

Chaste As It Was

Abdullahi Dahir Moge

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Whoever was occupying the solitary toilet, I thought, must be dead or obnoxiously insensitive. For how else could I explain a man sitting in a desolate toilet for over fifteen minutes now? As if he was reading my mind, a man way back in the slowly forming queue grumbled, 'Is this cursed creature inside, mistaking this stinking toilet for a sauna room adorned with gold mouldings, silk drapes and crystal chandeliers?' the impatient man rubbed his stubble for a moment, and wagged his finger, admonishingly, at the mysterious occupant of the small pit latrine. 'He must come out in the next thirty seconds or else, I am going to throw him out!' he yelled. Giggles were traded.

For over ten minutes, I stood in front of the toilet in that dusty airport, waiting for my turn to come. The pain in my bladder was excruciating. But I kept reminding myself of the virtues of patience and empathy. Empathy to the man inside, who I had no idea what he was going through? I knew it was at such testing moments that temper is never allowed to reign.

'Seriously, this man is (miraculously) giving birth to twins and is not relieving himself', said a cheeky man, munching green leaves of Qat as he aimlessly strode past me. Subconsciously gazing at the handwritten sign that read 'Toilet, no use of stones permitted', I saw my old school in it. Twenty two years ago, we were the graduating class.

Tales abounded, in the school, why Haybe was getting so many love missives lately, all of a sudden. For three years, he was the man every one of us pulled his leg. We knew he was at his wits end when it comes to finding a caring lover. As we dash to the post office to collect love letters from our 'fiancés', he was the lone member of the contingent who had naught to attend to. And God, what a hard time we gave him! He was the man all of us recited our valor to, and who listened to it patiently as Quresh, Ruqiya, Asli, Dulmar's and many more girl's secrets spurted to the floor.

Nevertheless, that final year of our study, started off with many surprises. Of which, the deluge of Haybe's serene life with letters was the most astonishing. Not only was he receiving a notice of a newly arrived letter (week in week out), but the names and locations on the 'from' side of the envelopes -plaid with red and blue on the corners- were equally startling. Unlike the old and boring names which we used to brag about, his were newer and fancier. And not all from the rural homes we came from. Ibtisam from Liboye (Kenya), Hani from Mogdisho, Taslim from Hargeisa, Ugbaad from Galcayo etc, etc. 'Where the hell did you meet all these girls? And how do you rate them?' we implored him for explanation, green with envy. For it was always more appetizing to be in touch with Hani than Quresh, we thought.

They were not in short supply. Yes, tales were coming in multitude. Some said, he has been

going around all these places during the school vacation; while others insisted many of these girls are pen-pals whom he never met. In fact, the girl from Liboye refuge camp was said to be his niece who fled the war in Somalia with her family. But that must be the chatter of disgruntled peers amongst us. I saw one letter from her, and I think it contained 'macaane Haykal'. Now, we all knew there was no way Haybe would render his correct name to the girls. It sounded so frightening, and symbolized charcoal. So Haykal is the 'nom de amour' we understood.

What was most infuriating for us was the content of the letters. Contrary to the 'how is your health? Here I and everybody else is fine, and wishes you good health' cliché-filled white papers from Dulmar's and Canbaro's (as if they were our family-doctor's painstakingly checking on our sugar levels); his were embellished with pictures of hearts and scents of rose, with mellow and sublime 'side tahay, qalbiga? Waxa aan xassuustaa...' type uplifting passages.

It was by accident that one of us found out that Haybe himself actually drafts the letters purported to have been sent by the girls and then sends to his address from another post office. He caught him red-handed while doing it. It was painful to learn the extent our reckless scoff impacted on his self-esteem. He finally confessed, tearfully. 'I was sick and tired of being the deuteragonist all these years' he sobbed. That closed the curtain on his luscious sources of self-worth. We vowed never to dishearten him again.

Still standing at the Airport, the man next on the line patted me at the back and asked where I was going to. I was awakened by his hand from thought of the olden days. I told him. Then, he started his story. He said he was watching the RTD (Radio-Television Djibouti) last night on the Arabsat, when he suddenly found out that his wife was making the headlines. 'I jumped up. For what is she there? When did she go to Djibouti?' I said. Apparently, his wife, who recently graduated from an embroidery school, thinks she is an erudite and modern woman. I should have known, he murmured, what Professor Saleeye told me. I had no idea who the professor he is referring to was.

'Professor Saleeye enlightened me, how our women are learning the wrong way,' he said. 'The professor said, if you see women Doctors, Engineers, or Pilots from India, China or Japan, they are all dressed up in their national costumes, speak their languages with pride, and are not necessarily averse to 'traditional' home-values and division of labour. Indeed, in the east, educated women strive to open-up education and employment opportunities for the other unlucky girls and women, uphold progressive cultural and societal capitals, and encourage the integration of useful western values into their native mores and norms that have served them well for centuries.'

