



The Place of Somali Women in Ifrah Hussein's An Anthology of Grief

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Abstract

This study examined how the place of Somali women is depicted in *An Anthology of Grief* by Ifrah Hussein. The anthology explores the lived experiences of Somali women through themes of gender roles, patriarchy, motherhood, marriage, love, and grief. Using a qualitative research design and textual analysis, the study investigates how Hussein's poems reveal the patriarchal structures that confine women to domestic spaces and subordinate roles. The findings show that Somali women are depicted as caregivers, nurturers, and preservers of culture, often burdened by social expectations of obedience, endurance, and silence. Through poems such as *Mama's Land*, *Memoirs of the Mogadishu War in '93*, and *Learning from Hooyo*, Hussein highlights how women embody resilience despite cultural oppression and displacement. The study reveals that marriage and motherhood remain key markers of female identity, while women's grief over loss and violence reflects their emotional depth and social marginalisation. Hussein's poetry further illustrates how women navigate suffering, nostalgia, and displacement with strength and dignity, offering a voice to Somali women silenced by patriarchal and war-driven trauma. By portraying the dual realities of endurance and vulnerability, *An Anthology of Grief* not only critiques entrenched gender hierarchies but also celebrates Somali women's agency and emotional intelligence. The research contributes to gender and literary studies by demonstrating how Somali women writers in the diaspora use poetry as a medium to reconstruct female identity and challenge patriarchal discourse within both traditional and contemporary Somali society.

Introduction

Somali poetry covers a wide variety of subjects and styles that adapt and develop over time and with the culture. Initially, Somali poetry depicted work songs that reflected rural activities involving camels. Recent poetry highlights the importance of Somali women in twentieth-century Somalia. Somalia is a patriarchal society (Said, 1982). In general, males have the ultimate power and control. At the same time, women serve as home guardians. The female gender is often faced with cruel practices including: female-child dissociation, involuntary marriage, withholding of a female-child in her biological family for reproduction, widowhood habits, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), involuntary sex and abuse, refusal of the right to inherit property, exclusion in leadership, physical assault, purdah, denial of rights to education and employment opportunities (Gabriel, 2012). Muslim women endure different kinds of neglect in various parts of Africa (Adenkule, 2004). The use of purdah is seen to isolate women from public interactions, advancing their invisibility through veil politics. Somali women are expected to submit to men and dutifully perform household chores, thus limiting



them to the set norms (Advameg, 2006). Women's poetry was predominantly performed in private spaces historically; however, in their quest to reach a wider audience, contemporary female poets have created both fiction and non-fiction poems in huge volumes. Ifrah is no exception. This raises the question of what roles or places the Somali woman holds in these poems.

According to Bryden and Steiner (1998), despite the fact that women were mostly restricted to the roles of housewives and mothers for many years, their contributions to their local communities were undeniable, and their potential for both individual and communal fulfilment was limited. The theory of gender roles puts females and males in a hierarchy where, because of the traditionally defined gender roles, females are considered less important than males (Bari, 2005). Somali women have, however, found a space in poetry to voice their concerns, fears, and lived realities under patriarchal oppression. As their menfolk, the female Somalis have ways to make their influence known (1964).

Gender roles in *An Anthology of Grief* are portrayed through the lived experiences of Somali women who endure and persevere despite societal constraints. Hussein (2019) shows that women in Somali society are expected to be dutiful, obedient, and aligned with cultural norms. In the poem *Mama's Land*, the poet writes, "Be dutiful and patriotic, because when you lose culture, you have lost your bloodline, your home." This line emphasises the heavy cultural expectations placed upon Somali women, where femininity and morality are defined by adherence to traditional values. The poem *Memoirs of the Mogadishu War in '93* presents women as both nurturers and survivors, depicting their strength as caregivers who "carried children on their backs across the Jubba River to Jamaame" while enduring the trauma of war. Hussein thus exposes the dual roles of women as life-givers and protectors in a society plagued by conflict and patriarchal dominance.

The portrayal of motherhood and familial responsibility also forms a central aspect of Hussein's depiction of women's place. In Somali culture, motherhood is revered, and women are often defined by their ability to bear and nurture children. Hussein's poem *Yaa Allaah* reveals this through the woman's prayer, "Yaa Allaah, please give me children who love me more than they fear my love." This plea underscores the deep emotional and spiritual connection between Somali mothers and their children while exposing the societal pressure on women to find worth through motherhood. Similarly, the poem *Learning from Hooyo (Mother)* shows the intergenerational transmission of gender roles as the persona learns from her mother how to "tie the guntiino below the ribs and above the iliac crest," symbolising how mothers prepare their daughters for womanhood and submission within patriarchal norms.

