Before the Earth Receives My Bones: Clips of the Somali Belwo

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Abstract

This paper builds on the brief introductory comments by both Donez Xiques and Margaret Laurence in A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose to show that while the belwo—a genre of romantic Somali lyrical poetry created and sang by young men—is simple, it is not frivolous, immature or simplistic as it has been accused of being. Instead, it is accomplished in form and universal in content.

Key Words: belwo, figurative language, Gorki, love, Laurence, Marvell, oral discourse, persona, poetry, protagonist, Pushkin, rhetorical questions, Shakespeare, Somali, universal, Xiques

The belwo is a genre of Somali poetry. An individual belwo normally consists of a periodic sentence that is organised into as short as two lines and as long as six lines. A creation of young men, the belwo has a male persona who sings praises to the beauty of or his passion for a female addressee; invariably therefore the belwo is a lyric poem that has romance as its theme. Executing this theme, more often than not it endeavours to capture struggles or tortures of a male protagonist as he endeavours to win the passionate love of a female antagonist.

Introducing A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose by Margaret Laurence, Donez Xiques draws attention to alliteration, image, and paradox in two belwo, while Laurence in the introduction to the same work mentions alliteration, images, figures of speech, length, and rhythm as some stylistic features of the belwo. In the process, Laurence says that “the general opinion seems to be that belwo making is a relatively unskilled craft” and “older men scorn the belwo...because of its shortness and ‘lack of style’” and because of it being a “frivolous and immature” product of young men (28).

One would agree that the belwo is short. Indeed what poetry would be shorter than each of these two belwo—as are all the belwo in this paper—drawn from A Tree for Poverty that contains poems and tales Laurence collected in the then British Somaliland Protectorate sixty years ago?

Woman, lovely as lightning at dawn,
Speak to me even once. (48)

He who has lain between her breasts
Can call his life fulfilled.
Oh God, may I never be denied
The well of happiness. (52)

Yet, despite their brevity these poems do not lack “in style” and are not “frivolous and immature.” A cursory look detects the images that characterise the two poems, the first one employing a simile to praise before pleading the woman who is the object of the persona’s attention, the second one employing the well as a symbol in a land where during the hot dry season water is life to human beings and their livestock the persona captures passionate fulfilment.

Consequently, building on the introductory comments to A Tree for Poverty by both Xiques and Laurence, this paper argues that the belwo is simple but it is not simplistic in both form and content. Indeed, its artistry is discernible in the techniques it uses and its seriousness is evident in themes of focus on passionate desire and romantic love that it focuses on; what is more, the techniques its uses are normally exploited by while its themes are weighty issues explored in poetry in all places and at all times.

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The artistry is apparent in the use of the persona who not only talks as the protagonist but also implies an audience as the antagonist. In the following poem, the persona uses a general statement as an irrefutable universal truth before employing personification talking about death to plead his romantic case and imply that only a cold-blooded addressee defying the universal law of mercy for the dying can reject him:

The merciful will not ignore
A man whose death draws near:
Before the earth receives my bones,
Show mercy unto me. (51)

At the same time, in this seductive four-liner, the persona both praises his antagonist through an image and a simile that appeal to our senses of sight and taste to create a memorable picture and identifies the object of seduction by her name, in the process, suggesting the setting of the poem:

The curving of your breasts
Like apples sweet and small,
Tolmoon, I will know again
When night turns dusk to dark. (51)

Further, swooning under the power and spell of love as he captures in a simile the yearning the woman who he identifies by name, the persona compares himself with the camel, the treasured animal that suggests with the name of the antagonist the setting of the poem:

Like a camel sick to the bone,
Weakened and withering in strength,
So I, from love of you,
Oh Dudi, grow wasted and gaunt. (49)

The presence of a persona in each of these poems undergirds the conversational nature of the belwo which appears to be a dialogue between the persona—the male protagonist for whom it uses the first-person pronoun—against whom is ranged an addressee—the explicit or implicit female antagonist or, in a few occasion, a communal audience. Yet, the belwo is a monologue, whose artistry lies in its masquerade as an address, conversation or dialogue in the presence of an assumed communal audience or an implied antagonist being directly addressed, as apparent in these poems whose setting “Kitab” and “Weeris” suggest:

If I set myself to write
Of the love that holds my heart,
A wondrous great Kitab
Could not contain it all. (48)

The bonds of kindred blood that claimed
First loyalty from me,
Are sundered, Weeris, for your sake,
Since now you claim my heart. (49)

To address or discuss the admired or loved woman to the individual antagonist or communal audience, the belwo uses the present tense to as a technique to create an urgent sense in the execution of the persona’s desire. This use not only shows that the persona talks about his desire in the immediate present but also underscores the how immediately and urgently the persona needs to have his desires fulfilled by the woman of his passionate or romantic dreams—who he at times addresses her by name, suggesting the setting of the poem and undergirding immediate and urgent fulfilment by a woman who he is familiar to. Further, the illusion of oral discourse that its conversational nature gives is evident the oblique way in which personas employ figurative language to create pictures and elicit response and evoke emotions and, once in a while, the dash to give not only an illusion of
disjointed parenthetical additions common in oral discourse but also an impression a lovelorn heart—all which are apparent in these poems where girls’ names and “djinn” suggest their setting:

