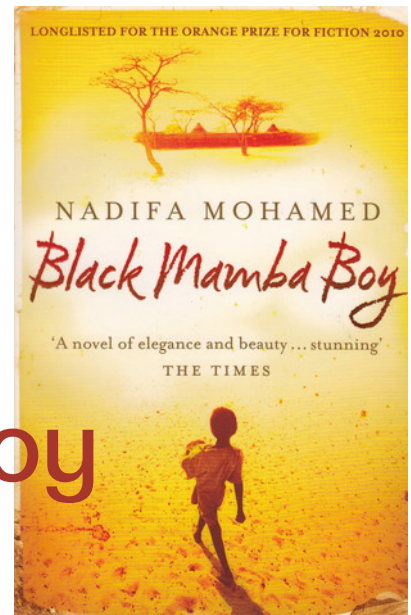


A book review on the Novel:

Black mamba Boy *Nadifa Mohamed*



by Abdifatah Mohamed Abdi

the Author: Born in Hargeisa (now in the defacto republic of Somaliland) in 1981, Nadifa Mohamed moved as a child to England in 1986 with her parents. Nadifa's Family was unable to return to Hargeisa and stayed permanently in the UK when the war broke out in Somalia.

The author lives now in London and her first novel, Black Mamba Boy was published in 2010. Her other works include 'The Fortune Men' and the more recent one is 'The Orchard of Lost Souls.'

Book summary

The black mamba boy was the 'Born a crime' of Guure's and Ambaro's firstborn. his parents lived quite impoverished life while Amabro was discontent with her husband's inability to provide for his family. Guure's Laziness being the first of a series of misfortunes cursed on

them, the family lost their younger daughter Kaahaweris, engulfed by a ruthless drought and things fall apart for them. Guure Migrated to Sudan, Ambaro to Yemen and the six years old Jama aka Goode later joined his mother in Aden.

Aden in Yemen, Ambaro worked in a coffee factory and lived on the roof of a house owned by a distant relative until she passed away from a disease that inflicted on her. In the evening Ambaro died, she told Jama the story of the black mamba that rested on her belly button listening to the heartbeat of the yet unborn Jama and finally sparing them. After Ambaro's death, the clansman in Aden sent Jama back to Hargeisa, Somaliland to live with a relative.

Jama worked as a Caracas carrier in Hargeisa and learned that his father is a driver in Sudan, and days passed as Jama contemplated on the gigantic mountains that surrounded Hargeisa mapping his way to Sudan until he accidentally finds a lorry to Djibouti where he survived on the generosity and the hospitality of a young couple. Jama aka Goode enjoyed his first impression of a wedding party, ate his first fish, and played with a merry-go-round in Djibouti.

on a steamboat on the red sea coast, Jama left Djibouti for Eritrea where he received the news of the death of his father. He then joined the Italian fascist army and fought for them; he also met his friend Shidane on the war front. Unbearable to the brutality of the Italian commanders' humiliation to the African Askaris Jama tried several times to escape and finally succeeded. He left Eritrea for Sudan and passed to Egypt after days of hunger and thirst crossing rivers, dunes, and jungles.

While in Egypt, Jama met with a Yibir friend and lived with him, deported together to Sudan, found a way to reach Palestine, and finally sneaked back to Egypt where they were so lucky to get British passports. As a British subject, Jama was able to join the British navy as a fireman to stoke the engine.

Jama's ships finally docked in Glasgow, Scotland. His next assignment was supposed to be to Canada, the land of the extreme colds, until he received that his wife in Eritrea Bethlehem gave birth to a son. Bethlehem was in Jama's dreams, he used to fantasize about being with her and traveling with her to all of where he has been to. Jama got his tattoo of a black mamba in London and finally returned to Eritrea where he wanted to father his son and give him the love, he wasn't fortunate to receive.

The book reviews

Black mamba boy is a novel based mostly on the life of the author's father. The story of Jama, the main character in the novel, is an adventurous journey of traversing all sorts of terrains in the Eastern part of Africa, the Gulf of Aden, North Africa, and Europe learning about people, history, and culture. Through Jama's struggle for survival in coming out of successive misfortunes that have seemed to plague his life including searching for his never-seen father and a better life, the writer marks points of great humanity and brutality as well in the story.

