

PART IV

Forms of Resistance

10 Figuring the Dictator in the Horn of Africa: Nuruddin Farah's Dictatorship Trilogy and Ahmed Omar Askar's Short Stories

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, Francis Fukuyama's 1990s declaration of the culmination of universal socio-political evolution in the precepts and institutions of western liberal democracy, seems premature. Although parliamentary democracy is the normative default political system, even in cultures without an established liberal individualist tradition, recent trends towards the right and increased authoritarianism and surveillance, especially in established western democracies, suggest the model of a continuum of political domination and control rather than an evolution towards individual freedom within a purely regulatory, transparent liberal democracy. Forms of authoritarian power within the normalized landscape of the modern nation-state today occur in all of the 'three worlds'. It occurs more than symbolically in the first nation of the first world when presidential candidate Donald Trump unironically states on a national television series: 'This is a dictatorship and I'm the dictator.' It occurs in the second world of Turkey with Recep Erdoğan's far-reaching clampdown on an attempted coup and the elimination of all political opposition. And authoritarian control is the hallmark of numerous third world dictators who seem organically to develop out of the social and political conditions of many postcolonial nation-states. Dictatorship, resistance to dictatorship and the outcome of destabilization of dictatorships are transnational concerns that have transnational impacts, as the failed revolutions of the Arab Spring and Syria attest. Dismissing cultural engagements with dictatorship to the shelves of the twentieth-century archive seems precipitate, and understanding dictatorship today remains as urgent as it has been in the past.

Nuruddin Farah's 'Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship' trilogy, which includes the novels *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1980), *Sardines* (1981) and *Close Sesame* (1983), is probably the most extensive and sustained single-authored exploration of the politics of dictatorship in an African literary context. The trilogy was written with its author in exile from his native Somalia, an exile that has continued from 1976 till this day. (Fearing that he had fallen foul of the Somali political regime after the publication of his novel *A Naked Needle*, Farah did not return home after his studies in London.) While the scholarship of the African 'dictatorship novel' is not as developed as the study of this sub-genre of Latin-American novels, including, most notably, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* and Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat*, the number of African writers who have fictionalized the origins, effects and decline of dictatorships is striking. The list includes the troika of African literary 'fathers', Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in *Anthills of the Savannah*, *Kongi's Harvest* and *The Wizard of the Crow*, respectively. But the list of African dictator fictions is much longer and includes many other works.¹ A complete overview of literary works that address dictatorship in the African context suggests the dominance of the genre of the novel, with a few exceptions, for example, Soyinka's drama, *Kongi's Harvest*, mentioned above. There are also numerous fictional engagements of the totalitarianism of the apartheid state, where social control was located in a structure and an ideology without a single figurehead leader. The dictator novel may, furthermore, be very productively read in conjunction with the African war novel; in particular, the many child-soldier narratives that have emerged in recent years. Very often in these novels, the dictatorship itself or resistance to dictatorship creates the spiral of violence into which child-soldiers are enlisted; and, ironically, the paramilitary leaders of the platoons of child-soldiers become mini-dictators of 'nations' on the move.

- 1 Some recent African dictatorship fictions include Ahmadou Kourouma's *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*, Alaa al-Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building*, Moses Isegawa's *Snakepit*, Yasmina Khadra's (nom de plume) *The Dictator's Last Night*, Maaza Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, Henri Lopès's *The Laughing Cry: An African Cock and Bull Story*, and the novels of Hisham Matar.

Farah's dictatorship trilogy that provides an archaeology of the power of autocrat, Mohamed Siad Barre, remains to date, however, the most extended detailed meditation on African dictatorship by a writer of fiction. Farah's oeuvre, beginning in 1970 with the novel *From a Crooked Rib*, narrativizes the history of Somalia from the colonial period to contemporary times where Somalia today, as failed state, makes the headlines for piracy and terrorism. In terms of the bigger picture of Somalia, the dictatorship trilogy is one part of a larger oeuvre that completes a Somali historical timeline. The dictatorship trilogy is flanked by *A Naked Needle* (1976), set in the period where Siad Barre has just come into power. Here, in incidental allusions, Farah, without a crystal ball in which Siad Barre's future authoritarianism is foreshadowed, appears to endorse the socialist coup that claimed it would bring stability and prosperity to Somalia, whose experiment in postcolonial democracy hitherto was anarchic in the extreme. The dictatorship trilogy is followed by the 'Blood in the Sun' trilogy, where Siad Barre assumes a background role, hanging onto a precipitously waning power which in *Secrets*, the final novel of the second trilogy, gives way to the power of the warlords.

In its representation of the figure of the dictator, Farah's trilogy will be compared with a collection of short stories titled *Sharks and Soldiers*, little known in Anglo-American literary circuits but widely read and easily available in Somaliland, by medical doctor, Ahmed Omar Askar. Askar sought asylum in Finland after the destruction of his home in Hargeisa in Somaliland in the north of the country in Siad Barre's aerial bombardment of the city in 1988. Like Farah, Askar's stories attempt to encompass a wide historical sweep but which, in this case, covers only the period of Siad Barre's accession to power, till his destruction of Hargeisa, a major city in northern Somalia, and seat of the greatest resistance to the dictatorship based in the south. These two representations of political oppression, both written by Somali intellectuals who were driven out of their country by the megalomaniac supremacy and cruelty of a military dictator, represent the dictator in intriguingly different ways.

General Mohamed Siad Barre came into power in a military coup in the early hours of the morning of 21 October 1969, declaring a 'socialist revolution' in Somalia. Within a few hours of consolidation of his power, he

arrested the prime minister and his cabinet, and other significant political figures. His takeover was, in the first instance, facilitated by the assassination six days earlier of president Abdirashid Ali Shermarke in an apparently unrelated clan-linked revenge attack.² The coup was more generally encouraged by the chaotic and tension-ridden state of parliamentary democracy in the preceding nine years since independence and by the failing state of the economy.³ The Westphalian nation-state model and British-style parliamentary democracy were alien to indigenous forms of social and political organization, that in many ways were more fundamentally democratic and anti-hierarchical than colonial models. In the days and weeks after the coup, Barre declared himself head of the newly constituted Supreme Revolutionary Council, suspended the supreme court, barred all political activity and presented a charter outlining the forms that social and economic engineering would take under his regime.⁴ Challenging the complex clan-based structure of Somali society, the new regime excoriated 'tribalism' as contradictory to the principles of nationalism and scientific socialism. Recognizing the importance of literacy in an internationally connected and modernizing Somalia, the 'socialist' regime introduced a script and orthography for Somali, which hitherto had been a wholly oral language. It also drove a literacy campaign which saw young people from the towns and cities deployed to nomadic pastoralist communities in the countryside to teach reading and writing. The new regime also declared itself the champion of women's rights under the Somali Women's Democratic Organization, under the leadership of Barre's wife. Putatively socialist, the regime nevertheless needed to find support for its policies in politically slanted interpretations of Islam, the deeply culturally ingrained faith of 99 per cent of Somalis. Unwilling to provide scriptural endorsement of Barre's dictats and policies, ten sheikhs were summarily executed in January 1975, shocking Somalia into final acknowledgement of the authoritarian nature

2 Mary Harper, *Getting Somalia Wrong: Faith, War and Hope in a Shattered State* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 54.

3 Ahmed I. Samatar, *Socialist Somalia: Rhetoric and Reality* (London: Zed Books, 1988), 70–7.

4 Samatar, *Socialist Somalia*, 83–7.

of their polity. Whatever its declared ideals, Barre's socialist revolution degenerated into a cruel and unpredictable personal leadership that ruled by fear, manipulated clan loyalties and promoted his own clan and the clans of his immediate family members.

Barre's dictatorship lasted more than twenty years in which time Somalia experienced drought and famine, war with Ethiopia in the Ogaden and the bombing in 1988 of Hargeisa by South African mercenaries so devastating that Hargeisa came to be known as the Dresden of Africa, recalling the indiscriminate bombing by allied forces of Dresden in Germany in the Second World War. While Siad Barre exerted tight control over the city of Mogadishu, he ruled largely by coercion and could not manufacture the consent one associates with European totalitarian states. He was, for the most part, kept in power by Cold War rivalries in Africa, that saw him armed and supported first by the Soviets and then by the US. The collapse of his regime and his eventual flight in 1991 were owing partially to internal resistance, but also to the waning power and collapse of the Soviet Union, also in 1991. The end of Cold War antagonisms saw a dwindling of American support in Siad Barre's final years on the pretext of a breaking of ties because of his regime's human rights violations. In these respects, Siad Barre's dictatorship has followed the pattern of most modern dictatorships marked by the collusion of the imagined community of nation with the cult of individual leadership, an ideology that provides justification for otherwise unconscionable acts of terror and violence, and an insatiable acquisitiveness that allows the accumulation of personal wealth amidst personal tyranny. Both Farah and Askar, the two writers of dictatorship studied here, draw on the major trends and events of Siad Barre's leadership described above, but approach the figure of the dictator himself in rather different ways. Farah's dictatorship novels have been studied by many scholars as individual works, as a trilogy and as part of general overviews of Farah's development across his career. Of the analyses of the dictatorship novels, surprisingly, very few focus specifically on the question of dictatorship.⁵ What none of the commentators on dictatorship in Farah's novels do, however, is focus

5 Articles that specifically focus on Farah's critique of the Somali dictatorship include, among others, the work of Patricia Alden and Louis Tremaine, Annie Gagiano,

on the figure of the dictator that lies at the centre of each of the novels and of the trilogy. Max Lerner in the classic volume, *Dictatorship in the Modern World*, proposes that the ‘most important symbol and emotionally the most evocative figure’ in an authoritarian state ‘is the leader himself’.⁶ Lerner has in mind Fascist and Nazi cults of leadership, but his powerful portrait is apt also for the postcolonial dictator, as this figure emerges in Farah’s dictatorship trilogy:

The dictator, like the movie star, has been excessively romanticized. A glamour-starved populace, ... create the myth of a superman who focuses all of the energies of his time and dares put an end to inaction. By enlarging his stature they succeed in compensating for their own dwarfed and stunted stature in an industrial age. ... He sways tens of thousands by his daemonic oratory; he moves about in a continuous hysterical parade; wherever he goes heels are clicked, hands raise to salute, hoarse and eager throats do him homage. In due course this begins to tell on him, for he is generally a person capable of persuading and hypnotizing not only others but even himself. If, to start with, he was only a man who wanted to be dictator, he ends by becoming a combination of Caesar and Messiah. And naturally so, for he comes at the end of a long romantic sequence. All the centuries of romanticism, by emphasizing genius and leadership and a Promethean defiance of fate, have contributed to his construction. He stands there, mystic, adventurer, orator, fanatic; the man of action who moves by his words, the man of words who incites to action; the hero of our time, which had begun to fear that it had lost its capacity for hero worship.⁷

The society that produces Lerner’s dictator is early twentieth-century, modernized, industrialized Europe; but if one substitutes postcolonial for industrial, the picture that emerges is of Farah’s dictator, especially in the Romantic and Promethean mirror the dictator holds up to the individuals of the elite who challenge his power in the three novels.

