

PRIDE & PREJUDICE: LIFE STORY OF A SOMALI IN EXILE

A translation of Abdi Farah Saeed Juha's QAB IYO QUURSI

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Translator's Note: *It is with great joy to announce to our dear interested readers that there is a **French** version of this interesting book, adopted from my English translation. It may become available to preview/share with you on this website, after concerned translator and author's permission is obtained. Yours happy readership.*

CHAPTER TWO

Adventurous Exile

I am not sure what time it is. I do not wear a watch, but anyway, it should be about early evening hours. I know that it is in the early hours of the night in East Africa, because the general curfew is yet to be announced. I am sitting in a tea house, already gulped a cup of black tea and placed an order for another with milk. I am somehow shaken and worryingly unsettled. I do not know who to listen or who to ignore, who to seek advice from or who not to and who to believe or disbelieve. I cannot tell apart, because the world of my early childhood and the one I am living in now are completely different. What was preached yesterday and what I see today are in total contradiction.

The barrister at the tea house is Amran, a girl of my neighbor and for her sake I came here tonight. For her sake I am drinking endless tea, one cup after the other. For several years, I have been harboring special feeling for Amran and had a special eye on her and her alone. All those years, my conscience was pulling me towards her direction. Hearing her soft and raspy voice is what I entertain my soul with. Her innocent smile and passionate gaze are what I am particularly fond of. Her prominent eyes with matching lashes, her long nose and her sparkling face command me "do not look away from me, not even a moment." Her braided hair hanging below the shoulders, her long figure looking like a flowering stem grown in a spring rain and her *taako* midsection all manifest perfect proportionality of beauty. Her long neck resembling that of a healthy giraffe, her straight long shins, well build arms and her golden brown complexion all indicate in unison what an especial creation of *Eebbe* she is!

With all that, I have never conveyed my feelings to Amran. I never said to her 'my darling', not in real words at least. I have weak point in that area. I used to fear or get shy before her; though not sure which one is true. I could not guess what to expect from her for a response. Actually, I didn't even know what I wanted from her. Even tonight, though I would have liked

to convey my secret pain to her; again, I will not relate my feelings to Amran. Though this may be my last opportunity to sit in front of Amran; again, I will not open my soul to her. I will not discuss my personal feelings and inner pains with anyone. I will not show my soul's vulnerability; not at all. If I am hurting with love, I will not seek remedy from anyone, and if it damages me, I will not blame it on anyone. I am strong-hearted. I am a proud a nomad.

On the seat behind me rests Cawar, Amran's father. In front of him lay a cup of black tea, as he smokes a long tobacco pipe. He is not a man whom I long for to seeing, as I do for his daughter. In fact, his company troubles me great deal. Cawar is in his fifties, big bellied, flat bottomed and skinny legged. If you did not know him personally, you would have not thought he and Amran shared same ancestry. In fact, you would have not assumed that they even woke up from same abode a single dawn. He and his daughter are two completely different creations, both physically and intellectually. With that being so, Cawar's ugliness is topped with extreme lewdness. He is rumored to be a spy who report neighbors and society's gossips and jokes for the hated regime in power. I am not sure if this is correct or what made him do that, but anyway, he is a man to be feared and not to share a gossip with. None of his family members work, except entrepreneurial Amran who brews tea. But, he neither seems unemployed nor empty pocketed man. According to his house, his car and attire, he seems to be a fairly rich man. This has increased suspicion about his mysterious personality. His life is all shrewd in secrecy and people do not like secrets. People do not speak when around places of his presence. I mean they do not speak freely and tonight is no different. The traffic is understandably minimal around the tea house. No one is talking to another, except few who are whispering mouth to ear in secret, like couples do in their courting ritual. Everyone is busy with own cup of tea or cigarette and sadness is manifested on all faces. People are somehow melancholically tuned out or absentminded. Is it that Cawar's presence poses extra burden on them or is it something else? I am not sure.

The hour of the curfew has finally come. Signal rounds were shot from the army barracks, not far from where I was sitting. Now I know what time it is! It is indeed 10:00 pm. People remember the curfew hour by the bang of the signal bullets. The clients who were sitting at the tea house did not get startled at all. If even random artillery rounds were fired, for the people it will only mean one simple thing. "Oh! It is five minutes to ten, let's just close down businesses and go to sleep soon."

