

Editors Note:

WardheerNews is pleased to present to its readers this scholarly literary work written by Dr. Mohamed Dahir Afrah, an outstanding Somali novelist, essayist, and linguistic and play critic on one of the Somali classical theatrical plays, *Shabeelnaagood*, (Leopard Among the Women), the best-known work of the late playwright Hassan Sheikh Mumin. In this academic work, the writer addresses and critically examines *Shabeelnaagood* in an original and fascinating literary style that captures the reader's attention.

Somalis have traditionally been regarded as a 'nation of poets'. As a direct corollary to that, the Somali language is rich in oral literature, where oral poetry plays a central role in all aspects of Somali life. This original literary review involves an in-depth study of Mumin's finest work; the power and influence of the theatre as a vehicle for the formation of both the individual and national character, provision of public guidance, and the exceptional role of the *Abwaan* as a great literary voice. Through this thoughtful essay, Dr. Afrah, a renowned Somali theatre scholar, demonstrates beyond doubt Mumin's profound knowledge of Somali literature and his literary creativity in the poetics of character formation.

The *Abwaan*¹ as Guidance Provider: The Centrality of the Message in the Somali Play *Shabeelnaagood*²

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The artist has always functioned in African society as the record of the mores and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time.

Wole Soyinka

Night and day we fashion our words,

.....

We guide the public rightly, we entertain them and we lead them to the right path.³

- Diiddan in *Shabeelnaagood* -

1. Introduction

'A poet is by definition a prophet, too.' So asserts Professor Said S. Samatar (1987: 129) in his interesting article on the 1970s poetic combat, *Hurgumo*, 'Festering Wound' initiated by the late Somali poet, Khaliif Shiikh Maxamuud⁴. Despite the hyperbole in Professor Samatar's deliberately exaggerated use of the word 'prophet' there is much truth in the essence of his informed description of the place of the poet in Somali society. The unusually influential role of the poet in Somali life and lore, as an opinion leader *par excellence*, and

the position traditionally allocated to him⁵ as the most esteemed public figure has repeatedly been highlighted in scholarly works (see Andrzejewski and Mussa, 1963; Andrzejewski and Lewis, 1964; Said, 1982; Antinucci and Axmed, 1986; Laitan and Said, 1987) and duplication is not necessary here.

What needs to be brought to light, however, is the fact that it is not just the poet but the literary creator in general that acts as guidance provider in Somali society past and present – the playwright and the novelist, for instance, share with the poet the tendency of being ‘issue-oriented’, to borrow a phrase from Professor Said S. Samatar (1982:70), of taking upon himself to deliver a message, to ‘guide the public rightly’, as declared by the late Xasan Shiikh Muumin in *Shabeelnaagood* (p. 45).

There are two more things that need to be brought to the attention of the students of Somali literature. The first is that, in contemporary Somali society, especially in the pre-civil war period, the theatre (which incorporates poetry, drama, music, dance and visual arts) has emerged as the leading form of cultural expression, the dominant medium through which the contemporary literary creator prefers to deliver his message. Over the four decades preceding the civil war, the theatre had become the lifeblood of Somalia’s cultural scene and the mirror of her social reality.

The second point, which is linked to the first, is the position of the contemporary literary figure and the recently-emerged or reinforced title attached to him, namely the title of *abwaan* with its complex shades of meanings and honorific connotations suggesting the supreme creative ability of the person described as an *abwaan* (see below for details). As will be explained shortly, the most commonly recognized *abwaan* is the poet/playwright.

The purpose of this essay is to explore these related issues, giving special attention to the centrality of the message in Somali drama with especial reference to *Shabeelnaagood*. The article is broken into two main sections. The first, which serves as a background to the second, highlights the stand of the literary figure in Somali Society over the centuries and how he always tended to act as an educator or guidance provider. In the second section I shed light on how this established tradition is perpetuated by the contemporary Somali literati, with especial attention to Somali drama, a field which has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. Here, to serve the aforesaid purpose I have chosen the very famous play *Shebeelnaagood* by the late acclaimed *abwaan*, Xasan Shiikh Muumin as a representative work of Somali theatre.

The concluding paragraphs shed more focused light on the importance of literature in general and drama in particular in Somali society, underling the pressing need to make use of the potential of literary creators as guidance providers in this dark moment in Somali history. This, in my view, could help a lot in finding a way out of the current Somali quandary.

2. The *Abwaan* as guidance provider

2.1. The literati in Somali traditional society

The *abwaan* or the gifted literary creator in Somali society renders credence to Wole Soyinka’s statement that ‘the artist has always functioned in African society as the record of the mores and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time.’ (qtd in Graham-White, 1978: 98). On close examination, the work of contemporary Somali poets,

playwrights and creative writers suggests that they make it their particular obligation to comment on the pressures and contradictions of their society, voicing the concerns and aspirations of the majority. This is an obvious carryover inherited from the classical poet, the leading and most influential literary personality in traditional Somali society.

Quite conscious of the esteemed position he is placed in by his people, the Somali poet assumes a greater moral responsibility than anyone else in the community. He acts as the nation's moral guide and as the shaper of its collective consciousness. He performs this function in such a way that suggests he is under constant moral pressure that the special position allocated to him entails equally special social imperative. As his main concern he takes upon himself to take the lead in championing the common good and in doing so he 'speaks in the collective tongue of the group' (Wright, 1994:15), i.e. the clan in the past or the *qaran* – the nation-state – in the modern context. His maxim is, as phrased by a contemporary Somali playwright, Maxamuud Tukaale, '*Abwaanku waa macallinka bulshada*, [the *abwaan*⁶ is the educator of the public]'. The late playwright has made this statement in his introduction to the video-recorded performance in Djibouti of his highly popular play, *Hablayohow hadmaad guursan doontaan*, 'O girls, when will you get married!' first produced in Mogadishu in March 1975. In the body of the play, the author more profoundly expresses this view of his in a powerful poetic language:

Weligiiba abwaanku

Ummadda waa u horseed

Halgan buu ku jiraa.

The *abwaan* is in a perpetual struggle

Leading the way [to a better life] for the nation.

In pre-colonial times, the classical poet often acted 'as the mouthpiece of the clan' (Nuruddin, 1989: 172), urging them to defend their honour, to help each other and to safeguard the common good of the community. At times poets instigated their clans to engage in feuds against rival clans to take revenge or resume their threatened prestige.

Beyond the confines of clan politics, however, the poet often engaged in philosophical observations of life and acted as all-time promoter of supreme virtues, whether religious or secular. He warned his fellow men and women against the consequence of their wrong doing. Following are extracts from a well known poem by a foremost 18th century poet and religious leader, Shiikh Cali Cabdiraxmaan:

Aadane aqoonlaawe away aabayaashaa?

Malaggii iyaga laayey ma aduunsan ku arkayn

.....
Urur noolba lagu waani Arrafo iyo Soonqaad
Adse weli ma aabayne ma oboo kalaad tahay!

Oh, unknowledgable mankind, where are your forefathers?

Do you think you will escape the fate that ended their life?

.....
You are warned time and again, in *Arrafo*⁷ and *Soonqaad*

Yet you keep disregarding it – are you like *obo*!⁸

Such a didactic style in which the poet tends to reproach the public is very common in the Somali poetic tradition. Acting as the most sensitive minds in society, Somali poets of all times are inclined to take liberty in fiercely criticising the behaviour of their fellow citizens. In the lines extracted below, a famous nationalist poet, Cabdillaahi Suldaan Timacadde (1920-1973), expresses his furious sense of frustration about people's turning deaf ears to the spirit of his patriotic poetry:

Dadkaan la hadlayaa baan lahayn, dux iyo iimaane
Dul iyo hoosba waan ugu digaye, waa dix dhagaxeede
Anuun baa u damqanayee dheguhu, uma daloolaane

The people I am addressing are void of substance and conscience
I warned them [both] openly and confidentially, but they are as deaf as stone
I am the one who cannot help caring, yet they have no ears to listen.
(Timacadde, 1983: 69)

Generally speaking, however, people do take interest in listening to what their poets have to say, seeking guidance in their words of wisdom. They believe that men of letters are uniquely endowed with extraordinary foresight and premonition powers. This view of the man of letters in Somali culture is best articulated in the words of the great poet and nationalist leader, Sayid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan:

Nin da' weyni meel durugsan buu, diirad ku arkaaye
Dunidoo fayow buu wixii, dilaya sheegaaye
Markaasaa dagaal iyo guhaad, lagula daataaye
Gebi markuu dumaa buu 'wixii, daya!' yiraahdaaye

A man of age and experience sees distant things [as if] with the use of a telescope;
He foretells deadly future happenings at a time when everything is still intact;
And people pour scorn on him and shout him down.
But when an escarpment crashes in ruins, he says: see that thing!
(Andrzejewski, 1967:6)

By saying 'a man of age' Sayid Maxamed refers to himself as an experienced poet. Both in his poetry and his day-to-day interaction, the Sayid tended to patronise when addressing people. One way of his doing so was his frequent use of the vocative *maandhow*, 'oh, my son' or 'my son' when addressing men including those of his age or even older.⁹ Normally, the terms *maandhow* 'my son' and *maandheey* 'my daughter' are used by parents and grand parents or by older people when addressing children in general and one's own children or grand children in particular. Sayid Maxamed, however, often used the phrase indifferently. In

many of his poems he addresses Xuseen Dhiqle – the famous reciter of the Sayid’s poems, himself a great poet belonging to the Sayid’s age group – as ‘my son’:

You will go up, up to be with the disciples of Fragrance,
Now hark, my son, your task is a little word I’d entrust to you;
Beloved, you’ll not forget my words,
Listen, then, to the chant of my poetic supplications.
(From the poem *Af-Bakayle*)¹⁰

As indicated in the Sayid’s verse cited above, Somalis believe that the poet possesses prophetic powers. One significant example of such spiritual powers, which is particularly relevant to our discussion, is known as *kuhaan* or *yu’asho*. This is the poet’s ability to perceive things beyond the natural range of ordinary human beings, especially things to do with future events. Customarily, Somalis believe that the poet has

a ‘hotline’ to the Deity and can therefore intervene, through his poetic oration, in natural events. The composer of poetic curse (*kuhaan*) is called ‘*afkuleeble*’ (‘he whose mouth is a dart’). An *afkuleeble* is at once weird, clairvoyant and prophetic: he is believed to foretell the future, to possess omniscient attributes and to perceive things which are beyond the natural range of mortal men.
(Said, 1982: 81)

There are two types of *kuhaan*. The first comes in the form of an evil will or curse hurled in verse against someone or something that often deserves it, in the poet’s view. Once unleashed, this kind of *kuhaan* or poetic curse is believed to have ‘the effect of stabbing the object. It tears away the flesh of an enemy as a weapon does.’ (Ibid.).