Paradoxically, Farah’s dictator is both at the centre of the dictatorship trilogy, but is also striking for his total absence. In ‘Why I Write’, a well-known essay describing the author’s origins and evolution as a writer

Josef Gugler, Dubravka Juraga, Armando Pajalich, John Masterson, Felix Mnthali, Gichingiri Ndigirigi and Derek Wright, as well as my own research.

6 Max Lerner, ‘The Pattern of Dictatorship’, *Dictatorship in the Modern World*. Ed. Guy Stanton Ford (London: Minnesota University Press, 1935), 9.

7 Lerner, ‘The Pattern of Dictatorship’, 9–10.

in a society that was largely oral, Farah outlines the impact of Siad Barre's dictatorship on his literary creativity. In response to pressure from both camps – those for and against the 'socialist' revolution – Farah admits in his youthful naivete to have written works that were 'as apolitical as I could make them' (8). But, after trips to various other dictatorships like the Soviet Union, Hungary, Greece and Egypt, Farah recognized that the essence of dictatorship consisted in the dictator's construction of fictive truths. For this reason, he adopted as the driving force for his own fiction the theme 'Truth versus Untruth' (13). Given that postmodernism is the implicit paradigm for the greater number of Farah's novels, the 'Truth' that the novels uncover is the truth of nontruth. In some ways this insight is carried over to the representation of the dictator in the four books written from 1971 to 1980 about Siad Barre's Somalia – the dictator is represented through nonrepresentation. At no point in any of the novels that constitute the trilogy is the dictator presented in person as a character. There are no physical descriptions of the general, no intimations of his character, drives or ambitions, and the reader is never told about the dictator's origins and personal history. At no point is any of the action focalized through the dictator. The 'aesthetics of vulgarity' that Achille Mbembe in *On the Postcolony* links with the African dictator, and the fetish objects and ritualization that are tropes in many of the other African dictator fictions, are not elements of Farah's representation.⁸ Throughout the novels, the dictator is referred to only in the third person 'he', or by his military designation, the General, he is never named and certainly is not presented as a fleshed-out character. But the novels do, however, construct in detail the architecture of a postcolonial, largely nomadic-pastoral and agricultural country, unusually, as a totalitarian state with explicit parallels in Mussolini's Fascist Italy and Stalinist Russia, both of which were socially and economically quite different from Somalia. (Somalia has historical links with both Italy and Russia. The south of Somalia was an Italian colony and Somalia received Soviet support after its proclaimed socialist revolution.) Across the three novels, despite the fact that the leader is presented in absentia, his authority,

8 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 102–41.

certainly in the city of Mogadishu, is shown to be virtually absolute through very concrete methods of control described below.

In *Sweet and Sour Milk*, the first novel of the trilogy, the dominant analogy is of Somalia, or more correctly, Mogadishu as prison with the General as Grand Warder, supported by his personal police, the Green Guards: 'There are thirteen cells. This city is broken into thirteen cells, of which all but one is of manageable size. The Security deems it necessary to break this sandy city into these, have each house numbered, the residents counted – and everybody screwed! The General has the master-key to all cells, whether numbered or unnumbered. He is the Grand Warder, remember' (87). This novel also introduces the allusion of Dionysius's ear (136), that is referred to in the other novels also. Here the cave built, according to legend, by the Syracusan tyrant to hear the whispered conspiracies of his prisoners is compared with Siad Barre's manipulation of clan loyalties and the 'technology' of orality to spy on the populace with the efficacy of electronic surveillance, given the exceptional memories of people in largely oral cultures. In *Sardines*, the second novel of the trilogy, the image of the oral informer is given visceral impact through being transformed into the figure of the pederast, cruising the streets for potential innocent victims, whose persecution generates the fear that keeps the populace in thrall. As in the USSR under Stalin where all information was filtered and reconfigured into news that supported state policies and promoted its leader, the General is shown in *Sweet and Sour Milk* to be a wily spin doctor who takes the state-sponsored murder of Soyaan, a resistance figure, and transmutes it in newspaper reports into the death of a loyal party hero. Loyaan, the twin brother of Soyaan who investigates his death, is appalled to read an article in the Mogadiscio daily that reports his brother's dying words as, 'LABOUR IS HONOUR AND THERE IS NO GENERAL BUT OUR GENERAL' (99). In *Sardines*, the subsequent novel, when the heroine, Medina, exploits her position as editor of the city daily to edit the speeches of the General undermining his control of the media, she is summarily fired. The General also is presented as controlling through the fear inspired by the notorious pre-dawn raids in which critics of the regime were rounded up and detained or executed without trial, or were simply made to disappear. Thus, the importance and impact of control through various means in the

Somali socialist state are clearly shown in Farah's novels, even though the dictator himself is not shown.

Farah's representation of the forms of surveillance, control and summary punishment of the dictatorship carries sufficient specific detail for it to read as a relatively accurate account of Somalia under Barre's rule, and, through implicit and explicit links, this dictatorship is paralleled with other tyrannies, both in Africa and internationally. Thus, although the effects of authoritarian rule are explicitly described, Farah's depiction of dictatorship moves into a more abstract realm through using the Somali dictator as a symbol of all forms of authoritarianism, rather than presenting him as a wily opportunist who takes advantage of political and social weaknesses in his society to consolidate power and wealth. The abstraction of the historical dictator is presented mainly in the first two novels of the trilogy through the control and oppression of the male hero *as son* in *Sweet and Sour Milk*, and the female hero *as daughter* in *Sardines*. Patriarchy in the double sense of oppression by fathers of sons and oppression of women by men is implicitly condemned through the absent-presence of the ruthless dictator figure. The twins, Soyaan and Loyaan, are victims not only of the control and cruelty of the head of state, they are the victims also of their father who is a security officer for the state. The father, Keynaan, is presented as a conservative 'flat-earther' persuaded both of his own political and religious subservience, and, his subordination fuels his cruel power over his wives and children: 'My father grew up with the idea that the universe is flat; we, that it is round ... My father sees himself as a miniature creature in a flat world dominated by a God-figure high and huge ... Suddenly, however, he behaves as if he were the most powerful of men ... the Grand Patriarch ... in front of his children and his wives' (83). For Medina in *Sardines*, the dictator similarly embodies the patriarchal brutality of her slave-owning grandfather, who exploits what, in the novels, is the inherent oppression of tradition and religion, especially of women. The conflation of dictatorial political power with patriarchy is underlined by a quote from Wilhelm Reich that is used as epigraph to part two of *Sweet and Sour Milk*: 'In the figure of the father the authoritarian state has its representative in every family, so that the family becomes its most important instrument of power.' The historical figure of the dictator is abstracted also to encompass

a critique of the authority of religion, through its foundation in a single Godhead in the monotheisms. This critique emerges most strongly in the middle novel, *Sardines*, where the honorific titles frequently linked with leadership cults, and a significant feature of Siad Barre's historical inflation of self, are associated with the 99 beautiful names or qualities of the God of Islam. The critique of tyranny thus, through the highly abstract absent-presence of the dictator figure who represents all hierarchical systems, is a simultaneous critique of traditional and religious forms of authority construed only as relations of power.

The idea of the dictator's 'absent-presence' is captured also in *Sardines*, where, in the same way that the novel itself educates the reader about authoritarianism generally, the heroine Medina writes a Somali translation of the folk tale of the tortoise and the birds told by a mother to her daughter in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Medina writes the translation for her own daughter, Ubax, whom she has taken out of school to avoid exposure to the General's propaganda. The story about the selfishness and greed of tortoise who tricks the birds out of a feast in the sky is left vague and is repeatedly referred to only by the title given to it by Medina – 'He'. The tale is intended as an allegory of Siad Barre's deception and avarice, but the moral does not clearly emerge; instead it is overshadowed by the looming, abstract figure known only as 'He'. Lerner in the excerpt above alludes to the Romantic and Promethean sources that feed into the construction of the totalitarian dictator. *Sardines* quite explicitly presents Siad Barre in a similar way. *Sardines* pivots the challenge between Siad Barre and those who resist him on the knife-edge of the battle of 'opposites' who are mirror images of each other. Medina is the rebellious, Romantic-Promethean who believes herself to be the General's nemesis, inspiring her to make 'daredevil' decisions like altering the General's speeches. The image used to describe this *pas de deux* is the 'dance of death': 'The General's power and I are like two lizards engaged in a varanian dance of death; we are two duellists dancing a tarantella in which they challenge their own destiny. He is as aggressive towards me as I am towards him. He uses violent language and so do I. He calls me "a dilettante bourgeois", "a reactionary"; I call him "fascist" and "dictator"' (45). Even in this 'manifesto' by Medina, she specifies that she opposes not the General, who is not represented even in this individually

directed challenge, but the General's 'power'. The effect of the above forms of inflation of the representation of the dictator as a larger than life, but also abstract, character is to make the Somali dictator a philosophical principle of authoritarianism writ unaccountably large, rather than a fairly pusillanimous military man and politician who, through manipulation of local contexts and through foreign support that bolstered geopolitical interests at the time, was able violently to terrorize Somalis for about two decades.

Thus in the trilogy the figure of the dictator, through the detail of the forms of brutality and control of his regime, is sufficiently specific to be historically linked with the Somali dictator. However, the real dictator, in crucial ways, is absented in order to exist as a stand-in for all other forms of authoritarianism. Specific references to the General are even fewer in *Close Sesame*, the final novel of the trilogy, but the General's animus looms large and threatening. In the final novel of the trilogy, the focus falls on the possibility of a non-authoritarian patriarchy in the ageing apparently traditionally and religiously conformist hero, Deeriye. However, in the final analysis, Deeriye is shown not to be shaped by Somali cultural and religious precepts, but as I have argued elsewhere, is revealed to be constituted out of an individual, rather than collective, spirituality.⁹ What remains thus is the idea of the oppressiveness of all sovereignty, including good authority, figured in the totalitarian absent-presence of the General. In this way, Farah's dictator comes in some ways to resemble the leader of the true totalitarian state, which for Hannah Arendt, is represented only by Nazism and Stalinism. Totalitarianism for Arendt is a destructive mass movement, with the leader as the absent-presence at its centre – like the eye of the storm. She uses the image of the onion for the totalitarian state, buffered by layers of self-justifying subterfuge, with the leader as the hollow in the centre. Totalitarianism, unlike dictatorship, 'means permanent revolution which does not exhaust its momentum in conquest of a particular state, but goes on attacking all institutional structures, and all

9 F. Fiona Moolla, *Reading Nuruddin Farah: The Individual, the Novel and the Idea of Home* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2014), 122–41.

territorial boundaries.’¹⁰ In some ways, perhaps, through exorbitation of the Somali general, Mohamed Siad Barre, into a figure that encompasses the world-dominating ambitions of a *Fuhrer* or a Stalin, and tyranny as a broadly philosophical concept, Farah may have created an abstraction that none of his heroes and heroines would be able to overcome, as indeed they do not. Neither the passive resistance of the elect group of ten in the first two novels, nor the violent individual resistance of Deeriye in the final novel of the trilogy appears to put a dent in the fictional dictator’s armour.

