

“Pen to Poet Is Weapon” — the Pastoral in Abdirahman Mirreh’s Poetry (1976-1994)



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Abstract

This paper examines three collections of poetry by Abdirahman Gaileh Mirreh (1942-2000). If anything, Mirreh can be described as a poet who uses his words to advance a more democratic, more just, simpler, and greener world, not just for humans but also for the fauna and flora. This article mainly focuses on environmental and philosophical themes developed in Mirreh’s poems from a yearning to go back to the motherland, to a nostalgia for an undemanding lifestyle, Mirreh does not limit his poetry to one theme but rather evokes all aspects of life while still questioning them, aiming to foreground a more balanced view of Somalia and the world at large. This paper sheds light on a ‘neglected’ yet brave and daring Norwegian Somali poet by contextualizing his poetry as one driven by the idea of being a citizen of the world and the environmentalist aspects of a new greener world view.

Key words: Abdirahman Mirreh, Somali Poetry, Pastoral Poetry.

*“Poets are linked by a call, akin to faith.
Hope, the pillars of this universal goal,
Aspirations activate, spirits elevate.
Justice is the cup.
The peak is in the poet’s eye.
Pen to poet is weapon
And with pen he wrote.”*

*(Safi Abdi, “Mahmoud Darwish,
a Tribute” 100)*

1. Introduction

Abdirahman Gaileh Mirreh was born in 1942 in Hargeisa, in what was then the British Protectorate of Somaliland, and died in Norway in 2000. He spent his early days in Aden, Southern Yemen, where he attended school. He later studied and worked for three years in Sheffield, England, and also three years in Norway, and in 1964 started studying in Leipzig, Germany, where he obtained a master’s degree in agriculture and later a Doctorate in anthropology. In 1979, he settled in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia where he worked until 1982 when he returned to be a farmer in northern Somalia. By 1988, he left the country when the civil war broke out in Somalia, after being imprisoned twice by the government, and he applied for asylum in Norway and worked for the National Folk Museum in Oslo.

Abdirahman Mirreh wrote four collections of poetry: *Songs of a Nomad Son*¹ (1990), *Songs of a Nomad Son, a Galool Tree Named Desire: A Collection of Poetry, 1990-1993* (1994), *A Gob Tree: Beside the Hargeisa Wadi*² (1995), and *From an Acacia Landscape*³ (1996). Mirreh also wrote a collection of Somali folktales, some of which are his own creation, entitled *Nomadens Stemme: Fabler Og Eventyr Fra Somalifolket* (1996). He also wrote *Die Sozioökonomischen Verhältnisse der Nomadischen*

Bevölkerung im Norden der Demokratischen Republik Somalia (1978), which is a study of the nomads in Northern Somalia. Mirreh's *Songs of a Nomad Son, a Galool Tree Named Desire: A Collection of Poetry, 1990-1993* (1994) is out of print, and one is justified in believing that many, if not all, of the poems included in this volume were reproduced in *A Gob Tree: Beside the Hargeisa Wadi* (1995) and *From an Acacia Landscape* (1996).⁴

In Mirreh's "Written Lines," the persona states that the poet has "no purpose [. . .] to achieve with the lines [that he] now and then write[s]" (91); he also stresses that he neither has "to appease" anyone "nor change//the planet earth" (91). Despite such proclamation by the persona—and one might say the poet as well—Mirreh, as an intellectual, and his poetry are indeed calls for positive change on the political, social, and environmental levels. Mirreh's poetry is driven by a strong belief in justice for all—regardless of nationalities, tribes, religions or species; the road to democracy, freedom, and peaceful coexistence is long but, through Mirreh's poetry, one's journey is shortened as his poetry is like a roadmap and a bridge to a democratic country, egalitarian earth, and peaceful coexistence between humans and non-humans.

