

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Editorial: Why Diamond Open Access in the Global South?</i> Jama Musse Jama	13
<i>If Buildings Could Talk: The Ottoman and British Architectural Legacies in Berbera and the Hidden Stories They Tell.</i> Nasra Dahir	21
<i>Diaspora Media and Resistance: Somali Horizon and the Struggle Against Siad Barre's Regime.</i> Marwaad Kayse	39
<i>Why I chose to rewrite Somali lullabies.</i> Halgan Daahir Axmed	61
<i>The Inner World in Cilmi Boodhari's Love Poetry.</i> Kidist Dorigatti	79
<i>Somali Women's Religious Poetry Through the Figure of Eve: Representing the Sacred and Engaging with Tradition.</i> Mirea Gabry Del Bianco	93
<i>Documenting The Climate Change Terminologies for Somali Language Speakers.</i> Tirsit Yetbarek	115
<i>Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman and His Reflections on the Tijaniyya Sufi Order: A Study Based on His Manuscripts.</i> Fatuma Hussein Abdulkarim and Nuraddin Aman	129
<i>Textual and Contextual Study of the Ḥulāṣah Manuscript Authored by Ṣayḥ Badruddīn ibn Ubbiyy on Ethiopian Indigenous Muslim Scholars.</i> Rameta Muzeyen and Nuraddin Aman	149

Why I chose to rewrite Somali lullabies
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Abstract

Socially, Somali women received as a fresh meat “*cad bisil*” which means they are weak psychically and mentally, and less intelligence than man. So, they can not lead, and they have to stay home. There’s proverb which ways “women should stay home or graves” “*gabdhi guri ha ku jiro ama god*” it shows you how Somali literature is full of misogynistic voices, and for me, I have no other choice but critical analysis. That’s what all of my work about it, I want to redefine the role of Somali women. In this article, I am reflecting on the harmful aspects of Somali lullabies, particularly for girls, and as a poet and a writer, I bring forth my own compositions as a way to outgrow harmful tradition. As Giulia Stefania (2024) put it “in Somali culture, poetry has always played a central role and it has always been part of people’s lives. Because of its variety in form, theme, and social background, it can cover different aspects of life and associated with many possible situations, such as work, love, dance, simple entertainment, and of course, childhood” therefore, when we are talking about inequality, marginalized womanhood, and injustice our society, we have to discuss how Somali literature describe what womanhood is. I start here; Somali lullabies.

Keywords: Lullabies, Somali Poetry, Womanhood.

1. Introduction

Somali is a language as unyielding as our nomadic lives once were. For generations, our words have been forged in a crucible of scarcity, of relentless struggles to find enough water and pasture. In this harsh landscape, vulnerability was often seen as

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weakness and a fatal flaw. This ingrained resilience, this unyielding spirit, became the bedrock of our traditional oral literature, be it our poetry, our proverbs, and even our children's songs; our lullabies. They teach rigidity, conflict, endurance, and stubbornness from the earliest age. Although Li (2022) noted that “sometimes, Somali mother’s also sing their worries for the children as well as their own fears and anxieties, conveying deep massages, saying the unsayable” and yet, there are two kinds of existence: simply being alive, and truly thriving – having a healthy mind, spirit, and body that can fully engage with life. Our traditional upbringing heavily emphasizes physical survival, often overlooking mental well-being, emotional protection, and nurturing a child's inner world. Children are rarely taught crucial life skills like self-expression, critical thinking, or healthy communication. Why? Because, often, the parents themselves were deprived of these very tools. When the child reaches the age of learning, his family take him to the *Madrasa*, and utter the famous saying “the flesh is yours, and the bones mine” to the *Quran* teacher, a saying that carries the painful but ruthlessly normalized meaning that a teacher can punish the child’s flesh however he likes without being asked for it.