By contrast, a very much more real and manageable, albeit disturbed and disturbing, dictator emerges in the narratives of Ahmed Omar Askar who lived in Somalia until his home was destroyed in the 1988 Hargeisa bombing. The author suggests in the foreword to *Sharks and Soldiers*, that this is a collection of ‘fictionalized short stories’, but the pieces in many ways are written as narrative nonfiction, coming close to the approach of auto/biography or the style of American New Journalism, where reportage is combined with the use of literary techniques. In the foreword, Askar states furthermore that he seeks through his ‘few lines’ only to preserve a memory of Somalia under tyranny for younger generations of Somalis who have been dispersed throughout the world: ‘This book preserves a few lines for the younger generations, who seek answers for many questions concerning their situation during this period in which hundreds of thousands of Somalis live as refugees in foreign countries and millions suffer from hunger, diseases and war in their homeland’ (Foreword). Thus, the ambition of the collection is modest. It does not seek to reveal ultimate truths, and the choice of English as international language over Somali by a political refugee in Finland is probably motivated by the likelihood that future generations of Somalis in the diaspora would be English – rather than Somali-speaking. Askar emphasizes, however, that his writing should not be considered as historical evidence, but that his 8 short stories represent a fictionalized account of major events from the proclamation of the

10 Margaret Canovan, ‘The Leader and the Masses: Hannah Arendt on Totalitarianism and Dictatorship’, *Dictatorship in History and Theory: Bonapartism, Caesarism, and Totalitarianism*. Ed. Peter Baehr and Melvin Richter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 241–62, 248.

socialist revolution to the heavy-handed clampdown on the insurrection in Somaliland in the north. The titles of the 8 stories provide a timeline of key moments in the development of the Somali dictatorship: 'Paint the Revolution Bloody Red', 'The Devil is a Mullah', 'Feeding the Sharks', 'Laughter is a Crime', 'Operation Water Reservoir', 'The Isaak Extermination', 'Hand Over Your Money', and 'The Appeasement Committee'. The stories are not markedly literary in their techniques and are simply written, given that English is not the author's first language. However, the stories provide one of very few narrative glimpses, certainly available in English, into a dark but interesting period of Somali history; and what is especially fascinating is the quite dismissive representation of the dictator by a writer who himself lived subject to his rule and had his home and family life destroyed by Siad Barre's bombing of Hargeisa where he lived. Siad Barre is personally represented in 5 of the 8 stories, and where he is figured, the portrait is truncated and cartoonish, and quite calculatedly so. Although Askar is not an experienced creative writer with a literary background, there is nevertheless an artfulness in the use of juxtaposition of elements, irony, paradox and bathos in the representation of Siad Barre in the stories. For example, in the first story, 'Paint the Revolution Bloody Red', where Siad Barre liquidates members of the Supreme Revolutionary Council, beginning a consolidation of personal power, the narrative dramatically creates a climactic scene with a tense head of state testing the waters to see how far the Somali people will allow him to go:

President Mohamed Siad Barre was chain smoking in his office at Avezione, the national army's headquarters, which also served as the presidential palace. The military camp is not far from the Badka, the revolution's death site. ... Siad Barre started walking up and down his office as it was about the time at which the death squad was to carry out the death penalty of the SRC members. He can hear the firing in his office and he was waiting for this to happen at any minute. At last the sound of the firing reached him. He was seized by a wild sensation. Breathing rapidly and perspiring, he clutched the edge of his desk. When the firing stopped, he felt a deep pleasure through his whole body and relaxed his grasp. This was his first test of the Somalis, it was a success. They were all ready to offer their necks for hanging. ... It is a great day. (4)

Askar goes on to write that a light ‘*hagayo*’ rain begins to fall shortly after the execution, shedding tears that no one else ‘dared’ to shed. The narrative thus creates a critical ambiguity regarding whether the populace is justifiably fearful, or, alternatively, too cowardly openly to condemn Siad Barre’s actions. The representation of Siad Barre is similarly ambiguous, presenting an image of a ruthless dictator, which is simultaneously a comic-book sequence of a depraved little man deriving orgasmic pleasure from seeing how far he can go. The narrative thus presents a picture of a cruel but certainly not superhuman man, subtly implying the potential but historically failed agency of the Somali people to put him out of power early in his career. A very similar scene is constructed in the story ‘The Devil is a Mullah’ when the religious leaders who critiqued Siad Barre’s interpretations of the Qur’an are executed.

The stories also record Siad Barre’s paltry attempts at distiguishing himself through various means – honorific titles, narcissistic valorization in print, portraiture and popular music, plush office furnishings, cars and presidential ‘palaces.’ The second story, for example, presents Siad Barre staging himself as the father of the nation through very careful events management:

The Dervishs’ [sic] Park of Mogadishu lies in the low valley between the statue of Mohamed Abdulla Hassan and Hotel Bulsho. This is a favourite spot for Siad Barre to make his public speeches. While making a speech, he is usually standing at the highest point of the sand-hill near the statue, looking down at the crowds down in the valley. This gives him a real sense of power and greatness. (17)

In the final line of the extract, the narrative undercuts the attempts of the president to align himself with the leadership, charisma and oratory of Muhammad Abdille Hassan, ‘Sayyid’, often considered the father of Somali nationalism and the Somali Shakespeare for the unsurpassed power of his oral poetry. Even though Siad Barre positions himself in close proximity to the statue, he himself is the bathetic anti-climax of what the Sayyid represented.

On the one hand, the picture that emerges is of a fairly insecure man, not a postcolonial Somali Prometheus, or magnetic charismatic *Führer*. In fact, he is presented in the context of his family members, namely a drunken

son and a wife who solicits butter as a bribe from a visiting regional official, further reducing his stature. On the other hand, the picture emerges of a cruel, vindictive, heartless man. The collection in part takes its title from the rumours associated with Siad Barre that he threw his political opponents into the shark-infested waters of the Indian ocean off the Mogadishu beaches. In the story 'Feeding the Sharks' Siad Barre is presented as having built a shark aquarium where he studies shark predation in an attempt to hone strategies of political and actual attack. The dictator who emerges in these accounts is an altogether more manageable, albeit cruel figure, than the dictator of the trilogy – he is a leader who rules by wiliness and strength of arms, but who may be overcome. The figure of the dictator is balanced by the representation of individuals and groups who challenge his policies and who sometimes suffer setbacks but are not written out of the political picture, or at least, the spirit they represent is not.

The study of the representation of dictatorship in the trilogy and the collection of short stories provokes questions about genre. Does the form of the dictator genre determine its content? How does the content shape our understanding of the problem of dictatorship and the response to the problem? More specifically, does the novel as genre, with its channelling of individual character and the attendant ironies and contradictions of philosophical individualism, reflected in the anti-hero as mirror, produce a dictator figure so abstract and complex that he cannot be resisted? Does the compressed narrative form of the short story, often located within a short story sequence or short story cycle, predispose the genre to a more focused, specific representation, minimizing inflation of the dictator figure? Do the claims to factuality of narrative nonfiction impact forms of representation of the dictator? Finally, how might other genres, for example the oral forms alluded to in both the novels and the short stories, figure dictators? These questions demand a more rigorous analysis of the impact of forms both on modes of representation of the dictator figure and effects on the audience of these forms – an enquiry which is opened up in this volume.

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II 'Under the Lion's Gaze': Female Sexualities under Dictatorship in Selected Fiction from Malawi

The intersections between the ideological-material legacies of Hastings Kamuzu Banda's dictatorial regime and representations of female sexuality in Malawian fiction are the focus of this chapter. Drawing from Dubravka Juraga, who points out that 'literary texts may offer an incisive perspective on the social and psychological dynamics of authoritarianism, addressing not only how dictators maintain power through outright surveillance mechanisms, but what living conditions are like for ordinary individuals under modern despotic regimes,'¹ I am particularly interested in using literary narratives to examine how writers explore the congruencies and disjunctures amongst outright political dictatorship and the impact on bodies and behaviours of subjects, along with discourses such as gender and culture which are commonly mobilized in the service of national identity. I focus on two novels by Malawian writers, namely Tiyambe Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* (1992) and James Ng'ombe's *Sugarcane with Salt* (1989 [2005]), texts which are both set in Banda's dictatorial regime. The chapter examines the writers' portrayal of female sexual agency, desires and pleasure and how they simultaneously challenge and reproduce received, normative 'truths' about female sexualities.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's critical insights from his seminal text, *History of Sexuality*, this chapter explores Zeleza and Ng'ombe's depiction of female sexualities in their novels as sites of resistance against patriarchal

1 Dubravka Juraga, 'Nuruddin Farah's Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship: Patriarchy, Gender, and Political Oppression in Somalia', in Derek Wright, ed., *Emerging Perspectives on Nuruddin Farah* (Trenton: Africa World Press Inc., 2002), 283–307 (283).

hegemony, which elude control even while there remain awkward moments in which the female characters continue to be interpellated by normative, even hegemonic discourses around sexualities. Foucault maintains that sexuality has ‘been taken charge of, tracked down, as it were, by a discourse that aims to allow ... no obscurity, no respite.’² He argues that discourse involves power because it is about knowledge and language and narratives are key vehicles for producing knowledge. Power is thus a multiplicity of force relations of which discourse and knowledge are key elements. As such, language is not merely an explicitly directed, repressive power, but productive of knowledge in more dispersed forms – in the case of the present chapter, of the nature of sexuality and ‘proper’ sexual conduct. Thus power paradoxically offers spaces for reverse, opposing discourses as will be illustrated in this analysis.

Regimes of power and sexualities

In contemporary Malawi, the mention of the name of Kamuzu Banda, the first president of Malawi, commonly referred to as *ngwazi* and *mkango*,³ invokes many ambivalent memories including those of murders, mysterious accidents, imprisonments and exiles of dissenters as well as peace and food security. To further comment on the ambivalence in the national memories of Banda, Reuben Chirambo explains that ‘the narratives of constructed monuments (both scripted and symbolic) recall and celebrate Banda as a nationalist hero, the father and founder of the Malawi nation, but his critics and victims suggest he was a vicious dictator.’⁴ Banda’s Malawi, as

2 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol.1* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 20.

3 Ngwazi was Banda’s official title, which means ‘the all wise one’, and *mkango* means ‘lion’ in Chichewa (the national language of Malawi).

4 Reuben Chirambo, “‘A Monument to a Tyrant’ or Reconstructed Nationalist Memories of the Father and Founder of the Malawi Nation, Dr. H. K. Banda,” *Africa Today* 56.4 (2010), 2–21 (3).

