The crisis of representation: A comparative discourse analysis of Somali and Western voices in Somali development research

Major Research Paper

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Introduction

Underrepresentation in international development is perplexing given the vast amount of research situated in the Global South. Somali development literature, in particular, is dominated by non-Somali authorship. The interdisciplinary body of literature referred to as Somali studies was itself "founded" by I.M. Lewis (Haaksonen, 2014). The notion that a White man of Welsh and Scottish descent can establish the study of Somali culture and history presumes that Somalis were either not already doing this work or, if they were, it was not good enough to be considered legitimate by Western academia. The issue of underrepresentation in Somali studies was recently brought to the fore in 2015 due to the creation of the Somaliland Journal of African Studies. The journal garnered attention for the lack of Somali academics on its editorial board and in published studies. In response to the criticisms of the journal, Markus Hoehne, an advisory board member, said that "[he] did not come across many younger Somalis who would qualify as serious scholars – not because they lack access to sources, but because they seem not to value scholarship as such." Hoehne also claimed that there is a lack of quality higher education in social sciences within Somalia, but diaspora Somalis have opportunities to receive degrees from American and European institutions and join the academic conversation (Hoehne, 2015; "Can the Somali Speak?," n.d.).

The erasure of native voices in international development research has serious ethical and practical implications. Besides the obvious issue of excluding the very people that development practices claim to help, underrepresentation begets misrepresentation

that ultimately leads to ineffective development projects. Inaccurate assumptions and claims fuel Western-backed development projects that do very little to actually improve the condition of purportedly "underdeveloped" nations (Ferguson, 1994). In the Somali context, the absence of native voices is perhaps most visible when examining research focused on female circumcision. Female circumcision, which is also referred to as female genital mutilation, is a major topic of interest in development studies that happens to be dominated by non-Somali authors. As of February 29, 2020, a search of the ProQuest Social Sciences database for peer-reviewed articles using the keywords "genital mutilation*" and "Somali*" yields 512 articles. It is concerning that of these articles, only nine are first-person authored by Somali academics. This means that Western voices dictate what the issue is, why it is a problem, and how to fix it with the use of foreign aid and ill-informed development projects. For a nation that has been devastated by colonialism and its aftermath, it is imperative that we examine the harmful narratives that continue to be promoted in development literature focusing on Somalia.

In this paper, I argue that Somali authors who write on Somali-centered issues produce academic research that is more nuanced and balanced than their non-Somali, namely Western, counterparts. To support my argument, I conduct a comparative discourse analysis of female circumcision literature authored by Western and Somali authors using a postcolonial and intersectional feminist framework. I examine the narratives and imagery used by both groups along three main themes:

1) Female circumcision as an inherently barbaric and non-Western phenomenon

2) Somali women as perpetual victims devoid of agency

3) Somali women as sexually oppressed subjects of Islam

I argue that both camps employ harmful narratives that further the perception of female circumcision as a barbaric and non-Western practice, as well as the image of Somali women as powerless victims. The Somali authors, however, gain a slight advantage by simultaneously offering a dialectic that counters those same harmful narratives. They acknowledge that female circumcision is not just an exotic peculiarity by explicitly calling attention to the fact that female circumcision exists in Western societies. The Somali authors also disprove the notion that the practice is rooted in barbarism by highlighting that it is considered an act of love towards daughters. Furthermore, they are also the only cohort to explicitly acknowledge the agency that victimized Somali women possess. With regard to the third theme, both Somali and non-Somali authors discuss Islam in a rather neutral manner that does not portray the faith as an oppressive force in the sexual lives of Somali women. I argue, however, that the mere absence of harmful narratives should not permit Western researchers to occupy space in Somali-focused development research. Given that Somali authors can be just as complicit in enforcing damaging rhetoric, I use a postcolonial lens to examine the ways in which a colonial mindset (Fanon, 1965) contributes to the perpetuation of these narratives. Alternatively, I use the few instances where Somali authors go against the Western grain to underscore the necessity of a greater Somali presence in academia. I conclude that not only are Somali authors capable of being serious scholars, it is, first and foremost, through their

increased representation in academia that hegemonic representations of Somalia can be subverted.

Framework of Analysis

A postcolonial framework guides my research, as the study of Somalia necessitates an understanding of colonialism and its effects. Postcolonialism, especially in the context of international development literature, examines the ways in which dominant cultural and institutional practices shape the way that knowledge is produced. Although various definitions of postcolonialism exist, the underlying theme is that of domination and resistance (Gandhi, 1998; Kapoor, 2008). The process of decolonization is of particular relevance as it examines the unfolding relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. In the modern era, colonialism has been reimagined in the form of global economic forces that perpetuate inequality and privilege the Western world. This inequality goes beyond the economic realm and permeates into knowledge production (Gandhi, 1998; Kapoor, 2008). According to Kapoor (2008), "Postcolonialism turns the gaze back onto the colonizer to better reveal the tactics and representational practices of the dominant". Critiquing dominant Euro-American narratives is crucial in order to understand the ways in which third world knowledges are silenced. The field of subaltern studies, which can be thought of as a subset of postcolonial studies, examines Western dominance in the study of non-Western histories. Spearheaded by Indian scholars such as Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak, subaltern studies provides an outlet for the oppressed

who have been largely ignored by elitist historiography. Circumventing outsider investigators who position themselves as representatives of the subaltern, subaltern authors can represent themselves more accurately as they are in control of their own narratives (Gandhi, 1998; Spivak, 1988).

An intersectional feminist framework is also crucial to my discourse analysis in order to better understand how various authors frame issues relating to gender and women. Postcolonial scholar Leela Gandhi explains that postcolonial theory and feminist theory have followed a similar trajectory in terms of their evolution. Both types of theories share similarities in their study of how marginalized bodies navigate systems of oppression (Gandhi, 1998). Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (1996) notes that while advances have been made in developing postcolonial theory, many of the hallmark texts, such as those by Albert Memmi, Franz Fanon, and Edward Said, fail to address gender. A postcolonial feminist perspective allows us to understand how colonialism, race, and gender interact with one another. This approach is a form of resistance by feminist scholars who acknowledge the marginalization of gender issues in academia (Ahmed, 1996).

In the African context, colonialism has had a profound effect on the history of the African female figure. Colonial political economies afforded African men more power in political realms, which informed the roles that women took on (Aniekwu, 2006). Aniekwu explains that feminist research has disproven the myth that current gender roles in Africa are inherently “African”; these roles are not simply from an archaic past, but

rather from a constantly changing environment informed by colonial and development projects: “In the history of colonialism, Western ideas and concepts of female sexuality played a very important part in African societies, and a variety of Western imperial projects reconfigured the discourse of African sexuality in many ways” (Aniekwu, 2006). In my research, there are a variety of intersections to consider, such as gender, race, religion, and violence. A postcolonial and intersectional feminist framework is required in order to unpack harmful discourses about Somali women.

