

“Of Warlords and Wordsmiths”: Journeying the Somali Civil War Through Selected Poetry



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Abstract

Since mid-1980s, Somalia has experienced a long period of instability and chaos characterized by a brutal civil war. This paper focuses on some literary representations of the Somali civil war, in selected Somali poets, which shed light on Somalis' experiences and struggles in the civil war era. These poems reflect on how contemporary Somali poets have attempted to better understand and counter the effects of war, and delve into the intricate and complex nature of the civil war including its effects on Somalis such as loss of relatives, exile and destruction. These works do not restrict the war to images of bloodshed but also provide images of Somalis who strive to confront the violence and look forward to a peaceful Somalia. As they historicize the war, these poems achieve a cathartic effect, by which writers and readers cleanse themselves from distress, pain and loss of hope.

Keywords: Somali Poetry, Civil War, Peace, Catharsis, Warlords, Wordsmith

"A novel [or a poem] is a mirror carried along a high road. At one moment it reflects to your vision the azure skies, at another the mire of the puddles at your feet."

*Marie-Henri Beyle (Stendhal),
The Red and the Black*

Introduction

This article is a parallel reading of the war violence as it is countered by Somali poets. In the very act of describing the effects of the civil war, poets manage to perform two functions: a historicizing function and a cathartic one. The phrase "Of Warlords and Wordsmiths" is taken from Abdulqawi Yusuf's article by the same title, in which he studies the effects of Keinan Abdi Warsame's hip-hop songs and how Warsame is "battling warlords with lyrics" (49).

This article aims to stress the crucial role of poetry in the ongoing struggle for better life - of course, in a figurative and symbolic manner. In other words, the poems to be studied counter violence through discrediting violence and challenge the power of the gun through words filled with hope and aspirations of a lost generation, one devastated by civil war.

The way that poetry, as a form of writing, reflects the situation will be examined in a selection of poems by Somali poets—three women poets and two men poets respectively: *Ilwaad Jaamac*, *Warsan Shire*, *Aamina Axmed Yuusuf*, *Gamuute A. Gamuute* and *Cali Jimcaale Axmed*. These poems chronicle different stages of the Somali experience: from hope to despair, from tyranny to warlordism, and from statehood to statelessness. They also give a complete image of Somalis as they travel alongside their

country when songs of hope and aspirations were sung only to be muted by bullets—bullets that eventually mute the very people who were singing.

From 1969 until 1991, Somalia was governed by Dictator Siad Barre.¹ When his regime was driven outside of the capital Mogadishu, Somalis looked forward to a bright future when Somalia would be run outside of the dictatorship. Parallel to the poets who celebrated Barre’s 1969 coup d’état and “came up with moral justifications . . . for Barre’s ascendancy to power [with] songs like ‘*Geeddiga wadaay*’ . . . ‘*Guulwade Siyaad, aabbihii garashada*’ . . . and ‘*Caynaanka hay*’”² (Ahmed, “Daybreak” 17), most of Somali intellectuals have taken to the pen to justify a revolution against all forms of power-corruption. Somalis aspired to fulfil in a true manner the goals stated in the “First Announcement SRC Act on Behalf of the People”—“social justice,” “rapid progress of the country,” “liquidation of all kinds of corruption, all forms of anarchy, the malicious system of tribalism,” “Somali national unity,” and the “preserv[ation] [of] the policy of peaceful coexistence between all people” (Barre IV-V). In fact, in 1991, Somalis perceived the fight against Barre as a new chance for building Somalia on democratic and peaceful ground.

