aden’s *Fra-intendimenti*’, in *Shifting and Shaping a National Identity: A Study of Literature Written in Italian by and about Migrants in Italy*, ed. by Grace Russo Bullaro and Elena Benelli. Leicester: Troubadour, 2014: 29-30 [23-42]]

Wash your teeth, wash one foot, now the other, the bath’s so cold! Pyjamas, then under the covers.

I read, I don’t read, I turn off the light, then under the covers.

“Ring ring”, goes the doorbell, I go to open it, it’s the boys who usually hang out in the courtyard behind my house.

Me: Hello. Yes! Hello.

The boys: Could you give us a drop of water?

What a strange request. It’s not a common habit in this town, that of knocking on a door and asking for water. But it was in my old town and perhaps because of this the boys didn’t consider mine one

of those doors.

I opened the door. They entered; they settled themselves on the chairs. There were ten of them and they had a stereotypical look about them: so why didn't you hurry to give them the water? Since their entrance there was a strange silence that had hypnotized me until one of them, in a shrill voice, disturbed my ear, saying to me: are you OK? Hurriedly, confused, I began to search for the glasses, obviously the plastic ones. I searched for them, and I didn't find them.

One of them: What are you looking for?

Me: The plastic glasses.

A piercing voice: You want to serve us with the plastic glasses, but I asked how you were?

Me: Let me be! I ask you kindly to leave my house. Another: My house! You make me laugh. You would even want us to address you as madam, next? Whatever I would say they would repeat it to the parrot with great laughter. One could say that they were really enjoying themselves; obviously the feeling wasn't reciprocated.

I'm giving up trying to convince them. I'm getting the phone and I'm calling the police.

Me: Hello, Police? I need you.

Police: What's the problem?

Me: My house has been occupied by strangers and they don't want to leave.

Police: Give us your phone number and address. We will get to you as soon as possible.

Me: Thanks, I hope that you arrive soon because this is scaring me.

Police: Don't worry, madam.

I sat on my bed for 15 minutes, during which I waited for the police. They drove up to the front of my house. As soon as I heard the noises outside I left the house. Thank God the police arrived.

Policeman A: Who are you?

Oh God what a question. Every time an authority asks me it they seem to be saying to me: show us that you're a good girl. And the answer that I'd like to give is: why should I? Obviously I didn't give this response but I mumbled a few random, confused sentences, like: they're the ones you have to talk to, I live here etc etc.

Policeman B: Documents, mademoiselle.

Me: Madam, please. I called you. You should check these guys here.

Policeman B: Excuse me, madam, don't tell us what to do. We are starting with you. Are you married?

Me: No!

Policeman B: How did they enter the house?

Me: I let them in.

Policemen A: Now we are going inside the house. In the meantime, show us your documents.

We went inside, I did not understand anything anymore. I was anxious because I have been trying to renew my residence permit for two weeks now and have not yet succeed because of the very long queue one has to wait in. Practically, one needs to be there by 4 am and struggle to be one of the 15 who will be received at 8:30 am; the day is spent in the police office, then, even if you are successful in becoming a part of the selected group, the atmosphere that reigns inside varies between dramatic and dramatic and it is hard not to dismiss the existence of that day at all.

Therefore, I have forgotten to renew my permit. Why have I not renewed it? You could answer: I was not able to do so due to the long line outside the police office,” or: “I have forgotten”. Who knows? One thing is true: there, in the immigration office, many people find themselves flooded with documents, all with blank looks, as if they want to say: “we are not guilty”. Foreigners are all in the queue. I think it is normal to avoid spending the whole day in that place and to conceal the expiry date of the documents somewhere in one’s heart of heart. What I can tell you: the permit has not been renewed.

I was so anxious my heart pounded and filled me with fear. Here is my residence, the card which allows me to remain in the world of lawfulness. You see, it is not nice to enter the lawlessness without doing any evil, nor wanting to do something evil, your document simply expired. Instead, for some foreigners not having all bureaucratic matters in order, means going underground, I do not want to imagine the consequences.

I insist: How scary!

Policeman A: Madam, this document expired two weeks ago!

Me: Yes.

Policeman A: Madam, we must go to the police station.

I watched the policemen. One was with the boys and had a friendly attitude with them. The other went towards the door to take me to the police station. I burst into tears, but the policeman was so indifferent to my attempt to give up, to pretend that I had never called him and my request could not reach him. I could hardly breathe, I felt suffocated, I opened my eyes in bed in a cold sweat.

How lovely! The door opens, here is the treasure: it was just a dream. Time to get up.

I wish I could give this dream to someone. Someone worth opening this dream to. To open the dream, is literally what one says in Somali. One way to open it is to tell the dream to someone who

knows you, someone you trust and discuss it.

I have a theory about this dream: all immigrants have it. In particular those immigrants who unfortunately have no community that recognises them, protects them. For them that exact ending is a nightmare, and for many it is a reality.

The dream is not frank if we don't discuss at least two subjects: the dreamer and a person chosen by them. The person chosen should give the dream sense and make it sensible, by relating that situation to the past, or especially present, the everyday life of the dreamer.

I have decided to share the nightmare with you. It isn't possible to discuss it with you, and neither can you discuss it with me. The simplest solution is to hide it in some part of our minds. In short, keep it out of reach.

Me: simple! Yes?

You: No answer, silence.