Opposing Influences of Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary Somali Literature

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Introduction

> All writers begin with the literary tradition they inherit, no matter what they do to it, and they write for an audience educated to respond in particular ways. What is significant about the first novels is that writers used materials and techniques from older literary forms to provoke a new kind of response. Later in the genre's development, when the audience knew how to respond in a new way, elements from more traditional kinds of literature gradually disappeared. **Kongsberg**[1]

What Kongsberg has observed above, in his study of the development of the English novel, is also observable in the development and the nature of contemporary Somali literature. As stated above, one striking feature of contemporary Somali literature is the use of materials and techniques derived from older forms of Somali oral culture. Dramatists, poets and fiction writers all employ this kind of familiar elements in treating topical issues of immediate relevance to the social and political realities of modern Somali society, a characteristic feature which modern Somali literature shares with other literary traditions elsewhere in Africa; e.g. the Yoruba Travelling Theatre in Nigeria (Ogumbiyi 1982; Etherton 1982; Fiebach 1996); Hausa theatre in Niger; (Beik, 1987) and the Concert Party in several West African countries (Kerr 1995).

The union of these two seemingly contrasting sets of elements (traditional and modern) is what gives the Somali literature under discussion its characteristic feature of being an art in transition. It should also be seen as an art in transition in the sense that it represents the experience of a society in transition; or, in other words, this form of literature came as the cultural expression of a moment of transition in the development of Somali society.

As representatives of both sides of this moment of transition, the new literary creators struggle to establish an equilibrium between the old/the familiar and the new in a balanced combination acceptable to their – also transitional – recipients. In the words of poet/playwright Siciid Saalax Axmed, who uses a familiar Somali metaphor: 'we know our guests (i.e. audience), we are aware of their changing taste, we therefore offer them a new meal served in there own old plates'[2]

[1] *Narrative technique in the English novel*, 1985:1

[2] In a conversation I had with him in Paris, 27 October 1995.

Here, I must hasten to point out that not all Somali playwrights or poets do this as consciously as does Siciid Saalax, a graduate and educator, or someone like Wole Soyinka who purposefully 'scouts the Yoruba oral narrative tradition to derive a figure who would represent the painful dualities of existence and the revolutionary urge to grapple persistently with the mess of society and menace of existence.' (Okpewho, 1983:2)

As a matter of fact, Siciid Saalax represents a minority of Somali playwrights with formal education up to university level; and he belongs more to the few script-based theatre practitioners than to the majority dramatists who largely rely on traditional oral methods of production and who generally maintain stronger links with tradition. The majority are people who spent a part of their early lives in a rural environment where they cherished the Somali traditional culture and then moved to the city and became part and parcel of a new reality characterised by conflicting values and social contradictions. On the one hand, these literary creators are firmly tethered to their traditional roots and on the other, they have to be responsive to the needs and pressures of the day-to-day life in a half-traditional urban setting of which they are now an integral part.

Hence, the transitional characteristic of the post-independence Somali drama must be understood against this background, i.e. as emanating from the nature of its practitioners being themselves transitional artists, as well as from the inspiration of the prevailing general conditions, but not as the result of any conscious plan or long-term strategy.

What has been said about the Somali dramatists of the post-independence period is also applicable to the poets and fiction writers belonging to the same era; for the simple reason that they, like the dramatists, operate under the influence of tradition and modern urban life, as we shall see shortly.

It is relevant to note here that the practice of employing materials and techniques inherited from the past, to deal with issues relevant to the present, is itself inherited from Somali traditional oral literature. Almost all forms of oral literature, such as poetry, prose narratives and proverbs, have used materials derived from earlier works or inspired by established Somali heritage. Different forms of Somali literature, (both old and new) also tend to be interdependent, in the sense that they utilise each other in an interweaving fashion, as will be illustrated shortly. For instance, poets make extensive use of proverbs, while on the other hand, most proverbs are structured in a poetic form, using such poetic techniques as alliteration and metric patterns. Drama too relies on poetry and proverbs to convey its central messages.

I. Tracing the origins of borrowing in the established forms of Somali oral literature

Any observer of this literature cannot fail to notice the paramount presence of features drawn from traditional culture used as essential ingredients in works which belong to "genres alien to Somali oral literature: the novel and the fully scripted play with elaborate stage directions" (Andrzejewski, 1975:9). In the discussion that follows we shall see how this creative habit of borrowing and blending various elements and materials extracted from established forms of cultural expression is inherited from older forms of Somali oral literature, such as oral poetry, proverbs and narratives, three leading forms which contemporary literary creators use to construct their new work.

