

Exploring Oral Poetry in the Somali Novel
‘Ignorance is the Enemy of Love’



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Abstract

Somali writer Farah Mohamed Jama Awl has written three novels, with 'Ignorance is the Enemy of Love' (Aqoondarro waa u nacab jacayl) being the first and most influential. This novel is based on a true story. Farah, the author, demonstrates a profound understanding of Somali traditional oral poetry, weaving it throughout the entire narrative. This novel reflects that oral poetry is an integral part of the daily life of Somalis and a powerful tool for expressing emotions and conveying thoughts.

This article examines the significance of poetry in Somali literature and culture. It delves into the cultural and literary importance of integrating poetry into the narrative, shedding light on the stylistic elements of poetry in fiction.

Keywords: Somali novel, oral poetry, “Ignorance is the Enemy of Love”, Somali literature, cultural expression.

1. Introduction

Farah M.J. Awl was a Somali writer.¹ His works are based on Somali history and are filled with many traditional Somali poems. He has crafted three novels, and among them, *'Ignorance is the Enemy of Love'* (Aqoondarro waa u nacab jacayl) stands as the inaugural and most impactful. Additionally, "*Ignorance is the enemy of love*" is the first novel written in Somali language, which not only contributes to the success of Farah, but also inspires the writing of many other Somali writers, promoting the rapid development and progress of Somali written literature within just a few years. As reflected in this novel, oral poetry is an integral part of the daily life of Somalis. Hence, it has been chosen as a subject for exploring the characteristics of Somali oral poetry.

In 1982, B.W. Andrzejewski, a renowned linguist and specialist in Somali and Cushitic languages, translated the novel into English, named *'Ignorance is the Enemy of Love'*, and published in London. As one of the masterpieces of African literature selected by UNESCO, it has taken a place in the international literary history. Furthermore, Mr. Liang Bingtian, a Chinese scholar and translator, translated the novel into Chinese, named *'Aloe Love Song'* and published in Beijing in 1984. This novel marked a significant moment in the development of the novel genre in the Somali literature, a new genre in Somali literature.

2. The Story Background and Content

Ignorance is the enemy of love, though presented in the form of a novel, is written based on a real story in Somalia. Both the hero, *Cali Maax*, and the heroine, *Cawrala Barre*, are real historical figures whose stories have

been spread among Somali people. The situation in the region at the beginning of the 20th century sets the stage for the tragic ending of the love story between the hero and the heroine.²

At the end of the 19th century, the British colony occupied the northern coastal region of Somali territory, where *Ignorance is the enemy of love* was set. During this period, the Dervish forces,³ including Cali Maax, opposed the colonial invaders. *Ignorance is the enemy of love* tells the love tragedy of the hero Ali Muhammad Hassan, nicknamed 'Cali Maax' and the heroine Awrala Barre 'Cawrala Barre'. Cali Maax's ship sank on the way back to Somalia from the Gulf of Aden when he saved the heroine, who was his shipmate at that time. Cawrala Barre dreamed of a beautiful life and fell in love with the brave and talented Cali Maax.⁴

Later, before Cawrala Barre had the opportunity to express her love, Cali Maax went to take part in an armed struggle against the colony and joined the Dervish Forces. Then, Cawrala Barre was betrothed by her family to a rich man at an old age, when she started to resist this arrangement and wrote a letter to express her love to Cali Maax, who unfortunately was already married when receiving Cawrala Barre's poetic letter. Worse still, he was illiterate and could neither read nor write. He handed the letter to his father-in-law and brother-in-law, anticipating their reading. Soon, realizing he was in an inappropriate situation, and unintentionally, became a subject of amusement before his wife's family, despite their sympathetic acknowledgement of his ignorance.⁵

Meanwhile, Cali Maax was moved by this poetic letter and fell in love with Cawrala Barre, which prompted him to learn reading and writing. In the end, under the pressure of public opinion and the blow of dignity, he

went to a remote area to participate in an armed struggle, during which he tried his best to learn knowledge to make up for the regret in his heart and finally was injured and almost died in the battle.⁶ Cawrala Barre fell ill due to long-time worrying about not receiving a reply for a long time, the forced marriage by her family, and the gossips of her neighbors. Her marriage was even taken place by her sister because of her heavy illness. Cawrala passed away just one day before Cali Maax recovered from his injuries and rode a horse to ask her to marry him.

