

# “Made of Sterner Stuff”: Female Agency and Resilience in Nadifa Mohamed’s *The Orchard of Lost Souls*

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## Summary

The focus of this article is on the literary representations of women in postcolonial wartime narratives by African female novelists. An important assumption drives this article, namely, that women are largely absent from discussions on the interventions they can make to help fight social injustice, even though violence and resistance to injustice are mostly mediated through images of women and their bodies. Specifically, the article examines how Nadifa Mohamed employs agency as a discursive technique for negotiating female identities and dismantling oppressive structures in *The Orchard of Lost Souls*. The article is cognizant of Annie Gagiano’s views that recent African female authors’ novels have gained prominence in tackling national(ist) issues through their imagination of the nation with moral profundity and historical force, placing the women themselves at the centre of this national imagination. I argue that the leading female characters in Mohamed’s novel reconstruct their subalternity all too predictably to fight gendered violence and social vice, thereby contributing to the nationalist fervour that is underway in the narrative context of the novel.

## Opsomming

Die fokus van hierdie artikel is op die literêre voorstellings van vroue in postkoloniale oorlogsverhale deur vroulike romanskrywers van Afrika. Die artikel is op ’n belangrike veronderstelling gegrond, naamlik dat vroue grootliks afwesig is in besprekings oor die intervensies wat hulle kan toepas om sosiale ongeregtigheid te help beveg, selfs al word geweld en weerstand teen ongeregtigheid gewoonlik deur uitbeeldings van vroue en hul liggame bewerkstellig. Hierdie artikel ondersoek spesifiek hoe Nadifa Mohamed bemiddeling as ’n diskursiewe tegniek aanwend vir die onderhandeling van vroulike identiteite en die uitmekaarhaal van onderdrukkende strukture in *The Orchard of Lost Souls*. Uit die artikel blyk kennis van Annie Gagiano se beskouings dat die romans deur onlangse vroue-outeurs van Afrika prominensie verkry het deur nasionalistiese kwessies aan te pak deur hul verbeelding van die volk met morele grondigheid en historiese mag, waar die vroue self in die middelpunt van hierdie nasionale verbeelding geplaas word. Ek voer aan dat die leidende vroulike karakters in Mohamed se roman hul ondergeskiktheid alte voorspelbaar herkonstrueer om geslagsgebaseerde geweld en sosiale onsedelikheid te beveg, en sodoende by te dra tot die nasionalistiese toewyding wat onderweg is in die verhalende konteks van die roman.

## Introduction

When making a funeral oration for his slain friend, Marc Antony uses bitter irony to manipulate the fickle Roman citizens into believing that Julius Caesar was not as ambitious as Brutus and his co-conspirators had presented him in William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Antony's recasting of Caesar is that he was not harsh, but a weak, compassionate and helpless victim who suffered a cruel death at the hands of the conspirators. Antony shrewdly persuades his audience, adding that it is actually the conspirators themselves that were "made of sterner stuff" (Daniell 2006: 258) – his way of insinuating that the conspirators were bold and unyielding in their plan to assassinate Caesar. If the conspirators in Shakespeare's play have become icons of one's mettle today, the character of the three leading female characters in Nadifa Mohamed's *The Orchard of Lost Souls* has to be foregrounded as an epitome of resoluteness in the face of life's disappointments. This article is about the choices women make in nationalist processes as imagined in *The Orchard of Lost Souls*. I am interested in locating the lived experiences of the principal female characters, with a view to tracing how they claim their agency in the Somalia fictionalised in the novel. The article is cognizant of Annie Gagiano's views, that recent African female authors' novels have gained prominence in tackling national(ist) issues through their "imagination [of] the nation with moral profundity and historical force" (Gagiano 2015: 187), placing the women themselves at the centre of this national imagination.

*The Orchard of Lost Souls* is a fictional representation of the impact of the Somali Civil War on a civilian population. The novel picks up on the tail end of General Mohamed Siad Barre's military dictatorship. Its historical setting is 1987, on the brink of Siad Barre's collapse, when rebel forces are closing in on the northern town of Hargeisa. The novel opens with a scene where people are being rounded up by the regime's neighbourhood watch – the *Guddi* – for the annual 21 October celebrations at an unnamed stadium. This rally is in honour of the military dictatorship's eighteenth anniversary. The novel focuses on three female protagonists: Kawsar – a rich but childless widow in her late fifties; Filsan – an Internal Security officer in her late twenties; and Deqo – a nine-year old orphan born and raised in the Saba'ad Refugee Camp.<sup>1</sup> Deqo is in the stadium as part of a choreographed dance troupe of children ferried from the Camp about twenty miles away, having been promised a pair of shoes as their reward for dancing at the parade. Owing to nervousness, Deqo forgets her dance steps; she also wets herself and is dragged aside to be beaten by women of the *Guddi*. Kawsar watches the whole

