

Traders of A Cargo of Guilt

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The title of Abdi-Noor Hagi Mohamed's newest novel, *A Cargo of Guilt*³, evokes images of law enforcement and courts, of psychology and emotions, and of individual responsibility. The book deals with varied abstractions of the concept of guilt and contextualizes it as verdicts associated with personal, state, and tribal laws enforced in the lands of the Somali, as intricacies of love, of life, and of inner struggles and personal events lacking logic and argument. It also explores the mass production and transportation of guilt through Somali minds as this society was getting established in the Horn of Africa. The text serves plates of a future state in which Somali people learn to say *mea maxima culpa* to take responsibility for their personal mistakes, adapting and tailoring ideas from the Confiteor, for their own continued co-existence. Somali men cry, criminals confess and seek forgiveness, and most important of all, members of the *Gobta* tribe embrace equality of their brethren, declaring that they belong to the same tribe as their victims. Abdi-Noor weaves a central narrative of a family surviving a self-imposed dogmatic decomposition when others lost members into the consequences of the largest exodus Somalia's deadly civil war brought about.

The tale is set in Mogadishu before the Somali civil war spread into the capital. Right away, in the first few pages of the book, we learn that Safi, who "*belonged to a socially outcast tribe called Midgaan*", had just delivered Shamis. Guilt in this context is associated with social control where a large segment of the society is marked as inferior to the rest. Ancient Somalis erected barriers for certain clans, who otherwise are not different than the rest of the society, to ever gain their legitimate equality rights. Even though there were never written laws restricting those clans considered inferior to freely interact and intermarry with others, the Somali people nevertheless enforced this segregation for centuries.

The text quickly develops the main protagonist into a full, likeable character. Safi is exposed to her "Midgaan-ness" at a very young age when her playmate explains to her that she is Midgaan and that "*anybody who shares something with Midgaans would end up in loss if not in a horrible tragedy.*" Safi's father was a Mogadishu shoemaker, working in a makeshift store whose only tools consisted of "*a metal, half buried in the ground, with a rounded scalp ...*". While growing up, Safi experiences the bitterness of social discrimination based on her father's profession. She struggles with this enigma all along, questioning her guilt, but her spirit "*never ceased to glow like a morning fire*". She quietly decides to prove her innocence, on her own terms.

During her secondary school years, Safi excelled in sports and was selected to represent her school in the long jump contest. This is where Safi met Haroon who was a member of the school's basketball team. Haroon had eyes "*protruding forward as though something was pushing from behind*". Safi was attractive with a face glistening "*like a sunshine beaming out from the eastern horizons of Sanaag Plateau*". The duo were attracted to each other. Safi withholds revelation of her Midgaan-ness to Haroon, internally debating her mother's prudent explanation that they "*are a different clan*" and that none of her family members "*can share marriage affair with other clans who look down*" on them as "*outcasts*".

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Nevertheless, the two, like butterflies, enjoyed each other's companionship. In doing so, like Ammu and Velutha in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, a novel about the caste system in India, Safi and Haroon broke an un-codified law. Haroon seemed to enjoy women regardless of their clan affiliation and Safi, despite her deep feelings of hurt with the meaning and the restriction of the Midgaan concept, pinned her future on trust for Haroon's ability to reject this misguided Somali faux pas. However, Haroon, had "*no personality to crash the tribal taboo*".

Su'aad, the other main protagonist and the only child of Haweeya and Diirshe, orchestrates Haroon's rejection of his daughter and his wife. To advance her project, Su'aad connives and convinces her mother that she needs Haroon to help her with her school work at home. Like a Confessor, late at one night, Su'aad navigates Haroon's hand and lays them "*on the line dividing the two blades of her chest*" and seduces him "*You ... honey ... press here ..., press not hard*". Haroon falls on her "*much the same way a tree axed from the bottom inclines to kiss the sand*". For a while, her additive and subtractive powers collude to control Haroon. Their relationship, however, did not last. The narrative composes intricate tales of love, of crime, of extra-marital affairs and of political assassinations. Su'aad's life was caught in the middle of all these.