“Premonition”

Somali acclaimed critic and poet Ali Jimale Ahmed³ (Cali Jimcaale Axmed) has evocatively expressed this anticipation shared by Somalis in his poem “Premonition”; this poem, which was written on Thursday 27 December 1990—precisely a month before the fall of Barre’s regime,⁴ is “dedicated to those who translated a premonition into reality” (Ahmed, “Premonition” 84)—that is, to Somalis effectively casting a shadow over Barre’s rule. To describe this poem, one can only call it an optimistic ode to the power of the Somali people and to their shared hope for a brighter

future; the poet⁵ eloquently describes the last days of Barre in Mogadishu as his powers were fading against the willpower of the Somalis:

Besieged by the gun singing lullabies
Of freedom yet to come
Pigeonholed to the far end of town
Where the ocean meets land (84)

The poem puts into opposition two elements: a dictator retreating and a people advancing; with each step taken by the people, Barre finds himself further cornered into an even smaller space. The guns used by the people are different from those used by the regime; the insurgents` guns are “singing lullabies,” which are usually sung to babies to get them to sleep. Ahmed’s association of these guns with lullabies effectively associates Barre with sleep—a form of inactivity, closure and end; in chanting hope songs, Somalis drive Barre to sleep, that is, to idleness and to passiveness—an inability to respond and to counteract. Indeed, Barre is forced into a symbolic death as the landmass, he controls, decreases until he is caught between “*freedom-fighters*” and the ocean. Barre, realizing that he has lost the battle, chooses to flee Mogadishu.

In fleeing Mogadishu, Barre “mourns the loss of his name [which is] shrinking” (84); as Ahmed explains in a footnote, “Siyaad in Somali means ‘to increase or augment’” (84) and consequently the name has become antithetical to the person bearing it, for Barre’s power is shrinking as the power of the Somali people is growing. Prophesying such an historical moment, Ahmed describes what he thinks Somalis would be doing the day Barre is ousted:

Too small to swell anyone
.....
While people were dancing

In rain by the Mandrake
Jubilant, a curse lifted
But never put to rest. (84)

With Barre out of the picture, Somali people take to the streets to celebrate the end of dictatorship, which they hope will bring with it the end of many other negative aspects of the autocratic rule; dancing under the rain presents us with a highly romanticized image of the Somali people akin to that of two lovers walking under the rain or a desert people celebrating the end of a drought. The image set by Ahmed is that of a people determined to plant the seeds of future and water them with the rain of hope. Ahmed’s picture of the rain can be seen as a counter-image to an incident from Somali history: “Even the skies were generous to the coup makers: long awaited rains fell in abundance . . . [which] the ideologues of the new regime quickly interpreted it as a divinely symbolic act” (Ahmed, “Daybreak” 17). One can argue that the rain of 1991 is as divinely symbolic as that of 1969, different eras with same aspirations; this rain is also symbolically cleansing in that it washes away the traces of bloodshed and violence. In the course of cleansing, it has washed away the curse that has been cast over Somalia; Barre’s defeat equals the death of dictatorship and lack of freedom. Nonetheless, Ahmed ends his poem with a rather sharp twist as he warns that the curse would not fully be destroyed with Barre’s ousting; this is a strong call for Somalis not to be caught up in the moment of Barre’s removal but instead to be watchful for what remains of the curse.

When “The Mayor of Mogadishu,” as Barre used to be called (Diriye Abdullahi 39), was pushed out of Mogadishu, anarchy descended on Somalia, and various factions challenged each other about who should have power: “As soon as the detested centre collapsed, a new vicious jostling for individual and clanistic power commenced, exacerbated by revenge-seeking rage . . . an orgy of looting . . . anarchy and chaos in

most major urban centers” (Lyons 21). Somalis, who were hoping for peace and democracy, were shocked to realize that ridding themselves of Barre was but the start. This brings back the suggestion at the end of “Premonition” that the journey towards democracy would not end with Barre. Somalia was trapped within a political scene characterized by chaos, violence and deep political and social divisions.