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1. The Saba'ad refugee camp was created in 1978 to accommodate refugees, most of them ethnic Somalis, who were running away from the disputed region of Ogaden in Ethiopia. A year earlier, in 1977, Somali forces had gone to war with Ethiopia, claiming that the Ogaden region belonged to Somalia.

incident just a few metres away. When she attempts to save Deqo from the merciless beating,<sup>2</sup> she is arrested by Filsan who then savagely beats her and breaks her hip. Somalia descends into violence soon after the celebrations, with the rebels launching an offensive against government forces to oust Siad Barre from power. Towards the end of the novel, when the nation is “bleeding dry” – a euphemism that Mohamed uses to refer to the violent carnage that rocks Somalia in the novel – the paths of Kawsar, Filsan and Deqo cross again when they take refuge in Kawsar’s house off October Road in Guryo Samo area. Before long, the three women embark on a long trek out of Hargeisa to the Saba’ad Refugee Camp, escaping the ravages of the Civil War.

Two narrative tapestries are embedded in Mohamed’s novel: the public – the narrative capturing the (historical) devastation wrought on Somalia by the Civil War, and the revolution in its wake – and the private: a story of individual trauma, isolation and loss in which the three female protagonists decide to take the path of resistance by standing up for their rights and, eventually, walking away from the violence that has caused them (and their community) so much pain. Each of these stories is connected by the dimension of a set of experiences which mark, define and shape individualities of the three female protagonists. Structured in three parts, the novel introduces Deqo, Kawsar and Filsan in Part One, telling the reader what brings the three together: the annual 21 October celebrations. Part Two dedicates a section to each of the three female protagonists, in which we see them watch the Somali state’s descent into war and revolutionary violence. We also learn their personal lives, their embodied experiences and what reunites them once more in Part Three of the novel, this time not as people pursuing individual goals, but forging a common front. In both contexts, the subaltern female voice seeks to assert itself and claim authority over the social ills that happen around, and to, them.

A brief overview of Somalia will prove useful to understanding the issues depicted in *The Orchard of Lost Souls*. Somalia has had a complex history. According to Hassan Mohamed, it stands out as the only African country that was partitioned into five separate parts during the colonial period: British Somaliland in the north; North Frontier District (NFD, which was later ceded to Kenya by Britain); Italian Somaliland in the south; French Somaliland (now Djibouti); and a large region known as Ogaden of which all three European powers relinquished portions to Emperor Menelik of Ethiopia as a reward for

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2. Kawsar comes to the rescue of young Deqo both out of empathy and because she lost her own child to a similar malpractice. Five years earlier, security forces had arrested her only surviving child, Hodan, in the mistaken belief that she had participated in a nonviolent protest alongside other students. Hodan was eventually released, but not before she was violated and tortured so severely that she became irreparably traumatised. Shortly after the incident, Hodan committed suicide. Kawsar is thus embittered by the repressive regime, as she blames it for the death of her daughter.

his collaboration (1994: 7). Out of these five, only two parts of the Somali nation – the former British Somaliland and former Italian Somaliland – gained independence and united, on 1 July 1960, to form what came to be known as the Somali Democratic Republic. These views are also corroborated by Nadifa Mohamed, who adds that the division of Somalia into five parts became the source of conflict first between Somalis and the neighbouring countries and, later, among the Somalis themselves (2014: 12). The Somali Civil War was born out of these and other internal conflicts. It started on 9 April 1978, when a coup attempt was made by disaffected Majeerteen officers. One such Majeerteen-based opposition movement – the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) – was created soon after the coup attempt. It started launching armed attacks against Siad Barre’s regime. More armed opposition groups followed. On 9 April 1981, the Somali National Movement (SNM) was formed, while the United Somali Congress (USC) and the Somali Peoples Movement (SPM) were founded in 1989 (Gardner & El Bushra 2004: 230). These factions formed a united front against the Siad Barre regime in August 1990. Siad Barre was finally forced to abdicate the presidency when USC forces captured Mogadishu on 26 January 1991 (Gardner & El Bushra 2004: 232). Since Barre’s ousting from power, competing factions continue to fight for supremacy, leaving millions of people dying and thousands fleeing the country every year.

Set at a very particular moment in Somali history, Mohamed’s novel deals with the catastrophic events that happened in the northern part of Somalia when government forces went to war with the Isaaq (or Isaak) clan; the largest in the region. In history, Isaak exiles living in London created an anti-government guerrilla organisation in 1981, the Somali National Movement (SNM) – called the National Freedom Movement in the novel – with the aim of ousting Siad Barre from power. The novel’s focus, however, is not on the civil war but on the women’s lives as they try to cope with the devastating impact of war. This is also what Magnus Taylor says, that “rather than becoming a story of the war, the book becomes a study of what goes on in the minds of these [female] characters” (2013: n.pag.). Taylor qualifies his position by insisting that “Apart from a brief description of the fighting experienced by Filsan towards the end of the book, Mohamed seems to deliberately eschew the potentially dramatic episodes in the war” (2013: n.pag.). I find this component of the lives and experiences of women essential to understanding their choices since, as the novel’s omniscient narrator also says, they are the ones “running their families because the streets have been emptied of men; those not working abroad are in prison or have been grabbed off the street and conscripted into the army” (2014: 147).

