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13-14 vol VII Article on Abdirahman Faris's maps

40. See Greenfield, *Ethiopia . . .*, *op cit*, p. 102. The Afan Oromo name for the Addis Ababa area is Finfine.

41. R. Pankhurst 'Fire Arms in Ethiopian History 1800-1975' *Ethiopian Observer*, Vol. 2 (London 1962), pp. 135-180 and 'The role of Fire Arms in Ethiopian Culture (16th to 20th Centuries)' *Journal des Africanistes*, Vol. 47, 2 (Paris 1977), p. 131-144.

42. Major W. Cornwallis Harris *The Highlands . . .*, *op cit*, Vol. 1, p. 303, remarked in 1844 'The Hawash (River Awash), here upwards of two thousand two hundred feet above the ocean, forms in this direction the nominal boundary of the dominions of the King of Shoa.'

R. Darkwah, *Shewa, Menelek . . .* *op cit*, p. 105, describes the Arusi campaign as 'the most sustained and the most bloody which Menelik undertook.'

It has become the fashion to write *Arsi* rather than *Arusi*.

43. M. Abir, *Ethiopia: The Era of the Princes: The Challenge of Islam and the Re-unification of the Christian Empire 1769-1855* (London 1968) provides an interesting background to these events.

Indigenous histories, some in Arabic exist.

44. See discussion of Girmame Neway's unpublished MA thesis 'The impact of the White Settlement Policy in Kenya' (Columbia 1954) in R. Greenfield *Ethiopia . . .*, *op cit*, p. 341-351.

45. Children believed to be those of local leaders who were taken 'hostage' to Addis Ababa for elementary and even secondary education were sometimes found not to be so.

46. R. Greenfield, *Ethiopia . . .*, *op cit*, p. 273.

47. At the very time in 1960 that the late Emperor Haile Sellassie was attracting the attention of a shocked world by offering scholarships (never taken up) for the 'orphans of

Sharpville', the spearing of an imperian tax collector near Dilla in Sidamo was followed by such violent retribution that students in the then University College (including Amharas) draw a comparison in their subsequent protest.

This serious incident was almost reminiscent of the 14th century when 'they . . . demolished the mosques, burnt the towns with fire and destroyed the food of the country and they killed man and beast, men and women, old and young, through the power of God', G.W.B. Huntingford, *Amde Seyon* (London 1965), p. 104.

48. See sections on Oromo or Galla nationalism in C. Clapham, *Haile Selassie's Government* (London 1969), pp. 80-82; J. Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity* (Oxford 1974), pp. 51-70 and passim; P. Gilkes, *The Dying Lion* (London 1975), pp. 204-226; M. & D. Ottaway, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution* (New York 1978), pp. 82-89, 90-94 etc.

49. R. Greenfield, *Ethiopia . . .*, *op cit*, p. 312, 453, 457 and passim.

50. Matchet, *West Africa* (London, 16 July 1979), p. 1257, noted that 'Currently 15 out of 16 members of the Standing Committee and 9 of the remaining 11 members of the dergue's Central Committee are Amharas. So are 31 out of the 37 Ministers and Permanent Secretaries; 6 of the 7 Commissioners; 13 of the 14 Regional Administrators and all 14 of their deputies' and commented 'Emperor Menelik II, architect of the modern empire-state at the time of the "Scramble for Africa", could never have allowed such an obvious concentration of power. Nor could His (late) Imperial Majesty, Haile Sellassie I, under whom the empire reached its furthest extent.'

Analysis of other appointments—for example in the diplomatic corps, reveals similar proportions.

## SOMALI LITERATURE IN EUROPEAN LANGUAGES\*

David F. Beer

Although Somalia has produced little internationally-noticed written literature as yet, some Somali writing exists in three different European languages, indicating that like other Africans, a few Somalis have felt the need to communicate creatively in a language of widespread currency. To appreciate this literature it is helpful to understand the unique ethnic and political background of Somalia, a republic which occupies most of the Horn of Africa and holds the distinction of being the easternmost country on the continent. Except for the neighboring Republic of Djibouti, Somalia is perhaps the most homogenous nation in Africa both linguistically and culturally. While over a hundred languages are spoken in Ethiopia, Somalis speak one common language which, in spite of strong regional variations, serves in its standard form as a considerable unifying factor in a society traditionally nomadic and fragmented by clan rivalry. Further homogeneity is provided by the country's religion, Islam, to which the ancestors of the Somalis, an eastern Cushitic people, were converted by Arab coastal settlers centuries ago.