1.1. *Poetry and proverbs in Prose Narratives*

If we begin with the oral narratives, 'one salient feature of Somali oral narratives is their ability to incorporate poetry and proverbs … spoken by the characters in the stories' (Ali, 1996: 40) to enhance certain structural or thematic aspects in the story (Andrzejewski, 1982). This creative practice is carried over in contemporary Somali plays and even in a certain form of current prose fiction, namely the transitional novel. In both traditional narratives and contemporary literature, poetic inserts are used mainly to highlight moments of dramatic tension or of thematic emphasis.
One of the famous traditional narratives illustrating this point is a children's story entitled *Dabagaalle aar dilay*, the Squirrel who killed the Bull Beast[3]. It is about a mighty bull-elephant, very much dreaded by the other animals for his greed and tyranny, who cruelly mistreats a poor she-camel forcing her to marry him.

One day, the tormented she-camel takes advantage of the elephant's temporary absence and bolts away seeking protection under the other strong beasts in the valley. She approached the spotted giraffe, the rhinoceros, the hippopotamus, the buffalo and the lion one after the other, tearfully entreating each of them to save her from her cruel husband, saying she would be glad to become his in the bargain. None of those big beasts had the courage to challenge the mighty elephant.
Finally, the squirrel (whose enormous testicles symbolise bravery, in Somali culture) comes to the rescue of the poor she-camel. To the astonishment of the she-camel and everyone else, the tiny squirrel successfully challenges the giant beast. When the furious elephant tries to squelch the little creature under his feat the latter slithers out in a twinkling, with the help of the grease he applied all over his body, he then swiftly slips into the opening through the elephant's trunk down to his stomach and starts to dismantle his innards. The huge, dreadful elephant collapses and is soon dead and the brave squirrel comes out.

This dramatic end of the story is marked by the following verse, recited by the protagonist, the victorious squirrel, who dances and sings celebrating his huge victory in public:

Dabagaalle aar dilay ma aragteen?
Nin yar oo nin weyn dilay ma aragteen?
Xasan oo Xuseen dilay ma aragteen?

Did you ever see a squirrel beat a he-lion?
Did you ever see a small man beat a big man?
Did you ever see Xasan beat Xuseen?[4]

In other instances poetic inserts may be recited by a narrator rather than a character. An elder/narrator, who recites the tribulations and victories of an ancestor of a clan would quote from poems 'which where reportedly composed by the protagonist/or antagonist involved in the story. These quotations enhance the authenticity of the story as they act as a proof or illustration of the

[3] My summary of both this oral narrative and the one entitled *Qayb Libaax*, aLion's share cited in the following section comes from an English version of the two stories retold by Abdi Sheik-Abdi, 1993.
[4] The verse implies that 'Xasan' is the name of the younger (therefore weaker) brother of 'Xuseen'. In Somali naming tradition, the two names are given in that order in accordance with the order they were given to the two sons of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Mohamed and Ali, one of the first four Caliphs and the prophet's son-in-law.

reciter's version of the story.' (Ali, 1988:23-24). Given the dominant role of poetry in the cultural life of Somali traditional society, it would be difficult to accept the authenticity of an old narrative which is devoid of poetic insertions.

Narratives have equally close links with proverbs. In most cases, Somali tales and legends are replete with proverbs which serve as structural devices. The proverb usually comes at the end to summarise the whole story and to emphasise its underlying message. Proverbs are also "used to sound and reiterate major themes, to sharpen characterisation, to clarify conflict and to focus on the values of the society . . . [the narrator] is portraying" (Herskovits, 1978:64)

1.2. Prose narratives in poetry

On the other hand, tales and narratives are employed in different ways in the creation of poetic works. Two most frequent techniques of this practice are called *sarbeeb* (allusion) and *dibudhis* (reconstruction).

In common with poets in other cultures world-wide, Somali traditional poets are of the habit of alluding to something contained in a myth or narrative well known to the recipients to raise the interest of the audience. Making such relevant reference to shared knowledge serves as a short cut to the audience's mind or heart or both.

One good example of this is the following line from a classical verse composed about seventy years ago by an acclaimed poet, Salaan Carrabey. The poem was part of a well known series of poetic combat called *Guba* exchanged by 12 poets each of them rejoining as a spokesman of his clan. In this poem, Salaan Carrabey launches a counter attack against Cali Dhuux who started the series and Qamaan Bulxan who seconded him - both of them being from clans hostile to that of Salaan Carrabey. The line goes:

Kol uun baa Hilowle u tumaa, heello iyo jiib e

Again and again *Hilowle* plays for him the rhythm of heello and choral refrains.