## Trauma, Isolation and Inner Resilience

To the extent that the novel portrays the scarred hearts of the three female protagonists, the individual stories they tell and the choices they make (discussed in the next section) need to be put in context. I read Kawsar as representing the voice of reason and protector of the young and vulnerable still living in the Somalia portrayed in the novel. At almost sixty years of age, she reads as someone who has lived long enough to know the regime’s brutality in dealing with its critics. My argument is influenced by how she reacts towards the leadership. While attending an enforced pro-government rally, for example, she defiantly refuses to hold up a placard bearing “a shimmering portrait of Oodweyne” (2014: 17) – Mohamed’s fictional reference to Siad Barre – because she thinks he is *a blasphemer* and someone who has brought more pain and misery to the lives of ordinary Somalis. This pain is all too fresh in Kawsar’s life, having lost both her husband and daughter to the regime through arrest and torture. Earlier in the day, when she had seen General Haaruun – who is “the Military-Governor of the north-western region” who stands in as “the President’s avatar in Hargeisa” (2014: 7) – her heart pounded in her chest, since she had come face to face with the person whom she blamed not just for her daughter’s death but for the younger woman’s “arrest, disappearance and her decline into a huddled, diminished figure” (2014: 14). The Military Governor’s presence thus brings memories of pain and loss in her. But it is in the metaphor of the orchard that Kawsar’s growing sense of loss and desolation is best captured in the novel. In a broad sense, one could say that the novel deals with the theme of desolation as expressed through the orchard metaphor. Kawsar’s house has an orchard whose trees “had been born from deaths” since they “grew from the remains of the children that had passed through her” (2014: 165). This description is significant in showing the extent to which Kawsar is affected by the losses in her life. She is emotionally attached to the orchard, always thinking that if she doesn’t tend to it she will be letting her “children” down, just as picking fruits that fell from them will be “a kind of cannibalism” (2014: 165). In the end, we get the sense that Kawsar immortalises her loss through her imagination that the orchard symbolises her long gone family. It is also possible to read Kawsar’s orchard as functioning as a symbolic representation of the Somali community: the desolation that surrounds Kawsar in her orchard is similar to the one that surrounds the northern city of Hargeisa. Her refusal to eat the fruits from the orchard, then, must be understood as a form of resistance to the violence of a state that eats its own children, through the killings that seem to go on unabated such that towards the end of the novel the city looks deserted and in rubble after its inhabitants are either killed or escape its deteriorating state. In that sense, Hargeisa is the real orchard of lost souls. It represents the Somali state and its senseless leaders who seem to eat the fruits

of war, by accumulating wealth and power watered by the blood and lives of its citizens.

For Kawsar, the “new” Somalia she lives in is a far cry from the old. What is more, it is a poignant and disturbing place as compared to the Somalia of 1960. Strapped to her bed while fighting rages outside her house (she can neither walk nor sit upright, after she is disabled following Filsan’s savage beating), she reminisces how everything seems to have changed from “the good times [...] once shared” (2014: 11) by all Somalis *then to now* when anniversary celebrations are only “poor imitations of the Independence Day celebrations” (2014: 11) of the yesteryears. She explains:

When the British had left on 26 June 1960, everyone had poured out of their homes in their Eid clothes and gathered at the municipal *khayriyo* between the national bank and prison. It was as if they were drunk, wild; girls got pregnant that night and when asked who the father of their child was, they would reply: “Ask the flag.”

(2014: 11)

The description of girls getting pregnant on Somalia’s Independence Day as “the Somali flag [is] raised for the first time” (2014: 11) resonates with Yvonne Vera’s short story which also evokes the heady jubilation of Zimbabwe’s coming of independence from Britain. Similar to what Mohamed captures above, Vera’s story captures a man celebrating the lowering of the British flag on Independence Day “in style and triumph” (Vera 1992: 29) by sleeping with a woman. Suggested in both cases is a premonition of the deployment of women’s lives and bodies as battlegrounds for male nationalist pleasure, which, in wartime, translates to men’s nationalist anger, articulated through the weaponisation of rape against both the enemy-camp and the local women’s bodies. Mohamed’s description of women falling pregnant, albeit under the euphoria of independence, is, therefore, her enactment of the various and nuanced ways in which women are elided in nationalist discourses except where patriarchy wants to (ab)use them under the guise of a nationalist agenda. This is suggested in the novel through the new Somali regime’s tactics of intimidation and fronting of women to “foreign dignitaries [...] to make it seem human” (2014: 5). It is further shown through the way the second female protagonist, Filsan, is treated in the novel.