Colonialism has played a major part in recent Somali history and dates back to the mid-1800s. France initiated a European presence with the acquisition of the port of Obock from the Sultan of Tajura in 1862. This was followed in 1884 by the expansion of the port into a protectorate and the transferral, in 1887, of the protectorate's seat to Djibouti. Britain took over the northern coast of Somaliland in 1884 and established a protectorate

with Zeila as its chief port. In the 1890s Italy established her presence in what is now southern Somalia, and Ethiopia seized the Ogaden in the same decade; both areas were to become part of Italian East Africa in 1935. This part of Africa has thus been exposed to three European languages for some time, and to Arabic for several centuries.

In spite of the long presence of Arabic, little Somali writing has been produced in that language. The reasons are not hard to discover. Until recently few Somalis—even Moslim religious men—were completely literate in Arabic. Moreover, traditional schools using Arabic as the language of instruction have not emphasized literacy as much as memorizing the Koran, and had literacy schools existed it is doubtful many pastoral Somalis would have had the leisure to attend for long.

Although various proposals for making Somali a written language had been put forward since the early 1900s, no orthography was generally or officially accepted until 1973. Thus any literature in the indigenous language must of necessity be quite recent. However, over the centuries the Somalis have developed an unusually large and rich body of oral literature which is immensely popular throughout the country, and which has more than compensated for the lack of a written literature.<sup>1</sup>

With Arabic as the language used in most primary schools prior to 1973, and English, French and Italian given their own emphasis as official languages in the respective colonial areas, it was at least theoretically possible up to the mid-1970's for an educated Somali to be multi-lingual yet illiterate in his own language. The Somali press reflected this state of linguistic affairs until recently with publications only in Arabic, Italian and English, with of course French the journalistic language of former French Somaliland. Since 1973, however, the Ministry of Information and National Guidance in Mogadishu has published the *Hidigta October*, a daily newspaper in the Somali language.

As their rich corpus of oral literature indicates, Somalis are far from insensitive to the finer arts even if they so far possess a meagre written tradition. In Somali culture oral poetry, singing, folkdancing and drama have always been vital activities. Poetic ability is highly valued and admired, and poetry recitals form a popular pastime. Major

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themes are war, peace, love, and camels. Although formal theatre is an imported art form dating only from the early 1950's, it also has become increasingly popular, and a number of theatre groups now exist which tour the country regularly, bringing entertainment to a nation of over three million people, three quarters of whom are still pastoralists.

A few English translations of Somali oral literature have been made, but they do not appear to have influenced the production of writing in English, as such translations have in Ethiopia. The pioneering work is *A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose* (Nairobi: The Eagle Press, 1954). Compiled by Margaret Lawrence, this collection was reprinted in 1971 by Irish University Press, Dublin, and is an interesting and helpful book. Some of the poems and stories in the collection are paraphrased. Explanatory notes and a long introduction add to the value of *A Tree for Poverty*, although some of the information provided in the latter is now understandably dated.

More significant is B.W. Andrzejewski's and I.M. Lewis' *Somali Poetry: An Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964). As its editors state at the outset, the book offers an insight into an extensive and rich oral literature. *Somali Poetry* is informative not only because of the poems it contains, which are presented with parallel Somali and English texts, but also because of the lengthy introduction provided. This introduction gives important information on the Somali people, their history, and their language. Since the book was written when Somalia still had no official orthography, i.e. before 1973, full attention is paid to this problem and detailed information on the systems of transcription used is furnished. The final section of the introduction deals with the characteristics of Somali verse and the biographies of the poets represented.