In the second type of *kuhaan*, a poet would prophesy that a calamity will strike, that something disastrous will engulf the group or a person. People believe that such a prophesy by a poet is inevitable to come true, as there must be certain heavenly forces behind the poet’s premonitions in the first place, *waa laga hadliyey*, ‘he has been made speak [by supernatural power]’. To illustrate this, it may be helpful to cite a recent example.

The acclaimed poet, Maxamed Ibraahim “Hadraawi” has repeatedly commented on his dilemma and frustration with people holding him responsible for the calamity that has engulfed Somalia. They keep accusing him of hurling a deadly *kuhaan* that has come true and destroyed everything. In an interview with *Jamhuuriya* newspaper (*Jamhuuriya*, 11, 12 August, 1999, pp.1, 3), the poet laments in an obvious sense of quandary:

*Dadku had iyo goor waxay yidhaahdaan, dalka gudihisa ama dibaddaba,
waar dalka adigaa habaaray oo tafaafulaye u ducee, dalka adigaa dumiyaye u
ducee bay ku odhanayaan. Waar anigu ma dumine xaqiiqo jirtay ayaa
dumisey. Kala qaybsanaantii baa dumisey. Waxa dumiyey mabda’a iyo
falsadii dalka lagu hoggaaminayey oo ilaa maanta ta aynu ku dhaqmayno ah.*
(Hadraawi, 1999: 3)

(Both inside and outside the country, people keep saying say to me: “you put a curse on the country, pray to Allah for the country as it is you who is behind its desolation”. In fact, it was not myself who have destroyed the country.

Rather, the country was destroyed by the conditions of the time, by the raging contradictions, by the destructive mentality of the ruling elite which continues to dominate the scene to date.)

The time of this interview was immediately after Hadraawi's return to his hometown of Burco in mid-1999, after eight years of being in exile, mostly in London. Upon his return, thousands of fans and admirers welcomed the celebrated poet in localities and public gatherings where people made the accusing comments he refers to, as did other on previous occasions in the Diaspora.

Back in the 1980s Hadraawi joined the armed opposition against the rule of the late General, Maxamed Siyaad Barre, and composed a number of dissent poems. In some of these poems, such as the famous *jiifto* 'Daalalley' (Hadraawi, 1993: 407-424), the poet, in order to further instigate the anger and the determination of members of the armed opposition, threatened the regime that the wrath of the opposition forces will ruin the current prosperity and tranquillity enjoyed by the ruling elite and that an unparalleled catastrophe will strike destroying everything in the country; all as the result of the political wrongs committed by the regime of the time.

In a few years time, i.e. by the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, an unprecedented misfortune of civil war and famine engulfed Somalia, following the acceleration of a violent conflict which resulted in the distraction of everything – the state collapsed, the civic society disintegrated, and a devastating anarchy prevailed ravaging the entire infrastructure of the country's urban life. Many of the disasters described by Hadraawi in his angry prophesy became the order of the day: once beautiful houses engulfed in flames, countless dead bodies laying in the streets, a general atmosphere of unspeakable terror and fleeing masses and so forth.

It was then that many Somalis, especially the literary-minded, began to painfully recall and critically review Hadraawi's words. Frustrated people began to point angry fingers to the great poet accusing him of unleashing a *kuhaan* that has come true. Ordinary people frequently ask him to try and remedy the harm by composing peace promoting poetry, asking Allah to undo the effect of his original poetic curse and, hence, to reverse the situation.

Two significant conclusions could be drawn from this vivid example. The first is that many Somalis continue to believe to date that poets possess prophetic powers such as *kuhaan* (loosely translating 'evil will') and, more significantly, that the esteemed position of the literary figure in Somali society remains intact – Poets and *abwaans* continue to be highly influential public figures.

The latter conclusion has been confirmed further by more recent incidence again involving the famous poet, Maxamed Ibraahim Hadraawi. One of the most circulated news item that made the headlines in Somali media in the second half of year 2003 was a peace march led by Hadraawi round Somalia, followed by rather similar tour round a number of European countries hosting large Somali communities. The move was initiated by an umbrella of Mogadishu-based civil society organizations (INXA) who in June 2003 attended a week-long literary/artistic symposium organized in Djibouti by the Somali-speaking Writers Centre of International PEN; Hadraawi was among the many participants in the Djibouti Symposium where INXA representatives invited him to lead the stated peace march throughout Somalia.

During his long journey across the country, the extent of popular welcome and the unusually warm reception given to him had taken the poet and his fellow visitors by surprise. In most of the many towns and villages visited, scores of people took to the streets to welcome the poet. Community leaders and administrators organized very crowded public meetings where the *abwaan* was addressed by the war-exhausted population as though he was the long-awaited saviour. Expressing his dilemma with the high expectations of the local people and their many demands, Hadraawi has commented, in a number of his post-march public speeches:

Waxaa iigu darrayd, meel kastoo aan marayey dadku waxay ii soo bandhigayeen dhibaatooyinka haysta oo ay i lahaayeen wax ka qabo oo xal raadi, ilaa xad ay gaadheen mar aan marayey tuulo ka mid ah tuulooyinka webiyada in ay dadkii iiga cawdaan bahal libaax ah oo nafta u keenay oo xoolihii ka dhammeeyey.... Dadku waxay iila hadlayeen sidii iyagoo u dan sheeganaya madaxweyne booqasho ugu yimi. Ma oga inaan ahay gabayaa miskiin ah oo aan lahayn wax awood ah oo uu wax uga qaban karo dhibaatooyinkooda.

My biggest dilemma was that wherever I visited local people kept complaining to me about their daily sufferings, asking me to help find solutions for their problems, to the extent that in one of the riverine villages people complained to me about a dangerous lion that kept killing their livestock People addressed me in the way they would complain to a visiting president, unaware that I am only a poor poet too powerless to do anything about their problems.¹¹

Hundreds of Somalis both inside and outside the country rallied to Hadraawi's journey flooding him with endless invitations and gifts, the reason being that they had perceived him as a beacon of hope, as the desperately needed spiritual leader expected to fill in the deadly vacuum (lack of leadership) and lead the way (either through his poetry or otherwise) towards the salvation of the war-ravaged nation. It is interesting, however, that these popular emotions were at odds with the fact that Hadraawi had no political ambition whatsoever, as he repeatedly stressed in almost all his public addresses; nor had he articulated any clearly defined agenda or vision for salvation and nation rebuilding. His whole message was a rather blurred call for peace in general – peace as a virtue.

This very recent happening, i.e. the unparalleled respect shown to the poet Hadraawi by all Somalis wherever they were demonstrates the fact that present-day Somalis continue to attach the highest esteem to the literary figure (if found) as did their forefathers. This too confirms the continued power of literature in Somali society as, perhaps, the most effective medium to get a message across.

2.2. Metamorphosis into Abwaan

In their reference to Hadraawi and other distinguished literary figures, present-day Somalis always use the title of *abwaan*, more so in the case of gifted poet/playwrights. The term is neologism that has come into everyday speech over the past couple of decades as the result of an important metamorphosis in the function of the Somali poet. The *gabayaa* (poet) has gradually assumed additional tasks in his creative vocation. A significant poet of great talents is no longer just a poet, in many cases. In fact, the use of the term 'gabayaa' has become far less frequent in recent years; it is increasingly replaced by the term '*abwaan*'. This is because

the contemporary poet – chiefly in the post-independence era – has endeavoured to undertake the new tasks of playwrighting and composing modern lyrics in addition to continuing to create the conventional verse of *maanso-goleed*, or public forum poetry. As a result, his title has been upgraded; he is crowned with the more prestigious title of *abwaan*, meaning multi-talented literary creator, poet-playwright in most part.¹²

With its majestic touch and complex shades of meanings, *abwaan* is one of those Somali literary terms that defy translation into English. The nearest English equivalent to the meaning of *abwaan* in the established Somali is probably ‘sage’; the term was used to describe a wise man with a wealth of knowledge and experience in life. In view of this, traditional Somalis always turned to the *abwaan* for advice and trusted his guiding judgements.

In *Qaamuuska Af-Soomaaliga* (Somali Dictionary) by Yaasiin Kenadiid, the entry is given the following definitions:

Qof laamo badan oo cilmi aqoon weyn ku leh ama u leh siiba dhaqanka iyo ilbaxa; waaya-arag; wax-yaqaan; buuni. 2. Buug ama buugag laamaha aqoontoo dhammi ku urursan yihiin.
(Yaasiin, 1976: 5)

(A person with remarkable expertise in many branches of knowledge, especially in culture and ancestral civilisation; experienced; knowledgeable; expert or sage. 2. Book or books containing all branches of knowledge [encyclopaedia].)¹³

Thus, giving the title *abwaan* to the contemporary poet means that he became even more esteemed. In return to his undertaking such complex creative tasks, he has acquired the double esteem customarily attached to the poet and the familiar *abwaan* separately.

True, some poets are still there who are not seen writing plays or composing songs. There too are others who only concentrate on writing for the theatre. However, most of the significant poets in contemporary Somalia try their best to become playwrights as well; indeed, those who find themselves capable, would seek to make play writing the centre of their creative activities. This emanates from the general belief in Somali artistic circles that it is the poet alone who is entitled to create successful plays, the assumption being that the crucial ideas in the play should be expressed in verse, whether sung or exchanged between characters in the dialogue (for details see Andrzejewski, 1985 and Afrax, 1987). In Somali theatre tradition, every drama group is normally led by an *abwaan*, who serves as the god-father of the camponay. As a senior colleague and leader, the *abwaan* is highly respected by the rest of the group.

This increase in the range of the poet’s responsibility corresponds with a similar increase in the complexity of the contemporary social issues dealt with in the new literature. Unlike the classical poet in a traditional clan setting, the post-independence *abwaan* has to deal with the problems of a sophisticated urban society in a modern nation state which is part and parcel of a fast changing global context. To represent the experience of such a new, complex world and to meet its entertainment needs, new forms of literature are required, forms far more complex

than the traditional ones. Among the leading modern art forms, drama appears the most successful in dealing with a complex social reality, in ‘mirroring’ life in its entirety. As Biodun Jeyifo asserts, ‘More than the other literary arts, drama deals at a highly concentrated, more intense level with the contradictions of social existence. (Jeyifo, 1985: 7)

Herein lies the reason for the contemporary Somali poet’s shifting to the theatre where the established craft of versification is moulded into becoming part of a combined work of art, a dramatic performance with new features tuned to the needs – both entertainment and educational – of the contemporary audience. In a tape recorded interview conducted during my fieldwork, the celebrated *abwaan*, Cali Sugulle has stated that, ‘*Haddaad xadhiggay doonayaan u garaacdo uun bay dadku ku raacayaan* [You can only gain the interest of the public if you make your work tuned to their tastes and needs]’ (Cali, 1997).