In old Somali tradition, *Hilowle* was a spirit of revelry who persuades people into wrong-doing by inspiring them with dance and singing (Andrzejewski and Galaal, 1963).

The second important technique used by traditional poets in this connection is reconstructing the elements of a famous narrative adopting it to serve the purpose of his contemporary poem. A classical poem called *Qayb Libaax,* (Lion's Share) by Xuseen Maxamuud Faarax, known as "Xuseen-Dhiqle", provides a good example. The title of the poem and much of its content is reconstructed from a well known tale about the lion's abuse of his power as the king of the wild. In a gathering of the beasts of prey, the lion summons Hyena to divide the kill among them. "Divide the meat into two equal halves," says the hyena "one half should go to the lion and the rest of us should share the other half." The lion expresses his wrath with a lightning blow on the hyena's jaw, smashing one of his eyes out of its socket. He then threateningly turns to the fox and asks her to do the job. "Divide the meat into two equal halves" begins the shivering fox "one half goes to the lion

--" "what about the other half?" glares the lion. "It too goes to his majesty" she adds quickly and submissively.

Xuseen-Dhiqle skilfully utilises this story reconstructing it in the opening stanzas of his poem which is addressed to the chief of an Ethiopian territory inhabited by the Muslim Oromo clan of Arsi. The poet was one of the elders of a group of new-comer Somali refugees to the territory , most of them families of once powerful leaders of the Dervish Movement (q.v.). After the final defeat of the Dervish Army by British air forces and the surrender of their capital, Taleex, a group of dislocated adherents, including members of the family of Sayid Maxamed, the deceased leader of the Dervish movement.

The refugees had to surrender their weapons and possessions to their hosts and according to sources of oral history (Aw Jaamac, 1976) some members of the Arsi ruling family tried to take advantage of them. A man called Cali Diniqo married a young widow of the Sayid, Naado Buraale. Then chief, Nuux Maxamuud Daadhi, asked for the hand of Jamaad Cabdulle Xasan, sister of the Sayid who did not want to marry him. However, her brother and legal guardian, Shiikh Yuusuf Cabdulle, "reluctantly consented to the marriage, since he knew Nuux's autocratic temperament and feared the consequences of rejection". (Andrzejewski 1993:48).

The chief then authoritatively approached Xuseen-Dhiqle as one of the leading elders of the group and associated member of the Sayid family. Deeply sympathising with Jamaad in her plight, yet trying to avoid the wrath of the powerful Nuux, Xuseen addresses the chief with this poem, making clear to him that any consent to this marriage on their part is one given in captivity. After he heard the poem, Nuux apologised and immediately withdrew his claim to Jamaad[5].

1.3. Proverbs in poetry

Somali Poets of all times have also utilised proverbs in a similar vein; a poet may allude to a proverb or reproduce it to serve the purpose of his contemporary poem. The work of the early 20th Century poet, Ismaaciil Mire, provides a good example. Ismaaciil is renowned not only as a great poet but also as a wise man(traditional philosopher) and as the military commander of the Dervish forces who, under the leadership of Sayid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan, fought against the Italian, British and Abasynian powers in Somalia from 1901 to 1921, as mentioned earlier.

Shortly after the Dervish Movement collapsed in 1921 and the colonial Administration began to recover its hold on the British Protectorate of Somaliland, Ismaaciil composed a famous poem addressed to a Somali police commander in charge of the colonial police forces in the poet's area.

Nicknamed Carab-dheere, this arrogant police officer was, according to the poet and to sources of oral history, ill-treating the public and abusing his position to unlawfully amass wealth at the

[5] The original Somali text of the poem, together with a detailed account on the circumstances that surrounded its composition is found in Aw Jaamac, *Taariikdii Daraawiishta*, 1976:308-311. An English translation of the poem is provided in Andzejewski, *Anthology* 1993:48

expense of the local population. The poet warns Carab-dheere of the consequence of his tyrannical deeds by citing a series of cautionary examples from history.

To achieve the desired effect, the poet uses two combined techniques. Firstly, he begins each stanza with the presentation of an historical incident to illustrate his point and concludes with a refrain, a repeated line of wisdom which goes:

> *Ragow kibirka waa lagu kufaa kaa ha la ogaado*
> (Oh men, arrogance brings disaster: let that be remembered!)

