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Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

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Women and Words

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8ss7h3z7>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 10(3)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

1981

DOI

10.5070/F7103017286

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WOMEN AND WORDS

By

Amina H. Adan

Poetry occupies a large and important place in Somali culture:

Interest in it is universal and skill in it is something which everyone covets and many possess. The Somali poetic heritage is a living force intimately connected with the vicissitudes of everyday life.¹

An apt description. The poet in Somali society is the innovator of new styles of speech. He is the critic of despotic chiefs and he is the artist whose verse gives pleasure to the mind. He is also the agitator and he is the newscaster who informs his listeners what is going on in the outside world. Somali poetry is sometimes a political comment as the following verse shows; it was composed during the 1800s when the African continent was divided among the European powers and Somalia, in particular, was sliced among conquering factions.

<i>Ingris, Amaxaar iyo Talyaan</i>	<i>way akeekimiye</i>
<i>Arladaa la kala, boobaba</i>	<i>Ka u itaal roon</i>
<i>Waa duni la kala iibsaday</i>	<i>aan nala ogaysiin</i>

The British, the Ethiopians and the Italians are squabbling,
The country is snatched, divided by whosoever is strong
The country is sold without our knowledge!

The poet, Faraax Nuur, was lamenting the partition of the Somalilands and was, in fact, alerting his people to the tragic plight that had befallen them.

The reason why these verses are cited is to show that poetry is not only a classic expression but it is also the daily journal which makes the masses aware of the issues which concern their world. Since poetry is the Somali's most valuable artistic expression, it is no wonder that poetry is classified into different categories. Poems are divided into (1) *'gabay*, (2) *gearar*, and (3) *jiifto*. The most serious is the *'gabay* and all three are considered man's dominion. The *jiifto* and the *gearar* are sung,

while the *'gabay* is usually recited. Traditionally, in nomadic areas, *'gabay* is never accompanied by music, stepping or clapping. It is too serious, too solemn to be accompanied by anything but the poet's voice. Moreover, women do not often compose poetry using these forms. One can find a female *'gabay* poet occasionally, but it is not a common affair.

First of all, poets are the traditional spokesmen of their clans. And a great poet is considered a great value to his clan. Inter-clan politics always give a poet a tremendous voice in clan affairs. Perhaps that is why women are excluded from this type of expression. A Somali saying goes, "three qualities that are considered virtue for men are considered vice for women: *geesinimo*, *deeqsinimo* and *aftahanimo*." These three are courage, generosity and eloquence. This sheds some light on why women shun *'gabay* poetry. The explanations given as to why these noble characteristics are denied to women are that if a woman is courageous, she will fight her husband, if she is generous, she will give away her husband's property which is entrusted to her, and if she is eloquent, she will debate or daringly address her brother-in-law. A brother-in-law inherits his brother's wife and there is always a great respect expected from both partners.

All in all, women are denied three noble aspects of life. To come to the point, Somali women compose poetry, but it is a special type of poetry which is not considered serious enough for the taste of the nomadic man. It is called *buraanbur*. *Buraanbur* is usually shorter and lighter than *gabay*, *jiifto* or *geerar*. It can be accompanied by drums, clapping or stepping. Men can compose *buraanbur* verse, but it is considered as a king's visitation; in other words, a great poet might compose a *buraanbur* verse in recognition of a female relative.

Another form of *buraanbur* is the *hoobeyo*. *Hoobeyo* is the lullaby sung to children. Women can compose new lullabies in addition to the traditional ones passed from generation to generation. We will survey a cross section of the *hoobeyo* because these songs convey different messages. A song is multi-purpose. It is not only to entertain a child; the mother or the singer is always addressing someone else, too. This could be a husband, a brother, a mother-in-law, a co-wife or men in general. A lullaby song may be a complaint about a heavy-handed husband, a bad drought or just a joyful entertainment for a child.

Gudooy weyno gefeene
Ardaa aan gabadhi jooqin
Gudooy geel laguma maalo
Gamaan faras laguma raaco

Oh my daughter men have wronged us

For in a dwelling where women are not present
No camels are milked
Nor are saddled horses mounted.

This song is first of all to entertain the child. However, it is loaded with a message like many others that we will encounter in this paper. The child to whom the song is addressed is a female. Thus, the child and her mother are in the same boat. The mother feels and illustrates their unity in being women together. She is not only addressing her child but also a fellow woman to whom she is pointing out the wrongs which men have spread against them. One could ask 'what are these wrongs?' A nomadic society believes that a woman always belongs to another family. That is, to the family she marries into. She does not contribute to the wealth of the family of her birth. So, this song is an answer to this general belief. Since horses and camels are the brideprice paid to a woman's maiden family by her suitor, it should be considered a contribution to the wealth of her family. Thus, the mother is asserting herself and declaring autonomy because family property comes through the female members.

There are also work songs like the *salsal*, which is sung while loading a camel, and *hoyal*, which is sung while weaving mats. These songs are short. Sometimes a line or two is repeated and a chorus is formed. There are also religious songs and healing songs. All these songs have a double purpose. They are primarily for entertainment, but equally important is the protesting and voicing of female problems. In short, these songs are a platform of protest for the female population. Let us look at one *salsal*.

Nabad gale nin laba dumar le
Nabad uma soo gelin

For the polygamous my lovely camel
Worry and nagging are his companion.

While singing these lines, a woman's own husband may be helping her in loading the camels, but there is no way he can stop her because she is singing a traditional work song which women have sung for at least the past two hundred years. This clearly shows that women are protesting against polygamy.

The Hobeeyo Chorus

The term *hobeeyo* is the chorus of the children's lullaby which Somali women have been repeating meticulously for at least the last two hundred years. The nomadic Somali women learn these songs during childhood by listening to their mothers or to other older women. These songs serve a double purpose, as we have

mentioned before. To the Somali woman, they represent the history of the female population of the country. However, it also gives us a glimpse of the history of the nation as a whole. We will go through a cross section of the *hobeeyo* and try to capture the message it conveys.

Dhibaay gabaah dhalatayee
Dhibaad soo doonisteeda
Ninkii bay dhibayadeeda
Dhibaata u joogisteeda
Anaan dhalin bay ugu rooneed!

It is your troubles
The inconveniences of the (*dhibaad*) ceremonies
And your constant whimpering cries
And your the-husband-has-beaten me complaints
Have I given birth to you to discomfort me
If only I didn't (I might have saved myself these troubles.)