In this environment, as pointed out by Somali novelist and scholar Maxamed D. Afrax, a new form of struggle emerged:

Painfully moved by the current disaster, many Somali poets, dramatists and creative writers have responded to the civil war by a wave of new literature, condemning clan hostilities and similar destructive practices, and advocating for peace and national rebuilding. (32)

As Afrax indicates, the new emerging literature was aimed against the present status-quo and was a preparation for the future; novels, short stories and poems were written demanding the end of anarchy and civil war and the creation of a stable path for a prosperous Somalia. The emerging literature was “amongst the non-violent instruments of resistance used by Somalis against these home-grown oppressors” (Yusuf 49): Nuruddin Farah’s *Blood in the Sun Trilogy*, Abdirazak Y. Osman’s novel *In the Name of Our Fathers*, and Samatar Sooyaan’s short story “A Foreign Language Is Such a Nuisance” illustrate the civil war and its effects on the Somali population including crimes, relative losses, famine, displacement and emigration.

Reflections

In his poem “Condolence”⁶, Somali poet Gamuute Axmad Gamuute, the penname used by Faarax Axmad Cali,⁷ expresses, as the title suggests, his concern for and commiseration with the Somali people; this poem is

structured in a surprising and evocative manner, in which there is a parallelism between two actions—shedding tears and shouting—and between association and disassociation with certain elements of the war. In other words, the stanzas are at times cries “with” the victims and at other times cries “against” the victimizers—from being passive through tears to being active in voicing a desire to end violence; the poem starts with a stanza that calls for mourning over the fate of Somalia:

Cry, my pen, cry	Cry, my pen, cry
Shedding tears of blood, cry!	Shedding tears of blood, cry!
Cry, my pen, cry	Cry, my pen, cry
For the slaughtered peace, cry!	For the thousands butchered, cry! (25)

One can make several remarks concerning the style employed in this stanza, which in fact applies to all of the following stanzas; there is an emphasis on reiterating the phrase “Cry, my pen, cry,” which can be understood symbolically as the pen crying on behalf of the Somali people. In writing this poem, Gamuute weeps through the pen, metaphorically ‘bleeding’ on the white paper on which the poem is written; as Somalis lost their voices due to killings and violence, the only way to cry is through the pen. In fact, the pen is “shedding tears of blood,” which are as dark as the depressing present of Somalia; whereas the history of Somalia is written in red ink—that is, with Somalis’ blood—Gamuute writes his tears with the black ink of the pen, which both highlights the dire present but also gives Gamuute an outlet for his ever-growing frustration with reality. Within this new reality, peace—that is, the very notion of coexistence—is “slaughtered,” which associates the deaths of Somalis with the death of peace; with every new “butchered” Somali, peace dissolves and is swallowed into the widening and growing ocean of blood.

As the poem progresses, Gamuute points to a new struggle that Somalis have to face; the problem is not ridding Somalia of Barre but of Barre-like

people: “Cry, my pen, cry//Against the locust that left//the larvae behind, cry” (25). Gamuute is referring to the Somali proverb “Ayax teg, eelna reeb (Don’t be fooled by the migration of the locusts. They leave their larvae behind)” (Ahmed, “Daybreak” 20); the locust is symbolic of tyranny, The larvae refer to anarchy and warlordism, the insurgents fought against agony of tyranny but replaced it with another agony; and thus Somalia will be trapped in a vicious circle/cycle of warlords and fissional factions, looting and burgling, devastating civil war, social fragmentation and inter-clan violence. In fact, in his poem “Why Are We not Blest?,” Ali Jimale Ahmed shares the same perception as Gamuute: “A new head, stronger// mushrooms in the place// of the decapitated” (104); Barre’s decapitated head—that is, his physical absence from power and presidency palace —does not terminate the suffering of the people. Both poets highlight the fact that “the onslaught// starts anew” (“Why Are We not Blest?” 104) because the agony and misery does not end with ousting a dictator but rather starts with him! Somalia has become a “mutilated homeland” (“Condolence” 25) where every warlord thinks himself to be fit to lead, and wants to possess the recently-emptied seat of power upon huge heaps of skulls! Somalia has been divided between different rivalling warlords, whose only interest is to control more land and more resources, resulting in a dysfunctional disintegrated nation!