Lastly, in order to analyze the different voices in development studies, an analysis and critique of development itself is necessary as development narratives inform the way that development is practiced. In this regard, postdevelopment studies have contributed substantially to critiques of the field of development. Scholars in this school assert that the traditional approach to development, which focuses heavily on Western concepts of modernity, economic growth, and industrialization, is not the only way to reach development (Ziai, 2007). Critics of development contend that development does not work, with some even going so far as to say that it was never intended to work. This latter group views development as an elaborate plan intended to mask the devastation caused to the third world (Ziai, 2007; Allen & Thomas, 2000). Furthermore, development is accused of being an operation designed to eliminate cultural diversity by endorsing universalism and Western structures (Ziai, 2007; Sachs 1992). Arturo Escobar (1995), a prominent postdevelopment scholar, asserts that knowledge production concerning the third world is controlled heavily by development discourse. Because knowledge

production is intricately linked with power, development ultimately robs the Global South of agency (Escobar, 1995).

Beyond the ethical premise on which it operates, development has also been criticized for its apparent lack of success in the developing world (Ferguson, 1994). While the destruction of diverse ways of life is readily accepted as a necessary step to improvement, postdevelopment studies show that this approach to development simply fuels impoverishment, exploitation, and oppression rather than improve conditions in the so-called underdeveloped world (Escobar, 1995). Escobar (1995) explains that development, as a discourse, has roots in larger processes such as modernity and capitalism. While Western conceptions of modernity and economic progress dominate the field of development, alternatives to traditional forms of development do exist and should be considered; but what do they look like? Firstly, there is a distinction between development alternatives and alternatives to development. The former is simply a re-imagination of development, while the latter emphatically rejects the entire paradigm (Escobar, 1995). Discussions about alternatives to development involve the transformative role of grassroots movements, local culture, and local knowledge. Escobar (1995) states that, "Resistance to development was one of the ways in which Third World groups attempted to construct new identities." In the implementation of alternatives to development, the collective action of social actors is required to affect change in existing political structures. For developing nations, this means moving away from Western knowledge and allowing for other knowledges to take precedence. There must be a drastic breakdown of the development discourse in order for a change to result in a

lasting transformation (Escobar, 1995). In conjunction with a postcolonial and intersectional feminist framework, postdevelopment as a critique of development practices guides my research as it speaks to the practical consequences of underrepresenation in the field of international development.

Methodology

My research employs critical discourse analysis to reveal inherent beliefs that Western and Somali authors hold about female circumcision and Somali culture. Discourse analysis involves the analysis of language or text in various mediums; language does not necessarily have to be written material and can include spoken language, visual text, etc. The text is analyzed in order to inform us of phenomena that go beyond the individual producing it, as discourse acts as a snapshot of society in that very moment and, depending on what is uncovered in the analysis, of an earlier time as well (Taylor, 2013). An example of this is a passing reference that may be used in a text, which informs the researcher of priorities and values that are accepted at face value. Taylor (2013) explains that, "Some of the words used may even be offensive to a contemporary reader, for instance, because they are linked to assumptions about class or gender or race which have since been questioned." Post-structuralism has contributed heavily to discourse analysis theories by asserting that discourse is the site within which social struggles, reproduction, and contestation occur (Lazar, 2005). There are a variety of academic lines within discourse analytic research, including one line that focuses

solely on the nature of language and another line that has its roots in the study of society (Taylor, 2013). It is the latter approach that I use in my own research, which allows me to make inferences about the way that people and actions are situated in institutions of dominance. The meanings used to make these inferences are usually cultural and are generated as a result of experiences in a particular society. It is important to remember that meanings are fluid and constantly in flux; a researcher is always situated in a particular context and uses these experiences to inform his or her research (Taylor, 2013). Critical discourse analysis is particularly interested in knowledge that is taken for granted and accepted as truth, and how this knowledge works to advance the interests of dominant groups (Taylor, 2013). By examining narratives and images, this methodology allows me to uncover certain truths, or better yet "untruths," that are propagated by Western and Somali authors.

Feminist discourse analysis allows me to delve even deeper, to answer questions about the types of narratives that are put forth about Somali women who are at the intersection of several marginalized identities: third world, Muslim, and Black. The cornerstone of feminist language studies, according to Lazar (2005), is the uncovering of unequal social structures by analyzing language: "Feminist [critical discourse analysis] as a political perspective on gender, [is] concerned with demystifying the interrelationships of gender, power and ideology in discourse." Feminist discourse analysis preoccupies itself with the goal of dismantling the current conditions of oppression. By critiquing dominant patriarchal narratives, achieving and maintaining justice with regard to women's issues may be possible (Lazar, 2005). In the same way that postcolonial

feminist theory addresses the absence of gender in postcolonial theory, Feminist discourse analysis responds to the lack of diversity in critical discourse analysis. It creates room for scholars who do not fall into the category of "straight white man" (Cameron, 1998; Lazar, 2005). Inclusion of these voices shows that social practices and messages are gendered. Gender is crucial to discourse analysis because it serves as the basis for other social relations (Lazar, 2005). For example, Rajiva and Khoday (2014) use feminist discourse analysis to uncover implicit racist and patriarchal values in Canadian media. Through their analysis of media representations of honour killings, they conclude that colonial imagery reinforces images of South Asian and Muslim cultures as dangerous and inassimilable. In a similar fashion, I aim to understand how Somali women are represented in the highly gendered discussion of female circumcision.

To conduct my comparative discourse analysis, I use four articles focusing on female circumcision in a Somali context authored by mostly European non-Somali researchers and three articles authored by Somali researchers. Below is a breakdown of the articles:

Non-Somali Authors:

1. Van Der Kwaak, A. (1992). Female circumcision and gender identity: A questionable alliance? *Social Science & Medicine*, *35*(6), 777–787.

2. Vestbostad, E., & Blystad, A. (2014). Reflections on female circumcision discourse in Hargeysa, Somaliland: purified or mutilated? *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, *18*(2), 22–35.

3. Johnsdotter, S. (2003). Somali women in western exile: Reassessing female circumcision in the light of Islamic teachings. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, *23*(2), 361–373.