Thus, as the *gabay* (the leading art form in the past) began to go out of fashion, drama has taken precedence in the Somali cultural life, particularly in the fast growing urban life (prior to the civil war destruction) and the *abwaan* has taken the lead in the overall artistic scene. The essence of an *abwaan*’s function remains more or less the same as that of the familiar poet: to act as leading entertainer-educator. Of the two parts of the compound function, the latter receives the greater part of an *abwaan*’s attention, particularly in the case of almost all significant *abwaans*. Talented poet-playwrights concern themselves with reflecting the general feelings of the public, to give expression to the aspirations of the nation in place of that of the clan in traditional society.

Having said that we must note that in recent years many ordinary Somalis have started to increasingly use the term ‘abwaan’ indiscriminately. Oblivious of the original criteria discussed above, average Somalis of today use the word ‘abwaan’ to refer to any one who composed some poetry thus downgrading the awe-inspiring sense attached to the original meaning of the word. Similar terms normally reserved for qualified or truly knowledgeable persons increasingly suffer from this kind of indiscriminate use among the Somalis; examples are ‘doctor’, ‘professor’, ‘sheikh’ and so forth.

2.3. A Committed *abwaan* in the making

The acclaimed *abwaan*, Xasan Shiikh Muumin, author of *Shabeelnaagood*, a ply of proverbial fame, is a legitimate child of the literary tradition discussed in the preceding pages. Hence, he is a glaring example of a Somali *abwaan* acting as guidance provider. In the rest of this article I examine Xasan’s main concern in his major work, *Shabeelnaagood*¹⁴, where he launches a fierce attack against the increasing social and political ills emerging in the Somalia of the immediately after independence era. In perpetuation of the traditional role of an *abwaan*, Xasan is driven by the compelling sense of duty that he, as an *abwaan*, must forewarn his fellow men and women against the deadly consequence of their wrongful behaviour. As we shall see shortly, from the ample evidence provided in *Shabeelnaagood*, the playwright has chosen to undertake the arduous task of acting as a voice of an enlightened opinion in his society, ‘a voice of vision’ to borrow Soyinka’s phrase; hence, the paramountcy of the instructive message in the overall content of the play.

Before getting into the elaborate discussion of the centrality of the message in *Shabeelnaagood* in the next section, let us first consider the factors that have contributed to the formation of Xasan as a committed playwright, a playwright with the main preoccupation

of delivering a message, of diagnosing ‘the rot that was eating away at society and [trying] to mobilize the hearts of all Somali individuals against it’ (Maryan and Kapteijns, 2002:129). In addition to the general background discussed above, i.e, the established stand of the literary creator in Somali society, three significant factors can be identified.

The first is the fact that Xasan was a poet before becoming a playwright. Indeed, he has built on or made full use of his poetic talent in developing his playwrighting career. This is quite obvious from the author’s heavy reliance on poetry in constructing *Shabeelnaagood* and other major plays, such as *Gaaraabidhaan* ‘Glow worm’ (1970). As a poet-playwright, Xasan has kept on the established tradition of the Somali poet playing the assumed role of voicing the common concern of his people, as stated earlier.

A second, important factor is the political and social environment in Somalia at the time when Xasan Shiikh Muumin opened his eyes to this world both as a young man and as a poet. This was the two decades that preceded Somali political independence in 1960, a period characterized by an overwhelming political drive for independence and for an improved quality of life. Poets and other artists were at the forefront of the energetic popular movement, of those Somali men and women who associated themselves with the struggle for a better Somalia. I have detailed elsewhere¹⁵ how such a drive had influenced or inspired the emergence of an entire body of new art and literature. This has also been discussed in other scholarly works (see, for example, Johnson, 1974).

Although Xasan did not belong to the first generation of patriotic artists, he was greatly influenced by them, as we shall see in a moment. As a playwright he belongs to the second generation, the post-independence generation of committed artists. However, Xasan did participate in the dynamics of the movement for Somali independence as a member of the Youth League (S.Y.L.), the leading nationalist part of the time.

Third, Xasan Shiikh Muumin was remarkably influenced by previous men of letters who took upon themselves to educate the public. He tends to consciously follow the example of those role models to whom he refers as ‘*halyeyadii* [the heroes]’:

Halyeyadii habeeyay ee, higaaddooda kala qaybshey
Dhaxalkoodii baan haysanaa, hilinkii toosnaaye.

The heroes who gave guidance¹⁶ and dispensed their well-ordered words’
We keep all their inheritance – that straight path (p. 212-213).

Of Xasan’s ‘heroes’, who have had an impact on his formation as an artistic creator, some were his contemporaries who belonged to an older generation of poets, such as the poet-playwright Maxamed Ismaaciill “Barkhad-cas” (died in 1967) and the poet Cabdillaahi Suldaan Timacadde (1920-1973), both of whom were devoted patriots and social reformists. Relating his disappointment with the coming of a shaky independence in 1960, Xasan identifies himself with these two great poets, saying: ‘Right from the first day of independence, Timacadde, Barkhad-cas and myself had taken opposition stands. We felt that what was happening was quite different from what we had struggled for.’ (Xasan, 1997). In the play too, he expresses this same view by saying, in the words of Diiddane:

*Halkaan haabanayno iyo, asluubteenii waxa haysta
Waa laba hab oo kala fog, aan haab isku lahayne.*

The goal to which we stretch our hands and our true behaviour
Are two things far apart which have no common bond (P. 214-15).

Such a disappointment felt by the general public, who saw their aspirations in the independence evaporating into thin air, was constantly mirrored in all forms of post-independence Somali literature. This major concern is best expressed in the following verse, by Saxardiid Axmed, which provides another example of the post-independence literature, critical of the status quo:

*Hashaan toban sano u heesaayey
Hadhuubkiyo heeryadiiba cuntaye
Lixdankaan haybin jirey maxaa helay?*

The she-camel¹⁷ I've been singing about for ten years¹⁸
Has eaten both the milking vessel and the saddle!
What happened to the [year of] sixty I so much longed for?
(Maxamed, 1994: 242)

Having explored various aspects of the background to Xasan shiikh Muumin's emphasis on the instructive message in *Shabeel-naagood*, let us now proceed to how such a tendency is manifested in the play.

3. The Centrality of the Message in *Shabeelnaagood*

One central aspect of content in *Shabeelnaagood*, which unfailingly emerges from even a casual reading of the play, is the thesis-orientedness of its author, the centrality of the message in the performance. Despite the fact that *Shabeelnaagood* is a wickedly funny satirical comedy in nature, it is obvious that the playwright's main preoccupation remains to deliver a pressing message.

Again, this is not surprising if one considers the fact that Xasan is an immediate descendent of the literary tradition discussed above where the man of letters has always acted as a guidance provider, as a wise preacher, as a messenger, as someone with primary responsibility to 'guide the public rightly' (*Shabeelnaagood*, p. 45). A close look into the content of the performance as a whole suggests that the author was motivated by a bitter sense of being caught in a wicked world, a 'world [that] has reached a helpless state' (p. 119). Xasan has composed *Shabeelnaagood* with an alarming sense that the entire fabric of his society was being dismantled, that the country was heading for what he terms 'guuldarro', 'disaster' (p. 45), due to the people's failure to 'winnow right from wrong' (p. 213). In response, he feels that he, as an *abwaan*, has a duty to act immediately, to warn his fellow citizens of the deadly consequences of their indulgence in wrong-doing, both as individuals and collective.

To facilitate the reader's acquaintance with the following discussing of some important aspects of *Shabeelnaagood*, it may be helpful to give a brief synopsis of the play.

Like in most Somali plays, two distinct strands of plot are interwoven in *Shabeelnaagood* – one of them being the principal storyline and the other a subordinate one. The principal plot is not complex. It centres around Shabeel (Cabdille Raage), the heartless playboy or *Shabeelnaagood*, and his victim Shallaayo Maryan Mursal. Shabeel, the title character, is a young townsman, easy going as he is, who chooses to go against the established code of right and wrong. He particularly fancies to lust after inexperienced young women; he ‘fans them with flattery and Voluble words’ (*Shabeelnaagood*, p. 121) trapping them by means of false promises and bogus love, only to ruin their lives (socially, sexually and emotionally) after he has used them as ‘a queen for a night’.¹⁹

The central plot-line in the play takes off from the third scene where Shabeel casually meets Shallaayo, a secondary school girl with no previous experience with men. In the words of Shabeel, she is ‘a nice worthy little girl of astonishing beauty’ (p. 77). She is the only child of a middle class family in the Somali capital, Mogadishu. Shabeel pretends that he knows her and her family very well and that he has been in love with her for a long time but had to conceal it from her and the family because ‘I am a very shy man’ he claims to cover up his lies ‘I am shy even with the people among whom I was brought up, not to mention your father and your mother’ (p. 71).

At the beginning, Shallaayo strongly rejects him and his advances, her immediate response being ‘Go away!’ (P. 69). Even after he carries on heaping persuasive lies on her she resists ‘Why should I talk to you, brother? You don’t know me . . . You cannot buy me with your sorcery - Good-bye!’ (p. 71).

Actually he could; he does buy her with his “sorcery”, with the magic in his eloquent courtship and tempting promises of a happy marriage, lavish wedding ceremony, luxury lifestyle and exiting holidays around the world. He eventually succeeds to persuade her into saying: ‘I have no objection to that’ (p. 71). What is more, he manages to convince her to keep their relationship as a secret. ‘Don’t tell anyone about yourself or about myself or about us.’ When she suspiciously asks: ‘Shall I keep it secret from my family?’ he artfully replies her: ‘The family! Don’t tell it even to the birds, until we have the big wedding!’ (p. 75).

Shallaayo gets pregnant following a bogus marriage. When she naively attempts to convey the “good news” to Shabeel, he deserts her cruelly, denying that he even knows her. As she finds herself unable to face her conservative, intolerant family with a fatherless baby, Shallaayo becomes utterly ruined, homeless and helpless.

The playwright has created Shallaayo as a symbolic analogue of the young nation-state²⁰, Somalia, in the aftermath of an independence that came with the symptoms of the diseases that were set to kill it ‘unless one goes out to face them’; if something has not been done about these diseases, ‘one will perish through them’ (p. 215).

The ‘nice worthy little girl of astonishing beauty’ (p. 77) who suffers a lot as the result of her inexperienced, unguided pursuit of a premature independence from her family, through a marriage that was to turn out false, could be seen as mirroring the young unguided nation-state threatened by a multitude of malpractices resulted chiefly from the new generation’s misconception of modernity (Shabeel’s unfamiliar behaviour as a modern libertine), as well as from the young nation’s failure to elect the right leaders capable of the healthy

management of the delicate, new-born independent state (the man 'elected and placed in his high office and yet does nothing to fulfil his trust' [p. 63]).²¹

The devastating malpractice embodied by Shabeel is highlighted throughout the play, from the first scene in which he appears (Scene 3), where he plots his 'deceitful designs' (p.131), pouring lies on Shallaayo to trap her into that fatal bogus marriage, to the end of the principal plot, eleven scenes later, where Shabeel is not only exposed but humiliated by school girls who scorn him singing:

ARDADII: *Shabeelka, shabeelka, shabeelnaagoodka, shuftayga, shartiisa na*

mooti!
Shuqshuqda iyo beentaad, hablaha ku shubeysey
Haweenku sharayste, haa, shirkii laga qaatay
Wallee lagu sheeg!
Shabeelka, shabeelka, shabeelnaagoodka, shuftayga, shartiisa na
mooti!

