Sexual Desire, Modesty and Womanhood: Somali Female Hybrid
Subjectivities and the Gabar Xishood Leh Discourse

by

Bilan Hashi

A thesis submitted to the Department of Gender Studies
in conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
(October, 2016)

Copyright © Bilan Hashi, 2016
Abstract

Extending work that examines Somali female identity, this thesis addresses how gendered subjectivity is articulated and performed within the Somali social imaginary vis-à-vis notions of “tradition,” modernity, colonialism, and post-colonialism. The project starts with the construction of an idealized Somali womanhood (what I refer to as *gabar xishood leh*, a modest girl), the affective pull and attachment of this identity formation, and the compulsion to perform it. In part, I illustrate how this gendered paradigm lays the conditions for being and belonging within the Somali collectivity. As the *gabar xishood leh* discourse is embedded with a particular conception of modesty, female desire and agency is bracketed outside the *gabar xishood leh* ideal. As such, this distancing precludes collective belonging and opens up real possibilities of unbelonging. The negotiation of modesty and female sexual desire is the focus of this project. I ask: how do women exert sexual agency, ‘voice,’ and modesty in ways that allow them to participate fully in the (various but often silenced) performances of Somali womanhood? In looking at classical Somali female poets (1899-1944 in pastoral lands of Northern Somalia) and modern Somali female poets (1969-1989 in the urban centre of Mogadishu, Somalia), I argue these poets have hybrid subjectivities that allow the expression of sexual desire thorough the subversion of normative codes of modesty. In addition to re-sgnified codes, specific spaces such as alternative publics, and the agentive acts of speaking through codes and performative listening, open up the different trajectories of how classical and modern Somali female poets creatively, socially, and politically participate in the Somali public sphere. Using theories of affect, hybridity, in-between space, and public culture, among others, I question how the nexus of modesty, sexual desire, and Somali femininity not only exposes lacunae in the Somali collective imagination but creates an
unconventional map of Somali womanhood—a map that re-imagines *gabar xishood leh* in its complexity.
Acknowledgements

I would like to start off my acknowledgements with my Ayeeyo (illaahay ha u naxariisto). Without her, I would not and could not be the person I am today. For my Aabo and Hoyo, thank you for all the support. There were times when I needed that extra push. This has been a long time coming—I hope I have made you proud. I love you both. My brothers, Mohamed, Ahmed, and Hussein, thank you for all the late nights and your patience in listening to me “droning on” about this project, I am sure you never want to hear the words ‘xishood’ or ‘gabar xishood leh’ again. To my cousin Muna, Edo Asha and Edo Zahra, thank you for all the times you were there for me to bounce ideas off you, your help with the clarity and linear progression in my writings, and your editing ninja skills. Abti Abdillahi, thank you for all the sheeko sheeko, you were invaluable in formulating my ideas around this project. For the rest of my family, all my uncles, aunts, and cousins, thank you for the small but very meaningful ways you have helped me out. I love you all.

To my supervisor, Dr. Katherine McKittrick, thank you very much for your support, guidance, and patience. My experience at Queen’s University has surpassed my expectations because I have had you as a professor, supervisor, mentor, and a support system. You have been generous with your time, feedback and dedication in enabling me to become the best academic thinker and writer that I could be. From the beginning, you introduced new theoretical concepts and theorists and pushed me to question my assumptions. At the same time, you allowed me the intellectual space to grapple with and explore my ideas. If there was an issue with clarity or contextualization, for example, you made no quibbles about alerting me about where improvements could be made. I appreciate your candour and the ease with which you convey
your feedback. When there were instances where doubt crept up in regards to my thesis, you listened when needed be, encouraged when required, and pointed out moments of originality and creativity in my work to get me back on track. To say this project would not be what it is without you is an understatement.

Thank you to the members of my defense committee: Dr. Sarita Srivastava, Dr. Margaret Pappano, and Dr. Elaine Power. I appreciate your time and support.

To the people at the Department of Gender Studies—professors, colleagues, friends—thank you so much for creating a safe, inviting and comfortable space. Thank you to Kathy Baer and in particular, Terrie Easter Sheen for all your support, advice, and general help in making my time here much smoother and more enjoyable. Dr. Scott Morgensen, I appreciate all your help and support, thank you.

Idil, Sanchari, Ahsan, Altug, Nate and the rest of my friends, thank you for all your help, encouragement, and support. I am finally done!
# Table of Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................ ii

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... iv

Chapter 1 Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 1

  Methodological Framework............................................................................................................ 13
  Literature Review ......................................................................................................................... 16
  Chapter Breakdown ....................................................................................................................... 19

Chapter 2 Theorizing *Gabar Xishood Leh* through Affective Ties and Ruptures ............... 23

  Affective Belonging to the Construction of *Gabar Xishood Leh* ............................................ 23
  Contextualizing Origins of *Gabar Xishood Leh* in “Tradition” ............................................. 29
  *Xishood* as Affect and Sexual Modesty/Good Shame............................................................. 34
  Affect and Attachment in *Gabar Xishood Leh* ........................................................................ 36
  Recognizable and Shared Codes of *Xishood* ........................................................................ 41
  UnBelonging in *Gabar Xishood Leh* ....................................................................................... 45
  Hybridity and In-between Space ................................................................................................. 47
  Alternative Publics and Spaces of Performances ..................................................................... 52

Chapter 3 Speaking through Codes of *Xishood* and Counterpublics in Classical Somali

  Female Poetry .................................................................................................................................. 58
  Subordinate Social Positioning of Classical Somali Female Poets ............................................ 62
  The Devalued Status of Classical Female Somali Poetry .......................................................... 63
  Acceptable and Unacceptable Topics in Somali Classical Poetry ........................................... 67
  The Difference between Sexual Awareness and Sexual Desire ............................................... 69
  Overt Expressions of Sexual Desire ......................................................................................... 73
Chapter 1

Introduction

In a fractured age, when cynicism is god, here is a possible heresy: we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness.

—Ben Okri

I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean/ where the two overlap/ a gentle coming together/ at other times and places a violent clash.

—Gloria Anzaldúa

In a Toronto studio reminiscent of the cacotopian atmosphere of Ridley Scott’s film Blade Runner, circa 2003, I had my tongue professionally pierced. It was not my first, or my second piercing. In fact, there were a quite a few body piercings that preceded it; as a result, I assumed my family would have been accustomed to my piercing practices. Unfortunately, judging from their reactions—which ranged from bemused to horrified—that was not the case. The most vocal critics were my parents: my mother bemoaned what she considered a desecration of a God-given body and my father, more secular, dismissed it as a sign of immaturity and a passing phase of rebellion. Despite the gendered differences in their responses, however, both were vehement in their views of my piercing as an act they considered an ‘un-Somali-like’ betrayal of the privileged values my parents readily invested in, especially in terms of bodily decorum.

---

The rhetoric surrounding my parents’ dismay revolved around their concept of an ideal Somali female, particularly the gendered expectations that inform dress and behaviour. Words such as ‘modesty’ and ‘shame’ were tossed around, reinforcing the seemingly connected notions of Somali gender identification, femininity, and modesty. Belatedly, I wondered if my parents suspected the erotic inclinations associated with oral piercings, and whether that played a strong role in their disapproval—especially given that my other piercings did not elicit the same reactions of dismay and disappointment. What was clear to me, even though it was not verbally indicated, was the pivotal role that any semblance of sexuality—the enunciation of potential sexual and erotic intimacies—played in the construction of an exemplary modest Somali woman.

That narratives and discourses shape identity formations is succinctly expressed by Ben Okri in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter: “…we live by stories, we also live in them.”3 I am interested in the dominant discourses that influence Somali womanhood and the meanings that are ascribed to performances of certain Somali femininities. At the same time, I am intrigued by what is effaced by the dominant discourse: alterative engagements with gender and gender identifications that reveal the myriad ways that women negotiate and resist hegemonic constructions of Somali womanhood. As Michel Foucault writes, “[t]here can be no commentary unless, below the language one is reading and deciphering, there runs the sovereignty of an original Text.… The necessary proliferation of the exegesis is therefore measured, ideally limited, and yet

ceaselessly animated by this silent dominion.”⁴ For me, what Foucault opens up are the ways in which female sexual desire and agency can be understood below, or subversively within, the narrative of modesty that tends to dominate definitions of Somali womanhood.

When I returned home from living in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in 2012, I wanted to write about my experiences as a woman who navigates a deeply sexually segregated society. In 2014, when I began thinking about sexuality vis-à-vis modesty and femininity within an Islamic context for this thesis, a kernel of an idea was planted. This idea later became the theme of my novella. As often the case, creative inspiration arrives without warning, and I grabbed the closest writing utensil—a blue-tipped sharpie for my white board—where I hastily wrote down these words:

I heard of a woman from across the sea who bewitched men on their Umrah trips. She cast her spell making them forget their former lives. And they become nation-less like her. Nothing else about her was known. Or maybe it was intentionally forgotten.⁵

My story, of which these few lines are a small component, was shrouded in elements of female sexual desire and agency. While perusing this passage later, I was struck by the subconscious connections between my use of the words ‘bewitched’ and ‘spell’ in conjunction with female sexuality, as well as the hint of religiosity that comes with the mention of Umrah.⁶ These terms underscore the power of female sexual desire, especially

---


⁶ *Umrah* is a pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia—considered the holiest city for Muslims—at any time of the year, as opposed to Hajj, which is only on specific days.
in a Saudi Arabian context and the geographic setting of the novella, where heterosexual female sexuality was (is) feared and socially controlled through dress codes. But more than that, I was intrigued by certain behaviours that seemed physical manifestations of modesty dictating modes of sociality—in particular, those involved with concepts of “belonging.” I noticed that my creative work understood belonging and unbelonging not as tied to the nation-state or a specific territory, but rather as mediated through sexuality and sexual practices.

As the word “nationless” indicates within the story, the woman, as well as the men who succumb to her bewitching sexual spells, suffer the same fate: they are deemed stateless people. As well, in this story, explicit heterosexual female desire and agency deconstructs the barriers and borders that systematically uphold specific gender expectations (as seen in the imposition of statelessness). At the same time, and just as importantly, sexuality appears to be the impetus for social exclusion—especially if one deviates from heteronormative standards of sexuality. In other words, containment within the confines of established gendered boundaries dictates the conditions for belonging, specifically in regards to female sexuality, just as unbelonging reveals an alternative to nation-state models of citizenship.

My personal narrative and the creative story both open up issues of belonging, and raise deeper questions about attachment, desire, and affect. For example: who or what is one supposed to belong to? To where and to what do we claim to belong—to a community,

---

to a region, to a home, to an ideal? How do people negotiate different conditions or modalities of existence in conjunction with their desire for belonging? The questions encompassing ideas of belonging and boundaries have been taken up in a range of theoretical debates in the areas of postcolonial theory, theories of migration and borders, and theories of diaspora.8 Gloria Anzaldúa, in her chapter “Towards a New Consciousness,” explores the porousness of borders in relation to identity and belonging. She writes: “...I, a mestiza, continually walk out of one culture and into another, because I am in all cultures at the same time.”9 Anzaldúa’s example illustrates the fluidity in boundaries and shifting identity formations, which allow for multiple imaginings of belonging. At the same time, her work insists on migratory identities precisely because she has been—as a lesbian Latina—displaced within and cast out of her broader community. The multiplicities embedded in belonging, then, also imply removal and/or displacement.

8 In this thesis, I use theories of migration and diaspora as an analytical lens for Somali female poetry contained within Somalia; this is, in part, intentional due to the issues these theories raise in relation to social belonging, doubleness, and authenticity. As Gayatri Gopinath states in Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures, Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall expand the notion of diaspora from the original definition of home, exile and return to one of a fluid identity based on difference and hybridity. Gopinath further utilizes this concept of the revised definition of diaspora as “potential to foreground notions of impurity and inauthenticity that resoundingly reject the...absolutism at the center of nationalist projects” (Gayatri Gopinath, Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005], 7). It is this fluidity and complexity that is understated in Somali female poetry and which I would like to pay particular attention to. In this way, dualistic trajectories of Somali female poetry blur the boundaries between the core (hegemonic social customs) and periphery (embodied social practices) regarding Somali womanhood, modesty, and female sexuality. The ‘blurring’ highlights the numerous identifying sites and the multiplicity of engagements of Somali female poets in relation to the previously stated notions. By introducing “difference” in a imagined static conception of Somali womanhood, I lay claim to the further destabilizing aspect of hybridity of Somali female poetry which debunks normative discourses and opens new possibilities of being and belonging within Somali womanhood.

9 Anzaldúa, Borderland: The New Mestiza = La Frontera, 99.
Through the lens of displacement or removal from a homeland or community, belonging is consequently configured as a perceived allegiance to a nation-state, an imagined homeland, or an ethnic-racial community. Like Anzaldúa, Dibyesh Anand problematizes belonging. In a different context, he theorizes subjectivities as “collectivities within which individual subjectivity is marked by an ambiguity, a confusion, a productive anxiety, [and] an affective pull from different directions.” In this conceptualization of belonging, what is highlighted is a messy instability associated with, as Stuart Hall notes, an “experience defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity.”

While Anand and Hall specifically refer to the complexity of diasporic belongings and displacements, similar work has been done in relation to religious or cultural minorities navigating the nation and faith systems they do not adhere to. Vincent Crapazano’s work with the Harki community illustrates the impossibility of a uniform belonging; he argues that the Harki community asserts a discourse that both claims and disclaims the Algerian cultural authenticity and legitimacy that underwrites nation-state discourses. In his analysis of the marginalization and alienation in the Harki community, Crapazano uses the term “apartness” to describe the perilous position involved in the longing to belong and the

---

disavowal of a legitimate belonging. “Apartness,” he writes, “implies the desire not to be there and to be there, to remain unwelcomed and to be welcomed, to recognize and to misrecognize.”

These different commentaries on belonging, apartness, and displacement are particularly salient for my discussion below. The Somali female poets that I explore in this thesis negotiate belonging in relation to female modesty and sexuality through their hybrid subjectivities. I refer to these poets as hybrid because they inhabit and are navigating different kinds of gendered expectations that circulate within their nation. Hybridity is illuminated by and within these very complex gendered locations, national affiliations, and histories. Contained within hybridity, and keeping in mind Stuart Hall’s insistence on the

---

13 Ibid., 7.
14 Ibid., 7.
15 The concept of belonging is also taken up in theories of gender, displacement, and African literature, albeit differently than my usage. One core theme, the division between the private and public spheres, is at the forefront of women’s social and political participation in African works of fiction. In the context of European colonialism in West Africa, literary works depicted women’s political activities as regulated and confined to the domestic arena: see Anthonia C. Kalu, Women, Literature, and Development in Africa (Lewisville, NJ: Africa World Press, 2001). In Maghrebi and Egyptian women’s literature, the negotiation of silenced women’s voices in the public sphere was prevalent in the postcolonial era: see Nawal El Saadawi, The Fall of the Imam (London: Telegram Books, 2009), and also Leila Abouzeid, The Last Chapter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). The demarcation between the home and street is particularly salient when it comes to issues of female sexuality. While I acknowledge the site of domesticity as the origin of intimacy, the public fixation on controlling sexuality and desire is relevant in that it sets out the conditions for discursively produced subjectivity and affective belonging. In other words, the disavowal of gendered spatial segregation is intrinsically connected to social displacement, particularly its instrumentality in drawing the boundaries that dictate gendered social nuances. This is evident within postcolonial Somali female literature which focuses on the complex interplay between female sexuality, social belonging, and Somali womanhood: see Saida Herzi, “Against the Pleasure Principle,” Index on Censorship 19, no. 9 (1990): 19-20.
“necessary heterogeneity and diversity” within identity claims, is unbelonging.\textsuperscript{16} Unbelonging draws attention to the loss of particular forms of sociality. The penchant to associate with others and to construct social formations based on common or shared ideologies, especially as they relate to nation and/or homeland, is called into question. Importantly, the theme of religion, specifically Islam, underwrites the work of the Somali poets I examine here—so questions of hybridity and apartness are, in this thesis, informed by the ways in which practices of sociality, displacement, and gender are inflected by faith.

This simultaneous experience of belonging and unbelonging is a condition often attributed to Black communities as well as other minority formations.\textsuperscript{17} It is also theorized within new African minority communities, particularly the Somali diaspora.\textsuperscript{18}


comes to mainland Somalia, however, this doubleness is under-theorized. The interlocking workings of belonging and unbelonging have informed one of my central organizing questions for this thesis: if displacement and doubleness uncover an emotional connection to specific spaces (nation, culture, diaspora, as well as their attendant ideologies) and, at the same time, engender the experience of feeling alienated within those spaces, how do these processes inform the experiences of Somali female poets?

Part of my interest in unpacking this connection between belonging and unbelonging stems from how, at times, the complicated nature of sociality is undermined by the representation of a singular narrative—one which is constructed from “traditional” Somali culture and religion. The singular narrative attempts to construct a homogeneous category of what it means to be “Somali” and, in this, conceals the silences and pluralities that enunciate different ways of being and belonging. This erases many people who exist outside the “traditional” Somali belief system, such as racial, gendered, queer, and religious minority communities. At the same time, the singular narrative silences alternative gender performances that are produced in relation to but not necessarily beholden to Somali culture.

19 In regards to doubleness and minority groups in Somalia, see H.Y. Mire, “Somali Stories as a Site of Knowledge (Re/De) Construction” (paper presented at Reimagining Somali Studies: Colonial Pasts, Postcolonial Futures, Cambridge, Massachusetts, April 14-15, 2016).

20 I am using “tradition” as an umbrella term that is interconnected to the religious and cultural belief system that is practiced in the Somali community (inside and outside Somalia). I understand that “tradition” and “traditional” are contested terms—and that they can reify the assumption that “traditional” countries, “traditional women,” or “traditional” belief systems are “undeveloped” or “backwards.” However, for reasons of clarity, I employ “tradition” to signal the Islamic religious beliefs and values that exist within the Somali social imaginary. From here onward I put “tradition” or “traditional” in scare quotes to draw attention to my uneasiness with the term. In Chapter 2, which outlines my theoretical frame, I provide a comprehensive discussion of “tradition.” On the critique of “tradition” see also: Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” Boundary 2, nos. 12:3-13:1 (1984): 333-358.
and Islam.

My thesis will explore the ways *gabar xishood leh* is negotiated by poets in Somalia. *Gabar xishood leh*, in English, means: a modest girl or a girl with modest behaviour. In this work I think about Somali modesty in relation to the themes of belonging, unbelonging, public space, femininity, and female sexuality. As I briefly suggested at the beginning of this introduction, the connections between Somali womanhood and modesty are very relevant to the construction of Somali femininity. The

---

While it is a topic I do not attend to extensively in this thesis, my thinking about modesty has been informed by the impact of Islam on Somali religious belief systems. In Chapter 2, the tensions between Islam and “tradition” are cast as embedded and intertwined processes that shape identity formation. It is important, though, to briefly note how Islam constructs modesty. The Arabic word typically denoting modesty, *al-hayaa*, often translated as “shyness” or “modesty,” stems from Islamic modes of conduct, *al-adab al Islamiyya*. Rather than directly denoting what is typically understood in English as modesty, however, *al-hayaa* is an umbrella term—a metonymical archipelago—related to coded Islamic dress, behaviours and customs. As such, “[t]o practice *al-hayaa* means to be diffident, modest and able to feel and enact shyness” (Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* [Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004], 156). The Arabic word *al-hayaa*, from the origin *al-hayaat*, meaning life is the concept of modesty, which is deeply embedded in the Islamic faith as an ethical endeavour to produce a particular ideal self. In the Qur’an, the exegetical literature as well as the Hadith, the ‘prophetic traditions’ of Islam, there are over a dozen instances, which directly and indirectly reference modesty. *Surat Al Noor – The Light* verse 24:30 illustrates, for example, the meaningful connection between “believing women” and “particular behaviours,” reinforcing the parameters of ethical female Islamic subjectivity of which modesty is key (The Qur’an, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], 222). *Surat Al Noor – The Light* also lauds the merits of modesty for men; however, as Saba Mahmood explains, the interpretations and expectations of male and female attire and comportment significantly differ in Islamic habitus, exposing the complicated interplay of collective agency and structural power in producing these gendered distinctions. She states: “While all of the Islamic virtues are gendered (in that their measure and standards vary when applied to men versus women), this is particularly true of shyness and modesty (*al-hayaa*)” (Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 156). Nader Al Jallad’s analysis of culturally based emotions in the Arabic language, of which *al-hayaa* is one of the more prominent, also pinpoints the confluence of affective markers of *being* to an intemporal attribute of desired femininity (Nader Al Jallad, “The concept of ‘shame’ in Arabic: bilingual dictionaries and the challenge of defining culture-based emotions,” *Language Design* 12 [2010]: 39).
term *gabar xishood leh* is an idealized construction of Somali womanhood, often enacted and performed through certain dress codes, speech, and other gendered behaviours. I draw attention to how female *desire* and *agency* are continually constructed outside the category of *gabar xishood leh*. As a prominent and pervasive narrative of Somali gender identification, the modest girl not only designates the conditions for being, but also grounds the dominant trajectory for social belonging.