Indeed, Mirreh's poetry goes beyond the Somali example to address burning issues for all humanity from wars, the Holocaust, human rights, refugees, animal rights, to protecting the environment for future generation, etc. Mirreh might have thought that he "write[s] mostly for the//pleasure of [his] soul" ("Written Lines" 91), but, as Safi Abdi writes, "pen to poet is weapon//And with pen he wrote" where Mirreh's poetry is as equally a self-absorbed intellectual activity as it is his weapon to express a poet's concern for his homeland and the world at large, stressing his belief in being a citizen-of-the-world. Hence, this essay explores the themes of nature, animals rights, progress and nomadic life—a celebration of a deep connection with nature and animals.⁵

2. Mirreh’s Pastoral Engagement

“Cet amour vibrant et poétique de la nature [. . .] se souvient encore des récits que contaient ces sage vieillards, le soir autour du feu des campements [. . .] au rythme d’une vie séculaire que les excès de la vie moderne n’ont pas encore déshumanisée.”

(Nicole Lecuyer-Samantar, “Présentation de La Pioggia È Caduta, Il a Plu!” 4-6)

With these words, Nicole Lecuyer-Samantar described Mohamed Said Samantar’s *La Pioggia È Caduta, Il a Plu!*⁶ (1974); were one to describe Mirreh’s philosophy about nature, animals and progress, Lecuyer-Samantar’s words can be used because Samantar and Mirreh share common beliefs in the preservation of fauna and flora, in the cultural value of certain traditions, and in the need to resist over-modernization. Mirreh’s poetry is characterized by a deep commitment to save nature from human over-exploitation; his poetry is essentially in the pastoral tradition, in that, it “describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban [with] a delight in the natural” (Gifford 2). In order to better grasp Mirreh’s pastoral philosophy, three categories need to be examined: nature, animals, and the nomad; each of these categories highlights a component in an all-encompassing vision of what it means to be interconnected with one’s surrounding.

Born in Hargeisa, studied in Aden, Sheffield, Leipzig and Jeddah, and resided for a long period in Oslo, Mirreh’s poetry represents “an urban poet’s nostalgic image of the peace and simplicity of the life of shepherds and other rural folks in an idealized natural setting” (Abrams 202). In “The Galool Tree and the Acid Rain,” the persona describes his daily rituals as follows:

I lay the whole day
on the earth, in God's
nature, between the
galool and the gob trees,
watching the creations
of God. (34)

From the outset, the persona fits one of the conventions of the pastoralist, someone who is “reclining under a spreading beech tree and meditating the rural muse” (Abrams 202). There is nothing separating him from the immediate environment that includes trees native to the Horn, Galool and Gob trees, and animals—such as camels; it is within this setting that the act of observing becomes synonymous with connecting with the non-human elements—usually ignored in modern life—from “the bees [that] diligently// buzzed in the air//kissing the flowers” to the “pigeons” and the “three eagles” roaming the sky and “flying home” (34).

3. Protecting Nature

Mirreh's celebration of nature is linked, for instance, to his dislike of mass tourism as expressed in “On the Slopes of Kilimanjaro”: “And very soon their [Masai people] land will//disappear the elephant too, where//the tourists came” (40). In fact, throughout his environmentally-motivated poetry, Mirreh insists that saving nature is for aesthetic reasons, as “it gives us beauty,” and also for practical reasons, as “it gives millions//bread” (“Dying Man” 44); thus, Mirreh perceives in saving the environment an exigency that speaks to the diminishing ability of humans and non-humans to continue to live on Erath if no immediate actions are implemented.

In his advocacy for protecting nature, Mirreh has also addressed the increase in the frequency of acid rain and its impact on the environment

and human/non-human activities. Acid rain is incongruous with what nomads, and people in general, recognize in water as a source of life and prosperity; in fact, acid rain becomes an alarming event that foretells of death, destroying crops, creating food insecurity and damaging clean water supply. “Uffo I” describes how the Uffo wind, which “comes as//a forerunner before//the rain” (85), “carries no chlorine//nor acid rain” (85) and, thanks to its purity, it “gives happiness//to man and beast” (85) as it is not tainted by the chemicals released from industrial complexes, houses, or transportation vehicles. In this respect, Mirreh is apprehensive of acid rain and its effects on the environment:

