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ASPECTS OF SOMALI LITERATURE IN EUROPEAN LANGUAGES

Contemporary Somalia presents a unique example of a nation with a nascent body of literature. Although possessing a standard orthography barely a decade old, Somali writers are already active and often draw significantly from their culture's rich tradition of oral literature. This oral literature and the new literature written in Somali have been studied by competent scholars, but the fact remains that such literature must usually stay the possession of those who read Somali - a small group even within the nation's own population.

Not all Somali writers, however, are lost to the non-Somali speaker due to the language barrier. Some Somalis, motivated perhaps by the same urge to be read more universally that has prompted writers from other African nations, have written in European languages, especially in English, over the past ten-years - and in one case even earlier. At the same time a small corpus of Somali literature has appeared in English translation, due particularly to the good services of Prof. B. W. Andrzejewski. Possibly English translations of Somali writing will result in further original work in English, as was the case in Ethiopia in the 1960's.

Perhaps the first glimpse of Somali oral literature was made available to readers by "A Tree of Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose". Compiled by Maragaret Laurence, this collection was reprinted in 1971 by the Irish University Press, Dublin, and it is an interesting and helpful book containing poems and stories, some paraphrased. Explanatory notes and a long introduction add to the value of "A Tree of Poverty", although some of the information provided by the latter is now understandably dated.

B. W. Andrzejewski's and I. M. Lewis' "Somali Poetry: An

Introduction" provided an even more significant look into Somali traditional verse. As its editors state at the outset, the book offers an insight into an extensive and rich oral literature. Three kinds of poems are recorded: classical, traditional, and religious verse. Themes range from ingratitude, war, theft, politics and love, to modern heello and national pride. The book is important not only for the poems it contains - which are presented with parallel Somali and English texts - but also for the rich introductory material provided. Since "Somali Poetry" was published before Somalia had an official orthography, i.e. before 1973, detailed information on the systems of transcription used is furnished. Interesting facts on the characteristics of Somali verse are provided, as are the biographies of the poets represented.

The next important Somali work to be translated into English was Hassan Sheikh Mumin's "Leopard Among the Women". Translated by B. W. Andrzejewski and printed with parallel texts in English and Somali, "Leopard Among the Women" portrays a scheming Mogadishu rake who prides himself on how many women he has seduced (eighty at the latest count), and who fools yet another young girl into believing he has legitimately married her. No dramatic climax or denouement is involved; the playwright is content to allow dialogue, song, repartie, and situation in his sixteen scenes to speak for themselves on the plight of abandoned women and children in Mogadishu.

There is no doubt about Hassan Sheikh Mumin's intended audience, of course. He has produced a play in Somali for Somalis, and his moralistic message of social reform is clear. In fact "Leopard Among the Women" was chosen for translation from over three hundred plays produced since the birth of the Somali theatre, and is one of the most popular of its kind.

The same reformist message on the need for more equitable treatment of women runs throughout the only major Somali work to be translated into English so far. This is Faarax M. J. Cawl's novel, "Ignorance is the Enemy of Love", a novel which

claims to be the first literary publication in the Somali language since the establishment of the official orthography. Prior to being translated by Prof. Andrzejewski and published in English in 1982, the novel's audience was those readers literate in Somali. The novel is a celebration of historical events, romance, patriotism, and the need for education and women's rights. The author is innovative in his approach to the novel form, and freely mixes traditional oral poetry with his prose in an effective manner to further his narrative and themes.

Obviously all of the above literature, plus the scattering of translated folk tales and traditional poems to be found in a few other publications, have as their intended audience the people of Somalia. Some Somali writers however have aimed at a potentially larger audience, and both their medium and message have been noticeably modified by their intent.