A certain signal was shot for turning off the city lights and the seated clientele streamed out at ease, while Amran started collecting chairs in preparation of shutting down the teahouse. "Koombo, I am sorry. It is that time they used to make us sleep early. I will brew a spicy tea tomorrow night, so have a good night cousin", she said in soft voice, standing over my seat and smiling for me briefly. She was worried about not being able to serve me the second round of creamed tea I ordered previously.

I looked at her with affectionate gaze suggesting “it is nothing sweetie”, but with a feeling of inner sorrow indicating ‘darling, tomorrow night I will be far away. Only *Ilaah* knows where I will be by this time tomorrow night.’ I somehow desired to bid her a genuine farewell. I was tempted to kiss her or hug her briefly, even tell her something about my secret journey and wish her all the best, in case we may never meet again. But, I held myself back from such temptations. I looked at Cawar whose eyes were focused on me, while his ears seem to be able to record the many thoughts rioting in my mind. I replied, ‘Ok, tomorrow night’, and left abruptly without even saying her proper goodbye. I eagerly wished for she had a different father.

At this time, only the secret service agents, armed military personnel and few crazy individuals, I mean really crazy ones, roam the city. These are several individuals whose thoughts do not bother the regime and are exempted from the curfew law. Any other person caught after this hour is considered a ‘national traitor’. That is the regime’s opinion, anyway, and the people do not like being accused with such crime. They do not like it, because it is an accusation that may result in severe punishment, a death penalty or imprisonment, depending on how the soldier that catches you puts the report against you. I therefore have to hide, in order not to be accused of such crime.

I departed the city towards the main sports stadium and rested on my sheet spread under the safety of a small tree. This is the darkest of a night. A ten day old moon has just sat in, and the light of the stars is obscured by clouds. It is autumn and therefore a cold front is pressing from the east, the direction of the mighty Indian Ocean. The place is isolated, hopeless and without any succor. The only sounds heard around are made wolves and hyenas howling from the far outskirts, in addition to the braying donkeys and the fierce feral dogs growling all over the city corners.

Here I am waiting for Kamas, the leader of a group of youth that will be leaving Somalia tonight. This is a rebellious group that will leave for Ethiopia to join the ill-informed wars against the regime. I rested hands on cheeks resignedly, closed eyes and went back in time to stashes of old memory. I tried to make some sense out of my journey of joining rebels but could not get convinced at all. ‘O my Allah! I beg you to lead me to the better one’, I prayed, wondering what the future has in store for me. This is not my first journey of facing life of uncertainty, but my first ever odyssey into certain exile. In fact, it was way more different and more difficult than the one undertaken during my childhood to Qardho, in search of the city sweetmeats. At least I knew what I wanted from my childhood journey to Qardho. Love and craving for *timir* was bushing me out of countryside and family in to the city. Tonight, what I want and where I am going to are both in the dark from me, like the darkness of the eminent night. Many things that I did not understand are responsible for my departure. I am departing on someone else’s idea and thinking. Of course, I am aware of that my clan and the regime are enemies; that they are real sworn enemies and their fight is regular. The regime

robs my clan of their valuable herds and kills or imprisons the men. This depends on what it accuses them with in any given case, sometimes even rapes their women. I mean the government soldiers do rape helpless women! My clan is not an angel either. They gossip about the regime, break its laws, propagate its ills, and sometimes inflict unexpected ambushes and heavy damages on its army in guerilla warfare.