Three kinds of poems are recorded by Andrzejewski and Lewis in this book: classical, traditional and modern, and religious verse in Arabic. The classical poems deal with such subjects as ingratitude, theft, politics, and war; one graphically warns of the respect to be shown powerful people:

A forest with lions and a place where the but-  
tocks and  
manes of beasts of prey are seen,

Can only be crossed by stilling all sound; leave them  
unroused. (p. 65, lines 1-2)

Several brief love songs are recorded. Some are modern "hello," first made popular by lorry drivers and now widely broadcast on radio much like "pop" songs:<sup>2</sup>

A flash of lightning does not satisfy thirst,  
What then is it to me if you pass by? (p. 146)

National pride and politics provide material for modern Somali verse just as it does for classical poetry. Thus the unification of ex-Italian Somalia with the former British Somaliland, and the resulting creation of the independent Somali Republic, is celebrated in an anonymous poem:

Freedom and dignity have reached us,  
We have brought together the two lands.  
Glory to God!  
Say: 'It is God's victory,  
It is God's victory!  
We are victorious.'  
Beat the song, join the dance!  
Everyone, with all your might!  
And now let us finish, cease!  
It is God's victory!  
It is God's victory! (p. 148)

A recent piece of Somali literature in translation is Hassan Sheikh Mumin's play, *Leopard Among the Women* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974). Translated by B.W. Andrzejewski, the work was listed in the MLA Bibliography for 1974. Like the poems in *Somali Poetry*, the play is printed with parallel texts in English and Somali, the latter being a transcript of a tape-recording made during a performance at the National Theatre in Mogadishu in 1968. Hassan Sheikh Mumin (b. 1930) works for the Cultural Department of the Somali Ministry of Education, and is from northwestern Somalia. He is a well-known poet, broadcaster, and actor in his country, and has composed several poems and some very successful radio dramas.

This particular play was chosen for translation by Professor Andrzejewski from over three hundred

plays produced since the birth of the Somali theatre. His choice was based on popularity, poetic value, and relative freedom from obscure or detailed political allusion. As in Ethiopia, the Somali stage is a vehicle for social edification, and drama usually provides undisguised moralistic and didactic messages. *Leopard Among the Women* portrays a scheming Mogadishu rake who prides himself on how many innocent women he has seduced (eighty at the latest count), and who fools yet another young girl into believing he has legitimately married her. The couple, Shabeel ("the leopard") and Shallaayo ("she-who-repents") is contrasted to another couple, Diiddan and Diiddane ("she-who-rejects-evil" and "he-who-rejects-evil"). The latter pair get married in order to take care of an abandoned child of divorced parents. No dramatic climax or denouement is involved; the playwright is content to allow dialogue, song, repartee, and situation in his sixteen scenes to speak for themselves on the plight of abandoned women and children in Mogadishu.

The rich Somali imagery and alliterative language are, of course, all but impossible to reflect in the English text of *Leopard Among the Women*, although both are hinted at in the label names of the characters mentioned above. Like *Somali Poetry*, this publication is additionally valuable for the introduction provided by Professor Andrzejewski. Forty-odd pages cover such subjects as the nature of Somali drama, social and cultural settings, stage directions, and the problems involved in the transcription of Somali. Three scholarly appendices are also included, plus detailed notes which help illuminate many allusions and references, the full meaning of which would otherwise remain hidden to the non-Somali reader.

The first Somali author to write in a European language is William J.F. Syad (b. 1930). 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. After the publication of his first volume of poetry, *Khamsine* (Paris: Editions Présence Africaine, 1959), Syad entered service with the government of the Somali Republic. The volume consists of sixteen poems in French and nine in English, with a preface by Léopold Senghor who is

generous in his praise for Syad and his work:

Il a conservé quelque chose 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. (p. 7)

The poems in *Khamsine* are mostly quite brief, some consisting of little more than half a dozen two-word lines. Syad's lines are characteristically short, few being more than four or five words in length. 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 which sets the mood and at the same time reveals why the poet has named his collection after the wind which blows from the Sahara for a brief period 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 grâce (p. 11)

This ephemeral, fragile quality is further developed in subsequent poems. In "Ni Poète . . . Ni Écrivain . . ." Syad appears to create his poetic stance:

Je Te prie de croire  
Je ne suis  
ne poète  
ni écrivain  
mais une pensée  
vouée à l'éternel *néant*  
où tout est vibration



dans l'engrenage transitoire  
où tout est rien  
je ne suis  
qu'une vibration  
dans la myriade des mortels (stanza 3, p. 13)

Although many of the poems are airy contemplations on the fragility and passing nature of love, others look to Somalia for their inspiration. Thus "L'Ange aux Ailes Brisées" reconstructs a Somali legend:

J'ai rêvé  
que dans l'antique légende  
de mon pays natal  
existait un ange  
banni à jamais  
du néant vibrant  
aux ailes brisées  
par le feu du Mal, (stanza 1, p. 29)

while in "Hier" we find the poet's sense of his origins combined with the spirit of his love poems:

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

Et comme  
ce sable fin  
au creux  
d'une main  
tu glissais  
dans le passé  
où l'esprit  
seul  
peut glaner (lines 7-20 p. 44)

The English poems in *Khamsine* mostly maintain the same style as the French ones, but some of the six grouped under the heading of "Nationalism" are not only noticeably long works but are also characterized by a fierce patriotism and imagery far removed from the tenor of the French poems. Many

lines come close to cliché, and as in the French poems, all punctuation is dispensed with. Anti-colonialism and Somalia's independence are the main themes. In "When Dawn will Rise," first written in 1954, we hear a clarion call for liberty and independence interwoven with the dream of the greater Somalia which will one day reunite the Somali populations of Ethiopia, northern Kenya, and former French Somaliland. "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 countries to gain independence in the 1960's.

Syad's later work consists of more of the same kinds of French and English poems. His subsequent two volumes are *Cantiques* and *Harmoniques* (Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1976). No information is given about the poet in either volume, and his earlier *Khamsine* is not mentioned. Only two poems in the volume are dated, one for 1960 and the other for 1963, indicating that the collections represent the work of a considerable span of years. There is no indication of which are earlier and which are later poems.

*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:

une infime  
partie  
de mon âme  
repose  
ce soir  
dans le creux  
de tes  
mains (p. 125)

Focus on the immediate moment, the present emotion, is required — we can hope for no more. The poet attempts as a lover to capture "Une voix / une âme / Un Instant / de ma vie" (p. 25), since for him love exists almost excruciatingly in a moment's

glance, a shadow, a hint, a smile: "mon âme / FRÉMIT / à ton sourire" (p. 78). In spite of his claim, however, that

Ma profession  
de foi  
est l'extase  
de ton  
âme en délire, (p. 111)

some of Syad's poems appear to come closer to being tributes to "ce dieu / païen / idole / de l'Amour" (p. 105).

Two poems in *Cantiques* stand out from the rest in that their subject is Ethiopia and Ethiopians. These works, written in Addis Ababa at a dinner table, we are told, are eulogies to the "Belles Filles d'Ethiopie" and the "Terre D'Aethiopia." A sense of the quiet dignity of the Ethiopian women is evoked in the former, while the latter creates a feeling for the grandeur and history of that nation. Syad provides footnotes for both poems, which helps with a number of his allusions, and it is noteworthy that in one of these footnotes he refers to L.S. Senghor as his "respecté Maire."

The companion volume *Harmoniques* consists of the same kinds of randomly arranged short poems, often untitled, and mostly in French. Many are no more than very brief word-pictures, glimpses of a thought, emotion, or fancy, and are developed no further:

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

A few poems are quite introspective, but most are addressed to an unidentified loved one, as in *Cantiques*. Indeed, the only unity offered in these volumes is the brevity and tone with which the loved one is addressed; no kind of progression, biographical, chronological, or otherwise, appears to exist. Occasionally a page mystifies the reader, as for instance page 49 in *Harmoniques*, where the words OYSTER BAY appear alone but do not seem to be the title of a poem, section, or anything else. Fragments of popular Somali song appear without warning in the texts, reiterating the same romantic

attitude found in Syad's own work. "Toi" and several other words are often inexplicably capitalized in Syad's work; we are left to guess why. Frequent juggling with the visual appearance of many of the poems by random line spacing and length seems to be equally arbitrary. Although only a brief section in *Harmoniques* is entitled "Effluves," in reality perhaps most of Syad's poems might so be labeled:

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

The only other Somali poet to so far write and publish in a European language is Mohamed Said Samantar (b. 1928). Samantar was born in Wardere and was educated at the Istituto Magistrale and the Istituto Universitario di Diritto ed Economia di Mogadiscio. He later attended the University of Rome, and holds a degree in political science. He is now a Somali diplomat who became ambassador to Italy in 1970 and ambassador to France in 1974. Given his educational background and career it is not surprising that his poetry is written in Italian, and translated into French. The published collection is *La pioggia è caduta!!! a plu!* (Rome: Tipografia Editrice Italia, 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 with parallel French translations; the title of the volume is also the title of the longest poem in the collection.

A brief preface in Italian only by Adriano Miranda 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 experiences 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 background, noting that he was born at the foot of a tree.

Fourteen poems written over a quarter of a century scarcely form a significant corpus for analysis, but in general it might be said that the earlier ones,



written in the late 1940's, deal with nationalism and imprisonment. In "Libertà/Liberté," dated 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 correvano nelle verdi foreste della nostra boscaglia" (lines 11-12). "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 images of camels, wood, milk, lions and shepherds help evoke a nostalgic picture of the Somali homeland, while other imagery reveals the brutal realities of colonial domination. "Il progioniero di Warder/Le prisonnier de Warder" (1947) is a moving portrait of a political prisoner in a dark cell who dreams 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 come. "Anima ferita/Ame blessée" (1965) describes metaphorically and romantically the passage from innocence to experience, a theme also found in the poems dealing with growing Somali nationalistic awareness. "Lumumba" (1963) is both a praise poem to the Congolese leader and a lament for his untimely death, and includes a refrain-like quality similar to that found in Somali oral poetry.

"Lumumba" is a good example of how the French translations of Samantar's poems are sometimes victims of the inevitable *traduttori traditori*, particularly as far as lineation is concerned. Yet the spirit of his poetry appears in their French versions, as is evident in "Africa, fiore appassito/Afrique, fleur déjà fanée" (1965), a poem 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)

Several poems in this collection show, like the one just quoted, a concern for Africa as a continent. This pan-Africanism is particularly evident in a 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 figlie dell'immenso continente africano!" At least two poems confront the world-wide issues of 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 pugna 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. Yusuf Duhul is a Somali who for political reasons left his country and now lives in London; he is a lawyer by profession. His short story "The Last Morning of Buttonnose" has been published in the journal *Okike* (No. 7, April 1975, 11-25). It is an effectively-written story of the last few hours of a Mogadishu streetboy's life, prior to being run over by a car. Ahmed is nicknamed Buttonnose because of his flat nose, and through his thoughts and feelings we vividly enter the world of an urban, impoverished ragamuffin. The story has no room for sentiment, but is uncompromisingly factual, and leaves an unforgettable impression.

Abdi Sheik-Abdi is a Somali who lived in the United States from 1968 to 1975. He studied literature and received a degree from the State University of New York at Albany. His first short story "The Luncheon," was published in *Black World* (Vol. 24, No. 8, June, 1975, 56-66). In it, a misunder-

standing 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. There is some good characterization and description in the story. Another story by Abdi Sheik-Abdi has appeared in *Okike* (no. 10, May, 1976, 1-4), and is entitled "The Man Who Shot the Sky." This brief tale is based on Somali folklore regarding why the sky and the earth are so far apart now, thus preventing many of mankind's prayers being heard in Heaven.

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. The novel, *From a Crooked Rib* (London, 1970), has its setting in Italian Somaliland and from internal 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 Nuruddin Farah 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 the 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 Belet 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 the only place to flee to, and there she quickly passes from innocence to experience. Mirrored in miniature here is the general problem of urbanization in Somalia, where an increase in urban population of over 200% between 1950 and 1970 brought with it the usual erosion of old values and increased economic and social problems.