And wondered endlessly
how many years it
will take until the acid
rain reaches these trees.
(“The Galool Tree and the Acid Rain” 34)

Mirreh’s environmental awareness also addresses the issue of deforestation whether in Somalia or abroad. “Thoughts of a Dying Man” starts by calling on mankind to “save the world//save the forest//in Brazil” and then adds “Save the world//save the forest//on Sumatra” (43); in both instances, the persona links a specific region with the overall fate of humanity and earth whereby the effects of protecting the Amazon forest or the Sumatra forest has effects that rise above national borders to affect everyone. Moreover, as the title of his poem “Creeping Desert” indicates, Mirreh warns against the loss of human and non-human habitat as more arable lands are lost to the desert:

Like a cactus standing
lonely on a desert terrain
fighting the desert expanding
it’s [sic] wings. (32)

The lonely cactus is symbolic of both the solution to desertification and the failure in combating it; cactus and other heat-resisting and drought-tolerant plants can be used to stabilize the soil and fight degradation which in its turn would slow down—and hopefully stop—the advancing desert (Nafzaoui 1).

Using the title of Osman Gedow Amir, one can argue that the environment in Somalia is “the silent victim” (189) since, as Quasim H. Farah affirms, “Somalia is in a state of a major environmental degradation” (qtd. in Lal Panjabi 434) where security, education, health, and food insecurity are foregrounded by the state whereas environmental issues are backgrounded.

4. Animal Kingdom

Part of Mirreh’s celebration of nature also lies in his advocacy for animal rights and the protection of certain species. His poetry’s “rhetorical strategies, use of pastoral and apocalyptic imagery and literary allusions” locates Mirreh in the intersection between literature and science, making it part of “ecocriticism” (Garrard). It is here that Mirreh’s ecocritical mind shifts its interests from the human to the non-human, namely animals; defending them, protecting them, and stressing similarities between Man and animal are some of the main tenets of Mirreh’s philosophy as it pertains to animals.

Mirreh’s celebration of the animal kingdom does not end at the threshold separating the domesticated animals from the wild animals; he equally defends the rights of animals that many shun because they are considered to be untamed and violent. “Thoughts of a Dying Man” urges humanity to save “the rhino,” “the seal,” “the bear,” “the elephant,” “the ostrich,” “the reindeer”, *inter alia* (43-4); unfortunately, between 1980 and 1998, Somalia itself lost 40.000 elephants due to illegal poaching (Amir 191)

which makes of Mirreh’s call to save the remaining herds, be it of elephants or other animals, more imperative than ever.

Furthermore, Mirreh’s advocacy of animal rights shifts the discussion from one centered on anthropocentrism to anthropomorphism. In other words, Mirreh rejects the centrality of Man and explores the animal world as one that is self-contained in its own right; for Mirreh, admitting that animals suffer, feel, and communicate among each other and with humans does not undermine the status of Man but rather acknowledges a natural link between two different species occupying the same space. In “Fatherhood” and “Death of a Baboon,” Mirreh explores life and death in the animal kingdom, emphasizing that animals have as much of their own familial and social structures as humans.

In “Fatherhood,” the reader is introduced to a family of eagles residing in the Golis range; the eagle parents’ decision on the location of the nest is motivated by their innate concern for the survival of their unborn children: “where no man can//trample the unhatched eggs” (79). Given that humans also care for the safety of their unborn children, Mirreh highlights that “the boundary between human and animal is arbitrary” (Garrard 137) because human and non-human are two variations of similar structures—families, parenthood and races/species.