In the character of Filsan, Mohamed includes the perspective of a ranked female officer in order to examine the ways in which notions of power play out in the novel, both within the military sphere and between Filsan and the wider androcentric Somali society. Filsan is an embodiment of what Jean Bethke Elshtain calls “the Ferocious Few” women because of her ability to reverse cultural expectations by serving in the military (1995: 164). Mohamed labours to make Filsan stand out as a character representative of women who, through hard work and dedication, occupy recognisable positions in the Somali nationalist struggle. Originally from Mogadishu, Filsan is seconded to

Hargeisa to help quell anti-revolutionary protests there. According to the narrator, Filsan “volunteered to come north, hoping to show that although a woman, she has more commitment to the revolution than any of her male peers” (2014: 8). She sees Hargeisa as “the coalface of internal security, where real work can be done defeating National Freedom Movement bandits who persist in nipping at the government’s tail” (2014: 8). While in Hargeisa, Filsan oversees three *Guddi* units, one of which is responsible for training children from the Saba’ad Refugee Camp in traditional dances to be performed at the forthcoming eighteenth anniversary celebrations (2014: 6). These national assignments become subject positions that grant her some form of “power”. Being in the limelight also allows her to rub shoulders with top military officers and foreign dignitaries, including General Haaruun and the unnamed American attaché. Such spaces open Filsan’s mind and lead her to begin to cultivate ambitions for more power. When the stadium events are over, for example, we see her casting “a competitive glance [at] two other female officers [standing] nearby” even when she knows that “she is the closest” to Haaruun, “hoping that the General will notice the sharpness of her uniform, the straightness of her back [and] the smartness of her salute” (2014: 28-29). Through these mental peregrinations, we begin to understand why she admits to have “studied and trained to take her place at the heart of things” (2014: 30), just as we are indulged in her equally wishful thinking that one day she will be “in the centre [of power], not as [Haaruun’s] companion but as his successor, waving down to her subjects” (2014: 7). Beyond this fantasizing however, Filsan is not allowed to try out her ambitions. In fact, she becomes increasingly disillusioned with the way patriarchy treats her. She is constantly objectified by the men who “see nothing more than breasts and a hole” (2014: 34) in her. Haaruun and the visiting American attaché are no exception to the rule, as exemplified in the following conversation:

[Haaruun]: “I bet you this girl could strip a Kalashnikov in a minute,” the General boasts, placing his gold-rimmed sunglasses on top of his bald head. “Yes, and could annihilate an Ethiopian battalion while unicycling. I don’t doubt it,” the American laughs.  
“Look buddy [...]” General Haaruun grabs Filsan’s hand and raises it before twirling her around. “You’re going to tell me that American women can be trained killers and still look good?”  
Filsan fixes her gaze to the floor; she can feel others looking her up and down, eyes flicking over her like tongues.  
[American attaché] “Not bad, not bad. I wouldn’t want to meet her down a dark alley. Or maybe I would if it was the right kind of alley.”  
(2014: 33)

Both Haaruun and the American attaché fail to recognise and respect Filsan as a serious soldier with military ambitions and hopes for advancement based on her capabilities and leadership skills, choosing to focus on her gender and

sex appeal instead. Haaruun parades Filsan around for all to see while the American nods approval. I read the two men's treatment of Filsan as the objectification of the female body and a reinforcement of the rampant misogyny and sexism present in the novel. This is underscored by Haaruun himself, who orders Filsan to take off her hat in the back seat of his car as they leave for the Oriental Hotel later in the day (2014: 35), an act that signals Haaruun's extraterritorial jurisdiction over Filsan's body. Filsan meekly obeys. But when she fights him off her because he wants to rape her, Haaruun savagely pushes her out of a barely stopped Mercedes: "*Abu kintiro*, you cunt, make your own way home" (2014: 37), he mildly swears at her as his convoy pulls away from her. It is useful to consider Haaruun's treatment of Filsan as reflecting Sharon Marcus's concept of the "gendered grammar of violence". According to Marcus, this grammar

predicates men as the objects of violence and the operators of its tools, and predicates women as the objects of violence and the subjects of fear. This grammar induces men who follow the rules set out for them to recognize their gendered selves in images and narratives of aggression in which they are agents of violence who either initiate violence or respond violently when threatened.

(1992: 393)

The violence perpetrated against Filsan by Haaruun is, therefore, aimed at reducing her to what Marcus describes as "the subject of fear". It also pushes her into a blind rage, unfortunately, where she is portrayed as displacing her anger not on the source of her ill-treatment but on Kawsar, a fellow woman. Dwarfed by the men's lewd jokes about her body and by Haaruun's debasing treatment, she begins to feel insignificant, and the male community in whose presence she thought she had exuded power slowly turns her into an enraged vixen. She rushes to the police cell and takes her aggression out on Kawsar by beating and rendering the older woman bedridden for the rest of her life.