'So why do you feel ours are not doing the same?' I asked.

'Because I know from my own experience. Ours are blighted with confusion and vengeance against men. For them, civilization 101 starts with vituperative rhetoric of 'men and women are equal! Down with the male, and to hell with headscarves! They spend their energy on

trivialities.’

‘Are you sure you are not bitter because they are demanding long-denied rights?’ I asked. ‘I am not crying for lost privileges, my friend. The thing is, of all the issues that await them, why do myopically focus on upsetting family cohesions, and initiation of unwarranted scuffles. Why do they give too much weight to ‘the man should cook for me, and wash the dishes’ slogans? Even, in situations (unlike in the West) where there are no pressing conditions for that to be done.

‘I think there is no harm in us doing those works. But I agree with you, that if respect is mutual in the family, then sharing house chores could be agreed upon cordially without any bitterness. And I concur with you that the element of coercion is the spoiler here. In addition, the prejudice that the ‘whites’ are culturally more superior to us is what we have to repel.’

He shook his head and finally told me what happened last night. According to his story, he expected his wife to be in her family’s home - attending to her sick mother. At least, that is what she told him before she left the house, two days ago. But he says, he was dumbfounded when the news reader of the TV broadcasted pictures of Yusra, his wife, donning a cap, and with big dark sunglasses. ‘A delegation of young women has arrived today from Diredawa to pay a week-long visit, aimed at fostering the sisterly relations between the youth of the two cities. Marwo Yusra, the head of the delegation told journalists that this year’s event is organized under the slogan ‘Free movement for women bolsters family cohesion’ the TV man said, the stranger-friend told me. He held his mouth with his hands, and quizzed me, ‘mind you, with no notice. With no permission. Do you think this will bolster our unity? No way. She will see!’ he vowed.

Suddenly, the door of the toilet opened, and a skinny short man walked out, throwing his hands. He was furious. ‘Now, do you call yourselves human beings? I have epilepsy and fell down inside the toilet, and no one comes to my rescue? Thankfully, it was before I started and I am not messed up’ he walked away - dejected.

The man who told me his wife’s story was the next after me, but on account of his age, I allowed him to take my turn. Some at the back of the line murmured. Disrespect? The humiliation the man was dealt by his wife triggered reflections of parallels I knew about. My mind quickly raced back to that final year in my school. And to Haybe.

Despite our earlier undertaking not to disappoint Haybe again, when in the same year – the graduation year, we saw his pick of partner from the Eve’s descendants; we couldn’t let him ruin himself. Not before our own eyes!

‘Naagtan faraha ka qaad! She is not for you. She is worthless’, all of us thundered on the daunted Haybe; who in his confusion cocked his head to his left, eyes fixed on the sand flooring, as if to say enough, enough, I hear it, but would you please end it. The torment was unbearable, I felt.

‘What is with her? And why are you so much concerned?’ he said, after he somewhat

recovered from the initial agony.

Mahdi never minces his words. 'Everything is wrong with her. In fact, it would have been easier to answer, had you asked what is right with her. Don't you see the way she dresses, the way she talks and most of all the unfaithfulness? By the way, even if she is the most righteous girl in the city, would it matter, as long as everybody in town sees her entirely differently? And that is what they do.'

'You haven't said anything.' Haybe got heart from the lack of evidence of the supposed culpability of his love.

'I have said everything, if you have ears. Must I say she is the toast of men of all ages? Or ought I to tell you, what her epithet these days is: 'the river of the country'. Do you see the jab here? Or you are God's sheep as I suspected? War meesha waa laga wada cabbaal!'

Nobody disdains Haybe as a squeamish soul, but with what is just being said against Hibo, he had a fill of insult. His neck prickled with ire. Testicles are patted, and there was no way he will let this go with impunity. He charged forward, tooth clenched, eyes red-shot, and got the chin of the last talker- who, frankly, he doesn't recall who he was anymore- with a head butt. Blood gushed out and smeared shirts. The frenzy and the swapping of blows didn't let us distinguish who was bleeding and who wasn't. If we hadn't intervened in time, I bet grave-diggers would have had at least one more body to rest, that day.

The next morning, all of my friends handed the weight of convincing Haybe to ditch that crazy girl down to me. We knew he was head over heels for her, but we also knew she will land him in unfathomable mess. I, the self-proclaimed most liberal of all the guys, wondered what is so special of the girl, that blinded the serene friend of us, from the glaring reality. For it was true, that Hibo was seen entwined with so many men, that nowadays, it has become easier to recall the date and place she was sighted, than to describe the man with whom she was last seen. It was rumored she goes out with men on an hourly basis.