Despite this subjugation, Hussein's women are not voiceless victims. The poems reflect women's agency and their ability to navigate societal expectations with quiet strength. In *Hooyo Says*, Hussein writes of a mother's endurance: "Tiredness and melancholia never afflicted a woman born under the Somali sun." This line represents the stoic resilience imposed upon Somali women who must bear suffering silently. The poet exposes the contradictions of a society that glorifies women's endurance while denying them freedom and emotional expression.

Moreover, *An Anthology of Grief* intertwines themes of death and mourning with feminine identity. The poem *The Birth and Death of Somali Boys* depicts women's grief as both private and collective, showing how war transforms mothers into symbols of resilience and sorrow. "I've forgotten how to cry for my brothers who learn to kill one another quicker than they learn to speak Somali," the persona laments, reflecting the trauma and despair of women who lose their sons to war. Hussein situates grief as an intrinsic part of Somali womanhood, one that transcends personal pain to encompass the collective suffering of a nation.



Through *An Anthology of Grief*, Hussein redefines the portrayal of Somali women from silent subjects of patriarchy to active participants in shaping their identity and memory. The poet captures the contradictions of Somali femininity – submission, endurance, despair and hope. Her poetry serves as both testimony and resistance, offering a voice to women silenced by war, religion, and culture. Ultimately, Hussein's work contributes to feminist literary discourse by illuminating how Somali women, through their roles as mothers, daughters, and lovers, embody resilience amid displacement and patriarchal constraints.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws from a post-secular feminism theory to examine the multifaceted oppression of women within religious contexts, emphasising the influence of religion on both public and private life. This theory's proponents include Judith Butler, Rosi Braidotti, and Saba Mahmood, among others. This approach is particularly relevant to the study of diaspora literature, where the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and gender plays a critical role in shaping individual experiences. According to the Oxford Dictionary, intersectionality is defined as " *The interconnectedness of social categories like race, class, and gender, in relation to individuals or groups, is seen as forming intertwined and interdependent networks of discrimination or disadvantage.*" This definition underscores the complexity of discrimination, which extends beyond a single facet of identity, revealing the layered oppressions individuals may face.

The poet selected for this study, a woman of colour from the diaspora, exemplifies the nuanced intersections of race, religion, and gender. Her work, emerging from and responding to her multifaceted identities, offers rich sites for exploring how these dimensions interact within the broader discourse of feminism and literature. The use of poetry as a form of expression highlights the transformative power of literature to expose oppressive narratives and structures (cf. Thiong'o & Barasa, 2020).

Post-secular feminism enables a detailed examination of how religious and cultural backgrounds intersect with gender to shape the poets' works and lives. The theory posits that women's experiences are profoundly shaped by religious beliefs and practices, often more so than by patriarchal structures alone. This perspective is crucial in understanding the specific challenges and oppressions faced by women in religious contexts, particularly those from minority communities in diaspora settings.

The application of post-secular feminism in this study involves a thorough analysis of how religious or spiritual experiences influence this poet's expressions and identity.

Methodology

A research design is an important part of any scholarly inquiry which gives us a structured way to an investigation. Research design is a framework that guides the collection, analysis and interpretation of data (Creswell, 2012). The study employed a case study design to examine the representation of Somali women in Ifrah Hussein's anthology, *The Anthology of Grief*. By focusing on this anthology, the study aimed to uncover the nuanced portrayal of women and examine how cultural, social, and personal dynamics are reflected and constructed through poetry.

The study draws from Ifrah Hussein's *An Anthology of Grief* (2019). Ifrah was recently named Artist of the Year in Canada and is also the 2017 Canadian Individual Poetry Slam Champion, making her the first woman to hold the national title. Poet and educator Ladan Osman is of Somali descent. Her poems have appeared in prestigious literary journals, many of which focus on her Somali and Muslim roots.

Target Population

The study draws from Ifrah Hussein's *An Anthology of Grief* (2019). Ifrah was recently named Artist of the Year in Canada, and is also the Canadian Individual Poetry Slam Champion for 2017, making her the first



woman to hold the national title. Poet and educator Ladan Osman is of Somali descent. Her poems have appeared in prestigious literary journals, many of which focus on her Somali and Muslim roots. The study used Purposive sampling. The sample size of the proposed study included all sections that depict the aspect of the place of women in the contemporary diaspora Somali female anthology; *An Anthology of Grief*.