In this song, the mother is clearly lamenting the situation of womankind itself. She is alerting the baby daughter and schooling her in the problems which accompany womanhood. There are two important issues involved here. One is the *dhibaad* or dowry that women bring from their maiden families. When a young girl marries, she is entitled to many gifts from her family. *Dhibaad* could also be an occasional gift from one's maiden family. That means that *dhibaad* could be continuous gifts draining the wealth of one's family! The word *dhibaad* literally comes from *dhib* (hardship). This sheds light on the fact that it can be considered huge burden on families who have many daughters. But, of course, the brideprice balances the scales. The dowry and brideprice are aspects that feature well in a nomadic economy. Both are used politically as marriage is many times a political alliance for different groups. Another message embodied in the song is the complaint of wife beating. Historically, the 'court' that protected a woman was a strong family. If you had no family, there was always the clan, the elders, or the chief. But, the person who found this beating and complaining the most loathesome was the mother--perhaps because she herself went through it only a generation before. It befits someone like her to comment so movingly.

Haddaan Herar waaqla joogo
Assad howd halo ku haysid
Anamba hooyada ah

Even if I were in Herar a god-forsaken place
And you were tending camels in the plain of the Howd
Even then my son, you are mine and mine alone.

Traditionally, when a nomadic husband divorces his wife, the children are his. However, usually the children may be left with the mother. But at times, children are snatched from their mothers' backs. Women resent this and protest it in their own ways. In essence, what this song is saying is that blood is thicker than water; that, regardless of the distance between her and her child, no one can deny her exclusive natural right. In this, the woman rejoices that what man has denied her, nature has vindicated her. It is only she who gives birth and the child is hers and hers alone!

*Anaba geel dhalay ma maalno
Anaba googan ma gurano
Anaba kaa gubayo weynin*

We, too, don't pick dates off its tree
We, too, don't own milky camels
But, we feel the weight of worry more.

Somalia is, in general, a drought-ridden country. One cannot rely on the coming of the rains. And, if a drought strikes the country, the whole life of the nomad is in danger. Animals die and, naturally, one cannot feed the young. For a mother, the most awesome feeling is the whimpering cries of a youngster--cries caused by hunger. The mother is engaged in self pity, but to console the child she describes how she feels the weight of worry even more.

*Sidaan gumanow ku qadiyay
Sidaan golo kale wax siiyay
Sidaan keligay wax qutay
Qalbiga mayga la colowday*

As if I have fed others
As if I deprived you
As if I have eaten alone
My beloved son, you seem to despise me.

Again, she is explaining her position to her child. She is demonstrating her worries. She is a mother and she should feed and give, but how can she when everything has gone dry, the camels, the breasts and, above all, the rains?

*Miyaad gaajootay gacalo
Ma geeliba hayaamay
Hayaamoo hawd ku oomay
Ma naaskii baa gudhoobay
Gudhoobood gudol ka weydey
Ma odaygii baa sodcaalay
Sodcaaloo sofar ku raagay*

Is it because hunger has stricken you
Is it because they have gone thirsty in the *howd*
Is it because my breasts have begun to turn dry
Is it because your tongue has sucked only a meager drop
Is it because your father has gone on a journey
Is it because he's been gone for long and you miss him.

The general theme is still that of hunger and consolation; this song gives a clear description of nomadic life. Camels venture far into the country in search of pastures and water. At that time, women, children, and the smaller herds like sheep and goats do not move far from the meager waterholes sparsely dotting the *howd*. In addition, the song conveys how a father's presence is a symbol of security and a psychological necessity to the patriarchal family as a source of protection. The milky camels are important for nourishment.

*Sedba Rabi soo sidaa ee
Samo iyo kheerba danbeene
Ma Sareenseerkaad run mooday*

Good fortune is riding on God's wing
On its flanks a good omen is in view too
Regain your calmness my son and don't despair.

Consoling and complaining go hand in hand and hope never dies. The nomadic woman is true to her Muslim heritage and she always believes that God's good grace is within reach. If it doesn't rain today, it will tomorrow. Hunger won't persist and, with God's grace, will and mercy, she will be happy in the future. After every drought, epidemic, or misfortune, the horizon of hope appears afresh. That is the message which the song conveys.

Let us move to another theme in the *hobeeyo*. For the nomadic family, the birth of a child is happiness itself and, if that baby is a boy, the family is simply overjoyed.

*Markaadda labay aad dhawaaqday
Dhamow dhaxan bayga duushay
Dhulki bay wada iftimay
Dhuraya iga dareeray
Dhirtu bay wada magooshay*

Your voice at birth was a delight
Your birth was like a fine sunshine
Your birth was like a morning breeze
Your birth was as pleasant as a bouquet of flowers.

The birth of a baby boy gives the nomadic woman tremendous security. For his mother and sisters, he ensures a greater share in

inheritance. The birth of a boy sometimes, but not always, ensures a monogamous marriage. One of the reasons men marry a second wife is to have more sons to inherit and ensure the family name or, to be more exact, the man's name. Thus a woman who only gives birth to daughters runs the risk of her husband looking for another wife. Polygamy is much hated by nomadic women. However, they submit to the dictates of their society. Each individual woman reacts to it in her own way. However, the literature is full of the distaste women hold for polygamy. It's no wonder that a co-wife is called in Somali *dangalo*--the one who intervenes in one's affairs.

*Hadaan heestaada qaado
Hadaan qaado qindhiiciyo
Hadaan qalqallooc u dyido
Kasli Kabahay Ka roori
Xumi baa xaaska daadin
Dhibeel daran wey dhaqaaqi*

If I sing your praises
If I recite your names
If I quote every phrase with the right metaphor
Then this idiot might go mad
She might turn her back on everything
That good-for-nothing might ruin the foundation of
the family home!

Women sometimes employ the *hobeeyo* to compete with a rival. In this instance, the rival is the co-wife. She heaps upon her all the insults one can think of. Women always compete not only for the affection and attention of a husband, but also for the actual wealth of the family. A man with many wives is called *godote*--the one with the many holes or caves--perhaps because he spends alternate nights with different wives. Thus, he has no real home and his loyalty is divided and doubted. One trait of a polygamous man is that he always lies to his wives. Every night he experiences the nagging, competing and complaining of his wives and his only recourse from this constant upheaval is to lie. None of his wives trusts him wholeheartedly.

