

CULTURE & HERITAGE

My father's journey

Nadifa Mohamed in conversation with Allah Allfrey

In partnership with Kwani Trust



On 21 June 2013, RVI and Kwani Trust hosted **Nadifa Mohamed**, the Somali-British author, who spoke with **Allah Allfrey**, Deputy Editor of *Granta*, about her writing and her Somali homeland. Born in Hargeisa and raised in South London, Nadifa has been listed by *Granta* as one of the Best of Young British Novelists. Her first novel, *Black Mamba Boy* (HarperCollins, 2010), was inspired by the life of her father, who was forced to leave Somalia and embark on an odyssey that took him to the UK. The book was described by one reviewer as a book of 'elegance and beauty'; it won the 2010 Betty Trask Award and was shortlisted for numerous other prizes. Nadifa's new novel, *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, describes the fall of the Somali state through the lives of three women, and will be published in August 2013.

Key points

- Few people document their family's experiences as vividly as Nadifa Mohamed did while writing her first novel, a process in which she describes herself as being her father's *griot*, or praise-singer.
- While it is critics who put labels on writing, it is the reading public who have the most important role in the publishing world. They are less concerned with labels than by the narrative itself.
- Since memory is fragile, good fiction can be an important one way of keeping alive and preserving places and people left behind.
- Stories of real events such as civil wars can be told in different ways; these include focusing the narrative on personal perspectives inspired by individual stories.
- British literature has evolved, embracing more voices from the Asian and African diaspora, among them the children or grandchildren of immigrants now settled in the UK.

Introduction

Mark Bradbury, the RVI Horn of Africa and East Africa Regional Director, welcomed the panellists and audience to this literary evening organised by Kwani Trust and the Rift Valley Institute. The conversation between Nadifa Mohamed and Allah Allfrey follows an event in April, when Nuruddin Farah was in conversation with Binyavanga Wainaina. A film of that evening is available online.¹

Angela Wachuka, Kwani Trust Executive Director, introduced the two panellists.

Motivation behind storytelling

Asked about her motivation behind writing the story of her father, Nadifa explained that her father, who is now 88, would reveal snippets of his story from time to time and, as she grew older, she became interested in learning more. At the time, she was working on a script that narrated the story of a Somali man convicted for a crime he did not commit. Her father told her 'I'm the interesting one,' and proceeded to describe his difficult early childhood. He lived on the streets, worked as an office boy, and

¹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UbNk_uztZ8s.

experienced the Second World War, all before taking work on a ship and beginning to travel the world in search of his own father at the tender age of eleven.

Few of us turn our family stories into narratives, Allah remarked, so why did Nadifa choose to do so. 'It was a story I wanted to hear, it was unique,' said the author, adding that there were surreal aspects of it that piqued her interest and kept her excited. After she left university she was not sure what she wanted to do. She did a lot of research for the book to ensure that she got the historical facts right, but was still unsure whether she wanted to write a biography or a novel. Without a clear goal, she ended up with a 'fictionalized biography' that won critical and popular acclaim in countries as far away as Korea. Nadifa explained that Jama's story was one of love and celebration, but with elements of sadness that resonated with many readers.

Nadifa spoke of the daunting task of writing about her father's difficult experiences as a child, including his search for his father, who was rumoured to be in Sudan or Eritrea, with nothing other his clan networks to fall back on. Nadifa said that in the story of the street children there was a bit of her father, a bit of today's street boys, and a bit of herself. She found her father's freedom and wanderlust attractive – even if she could not picture herself making such a journey at such a young age.

Memory and war

In response to Allah's question on whether she wrote to give an insider's view of Somalia, Nadifa said that she did not deliberately set out to do so, but it was one of the motivations behind her narrative. In writing Jama's story, Nadifa said she was celebrating her father's life, while grieving for the painful memory of those who were left behind. 'It was a gift for him and the rest of us,' she said.

Nadifa's second novel, *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, is set at the outset of the Somali civil war. Many people had read about it in media and NGO reports but were unaware of its that

it started not in Mogadishu but in the North. She spoke of telling her story from 'small perspectives', those of individuals influenced by her family's stories. Her storytelling is inspired by personal experiences, but can speak to larger issues, such as migration in *Black Mamba Boy* or civil war in the *Garden of Lost Souls*. She said a character in the latter novel was modelled on her grandmother, who was left behind in her village when the war broke out but was later rescued by one of her nieces. 'My father pulled us out two years before the war because he felt something bad would happen.'

In describing the protagonist, Filsan, Nadifa talked about a woman who was a soldier and as such a rarity in Somalia, as in many other conflicts. Filsan, she said, is a feminist desperate to be a 'normal' woman. The Hargeisa-born Filsan is fragile, having grown up in a privileged environment with a father who loves but also intimidates her. The writer described Filsan as an 'inconsequential person': 'It would have been my story if I'd stayed in Somalia,' she said, adding that this is 'a story of the place I left behind, the place I wanted to leave behind.'

Her father's adventures were proof that the life of a migrant is not easy, even if it was sometimes made tolerable by the strong clan network that always provided a safety net for him. However, this was not always the case in the 1980s, when people didn't always know whom they could trust. Many simply disappeared or were sent to jail, adding to the mistrust within the community.

'Filsan was a difficult character to write,' said Nadifa, because she is a complicated character, one who perpetrates violence but is also well educated, wealthy, idealistic, and loves the idea of order. According to the writer, Filsan's complex identity makes her a necessary character in writing about the civil war, where the line between victim and perpetrator is so fine. 'If my father was born in the 1980s or 1990s, he would have been in the militia,' said Nadifa, describing Filsan's

vulnerability and drawing parallels to that of a street boy.

Nadifa read excerpts from both *Black Mamba Boy* and *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, in which Filsan is one of three female characters who carry the narrative.

Questions from the audience



At the end of the conversation, Ellah Allfrey invited members of the audience to join the discussion. One asked: 'What happened to Jama's marriage to Bethlehem, the Eritrean woman in *Black Mamba Boy*?' The author was also asked when she would write about her mother, following her earlier comment that one of the characters in *The Orchard of Lost Souls* was inspired by her grandmother, who was left behind when the family left Somaliland. Nadifa explained that Bethlehem was a fictional creation to take some of the weight of the narrative from herself and her father. She wanted to give her father a break to experience love after the difficult experiences he had undergone. Nadifa also indicated that writing her father's story made her realize how fragile memory is.

'In Somali culture, parents – especially fathers – rarely talk to their children about their adventures,' said another audience member, adding that, through Jama's story, 'we have been inspired to talk to our children and tell our own stories.' He also asked Nadifa how difficult it was to extract the story from her father. 'He was ready to be heard,' she replied. 'He had always said that his story needed to be heard.'

One member of the audience asked whether the face of British literature is changing, with the body of contemporary British writers

encompassing diaspora voices from Asia and Africa. Ellah responded by saying that it was critics who put labels on writers and their work, not the reading public who matter more. The reading public reads contemporary British writers without caring about their countries of origin. The Granta list of the 'Best of Young British Novelists', published every ten years for the past three decades, has included writers such as Ben Okri, Buchi Emecheta and Salman Rushdie. Nadifa indicated that, through Granta, she had met Adam Foulds, who, unknown to her, had written about Kenya.

Another audience member asked Nadifa to read aloud an excerpt from the book in which she describes herself as her father's *griot*, or praise singer. That description, she said, came to her much later in the writing process.



Credits

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