

## IDENTITIES, WOMEN & CULTURAL CLICHES

AN OLD MAN COMES HOME EARLIER than expected. Upon approaching the open door he utters, in Somali, the customary "Hoodi" to announce his return. The woman in the room with the open door is changing out of one dress into another, and she is extremely flustered. She does not answer, speaking the standard "Hooden", to welcome him in. Meanwhile, she reaches for the first thing that is available to hand, a pair of shoes, with which she covers her naked body. And shouts to the man, "But who is it?" The man identifies himself.

Relieved, the woman takes her time, ultimately finding within herself the calmness with which to search for something more decent to cover her nudity before saying, "Forgive me dear Father, I thought you were a man!"

WOMEN'S BODIES HAVE BEEN THE SITE of so much controversy the world over. The story given above puts me in mind of a hardly documented incident, which concerns a group of women, who bared their breasts in front of an assembled crowd of mainly men. The place was Kismayo in the south of Somalia, the time early 1988, the context: enormous frustrations at the excess of Siyad's dictatorship, not to speak of political apathy and inaction, especially on the part of the men. A great deal of turmoil resulted from this sex-specific act.

There was a sense of public unease, the haruspices interpreting the woman's action as a transgression, a sign of worse things to come, a countdown to the total collapse of a centuries-old status quo. Meanwhile, Kismayo's harbingers of folly spoke of women preparing to take over the opposition, of AIDs spreading in devastating vengeance, of families fragmenting, and the breakdowns leading the entire society to the awaited end. At stake was culture, the death of which was now thought to be certain.

The augurers, for their part, held the view that for women to fall back on the pre-political modus of exposing their chests was adumberative of a cultural crisis, a butch act, which came closer to telling the story about gender than any other act they

witnessed all their life. Probing further, they discovered in the collapse of the particular in the universal, the personal in the political, and they took the discord at the hearth level as being symbolic of the discord at the national level. They argued that at the height an autocrat's rule, especially towards the end of his reign, the difference between the sexes is blurred to the point where you couldn't tell them apart, the two becoming one and the same, in submissive recognition of the supreme authority. In this scenario, men become women, women men, the terms defining either rendered provisional.

In the light of what occurred, you could say that the women gave politics a more intimate profile, bringing to the fore questions about the identity crisis bedevilling the entire nation. In other words, the women took politics out of the privacy of the hearth into the public domain, allowing the participants of the debate to be, and to remain less parochial, as more people got involved. No doubt a desperate gesture, the women's undertaking was a response to a need the men had failed to meet. Call it "body metaphor" if you please, but when women are dis-clothed and in public, nothing goes as planned. The political landscape undergoes a drastic change, sex becomes politicized, and politics is made as intimate an affair as one's own body.

Covered in polemic, women's bodies are meant not to be revealed at one and the same time to strangers and intimates alike. Otherwise, the aura attached to them might be compromised, and the supreme numen, in which feminine spirits preside, sullied. This points up a giant weakness in the argument, for if women's bodies are revered, why is it that their souls are at the same very instant humbled to those of men's?

In phallus-centred cultures such as ours, society tends to be fearful of undomesticated female sexuality. While we do not conceal our women under veils as great numbers of Muslims do the world over, we, in Somalia, perform uglier, more explicit forms of sexual constraint, female infibulation. We won't speak of the bodily torture meted out to the self-perception of young females at such a tender age.

Nor do I need reminding that we are unIslamic when it comes to our traditional dress culture, our women displaying so much of their bodies, wearing guntiino- or see-through dirac-robes, both garments allowing women's breasts, navel-buttons and the contour of their figures to be within general and specific view, covertly revealing as much as they hide. You ask: How did the people of Kismayo react to the women's more blatant baring of their breasts?

SHOCKED, SOME OF THE MEN were downright rude, and they booed. But the majority did not know how to react, some covering their faces with their fingers splayed, staring; others standing there, mesmerisedly gawking. Without a doubt everybody knew the country to be on a binge of despair, and maybe both the participants and the spectators of the demonstration took the women's disconsolate behaviour for what it was meant to be: the utopian despondency of a society ill at ease with its failed condition.