A man enchanted by the waking dream
That enters like a djinn, his heart to own,
Can never sleep, Amina—I have been
Away, these nights, walking the clouds of heaven. (48)

Your bright mouth and its loveliness,
Your fragrance, the look of you—
Ubah, flower-named, for these
My journey is forgotten. (50)

I lost my ammunition on the trek,
And I lost my rosary as well—
Oh Rubo, love of mine, come out with me
Across the plains, and we will search for them. (52)

Then there are the rhetorical questions which give an illusion of an immediate addressee as in oral discourse to an audience who cannot but agree with the protagonist’s implicit romantic assertion that he is a hot-blooded lover, as he uses a simile creating an image of precious and pretty to sing praises to their beauty, that beautiful girls are the reason for his leaving and his living:

The girls who were fair as diamonds
And slender as trees—
In the country they left,
Why should I remain? (51)

Yet this is not all. Employing rhetorical questions, the protagonist seeks to persuade the antagonist to agree with him, for has he not been so persuasive in putting forward his incontrovertible case that he has left the antagonist with nothing to say in defence? With no wiggle room as a result of the rhetorical question, the antagonist would have nothing to disagree with casting her, if she does not hearken to his cry, as guilty of or hard-hearted for spurning his passionate attentions in these poems where “Waysara” and “Jilal” suggest their Somali particularity:

Do you now, Waysara, cause my head to spin,
And then refuse me solace in my wretchedness? (48)

You hear my pleading songs to you,
But surely the drought of the last Jilal
Has addled your brain and shrivelled your heart—
Else why do you not come to me? (51)

As they create an illusion of oral discourse, the rhetorical questions enhance rhythm, a universal feature of poetry—enhance because in itself versification creates rhythm that devices and techniques such as repetition of lines or words and alliteration draw attention to, rendering the belwo memorable and pleasurable, as evident in this poem where the first line and the last line act as a cohesive device and where, using personification, the protagonist implicitly counsels the antagonist on the ominous upshot of snubbing his romantic overtures before the earth receives her bones:

Turn not away in scorn.
Some day a grave will prove
The frailty of that face,
And worms its grace enjoy.
Let me enjoy you now—
Turn not away in scorn. (50)
As these clips from the belwo show, the central theme of this genre is romance in the form of praising the beauty of, or making affectionate or amorous advances to, a woman. At times counterpoised to or tempered by thoughts of death, which puts to an end to physical beauty, the consuming passion the romance engenders is the central theme in and a key to the unity of the belwo. In this connection, the romantic dreams this central theme arouses are the object of a central image, as well as a layered picture presented through imagery where figurative allusions to things such as the camel both immediate or valuable to life and pertinent to the central theme coalesce around. The romantic dreams through which the central theme is realised stand on three planks: one, appreciating the beauty of a woman, two, agonising over the need for the loved woman and, three, desiring to consummate love before the earth receives the woman’s bones.

One, appreciating the beauty of a woman, the persona captures her loveliness through dazzling images of precious and pretty objects in the environment in which the poems are set to sing and undergird his romantic love for the woman:

So perfect are her teeth, one might mistake
Their whiteness for the palest inner bark
Cut from a place of Allah’s kindly Grace
Where new rains fell and the ‘galol’ tree flourished,
And fashioned into a vessel, bound around
With pearls, pink glowing, garnered from Zeilah’s sea. (50)

All your young beauty is to me
Like a place where the new grass sways,
After the blessing of the rain,
When the sun unveils its light. (50)

Two, agonising over the need for the loved woman, these two belwo capture the agony over love by employing images drawn from the environment which together with words such as “dhow” and “hyena” and the name “Dunbuluk” suggest their setting: the first one, a cumulative sentence cast in six lines, employs the image of a dhow to compare a desolate persona separated from, and longing to be united with, his loved one, while the second one pines for the loved through an image of the hyena and its wandering:

I long for you, as one
Whose dhow in summer winds
Is blown adrift and lost,
Longs for land, and finds—
Again the compass tells—
A grey and empty sea. (48)

I ask the stealthy hyena
Who prowls past Dunbuluk’s fires,
If he, from his wide wandering,
Brings back one word of you. (49)

Three, desiring to consummate love before the earth receives the woman’s bones, the belwo endeavours capture that tension between beauty and time or between love and death that finds its expression in desperate, immediate, passionate, urgent yearning for fulfilment in love by the persona who, through the personification of creeping age and certain death, reminds the loved woman of death as the way of all flesh as a way of imploring her to accede to his entreaty for love:

Your body is to Age and Death betrothed,
And some day all its richness they will share.
Before your firm flesh goes to feed their lusts,  
Do not deny my right to love you now. (51)