GIRLS: The leopard, the leopard, the women-hunting leopard, the robber who robs us,
God save us from his harm!
The lies that he whispered, the deceit poured on girls-
Women have discovered the evil of it. Yes, a meeting was held to deal with the case
And by God you've been exposed!
The leopard, the leopard, the women-hunting leopard, the robber who robs us,
God save us from his harm!
(P. 190-91).

On the other hand, Shallaayo too is not left blameless. In fact, the playwright clearly and sometimes fiercely criticises his heroine and the generation she represents. This is illustrated in the judge's response to Shallaayo's protest against the court's decision in favour of Shabeel the culprit:

If you women guard your own dignity yourself, the lady killer would not destroy you.
Be quiet and weep softly – It is the devil's prompting that has slain you!
Whom can you blame? Blame yourself! (P. 135).

Again, metaphorically, this could be read as symbolising the agony of the young African nation-state, who suffers as the result of its failure to govern itself properly, to produce or choose the right leaders, instead of opting for those who were set to put its destiny on the balance.

Thus, the *abwaan* must have acted under the pressing social imperative that he must speak out. He felt duty-bound to come forward and warn his fellow citizens against the fatal

precipice their country was heading for, a prophecy that came true two decades later when the entire country was ravaged by mindless civil war.

This central preoccupation of the playwright and his emphasis on the message-delivering aspect of the play is reflected in his successful employment of three significant tools which, in most part, are not universally very common in contemporary playwrighting. The first is Xasan's making full use of his poetic talent to serve the stated purpose; the second is his skilful employment of well-designed prologue and epilogue; and the third tool is the author's devising a supplementary plot to provide a more focused choral commentary on the main problems dealt with in the play. Let us consider these three artistic techniques one by one, examining how they complement each other in serving the said purpose, namely to make sure that the central message of the play is meticulously delivered, that the crucial issues raised in the principal plot are clearly highlighted.

3.1. Poetic inserts as dramatic action

It is the general tendency of Somali playwrights to construct the core of the dialogue in their plays in the form of poetic exchanges. As the late Professor Andrzejewski writes,

In Somali plays the important parts are usually in poetic form. The use of prose is mainly restricted to humorous scenes or brief snatches of conversation. Initially some plays were entirely in prose or contained just a few poetic inserts, but authors soon discovered that to succeed in their art they had to satisfy the insatiable craving for poetry among the public. This is not surprising if one considers that poetry composed in alliterative verse is a dominant feature of Somali culture in general (Andrzejewski, 1978: 88).

No play attests to the truth in these statements more than Xasan Shiikh Muumin's *Shabeelnaagood*. To get his message across in the most effective way, Xasa makes a full use of his competence as a poet – he strives to make sure that all significant ideas in the play are conveyed in verse, as illustrated below.

3.1.1. From prose to poetry: the build-up of a dramatic tension

Having a look at the printed pages of *Shabeelnaagood*, one can easily observe that the core content in each of the 16 scenes is in poetic form. Almost every one of these main, poetic parts is preceded by an initial part in prose mainly meant to set the tune for the main body of the dialogue that is exchanged in verse. Improvised and comic in nature, the prose parts are smaller in size and less substantial in content. True to life, to real conversations in Somali oral communication, the prose parts tend to be fluid, slow-paced, sometimes repetitive to the extent of sounding monotonous to people unfamiliar with Somali drama and with the life situations it attempts to imitate. Such a response or impression is even more likely in the case of someone reading just the playtext in translation.

When it is time for the conversation to move on to a point of remarkable importance, the language too shifts into poetic form and the dramatic tension intensifies. Regulated by the strict rules of the traditional alliteration (*xarafraac*) and metre (*miisaan*), the poetic parts are highly stylised, economical, well-thought out and well-focused. Every word in the extremely rich poetic language is counted for and carefully chosen to serve a definite purpose.

The following extract from the beginning of Scene Two illustrates this contrast between the fluid initial parts in prose and the carefully-built ones in poetry in the dialogue of a typical scene in the play. We shall also see how the first form leads to the second. This is the first scene of the supplementary plot led by Diiddan (Hibo Maxamed), an unmarried female teacher in her early thirties, and Diiddane (Cabdi Muxumud Amiin), Diiddan's neighbour, a man of around her age who is equally unmarried. The content is self-evident:

DIIDDAN: *Alla!*
DIIDDANE: *Alla!*
DIIDDAN: *Maxaad sheegtay, ina adeer?*
DIIDDANE: *Waa nabad e maxaad sheegtay, ina adeer?*
DIIDDAN: *Ina adeer?*
DIIDDANE: *Alxamdu Lilla!*
DIIDDAN: *Waalid kuuma ihiye ha i dhunkan, kow dheh! Alla, maxaad soo naaxdoo soo qurux badnaatee!*
DIIDDANE: *Haye.*
DIIDDAN: *Waaryaahee!*
DIIDDANE: *Hee?*
DIIDDAN: *Alla , aabbow! Waar ina adeer, suuqa ha marin, yaan lagu cawryine dee!*
DIIDDANE: *Horta mid ma ogtahay?*
DIIDDAN: *Hee?*
DIIDDANE: *Sidii la ii lahaa 'Alla muxuu cayilay!', dhejis baa laygaga gooyey weliba. Sow wax aad garatay ma aha?*
DIIDDAN: *Lagugu dhajin mayee, laakiin waa. . . .*
DIIDDANE: *Dee anigu waxaan ku cayiley, waa miyigii baan tegey. Waan isa soo qaras bixiyey, sidaan caano geel u soo dhamayay. Dee iska daa miyaanad arkayn quruxda igaga soo baxday e yaa?*
DIIDDAN: *Waan tegayaa anna doorkan doorka xiga. Fasaxaan tegayaa.*
DIIDDANE: *Fasaxa?*
DIIDDAN: *Haa, waayo meel aan ka maqnaan karoba ma aha meeshani.*
DIIDDANE: *Caafimaad ku soo qabo, dee! Nacam, fasaxa yaanay ku dhaafin. Een waxaan ku leeyahay, Diiddaney labadeenu Guyaal kala baadney oo Warkeenu aanu is gaadhin Oon kala gooni ahayne, Miyaanad weli guursan?*

DIIDDAN: *Guntanow hadalkaa Gef weeyaan badidiisu Oo arrinkii la gorfeyyona Murti loo wada guuxo oo Gaaban baa ka habboon. Ee anigu guur taladiisa Garaadkaygu ma dhaadin Dibna u soo gocan maayo Oo anigu waan ku gaboobi!*

DIIDDANE: *Oo maxaa jira, walaal?*
DIIDDAN: *Dee guurkii loo xilanaayey baa*
Galladiisii dhammaatoo
Gubyaanyuu ku dambeeyey.
Haddii uu gurmada waayona
Sidii goof laga guuroo
Biyihii ka gureen
Beddiisii ku dambayne
Adigu sow ma aad guursan?

DIIDDAN [*unexpectedly encountering Diiddane*]: What a surprise!
DIIDDANE: What a surprise!
DIIDDAN: How are you, cousin?
DIIDDANE: I'm well, and how are you, cousin?
DIIDDAN [*affectionately*]: Cousin²²
DIIDDANE [*kisses her on the cheek*]: Glory be to God!
DIIDDAN: Don't kiss me, I'm not your aunt!²³ Well, you have gained weight and become handsome, haven't you?
DIIDDANE: Well--
DIIDDAN: Listen!
DIIDDAN: Yes?
DIIDDAN: By God, cousin, don't walk in the street! You may get hurt by the glances of those who envy you!²⁴
DIIDDANE: Do you know something?
DIIDDAN: What?
DIIDDAN: I've been in the town for a whole week now, and . . .
DIIDDAN: And what?
DIIDDANE: And because people have kept on saying 'oh, how he has filled out!',²⁵ the glances of envious eyes have whittled me down already. Do you see what I mean?
DIIDDAN: You won't be hurt by the eyes of the envious, but it's. . .
DIIDDANE: The reason why I've become fat is that I went into the country.²⁶ I cleaned my stomach of all impurities by drinking camel's milk. Anyway, can you see how handsome I am now?
DIIDDAN: I shall go into the country too at the first opportunity. I shall go during my holiday.
DIIDDANE: Holiday?
DIIDDAN: Yes, I can't stay away from the country for too long.
DIIDDANE: May you find good health there! Be sure to go during your holiday. I say [*lapses into verse*],
Diiddan, the two of us
Haven't seen each for years,
And, all that time apart
We've heard no news of each other.
Did you ever get married?
DIIDDAN [*following the poetic pattern started by Diiddane*]:
My brave friend, that talk of yours,

Is for the most part mistaken.
 In any discussion
 The wisdom which is acknowledged by all
 And is marked by brevity is much better.
 As for myself, to the question of marriage,
 I have given no attention
 I shall not regret it
 And I shall grow old in this resolve!
 DIIDDANE: Why, sister?
 DIIDDAN: From marriage, which people
 used to cherish,
 All dignity is gone
 And burning bitterness comes after it.
 Unless it is rescued.
 A hollow land abandoned by man
 And drained of all water
 It will become at the end.
 I have tied the hands of marriage behind its back.
 And you, didn't you get married?
 (P. 56-59).

Obviously, the central issue which the scene is designed to highlight is the collapse of contemporary marriage. However, the dialogue goes on for one and a half pages of the book before saying one single word relating to the actual theme. Instead, the two characters have a slow-paced, over-elaborate chat about Diiddane's return from the countryside and his gaining weight. However, from a structural point of view, such a preliminary chat is important to set the tone for the discussion about marriage. It creates a life-like situation whereby this kind of discussion comes naturally between two related people who have not seen each other for a long time. It is natural that they ask about each other's news, including whether they got married, and this leads to the more serious discussion about the broader problem of marriage breakdown and family disintegration in modern Somalia.