This research will therefore fill in some empirical gaps in scholarship on Somali poetry by closely analyzing the category of *gabar xishood leh*—which is understudied—and also think through how female sexual desire and agency are embedded in female performances of *xishood*. This will draw attention to alternate performances of the meaning of *gabar xishood leh*. By looking at Somali female poetry from two different periods in Somali history (1899-1944 and 1969-1989) and two different locations (the pastoral lands of Northern Somalia and the urban centre of Mogadishu, Somalia), my discussion will track the dominance of the singular narrative of *gabar xishood leh*. This will allow me to trace how modesty is poetically constructed while also drawing out the disruptions and inconsistencies particular to each spatiotemporal location. In other words, I will explore the nexus of themes and locations that emerge in these different historical and geographical contexts, and argue that they offer us a way to think about gendered subjectivities that are alternative to “traditional” Somali narratives of belonging. I am not denying the weight of how gender is constructed in “traditional” Somali culture and religion, as there are visible remnants of that influence in the poetry. Rather, I am arguing that these poets have what Homi Bhabha and others call a “hybrid” identity and therefore undermine and complicate
the singular representation of female Somali subjectivities.\textsuperscript{22} I stress the simultaneous existence of belonging and unbelonging, which reiterates Hall’s suggestion that displaced communities have “a psychogeography of displacement and desire built into itself.”\textsuperscript{23}

I also situate the performances of these female Somali poets in public culture.\textsuperscript{24} I look specifically at oral poetry performances in public culture in order to address how these texts and voices fall outside of mainstream narratives, reify and/or undermine hegemonic constructions of Somali womanhood, and reveal the multiplicity of Somali femininities and subjectivities. As a corollary, the content of the poetry (means) and the context of the performances (spaces) simultaneously highlight the glaring lacunae of divergent expressions of female desire and agency. In short, my thesis draws attention to how these Somali women trouble stable notions of identity and place through their ‘doubled’ (belonging and unbelonging) positionalities which, in turn, shape their complex understanding of \textit{gabar xishood leh}, a modest girl. Through their hybrid subjectivities and texts, these poets disrupt dominant discourses and offer the concept of \textit{gabar xishood leh} as a site of contestation. The very public nature of these cultural texts speaks to the practice of ‘talking back’ and the centralization of personal narrative.\textsuperscript{25} The expressive practices by these poets complicate claims to belonging by subverting and refashioning \textit{gabar xishood leh}.  

\textsuperscript{22} Homi K. Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture} (London: Routledge, 1994).
\textsuperscript{24} For theories of public culture and belonging, see Gayatri Gopinath, \textit{Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
leh, thus bringing new insight into the discourse surrounding notions of Somali female subjectivities, modesty, female sexuality, and public culture.

As a woman of Somali descent from the “Global North,” I am aware of my intersectional positionings. On the one hand, as I stated in the beginning of this chapter, I was socialized in the gabar xishood leh discourse, lending me an insider status. At the same time, as a Western-educated feminist, I am conscious of my restricted vocabulary and am wary of particular framings that could reduce the complexity of the social life of the Somali poets in my research. The necessity of producing transnational feminist knowledge, then, is incumbent on the continual awareness of one’s positionality and self-reflexivity and a probing of ethical dilemmas that might reproduce a unitary conception of women’s subjective experiences and political acts. While I do not explicitly engage with the topic in my thesis, I would also like to flag the intricate and complicated ways that overarching paradigms of colonialism, nationalism, and modernity play in the construction and production of Somali “tradition” and “traditional” womanhood; these themes have informed my thinking implicitly.

**Methodological Framework**

The two historical periods I focus on in my discussion of Somali women’s poetry pinpoint ruptures in Somali history: the first period, 1899-1944, particularly the latter years, overlaps with the end of British colonialism; the second period, 1969-1989, was after independence and signals the creation of the Somali nation-state. These contexts, then, were periods of instability and sociopolitical upheaval and therefore allow me to think
about the construction and reification of *gabar xishood leh* in relation to broader practices of colonialism and nation-state formation.

As noted above, I will be looking at how the discourse of *gabar xishood leh* is engaged and subverted by Somali female poets in classical and modern Somali poetry. By noticing how and where they include sexual agency and *xishood* in their creative works, I argue that their specifically hybrid subjectivities are revealed through alternative publics and agentive acts. Employing the methodologies of textual and semiotic analysis, I look at classical and modern Somali female poetry to reveal the interplay between complex performances of *gabar xishood leh* and affective social codes. I use textual analysis of poetry for two reasons: to illustrate the importance of oral poetry to Somali culture and identity, and to highlight the often unspeakable elements in speech that could only be revealed through poetry. As bell hooks claims: poetry in itself “[i]s the place for the secret voice, for all that [can] not be directly stated or named, for all that would not be denied expression. Poetry [i]s privileged speech—simple at times, but never ordinary. The magic of poetry [i]s transformation; it [i]s words changing shape, meaning, and form.”

It is important to note here that Somali poetry infiltrated every aspect of social life, and blurred the boundary between public and private life. In fact, until the official Somali script was institutionalized in 1972, poetry was archived orally, through the historical, collective memory of Somali culture wherein certain narratives have been passed down

---

26 Ibid., 11.
inter-generationally. The role of poetry therefore was and is instructive in the shaping of the Somali psyche and cultural imagination. It is also a form of personal expression, a form of sociality, and a mediation of discourses.

I bring to this project an interdisciplinary theoretical frame, which is extensively laid out in my first chapter. To be brief, theories of diaspora, affect, and belonging will inform my textual and semiotic analyses of Somali women’s poetry. These theoretical approaches will allow me to pinpoint moments of textual subversion, silences, and other patterns that are at play within these complex narratives of gender, sexuality, and modesty. Theories of public culture will complement this work, permitting me to analyze how the practice of oral poetry politicizes the themes of modesty, sexuality, and gender norms.

The methodologies used in much academic research regarding gender, Somali women, and voice, are primarily interview-based and focus on experiential knowledge. This is useful, as Somali poetry is orally transmitted and presents a means of political engagement. According to Dahabo Hasan, group interviewing serves to “rais[e] consciousness of women and reviv[e] women’s history while at the same time stimulating their struggles.” This qualitative approach has been complemented by historical

---


28 For further discussion of the public role of Somali poetry, see Mohamed Diriyu Abdullaahi, *Culture and Customs of Somalia* (Westpoint, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001).


These are meaningful studies, but the qualitative approach and the historical
method shy away from what cannot be ‘said’ in the creative output of Somali women,
which I believe contains valuable but understudied epistemological narratives. This is not
to say that interviews are inappropriate, but rather that applying this methodology alone
might foreclose other ways of thinking about gendered formations and subversions in
Somalia, in particular concerning issues of female sexuality and desire. My methodology
thus seeks to complement and extend these existing literatures that take up Somali
belonging and belonging.

**Literature Review**

The literature that analyzes Somali female poetry from Somalia is divisive in how it
takes up women’s creative, social and political participation. On the one hand, there is a
general consensus about the subordination of women’s poetry. Put bluntly, women’s poetic
craft is considered “less than” men’s poetic craft. On the other hand, the connection
between the diminished rank of Somali female poetry and the degree of female public life
is contested. For some, the subordinate position of female poetry correlates with the social
status of Somali women. Others, however, claim the lowered status of female poetry is a

---


result of how women are depicted by male orators and historians.\textsuperscript{33} In other words, Somali female poetry has been deliberately silenced and erased.\textsuperscript{34} This erasure obscures the active involvement of Somali women, who took part in a more egalitarian Somali pastoral society. As a result, the recovery of lost female voices is a chief purpose in the research of Somali poetry.\textsuperscript{35} The focus, then, is mostly on women’s poetic genres such as the \textit{buraanbur}, the female “prestigious” style. The recurring themes of feminine poetry, whether constructed as an advisory tale or lament to future generations, included perils such as domestic abuse and desertion.\textsuperscript{36} The topics of female sexuality, sexual desire, and sexual agency are under-theorized in the research, although the association of morality and Somali femininity is taken up by Lidwein Kapteijns through her term “moral womanhood.”\textsuperscript{37} For Kapteijns, “moral womanhood” stems from the need to “preserv[e] …notions of cultural authenticity and authentic morality” within a nationalist project that strived to be simultaneously “modern” and uniquely “Somali.”\textsuperscript{38} As such, she situates “moral womanhood” within the

\begin{enumerate}
\item For further discussion of the subordinate status of female poetry within the Somali poetic hierarchy, see Dahabo Hasan et al., “Somalia: Poetry as Resistance against Colonialism and Patriarchy”; see also Zainab Mohamed Jama, “Silent Voices: The Role of Somali Women’s Poetry in Social and Political Life,” \textit{Oral Tradition} 9, no. 1 (1994).
\item Ibid., 102, 105.
\end{enumerate}
larger tensions of soomaalinimo (Somali personhood) post-independence, which raised questions of “how to be a modern yet moral (for cultural authentic) Somali…..”

In my theorization around modesty and Somali womanhood, I explicitly refer to female sexual desire and sexual agency in Somali female poetry. My work also introduces the notion of hybrid subjectivities, which reveal the intermingling of xishood and sexual desire, expanding the dominant perspective of gabar xishood leh. My research works with the volume of collected poetry Women’s Voices in a Man’s World edited by Lidwein Kapteijns and Marian Omar Ali and the poetry included in the article “Discourse on Moral Womanhood in Somali Popular Songs, 1960-1990” by Kapteijns. I use these texts as my primary sources and track how the gabar xishood leh discourse arises in women’s poetry in colonial and postcolonial settings. Specifically, I read the poems for expressions of Somali womanhood and the dual expressions of sexual modesty/“good shame” and sexuality. By looking at classical poets (who were anonymous) and modern poets (Maryan Mursal, Fadumo Nakruma, Hibo Mohamed, Kinsi Adan, Adar Ahmed, Khadija Hiiraan, and Fadumo Elmi), I explore the coded emotionality and affective dimensions of hybrid Somali subjectivities, drawing specific attention to the means and spaces through which complex performances of gabar xishood leh add to the conceptions of Somali femininities and sexualities.

39 Ibid., 105.
The poets I examine here, then, are in many ways public figures—their poetry is a significant part of a longer national story and the political work of poetry is, as noted, part of the Somali social fabric. Yet the question of Somali femininity, in relation to the public sphere and public culture, is contested: *gabar xishood leh* is a construct that is underpinned by feminine modesty, respectability, and silences—characteristics that, in many ways, discipline women’s participation in the public sphere. It is between modesty and public culture that I situate Somali female poets and draw attention to their refashioning of the *gabar xishood leh* paradigm.

**Chapter Breakdown**

Chapter 2 is the theoretical framework chapter. I extend the discussion I started in the introduction surrounding ideas of belonging and unbelonging to theories of affect, hybridity and in-between space, and public culture. Starting off with the construction of *gabar xishood leh*, I unpack and contextualize its origins in “tradition.” In doing so, I show how notions of “cultural authenticity” validate and support certain ideals, such as modesty equating to an asexualized womanhood. The insistence on “cultural authenticity” is important in that it lays the groundwork for affective belonging. Next, I put forth the idea of *xishood*—sexual modesty/“good shame”—as a positive affect that propels attachment and belonging to the construct of *gabar xishood leh* through certain performances. Through this, I show how certain Somali women, such as the poets whose work I analyze in this thesis, have an emotional investment to this identity formation. Codes of *xishood*—the externalization of *xishood*—are recognizable markers of *gabar xishood leh*, and it is these
signs that lay the conditions for collective belonging and the possibility of unbelonging. This simultaneous belonging and unbelonging is inherent to hybrid subjectivities (in this case, the expression of sexual desire and modesty) and the in-between space that arises as a result of their existence. I conclude with the assertion that public culture, specifically ‘alternative publics’ and the agentive acts of speaking and listening, is a vehicle for the production and expression of Somali female hybrid subjectivities.

Chapter 3 contains an analysis of classical female poetry, speaking through codes of xishood and counterpublics. Somali female classical poets performing love poetry were censored and silenced along two trajectories: through the lower status of their poetry and through the unacceptability of love and/or sexual desire as subject matter, as they are contrary to the gabar xishood leh narrative. As a result, the subversion of codes of xishood through what bell hooks calls “coming to voice” and the space of counterpublics—sites that allow the expression of hybrid discourses—are the chief means by which classical female poets exert their sexual agency and unhinge the dominant discourse of gabar xishood leh.

The focus of Chapter 4 is the nexus of intimate publics and performative listening in modern Somali female poetry. Invoking Lauren Berlant’s concept of an intimate public sphere, which involves a shared worldview and affective connections among its members, I argue that modern Somali female poets express their hybrid subjectivities of xishood and sexual desire precisely because of their belonging to a female intimate public invested in the gabar xishood leh narrative. In addition, performative listening, particularly the call and response dynamic embedded in it, allows for the expression of re-signified codes of xishood through a hidden message only understood by members of the intimate public.
I conclude with the power of hybridity and in-between space, which allow the performances of Somali female hybrid subjectivities to unsettle the dominant discourse of *gabar xishood leh* by rendering ambivalent certain notions and naming conventions. As such women are considered “impossible” figures within the discourse, this disruption reveals the limitations of language and hints at the possibility of unbelonging. At the same time, the covert addition to the meaning of codes of *xishood* allows this either/or and neither/nor position to go undetected, allowing the full measure of social belonging to the *gabar xishood leh* construct. I end with my aspirations for further research, specifically, my interest in how *xishood*, sexual desire, and *gabar xishood leh* are taken up in diasporic Somali female poetry.
Chapter 2

Theorizing Gabar Xishood Leh through Affective Ties and Ruptures

What follows is a theoretical discussion of the formation and conditions of affective belonging in relation to the notion of gabar xishood leh. I unpack the construct of gabar xishood leh by paying particular attention to the concepts and codes of xishood, and the rhetoric of female sexuality implicitly contained within it. I also explore gabar xishood leh as an affective expression that propels attachment to this gendered category. I focus on the possibility of unbelonging by drawing attention to textual moments when gabar xishood leh calls into question “traditional” notions of Somali womanhood. These alternative performances of gabar xishood leh contain subjacent references to female desire within Somali female expressive practices. Here the spectrum of belonging and unbelonging arises from the simultaneous existence inside and outside—or the in-between space—of the gabar xishood leh discourse. As such, I draw on the writings of Sara Ahmed, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Gopinath, bell hooks, and Ketu Katrak, among others, as well as theorizations of barzakh, to think through hybrid Somali female subjectivities and performances.

Affective Belonging to the Construction of Gabar Xishood Leh

In order to analyze belonging in relation to the gabar xishood leh ideal, I begin with an exploration of the dominant discourse informing Somali womanhood. I expound on the seductive but containing power of “tradition” that forms the basis of gabar xishood leh. I
highlight the connection of female sexuality to modesty—a connection that is often silenced or hidden within the *gabar xishood leh* narrative. I then theorize *xishood* as a positive *affect* and *gabar xishood leh* as an affect carrying construction of identity. Put slightly differently, I argue that *xishood* and *gabar xishood*, together, foster or encourage attachment to an idealized Somali womanhood through recognizable markers and social codes. Consequently, modesty is (ostensibly) equated with belonging.

Various theorists, such as Lidwien Kapteijns and Anu Isotalo, have taken up the dominant discourse surrounding Somali womanhood. In the work of both theorists, the association of Somali femininity with unsalacious speech, demeanour, and actions is emphasized. Kapteijns situates her conception of “moral womanhood” in the period running from immediately before the country’s independence in 1960 to the 1980s.\(^4\) During this time, tensions arose within the anticolonial and nationalist movements for independence.\(^5\) There were those who strove to stress a communal Somali identity outside “traditional” and clan formations, and “traditionalists,” who sought to retain Somali “cultural authenticity” as a means to distinguish the nation from “Western” forms of modernity.\(^6\) These two views also informed different approaches to Somali womanhood and femininity. The “traditional” rhetoric, in particular, was concerned with defining what a “proper” woman should be and upheld Somali femininity as *gabar xishood leh* and situated

---


\(^5\) Ibid., 105.

\(^6\) Ibid., 105-106.
it under the purview of the authority of a woman’s family and clan.\textsuperscript{44} Invoking a “traditional” Somali femininity—which sanctioned female morality in regards to “women’s behaviour and dress in public space (and thus their sexuality and obedience or respect for authority...)”—legittimates the gender discourse as “authentic.”\textsuperscript{45}

The eminent authority of family and clan was expected to define and police women’s and girls’ behaviour and actions in public and private spaces. These kinds of disciplinary practices are also prevalent in Anu Isotalo’s research on diasporic Somali girls in Finland from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. Looking at “ideals and practices concerning gendered moral and socio-spatial behavior,” Isotalo claims that the expected physical location for a “good” girl was home with her family.\textsuperscript{46} She also notes that women inhabiting specific sites—typically public spaces and without family members—were deemed inappropriate and invited the perception of “sexual moral indecency.”\textsuperscript{47} The connections between private spaces, public spaces, and the gauging of modesty is important in demonstrating the specific parameters and spaces Somali girls and women navigated in relation to their gender and sexual identities. Yet the work of Isotalo and others also overlooks negotiations and resistance of \textit{gabar xishood leh} within public spaces—which is the focus of this thesis.

Despite the differing time periods and geographies that Kapteijns and Isotalo take

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 109.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 117.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 184.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
up in their work, they draw attention to the ways morality underpins an ideal Somali womanhood. They also point to how this morality is rooted in “tradition” and justifies the rhetoric to label specific behaviours and actions as “Western” and therefore not “authentically” Somali. I am interested in how these intricacies get effaced under the auspices of “tradition” and “cultural authenticity,” and how a nostalgia for an idealized “past” is affectively emoted. In other words, I am intrigued by what Miyako Inoue’s research focuses on: the productions that create the standard to become the standard; and I ask how this standard lays the conditions for belonging affectively.48 The work of Kapteijns, Isotalo, and others describes this standard, for Somali women and girls, as modesty. This gendered standard of modesty sets the stage for me to trace the ubiquitous and quotidian nature of this idealized Somali womanhood, gabar xishood leh, through several different periods of history and reveal the affective desire to perform it.

