Modern Somali Prose Fiction: an Overview

ALI JIMALE AHMED

Somali National University - Mogadishu

This essay attempts to analyse some structural (in the old sense of the term) aspects of modern Somali prose fiction. These include: the type and role of narrators in the works to be discussed,[1] the question of time (what period does it cover and how straight forward narration, flashback, stream of conscience); and characterization. Finally, on the basis of the above structural aspects, what social and political conclusions can be drawn from reading these works.

Narrative art is not and has never been the monopoly of any one culture. It is an art form which is as old as the human language and which has different forms in different countries. Saying this, however, we must not be taken to deny the existence of universal characteristics; rather, these characteristics « need not conform to the criteria accepted in Europe and America ».[2] We all agree that narrative art, worldwide, « consists of making the narration attractive, stimulating and maintaining interest and using the language in such a way that it gives pleasure to the reader or the listener ».[3].

Having said that much, let us go directly to the works under scrutiny. These are Faarah M.J. Cawl's *Aqoondarro waa u nacab jacayl*, Shire J. Ahmed's *Rooxaan*, and Hussein Sh. Ahmed Kaddare's *Waasuge iyo Warsame*. The choice is not accidental. Cawl and Kaddare can be grouped under « transmuters ». They « transmute what belonged to the oral literature and adapt it to the new needs of written literature » (Andrzejewski 1975: 9). Moreover, the three stories are held together by some similarity in some aspects of their themes.
We discern in these stories, for example, a replica of a perennial problem: town life versus country life.

Waasuge iyo Warsame (« Waasuge and Warsame ») is based on the experiences of the eponymous heroes whose difference in perceptions sustains the whole nar-

---

[1] Xuseen Sh. Axmed « Kaddare », *Waasuge iyo Warsame*, (n.d. Mogadishu: Akadeemiyaha Cilmiga iyo Fanka). Shire J. Axmed, *Rooxaan*, (Mogadishu: WH iyo Ts, 1983). Faarax M.J. Cawl, *Aqoondarro Waa u Nacab Jacayl* (Mogadishu: WH iyo Ts, 1974). This book has been translated into English by Prof. Andrzejewski and published by Zed Press.

[2] Communicated in writing to the author by Prof. Andrzejewski, when I visited him in London, Jan. 1986.

[3] See note 2.

rative. Waasuge is a farmer from Middle Shabelle region, while Warsame, the other hero, is a camel herder from Mudug.

These two men meet on a coach bound for Mogadishu; each is going there to visit his kinsmen. The sharp difference in their understanding of life shows itself early in the journey, while the rest of the passengers are enthusiastically drawn to their (the heros') duel over oratory, articulation and poetic recitation.

Once in town, each one accumulates an interesting experience in his own way. But Waasuge seems to have enjoyed the strangest of experiences as he confronts an alien culture in the person of his daughter-in-law, Maria. Warsame, on the other hand, had a good welcome in the hands of his brother, Dirir, and his wife, Deeqa. The two old men were, however, invariably seen by townspeople as rustics and nomads devoid of civilization.

Again, on their homebound journey, the two protagonists auspiciously meet on a coach. Warsame stays with Waasuge for a few daays before he continues his journey to Mudug. Waasuge, too, visits Mudug at a later time. Each one of them gains a better understanding of the social reality which shapes the other's thinking.

The story ends with Waasuge's remembrance of a meeting of a homestead council in Mudug. He vididly remembers a poem about a pus not well suppurated which had been used by one of the defendants at the meeting. The poem states that it is pusillanimous to wishfully think that problems wither away unsolved. It also warns us not to settle for palliative measures for a cure. And with that ends the interesting story of Waasuge and Warsame.

The author, Kaddare, acknowledges in the body of the text the many poets he borrows from. The story also contains more than 20 proverbs. The narrator is a third person omniscient who pretends to be objective but who makes subtle remarks about his characters and their actions. The author makes use of narrative analysis rather than interior monologue. The story moves from a rural setting to an urban one and then back to a rural setting.

The poetic insertions in the works of Somali authors in the new medium of the novel reveals the importance of poetry in traditional Somali society. Through poetry, a poet can instigate people to action. This « magical efficacy » of the word is extinct in Western narrative. In the works under discussion, for example, the eponymous heroes Waasuge and Warsame, are described as men who are well versed in the traditions of their people. The protagonists can either recite an old poem or compose a new one.

The same is true about *Aqoondarro* ... (« Ignorance is the Enemy of love »), a true history recounted in fictionalized form. The hero is a dervish returning from a spy mission he has successfully carried out against the British in Aden. Cawrala, the heroine, is on the same boat that Calimaax (the hero) is on. A strong love relationship develops between them. But their love ends in tragedy as Cawrala dies of unrequited love and the effects of a forced marriage to a despotical husband. Calimaax dies within two years of Cawrala's death. Poetic insertions in this truly moving story, therefore, add credence to the authenticity of the real characters and events.