What is significant here is that in this gradually developing dialogue line, poetry takes over at the stage where a significant point is about to be made (e.g. when Diiddane began to raise the issue of marriage by asking Diiddan whether she 'ever got married' {p. 59}), and it carries on until the playwright's message is satisfactorily brought home in the words of the characters. The core of the message is still to come; it is developed and fully articulated in Diiddane's answer to the question asked by Diiddan at the end of her last passage:

DIIDDANE: *Weli Diiddan ma guursanoo*
Geddaas aad ku tilmaantay baan
Gacmihii uga laabtay oo
Gacalkii uu lahaa iyo
Xiisihiisii la gawrac oo
Isu soo geliddiisii
Waa googga cadalays iyo
Gudhubaa gadhabaa iyo
Gidhaan suuqa ordaysiyo

*Shabeel gaadmo yaqaan oo
Galabtii isa salaama
'Gaban weeye wanaagsan'
'Gabadh weeye carfoon'
'Guddoonka aynu dhamayno!'
Caawa waa gelbiskii
Berrina waa kala guur,
Gogoshiiba la laab,
laguna kala yaac!*

DIIDDANE: Diiddan, I haven't married yet,
And for the same reasons as you spoke of,
I too have kept my hands away from it.
The love which marriage had,
And its significance, have now been slaughtered.
Entering upon it together
Is nowadays like an exchange of riddles
And silly tittle-tattle.
A girl from the neighbourhood running along the street
And a leopard, expert in stalking
Greet each other in the evening.
'He is a nice boy'
'And she is a fragrant girl'.
'Let us decide now!'
The wedding is in the evening
And on the next day there is the split.
Instantly the bed is folded up
And they part in haste! (P. 60-61)

Note how this passage links up the subordinate plot to the main one by directly commenting on the latter's central theme: Shabeel's victimisation ("a leopard, expert in stalking") of Shallaayo ("a girl from the neighbourhood") by means of a bogus marriage which she accepted "in haste".

The dramatic tension gets more intensified with the dialogue growing even more seriously toward the end of page 60. Here, the playwright makes his instructive message even more direct by asserting this poetic pronouncement, in the words of Diiddan:

DIIDDAN: *Guuldarro weeye sidaasiye
Haddii guurka la daayo
Lays gargaarsana waayo
Geyigaa goblamaaya.*

DIIDDAN: It's a disaster!
And if people give up marriage
And do not help each other
The country will be bereft of children
(pp. 60-61).

3.1.2. Why poetry and where?

We have already considered the important role of poetry in constructing Somali transitional plays and there is no need for repetition. To put it in a nutshell, however, the purpose of a playwright's employment of poetry is three-fold: to make sure the important ideas are thoughtfully formulated; to ensure the core content of the play is 'protected against distortion by the rigid forms of the verse' (Andrzejewski, 1974: 4); and to take advantage of the powerful influence of verse among the Somali audience to get the message across. If this multi-sided purpose indicates how useful is verse for the message-oriented, committed playwright, the preceding pages have shown us how this tool works in the play-building process. We have seen when, why and how the *abwaan* turns to poetic insertions.

Here, we must note that, in many instances, the intensity and the philosophical depth of such poetic inserts in the play are out of proportion with the capacity of the visual components of the play; namely the incidents that make up the plot. More so in the case of those pieces sung by Diiddan and Diiddane, as well as the verses recited in the 'prologue' and the 'epilogue', as we shall see shortly. Most poetic inserts occur within the dialogue where they constitute the larger and more profound part. The poetic parts of the dialogue are either sung in solo or duets, or exchanged by the characters in their life-like conversations.

On certain occasions, poetic insertions also come in the form of introspective commentary, often in the aftermath of a dramatic event (see, for example, the passages by Shabeel at the end of Scene 6, p. 115).

The playwright's inclusion of the two supplementary pieces, namely the prologue and the epilogue is so significant that it deserves to be treated in a separate section, the one we shall now turn to. As poetry still forms the major constituent in each of the two next sections, the discussion of some of the points relating to the playwright's use of verse maybe carried forward to these coming sections, to avoid or minimise possible overlapping.

3.2. The Message in focus: prologue and epilogue as theatrical magnifiers

In his issue-oriented effort to engage supplementary tools, reinforcing the central plot, Xasan introduces *Shabeelnaagood* with a well-designed prologue and winds it up with a moving epilogue. Complementing each other, as they do, the two constituents are both pregnant with the potential to capture the hearts and minds of the audience. While the epilogue performs the function of double-ensuring the audience's grasp of the play's message, the prologue opens up their hearts and minds making them tuned right from the outset.

3.2.1. The Prologue

To give the audience an initial clue of his main concern in the play, the playwright opens the performance of *Shabeelnaagood* with a ceremonial scene where all members of the cast assemble, introducing their mission through an exceptionally moving blend of orchestral music, powerful singing, instructive recitation of interlude verses, ceremonial costume and assertive theatrical movements. All these various artistic elements combined in a beautiful harmony were certain to get the Somali audience into a highly receptive mood, as they actually confirmed through their explosive applause.²⁷

Another very significant confirmation of the powerfulness and successfulness of this artistic device in the play is the fact that the refrain of the song, *Walaalaha*, 'O, brothers and sisters',

around which the prologue centres, had been chosen as a signature tune, a permanent prelude, for the Somali National Theatre ever after. It became the logo with which people identified²⁸ for decades the plays performed by the highly popular *Waaberi*, the once leading national artistic troupe, the biggest theatre company by far, from the beginning of the 1970s to the degeneration of Somalia by the beginning of the 1990s.

In this song, the author defines his role as an artist (in the collective tongue of the cast) – the actors spell out the purpose of their mission, soliciting the sympathy of their audience by addressing them directly and emotionally.

Upon lifting the curtains, to reveal the assembled members of the cast, with their bright costumes, the orchestra takes charge with a penetrating prelude towards the end of which Diiddan steps forward coming closer to the audience. As the sound of music gives way to a momentary majestic silence, generating a feeling of suspense, Diiddan addresses the audience, in a conversational manner, reciting a passage in which the cast unveil their professional identity or function:

DIIDDAN: *Habeen iyo dharaar
hadalladaan dhisnaa,
Afkeenna hooyoo horuu maraan ku hoos caawinnaa,
Hoggaaminaa had iyo jeer hagnaa oo waan hagaajinaa,
Ma hagranees waan u hawlgalaa murtidaan hurinaa,
Kala hufnaa haqab tirnaa u handannaa,
Dadweynahaan hanuuninnaa haasaawinaa danta u hagnaa.*

DIIDDAN: Night and day we fashion our
words,
In depth we help our advancing mother-tongue,
We lead it, we always guide it, we set it right,
We never shrink, we toil for it, we kindle the old wisdom,
We winnow it, we satisfy its needs, we strive for it,
We guide the public rightly, we entertain them and we lead them by
the hand to profitable things. (P. 44-45)

At this point, the cast takes over, with musical reinforcement by the orchestra – they sing the chorus, the emotional refrain stanza that was set to be honoured later, to be crowned as the signature tune of Somali theatre:

HOOBALLADA: *Walaalaha hanuunsanow,
waan idinla haynaaIs hurina maynee,
Halkan waxaad u timaaddeen
Aan hagar lahayn baad caawa naga helaysaan!*

CAST: Oh rightly guided brothers [and
sisters], we give you our support.
You and we cannot do without each other, and what you have come
here to find
You will get from us tonight without stint. (Ibid.)

In the standardised version used as the artists' standing banner, Diiddan's last line above, 'we guide the public . . . profitable things', is added. By the end of the refrain each time, Diiddan comes forward again to recite the next solo passage, as follows:

DIIDDAN: *Buraanbur iyo hees*

Hheelliyo ciyaar

Gabayo haybadliyo, hallaali baanu hindisnaa

Lama huraan hilinka toosan baan, barbaarta u horgallaa.

Ma hagranees waan iwm.

DIIDDAN: *Buraanbur and hees, heello*

poems and dance songs

We compose, and *gabays* illustrious and significant.

We go in the forefront of youth along the straight path which is indispensable.

We never shrink etc.

HOOBALLADA: *Walaalaha anuunsanow, etc.*

CAST: Oh rightly guided brothers, etc.

DIIDDAN: *Taariikhda hiddeheennaan*

habaaska ka tirnaa

Hannaankii aan ku soo dhaqmeyney baa u hiillinaa

Hurdadaan guyaal ka haayirnaa, naftayadaan hurnaa.

Ma hagranees iwm.

DIIDDAN: We wipe the dust from the

history of our heritage,

We give help to the upright way in which we have been reared.

For years we have had no sleep because of it, we wholly dedicate ourselves to it.

We never shrink etc.

HOOBALLADA: *Walaalaha hanuunsanow, etc.*

CAST: Oh rightly guided brothers, etc (pp. 44-47)

Going through this text, note how frequent the word 'guide' occurs in the song, in addition to other words / phrases used to the same effect, such as 'lead' and 'go in the forefront'. This indicates how message-focused is the author and how consciously he acts as 'guidance provider'. Furthermore, the paramountcy of this kind of words and expressions extends throughout the play right to the closing song, the epilogue, where the playwright even more boldly articulates his (and his fellow artists') "vanguard" position and their total committedness to "expose" the wrongs of society, which Diiddan enlists, to 'sever the necks of spiteful malefactors' (such as Shabeel), to 'winnow right from wrong' (p. 215). Before we leave the prologue, however, it is important to point out that the use of this kind of prologue is now a well-established feature in any performance of a Somali play and the

inspiration for devising this feature in Somali transitional drama is easily traceable to the use of the *arar* (poetic introduction) in Somali poetry.

3.2.2. *The epilogue*

As is obvious from the name, the epilogue comes as a ‘farewell’ gesture, marking the end of the performance. This, however, is not the only function of the scene. Shortly, we shall see the far more essential function performed by this component of the play.

As in the opening scene, the entire cast assembles once again on stage, following the scene that concludes the plot enactment. The setting is ceremonial, more or less the same as that of the prologue. The performing procedures too follow a similar pattern, except that, due to the fortified capacity of the epilogue, as well as the heightened intensity of the theatrical atmosphere, one more soloist (Diiddane) is added to Diiddan (who reappears as the leading soloist) and the chorus gets more assertive. This time the piece opens with the chorus, with the whole cast storming with a self-assertive pronouncement in defence of the Somali tradition; this is followed by a direct didactic agitation in which the artists declare their determination to launch an attack against the prevailing evils in society:²⁹

CAST: We shall not hold back, we shall toil for our heritage.
Awake, you who are asleep! Awake, you who are asleep!
Awake, you who are asleep!
We are winnowing right from wrong!

At the end of each presentation of this choral refrain, a soloist (Diiddan or Diiddane) steps forward to recite a stanza focusing on one particular issue raised in the main body of the play. Alternately presented by a male and female soloists, two professional singers with powerful voices (Hibo Maxamed and Cabdi Muxumud Amiin, who play Diiddan and Diiddane respectively), these stanzas are astonishingly well-organised. Complementing each other in a progressive succession, the five passages are designed to sum up the overall message of the play, commenting on almost all the main issues in a well compiled list. Diiddane is first to come forward with his first, base-setting stanza:

DIIDDANE: The art of speech, the words
which sum up wisdom,
The verses of *hees*³⁰, *buraanbur*³¹, *gabay*³², *heello*³³, and *jiifto*³⁴,
The ancestral lore and history which children learn with speech,
The heroes³⁵ who gave guidance and dispensed their well-ordered
ords,
We keep all inheritance - that straight path.
We shall not hold back, we shall toil for our heritage.