In a poignant conclusion, Cali Maax visited her grave, leaving a poetic letter written to her about the cause and effect of the whole story and his full and infinite regret and love.⁷

3. An Overview of Oral Poetry in Somali Literature

Oral poetry has been a powerful tool for Somali people to express their emotions and communicate their thoughts for centuries. It is an integral part of Somali culture and an important way to preserve Somali history, beliefs, and values. British explorer Richard Burton, who visited Somalia in 1854, named *'the Land of Bards'*. Somali scholar Said Sheikh Samatar once stated, *'Somali oral poetry is the core of Somali life'*. Therefore, poetry has become a rich cultural history of Somalia.

A. Significance of Oral Poetry in Somali Literature and Culture

In ancient times, although the Somali language was written in Arabic script, it primarily remained an oral language without an official script or written records. Nonetheless, it persisted as a spoken language throughout the colonial period. Most of the readings circulated among the locals at that time were oral poems and stories. Furthermore, before adopting the

official script for the Somali language, foreign languages posed practical difficulties for Somalis, and many Somalis with creative talents could not write in their native language. They could only translate their work into other languages as secondary creations.

In 1972, the Somali government officially adopted the Somali orthography. Subsequently, efforts were initiated to promote the use of the Somali script, and a national literacy campaign was launched.⁸ In 1979 the Constitution of Somalia set Somali and Arabic as official languages. Hence, Somalis finally tell their story in their own written words. In these circumstances, *'Ignorance is the Enemy of Love'* was presented not only in the Somali script but also in the form of traditional Somali poetry, thereby enhancing the Somali people's cultural awakening.

B. Key Features and Characteristics of Somali Oral poetry

This form of expression is open to any talented individual, allowing them to craft poems that reflect either their personal experiences or those of others. Through reading poems, people can understand the development of things and the poet's position and attitude towards things and get wisdom and wishes for good things from them. A respected poet must have superb poetic skills and strong persuasive ability and could enjoy privileges in society and politics after winning public's favor.

In Somalia, poets and poetry reciters are separated. Preserving and disseminating the original text of oral poetry is the task of poetry reciters, whose main ability is to memorize poems, which they have practiced repeatedly since they were young. According to the rule of poetry reciters, they must remain committed to the original work. They cannot change,

add, delete, or even miss a single word, by which they could gain trust from the public and win recognition and reputation. Poetry reciters must report the poet's name when reading poems based on the etiquette and responsibility of the reciter; otherwise, their reputation will be affected. In addition, reciters, in the process of reading aloud, are also required to explain the background and description of the poem, which is also a part of the oral poetry inheritance. The most famous ancient and remote poetry in Somali people is often transmitted through poetry reciters who are regarded as Somali oral historians.

C. A Journey Through Past and Present of Oral Poetry

Somali literature includes a large number of oral art in different genres and a relatively small collection of written works. Anyone exposed to Somali literature will know that Somalis attach great importance to oral communication, especially oral poetry. It is a kind of historical discourse everywhere in Somalia, passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. In the 1940s, the invention of radio and audio tapes contributed to the recording and spread of poetry. In the past, much of Somali traditional culture was lost, of which oral poetry was best preserved in rural and pastoral areas, where herdsmen gathered to discuss poetry while looking after herds of camels grazing nearby.

In the modern era, the role of poetry and its impact on society continue to be significant. Prominent series of poetic debates, such as '*Siinley*' in 1973 with over a dozen poets, and '*Deelley*' in 1979-1980 with about 50 poets, have marked this period. The Somalia Peace Conference held in Djibouti in 2000 featured Somali singers and musical troupes performing on stage, using songs and poetry to promote peace and reconciliation.

Since the country plunged into political disturbance, economic hardships, and armed conflicts, eventually spiraling into civil war with the overthrow of the central government in 1991, it has endured decades of turmoil. This upheaval has significantly impacted both the propagation of poetry and the environment in which it is created.

In the contemporary era, poetry appears to have lost some of its traditional allure, resulting in a weakened role in Somali society. The younger generation is less inclined to compose poetry in the traditional '*maanso*' form, instead focusing on innovative approaches within the '*hees*' form. Young Somalis living abroad are keenly interested in crafting Somali oral songs. Modern multicultural programming and internet platforms are also steering oral poetry in Somalia toward new directions in terms of creation and presentation.