Secondly, this line is a poetic reproduction of a well known Somali saying:

> *Waa lagu kufaa kibirka*.
> (Pride leads to downfall).

This particular line from Ismaaciil's poem became current among Somalis and most people still memorize it and refer to it in relevant occasions; it can be confidently assumed that the poet's incorporation of the popular saying has reinforced the lasting impact of his piece.

1.4. Poetry in proverbs

Turning to the other side of the interdependence between poetry and proverbs, we find that the influence of classical poetry on the formation of proverbs is even more obvious. Most good proverbs, are constructed in a poetic or semi-poetic form; moreover, many proverbs seem to be themselves a line or half-line fragmented from a poem that has faded into oblivion. To illustrate the poetic nature of Somali proverbs, let us consider the following three popular sayings:

> *Hubsiino hal baa la siistaa*
> (One gives a she-camel in exchange for certainty).
>
> *Rag waa kii kufoo haddana kaca*
> (a [real] man is one who rises again after a momentary fall).
>
> *Sir naagood lama salgaaro*
> (One cannot get to the bottom of women's secrets).

In each of these sayings, the two structural devices which regulate Somali poetry are utilised, namely, alliteration (*xarafraac*) and metre (*miisaan*). The substantive words in the first of the above sayings alliterate in *h* sound which occurs at the beginning of the first two words in the saying. Similarly, the second and third sayings use the alliterative sounds of *k* and *s* respectively.

In terms of metre, the first two sayings conform to the metre of a poetic genre called *dhaanto*, the line of which should contain twelve or thirteen duration units or short vowels. The last saying is not identifiable with the metric arrangement of any known poetic type; yet, it sounds to the ear like following a metric pattern of a sort – it sounds like having a *dhaanto* metre less two duration units.

There are proverbs that do not follow any specific *miisaan* (metre), but almost all well known proverbs use *xarafraac* (alliteration). The two main words in the proverb that follows alliterate with

each other in *t* and this makes the proverb maintain a poetic quality, although it does not conform to any known *miisaan*.

> ***T****agto daayoo* ***t****imaaddo hay.*
> (Stop blaming the past, start planning for the future).

Thus, what has been discussed in the preceding pages illustrates the interweaving nature of various forms of Somali oral literature; it also shows how this literature has always tended to preserve and build upon existing material of oral culture, reviving and reproducing it in the context of new works. This preservative tendency maybe seen as being established, among other things, by the need that in an oral culture, knowledge learned arduously over the ages must be repeated aloud over and over again to prevent it from vanishing.

2. Continuum to tradition - its usefulness

This established method of engaging traditional culture in creating new works of art served, and still serves, several purposes. First, it renders importance and plausibility to the new work. In traditional Somali society, learned men, including orators and artists, were expected to show a vast background knowledge of their people's heritage and they had to relate their new contribution to the common experience that had accumulated over the years. In essence, this convention is the traditional equivalent of the modern scholarship practice where researchers have to locate their new contributions in the context of the existing body of scholarly work on the subject.

Customarily, Somalis are renowned for their oratorical eloquence. This is widely documented (Laurence, 1954, Andrzejewski and Lewis, 1964, Lewis, 1965, Samatar, 1982,). I.M. Lewis points out that 'Somalis are born talkers. Every elder is expected to be able to hold an audience for hours on end with a speech richly laced by judicious proverbs and quotations from famous poems and sayings.' (Lewis, 1993).

Second, in an oral society, like the Somali, this process of continued reference and reproduction of material from the past represents a natural mechanism which helps to keep reactivating oral memory, disseminating oral information and preserving oral heritage for posterity, as mentioned earlier.

Third, this shared frame of reference between the literary creator and the recipient facilitates a more effective communication between the two. This is all the more essential in a period of transition where several new variables enter experience. The integrative use in a new art form of elements steeped in traditional culture incorporated with topical elements attuned to the taste of the current audience helps such transitional audience to accept and appreciate the new form. It also helps the creator himself to get a familiar framework for organising his/her innovative ideas; it serves as a testing ground at the earlier stage of the development of a relatively new genre. 'Later in the genre's development, when the audience knew how to respond in a new way, elements from more traditional kinds of literature gradually disappeared.' (Kongsberg , q.v.)