The first such example is William J. F. Syad (b. 1930), the first Somali to write in a European language. Since he was born in Djibouti, where the French language was given complete supremacy by the former colonial authorities, it is not surprising that although some of his work is in English, he writes predominantly in French. His first volume of poetry was "Khamsine", consisting of sixteen poems in French and nine in English. The collection is introduced with a preface by Léopold Senghor, who is generous in his praise for Syad and his work:

"Il a conservé quelque de cette gracieuse ambiguïté que souligne son type de 'Nègre Marginal' car Syad est un Somali, un nègre d'Orient, comme la reine de Saba.
Ses poèmes ont le parfum subtil, du Cantique des Cantiques. Et aussi l'accent des poèmes de Tagore, c'est dire qu'ils sont les fleurs naturelles d'une terre de poésie, de la terre du nard et de l'encens: des orchidées parfumées."
(Khamsine, p.7)

The poems in "Khamsine" are mostly quite brief, consisting of characteristically short lines of no more than four or five words each. Elements of romanticism, négritude, and Somali

nationalism can be found in these poems and in Syad's later works. In "Khamsine" the French poems deal mainly with love, and are divided into three sections respectively entitled "Du sable au creux d'une main", "L'aube d'une vision", and "Crépuscule". Preceding the first section is a brief poem setting the mood and at the same time revealing why the poet has named his collection after the wind which blows from the Sahara briefly each year:

Comme
le khamsine
de désert
Tu as passé
dans ma vie
et pour toute
trace
Tu n'as laissé
que des sillons
vagues
et ce répit
de grace

(Khamsine, p.11)

This ephemeral, fragile quality is further developed in subsequent poems, but although many of Syad's poems are rather airy contemplations on the fragility and passing nature of love, others look to Somalia for their inspiration. "L'Ange aux Ailes Brisées" for example reconstructs a Somali legend, while in "Hier" the poet combines his sense of his origins with the spirit of his love poems:

Oh! Naftaye
tu m'as conté
le passé de ma culture
Pensée ivre de ma race
Somale...

(Khamsine, p.44)

The English poems in "Khamsine" mostly maintain the style of the French ones, with the exception of six poems grouped under the heading of 'Nationalism'. These are not only longer poems, but they are also characterized by a fierce patriotism and imagery far removed from the tenor of the French poems. Anti-colonialism and Somalia's independence are the main themes. For example, in "When Dawn will Rise", first written

in 1954, we hear a clarion call for liberty and independence interwoven with the dream of a greater Somalia one day reuniting the Somali populations of Ethiopia, northern Kenya, and former French Somaliland:

When will that memorable occasion be
By all eagerly cited
When five brothers of Somalia
Shall stand fast united

Under a single banner our land
Freed from all yoke foreign
Shall rise a noble nation
On her own might and main
(Khamsine, p. 58)

Another such poem, "Hunger at their Heels", is dedicated to all Somalis who go abroad, and specifically protests the exploitation of Somalis in the French and British armies. The volume concludes with "The Birth of a Nation", honoring the new African nations that would gain independence in the 1960's.

Seventeen years after publishing "Khamsine", Syad produced two more volumes of poetry: "Cantiques" and "Harmoniques". Apparently these collections include poems written over a span of several years since two of them are dated 1960 and 1963 respectively.

"Cantiques" opens with a love song in English addressed to 'Shoukry', which a footnote explains is from the Arabic word 'Shoukran', meaning "grace", and thus used, with the same implication, as a girl's name in Somalia. A tender, fragile quality pervades the short French poems which follow. Love is delicate, easily lost, and almost always spiritual rather than physical. The reader is asked to focus on the immediate moment, the present emotion, since as far as love is concerned, we can hope for no more. An audience familiar with the tenets of European romanticism appears aimed for these poems. The poet as a lover attempts to capture "Une voix/une âme/Un Instant/de ma vie" (Cantiques, p.25), since for him love exists almost excruciatingly in a moment's glance, a shadow, a hint, a smile: "mon âme/fremit/à ton sourire" (Cantiques, p.78). Romantic indeed, yet it is noteworthy that in a foot-

note to one poem in "Cantiques", Syad refers to Léopold Senghor as his "respecté Maître".