4. Ahlberg, B., Krantz, I., Lindmark, G., & Warsame, M. (2004). "It"s only a tradition': making sense of eradication interventions and the persistence of female "circumcision" within a Swedish context. *Critical Social Policy*, *24*(1(78)), 50–78.

Somali Authors:

1. Gele, A., Kumar, B., Hjelde, K., Sundby, J., & Gele, A. (2012). Attitudes toward female circumcision among Somali immigrants in Oslo: a qualitative study. *International Journal of Women's Health*, *4*(1), 7–17.

2. Gele, A., Bø, B., Sundby, J., & Gele, A. (2013). Attitudes toward Female Circumcision among Men and Women in Two Districts in Somalia: Is It Time to Rethink Our Eradication Strategy in Somalia? *Obstetrics and Gynecology International*, *2013*(2013), 312734–312734.

3. Abubakar, N. (2013). Global Discourse, Local Practice: Female Circumcision and Inter-Generational Conflict in a Somali Diaspora Community. *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, *12*(4), 476–488. https://doi.org/10.1163/15691497-12341268

Of the non-Somali authors, all are of White European descent except for Ahlberg who is of African descent. Nonetheless, as an author living in Sweden, I felt it was important to include her as a Western author as she exhibits Eurocentric attitudes similar to her White European counterparts. Due to difficulties in obtaining published articles by native Somali scholars residing within Somalia, the chosen Somali authors are members of the Somali diaspora.

Literature Review

Somali authorship in academic research on female circumcision

In contrast to the array of peer-reviewed research on female circumcision in the Somali context by Western authors, the lack of accessible research by ethnic Somali authors is a persistent issue. From a cursory glance, it may appear that there is a wealth of Somali authored material focusing on circumcision in Somali society, but the reality is that many peer-reviewed texts merely mention female circumcision in passing, as the main focus of the research is another aspect of the Somali experience. For example, public health researcher Abdullahi examines Somali women's experience with cervical screenings in London, England. Although the main goal of the article is to uncover barriers that they may face in medical settings, the issue of female circumcision is inevitably raised (Abdullahi et al, 2009). Somali anthropologist Sada Mire also briefly discusses female circumcision in the context of reproductive health as she describes how female circumcision intersects with nomadic fertility treatments such as the burning of the abdomen with wood and oil. Female circumcision is mentioned only once, as the beliefs, practices, and culture informing fertility in Somali society take center stage (Mire, 2016). Canadian scholar Hamdi Mohamed also mentions female circumcision in passing. Unlike Abdullahi and Mire who discuss circumcision in the context of reproductive health, Mohamed aims to understand the ways in which Somali refugee women adjust to life in Canada while reconstructing their sense of identity (Mohamed, 1999). What is evident from these articles is that any discussion of Somali women is bound to make reference to the tradition. Whether the focus is on reproductive health or

another seemingly unrelated issue, the Somali female experience has become inseparable from female circumcision.

While there is an existing body of Somali authored research that explicitly focuses on female circumcision in Somali society, the methods and approaches used do not lend themselves well to a discourse analysis. Several of the researchers use quantitative methods such as surveys to learn more about the attitudes of Somali women towards circumcision. For example, Somali researcher Mahdi Dirie and co-author Gunilla Lindmark administer a questionnaire to 300 Somali women living in Mogadishu that contains questions about their age, occupation, education level, circumcision history, and their motives for practicing or foregoing circumcision (Dirie & Lindmark, 1991). Marwa Ahmed (1999), on the other hand, does not use a survey in her study examining attitudes of Somali women living in the United Kingdom; she uses focus groups to gather autobiographical accounts about the women's experiences with female circumcision. While a focus group is not necessarily a quantitative method, the way in which Ahmed organizes and interprets the data gathered from the discussions is primarily quantitative using percentages, graphs, and charts. It is extremely difficult to deduce the authors' own views towards circumcision when quantitative methods are used. There is little to no room to analyze narratives because they simply are not present. This is further complicated by the medical and health-focused approach employed by many Somali researchers. This approach does not delve into the sociological implications because that is not the purpose of the research. For example, Omar Mohamud uses mathematical estimation to examine the link between female circumcision and child mortality.

Mohamud does not explicitly or implicitly express his own views on the topic, as he relies on the data to determine risk (Mohamud, 1991).

Lastly, the biggest hindrance in conducting a discourse analysis using Somali authored texts is that many of the texts are not peer-reviewed journal articles. I chose peer-reviewed articles as this provides consistency in the methodological rigor of the literature that is analyzed. While there are Somali authored articles published in journals, such as Nimco Aden's (2006) account of female circumcision and human rights violations in Somaliland in *Women's World*, they are not peer-reviewed and are presented as editorials. Other non-peer reviewed Somali authored texts found in academic databases can be categorized as resources for development and healthcare professionals working in the region. For example, decorated Somali nurse Edna Adan Ismail published a survey on female circumcision at the Edna Adan Maternity and Teaching Hospital (Ismail, 2010). Similarly, Somali authors such as Mohamed Yussuf (Powell and Yussuf, 2018) publish material for non-governmental organizations on female circumcision as these organizations research and fund eradication and/or harm mitigation campaigns. Lastly, a large portion of Somali authored texts consists of graduate theses, as female circumcision in the Somali context garners a great deal of attention among Somali doctoral candidates (Shermarke, 1996; Mohamed, 2016; Abubakar, 2012). While theses contribute immensely to academic knowledge on female circumcision in Somali society, it is unreasonable to scrutinize them in the same manner as a peer-reviewed journal article, as peer-reviewed articles could be perceived as having more validity in the construction of expert knowledge. As the Western authored texts I have chosen to analyze are published

in peer-reviewed journals, I chose to examine Somali authored texts published in academic journals in the spirit of consistency and fairness.

Representation of authors from the Global South in academia

The underrepresentation of minorities is a problem for many fields; for instance, the presence of developing countries in medical journals is overwhelmed by Western authorship. Sumathipala et al. (2004) found that 90% of the world's population is represented by a mere 6.5% of published articles in top journals. According to them, developing countries have been excluded from health research despite over 90% of preventable mortality occurring within these countries. Sumathipala et al. surveyed the contribution of the Global South (countries other than the UK, USA, and other Euro-American countries) in two British journals and found that only 7.6% were from the Global South. American journals had even lower rates with only 4.8% of entries in three journals coming from the Global South (Sumathipala et al., 2004). Possible reasons for this publication gap include language barriers, fear of rejection, and authors from developing nations being unfamiliar with the culture of foreign publications (Sumathipala et al., 2004; Medical Research Council of South Africa, 2000). The social sciences also show similar patterns: *International Organization*, *International Studies Quarterly*, and *World Politics* did not publish a single African first-person author from 1999 to 2003 (Breuning et al., 2005).