*Gabeedh gabadheed ma fiicane
Raggaba goonyaha fadhiye
Aday geel ka wadeen
Geyaan kaba ku jire
Gudooy gaagaabi hadalka*

Quietness is a girl's virtue
You are within reach of your potential suitors
Who've come laden with dowries for your hand
Possibly one of them will become your husband
A girl's quiet voice is a great virtue.

Before we say anything else, let us explain one thing. For the nomad, there is no land ownership. One uses the land, but it is not for exchange. Private property is recognized in livestock and dwellings. Livestock is accumulated and exchanged. In both of these spheres women are important. All items in the dwellings are made by the wife and daughters. The woman is the sole architect of the family's dwelling. In addition, no utensils are made by men. The second item prized by the nomad as the height of wealth is the camel. One of the ways that camels are accumulated is through the brideprice. So, we can see that camels are important not only for the milk they give, but also because they are commodities for exchange. Camel meat is rarely used by the nomads since smaller animals such as sheep and goats are slaughtered for meat. Since the nomadic society's brideprice involves the exchange of wives for camels, women occupy an important position--for their maiden families, women are a source of wealth.

What this song conveys is the mother's advice to her infant daughter that she should groom herself for the role the family expects of her and upon which depends its wealth. Her role is to be a quiet, soft-spoken lady, who will attract suitors who will in turn pay a handsome brideprice to the family. As we have seen in a previously cited song, we come face to face with the clear voice of the woman who knows her worth. She is the most valuable source of wealth to the family whether the menfolk acknowledge it or not!

*Bullow wiil boqol halaad leh
Bullaale iyo xamar ku jooga
Bartiisa ka dhaariyay naa*

Oh dearest Bullow
Come a young man with a hundred camels
On the back of a saddled *Bullaale xamar*
For you, dearest, he'll pauperize himself.

The mother is referring to her daughter's beauty in admiration, but the core of the theme is again the camels which will be exchanged for the girl's hand. Yes, some young man will pauperize himself and willingly give away his camels. This constant referral to the brideprice has three underlying themes. The first is the wealth gained through the brideprice; second, the protest against the idea that a daughter is a burden, and third, the education of the young in the norms of their society. The mother teaches the daughter the manners that are expected of her. A foreign writer who once observed the way Somali mothers inculcate ideas and manners to their daughters had this to say:

*Teachers and pedagogues ought to have envied her
that great inspiring quality which she had in her;*

in her hands education was no compulsion, and no drudgery, but a great noble conspiracy into which her pupils were by privilege admitted.²

Ms. Dinesen, in her book Out of Africa, refers to songs and dances of Somali women on her farm when a son was born to her Somali housekeeper in 1935. This is the time when many settlers were moving to the Kenyan highlands and some Somalis followed them there in search of employment. In the writings of former settlers, we came into contact with vivid descriptions of the Somali servant. Whether it be Lord Delamere or Ms. Dinesen, these writers comment on the characters and cultures of their servants. From these writings we learn how these Somalis saved their money in order to return to their homes, buy some camels and, in exchange, get a wife.

By the time we had become well acquainted, the Somali girls asked me if it could be true what they heard, that some nations in Europe gave away their maidens to their husbands for nothing. They had even been told, but they could not possibly realize the idea that there was one tribe so depraved as to pay the bridegroom to marry the bride. Fie and shame on such parents, and on girls who gave themselves up to such treatment. Where was their self respect, where their respect for women, or for virginity? If they themselves had had the misfortune to be born into that tribe, the girls told me, they would have vowed to go into their grave unmarried.³

Let us diverge from the *hobeeyo* for a moment and venture into a work song. This song is sung when women are pounding the grain used for porridge. The words in this song are, to our understanding, what the Somali girls were paraphrasing to Ms. Dinesen.

*Gacaloy, Gacaloy - Gacaloy
Garbasaaro carwo - Gacaloy
Gancantay midigeey - Gacaloy
Gabdha taan ujecele - Gacaloy
Hadaan geeno lamaan - Gacaloy
Iyo geel kugn waayo - Gacaloy
Iska joor gurigeena - Gacaloy
Gabadhaada ahaw - Gacaloy
Iska guudad widhmaw - Gacaloy
Weligaan ha guurean - Gacaloy
Goblan geeri ku dhowr - Gacaloy*

Oh my dear, my dear

You are exhibitable as a dress in fair
You are my right hand
My dearest my loveliest girl
If camels and ponies aren't offered (in exchange
for your hand)
You will have to stay within this courtyard
An unmarried maiden
With plaited hair
Never marrying
A childless woman awaiting death.

Every society justifies and glorifies its economical mode. The Somali nomadic system depended economically, perhaps partially, on the transaction of the brideprice. Thus we see how song after song conveys this. It is a link and a bond between two families and even between two clans. That is why the nomads will not understand what solidifies a society where there is no brideprice. From these songs it may be gathered that the brideprice is the sole commodity in this society. Through it, the woman asserts herself. After all, an entire economic system depends on her.

*Haddii gedahaagu gaadho
Haddii guur kun maloobo
Haddii guulle alle yeelo
Mid baas oo xero bilaal ah
Mid baas oo bowdo jebiya
Ku siin maaye ku seexo*

When you reach marriageable age
And if God keeps his approval
A wicked mean and evil man
A wife-beater and intimidator
To such a man (I promise) your hand won't go.

An arranged marriage could be a problem. Sometimes a greedy father or a male guardian could overlook a girl's preference and condemn her to wedlock with an undeserving man. Women protest and rebel against such an arrangement. This song refers to that. The mother is assuring her daughter that such a fate will not befall her. The mother is certain such a man won't be welcome. A mother has a say and a great one at that, and this is what the song is conveying. The bottomline here is that she herself, being a woman, knows how an intimidating husband could be a disastrous match. Beating is very distasteful and women often protest about it in songs.

*Habeen baas iga gudooyao
Gambada haabhaabatooyaa
Habaarqabe gursatooyaa
Hangool jabay la la dhacayyaa*

It is you who travels into the dark night
Only to enter into wedlock with an ill-chosen husband
Who beats you with a *hangool* (proning hook)
And in the scuffle, it is you whose headscarf comes
undone.