The companion volume "Harmoniques" consists of similar short poems, many untitled, and mostly in French. Some are very brief word-pictures, glimpses of a thought, emotion, or fancy:

O
Toi
rameur de l'Aube
ou va ta barque
(Harmoniques, p.5)

A few of these poems are quite introspective, while some are addressed to an unidentified loved one, as in "Cantiques". Sometimes fragments of popular Somali song appear in the text, reiterating the same romantic attitude found in Syad's own poems. One section of poems in "Harmoniques" is entitled "Effluves"; perhaps many of Syad's poems might be so labeled, yet he does not fail to touch us with his fragile tone and delicate sensibilities:

Mon amour
est palpable
comme la
nuit chaude
d'un été
tropical
(Harmoniques, p.120)

The one other Somali poet to so far write and publish in an European language other than English is Mohamed Said Samantar (b. 1928). A Somali diplomat who became ambassador to Italy in 1970 and ambassador to France in 1974, Samantar not surprisingly has published his work in French and Italian: "La pioggia è caduta/Il a plu!" in 1973; a second edition appeared in 1974. The fourteen poems in the book were written over a period of twenty-five years from 1947 to 1972, and are printed in parallel in Italian and French. The poems' linguistic origins are complex - the poet has stated in a letter that "mes poèmes je les ai conçus originellement en langue somalienne mais, puisque à l'époque notre langue n'était pas écrite, je les ai transcrits directement en italien et ce

n'est qu'après qu'ils ont été traduits en français."

A brief preface to Samantar's work by Adriano Miranda, in Italian only, notes that some of the poems in "La pioggia è caduta" previously appeared in Italian and other periodicals, and adds that some are based on the poet's experience during the colonial period in Somalia. A four-page introduction by Nicole Lecuyer in Italian and French reviews the themes of Samantar's poetry and reminisces on the poet's Somali roots.

A group of poems written over the span of a quarter of a century obviously will not constitute a unified group. However, in general it might be said that Samantar's earlier poems, written in the late 1940's, deal with nationalism and imprisonment. They are largely autobiographical. In "Libertà/Liberté" (1947) the narrator looks back on a time of naive innocence prior to being thrown in jail by the Italians:

"Ricordati quanto ero felice nei giorni di libertà;/ I miei passi leggeri correivano nelle verdi foreste della nostra bosaglia" (lines 11-12). Another poem, "Somalia mia!" (1948) was written the year Britain returned the Ogaden area to Ethiopia, and calls for a unified Somalia while passionately lamenting what has happened:

Somalia mia!
La tua disunione stringe il mio cuore e mi toglie ogni forza;
La tua disunione riempie le mie vene di una rabbia sorda;
La tua disunione condanna i tuoi figli all'amarezza dell'esilio
(lines 9-12)

Samantar's image of camels, wood, milk, lions and herders help evoke a nostalgic picture of the Somali homeland, while other images reveal the brutal realities of colonial domination. "Il prigioniero di Warder/Le prisonnier de Warder" (1947), is a most moving portrait of a political prisoner in a dark cell dreaming longingly of his camels and their milk, of spring flowers and blue sky, and who warns his captors darkly that his hour of revenge will one day arrive. "Anima ferita/Ame blessée" (1965) describes both romantically and metaphorically the passage from innocence to experience, a

theme found also in the poems dealing with growing Somali national awareness. "Lumumba" (1963) is both a praise poem for the Congolese leader and a lament for his untimely death, and includes a refrain-like quality similar to that found in Somali oral poetry.

A number of Samantar's poems show a deep concern for Africa as a continent. The French version of "Africa, fiore appassito/ Afrique, fleur déjà fanée" (1965) is to the point in comparing the continent to a young woman who has been seduced:

Afrique, qui donc t'a condamnée
A toujours courber l'échine?
Qui donc a décidé que tu sois à jamais la fiancée séduite
Sans arriver jamais au jour des épousailles?
(lines 6-9)

Such Pan-Africanism is also particularly evident in the poem which shares its title with the volume, "La pioggia è caduta" (1966), and which is addressed, as the poet points out in the final line, "A tutti i figle dell'immenso continente africano!". Two other poems confront the even larger issues of world-wide injustice, futility and lethargy. The starving child addressed in the final and perhaps best poem, "Lo sguardo di un bambino/ Dans le regard d'un enfant" (1972), is not necessarily a Somali child, or even an African one, but a universal child who is the victim of mankind's neglect, greed and inhumanity:

E ti dico
Lascialo senza rimpianto
Questo mondo
Dove hai fatto una breve apparizione
Casuale.
Bambino innocente, fuggi
Da questo mondo che puzza di sangue,
Di parole avide, di surplus
E di milioni di panettoni invenduti.
(lines 19-28)

Two Somalis have so far published short stories in English. Yousuf Duhul, who now lives in England, has written "The Last Morning of Buttonnose". It is an effective and touching story of the last few hours of a Mogadishu streetboy's life, before he is run over by a car. Ahmed is nicknamed 'Buttonnose'

because of his flat nose; through his thoughts and feelings we vividly enter the world of an urban, impoverished ragamuffin. The story is clear social criticism, with no room for sentiment. It is uncompromisingly factual and leaves an unforgettable impression on the reader who is perhaps unfamiliar with the extent of poverty suffered by streetboys in Africa's cities.