Unsurprisingly, scholars tend to publish their research in journals based in their country of origin (Sumathipala et al., 2004). For example, American authors will predominantly publish in American journals, while British authors may publish more frequently in UK publications. However, this does not hold true for African publications, as non-African authors actually dominate publications that write exclusively about Africa (Briggs & Weathers, 2016). In addition to the percentage of African authorship in *African Affairs* and *The Journal of Modern African Studies* actually declining from 1993 to 2013, the diminishing publication rate can be attributed to low acceptance rates rather than low submission rates. Furthermore, because African authors focus more on smaller countries, their publications contained fewer generalizations than those of non-African authors (Briggs & Weathers, 2016). From an ethical standpoint, "the ability to represent a country or community in academic research is a form of power that historically has been denied to Africans due to the experience and legacies of colonialism, racism, and economic stagnation" (Briggs & Weathers, 2016). It is these legacies that allowed Hoehne (2015) to proclaim that there are no serious Somali scholars. The same legacies also inform Hoehne's belief that receiving degrees from Western institutions validates native Somali voices in academia. These beliefs are not new; as Briggs & Weathers (2016) state, African scholars are often confined by foreign concepts and paradigms when speaking to international audiences. If published, their work receives fewer citations than non-African scholars. This is despite the fact that African voices in African research are necessary because authors possess a privileged knowledge that translates into rich analysis (Briggs & Weathers, 2016; Yankah, 1995).

The above state of representation in academia led Nigerian-British scholar Amina Mama to ask whether it is even ethical to study Africa. She explains that despite being affected immensely by globalization, Africa is marginalized in the academic realm. Critiques of globalization by African scholars have been ignored and denied inclusion in major journals (Mama, 2007). As such, as Paulin Hountoundji (2002) argues, intellectual life must be decolonized to effectively address the externalization of knowledge production. Mama suggests that an ethical approach involves consideration of Africa's radical intellectuals and their perspectives. According to her, "One of the things this ethic would include would be a commitment to greater levels of collegiality and solidarity with Africa's radical intellectuals, and taking their critical perspectives more seriously" (2007). Africa's lack of presence in academia is not surprising as it is reflective of its general marginalization in the world order. In terms of gender, the situation is made worse by the fact that African women publish a negligible amount of academic work in an already limited proportion (Mama, 2007). Kwesi Yankah, in his 1995 critique of Western academia, describes possible ways to cultivate a fairer academic world order, by encouraging the recognition of oral traditions and Indigenous knowledge. Rather than simply being studied by others, these practices should be taken seriously as an epistemological basis to be used in research. He also campaigns for African inclusion in international journals and conferences (Yankah, 1995). Considering the wealth of knowledge Africa has that can be developed and disseminated globally, there is much work to be done. In the Somali context, the inclusion of Somali authors who have firsthand lived experiences and are well-versed Somalia's complicated history can elevate the quality of academic research.

A homeland history: Colonialism, clanism, and civil war

Somalia's homeland history is one marred by colonialism and state failure, but it is often forgotten that the nation enjoyed periods of prosperity prior to colonial invasions. Stretching from the Gulf of Aden to what is today northern Kenya, a rich oral tradition details the Somali expansion across east Africa up until the mid-1800s (Lewis, 1965). Widely regarded as the location of the ancient Land of Punt, Somalia adopted Islam after the 7th century as a result of contact with Arab traders and the nation subsequently saw the rise of various sultanates (Janzen & Lewis, 2019). The Ifat Sultanate seized control of northwestern Somalia in the 13th century and ruled the area until the Adal Sultanate superseded it in the 15th century. During that same period, the Ajuran dynasty ruled much of southern Somalia and, in conjunction with the other sultanates in the region, established effective trade routes along the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden coasts (Shelley, 2013). While various sultanates contributed to the resistance of Christian crusaders, the Ajuran dynasty in particular is credited with holding off the Portuguese in a series of skirmishes in the 16th century (Shelley, 2013; Njoku, 2013). Although initially victorious in what was then the first European encounter, the Sultanate had become fragmented by the 18th century following countless assaults from the Portuguese and thus began the decline of the Somali regimes (Shelley, 2013; Njoku, 2013).

The formerly independent Somalia became a target of colonial expansion in the mid-19th century as British, Italian, and French imperial powers began to carve out the nation into their respective territories (Janzen & Lewis, 2018). Ethiopia was the only non-European nation that participated in the scramble for Africa during the 1896 Berlin Conference. This resulted in the creation of British Somaliland, Italian Somaliland, Ethiopian controlled Western Somaliland, and French Somaliland (Abdi, 2015). As Bufalini (2017) explains, the era of colonialism was characterized by violence; the Italian army, for example, killed entire Somali clans in the early 20th century. In her account of the political history of Somalia, author Alice Bettis Hashim (1997) states that colonialism threatened traditional pastoral livelihoods in Somalia and also permeated social life. Clan divisions in the nation were intensified and reinforced through colonial practices and the administrative, social, and cultural division of the country commissioned by colonial powers left Somalia in a substantially weakened state (Hashim, 1997). As Hashim (1997) states, "Italy's incursion in the South was clearly intended to promote the welfare of Italian settlers with little thought to improving conditions for Somalis." The Italian and British occupations impoverished local producers as they hoarded surplus commodities intended for local consumption. The subsistence economies of Somalia were ravaged as capitalist models infiltrated the country (Hashim, 1997).

Following nearly two decades of colonial rule, the era of Somali independence was slowly ushered in following World War II. The war had not only fostered a sense of Somali nationalism amongst Somalis who sought to unify the divided nation, but it also created tensions between the colonial powers (Lewis, 1965; Shelley, 2013). Italian forces,

which had up until then controlled the southern portion of Somalia, seized control over British Somaliland in 1940. This victory was short-lived, however, as the British soon regained control of northern Somalia in 1941 and subsequently annexed Italian Somaliland (Lewis, 1965; Shelley, 2013). In 1949, the United Nations brokered a deal that saw Italy regain control of their former territory, but under the condition that Somalia become fully independent in ten years (Lewis, 1965). To prepare for the eventual transfer of power, Somalis gained increasing responsibility in the political realm and the nation witnessed a surge of development programs. By 1956, Somalis had replaced a sizable portion of Italians in government administrative positions, which led to the creation of a legislative assembly. The Somali Youth League, a prominent political organization, was able to consolidate their power as they swept up 43 of the 60 seats provisioned for the Somali electorate (Lewis, 1965). Abdullahi Isse, the leader of the League, became the first prime minister of Somalia in 1956 and held that position until the end of the Italian trusteeship. Somalia gained full independence on July 1, 1960 and both British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland were united.