But I do not know who bitted them against each other and who the aggressor is. Perhaps I am too young or less knowledgeable, or both. When I was a child growing up, I heard from home, school, neighbors and everywhere that the great Chief is a good person. I was told that he is “the father of the nation, the society’s teacher, and the country’s brain” and that he is a new dawn for the Somali people. It was said that he was a good omen moon of peace and milk shone over the country. I was continuously advised to idolize him, follow his orders, and to be proud of him. I was taught to learn by heart the art of his praises, his slogans and his aggrandizement. His picture was hanged for me looking like he follows my every action and movement in the bedroom, kitchen, classroom, and every street I crossed. I was brought up with the notion that the Chief is building the country and truly loves his people. He will fight corruption, clanism, nepotism, and hundreds of other social diseases that I could not understand but was said to be ills that are deadly on the society. By the time I believed in the society’s orientation and decided to follow to the letter, the society has all the sudden reversed its mind. “No, we were joking, but if you want the truth forget about the previous song and learn this new one by heart”, they tell me now. “The Chief is a bad man. He is a very bad psycho man. He is a killer, incarcerator and a big ruthless pulley”, argued some of them. “He is an arrogant self-righteous man, he stubbornly neither acknowledges nor lets right of argument, a habitual liar whose mouth and ear are not coordinated. His heart and his words have no relation at all”, claimed others. I even heard some gossiping about him, “He is cruel, pitting people against one another and hates the society’s peace and good neighborliness”. The Chief is discussed both in public and private, calling him unflattering names. In short, “the Chief is not who he was thought to be” was heard from every wall. It is astonishingly never seen before attitude. Who is wrong and who is right? Was the society telling the truth before, when they were praising the Chief, or now when they are condemning him in scores? Who knows! The Somalis say; *your lies in advance are detrimental to your latter truth*. That is if anyone is telling the truth at all this time around.

The people’s dilemma made me lose my confidence in listening to them. Only, I had no difficult in comprehending the new song, it even scared me; because it threw what I used to be proud of into deep doubt. Now, I am not sure about all I believed before, and the new story people are telling does not convince me at all. I only gained mental confusion which complicated my life’s thoughts and direction.

My first confusion started with listening to Radio Mogadishu. It was one early dewy morning when I sat for breakfast, preparing to go school. I turned on an old Philips radio on the kitchen

desk, while I waited for the breakfast. It used to broadcast a program called the Wisdom of the Day, my favorite of all. It was a mixed program containing sayings of wisdom, proverbs and riddles. For me, it was the source of the richness of the nomadic oral wisdom which I used to admire. To my surprise, that morning the Wisdom of the Day was not broadcasted. In its place was put on a new song known as *Same Diido*, which I never heard before but liked its music arrangement. “Hoogey! Hoogey!” startled me Eeddo Xaliimo who was in the kitchen sharpening the knife she intended for slaughtering for us a buck goat tethered in front of our house. She listened to the radio carefully, resting arms on her hips. “Catastrophic! Catastrophic!” exclaimed she, furiously beating on her chest. “What is the catastrophe?” I asked, wondering what has constituted such an alarming reaction. “This song is not broadcasted by the radio unless something evil is about to happen. I remember when the army Generals were executed” she narrated sorrowfully. “Did the Generals and the Mullahs rape a child or a new mother?” asked a young son of hers, surprised by why a live person could be killed. Eedo Xaliimo did not answer the question, perhaps considering us young kids who could not comprehend complexity of some happenings. She called for some neighboring women to listen with her the song that made her worry at the daybreak. “Dhii-dhii-dhii...”

A little while after, came the time for the eight o'clock news.

A group of greedy armed forces commanding officers tried a coup d'état last night. They miserable failed to achieve their goal and all were captured except the greediest of all of them, Colonel Abees, who is still in hiding. Sources from the Department of Defense and the Office of the Presidency stated that all of them will be tried according to the full extent of the law.

Then, the names and the ranks of the men in custody were broadcasted and the song *Same Diidow you will be hanged* was played again after the news. “Hoogayeeey! May the name of mine be damned! They will be put to death. Why did they tantalize the devilish regime?” All the neighboring women and others in the village cried out loud. They seemed to us like they knew many of the broadcasted names. “He is the son of this and son that, his mother is punished with a sonless life” cried all. I went to school after leaving the women in company of their morning wails behind. I wished for the bad news to end while I am away, in order not to interfere with the fat goat to be slaughtered for our feast today. I was interested in knowing the meaning of the song with the sweet music that made our homestead cry today. I did not lend an ear to the teacher's lesson of the day for I was busy passing written inquiry notes under the desk to the students sitting around me. My most important issue was understanding the meaning of the song ‘Same Diidow’ which made me miss the ‘Wisdom of the Day’ this morning, the program I used to follow regularly. I wanted to know if other students listened to the radio today and how it was felt in their homes. “The ‘Same Diidow’ song is music for death penalty. It is sung when some people foolishly vie for the Chief's seat.” A neighboring classmate wrote me in a small scrap note. “Same Diidow is the music of joy and ass-shaking.