4. Oral Poetry in '*Ignorance is the Enemy of Love*'

A. Analysing Stylistic Elements of Oral Poetry in Fiction

Farah M.J. Awl is loyal to traditional Somali culture and created this novel based on the materials and outlines provided by the local people in oral form. The first chapter of this novel's eight chapters describes where Cali Maax and Cawrala Barre grow up. By quoting the traditional long poems of Haji Adan Ahmed (Afqalo'), one of the most famous oral poets in Somalia, which depict mountains, green trees, singing birds, and fragrant flowers, the writer praises the beautiful natural scenery of Somalia for expressing his love for his country.

The second chapter tells about the encounter of Cali Maax and Cawrala Barre in the sea, where in the dialogue between Cali Maax and Nuur, Nuur quotes an excerpt from Sayid Mohamed Abdulle Hassan's poem:

Magaalada masruufkiyo dharkaa, laga muraadeysto
Mushmushaaxa iyo beecu waa, moodka soo dega e
Miyigaba haddii laga xiraa, mawdku ka adeegi.⁹

The second chapter also uses an old Somali proverb by the heroine Cawrala:

Afar waa mugdi,
Afar waa maradhaamo,
Afar baa ka macaan,
Afarna wawga maso.

1. Abaari waa mugdi
Cawsna waw maradhaamo
Doog baa ka macaan
Ninna wawga maso, oo waa ninkaan cood lahayn.

2. Colaadi waa mugdi
Ergana waw maradhaamo
Nabad baa ka macaan
Ninna wawga maso, oo waa ninkii ku dhintay.

3. Habeen waa mugdi
Dayaxna waw maradhaamo

Maalintaa ka macaan

Ninna wawga maso, oo waa ninkii indhoole ah.

4. Hammadi waa mugdi

Guurna waw maradhaamo

Jacayl baa ka macaan

Ninna wawga maso, oo waa caamadaan garanayn.¹⁰

The proverb implies Cawrala's positive attitude towards life and the optimistic nature of her mindset. This chapter also shows the talent of the hero Cali Maax, especially his act of saving the beauty, which provides foreshadowing for the future development of the story.

The third chapter mainly includes the letter written by the heroine Cawrala to the hero Cali Maax, where the poems created and the dialogue with friends are expressed in the form of poetry. Somali poetry could be classified into two categories, poetry (Maanso) and songs (Hees),¹¹ which are well reflected in this chapter and meanwhile express Cawrala's sincere feelings and beautiful dream for a better life.

The fourth chapter tells that both Cali Maax and Cawrala are fighting for anti-colonialism and shows the pain of losing loved ones in the war through Cawrala's poems, where the author metaphors peace against war and praises the patriotism of both Cali Maax and Cawrala. The fifth chapter tells the story of Cali Maax realizing the value of Cawrala's love after he survived the war. Cali Maax's poems show his excellent qualities of courage, dedication, and loyalty to the country and its people. The dialogue between the herders and Cali Maax after he is rescued embodies a metaphor for the life philosophy of the nomadic people in Somalia.

The sixth chapter presents Cawrala's resistance and struggle against fate, where her uncle, a family elder, quoted the poem when he persuaded her:¹²

Ma ogtahay ikhyaarkii ku raba, inaan la iska eedaynin
Ma ogtahay abaalkiisu waa, inaad addeecdaaye
Ma ogtahay ninkii uumiyaha, la ibtilaynaayo
Ma ogtahay wixii khayr leh, baa lagu adkeeyaaye
Ma ogtahay adduun nimaan lahayn, laga ilwaad roone
Ma ogtahay dadkuba haatan, waw iima tiriyaaye
Ma ogtahay inkaar waalid, waa eebo kugu taale
Ma ogtahay ishiisaa ka daran, ololkii naareede.

This poem has a deep persuasive power, which Cawrala and her uncle quote to persuade each other. A notable feature in this poem is the art of persuasion, which appears when conflicting opinions, thoughts, and attitudes are resolved through proverbs and poetry. Philosophical lines are meant not only to convince the characters in the story but also to convince the reader.

Chapter seven tells the process of Cawrala's dying of serious illness, which describes the traditional Somali wedding customs in detail as well as Cawrala remaining hopeful for love and free life when she was seriously ill, as is shown in her poems. Chapter eight is Cali Maax's condolences to Cawrala, which contains a large number of poems in different forms created by Cali Maax after he learned of Cawrala's death and quotes the poems of Qamaan Bulxan, the most famous poet at that time, which was used to express Cali Maax's reluctance and infinite sadness for Cawrala's departure. Cawrala's dying poem in chapter eight is just as moving.¹³

Naftu waa macaan tahay intay, mala awaalayso
Waa maqaama weyn tahay intay, maasha talinayso
Ha yeeshee, masuubada heshaa, magaceed waw hooge.