In addition, in “Death of a Baboon” Mirreh depicts “a family//of hamadryas baboon” as “they gathered//and mourned the one//they loved”⁷ (32); Mirreh’s description underlines three ideas: gathering, mourning, and love. As with the eagles, love in the animal kingdom is not a matter of whether it exists or not but how each animal unit expresses it. It is the gathering and the mourning that are most intriguing here; at first, such actions are not usually thought of in relation to animals but Mirreh ascribes a level of normalcy to a gathering of animals as they pay their

respect to one of their mates. At one point Mirreh wonders: “how can I explain//the sorrow I shared//the ceremony I disturbed” (33); the answer lies in his sympathy with the baboons’ grief which stresses his understanding the baboons and validates what others may perceive as random actions—disturbing their ceremony is the result of the persona’s sensitivity.

Mirreh’s praise of the nomadic life is also related to the animals reared by the nomads in which the “animal[’s] joy” reflects and is reflected on the nomad’s mood: “I blew my flute//jubilant they grazed//with swinging tails” (“Animal Joy”⁸ 13); the nomad’s flute symbolizes the nomad’s contentment with his life and also reflects how humans and animals are entranced in the simplicity and regularity of life. In this respect, the nomad’s life is entwined with his animals: “As sunset came, I//drove them home” (13); the nomad’s day is structured around finding pasture and water for the animals in which the “time reference of the nomad [. . .] is marked by sunrise [and] sunset [. . .] and the same everyday” (Rabeh 63). As the herd is led into the pen, the scene is depicted as follows:

I knew what it meant
their jolly jump, and
all it said thank you
for the day. (13)

Given his constant interaction with the animals, the persona has developed an understanding of their movement and gestures, enabling him to communicate with them; as Ahmed Ismail Yusuf emphasizes in “A Slow Moving Night,” “thousands of years of experience, passed down from generation to generation, had taught herdsmen to recognize the behaviors of certain animals”(1).

5. A Virus Named Progress

Furthermore, Mirreh’s celebration of nature and animals is closely linked to his praise of nomadic life and his antagonistic views regarding modern life and progress. In “Cactus Leaf,” Mirreh highlights how the nomads “never write” the date of their birth nor the date of their death (30) because the nomad follows ancestral tradition; the nomads locate themselves within a continuum where their individual lives are inconsequential in the scheme of the collective history. Mirreh reiterates the same idea in “Yearning”: “A nomad son doesn’t//know his age he//knows the seasons” of rain (81); there is a division between what is perceived as being natural and what is seen as artificial—the former is valuable and the latter is insignificant.

In “The Madra Pass” Mirreh further explores the umbilical cord that connects the nomad with nature which “decide[s] whether//we should live//or perish” (22). It is because of the preciousness of water that for the nomad “patterns of movements are primarily dictated by the distribution of rain and pasture” (Lewis, “Problems”53), making knowledge about seasons and rain more significant than a date of birth or death.⁹ Indeed, Mirreh depicts the change of mood as “Rain falls upon//cracked clay” (“The Savannah-House after the Drought” 15) where “Nomads are singing again//lambs are leaping high//camels are galloping” (15)¹⁰ and where one “can hear the music of//the mountains and the//wadis connected chains” (“After the Drought” 47); in “Il a Plu!” (1966), Mohamed Said Samantar emphasizes how rain brings happiness to humans and non-humans alike: “Symbole de vie, symbole de renouveau.//Tous, plantes, hommes et bêtes//Participaient à cette résurrection” (58).

‘Nomads are singing again’ signifies the reoccurrence of the same seasonal shift in precipitation, in what Lewis calls, “this fairly regular cycle of seasons” (*Modern* 4), highlighting the nomad’s reliance on

accumulated knowledge about seasons. In this respect, Mirreh explores the simplicity of the nomad's life:

Our ancestors moved
freely with their herds
.....
sometimes they marched
little more than a stone throw,
sometimes from dawn to dusk
("Cactus Leaf" 30).

Moreover, in "When Nomads Move," Mirreh rejects modern forms of entertainment, such as radios and televisions, and he praises "the campfire" where "fairytales are being told//to children in the evening" (69)¹¹; storytelling, an integral part of the Somali culture, has two functions: creating a sense of unity between the older and the younger generations, and entrusting adages and knowledge of the past to the future generations. Similarly, after experiencing life in Mogadishu, Olaad, the protagonist of Abdi Sheik-Abdi's "Rotten Bananas" (1979), indicates his nostalgia for the nomadic life: "Longing for the country-side [. . .] He began, missing the wide, open plains and the plentiful milk of their wholesome herd" (186).