The first short story written by Abdi Sheik-Abdi, a Somali currently living in the United States, was entitled "The Luncheon". In the story, a misunderstanding and a temptation lead a young man to be ousted from his uncle's home, where he had been receiving one free meal a day. Urban poverty receives a great deal of emphasis in this story too, just as it does in Abdi Sheik-Abdi's other published story, "Rotten Bananas". Once more street people are realistically shown, wallowing in poverty, hunger, and moral decay.

Abdi Sheik-Abdi has written several Somali folktales and fables which have appeared in such journals as Okike and Al-cheringa, and he has been a rather prolific author of articles and essays on Somalia. All have been written in English, as has his (as yet) unpublished novel "When a Hyene Laughs", a novel which deals with the conflict between nomadic and urban life as well as the violation of the country by foreign exploitation.

There may be some significance in the fact that the first Somali novel was written in English, even though its author, Nuruddin Farah (b. 1945), is from the southern part of the country, formerly colonized by Italy. This milestone novel, "From a Crooked Rib" is set in Italian Somaliland and from internal evidence such as references to the Ogaden and Ethiopia, the story appears to take place around 1950. A note at the end of the final chapter indicates the novel was written in 1968 in India, where the author studied literature and philosophy at the University of Chandigarh. "From a Crooked

"Rib" has thirty chapters and is 179 pages long; a brief glossary of fifteen Somali words used in the text is given. A quotation at the beginning of the novel reveals its title to be taken from a Somali proverb:

God created Woman from a crooked rib;
and anyone who trieth to
straighten it, breaketh it.

The implications of this proverb become clear as the character of Ebla is gradually developed. As the story opens, Ebla has run away from her family compound because she has been promised in marriage against her will to an "old man of forty-eight" in exchange for several camels. She accompanies a local camel train to Beled Wene, the first town she has ever seen, and stays with relatives who quickly relegate her to the status of a servant. To Ebla, the town is her only refuge, yet there she quickly passes from innocence to experience. Mirrored in miniature here is the general problem of rapid urbanization in Somalia and the erosion of old values and increased economic and social problems.

Ebla's town cousins soon find it expedient to marry her off for gain, but Ebla avoids the second unwanted match by once more running away, this time eloping with a young government official to Mogadishu. She loses her virginity to him the first night they are there, and the pair go through the ceremony of a Moslem marriage the following day. Her new husband, Awill, leaves for his three-month study tour in Italy soon after, and Ebla quickly learns that he is involved with an Italian girl. By now she has also learned a great deal else, and is ready to use men as they use her. Accordingly, she becomes the secret wife - in effect the whore - of a wealthy man while Awill is away, only to discard him when her husband returns. The theme of "the exploiter exploited" unfolds the context of the relationship between the sexes in Somalia, and the author's obvious sympathies with Ebla enable him to convey a message quite similar to that found in the Somali-language play "Leopard Among the Women".

In many ways "From a Crooked Rib" can be considered a sociological novel. Ebla is the Somali woman trapped in her culture, resenting the subordination, vulnerability and constant dreary labor that such a role entails. One is reminded of the words of the main female character in Faarax M. J. Cawl's novel, a woman who also felt the anguish of being caught up in a conflict between her own goals and those her culture dictated for her.

Nuruddin Farah's second novel, "A Naked Needle", displays considerable development in the writer's abilities. "A Naked Needle" has both more breadth and more depth than the first book. It is more cosmopolitan in nature and more technically complex. Written in the present tense like Joyce Cary's "Mister Johnson", its flavor is often reminiscent of Soyinka's "The Interpreters" - the favorite novel of Koschin, its main character. Koschin is a Mogadishu teacher who had agreed two years previously in England to marry Nancy, an English girl. Nancy now arrives in Mogadishu expecting Koschin to keep his promise, much to the latter's surprise and alarm.