Tiyambe Zeleza describes the thirty-year regime (from 1994 to 1964), was 'a contraption of totalitarian power [...] a land of pervasive fear where words were constantly monitored ... a state of dull uniformity that criminalized difference, ambiguity, and creativity, an omniscient regime with a divine right to nationalize time'.⁵ Through a pervasive system of control which employed various state machinery, Banda's one party state 'censored memories, stories, and words that contested and mocked its hegemonic authority, thus rewriting history, banishing and imprisoning numerous opponents, real and imaginary, who questioned the legitimacy of the regime'.⁶ In post-colonial Malawi under Banda, state power exceeded its normal limits; the state was able to exert influence, direct and indirect, on both mundane and politically consequential matters. In such semi-permanent states of political 'excess', the postcolonial commandment (as Mbembe calls it), routinizes itself through 'daily rituals that ratify it'.⁷ Such control by the regime was even extended to issues to do with sexualities which Banda sought to regulate and mould into his idea of propriety. For example, on one occasion in the early 1970s long before AIDS struck the nation, Banda devoted a three-hour speech to 'extolling traditional sexual and moral propriety as part of a perceived Malawian cultural heritage'.⁸

Furthermore, in 1973, Banda's regime, through the Decency in Dress Act, imposed strict dress codes for women whereby 'a new script, steeped in the moralistic, anti-sexual and body shame acts, was inscribed on the bodies of women and with it an elaborate system of control'.⁹ The act made women's wearing of trousers, miniskirts, skirts with slits, showing cleavage a criminal offence as it was perceived inimical to the so called Malawian

5 Tiyambe P. Zeleza, 'Banishing Words and Stories: Censorship in Banda's Malawi', *CODESRIA Bulletin* 1 (1996), 10–15 (10).

6 Zeleza, 'Banishing Words', 10.

7 Achille Mbembe, 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', *Africa* 62/1 (1992), 3–37 (10).

8 Chimaraoke Izugbara and Jerry Okal, 'Performing Heterosexuality: Male Youth, Vulnerability and HIV in Malawi' in Andrea Cornwall et al., eds, *Men and Development: Politicizing Masculinities* (London: Zed Books, 2011), 21–32 (22).

9 Sylvia Tamale, ed., *African Sexualities: A Reader* (Cape Town: Pambazuka Press, 2011), 16.

cultural values. The regime claimed that these prohibited clothing items drew attention to a woman's thighs and buttocks, two areas considered particularly erogenous in Malawi. Banda was known for having very strict, conservative notions about sexuality and the impropriety of displaying or even discussing anything that might be construed as sexually suggestive. The state's control of bodies, conflated with the dictator's puritanical beliefs, made sexuality a taboo subject in Banda's Malawi. A censorship board was even constituted to monitor and regulate the literature, films, and music Malawians had access to. For example, Marvin Gaye's hit song 'Sexual Healing,' released in 1982, was banned from Malawian airwaves because of its title and lyrics which were perceived to be sexually explicit. Under the regime, even various sexual practices such as homo-erotic practices and oral sex were penalized and prohibited as they were categorized under 'unnatural sexual acts' and contrary to Malawian culture. Here, one notes how sexuality exists as a site for marking national belonging, thus reminding us of Foucault's argument that sexuality is a charged point of transfer for power. Banda's systematic control of bodies and sexualities was maintained and perpetuated through the indoctrination of the nation, exercised through the regime's four cornerstones, namely unity, loyalty, obedience and discipline.

Contrary to the regime's rhetoric that one of its main agendas was to empower women's lives, women bore the brunt of the regime's oppressive machinery. Traditionally the role of the Malawian woman has been that of subservience to the man and female sexuality is generally perceived as subordinate to that of men. Modes of regulating and controlling female sexualities are embodied through various forms including through cultural practices, religious and state institutions and their role in socializing women and men. Banda's regime took advantage of the already disempowered position of Malawian women to further exploit them and to further secure women's sexuality under men's control. Oppressive conditions under the regime perpetuated by the *Mbumba* culture in which every Malawian woman was forced to dance for Banda at every political event, exposed women to different forms of sexual exploitation carried out by politicians and the

youth militia who exercised power over local citizens.¹⁰ Emily Mkamanga argues that women suffered in silence despite the *Nkhoswe-Mbumba* ideology which purported to exist for the provision and promotion of women. She argues that women were 'vulnerable [...] in [the] dictatorship which downgraded [their] status to second class citizens' and the regime 'left no woman untouched'.¹¹ Although Banda insisted on sexual propriety in terms of dressing and behaviour exemplified through the dancing women's donning of long *zitenjes*, the dance movements in interaction with the dress had a transformative effect on the message. The dance moves in the form of eroticized hip and thigh movements directed towards male politicians, notably Banda himself, presented a paradox. The message of female sexual propriety changed from one of modesty to one of explicit sensuality and sexuality but under the control of Banda, who always made sure that he had the optimum view of women's dancing bodies.¹² Such were the contradictions of Banda's regime.

Literary production and authoritarianism

Thirty years of Banda's systematic control on the publication and circulation of literature, which was implicated in various state and cultural institutions, affected literary production in the country. Hester Ross argues that 'Malawian literature has been affected by the prevailing totalitarian power structures', and goes on to assert that this is even reflected in the

10 Women in Malawi were fondly referred to by Banda as *Mbumba za Kamuzu* which literally means women who were under the protection and moral care of Kamuzu Banda as their *nkhoswe*.

11 Emily Mkamanga, *Suffering in Silence: Malawi's 30-Year Dance with Dr Banda* (Glasgow: Dudu Nsomba, 2000), 6; 11.

12 Lisa Gilman, *The Dance of Politics: Gender, Performance, and Democratization in Malawi* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009), 66.

representation of male-female relations in Malawian literature.¹³ Generally, Malawian literature has attracted minimal critical attention and even more so, the subject of gender in Malawian novels has been neglected by critics within Malawi and outside. Issues to do with gender and sexuality have not occupied much space in the literature produced by Malawians. In fact, these issues are often glossed over by critics and writers alike in favour of focusing on the harsh realities of Kamuzu Banda's autocratic regime and less on its effects on gendered and sexed subjectivities. This focus has 'arrested the discussion of sexuality', to borrow from Allison Donnell's observation about the dearth of studies on representations of sexualities in Caribbean literature.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the few studies on gender with a biased reference to women in Malawian fiction reflect that their representation in Malawian literary imaginaries is almost always framed within binary representations of the prostitute/mistress living at the margins of society versus the 'Madonna', or the ideal, long-enduring wife and mother.¹⁵ Francis Moto adds to this observation by contending that he is yet to come across a story that treats a woman character as 'a whole person in her own right and not only as a tangential individual who cannot lead a free and independent life.'¹⁶ However, in these representations, I notice a glaring absence of the complex and heterogeneous ways in which women embody their gendered experiences as well as the diverse and multifaceted inflections of their sexualities. Sexuality in relation to embodiment is important to this analysis for, as Ezekiel Kaigai argues, 'embodiment offers a nuanced optic through which to capture the way power hierarchies ... are exercised'. It is through bodies, for example, 'that ... narratives invite the reader to reflect on how

13 Hester Ross, "All Men Do is Love, Love ..." Context, Power and Women in Some Recent Malawian Writing', in Kings Phiri and Kenneth R. Ross, eds, *Democratization in Malawi: A Stock-taking* (Blantyre: CLAIM, 1998), 168–94 (169).

14 Alison Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature* (London: Routledge, 2007), 182.

15 Jessie Sagawa, 'Archetype or Stereotype? Three Images of Women in the Malawian Novel', Paper presented at an International Conference on Malawian Literature, Blantyre, Malawi, 1996.

16 Francis Moto, *Trends in Malawian Literature* (Zomba: Chancellor College, 2001), 10.

certain forms of power and domination are gendered in particular ways and how stories present the gendered body as an unstable field of power contestation' (Kaigai 60).¹⁷

Moreover, representation of sexuality in Malawian fiction is often shrouded by a myriad of taboos, essentialisms, as well as political and cultural objections, as it is framed within cultural silences which regard talking publicly about issues of sexuality as taboo. As Joel Gwynne and Angela Poon observe,

sexuality is often perceived as shameful, for the dangers it potentially precipitates – rape, exploitation ... – often outweigh its pleasures. Essentialist arguments surrounding sexuality have historically cast the subject as taboo, and even within relationships where sex is sanctioned – namely heterosexual marital relationships – it is often a difficult subject to navigate and negotiate.¹⁸

Indeed, this critical observation proves to be pertinent especially when interrogating how sexualities of Malawian citizens within a thirty-year contraption of totalitarian rule, have been represented in works of literature considering the restrictions that were placed on the literary production of issues concerning sexualities.

Representing female sexualities in *Smouldering Charcoal* and *Sugarcane with Salt*

Zezeza's *Smouldering Charcoal* and Ng'ombe's *Sugarcane with Salt* are both set in Banda's repressive Malawi. Since both texts were published when Banda was still in power, both writers go out of their way to disguise certain

17 Kimani Kaigai, 'Sexuality, Power and Transgression: Homophobia in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure*', *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 1/1–2 (2014), 59–70 (60).

18 Joel Gwynne and Angela Poon, eds, *Sexuality and Contemporary Literature* (Amherst, MA: Cambria Press, 2012), xi.

locations and names to avoid political persecution. Writers who seemed to be critiquing Banda's totalitarianism were detained without trial, exiled and even killed.¹⁹ However, the socio-political reality which they depict form part of the backdrop in the two novels and make it clear that the reference is Banda's Malawi; for example, the portraits of the head of state hanging on the walls, the perversion of youth militia who demand party membership from local citizens, and women forced to dance for the nameless leader. In her analysis of both novels, Hester Ross notes that 'there is even an irrational "big brother" force in the country which rules by fear'.²⁰ Zeleza, who was living outside the country, reveals that he wrote the novel in 1982 but to avoid the persecution of his family, he only published the novel in 1992 when Banda had begun to lose his grip on power. Banda is simply referred to as 'the leader' and he does not appear anywhere in person in the novel. However, reminiscent of an 'Orwellian Big brother, he has almost everybody in the country in his radar'. The leader is the sole administrator of the only political party in the country which deploys spies for the regime in different capacities. As Ogbeide remarks, 'the party has no boundaries ... through it the leader has his iron grip on the country through vigilant party women, fanatical youth leaguers, chairmen, ministers and other informers who work either as house helps, university lecturers'.²¹ Reuben Chirambo describes these as 'untamed pests', a horde of fanatics or political loyalists who 'have chosen to serve the party either in position in its hierarchy or as undercover agents in clandestine activities'.²²

Smouldering Charcoal focuses on two families from different social classes as they are trying to navigate through life under a dictatorship. Chola is a journalist who is influenced by Marxist thinking. He lives with his girlfriend Catherine who is a university student. On the other side

19 Writers imprisoned by Banda include Jack Mapanje and Felix Mnthali.

20 Ross, 'All Men Do', 181–82.

21 Victor O. Ogbeide, 'Raping the Dreams and Subverting the Aspirations: Post Independence Disillusionment in Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal*', *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)* 2/7 (2014), 76–83 (both quotations 78).