As Somalia was being divided like a prize of war between warlords, more and more Somalis became either internally displaced people or refugees “thrown to the four winds” (Mohamed 90); those who did not manage to escape the raging war were reduced to a “human shield” (Gamuute 25) protecting one faction against another. Somalis, who “slept//in the same womb, two horns//of the same cow” (Ahmed, “Season of Rape” 72), moved away from their shared past, culture, and fate towards being self-destructive people. Thus, Somalis used other Somalis to kill more Somalis—a literal translation of the Arabic proverb: “I, against my

brothers. I and my brothers against my cousins. I and my brothers and my cousins against the world” (Lewis 114).

From a revolution to overthrow a dictator to a brutal civil war, Somalia witnessed a sharp and unexpected shift in its history as the revolution became a clan war—or as Hussein Mohamed puts it, “with every gain comes a loss, in every loss a gain” (qtd. in Farah, *Yesterday* 120); while faction leaders fought each other for power, Somalis were caught in the in-betweens of a chaotic space in search for an escape and a people in constant fear for their lives.

Tainted Memory

In her poem “First Kiss,” Warsan Shire⁸ tells how a love story turned sour when the war started; this story of a Somali mother is told to her son by one of the relatives. It starts with a commanding statement: “The first boy to kiss your mother later raped women// when the war broke out . . .” (16); there is a rather shocking juxtaposition between a highly romanticized memory and a horrifying image of the present status-quo. The same Somali man, who loved the mother, raped other women as the war took hold of Somalia; in fact, the mother herself was raped by the first man she ever kissed: “Your mother was sixteen when he first kissed her// . . . //On waking she found her dress was wet and sticking// to her stomach, half-moons bitten into her thighs” (16). From romanticism to rape, the mother becomes symbolic of the nation and its history: “In poetry, they [women] serve as a metaphor central to the nation’s psyche, a poetic metaphor representing the integrity and honour of the land” (Farah, “Clichés” 6); the rape of this particular Somali woman is evocative of the larger motherland being politically raped as it is divided among warlords. In the fate of its women, Somalia can be read.

Warsan Shire's poem concludes with a stanza that rather foregrounds essential questions about the post-civil-war period, reminding the readers and Somalis at large that the present cannot be easily forgotten:

Last week, she saw him driving the number eighteen bus,
.....
.....You were with her, holding a bag
of dates to your chest, heard her let out a deep moan
when she saw how much you looked like him. (16)

The driver of the bus is the man who had previously raped the mother; upon seeing him, the mother is transported back to the moment when she was raped—a visual-mental association. But what is more important is that the mother saw in her child her rapist; she is constantly reminded that she has carried in her womb the outcome of the rape, and that her child's father raped her. The child can be seen as a catalyst for a history that is engrained into the lives, memory and lineage of Somalis. In other words, children born-out-of-rape are living documentations of the atrocity of the civil war and anarchy - where there is confusion between friend and enemy, and neighbor and attacker.

But if “children who witnessed their mothers killed or molested were traumatized,” (Haji Ingiriis “Mothers and Memory” 229) what can one argue about children who bear in their blood the mark of trauma itself? Furthermore, if “it is likely that many of the affected children emerged as militiamen in order to avenge their loved ones,” (Haji Ingiriis 229) how will the rape-children act and how will they treat their fathers? The answers to these questions can only be answered by the victims themselves—both women and children—whose memory is forever imprinted by a trauma that extends to the future of the nuclear Somali family and the nation at large; only by “healing mothers and children [by helping them . . .] escape the mental depression” and the stigma of

“reputation injury” (Haji Ingiriis 234-5, 229) can Somalia as a country start the repair process of its wounded national identity and history.