After the creation of the Somali Democratic Republic, Abdirashid Ali Shermarke led the country until his assassination in 1969. The nation was then led by Mohamed Siad Barre who maintained a dictatorial rule from 1969 to 1991 (Abdi, 2015; Janzen & Lewis, 2018; Shelley, 2013). Barre came from a military background, having trained with the Italian administration's military service and the British Military Administration of Somalia as a police officer. In his transformation of Somalia, he had hoped to simultaneously liberate Somalis from traditional structures that he believed did not serve

them and free them from a colonial past (Hashim, 1997). Barre had risen to power a mere nine years after Somalia had become a republic. A coup d'état led by Major General Barre and his 20 army officers and five police officers proved to be successful. Barre's regime initially enjoyed widespread support due to his crackdown on nepotism and clan-based favoritism, but support began to waiver as his rule became increasingly authoritarian (Greenfield, 1991). Following an unsuccessful invasion of the Ogaden region of Ethiopia ("Ogaden," 2016), Barre struggled to maintain a stronghold in Mogadishu and in 1991 the Hawiye-led United Somali Congress overthrew his government (Janzen & Lewis, 2018). The country was plunged into civil war when two rival warlords, Muhammad Farah Aydid and Ali Mahdi Mohamed, clashed violently with Barre's militias in the capital. Famine spread throughout the region as grain-producing regions were destroyed by war (Janzen & Lewis, 2018).

Reinstating peace in war torn Somalia did not prove to be an easy feat. Numerous peace conferences were held throughout the 1990s to put an end to the civil conflict; however, they were largely unsuccessful. The Transitional Federal Government (TFG) was finally ushered in, following peace talks in 2002. By 2004, the transitional government was inaugurated, with Abdullah Yusuf Ahmed serving as the interim president. The interim president was to serve for a five-year period while peace-building efforts continued. The TFG operated in Kenya in response to fears surrounding the security of a government based in Somalia (Janzen & Lewis, 2018). Security concerns increased as the Islamic Courts Union, which was an amalgamation of Sharia-based courts, gained control in mid-2006. They were quickly dismantled by a US backed

invasion by the end of the same year; however, this created a power vacuum that the militant Islamist group Al-Shabaab quickly took advantage of (Horst, 2017). Establishing a long-term government was of utmost importance as the transitional government's mandate was nearing its end date of August 20, 2012. Hassan Sheikh Mohamud was elected as president on September 10, 2012. His administration soon began to lose support, however, due to Mohamud's responses to various challenges in the country. Direct elections were to be held as soon as 2016, but due to security concerns, an indirect election was to be held. On February 8, 2017, former Prime Minister Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed won the election and currently sits as the president of Somalia (Janzen & Lewis, 2018). Nicknamed "Farmajo," Mohamed has received widespread support and offers hope to a nation ravaged by over two decades of civil conflict.

During the tumultuous history of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Somalia, the education sector has seen many changes. Traditional forms of education were largely informal and consisted of the elderly training young Somalis in the areas of history, military, fighting, and manners. Eventually this led to the formation of nomadic schools where children were given religious instruction; they were taught how to read and write the Quran. Somalia's largely informal education system was replaced by more formal systems in the 19th century after colonialism. These systems, however, were solely constructed to fulfill colonial goals. The purpose of colonial education was to train locals who would perform low-level administrative duties for imperial firms (Abdi, 1998). Rodney (1974) explains how the colonial education model resulted in "the participation of a few Africans in the domination and exploitation of the continent as a

whole." Following independence, the education sector saw new developments, including the implementation of literacy programs and training of educators. This era was short-lived, however, as the civil war plunged the education sector back into insecurity and the country was left without formal learning systems (Abdi, 1998; Markakis, 1987; Laitin & Samatar, 1987). In recent times, the education sector has become a target of reconstruction efforts as local initiatives attempt to rebuild formal institutions in the nation. While impressive improvements have been made, gaps continue to exist such as the lack of opportunities for the rural dwelling population (Cummings, 2003). Furthermore, women and girls' access to education continues to be a challenge, resulting in organizations such as UNICEF Somalia working with local governments to develop programs intended to bridge the gender gap ("Somalia," n.d.).

The intersection of gender and development in the Global South

In order to conduct a discourse analysis on gender in a development studies context, we must first examine the ways in which gender and women in the third world are represented. Prominent feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty (1984) examines the production of what she refers to as the "Third World Woman" in Western feminist literature. Women living in the Global South are spoken about as though they are a monolithic group that shares the same histories, experiences, and futures. Like other Western writings, feminist scholarship is political and discursive; it does not simply speak objectively about subjects – it is deliberate in the ideologies that it puts forth

(Mohanty, 1984). Speaking of the third world difference promoted in Western writing, Mohanty says the complexities of non-Western women's lives, such as religion, class, culture and race, are lost as their experiences become appropriated and colonized. In her analysis of the third world woman in Western texts, she finds that a coherent group is created into which non-Western women are expected to fit neatly (Mohanty, 1984). It is important to note that the creation of this group actually occurs prior to any analysis by a given author. Rather than uncovering concrete evidence that shows third world women as being "powerless," they are already deemed powerless before the evidence is presented. The author's job is to simply cherry-pick certain cases to prove this innate "powerlessness" (Mohanty, 1984). Mohanty uncovers ways that third world women are represented in Western discourse, which ultimately accomplishes the goal of constructing a "powerless" figure. They are as follows: women as universal dependents, victims of patriarchal violence, victims of the colonial process, victims of the familial system, victims of religious ideologies, and victims of the development process. This creates a monolithic class of women that supposedly reacts to the aforementioned structures in the exact same way every single time (Mohanty, 1984).

While Western literature views third world women as a monolith, there is a subset within this group with whom the West has developed a particular obsession: the Muslim woman. In Somali culture, Islam plays an important role and in conducting a discourse analysis using gender as the category of analysis, it is difficult to ignore the intersection of religion and gender in a country where 98.6% of the population identifies as Muslim (Pew Forum, 2015). Arab scholar Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) examines the Western

response to Afghan women living under Taliban rule to understand why the West thinks Muslim women are especially in need of saving. She recounts a 2001 address by First Lady Laura Bush that focused heavily on culture and religion as a detriment to women living in the region rather than focusing on the role that Western powers play in the destabilization of nations. Abu-Lughod states, "Most pressing for me was why the Muslim woman in general, and the Afghan woman in particular, were so crucial to this cultural mode of explanation, which ignored the complex entanglements in which we are all implicated" (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Laura Bush did not tackle pre-existing conditions that affected Afghan women, such as malnutrition and poverty. Instead, she conflated it with new malaises that arose after the Taliban's rise to power, such as the prohibition of girls and women attending school. What this speech did was garner support for a war and intervention that was supposed to free Afghan women from religious oppression (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Arguably, this is nothing new as colonial history shows that saving women from religious practices has been used as justification for colonial rule. Gayatri Spivak poignantly describes this as "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1988). Muslim women's existence is essentially reduced to feel-good liberation missions for Western benefactors.