As noted in my introduction, gabar xishood leh is a vernacular phrase meaning “a modest girl.”49 It is an idealized gender characteristic describing Somali femininity. The word gabar contained within the phrase gabar xishood leh means maiden in English. Therefore, regardless of the age of the girl or woman, if she is of a marriageable age but not married, she would be considered a gabar. Xishood in Somali is defined primarily as modesty. By modesty, I mean cultural, social, and religious norms dictating decency and propriety. Modesty is also gendered and is an indicator of an “ideal femininity.”

49 This phrase is commonly used by my relatives and Somali community members.
These themes can be thought of in relation to the ways modesty, in connection with sexuality and xishood, emerges in Arabic lexical history, specifically in the term hishma.  

Hishma is “formed from the trilateral root hashama … [and is] translated by a cluster of words including modesty, shame, and shyness. In its broadest sense, it means propriety.” Morphologically similar to mahashim, meaning “genitals,” hishma has a sexual connotation. In citing Richard T. Antoun, Lila Abu-Lughod states that the “…root mahashim means pudenda. Many Qur’anic references to modesty and chastity are literally references to the protection of female genitalia.” Gideon Kressell echoes the same sentiment when he traces the linguistic derivation of mahashim to “the triconsonantal root ‘h-sh-m.’” Through this lineage, he reveals that hishma, and other words with the same root such as hasham and hshumiyya, have sexual modesty at their core.

Akin to hishma, xishood is a gendered index of sexual modesty. Xishood has an equivalent meaning to its Arabic counterpart and, according to Heather Marie Akou, is a

54 Gideon M. Kressell, Descent Through Males: An Anthropological Investigation into the Patterns Underlying Social Hierarchy, Kinship, and Marriage among Former Bedouin in the Ramla-Lod Area (Israel) (Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 201.
55 Ibid., 201.
measure of “respectability” in the Somali community. I take that corresponding Arabic word to be *hishma* not only for its denotative meaning but also for the connotative association between both words. It is this notion of “respectability” that I think heralds the expansion of meaning from modesty to shame in the concept of *xishood*. Shame is often conceptualized as negative. However, I am thinking of *xishood* as positive affect, for contained within *xishood* is an inherent quality that points to a positive and “proper” way of being and acting.

Modesty, then, is a gender expectation and standard, emerging from cultural ideologies and constructing Somali femininity through discourses of respectability. With this in mind, I suggest that certain gendered behaviours, acts, and silences dictate the sociality of *gabar xishood leh*. These signs or codes also legitimate *gabar xishood leh* as disassociated from female sexual desire and agency (something that I unsettle in this thesis). The discourse of *gabar xishood leh*, as well, uncovers the link between contained female sexuality and the parameters of premarital female experience and subjectivity,

---

57 A further association between the two words *hishma* and *xishood* is the phonological similarities, such as the /htʃ/ syllable with its initial voiceless pharyngeal fricative. This vocalization common to Semitic, Cushitic and Berber branches of the Afro-Asiatic language family tree, which contains the Arabic and Somali languages, makes me think these words are related and are possibly linguistic cognates.
59 In tracing Arabic words meaning modesty/shame in general, and words derived from the root *h-sh-m* in particular, we saw that this group of words is associated with emotion or affect. Abu-Lughod, whom I mentioned above in regards to sexual modesty, theorizes *hasham* as emotional states arising from the combination of feelings of shame in mixed gender spaces and the performance of deference as a result of these feelings (Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1986]).
especially as it pertains to the negation of female desire and agency. In turning to Somali “tradition” next, I hope to illustrate how the inverse association between modesty and unbounded sexuality is at the core of the dominant discourse of *gabar xishood leh*.

**Contextualizing Origins of *Gabar Xishood Leh* in “Tradition”**

Many scholars acknowledge religion as a key social system that informs identity formation in Somalia. However, the question of how “traditional” Somali culture shapes identities is also at play. Kristin M. Langellier writes that “identity as culture” and “identity as religion” are separate narratives, while other scholars espouse an established public identity comprising a mixture of “traditional” Somali culture and Islam. I am advocating the latter viewpoint and it is within this Islamo-Somali framework that I contextualize the dominant discourse of *gabar xishood leh*. As such, when I refer to “traditional” Somali culture, it is with this embedded Islamness. As Kapteijns reiterates: Islam was present “implicitly because traditional Somali morality was seen as coterminous with Islamic...”

---


morality, and explicitly, as discursive sanctions of Islam and tradition were invoked in tandem."\(^{63}\)

Although “traditional” Somali culture varies across geographical regions, the shared history of pastoralism and clan/tribe-based kinship structures in northern Somalia evokes specific cultural conventions that it shares with other pastoral nomadic societies.\(^{64}\) Agnatic kin structures within pastoral nomadic cultures reveal a tribal ideology where specific gender moral virtues, such as honour for men and modesty for women, are paramount in acknowledging the significance of patrilineal practices.\(^{65}\) The Somali clan structure thus privileges paternal kinship as the means of social identification and socialization.\(^{66}\) Male honour (\textit{sharaf}) is contingent on the protection of the virtue of their female kin in agnatic social formations.\(^{67}\) Strictly speaking, then, the emphasis on socially controlled female sexuality outside the parameters of marriage is encoded as modesty precisely because it is threatening to the patrilineal kinship structure. Lila Abu-Lughod outlines how unbound female sexuality is disruptive to the social order:

\(^{63}\) Ibid., 120.


\(^{65}\) For extensive discussion about moral gendered virtues in pastoral communities, see Steven C. Caton, \textit{Peaks of Yemen I Summon: Poetry as Cultural Practice in a North Yemeni Tribe} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); see also Abu-Lughod, \textit{Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society}.


[T]he denial of sexuality that is the mark of hasham (modesty) is a symbolic means of communicating deference to those in the hierarchy who more closely represent the cultural ideals and the social system itself. This denial is necessary because the greatest threat to the social system and to the authority of those preferred by this system is sexuality itself.68

Through an unequivocal correlation between modesty and the dismissal of female sexual agency, Abu-Lughod reveals how female sexuality undermines and challenges the cultural hegemony of agnatic kinship groups.69 As arranged marriages in “traditional” Somali societies were necessary to strengthen family and clan ties, the construction of gabar xishood leh served as the vehicle to restrict female sexuality within prescribed normative expectations that were deemed beneficial to girls’ and women’s family and clan.70

While the origins of gabar xishood leh lie within “traditional” Somali culture, this is linked to the ways “tradition” is used in conjunction with cultural authenticity. The authenticating work of modesty, then, justifies and validates gender norms and generates a homogeneous portrayal of Somali female subjectivities. The application of “tradition” in repudiating female sexual desire and agency is a common occurrence. As Ketu H. Katrak writes, in reference to India post-Partition, a torpid female sexuality is discursively produced and contained through a reification of “tradition.”71 Patriarchal formulations of women as “guardians of tradition,” and I would add “mothers of the nation,” work to

---

68 Ibid., 119. (Parenthesis added).
69 Ibid., 119.
categorize women as asexual beings under the purview of a hegemonic production of nationalism-as-tradition.\footnote{Ibid., 157.} Katrak provides an exhaustive critique of the ways “tradition” is veiled as patriarchy in the Global South. She outlines how this has detrimental consequences for women and insists that cultural “traditions” buttress patriarchy by justifying its origins within particular masculinist historico-political frameworks.\footnote{Ibid., 160.} These specific lenses, she argues, “exalt traditional culture, however oppressive, particularly for women (most common during nationalist movements which glorify ‘tradition’ in order to counteract colonialist attitudes); and…ahistoricize…social customs as inexplicably a part of ‘human nature’.”\footnote{Ibid., 160.} Through naturalizing and normalizing the dominant patriarchal discourse, other modes and articulations of womanhood are either erased or hidden. I call into question representations of “traditional” (modest and asexual) Somali womanhood in Chapter Three by showcasing how performances of gabar xishood leh in classical poetry draw attention to alternative constructions of Somali femininity.

Katrak’s analysis of “tradition” also demonstrates how it is used to legitimate certain social norms as “authentic.” Amanda Weidman writes (in relation to authenticating practices in India) that “authenticity [is] the preserver of…tradition in the face of modernity.”\footnote{Amanda J. Weidman, Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.} As a result, by naming certain “traditions” as “authentic” and “emblematic” of “real” culture, experiential knowledge and alternative modes of gender identification are
obscured. *Xishood*, as the primary signifier of Somali womanhood, authenticates the dominant discourse of *gabar xishood leh*. This situates Somali femininity within a “traditional” terrain and engulfed within the singular narrative of female modesty *sans* sexual agency. By rendering the discourse of *gabar xishood leh* as the only recognized, or “real” performance of Somali womanhood, alternative productions of female Somali identity nullify the latter’s cultural value. Christine Yano thus writes that “cultural traditions” of the past are recalled as “nostalgized figure[s]...[who] serve as a critique of contemporary... women, who, by this argument, have forgotten the shyness and modesty of their past.”

This constructed, romanticized “past” of *gabar xishood leh*, hailed as “traditional” and “authentic” Somali, I propose, is the impetus for social belonging within Somali womanhood. This underscores how the “nostalgized figures” of *gabar xishood leh* are affectively produced and reinforced. I am arguing, then, that some Somali women are emotionally invested in the dominant discourse of *gabar xishood leh* and as such, are compelled to perform it. The longing to perform *gabar xishood leh*, as a means for belonging, recalls Dibyesh Anand’s proposition that contained within displaced subjectivities are messy, ambiguous, affective pulls that result in belonging. This premise is important in looking at the ways female Somali poets negotiate claims of identity and

---


77 Dibyesh Anand, “Diasporic subjectivity as an ethical position,” *South Asian Diaspora* 1, no. 2 : 104.
belonging through their complex performances of *gabar xishood leh*—hybrid expressions of sexual desire and *xishood*—in this thesis. Thus, the seemingly contrarian aspects of their cultural productions in some ways bolster particularistic forms of attachment and belonging. In Rosemary Overell’s words, “belonging is an embodied, affective experience.” In this regard, the desire to perform *gabar xishood leh*—which stems from the potency of the *gabar xishood leh* rhetoric as a “culturally authentic” expression of Somali womanhood—ushers in belonging through affect.

**Xishood as Affect and Sexual Modesty/Good Shame**

To consider the nexus of affect, belonging, and attachment to the *gabar xishood leh* construct, I explore *xishood* as an affect that is a combination of sexual modesty and “good shame.” I then look at *gabar xishood leh* as an affect-carrying construction using Sara Ahmed’s figure of the melancholic migrant. I then turn to the question of affectively belonging through shared codes of *xishood*.

Affect has been theorized in many different ways. Clare Hemmings argues that “affect broadly refers to states of being, rather than to their manifestations or interpretations as emotions.” Affect is, then, an inner state of experience that exists before

---

78 For general discussions on socialization, attachment, and belonging, see Anton Allahar, “The Social Construction of Primordial Identities,” in *Identity and Belonging: Rethinking Race and Ethnicity in Canadian Society*, ed. Sean P. Hier and B. Singh Bolaria (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2006), 31–42.


phenomenological consciousness and before the subject translates their inner being into qualitative, linguistic, discursive, emotional, or embodied narratives. Instead of using the word “affect,” Brian Massumi uses “intensity” when he claims that “[i]ntensity is embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin—at the surface of the body, as its interface with things.” For Hemmings and Massumi, affect is manifested corporeally before the occurrence of qualia (“perceptions and sensations ‘in’ or ‘of’ the mind”). 

_Xishood_, as “good shame,” is an internalized state that propels forth. As Nader al Jallad claims, “good shame” is indicative of, first, the intensity of the feeling, and second, the production of appropriate behaviour. As a result, _xishood_ affectively induces certain codes that are manifested physically, a topic I look at later on.

While I stress affect as a subconscious experience, as Hemmings and Massumi iterate above, I place more emphasis on the understanding of affect as evoking feelings of attachment and belonging. For that I turn to Sara Ahmed’s model of the sociality of emotions below, where affect is discursively conceptualized as a model of “outside in.” That does not mean I deny the _internal_ state of _xishood_, but rather emphasize the pronounced relationality between the sign (modesty) and affect (attachment to modesty) through shared codes. This line of inquiry leads me to think about _xishood_ as a category of

---

in-betweenness.

Affect and Attachment in *Gabar Xishood Leh*

Sara Ahmed’s understanding of the affective encounter is explored in relation to happiness in her book *The Promise of Happiness*. In this text she illustrates how objects themselves are affective: due to the spatiality or temporality of a previous encounter, objects contain memories, feelings, and histories, which, in turn, can produce positive affect.\(^{85}\) As such, it is the context surrounding the object that contributes towards a particular experience with that object. Over time, that object accumulates positive affect to the point that the affect itself becomes part of the essence or composition. If the discussion is extended to bodies (and in this case, constructs of identity as well) there is the view that bodies, like objects, have an affective catch and release, what Ahmed refers to as stickiness.\(^{86}\) She argues, “the atmosphere is not simply ‘out there’ before it gets ‘in’: how we arrive, how we enter this room or that room, will affect what impressions we receive.”\(^{87}\) Therefore, there are specific triggers which influence affect.

Hemmings, like Ahmed, asserts that affect is not free and autonomous from sociality. Even if affect is intensity, she claims, it still exists within a world where it “is always crosscut with fissures that have a social and political history that signifies

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 25.
\(^{86}\) Ibid., 40.
\(^{87}\) Ibid., 40.
otherwise.”88 In other words, due to certain signifiers or histories, affect cannot be claimed to place all individuals in the same sequence of catch and release of intensities. In fact, “[s]ome bodies are captured and held by affect’s structured precision. Not only then, is affect itself not random, nor is the ability to choose to imagine affect otherwise.”89 I suggest that the construct of gabar xishood leh carries affect through certain bodies and bypasses others. I illustrate this point with an example: if a man behaves with sexual impropriety in his dealings with an unmarried girl, he would be rebuked waryaa, xishood, the imperative form in which waryaa is the masculine interjection. Implicitly contained within this clause is ‘waryaa inaanta ka xishood,’ loosely translated as “maintain xishood around the unmarried girl.” In other words, there is sense of moral protection surrounding Somali females in this context, where even a male’s improper behaviour could be considered socially contagious. This interaction, however, does not result in the transference of xishood. As much as affect is transmitted as states existing between bodies, I do not consider xishood to be carried indiscriminately between all bodies. As Hemmings established above, social context matters in the affective encounter, and so I would place only females within this field of signification.

The “stickiness” of gabar xishood leh then, is contained only amongst and between women. The catch and release of xishood, however, does not claim all women in the same way; rather, it is women who have an invested emotional interest in the dominant discourse of gabar xishood leh. The emphasis of “good shame” in xishood as an affective state that

---

89 Ibid., 562.
manifests its exteriority in Somali female interactions, evident in the indication and socialization of Somali girls and women through *gabar xishood leh*. For example, a girl emotionally attuned to *xishood* would not sit with her knees apart in proximity to a group of all women, due to feelings of *xishood*, regardless of the location. Related, but differently, if she was in a public, mixed-gendered space, the act of sitting in such a manner would be considered “*ayb*” or “bad shame.”

The transmission of *xishood* is partly due to the attachment of the idea of *gabar xishood leh*. As I stated earlier, the construction of *gabar xishood leh* is rooted in Somali “traditional” culture, which validates the “authenticity” of an idealized Somali femininity. I suggest this proposition lends itself to a “legitimated belonging,” which propels the necessity to perform *gabar xishood leh*. As performance, and by extension performativity, the practice of belonging to *gabar xishood leh* entails a linguistic and theatrical engagement in which the subject is produced through a set of meaningful practices in an established field of signification. The insistence on *gabar xishood leh* as a dominant discourse and an authenticating category hints at a possibility of fulfilling the ideal.

At the same time, due to the limitations of representation—which disclose what “traditional” constructions of *gabar xishood leh* cannot say—social drama allows affect to evince “excess.” While I have been hinting that there is more to performances of *gabar

---

90 ‘*Ayb* alludes to exhibitions of behaviours and actions that transgress socio-moral parameters. Dina Georgis, in regards to ‘*ayb* (bad shame) as a socio-moral barometer, states: “The anxieties around violating social norms are often less attributable to the behaviour being *haraam* (a sin or religiously forbidden) as to the fear that it will lead to *kalaam al-naas* (what people will say) and therefore public reckoning.” See: Dina Georgis, “Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame in Bareed Mista3jil,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 2 (2013): 243.
xishood leh than “tradition,” the link between affect and “tradition” is undeniable. Richard Ostrofsky expounds on the intricate connection between affect and social customs by stating that “[w]hether an affect makes it to consciousness as a feeling depends on many things—for example…on the compatibility of that affect with prior scripts.”91 Extending Ostrofsky’s claims to the Somali context, we can see how scripts—socio-sexual codes of morality and respectability—allow and valorize gabar xishood leh performances through the attachment of xishood to Somali womanhood. Their conjoined nature is, thus, an added incentive to perform gabar xishood leh.

Positive affect in the form of xishood gets distributed depending on the frequency of the performance of gabar xishood leh. Put differently, the intransient association between sign and affect is reinforced as “[s]igns increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more signs circulate, the more affective they become.”92 In Ahmed’s research, she works with the figure of the melancholic migrant and illustrates how the attachment to suffering interpellates and solidifies the migrant’s location as Other to an English Gemeinschaft.93 Through self-imposed and collective exclusionary practices it is “the repetition of the narrative of injury which causes injury” to migrants.94 It is the continual replaying of an original indignity—the experience of racism—that produces a rhetoric that is isolating and self-perpetuating. Flipping Ahmed’s example, in a reverse

93 Ibid., 45.
94 Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness, 143.
state, the premise of *gabar xishood leh* gains momentum through recurrent performances. The attachment to *gabar xishood leh*—as the noted sign of Somali womanhood—escalates the more it is performed. The repetition of the performance adds to its emotive significance, resulting in a circular process that reinforces, calcifies and authenticates “traditional” gender expectations and ideals. Feelings of attachment and belonging to the construct of *gabar xishood leh*, along with the compulsion to perform, then, are partly due to its established status as the symbol of a good, respectable, modest Somali womanhood that is entrenched in the Somali social imaginary.

Affect, Ahmed affirms, not only proceeds laterally between signs, bodies, and figures but also “forwards and backwards” since “repression always leaves its trace in the present—hence “what sticks” is bound up with the ‘absent presence’ of historicity.”

Ahmed’s point about the ‘absent presence’ is particularly salient in regards to my thinking of female sexual desire in the *gabar xishood leh* construct. While the dominant discourse encompassing *xishood* does not explicitly reference sexual desire, I am conceptualizing it as such because I think female desire and agency, as the unspoken spectre, haunts the discussion of *gabar xishood leh*. As Avery Gordon explains, “…haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities.” In other words, I argue that despite the silencing of female sexual desire and the denial of its existence within the *gabar xishood*

leh paradigm, it underpins female modesty. As such, what “sticks”—xishood—contains elements of desire.

That the past is influential in current everyday life accentuates the affective desire to perform gabor xishood leh despite differing spatiotemporal localities. However, I think it is worth recalling here Katrak’s and Yano’s separate assertions that “tradition” as the nostalgized “past” is often constructed in relation to modernity or nationalism, depending on the political agendas of the patriarchal nation. That is to say, by laying claim to a particular “past,” it conjures up and validates certain narratives as historically accurate and “authentic,” through this lens and not others. In either case, despite nuanced differences in place and time, what is pressing is how varying interpretations rest on one important feature: the relationality between several fields of signification is dependent on the overarching frameworks of gender, nation, and belonging.\textsuperscript{97} Strictly speaking, then, the efficacy of the gabor xishood leh discourse in serving as the only model of Somali womanhood is propped up by socio-sexual scripts stemming from a “traditional” context that circulates xishood through the use of certain recognizable markers that establish the conditions of affective belonging.