Lamenting

A great part of the healing process is to voice the atrocities that Somalis have undergone during the civil war as does Aamina Axmed Yuusuf⁹ in a two-stanza poem entitled “Can You Hear Me?”. Similar to Gamuute and Warsan Shire, Aamina Yuusuf details the “cry of pain” of Somalis, who witnessed the killing of mothers, the raping of sisters, and the burning of villages (24); throughout the poem, the same question is reiterated: “Can you hear me? Can I be heard?” (24), which is at times shouted at soldiers (24), representative of violence and brutality, and at other times at doctors who are reopening the very wounds they want to cure. But most importantly, Aamina Yuusuf expresses her agony in a statement directed towards the city of Mogadishu:

Can you hear me, dear city,
For I can hear you cry as your heart is ripped out of its inner frame
And as your big walls are brought down,
Exposing you nakedly under the harsh African sky! (24)

The city described in this stanza can be any other Somali city such as Hargeisa, Baidoa, and Kismayo; regardless of which city the stanza portrays, the city is given human qualifiers—depicted as having a heart, a body and a rib cage. The city cries as its heart is taken out of it, symbolizing the stopping of the propulsion of blood throughout the body of the country and thus synonymous of death; the bloodshed, which has taken over Somalia, is intensified by the image of the city itself losing life. Nonetheless, the devastation of the human-like city does not stop at the level of ripping of its heart but extends to exposing it to the eyes of the outside world; as the walls of buildings collapsed, the city found its

inner and private parts publicized as part of the ongoing discriminatory war—a war that perceives everyone and everything as a justifiable target.

As cities rich in history fell to the ground under the constant violence sponsored by warlords; the residents, including particularly children, found themselves caught in a war where their “short life” (24) was even more shortened. “scared” and “dying” (24), Somali children realized that “say[ing] ‘mother’ at the age of one,” “laugh[ing] at the age of two,” “sing[ing] at three,” and “at four danc[ing]” have “not come to mean anything on a large world scale” as they were “at five learn[ing] to die” (24). As much as the four years are filled with joy, love and excitement, they were terminated in the civil war by the fifth year; Somali children were not allowed to contribute positively to the history of their cities and nations reducing them to mere casualties of the war.

Eventually, as Somalia’s and Somalis’ voice, arms and legs weakened, and as “voices of death” approached, death itself became a comfort; death, which was initially feared and avoided at all cost, was welcomed because only then Somalis “may no longer be scared” (24). In a curious twist of symbolism, life becomes death while death becomes life; in other words, death, that is, the physical end of life, is perceived by Somalis as an end to their agony and thus it begins a new form of life. All the activities learned in the short four years will be reignited and lived again in the afterlife, in a hope based on religious belief, for a better, safe and peaceful environment as opposed to the one in war-ridden Somalia. In brief, although Somalia as a mother is dying, Somalis look above to the heavens, waiting “to sink into the deep embrace of [their] mother[s]//who will comfort [them] so that [Somalis] will never be scared again” (24).

“Who am I?”

Not only did Poetry chronicling the Somali civil war become “the factual mirror of social reality in which the Somali finds an intimate representation of himself/herself”(Afrax 32) but it also became a notable venue for Somalis to voice themselves—not only among each other but to foreigners as well. In her poem “Who Am I?”, written when she was a high school student in Ottawa, Somali Canadian poet Ilwaad Jaamac¹⁰ authentically voices Somali children. “Who Am I?” essentially a manifesto-like poem defending the non-violent Somalis’ inability to alter the Somali reality, starts with a question many Somalis face abroad:

I am a Somalian,
And people ask me why
I stand by
And watch my people die (23)

The image of Somalis depicted in mainstream media is one of refugees or of a starved population carrying AK-47 Kalashnikov rifles; those who were not engaged in violence were reduced to the image of a “passive population” (Binet 149). Somalis were perceived as mere voyeurs to the violence and bloodshed that inflicted Somalia. In this respect, non-Somalis demanded Somalis to justify their ‘apparent passivity’ and ‘lack of involvement’ in Somali politics and state building.