When we were compiling evidence on her infidelity, we were astounded by what we saw and heard. Yusuf would come with the story of 'she was with a young boy-half her age, jeego-xiir ah, and they held hand-in-hand,' with a wrath that leaves one wondering whether he is just imparting information, or bemoaning a harsh rout in a love contest. Xaashi said, he saw her with a very old man, balding and white-haired (driving a Toyota Pick-up). He added that on top of the Pick-up car was flour-mill, and that he suspects the man might be an owner of a bakery in the town.

'Waxba maydaan arkin idinku', Shakuur bellowed. 'Last night, when I was coming back from the library, I saw two men and a girl walking side by side on the first street. The girl was in between and was holding the hand of one man, while she was in passionate cuddle with the other one.' He heaved a sigh of disgust, and went on. 'Where on earth is such a game being played? It was Hibo.'

And he heard. Haybe was listening to all of these. But when I finally took him to a secluded pastry, and started to give a useful counsel why it is for the good of him, I and other friends

are concerned, he only spoke one sentence: 'why don't you leave me alone?' Later, while in our study (and sleeping) room-we were all students- he played Hanuniye's 'dadbaa jira waalanoo haday wax is rabba arkaan ukala wariya xumaan...Jacaylkeena ka weyn', over and over as if the tiny National Panasonic tape that we bought collectively belongs to him alone.

Then it slowly crossed my mind. Why can't I meet the young lady and make out all I need to know. I knew their home; but again, why go into all that intricacy. Is she not going to pass by the front of the cafeteria 'leopards' loiter for their pray, 'I think I love my wife cafeteria'. Mostly, married men assemble there; men they call the 'undeterred elderly', who would not hesitate to nib the bud of any wayward virgin. Hibo was restless and wayward. She wasn't a filly, though. Not anymore. She was in her early thirties. Yet, she still conducted herself as if she was in the eve of the days when she was in her fullness of adolescence; just coming to bloom. The impertinent fellows who roost there say Hibo passes by, at least, twice a day. If she doesn't, then she didn't need to. She has her man already.

I didn't need to look for her for long. There she was, by the side of Xabiibi's shop. I shook hands with her and started telling her the purpose of my meeting with her. Barely did I finish the first sentence, when she cut me short.

'Are you talking about your friend Haybe? Or you are here for, let us say to try your luck?' she said, and then let out a mock chortle. It was a rather wry humour to me.

'Of course, I am here to talk to you about why you are not treating my friend well. You know he is ready to marry you. Why can't you de-crowd yourself?' I was getting disconcerted.

'First of all, I am a woman. I talk to a thousand and marry one. Don't you know that?' she said derisively, and strode back and forth, with as much panache as she could muster. 'But you are abusing that antiquated aphorism. It is practiced by you in that face, literally. How many are you talking to right now! Three hundred, five hundred, two thousand? Nobody knows. And to be honest with you, that is not the issue. It is not about talking to men. It is about...' I almost said what wasn't a secret to anyone in town; but decided against it in the nick of time.

'What are they saying? She is a provider? I know and I don't care. Anything else?' had I said the talk is about how well you dress, she couldn't have been more indifferent. And she gave vent to her indecency with a loud guffaw and wiggle of her waist.

I didn't reckon that respectful one bit, but even before I went far with the probe of what she thinks about Haybe, a young boy came running from the street, and stood right beside the wall she was leaning on. 'Hibo, Jaamac says I am not in that house tonight; come to the other one. Near the airport.' The boy scratched his head as if he expected something, but she motioned with her hand for him to go. And then the telephone rang. Not her mobile; there were no mobile phones those days. The telephone in the shop, next door. A tall man stretched

his neck out of the window, pointing a hand towards her, and gestured 'you have a call here'. She swiveled the first finger twice, to hint 'let him ring later' note.

On a hectic evening, he finally caught her. She was dining in 'the hungry Hippos' restaurant with a man who is a cashier in local remittance agent (xawaalad). We were with him, and he froze for a good ten minutes. It was time to go back to our tiny room and confer on the issue.

'You see what we were telling you! Now, it is not you who is in charge. It is us. You have shamed us enough. We have become the objects of ridicule for everybody. Listen now.' We all said one after another. And then issued commands to him. You will not talk to her again, you will not pass by the route she passes, you will not utter her name, and most of all you will not talk to any of her woman friends. And a lot more of don't do's.