To counteract the incorrect portrayal of third world women as helpless victims, post-colonial feminist legal scholar Ratna Kapur (2017) investigates how third world women can become agents of change. She finds that, internationally, the focus has mainly been on violence that women face and their victimization. While this is a very important issue, this focus on women as victims denies the same women the opportunity to be other

things. This articulation of the victim subject ends up defining their identity (Kapur, 2017). Kapur rejects the pervasiveness of representations of victim subjects as being completely disempowered. This passive image, which has largely gone uncontested, is not at all accurate. While postcolonial female subjects have been subjected to various harms, there are also many ways in which they have exercised agency and resistance. Kapur (2017) states that, "we need a more sophisticated subject that is both a victim and has agency." This is a very important notion that is in direct contrast to the helplessness of victim politics and the impracticality of what Kapur refers to as power feminism. Victim politics tells women they cannot overcome their powerlessness, while power feminism ignores very real obstacles to say "you can do anything if you put your mind to it." Using the Disney movie *Babe* as an example, Kapur explains that the middle ground between these messages is a "that'll do" mind set (Kapur, 2017). Shifting focus back to the post-colonial victim subject, there is a need to take into account the social and economic realities that third world women face. Victim subjects, who are just as complex as any other subject, can exercise partial agency. It does not mean that they will always prevail in the challenging situations they find themselves in, but the decisions they make are still valid and real. The following analysis of female circumcision research shows the pervasiveness of the image of a simultaneously weak, oppressed, and barbaric Somali woman that must be combatted if development projects and eradication campaigns are to ever be successful.

Analysis

The construction of female circumcision as a barbaric and non-Western phenomenon

My first concern with Western authored research on female circumcision in the Somali context is the use of the word "mutilation." This word emphasizes the belief that female circumcision is a barbaric phenomenon unique to non-Western cultures. The "mutilation" label is a direct result of the Western monopoly of power about which Mohanty speaks. In this case, the power to define what constitutes mutilation lies solely in Western hands (Mohanty, 1984). This is exemplified in the following quotes by Dutch health researcher Anke Van Der Kwaak (1992):

> "Bryk [lo] discusses the circumcision complex as consisting of 8 different types of female mutilations, bloody and non-bloody." (p. 778)
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> "The grandmothers who were themselves once virgins, and have suffered the effects of infibulation throughout their lives, organize the operations for their granddaughters. Their age confers status on them, and they enjoy being seen as the co-founders of the family. They have become powerful, and they use that power to have their own female relatives mutilated." (p. 783)
>
> "The price of identity is infibulation. From an outsider's point of view, however, we are dealing with a contradiction. No identity can be sound if one has to pay for it by humiliation and mutilation." (p. 783)

Van Der Kwaak's use of the word "bloody" in the first quote to describe circumcision is deliberate, as it emphasizes the invasiveness of the procedure in order to make it appear horrific. In the second quote, she calls to mind the imagery of mutilation when discussing the transmission of the practice through older women in the community. She portrays Somali women as a barbaric monolith that willingly inflicts unnecessary pain on those who cannot protect themselves. Lastly, Van Der Kwaak associates infibulation, which is the most severe form of circumcision, with humiliation and mutilation when discussing

the importance of female circumcision in the formation of gender identity in Somali culture. What makes the aforementioned characterizations problematic is that it completely disregards how Somali people view their own practice. One simply has to look to the words that Somali people use to refer to genital cutting in order to understand how they view the practice. Van der Kwaak (1992) actually notes that the words *gudniin* and *xalaaleys* in the Somali language translate to *circumcision* and *the act of purifying something or someone* respectively. Still, she fails to take the meaning into account or to acknowledge that Somali practitioners of female circumcision do not intend to harm their young daughters; unfortunately Western scholarship is abound with these images of barbaric African women who mutilate their young.

The framing of traditional African practices as barbaric is neither surprising nor new. This rhetoric can be traced back to the colonial era when Europeans first encountered various groups in Africa (Smith, 2011). Winter et al. (2002) contend that Western ethnocentrism in the postcolonial and globalized era has been repackaged as concern – that is, concern for girls and women who are subjected to "harmful traditional practices." In fact, modern liberal and feminist activism has made it its goal to open the eyes of those who engage in female circumcision to its supposed barbarism (Ahmadu, 2007; Smith, 2011). Implicit in the labeling of female circumcision as mutilating is the racist belief that only non-Western peoples are capable of causing harm. Furthermore, it plays into the trope that the female Somali Other is a member of a coherent group that shares the same intentions and beliefs concerning female circumcision (Mohanty, 2003). There are several types of female circumcision practiced in Somalia, ranging from a

symbolic pinprick of the clitoris (referred to as *sunna*) to the full suturing of the labia (Gele, 2013). Rather than engaging those who practice circumcision, to learn more about their myriad views, Western authors such as Van Der Kwaak have decidedly determined that circumcision is akin to mutilation. To use Spivak's words, denying Somali people the power to define the circumcision narrative effectively "conserves the subject of the West" as the locus of knowledge and power (Spivak, 1988). As a result, Western authors such as Van Der Kwaak can inaccurately depict Somali women as agents of mutilation and humiliation while the Western world accepts this as an incontrovertible fact.