2. Lullabies meaning within the Somali culture

As scholar Mohamed Bashe describes, Somali lullabies are a child’s first school, a gentle introduction to life and language. (Maxamed Baashe, 2019) But in Somali tradition, they also become a potent tool for instilling fear, reinforcing gender hierarchy, promoting clannism, and silencing girls, our lullabies often carry unsettling narratives like a mother who disappears without a trace, a lurking beast, an empty breast, a mother hungrier than her child, a father who travels and never returns. They are perpetually laden with distress and sorrow, and through it all, there's a stark favoritism shown to boys over girls. Axmed (2014, p.29) divides the lullaby songs he collected into two categories: songs for baby-boys and songs for baby-girls. In the process of collecting he finds that songs for the baby-boys are greater in number than those for girls. Boys' lullabies are full of praise, advice, and lessons on life's responsibilities, they celebrate the joy of their birth, their significance, and shower them with blessings.

Girls, on the other hand, are often admonished and hushed. These aren't just random verses but powerful teachers mirroring the social conditions of the family and community. Children learn not only the language but also their prescribed role in life – whether they are valued or deemed insignificant. Through these songs, children hear stories of their birth and its impact on their mother, the positive side mostly reserved for boys.

Songs Sung for baby boys

Songs sung to baby boys in their mother's cradle are more numerous, more compassionate and contains more exemplary teachings than those sung to baby girls.

A boy, from the tenderest age, is groomed to be a "person being trained for life," prepared for a world of conflict and hostility. He's taught to defend himself, to fight for his property, and never to surrender easily. If overwhelmed, the advice is not to flee too far. Courage, resilience, and self-defense are whispered into his ear so he can endure hardship. Songs composed for baby boys are often brimmed with teaching on life, like this song:

*Haddaad gaadhoo gabowdo
Markaad geeliinna raacdo
Haddii guluf kuu yimaaddo
Ma go'e geela ha ka roorin!*

When you grow and reach the age,
When you're entrusted with the camels
Should conflict come your way,
Stay your ground, don't flee the camels

But what about girls? Didn't they also face harsh realities?

Yes, they fetch water at dawn, trek far for grass, load and unload the household goods when moving, herd goats, and gather firewood from distant forests. Along these paths, beasts do lurk, rapists exist, and enemies that can hurt her lie in wait.

Yet, no one tells the Somali girl anything about how to defend herself or what to do in the face of danger in these songs. Why? Because her aggressors are often men – and if she learns to defend herself against the camel herder in the bush, she might also defend

herself against the one who abuses and belittles her at home.

So, as a way of precaution, from a young age, words like "A girl is a ripe flesh, and only a man can protect her!" is instilled in the mind of a young Somali girl. But protect her from what? one may ask. Protect her from the hyena attacking the flock. But to whom will he, the protector, give her later on? To a man of his own kind, sometimes the very man who harassed her (even raped her) on her way to gather firewood. But why would he do that? So he can just silence her, hide her wounds. Her suffering isn't what matters or drives him to act; what truly vexes him is that "a girl from that family was harmed" - the family's reputation.

Success, in this worldview, is tied to wealth. The wealthy are scholars, politicians, advisors, respected figures. "You are valued for what you have," a mother might tell her son, urging him to work hard. She even points to places where he can find opportunity:

*Billaawa Bilow Biloow wa
Bilow loo baahanoow wa
Baxreyn iyo beled shishiiye
Bariisku halkuu ka beermo
Tolkaa baa lagu boqraaye
Tagoo adiguba badh doono
Billaawa Bilow Biloow wa*

Bilow (bright one) O' you needed one,
To Bahrain and foreign lands
Where rice is grown,
Your kin are crowned kings,
Go, seek your share too.

He is taught that trade brings honor and social standing. He has every right to his share of wealth, reputation, and respect because in this society, people aren't honored for being human; they're honored for what they possess and their lineage. This relentless pursuit of wealth and an escape from poverty is instilled in boys from a young age. It's a high ambition, a distant goal requiring hard work. And the girl? Her pot is often deliberately pierced. Her labor is like water drawn for others, and as the proverb goes "a woman's wealth brings no fortune." She isn't prepared for

achievement. Instead, she's taught to be submissive to her owner. She's taught to obey men; the rest of life is just her fate.