Jacayl waa macaan yahay intaad hayso midhihiise
Waa muusiiqa raaxa leh intaad, milaygii dhawraysid
Ha yeeshee, haddii uu ku miro, mililkii waa hooge.

Cali way macaanaa markuu, midigta ii laadshey
Waa mahadshay araggiisi hore, mayey la moodkiiye
Ha yeeshee, markaan muuqii gabay, maqalkii wey hooge.

Mar haddaan waxaan mohanayiyo, mudanihii waayey
Micne maleh adduuyadu haddaan, maahad ku waarayne
Mootkoo i dilaa ka roon, miiska aan ahaye.

The hero and heroine, as well as other characters in the novel, have created a large amount of wonderful and touching poems, which cannot be shown one by one because of the limited space.

B. Oral Poetry and Theme of the Novel

At the beginning of the novel, Farah M.J. Awl explains the heroine's emotion in *Ignorance is the enemy of love* with a poem in the form of Hees, like a story that is explained before a reader reads the poem.

“All this is true, just like a person who goes to a place to fetch water. When you recall these things, you will know that I am Cawrala Barre. I am talking about a woman whose eyes and emotions have been following you since she first saw you. There is no doubt that she belongs to you, and

her body and soul belong to you, even though you have not noticed it. Whether it is day or night, or whether it is she was thinking of you when she was asleep or awake. Her love for you has been melted in her blood and engraved on her heart. For this reason, she does not want to eat all day!”¹⁴

Oral poetry is Somalia’s most prestigious literary form and a unique way for Somalis to express themselves; it is widely used to celebrate important events such as weddings, and to commemorate the death of a family member or friend, as well as during a war. In the novel *Ignorance is the Enemy of Love*, poetry is the medium of people’s daily communication, by which characters communicate, a common form of communication among Somalis at that time. As mentioned above, poetry is the purest artistic expression of Somalis, close to true and realistic Somali culture.

5. Connection Between Oral Poetry and Theme of the Novel

A. How Poetry Enhances or Complements the Themes in the Novel

Farah M. J. Awl specializes in using traditional Somali poetry in his work, whose skills in interweaving poetry and extensive use of oral historical sources are fully deployed in *Ignorance is the enemy of love*. The poems in the novel are based on traditional poetic styles, quoted from other poets, or attributed to the creation of real historical figures in this novel, including Ali Mohammed Hassan, Cawrala Barre, Nuur Ciise, and Dalmar Barre, which enhanced the authenticity of the story. In the novel, Farah M.J. Awl describes the hero’s suffering in battle and his longing for love in a sympathetic tone. Moreover, under the background of the Somali language and literacy campaign issued by the Somali government at that time, Farah expressed his support for the government’s economic

development, acceptance of new ideas, and positive attitude towards the promotion of women's role and the autonomy of young people in marriage through the poems in the novel. In addition, he showed his love for the country by describing the natural scenery, landform characteristics and customs of Somalia in a large number.

B. Significance of Incorporating Poetry into the Narrative

Somalia has an old and rich oral literary tradition that still influences Somali literary creation. *Ignorance is the enemy of love* is the first full-length novel written in the Somali language, whose significance lies not only in its adaptation from the rich oral poetry of Somalia but also in the oral historical narrative and poetry in the novel, marking the transition of Somali literature from oral to written form. Although inserting spoken poetry into a novel is a common practice in African fiction, *Ignorance is the enemy of love* sets up its framework with oral poetry, which becomes the main line of the novel's narrative and inherits the creation and dissemination of oral poetry in the narratives and dialogues of nearly twenty oral proverbs and poems.

C. Exploration of the Author's Intentions and Motivations in Incorporating Oral Poetry

In the past, oral poetry was not only a tool of propaganda for Somali people, but also a unique way of socializing for Somalis, whose social status was beyond doubt. After the Second World War in the 1950s, due to the modernization of Somali society, the status of oral poetry gradually weakened. Oral poetry embodied rich historical stories and excellent literary connotations in Somalia, which were especially massively created

during the colonial period. In this book, the author incorporated a large number of oral poems into the narratives, which followed the traditional literary values in Somalia, innovated the way of expression in Somali literature, and, moreover, publicized the reform goals of the Somali government at that time, especially in promoting literacy and women's rights. In addition, the author was proud of the connotation of traditional culture-oral poetry and regretted the weakness and loss of it.