Ilwaad Jaamac does not accept the characterization of Somalis as passive but she rather describes them as “feel[ing] useless// sometimes hopeless// most of the times, however, [. . .] homeless” (23). She wonders about her true identity as Somali, that is, about what makes her a Somali; the use of three adjectives with the suffix ‘less’ stresses

not the passivity of Somalis but their inability to act. In other words, to be useless, hopeless, and homeless is not the result of a self-identification action in which Somalis decide to be an ineffective people and refugees; actually Somalis are instead made useless and homeless by warlords, who control the power dialectics in Somalia: “Power was invested in the long neck of the gun with which it was protected” (Farah, *Milk* 86)—only the warlords had guns and thus power was exclusively in their hands. Faced with violence, peaceful Somalis found themselves forced either to flee the country or to stay and face possible death. Ilwaad Jaamac argues that Somalis were defined by the power of the gun, which was supposed to protect all Somalis not one specific faction against another.

Ilwaad Jaamac further expresses her feelings about the situation in Somalia when she “wonder[s] why//Everything [she] ever held dear// Is no longer here” (23); life as it was known by Somalis “seems to disappear//In fact, it did disappear” (24). As more warlords join the war, more treasured objects of Somali culture, history and experience are lost; here, disappearance does not refer only to what Somalis used to have but also to what they could have had in the future. In other words, with every Somali killed, Ilwaad Jaamac does not only “weep” for what was but also for “what no longer is,//And will never be” (24) including the bright future Somali children could have had. Indeed, as more Somalis are lost to violence, Somalia loses its past and its future alike as those killed carry in them the history of Somalia—thus by dying, a fragment of the Somali past is forever gone.

Somalia, a “beautiful land that was filled with trees//And peaceful seas from west to east” (24), is currently a country whose population uses those very seas to escape the war; rather than being enjoyed for their aesthetic beauty, seas are now functional as they offer one of the safest paths out of Somalia. The “wise old man praying in peace// children

joyfully playing and laughing//their mothers proudly watching and cheering” (24) are all lost in the midst of war deepening the scars inflicted on the collective memory. What matters is that in the deaths of these men, children, and mothers, Somalia has moved from being a reality to a nostalgic thought in Somalis’ minds. Previously, Haji Ingiriis stressed the need to examine the future of children born as a result of “rape” or those who witnessed any form of violence; the same inquiry can be broadened to include all Somalis regardless of gender, age, and clan affiliation. In this respect, Ilwaad Jaamac offers her answer to the ongoing war:

Hatred is the very core,
The bitter soul,
Of any war
It’s a war that destroyed the whole
And will destroy more
And will destroy more and more (24)

The collective psyche of Somalia has been imprinted with recurrent images of deaths and bloodshed, which have become part and parcel of the Somali legacy; denying this fact does not change the truthfulness of Jaamac’s postulation that hatred has taken over the Somali experience. The civil war, which was ignited by Barre’s tyranny, was indeed a movement based on a deep-seated hatred of Barre; Somalis, who before had only one figure to channel their hatred towards, are now engulfed in a more complex and fragmented system of hatred, where most Somalis are both hated and hating. Unless this hatred is healed from within, that is, by Somalis uprooting the seeds of hatred, the destruction will continue to characterize Somalia; the warlords can be silenced only when the core of the war is destroyed as a final act of constructive destruction in Somalia.

From Swords to Words:

In brief, referring back to Ali Jimale Ahmed's "The Third Season of Rape," the "feud internecine" (72) has changed the socio-political Somali landscape by making Somalis enemies of themselves; nonetheless, the end of the civil war is located in the very germ that started it—that is, in "the same womb" where the feud was ignited (72). In his poem "Of Nations and Narratives," Ahmed makes it clear that the beginning and the end of the civil war is situated in the same place:

Happy endings are
Not concocted
Nor delivered in
A C-section (23)

The end of the civil war needs to be delivered in the same manner as an infant is traditionally born; the birth of peace cannot be brought with more scars to the body of Somalia as a mother-symbol. It rather needs to be begotten in the very womb where war started; the happy endings "must germinate in// the belly of the narratives" (23) that would weave "in the loom of the plot" (23) a new Somalia where warlords are silenced and wordsmiths are voiced.

