A Shelter for All: Margaret Laurence's
A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose

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**ABSTRACT**
This paper revolves around Canadian author Margaret Laurence's translated collection of Somali poetry and prose. The collection was a result of her keen observation of the Somali culture and literature which was in oral form. After overcoming the initial reservations of the native community of Somali land, *A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose* includes Laurence's comments on around ten different types of Somali poetry, translated versions of thirty poems and paraphrases of thirty six tales both Somali and Arabic. These honest and sincere translations of the Somali literature and the frantic efforts to understand and accept Somali people their culture and their society all these factors prove one very important fact. This is that Margaret Laurence always wanted to be understood not as a typical Memsahib but as new comer, a person who seriously wanted to be accepted by her fellow dwellers in a true sense.

**INTRODUCTION**
What makes Laurence's African fiction so interesting is the fact that she viewed the colonized African society with a dual perspective. While she was a stranger who belonged to the group of the colonial masters. She was also psychologically equipped to share the feelings of the colonized. Being a stranger she always experienced a sense of detachment from the African people and yet being a Canadian or someone who has had the experience of colonialism. She was able to understand its implications in the African society. Thus we may say that during her stay in Africa she developed a special relationship with the society. Her African experience not only taught her more about herself but also about her own land. Canada as "living away from home gives a new perspective on people of another culture, and of the social complex in wider sense". (Morley, 1981, 15)

Laurence's metaphor of journey - in both personal and social terms became a live reality for her in the deserts of Somaliland. It was en route to the British Protectorate that she read the Gideon Bible. She was moved by a verse from the Book of Leviticus that says, "Ye shall not oppress a stranger, for ye know the heart of a stranger: seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt". This verse gave her the title for her well known travel memoir, *Heart of a Stranger*. She quotes this verse in the forward of this travelogue, thereby emphasizing the central theme of the book. The significance of travels in her life can be understood when she writes:

I have spent a good many years of my adult life as stranger in strange lands, in some cases as a resident and in others as a traveler. I have met suspicion and mistrust at times, and I have also met with warmth and generosity. The process of trying to understand people of another culture, - their concepts, their customs, and their life-views is a fascinating and complex one, sometimes frustrating, never easy but in the long run enormously rewarding. (Laurence, 1976, 11)

This conforms to Clara Thomas's observation that Laurence's literary growth can also be attributed to her travels. Patricia Morley considers Africa to be a "catalyst" and a "crucible" in much of Laurence's work. Her African fiction very distinctly appears as the work of a young enthusiast who is full of faith. One finds an optimistic outlook of many Africans and western liberals of the time in her African fiction.
One such work which perhaps is the most important that came from her seven years of stay in Africa is *The Prophet's Camel Bell*. This travel memoir published in 1963, recounts the writer's experiences of the period" between 1950 and 1952 in Somaliland. Due to its biographical information and also its picture of spiritual growth, this travelogue can be considered to be the logical starting point for an explanation of her later achievements as a writer. As far as its narrative is concerned, it is not an account of her personal and first-hand experiences in a new and strange place. The point where this travel narrative goes beyond other such works is that while other travelogues end with the end of the voyage at the aimed destination, this one goes far beyond. As Laurence states in the travelogue, "When can a voyage be said to have ended? When you reach the place you were bound for, presumably. But sometimes your destination turns out to be quite other than you expected". (1963, 2)

Truly enough, Laurence's journey does not end with her arrival in Somali land. On the contrary, it begins with that. In fact, her psychological journey begins even before she reaches Somaliland. The verses which she read from Gideon's Bible on the ship, remained in her mind throughout her stay and helped her understand the Somalis, despite the disturbing experiences she had with some of them. It was these verses which made her accept her situation as a stranger in a strange land where she received both "hostile words" and also food and shelter in the time of real need from people who did not have enough even for their own. Their personal and first-hand experiences in a new and strange place. The point where this travel narrative goes beyond other such works is that while other travelogues end with the end of the voyage at the aimed destination, this one goes far beyond. As Laurence states in the travelogue, "When can a voyage be said to have ended? When you reach the place you were bound for, presumably. But sometimes your destination turns out to be quite other than you expected". (1963, 2)

Thus, as far as the English are concerned, the Somalis did not believe them initially. Although Jack Laurence convinces them of the safety and security of the people and their camels, the Laurences are sure that the process of convincing the tribal is an endless one.

While Jack Laurence was busy with his dam building project, Margaret Laurence begins to take a serious interest first in Somali language and then its literature. Upon her wish to translate some of the Somali poems, the initial reaction of people like Musa is "Absolutely not. Impossible". (35) The word impossible is also applied to the possibility of the English person's ability to feel and understand the depth of Somali poetry. Laurence observes:

He felt protective towards his own Literature... He felt no English person could comprehend them anyway. They would be wasted on the cold and unemotional English... He found it hard to believe that English people ever felt despair or exultation. (1963, 35)

However, Laurence's perseverance pay when Musa later on helps her to prepare translations from Somali epic "Gabey, and -Belwo" in Baroma. Thus, the project of translations initiates in the same way as the dam building project (i.e. 'with the efforts to diminish prejudices against telling stories and poems to a foreigner woman') and finally succeeds. Despite the fact that she finds Musa easy to talk to, she is always doubtful.