CAST: We shall not hold back, we shall toil
for our heritage.
Awake, you who are asleep! Awake, you who are asleep!
Awake, you who are asleep!
We are winnowing right from wrong!

Clearly, the initial stanza by Diiddane is designated to register the dramatists' commitment to stand for traditional values, acknowledging that in whatever they - the current artists - do, they rest on the established tradition and on the body of accumulated knowledge that has resulted from the efforts made by past generations of gifted people, by 'the heroes who gave guidance'.

This further underlining in the play's conclusion of the importance of cultural heritage demonstrates the strong preservative tendency of the playwright. Interestingly, however, unlike other authors, who are unable to see the weaknesses and imperfections of the past in their concentration on the romanticised 'glory' and 'purity' of the 'good old days', Xasan presents the traditional culture as a double-edged sword. Whether he has done this consciously or sub-consciously one can only speculate.

In this important song, he strikes a delicate balance between the strengths and weaknesses of Somali tradition. While on the one hand he advocates the preservation of the most valuable assets of Somali heritage, he, on the other hand, warns against the dangerous loopholes of our inheritance, against the dark spots found in every tradition, the aspects of the old mind-set that pose serious hurdles to any future progress. Xasan presents this darker side of Somali inheritance in the third stanza, where he resentfully attacks these progress hindering aspects of the old tradition. The author identifies and criticizes such inherited evils as clanism in the words of Diiddane as follows:

DIIDDANE: Vainglory, tribalism, and pride in
ancestry do not ensure achievement,
The toil that is one's lot, the trouble that leaves behind,
Unless one goes out to face them one will perish through them in time.
The goal to which we stretch our hands and our true behaviour
Are two things far apart which have no common bond.

CAST: We shall not hold back, etc.

Here, it is important to note that Xasan's attack against 'tribalism and pride in ancestry' clearly indicates the modern influence reflected in the playwright's world view. In this connection, the epilogue provides us with further evidence of the obvious presence in *Shabeelnaagood* of opposing influences of tradition and modernity.

It is interesting that while the playwright champions a set of ideas or aspects representing both traditional and modern way of thinking, he on the other hand strongly criticises another set of aspects belonging to both sides of the time spectrum. If the inherited social ills were the target for Diiddane's strong criticism in the last stanza, the recently-acquired evil behaviour resulting from modernisation were 'exposed' in Diiddan's even more ferocious attack in the preceding stanza. Summarising the main social ills dramatized in the principal plot, Diiddan says:

DIIDDAN: Kicking in hidden onslaughts,
muted voices,
Wanton attacks, lies, gossip behind the houses,
Clandestine marriages, by which girls are led astray,

Hot embers, camouflaged with bark fibres,
Obstacles set up – all these it's our duty to expose.

CAST: We shall not hold back, etc.

In the last two stanzas, the performers place further emphasis on introducing themselves as artists and their “vanguard”³⁶ role as tireless combatants against all the said evils, be they old or new:

DIIDDAN: We who are the champions of
poetry, the singers,
When people are debating what they ought to do,
On the very day when things are packed for the trek and we saddle our
horses
– God does not lead us to perdition, He brings us to victory –
We find the right remedies and sever the necks of spiteful malefactors.

CAST: We shall not hold back, etc.

DIIDDANE: For what was before us and
what will come after we are an ever ready vanguard,
The fire which we have kindled is a gift to all Somalis.
We are like a kindly mich beast which suckles any calf which comes
under her.
We shall not hold back, we shall toil for our heritage.
Awake, you who are asleep! Awake, you who are asleep!
Awake, you who are asleep!
We are winnowing right from wrong!

CAST: We shall not hold back, etc. (p. 213, 215).

In addition to the underlining, in a summarised form, of the main issues in the play, the epilogue performs another function. Highly artistic in form and moving in content, this ceremonial scene reinforces the final impact of the play on its audience. As they go home, and perhaps beyond, the echo of the moving words and the image of the breath-taking scene would follow them and stay with them, maybe for years to come.

Indeed, after nearly thirty years, I myself still retain the images of this closing scene of *Shabeelnaagood*. I can ‘see’ myself as a school boy standing up beside my older cousin, among a huge crowd of an extremely excited audience in a movie theatre in the coastal town of Kismaayo where the play was performed for several crowded nights, as part of a long provincial tour. As the assembled cast of much loved national stars vigorously repeated, with the thunderous beats of the drum, the last line in the refrain:

Hurdow toos
Xaqiyo baadilkaan kala hufaynaaye!

Awake, you who are asleep!
We are winnowing right from wrong!

I remember how we, the audience, were totally taken away by emotions, most of us hysterically and continuously clapping, others were overwhelmed by tears, while numerous youths, mostly young women, rushed up the stage, awarding gifts to the singers, or enthusiastically embracing the actors one after the other in a virtually involuntary expression of overwhelming appreciation.

This is a typical example of how emotionally involved the Somali audience is in theatrical experience. This audience comes from all walks of life, from the head of state to the man in the street. In his *Heelloy*, John Johnson (1996) makes a mention of how ‘extremely popular’ a Somali play was called *Indha-sarcaad*, ‘The Haze’, composed by Cali Sugulle in 1962. The Prime Minister of the time, Cabdirashiid Cali Shar-maarka, ‘who attended the play more than once, wept with emotion during the performance.’ (P. 169n).

3.2.3. A legitimate self-defence

In the diction of the two songs, the prologue and the epilogue, put together, what may sound an overstatement of the role of the theatre and theatre practitioners was necessary from the point of view that in the 1960s, when *Shabeelnaagood* was produced, modern stage drama was a relatively new art form in Somalia; it was still struggling to establish itself, to take its secured seat among respected forms of cultural expression in Somali society. Although it was already popular by the time (1968), especially with the youth and the open-minded, the theatre was still faced with continued opposition by the more conservative sections of Somali society, particularly, by the influential strata of elders and men of religion, both of whom had continued their fight against the modern-oriented performers, depicting them as new evils who were there to spoil the youth by involving them in ‘something against Somali and Islamic culture’ (Abdilaahi, 1996: xi).³⁷

The new art was even opposed by some leading poets belonging to the older generation, as expressed in the following contemptuous line in which the late acclaimed poet, Cabdillaahi Suldaan Timacadde, attacks the new artists: *Maansada qaraamigan yaryare “qaaq” leh baa dilay e* (Poetry is slaughtered by these little *qaraami*³⁸ singers barking around).

Taking this situation into account, it is quite understandable that Xasan Shiikh muumin and his fellow performers had to clear the name of the new art and artists; i.e. to make it crystal clear to everyone that they were not there to spoil the new generation but to ‘go in the forefront of youth along the straight path’ (*Shabeelnaagood*, p. 45). They wanted to say loudly: ‘we are not just “barking around”, on the contrary, ‘we wholly dedicate ourselves to’ the good cause of educating our people and entertaining them: ‘We guide the public rightly, we entertain them and we lead them by the hand to profitable things’, ‘For years we have had no sleep because of it’ (p. 45). The magnitude of the unspeakable devotion and the heart-felt pain implied in the untranslatable Somali expression ‘*naftayadaan hurnaa* [p. 44]’ (roughly, we consecrate our soul [to educating and entertaining our people), is utterly moving.

Seen from another angle, the degree of the performers’ self-assertiveness in wordings such as ‘we the champions of poetry . . .’, ‘we are an ever ready vanguard [p. 215]’ and so forth, reminds us of the customary poetic boasting commonly practised by classical poets. I have detailed this traditional poetic practice elsewhere.³⁹ Clearly, the influence of such a tradition is not absent here, owing to the closeness of Somali transitional dramatists to the traditional culture.

However, we must take note of two significant differences in this connection. First, in place of the classical poet's personal boasting, which focused on the individual poet's self-promotion, what we find here is a self-assertive group focusing on the promotion of a noble profession, from their point of view. The plural pronoun 'we' has replaced the classic poet's self-centred singular pronoun 'I', and it is apparent from the overall context that in their saying 'we' the contemporary dramatists do not speak just for themselves but for the community as a whole. Their speaking in the collective tongue is an indicative of their orientation to strive for the communal interests, for what the author has termed "*danta* [p. 44]", the general well-being of the nation, of the humanity by extension.

This kind of collective poetic boasting, which emanates from such a modern concept, is indeed a significant new artistic aspect, one which shows the union of traditional and modern elements in Somali post-independence drama, another indication for the transitional footing of this art form.

Seen from yet another perspective, the departure from the individually-based poetic boasting here, can be seen as something prescribed by the very nature of the theatre as a communally practised art form, unlike, say, the poetry which is often created and transmitted on an individual basis. The theatre is an art form which depends for its existence on the joint efforts of so many people, from the scriptwriter and producer to the various stage technicians through all those troops of actors, musicians, singers, dancers and so forth. Even the audience is an essential part in the final product of a work of stage drama. Hence, it is only normal that such a communal environment inspires a sense of collective being in the minds of play-makers.

3.3. Subordinate plot for choral commentary

This is one more feature emphasizing the centrality of the message in *Shabeelnaagood*. Alongside the principal plot, centring around Shabeel the libertine and his victim, Shallaayo, the author has constructed a well-thought-of sub-plot driven by two important characters, Diiddan and Diiddane, to be instrumental in further highlighting the crucial problems of Somali transitional society dealt with in the play. The sub-plot fulfils the stated purpose on two levels: commenting on or further underling the central issues raised through the main plot and bringing out some additional, related issues for which the structure of the principal plot could not provide enough room to highlight.

On the first level the subordinate plot provides more focused commentaries on two crucial problems dramatised in the central plot. The first is the victimisation of young women by heartless playboys, and the second is the family disintegration following the collapse of modern marriage in the fast burgeoning Somali towns 'where it [family life] is deprived of the traditional support [and protection] it has in the rural interior' (Andrzejewski, 1985: 364).

To make this a bit clearer, we must observe that the playwright has created Shabeel, the chief character, to represent the evils practised by sections of the Somali urban society or what Johnson (1996) calls 'the new elite' (P. 2). Acting out his darkest fantasies, Shabeel deliberately ruins the live of a rising school girl, Shallaayo, who represents the new generation of young women in Somali towns.

SHABEEL: Until I bring the number [of ruined women] up to ninety,

And then get it level with a hundred, and chastise them in this way,
I shall not give up – this is my resolve! (P. 117)

Thus, the playwright uses this chief character as a symbol of cruelty in modern society. Shabeel is the product of a drastically changing society which, in the playwright's view, has fallen away from its traditional values and way of life, without establishing new and better alternatives. Shabeel chooses to disregard and undo all the established virtues of his society. He prefers to be a dishonest lover (condemned by the Somali tradition and current accepted social norms) to being a legitimate husband and father. He breaches religious morality (his false oath at the Islamic court as well as his indulgence in sex outside marriage). And in so doing he ridicules the entire establishment including the state and its judicial system.