Nomadic marriage is usually an arrangement between two families. However, the two young people who are involved should be consenting. Sometimes a couple will decide to elope. Elopement is considered to be a childish act. The girl's family thinks it is a disgrace to their honor. It is also an economical loss. If her marriage fails and the woman comes back to her maiden family complaining, since there were no negotiations before hand, it is hard to defend the woman against her husband. Her kinsmen will have no grounds upon which to bargain. The song is a warning for the young girl not to fall into the trap of elopement. The family will lose the brideprice, the girl will not get a good *meher* (bride wealth). Girls are repeatedly warned about elopement.

Even though poetry is considered a man's domain, as shown above, the formidable voice of the pastoral nomadic woman is heard. One of the most remembered Somali verses was uttered by Muhiya Cali, the wife of the renowned poet Cali Dhuux. The story was recited to me by Axmed Cali Abokor and recorded by Said Samatar in his dissertation. Cali Dhuux was married to Miido, a distant relative of Muhiya. Muhiya, as a young girl, was staying in the Cali Dhuux household and used to help Miido with house chores. As Miido sensed that Cali Dhuux was ready for a younger wife, she manipulated him to marry Muhiya, her young relative, whom she thought she could perhaps dominate because of Muhiya's status as a *minyaro* (second wife). The older wife is called *minweyn* or the big house and she has more to say in the family affairs than a new woman. However, this situation depends on leadership and sometimes the young wife can defy this rule and exercise more power than is generally accepted.

Muhiya, rather than be the young timid new wife both Miido and Cali expected, proved to be a formidable contender for both of them. Some claim jokingly while others think seriously that Muhiya composed the following verse:

Waa Kararaa Cali Adan oo
Waayey laba Koobee
Kalwin maayo haasaasahoo
Ways Kambal yaayee
Sid-i Koofil iyo laraan buuii karkabadaynee
Kurta intaanu seef lgaga hoyn
Maan U Kulleeyo
Irrata is Ali Adan
Without two cupfuls

Calmly he won't say the conversation
But will awesomely lie prostrate
Like Corfield and Larry pester me will
Before he beheds me with a sword
Why don't I make the tea ready. ⁴

"Cali was chagrined enough by her attack to respond in poetic retort" ⁵:

*Muhiyay Malkada xitadii ma aad muraaddene,
Waxad maqashay maydho iyo godlay midhoku yaaline,
Inaad himirta maudmasataad mihindisaysaaye,
Mooyaa Ka ciyay reerahaad magac wadaagteene,
Ogaadeenna miiskii Kushubay mohoradiisiye,
Mustmushaaxa anigaa leh iyo maydha galobeede,
Allaylehe waxaan kaaga biqi Mido oo Kale,
Iyaadaan masayar iyo ku furay madax adaygaase,
Saddexdiiba naag loogu maray layn madoobaaye,
In muraayaddeedi jabtaan marag u haystaaye,
Maakabkay heshaa waa carmali magac ku yeedhaaye,
Iga maareo yaan ina calaye kuugu malaqsine.*

Listen Muhiya (I gave you) milk camels
But you've heard Maydho and Godlay are blossoming
with wild berries
In truth the mortar sounds from the people you share
a name with
A woman dismissed with triple divorce oath is disgrace
That her mirror of honor is broken I have witness
Be strained from me daughter of Cali lest I cast you
out. ⁶

Muhiya achieved fame over Cali, in this instance, because first she exploited the historical-cultural experience in which she compared him to the British colonizers Lawrence and Corfield, who were famous for their ill temper and ill-gotten power over the Somalis. She voiced her grievance over his position as a master who expects women to cook for him and rewards them with ill-tempered behavior. Secondly, Cali Dhuux did not follow her line of argument and did not address the crucial points. He did not deny her argument as stormy and ill-tempered, and we are free to believe her since Cali did not deny these qualities. Her statement, "before he cuts off my head," leads us to believe Cali was a wife-beater or at least an intimidator! Even if we try to be fair to Cali, we are at a loss. We cannot give fair judgment because instead of following the argument, Cali resorted to threats of divorce, which is a power Muslim men hold over women. Cali even used his class position, telling Muhiya that her people are poor gatherers of berries and that she owes her elegant clothes to him.

Muhiya's verses lived and lasted because, as is expected from Somali poets, she used a topic that her audience felt at home with. Somali poets are known for building their poetry around topics familiar to their group. An example is when Salaan Carrabay accuses a kinsman with ingratitude and compares him to a woman.

*Dumarkuba xublada fooshay
Wey xanoof weneeraane
Bal inay xusuus daran yihiin
Xeedka kale mooge*

There was a man who once knew great distress
And lost his wealth, his power, his tribe's respect
But now restored to eminence, he forgets
His former anguish, and my assistance
Ah, friend, your memory is short as any woman's!

By referring to the former "anguish" of the now powerful and eminent man, the poet is pinning his case on a historical fact which others hearing the poem are familiar with and probably affirm. Similarly, when the poet attacks the man of ingratitude as having a short "memory" as "any woman's", he utilizes the image of what in the minds of his hearers is an established fact, namely, the inferiority of women to men. His strategy is to hang his case on the merits of established wisdom and thereby mock his opponent by comparing him to a female. ⁷

We can derive two points from this. First, Muhiya followed the tradition of "established wisdom" so that their audience will grasp the situation easily. The fact established here is that men are as oppressive as colonizers! Secondly, she is striking back at all men by arguing and challenging not only a husband but a poet of the stature of Cali Dhuux. Muhiya composed this verse about 1915. Cali was one of the dervishes who supported Sayid Mohamed Cabdulle Xasan in the beginning, but finally parted with him because of the lack of free speech. One of the verses Cali is remembered for throughout Somalia is this.

*Hadlkii la tuugaysan jiray
Waa Ka togananaaye
Tunka namala soo gaban
Abtoo tiine dabadeede*

Conversations that were kept secret
We freely now speak out
Nobody catches us by the neck
Oh uncle, since your time.

One should also remember that Muhiya was a contemporary of Salaan Carrabay, the poet who insults an ungrateful relative of his and

compares him to a woman. I do not believe it is an exaggeration to suggest that Muhiya was also referring to Salaan. Certainly Muhiya was aware of Salaan's poem since she was married to Cali Dhuux who was the starter of the "guba burner" series of poems which created hostilities among many clans for at least twenty years (1922-42).

Another aspect of the Somali women's life is the religious aspect. Islam recognizes woman as full human beings and requires them to pray, give alms and fast just like the menfolk. However, women are exempted from both prayers and fast during menses. Women are excluded from certain Islamic leadership positions such as judgeship or Imamship. One should note that nomadic women do not wear the *purdeh* and are not secluded.