**Recognizable and Shared Codes of Xishood**

As I stated previously, xishood manifests itself externally through certain behaviours. In short, actions, dress, and linguistic pauses or silences index xishood. Regarding modesty in general, visual signifiers such as veiling and/or dressing in an

\textsuperscript{97} Massumi, *Parable for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, 72.
“Islamic” manner (wearing guntiino, which covers the whole body, or not wearing ornaments) are examples of how modesty is gauged. Within the Somali diaspora, the jilbaab—the Somali equivalent of the burqa—is prized among Somali women.98 As well, gestural acts such as “downcast eyes, humble but formal posture and restraint in eating, smoking, talking, laughing, and joking” are often cited as the epitome of Islamic feminine behaviour.99 Furthermore, acts such as shy and polite behaviour, not speaking a lot, and manifesting a vapid or insipid demeanor—especially in the company of boys and men—all mark signs of xishood in Somali girls and women. These socially recognizable signs, codes, and acts index xishood and also reference the suppression of female sexual desire that is assumed to accompany xishood behaviour. By these acts, as Isotalo states, a Somali girl or woman “expresses her modesty and premarital abstinence from sexual relations.”100 The avoidance of sexual expression is not, in my view, only confined to acts of modesty, shyness, and adornment decisions; it is also evident in silence, quietness, and minimized talking.

These expressions are contained within specific motifs—for instance, marriage and other religiously and culturally sanctified customs and traditions—which I refer to as codes of xishood. The performance of codes is likened by Massumi to “modeling...[which] occurs through the accumulation of already-constituted relations, contracted into bodies as

98 Berns-McGown, Muslims in the Diaspora: The Somali Communities of London and Toronto, 224.
100 Isotalo, “‘Did You See Her Standing at the Marketplace?’ Gender, Gossip, and Socio-Spatial Behavior of Somali Girls in Turku, Finland,” in From Mogadishu to Dixon: The Somali Diaspora in a Global Context, 184.
habit (which includes belief: habituated meaning)."\textsuperscript{101} While I am in agreement with Massumi about social referents becoming internalized (recall here Ahmed’s framework of “outside in”), I am disquieted at the generalizing nature of presenting such performances as prosaic. I am hesitant to claim the contextual overtones implied by the word “modeling” as the only stimulus. By claiming the performances of codes as imitation, Massumi insinuates an aura of “happenstance” and derides the agentive intentions of the performers.\textsuperscript{102}

The practice of sharing codes is dependent on the metanarrative of Somali cultural ideology with its insistence of embalming codes of \textit{xishood} within “tradition.” In other words, since “traditional” culture serves as a marker of belonging within the Somali social imagination, some codes are legitimated as “authentic.” In a circuitous manner, then, the acts, dress, and silences—the external manifestations of \textit{xishood}—likewise reinforce the validity of “traditional” culture as the sole representation of Somali womanhood. Shared codes, in other words, are passed down as tradition. The acts, dress codes, and silences get wrapped up in customs through socialization and interpellation. As such, both an interiority—an internal state—and external influences are at work in shaping the conditions of practicing codes. The framework of practicing codes as well the codes themselves form the basis of a collective understanding of the \textit{gabar xishood leh} construct, resulting in affective belonging and attachment. This is important, and in Chapters Three and Four I

\textsuperscript{101} Massumi, \textit{Parable for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation}, 82.

\textsuperscript{102} I am aware that the work of Brian Massumi in regards to affect is not about intentionality or agency, but rather the ways that social codes become entrenched in the social psyche. That is to say, it is not about overt subversion but rather internalization. So while I do argue that many aspects of “performing” \textit{gabar xishood leh} are involuntary, due to continual imitation, I am interested in overt and deliberate acts of subversion.
will show how the poets I am looking at purposely use these codes in their complex performances of *gabar xishood leh* as a means of expressing their hybrid subjectivities. Nonetheless, shared codes are imperative in enunciating the parameters of social belonging, and more importantly indicating who has the legitimate right to claim authenticity. Fundamentally, “…the experience of belonging depends on the individual’s shared experience with others in relation to a particular object, event or subject.”¹⁰³ While I am interested in how the unifying factor of *xishood* conjures feelings of attachment and belonging to the dominant discourse of *gabar xishood leh*, I suspect that codes that signal the externalization of *xishood*, such as social acts, dress, and linguistic pauses, as well as acceptable conversational topics such as marriage, function in a similar fashion.

Homi Bhabha draws attention to how codes need to be recognized within a social group in order for one to be acknowledged through collective belonging.¹⁰⁴ Belonging is complicated, as “[it] is no longer perceived as natural, exclusive or fixed…[but instead] always formed in relation to others.”¹⁰⁵ Bhabha draws attention to what he refers to as the “right to narrate,” which involves the acceptance of one’s response by others—a process that comes to identify the condition of belonging. He states:

> No name is yours until you speak of it; somebody returns your call and suddenly, the circuit of signs, gestures, gesticulations is established and you enter the territory of the right to narrate.¹⁰⁶

---

¹⁰⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, xxv.
¹⁰⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, xxv.
Narrating the self and identity is dependent on the recognition of codes, which propels one forward into a framework of affective belonging. The response is not only concomitant with the acknowledgement of “legitimate belonging” to the gabar xishood leh paradigm but, according to Bhabha, is the impetus for subjective “voice.” If the process of coming to belong enables “voice,” how do voices outside dominant discourses negotiate these codes and create spaces of self-expression? Another way of asking this is: if the porousness of borders in relation to identity and belonging appear to be embodied in a field of established signification—a signification that might not bode well for marginalized communities and voices—how can we re-conceptualize the way we think about being and belonging, keeping in mind Bhabha’s query of social relationality? With this in mind, I turn to the prospect of a failed attempt at acceptance in the form of unbelonging.

**Unbelonging in Gabar Xishood Leh**

So far, I have shown how performing gabar xishhood leh informs the practice of belonging. The belonging is rooted in the “traditional” gender expectations, as well as codes of modesty, that underwrite Somali womanhood. The poets I am looking at in the following chapters perform codes of xishood because, I argue, they are attached to this construct of feminine modesty. At the same time, they express sexual desire and exhibit sexual agency through their expressive practices. Performing codes stemming from xishood simultaneously with codes of female sexual desire results in complex, multilayered performances that rework gabar xishhood leh. As I noted earlier, any semblance of female
sexual desire is constructed as the antithesis of xishood. As a result, contained within these complex performances of gabar xishood leh is the possibility of unbelonging. Tove Pettersson sheds some light on the messiness surrounding social inclusion when he claims that “markers of belonging in one dimension, at the same time may generate markers of unbelonging in others.”

The anxiety surrounding belonging and unbelonging to the gabar xishood leh ideal uncovers the performative nature of identity and allows some Somali female poets to reposition themselves as both unique individuals and as members of the larger community.

I am arguing that complex performances stem from hybrid subjectivities that encompass indicators of xishood as “good shame” and sexual modesty, and projections of female sexual desire and agency. In other words, the poets I study use codes of xishood as a medium to publicly engage with stalwart preconceptions of female sexuality and Somali womanhood. The advantage of using these codes is that because they are recognizable, they are read through a particular lens that deems them, seemingly, ineffectual within the dominant discourse. However, as Foucault notes, underneath the rhetoric runs another commentary.

This, I believe, urges us to think of these codes differently—outside the normative scripts of modesty. The importance of these codes, then, lies in divulging the location of women’s agency. As Saba Mahmood highlights, the feminist endeavor of subverting commonly held symbols—what she refers to as “redeploying [hegemonic

---


108 Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archeology of Human Sciences, 45.
meanings of cultural practices] for [women’s] ‘own interests and agendas’”—pinpoints the negotiation and resistance of women which might not be readily apparent at first glance.¹⁰⁹

Opening up the multiple meanings of gabar xishood leh codings, by tracking how poets subvert gender expectations in their performances, not only reveals alternative narratives but also unhinges the dominant discourse of gabar xishood leh by imploding the imagined figure of a “sexless” Somali woman. Unsettling dominant discourses is an inherent trait of hybridity according to Homi Bhabha, and it is this concept I use to reframe complex Somali female performances.¹¹⁰

**Hybridity and In-between Space**

I turn to thinking about belonging and unbelonging through the work of Homi Bhabha and his notion of cultural hybridity, which describes the construction of culture and identity within a colonial setting. Hybridity is the process where the colonial governing body utilizes a singular and Universalist framework though which the colonized (the Other) is measured and disciplined.¹¹¹ The end result is a hybrid identity consisting of the colonizer’s and colonized’s culture, which challenges the validity of any essentialist cultural identity. In using Bhabha’s concept of cultural hybridity in a colonial and postcolonial cultural setting, I highlight hybrid Somali female subjectivities that emerge combining the codes of xishood with expressions of female sexuality.

¹¹⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 35.
Cultural hybridity with its insistence of multiplicity problematizes hegemonic constructions of identity, which are often presented as homogeneous. By highlighting difference, hybrid subjectivities pose a threat to communal cultural imaginaries by exposing holes in the constructed landscape. This definition of difference posits Somali women as complex and antagonistic Others—which means their claims to the collective identity are contested. The term “antagonistic” is, though, something I am trying to dispel within the nexus of Somali gendered politics and collective belonging. I name it because I want to think through how belonging is different but not in opposition to the dominant order, which I hope will expand the meaning of gabar xishood leh. As a mixture of difference and similarities, hybridity forms a liminal or in-between space. Bhabha refers to this as a third space. Hybridity, then, consists of dominant and alternative performances, and unhinges the fixity of meaning that is tied to the dominant discourse.112 Third space challenges the importance of significations produced by the dominant culture and its disciplinary expectations; in disrupting dominant culture, third space also opens up a space for the possibility of other performances.113 The third space of hybridity and ambivalence, in turn, subverts and renegotiates hegemonic systems and opens up new possibilities through multilayered performances. In the following chapters, I use the concepts of hybridity and third space to theorize about power and resistance within a colonial and postcolonial cultural setting. More specifically, I underscore the ways hybridity and third space illuminate the complexities of Somali female subjectivities and through that, draw attention

112 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 35.
113 Ibid., 53.
to the ways *gabar xishood leh*, and therefore Somali female identity and belonging, are contested.

Similar to Bhabha’s theorization of third space is the notion of *barzakh*. Like third space, *barzakh* is an in-between space.\(^{114}\) Initially, as used in Islamic eschatology, the Arabic word *barzakh* meant the liminal space between the material and supernatural spheres where the soul lingers after death but before resurrection on Yawm al-Qiyamah (the Day of Judgment).\(^ {115}\) However, medieval Sufis expanded the definition to include the threshold between different states of wakefulness and sleep/meditation. Ibn al-‘Arabi, a 12th-century Sufi philosopher, defined it as thus:

> A *barzakh* is something that separates two things while never going to one side, as for example the line that separates shadow from sunlight…. There is nothing in existence but *barzakhs*, since a *barzakh* is the arrangement of one thing between two things…and existence has no edges.\(^ {116}\)

The conceptualization of *barzakh* pertains to a gap between two distinct modes of existence. In this vein, what is contained within *barzakh* is a dualistic ontological difference, exemplified succinctly by Gloria Anzaldúa, whose epigraph began this thesis. Anzaldúa writes that “I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean/ where the two overlap/ a gentle coming together/ at the other times and places a violent crash,” and in this stresses


\(^{115}\) Ibid., xxxiii.

the doubleness that underwrites identity formation. Anzaldúa’s ontological location is simultaneously “gentle” and “violent,” and her commentary instantiates the fluidity in boundaries and shifting identity formations. Differently put, because Anzaldúa’s location is also neither completely “gentle” nor “violent,” its intermediary position creates a productive tension that highlights the multiple imaginings of belonging. Nira Yuval-Davis thus writes that as “identities and belonging/s become important dimensions of people’s social locations and positionings…the relationships between locations and identifications can also become more closely intertwined empirically.”

What I find intriguing about Yuval-Davis’s assertion is the concomitant alignment between modes of being and notions of belonging. Within the Somali context, this allows me to think through how women navigate the *gabar xishood leh* ideal in relation to female sexual desire and how the poets in my study negotiate their in-between existential state.

The tension arising from *barzakh* is taken up in African postcolonial thought where Maghribi writers of decolonization call it a *différence intraitable* (intractable difference).

In other words, it is “a hiatus which destabilizes the assignment of places and parts, which [then] displaces the categories of classical and colonial reason and opens up a heterological space….” Analogous to the epistemic disruption that accompanies the third space, *barzakh*’s ability to unsettle tacit social constructions reveals its distinctive power: mapping

---

120 Ibid., 5.
out the loci of the “unnamable.” Bhabha, in reference to characters in V.S. Naipaul’s novels, hints at this elusive element. He states: “Naipaul’s people are vernacular cosmopolitans of a kind, moving in-between cultural traditions, and revealing hybrid forms of life and art that do not have a prior existence within the discrete world of any single culture or language.”

The italicized segment of Bhabha’s observation is pertinent in showcasing the parameters linked with the act of naming, chiefly its existence within normative social discourses, something that Miyako Inoue also implies. Inoue illustrates this ineffable quality of the “unnamable” through the actions of her interlocutor Yoshida-san, who simultaneously defies and periphrastically recognizes the association of women’s language and Japanese femininity:

This elusiveness accounts for the fact that [Yoshida-san] speaks from a position that the discourse fails to name. She does not use women’s language in an overt sense. Yet she does not speak against women’s language, or outside its regime, either…. Her strategy, and the semiotic position that it creates as “the middle”, ambiguously circumvents all the possible positions and names that the discourse designates as external, oppositional, or deviant.

Inoue makes a clear distinction between a lack of existence and the unwillingness of the discourse to recognize certain subject positions. What is at stake here is the effacing of certain figures, which as I stated earlier expose lacunae in the collective identity. Gayatri Gopinath theorizes these figures as “impossibilities,” which she claims is a method of fathoming certain subject positions as “impossible” and “unimaginable” within the

---

121 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, xiii (emphasis added).
122 Inoue, *Vicarious Language: Gender and Linguistic Modernity in Japan*, 250 (emphasis in the original).
dominant social codes and the social psyche. José Esteban Muñoz similarly alludes to a “disempowered...positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.” These theories of impossibility, efficacy, unnamability, and unthinkability allow me to analyze not only how Somali women expressing sexual desire and exercising sexual agency are outside the intelligible gabar xishood leh paradigm, but also how women engaging with female sexuality and sexual modesty and “good shame” are actually considered inconceivable among members of the Somali social collectivity.

While the theorists noted above think through the issues surrounding “impossible” and “unnamable” figures in divergent ways, they all pinpoint the authority of dominant discourses and their seeming monopoly in labeling and legitimating social mores. Yet as I have also been trying to underscore, something exists in-between—not strictly outside or inside the discourse—that is hybrid. In the upcoming chapters I ask: how do Somali poets through their hybrid subjectivities “name” their ontological locations, if their very positions are considered “unnamable” or “impossible” according to normative and gendered scripts?

**Alternative Publics and Spaces of Performances**

Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods suggest that “places, experiences, histories, and people that ‘no one knows’ do exist, within our present geographic order.” With the

---

123 Gopinath, Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures, 15-16.
124 José Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.
125 Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, “No One Knows the Mysteries at the Bottom of the
above discussion in mind, I conclude this argument by illuminating how “impossible” figures, those working within and refashioning gendered scripts of modernity, inhabit space. Dwelling in in-between spaces renders some invisible to the dominant discourse, so I want to address how Somali poets express their agency and practice belonging. I want to echo Katherine McKittrick’s and Clyde Woods’ reminder that “…we need to consider how the unknowable figures into the production of space,” and also emphasize the urgency of examining the ways unknowable, “unnamable” and “impossible” subject positions play out in public performance of spaces.126

I therefore complement theories of hybridity, third space, and barzakh by turning to Gayatri Gopinath’s research on public cultures. This will highlight how silenced and displaced women perform through and in public cultures and, consequently, unsettle hegemonic notions about gender that are upheld by “tradition,” the nation-state, and social mores. By public culture, I refer to cultural expressions and performances that are recognizable to an organized group of people with a common identity. At the same time, public culture is an accepted zone where “competing notions of community, belonging, and authenticity are brought into stark relief.”127 As I noted in my introduction, Somali public culture lauds poetry as a marker of Somali identity; poetry is closely aligned with Somali public life. In some ways, Somali public culture and the Somali public sphere are interchangeable, as both sites shape who can participate politically and where. As I will

126 Ibid., 4.
show in the following chapters, women’s poetry was considered socio-culturally inferior to men’s poetry within the public realm. As such, the general constraints placed on women’s expressive practices, in addition to the silencing of female sexuality within the *gabar xishoox leh* construction, demonstrate a twofold binding for the Somali poets I am studying. Therefore, contained within the analysis of Somali “alternative publics” in this thesis is a tinge of resistance—as a reader of the poetry, I am also challenging the norms of the Somali public sphere and proclaiming Bhabha’s “right to narrate” and bell hooks’ “talking back,” along with performative listening, as ways to uncover silences and unnamable narratives.

In her chapter “‘Other Ways of Being in the World’: Alternative Narratives of Globalization and Diaspora,” Gopinath argues that the “‘invisibility’ of other subjectivities and other forms of cultural production [can] result [in] the misrecognition…of new mappings of space, race, gender and sexuality.”

It is the performance and remapping of alternative subjectivities that disrupts a seemingly singular framework. Alternative subjectivities provide a “new mapping” that speaks of the “in-between space” I am interested in exploring. I propose the Somali female poets I am reading here portray their hybrid subjectivities through “alternative publics”: counterpublics in Chapter Three, and intimate publics in Chapter Four. “Alternative publics” contain elements of Somali public cultures through the use of poetry. At the same time, the refusal to conform to a singular narrative of Somali femininity, which is displayed through the “recoding” of recognizable

---

129 Ibid., 58.
codes and the use of agentive acts such speaking and listening, is suggestive of “alternative publics.” These spaces of performances and agentive acts are, in my opinion, indispensable to expressing hybrid Somali female subjectivities of *gabar xishood leh*.

The “in-between” cultural and gendered spaces of belonging, as well as the spaces of cultural production and poetry, are understood alongside the politics of “talking back” and performative listening.\(^{130}\) Not only does performing hybrid subjectivities disrupt hegemonic narratives, it creates a space where self-representation and the authorial voice are revealed.\(^{131}\) Through the act of telling, “[a] woman ‘brings her story into the story’;[…]free[s] herself from speech enslaved to mastery,…”\(^{132}\) The politics of voice as well as the closely aligned politics of listening are particularly salient in the performances of marginalized communities and impossible subjects. As Audre Lorde rightly claimed: “If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive.”\(^{133}\) Performative listening also allows the means of producing self-identifying narratives. According to Chris McRae, performative listening “…functions as a relational process of meaning making and coming to knowledge.”\(^{134}\)

---

\(^{130}\) The phrase ‘talking back’ is attributed to bell hooks; see hooks, *Talking Black: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*.


\(^{133}\) Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 137.

is to say, performative listening reinforces the association between the speaker and listener through a shared understanding.

Looking at the acts of speaking and listening, in the next two chapters I trace the complex ways that Somali female poets express their hybrid subjectivities in “alternative publics” and reveal different forms of engagements with and conditions of social belonging to and identity with Somali womanhood, xishood, and female sexuality.
Chapter 3

Speaking through Codes of Xishood and Counterpublics in Classical Somali Female Poetry

The conception of sexual modesty I outlined in my theoretical chapter was understood alongside, and emerged from, “traditional” femininity. As I noted, “tradition,” with its patriarchal roots, is an authenticating practice in which modesty acts as a gendered disciplining narrative. “Tradition” and modesty, then, authenticate the figure of the asexual woman—whom other women are measured against. Within the Somali context, the term *gabar xishood leh* indexes the enactment of sexual modesty and “good shame” as gendered identifiers that also diminish or hide expressions of female sexuality. Put slightly differently, the asexual female ideal within the dominant discourse of *gabar xishood leh* stems from the erasure of female sexual desire and agency by touting modesty as normative behaviour. Using the aforementioned analyses of “traditional” femininity as a stepping-stone, I will explore how female poets utilize localized customs (social codes of *xishood*) as a means to achieve a modicum of social control and agency and as a means for self-representation and authorial voice.