In this analysis of the book, however, we pick the two themes of 'Injustice' that existed in the political, social, and economic layers of the societies that Jama lived in during his journey and the theme of 'Deconstruction of African colonial histories' as it is told today in the Western World.

Deconstruction of African colonial histories

History is always a significant part of the current economic, social, and political dynamics of any country. The African historiography is split into three separate eras which are namely pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial times. Each one of these eras has its own features that make it different from the other two although they are highly connected.

Having noted that, how African histories are told, written, and represented in academia remains still Eurocentric. This is because of access to financial and other facilities needed to conduct research and raise the African voice in telling the African History is limited in the continent. Western academia, therefore, gets the chance in producing distorted and insufficient narratives about African colonial histories as they have the access to and control of the finances and techniques of knowledge production.

As a result of this, African history, as written in the west highly neglects the western imperialist drive and its implication in structures of exploitation and discrimination, as well as the fraught processes of separating colonized societies from the economic, political, social, cultural, and psychological damage of imperial rule. It also doesn't capture that Empires were engines of migration and social change, which generated vast wealth in metropolitan societies while exploiting the resources of Africa. These gaps in presenting and documenting African Histories and the other Eurocentric histories produced through western historiographic lenses need to be challenged.

To fill this gap stated above, Nadifa, in this piece, is radically challenging and deconstructing those narratives. The text shows the evil history of colonialism and capitalism in third-world countries and specifically in the 1930s and 1940s East Africa. The work details how WWII impacted on that part of the world. It gives the nuanced experiences of the African soldiers who were fighting in the European wars, Families who lost their loved ones like Jama's friend Shidane who was tortured and murdered by the Italians, and poor farmers who lost their fertile lands to the European corporations. As a postcolonial work, black mamba boy documents well the memories of those people who lived under the colonial powers in East Africa that would have otherwise been lost.

Added to this, Nadifa, through the story of her father,

presents the harsh and cruel treatment Jewish refugees received from the British navy officers. Indiscriminate to their age and sex, Jewish refugees were treated inhumane and brutal ways as the following quote from the novel exposes:

.....The refugees had borne the filth, heat, worm-infested soups, moldy crackers, and varied deprivations quietly for three weeks but now they exploded with angry yelling faces, painted gentian violet to heal the blisters and rashes that had erupted on board. By the time the ship docked at Port-de-Bouc in France, a swastika had been painted over the flying Union Jack and the marines had had to force the seething purple masses back into the cage after their riot. (p 191)

Interestingly, the Italian empire and to a lesser extent the French colonies are shown as more destructive than the British colonies in Yemen, Somaliland, and Egypt. The Italian colonial administration was so cruel that it used torturing to death, captivity, displacement of local farmers, and depleting of resources for export. An Italian commander, a descendent of a Jewish Italian family showed more sympathy while his successor dehumanized Jama when he arrested him in a wooden pen where chickens had been kept. This happened while Jama staggered to his work as an office cleaner because he got malaria which pounded at his head. The sympathy that the Jewish commander showed to Jama can be interpreted as that the commander could relate to the suffering and persecution that the Africans under the Italian fascist colonial administration faced. During this time Jewish people in Europe and especially in Germany faced similar violations and suppressions.

In the British colonies of Egypt, Somaliland, and Yemen, although the economic deprivation and poverty were drawn well in the text, the existence of torture and other inhumane treatments weren't shown enough. The reason could be that the author herself grew up and studied in Britain and received the same curriculum that she wanted to challenge. However, the cruel treatment of Jewish refugees on board the British navy ship shows that 'no evil is less evil than another evil'. Colonial powers had the same motives and used more or less the same means for the acquisition of resources and power to subjugate the colonized societies to maintain their imperialism.

Finally, the enslavement of African Askaris(soldiers) in Italian Eritrea and compelling them to die on the front

lines by the fascist commanders is another piece of African colonial history that never appears in western historiography. The soldiers were tortured and punished to death if they tried to resist going and fighting for the colonial administration.