When young people court each other, they dance and sing together and girls are expected to show wit and cleverness to their suitors. Because of this openness in the society, women participate in a folk way when traditional Islam excludes them. At the beginning of the 1880s, Somalia was teeming with puritanical Islamic sects. There were about twenty Tariqa settlements of both Qadiriya and Amdiya provenance in the Somali interior in the 1890s.⁸ For men, the institution of *wadaad* was blossoming all over the country. It was during this period that such great sheikhs like the Sayid, Sheikh Madar, the founder of Hargeisa, and Sheikh Uways Mohamed emerged and had great followings. Women joined the tariqa as wives, sisters and daughters of men but felt they should establish their own institution where they could be the policymakers. This was also a time when many Somalis were settling in towns. The Somali nomadic women who were settling in a town did not have the hard work of pastoral life with which to busy themselves, and, of course, felt the monotony of their new life. Perhaps in remembering the congregation of *kebed* making and *saar* dancing they created for themselves an institution that blends Islam and older Somali traditions.

This is the institution *Abay siti*, which literally means "lady sister." The head of this institution is an old lady who must know some of the Koran and also the "history" of her locality. She should have a good reputation as a God-fearing good Muslim sister. She either lends her own house to be the seat of the *Abay siti* or each woman pays a little amount of money to her so that she can pay the rent for the meetings of the ladies. Women usually meet in the afternoons after they have fed the family the midday meal. The favorite days for the meetings are Sundays, Thursdays and Fridays. They call each other sisters. The sisters come to the meeting dressed well. They pray together, sit in a circle and burn incense, and the ones who know the Koran or are familiar with religious stories instruct the others. When the Koran is being explained the ses-

sion is very solemn and quiet and the sisters are very attentive.

After that, religious songs are sung. In most of the religious songs, the women sing praise songs to what they consider "female saints." These saints are the wives of the prophet, his daughters, Eve, and some local female saints. Occasionally, they honor male saints and prophets. The sisters can bring their problems to the *Abay siti* and prayer will be said for them. If a woman is barren, or sick, or expecting a baby and wants a safe deliverance, she will give some gift, food or money and ask for prayers.

Sitidayay Udgoo
Fadumo Nabay
I magal
Janno aday
Ku dhacaday
Anana noo Jawaab
Oo Sowjad
Cala Daalibe
Anana noo Jawaab
Oo Maalintaa
baadka Kulul
Biyo Gabow na sii
Oo xisaabaayo
Noo xil qari!

My sweet lady
O' Fadumo prophet's daughter
Accept our prayers
Paradise is yours
Wife of "Cali"
Help us the day of judgment
Forgive us our sins!

Men seek forgiveness from the prophet and praise him in their songs. But the sisters sing for the "female saints" and pray for forgiveness and expect to be led to paradise by these chosen, almost prophetlike ladies. This shouldn't be surprising because in the 1880s, when this religious association emerged, more and more Somalis were settling in the coastal towns and centers of trade. The women who came along with their menfolk to the towns were excluded from the religious activities of the men. Secondly, there was nothing to keep them occupied because in the towns they did not hold the important economical role they held in the nomadic life.

"The nomad woman is the most resourceful member of the family." She:

1. Bears and nurtures children;

2. Does the family chores like cooking, house-management, fetching water over long distances, collects firewood, milks the smaller animals such as goats and sheep;
3. Makes the household utensils;
4. Weaves all articles for the collapsible Somali *guri*;
5. Dismantles and builds the Somali *guri*;
6. Preserves food for hard times;
7. Educates the young girls."

In such a setting there is no such notion as man the provider. Every member is important, even the children contribute. The husband, whether he acknowledges it or not, knows that a wife is indispensable. Among the pastoralists, there is no such thing as an old bachelor. As soon as a boy comes of age, he has to marry, otherwise he will starve because his sisters will be married and gone and his mother will not tolerate him. His only way to survive is to set up his own family.

However, when the nomadic women, who played such an important role in rural life found themselves in towns cut off from the animals, excluded from building houses because in town, builders are mainly male, these women found themselves totally dependent on men because they were excluded from all important avenues of income. Thus they first took aim at the spiritual side of life and created their own religious associations.

Moxamed Nebi
Magaca samow
Nuur Allow
Nebi Allow
Ninba afkii
Kugu amaan

Moxamed prophet of God
 Blessed is your name
 Light of God
 Each one praise you
 In their own tongue.

True she praises the prophet and does many of her religious activities in her own Somali tongue. Women in towns did not have the opportunity to study in Koranic schools in the 1880s. They were not prohibited but, on the other hand, they were not encouraged. Ironically, this led to a great amount of religious literature in Somali. To my knowledge, this literature was never collected. But the meager amount I have collected demonstrates the creativity, the sensitivity and genuine way in which these women worshipped in their own language.

The *Abay siti* institution led to the *Hagbad*, a group of

women who raise money together. For example, ten women may pay twenty shillings each month and one of them will take the whole amount that month; the process is repeated until each gets her turn. At the beginning, women spent this money on buying new clothes, which their husbands would not buy for them, or they helped their poor relatives or they maintained the religious associations.

In the early fifties, these women supported political parties, such as the Somali Youth League and the Somali National League. Women like Fadumo Xersi Cabane were famous poets throughout the country. Fadumo sang at political rallies, always encouraged political prisoners, and envisioned a better future through her lyrics and fine voice. Leaders of the political parties respected her as a fellow political agitator. Later, after independence, women found religious institutions and political participation would not fill the vacuum felt in their lives. This is why many went into business. Somali women traders travel all over the Middle East, India and Italy and they dominate small business throughout the country. The Somali townswomen, whose grandmothers were important members of the family, do not adjust easily to the role of sitting at home, rearing children and waiting for a man to provide for them. This illustrates to us that Somali women did not lose their personality and independence when they found themselves in a socioeconomic setting different than the ones their great grandmothers had so well mastered.

Women in Literature

The picture depicted by Somali poets about women is not any different than that of the West. The literature is replete with sometimes humorous jokes, sometimes tasteless anecdotes.

*Marwo camal xun
Naan gaab n'ikeed
Magasha baa dhaanta*

An obedient wench is better
Than an intemperate woman
of class and intelligence.

Thus the poet thinks that a woman should be passive, be led by, and should follow all the instructions imposed by her husband. A positive and strong woman is uncontrollable.