---


58
Codes of xishood as a symbolic marker of gabar xishood leh manifest themselves along two trajectories within the female Somali poets of classical poetry. First, xishood serves as a visible and participatory engagement of Somali womanhood, and second, because of its acceptance with the larger community, such codes resist a single narrative of gabar xishood leh. As such, codes of xishood serve a dual purpose: they reaffirm the attachment to the gabar xishood leh ideal and advance its expansion to include expressions of sexual desire in poetry. Using Sara Ahmed’s lens, in which affect is discursively reiterated as a model of “outside in,” we can see a direct correlation between the sign (modesty) and affect (attachment to modesty) in social codes. The use of codes of xishood through speaking is, I suggest, an agentive act—one that allows the expression of sexual desire and expands the meaning of gabar xishood leh. As I mentioned before, there is an advantage in using these codes, as they are recognizable signifiers; at the same time, due to their familiarity, they allow the undetected expression of sexual desire. For this reason, I consider codes of xishood as the site of sexual agency.

Agency, as such, within classical female Somali poetry contains a tinge of resistance, a refusal to be constrained within a prevailing conscription of Somali womanhood. As I stated earlier, the ‘silencing’ of female sexual desire within the gabar xishood leh paradigm dictates a prominent display of sexual modesty/‘good shame’ as the totality of Somali female expression. To expand on the subtle defiance of expressing sexual

---

desire, I turn to bell hooks to illustrate the inaudible presence of agentive functions through the politics of “voice” in classical Somali female poetry.

In her concept of “coming to voice,” bell hooks highlights the obligation of silenced and marginalized social groups to find the means and the spaces to exercise their right to speak publicly. Nancy Fraser also proposes that political “participation means being able to speak ‘in one's own voice,’ thereby simultaneously constructing and expressing one’s cultural identity through idiom and style.” Enclosed within the politics of “voice” in the public sphere, then, is the ability and impetus to speak as an agentive act and also the establishment of an “authentic” voice, which Fraser alludes to in her phrase “in one’s own voice.” That “coming to voice” relies on the presupposition of individual authenticity being expressed as a necessary means of political engagement exposes one possible conundrum: if “coming to voice,” as a political act, must be acknowledged in order to gain traction, how do those on the periphery overcome this hindrance? One possible answer is Homi Bhabha’s assertion of the “right to narrate,” meaning that one should have the right to construct one’s own narrative and, more importantly, to reveal it to an another voice or perspective.

While the use of codes of xishood was effective in propelling women’s voices in classical Somali poetry, there still were societal constraints due to the positioning of female poetry within Somali public culture. The censorship of Somali girls and women in classical poetry is three-fold: through the restriction of content and means of poetic transmission;

---

139 Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 69.
140 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, xxv.
and in the semi-public spaces of performances. As stated above, the public performance of female sexuality alienated women from the *gabar xishood leh* construct; however, this limitation manifested itself principally within the domain of Somali classical poetry. Female poetry, overall, was deemed inferior to male poetry in Somali classical expressive practices. Further contained *within* female poetry was a supplementary difference where women who spoke about sexuality were derided, reinforcing the implicit claim that ‘proper’ Somali women were modest. As such, the spaces for female performances, which were already finite, dwindled considerably with this supposed impediment. This multiple silencing of Somali female poets in classical poetry is the main reason I consider them as Othered. It is also serves the necessity of having counterpublics through which to theorize their creative works and acts.

The politics of voice and speaking through codes is contingent on spaces of performance that do not alienate diverse voices, or, to put it slightly differently, on spaces that offer difference—meaning hybrid subjectivities—as a legitimate representation of Somali womanhood. As Michael Warner reminds us, “…a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse.”¹⁴¹ Far from being apolitical, however, the boundaries of “public culture are marked by prescribed conditions of collective belonging, in particular discourses of gender, race, and sexuality.”¹⁴² Within the time period of classical Somali poetry, both the public sphere and public culture were synonymous in

---

dictating the perimeter of acceptable subject matters and locations. As elites (a significant fraction of male poets) drew the parameters of legitimate forms of classical poetry, the obstruction of female poetry, particularly the poets I am looking at in this chapter, led to the necessity of forming alternative publics that allowed the flourishing of the classical poetic oeuvre of Somali women.

I argue that classical Somali female poets do form women-only spaces. However, I also suggest that counterpublics challenge the dominant discourse; Somali female classical poets, with their hybrid subjectivities and the use of recognizable codes to express sexual desire, disrupt the singular conception of the *gabar xishood leh* narrative. Recalling Gayatri Gopinath’s notion of “impossible figures”—an accurate description of female Somali poets, whose hybrid subjectivities simultaneously engage with female sexual desire and *xishood*—and the poets’ unnamable/unknowable existence within the dominant *gabar xishood leh* discourse, challenges us to expand this limited vocabulary and parse out the different ways female poets in classical Somali poetry exert their agency and perform their subjectivities through the nexus of the politics of voice, speaking through codes, and counterpublics.

**Subordinate Social Positioning of Classical Somali Female Poets**

The condition of a subordinate group, for Nancy Fraser, is the existence of a

---

collectivity that is streamed out of the public sphere and denied a political “voice.”

Somali female poets within the classical period were systemically denied a voice through the subjugation of female poetry and possible ostracization for deviating from the typical enunciations of Somali womanhood. This silencing, on multiple levels, leads me to consider them as subordinate subjects, and it is these strict conditions that they were resisting. In following this route, I look at first the social standing of female poets within classical poetry, following with the distinctions of acceptable topics within the gabar xishood leh rhetoric and between sexual desire and sexual awareness, before ending with examples of overt expressions of sexual desire.

The Devalued Status of Classical Female Somali Poetry

In B.W. Andrzejewski’s classification of Somali poetic periods, the Era of Fire and Embers (1899-1944), which I consider the golden age of classical poetry, coincided with the advent of British imperialism and ended with the first attempt at Somali nationalism. During that historical moment, the most renowned Somali poet, Sayyid Mohammed Abdulle Xassan, led and mobilized anti-colonialist resistance movements partly through the

---

144 Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 69.

use of poetry. As a foundational text, Xassan’s poetry serves to prop up a particular ideal of Somali expressive practices and sets the tone for the parameters of the maanso-goleed (“prestigious”) category, of which classical poetic genres such as the gabay, geeraar, and jiifta are considered the most prominent.\footnote{146} The poetic content of the “prestigious” category was saturated with “serious” topics, often those pertaining to socio-political, nationalistic, or historically relevant issues.\footnote{147} In contrast, maanso-maaweele ("non-prestigious") styles such as the guux and the bittikoober often contained what was considered “frivolous” elements, such as love.\footnote{148}

In addition to the content, the social position of the poet was also an indicator of the poetic category. As older, married men were considered the quintessential poets, they were often the only ones allowed to perform prestigious genres in classical poetry. Younger, single poets by default were on the lowest echelons of the poetic hierarchy.\footnote{150} As a result, since the younger crowd often performed non-prestigious poetry, with its seemingly trivial subject matter, it was dismissed as the realm of young and inexperienced poets.\footnote{151} What is not clear is whether the disdain of non-prestigious poetry was due to the social position of the poet or the content of the poetry. I suspect, though, that it was a mixture of both criteria.

\footnote{148} Abdullahi, Culture and Customs of Somalia, 75.
\footnote{149} Andrzejewski and Lewis, Somali Poetry: An Introduction, 17.
\footnote{150} Ibid., 17.
What is transparent, however, is the differing treatment of male and female poets even within non-prestigious poetry.

While it was deemed immature for young men to participate in non-prestigious poetry, it was perceived more importantly as a means of gaining experience to perform the *gabay, geeraar*, or *jiiflo*—prestigious poetry genres—later in life as a seasoned poet.\(^\text{152}\)

However, this same consideration was not extended to young women. While some eventually progressed from non-prestigious poetry to the *buraanbur*, the female prestigious style, young women were not encouraged to evolve poetically to the same degree as men.\(^\text{153}\)

As such, what is illuminated by the dichotomous split in the treatment of male and female poets is the reduced ranking of female poetry.

Aside from non-prestigious poetry, the subordinate position of female poets and female poetry in general in the Somali social imaginary is well documented.\(^\text{154}\)

In referencing prestigious female poetry, Zainab Mohamed Jama’s “Silent Voices: The Role

\(^{152}\) Ibid., 20.

\(^{153}\) It is debatable whether the *buraanbur* is considered a prestigious form of poetry or not, as some scholars declare it is and others do not. However, scholars are in agreement that the *buraanbur* would be considered lower in status compared to male prestigious poetry: see Dahabo Hasan et al., “Somalia: Poetry as Resistance against Colonialism and Patriarchy,” in *Subversive Women: Women’s Movements in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean*, ed. Saskia Wieringa (London: Zed Books, 1995); Amina H. Adan, “Women and Words: The Role of Women in Somali Oral Literature,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 16 (1996). However, I am including the *buraanbur* in the non-prestigious category in this thesis as the issue is with the subject-matter. To be more precise, the content of ‘love’, deemed a superficial and trivial topic, placed the poetry in the non-prestigious category.

\(^{154}\) Despite the subordinate status of Somali female poetry, Somali women have resisted and challenged this label in a myriad ways, see Dahabo Hasan et al., “Somalia: Poetry as Resistance against Colonialism and Patriarchy,” in *Subversive Women: Women’s Movements in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean*; Safia Aidid, “*Haweenku Wa Garab* (Women are a Force): Women and the Somali Nationalist Movement, 1943-1960,” *Bildhaan* Vol. 10.
of Somali Women’s Poetry in Social and Political Life” illustrates how Somali women’s poetry was erased through several methods. In addition to the poetic hierarchy I mentioned above where female poetry was on a lower rung than male poetry, Jama’s preoccupation is primarily how the distribution of poetry provides evidence of the inferior status of female poetry.

During the Era of Fire and Embers (the golden age of classical poetry), there were specific means for publicizing and disseminating poetry: memorization and recitation. While this propagated male prestigious poetry, it hindered women’s poetry in two ways. First, due to limitations enforced by a sexually segregated society, the roles of memorizer and reciter were male. As a result, other than through female members of their family, men were not privy to or able to access female poetry. This limited the spread of female poetry through the general population. Second, male orators themselves “view[ed] the act of memorizing poetry by women as demeaning and insulting.”

After the introduction of the written script in 1972, classical oral poetry was documented as part of the effort to preserve the Somali cultural heritage. However, the emphasis was again on male poetry and female poetry was sequestered, except for what

---

156 Ibid., 192.
157 Ibid., 186.
158 Ibid., 187.
was considered “acceptable” poetry. The only female poetry collected, according to Jama, was on “subjects associated with what [were] seen as female roles…[such as] work poetry…and children’s lullabies.” These decisions to diminish female poetry’s value and importance, and selectively choose some types of poetry over others pinpoint the double silencing of female poetry. Both these measures serve to undermine female poetry, and I would argue they are intrinsically linked in mandating the production of an ideal Somali womanhood, what I refer to as a *gabar xishood leh*.

**Acceptable and Unacceptable Topics in Somali Classical Poetry**

The acceptability of certain types of female poetry depended on the relative stance regarding gender relations in the Somali social imaginary. In addition to the tolerance of specific female poetic genres, poems’ subject matter was also scrutinized. Since the dominant discourse surrounding *gabar xishood leh* constructed an aura of sexual modesty/“good shame” which resulted in the demarcation of female sexual desire and sexual agency, this narrative, I claim, dictated the respectability of poetic topics. As such, non-prestigious poetry, with its emphasis on love, was considered suspect in relation to this idealized Somali womanhood.

The theme of love in non-prestigious poetry, while ubiquitous, was ambiguous in its meaning. Contained within the poems, however, are aspects that hint at its gendered themes, depicted differently in male and female poetry. For example, men’s performances

---

159 Ibid., 187.
160 Ibid., 187.
of love were explicitly “irreverent…funny…[and] obscene, clearly referencing [physical manifestations of] sexual desire.”\(^{161}\) Women’s, on the other hand, were amorphously constructed around the fulfillment of love and marriage.\(^{162}\) While male expressions were obvious indicators of physical love, I argue that the love mentioned in ‘non-prestigious’ female poetry equates to sexual desire for two reasons: first, female sexual desire became constructed outside the confines of marriage within the *gabar xishood leh* narrative, and second, as a result, any expression of female sexual desire produced a visceral, reactionary force.

As *xishood* signaled gendered propriety—which I associate with the marital state—female sexual desire was considered antithetical in nature. This adamant distancing of sexual desire/love outside the confines of marriage becomes engulfed in the *gabar xishood leh* narrative. Fatima Mernissi alludes to something similar in the discursive inscription of “promiscuous sexuality” on the Arab female body in pre-Islamic literature, heightening the fear of a hypersexual and non-familial-oriented sexuality.\(^{163}\) That is not to say that there is a denial of female sexuality within marriage; rather, the rhetoric surrounding Somali “traditional” female sexuality made a distinction between sexual desire and sexual

---


\(^{162}\) Ibid., 29.

I propose that sexuality leading to marriage—sexual awareness—was celebrated precisely because it resulted in marriage in a manner that female sexual desire did not.

The Difference between Sexual Awareness and Sexual Desire

Somali girls’ sexuality was a space of contestation in the expressive practices of pastoral British Somaliland in the early twentieth century. On the one hand, girls were expected to be active participants in courtship rituals (as marriage was socially advantageous) and therefore were expected to have some semblance of sexual awareness. On the other hand, sexual knowledge was frowned upon, as chastity was a prized attribute in a successful bride. One particular Somali expression exemplifies this through the warning to men of the danger of unmarried females’ familiarity with sexuality by claiming: “Three things should be avoided: building a house on a road, marrying a woman who knows [about sex], and holding back news.”

Sexual knowledge differed significantly depending whether marriage was the primary motivation or not. According to oral texts from the classical period, expression of female awareness of sexuality in general was acceptable as long as unmarried women did not.

---

164 For discussion of female sexuality in marriage within a North African Muslim context, see Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society*.
166 Ibid., 25.
167 Ibid., 25.
168 Ibid., 25. (The square brackets in this quotation are in the original text by Kapteijns and Ali.)
not transgress the limits, meaning engaging in untoward behaviour outside and/or not leading to marriage. As “traditional” marriages were imperative in adding material and social resources through affinal kin, awareness of sexuality, which generally indicated sexual maturity, was seen as an added incentive. Sexual maturity is often considered the physical manifestation of a body undergoing the transition from childhood to adulthood in what Terence Turner refers to as “bio-sexual development.” In this case, the materiality of the self is emphasized as the primary platform for sexuality. As such, Somali girls of a certain age were expected to signal their readiness for marriage through explicit dress (such as braiding their hair in a particular design) and courtship rituals.

Thus, sexual awareness—sexuality associated with marriage—not only became synonymous with chastity but also extended to female modesty, signaling Rey Chow’s reasoning that “female sexuality itself [needed to be] barred from entering a community except in the most non-transgressive form.” Sexual modesty then, became the desired measure of Somali femininity, as evident in oral texts from the classical poetic period from the first half of the twentieth century. These texts allude to sexual modesty as an inherent trait of a ‘proper’ girl through couplets such as these: “men are issue-solvers, women are

---

modest.”¹⁷⁴ This conception of modesty and Somali womanhood indexes what I refer to as the *gabar xishood leh* discourse. The question of chastity then, in a way, becomes moot in conjunction with sexual awareness, since implicitly contained within sexual awareness is sexual modesty. In other words, these preconditions for marriage insinuate modest behaviour and *xishood* in general.

At the same time, sexual desire in this context is the expression of female sexuality outside the restraints of and not leading to marriage. Sexual desire was theorized, particularly by sociobiologists, as inherently biological for most of the twentieth century until that notion was superseded by “constructionism.”¹⁷⁵ Gregory M. Pflugfelder states: “…scholarship on the history of sexuality challenges this biologistic view… [and instead champions] ‘constructionist’ [models which view]… desire, sexual or otherwise,… not [as] a constant or a given but [a]s shaped in crucial ways by the very manner in which we *think* and *speak* about it.”¹⁷⁶ As sexual desire was constructed as female sexuality outside marriage, any performance of sexual desire negated sexual modesty/“good shame.” This, in part, was considered detrimental in undermining the ritualistic significance of marriage. The manner in which female sexual desire was talked about was also very telling. As the expression of female sexuality was allocated to specific sites (courtship rituals) where the

---

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 25.
¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 400. (Emphasis added.)
normative behaviour aligned with the image of *gabar xishood leh*, it only become problematic when a woman initiated or expressed sexual desire.

These gendered patterns are illuminated through the figure of Margaret Laurence. In 1950, before she became a Canadian literary icon, Laurence travelled to British Somaliland where she documented her travels in her memoir *The Prophet’s Camel Bell*. Of particular interest to her were Somali folktales and oral poetry. As a European-Canadian, she did not have access to female poets and her research primarily focused on the voices of the local men. In one of her interviews inquiring about female poetry, she was told that “proper women” did not talk about love in their poetry and it was only “prostitutes” who sang love-songs. What is transparent in the men’s feedback are how expressions of love in female poetry reinforced the fixed perception of the differences between “proper” and “improper” Somali womanhood, first through the declarative statement about objectionable topics for Somali women, and second, through the usage of the lexical item “prostitutes.” This response further cements the idea that love in female poetry was a euphemism for sexual desire. While Laurence’s interlocutors dismissed love poetry, it was evident that it existed in many forms. I am looking at love in complex performances of *gabar xishood leh*, productions utilizing codes of *xishood*; however, these expressions were not acknowledged, as they did not fit what was considered the typical productions of female sexual desire within classical poetry. Performances depicting overt expressions of sexual desire were

178 Ibid., 27.
considered the only productions of female sexual desire in Somali public culture—a salacious act that drew censure, as Laurence observed.

**Overt Expressions of Sexual Desire**

The stigmatization of explicit articulations of female sexual desire in performances such as the *bittikoober*, a spirit possession poem/dance, extended to the moral character of the performers. The poets involved within these expressive practices were demeaned through the claim that they did not conform to the Somali ideal of womanhood or *gabar xishood leh*.\(^\text{179}\) The *bittikoober*, a spirit possession performance from northern Somalia, has two elements: a poem accompanied by a dance. What is evident in the *bittikoober*, similar to other possession dances, is the explicit display of female sexuality. Janice Boddy, through her work on spirit possession in northern Sudan, alludes to the mimetic parallels of the “entering of a spirit,” usually male, into a woman’s body and the act of heterosexual intercourse.\(^\text{180}\) The performance of possession trances, or as it is called in Sudan, *zar*, mimics seemingly outlandish speech and behaviour in such a way that makes it transparent that the “woman does not act through her spirit, [but] the spirit acts through her.”\(^\text{181}\) In this regard, the spirit “makes keen use of signs that proclaim its identity. It swaggers, struts, is impolite, gives commands and refuses to answer when addressed, none of which are


\(^{181}\) Ibid., 149.
typical...[of the] women.” As such, atypical behaviour or speech is attributed to the spirit and not the woman herself. Similar to the Sudanese trances, Somali possession performances, *saar*, utilize the same procedure of a male spirit entering a female body. The emphasis on the spirit makes it permissible for a woman to express sexual desire—a role typically designated as masculine—within specific socio-spatio-moral conditions.