While use of the "mutilation" moniker appears to be waning in more recent academic literature and eradication campaigns, another persistent problem with Western research is the characterization of female circumcision as a uniquely non-Western tradition. By examining the following quotes, it is evident that non-Somali authors weaponize female circumcision in order to distance Somali culture from Western society:

> "This provides an opportunity to show people of Somaliland, who perceive female circumcision to be normative, that girls can be 'well behaved' and 'good' even if they are not circumcised." (Vestbostad & Blystad, 2014, p. 31)
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> "In exile the 'naturalness' of the practice of female circumcision becomes questionable." (Johnsdotter, 2003, p.1)
>
> "Though we in the West may have clear perceptions about the practice of infibulation, we should try our notions with patience." (Van Der Kwaak, 1992, p. 785)
>
> "While assisting in the clinics, taking part in two training courses for traditional birth attendants (TBAs), and living, interviewing, and talking with women, I often encountered the practice of infibulation through the complaints of women, the complications they were suffering from, and the attempts being made to raise the consciousness of [TBAs] about this practice." (Van Der Kwaak, 1992, p. 777)

The Western authors make it a point to emphasize the supposed incongruity of female circumcision with Eurocentric ideals. Vestbostad & Blystad and Johnsdotter both speak of the Somali diaspora as a resource in the eradication of female circumcision. In doing so, they reveal their Eurocentric belief that those who have lived in the West can enlighten homeland Somalis enough to abandon the practice. Somali people must be shown the error of their ways by those who have migrated to European and North American societies and have seen the light. In fact, Johnsdotter implies that the unnaturalness of the procedure becomes apparent to Somalis only after living in a Western society. It is Van Der Kwaak who articulates this belief most plainly, as she says those in the West have clear perceptions of the intricacies of female circumcision. Van Der Kwaak goes on to speak about "raising the consciousness" of Somali birth attendants. I ask to what consciousness are Somali people being raised? Beneath the veneer of concern, it is evident that Western researchers and development practitioners believe they are guiding Somali people into the modern era.

This assertion that Somali people are in need of enlightenment by Western actors is rooted in the practice of development itself and Western concepts of modernity. As Escobar (1995) notes, the Western model of modernity, involving industrialization and capitalism, has been deemed the appropriate development model for the rest of the world. While assuming a nation is underdeveloped due to its "non-Western" practices is problematic in and of itself, in the case of female circumcision, it is not even an accurate assumption. There exist analogous Western practices that have been spared the "mutilation" label. For starters, forms of female genital cutting targeting the clitoris were

practiced in the West as recently as the 1900s as it was believed to cure "ailments" such as masturbation (Daly, 1979). Even contemporary sex-based body modifications widely practiced in Western cultures such as labioplasty, vaginal rejuvenation, and breast augmentation do not gain nearly as much attention as female circumcision, nor are they routinely labeled as being harmful (Smith, 2011). In fact, women in the West are lauded for exercising agency and making alterations to their body, whereas Black and Brown women in the Global South who practice circumcision are viewed as being coerced and in need of liberation so that they may join the rest of the World in the modern era (Smith, 2011). According to postcolonial and postdevelopment scholars such as Escobar (1995) and Ferguson (1994), this serves the purpose of making the West appear to be the pinnacle of modernity, while the Global South is deemed inherently backwards; this in turn creates an impetus for ill-informed and self-serving female circumcision eradication campaigns.

The narratives employed by Western authors are indeed inaccurate and damaging, but what is perhaps more interesting is that Somali authors propagate similar narratives in their own research. It is worth noting that both Gele and Abubakar refrain from using the term "female genital mutilation"; however, there are still instances where they use language that portrays the practice as barbaric and backwards:

> "The practice is often performed on girls between the ages of 0–9 years, thus making it one of the most horrific child tortures of our time." (Gele, 2012, p. 7)
>
> "The result shows that [female circumcision], which was formerly considered a form of cleanliness and an essential religious requirement, is now considered by Somali immigrants in Oslo as harmful, barbaric, and un-Islamic." (Gele, 2012, p. 14)

> "In fact, it helps to think of [female circumcision] as a complicated, interwoven web of misguided beliefs, social norms, identity, socio-economic issues, and power." (Abubakar, 2013, p. 480)

While the adverse physical and psychological trauma of female circumcision should be acknowledged, Gele's labeling of the practice as child torture vilifies those who practice it. Somali mothers do not wish to subject their daughters to torture. Furthermore, when Gele concludes that Somali immigrants in Oslo view female circumcision as harmful and barbaric, it is important to note that the Somali focus group participants he spoke with did not mention the word "barbaric" explicitly. Several participants go into detail about the various harms of the practice and how it has no basis in Islam:

> "This practice is not a religious requirement, and therefore we have to stop it. We have experienced its pain,so how could we subject the same pain to our daughter? (44-year-old female)" (Gele, 2012, p. 11)

> "I have two daughters and I didn't circumcise them, and their children (his grandchildren) will not be circumcised. I believe it is a harmful culture. Every harmful culture has a time for it to be eradicated; I think it is time for [female circumcision] to be eradicated. (54-year-old father of four daughters)" (Gele, 2012, p. 13)

Interestingly, the use of the word "barbaric" is Gele's own interpretation of the aforementioned opinions. Similarly, it is Abubakar who has deemed the beliefs of Somalis who practice the tradition as being "misguided." As a diasporic Somali living in the United States, labeling traditional Somali practices as misguided implies that her Western-informed beliefs about the practice are more accurate than the beliefs of native Somalis. Both Gele and Abubakar should be able to question the underlying motivations and beliefs about a tradition in a way that does not demean those who practice it. Furthermore, as Somali researchers in a discipline lacking proportional representation of

Somali scholars, there is a need to question harmful Western tropes and narratives about Somali culture.

Gele and Abubakar's conforming to existing narratives that characterize female circumcision as barbaric and backwards is a symptom of the wider problem of Western dominance in academia. Postcolonial scholar Edward Said (1978) argues in his magnum opus *Orientalism* that the cultural hegemony of the West allows White intellectuals to determine how other nations are spoken about. The problem with this dominance is that diasporic authors must rely on existing literature to frame their own analysis, leaving them susceptible to adopting Western tropes and narratives. Associations with mutilation and barbarism are potentially embedded into the subconscious of diasporic Somali authors who subsequently emulate similar narratives in their own writing. Exploring why these harmful narratives are not challenged and accepted almost as indisputable facts by diasporic academics requires delving into the legacy of colonization and the resulting internalization of inferiority. Frantz Fanon writes, "… the impressionability and sensibility of the Young African are at the mercy of the various assaults made upon them by the very Nature of Western Culture" (Fanon, 1965). Rather than questioning the existing rhetoric in female circumcision literature, Gele and Abubakar join the cacaphony of derogatory depictions of Somali people. Nkuzi Michael Nnam (2007) asserts that this is due to colonized African peoples regarding their own cultural practices as shameful long after gaining independence from colonial powers. Whether it is intentional or subconscious, Gele and Abubakar's use of words such as "barbaric" and "misguided" perpetuates and, more importantly, legitimizes the existing negative portrayal of Somali

women and men who support female circumcision. It is imperative that Somali authors question the legitimacy of these narratives in order to decolonize their own writing.