Intertwined with the plot of "A Naked Needle" is a wealth of impressions filtered through Koschin's consciousness which expose in 181 pages the many facets of life in the Somalia of the mid-1970's. Like Ebla in the earlier novel, Koschin is a complex character who reveals himself as he shows his attitudes towards life around him. He has written a thesis on James Joyce while overseas, and is a sophisticated young man who loves cerebral gymnastics and allusions to such wide-ranging figures as Freud, Nietzsche, Plato, Prometheus and Albee. He is an utter idealist regarding the Revolution, is disgusted at his school principal's seduction of girl students, and looks with a cynical and bitter eye at much of society. He also has some quite earthy flaws: he never washes his ears, and his underwear is worn until ready to fall apart, at which point he dumps it in the sea.

Through Koschnin's internal monologues we get a view of Somali urban life which is every bit as sordid as that given

in "From a Crooked Rib", and far more extensive. Physical filth now more fully parallels social and political filth. Economic and moral poverty are related. The capital is thus portrayed:

"Mogadiscio. Mogadixo. Mogaldisho. Muuqdisho. Its populace: gangsters with no gang, a town with no treasure, no history beyond what Davidson gives it in his most authenticated narrative as blood-suckers in Berbera. People with no purity. Donkey-man damned to the last degree, that is what we all are, not on this side of darkness, neither on the other, unacceptable to everyone on the face of this earth. Friends we have, both in the East and the West, depending on what era. Good heavens, we are all the puppets of Prometheus, the Cupbearers of Zeus! Bad blood, the worst there is."
(A Naked Needle, p.21)

Although sometimes the narrative in "A Naked Needle" acquires an almost consciously obscure quality, the fast exchanges of dialogue throughout prevent the novel from getting bogged down by its passages of social commentary. It is an intellectual novel, thoroughly cosmopolitan in its approach and assumptions; no excuses are made for its Somali origins or setting, either by textual explication or explanatory notes and glossary. It might be said that because of this cosmopolitan outlook, "A Naked Needle" heralds the coming of age for the European-language novel from the Horn of Africa, and assumes the same on the part of its readers.

Nuruddin Farah's third novel, "Sweet and Sour Milk", has been described by one reviewer as the first political novel in English by a writer from Somalia (cf. Horn of Africa 1981). It is true that the novel's main theme is the corruption of the established regime in Somalia, and it does contain most of the ingredients of a political novel set in a totalitarian state, such as arrest and disappearance of former officials, executions of religious and political dissidents, suppression of civil liberties and the denial of free speech and movement. The novel is permeated by an atmosphere of that harsh paranoia and fear found in the archetypal police state.

Within this atmosphere the story of twin brothers unfolds. One, Soyaan, apparently a conspirator against the state, has met with a sudden and mysterious death by poisoning. His brother Loyaan, a dentist, begins a quest for the truth regarding Soyaan's demise but never does attain it. Instead he is confronted at each turn with all kinds of duplicity and chicanery, and the supreme irony comes when Loyaan must helplessly watch the state make Soyaan a national hero for the record, rather than recognize that foes of the regime do in fact exist. Finally, Loyaan himself is made an offer he is not permitted to refuse: exile in the form of a diplomatic post in Belgrade:

"I am being deported, am I?"
"No one is ever deported from his own country."
"Bribed with a post, silenced, got rid of?"
"No. Not at all. Saved from ridiculing yourself and embarrassing everybody. You are being given a chance to serve your country in the capacity of a Councillor abroad. To be frank with you, it is something I wouldn't do. But I am not the General, nor am I the Minister to the Presidency, two souls generous as the angles which protect them."
(Sweet and Sour Milk, p.199)

"Sweet and Sour Milk" received extremely favorable reviews in the British press and also on the BBC. Critics have praised the novel for its effective imagery (although the image of Somalia as a puppet satellite of the USSR is now dated) and have found considerable skill and depth in Farah's use of the English language as his medium. The novel effectively reveals the complexities of life, it has been shown, and blends mythic and local references with cosmopolitan and humanistic ones. One critic has stated that with "Sweet and Sour Milk" Nuruddin Farah has become one of his continent's major novelists. Farah's most recent novel is "Sardines". The author continues many of the themes of his previous three books, and particularly focuses upon sexual exploitation and political repression. Continuity is further achieved by the presence of - or reference to - some characters met in the earlier works,

such as Ebla, Awil, Loyaan and Soyaan.