The Somali experience lends credence to Kongsberg's assertion. In Somalia upon introducing Somali writing system there had been a process which started with an enthusiastic collection and

transcription of existing oral literature, followed by the creation of a new literature deeply rooted in the old. As a third stage, an increasing number of authors began to venture introducing new forms of literary creation, especially in the field of drama and fiction, with less and less reliance on traditional techniques. This was an evolution from tradition to transition to innovation. An obvious example is found in the field of songs. If we compare the bulk of songs produced in the first three decades following independence (1960) with those created in the first two decades of the 21st Century, we notice absence of rural imagery in the latter while such an imagery was a paramount feature in earlier songs. This is because the more recent songs are created by members of the new urban generation.

3.Continuum to Tradition - Some negative impacts

Despite its advantages, delineated in the preceding section, continuum to the past is not free from some negative impacts. At least two disadvantages can be discerned. One is that the heavy reliance on oral medium delays the process of getting "out of the orality ghetto" to borrow a phrase from Ali Iye. (1995:32).

Even after the introduction of an official writing system for Somali in 1972, dramatists remain unable to get out of the established habit of oral transmission; they fail to make use of the written medium now at their disposal. In consequence, the work of these dramatists, which includes some masterpieces, is bond to be short-lived and unable to reach a wider audience. In the absence of written and printed play texts, it is difficult to document and circulate these dramatic productions.
A second possible side disadvantage is that a strong attachment to the past can pose a potential problem. It may lead to being blind to the loopholes and imperfections of that past. 'Idealisation of the past' as Professor Andrzejewski puts it is a universal human tendency 'to which every society is prone' (Andrzejewski, 1982: xiii). Obsessed by the often romanticised "glory" and "purity" of his/her nation's history and culture, the artist may become unable to see the dark spots in those "old good days", in that "glorious" past which may contain serious hurdles irrelevant or even embedding any progress towards a better future. This danger is particularly great in moments of serious crisis in the history of a country or society.

And that is the case with the Somalia of today where many literary creators seek refuge either in Islamic fundamentalism or in what is referred to in Somali as *dhaqankeenii suubbanaa, "*our glorious tradition". The great poet, Maxamed Ibrahim Hadraawi, provides a vivid example. In his poem, *Dabahuwan, (1996),* Hadraawi depicts the traditional way of life as the ideal situation for human beings and as an alternative resort, while he launches a fierce attack on modern civilisation, accusing it of destroying that ideal traditional life, where things were well-established and well-balanced:

> *Waxay dumiyeen aqoon, ilaa dure soo taxnayd*
> *Waxay damiyeen ilays, u daaran qof beel lahaa*
> *Waxay kala daadiyeen, daryeel isu dheelli tiran*
>
> They destroyed [an established] knowledge [accumulated] from time immemorial;

They put off a light which guided members of [an integrated] community;
They undid a balanced welfare system.

In this recent poem, Hadraawi expresses a rather religious and traditionalist outlook which he has developed since the outbreak of the civil war in Somalia in the late 1980s, a tendency he shares with an increasing number of well known Somali poets, (eg Cabdulqaadir Xirsi Yamyam and Abshir Bacadle). Hadraawi attributes the evils of today to what he refers to in the poem as "*cilmiga sama-dawdarka ah"* (the modern science that has overturned righteousness).
Hadraawi's response to the current Somali crisis is reminiscent of the response of some Western great writers, such as T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence, to World War II. For instance a parallel can be drawn between Hadraawi's *Dabahuwan* and the well known epic, *the Waste Land,* in which T.S. Eliot asserts that Europe became "waste land" because people went away from God and lost faith in everything. According to Eliot, the solution was to go back to the church. Lawrence's protest against modern civilization was even stronger. In his classical work, *Sons and Lovers,* Lawrence calls us to go back to primitive life, because science and technology dehumanised man. In essence, that is what Hadraawi expresses in the following lines:

Cilmiga sama-dawdarka ah
. . . .
Ilaah lagu diiddanyahay
Islaam-la-dagaallanka ah
Danaysigu weel u yahay
. . . .
Dadkiyo simay xoolihii

The science that overturns righteousness
. . . .
That denies [the existence of] God
That fights Islam
That is shaped by selfish interest
. . . .
That has equated human beings with animals.

In the body of this article we have demonstrated the union of the opposing influences of tradition and modernity in the corpus of Somali literature produced in the post-independence period. We have seen how this literature is in a passage between traditional and modern ways of cultural expression, between orality and writing and between conformity to tradition and responding to the pressures and influences of a changing, modern life.

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