In conjunction with the same philosophy about nomadic and modern lives, Mirreh perceives progress as a "virus," as the title of his poem "A Virus Named Progress"¹² highlights; in this poem, he contrasts his life as a child with that of his children, emphasizing how daily rituals have been impacted by modern tools:

As a child Qasil
was my shampoo
Xina henna was my soap
.....

My toothpaste was
from the cadey shrub. (77)

The toiletry described is characterized by its emphasis on natural elements: Qasil, a powder made from the leaves of Gob’ trees, henna, a natural dye used usually in celebrations, and cadey, a Somali traditional toothbrush¹³; by making use of his natural surroundings, the persona frees himself from paying for modern toiletries—an idea expressed in “Yearning” (81)—and also saves his body and health from all the chemicals that are found in modern beauty products¹⁴. In fact, his tribute to traditional cosmetics is contrasted with his children’s “want[ing] the shampoo//the perfumed soap//and toothpaste” that has “a chemical taste” (“Virus” 77); the younger generation’s acceptance of chemicals indicates how numbed modern generation has become to what are otherwise harmful products. In fact, as a young man, the persona “cleaned the cooking//pot with sand” even though “Ajax was available//in the shops” (77); hence, his present rejection of modern products stems from a deep conviction in the preeminence of natural products because they do not harmfully impact one’s health and surroundings.

Mirreh’s antagonistic view on progress is further explored in “Progress” where he laments that “no more do the nomads travel//through the land on foot” but on “trucks” (31)¹⁵; the lament over the shift in transportation mode is related to the nomadic life’s essence rather than to the transportation mode itself. In other words, opting for “Toyota and Nissan” results in the nomads no longer “load[ing]” their belongings on “a camel’s//back” (31); in view of the fact that “a nomad loves his camels [without whom] he can’t survive in the steppe” and since “a nomad is known by his camels and the size of his herds” (Korn 14-5), replacing the camel by a truck signals a cultural shift from nomadism to urbanism, from not paying bills to paying for the fuel, and from economic independence to dependence which the persona is reluctant to accept¹⁶.

6. Conclusion

“If, as they say, there is only one story, which is told and retold [. . .] then surely one may be tempted to read all the novels [or poems] as one [and] one will assume that each novel [or poem] contributes to the tributary of tales being told again and again, in parts or in series.”

(Nuruddin Farah, “If All Stories . . .!” 14)

If Farah’s words are any indication, Mirreh’s poetry needs to be read as one, representing a poet’s life commitment to the bettering of his homeland as a prelude for his engagement with the world. Throughout this essay, Mirreh’s commitment to greater principles was emphasized, stressing how local and global issues are intertwined; based on this postulation, this article mapped a web of issues that Mirreh judges to be vital for the development and survival of humanity. Mirreh’s eighteen-year-long poetry (1976-1994) takes the reader on a journey that is not bound by borders, a journey where harmony with nature is prioritized.

Moreover, Mirreh’s environmental consciousness takes its roots in his immediate environment where the Somali nomads are emotionally and economically connected with nature. In this respect, this article emphasized the symbiotic link that connects the nomads with nature; in his quest to safeguard the environment, Mirreh judges all natural elements to be vital as they are all connected in a chain where one is both giving to and getting life from another since a butterfly has as much rights as grass, as a whale. Within this general thinking, Mirreh rejects modern life and embraces the nomadic life, the one he enjoyed as a young man; seeking to reunite with his nomadic roots, Mirreh describes a life free of technology, debt, and pollution where the individual lives in accordance with nature’s rules.