The above experiences of people who lived under the colonial administrations raised by Nadifa in her novel are not well represented in the history books about the colonial times. Macro-level factors like economic variables, politics and power dynamics, ethnic groups and their cultures, and sometimes the literature of the colonized societies were interested and documented by colonial historians.

In conclusion, the novel well represented the efforts of deconstructing colonial African History by giving the experiences of actual people who lived under such administrations in those days. It gave a good account of those people who suffered under the Italian, British and French empires.

Injustice and It's many layers

The theme of injustice is widely discussed in the novel. Injustices, discrimination, and alienation of some groups from the rest of the Somali society existed and persists on many layers. Irrational traditional beliefs form the basis of these injustices that have been passed from one generation to the other. For example, discrimination against the Yibir people of Somaliland is said to be based on a story that those people ate a dead animal during a severe drought. Another superstitious and mythical reason was that they were accused of being descendants of a pagan, an African magician who believed that he could defeat the Muslim missionaries. Women's discrimination was also reasoned on a story about Eve (representing all women after her) urging Adam to eat from the forbidden tree in heaven. The later incident is said to have caused the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Heavens.

Starting with the discrimination against the Yibir people, Nadifa shows the harrowing acts Yibir people faced in Somaliland as they were socially oppressed and victimized by their likes. In the story, Jama witnessed the Yibir woman whose son was slaughtered, his body butchered, and was left in front of her house. The Yibir people or 'Looma Ooyaan' literally meaning 'the one that nobody cries for his death' faced such vicious acts from their fellow Somalis. On another occasion, Jama's friend Liban

didn't find a job in the British navy ship because the recruiter who was from the Aji clans didn't believe that the Yibirs belong to working such a well-paid job according to Somali standards. The latter case can be related to the type of discrimination against the Yibir people that still sustains to exist in Somaliland.

Added to this, Nadifa's Novel pictures the Yibirs wearing the name of his clan like a yellow star which marked him as low, dirty, despicable. A Yibir, as shown in the book, learned from infancy that he had nothing to be proud of, no Suldaans (traditional leader-) to boast about, no herds of camels, no battalions of fighters. The Midgaan and Yibir boys, whom Jama worked with as a Caracas carrier were also insulted out of the lines for the work and moved away, forming a separate line, silent and enraged.

All those added together depicted the level of social and economic discrimination that Yibir people faced and may still face. This theme of the novel is motivated as the author pointed out in the acknowledgment part of the book by Mohamoud Gaidon's novel of 'The Yibir of Las Burgabo'. Both accounts present vivid images of the daily struggles of Yibir women, children, and men for their personal and economic security. Regarding this theme, the novel can be understood as an awareness-raising tool to reverse these senseless discriminations. It really serves well in giving a vibrant picture of the pain that the Yibir people feel on daily basis as a result of the verbal and nonverbal dehumanization against them. Because of their low representation in the media, politics, and even in the religious institutions the voices of the Yibir that would have projected this pain isn't always heard. Nadifa is bringing this pain to her readers so that other people will feel and act in making the situation better. The text can also be understood as a call for better policies that enhance the inclusion of discriminated groups into mainstream society.

Thanks to the voices like that of Nadifa, the situation is improving today in Somaliland. In the recent last parliamentary election, the candidate from the Minority groups of Somaliland won the highest number of votes in the whole country, a sign of the closure of centuries of political and social exclusion of the Yibir people.

The second group of people who face another form of injustice, as detailed in the text, were women. Women were particularly very vulnerable to other dreadful types of injustices. Jama's mother was accused of being "cursed"

and "miserable," because her family died of smallpox, diarrhea, petty accidents, coughs that had wracked tiny rib cages. Isir, the relative whom Jama lived within Hargeisa after his mother's death was divorced by her husband accusing her of being possessed by Jin (devil). The cruel husband also rejected her Meher; divorce rights.

