

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

The Inner World in Cilmi Boodhari's Love Poetry

Kidist Dorigattiⁱ

University of Naples "L'Orientale"

Abstract

Cilmi Boodhari's poetry marked a turning point in Somali literature by elevating love poetry from a marginal theme to a central subject of innovative artistic expression. He is one of the pioneers of subjectivity in Somali poetry. Through the lens of his inner self, he channels profound human emotions, and unrequited love becomes a driving force for inner reflection and lyrical expression. This article explores the poetry and life of Cilmi Boodhari and demonstrates that his poetry represents a personal confession but also positions him as a spokesman for social reform, giving voice not only to his own inner conflicts but also to challenge cultural norms of the early 20th century.

Keywords: Cilmi Boodhari, Inner self, Somali love poetry.

1. Introduction

In Somali culture, poetry is regarded as the most important and respected form of verbal expression (Andrzejewski, 1985; Puglielli, 1987). Among the most significant figures in Somali poetic tradition is Cilmi Boodhari, whose legacy continues to shape Somali cultural identity long after his death. In this article, I will explore the cultural context in which Cilmi Boodhari was shaped and developed, followed by a short examination of his biography and his unrequited love for Hodan, a relationship that profoundly influenced both his life and his poetic output. Particular attention will be given to the poet's inner world, intimate dimension, as an innovative element within the oral poetic tradition, as well as to Boodhari's use of the Somali language, rich in imagery, metaphor, and musicality.

Cite as: Dorigatti, K. 2025. The Inner World in Cilmi Boodhari's Love Poetry. *Dhaxalreeb*, 21 (2), pp. 79-92.
DOI: 10.13169/Dhaxalreeb.21.2.0079



I will then analyse Boodhari's legacy in contemporary Somali literature, reflecting on the universality of the theme of tragic love. The poem under analysis is taken from an article by Mohamed Farah Abdillahi and B. W. Andrzejewski, who transcribed a recording made by Baadi'awstume in Hargeisa in 1965. In Somaliland, modernity developed primarily in urban settings during the colonial period. It was within this context that the story of Boodhari and Hodan unfolded, a love story that represented a pivotal moment in the rise of modernism in Somali literature. Both lived in the city of Berbera, an urban centre where, unlike rural areas, economic life was dominated by the labour market and the sale of individual labour, an economic model introduced through colonial influence, rather than the collective labour typical of pastoral and agricultural practices (Jamal Abdi Gabobe, 2014). Written Somali literature is a direct descendant of a rich and long-standing oral literature. It did not emerge solely under foreign influence or as result of the introduction of writing but rather evolved organically from existing cultural practices (Andrzejewski, 2011). In this context, love poems, sometimes considered ephemeral, are ranked higher than other forms of poetry such as work poems or dance poems.

2. Who is Cilmi Boodhari, the poet of love?

Cilmi Boodhari is undoubtedly one of the most important poets of Somali culture, born in 1908 to a family of nomadic herders in the rural border area between what was then the British Protectorate of Somaliland and Ethiopia. The name Boodhari is a nickname, deriving from a Somali adaptation of the English word "border" (Andrzejewski, 1985; Laurence, 1970). His upbringing in a rural environment afforded him a profound immersion in the pastoral traditions of Somali culture. In 1930, he relocated to Hargeisa and, shortly after to Berbera, where he obtained employment in a bakery, working as both a baker and pastry chef (Andrzejewski, 1985). Owing to his proficiency in his craft, he was soon promoted to the position of bakery manager. It was during this period, around 1934, that he first encountered a young woman named Hodan at the bakery and fell deeply in love with her. Hodan became his muse, inspiring a considerable corpus of

love poetry that would secure his reputation as a celebrated poet, even though he had never been a poet before, and few would have imagined him to be one (Mohamed Farah Abdillahi, Andrzejewski, 1967). His love for Hodan, however, remained unreciprocated, a rejection that brought profound emotional turmoil and unsettled his inner equilibrium. In Somali popular tradition, he is immortalised as the poet who died for love (Banti, 1996).