Data Analysis

In this study, a qualitative data analysis approach was employed, specifically utilising textual analysis as the primary method for examining the collected data. Textual analysis is a detailed methodology that involves the decoding and deconstructive examination of texts. In this research, content analysis was the chosen strand of textual analysis, with special emphasis on thematic and stylistic elements in the selected poems. The analysis was specifically guided by the research objective: To show the place of Somali women in Ifrah Hussein's *An Anthology of Grief*, ensuring a focused examination of the textual material that aligned with the study's goals. Furthermore, the theoretical framework of post-feminism theory was integrated into the textual analysis to critically examine the societal norms that confine women to specific roles. This theoretical lens helped to highlight and critique the patriarchal structures that mandate specific social positions for women.

Results

This research shows how the religious and cultural perspectives often subjugate women. These women are left to play second fiddle to men, thus bringing out gendered expectations and practices to the detriment of the females. The study synthesises these observations, thus bringing clarity in understanding of gender dynamics and contributing to discourse on gender equality and empowerment.

Depiction of women in the 'An Anthology of Grief' (Hussein, 2019)

The study focuses on the depiction of women in the '*An Anthology of Grief*' by Ifrah Hussein. *An Anthology of Grief* is a book of poetry that explores themes of grief, diaspora, love, and being a Somali woman. An anthology of grief speaks for itself in tales of defiance and love.

Gender roles and patriarchy

As noted earlier, gender encapsulates customs, roles, relationships and people's behaviour. "*An Anthology of Grief*" (Hussein, 2019) reveals the state of women through poems and uses language in an unusual way to discuss gender roles. Gender roles are not only cultural but also personal. They dictate the manner in which men and women behave, interact with each other and the duties they are expected to play within their society. In the poem "*Mama's Land*" (Hussein, 2019), women are expected to be dutiful and obedient to their culture. The poet writes;

"... be dutiful and patriotic
Because when you lose culture
You have lost your bloodline
...Your home..."

The poem above reveals that gender schemas are deeply embedded cognitive frameworks that define masculinity and femininity. The persona ascribes to what is expected of women. Thus, it is clear that the persona reinforces gender roles for the audience. This may subject women to suffering since some aspects of culture may be repressive towards women. The text further underscores the shortcomings of the patriarchal family structure. The study notes that the patriarchal system thrives on the exploitation of inexpensive, unpaid, or enslaved labour, particularly as carried out by Somali women. Women flee from their homes in times of war. In the poem '*Mama's Land*' (Hussein, 2019), the poet writes;

"... The blood of a Somali boy is still searching for home



A wall to dry peacefully on.
Maybe this is why mama fled...”

The poet further shows how mothers love and care for their children. They would do anything to ensure their children survive even pray to God for it. The poet writes;

“... Maybe tis is why hooyo(mother) always says
... God, please do not take my children before me...”

A close analysis of data in the poem *Memoirs of the Mogadishu war in '93* (Hussein, 2019) reveals that the caregiving of children is a responsibility of mothers, as shown below:

Donald
What does it mean to be a Somali woman anyway?
We carried children on our backs
Across the Jubba River to Jamaame
And drank camel milk at the base of Bahaya.
We raised men to herd an entire nation
While still having enough breast milk left

In the poem above, the conceptualisation of femininity is reflected in the maternal roles of mothers in terms of birth, nurturing and socialisation of children in spite of the effects of war. The persona narrates that *we carried children on our backs across the Jubba river to Jamaame*, which depicts love, compassion, and dedication as feminine attributes in spite of the challenges that women suffer. The poem projects women’s maternal love and compassion for their children, and that such love transcends barriers and disabilities. Being a mother and woman in Somali culture was important as a mother brought forth children, nurtured and cared for them, as shown:

Across the Jubba River to Jamaame
And drank camel milk at the base of Bahaya.
We raised men to herd an entire nation

The line “*We raised men to herd an entire nation*” Hussein, 2019) reveals the value placed on mothers by their children due to the maternal roles they play in their lives. *The data also shows that women participate in productive roles. Productive roles encompass tasks undertaken by both men and women to fulfil the needs of the family, while management roles involve activities aimed at securing and sustaining resources for familial requirements, as well as those pertaining to socio-political decision-making.*” The analysis of the poem implicitly reveals that men are the leaders of the nation, as shown:

“*We raised men to herd an entire nation*”

The line above excludes girls and women who also participate in nation-building. Thus, the poet shows how society permeates gender prejudices against women.