Not only the denial of rights was the brutal behaviors against women, but also early and abusive marriages were another nightmare that ended the joyful teenage life of many girls. Zainab, the wife of Talyani; a Somali commander in Eritrea, was envisioning getting to Yemen and creating a better life there when she run away from her homeland in Somaliland. After she got married to Talyani she nearly forgot what it was like to have someone to talk to and do things with as Talyani never allowed her to leave the house nor talk to anyone. Her teenager's life, with its cast of sisters, aunties, friends, and neighbors, had come to an abrupt end when she married, a sacrifice she had made without any real knowledge of what she was leaving behind.

Those irrational beliefs as noted above put women in Somaliland in a position of a lower status relative to men. The Gender division of labor in the Somali culture gave women the unproductive and unpaid domestic work while men controlled all the economic resources of the country mainly farming and livestock husbandry. In line with the stories of women narrated in the text, Somali women's rights were/are violated as they were/are economically dependent on their husbands. Divorce was taboo and that made women stay in abusive relationships. Like social discrimination against Yibir, violation of women's political and economic rights is still present in the Somaliland Society, and this is one of those injustices that the writer wants to draw our attention to.

Finally, on this theme of injustices, Nadifa forwards the economic classes as another form in which injustices manifested themselves. in Yemen, Somaliland, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Egypt, Nadifa shows in her novel the social stratification and economic classes that the colonialists brought with them from their home countries. In the bustling cities of Aden, Djibouti, Alexderia or the sleepy Hargeisa Jama would interact with people of different classes. Some of those people belonged to the upper-class and lived in villas, wore nice and attractive clothes, and ate food that Jama dreamed of. These were the colonial masters, navy officers, British ship crews,

and jews merchants in Aden. Jama, his mother, and his friends belonged to the lower class of society. They wore poor man's clothes and slept on the rooftops, beside the tombs of saints, and many times under the blue sky decorated with the blinking stars glaring from every corner.

After the colonial administration left east Africa and Somaliland particularly, economic classes remain to persist as a remnant of the colonial era. The political elites, after the independence, through corruption, accumulated a lucrative wealth from the public funds while also colliding with the emerging businessmen in creating a monopolistic business environment. These two groups together with the military and religious leaders form what later becomes the upper class of the postcolonial Somali society. The rest of the masses still live in poverty and deprivation while the upper class is the 'fortunate in the unfortunate'; they send their children and families abroad for better health, education, housing, and security as they continue their business of exploiting the poor.

What needs to be improved

Initially, reading the current text, one should have a map of that region with him/her, the Gulf of Aden, the horn of the African region, and North Africa to better grasp the locations that the journey is taking to the reader. Some of the places mentioned in the novel may not appear on the map like 'Banka Gumburaha' as they are nomadic settlements which only nomads know.

The romantic scenes in the text like that of Guure and Ambaro, Jama's parents, and the lute played by Guure together with the romance between Jama and Bathlehelm made me think that those parts were not in the original story. Maybe I am the only nomad reading Nadafa's book, but the romance was not present or at least not explicitly shown in the Somali nomadic culture. Lute and other musical instruments as well started with the urbanization of Somali society.

Moreover, Young Jama, almost 10 years old or sometimes younger and still able to comprehend everything going around him may breach the rules of logic as similar as his abilities to carry a Caracas of a camel from the slaughterhouse to the restaurants. Likewise, Jama continuing his journey without eating or drinking for along brings the same feeling to the readers. The writer in a YouTube interview mentioned that her father believed he would survive for a month without eating or drinking. My take

here as a reviewer is that logic should prevail in such a case.

The multitude of Somali terms, names, and words in the text without the existence of a glossary in the book will make the non-Somali or non-nomadic readers tired of trying to understand words in their context. Likewise, the novel has too many actors who are emerging and disappearing as the main character pursues his endless journey to find his father or a better life. This makes the readers confuse the actors with one another since the names are foreign to many people.

In conclusion, the Black mamba boy is a very interesting educational novel that shows the research the writer did during her writing. For me, the novel is a tool for deconstructing history and presenting the voices of the oppressed. It deserves any time spent on reading it.

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