Filsan's sense of isolation is expressed more through her relationship with her parents than with the idea of not having a family. She is depicted as having a lonely childhood, the result of staying with a strict and abusive father who had divorced her mother when she was barely five years old. Her parents had divorced when her mother left her father for another man (2014: 255), and her father "had only given her mother a divorce on condition that she left Filsan to him, for him" (2014: 256). Since then, her life had revolved around her father who had literally "locked her away" (2014: 213), not allowing her to interact with anyone outside their home. Although she rises through the ranks to become an "honoured" daughter of the land as her father had wished, she still feels "alone, untouched, forgotten" (2014: 209), leading "the celibate, sterile, quiet existence of a nun, growing nothing but grey hairs" (2014: 213). Mohamed uses these strong descriptions to reveal the true character of Filsan. Like Kawsar, she lacks a true home and companionship.



In her portrayal of Deqo, Mohamed gives an account of innocent Somalis caught in the crossfire of fratricidal violence, but for whom politics seem meaningless. Deqo is a child of war, “the bastard of a loose woman” (2014: 67) who had arrived in the Saba’ad refugee camp one day, given birth to Deqo and then abandoned her. Owing to this, Deqo learns very early in life that “she belongs to the wind and the tracks in the dirt rather than to any other person”. and that “no watchful mother would come after her shouting her name in every direction” (2014: 67). This description foreshadows Deqo’s wandering nature, especially after she is out on the streets of Hargeisa. The sentence “no watchful mother would come after her shouting her name in every direction” is particularly poignant, as it foreshadows the sense of isolation and vulnerability that will soon define her. This unhomely upbringing forces Deqo to not only accept her fate but also learn how to look out for herself from a very tender age. After the anniversary celebrations debacle, for example, she relocates to a barrel under a bridge as her new “home”, from where she wanders into the farms along the ditch to “collect guavas, pomegranates, mangoes, bananas and papayas” (2014: 54), which she then sells in the *faqir* market. We also learn that Deqo has tried other jobs before: “collecting scraps of *qat* to sell to the dealers, pulling grass to sell as goat feed to housewives, sweeping the main market when there aren’t enough girls in the evening” (2014: 72). Her mode of dressing further accentuates the type of person she is. She is described as someone that “has grabbed all of her clothing from the wind: a white shirt caught on a thorn tree, a red dress tumbling abandoned by the roadside, cotton trousers thrown over a power line” (2014: 56); she is one who “dresses in these items that ghosts have left behind and becomes an even greater ghost herself, unseen by passers-by, tripped over, stepped on” (2014: 56). Her next ‘home’ is a brothel, where she works as a maid and errand girl to four prostitutes.<sup>3</sup> But the security she finds there is short-lived, especially after Nasra – the kind-hearted prostitute who takes her in – “sells” her to Mustafa as part of financing her own exit to start a new life elsewhere. Deqo soon finds herself on the street again, this time in the middle of a war zone, from where she must find her way to safety. From sleeping in a ditch to

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3. The four prostitutes in the novel are Nasra, China, Karl Marx and Stalin. Except Nasra, the other prostitutes do not bear their real names. China, we are told, got her name because she “helps the men who build [roads]” (2014: 25), most of whom are “drunks and gangster types” (2014: 102); Karl Marx, in line with her eponymous name, services the poor and humble workers (2014: 102). She even admits to going into prostitution when she was Deqo’s age (2014: 87). In her late thirties now, Karl Marx thinks she has “shared and shared and shared until there is nothing left to give” (2014: 88). Stalin is depicted as handling “the middle-aged husbands hiding their faces behind sunglasses” (2014: 102), while “the younger, smartly dressed men go to Nasra” (2014: 102).

staying in a brothel, and from being “sold” to almost being raped, the impression we have about Deqo is that of a doubly vulnerable child.

Deqo’s sense of isolation is heightened by the fact that she is overcome with the shame of telling others that she was born and raised in a refugee camp and that she has no family she can relate to: she “knows the way smiles fade when she tells people she is from the refugee camp” (2014: 80). So, she chooses to hide her identity, unless she is speaking to people like the four prostitutes probably because society calls them “lechers and dirty women” (2014: 74). This does not alleviate her sense of isolation, though. When Nasra wants to know what it is like “being all alone in the world at [her] age” (2014: 77), for example, we learn that the question “hits [her] like a falling branch” and makes her uncomfortably “shuffle her feet a little [as she] tries to pick through the words lodged on her lips” (2014: 77). This is understandable, given the circumstances surrounding her birth:

The truth [about her birth] is so brutal in contrast. She has no knowledge at all of where the rest of her family are; there are no stories passed on by cousins, no villages to return to, no genealogy to pass on if she ever has children of her own. She is like a sapling growing out of the bare earth while others are branches on old, established trees.

