

Love Songs in Motion: Book Review



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Christina J. Woolner's *Love Songs in Motion: Voicing Intimacy in Somaliland* explores the soundscape of love (-suffering) in Somaliland through the multivocality of creating, listening to, and performing music. In Hargeysa, the capital city of Somaliland, both music and love are complicated by gendered expectations and norms, personal and public religious values, the lingering effects of war, and political realities. Songs, thus, provide a unique glimpse into relationships and intimacy. Much of the current scholarship on the Somali regions of the Horn of Africa revolves around politics and peacebuilding. Woolner was, herself, in Hargeysa to conduct research on peacebuilding when she began to consider the alternative narratives music might offer in understanding life in an unrecognized polity (xviii). However, rather than using music and song to explore politics or peace, Woolner recognized that their power “lies not in the social and political demands that they inherently make but in the intimacy that they distill and invite and the spaces they create for what Somalis refer to as *dareen-wadaag* (feeling-sharing) (Woolner 2023, xix). Using a skillful mix of personal narrative, history, anthropology, and musicology, Woolner weaves the complexities of gender, religion, and war into her study, making this book academically rich and enjoyable to read.

Chapter 1, “Anatomy of a Love Song”, opens with the idea that “Somalis always associate love with pain,” (30), which is the reason Woolner uses

“love (-suffering)” throughout the book. Naturally, to anyone familiar with Somali orature, she turns to the story of Cilmi Boodhari, a poet-baker whose unrequited love for a young woman named Hodan led to the creation of poetry that established the heroic imagery of a suffering lover-poet. Cilmi reportedly died of a broken heart in the 1930s, but only after suffering physical agony in his body (34-39). This chapter follows the transformation from the poetry of Cilmi to the development of a particular style of Somali music when poetry met the oud instrument. Both men and women created and performed this music, opening a space to hear about the love suffering and tribulations of the opposite sex (43). Chapter 2, following on the physical agony of love apparent in Chapter 1, addresses the healing power of love songs through the imagery of one singer’s viral song, “Qirasho,” about a “love hospital” (66). The chapter illuminates how the multivocal and collaborative process of creating and producing a love song moves from the personal experience of love (-suffering) through the voices and musical production of others and into the ears of listeners, while remaining individually impactful.

Chapter 3 tells the story of Khadra Daahir Cige, a famous singer in Somaliland, and a woman who was able to deftly navigate the complicated moral and political situation as an artist because of her personal history and family connections, highlighting without overemphasizing issues of power in art. This is especially pertinent in post-war communities, and those with an encroaching fundamentalist religious bent, such as is the case in Somaliland. Through Khadra’s story, Woolner provides a glimpse into the political history of Somalia/Somaliland. This is succinct, but for the purposes of this book, it reads as sufficient, placing music into that history without allowing the lingering effects of violence to overtake the musical core of the book. Chapter 4 invites the reader into the experience of listening to music, opening the topic of intimacy, as people share their responses to particular songs and how those songs have spoken to their own love (-suffering). It

also describes how Somalis use music to communicate to lovers and those they long for, or are in conflict with. Woolner explores how one expresses love in a society in which love, romance, and marriage are deeply private (123).

In her delightful Chapter 5, Woolner obtains and begins to learn to play an oud. The story of finding an oud reveals, perhaps more than any other chapter, the political and moral context in Somaliland, as well as Woolner's unique position. As a foreign White woman married to a Somalilander, Woolner is both insider and outsider, given access to female spaces while being afforded privileges not often available to Somali women. Still, she struggles to find an oud and to transport it in culturally and religiously acceptable ways, so as not to cause trouble for other artists. This chapter makes subtle note of cultural differences she encountered in her study, without allowing them to overshadow the more relevant topic of the oud's history and musicality. She notes that her "own body would become a site of local action" (159) through studying the oud, an embodied and interactive process. Chapter 6 takes music to the stage at Hiddo Dhawr, a diaspora-run cultural center with an emphasis on "heritage preservation" (174). This emphasis is essential to its ongoing survival, as the center faces opposition even while it is immensely popular. In this chapter, the political nature of singing and performing is juxtaposed against the antipolitical nature of love songs and of Hiddo Dhawr's aim that patrons "eschew the sociopolitical cleavages and gendered prohibitions that color everyday interactions" (175).

For a non-musical reader or a non-Somali speaker, there are a few challenges in fully comprehending this book. In Chapter 1, for example, Woolner is tasked with employing multiple Somali terms for poetry and music (*gabay*, *balwo*, *qaraami*, *hees*, *maan*so, *luuq*, and more) and, even as a Somali-speaker myself, at times it was difficult to follow or to distinguish between the precise differences she notes. Also, as a Muslim

society with a significant Sufi flavor, Woolner's overall argument for love songs' voicing of intimacy would have been strengthened even further by engaging even on a cursory level with various forms of vocality within Islam or ways love songs may invoke intimacy with the divine. These are minor quibbles, however. Woolner has crafted a meticulously researched book that foregrounds a notable dimension of Somali studies, moving beyond the usual focus on war and politics to explore "love songs *in motion*, highlighting the ways that love songs are continually made (intimate), affecting and being affected by the voices and ears they meet along the way" (203). Readers are encouraged to explore the companion website (lovesongs.christinawoolner.com), which provides valuable audio examples. This would be well-read alongside Lauren E. Osborne's *Hearing Islam: The Sounds of a Global Religious Tradition* (2024) or Andrzejewski's *An Anthology of Somali Poetry* (1993).

Works Cited:

Andrzejewski, B. W., and Sheila Andrzejewski, trans. *An Anthology of Somali Poetry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

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