There is a Somali proverb which says: *Kal caano galeen kas ma galo* ("The breast that contains milk cannot contain intelligence." This tasteless, unscientific statement shows the measure of disrespect with which women are held. Amazingly

enough, one poet of Radio Mogadishu used this statement as the title of one of his modern songs and, ironically, it was sung by the star of Somali modern songs, *Magool*, and, again surprisingly, it went unnoticed by the revolutionary government.

*Hooyo madi dhalla
Aada i macaniyay
Oo midh lga dhiyay
Meel xuna i dhigay
Ee wiil walaale leh
Oo waraabsaday
Oo wadda hayaa
Haygu wiirsado*

O mother of one boy
You let me down
You bore me alone
and made me unhappy
So a boy blessed
With many brothers
Who watered his camels
And got the job done
has to pooh on me.

Many of the chores of nomadic life require communal work. Whether one is herding camels or watering them, one is always in need of the help of others. That is why kinship, unity, and family ties are extremely important to the nomads. A brother is not just a brother, he is a fellow worker, a comrade in arms, the protector of the family. Someone who does not have relatives is ruined. To have many cousins, brothers and uncles gives one political clout and strength. One's life is insured and secured through kinship. But, what is disturbing here is that the poet blames the lack of brothers on the mother. She made him one and alone and without strength. Thus, infertility is caused by her alone.

*Geeridaydana guro ba'biyo
Goblan laga qaad
Geeridaadana gaawe madhan
Iyo gaajo laga qaad
Geerida haveen guud la
Guursi laga qaad*

My death will bring upon the family ruin
Your death camel will bring
Empty vessels and starvation
But a woman's death brings
Fresh grooming and remarriage.

The nomad holds camels in high esteem. He uses them in marriage for the brideprice. He draws his livelihood from them by milk. He uses them as beasts of burden and as transportation. His finest poetry is always about a camel. Up to this day, Somalis compare anything good, honorable or lovable to a camel. Even Somali independence is compared to a lovely camel. Freedom is like a milk camel. When a nomad composes poetry in honor of his lover he will compare his tender feelings to a she-camel who misses her young.

All that is fine, but to belittle a female's death and think it will only lead to remarriage and hair grooming is rather painful. At first glance, one would think that the Somali woman, upon whom is heaped these criticisms and sarcasms, will be tormented. The Somali woman prevails because the literature is contradictory and girls are raised to be witty, intelligent and sharp. One of the positive characteristics a nomad looks for in a woman is a sharp mind. Somalis all admire the story of Huryo Ugaas. She was a very clever lady. She eloped with Xersi. When Xersi decided to elope with Huryo, he asked his witty cousin, Kabacalaf, to help him fetch Huryo so that he could take her to his clan. When a nomad wants to elope with a young lady, he has to take someone else with him in case her male relatives catch them and start a fight. While they were travelling to Xersi's village, Huryo decided to test him. So, after journeying for an entire night, the three decided to sit and rest. As they sat, Huryo said, "Let us rest." Xersi was amazed and answered, "We are sitting and resting, how much rest do you need?" Kabacalaf smiled and explained to Xersi that one is not rested until one takes off one's shoes--that is what she meant. As they rested a while with their shoes off, Huryo struck again and announced that she believed that some other people were nearby. Xersi was astonished: "We are in the middle of the desert, there are no wells, there is no sign of life." Kabacalaf again explained, "She must have seen the *xuunsho* (bird), because this bird always lives near people." Finally, Huryo said, "Let us eat." Xersi clearly thought she was crazy because they had no food whatsoever. "How can we eat?" Xersi asked. Kabacalaf smiled and explained that 'to brush one's teeth with the twig is the first food.'

At that moment, Huryo made up her mind not to marry Xersi. When they reached the family of the young man, she told the elders that she would either marry Kabacalaf or go back to her maiden family. Her argument was that she wanted a sharp, witty man. Fortunately, her demand was accepted and she married Kabacalaf. Kabacalaf was a warrior and a camel raider. He often left Huryo with the children, the livestock and the home. She managed well but she became legendary when she claimed that the camels he looted should be shared by both of them. She claimed

she saw the family as a unit; he was able to go off to raid and loot only because she took care of the children and livestock at home.

*Anba guuydeenaan hayay gabandeeni ee
Xaqu meesha waa ii gale
Geela noo gabaysha*

And I was the caretaker of
Our stock and children
It is only fair and justifiable
That I claim my share.

Huryo was a contemporary of Sayyid Mexamed Cabdulle Xasan. She was not touched by town life; she never saw a veil in her life. Her upbringing and education were Somali and pastoral. She eloped, but following a bold line, changed her mind from the man she left her family for and married his cousin. Later, she claimed her equal share of the family property, demanded it, and got it! Somalis admire her courage and wit, and her story is told by men, women, young and old. "Every mortal circumstance seems against her and yet the dominant and extraordinary personalities of the Somali women have been remarked by travellers since Egyptian times."⁹

The nomad who will hold a woman with disdain and contempt on the one hand will prize her over everything on the other. Somali men show, at most, respect to their mothers and aunts, and they will give all their wealth if need be to a sister or a sister's child. A maternal uncle is very important and always gives generously to a sister's child.

Perhaps it is the realization of this that gives the Somali woman her inner strength, for, in compensation for the rest of her hard life, she knows that surely, during one short phase of it she will be prized above all else and that for a glimpse of her a man will travel on foot hundreds of miles, will risk his life (since her male kinsfolk will inevitably object to the suitor), and in honor of her shadowed eyes and slender arms will think up lyrical verses comparable to Herrick and Marlowe.¹⁰

However, what is depicted in the male literature, whether it glorifies her or makes her into a base, brainless creature is not important. What is important is that she demands that her voice must be heard. In the colonial files, one can find the stories of dozens of women who sued their husbands. Major H. Rayne reported in his book, Sun, Sand and Somalis, that when a woman started fighting her husband in court, he asked his Somali interpreter to calm her down. The interpreter told

him, "Who can stop a Somali woman? Drown her. Murder her--yes, but as long as she has breath in her body, she'll talk."¹¹ Major Rayne wrote this in 1921 when he was stationed in northern Somalia as a colonial officer. At this period, quarrels, disputes and fights among the Somalis were beginning to be settled in the so-called courts set up by the new conquerors of the country. From old colonial files, we can decipher a clear picture of the complaints women brought. The colonists were careful and cautious of how they dealt with the Somalis. The land wasn't rich, the people weren't friendly, and they fought a bitter war. Just emerging from the war with the Sayyid, the British were not anxious to change the laws of the land.