Hodan was renowned for her beauty and was among the wealthiest young women in Berbera at the time (Jamal Abdi Gabobe, 2014; Mohamed Farah Abdillahi, Andrzejewski, 1967). Deeply attached to her family, she adhered unfailingly to their wishes, which was typical of girls at the time who had a strong sense of decorum and were not expected to be independent in their thoughts and decision (Mohamed Farah Abdillahi, Andrzejewski, 1967). In 1937, she married another man (Mohamed Farah Abdillahi, Andrzejewski, 1967; Laurence, 1970). The considerable public sympathy that followed Boodhari's death, together with his subsequent recognition as a prominent figure in Somali culture, did not alter the views held by the elder members of Hodan's family. They continued to regard him as a reckless young man seeking to insert himself into their daughter's life and to transgress the codes of honour of their lineage by composing what they considered irresponsible verses about her. What remains absent from the historical record, however, is Hodan's own perspective on Boodhari (Jamal Abdi Gabobe, 2014).

3. Subjectivity and the inner self: expression of love

The theme of love in Somali poetry is particularly innovative, especially in the work of Boodhari. Prior to his contributions, love was largely treated by the most authoritative and prestigious oral poets as a topic of secondary importance, subordinate to matters of greater public concern. Traditionally, Somali poetry focused on themes such as warfare, peace agreements, politics, commentary on public affairs, religion, and the prestige of one's clan and so on (Andrzejewski, 1985; Banti, 1988). Love as a subject was relegated to simple songs (Jamal Abdi Gabobe, 2014). One of the central themes of Boodhari's work is the ordeal of unrequited love, which drove him into despair and ultimately

compelled him to abandon his work in Berbera. In this context, Hodan became an insurmountable barrier for him, as he did not want to give in his feelings. Then he wrote his first poem:

"It was God the just who long ago created the love of women.

[...]

*People have been bringing forth offspring since the time of
'Iise, prophet, till now.*

*If they had all been of one sex they could not have sprung forth
in an unpeopled land.*

*They were made of two kinds so that they might inspire
admiration in one another.*

*Evil is the custom of Somalis – otherwise they would not revile
me."*

(Mohamed Farah Abdillahi, B.W. Andrzejewski, 1967, p.196)

The poet reveals how individual identity is shaped, constrained, and, at times, fractured by communal codes of honour and masculinity. In the last line, he evokes an ancient Somali custom, according to which a man who falls in love, admits it openly and allows himself to be influenced by such emotions, becomes the object of public ridicule.

*"Even though I cleanse my bosom, like a milkvessel, with a
fire brand*

And wipe it then with a fiber rag, will anything pass my gullet?

*What I would wish to chew, I was refused, and I can do nothing
but brush my teeth.*

*The amulets written by men of religion failed to stop sickness.
I sought the sacred knowledge and medicines but failed to find
a cure.*

*You cannot wash away the love which turned into grey hair
upon you."*

(Mohamed Farah Abdillahi, B.W. Andrzejewski, 1967, p. 197)

In the nomadic interior, where water is scarce, milk containers are cleansed with firebrands and then wiped with bark fibers. This image implies that even though he tries to cleanse his heart of love, he cannot eradicate it. Further frustration is given through the image of the customary method of cleaning one's teeth, which

is with a small stick whose fibers are split at one end for this purpose. He also emphasizes that his suffering cannot be alleviated by amulets. In times of hardship, Muslims seek the counsel of religious authorities, who draw upon their sacred texts and select prayers appropriate to the occasion, or provide advice and guidance based on the Qur'an. Moreover, his grey hair is due to the irresistible and inescapable effect of love and not preoccupation.

*"Evil is the sleep at noon; alas, what made me go to sleep?
Unless there is a curse on me, what else has made me miss
Hodan?"*

(Mohamed Farah Abdillahi, B.W. Andrzejewski, 1967, p. 199)

These words convey, again, a sense of disappointment and a feeling of despair that overwhelms the author. He subsequently travelled to Zeila, where he expressed his sentiments in the following words:

*"As if you were my cloak and my kilt which I had cut for
myself
And as if you could rescue me from the pit of the Other
World and death
Every new day, when I wake up it is for you that I gird
myself.*

(Mohamed Farah Abdillahi, B.W. Andrzejewski, 1967, p. 199)

His suffering nearly drives him toward a tragic act, and he appears to see his only salvation in Hodan, whom he implores to save him and prevent his passage into the afterlife. The term "cloak" attempts to render the Somali word go' which is a cloth wrapped around the body and constitutes the traditional dress of men in the nomadic interior and Boodhari suggests the closeness of the poet to his beloved, who seems as near to him as his own cloths. Hodan also represents his reason for living, protects him from death. This suffering manifests physically as well, his sleep is disturbed by her visits.