(2014: 92)

When Nasra temporarily takes her in, she feels a sense of belonging to a family at last. The fact that she “felt natural being bathed by Nasra, as if [Nasra] was an older sister or mother” (2014: 98), for example, reveals the extent to which Deqo yearns for familial connection. Mohamed develops an optimistic ending for Deqo, when we see her telling the Ethiopian official working for the UN in the Saba’ad Refugee Camp that her “mother and grandmother” need help outside (2014: 334), in reference to Filsan and Kawsar. In the larger context of Deqo searching for a family and a home, her “lie” to the UN official concerning the two women waiting for help is especially poignant. The novel ends with Deqo leading a young Somali man (working for the UN at the refugee camp) to where her “family” waits:

He places a hand gently on her shoulder and leads her out of the tent. He collects a wheelchair and she guides him to where Filsan and Kawsar wait. She is back in a familiar world; the war and all that time in Hargeisa just a complicated trial to achieve what she has always wanted: a family, however makeshift.

(2014: 334)

Here, the Saba’ad Refugee Camp is not only a symbol of hope to fleeing Somalis but also that of a family home for Deqo. While initially she had longed for familial connection, she now returns to it with two women whom she can relate to as family. Here, the institution of the family takes on a

different meaning. It is the type of family which is constituted along affiliation rather than filiation or biological connections. In a way, then, Mohamed seems to suggest that violence and civil war are insidious. They separate families and rob people of their loved ones.

I would like to extend Deqo's sense of isolation and vulnerability, however, by exploring the ways in which her orphanhood could also be understood in its metaphorical sense. In “Postcolonial Dread and the Gothic: Refashioning Identity in Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*”, Robert Smart meditates on the troubling role that orphans play in life. Smart illustrates his point by using the example of the Gothic novel where, in his view, orphans “either arrive in the story unrooted in family and history or they become so as a result of mysterious deaths and disappearances” (2013: 13). Orphanhood, for Smart, becomes a troubling experience, an arduous task in which “the orphan is essentially a social cipher seeking a missing [or new] identity [...] through marriage or adoption” (2013: 14). A central argument that Smart seems to advance here, which is also found in Deqo's character, is that the orphan character is rootless, always under threat: “the orphan character [...] is ‘psychically bipolar’ because s/he has no past, nothing from which to determine a current identity and no prospect for a future because of the orphan's misalignment with the familial structures” (2013: 14). I view Smart's illustration of the deprivations of the orphan, “[w]ith an origin from neither inside the family nor from outside it” (2013: 14), as indistinguishable from the Somalia portrayed by Mohamed in *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, with its history of violence and in-fighting that has led to scores of people wandering from place to place. I, therefore, read Mohamed's use of the orphan imagery in her novel as an embedded critique of the nation-project. Unlike the ostensibly pure nation which all citizens are called upon to defend patriotically, and render themselves subject to, Somalia, like Deqo, is an orphaned state in which its citizens seem to have been abandoned to their own fate. In this case, Deqo's character represents Mohammed's critique of the nationalism that underpins the violence of Somalia. In a way, her life mirrors the fate of independent Somalia and the various abuses and betrayals meted out to it by figures who should have protected and nurtured its freedom.

A striking feature that binds the three female protagonists, then, is that they are treated as second-class citizens, and Mohamed's description of their experiences drives home the message of isolation, loss and trauma. In psychological terms, trauma is a deeply distressing or disturbing experience, as well as the mental and emotional after-effects of that experience. Cathy Caruth looks at trauma as an “event [that] is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time [it occurred], but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (1995: 4-5; original emphasis). Caruth's designation of trauma as an *event* that is lived or re-experienced belatedly (a phenomenon

that Freud calls latency)<sup>4</sup> suggests ways in which past occurrences of trauma live out in a person's life. For Kawsar, these past occurrences appear incrementally in the novel, starting with the two deaths of her husband and daughter, the miscarriages and stillbirths she has had in her life, the crippling beating she receives from Filsan, and the fact that she is confined to her bed for a greater part of the novel's action while everyone is fleeing the violent carnage outside.

### **The Agential Imperative in *The Orchard of Lost Souls***

Agency may either take the form of studying cognate forms of being human (as proposed in the humanist framework); or, more generally, demonstrating some form of authority over certain mis/perceived social predilections (as proposed in the poststructuralist framework). The former, according to Bronwyn Davies, is used interchangeably with such concepts as freedom, autonomy, rationality and moral authority and is understood to mean that

each person is one who has an obligation to take themselves up as a knowable, recognizable identity, who 'speaks for themselves' and who accepts responsibility for their actions. Such responsibility is understood as resting on a moral base and entailing personal commitment to the moral position implied in their choices.