A boy's birth was and still is a mother's fortune, a source of joy for kin and father, a symbol of abundance for the family. Giving birth to a son brought special happiness, a sign of good tidings. Many women were divorced for bearing only daughters or for not bearing sons at all. Daughters were a flaw; only having daughters was a life's tragedy for a mother. This song reflects how a son was seen as hope:

*Dhammow wa dhammow dhammow wa
Markaad dhalateed dhawaaqday
Dhammow dhaxan baa iga duushay
Dhulkaa ii wada iftiimay
Dhurwaagii baa dareeray
Dhirtaa ii wada magooshay.
Dhammow wa dhammow dhammow wa*

When you were born and cried out,
Dhammow (O' fulfilled one), the cold left me,
The land brightened for me,
The hyenas scattered,
The trees all blossomed for me.

From this joyous feeling, mothers would compose many songs of pure affection, blessings, praise, and hopes for their sons' future. However, these blessings, seemingly laden with favoritism, often went unheeded. The good a mother wished for her two-year-old son was often overpowered by the distorted realities he would face; she would wish him the most beautiful things her eyes could see - rain-soaked skies and lush green lands – and she prays for his protection from becoming the worst possible thing she can think of: a helpless, abandoned vagrant. Yet, sadly, many of her sons today find themselves in this latter harsh reality, lagging behind the world by centuries, having built tall buildings but they remain in jungle mentality, no matter how they decorate it.

Another mother laments:
Calowa calow calowa

Why I chose to rewrite Somali lullabies

*Calow Cabdillaahiyow wa
Calaacalo maydhanow wa
Calow cir daroorayow wa
Calow cosob laacayow wa
Calow meel laga carraabay
Caruurii laga xanbaartay
Allow yaad carari waayin
Allow yaad ciil la hoganin.
Alowa alow alowa*

O' my Abdillahi,
O' you with washed palms,
like the pouring rain,
like fresh green shoots, you are.
if ever you find yourself
alone in an abandoned place,
where no child is left but you,
may you not be unable to flee,
May you not moan with sorrow.

But contrary to this mother's prayer, how many sons have left their homes only to have their flesh consumed by birds of prey when they couldn't flee? How many educated young men moan with sorrow after failing to find work? How many sons serve the very people who killed their fathers, simmering silently? How many are driven mad by explosions, poverty, and harsh realities, wandering aimlessly? How many young boys, discarded and told "you're not a woman to be raped, go defend yourself in the world," now lie on the streets? So many!

One of the most beautiful aspects of literature is its ability to express universal human affection, and a mother's love for her child is arguably the most primal. The two lullabies above, brimming with pure maternal love, each describe a unique situation. But the sweetest, also the most painful, is when a mother sings to her ailing son in a land without doctors or places to seek help, without the wealth to afford care far away. In her heartbreak, worry, and pain, this mother turns to God for her son's healing, simultaneously acknowledging his vulnerability and the power she invokes:

*Halkaad xalanow xoqaysay
Halkaad xaradhaaminaysay
Halkaad xalay ledis ka wayday
Malaa'iig ha kuu salaaxdo
Quweeye ha kuu qaboojo!*

Where you Halane (cleansed one) were toiling,
Where you were restless with thirst,
Where you could not sleep last night,
May angels caress you,
May the Almighty bring you comfort!

Another song sees a mother praying for her son to avoid isolation in life, a terrible state, especially in Somalia. She prays he won't lose his kin or be left alone by life's hardships. It's a truly profound song:

*Hobeeya hobeey hobeeya
Ha waayin ha waalalloobin
Ha waayin waxsiiso hooyo
Ha waayin wardheere aabbe
Ha waayin walaallo dhawr ah
Ha waayin wixii wax kuu ah
Hubkaaga nin kale ma qaato
Halkaaga lagaama seexo
Hashaada lagaama maalo!
Hobeeya hobeey hobeeya*

May you not be lose,
may you not be taken by worry,
May you not lack a mother's provision,
a father's wisdom,
May you not lack few siblings,
May you not lose those who matter to you,
May no one else carry your weapon,
May no other take your resting place,
May your camel not be milked by another!