Therefore, the birth of new Somalia is closely linked to the end of war, hatred, and feud, which were intertwined for many years; the new narrative of the nation should be essentially about muting bullets in favor of words—in other words, moving from swords to words whilst keeping Somalia at the foreground of Somalis' minds.

Notes

- ¹ Mohamed Siad Barre (Maxamed Siyaad Barre) (c.1919-1995), the president of Somalia from October 1969, when he took the power via a bloodless military coup, until January 1991, when he was overthrown in a bloody civil war.
- ² “*Guulwade Siyaad, aabbihii garashada*” “Siyad the victory-bearer, and the father of knowledge” is the most prominent Somali revolutionary song which is flattering Siyad Barre for creating heroic image for him. It was compulsory to recite loudly in schools and community gatherings and meetings. In 1970 this song was composed by Hassan Haji Mohamed aka “*Hassan Guulwade*” (1949-). “*Geeddiga wadaay*” “Lead the track” is a Somali nationalistic song composed in 1962 (Amin, 12-13). “*Caynaanka hay*” “May you hold onto the reins of power forever” is a Somali revolutionary song composed in 1971 (Amin, 42-43), and it praises President Siad Barre personally. Both songs were overplayed in radio stations in 1970s, and composed by the late popular famous songwriter Abdi Muhumed Amin (1935-2008).
- ³ *Cali Jimcaale Axmed (Ali Jimale Ahmed)*, a prolific Somali poet, short-story writer and literary critic. He holds a PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). He is the author of three collections of poetry: *Fear is a Cow* (2002), *Diaspora Blues* (2005), and *When Donkeys Give Birth to Calves* (2012). He is also the author of *Daybreak Is Near: Literature, Clans, and the Nation-state in Somalia* (1996), the editor of *The Invention of Somalia* (1995) and the co-editor of *Silence is not Golden: A Critical Anthology of Ethiopian Literature* (1995), and *The Road less Traveled: Reflections on the Literatures of the Horn of Africa* (2008). Ahmed’s poems studied in this article are reproduced in his collections of poetry.
- ⁴ Insurgent movements against Siad Barre’s regime emerged in 1980s, and they fired the first bullet in Mogadishu on 30 December 1990. After 26 days of confrontation Siad Barre was ousted, and the armed oppositions took over the power without any national agreement among them and the country plunged into chaos and wide-scale civil war.
- ⁵ This article opts not to use the literary term ‘persona’ when referring to the speaking voice in the poem; this article share the belief that, in the case of these Somali poems, the immediacy of the experience and the personal nature of the poems make it unfeasible to separate the poet from the poem as they are entwined.

- ⁶ This poem was translated by Mohamed Mohamed-Abdi and published in a French collection of Somali poems entitled *Apocalypse: Poèmes Somalis*; the poems in this collection span from 1978 until 1994 and chronicle the misery that befell Somalia and Somalis.
- ⁷ *Gamuute A. Gamuute*, pen name of Farah Ahmed Ali, a writer, poet and literary scholar based in Canada. In 1977, he obtained a degree in Arts from Faculty of Education (*Lafoole*), Somali National University. During his years at the university, he was the editor of the Somali section of *Baraha: The Educator*, a periodical published by the University. In 1976, his short story entitled “*Caynba Cayn*” (“*Everyone According to His Eyes*”) won the first prize in a literary competition held at the University. He is the author of *Coming of Age: An Introduction to Somali Metrics* (2012).
- ⁸ *Warsan Shire*, a Somali-British poet, writer and activist. *Her collections of poetry are Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011), *Our Men Do Not Belong to Us* (2014), and *Her Blue Body* (2015). In 2013, she has been awarded *Brunel University’s first African Poetry Prize*.
- ⁹ *Aamina Axmed Yuusuf*, a Somali-British poet. *She holds a degree in political sciences from University of London*.
- ¹⁰ *Ilwaaad Jaamac*, a Somali Canadian poet residing in Ottawa.

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