

The Poet's Death is His Life

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According to Quondam Prime Minister Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke, we Somalis have two aces in the hole:

Our faith in Islam and
our Lyrical Poesy.

So it is with great sadness that I share with you the distressing news of the death of Abwaan Ahmed Ismail Diiryé, better known to the world as "Qaasim," who distinguished himself and made us all proud in his compositions of unforgettable lyrical poesy in our own mother tongue.

Rabindranath Tagore, the great Indian Nobel Laureate, said: "God respects me when I work, but he loves me when I sing."

Qaasim loved to sing as he worked farming Somali verse. His song, "Macaan iyo qadhaah," ranks in greatness and grandeur and in beauty and pathos and in theme and range and in leitmotif and lyricism with the best that has been thought and said in the world.

When I first heard it in Montreal, Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" and William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" immediately possessed and pervaded my mind.

That is how great our Qaasim is; he is Whitman's not so "silent and dark-cheeked bush-boy" who behind him "rides at the drape of the day"; and who has now joined him, home in heaven.

When an *Afmiishaar* (Somali: literally, af [mouth] miishaar [saw], meaning a saw-mouthed sage; a pundit; a spinmeister; a demagogue;

one who is wise in his own sight; a smashmouth: one who smashes images, names, and reputations with his mouth because his mouth is as cutting as a saw; a wiseacre; a wise guy; a wise-ass full of wisecracks and wise saws and modern instances; a rainmaker; a pimp of power politics and “The Pornography of Power”; a rumourmonger; a sower of the tares of suspicions and character assassinations) attempted to cruelly caricature our formidable Somali poet, Qaasim, and write him off as mere mug-turned-blotto, Qaasim’s refutation of the attack on his reputation became his classic much-celebrated signature song, “*Macaan iyo Qaraar*,” which is now as distinguished and as famous as Frank Sinatra’s classic signature song “I Did it My Way.”

“*Macaan iyo Qaraar*” is well known to all connoisseurs of Somalia’s current literary scene. It is for this reason that I rendered it into English in the summer of 1986 for the Montreal World Poetry Festival. It was later featured in the Montreal literary review *Zymergy*, to which I contributed poems and essays during the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, when I also served on its editorial board.

Another version of the story behind this now internationally famous Somali song goes as follows:

Qaasim, the Somali poet, was once asked by his exasperated friends and fans:

“Qaasim!
Who are you? Are you the poet the Somali nation is most proud of
or are you
the jerk
the drunk
the bum
the khatcrazy cur
the khatcrushing cat
the crazywater consumer
the dweller of ditches and gutters
we pick up every dawn before the call of the *muezzin*
from the ditch
from the gutter
Qaasim!
Who the hell are you?”

It is now my pleasure and delight to lighten our grievous loss of Qaasim, of the great Somali poet, of that national treasure, of that light that

shone in the world, of that voice that sang of love in the midst of our crooked and cruel and clannish and perverse and hate-harried Somali nation, by sharing with you all Qaasim's riposte, his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (*Macaan Iyo Qadhaadh*). It is translated into English by this other son of Walt, by this other dark-cheeked Somali bush-boy.

Sweetness and Bitterness

(For Goosh and Sheila Andrzejewski, who initially rendered the poem into English¹)

"Without contraries is no progression."
— William Blake

"Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)"
— Walt Whitman

I.
Sometimes even the aloes bear honeyed flowers
Whose nectar you slurp
I am sweetness and bitterness planted in the same place.

II
My right hand and my left hand are twins
One entertains the guests and walks the weak
The other is a dagger dripping woes and wormwood.

III
My boy, I am rich
I contain countless contraries
Do not take me for a poor *miskiin*² monomaniac
Out on a limb
Hectoring for his bloody hobbyhorse.

IV
Sometimes I am faithfully obedient
Well-mannered
Utterly innocent of Evil.

V

Sometimes I am the obdurate destroyer
An arrant knave.

VI

Sometimes I am the anchorite who sequesters himself in the
mosque
To review his life and purify his heart.

VII

Sometimes I am the villain
The loony who blusters in every saloon in Somalia
Go to now
I'll prove thee with mighty-mouthed Evil
Till my cup runneth over
With contumely
With crazy *Asha*
With crazywater.

VIII

Sometimes I am the towering heads
Of wit
Of wisdom
Of waggery
Of honor
Of forbearance
Of forgiveness.

IX

Sometimes I am the loafer
The nowhere man with no name in the street.

X

Sometimes I am a man who does not allow
Anything *Haraan*³
Anything not kosher
Go past his gullet.

XI

Sometimes I am a thief dyed-in-the-wool
Who does not spare
Even the orphan's share.

XII

Sometimes I am the leader of silent sages and high-ranking saints.

XIII

Sometimes I am an honorable member of Satan's conclave
After the fiend's very own heart.

XIV

A presumptuous jackass
Cannot size me up
For I am
Fearfully
Wonderfully
Fashioned
For I run interference for chameleons
For I run schools for chameleons
For I chop and change.

XV

Day in
Day out
Daily I turn
Every morning my mien is distinctly
Of different color
Of different creed
I know how to huddle and hobnob
With both Muslims and heathen honky alien monkey ofay *kaffirs*
The angels of Hell and Heaven argue over my sinful Somali soul.

XVI

No man has traced to me
All these contraries I trail
But a man of many days
One whose head is hoary
Or

One who is hip to sizing men up
May possibly take my proper measure.

XVII

'O every man Jack
Pick
Your sweetest
Your aptest
Your most magnificent metaphor
To brand me with.

XVIII

You
Over there
My hobbledehoy
Hop on the hobbyhorse
Your heart hobbles after
Or the one you can't help but
Harass me with
Tease me with
Taunt me with
Tear me with
Tar me with
Feather me with.

XIX

Speak
Right on
Ride on
For I make means for you.

XX

Please
Prowl and Pounce
Pronounce and proclaim
Publish and brandish
Your finger-licking
Your finger-pointing
Your finger-stone-throwing
Your finger-frigging Ayatollah fanatical *fatwa*

Your finger-wagging *fitna*⁴
Your farcical *fatude*.⁵

XXI

Please

Right now

Right here

Holler the Hobson's hooey you are hoarding in your horrible
hypocrite heart.

Notes

1. B.W. Andrzejewski with Sheila Andrzejewski, *An Anthology of Somali Poetry* (Bloomington: University of Indiana, 1993), pp. 88–89.
2. pauper
3. forbidden
4. *Fitna*, an Arabic word, means troublemaking.
5. *Fatude*, a Somali word, implies a mixture of self-importance and connivance.