I remember his request. 'I fully agree', he said, 'but allow me to see her one more time just to take my anger off my chest. I will tell her that she is not what I thought she is, that if she thinks I am not enough for her, she has made a big mistake and that she will end up in the hand of one of these losers.' Permission not granted. Then he begged, 'what about if I call her and say she should never come around me, please let me say that to her'. Again, a resounding no, was the consensus from us.

After a silence of maybe half-an-hour, Haybe made another request, this time more cogently. 'Hey, friends, is it not weird that I just stop a relationship and the other player doesn't know about it? No, no, I think I must let her know that it is over'.

Xashi's patience waned. 'You man. You look you are not yet over it. Why do you insist on seeing her again? It is over. Over. We said so, and don't expect us to acquiesce to the whims of an infatuated man.' Haybe looked at me with beseeching eyes. 'Why don't you say something, Caabi?' his voice stuttered like a radio with a dead battery. Like the proverbial Hyena that run to the side of whoever showed mercy, among the hunting men; he likes to slope towards me when he is in an unpleasant condition. But he must have known, of all days today, I wasn't going to come to his rescue. I was up to my neck in distaste for the young lady.

I told him to listen to his friends and heed their advice. It was clear he was making a valiant effort to contain his disappointment with our intrusion. Gradually, Haybe walked out of the room with melancholy. We later learned he actually confronted her with the allegations, but thankfully, Hibo assured him that it was all an ugly fib. Truth be told, the first acquaintance of a celestial visitor would have been Hibo, in that town. Was it Percy Sledge, who said Loving eyes can never see? Right, he was.

After a week, we were invited to their wedding rite. She insisted Axmaaro friends of her, must sing for the occasion. And the unambiguous wedding melody (of the Axmaaro) flowed, to the disapproval of many of us, who saw it as uncalled for and iconoclastic.

'O! (You) Bride, O! (You) groom
To you comes, our heartily wishes
May your matrimony bloom
Like that of Abraham and Sara
Like Methuselah, May it live
For a long time, for eternity'

Three months later, it was time for divorce. Disregarding the blessings, they obviously lampooned Abraham and Sara. 'What happened?' We asked, recalling that in those early days of nuptial festivities, we were small with shame, and Haybe made sure we feel the pain of our crimes (by playing different songs that hailed the inevitability of the triumph of love over jealously and pernicious gossips) whenever we paid the newly-wed family an obligatory visit.

'War bad baan galay', he said, holding his head.' I now know I wasn't living in this town. 'Rag aana magaaladda waligay ku arag baanu isbaranay' these days. The bottom-line is my house became 'Acapulco bay' where the obscure love and lust chase of a Mexican series is played out. Sometimes, I think I am a receptionist in a massage parlour. 'Where is Hibo?' is the most used word of my days, and to my surprise, when visitors come, and when I face her with who they are, it is always 'either her ina-abti or waa caadi'.

'Kaalay, is the United Nations your reer-abti? I asked her once.' He asked us, not soliciting any particular answer,' how can folks of all nations and races surround my house and she tells me they are her ina-abti?' He made us laugh when he defined 'caadi', not as a word, but as anything from 'a bearded-stranger at your doorsteps asking for your wife, to a young lady who knocks at your door after midnight and whispers things in your wife's ears'.

Her version was different. 'Wuu bacoobay', she said. 'I don't know why he is behaving so strangely? Before we married, he never protested against 'people I socialize with'. He knows I am an avid lover of social discourse and interactions'.

As my patience paid off and I finally walked into the smelly toilet, it passed my mind, whether Haybe will think of us, with hindsight, as an insufferable hordes, or genuine friends with a legitimate cause for concern (who were on a scared mission of saving him a damned life)'. Considering that we disapproved of his second marriage as well, which since then proved a success; it isn't so clear, I thought. Is it? And then Haybe's words the last time I saw him, three years ago, reverberated in my mind. 'Chaste as your friendship was, it was rude and abysmal' he said. 'The hurt, nonetheless, was adequately expiated by ever the healer - time'.

But, what intrigued me most was the pace of human mind, which in the span of seconds re-winded enormous recollections that had nothing to do with the purpose of my travel that day (I was going to Mecca for the Hajj). And, of all places, why would a toilet evoke memories that are held like dear treasures in my heart? It made no sense.

I asked myself, was the man right? “Are our women learning the wrong way?” I know I have some lingering misgivings about some ‘scholar’ women, but can I be so conclusive? I don’t know. Then, I heard the sound, ‘Passengers, passengers, you are reminded to please get ready to board’ and I hurried out of the toilet.

(1) The Writer is a freelance contributor to Wardheernews.com. He can be reached at E-Mail: moogedahashas2008@yahoo.com. _