22 Chirambo, 'Untamed Pest', 9.

of the economic spectrum is Mchere, a baking factory worker, who lives with his wife Nambe and their five children. The two families are drawn together by a strike which subsequently has a profound effect on their relationships, identities and politics. *Sugarcane with Salt*, on the other hand, is about a young medical doctor called Khumbo Dala who comes back from his studies in England only to find his family and the country in a state of disintegration ranging from the divorce of his parents to widespread corruption in the country. Women in the two novels occupy very marginal positions in the society and their significance is mainly in relation to the major characters who are male. Nevertheless, I am interested in the various degrees of co-optation and coercion, containment and escape demonstrated by these female characters in the face of totalitarian power structures and patriarchal socio-cultural values and norms which mediate the agency of female sexualities. Further drawing on Foucault's ideas about sexuality and power as being diffusive, my analysis pays attention to how the self is, to a certain extent, a product of particular knowledge engendered by dominant discourses. I therefore reflect how the embodied self's relationships to societal modes of respectability, values and aesthetics 'continue to play roles in how people negotiate place and power, and inform how we traverse the terrain of sexualization', and that 'rather than being a mere tool, then, the body acts as both the site and language through which positioning is negotiated'.²³ My analysis focuses on three characters in *Smouldering Charcoal*, namely Catherine, a university student who is expelled because of her boyfriend Chola's political activities, Nambe, a poor wife to Mchere, a bakery worker who is later arrested because of his participation in a strike, and finally Lucy, Mchere's mistress, who is also a prostitute who works in a bar which Mchere frequents. In *Sugarcane with Salt*, I examine the character of Grace, a primary school teacher who has a short-term relationship with Khumbo Dala, the main protagonist of the novel. Although marginal, these characters variously exemplify the ways in which women resist and negotiate cultural and political constraints on

23 Pumla D. Gqola, 'Yindaba kaban' u'ba ndilahl' umlenze? Sexuality and Body Image', *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 19/63 (2005), 3-9 (3).

their bodies and sexualities at the same time as they conform to societal ideas of sexual propriety and respectability.

Catherine is one of the interesting characters who challenges societal expectations of how a respectable female is supposed to behave sexually. She is a university student and is described as a beautiful, intelligent woman who is in charge of her mind and body, one who realizes that her sexuality is hers to own and control. She distinguishes herself from other women who after graduation 'sink into the anonymity of marriage' by mapping out a plan for herself after marriage thus resisting the almost inevitable obscurity that accompanies female determination after marriage in the male hegemonic society she has been brought up in.²⁴ She refuses to shelve her ambitions while settling for marriage with the successful Chola. She asserts that when she gets married 'she would not be reduced to a carbon copy of Chola, a faceless wallflower', just like other married women.²⁵ Being a carbon copy of Chola and a faceless wallflower implies the loss of her own individuality and autonomy and being at the service of Chola's needs. This effacement of one's identity is embedded in patriarchal, cultural expectations of wifedom which enforce limitations on women and places them at the service of man of the house. To conform to such expectations also connotes being a 'good', 'respectable' wife, one who knows her place. Catherine refuses to limit her capabilities and ambitions by being Chola's subordinate and despite objections from her family and friends she chooses to be in a fulfilling sexual and love relationship with Chola often 'cuddl[ing] up to each other' with 'soft music playing in the background' while making passionate love.²⁶ Often times, she feels a pleasurable 'warmth and tenderness tingling in her body as an aftermath of sexual pleasure derived from her passionate lovemaking with Chola.'²⁷ The narrator says about their relationship:

They had been going together for two years now. They had been engaged and living together for the past six months despite the objection of her parents and some of her

24 Tiyambe Zeleza, *Smouldering Charcoal* (Essex: Heinemann, 1992), 55.

25 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 55.

26 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 55.

27 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 14.

friends ... They had agreed that there was an advantage in knowing each other before taking the final plunge in order to find out whether they were really compatible.²⁸

Her rebellion against expectations from her parents and her friends illustrate her defiance against notions that equate female respectability with so-called sexual purity and which are moulded within cultural narratives that require heterosexual marriage to be the basis for living together as that is the normalized space for legitimate sex, 'divine and sacrosanct ... the most appropriate place to be in terms of conducting sexual activity and or the procreation of future generations.'²⁹ Her relationship with Chola, seen as a transgression of moral codes of female sexuality, therefore subjects her to different forms of ridicule and shaming from many people, including her own peers who label her a prostitute who is interested in getting money out of her 'sugar daddy'.³⁰ From these labels, one notes that the relationship, which is actually based on mutual respect and affection, is reduced to a transactional activity in which they see Catherine callously intending to exploit the older Chola and financially benefit from him before dumping him for younger suiters. The age gap between Chola and Catherine provokes this disapproval. Catherine is stereotypically framed as a *femme fatale* since primary ridicule and shaming is directed to her and not Chola, who is largely exempt from negative labels.

The expectations of wifhood discussed earlier and prescribed sexual propriety for women which Catherine rejects and refuses to conform to can best be understood through Foucault's argument that it is through discourse, paradoxically verbose and clear, that expectations, experiences, and events are constituted. According to Foucault, the discourse of sexuality has been instrumental to the development of the self and he points out that particular knowledge (in this case about women) produces and reinforces a certain truth about female sexuality and how this is subsequently

28 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 55.

29 Sara Mvududu and Patricia McFadden, *Re-conceptualising the Family in a Changing Southern Africa Environment, Women and Law in Southern Africa* (Harare: Research Trust, 2001), 63.

30 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 54.

internalized and manifested in various subjectivities such as wifeness and motherhood. Catherine resists the internalization of such subjectivities and maps her own path. Thus, Zeleza's depiction of Catherine's reactions against societal expectations of female sexualities not only illustrates the social construction of sexuality and how discourses generate subject positions, it also portrays 'how people embody, transgress or reconstruct such positions'.³¹

Zeleza further shows how Banda's male state agents and political party leaders use sexuality as a tool through which to exploit and punish women who did not subscribe to the laws of the regime or whose husbands or male relatives were suspected to be anti-Banda. The author's depiction exposes what Desiree Lewis calls 'a conflation of power and sexuality'. In repressive contexts such as the one depicted in the novel, 'far from being disassociated from any realm that we could call "instinctive", sexuality is constantly defined through and within violence and the assertion of power'.³² As the narrator explains about those who did not possess a party membership card: 'Others were beaten to death, their houses burnt, or women raped and children barred from school, if they did not possess the almighty card'.³³ Emily Mkamanga argues that even though public prudery was at its height during Banda's regime, it was however undermined by the MCP itself with its perverse sexual exploitation of women.³⁴ This aspect is portrayed through Catherine who is almost sexually assaulted by government agents. Her firm belief that a woman should not be used as an object of sexual pleasure for men, 'that what was at stake was the very essence of her being'³⁵ enables her to fight off attempted rape, first by the government official who promises to give her favours whenever she wants to visit Chola

31 Rachel Spronk, 'Sexuality and Subjectivity: Erotic Practices and the Question of Bodily Sensations', *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 22/1 (2014), 3–21 (6).

32 Desiree Lewis, 'Rethinking Nationalism in Relation to Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence"', *Sexualities* 11/1–2 (2008), 104–9 (106).

33 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 18.

34 Mkamanga, 'Suffering in Silence', 22.

35 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 144.

in exchange for her body and who happens to be the same person who had arrested Chola for covering anti-Banda activities. Later, her professor, Dr Bakha, also attempts to lure her into having sexual relations with him thus taking advantage of her vulnerable situation when she is expelled from university because of her association with Chola. In both cases, she could have used her sexuality to secure these benefits since without Chola who provided most of the material benefits she would suffer financially as she had no other stable source of income. However, she refuses to be objectified by these men and asserts ownership of her sexuality by resisting and warding off the violent advances.

Similarly, Nambe refuses to be the object of political party men's perverse pleasures and strategically manipulates the same system that is used to sexually exploit women thus illustrating that African women 'know when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal landmines ... how to go around patriarchal landmines ... how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts'.³⁶ Nambe and her husband Mchere live in dire poverty and she resorts to brewing local beer to provide for her family. However, in order for the business to be allowed in the area, she had to obtain permission from party officials who also used their ability to grant permission as leverage to get sexual gratification from the local women:

When Nambe was approached by one of the party officials after she had started her business and was asked whether she had obtained the necessary permission, she replied affirmatively. Little did she know what was meant by permission. When the party official made himself clear, Nambe was utterly shaken. What a price! She could not allow it ... But she did not want to stop brewing *kachasu* either. Surely there had to be a way out. Yes, how about promising him that next time would do because at present she was not in the right condition? He bought her story. When he came back a few days later she took a gamble: well, how unfortunate he was, she said, he had come rather late, for none other than the Party chairman himself had been to see her and had told her to keep herself only for him. He could go and ask for the chairman's permission if he still wanted her.³⁷

36 Obioma Nnaemeka, 'Nego-feminism: Theorising, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29/2 (2003), 357–86 (377–8).

37 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 73.

Because of selling *kachasu*, a home-brewed spirit, a trade that she engages in as a source of income for her impoverished family, Nambe is considered as being outside the bounds of female respectability. This is because women who brewed *kachasu* were labelled as 'aggressive and disobedient to their husbands and morally loose'.³⁸ A party official takes advantage of this stereotype and uses it to sexually exploit Nambe who is desperate to make ends meet. The official is aware of the power that he yields in the community and the fact that the women in Njala village cannot openly challenge his power and therefore will give in to his sexual advances. Refusing to be commodified as a sexual object, Nambe appropriates the same discourse which objectifies women's bodies and constructs female sexuality as free and open to male consumption to manipulate and resist the party official's sexual advances. To buy herself some time, she lies to the party official, saying that she is menstruating, as a tactic to ward off his sexual advances. Though temporary, the strategy works as it is a cultural taboo to engage in sexual intercourse with a woman who is on her monthly period since she is considered to be defiled in that moment. As a way of rejecting the official, hence defending her bodily integrity, she wittingly performs the role of sexually licentious *kachasu* when she tells him that she is already sleeping with the party chairman who is obviously much more powerful politically and socially than he is. She deliberately uses commodifying language which reflects the official's perception of female bodies to taunt him and make him aware of his inferiority when she tells him to go and ask permission from the chairman with whom she is supposedly having sexual relations. This strategy saves her from the official's advances.

Further exploitation of female bodies by powerful politicians in Banda's regime is portrayed through the character of Lucy, a prostitute at a bar in Njala. Lucy, a former beauty queen is coerced into a relationship with an older man, an MP for Njala who 'seduced her by promising to pay her school fees at one of the famous boarding schools for girls'.³⁹ The MP merely uses her for his own sexual gratification for he refuses responsibility and abandons her soon after she falls pregnant at seventeen. She becomes expendable

38 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 73.

39 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 104.

for she is now tainted with the inescapably female-embodied, public visibility of pregnancy and framed as a damaged, typical representative of sexual promiscuity. Because of his powerful position and gender, the MP escapes repercussions of his despicable behaviour as well as the ostracism that Lucy faces because of the pregnancy. He ensures her silence by threatening her that if 'she continued spreading lies that he was responsible, she and her family would pay for it'.⁴⁰ Lucy resorts to sex work as a means of supporting herself, her child and her family. Despite her circumstances, Lucy refuses to be a victim and fights against exploitation from men who simply want to use her labour for free. For example, when Mchere, her regular client, begins to make a habit of not paying her after sex, she demands payment, and 'threatened that unless [he] gave her K2 right now she would never talk to [him] again'.⁴¹ She asserts herself by threatening to withdraw her labour from Mchere who is becoming potentially exploitative. Furthermore, she refuses to be objectified by Mchere when he approaches her in her room at the back of the bar. She tells him, 'If it's sex you want I am not in the mood for it and I don't have the time'.⁴² Exercising her agency, she disabuses the notion that because she is a prostitute she is open for sex at all times even if she doesn't want it. She takes charge of her body by controlling who has access to her body and when.