*"Rapt in a deceitful trance I thought I was sleeping with her.¹
But it was only that a djinn counterfeited the image of her
sister."²*

Consequently, his suffering affects him not only physically but also psychologically. Imagination serves as a means through which he conjures Hodan's presence in his life, yet this very mechanism only intensifies his sense of absence and his acute awareness of his inability to attain her. This vision is not tangible but illusory, it does not diminish her absence but, on the contrary, accentuates it, underscoring the poet's inability to reach her. Moreover, Boodhari conveys not only his unwavering devotion to Hodan but also his wish not to impose upon or burden those around him:

*"When a mature he-camel learns how to sport with other
camels and throw them down
He is the most playful among all the livestock.
Again and again he forces down with his neck the frolicking
young she-camels.
Before he is six years old if he becomes expert in dealing
with them
One cannot turn him away, until his thigh weakens.
And I also cannot pluck out from my bosom the love for
Ladan.
I shall take it with me into grave, for it is more steadfast in
me than may appear.*

¹ The word *trance* according to Mohamed Farah Abdillahi e B.W. Andrzejewski, *ibidem* is a translation of the Somali word "hammo" that encompasses a wide spectrum of meanings. It refers to profound and obsessive thoughts that could drive the individual into a state of isolation from the surrounding environment.

² Mohamed Farah Abdillahi, B.W. Andrzejewski. *Ivi.* p. 201. The two authors specify that this verse aims to convey a very tragic image, in which a "djinn" takes on the appearance of a girl, perhaps Hodan's sister or someone who closely resembles her, and covers her with a shadow, so she can be mistaken for his beloved. Then this ghost gets into the poet's bed with the intention of deceiving him and causing him further suffering.

Do not trouble yourself, any one of you, about me, for the heart can never love two!"

(Mohamed Farah Abdillahi, B.W. Andrzejewski, 1967, p. 198)

Boodhari uses the image of the mating habits of camels, in which the male compels the female to sit by pressing her neck down with his own, before proceeding to mate with her. This vivid image is situated in the pastoral world familiar to the author and to his audience but also conveys themes of dominance and physical intimacy (Axmed Cali Abokor, 1987). Here the poet uses another woman's name, but it refers to Hodan. In Somali poetry, it is common to employ different names for the same individual. This declaration reflects his independence and personal autonomy. His love for Hodan also functions as a catalyst for the development of his personality and identity. A significant motif in Boodhari's poetry is the wind, which recurs as a symbol and serves as a medium for rapid romantic communication.

"Talking winds are perhaps something that is new to the world,

Yet you must swear to me by the Everlasting One that you will record my words.

*I would have handed a bundle of letters to the sailing ships
But they would tarry several nights on their journey and I
have decided on you for the sake of speed. [...]*

*You must swear by the Everlasting One that you will carry
my words through the air.*

It was at Daarooole that I knew the remedy for my love."

(Mohamed Farah Abdillahi, B.W. Andrzejewski, 1967, p. 200)

The elements of nature are also characteristic of traditional Somali poetry and reappear in Cilmi's poems, where they acquire new nuances reflecting his personal and romantic experiences. The author's subjectivity emerges once again, as he asserts that the sight of his beloved was the remedy for the lovesick poet. In 1936, Cilmi's circumstances worsened further when he discovered that Hodan had been married to another man, and he said:

*"I am taking leave of this our Somali land.
I am going away from confusion among men and
defenselessness among women."
(Mohamed Farah Abdillahi, B.W. Andrzejewski, 1967, p.
203)*

Leaving his homeland seems to represent an attempt to alleviate the overwhelming pain that consumes him. He became a man overpowered by the suffering that love had inflicted upon him.

4. Conclusion

Cilmi Boodhari's poetry embodies all the stylistic and linguistic qualities that are typically esteemed by the Somali public. Boodhari not only pioneered modern Somali love poetry but also revitalized the existing poetic vocabulary, giving it depth and nuance. Many of the terms and expressions he uses already existed in the Somali language, but he employed them in an innovative and creative way. Furthermore, he is also the pioneers of subjectivity in Somali poetry, through the lens of his inner self, he expresses his love, desires and sufferings. He is able to transform intimate feelings into lyrical expressions. In this poem, the individual emerges as a tormented subject. Unrequited love becomes a driving force and a means of inner reflection and lyrical expression of subjectivity. The experience of love does not have a happy ending, but on the contrary generates torment, nostalgia, desire and melancholy in the poet. A recurring element in Cilmi's story is romantic failure. He experiences deep and all-embracing love, but this does not lead to the social fulfilment of marriage. It collides with external obstacles like family, clan, cultural conventions. Allusions to physical contact are vague and rare. This could be attributed to the spiritual and inner nature of his love and to the reserved social code regarding the female body in Somali culture at the time.