From experience, those <sup>men</sup> who belonged in the same house as the breast-baring women knew that, before long, they would suffer humiliation at the hands of the Security. And indeed they did. Taken in, they were interrogated, and asked again and again what they knew as husbands, as brothers, as male relations of the women living in the same compound as they. Those who were lucky enough to be released were reprimanded for not having alerted the authorities of what the regime viewed as a treasonable act.

The men had more questions than they had answers for. For instance they wished to know from the Security how come the women who organized the demonstration were let go, dry and free, after the crowd had been dispersed, while all their male relations had been picked up, to be bodily frisked and humiliated? Was it because the women were believed to be incapable of staging a public action without the support or knowledge of their menfolk?

A handful of male politicians met later that very day in a room, in secret, after dark. This group of select men resolved, in the small hours of the night, to form a fighting force, which was to be recruited from their immediate families, a militia bonded by blood.

The women, when they learnt of this, were shocked, because setting up a militia bonded by blood was not what they had in mind. After all, women are at best cynical about blood-bonding, and at worst doubtful about the efficacy of the bonding. If women find it impossible to be loyal to the idea of the clan, which is based on male-bonding, it is because they know the clan as a collective to be hostile to and dismissive of their standing in society. The clan oligarchy prides itself on lording over the affairs of women, often taking pleasure in betraying the interests of females, committing treacheries which they perform with great masculine elan.

Which explains why almost all the women you talk about the civil war interpret the current community-based mutinies in the peninsula in ways that are antithetical to the views held by the generality of men. Where men mystify politics, glorifying their role in it, women are distrustful of the warring and peace-making processes; where men behave like self-raising yeast, making a mystery of how bread is baked, and how they dispense with it and who eats it, women are more pragmatic about their involvement, and are down to earth when they speak about their contributions. What's more, women are conscious of the interdependence of the genders, putting more of an effort to keep the peace. More to the point, women are aware of the importance, not of blood-bonded identities, but of the multiplicity of connections the warring communities have, seeing themselves now as mothers to children of one family, now as daughters of another, and on remarriage, as mothers to offspring from yet another lineage. The men remain true to their father's ancestral identity, the women not.

When you come down to it, women know the idea-construct of their identities to be a mere artifice, they know how much they contribute to the making of them, how much owe existence to a male construct, that is to say, to myths invested with authority by power politics. They know the men who stage the mutinies, know the women who have been made victims of the aggression generated by these bloody confrontations, now as war booties to the winners, now as peace gifts, items given away in marriage to settle a dispute between men. The management of a war is largely

a man's job. Even so, women are not always hostage victims in the firing-line, willing fodder feeding the war-machine. A handful contribute to the effort as much as the men murdering, but the majority act as arousers of emotions, as movers of men's morale, , or as hostage victims in the firing line. Amorphous in the extreme, women's identities alter with every change of their status.

From the fracas of what the haruspices described as the women's act of trespass on the territory of male politics, women could conclude only one thing: that whether the society is on a clan-based mutinous footing, or delighting in the prosperity of peace, men continue to be the inventors of the rationale on the basis of which life is lived. Now the mistake they made is that neither women's positions nor identities are unitary in the way men tend to think. Because even the most downtrodden woman has her own self-perception, which she may choose not to reveal, a contrary image ensconced in the native rootedness of a woman's hidden secret to herself.

By baring their breasts and putting their honour, or what there was of it, on the line, the women of Kismayo exposed a weaknesses in the scheme of identity constructs. They exposed that men think of them as secret enemies, labouring in the service of some alien interest, that they are fickle-mindedly untrustworthy. Local wisdom compares women to shadows, formlessly adjusting their shapes to the external circumstances prevailing.