The plot of "Sardines" is sparse, and looks at a short but critical period in the life of Medina, who has been removed from her job as editor of Somalia's only daily newspaper because she will not follow the party line. Through a series of flashbacks and vignettes we also meet some of Medina's close friends and relatives, most of whom constitute part of the 'privilegentsia' of their nation. They are highly educated and cosmopolitan, and share to varying degrees an antipathy for what they see as a fascist regime holding their nation in a potentially disastrous iron grip.

"Sardines" might be approached as a psychological and philosophical novel as well as a political one. It is written from a woman's point of view, and reveals considerable insight into the feelings between mother and daughter and between women friends. Marriage, divorce, extra-marital affairs, abortion, rape and female circumcision all find a place in the story, and meanwhile poverty, frustration and disintegration permeate the atmosphere of Mogadishu much as they do the Dublin of James Joyce. A lot of action takes place in the form of internal monologue:

"Here Medina was drowned in a meandering stream of reminiscences, she was flooded with a rivulet of memories which abandoned her on the bends and creeks of a ditch. Would someone fling her a life-belt? Would someone stretch out a little finger for her to hold on to? And her mother Fatima bint Thabit was there, veiled from the top of her head to the tip of her toes in the dark traditional length of pardah. Noons in those days were hot and pungent with capsicum; noons in those days smelt of garlic and onions and quarrelsome children. And there was a bedridden monstrosity, Medina's grandfather, who had large eyes and a mouth ravenous as a locust's. His cheeks had pouches like a baboon's and he chewed with tobacco-stained teeth and breathed venom. He was unkind to Medina and to the women in the household; he was the typical authoritarian patriarch. "A woman needs a man to intercede for her and present her to Allah; a woman's God is her husband", he would go as far as misquoting the Koran. She hated him." (Sardines, p.53f)

The language of "Sardines" is competent and urbane, yet use of frequent metaphors and similes give the book at times an almost poetic quality:

"Her feet domiciled in the shapelessness of a pair of Chinese rubber sandals like animals in a zoo." (Sardines, p.72)

"Sandra was uneasy like a liar caught at an unguarded moment, like someone reminded of an inconsistency in the anecdote told to a group of enthusiastic listeners.

Medina left, polite as a maid on the day of pay." (Sardines, p.210)

A moth that has been circling a lamp is described:

"The moth, now de-winged, died and its body broke in two. Like a myth, it fell apart, and lay by the flames of the paraffin lamp into which it had flown hero-like, head first. It lay there, it lay dead, a martyred insect, unmourned by its companions that revolved round the light frenziedly like Cherokee Indians preparing a tribal assault on the technology of this century when armed with the weapons of another epoch." (Sardines, p.211)

One reviewer of "Sardines" (cf. Pullin 1982) has summed up Nuruddin Farah as a "disturbing writer" whose linguistic abilities sometimes overpower both the author and the reader, yet whose vitality, compassion, insight and talent demand recognition. There is certainly no doubt that at the present time he is the Somali writer most widely published and read around the world, and the one we are most likely to hear more of in the future.

Only the passage of time will reveal the direction that Somali literature is to take from here. As stated at the outset of this paper, the literature is young, exploratory, newly finding its way in a literary world that is well established and in some cases ancient. Somali literature can bring a freshness to this world since it deals with a culture that is new and exotic to many readers, and because it does not appear to be willing to sacrifice its traditional oral roots.

Much of what has so far been written inevitably deals with the need for social and political reform, as has been the case with many emerging African literatures. With the later novels of Nuruddin Farah, however, a noticeable cosmopolitanism is also achieved, permitting this author's work to be compared, for example, with the work of Soyinka - and in some cases with that of Joyce. The interested non-Somali reader can only wait with open-minded anticipation for both the translations and English-language literary works that are undoubtedly to come.

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