It is sung when the Chief marries a new girl”, sent me another. Same Diidow is “the music of women’s condolences and sadness. It is sung when the Chief divorces a wife and destroys a home, warning his other wives”, said another sitting behind me.

When it comes to the students; there was cries in one’s home, joy and celebration in another’s and no reaction felt in another’s family who woke up normal as any other day. Their answers did not help me but instead contributed to further my new suspicion and confusion. It was generally agreed that the Same Diidow song announces the Chief’s reaction, though what he will do is yet unclear. Will the Chief hug someone, marry someone or divorce someone today? Only God and he know that. If he wants to marry a new wife, it is up to him, and also does not seem a major problem if he is divorcing one. Marriage and divorce are part of the human character, being ever present as they will be. They do not qualify as surprise and astonishment. What is the reason that imposes souls that do not share mutual feelings upon each other? Perhaps nothing, I questioned myself.

But, suppose the Chief will be wedding this morning. Suppose similarly that he is tired of his former wives and met a new girl that attracted him. Why is that celebrated in some homes, cried in some and some stay untouched? Why are the people so concerned about the wedding and threats of a man living in *Xamar* minding his own interests? Why are they even bothering for something that does not affect them directly or indirectly? Why all that trouble? I questioned myself, trying to make sense of the issues. Perhaps those celebrating are rooting for the Chief’s wedding, a good hearted people who want to share their joy with the Chief. They are showing that he is one of them and needs a new young wife and comfy bed. Those crying are perhaps saddened by the fact that the girl will be divorced next year, since the Chief is a man who likes changing wives frequently, one after another. They are shedding tears for the girl whose virginity is just being wasted. Perhaps they do not like the Chief and think he is an obnoxious xilegube. But, what do the silent ones think? Why don’t they join a side, either the celebration or the mourning? May be they are also tired of the Chief’s regular wedding and the divorce ceremonies? But, what about if the music is for the death penalty or if the issue is not related to either wedding or divorce?

What about if this morning’s news broadcast was real and all the names in the list were about to be put to death by a shooting squad? That can spell bad news; a very sad news that was not expected from the Chief. How could he shoot innocent live people? How could he take a life created by Ilaah? How can he render mothers sonless and orphan young children? Didn’t he say he was the father of the entire nation? Where was the precedence for father who kills his own children? I searched my inner thoughts for a moment and tried to look the issue from another angle. I tried, to an extent, to give the Chief the benefit of the doubt and understand what can force him to kill. I asked myself why they did they oppose their father in the first place? I chewed fingernails and again wondered how he became the father of the entire nation anyway! I had to reach a resolution from that day on to choose a side in the fight between my clan and the Chief. And so, I joined my clan’s side and decided to travel to Ethiopia to

provide succor. I asked my worried self whether my clan will defeat the regime or lead me into an endless war. If they defeat the regime, will they be better than the Chief's administration or will they go on a killing spree of other clans? If I provide them hand will they pay for my tomorrow's wages or will they betray me? I prepared for departure while still having many questions about the hostility of joining the clan ranks. Clannish passion and stirred emotions topped my reasons for becoming a rebel. Only Ducaale, my cousin whom we initially agreed to join the rebellion but later changed his decision at the last minute knows about my departure. "Mother will curse me if I join the rebels" was his excuse. He also tried to dissuade me from leaving by talking to me in clan jargons. He said, "Koombo, whatever bad or good deeds the rebellion may entail, many men of our clan joined, so abstain from it." But I rejected his advice outright. I did not want to get advice from anyone, since right and wrong could not be separated anymore.