The *bittikoober* differs from more mainstream Somali trances, however, in several ways, in particular, the marital status of the female poets and the mixed gender participatory space. In *saar* performances, the spirits often possessed married women, although there have been cases of single women. Unmarried women, on the other hand, could only perform the *bittikoober*, because “a woman [could not] be married to two.” The claim that male possession—spirit or otherwise—counts as a marriage is interesting in that it reiterates the acceptable domain of female sexual expression. In other words, as the sexuality of a married woman was confined to the parameters of heterosexual marriage, the *bittikoober* was an exclusionary space within the discourse. Indirectly then, the *bittikoober* was recognized as a performance of sexual desire, both by the state of singlehood and the construction of sexual desire outside the limits of marriage.

Along with the masculinity of the spirit, there are male performers, secondary to the lead female poet. Unlike typical trance performances, which were usually contained within

---

182 Ibid., 149.
private and women-only spaces, the *bittikoobar* called for a mixed-gender gathering. In fact, the inclusion of men in a predominantly female space acknowledges not only the active but the necessary participation of men, specifically within the context of sexual desire.

Within this particular poem, a woman expresses the tension in/of her body—a tension that appears to be induced and can only be expelled by maleness:

The young woman: My skin is crawling—Is it them?/ And I am choking—Is it them?/ My flesh is creeping—Is it them?/ The spotted one—Is it them?/ An angry *saar* spirit—Is it them?/ Which cuts my tendons—Is it them?/ Who can drive it out?—Is it them? I am calling Xareed [male name]—Is it them?/ I am calling Xasan [male name]—Is it them?/ With strong arms—Is it them?

The young men: I will drive it out, sister/ It is what cut the strength of your arms, sister/ the one who made you furious. ¹⁸⁵

The female performer’s words hint at sexual desire through the references to her ‘skin’ and ‘flesh’ undergoing violent episodes that seem out of her control. The usage of such verbs as “crawling,” “choking,” and “creeping” further suggests an instability that comes from within, hinting at an internal state which appears to simultaneously sap her energy yet invigorate her. This agitated state—the possession of a male spirit within a single woman’s body—demands the performance of unmarried men. In calling out the names of specific men, Xareed and Xasan, the female performer acknowledges that their presence is a necessary aspect of the ritual. Her plea and their avowal also indicates the liberating force produced through their participation. Lidwien Kapeijtns, in speaking of male inclusion within the *bittikoobar* poem above, proclaims “only their presence…and in particular [their]

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 30. (Original square brackets.)
sweat could cure her.”186 In other words, there is a complicit agreement that this particular space allows for unmarried women suffering from a mysterious ailment that only specific unmarried men can cure.

As seen earlier in saar and zar performances, maleness legitimated the expression of female sexuality. However, in the bittikoober, neither the male spirit nor male performers were sufficient to validate the enactment of sexual desire. As established previously in my distinction between sexual awareness and sexual desire, the condition of marriage was constructed as the appropriate arena for female sexuality—as a code of xishood—and while the bittikoober parodied courtship rituals in that it revealed sexual maturity and mimicked certain behaviours, the fact it was “almost the same, but not quite”—to use Bhabha’s words—was not adequate.187

Poetic performances such as the bittikoober, then, became the preeminent token of female sexual desire. As the expression of female sexuality outside marriage—sexual desire—was distanced from the notion of gabar xishood leh, and xishood in general, overt expressions of sexual desire were systematically scorned. The association of poetic content and the prevailing status of women’s poetry contributed to the subordinate subject position of these classical female poets. In fact, I would argue that there is a correlation between the poetry and the discourse, read as female in a patriarchal society and deemed inferior as a result “since an important feature of dominant ideologies [was] precisely the control of not

---

186 Ibid., 30.
187 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 123. (Original emphasis.)
only the content but also the valued means of expression.”188 This repeated silencing of female voices was not only limited to women who performed overt expressions of desire in their poetry, but extended to all women, since Somali womanhood was defined by an absence of female sexual desire. The configuration of xishood and sexual desire as polar opposites is problematic as it overlooks the complicated imaginings outside the explicit female sexual desire paradigm, something I look at in complex counterdiscourses below.

The position of all female poets performing expressive practices containing expressions of sexual desire, then, were attributed a diminished stance eradicating most of them from the historiography of Somali classical poetry. Lidwien Kapteijns implies this through her observation that “[t]here are indications that girls and especially women composed many such love buraanburs, but only a few have been preserved.”189 The inferior status of female poetry in conjunction with sexual desire is further revealed through the anonymity of the female poets. As Jama laments, because of the silencing of women’s voices, the genealogy of female classical poetry is opaque.190 As a result, Kapteijns, who collected these poems, which I analyze below, does not list names, but rather regions where the poetry originated.191 The metrical structure also indicates its time period.192 These three

192 Ibid., 4.
indicators—poetic style, region, and time period—is often how poetry is referenced. In this case, the poetry I look at in complex counterdiscourses is buraanbur and guux produced in Northern Somalia during the Era of Fire and Embers. Despite the differing poetic structure of non-prestigious genres of classical poetry such as the two explored below and the bittikoober, the commonality of love signifying sexual desire as a generic theme is prevalent. Furthermore, the use of codes of xishood within the buraanbur and guux styles as a means to express hybrid subjectivities offers an under-analyzed look into the expression of female sexual desire in Somali female classical poetry.

**Hybrid Discourses**

The circumstances arising from a subordinate position are meant to silence one’s voice and agency. However, recalling bell hooks’ assertion of the necessity to speak, found in her term “coming to voice,” and the complicated nuances through which agency can take form, forces us to ponder how Somali female poets perform their subjectivities. Counterdiscourse—an ethos in opposition to the hegemonic ideal—is a necessary means in enacting subordinate agency. If gabar xishood leh was the dominant discourse for Somali womanhood with its erasure of female sexual desire, overt performances of sexual desire such as the bittikoober are the predominant fixtures of the counterdiscourse of gabar xishood leh. Hybrid discourses, however, while appearing benign, are a probable avenue for agentive intentions. I consider hybrid discourses to be subordinate discourses/performances that challenge the dominant discourse through the expression of female sexual desire while simultaneously containing indicators of the dominant discourse, such as references to
xishood in Somali non-prestigious classical female poetry. Below I look, first, at the association of female sexual desire and modesty in poetry, before turning to recoding codes of xishood, in particular within complex performances of gobar xishood leh. I end with a discussion of the hybridization of discourse and in-between spaces. In order to start thinking about the agentive possibilities of codes of xishood, I turn to the overlapping contours of female sexual desire, modesty and poetry.

**Sexual Desire and Modesty**

Sexual desire, modesty, and female subjectivity have long been documented within Muslim female poetry.\(^\text{193}\) I briefly touched on the preeminence of modesty as a marker of Bedouin female subjectivity, with its attempt to silence female sexuality, in the introductory chapter. Bedouin women, nevertheless, displayed sexual agency through indirect measures as a way of negotiating two seemingly contradictory views of a tribal, Muslim womanhood: female sexual desire and modesty. Moneera Al-Ghadeer describes the tension as such in Saudi Arabian Bedouin female poetry: “Even though desire seems to have an erotic overtone in these poems, it usually displayed a woman’s wanting and longing for a male lover, juxtaposed with the external forces that women have to navigate while declaring their erotic desire.”\(^\text{194}\) If by “external forces” Al-Ghadeer is alluding to social mores that establish female sexuality within specific parameters, such as modesty, it

---


would be interesting to ponder the ways female poets negotiate the duality contained within Bedouin female sexuality. While it appears that poetry is the necessary means for the expression of sexual desire and modesty, the poem below reveals that modesty is disproportionately emphasized:

Seeing my lover will fill my eyes.
I swore that I would pour to him my saliva
Even if my family should kill me by the sword,
My lips are pure and never seen,
Never unveiled by lovers.
I say this as a joke and sketch
To amuse the anguished mind.\textsuperscript{195}

The declaration of sexual desire in the first section of the stanza is disavowed in the second part by stressing modesty. By renouncing sexual desire, it reinforces the fact that “…erotic desire is considered inappropriate and should remain unspoken. Consequently, [the poet] conceals her longing by describing the purity of her mouth and then ultimately veiling it, as if she appropriates silence…”\textsuperscript{196} As the covering of the female mouth with the Bedouins of the Arabian peninsula—\textit{burgu} and \textit{batula} veiling—indicated chastity, the explicit reference to the lips as veiled reestabishes the poet as a modest woman from the slip produced by the articulation of sexual desire.\textsuperscript{197} The poet then turns to the tropes surrounding female modesty by symbolically “eating” back her words of desire and trivializing female

\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 53.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 56.
sexuality in general. In other words, “[t]he poet...by ending on a satirical note, reappropriat[es] the rhetoric of modesty and politesse. By stating her desire, she almost gives up her position as a ‘good’ and honourable woman; but in order to retain her position she negates it.”198 These two last lines, “I say this as a joke and sketch/ To amuse the anguished mind,” are most telling of the abject positioning of female sexual desire in Bedouin Arabian culture and appear to serve as a foil to female modesty. However, it is this slippery negotiation between the two that allows the articulation of sexual desire.

While in Bedouin Arabian female poetry the coexistence of female sexual desire and modesty was contested, North African Bedouin poetry was considered the legitimate format for revealing sexual desire. What was denied in quotidian speech for the Awlad ‘Ali women, Bedouins in Egypt near the Libyan border, could only be expressed within the space of poetry.199 Adhering to a strict moral system, women were rebuked for expressing sexual desire in everyday conversation.200 However, ghinnaawas—melancholic lyric poetry—was an acceptable venue for sexual expression without transgressing socio-moral boundaries.201 It was only within the poetic realm, then, that sexual desire and female modesty harmoniously endured.

I cite these two examples to showcase the existence of hybrid discourses of female sexual agency alongside modesty amongst women in tribal societies. More importantly, though, I wanted to highlight how moral and tribal codes drew specific boundaries for the

198 Al-Ghadeer, Desert Voices: Bedouin Women’s Poetry in Saudi Arabia, 55.
200 Ibid., 226.
201 Ibid., 221.
expression of female sexual desire, female modesty and poetry—borders that are resisted and negotiated and lie at the core of subordinate agency. The preferential treatment of modesty contained within the construction of a tribal Muslim womanhood, then, is useful in revealing its affective impulse and its emancipatory capabilities—in particular the expansion of meanings associated with these codes. In looking at codes of xishood, I want to illustrate the conjoined nature of modesty and female desire and also the consideration of complex performances of gabar xishood leh as a means of resistance to a singular conception of Somali womanhood.

**Recoding Codes of Xishood**

Codes of xishood are certain conditions that signal expressions of xishood such as the marital state. As discussed earlier, marriage in the Era of Fire and Embers offered a political and economic advantage to Somali families and (at times) clans. Kapteijns, in her comprehensive analysis of gender norms and their correlation to morality, argues that the concept of romantic love and the notion of companionate marriage was a construction of “modern” Somali personhood.  

> “[T]raditional marriage—or at least…[the] public articulations of traditional marriage—…was presented as a marriage that was often arranged by (and in the best interest of) the families of the couple….”

Since sexual maturity was paramount in a successful marriage, female sexuality as “sexual awareness”

---


203 Ibid., 109.
was contained within the marital state. As marriage became the legitimate space for
expression of female sexuality, the concept of marriage became a recognizable code of
xishood and ushered in feelings of affect and attachment to the gabar xishood leh narrative.

This shared cultural norm, I argue, opens the space for single women to express
sexual desire in classical poetry. Marriage as a dominant symbol of Somali female
respectability garners acceptance and reinforces the hegemonic discourse of gabar xishood
leh, therefore vindicating any associations. This purification, then, allows the expression of
female sexual desire without condemnation. As recoding typically connotes the ascription
of another meaning to a particular symbol, I am not advocating for the replacement but
rather the recasting of female sexual desire within the signification of xishood.

The other meaning I am referring to is female sexual desire. As Kapteijns stated
above, “traditional” marriages were arranged by families—rendering young women
powerless in the choice of a bridegroom and more importantly, dictating the conditions of
expression of female sexuality. This lack of agency, along with the prescribed notions of
gabar xishood leh enacted within specific socially constructed arenas with precise
ritualized behaviours, leads me to consider alternative articulations of female sexuality, in
particular to consider utterances of marriage in classical Somali poetry to signal personal
expressions of sexual desire.

In using what appears to be a tool of women’s subjugation that silences female
sexuality, then, codes of xishood contain a liberating quality. Speaking through codes
contains not only the agentive power of “talking back” but also a means of self-
representation allowing subordinate subjects to expand the meaning of Somali womanhood.
within complex performances of *gabar xishood leh*.

**Complex Performances of Gabar Xishood Leh**

Complex performances of *gabar xishood leh* in classical Somali female poetry utilize the codes of *xishood*, in particular the concept of marriage to express sexual desire in women-only spaces. The *buraanbur*, the female genre in classical poetry, was performed solely for a female audience. In this particular poem, the female poet calls out to an unknown man, in the impersonal second person and third person subjective pronoun:

```
You, who are like the full moon and the midday sun/
You, who are like the rising sun veiled by a fine mist/
the dawn to which wakes/
You, who were taken to paradise [before] the Prophet’s countenance/
I shiver when he moves his long neck/
Like the Prophet’s Hadith he is ever-present in my heart/
The road along which he passes stands out for me.204
```

The subject matter of the poem—that of cherishment—at first glance appears not to be extraordinary in a love poem, but the theme of sexual desire was commonplace in Somali love poetry. Much more than a praise poem, this demonstrates female sexual desire through the word “shiver” in reaction to her phantom lover’s movements. The lack of nominal references in tandem with the specificity of her lover’s physical attributes, “his long neck,” insinuates a particular attraction to an exact person who is shrouded in mystery. This ambiguity is chiefly indicative of sexual desire, as female sexuality outside of the marital state is considered extraneous.

---

At the same time, markers of religiosity valorize the concept of *gabar xishood leh* as a girl who has a religious upbringing, which not only lends credence to, but also sanctifies, sexual desire. In a similar construction, the references to the Prophet’s countenance and Hadith, cloaking the poem in Islamic imagery, indicate a legitimization of female sexual desire within the institution of marriage. As marriage is a code of *xishood*, the expression of female desire within these parameters was not considered to transgress socio-moral boundaries. We can glean through her words, “The road along which he passes stands out for me,” an element of predestination in which she and her lover are fated to be together. The assumed longevity of a romantic relationship again connotes marriage as the only legitimate kinship. While the expression of female sexual desire is implicit in the *buraanbur*, it becomes more evident in the *guux* genre.

The Somali word *guux* typically means a low rumbling sound. This poetic genre, referred to as the “nomadic blues,” was often performed by young unmarried men and “[i]t was clear that of all the age and gender groups the unmarried young men had (and took) special literary license to use sexually explicit language and to reject—in song—a status quo that allowed sexual relations with a girl or woman only within marriage.” In contrast, unmarried women were dissuaded from performing the *guux* since discussion of female sexuality did not conform to the *gabar xishood leh* ideal. Regardless, there were

---

205 The Hadith is a report of the sayings and actions of Muhammed. The Sunnah, which is the prescribed conditions of a moral life for Muslims, is based on the practices of Muhammed. As such, any reference to Muhammed—considered the last prophet in Islam—or the Hadith and Sunnah is a visible marker of Islamic religiosity.

female poets who performed the *guux*, albeit in less sexually suggestive language than the men. Here is an unmarried girl lamenting her single state through a *guux*:

…I will perish and my womanhood will be blighted/…I am still in the family camp you know/ My heart has been pounding wildly/ I am not running away from you/ build a family with me/…My father who always tells me to stay put/…Something has gotten into my body and is setting me on edge/ it is gobbling me up like a hyena/ I am on fire, won’t the day break?

As in the *buraanbur*, expression of sexuality was constricted within the parameters of marriage—mimicking acts of sexual awareness. The poet laments her position among her natal kin and her lack of a husband, by claiming, “I will perish and my womanhood will be blighted.” In this regard, her “womanhood” refers to the state of marriage—considered the natural aspiration for women within “traditional” Somali society. She calls out to her future bridegroom—an anonymous man—reassuring him that she is desirous of a sexual relationship through her words: “I am not running away from you/ build a family with me.”

She reveals her excitement for what appears to be the marital state through somatic responses, such as the pounding of her heart—reactions that I consider indicative of sexual desire.

Physiological reactions within this poem are more telling of sexual desire. In particular, the last two lines hint at something more than marriage: “Something has gotten into my body and is setting me on edge/ it is gobbling me up like a hyena/ I am on fire, won’t the day break?” What is this something within her body that is consuming her at night? There is an element of desperation, of urgency, in the words of this *guux* that belies

207 Ibid., 30.
the simple notion of marriage for the sake of establishing one’s own household. Another indication the content of this *guux* is not merely about a legitimate union is through the reference to the poet’s father. As stated earlier, “traditional” marriages were arranged by male kin, predominantly the father. The authorization of the father was then paramount in the acceptance of a marriage. In this *guux*, the poet reveals her father’s discouragement: “My father who always tells me to stay put.” While one can argue that the father’s disapproval could stem from the selection of bridegroom—a man of not his own choosing—there is no indication that he is specifying a certain person. Rather, through the words “stay put,” it appears that the father is adamant in his rejection of a particular state—a condition that is not matrimonial in nature.

In both the *buraanbur* and the *guux*, the expression of female sexual desire was mediated through codes of *xishood*. By recoding female sexual desire within utterances of marriage, complex performances of *gabar xishood leh* allow what Bhabha calls a “hybridization of discourse,” where sexual desire and *xishood* coexist. Brinkley Messick, in his work on Yemeni authoritative texts, examines this phenomenon of the text within. In his analysis of the *matn* (basic text) and *sharh* (commentary), he shows how “[t]he commentary…is inserted in spaces opened up in the original text. Although they remain distinct, the two are not physically isolated from each other…” Furthermore, “[i]n a

---

208 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 158.

work of sharh, interpretations literally become part of the text interpreted.\textsuperscript{210} In a similar vein, the articulation of female sexual desire is embedded within the gabar xishood leh narrative through the recoding of the symbol of xishood. Differently put, one needs the other in order to be completely interpreted within the notion of hybridity.

Through expanding the meanings associated with codes of xishood while retaining its familiarity, classical female Somali poets reveal rhizomatic relationalities contained within in-between space. More importantly, speaking through codes and counterpublics not only allows the production of their hybrid subjectivities, but also shifts the locus of power dynamics intermittently and illustrates how subordinate agency—what was once at the periphery—can come to the centre.

\textsuperscript{210} Ibid., 31.
Chapter 4

Performative Listening and Female Intimate Publics in Modern Somali Female Poetry

In the last chapter, we saw that Somali “traditional” womanhood was not synonymous with an asexualized femininity, despite the dominant discourse of *gabar xishood leh*. Rather, Somali women negotiated and resisted this label by “talking back” through social codes and expressing hybrid subjectivities comprising sexual modesty/“good shame” and female sexual desire in classical Somali poetry. However, the potency of the discourse of *gabar xishood leh* continued to linger in the Somali social psyche as the sole measure of Somali womanhood. As such, I begin to think through the ways that *gabar xishood leh* is perpetuated in post-independence Somalia, and particularly how Somali women through modern poetry disrupt this static identity. I look at the ways modern Somali female poets use codes of *xishood* as a means to negotiate and expand on the notion of Somali womanhood sans sexual agency. By listening to the other, modern female poets express their hybrid subjectivities through social codes recognizable to other members of the Somali female intimate public. In this chapter, I turn to theories surrounding the public sphere, female sexuality, and affective belonging and begin to lay the groundwork to look at intimate publics and the role social codes play within the space of performance.