Women are valued in society due to reproductive roles, such as childbearing, as shown in the poem “Yaa Allaah”

“... Yaa Allaah
Please give me children...”
Who love me more than they fear my love
Yaa Allaah
When my mother passes,
Please instil in me the strength to wash her body



The value of children is further shown when women grieve when their children die. In the poem *'The Birth and Death of Somali Boys'* (Hussein, 2019). The poet talks of a world of distracted Somali boys and grieving women. The persona further narrates how a woman named Habo prays for a girl child since she does not know how to grieve quietly for a boy. This not only brings out grief but also shows the value placed on the boy child as superior to that of a girl child.

The persona in the poem recognises that a fundamental role that gives a woman an identity is the role of childbearing. The poem shows that Mothers value children. A wife's main prayer is to have children for herself and her husband. In the poem *'Yaa Allaah'*, the woman character begs God for children. The poem shows that the construction of femininity in Somali culture is embedded in the concepts of fertility and reproduction, which are directly linked to motherhood, procreation, and lineage longevity.

'An Anthology of Grief' Hussein (2019) depicts women playing a mentorship role in the home. Such Poems are invaluable on important occasions, such as ceremonies that inculcate gender responsibilities, or during nuptials, for the bride and groom's married life. For instance, in the poem *'Learning from Hooyo (mother)'*, Hussein (2019) writes;

"She taught me how to tie the *guntiino*
Below the ribs and above the iliac crest"
Said women should know
How to put themselves together
Before the men take them apart
As if this garment could fasten all the distress
Sprinkled across our *fadhi carbeed*
on most days
I receive everything *Hooyo* teaches me and others ..."

In the poem above, it is clear that mothers teach their children how to groom. The poem reveals that gender roles are not innate but acquired through learning. These gender schemas are continuously inculcated in young children as they grow up to define what their community accepts as feminine or masculine. In Somali culture, parents are socialising agents and play a lifelong role of guiding their children in what the community customs dictate as feminine and masculine. *Hooyo* exerts the most significant influence, especially during children's formative years. The poem suggests that mothers were responsible for imparting early knowledge and values, such as life skills that enable them to co-exist in society. This explains why the moral character of a child in traditional Somali culture is associated with the mother. The poem supposes that one of the grounds of ascribing femininity is that mothers provide education, parenting and encouragement to their children, as shown:

"I receive everything "*Hooyo*" teaches me and others ..."

Further, Hussein (2019) highlights how women are expected to work tirelessly and not complain of fatigue, nor get sad. She writes;

"... *Hooyo*(mother) says tiredness
And melancholia never afflicted
A woman born under the Somali sun
I ask myself when my happiness
Invited it to die here
And whether it was before *hooyo*
Crossed the peace of the bridge
or after she panted herself



In a place that could never teach her how to subsist
In a world that knows very well
How to torment women”

Women and marriage

'An Anthology of Grief' also depicts the themes of life, marriage, love and nature. The textual data reveal that a woman in the Somali community values marriage since it is a form of social identity. Heterosexual marriage is presented as a normative life choice or requirement for women. Women look up to marriage as an ultimate goal. In the poem *'The Burnt Land'*, the persona says;

“ I speak in the civility of Somali poetry
... And when a woman marries
We make sound waves with our drums and fingers...”

The data shows that marriage comes with joy. The society makes insinuations that for a woman to have a fulfilled life, she must be married. However, the marriage of a Somali woman is depicted with marital challenges, such as abandonment, as shown below:

'Cottonmouth'

... You ask her why the men always leave
She tells you that you cannot
Ground a man whom Allaah
Planned to migrate from you.
... You keep a smile
Embedded by gratitude
Then return your heart to the domicile agony.
Your mother nestles your face
Between her palms...(Hussein, 2019)

The persona is not happy with her husband, who has abandoned her, as she expresses her social concerns. In a desperate show, the persona hopes that she will find worthy love from God.