In *Sugarcane with Salt*, Ng'ombe clearly portrays patriarchal socio-cultural values that subordinate and commodify women's sexuality as working in concert with authoritarian power structures in the mediation of female sexuality. The country is facing devastation as it is 'sagging under the yoke of betrayal, moral failure, corruption, drug peddling, disillusionment and stock suffering'. Against this backdrop, Ng'ombe moves away from 'the thinly disguised socio-political context' to focus on women and how they fare at the hands of both the dictatorial regime and the patriarchal society.⁴³ Of interest to me is the treatment of Grace, a primary school teacher

40 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 104.

41 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 63.

42 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 104.

43 Nick Mdika Tembo, 'Politics and stylistics of female (re)presentation in James Ng'ombe's *Sugarcane with salt*', in Reuben Chirambo and Justus K. S. Makokha, eds,

who teaches with Pempho, Khumbo's former primary school classmate who happens to be the headmaster of the school now. In contrast to the traditional and backward town where she lives, Grace is presented as a modern, young, educated woman who does not seem to fit in the town. Khumbo is immediately drawn to her independence and her assertiveness which is further mediated in the way she carries her body sensually as well as the way she interacts with people of the opposite sex. However, the fact that she is a single woman makes her vulnerable to the sharp eyes and wagging tongues of the community who monitor her every move. This is done especially by her fellow women who assume that she is going to go after their men. Furthermore, her singlehood renders her sexuality subject to commodification by the headmaster who unashamedly brings all types of men to her house at night in order to hook her up with them. Grace reveals to Khumbo, who is taken to Grace's house by Pempho who conveniently leaves the two of them together:

'This is not the first time he has done this to me,' she replied. 'That's the price you have to pay for being single in a small town like this. Everyone makes passes at you.' [...]

'The visitors I have had from Pempho have always come at Pempho's instigation.' She hesitated before proceeding. 'It's as if he wants to see my breaking point.'⁴⁴

There are a number of points to be noted in the way female sexuality is framed within this context. Firstly, the fact that Grace is single is an anomaly which stands against the norm, since patriarchy dictates that woman be attached to a man in order to gain validation. Female autonomy and self-determination exemplified by women who decide not to be male appendages therefore destabilize societal gender roles and expectations. Secondly, the fact that Pempho decides to use his position as Grace's work superior to turn her body and sexuality into a commodity through which his friends can achieve some gratification shows how little he respects her and how he reduces her body to a sexual object. Her resistance against being reduced

Reading Contemporary African Literature: Critical Perspectives (Rodopi: Amsterdam, 2013), 109–26 (both quotations 113).

44 James Ng'ombe, *Sugarcane with Salt* (Blantyre: Jhango Publishing Company, 2005), 47.

to a sex object is in turn viewed by Pempho and others as stubbornness which needs to be dealt with.

Interestingly, unbeknownst to Pempho and others, Grace does have a boyfriend called Dan Kapena who lives away in the city. However, even though Grace is faithful to him, staying indoors and refusing to interact with men about anything other than professional issues, her boyfriend is non-committal to her. The presence of Khumbo whom she is mutually attracted to offers her the chance to temporarily explore her sexuality by having a sexual affair with him, even though she is well aware of the transient nature of the affair since Khumbo is engaged to a white woman called Sue. Thus, transgressing the moral codes of female respectability, Grace exercises her agency to pursue sexual pleasure at the expense of her reputation. However, even though Grace exhibits some considerable level of independence, challenging patriarchal norms of respectable female sexuality, it is interesting to note that when she suspects that she is pregnant she becomes conscious of the shame that is associated with pregnancy out of wedlock and she grudgingly decides to get married, thus conforming to conventional expectations regarding respectable womanhood.

'I think I am going to have a baby,' she whispered evasively, and a tear or two landed on Khumbo's hand.

'Are you certain?' he gasped, helpless.

'I am hoping that Dan won't find out.' She whispered [...] 'I need a father for my baby,' she [...] cried openly. 'I'll just have to accept his proposal.'⁴⁵

To rid herself of the shameful burden of having a child out of wedlock especially one whose father was already involved with someone else, she decides to pin the responsibility of fatherhood on Dan to save face. She clearly does not love Dan, as she only grudgingly accepts his proposal because the child is on the way. Ng'ombe's portrayal echoes Rachel Spronk's argument that though modern women express the desire to challenge conventional modes of femininities, 'they also internalize certain constructions of femininity that are at odds with change'. Spronk further notes that about

45 Ng'ombe, *Sugarcane*, 107.

modern women: '[T]heir experiences and their wishes relate to conventional discourses that discourage particular expressions of their sexuality, as well as with those more liberal discourses that encourage them to explore sexuality'.⁴⁶ Similarly, Grace, as a product of her society, also embodies such ambiguous attitudes. She undermines conventions proscribed for female sexuality by following her sexual desires thereby being or representing the modern or liberal woman but at the same time she conforms to conventional notions of femininity by wanting a father for her child to avoid being stigmatized for having a child out of wedlock.

In conclusion, female bodies in Banda's autocratic regime were subjected to different kinds of sexual abuses and controls which aligned with patriarchal socio-cultural values to limit women's mobility and sexualities. However, these two texts depict the agency available to and exercised by women to negotiate against such restrictive discourses. At the same time, the two authors' representation of female sexual agency highlights the problematics of women's open expression of sexual desire and pleasure in a context where such freedom is perceived as transgressing the norms. I also observe that the representation of female sexual agency in the two texts is to a certain degree framed within paradoxical, normative expectations of gender and female sexuality.

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46 Spronk, 'Sexuality and Subjectivity', 17; 14.

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12 Mighty Mouth, Minor Literature: Siad Barre's Dictatorship in Italian Postcolonial Literature

Mohamed Siad Barre's autocratic rule over Somalia began with a *coup d'état*, including the murder of the former President Abdirashid Ali Shermarke on 15 October 1969, and lasted twenty-two years (1969–91), deeply marking Somali postcolonial history as a whole. In its latter years it also determined most of the political, social and economic conflicts leading to the outbreak of Somali civil war, which started with the demise of Barre's regime and is still ongoing. Siad Barre's political action, initially inspired by the secular principles of scientific socialism, was officially based on the motto, 'Socialism unites, tribalism divides',¹ but his regime eventually turned out to be supported by a specific inter-clan faction called 'MOD', from the initials of the three clans composing both Barre's family and government (Mareehaan, Ogaden and Dulbahante). Although heavily questioned in some recent reconstructions of the conflict,² it can be argued that the hegemonic force held by, or just ideologically attributed to, the MOD produced that clan rivalry which fuelled the war after its outbreak.

Equally ambivalent and divisive was the position of Somalia on the geopolitical terrain, shifting from an alliance with the USSR to one with the US during the Ogaden War between Somalia and Ethiopia (1977–8). This change was mainly due to the decision of the USSR to back Ethiopia, which was governed, at the time of the conflict in Ogaden, by another autocratic leader siding with the Soviet bloc: Mengistu Haile Mariam.

- 1 Donatella Strangio, *The Reasons for Underdevelopment: The Case for Decolonisation in Somaliland* (Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2011), 33.
- 2 Lidwien Kapteijns, *Clan Cleansing in Somalia: The Ruinous Legacy of 1991* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 79.

During Barre's regime, these political ambiguities were always concealed, if not directly suffocated, by a strong internal programme of propaganda, censorship and repression. This is aptly symbolized by the ironic appropriation of Barre's childhood nickname, 'Afweyne' ('Mighty Mouth'), by his political opponents which points, in this case, at the strength of political propaganda. In this regard, Gabriele Proglia has recently argued that 'Siad Barre's dictatorship was violent and murderous also because it made people feel alone, it muzzled sociality, it denied people the possibility for social and collective spaces to exist'.³ In terms of literary criticism, this remark constitutes a noteworthy suggestion to consider the narratives and representations of Barre's dictatorship not only from a historical point of view, but also for their symbolic value. In other words, writing about Barre's dictatorship was, first of all, a reaction to the censorship imposed by the regime and a way to rebuild the sociality destroyed by its authoritarian power, by staging, and often deconstructing, the conflicts that the dictatorship had helped to create. Paradoxically, however, those public and collective spaces which had been erased by the repressive action of the regime have been mainly rebuilt in the fiction about dictatorship written by exiled Somali authors and authors of Somali descent in Europe and elsewhere, leading to different and sometimes ambivalent outcomes.

The importance of exile and migration in the literary reconstruction of an 'imaginary homeland', to borrow Salman Rushdie's famous title,⁴ both during and after Barre's dictatorship, corresponds with the position of Didier Morin about Somali postcolonial and diasporic literature as a whole:

In a country where language has always been treated as a political good, literature, being the work of writers involved in the nation-building process, has become one of the markers of the political evolution of the nation and, for those able to decode it, the revealing symptom of its progressive entropy. In fact, this writing, which has been intended, since the beginning, as a form of civic engagement, has rapidly evolved into

- 3 Gabriele Proglia, *Memorie oltre confine. La letteratura postcoloniale italiana in prospettiva storica* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2011), 123: 'Il regime di Barre uccide perché rende soli, imbavagliando la socialità, negando gli spazi collettivi e sociali' (our translation).
- 4 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism (1981–1991)* (London: Granta, 1991).

a celebration of the regime, forcing free writers to exile, even before Barre's demise, in order to regain the authentic territories of the imaginary. [...] Exile affects 90% of the educated people and endangers the future of modern Somali literature, as well as the democratic evolution of the country.⁵

Morin's analysis is mainly based on the cultural policies of Barre's regime. Somali language gained official status, together with the adoption of the Latin alphabet, in the earlier years of Barre's rule (1971–2). This peculiar cultural investment was positively received by many authors composing oral poems or writing in Somali. Somali oral poetry focused on the celebration of Somali nationalism, or, more directly, of Barre's regime.⁶ Also the few examples of novels written in Somali – such as *Aqoondaarro waa u nacab jayl* (*Ignorance is the Enemy of Love*, 1974) by Faarax J. M. Cawl, whose publication was financially supported by the Somali Ministry of Education – did not express any explicit political critique of the Somali government.⁷

These symptoms of a growing political and ideological complicity with the regime do not signify, however, the absence of strong political and cultural resistance in Somalia during Barre's regime; on the contrary, this has been well documented.⁸ The opposition against Siad Barre's regime,

- 5 Didier Morin, *Littérature et politique en Somalie* (Talence: Centre d'Études d'Afrique Noire, 1997), 2: 'Dans un pays qui a toujours géré sa langue comme un bien politique, la production des écrivains, militants de la construction nationale, est devenue un indicateur parmi d'autres de l'évolution politique et, pour qui savait la décrypter, le révélateur de son entropie progressive. De fait, une écriture qui s'est voulue, dès le début, comme un exercice civique, s'est rapidement muée en un encensement de régime, obligeant, avant même la chute de ce dernier, les écrivains libres à s'exiler pour retrouver les vrais territoires de l'imaginaire. [...] L'exile touche 90% des personnes possédant un quelconque niveau d'instruction et compromet l'avenir de la littérature moderne somali, comme d'une évolution démocratique' (our translation).
- 6 Said S. Samatar, *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
- 7 F. Fiona Moolla, *Reading Nuruddin Farah: The Individual, the Novel and the Idea of Home* (Oxford: James Currey, 2014), 124–6.
- 8 Mohamed Hajji Ingiriis, *The Suicidal State in Somalia: The Rise and Fall of the Siad Barre Regime (1969–1991)* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2016).

took many different forms, including the two paradigmatic examples of the Somali National Movement (SNM) and Somali women's resistance to dictatorship. Founded in London in 1981, the SNM relied on the participation of various Somali exiles, as well as of specific clan-based communities, such as the Isaaq (one of the social groups which suffered from the clan politics enacted by the MOD). While mostly ineffective in its attempt to overthrow Barre's regime, the SNM achieved one of its goals in the declaration of independence of the Republic of Somaliland on 18 May 1991.⁹ The Somali civil war was a decisive step in this process, as Asteris Huliaras concludes, '[i]n sum, as happened in the case of medieval Europe [...], warfare had played a central and indeed essential role in the process of nation-formation in Somaliland'.¹⁰

As for women's resistance, its importance was often downplayed by the regime, which could rely, on the other hand, on various groups of women actively supporting it. This was the case of those women who collaborated with the only radio station in the Somali capital, Radio Mogadishu, in order to mobilize people in favor of Siad Barre after the unsuccessful *coup d'état* of 1978. There was, nonetheless, a strand of political and cultural opposition which was led by Somali women. Their opposition is illustrated by this oral poem recited by Hawa Jibril, who had also participated in the anti-colonial struggle against the Italian empire:

O Secretary General, you also declared that 'Women are a force the shortsighted cannot perceive.'