On the title page of this novel, the author, Farah M.J. Awl, wrote a 'giveaway' dedicated to the young generation of Somalia:

"I dedicate this book to young men and women who will learn the language of the motherland in the future.

They will not have the kind of suffering that we have suffered - the high and deep suffering like towering trees.

Their cultural heritage will be eternal.

O Allah, let them get the most benefit from the book!"

Farah M.J. Awl's gift in the book is to hope that young people in Somalia will no longer experience the pain that ignorance brought to their ancestors and will inherit Somali oral poetry in the future.

6. Conclusion

This article adds new perspectives to the research on '*Ignorance is the enemy of love*' *Aqoondarro Waa U Nacab*. By analyzing the oral poetry in the novel, this article summarizes the characteristics of Somali oral poetry; that Somali oral poetry shows the history, culture, and customs of the nation, the beautiful natural scenery of Somalia, the spirit of Somalis'

love of their families and patriotism, the spirit of not flinching or complaining in the face of problems and hardships, the status of women in Somali society, and their courage in dealing with love. Everything that happens in the world, whether in a country or a nation, cannot be separated from its history. The oral poetry is the history of the Somali nation. For future research, we hope to find new perspectives on oral poetry passed down from Somalis and the philosophical ideas it contains with the purpose to value the present and better understand the future.

Notes

¹ Farah Mohamed Jama Awl was born in 1937 in the Las Khorey district of the Sanaag region in Somalia. After completing high school, he pursued further studies in England and later returned to Somalia, eventually attaining the rank of lieutenant colonel. He traveled to villages whenever possible to collect information about Somali oral poetry and traditional customs, collecting abundant material on oral poetry.

² Liang Bingtian (Translator). "Ignorance is the enemy of love", Beijing, China: World Knowledge Publishing House, 1984. by p2-p3

³ The Dervish Movement (Dhaqdhaqaaqa Daraawiishta) was an armed movement from late 1890s to 1920, established and led by Sayid Mohamed Abdulle Hassan. Its objective was to expel British and Italian colonies from Somali territories while advocating for establishing an independent state.

⁴ Farah Mohamed Jama Awl, Aqoondarro Waa u Nacab Jacayl, Garanuug, page 6. (CAWRALA IYO DUXASHADII JACAYLKA). <http://www.garanuug.com/buug/aqoondarro-waa-u-nacab-jacayl-6/>

- ⁵ Farah Mohamed Jama Awl, *Aqoondarro Waa u Nacab Jacayl*, Garanuug, page 7. (CAWRALA IYO DUXASHADII JACAYLKA). <http://www.garanuug.com/buug/aqoondarro-waa-u-nacab-jacayl-7/>
- ⁶ Farah Mohamed Jama Awl, *Aqoondarro Waa u Nacab Jacayl*, Garanuug, page 9. (DHAAWACII IYO DHIIGKAFUQII CALIMAAX). <http://www.garanuug.com/buug/aqoondarro-waa-u-nacab-jacayl-9/>
- ⁷ Farah Mohamed Jama Awl, *Aqoondarro Waa u Nacab Jacayl*, Garanuug, page 13. (GEERIDII CAWRALA IYO BAROORDIIQII IYO U DUCAYNTII CALIMAAX) <http://www.garanuug.com/buug/aqoondarro-waa-u-nacab-jacayl-13-dhammaad/>
- ⁸ The data and sources here refer to the author's 'Language Policy and Language Situation in Somalia'.
- ⁹ *Aqoondarro Waa u Nacab Jacayl*, page 1-2. <http://www.garanuug.com/buug/aqoondarro-waa-u-nacab-jacayl-2/>
- ¹⁰ *Aqoondarro Waa u Nacab Jacayl*, page 3. <http://www.garanuug.com/buug/aqoondarro-waa-u-nacab-jacayl-3/>
- ¹¹ Maanso (classical poetry that deals with serious issues) and hees (light poetry, often sung and accompanied by instruments), each genre has its own set of performances, tunes, and rhythmic patterns.
- ¹² *Aqoondarro Waa u Nacab Jacayl* page 11. <http://www.garanuug.com/buug/aqoondarro-waa-u-nacab-jacayl-11/>
- ¹³ *Aqoondarro Waa u Nacab Jacayl* page 13. <http://www.garanuug.com/buug/aqoondarro-waa-u-nacab-jacayl-13>
- ¹⁴ From the opening of the first chapter of the novel.

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