Elba's town cousin soon finds it expedient to marry her off for gain, and she avoids this 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 learned a great deal else also, and is ready to use men as she feels they use her. Accordingly, she becomes the secret wife — in effect the whore — of a wealthy man while Awill is away, and discards him as soon as her husband returns. The theme of the exploiter exploited unfolds in the context of the relationship between the sexes in Somalia, and the author's obvious sympathies with Ebla enable him to convey a message similar to that found in *Leopard Among the Women*.

It is hard to decide whether *From a Crooked Rib* is primarily a sociological novel or a novel of character. The story is purely Ebla's story, seen predominantly through her eyes. She has been brought up as a Somali nomad who cannot read or write her own name, and she is unknowing about town life. Yet she is very much her own person, with an almost thoroughly existential approach to life whenever it suits her. She has an enquiring and analytical mind, and accepts the basic loneliness of the individual with the attitude of "everybody for himself." Thus she has been able to desert her dependent grandfather without caring whether he lives or dies. Her attitude is at least partly due to her resentment of the role she must play as a woman in Somali culture, with its subordination, vulnerability, and constant dreary labor. As she develops through her experiences in Belet Wene and Mogadishu, Ebla wins what she feels is complete independence from relatives, friends, and men in particular, and as the novel ends she appears to achieve the subtle dominance over her husband that she has subconsciously wished for all along.

Despite occasional stylistic awkwardness, *From a Crooked Rib* creates a valid and lively picture of a Somali woman's world when she is caught up in a conflict between her own goals and those her culture dictates for her. Realism abounds in the novel; the reader is not spared details of sexual habits, female circumcision, messy nose blowing, or lice. Description of the crudities of nomadic life on one



hand is balanced by the awareness of the repulsion a tribesman can feel for town life, all effectively highlighting the problems of Somali pastoral society at odds with urbanization.

Nuruddin Farah's second novel, *A Naked Needle* (London, 1976), displays considerable development in the writer's abilities. *A Naked Needle* has both more breadth and depth than *From a Crooked Rib*, 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 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. As far as plot goes, this is it. Hanging on this scanty structure, however, 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 the life around him. He has done a thesis on James Joyce overseas, and is a sophisticated young man who loves cerebral gymnastics and allusions to such wide-ranging figures as Freud, Nietzsche, Prometheus, Plato and Albee. He is a complete idealist regarding the Revolution, 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 Koschin's internal monologues the reader gets 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. A public toilet is described thus:

In the toilet, squalor hit him in the face. I hit those that don't hit back, squalor seems to say. A very badly ventilated cubicle, roughly cemented, with four hangers nailed to the four corners of the walls, not to mention the no-longer

usable chewingsticks all over the floor. Cockroaches appear to be very much at home, they stream in and out of the general-pit. Someone has missed the target by a few centimetres and has painted a Picasso-Modernissimo on the edges. Some people can never notice holes.

(pp. 11-12)

Soon our vision is expanded, with a view of the capital:

Mogadiscio. Mogadixo. Maqaldisho. Muuqdisho. Its populace: gansters 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 everybody 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 puppets of Prometheus, the Cupbearers of Zeus! Bad blood, the worst there is.

(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. In this sense perhaps it heralds a coming of age for the European-language novel from the Horn of Africa, and assumes the same on the part of its readers.

At this time Nuruddin Farah has a new novel, *Sweet and Sour Milk*, which has been accepted for publication in London. Abdi Sheik-Abdi also has now written a novel which is under serious consideration by a publishing house in England. Thus one can look forward to more Somali literature in English while at the same time wondering whether recent political events and reversals will give rise to the production of further creative writing, especially by those authors who, like Nuruddin Farah, now live outside of Somalia.

## Notes

\*This article is to be part of a book on African Literature to be published in the International Comparative Literature Association's series "A Comparative History of Literature in European Languages."

1. See I.M. Lewis, "Literacy in a Nomadic Society: the Somali Case," in Jack Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional*

*Societies* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 256-276.

2. See *Somali Poetry*, pp. 49-51. A complete scholarly study of this genre, which is also very readable and contains extensive English translations, is John W. Johnson, *Heellooy Heelleeloo: The Development of the Genre Heello in Modern Somali Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Publications, African Series, Volume 5, 1974).

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by Nimrod Novik

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