Is it fair to have only two women in our higher political offices? [...]

Do they not deserve higher positions and rewards?

Or were you too hasty, and are having second thoughts?

Are you not tormented by the injustice they suffer?¹¹

9 Although it is *de facto* independent, the Republic of Somaliland has not been internationally recognized as an autonomous nation-state so far.

10 Asteris Huliaras, 'The Viability of Somaliland: Internal Constraints and Regional Geopolitics', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 20/2 (2002), 157–82 (159).

11 Cited in Iman Abdulkadir Mohamed, 'Somali Women and the Socialist State', *Journal of Georgetown University – Qatar Middle Eastern Studies Student Association* 4 (2015) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5339/messa.2015.4>> accessed 30 September 2017.

These examples reveal the crossover between the movements of cultural and political resistance located in Somalia and those being carried out in the Somali diaspora. Indeed, some of the most vivid representations of Barre's dictatorship are to be found in the fiction produced beyond the national boundaries and written in the former colonial languages of English and Italian.¹²

Within this body of literature (which contests Morin's gloomy prophecy about the future of modern Somali literature above) Anglophone literature benefits from worldwide circulation while the literary texts in Italian are globally less known and less translated.¹³ These call for specific critical attention.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, there has been a large group of authors of Somali origin writing in Italian, including Mohamed Aden Sheikh, Kaha Mohamed Aden, Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, and Garane Garane.¹⁴ This might be related to the growing presence of the Somali diaspora in Italy after the beginning of the Somali civil war, in 1991. This wave of migration was not extensive, but it has nonetheless contributed to the creation of a stable and active Somali community in Italy, strengthened by intergenerational bonds.¹⁵ Somali refugees joined those Somalis who had relocated to Italy during the colonial era (1889–1950) and the subsequent UN Trusteeship over Somalia delegated to Italy until 1960.

The importance of intergenerational bonds is evident in the work of two writers: Mohamed Aden Sheikh and his daughter Kaha Mohamed Aden. Born in 1936, Mohamed Aden Sheikh was appointed as Minister in

12 British Somaliland was a British colony from 1884 to 1940, while the Italian colonial rule in Somalia and Somaliland, including the ten years of the UN Trusteeship after the Second World War (1950–60), lasted from 1889 to 1960.

13 Only two novels originally written in Italian have been translated into English: *Far from Mogadishu* (2013 [1994]) by Shirin Ramzanali Fazel and *Little Mother* (2011 [2007]) by Ubax Cristina Ali Farah.

14 This group of authors, whose works are analyzed here, should be complemented by at least four other writers, Sirad Salad Hassan, Ubax Cristina Ali Farah, Igiaba Scego and Antar Mohamed, whose literary production falls beyond the scope of this essay.

15 Nuruddin Farah, *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (New York: Cassell, 2000).

the first revolutionary governments, but he soon understood that he did not share the same ideas as General Barre. Due to his political opposition, he was arrested in 1975 and detained for more than ten years. In the early 1990s he eventually reached Italy, where he died in 2010. In his works, he offers a historical and political reconstruction of the dictatorship, without any fictional *détour*.¹⁶ He repeatedly argues that Somali military forces had planned to seize power way before the coup, eventually seizing the opportunity of the power vacuum created by President Shermarke's murder. According to Mohamed Aden Sheikh, a major cause for this political instability was the administration of the Italian colonial protectorate (1950–60), which had encouraged clan divisions instead of trying to amalgamate the different social groups living in Somalia. Clan rivalry, which would later fuel civil war, is thus traced back beyond Barre's policies to the *divide et impera* motto defining Italian colonial rule.

In addition to this, in *La Somalia non è un'isola dei Caraibi*, Mohamed Aden Sheikh makes a particularly ambivalent comment on the impact of civil war on Somali women: he describes it as an exclusively 'male business'. While he argues that Somali women may contribute to national reconciliation in the future on the grounds of their non-involvement in the conflict, he also criticizes them for their ideological adhesion to the clannist claims fuelling civil war, which, he claims, led many of them to a sort of regression in terms of mentality. His ambivalent position is shown when he invokes Somali anticolonial heroines as a point of reference that is nowadays disregarded; at the same time, he does not even mention the oscillation between support and resistance of Somali women's groups under Siad Barre's rule.¹⁷

What Mohamed Aden Sheikh seems to give, therefore, is an incomplete report of Somali women's resistance before, during and after Siad

16 Mohamed Aden Sheikh wrote four books on Somali dictatorship. Arguably, he re-wrote almost the same book four times, changing it each time, either to add more details or to incorporate the contemporary situation of Somalia. The definitive version could be identified as *La Somalia non è un'isola dei Caraibi* (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2010).

17 All quotations from Aden Sheikh, *La Somalia*, 236–7 (our translation).

Barre's regime, confining them, at the same time, into the homogeneous and monolithic category of 'Somali women', which he leaves unquestioned. In her short story '1982 fuga da casa' (2010), his daughter Kaha Mohamed Aden gives a different representation of Barre's dictatorship. The short story is set in 1982, during Kaha's childhood, and it includes a fictional dialogue between Kaha and the marmoset belonging to her sister Idil. Kaha tells the marmoset a fable which has been told her by her father, Mohamed Aden Sheikh. The tale goes as follows:

the lion, king of all animals, gathers all his subjects, asking them to share the amount of meat he has in front of him. The hyena tries first, dividing meat in equal parts. Warned by the fox, the lion does not accept such a division. The fox tries after the hyena, but she does not divide it equally: the lion receives half of the meat; the other half is divided into two parts: one for the fox and the other for all the other animals.¹⁸

The fable refers to the political dynamics of an authoritarian regime, which does not accept sharing power in a democratic way. It also refers to those people who sustain such power, looking for personal gain. Kaha Mohamed Aden uses this specifically as an allegory of the Somali regime, as indicated by the year mentioned in the title, which marks the beginning of the final period of Barre's dictatorship, the most violent of all. Unlike her father, then, Kaha Mohamed Aden argues that it was the last period of Siad Barre's rule which determined the conflicts leading to the outbreak of Somali civil war.

The subsequent dialogue between Kaha and the marmoset adds other elements to the allegorical story. The marmoset tells Kaha that there is a different version of the tale, which her father had previously narrated to Idil. In this version, a marmoset, said to be the ancestor of the present one, defends the hyena from the king's anger, pointing out that its own suggestion would have strengthened the king's power, by the consent of all the other animals. As the lion eventually agrees with the marmoset, all the animals live happily ever after.¹⁹

18 Adapted from '1982 fuga da casa' in *Fra-intendimenti* ('Mis-Understandings') (Roma: Nottetempo, 2010).

19 Aden Mohamed, '1982', 106.

According to the marmoset, Idil reacts to this story by asking her father about herbivores and their role in the fable. Granting legitimacy to Idil's doubts, her father replies by emphasizing the importance of diversity and the fact that social equity, as represented in the fable by the portions of meat, is not the only goal to be achieved by political wisdom. While this might be considered an implicit justification of Barre's regime by Mohamed Aden Sheikh, the young Kaha seems primarily to be upset because her father had told his daughters two radically different versions of the tale; her immediate reaction is, 'My father manipulated the story, then.'²⁰ Recalling this episode twenty years later, however, she no longer points that out. She seems to agree, instead, with the marmoset's enigmatic conclusion, 'The ability to adapt stories is a substantial one, sometimes happily present in oral traditions.'²¹ By underlining the mutability of narratives in oral traditions, she implicitly points at the mutability of political positions (including opportunism) held by Somali oral poets and storytellers under Barre's rule. In addition to this, the episode demonstrates the possibility for Kaha and Idil to contest such narratives, and thus refashion the cultural and political pillar of oral literature in Somali society from a gendered point of view.

Although merging with her personal experience, and emphasizing the role of the dictatorship in the exile of her family, the fable recounted by Kaha Mohamed Aden, in its two different versions, stands apart as an allegorical representation of dictatorship which is quite unique within the fictional texts written. In other texts in Italian by authors of Somali descent, the representation of Barre's regime serves either as an element of individual memory narrative or as plot-catalyst.

As for memory narratives, Shirin Ramzanali Fazel – who left Somalia in the 1970s, lived in Italy for more than three decades, and recently moved to the United Kingdom – gives a brief but impressive description of the life conditions under dictatorship in her short story 'Mukulaal' (2010). This is presented again through a generational shift, because it is Jama,

20 Aden Mohamed, '1982', 108, 'Quindi mio padre ha manipolato il racconto' (our translation).

21 Aden Mohamed, '1982', 108, 'Cambiare i racconti è una possibilità pesante, a volte piacevolmente presente nelle tradizioni orali' (our translation).

the protagonist's father, who recalls the enthusiasm for the 'revolution' animating Somalis in the earliest period of Barre's rule. Jama, in fact, grew up during the 'glorious period of the Regime'.²² In those days, according to his memories, the town of Mogadishu experienced great expansion, and new hospitals and modern roads were built across the country. Jama attributed the economic empowerment of Somalia to the efficiency of the educational system and to the creation of a dynamic intellectual class as well as to its growth in terms of trade and agriculture. In this way he recalls the aforementioned enthusiasm of oral poets and writers for Barre's cultural policies. However, he soon understood that everything around him was a farce: 'Those who had economic resources left town; many others stayed, helplessly enduring every imposition'.²³ With these few lines, Fazel shows the propagandistic dimension of Barre's regime, based on an illusion of progress, and introduces the *leit-motif* of departure, which will be hugely amplified by civil war.