Safi's parents did not know the secret love affair their daughter had with Haroon and felt all when they noticed a bulge in her stomach: Bad. Sad. Mad. Soon after, the family dignity began to plummet as people spread "*rumors that were licking*" Safi's "*reputation like a fire in the bush*". Her father, Gaduur, cognizant of honor killing, settles to kick her out of the house and threatens to kill her if she ever comes home. She pleads her innocence and challenges his rationality. Her words provide us a powerful "*second handle on reality*" of the damage prevailing tribal laws can cause in the lands of the Somali:

Here, standing in front of you is your first born daughter who is a teenager and had been rejected by a man who made her pregnant just because we belong to MIDGAAN clan. If it is my fault to be a Midgaan I accept all charges being leveled against me. I was waiting for you to prove my innocence. If my argument does not hold water, I am ready to die in your hands. The hands that so graciously worked hard to feed and clothe me, the hands that went into fire to give me a descent life, the hands that painstakingly worked longer hours to allow me to go school, the hands from which I used to eat and drink when I was a small kid, the hands that generated comfort and protection whenever I felt annoyed or threatened...If the same hands are ready to kill me today I am ready to accept death.

After she informs him that her *Meher* was legally officiated at *Cagaarane*, he decides to seek justice for her and requests an emissary to talk with Haroon's father, on his behalf.

Informed that Safi belonged to the Midgaan tribe, Haroon's father, Jibriil, initially rejects any arbitration mainly because Haroon has already broken off with Safi and disowned his baby while she was still in her mother's womb. Haroon's father confronts him on his affair with Safi and directly asks him if he knew her:

Yes, dad ... why?

An ERGO sent by her father came here, claiming that you made their daughter pregnant. Is that true?
Not True.

Do you know their tribe?

Yes, I know they are MIDGAAN.

So, why did you elope with a MIDGAAN girl?

I never eloped with her, dad.

So what was the relationship between she and you?

After a lengthy interrogation, Jibriil lectures his son about nobility and blood purity:

... marriage is not a joke. One is associating with a new family, new character, and new genes. So you should be careful of your choice. I don't want to spoil the long chain of fine blood we have been inheriting from our ancestors.

Thus, the father, as an agent of the systems of the Somali societal dictatorship and control, executes a bottoms up contribution to government's absolute control of society, while sustaining the centuries old social discrimination at the individual level. When the emissary showed up at his residence for a discussion of the issue, Jibriil informs them that he doesn't "*want to see a bunch of Midgaan elders*" in his house again. Humiliated, the elders leave. Gaduur assembles his family and relatives at his home and delegates his search for justice to a futuristic divine intervention, announcing thus:

No matter how long it may take, I'm sure that God shall teach Haroon and his family a good lesson.
I accept now to take care of my pregnant daughter and the baby when it comes. She is my daughter
and I love her.

In this textual context, *A Cargo of Guilt* provides us a second handle on the reality of legal responsibility in Somalia. Justice is not served when a father can, with impunity, refuse to care for his own child on the basis of ancient taboos.

The story also instructs us to be informed of another handle of reality, that of tyrannical machinations under a modern state expected to protect all. In a mysterious way, Rahmo, a husband rustler, steals Diirshe from Haweeya, a successful manager of the Jubba Hotel. Eventually, Diirshe, who was a member of parliament during the civilian governments, was found dead, laying in the trunk of Rahmo's car. Not only was Rahmo his secret lover, but she also ventured with him as a business partner. Hospital authorities tell Haweeya that her husband was buried the day before she showed up to recover him. The National Security Court (NSC) convicts Rahmo hastily and with no proper procedures. The President, who is the only person that could reverse verdicts returned by the NSC, pardons her within six years. People could not decide what to make of the resulting products of the rumor mill.

It turns out that government considered Rahmo's Café Mondiale "*as a clandestine political office for a group of opposition activists who posed as businessmen*". The government installs spies and communication equipments at the café. This information unravels when one of the men who hanged around Rahmo's house and at the Café Mondiale confesses to, and graphically describes, the killing of Diirshe. He said he did this for the sole purpose of satisfying the needs of powerful government officials. He also recounts accurately how he and his cohorts plotted the sudden rise of Haweeya, a semi-literate house wife, to a prominent government position. The idea, he said, was to humiliate former politicians like Diirshe by assisting their wives to dominate them, economically and politically. The criminal cries in front of Haweeya, Haroon, and Suaad, and utters *mea maxima culpa* for the sacrifice of Diirshe.