My father succumbed to jaundice long time ago, my mother is at the countryside raising the rest of the children and I do not think she will curse me if she heard that her son joined the rebellion against the regime. This does not mean anyway that my mother gives a care between the rebels fighting their way from Ethiopia or the Chief who rules from his seat in Xamar.

In fact, neither of them affects her nomadic life which depends on periodic rains and seasonal grazing rotations. Whatever I do, I knew my mother will pray for me fervently and that was the only assuring companion I needed.

Kamas is running late and the sitting in the football field has prolonged on me. I looked left and right but could not see anything. I restlessly stood up and sat again. I sucked on a hot minted caramel sweets found in my pocket like a toothless infant sucking on his mother's dried out breast. Suddenly, a commotion is heard in my near vicinity and I immediately fell into prone position on the ground, hiding myself under the tree. I could make out sort of silhouettes from a group of people walking in single file. I thought that a secret has got out and the security forces are coming after me. What would be my answer to them if they ask me what I was doing in the sports ground at midnight? I was in immense fear and felt the earth closing around me tight. Say to them: 'I have forgotten my shoes in the ground when the ball game ended this afternoon'. Tell them: 'I even forgot the books and pens in the ground and I have to find them before dawn breaks and someone else takes them.' No, I can't sell that to them. No one forgets own shoes unless one had two pairs in the first place and no one goes to a football ground to read. They all anchored beside me while I am still talking to myself searching for acceptable excuses. One of them signaled a flashlight twice; flick, flick! I came out realizing it was Kamas displaying one of our pre-agreed signal codes. He is not alone. With him are other thirty-five persons who, I guess, rebelled against their government. I knew many of them. Among them were my culture and literature teacher, one of the only two doctors in the city, several of my classmates, several jobless men well known in the city and several soldiers who deserted from the national armed forces. Also, going along are several faces that were new to me, in addition to several live goats, two of them naturally polled. I wondered how serious the situation is in a country where even the goats are getting out in a

hurry. We filed in a single line resembling hitched camel stallions led to the market for sale. We were led by Kamas and another carrying a goat on his back with a gun hanging from the shoulder. Following us on the rear were another three armed men. I took my place right in middle of the file, making sure to be in step with my teacher, guessing he knew where the destination was. The night trekking caused us to trample on rocks, trees scratched us and thorns bricked whoever had bad shoes. On several occasions, birds and hares scared us by unexpectedly springing before us.

After several hours, Kamas ushered us in to a large cave between two hills, about 20 kilometers south-east of Garowe city. He ordered us to get some sleep. Everybody parted the sand and used his small bag for cushion. There I lay beside my teacher. The two goats were tethered on a tree and Kamas and his armed friends kept guard over us with cocked guns. This time we looked like enemy soldiers captured in battle field in hope of a truce for prisoners exchange but fearing cold blooded secret murder before the Red Cross documents their names. But that night we slept in peace and without problem. That is if forever imminent fear, cold, the tossing and turning, and the constant scratching are not counted in.

Very early in the next morning, Kamas called us to a meeting and told us something about our journey and what our next step will be. He supported himself with a gun, stood before us and surveyed us with his gloomy eyes like a bodyguard for a hated government official does.

“Gentlemen, we will hide under this cave today. When our departure gets noticed in the city this morning, the security forces will try to trace and capture us. But do not worry about that at all, they will only waste precious fuel. We will very soon liberate our land from the Monster. The hiding and cave abiding will belong to them at last, understood?”

He surveyed us again and tried an induced laughter. I did not understand what he was talking about first, but was later told that the “Monster” is another nickname known for the Chief by our clan. All shook heads like students ashamed of not understanding their teacher’s explanation.

Kamas is a former soldier who deserter from the armed forces. He is now a member of the rebels and responsible for internal operations. He and his armed friends came from Ethiopia. Their job includes sabotaging explosions conducted in cities and roads, commandeering vehicles and spreading terror and unrest in the country. They are also responsible for recruiting new cadets, particularly strong youth with fighting capability, to join the rebels’ ranks. Two of Kamas’s brothers who are also my classmates are included in the group he is leading to war today. They introduced me to Kamas after they got the wind of my admiration and desire to join the rebels. Kamas receives some monetary and name recognition reward for every group he recruits and delivers.