In the course of this paper, I have pointed out that some words in the poems suggest the setting of the belwo. The figurative comparisons to the camel indicate the desert as its geographical context, while “Kitab” (48) “the Holy Quran” (53) and “Allah” (50 59) indicate Islam as its religious context. The use of “djin” (54 58) and “dhow” (48) narrows down the geographical context of the belwo to lands bordering the Indian Ocean, while names of trees such as “galol” (50), seasons such as “Jilal” (51), places such as “Zeilah’s” (50) and “Dunbuluk’s” (49) and women such as “Amina” (48), “Dolweris” (49), “Dudi” (49), “Rubo” (52), “Tolmoon” (51), “Ubah” (50), and “Weeris” (49) particularize specific belwo as Somali poems.

This particularity might suggest that the belwo is a “frivolous and immature” product of young men—an emotional, inexpensive and portable carrier or conduit of their romantic impressions, memories or yearnings that they capture in highly expressive and passionate language only for young Somalis. Admittedly, the belwo is brief, and immediate—features that must have been accentuated in its oral setting before a live audience.

Yet, focusing on love, however ephemeral the physical beauty it sings praises to, the belwo captures the universal in the particularity as it creates fantasy that transports its creators and its audiences to less drab and to more idealized realms. The universal is not only in its formal elements but also in its thematic concern—in this case, romantic love, which, despite its setting, is universal. In the words of Maxim Gorki: “the desires of a man to find in a woman the second half of his own soul has burned in the men of all countries and ages with an equal flame” (91). Literature from diverse lands and different ages bears out the truth of this statement with regard to the treatment of this theme in the belwo.

One, appreciating the beauty of a woman, like the persona in the belwo who compares the beauty of the loved woman to “a place where the new grass sways,/After the blessing of the rain,/When the sun’s. In the words—n both passion and substance, and its audiences to more lovely and.

May Heaven grant another love you so!

I loved you mutely, hopelessly and truly,  
With shy yet fervent tenderness aglow;  
Mine was a jealous passion and unruly....  
May Heaven grant another love you so!

1 Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;  
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:  
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this and this gives life to thee. (http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/18.html)

4 I loved you, and that love to die refusing,  
May still—who knows!—be smouldering in my breast.  
Be not you pained—believe me, of my choosing,  
I'd never have you troubled nor yet distressed.  
I loved you mutely, hopelessly and truly,  
With shy yet fervent tenderness aglow;  
Mine was a jealous passion and unruly....  
May Heaven grant another love you so!
loves not deny his right to love her before her “firm flesh goes to feed” the lusts of age and death (51), the persona in Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” tells his coy mistress in the second stanza\(^5\) that should she die without consummating their relationship “then worms shall try/That long preserv’d virginity” before concluding: “The grave’s a fine and private place,/But none I think do there embrace” (http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/marvell/coy.htm).

On the whole, the belwo is concise, dramatic, fresh, imaginative and musical, as it organizes passionate yearning or romantic dream into an aesthetic as well as a memorable composition, in which we see praise for beauty and longing for love as worthwhile experiences people go through as they accommodate themselves to life in a hostile environment. Capturing these experiences, the belwo employs devices such as figures of speech and rhetorical questions and techniques such as persona and versification to create images of beauty and love in poetry with rhythm that arises from its features such as alliteration, lines and repetition some of which help to anchor it in memory. These features as well as devices and techniques are universal and have been used by poetry down the ages the world over. As a form of poetry — indeed, lyrical poetry — the belwo is therefore universal in form. Need we add that its discourse — oral as in the original or translated and written as in the collection — is universal?

In the end, while the belwo is simple, it is not frivolous, immature or simplistic as it has been accused of being. Instead, it is accomplished in form and universal in content. In a different context, I have discussed the belwo “Your body is to Age and Death betrothed,/And some day all its richness they will share:/Before your firm flesh goes to feed their lusts,/Do not deny my right to love you now” (51) and indicated its maturity in both style and substance in these words:

> Cast in the form of a periodic sentence whose anticipatory constituents lead to the persona’s amorous proposition, the poem creates an illusion of direct address and oral discourse through the use of the second person pronoun, concretises age and death through figures of speech, names the abstractions of age and death as human beings with a capacity for desire and marriage through proper nouns, and uses irony that would render it perverse for the addressee to fail to requite the persona’s love, as the addressee is at the binding of the wanton wastefulness of age and death. (279-80)

Consequently, we can make similar statements about several belwo to show that they do not exhibit “relatively unskilled craft” and that they should not be scorned for “its shortness and ‘lack of style’” as they are neither “frivolous” nor “immature.”

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\(^5\) But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
Thy beauty shall no more be found,
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song; then worms shall try
That long preserv’d virginity,
And your quaint honour turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust.
The grave’s a fine and private place,
But none I think do there embrace. (http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/marvell/coy.htm)
Works Cited