Judging such an initial portrayal of Shabeel makes us conceive of him as a villain. However, to be closer to the complex texture of human nature, Shabeel must be seen from a number of different perspectives: he can be considered as a pathetic victim of fate, as a helpless human being drawn into a fragmented social existence with a legion of barriers preventing him from finding happiness or even a meaning to his life.

Although this dimension of Shabeel's character is not fully developed in the actual events of the play, reading the sub-text leads to the conclusion that his cruelty is a natural response to or at least an inevitable part of a wicked world, one which has been cruel to him as well. He regards his deeds as justifiable because others are doing the same and even more; he is part and parcel of a society in which wrong-doing has become the order of the day. He argues that women, his target victims, are not less dishonest, cruel or deceitful, 'they themselves are not blameless and they keep deceiving us' (p. 115).

There is a common mistake made by many playwrights in Somalia and elsewhere in the world. The conflict in Somali plays is often between a clear right and clear wrong. Characters are usually depicted as either ugly villains or flawless angels. Samadiid (He-who-rejects-good), for instance, the chief character in Cabdi Miigane's play, *Qaran iyo Qabiil*, 'State and Clan' (Cabdi, 1985), a graduate and director of a state enterprise, is a gross embodiment of all evils: he is corrupt in his management, dishonest and cruel in his relationship with his female partner who gave him all her love, and fat-headed in his way of thinking (narrow-minded tribalist). Conversely, his former classmate and friend, Siciid, is depicted as 'Mr right', flawless in every aspect: his behaviour, his work performance, his family relations and so forth.

This kind of single-dimensional characterisation is not true to life, if we are to treat drama as a realistic representation of life. Grey areas always exist in the nature of every human being. Hence, Shakespeare's genius in attaching a particular deadly flaw to each of the otherwise great heroes in his well known tragedies (e.g., Othello's jealousy and Macbeth's greed).

Xasan Shiikh Muumin seems to be far-sightedly aware of this need to represent the grey areas, the complexity of human character. In fairness to Shabeel, the playwright has done two important things. First, he makes others share the blame with him. He has given women and the society at large their fair share of the blame. Shabeel is just one sail in windmill, a part of a wicked world, a 'world [that] has reached a helpless state' (p. 119), a society that has turned men into beasts ("leopards") and women into material-minded liars and dishonest partners

(pp. 93, 115) who have misconceived modernity ('we have gained our freedom') and 'transgressed the bounds', that which 'is lawful' (p. 115).

Second, in further fairness to Shabeel, the author provides us with a glimpse of his better side. Shabeel struggles with conflicting desires inside him, thus truthfully representing (on another level) the contradictory nature of the broader social context. In one moment he boasts his deliberate cruelty against women; in the next, however, his conscience awakens and he expresses how regretful and how religiously concerned he grows.

The playwright presents such a delicate balance, as well as contradicting existence (both on individual and societal levels) in the following passage recited by Shabeel (aside), immediately after he locked out wrecked Shallaayo:

Of all the women I deceived with bogus
benedictions,
With spurious nuptials and forced attentions, This one who is now walking away
is the eightieth.
Yet the path to the Other World and the Questioning beyond the grave
Await me – oh men, what shall I do?
Shall I continue or shall I stop?
Still, they themselves are not blameless and they keep deceiving us:
'I was away on a visit to a friend, she lives in Marka',⁴⁰
Or 'I went to this or that market', 'I am going to the cinema' –
It is with such pretexts and lies that they appease us.
They keep collecting kerosene in mugs. I don't know where they are taking it!
They themselves are not blameless, and if you question them a little,
'We don't live in times like those – have me as I am,
And if that doesn't work, your nine children
Will be left to your care tomorrow morning, and I shall move into town'
Is their answer (P. 115-117).

Going through this passage, one can discern that the author has aimed to serve two purposes: to articulate his critique of the negative behaviour of contemporary wives and, hence, their share of the responsibility for family disintegration, and to depict the inner conflict within Shabeel's character – the better side of his nature tells him to 'stop' while the darker one persuades him to 'continue'. The latter prevails eventually – he decides to 'continue', but not without telling his reasons for cheating and eventually destroying women, one after the other.

Until I bring the number [of women victims] up to ninety,
And then get it level with a hundred, and chastise them in this way,
I shall not give up--this is my resolve! (P. 117).

Now, it is the need to further emphasise such prevailing social ills, in a more focused manner, that prompted the playwright to devise the supplementary plot driven by Diiddan and Diiddane. Alerted by his sense of responsibility as public educator, the *abwaan* felt it necessary to reinforce the attack against the decline of the society's moral values and the consequent disintegration of the family and degeneration of the young people .

These two related vices are the subject of several important scenes where Diiddan and Diiddane debate these issues in major poetic exchanges. One of such exchanges constitutes the dialogue of a moving melodramatic scene (p. 42ff) centring around another supplementary story-line, the events of which take place off-stage. It is the story of a little boy abandoned by his divorced parents, as the result of the breakdown of their marriage. Diiddan and Diiddane find the street child, crying of hunger and grief:

DIIDDAN: What happened to you?

BOY: I'm hungry!

DIIDDAN: Don't you have a mother?

BOY: No!

DIIDDAN: Or father?

BOY: No!

DIIDDAN: Did they die?

BOY: NO!

DIIDDAN: I take refuge from Satan with God. . . . What is this about – 'I've no father and I've no mother'? Did they die?

BOY: No, they didn't die.

DIIDDANE: Listen –

BOY: Yes?

DIIDDANE [*to DIIDDAN*]: He's just a little child – let me ask him.

DIIDDAN: Ask him, then.

DIIDDANE: Well, nephew⁴¹--

BOY: Yes?

DIIDDANE: Don't play about with us! Now, I'm telling you – you said to us 'I've no father and I have no mother, and they didn't die.' What do you mean when you say that? What happened to you?

Here comes the child's crucial answer with which the subordinate melodrama reaches its tragic climax. It is where the playwright wants to artistically yet explicitly deliver his stressed message against family disintegration by depicting its disastrous impact on young children:

BOY: My mother is married to another man,
and my father has another wife. When I go to my mother, her husband
chases me away, and when I go to my father his wife chases me away!

The effect of such a heart-breaking depiction of the child's plight on us as audience is further accelerated by Diiddan's overwhelmingly emotional response:

DIIDDAN [*to Diiddane With her hand on her heart*]: Oh God! Touch my heart! Touch my heart! Oh God! Touch my heart! Oh Diiddane! Oh God!

DIIDDANE [*putting his arm around her*]: Oh God!

DIIDDAN: Oh, Diiddane, ever since I learned to keep away from fire,
Of all that ever hurt me, this today was worst!

Look at my eyes, which are raining tears,
Spreading over my cheek like a stream in spate.

May you not be undone, oh Diiddane! Don't you grieve at this with me?

Look closely at this boy and touch my heart! Oh God! How terrible!

Furthermore, it is in the following poetic passage by Diiddane, in replying to Diiddan, that the author masterfully focuses on his major concerns in the play as a package. Through Diiddane, Xasan skilfully makes the tragedy of the little boy perceived within the context of a broader, alarmingly appalling state of affairs in the country. The author uses this exchange to directly highlight, in a summarised fashion, the crucial social problems tackled in the play:

DIIDDANE: Yes, Diiddan, but be still now. I shall say this to you –
Those tears raining from your eyes, oh, Diiddan,
And your trembling flesh, are they not just in woman's nature?
Don't you know this country? Do you live sheltered behind a screen?
Here is this poor boy, worn out and exhausted,
Abandoned by his parents; if his plight gives you pain,
Think, he is a man and can find his postures, he will snatch things from the streets with the other paupers,
If death leaves him be, there is no need to fear for him.
But when I consider, oh, Diiddan, something else even more evil,
My spirit wearies, my heart is torn and lips tremble.
How many a fragrant girl, golden and secure,
Loved by her people, some men have furtively approached
And set an evil trap for her, destroying her honour
And when she found her taste growing bitter, and saw her belly,
She hanged herself and left this world!
How many a fine baby that you would take for a full moon
Has been fettered with rope and cast into the open,
and beasts of prey have torn it asunder.
How many a crying boy, after they had wrapped him in wool,
When all were asleep, they put into a basket
And propped it against the wall – then as dawn came
He was found by people who took him to the Christian priests.⁴²
And when he grew up he did not know his people
And denies he is Somali!

Diiddane concludes his critique with two didactic lines in which the author precisely 'sums up' his prescriptive message, the bottom line of the entire play:

DIIDDANE: . . . Let me not make you
Weary – sum it all up!
Those who bear the guilt for the evil we described
Should now desist – that is what we must struggle for!
DIIDDAN: That's right! We must all struggle for it, mustn't we?
DIIDDANE: We must.

This kind of focused commentary on the crucial social problems dealt with in the main plot is provided in almost all the different scenes in the subordinate plot throughout the play. In addition to the social evils, the playwright fiercely criticises a legion of prevailing political ills such as corruption. In his expression of such criticism Xasan he uses, as do most Somali poets, such veiled language as *dab dhaxamooday*, ‘the fire ... [that] feels cold’ (p. 63), *dawo bukootay*, ‘the medicine ... [that] feels ill’ (p. 65) and so forth.

Despite the fact that *Shabeelnaagood* can best be described as a social satire, its political undertone is unmistakable. As Xasan Shiikh Muumin himself points out, ‘*siyaasaddu way ku dhex dhuumaneysey*, [the political critique is contained underneath]’ (Xasan, 1997). In the main plot, one of the locations where such political critique is ‘contained underneath’ is at the end of scene 9 (p. 136-9) where the Judge expresses his frustration and discontentment with the injustice and inefficiencies of the current judicial system and, by extension, the current political regime at the time. This is apparent from the sub-text of the judge’s comments, such as *muraayad cayn xun baa naga saaran annaga* ‘We have had the wrong spectacles put over our eyes!’ (p. 136, 137).

Here, ‘the wrong spectacles’ that deludes the judge into releasing Shabeel, the culprit, symbolises the government of the time who must be blamed either for binding the necessary autonomy of the judiciary or for the failure to put in place modern legislation capable of meeting the new challenges in contemporary Somali society. In either case, the playwright’s underlying message is obvious: a political and judicial reform is needed if the prevailing social ills in the new Somali society are to be eradicated.

4. Conclusion

In the preceding pages of this article I have discussed the paramount role of the literary creator in Somali Society past and present. I have presented arguments with ample evidence showing the way in which the *abwaan* always acts as guidance provider. In common with many others elsewhere in Africa, Contemporary Somali literary creators tend to take upon themselves the arduous task of educating the public with the use of their literary talents. The high esteem in which they are held by their society may be seen as a factor in their strong sense of moral responsibility and their commitment to the common good. To demonstrate such a commitment the Somali literary figure relentlessly seeks to deliver a message in his creative work, be it poetry, drama or prose fiction.