(Davies 2000: 56)

The latter is synonymous with authority. This is authority "not [...] in the sense of the one who claims and enforces knowledges, dictating to others what is 'really' the case, but as a speaker who mobilises existing discourses in new ways, inventing and breaking old patterns" (Davies 2000: 66). Elsewhere, in *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature*, Clare Bradford et al. define agency as "the making of choices and taking responsibility for them" (2008: 31). Bradford et al. add the ability to act as one of the defining features of agency. In their view, "To be able to act – to have *agency* – also means being able to answer for our actions, to be responsible" (2008: 33). The

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4. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Sigmund Freud "offers a psychopathological explanation for the origins of the Jewish religion" (Schäfer 2006: 25), adding that the birth of the Jewish religion today "is nothing more than the return of the previously repressed religion of the primeval father" (Schäfer 2006: 25). This return is expressed in terms of what Freud calls latency, or "the appearance of inexplicable manifestations which call for an explanation, and the strict condition of an early, and subsequently forgotten, experience" (Freud 1955: 117). Cathy Caruth holds that Freud "compares the history of the Jews with the structure of a trauma" in the book since, in both cases, there is "the return of the event after a period of delay" or repression (Caruth 1995: 7).

above-mentioned conceptions of agency resonate with Mohamed’s fictive portrayal of women’s experience in her novel and the subject positions they take in a bid to subvert overt and covert forms of harm inflicted on them due to the instability of the Somali nation-state and the androcentric perceptions of women portrayed in the novel.

McDonough states that for most female characters, “exhibiting one’s own agency normally requires courage and involves some kind of action. Displaying courage or bravery does not mean that a person is not scared; it means that she is still willing to act because the benefits outweigh the risk” (2017: 23). For Kawsar, this show of courage is first demonstrated in the book when she tells the regime’s handlers to stop beating up an innocent girl, and she ends up taking a savage beating for her bold act. This show of courage appears incrementally in the novel, including in an incident when Kawsar is seen spitting at the President’s effigy because it reminds her of previous pain and loss: “Before she remembers where she is, she spits violently at the sight, drawing a gasp from the spectators around her” (2014: 17-18). She fails to control herself upon seeing the President’s portrait and her reaction, though dangerous (given the ruthlessness of the regime), is understandable. Her actions draw fretful gasps from the spectators, who probably fear for her life. But Kawsar finds their fear “so paltry and pointless in comparison to what she has lived through” (2014: 18). She asks: “What more can [the regime] hold when they have taken away her only child?” (2014: 18). Her act of defiance towards authority begins to make sense to the reader in the sense that, according to the novel’s narrator, she “does not care about her life or possessions to keep abasing herself” (2014: 18) at the hands of a regime that holds no hope for the ordinary Somali. More crucially, Kawsar’s actions reflect.

Filsan’s agency is borne out of the pain and disappointment she suffers at the hands of state/male power. She feels used and abused by the regime for only seeing her as a woman instead of recognising her real potential as an able-bodied officer in the military. Unsurprisingly, as the Somali state finds itself at the intersection of Civil War and lawlessness, Filsan begins to question the ideals of the revolution and her place in it. All along she had lived under the illusion that she was part of nation building in the new Somalia, believing that she was “a new kind of woman with the same abilities and opportunities as any man” (2014: 213). Her search for Kawsar back at the police cell and the beatings she inflicts on the grownup woman bring temporary respite to her, but with it even more pain at the realisation that she has been made to feel “so small and inconsequential” (2014: 213) by state/male power. We thus understand why, after she finishes landing savage blows on the older woman, she “shakes her head, tears in her own eyes, and rushes out of the room” (2014: 44). Filsan’s sense of disappointment is magnified by the fact that “the thud of her boots as she runs down the corridor gets quieter and disappears” (2014: 44) with her retreating steps, which

foreshadows her eventual abandonment of her beliefs about serving the regime for the good of Somalia. Her abandonment of the nationalist ideals could be interpreted in two ways. First, it is her way of resisting objectification at the hands of male power. It is also a sign of frustration at her failed quest to become an honorary man; one able to inflict violence on others, just like the men do in the fictive world of the novel. Here she seems to have learnt that no matter how well she serves the military (and the state), she will remain a woman in its eyes, and subject(ed) to patriarchal violence and constructions of the female. More importantly, though, Filsan's decision to abandon the nationalist ideal is built out of choice, which, according to Megan McDonough, "is the crux of agency, and how a person decides to act is how we see agency manifest itself" (2017: 11). In "From Damsel in Distress to Active Agent", McDonough argues that "In order to claim agency, one must actively reflect in order to make the best decision" (2017: 10-11). For,

Understanding the power structures in which a person lives and accepting her own power can be crucial for a character to claim agency. For a person, claiming agency means going against society's norms in order for her to do what is best for herself, her family, her friends, or sometimes even society as a whole. *Agency involves doing what she believes is right*, regardless of society's attitudes and structures, and in spite of the possible negative consequences to herself. *The character must take responsibility for her actions*. She also accepts herself as a subject who can make her own decisions and she acts on those decisions.