They set up Somali *Qadis* or religious judges who were paid by the colonial government and followed Islamic law. Contrary to the popular belief that the British brought liberalism to rigid Islamic society, they in fact enforced the most absurd and unimaginable tradition in marriage laws. This is what Somalis call *Naakird*, but in correct Arabic is *El Neshous* or popularly termed *Beit El Ta'a* by the Arabs (meaning the "House of Obedience). That means that if a husband does not want to divorce his wife and she does not want to be married to him, then she becomes *Nashiz*; the government will force her to remain in the home of marriage. Legally, she cannot be married and cannot travel nor claim any maintenance from her husband; she cannot inherit his wealth if he dies. So, a *Nashiz* had only two choices--to 'rot' and suffer or be humiliated and live with a hateful husband all her life. The nomads claim they never used this system before the colonizers since in the nomadic areas marriage is viewed as a contract between families. If it did not work, it was broken by the Somali *Xeer* (legal system), and a religious leader was present only to pronounce its dissolution; the negotiation debates and discussion followed the Somali pastoral tradition which made every man cautious because responsibilities were communal.

The Somali *Xeer* has two meanings: 1) it is the legal system of the land, 2) it means "accord," "an eye for an eye," or "do unto others as they do unto you." If a wife is mistreated by her husband, it is a case of *Xeer*--the women from the husband's clan who have married into the other clan will be treated in the same way. A clan known to have bad husbands runs the risk of being refused when looking for new wives. Somali women keep their maiden names and are considered full members of the families they were born into. A brother, father, uncle, cousin or the closest male relative is responsible for the protection of his female relatives. They will often force a man to divorce or will warn him fiercely if mistreatment is ever suspected.

However, strange new laws were set up by the new courts,

the paid official *Qadi* and the European officer who saw the ideal family as nuclear units, and the Somali townsmen who provided for a woman who stayed home all day with children and cooked and cleaned and did not contribute economically. On the part of the British, perhaps they believed a man was a responsible partner and they never studied deeply the tradition of the people they had conquered. For the paid official *Qadi*, perhaps he wanted to overemphasize his imposed position on the social hierarchy. He was not only a learned man but a ruler whose word could pronounce heaven or hell as well. Somali townswomen complained about the dictatorial ways these *Qadis* managed things. In 1953 Amina Xaaji Moxamed, the mother of the renowned modern songwriter, Faysal Cumar Mushteek, sued her husband and demanded a divorce. She was known for her good looks, witty mind and she was also the daughter of a chief. She expected justice to be on her side, since she felt her actions were not at fault. When the *Qadi* listened to the complaint, he announced that, even though her husband was at fault, she should be obedient and remain at home. If she insisted on dissolving the marriage, the *Qadi* would register her as a *Neshiz*. Amazed and bewildered by such 'justice,' she uttered the famous words: *Qudura la arkay ee Qadi how tegin* (In seeking justice from a *Qadi*, I experienced bewilderment and a strange disillusionment).

Today these words are on the lips of every Somali when justice is violated. It is no accident of history that today the Somali man, whose great grandfather treated his great grandmother with respect and knew that she was indispensable to his welfare, has discarded this absurd institution along with colonialism. After independence, the *Neshiz* threat, which limited women and made them shiver with fear, was totally abandoned.

*People who say that Beit El Ta'a is based on Islam are either ignorant or dishonest. The prophet of the Muslims frequently said that a woman should not be forced to live with a man she does not want, or whom she hates, and explained on several occasions that, to start with, a woman should be allowed to choose the man she is going to marry.*¹²

*According to Islam also, a woman is allowed to tear up the marriage contract if she has been forced to conclude it, or was cheated when she entered into the marriage agreement. The prophet himself broke up the marriage of Khansa'a, the daughter of Khozam El Ansaria, because she was forced into it by her father.*¹³

Kebed

As mentioned above, the nomadic woman is the sole archi-

tect of the family. The man has nothing to do with house-building or homecrafts. All the utensils are made by her, and there are many articles used in a nomadic household.

The most celebrated item is the *kebed*. It is a colorful item and one of the finest examples of nomadic craftsmanship. It is made of the fibers of the acacia tree. The fibers are dyed different colors. The colors are arranged geometrically. *Kebed* is one of the 'fine' things in a nomadic household. Placed in the side of the house, it is looked upon as a painting or a piece of art. It takes a long time to make. Nobody has ever studied or documented the way in which Somali crafts are made. Needless to say, all the books written about Somalia do not provide any insight into the significance of self-expression for the women who create many useful things for their society. Their clever hands beautify the harsh environment and usefulness is instilled in a girl's life through dance, song and folklore.

A wedding is always an occasion for making *kebed*. *Kebed*-making is the most solemn and most important preparation for the betrothal. Women congregate and review with the mother of the bride all her stocks of beauty. Somali nomadic mothers store goods for their daughters' weddings the day the girls are born. Intimate friends and female relatives gather to discuss how to make the *kebed*. The fibers are suspended between two poles and are 'waved' by a group of singing ladies. Its preparation is taken seriously. It is a fine art which has its intricacies and fine points; the most experienced women know how each string is dyed and how each fiber is refined. No wonder then that the most exciting work songs come from the *kebed*-making sessions:

Ragguba gaashaan dhigu
Gaal walaal ku yayayee
Na mays garaarmaya ee
Mise waa ku kala goona!

Men protect one another's flank
Thus become brothers
Shall we aid each other or part company.

Kebed is considered the most serious work of the nomadic women. She cannot make it alone. She needs the help and cooperation of other women. That is why the song compares *kebed* to making war. The word *gaanshdig* literally means defense. The song conveys the idea that since men defend each other in wartime, so should women aid each other and prove their sisterhood through sitting long days and 'weaving' the *kebed* together.

Waana goor gaabaan
Gabal dhacayna waa jiraa
Oo gaura dheerow

*Nin baas baan u
Gogal dhigaa
Gododle weeyaan
Intaa gaafwareeg ku jira
Ku jira
Aqal kalu iga galaa
Baan ka gaadhayaa
Ee kuuma gooyeene
Gacalow ninka idhibay!*

Oh fellow sister! Time is up
The night has fallen
The journey is long
And a demanding husband is awaiting
He is ill-tempered character
He may leave me for another woman
If it wasn't for him I wouldn't part!