The very nature of publicity seemingly undermines the intimate aspects of sociability; as well, the notion of “intimate publics” appears to be an oxymoron. However,
in the conception of public sphere, as theorized by Jurgen Habermas, there was a plethora of intimacy implicitly contained within personal encounters in coffee shops and street sociality.\footnote{211} The Somali public sphere, similarly, was manifested in public gatherings and dictated the parameters of participation through oral poetry in two ways: distinction by gender and specific themes. In the modern poetry of (post)independence Somalia, both men and women were actively vocal through public culture and through definitions of Somali womanhood. The role of women as national and modern subjects centered on issues of female sexual agency and desire, juxtaposed by claims of “authenticity” of Somali “traditional” womanhood/\textit{gabar xishood leh}. As such, intimate topics such as female sexuality became intrinsically tied up with notions of nationalism and modernity and fell under the purview of the hegemonic public sphere.

This myopic vision of “traditional” womanhood is problematic as it eradicates other facets of female identity. In a similar way, the rhetoric surrounding \textit{gabar xishood leh}, particularly within the context of modern poetry, constructs an ideal Somali womanhood synonymous with modesty and an absence of sexual desire. I challenge this idea by referencing hybrid discourse, which I claim is indicative of hybrid subjectivities in Somali modern female poetry. Through that, I claim that \textit{xishood} and sexual desire are equidistant notions within complex performances of \textit{gabar xishood leh}. In addition, hybrid discourse is dependent on the existence of alternative publics, which are conducive to the existence of

hybrid subjectivities. In this chapter I will trace this through the formation of intimate publics, performative listening and the affective belonging and attachment to codes of xishood.

In her book *The Female Complaint*, Berlant focuses on the nexus of intimacy, publicity, and female agency in American public culture. Specifically, she claims the impetus of women’s agency in the public sphere stems from a shared understanding. Another way of thinking is that “[w]hat makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience.” It is this underlying commonality that unites relative strangers and affectively connects them. This definition of “intimate publics” is what I utilize for my analysis of Somali female modern poetry. Due to the shared knowledge and attachment to codes of xishood, and the affective pull of the *gabar xishood leh* discourse, Somali female modern poets formed an intimate public. Berlant continues her explanation of intimate publics as “…flourish[ing] as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promise a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as x.” In this regard, I argue modern Somali poets form a communal identity that offers a possibility of belonging to the *gabar xishood leh* ideal

213 Ibid., viii. (Original emphasis.)
214 Ibid., xi.
215 Ibid., viii.
whilst simultaneously employing the means to exert their sexual agency, in particular through their use of codes of *xishood* and performative listening.

Alongside intimate publics, Somali womanhood, and social codes, I want to bring in the act of listening as a means of negotiating codes of *xishood* and opening new spaces for belonging. In particular, I want to look at the messiness surrounding modern Somali female intimate publics that are aurally mediated. Listening, unlike hearing, is enabled by intentionality. In other words, there is a conscious deliberateness associated with the act of listening. Adriana Cavarero, in her examination of Italo Calvino’s story “A King’s Ear,” demonstrates the parallels between hearing and listening through the figure of the king.\(^{216}\) Unable to extricate himself from the oppressive acoustic sounds of the palace until he starts to listen, Cavarero stresses the myriad ways that listening for the king “opens a horizon of perception who[se] existential status” previously was limited.\(^{217}\) In a similar way, listening interpellates subjects, reinforcing Kate Lacey’s claim that listening is “actively responsive.”\(^{218}\) This calculated effort of agential intention is particularly important in conceptualizing listening as a performative act. I am interested in the performative aspect of listening as a means to understand the call and response elicited and contained within this act.

---


\(^{217}\) Ibid., 2.

This notion of performative act, typically associated with speech act theorist J.L. Austin, illustrates how language more than merely representative can be conceptualized as an action.\(^{219}\) Even more than that “…the terms of Austin’s classifying system proliferate and repeatedly break down in demonstration of how even descriptive language’s performativity—\textit{what it does}—calls into questions its referentiality—\textit{what it seems to point to in the world}.\(^{220}\) Extending this idea of the performative to listening, I propose that there is a call and response dynamic within performative listening. In other words, what performative listening does is emit a call and elicit a response, both acoustically and affectively. I claim that performative listening in Somali female intimate publics is imperative for accessing \textit{sarbeeb} (the hidden message) in the social codes of \textit{xishood}. Before getting to the referentiality of performative listening, I would like to clarify first the response, and second, the condition of the response within listening.

The response I am alluding to is an acknowledgment, an enforcement and acceptance of social connection. In looking at Masoud Raouf’s documentary \textit{What Does the Tree Remember? The Politics of Telling Stories}, Dina Georgis traces how the lack of a response often has detrimental consequences.\(^{221}\) The impetus of the documentary is the fate of Habib, an Iranian student who hangs himself on a tree in Ontario after being a political prisoner in Iran. His suicide illustrates his isolation and silence as his call goes unanswered.


As Georgis rightly acknowledges, the time and location of Habib’s suicide—during the day and near a public highway—speak louder than a written suicide note.\textsuperscript{222} As Cavarero asserts, listening to the other is complicated; however, what is fundamental is the requirement for listening and response.\textsuperscript{223} Contained within the response, then, is answering the call emitted, stressing the relationality between the call and response. In Somali female intimate publics, I want to reiterate not only \textit{what} they are saying, but also \textit{how} that is then taken up in listening to the other.

Instead of thinking of listening and response separately, Tsisti Ella Jaji proposes “a model of solidarity that is neither rigid nor bound by orthodoxies, one which could bear witness to difference and respond to it in joyful creativity, one which values individual listening as much as enunciation as (pro)active dimensions of expressivity.”\textsuperscript{224} For Jaji, then, the singular act of listening is actually not isolated from the response, but intertwined. Furthermore, she propagates the multiplicity of responses. In quoting Jacques Coursil, she states: “[S]cenes of listening allow for a plurality of reception, and an ensemble of responses, which are free and innumerable. Edouard Glissant would call such a scene a veritable \textit{chaos-monde}, a ‘totality composed of individuals and communities’.”\textsuperscript{225} Listening as a response then, allows an acceptance, and within Somali female intimate publics is dependent on the understanding of the multiple meanings of the codes of \textit{xishood}.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{222} Ibid., 224.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{223} Cathy Caruth, \textit{Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 9.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 10.
\end{flushright}
The call and response within performative listening, then, occurs in space where hybrid discourse is performed and negotiated within Somali female intimate publics. Analogous to José Esteban Muñoz’s term “disidentification,” which allows the latent intricacies of the “encoded message” to empower minority subjects, performative listening reconstructs codes of xishood in Somali female intimate publics. According to Chris McRae, performative listening “…functions as a relational process of meaning making and coming to knowledge.” That is to say, performative listening reinforces the association between the speaker and listener through a shared understanding. As part of the female intimate public, Somali modern poets have a commonality with their attachment to the gabar xishood leh construct. As Sara Ahmed argues, some bodies are contained within a field of signification that activates affect. With her word “stickiness,” she demonstrates how an interconnection is produced. An association, particularly through speaking and listening, is preeminent in Homi Bhabha’s “right to narrate” where he stresses not only the need to express one’s lived experience, but also the urgency of its being heard.

Within Somali female intimate publics, the recognition of the hidden message contained with codes of xishood allows modern female poets to communicate and express their hybrid subjectivities. This hidden message is accessible to a select few who can access it through performative listening. Following this line of inquiry, I ask: how do performative

---

228 Ibid., 40.
229 Ibid., 40.
230 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, xxv.
listening and the hidden message enable hybrid discourse and hybrid subjectivities in Somali female intimate publics? I next turn to the productive tension of modern and “traditional” discourses of Somali womanhood in modern poetry.

The Historical Progression of Modern Somali Poetry

The division of prestigious and non-prestigious within classical Somali poetry extended to modern expressive practices in form and content. Classified under the Family of Miniature Genres, the wiglo, dhaanto, hirwo, and the belwo, all considered non-prestigious poetry (with its simplified poetic structure and its themes of romantic love), ushered in a new era of Somali poetics. The belwo genre with its structural composition of a few lines of poetry was unusual but instrumental in Somali poetics. Eventually, this couplet poetry, the belwo evolved into a longer version referred to as heello starting in the late 1940s. The heello, the chief tool of the Somali modern elite was “rooted in the tradition of the pastoralist, but has other characteristics too, such as its use of musical instrument, which have been imported from other cultures.” As such, sometimes the Somali term for “song,” hees, was used interchangeably with heello. In other words, the use of imagery, alliteration and allusion common to “traditional” poetry was evident in

---

233 Johnson, Heellooy Heelleellooy: The Development of the Genre Heello in Modern Somali Poetry, 16.
234 Ibid., 3.
235 Ibid., xvi.
modern poetry along with new changes in subject-matter.\textsuperscript{236} Whilst conservative religious elders and “traditional” politicians disapproved of the new style with its emphasis on love and urbanity, it found favour among the new elite: young town dwellers.\textsuperscript{237}

The belwo and the heello revolved around issues relevant to the Somali elite (young, educated, modern) and as such, in addition to the topic of “love,” these genres were also contingent on the political climate in Somalia.\textsuperscript{238} With the independence of the Somali state in 1960, the heello reflected issues of modernity and nationalism.\textsuperscript{239} Comparable to other nationalist and modern projects of the Global South, the social position and contribution of Somali women were salient concerns among both men and women.\textsuperscript{240} The matter at hand for Somali women was pushing for more inclusive practices, as Somali female poets who were an integral aspect of the nation-building process “…were now finding themselves outside of the very political and state institutions they fought for, and the histories in which they were critical actors.”\textsuperscript{241} The limited accessibility of the public sphere for women stemmed partly from a concept of Somali womanhood that had clear limits to women’s participation in social and political life. As poetry was the primary platform for public culture, the heello became the contested terrain of Somali womanhood: modern or

\textsuperscript{237} Ibid., 107.
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid., 106.
\textsuperscript{239} Ibid., 107.
“traditional.” Therefore, poems “…debating the role of women in the new society, could be heard” predominantly in the capital city of Mogadishu. The heello also allowed women to speak publicly whereas before the sexes were segregated.

Tensions Surrounding Somali Womanhood in Modern Poetry

The conflict between different articulations of proper Somali womanhood—“traditional” or modern—arose as women strove to be active participants in Somali public life and the political sphere of the new state. Questions surrounding women’s rights and modern subjecthood were not only propelled by specific nationalistic discourses, but also had socio-cultural nuances similar to other Muslim countries after independence. If modern subjecthood was primarily concerned with individual rights and liberties, Somali modern womanhood chiefly differed from “traditional” articulations of Somali femininity by the emphasis on two themes: the concept of romantic love and the notion of companionate marriage in comparison to the arranged marriages in pastoral society, according to Lidwien Kapteijns. Illustrated in modern poetry, then, was the expectation of one choosing her future spouse, an act that pronounced the agentive power of women. In

---

addition to indexing Somali modern womanhood as female political empowerment, I would like to highlight their agency as sexual beings by including the often neglected concept of female desire. Differently put, references to love in modern poetry are synonymous with sexual desire, and in conjunction with urbanity and politics assert modern Somali womanhood. For this reason, modern Somali womanhood was denounced “[i]n the songs, and thus in [the] public, popular discourse of this post-independence era…[as] inauthentic, untraditional, Western immorality and frivolity….“246 By labeling “modernity” as a Western construct “…members of [the] male nationalist elite who created the love songs…legitimized their conception of national identity and cultural authenticity largely in terms of the northern Somali pastoral tradition.”247 As such, the push for a culturally “authentic” Somali womanhood as a foil to Western modernity allowed the space to re-iterate specific ideals of a “traditional” Somali womanhood with its fixture on morality.248 “Traditional” womanhood “was articulated in terms of ‘traditional’ dress, limited freedom of movement, respect for male authority and a de-emphasized sexuality.”249 Within a heello, then, one can pinpoint the tension between the desire to be modern and to socially belong within a culturally “authentic” (read: “traditional”) discourse. This modern but moral female subject, what Kapteijns refers to as “moral womanhood,” shares the desexualized femininity that is the primary foundation of what I call the dominant discourse

246 Ibid., 115.
249 Ibid., 114-115.
of *gabar xishood leh*. The asexual female ideal of *gabar xishood leh* erases expression of female sexual desire and agency and upholds the enactment of sexual modesty/“good shame” as the social norm of Somali femininity.

As female desire and sexual/modesty/“good shame” or *xishood* were constructed in the form of binary oppositions within the Somali social imaginary, modern poetry was read through this particular lens. What lends further credence to this interpretation is that poets and songwriters of the prominent *heello* genre, usually men, propagated notions of *gabar xishood leh*. However, instead of focusing on the construction and the producers of the *heello*, I would like to shift the attention to the performance of modern poetry in this chapter. In other words, I argue that the female poets perform the *heello* in such a way that exposes a different meaning countering and unsettling the notion of idealized Somali womanhood. What I mean by this is that there is a duality contained within the performances. On the one hand, groups of three or four female poets debate the merits of *gabar xishood leh* and bemoan the perils of modern womanhood in the *heello*. On the other hand, there is a deeper meaning implicit within the social codes of *xishood* understood only among members of a Somali female intimate public. In this way, I argue the call and response interplay contained with performative listening allows the Somali female intimate public the space to express a hybrid discourse of *xishood* and sexual desire.

Somali Female Intimate Public and Modern Poetry

The *gaber xishood leh* construct is deeply ingrained in the Somali female psyche as the “authentic” representation of Somali femininity based on its “traditional” values. Due to its transcendence throughout several generations, I consider the dominant discourse as laying the foundation of a Somali female intimate public. According to Lauren Berlant, a female intimate public has two components: a shared history and worldview; and an ongoing attachment and action to that communal social outlook. Recalling Sara Ahmed’s notion of “outside in,” in which certain bodies have a “stickiness” that attracts affect, we can consider *gabar xishood leh* as an affect-carrying construction that fosters attachment. The emotional investment in this rhetoric and the legitimized belonging it evinces, I suggest, compels Somali girls and women to perform it through codes of *xishood*.

Codes of *xishood*—actions, dress, and lack of certain speech acts—signify the affective intensity of *xishood*. By lack of certain speech acts, I mean phrases that mark the absence and/or erasure of female sexual desire and sexuality in general. As sexual modesty/“good shame” is a fundamental aspect of the *gabar xishood leh* ideal, there is a deep antipathy towards sexual desire. In addition to the void of expressions of sexual desire in the rhetoric of *gabar xishood leh*, there are acute socio-cultural constructs such as the institution of marriage and other religiously and culturally sanctioned customs. In modern poetry, the theme of marriage, in particular, a familial approved union of which paternalistic authority is key. The affluence of “traditional” values, stressing a communal

cultural heritage, also heralds the *gabar xishood leh* discourse in the *heello*. As such, both male and female poets were familiar with and incorporated codes of *xishood* within modern poetry, albeit in divergent ways.

The fact that codes of *xishood* are culturally shared and recognizable within the Somali social imaginary allows them to perceive through a particular lens, one that reinforces the segregation of female sexual desire and sexual modesty/“good shame” within the dominant discourse. This is evident in the surface reading of the *he ello*, but misses particular nuances. I suggest modern Somali female poets, as part of the larger female intimate public, recognize and utilize the codes as an affective attachment to the dominant discourse and simultaneously as a defiant means of expressing sexual desire and sexual modesty/“good shame.” While the Somali female intimate public encompasses women who share and are affectively invested in the *gabar xishood leh* narrative as a whole, in this chapter when I refer to the Somali female intimate public it is specifically modern female poets, who through performative listening negotiate codes of *xishood*. As Saba Mahmood rightly reminds us, commonly held symbols of cultural hegemony are often used as a mechanism of subversion, one that allows non-dominant social groups a modicum of agency, as in the case of the Cairene women.\(^{252}\) Oftentimes, resistance is covert, as José Esteban Muñoz explains with his term “disidentification.” He states: “…resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, …minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere. But for some,

disidentification is a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously.” 253 In other words, the use of codes of xishood is significant for revealing a new perspective hidden within what is considered a hegemonic symbol of the gabar xishood leh discourse. For these reasons, I consider codes of xishood as implicitly transgressive within the performances of modern female poets.

In this chapter, the modern female poets I am referencing were part of a larger collective, the Waaberi group. Waaberi, meaning “new dawn” in the Somali language, was a musical super-group formed in Mogadishu, the capital city of Somalia. According to Kapteijns, popular music renditions at that time “were part of the nationalist project of ‘modernity’ of the Somali nationalist movement and independent state from 1955 to 1991.” 254 Initially spearheaded by members of the radio stations in Hargeisa (the cultural capital in British Somaliland pre-independence) and Mogadishu, and later on the Radio Artistes Association in 1968, it gained momentum with the support of the newly formed government. 255

While the members of Waaberi were predominantly men, there were prominent female performers such as Magool, Hibo Muhammad, Fadumo Qasim, and Dalays and

---

253 Muñoz, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics, 5.
Maryam Mursal who greatly influenced Somali modern poetry.\textsuperscript{256} These women, I argue, used codes of \textit{xishhood} in such a way that opens alternative interpretations, in particular through a hidden message that is recognizable by participants of the female intimate public.

\textit{The Hidden Message}

\textit{Sarbeeb}, or the hidden message, is prevalent in Somali poetic and narrative formats, according to John W. Johnson.\textsuperscript{257} In fact, it is quite common. He explains:

\begin{itemize}
  \item [a]s the name of this device implies, what is involved is the passing of a message from one person (or group) to another in such a way as to prevent a third party from understanding or suspecting. To accomplish this the poet must employ images which seem to imply one point to the third party but which pass the oral message on the person for whom it is intended.\textsuperscript{258}
\end{itemize}

In other words, everyone listening to the poetry comprehends the superficial meanings indicated through commonly held motifs. However, a message is passed covertly between members of a shared understanding of certain protocols, resulting in some listeners being clueless to the underlying meaning. As Johnson claims, oftentimes the hidden message is contained within an image; at other times, it appears in the form of riddle.\textsuperscript{259} I suggest that

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{257} Johnson, \textit{Heellooy Heelleellooy: The Development of the Genre Heello in Modern Somali Poetry}, 37.
  \item \textsuperscript{258} Ibid., 37.
  \item \textsuperscript{259} Ibid., 33.
\end{itemize}
the *sarbeebs* in the modern poetry that I analyze in this chapter is enacted through the use of codes of *xishood* that requires performative listening.

While I claim that the hidden message in the poems I look at below alludes to the tension of female sexual desire and *xishood* in the *gabar xishood leh* ideal, sometimes the *sarbeebs* in modern poetry can reference a forbidden love affair or anti-government sentiment in general.\(^{260}\) Maryan Mursal, one of the Somali female singers within the *Waaberri* troupe, reveals a political *sarbeebs* within her song “Ulimada” (meaning “The Professors”).\(^ {261}\) While it seems to be a love song, the deeper meaning was a harsh criticism of President Mohammed Siad Barre and his regime.\(^ {262}\) For her, using *sarbeebs* was a necessary means for enacting one’s public duty, particular as a musician. She states: “…as artists [we] are responsible if something wrong is taking place in our society. It’s very important for us to speak up, even though we may have to do it with a double tongue. We have to speak out for our people.”\(^ {263}\) Through emphasizing the importance of the hidden message, Maryan’s action is indicative of a larger movement of using *sarbeebs*.

Maryan, alongside other female members of the *Waaberri* collective, I claim, make use of the hidden message poetic device through their negotiations of *gabar xishood leh*. Socialization in the affective connection and attachment to the *gabar xishood leh* discourse which defined the strict parameters for social belonging made the codes of *xishood* the

\(^{260}\) Ibid., 37.


\(^{262}\) Ibid., http://mp3.com/artist/Maryam%2BMursal/

ultimate means for the containment of a hidden message—a *sarbeeb* that was recognizable to other members of the Somali female intimate public. By this, I mean that the social codes allowed sexual agency without segregating it from sexual modesty/“good shame.” Put differently, the performances of modern female poets reveal a hybrid discourse.