CULTURAL CLICHES HAVE IT THAT there is a fluidity to the identity of women, a fluidity, which is thought to be not of their making. The amorphousness, the cliches explain, is rather suggestive of an absence, pointing to a major lack. Most Somali men are of the opinion that a woman's identity is incomplete, requiring reference to a man, a husband, a father, a brother or some other male relation. Society places a younger male sibling on a higher pedestal than his sister, whatever her age.

It was instructive how, standing in awe of the women baring their breasts, the men in Kismayo asked one another not who the

women were, but whose women they were, without granting any value to the women's identities, and insisting that who mattered were the men, deemed to be "responsible" for them. And so it was in keeping with this rationale that the State Security did not take down the names of the women, but of the men whom they later picked up, to make them account for their women's behaviour. In legal terms, our society places women on the same lowly pedestal as all non-persons, less privileged than an underage.

A woman is her calling. A widower retains his identity. Not so a "widow". For society believes that the woman is defined by the loss of more than a husband, "widow", in their minds being a notion suggestive of deficiencies, a woman forfeiting her place in the family, and eventually her identity. It was rather curious that, tortured, some of men disowned the women ring-leaders, whom they described as being odd, in the sense of being unattached, single, widows, spinsters or divorcees. It would transpire that the most outspoken of them were widows. At pains to distance themselves from the inspirers of the breast-baring incident, most of the men laid the blame at the door of a widow, with no blood connection to their own communities. The chief of the State Security branch was reported as saying jest, "He is indeed hopeless who expects women, whether these be widows, divorcees, married, single or spinsters to lead a campaign against a regime!" And yet ...!

Throughout Somali history, at least at the symbolic level, women are elevated to a mythical status, the country referred to as "Motherland", in acknowledgement of their "special" place. In poetry, they serve as a metaphor central to the nation's psyche, a poetic metaphor representing the integrity and honour of the land. And yet you discover that we treat them as lowly as door-mats.

Men are uncomfortable seeing their women jump into troubled political waters. Although not dressed as demurely as their counterparts in the Muslim world, our women are discreet with their lovers, some seldom showing the whole extent of their full bodies even to their husbands. Although there is no knowing when you might run into one who acts demurely in public, but who, as

the expression has it, might pull a butterfly on you.

There is a Mogadiscio tradition in which a bride does not reveal her face to the groom on their first wedding night until after the payment of a waji-fur fee, the settlement to be made not necessarily in cash. Treated as treasures, women's bodies are sexualized: a woman is a face is a fee is a treasure! In the idiom of a Somali satirist, "Naagi waa naas", meaning "Women are breasts!" a declaration explicating what is implicated.

But men are many things all at once, more than the sum of their members, which are often enough on public display, in as many forms as there are sizes, in as many possibilities as there are occasions. You see men of all ages and all walks of life half-crouched and busily urinating or easing themselves by the roadside, their fingers deftly holding their clothes away from the possible spatter of waste. Once done, they shake their manhood with vigour, and then place a pebble at the opening to dry up the urine, which impurity should not come into contact with a man's clothes. That men uninhibitedly exhibit themselves to all and sundry is emblematic of their appropriation of all the power outside the hearth, legislating what passes for modesty insofar as women go, but not for themselves.

But why did the women's action lead to an impasse? Maybe what was bound to happen happened, because, as a group, the women did not prepare the groundwork from which to launch a political campaign, nor, apart from engaging in a pre-political melodrama, did they brace up themselves for the groundswell of disdain, which greeted their noble effort. In their hearts and minds, women know men to be loath to credit them with foresight. With no independent women's movement, and no bonding comparable to the one shared by men who swear their allegiance to the clan, any action undertaken by the women was bound to fail, until they established a solid movement independent from the interference of men, or became adept anglers in the troubled waters of politics.

In the anthropology of confrontation, the breast-baring anecdote underscores how scared men are of female sexuality, women challenging their proprietorial rights to their own bodies.

To be a Somali and a radical woman fighting for equality and social justice at that in these terrible times requires tremendous trust, a great deal of courage, and a bravura bordering on martyrdom.

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