3. Girls: A Different, Harsher Melody

Girls, however, are not so fortunate. They don't receive the same songs of affection as their brothers, nor are their births celebrated

with the same joy. They don't experience the pampering and care bestowed upon boys. From the moment they turn two, they are initiated into a relentless cycle of unpaid, unappreciated labor that continues until they are buried. It's work that defines their womanhood - work that, if monetized, would be stolen, otherwise dismissed as mere "women's work." They are trained to be a burden-bearer. By age six, she will face the terrifying beginning of a harsh life: three women, as deafened as she is destined to be, hold her down. Then she will hear the scraping of the blade and pain swallowing her tender little body, as an old woman, as ignorant as she is to become, excises a vital part of her body. Long thorns from the acacia tree will be used to stitch the wound, and her thighs will be tightly bound with strong ropes. Then, she will be told to "Struggle all you want."

Girls are not blessed or advised like boys, the guidance and instruction they receive are often accompanied by blows. If she errs, her father will raise a stick, her brother will scold her, and her mother will strike her with a slipper. If she makes a major mistake, for instance, if she becomes pregnant out of wedlock, she and her child will be cast out. If no one intervenes, the man who rejected her will be begged to take her back.

Any abuse she faces at home, even if raped by male relatives, will be hidden. Because no one can accept "men raped their female kin." If a man from another clan did it, then it's a matter for discussion. Because both the girl's clan and the perpetrator's clan would be shamed, and many women might be raped in return if the matter isn't resolved. The crucial point is maintaining men's honor, regardless of what the victim endures -that's up to her luck.

A mother, scorned just as she scorns her daughter, whose own birth was met with dismay just as she laments her daughter's, and who was demeaned just as she demeans her daughter, sings a hateful song with palpable disgust to her wrong-destined child:

Dhibaay ya dhibaay dhibaay ya
Dhibaay gabadh dhalatay waa dhib
Dhibaay gabadh dooni maayo
Dhibaatiyo halalacteedda
Dhibbaad soo doonadkeedda
Dhig iyo caws qaadadkeedda

Aqalkii ma dhammaaninteedda

Ninkii ma dharaaranteedda!

Dhibaay (troublesome), a daughter born is trouble,
I don't want a daughter,
The Trouble of her restless spirit,
The trouble from when they come asking for her hand,
from her carrying sticks and grass
of the time it takes her to finish a new house,
and the trouble of her feeding a husband!

The countless numbers of livestock she cared for since she was four years old bring no joy. The thousand types of grass she gathered, the beautiful house she built, the utensils she crafted or wove, the ropes she braided - all her quiet labor goes to waste. The few utensils and the *Muqamad* (a traditional wedding dish consisting of dried meat) that will go with her sendoff daughter is what worries the mother. The many camels given to her as dowry, which her brothers' will use to pay for their marriages, the artistry she left behind for the family, and her extensive labor for the family's livestock are all forgotten. For the Somali daughter, the mother's home is merely a waiting room for her husband; once he arrives, her new abode is just property she manages for the man who built it. In truth, she owns no home.

The recurring "trouble" in the song isn't a real burden the girl imposes, nor is it a problem the song's creator can even define. It's a problem existing in the imagination of someone who despises themselves and those like them, vexed by the existence of a gender deemed inferior. Then, fate places this burden back on them. The mother's hatred for her daughter runs deeper than the small effort she'll provide when she marries; it's rooted in a scorned gender that has learned to scorn itself. It is the legacy of grudgeful literature and a misogynistic culture.

There's another song which says "you should'n be born!"

Maxaa Fiidooy ku keenay?

Fariid baad dhalan lahaaye

Raggaa faalali lahaaye

Wan baa foorari lahaye!

O Fiido, what brought you?
Fariid is who should have been born
The men should have celebrated
A ram should have been feasted on!

Silencing is a tool of mental enslavement. Before a person is silenced, they must be intimidated and shown what to be quiet about. And when it comes to intimidating women, our culture includes “*guur-ku-gooddin*”, which is the threat of “no one will marry you”, uttered in murmurs or even silently in the eyes of mothers and aunts, if women engage in certain behaviors. Among these behaviors is excessive talk.

There are cultural and linguistic tools that serve to enforce men's dominance, preventing girls from anything that might threaten the pride a man is expected to feel when speaking to a woman.

Even inherent human qualities like bravery, eloquence, boldness, and generosity qualities that are inherently valuable, are interpreted differently when it comes to woman; when a girl possesses any of these qualities, they stain it with a delusional flaw, they say “If a girl is generous, she'll give away her husband's wealth to everyone” and if she's bold, “she'll talk back to her husband.” and that's not wanted! It's unsettling when one needs to diminish another to feel significant.