The recurring theme is the ill-tempered man who belittles the work the women do and enjoys misusing his power to leave for a young woman.

*Adhigu wuxu dhoni in aad so dabalataa
Aurku wuxu dooni in aad dabar kusoxidhaa
Aqalku wuxu dooni in aad shay ku soo dartaa
Ilmihi wuxu dooni in aad aad u dayac tirtaa
Ninkuna wuxu dooni in uu meelo ku kirtaa
Haddana wuxu dooni inu aabi ugu dilaa*

Goats need to be tended with tenderness
Camels need to be tied to their tethers
Your children need encountering their needs
Whereas a husband needs your running errands for him
(And on top of that) to beat you for uncommitted wrongs.

The above song illustrates that a woman's work is too many-sided, too demanding--the foundation of the nomadic family rests on her. The work of the nomadic woman does not disappear through time as does the work of townswomen. The nomadic woman's work is not limited to housekeeping and childrearing; she is an architect and her role is very important.

*Eddow sidee oday loo galaa
Eddow sidayda loo galaa
Eddow sidaaduna waa sidee?
Eddow haddu caanooy ku yidhi
Cadday baa loo lisaa
Haddu baddana ku yadhi
Badhbaa laga sii shubtaa
Biyaa loogu alxisaa*

Mar waa laga xoowsadaa
Mar waa laga sii xigtaa
Haddu hilibay ku yadhi
Ri weyedan loo qalaa
Manjaha loo deebiyaa
Mindida waa laga qarshaa
Haddu mindiyey ku yadhi
Bilaawe af weyn udhiib
Shantaba hays xaabiye
Haddu barkimo ku yadhi
Aloolba loo ridaa
Haddu adagaa ku yadhi
Aboodiga madawa weyn
Adoogi la cadaadaab
Aloolkayga iga sii
Cimirka la daadiye
Cirada ciidda ha daree
Sankaa quri lag gesha
Saraa lagn henjiya!

O aunt, how does one deal with an old husband
Oh niece, you deal with him the way I do
Oh aunt will you kindly tell me how?
Say niece--if he asks for milk
You milk an old goat
When he comments on the plentifulness of it
You help yourself to half of it
You supplement the rest with water
Remember to drink the first mouthful yourself
Also the un milked are all yours
If he asks for meat
You slaughter a boney old goat for him
You roast the unskinned shin for him
Remember to hide knife from him
When he asks for knife
Give him a sharpened dagger
(In the hope that) he cuts off his fingers
And if he asks for a mat to sleep on
Throw him the *Alool*-mat
What if he asks for a pillow?
You fling a hard one at him
And if he complains about how hard it is
May God's curse be on him
He whose head is large like a python
You snatch the *Alool*-mat from him
You make him lose his composure
And let the sand sprinkle his grey hair with dirt
While asleep you place a stick in his nostrils
And you tortuously pull upwards.

The nomadic Somali woman is neither the veiled creature that comes to mind when Westerners think of Islamic countries nor is she the irrelevant, subservient housewife who does not contribute to the family economy, waiting for man, the provider. Both the man and she live in a relationship of interdependence and have power over each other. The powers of the nomadic women are active and lively, but of course they conform to the norms of nomadic life, and many times they have the last word. Townswomen found their personal rights limited if not hindered by the restriction on women's public and economic activities in the 1880s.

The activities of the Somali woman have been neglected by most foreign writers and travellers. Richard Burton commented on Somali poetry, but being a male chauvinist from Victorian England, he absolutely overlooked women's literature, even though he had a keen eye for every passing beauty! Even Margaret Laurence, a woman herself, overlooked her 'sisters' talents and, like her fellow countrymen, paid tribute to the male poets only. Because of the division of labor in nomadic society, women create different forms of expression. There are women's proverbs, women's work songs, women's religious songs; in addition, there are lullabies and children's riddles all sung and taught by women, because in childrearing the words of women are means to cultural ends. Children learn to recite the clan's history and genealogy from mothers, aunts and older sisters.

Conclusion

In conclusion, nomadic society was egalitarian in many respects. First of all, women had a stronger role than they do today because of their indispensable contribution to the family's welfare. Secondly, the woman's movement has deep roots in Somali history. The Somali bridal song, *hadagan ay hoy Daadow, Naan hoy ninku, aabahaa ma ahee Berito ku eryi doonaay*, is loaded with deep meanings. It literally means that the man you are going to be wedded to is not of any relation to you, so you should be alert and take care of yourself and be ever on your guard! This song might sound cynical at first glance, but I believe it demonstrates how outspoken these women were. They detected injustice in the marriage alliance, so they didn't want to betray their daughters. In short, they called a spade a spade!

Notes

1. B.W. Andrejewski, Somali Poetry.
2. Isak Dinesen, Out of Africa, p. 177.
3. *Ibid.*

4. Said S. Samatar, Poetry in Somali Politics: The Case of Sayyid Mohamed, p. 11.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. William Travis, Voice of the Truth, p. 20.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
11. Major Rayne, Sand, Sun and Somalia, p. 48.
12. Nawal El Saadawi, The Hidden Face of Eve; Women in the Arab World, p. 202.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

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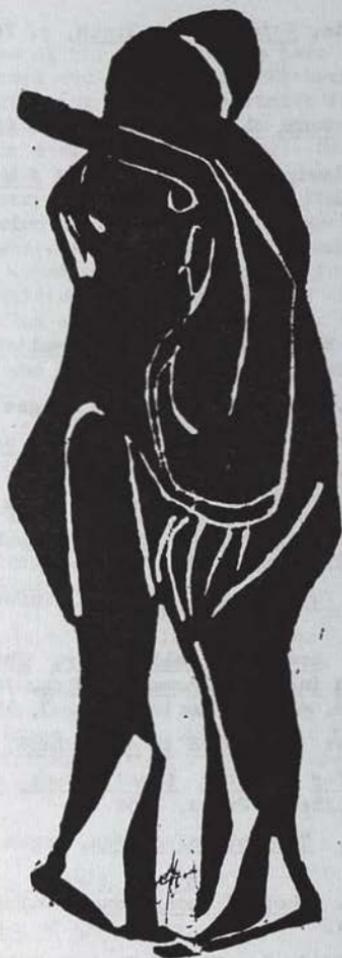
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Love in Two
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