Shire Jaamac's *Rooxaan* (« The spirits »), on the other hand, does not contain poetic insertions or character poets, nor does the narrative prepare us for such a possibility. *Rooxaan* is the story of a 15 year old lad who because of his inquisitive mind finds it difficult to find someone who could furnish answers to

ontological questions which torment his young mind. With no answer forthcoming, Guhaad wastes no time but leaves his village for Mogadishu.

After 5 years in Mogadishu, Guhaad gets a job as a cashier at a restraunt. Things were going smoothly for him till one day a client steals 50 Shillings from the till while Guhaad was out for something. The owner, suspecting the young man to be a thief, sacks him there and then. Once out of a job, Guhaad goes through many hardships. At last, he is advised to consult with a seance. It takes him a lot of time and effort before he is able to bring out in the open the fradulent methods of the charlatan. And the story ends with a proverb: where light enters, darkness dissipates into thin air.

In reading this story, one is reminded of oral narratives, especially didactic ones which have a proverb as a core-cliche. Like other stories under discussion, the influence from the oral tradition is quite conspicuous in *Rooxaan*. There is nothing abstruse about this, as every trend in literature contains two kinds of genres — the one that the new form violates and wants to surpass, and the one that it endeavors to create.

And now a word or two about characterization in these stories.

The question of characterization in African literature in European languages has engendered a lively discussion with no definite answers thus far. It is fair to assume, I believe, that a similar debate will center on characterization in African language literatures. Taban Loliyong, a controversial African writer, contends that African traditions restrict the author in his attempt to give a complete description of characters in his works, considering the fact that characterization is a cardinal element in the European novel (Taban: 1964). Taban's argument is, no doubt, triggered off by Henry James':

> « What is a character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? What is either a picture or a novel that is not of character? What else do we seek in it or find in it? » (James 1984).

While one can hardly find fault with James' implication that there is no character devoid of action and no action, in its turn, is independent of character, yet one can decipher the deceptive nature of the above quote. Character which is more important than action is perhaps found only in present-day European narrative. Here, we are dealing with psychological narrative which « regards each action as a means of access to the personality in question, as an expression if not a symptom » (Todorov 1984: 67). For James, narrative action is transitive in the sense that the subject of the action is more important than its object. But this is not true of the Somali stories under scrutiny.

In these stories, character is sub-ordinate to action, and a character trait only provokes an immediate action. Guhaad in *Rooxaan*, for example, is inquisitive, therefore he asks questions; and when his questions are not answered, he goes to Mogadishu in search of answers. Inquisitiveness which is a character trait provokes the act of asking questions: his questions are not answered — dissatisfaction is a character trait and it provokes the act of going to Mogadishu.

It is also interesting to mention, and this is perhaps in contradistinction to James' conception of characterization, that characters in Somali stories are described physically. This is the « external approach to characterization ». The quack in *Rooxaan*, we are told, has two wives. Two of his front teeth have gold fillings. He has a large sideburn and he never laughs before the public. He also wears a loin cloth of the *Sabarhindi* type (imported from the far east and once a symbol

of status). His hands are unlike sandpaper, and his face is always anointed with an oily substance. The charlatan is never nippy, but he saunters. Knowing these physical descriptions about the seance will, no doubt, make it easy for us to understand his social status, mental state and will shed some light on why he does what he does. It would, therefore, be presumptuous on the part of anyone to assume that these stories « lack internal analysis of the characters, that there is no description of psychological states » (Todorov 1984). The existence of an inner life is taken for granted and not mentioned in the stories. And that is « neither a defect nor a limitation. It is simply a characteristic » (Scholes and Kellogg 1968: 166). What is more, it is asinine to believe that characterization is stacked along a vertical line, that one order of characterization is better than another. « To recognize that differences exist is the begining of wisdom » (Scholes and Kellogg 1968: 161).

Finally, each character in our stories under discussion is an embodiment of his society; he or she is a representative. This is true, for example, of the eponymous heroes Waasuge and Warsame who not only « serve as an axis of reference to one and the other » (Todorov 1984: 12), but also serve as an axis of reference to the kind of sub-culture each of them represents.

References

Andrzejewsky, B.W. 1975, « The rise of written Somali literature », *African research and documentation*, 9, 8.
Faarax M.J. Cawl, 1974, *Aqoondarro Waa u Nacab Jacayl*, Magadishu.
James, H. 1884, *The Art of Fiction*.
Hussein Sh. Ahmed Kaddare, *Waasuge iyo Warsame*, Mogadishu, Akadeemiyaha Cilmiga iyo Fanka.
Shire J. Ahmed, 1983, *Rooxaan*, Mogadishu.
Scholes R. and R. Kellogg, 1968, *The Nature of Narrative*, London, Oxford V. Press.
Todorov, T. 1984, *The Poetics of Prose*, (Trans. Richard Howard), New York, Cornell U. Press.