And today, leading a whopping 35 rifle bearing recruits, he seems happy man who accomplished a critical mission. We spent the first half of the day preparing and securing supplies. Some went to a well nearby to fetch water; some went to collect firewood and others sharpened knives for slaughtering the bucks I thought were escaping from the Chief. Two youth kept guard over us, each climbing on a large leafy evergreen tree near the cave and watched 180° in front of him. Kamas and his friends were highly trained rebels who were careful to be captured by ambush. Besides preparations and securing supplies, we spent the day with entertainment. The day passed us by playing cards, exchanging poetry recitations, jokes and proverbs; but, surprisingly, we discussed neither itinerary nor the aim of our journey. Although we were on the same boat, yet it seemed as no one was frank, when it comes to the journey to the separatists and rebelling against the government. Perhaps mutual confidence was lacking. It is not yet safe distance a place from the regime's eavesdropping apparatus which gossiped the society one against the other. If my goal was to help my clan, I had no idea about the other colleagues' reasoning, if they have ever asked themselves a reason.

The time of our departure has come as the sun sat in. Kamas assembled us again and distributed the journey's logistical supplies. Everybody was given a five-liter plastic water container, several morsels of *solay*, and several loaves of bread and was reminded to ration his supplies economically. Kamas also distributed to us *Qaat* and cigarettes. "They will help you against fatigue and dozing off", he told us. That was unexpected and astonishing to me, because I believed that only bad people used drugs. That was what I was brought up with growing up to know right from wrong. I looked at my art and culture teacher standing beside me and waited to see what he will do. I thought he knew what is moral from immoral as he was my role model for the right way and the guardian of positive behavior. To my surprise, the teacher stuffed a large quid of qaat into his mouth and lighted a cigarette. He puffed it, sending blooms of smoke into the air. I did the same and hopped against contracting pile from the fresh leaves and get sick.

The border we were about to cross between Somalia and Ethiopia was long and treacherous. The armies of two hostile countries were facing each other in opposite trenches. To the Somalis, crossing into Ethiopia was unforgivable 'national treason'. During childhood, we were brought up with the notion of greatest enemy the Somalis ever face being the "*Amxaaro*", the Ethiopian kingdom and later the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam. If we were caught by the Somali forces stationed at the border, they will accuse us of joining a rebel group having bases in a hostile enemy country. That may constitute to getting shot on the spot and we would be worth no more than a dead donkey, if that happened. I mean, nobody would have had a second thought about why we were shot dead. On the other hand, if the Ethiopian forces caught us, they could accuse us of "Somali espionage". To shoot us only meant "fulfilling national duty" to them. To be safe from both sides, we should keep low, walk at night and hide under trees during the day. We were supposed to cross into Ethiopia and reach

rebel bases without getting noticed by either army. But, unexpected happened shortly before we commenced departing. The only doctor among us claimed sick. He threw himself on the ground screaming high and low as he held his abdomen and moaned writhing with pain. Nobody knew about sicknesses and none could help him. We gathered around him and hoped for him to get better on his own to no avail, his groaning only increased. Kamas and his friends stood aside and held a private whispering counsel. I have no idea what they discussed, but they decided to leave the doctor behind. We left him, leaving a sick stomach in company of an isolated cave. I do not know whether the doctor's sickness was genuine or he wisely reconsidered his journey but was afraid to confess changing his mind. However, for me, it threw a fresh fear and doubt into the journey on foot to Ethiopia. I asked myself, what can happen if you get sick in the middle of the journey and left there? I glanced back the city lights flickering from a far and thought; "throw yourself on the ground and cry sick like the doctor did, or pretend to be sitting in the bush to urinate and run back." I reassured myself; no, no, don't do that and suck it up like a man; you share a destiny with the other people, quickly reconsidering my thought. I remembered the advice of a mother to her son on his way to battlefield. She advised him: *my dear son, do not complain before men*. I did not want to be seen as weak man. I kept my step in line with my teacher pacing right in the middle of the long file, bidding Somalia a farewell while at the same hoping for the best of my uncertain destination.

Continues....

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