Cilmi Boodhari is still well known among Somalis today, both for his exceptional poetic talent and for his tragic destiny as Hodan's lover. He became the spokesman for social reform, using his poetry to express emotions and desires that many men and women likely shared but constrained by traditional social norms,

could not openly express. In his poetry, the figure of Hodan is central, as both his muse and the source of his suffering. However, her voice is absent. The only thing that we learn about her is her fate, which is decided by her family. She has become an emblematic figure of everything that is desired but cannot be obtained, and perhaps this is what makes this story timeless. His fame also derives from his ability to express the pain of love in a poetic form that was aesthetically acceptable. He was a precursor of poetic subjectivity and managed to give voice to his inner self in a society where openly expressing personal suffering and emotions was both difficult and rare. In conclusion, it may be said that Cilmi was a major Somali poet who left us a significant cultural legacy of his era and was a forerunner of the romantic love characteristic of our time. Through his verses, he gave voice to his innermost self, articulating personal emotions with intensity that was rare in his time, and thus standing among the first Somali poets to engage in such an intimate and self-revealing mode of expression. He was also among the first poets to confer poetic dignity to the theme of love. It would be highly interesting to undertake further investigation into his poetic works, that could provide valuable insights not only into his linguistic choices and syntactic structures, but also into the ways in which society itself is represented and constructed. Such research could also involve comparative analyses with the work of other poets and authors.

Appendix

*It was God the just long ago created the love of women
It reached the Lord whose light shone upon the world, and
'Ali
People have been bringing forth offspring since the time of
'Ilise, the prophet, till now.
If they had all been of one sex they could not have sprung
forth in an unpeopled land
They were made of two kinds so that they might inspire
admiration in one another.
Evil is the custom of Somalis – otherwise they would not
revile me.*

*Even though I cleanse my bosom, like a milkvessel, with a
fire brand
And wipe it then with a fiber rag, will anything pass my
gullet?
What I would wish to chew, I was refused, and I can do
nothing but brush my teeth.
The amulets written by men of religion failed to stop
sickness.
I sought the sacred knowledge and medicines but failed to
find a cure.
You cannot wash away the love which turned into grey hair
upon you.
If the eye catches sight of something that brings it solance
and coolness
And if a human being can achieve any contentment at all in
the beauty which he beholds,
Then I have seen it in Qatra and in the limbs of Hodan.
And yet it is through this that love entered me, butchering my
soul.
Oh girls, you have touched and torn my wound.
You have buffeted the heart which I was nursing back to
health.
The tinkling of the trinkets on your arms has dismayed me.
With your little smiles you lead us men astray.
Cover up your breasts, so that God may not confound you!
When a mature he-camel learns how to sport with other
camels and throw them down
He is the most playful among all the livestock.
Again and again he forces down with his neck the frolicking
young she-camels.
Before he is six years old if he becomes expert in dealing
with them
One cannot turn him away, until his thigh weakens.
And I also cannot pluck out from my bosom the love for
Ladan.
I shall go with it under the tombstone.
I shall take it with me into the grave, for it is more steadfast
in me than may appear.*

Do not trouble yourselves, any one of you, about me, for the heart can never love two!

Evil is the sleep at noon; alas, what made me go to sleep?

Unless there is a curse on me, what else has made me miss Hodan?

As if you were my cloak and my kilt which I had cut for myself

And as if you could rescue me from the pit of the Other World and death

Every new day, when I wake up it is for you that I grid myself.

And wherever I sit down I draw signs on the ground.

Oh Hodan 'Abdi, why did I not break away from you, on account of wrongs and indignities?

You are a wall. What then has put me by your side?

Talking winds are perhaps something that is new to the world,

Yet you must swear to me by the Everlasting One that you will record my words.

I would have handed a bundle of letters to the sailing ships

But they would tarry several nights on their journey and I have decided on you for the sake of speed.