(McDonough 2017: 11; emphases added)

In a curious, yet telling exit of her life as a military officer, Filsan's choice to no longer share in the ideals of the revolution is her way of "going against society's norm in order for her to do what his best for herself". She knows that the new Somalia does not hold any hope for her. Therefore, she decides to affirm her personality as a free, unhindered person by leaving for the Saba'ad Refugee Camp where she hopes to start life afresh. Nuruddin Farah also draws on this social angst in *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora*, noting that violence in Somalia has taken on a monstrosity that has caught everyone unawares and has left scores of Somalis abandoning their comfort zones for a new beginning elsewhere. According to Farah, the body politic is not free from the pestilence that has followed in the wake of the violent fighting in Somalia. To him, Somalia is a country in the throes of dying, with the body politic that was Somalia begetting "a gangster carrying out miscarriages of justice" (2000, 9). For Filsan, then, leaving for the Saba'ad Refugee Camp allows her the opportunity to take stock of her life even as she charts a new course for herself.

Of the three female protagonists in the novel, Deqo stands out as someone who is given a bigger form of agency in the novel. She knows that "It is wrong for any child, especially a girl, to be sleeping anywhere near [the] ditch, with

wild dogs and even wilder men” (2014: 82); yet, given the circumstances under which she was brought into the world, she takes her chances by looking out for herself, and oftentimes sharing living space with “wilder men”. But unlike Filsan who craves power and men’s attention, Deqo knows where to draw the line between herself and the men especially where they are too close for comfort. She is “able to act – to have agency” over her small build. For example, when she stumbles on two drunks warming themselves by the fire on a cold night and when one of them “reaches out to grab at her thigh[,] she jumps quickly beyond his reach” and calls him “a disgusting old lizard” because she suspects he wanted to rape her (2014: 53). This incident not only unsettles her but also leads her to keep vigil for the rest of the night. Mohamed portrays her as someone who knows that even though “her legs are tired, her eyelids eager to drop, but she can’t sleep here with them” (2014: 55). So, she “sits down heavily on the mulch and crosses her legs. She will wait until the sunrise and then [...] sleep for a couple of hours” afterwards (2014: 55). The fact that she “crosses her legs” even though she looks tired reveals the extent to which Deqo feels insecure in the presence of the two drunks. She immediately decides to keep herself on guard, probably recalling the instructions she had received from the women in the Saba’ad refugee camp who had warned her: “don’t sit with your legs open, don’t touch your privates, don’t play with boys” (2014: 64). In another attempted rape incident, when one of Nasra’s regular ‘customers,’ Mustafa, tries “to prise open her legs,” she sticks a stiletto knife in his eye and flees the brothel (2014: 116). These descriptions are striking in the action they imply: Deqo may be a mere underaged child, but she is ready to fight for her rights and keep herself safe even when she knows that she is a poor orphan, oftentimes at the mercy of strangers. Overall, these words convey a pervasive atmosphere of vulnerability for Deqo as a child. Mohamed deliberately refuses to dwell on the men’s actions here and focuses on Deqo’s instead.

Deqo’s agency does not stop at protecting herself from the bad men, however. She also embodies courage, compassion and a sense of duty; what Anthony Giddens describes as the individual who “‘make[s] a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events” (1984: 14). As she wanders through the streets of Hargeisa, for example, we see her shooing stray dogs that feast on the decomposing human corpses. In one touching incident, Deqo drags the body of a partially eaten man into a barely deep hole that she dug to “give him the dignity of a burial” (2014: 306). Towards the end of the novel, when everyone has escaped, she is seen guiding Kawsar and Filsan through the deserted streets of Hargeisa to the Saba’ad refugee camp. These actions, however small, are symbolic representations of human agency. It is as if the author wants to show us that real power to effect things lies with Deqo; that she is the one who must do something about her (fellow female protagonists’) condition if they are to survive both the misogynist society and the violent carnage.

## Conclusion

It is no coincidence that *The Orchard of Lost Souls* begins and ends with women. They are a pervasive feature in the novel; they symbolise a struggle, they represent resilience, and they play a major part in the author's construction of a desolate nation-state that still needs its women to survive. It is possible to argue that Mohamed's use of three women from three different generations in her novel takes a darker turn in the representation of women's lives within the socio-political crises that have defined Somalia in recent times. As pointed out earlier, Somalia has had a complex history, wrought with violence and insecurity. In this case the author, a historian, is employing a paradigm of historical trauma precisely to contextualise what the three generations of women have been through since Somalia gained independence from its colonial masters.

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