Fazel's fictionalization of the Somali dictatorship is not limited to memory narratives: Barre's rule is also presented as a plot-catalyst in her novel *Nuvole sull'Equatore* (*Clouds on the Equator*, 2010), and has a similar function in *Il latte è buono* (*Milk is Good*, 2005) by Garane Garane. Both novels, in fact, follow the lives of young adults whose lives radically change because of dictatorship.

In *Nuvole sull'Equatore*, a short passage describes how the *coup d'état* takes place. The police begin to arrest people, especially young people, because they wear jeans and other clothes which are considered to be too transgressive. However, nobody really complains, hoping that this is just a temporary measure. Young people, in particular, try to deal with police's 'moral zeal', making the best of a bad situation.²⁴ It is not insignificant that the young people went on strike and dressed defiantly, as it reveals the will to influence the future of the country, its development and possibilities of

22 Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, 'Mukulaal'. In D. Comberiat (ed.), *Roma d'Abissinia* (Cuneo: Nerosubianco, 2010), pp. 13–22 (14).

23 Fazel, 'Mukulaal', 15: 'Chi aveva i mezzi economici lasciava la città; molti rimanevano, indifesi, a subire ogni sopruso' (our translation).

24 Fazel, 'Mukulaal', 159 (our translation).

change. Very soon, the *coup d'état* shows its true face and a military regime is declared. The streets of Mogadishu are crowded with soldiers, who establish checkpoints everywhere. Fazel describes that moment: '[t]here were no victims and the situation in the country was quiet. The people had to stay home because at the declaration of the state of emergency, a curfew had come into force. All means of communication had been interrupted and the country was completely isolated from the rest of the world'.²⁵

The reference to the curfew has an important function for the plot, as young people are forced to hold secret meetings: during one of them, Giulia, the protagonist of the novel, meets her first boyfriend. After the description of the *coup d'état*, the novel focuses in a more direct way on Giulia's life. The consequences of the *coup*, in fact, will be disastrous for Giulia and her family: Giulia will leave the country, reaching Italy, and she will never come back to Somalia; her parents will be obliged to move to Kenya. Once again, then, the emphasis on departure overwhelms any other political and cultural concern about the dictatorship.

Il latte è buono is the only novel written so far by Garane Garane, a professor in French and Italian Literature at the University of Virginia. He studied in Somalia, attending Italian schools, and then came to Europe, first to Italy and then to France, where he continued his studies and obtained a PhD. Although heavily based on Garane's personal experiences, his text includes fictional sections, reaching mythical, if not epic, tones while speaking about the ancient origins of Somalia as a nation. As for the representation of dictatorship, Garane, like Fazel, focuses his attention on its very beginning, and more precisely on the day of President Shermarke's murder:

25 Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Nuvole sull'equatore. Gli italiani dimenticati. Una storia* (Cuneo: Nerosubianco, 2010), 162: 'La popolazione doveva rimanere in casa, perché con la dichiarazione dello stato di emergenza era entrato in vigore il coprifuoco. Tutte le vie di comunicazione erano state interrotte e il paese era completamente isolato dal resto del mondo' (our translation).

‘Suddenly, a snatch, a mortal snatch hit Somali people. President Shermarke had been murdered.’²⁶

Gashan, the young protagonist of the novel, gets the news while at school. He attends an Italian school, a place where, during the Italian Protectorate, as well as afterwards, the national élite was formed. Gashan is the son of Mogadishu’s mayor, whose political faction is opposed to President Shermarke’s. Shermarke’s daughter Mariam is also one of his classmates. As the murder takes place, Gashan tries to calm Mariam by inventing a story which draws a mythical parallel between Somali history and that of ancient Rome, which pupils used to study at the Italian school.

As Laura Lori argues, the rhetorical strategy used here by Gashan shows that during Italian colonialism, ‘cultural colonization went along with political colonization, influencing Somali future elites, as well as their political opponents.’²⁷ This cultural element, however, also allow the children – affected both by Barre’s dictatorial rule and its aftermath – to avoid involvement in Somali political matters, as if they were not concerned by it, because they belong to a new and different, Roman/Italian culture. In addition to this, the recurrence of the colonizer’s culture, although mediated by its rhetorical use, marks further ambivalence towards the public and collective spaces which Somali authors could rebuild from exile, as it reintroduces those elements of political and cultural colonization that Somali independence had tried to remove. This analysis leads to some preliminary conclusions on the representation of Barre’s dictatorship in Somali Italian Postcolonial literature. Although Barre is mentioned by all these authors, he is never presented as a fully-fledged character. There are no detailed descriptions of him. These authors never describe his physical

26 Garane Garane, *Il latte è buono* (Isernia: Cosmo Iannone, 2005), 48: ‘Di colpo, un colpo mortale colpì il popolo somalo. Il presidente Schermache [*sic*] fu ucciso’ (our translation).

27 Laura Lori, *Inchiostro d’Africa. La letteratura postcoloniale somala fra identità e diaspora* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2011), 91: ‘É indicativo come un fatto della realtà somala sia interpretato dai ragazzi attraverso la storia dell’impero romano: questo è un modo molto efficace per sottolineare come la colonizzazione culturale sia andata di pari passo con la colonizzazione politica’ (our translation).

appearance, his posture, his ways of moving or talking to Somalis during his speeches; there are no dialogues, even invented, involving the dictator. Apart from Kaha Mohamed Aden's short allegorical fable, there is no real plot or fictional storyline centered on him.²⁸

Nonetheless, his figure is at the origin of most of the plots, catalyzing many different events: Barre is repeatedly indicated as the main figure responsible for the crisis of Somali public space and of Somalia as a nation, leading to its dissolution with civil war, and the effects of his rule can be identified in the lives of thousands of people leaving the country.

This is utterly different from the celebration of the regime which can be found in Somali oral poetry and in Somali written literature of the time, but also from the treatment of Barre's dictatorship in Nuruddin Farah's oeuvre, which probably represents the longest and deepest engagement with the representation of Siad Barre's dictatorship.

Born in 1945 in Baidoa, Farah has been living in exile since 1976, a few years after his literary debut with *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), written in English, and the attempt to publish a second novel in Somali, which was later censored in Somalia. At least four of Farah's eleven novels written in English so far – from *A Naked Needle* (1976) to *Close Sesame* (1983) – are based on the 'quite direct relationship between the traditional patriarchal Somali family and the authoritarian regime in Somalia under the rule of Mohammad Siad Barre.'²⁹ Ranging from the authoritarian and murderous father Keynaan in *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979) to the figure of the anti-colonial fighter and resistant Deeriye in *Close Sesame* (1983), Farah both staged and deconstructed the linkage between Barre, as the self-declared 'Father of the Somali nation', and the relevance of fatherhood in Somali

28 An interesting case of fictional storyline centered on an African dictator is *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* by Maaza Mengiste. The novel is about the Ethiopian dictatorship under Mengistu Haile Mariam. Whilst the plot is based on historical events, the author imagines and describes the thoughts and feelings of the dictator, who thus becomes a character of the plot.

29 Dubravka Juraga, 'Nuruddin Farah's *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship: Patriarchy, Gender, and Political Oppression in Somalia*'. In D. Wright (ed.), *Emerging Perspectives on Nuruddin Farah* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2002), pp. 283–305 (285).

clans. Through a direct allegorical representation of his figure (Keynaan), as well as its reversal (Deeriye), Farah managed to fictionalize Barre's figure in a different way from what had been done so far in the Somali literature in Italian.

In addition to this, Somali literature in Italian, unlike Farah's fiction, can be helpfully understood via Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'minor literature'. This is of course an established trend within Italian Studies, especially when concerned with migrant and postcolonial literature, and the use of Deleuze and Guattari's category has already been criticized by several scholars in Postcolonial Studies, for its Orientalist consolidation of the 'major/Western' vs. 'minor/Other' dichotomy.³⁰ Vulgarizations and abuses in the application of this definition have also been underlined in the case of Italian postcolonial and migrant literature as a whole, as well as in its specific application to Somali literature in Italian.³¹

In the latter case, however, the definition of 'minor literature' bears some relevance, as Simone Brioni has convincingly argued by critically revising the three pillars of Deleuze and Guattari's analysis – the de-territorialization and re-territorialization of a major language, the extension of the political dimension over the individual one, and collective enunciation – in his recent monograph *The Somali Within* (2015). While Brioni's treatment of the de-territorialization and re-territorialization of the Italian language, through a careful analysis of the linguistic and translation strategies enacted in the texts written by authors of Somali origin, seems to be quite exhaustive, it is the political dimensions of this 'minor literature' which need to be closely explored in relation to the narrative representations of Barre's dictatorship.³²

30 Paul Patton, (2006). 'The Event of Colonisation.' In I. Buchanan and A. Parr (eds). *Deleuze and the Contemporary World*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 108–24.

31 Chiara Mengozzi, *Narrazioni contese. Vent'anni di scritture italiane della migrazione* (Rome: Carocci, 2013); Simone Brioni, *The Somali Within: Language, Race and Belonging in 'Minor' Italian Literature* (Leeds: Legenda, 2015).

32 Simone Brioni, 'Language'. In Simone Brioni, *op. cit.*, pp. 18–59.

When Deleuze and Guattari argue about ‘minor literatures’ that ‘everything in them is political’, in fact they also state:

In major literatures, in contrast, the individual concern (familial, marital, and so on) joins with other no less individual concerns, the social milieu serving as a mere environment or a background [...]. Minor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it.³³

The ‘whole other story’ vibrating within these texts can often be linked to the Somali civil war, as most of the texts have been written and published since the beginning of the 1990s, coinciding with that period of armed conflict. As mentioned, however, the disgregation of the Somali nation as a collective space goes back at least to the latter period of Barre’s dictatorship (if not to the period of the Italian colonial protectorate). Barre’s rule appears thus to be a constitutive part of this narrative, catalyzing important events in the life of individual characters.

As for the third element of ‘minor literature’,

[...] everything takes on a collective value. Indeed, precisely because talent isn’t abundant in a minor literature, there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that ‘master’ and that could be separated from a collective enunciation. [...] The political domain has contaminated every statement (*énoncé*). But above all else, [...] literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation. It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism [...]³⁴

Concerning Somali literature in Italian, this ‘collective enunciation’ appears to be only an ideal horizon, as the stylistic means which (according to Deleuze and Guattari) shows it at its best – free indirect discourse – is nearly absent in this body of literature. The impossibility of a collective enunciation ideologically rebounds on the ambivalences in the process of

33 Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986 [1975]) 17.

34 Ibid.

reconstruction of that ‘collective space’ muzzled by Barre’s dictatorship, whose reconstitution in Somali diasporic literature in Italian constantly faces physical, cultural and political boundaries – leaving room, thus, for new fictional and critical elaborations in the future.

The critical perspective of ‘minor literature’ is rapidly expanding its field of application to Somali literature (in Somali, as well as in English and in Italian) as a whole, given the ongoing violence and political troubles in Somalia. The dynamics of de-territorialization and re-territorialization of language, together with the political implications of the fictional elaboration of Somali postcolonial literature, history and culture as seen from outside its boundaries, are now becoming three defining features for this literature which largely survives in the diaspora – continuing, thus, and expanding on the political and cultural production from exile which began during Barre’s rule.

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