Looking at two particular poems, “Truly Marriage Causes Hardship” and “History Has a Direction,” I will show how modern female poets showcase a hybrid discourse that is indicative of a more complicated understanding of Somali femininity by doing two readings of the poems: the first one with the aim of demonstrating the typical perception of the interaction between the poets, and the second interpretation showcasing the hidden message illustrating their hybrid discourse. In these two *heello*, the tension between sexual desire/agency and *xishood* is illustrated by two motifs: marriage and dress. “Truly Marriage Causes Hardship” has three female poets expressing separate stances: Maryan Mursal and Faduumo Ali ‘Nakruuma take on a modern womanhood with its emphasis on sexual desire/agency, and Hibo Mohamed’s enunciations of the *gabar xishood leh* discourse reinforce a “traditional” womanhood *sans* female sexuality. Both viewpoints are represented as antagonistic to the other, reinforcing the clear divide:

Maryan: Truly marriage only causes hardship. It is impossible to build a family. To become an obedient wife means being left behind by one’s age-group. What I prefer, when you and a man want each other, is to go out in the early evening and dance to rock and jazz, hang out together and enjoy yourselves, just the two of you. What do you think?

---

Faduumo: Everyone has his own preference and taste is what sets people apart. One cannot tell who is wealthiest from how someone presents himself. I prefer rich men, who turn over lots of wealth and have capital; who, while you live with them, put you in a huge house and give you a luxurious life. What about you?

Hibo: Dear sister, Ruun, don’t get rid of the culture in which you were born or run away from your cultural heritage. Don’t throw away the ways of your ancestors. What I prefer is a man who establishes a home with you, receiving you from your male relatives, with their blessing. You will live together honestly, blessed by the Lord.  

In this poem, the continual references to marriage as a theme that sanitized Somali female sexual agency is indicated in the erasure of desire within Hibo’s statements, emphasizing the dependence on male kin. Implicit within this social position is a dominant idea ascribed to “traditional” marriages—a notion that choice of bridegroom is denied to the woman. “Traditional” womanhood, then, reinforces not only the institution of marriage but also the acceptance of non-choice. On the contrary, Maryan and Faduumo both establish that not only do their preferences matter, more importantly they are constructed outside the domain of marriage. While their means differ, the overall commonality for Maryan and Faduumo is that agency, particularly sexual agency, is forged outside the marital state.

The poem “History Has a Direction” similarly exhibits the segregation of female sexual desire/agency and xishood through dress. The four female poets have divergent views: two concerned with “traditional” expressions and two with modern articulations of Somali womanhood. Kinsi Adan and Khadija Hiiran expound on the tribulations of “traditional” dress, highlighting its corporeal limitations and the social freedom “modern”

265 Ibid., 115.
dress offers. For Kinsi and Khadija, conservative attire implies a lack of sexual agency. This point is supported by ‘Adar’s explicit reference of the connection of the *gabar xishood leh* discourse and female sexuality. In contrast to the poets mentioned above, ‘Adar Ahmed and Fadumo Elbai ‘Haldhaa’ both espouse the rhetoric of *gabar xishood leh* which amplifies the link between conventional clothing and *xishood*:

Kinsi: History has a direction people try to catch on to. The world is a journey towards a beautiful dream that is guided by modernity. Don’t shortchange yourself. It is a curse to stay behind one’s age-group. People have emancipated themselves from these rags and heavy clothes you wear. Follow us on this path. Shall I help you move forward and show you the way to the benefits it will have?

‘Adar: Foolish one, a docile camel that does not protect itself from [other] sucklings and does not kick away calves that are not its own, is left behind in the dry season when its udders run dry. No one likes leftovers. Know the meaning of my words. I do not spend the night with any man I may like in the daytime. My treasure is untouched. I am a paragon of modesty and represent the decency of all Somali girls.

Khadija: Putting yourself down is fatal. Even those who covered themselves used to get into trouble, while those who disliked this clothing – as I have heard tell – did not go wrong. It is better that you follow the person who takes your side. One covers things only if there is something bad. Sleepy one, the encampment has moved on. I am beckoning you to move forward. Follow us on this path. Shall I show you the way to the benefits it will have?

Fadumo: They call me beautiful like the male ostrich. I still wear the finery and am the leader of the tradition everyone knows is mine, of the ways in which my mother reared me, of our cultural heritage. I love to support this way of life. Contempt and dishonesty cannot undermine me, for I know these always cause problems and destruction. You, lost soul, I tell you, of your dress and mine, which of the two is more respectful, which one covers the body best?²⁶⁶

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 116.
As a result, both poems display a strict delineation of *xishood* and sexual desire/agency through the emphasis of the dominant discourse of *gabar xishood leh*. Furthermore, ending the poems with the viewpoint of “traditional” womanhood is indicative of its importance to the male songwriters of these songs. Instead of this perspective, however, I propose looking at particular phrases within the stanzas of each song and see how they hint at a hidden message—a *sarbeeb* that indicates a hybrid discourse—one that contains sexual desire and *xishood*.

In “Truly Marriage Causes Hardship,” Fadumo states: “Everyone has his own preference and taste is what sets people apart. One cannot tell who is wealthiest from how someone presents himself.”\(^\text{267}\) Her first line illustrates the diversity of opinions and specifically differences in identity. In the context of the poem, we can see that she dismisses categorical distinctions, in this case perhaps those of *gabar xishood leh*. In addition, she stresses how misleading it is to judge on perception alone in her second line. Her use of the word ‘wealthiest’ is interesting. While there is an indication that its reference is clearly to monetary resources, there is another interpretation, since wealth is often defined as plethora of desirable things, including attributes and qualities.\(^\text{268}\) One particular reading of wealth is *xishood* in this framework, since the subject at hand is the separation of sexual desire from *xishood*. The external manifestation of *xishood*, then, is not the sole indication of *gabar xishood leh*. In this vein, one can propose that one cannot attribute

\(^{267}\) Ibid., 115.

gabar xishood leh behaviours and speech based solely on appearances. This point is particularly germane in the context of Faduumo’s following lines—statements that proclaim sexual desire more intently. The juxtaposition between the expression of sexual desire and the insistence on a deeper look beyond appearances is telling of the nuances surrounding complex performances of gabar xishood leh—a complexity produced by the hidden message.

The ambiguity shrouding sexual agency and xishood in tandem is further taken up in “History Has a Direction,” where Khadija exclaims: “Putting yourself down is fatal. Even those who covered themselves used to get into trouble, while those who disliked this clothing – as I have heard tell – did not go wrong. It is better that you follow the person who takes your side.” Khadija hints at the idea that categorizing oneself is detrimental to self-identity. In her second line, like Faduumo in the previous song, she lays bare the conundrum of superficially determining one’s identity through initial impressions. Specially, she claims that a conservative dress does not always correlate to behaviours indicating xishood and conversely expressions of sexual agency does not negate xishood. In particular, in the quoted stanza above, Khadija is highlighting a particular conundrum that invalidates the notion that “traditional” women are asexual beings. In the original Somali lines, she references certain actions of unmarried girls and women such as heermi jiray. In heermi jiray, Somali women desirous of marriage would visit a campsite or familial holding where there were known bachelors. In this way, they would seek out husbands. As

we saw in the last chapter, I claimed “traditional” women expressed sexual desire within
the confines of marriage, and as these women were taking the initiative, it appears to be a
clear example of sexual agency. What is interesting to note is while *heermi jirray* was not
encouraged among clans it was recognized as a legitimate path for unmarried women and
girls. Furthermore, women who performed this ritual were not considered to be outside the
parameters of *gabar xishood leh*. By alluding to this particular example, Khadija highlights
the blurred boundaries between dress and behaviours that indicate *gabar xishood leh* and
the expressions of sexual desires. Overall, it appears one could be considered a *gabar
xishood leh* and enact sexual agency simultaneously.

In both cases, the poems pinpoint fluidity between female sexual agency and
*xishood* through the hidden message. While hybrid discourse permeates the entirety of the
poems, the hidden message is only recognizable to other members of the female intimate
public through the act of listening.

**Listening to the Other**

The act of listening, particularly within the context of oral poetry, is necessary for
understanding. More importantly, listening also draws the boundaries for social inclusion
and exclusion. Sometimes, these can be based on explicit measures such as language
barriers, as in the case of Emma Brinkhurst. Brinkhurst, despite intensely listening,
acknowledges her inability to fathom certain nuances of the Somali language due to her
basic knowledge during her research in King’s Cross, London, England.\textsuperscript{270} Furthermore, to her ears, everything “…was an almost overwhelming mesh of overlapping voices and sounds.”\textsuperscript{271} While Brinkhurst’s distancing stems from her inability to speak Somali well, native speakers also had difficulty understanding certain oral texts, according to B.W. Andrzejewski. Andrzejewski claims that

For the Somalis, listening to poetry is thus not only an artistic pleasure, but provides them with the fascinating intellectual exercise of decoding the veiled speech of the poet’s message. Sometimes, however, vagueness and obscurity reaches such a pitch that the average listener would be quite perplexed… were it not for the fact that there is a tacit poetic convention to help him.\textsuperscript{272}

What Andrzejewski illustrates is the hidden message within Somali poetry, a message that requires previous knowledge to be deciphered. As I expounded earlier, \textit{sarbeeb} contained within codes of \textit{xishood} were recognized among members of the Somali female intimate public acoustically and affectively; however, they also served another purpose among the poets themselves. The containment of the dialogue was contingent on the call that was released and the response that the other offered. The acknowledgment of the shared understanding is not only the basis of the hybrid discourse, but overlays the structure of hybrid subjectivities. Through performative listening, Somali female intimate publics, and the affect and attachment of codes of \textit{xishood} as such, hybrid subjectivities—women who

\textsuperscript{270} Brinkhurst, “Music, Memory and Belonging: Oral Tradition and Archival Engagement Among the Somali Community of London’s King Cross” (PhD thesis, Goldsmith University of London, 2012), 167.

\textsuperscript{271} Ibid., 167.

simultaneously consider themselves *gabar xishood leh* and exert sexual agency—can exist without the immediate threat of social exclusion and ‘unbelonging’.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

There’s always more than one map to a territory: you just have to intuit the terrain.
—DJ Spooky aka that Subliminal Kid

[T]he unfamiliarity of other forms of life… [which exist] in the form of the fragment—the fragmented, painful and sometimes original ways of inhabiting a world where none of the available vocabularies can be fully inhabited, even when they are invoked and the attempt at reconstruction takes the form a solitary self-creation in a space of destruction which is also, sometimes, self-destruction.
—Stefania Pandolfo

This thesis set out to demonstrate the negotiations and expansion of a hegemonic construction of a Somali womanhood, *gabar xishood leh*, by Somali female poets in two historical periods, 1899-1944 and 1969-1989, and two different locations (the pastoral lands of Northern Somalia and the urban centre of Mogadishu, Somalia). My research contextualized the practice of poetry in Somalia, and theorized how gendered norms and codes, patriarchy, public intimacies, and listening practices intersect with Somali women’s complex poetics. While I situated the origins of *gabar xishood leh* under the auspices of “tradition” and patriarchal productions of an idealized womanhood, there were colonial, national, and modern influences that dictated a particular way of being and created conditions for belonging/unbelonging. In addition to performing hybrid subjectivities of

---

xishood and sexual desire, which propelled a new understanding of gabar xishood leh, Somali women also impacted Somali public culture and sphere through poetic and political engagement, disclosing their role as social actors. As such, the aim for Somali female poets was two-fold.

The Contained Power of Hybridity

Complex performances of gabar xishood leh with their twinned expressions of sexual desire and xishood reveal the hybrid subjectivities of classical and modern Somali female poets. Simultaneously, the concept of hybridity opens up new conceptualizations of gabar xishood leh—for contained within hybridity is a systemic push and pull force, a recognition and displacement of the dominant discourse. Dominant discourse, according to Bhabha, gains its authority from “rules of recognition.”275 While what is collectively known—the codes—are subsumed within hybridity, there is an element of difference that is beyond the limits of the dominant discourse. Bhabha states: “It is, rather, that the [dominant] discourse has reached that point when, faced with the hybridity of its objects, the presence of power is revealed as something other than what its rules of recognition assert.”276 This difference, what Bhabha refers to as ambivalence, causes an instability of the “rules of recognition,” resulting in a displacement of the original meaning.277 Hybridity, then, is the condition that unsettles singular representation while repeating an aspect that is untenable within the

275 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 157.
276 Ibid.,160. (Emphasis in the original.)
277 Ibid.,158.
dominant discourse.

Codes of *xishood*, while widely recognizable, contain expressions of female sexual desire through the re-signification within classical female love poetry and hidden messages in modern female poetry. As such, not only do they disrupt the original conception of *xishood*; they change the overall meaning. Within complex performances of *gabar xishood leh*, the recognizable sign of marriage is rendered ambivalent—incorporating the inclusion of sexual desire along with the initial definition. In this way, while externally this code of *xishood* appears benign, it is intrinsically powerful and in some ways *unheimlich* to the dominant discourse of *gabar xishood leh*. Speaking and performative listening through codes disrupt the unitary conception of Somali womanhood—*xishood* without sexual desire. Through this, we arrive at an interpretation of Somali femininity where sexual agency and *xishood* co-exist, and more importantly pinpoint the presence of Somali female hybrid subjectivities. “Talking back,” counterpublics, performative listening and intimate publics, re-conceptualized through hybridity, are not “…necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor [are they] the simple negation or exclusion of the ‘content’ of another culture….” Rather, they establish an in-between—simultaneously inside and outside of the discourse—similar to Miyako Inoue’s assertion of particular subject positions that “ambiguously circumvent…all the possible positions and names that the discourse designates as external, oppositional, or deviant.” This position that the discourse cannot

---

278 Ibid., 157-158.
279 Inoue, *Vicarious Language: Gender and Linguistic Modernity in Japan*, 250. (Original emphasis.)
name is limiting to hybrid subjectivities, revealing the constraints of language exemplified in Amitav Ghosh’s statement: “I had no alternative; I was trapped by language.”\(^\text{280}\) As such, the existence of a Somali woman who has *xishood* and sexual agency was considered an “impossible figure” in the Somali national imagination, highlighting “the fragmented, painful, and sometimes original ways of inhabiting a world where none of the available vocabularies can be fully inhabited…” as Stefania Pandolfo reminds us in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter.\(^\text{281}\)

Through expanding the meanings associated with codes of *xishood* while retaining their familiarity, classical and modern Somali female poets subvert the dominant discourse of *gabar xishood leh*. As such, their work allows an agentive position that is simultaneously contained in and runs counter to the discourse. In doing so, Somali female poets illustrate how social belonging can be re-imagined. This inability to designate *xishood* and female sexual desire concurrently within the category of Somali womanhood reveals the hidden power of “naming” and the “unnamable.” According to Bhabha, since the conditions of naming are indicative of cultural hegemony, uncertainty is the ultimate demise of the dominant discourse.\(^\text{282}\) At the same time, since the expression of sexual desire is contained within codes of *xishood*—an identifiable marker of *gabar xishood leh*—it is not explicitly named as Other, limiting the possibilities of unbelonging.


\(^{282}\) Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 123.
Naming and the ‘Unnamable’ in Diasporic Somali Female Poetry

This condition of naming and the unnamable is a concept that I want to further research in diasporic Somali female poets’ negotiation with the gabar xishood leh narrative. There are several female poets in the diaspora, Ladan Osman, Amaal Siad, and Warsan Shire to name a few, who have tackled the weight of the topics of female sexuality, displacement, trauma, and social belonging. In particular, continual reference to the ubiquitous disconnection between xishood and sexual desire within gabar xishood leh in their poetry exposes the weight of this gendered discourse. Briefly looking at Warsan Shire’s work, I will provide a glimpse of poetic engagements of gabar xishood leh in diasporic Somali poetry. Shire, a British-Somali poet, published her first book of poetry titled Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth in 2012. While this is her first collection of poetry, it follows a similar trajectory as her other work in that it primarily deals with diasporic subjectivity and the messiness surrounding the politics of belonging. Shire, born in Kenya and raised in London, alludes to the question of “home” and not knowing where that is but simultaneously identifies strongly with the homeland of her parents: Somalia. As such, she has an emotional investment in the gabar xishood leh rhetoric; concurrently she overtly challenges its limitations. Instead of indirectly using codes of xishood like the poets of classical and modern Somali poetry, however, she is more open about sexual desire. She partly acknowledges the cultural restrictions on talking frankly about sexual desire in relation to gabar xishood leh by opening the collection with this Audre Lorde quote:
“Mother, loosen my tongue or adorn me with a lighter burden.”

Throughout Shire’s poems in *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*, the motif of “fire” and “burning” is constantly repeated. The aptly titled poem *Fire* has three different sections, each about an encounter of a woman with a man in a romantic context. This poem, along with other poems with references to “fire,” clearly indicates sexual desire, as do allusions to burning. In several instances, fire and burning are envisioned as a release, as self-immolation and other times as shame.

Shire’s poem “Things We Lost in the Summer” is the clearest example of Somali female hybrid subjectivities marked by the coexistence of *xishood* and female sexuality. She states:

One of them pushes my open knees closed.  
Sit like a girl. I finger the hole in my shorts,  
Shame warming my skin.

In the car, my mother stares at me through the  
Rear view mirror, the leather sticks to the back of my thighs  
I open my legs like a well-oiled door  
Daring her to look at me and give me  
What I had not lost: a name.

In this poem, a young woman is disciplined verbally and corporeally for not behaving in a manner befitting a *gabar xishood leh* (a modest girl). As I indicated in the introduction,


sitting with knees apart is incongruent with *xishood* behaviour. As a result, she feels ‘*ayb* (bad shame). In resistance then, she blatantly opens her legs. What is clear here is that the woman in the poem pointedly exhibits her right to be seen as a sexual being. At the same, by “daring” her mother to state otherwise, it appears she also considers herself a *gabar xishood leh*.

Shire’s poetry contains the same refusal to adhere to the naming conventions of the dominant discourse of *gabar xishood leh*—with its insistence of *xishood* or sexual desire—as the classical and modern poets whose work I analyzed in this thesis, albeit using different means. What is interesting to explore in future research is whether overt expression of sexual desire can exist without the fear of exclusion or unbelonging in diasporic Somali female poetry.
Bibliography


Fraser, Nancy. “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy.” *Social Text*, nos. 25/26 (1990): 56-80.
Garbin, David. “A Diasporic Sense of Place: Dynamics of Spatialization and
Transnational Political Fields among Bangladeshi Muslims in Britain.” In
Transnational Ties: Cities, Identities, and Migrations, edited by Michael Peter
Smith and John Eade, 147-163. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers,
2008.

Georgis, Dina. “Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame in Bareed Mista3jil,”

———. “What Does the Tree Remember? The Politics of Telling Stories.” TOPiA 25

150.


Gilroy, Paul. The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness. Cambridge, MA:

Gopinath, Gayatri. Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997.

Goth, Bashir. “Magool: The Inimitable Nightingale of Somali Music.” Bildhaan: An

Hall, Stuart. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” In Diaspora and Visual Culture:


Hashi, Bilan. Those Nights in Port Said. (Forthcoming.)


——. “Silent Voices: The Role of Somali Women’s Poetry in Social and Political Life.”


Kaya, Ayhan. “Aesthetics of Diaspora: Contemporary Minstrels in Turkish Berlin.”


[http://mp3.com/artist/Maryam%2BMursal/](http://mp3.com/artist/Maryam%2BMursal/)

Massumi, Brian. *Parable for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation.* Durham, NC:


Papastergiadis, Nikos. Dialogues in the Diasporas: Essays and Conversations on