Women, death and grief

In *'An Anthology of Grief'*, Hussein (2019) depicts the concept of death and grief in terms of gender. A textual analysis of the poems reveals that weeping is linked with females and femininity and illustrates the density and perils of showing grief openly. The poems delve into discussions surrounding tears and lamentation, mirroring the delicate nature of public displays of grief and echoing the rhetoric often directed at women. The findings indicate that within Somali culture, the interpretations of death and mourning by others imply that the grieving process is not straightforward or private. Instead, it is viewed as complex activities that can shape individual identities as either moral or immoral, respected or disrespected, and deemed worthy of mourning or not. In the poem *'The Birth and Death of Somali Boys'* it is revealed that death brings a lot of grief to women, as shown below:

I heard my mother say
Walaalo yaa is naceb, qabuurade badiyaan
This means: brothers who hate one another
Increase the graves in numbers
As if our demise could not suffice for the young
Bloods in *Kismaayo*,
They flood shrapnel through bodies
And we communicate with the horn from here



Where we carry out our problems
By living vicariously through dead niggas
And blood wounds

The persona in the poem above is a woman who is going through grief due to having lost loved ones to death. The poem shows all the sensibilities surrounding death, spirituality and respect for the dead in terms of the proper handling of the body as shown in the line: *As if our demise could not suffice for the young Bloods in Kismaayo*. The persona raises questions on whether the values and customs of a community can be upheld in a time of turmoil and upheaval. It seems her Somali brothers stopped maintaining the dignity of the dead. The poet shows grief in the persona as shown: *Where we carry out our problems, by living vicariously through dead niggas, and blood wounds*. The poet associates tears and femininity, and typically, tears are a female expression of emotion. The persona says:

I've forgotten how to cry for my brothers
who learn how to kill one another
Quicker than they learn to speak Somali

The lines above reveal the pain and weeping that the persona has gone through until she has stopped. The persona's inner struggle is depicted as she cries for her dead brothers. Brothers, meaning fellow countrymen who die violent deaths in time of war, by killing each other. It appears that men in the community are introduced to war when they are still young boys, and it is the women who bear the brunt of the senseless war and killing. The tone makes the audience feel that, given the opportunity, the persona would end the war, but, being a woman in a patriarchal community, she remains a mere spectator. The poet reveals the view that men were primarily expected to grieve stoically. Outside of pious, stoic grief, men could utilise another outlet: violence, as expressed by the persona:

"who learn how to kill one another
Quicker than they learn to speak Somali"

The persona laments that men are killing each other as a form of grief. But killing causes turmoil and reproduces grief throughout Somalia. The poem shows that grief and exercising power or control over others' or over one's own emotions relate, as shown by the way men fight each other regardless of the pain and emotion they cause to women. The persona advocates for the concept of unconditional forgiveness, urging men to pardon those who have wronged or caused harm intentionally, rather than resorting to revenge through violence or killing.

Discussion

The findings reveal that *An Anthology of Grief* (Hussein, 2019) presents Somali women as central figures whose identities are constructed through culturally defined gender roles, motherhood, marriage, and emotional endurance under patriarchy. The poems show that Somali women's existence is anchored in caregiving, obedience, and preservation of cultural values, as illustrated in *Mama's Land* and *Memoirs of the Mogadishu War in '93*. Women are expected to uphold the family and the community even amid war and displacement. They embody strength through nurturing roles, carrying children, raising men, and sustaining families despite hardship. Such portrayals reinforce the traditional association between womanhood and motherhood, where a woman's worth is determined by her ability to bear and raise children, as depicted in *Yaa Allaah*. The poems also uncover how patriarchal structures exploit women's unpaid labour and emotional sacrifices while excluding them from leadership and public decision-making. Furthermore, through *Learning from Hooyo*, Hussein reveals how mothers act as agents of socialisation, transmitting gender expectations to their daughters and teaching them to conform to patriarchal ideals of submission, endurance, and respectability. Thus,



the poet exposes the cyclic nature of gender oppression where women, though strong and wise, are moulded into silent carriers of culture and pain.

Conclusion

The exploration of Somali women's portrayal in contemporary poetry anthologies, authored by Somali women themselves, delves deeply into the intricate tapestry of societal norms, cultural expectations, and the lived experiences of women within Somali society. *An Anthology of Grief* by Ifrah Hussien serves as a poignant reflection of the multifaceted roles, struggles, and resilience of Somali women. Embedded in these poems' verses are layers of complexity that reveal the diverse experiences and identities of Somali women. Through vivid imagery and evocative language, the poets illuminate the everyday realities of Somali women, from the mundane tasks of domesticity to the profound moments of love, loss, and survival. Themes of motherhood, sisterhood, and community emerge as central motifs, underscoring the importance of familial bonds and collective resilience in the face of adversity.

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