The narrative climaxes as Somalia's civil war develops. Haroon turns into an alcoholic, but benefits from his association with the Bureau of Mobilization of the Socialist Party and was awarded a scholarship to former Yugoslavia. When he returns from Europe, Haroon takes a job as the Chief Laboratory Technician of the Jubba Sugar Factory. He does not like his job. Thus, given an opportunity to attend a conference on sugar production in Kenya, Haroon took it and never came back, settling in Nairobi's East Leigh ghetto.

Already disillusioned with seven years of life in East Leigh, and learning that the Americans were resettling Somali refugees in Kenya in the U.S., Haroon decides to move into one of the refugee camps. Haroon's family, destroyed on the eve of its formation, coincidentally runs into each other in Kakuma refugee camp when Shamis, now eighteen and working as a UNHCR clerk, recognizes her father as she helps him fill forms at the camp office. She had memorized his name and kept a longing love to meet him one day. Without alerting him, Shamis informs her mother of her discovery. Safi invites *the man* to her makeshift house. After a long exchange of information during an evening reception, Safi demands a legal divorce from him. Realizing what a terrible mistake he made in the past, a mistake his daughter's concrete humanness proves, Haroon refuses to dissolve the marriage. He begs his wife "*to accept him as her husband, trembling and as much helpless as Safi was the night she was begging him in front of Haweeya's gate. Like a pendulum, his heart was swinging inside a chest blackened by heavy smoking.*"

Safi makes peace with him for the sake of her daughter. She informs Haroon that her family is scheduled to go soon into the final phase of the process of getting certified to resettle in the U.S. She saw an opportunity to prove her innocence beyond doubt and explores his current convictions:

Would you join us, Haroon?

Why not? That is a good idea.

But we are registered as belonging to the Midgaan tribe, would you accept to list your name as Midgaan?

Why not? I belong to any tribe you belong to.

The Somali civil war forced the separation of working families. In *A Cargo of Guilt*, we are taught that it is possible for families broken by tribal laws to crash the dogma that detached them. The story seems not to end here, for, Shamis has to now live a different life in the United States. If the oft-characterized homogeneous Somali society expended the life of her mother as a miserable passage, it would be interesting to know how the diverse American society treats her. Societies such as the French changed greatly when its expatriates received enlightenments abroad during the colonial era and transported novel ideas back to their homeland.

Most of the characters in this work are fully developed, and the text contains carefully crafted plots. However, in certain parts of the book, Abdi-Noor allows certain characters, plots, motivations, and actions, albeit insignificant, to congest the text incoherently, coming into being and disappearing fast. In particular, several characters seem to resist internal focalization. This may be a proper contextualization for contemporary Somalia's multi-dimensional complexity. But, *A Cargo of Guilt* asserts its membership of the club that provides us dynamism in storytelling and immensely contributes to the scarcely available efforts for reconstruction and development of a just society.

Even though novel writing is new to the Somali society, storytelling is not, despite its dominant delivery through the spoken word. In this work, Abdi-Noor shows a great talent in presenting a fable through the written word. He no doubt joins Somalia's growing people of letters. While orature has contributed to the construction of stable building blocks for the Somali society over the years, it is no longer sufficient (See my essay on writing and record-keeping and their role on good governance⁴). Orature is stagnant in that it does not contribute new products. It also lacks the important feature of transmission accuracy. Contents of orature, therefore, are not reliably passed on. Thus, many Somali writers are picking on important issues in essays, in novels, and in scholarly works. The novel has gone through many transformations since it was invented in Europe as an entertainment medium addressing limited areas such as romance, conspiracy and scandal. Today novelists write about diverse topics including politics and society, and their products are referred to as literature.

In Africa, many novels provide commentary on Africa's post-colonial political experiences. Most are critical interpretations of public actions and views, often expressing cries for changes that may not be easily expressed. Others venture into complex issues facing the society at large. Novels, in this regard, have filled vacuums and have provided Africans breathing spaces otherwise squeezed by its tyrant leader community. As Chinua Achebe wrote, "Literature, whether handed down by word or mouth or in print, gives us a second handle on reality"⁵. Abdi-Noor's narration of the traders of a cargo of guilt helps us create images that portray the dichotomy between justice and tribal laws.

⁴ Mohamed Hussein, [*The Challenge of Good Governance for Somalia's TFG: The Case of Open State Public Records*](#), April 2005

⁵ Chinua Achebe, [*What Has Literature Got to Do with It*](#), in *Hopes and Impediments - Selected Essays*, 1988