Laurence considered Somaliland as 'a nation of poets'. She says:

Although the life of the Somali camel herder is drab and harsh, in their poetry and stories one finds sensitivity, intelligence, earthly human and a delight in lovely clothes and lovely women (190)

The regular sessions with Musa and B.W. Andrzejewski along with dramatic oration of Hersi result in a collection of translations of Somali poetry and folktales, named by Margaret Laurence *A Tree for Poverty*. Clara Thomas observes that when Laurence worked on these translations in 1952, she already had the patience and discipline of a professional writer. In the introduction to this collection Laurence states that the purpose of writing these translations is simply to present an account of poems which, because of the brevity of the life of a poem in oral literature and among a nomadic people, will be lost in few years.

The process of working on these translations was a three way process including Musa, Andrzejewski and herself. Although Musa was fluent in English, he would discuss the subtler connotations of the word with Andrzejewski. Then the latter and Laurence would discuss the lines in English. All the while Laurence was alert that her translated piece of work does not fail to preserve the meaning and spirit of the original.

*A Tree for Poverty* is divided into three sections where the first section consists of a long critical introduction followed by translations of Somali poems and tales and lastly there are extensive notes about Somali vocabulary and customs. The book, thus, includes Laurence's comments on around ten different types of Somali poetry, translated versions of thirty poems and paraphrases of thirty six tales both Somali and Arabic. While, explaining the term 'tree for poverty', Donex Xiques in his essay "Margaret Laurence’s Somali translations" says that the writer has selected this phrase because Somali poetry and folk tales are always available and are as free to the impoverished nomad as they are to the Sultan. This Somali Literature, in this way provides a *tree for poverty* to shelter under. Due to the effects of seven years of stay in Africa, in the introductory section one finds the voice of both a reporter and a scholar. The writer makes no attempt to come to the foreground by stating personal experience. One can, however, notice the writer’s style while she is discussing the poems and tales.

In the second section, where the translations appear, we find the addition of words and phrases by Laurence in order to clarify a concept contained within a single Somali word for which it is difficult to find the exact word in English. She distinguishes among the poems which are recited, chanted or sung to a tune. She then presents two main types of Somali poetry the belwo-the short, lyrical, popular song, usually a love
song and gabei a long narrative poem. Out of these two, the gabei is considered to be one of the most complicated and subtle types of Somali poetry.

In contrast to the -belwo', the -gabei' is a long, narrative poem with a serious tone. It has complex rules which govern its content, vocabulary, and style. As far as its chant is concerned, Laurence herself says that the tempo of the chant is slow and majestic, seldom changing throughout the poem. Being a complex form of poem ‘The Gabei’ is undertaken only by the more accomplished senior poets. In Tree for Poverty, Laurence has included only a few gabei translations like 'Qaraami', a love Gabei by the poet Elmii Bonderi.

The final section deals with Somali prose and includes thirty six tales of Somali and Arabic origin. Here, she again distinguishes between the tales which are translated and those which are paraphrased. In case of the translated stories, one finds that although they are brief, their subject matter is diverse. They include; the beast tables (How the Meat was Divided), moral tales (Right and Wrong), fantasies (The Strange and Terrible Camel), humorous tales (The Townsmen), etc. Laurence obtained the paraphrased stories of Arab origin, from Sources. They differ in content, style and source.

Although she has been most alert while dealing with the plots, she cautions that the readers are not to take the style as pure Somali, these paraphrases also succeed in conveying "a good deal of the tone and spirit of the original". (1992,17) The book includes nine paraphrased tales with Arab origin. The tale 'Ahmed the Woodseller' which is included in The Prophet's Camel Bell opens this section.

Regarding Ahmed, Laurence feels that he represents people who live in certain poverty-stricken lives. Referring to the paradoxical personality of Ahmed, Laurence writes:

He is completely selfish, and yet is capable of generosity and affection... He is good and bad, Lovable and despicable. In fact, he sums up a good many of the contrasts which make the eastern mind difficult for Europeans to understand. (Xiques, 1992, 41)

Apart from the help that she received from Musa Gallal, B.W. Andrzejewski and Hersi, one must also agree that Laurence proves to be an impressive translator. From the reader's point of view, she succeeds in retaining the elements of suspense and sustains the interest of the European readers. From the writer's point of view, the tales are rich in human interest. Her paraphrases of these Somali tales give westerners a genuine sense of the richness of an ancient mid-western culture and literature.

One can therefore surmise that while translating these poems, Laurence was highly conscious of the texts so that an English reader could experience some sense of beauty of the original. While talking about the single image and a strong alliterative pattern of Laurence's translations, Donex Xiques in his essay quotes from the belwo' the following lines: “The curving of breasts like apples sweet and small, Tolmoon, I will know again when night turns dusk to dark”. (1992,37). Indeed, A Tree for Poverty provides means of access to and appreciation of unfamiliar country and culture.

These honest and sincere translations of the Somali literature and the frantic efforts to understand and accept Somali people their culture and their society all these factors prove one very important fact. This is that Margaret Laurence always wanted to be understood not as a typical Memsahib but as a new comer, a person who seriously wanted to be accepted by her fellow dwellers in a true sense. However, due to the strong colonial consciousness on the part of both the colonized Somalis and the white colonizers she is never forgiven for belonging to the latter group. Never is she regarded without suspicion or with full acceptance. She is however able to understand their mentality in a positive way after a span of a few years when she was more matured. Moreover, she felt that her stay in Somaliland proved to be a learning exercise for her.

To conclude, one can only say that her travel to Africa was an invaluable phase in her life as, "Africa deepened her appreciation of human differences and of shared universals in a world of people whom she describe as being different and similar to themselves". (Morely, 1981, 44).

**REFERENCES**