You must swear to me by the Everlasting One that you will record my words.

You pass above the ground, where there are settlements.

You never stop running, as if you were always on God's errands.

You do not get weary, it is only those who have life who wear out.

It is said that other men stepped forward to claim the girl on whom my mind was set.

You must swear by the Everlasting One that you will carry my words through the air.

It was at Daaroole that I knew the remedy for my love.

Neither a bad road nor a screen partition can stop you.

Muuse who knows the country knows the way to her.

There is a man who is committing injustice – and in this world it is only wealth that matters.

*Tell her that even walls and stone houses would have felt the pain.
Tell her that termite hills would have sprouted green frass on account of my words.
As camels who have become thirsty after they have been grazing in the Haud for a long time
And who are stopped in front of the wall, while a youth sings to them
And while the word 'hoobay' is chanted and voices interchanged,
So I grow wild with impatience when you say 'Hodan'.
What seems to you so simple, to me brings grief and woe.
Until people treated earth into her grave, I shall not give her up.
Rapt in a deceitful trance I thought I was sleeping with her
But it was only that a djinn counterfeited the image of her sister.
I aimed to snatch her by her hand – the place beside me was empty.
When I discovered that I was striving but that no one was there
I woke up abruptly, having tossed from side to side.
I rumped my bed, like a prowling lion
I attacked and pounded the bedclothes as if it were they who had caused my deprivation.
I lowered my face, like a hero against whom men have combined.
I was humbled like a boy from whom a herd of camels, which belonged to the clan, were looted.
I felt disgraced like a woman to whom the words 'I divorce you' had been spoken.
It is degrading to yearn for what you cannot have
Alas, alas, what a disaster has come upon me!
I am taking leave of this our Somali land.
I am going away from confusion among men and defenselessness among women.*

Bibliographic References

Adan, Amina H. (1981). Women and words. *Ufahamu: A journal of African Studies*, 10(3). University of California. Link: <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/8ss7h3z7>.

Andrzejewski, B.W. (1985). *Somali Literature*. Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna State Publishing House.

Andrzejewski, B.W. (2011). Poetry in Somali society. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*. Vol 23, no. 1. Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Andrzejewski, B.W. (2011). The rise of written Somali literature. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*. Vol. 23. no. 1. Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Axmed Cali Abokor. (1987). The camel in somali oral tradition. *Somali Academy of Sciences and Arts in cooperation with Scandinavian Institute of African Studies*. Sweden. Motala Grafiska.

Banti G. (1990). Introduzione alla traduzione di Xuseen Sh. Axmed Kaddare Waasuge iyo Warsame. *Academia Medicine*, vol. 2, no. 2, Academia.edu Journals.

Banti, Giorgio. (1988). 'Letteratura'. In *Aspetti Dell'espressione Artistica in Somalia*, edited by Annarita Puglielli, 30–71. Roma: Università di Roma 'La Sapienza'.

Jamal Abdi Gabbo. (2014). *Elmi Bodari and the Construction of the Modern Somali Subject in a Colonial and Sufi Context*. Phd Dissertation of Doctor of Philosophy. University of Washington.

John William Johnson. (2006). Orality, Literacy, and Somali Oral Poetry. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*. Vol. 18. No. 1. Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Laurence M. (1970). *A tree for poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose*. McMaster University Library. Press, Canada.

Mohamed Farah Abdillahi, B.W. Andrzejewski. (1967). The life of Ilmi Bowndheri, a Somali oral poet who is said to have died of Love. *Journal of the Folklore Institute*. Vol. 4, no. 2/3. Indiana University Press.

Mohamed Razi. Elmi Boodhari and Hodan: A Timeless Love Story". Medium, <https://mohamedrazi.medium.com/elmi-boodhari-and-hodan-a-timeless-love-story-7ef18d940fd1>.

Orwin M. (2001). Language Use in Three Somali Religious Poems. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*. Vol. 14. No. 1. Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Puglielli Annarita. (1987). *Aspetti dell'espressione artistica in Somalia*. Università di Roma "La Sapienza". Stampa di Bagatto Libri.Roma.

Yusuuf Meygaag Samatar. *Madhaafaanka Murtida*. Afropress Ltd. Kenya.

ⁱ Kidist Dorigatti is a master's student in African Languages and Cultures at the University of Naples "L'Orientale", focusing on Amharic and Somali, and can be reached at dorikidist@gmail.com