Silence is the pillar of enduring oppression, a life-denying root destined for girls from a young age. If words, the very tools of thought, are withheld from someone, it's like a caged bird that sees the grains thrown to her as a favor, believing itself indebted. Women are taught from a young age to weigh their words, especially if a man is nearby. Because she lives to be chosen by a man! Here, a mother, part of whose soul was buried to be chosen, teaches her daughter how to bury a part of hers:

Gadooy ya gadooy gadooy ya
Gadooy gaagaabso hadalka
Rag baa goonyaha fadhiya'oo
Fardiyo geel bay wadaane!

Gadooy, shorten your speech,
Men are sitting by the corners,

In their possessions are horses and camels!

Throughout history, there have always been Somali women who defied oppression, refusing to accept the diminished role tradition assigned them. Though their voices were often muffled, they never died; occasionally, they resurfaced with a loud cry. Mothers were the backbone of our oral literature, crafting lullabies, folktales, proverbs, and through all these transferring their wisdom. However, much of this rich heritage was consumed by the prevailing societal narrative that demeaned women. We still can hear echoes of these brave souls from beyond time immemorial, like this mother, witnessing the verbal and physical abuse inflicted on women, sang to her daughter:

*Gudooy way innagu gafeenne
Ardaa aan gabadhi joogin
Gudooy geel laguma maalo
Gammaan faras laguma raaco.*

O' Gudo, they have wronged us,
A homestead without a girl,
Gudooy, camels are not milked,
Horses are not ridden.

And another mother, astonished at how boys were celebrated while girls were forgotten, sang to her daughter:

*Waxaa wiilowda la hayo
Waxaa loo waalanaayo
Aduun baa ila wanaagsan.*

Let them sing "O'baby Boy" as they wish
Lose their minds to their sons as they wish
But to me, you (my daughter) remain the best.

This was a mother secure in her womanhood, unafraid and unashamed. A mother who didn't see the birth of a girl as a flaw but took pride in her daughter. A mother who saw the hidden truth of her society: there is nothing a man possesses that makes him superior to a woman, nothing to warrant celebrating his birth while mourning a daughter's.

Hence, while not singing to children is a linguistic hazard, however, as we have seen, singing old songs to little girls is a much deeper existential harm too. To eliminate both these dangers, I believe we need new compositions; songs that introduce newborns to life in a healthier and more beneficial way, while instilling in them the beauty of their language and its melodies. A child sees themselves the way they perceive their parent. Thus, if a girl sees her mother looking down on herself, she too will look down on herself. If a mother sings to her daughter “*Dhibbooy yaa dhibbaay*” the daughter internalizes that she is a burden and begins to despise herself.

I have long wandered about the possibility of finding, or inventing, a healthy, fear-free lullaby? Can we replace the inherited worldview embedded in old oral poetry with new songs that redefine the girl’s role in society? Can a modern mother, who no longer defines herself by ancient customs, find Somali words to sing to her daughter that energizes and strengthens her for the harsh reality ahead?

This attempt at composing girls’ lullabies, I believe, can inspire mothers who recognize the existential harm of degrading songs and have rejected the entirety of Somali children’s songs for that reason.

The first right the Somali girl lacks, and must struggle to reclaim, is that of being human. As we’ve mentioned earlier, women are often belittled in society, treated as objects valued only for utility or as burdens to be borne. Insulting their intelligence or demeaning their existence is sometimes even applauded in public spaces under veiled names. A young girl growing up in such an environment needs to be told, repeatedly, that despite all of these words, songs, and culture trying to depict her as less, she remains innocent of these flaws:

*Hobeeya hobeey hobeeya
Hiddaha guunkee ku hiifay
Halhaysyada layska qaatay
Intuu xume kuu hagoonjay
Hacooyada beenahoodu
Garaadkooday hadleene
Ma tihid hilib iyo cad liita*

*Ma tihid haaf laga sarreeyo
Ma tihid fidmo lagu halaagmo
Hoggaankiyo hoga-tuskeeda!*

Hobeeya hobeey hobeeya
Away with the heritage
That Looks down on you.
Away with all the unexamined cliché
that Veil you with evil,
Away with their narrow lies,
they just reflect their minds
You are not a worthless flesh
You are not a half, nor any less,
neither are you the light-bearer,
Of destruction and chaos!