Notes

- ¹ This collection includes 44 poems written between 1976 and 1990.
- ² This collection includes 93 poems written between 1983 and 1994. Some of the poems in this collection are reprints, if in different format, from earlier collections.
- ³ This collection includes 96 poems written between 1983 and 1994. Some of the poems in this collection are reprints, if in different format, from earlier collections.
- ⁴ According to Ismahan Mirreh, Mirreh’s stepdaughter, Mirreh donated all of his poetry, published and unpublished, to the Hargeisa National Library.
- ⁵ Though this article only explores the pastoral in Mirreh’s poetry, Mirreh also published fourteen love poems such as “A Few Steps to Love,” “At the Well,” “On the Toyo Plain,” “Departure,” “Passage to Nowhere/Life after Death,” “Pale-face Woman,” “Our Song,” and “Woman.”. Mirreh also wrote numerous politically-motivated poems.
- ⁶ Nicole Lecuyer-Samantar is the author of *Mohamed Abdulle Hassan, Poète et Guerrier de la Corne de l’Afrique* (1979). Mohamed Said Samantar, former Somali ambassador to Italy and France, is the author of *La Pioggia È Caduta, Il a Plu!*, a fourteen-poem bilingual (French-Italian) collection whose main themes are African unity, anti-colonialism, and the quest for Greater Somalia, among others.
- ⁷ By describing the baboons as family, Mirreh shares the same views as, for instance, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, a Barbadian poet, who writes in “Sequences”: “and i retreat further into my yard of the dark//into what’s left of the starlight, into what’s left of the jungles//i can still remember giraffe, gazelle, leopard’s dry lizard cough//the way baboons moved like us in families” (5-6).
- ⁸ “Animal Joy” was posthumously republished in a different format in *The Silver Throat of the Moon: Writing in Exile* (2005).
- ⁹ Mirreh emphasizes the same idea in “Father”: “No matter how//hard it dries//by the jilaal//sun.//Green it will become the//Gu rain” (8). He also expresses the same idea in “When Nomads Move”: “They shifted camp in search//of grass, in search of water//for their families, for the herds//they love” (69).
- ¹⁰ Abdil-Weli Ahmed Elmi (of Burao) reiterates the same idea in “Gu” (1965): “The grey rendering at last got lost//The ground is tinted green once

more,//And galloping high, God-sent host//Of grey cumulus give a great uproar//Of gay laughter; and guffawing they//Show glistening teeth and send a glimmer//Of glittering light—for the month is May.//The grasshoppers garrulously clatter;//And Geeleh there goads his camels;//And gleefully sings good-hearted songs,//which give with the jingling camel-bells,//A melodious gavot and gay bling-bongs” (14).

¹¹ Abdi Sheik-Abdi describes in *When a Hyena Laughs* (1994) a similar scene: around “her crackling campfire” Aunt Dahabo “told of awesome nations whose magnificent kingdoms lay behind the seven skies” (105-6).

¹² “A Virus Named Progress” was republished in a different format in *From an Acacia Landscape*.

¹³ John Drysdale describes the *cadey* as follows: “Chewed at one end, and applied vigorously to the teeth, the latter are made to glisten like the white of a fried egg” (*Stoics* 118).

¹⁴ Similarly, Hali Hassan Eiman’s “It is a Tradition” emphasizes this idea: “She washes with Qasil and water only//Qasil is a planet, like henna.//You take the leaves and you dry them” (29).

¹⁵ Mirreh also laments this shift in “Kismet”: “My father never drove//a diesel train,//he never flew with D.C. ten” (25); also in “Til Leif/Time,” he writes: “Flying bird, cold aluminum//with all that speed, how I do//hate your gleaming wings” (9).

¹⁶ In contrast to the persona in Mirreh’s “Progress,” the persona in Ismael Hurreh’s “Pardon Me” (1967) depicts a Somali nomad who does not object to abandoning the nomadic lifestyle and traditional Somali culture: “although I too have been a nomad//although I’ve slept under roofless huts eyeing the moon//and raising my hands to God//and envying His might//time has unfolded many strange sheets//and spread them between us//time has uprooted me//time has transplanted me to grounds//where prayer is of no use” (36).

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