In the main body of the article I have focused on the centrality of the message in late Xasan Shiikh Muumin’s highly popular play, *Shabeelnaagood*, as a representative work substantiating our opening contentions summarized above. I hope to have highlighted Xasan’s issue-orientedness, i.e. his commitment to combat the social and political maladies of his time, and the ways in which he has skilfully utilized a variety of artistic techniques – both traditional and modern – to bring his message home.

We have mentioned that in recent decades (prior to the Somali civil war) drama has become the lifeblood of Somalia’s cultural life and the mirror of its social realities and *Shabeelnaagood* was ‘a fine example of the genre’ (Andrzejewski, 1974: vi). It was also a fine example of the popularity and the powerful influence of drama in modern Somali society. This could be judged from a number of considerations, including the popularity of the play and its impact

on the audience. On both counts the late Professor Andrzejewski, who attended a performance of the play in Mogadishu in 1968, provides the following testimony:

It drew such crowds in Mogadishu that police reinforcements had to be brought in to deal with the traffic jams and the hundreds of people who were besieging the box office. I met many people who knew whole passages from the play by heart, especially the exchanges between Diiddane and Diiddan (on pp. 62-5) and between Shabeel and the five schoolgirls (on pp. 186-93). The pro-feminist tenor of the plot made it popular with women and with the educated élite while the more traditionally minded men were impressed by its wit and wisdom (Andrzejewski, 1974: vi).

Another indicator in which the influence of Somali drama is manifest is that since the performance of this play in 1968, the neologism *shabeelnaagood* has become an established expression in everyday speech as an informal description of the cunning townsmen who, like Shabeel, are particularly skilled in acting as love cheats. This effect of the play, *Shabeelnaagood*, is reminiscent of that of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) after the production of which the phrase 'angry young man' became popular in England to describe writers who, like Osborne himself, were not happy at the time about the state of affairs in Britain (Rees, 1973:189).

The main concerns expressed by Xasan Shiikh Muumin in *Shabeelnaagood* over four decades ago have lost nothing of their relevancy in present-day Somali society, as remarked by Maryan and Kapteijns (2002). 'If anything, they still await solutions' (Ibid: 129). If anything, they have been coupled with a new set of even more complex and more devastating social and political ills putting in jeopardy the collective being of the Somalis and the very existence of the nation as a coherent entity.

At this critical moment in Somali history, when the country is held hostage by a handful of foreign-driven opportunists of war mongers and very existence of whole nation is in the balance, the potential of Somali literature and the role of the creative members of the society as guidance providers offer a unique opportunity. Given the necessary means, Somali poets, artists and creative writers have the potential to provide a torchlight helping their people to get out of the perennial mess and piece their shattered lives together again.

Notes

¹ *Abwaan* is a complex neologism mainly used as an honorific title given to certain criteria of multi-talented literary creators. For details see below, section 2.2.

² This is a revised version of an article that appeared in *The Horn of Africa*.

³ *Dadweynahaan*

Hanuuninnaa

Haasaawinnaa

Danta u hagnaa.

⁴ In spelling Somali words and proper names, I have adopted throughout this study the official Somali orthography in use since 1972. In referring to Somali authors, libraries with substantial holdings in the Somali field have adopted a system for Somali entries recommended by late Professor Andrzejewski (1980) based on the official Somali script and customary naming order. In Somali tradition, surnames are not normally used. Persons are identified by their given name followed by the names of their father and grandfather. In accordance with this, names of Somali authors in the references contained in this article are not inverted and they are given in the official Somali orthography, unless a different spelling is used on the title page of an author's published work.

⁵ In referring to both the classical poets and the current poet/playwrights (*abwaans*) I use the male pronoun throughout as all esteemed and hence influential poets of the past were male. So are the contemporary *abwaans*, as the name (masculine) itself indicates. Somali women are by no means less talented in composing poetry, but the nature of Somali society, traditionally governed by male-dominated or patriarch world outlook denied them the opportunity to take precedence, specially in the field of the public forum poetry.

⁶ He means the poet/playright.

⁷ *Arrafo* and *Soonqaad* are the Somali names of the two months of Dhul Hijjah and Ramadan in a Muslim calendar respectively; they are of time for intensified religious preaching.

⁸ *Obo* is black hole.

⁹ Some contemporary poets too, who may have been influenced by the Sayid, have used the vocative *maandhow*. One good example is Axmed Diiriye "Qaasim" in his famous poem, *Macaan iyo Qadhaadh* 'Sweet and bitter', *Masalooyin talantaalliyaan maandhow leeyahaye*, 'My son, I have alternating characteristics'. For more details see Orwin, 2000.

¹⁰ Translated in Said, 1982, p. 70

¹¹ In a public speech presented on 11/1/2004, Friendly House, London.

¹² In more recent years, the use of the title has also been extended to refer to any literati. Moreover, an increasing number of ordinary people have tended to use the term, 'abwaan', indiscriminately to refer to anyone who has produced some poetry or worked out a play. If continued, such a tendency is likely to lead to the delusion of the value of the honorific title, as happened to the titles of 'doctor', 'professor' etc as the result of similar misuse by many Somalis.

¹³ The translation is mine.

¹⁴ The version of *Shabeelnaagood* used as a source in this study is the published *Leopard Among the Women - Shabeelnaagood*, by Hassan Sheikh Mumin, translated by Andrzejewski London: Oxford University Press, 1974.

¹⁵ Maxamed, 1994.

¹⁶ The word 'guidance' frequently occurs throughout *Shabeelnaagood*, an indication of how conscious the author was to serve as a guidance provider.

¹⁷ Somali poets frequently use the image of a beloved she-camel to symbolise the country, the sovereignty, the dignified existence of the motherland. The reason for choosing a she-camel to embody the most valued ideals lies in the pastoral background of many poets. To the pastoralist, the she-camel is the most valued of all property.

¹⁸ Here, the poet refers to the ten years (1950-60) of struggle for Somali independence.

¹⁹ I will explain shortly how this happens in Somali cultural context.

²⁰ The depiction of a beautiful girl to symbolise the nation is a very familiar feature in Somali literature. Clear examples are the two heroines, Inan-Sabool (meaning 'Daughter-of-the-impooverished) and Xorriyo (Independence), the female protagonists of two popular plays named after them respectively. In the first play, *Inan-Sabool*, by the late poet/playwright Maxamed Ismaaciil "Balaaya-Cas", 1959, the heroine suffers a lot at the hands of male characters symbolising clannism, ignorance, greed and so forth. Finally, a righteous male character, Cilmi, meaning knowledge or education, comes to the rescue of Inan-Sabool and eventually marries her (Xudeydi, 1997). The message is clear: it is only through education that the fragile nation-state can be salvaged from clannism and ignorance and be built in the right way. In *Xorriyo*, by Maxamuud Cabdullaahi

“Sangub”, 1980, the title heroine is kidnapped by a gang of four brothers and their mother and forced to marry the four men simultaneously. Here again Xorriyo is Somalia or Somali independence being hijacked by evil leaders; and the forced polyandrous marriage mirrors the extent to which such “leaders” go against all moral and religious virtues. For a detailed critical analysis of the play see Maxamed, 1987.

²¹ In the interview, Xasan has confirmed to me that, as a patriot who has contributed to the struggle for an independent Somali state, he was grossly disappointed by the success in the general elections of men (he gives names) renowned of their incompetence or malpractices or both. In place of the honest and the competent, those people came to the fore, through corruption and clan sentiments, and dominated the state machine.

²² Diiddan and Diiddane’s use of the word ‘cousin’ and similar kinship terms does not mean that they are related to each other as such. Somalis are of the habit of using kinship terms such ‘cousin’, ‘brother’, ‘sister’, ‘uncle’, ‘aunt’, ‘niece’, ‘nephew’ and so forth in addressing people who are not necessarily their relatives; in this case, they use these terms either for endearment or respect.

²³ By custom, Somali women shy away from being kissed by a man in public (even out of respect or endearment) unless he is a relative.

²⁴ The reference here is made to the evil eye which, according to Somali customary belief, “can harm someone even without the will or knowledge of the person who casts the spell; he does not need to have special powers, for a feeling of envy or a sense of grievance will generate enough malice to have an effect. The more a man [or woman] gives cause for envy or dislike the more he [or she] is exposed to danger [of becoming a victim of an evil eye]” (Andrzejewski, 1974: 27).

²⁵ Contrary to the current western style of favouring slimness as a sign of fitness or beauty, in Somalia and elsewhere in Africa, especially at the time of production of *Shabeelnaagood*, gaining weight was considered as a sign of being wealthy and healthy; it was even believed that it makes people look nicer.

²⁶ Owing to the very close links of the half-urbanised townspeople in the burgeoning urban centres with their pastoral roots, they tended to go back for frequent visits to their rural areas of origin as favourite resorts during holidays and similar occasions. They believed, and still believe, that the fresh air and the unprocessed food of livestock products would enhance their health and their general feeling of well being.

²⁷ This can be observed from the tape recording of one of the play’s performances in Mogadishu.

²⁸ In a cultural festival held on 6 February 1999 at Barnet Somali Community Centre in North London, I was asked to give a talk on Somali theatre. As a supplementary illustration of what I was about to say, I played an audio recording of this song and I was not surprised to see several members of the audience, mostly middle-aged Somali women, bursting into tears, while many others expressed their uncontrollable nostalgic emotions in different ways, such as hysterically applauding, shouting or chanting to the music played by my cassette-player.

²⁹ Since this piece is rather lengthy, I shall limit my citation to the English translation.

³⁰ Song

³¹ A traditional genre of women’s poetry, still the lead genre for female poets.

³² The lead genre of classical verse.

³³ The name ‘heello’ was used traditionally for dance songs; later, during 1950s it was adopted for modern songs.

³⁴ Another poetic genre currently favoured by many poets.

³⁵ Here I have used the word ‘heroes’ for ‘halyeyadii’; I feel that it is more accurate than ‘champions’ in Andrzejewski’s translation.

³⁶ This point of the artists’ self-promotion will be elaborated very shortly.

³⁷ On the part of the religious circles this kind of opposition against the arts continues to date, more so in the case of the fundamentalist hardliners.

³⁸ The root ‘qaraam’ comes from an Arabic loan word meaning love and the poet refers to a group of the new young performers of music and sung poetry known as ‘qaraami’, a new art form set to be highly popular among the young generation by the early 1950s..

³⁹ Maxamed D. Afrax, *The Changing Shape of Somali Poetry*, due for publication soon.

⁴⁰ a town in southern Somalia.

⁴¹ In Somali culture, such words as ‘nephew’ or ‘niece’ are used by adults when addressing a child in a caring way; on the other hand, children and young adults call older people ‘uncle’, ‘aunt’ and so forth to show respect.

⁴² Professor Andrzejewski (1974: 228n1) explains what is meant by the ‘Christian priests’ referred to here: ‘The reference here is to an Italian missionary orphanage in Mogadishu. In the past some of the children brought up grew up to be more Italian than Somali, but others became fully integrated into Somali society.’

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