We grow up in harsh living conditions. The poverty and vulnerability we experience in childhood lead to an impoverished mindset that misunderstands potential. Many women who could've been trailblazers if only given little support, were silenced by a poverty-driven mentality that said: *As long as you're fed, you don't need anything else*. And by doing this, they bury all the societal roles women should have filled. Girls are rarely taught that they belong to society, nor that there is such a thing as "public responsibility" they're part of. Instead, they are raised to be obedient servants. To return the girl to her rightful role, she must be sung to from infancy:

*Waxaad habatiyo hankaaga
Aqoontiyo haybinteedda
Hawlaha ummadiyo dhulkaaga
Hareertaadiyo xilkaaga
Inaad hanataa habboone
Ha daynin ha quusan, hooyo.*

Your dreams and aspirations
Your search for knowledge
Your place in the world

your people's work
and your role in your community

You must claim boldly you must
Never give it up, never despair, my child.

What you love is part of who you are. And if you love children, then protecting them from all harm becomes part of your responsibilities. But protecting children isn't just about avoiding danger – but you also pray, with all the strength you can summon, that the world's harm may pass them by. While I don't believe that motherhood is a fixed kind of conventional loving - it's something every woman feels differently - I do believe this song reflects one essential part of that love, which has waited long to be sung:

*Hobeeya hobeey hobeeya
Hibow hadal barashadaadii
Hadaaqa kolkaad bilowday
Markaad hooyo iigu yeedhay
Haraadka waxaad ka biisay
Kashayda hamuun ku raagtay.*

*Hobeeya hobeey hobeeya
Horseed kaahaay hobeeya
Hannaan wacaneey hobeeya
Hiraay cilmi lagu hagaago
Markaad hanatee dalkaaga
Hagtaa lagu haybiyaaye
Ha daynin aqoonta, hooyo.*

*Hobeeya hobeey hobeeya
Allow hagaraamadeedda
Allow hadimooyinkeedda
Allow hawlaha adduunka
Huq iyo ciil yay ku mudanin!*

*Hobeeya hobeey hobeeya
O' my gift, with your first words
When you first began to speak
and first called me "mother"
You quenched the thirst
That had long haunted my soul*

Hobeeya hobeey hobeeya

My rising dawn, omen for a coming light
O' you destined for the good,
seek knowledge that guides
be it you who leads the land,
never abandon learning, my child.

Hobeeya hobeey hobeeya

Oh God, shield her from the world's pain
protect her from its betrayal
guard her from its harm
May she never know grief and sorrow!

Blood and Marriage payment - bride price, dowry, - do not define a girl's worth, though they are traded as if they do. Especially the dowry and blood compensation (*mag*), have become tools for pricing women - a creature seen as incomplete. Now, and in such environment, what can we tell a newborn baby girl about womanhood? I believe we must correct the myths society believes about girls and sing to her instead of her true worth:

Adoo hodanoo hormooda

Adaa hoodiyo ayaana

Adaan halo baas ku goynin

Adaa dhaqankii horreeyay

Haweenka guhaadintiisa

Intii hagar daaminaysay

Huqdiisu ku gaadhin, hooyo.

Ripe with potential, you're a guiding star
a good fortune you are,
which no number of camels can buy,
Spared may you be
From what ancient custom
had long inflicted on women, my child.

And to the baby girl being awaited with joy, I believe this tender lullaby will delight her:

Why I chose to rewrite Somali lullabies

Eey hobeey hoobeey hobeey
Noo dhaloo nabad noogu dhalo
Oo dhammooy noo soo dhawoow
Dhawranee aan ku dhawranee
Oo dhammooy kugu dhaadanee
Noo dhammee farxad noo dhammee
Oo dhabtiyo dhinacayga imo
Aan dhalyahay ku dhooldhoolinee.
Hobeeya hobeey hobeeya
Born to us in peace
Welcome to us, complete one
Oh we'll guard you
Oh whole one, we cherish you
Fulfill us with your joy
Come to my lap, my side
That we, O' newborn, spoil you with care.

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