Moving away from the negative narratives present in Gele and Abubakar's research, there are several instances where they discuss female circumcision in a more neutral or even positive light. Both authors demonstrate instances where they eschew the negative perception of female circumcision as a practice that is fueled by a barbaric desire to cause harm. A prime example of this is when Gele remarks,

> "Thus, ensuring that a daughter undergoes circumcision is a loving act aimed not only to boost a girl's chance of a successful marriage, but also to promote integration into her culture." (Gele, 2013, p. 2)

He acknowledges that the practice is rooted in love and compassion rather than mutilation and humiliation. As mentioned previously, *xalaaleys*, which means purification, is used to refer to the circumcision procedure. Somali women who circumcise their daughters do so with the intention of purifying them and bringing them into the social fold. It could be argued that Gele, as a Somali author, is familiar with the nuances of female circumcision and understands its social importance. By calling attention to the intention of parents who choose to circumcise their daughters, Gele effectively combats the notion that Somali people are a barbaric group that intentionally harms girls. Abubakar further combats the barbaric narrative by highlighting the existence of female circumcision in Western countries. She writes:

> "Historically, practices of [female circumcision] have been documented around the world, including Asia, Australia, France, England, and the United States. For example,

> circumcision was performed on women in the nineteenth and twentieth century to "cure" sexual "disorders" like masturbation and lesbianism—sometimes even when medical personnel knew there were no benefits to carrying out the procedure." (Abubakar, 2013, p. 477)

I have already touched on the problems and inaccuracies associated with the characterization of female circumcision as a non-Western practice, but what is noteworthy is that Abubakar is the only author to acknowledge that female circumcision is not unique to non-Western countries. This is imperative because it dismantles the underlying belief espoused by non-Western authors that Somalis are backwards and in need of being saved from their barbaric traditions. According to Spivak (1988), native voices can run the risk of becoming mouthpieces for first world intellectuals. By boldly highlighting that the West has engaged in the same practice it frowns upon, Abubakar ensures that the native voice does not just serve the goals of the dominant group. Additionally, by challenging prevalent tropes peddled by Western authors, both Abubakar and Gele ensure that Somali women are not portrayed as underdeveloped and oppressed, as is often the way third world women are portrayed (Mohanty, 2003). This demonstrates the value of diasporic authors who are able to critically analyze the traditions of both the homeland and the Western host country. Abubakar and Gele subvert dominant Eurocentric narratives and speak to the aspects of female circumcision that Western authors conveniently ignore; they show us why native voices matter in Somali development research.

The silencing of Somali women and denial of their agency

In addition to the construction of female circumcision as a barbaric and non-Western phenomenon, the lack of agency afforded to Somali women is another prevalent narrative in Western circumcision literature. One way in which this is done is by characterizing Somali women as helpless and in need of salvation. This trope of saving Muslim women is not new, as we have seen in Abu-Lughod's (2002) analysis of Western representations of veiled women. She writes, "Projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged" (Abu-Lughod, 2002). This superiority is evident when Van Der Kwaak begins her examination of female circumcision and gender identity with a Somali poem speaking about the pain a circumcised woman experiences on her wedding night. Referring to this poem, she says the following:

> "In this paper I will clarify why this cry for help is usually silenced in countries where circumcision is practiced, and enumerate the main impediments for the abolition of female circumcision, particularly infibulation." (Van Der Kwaak, 1992, p. 777)

Labeling a Somali woman's recollection of one experience as a cry for help feeds into the Eurocentric image of the helpless and weak third world woman (Mohanty, 1984). It depicts Somali women as incapable of enacting any change in their own lives. Furthermore, the silencing that Van Der Kwaak mentions is, in fact, a direct symptom of Western dominance. The image of the supposedly silenced Somali women justifies the salvation mission of White researchers and development practitioners. As Spivak (1988) laments, the historically silenced subaltern woman is used to serve the interests of those who have the power to choose how she is depicted. Western authors such as Van Der

Kwaak endorse the narrative of a weak and muted Somali woman in order to legitimize their "liberation" efforts.

Another way that Western authors deny Somali women's agency is by invalidating their opinions concerning female circumcision. The most egregious case involves Ahlberg's dismissal of her Somali focus group participants' views about the practice. When they say that the practice of circumcision is rooted in tradition rather than religion, Ahlberg concludes that they are lying and says, "Paradoxes implying denial and avoidance emerged. Female circumcision was described, as just 'a tradition' that has little to do with Islam" (Ahlberg, 2004, p. 50). We see Ahlberg's dismissal of her participants' views yet again when they discuss the various challenges they face in a Western society that does not accept the practice and their steps to practicing less severe versions of the procedure. The following excerpts detail the participants' views towards the practice and the ways in which they negotiate its meaning in a Western society:

> "First of all we have a tradition . . . an old tradition . . . not something we are starting now. We are not going to say that today we are in a new modern place, that we should not circumcise our daughters. We must continue to perform suna." (Ahlberg, 2004, p. 68)
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> "Since the school programme only focuses on the bad aspects of [female circumcision], this can affect the relationship between the circumcised and the uncircumcised . . . It would have been better if they . . . involved only the circumcised. When our teacher talks about circumcision, she dramatizes as if it was a disease . . . students pity you and think you are different." (Ahlberg, 2004, p. 66)

Ahlberg responds to the ways in which the participants reassess the practice in exile with further dismissal:

> "There was denial that [female circumcision] is still prevalent against enormous fear of bringing up uncircumcised daughters in a liberal sexual moral environment. There was lying about [female circumcision]'s status as a balancing act for the Somali girls." (Ahlberg, 2004, p. 71)

Rather than acknowledging the lived experiences of Somali women whose lives are now in flux after moving from their homelands, the author accuses them of being dishonest. It is deemed unacceptable that the Somali participants interviewed would deviate from the self-serving assumptions of the researcher. While Ahlberg is blatant in her dismissal of Somali women's views, Johnsdotter also dismisses their views, albeit in a subtler manner. She does this by attributing their continued practice and support of female circumcision to a lack of education:

> "This makes sense, if one considers the fact that to the great majority of people who practise female circumcision, the religious texts are out of reach. Reflection upon Islamic sources is an activity restricted to the educated and the religious elite, and the discussion does not reach ordinary people." (Johnsdotter, 2003, p. 364)

She contends that women who still practice circumcision do so simply because they are not educated and do not have the ability to read and interpret religious texts. Johnsdotter cites several *hadith*, or sayings attributed to Prophet Muhammad, that oppose female circumcision in its most extreme forms. According to Johnsdotter, those who do not have access to interpretations that condemn the practice assume that undergoing female circumcision is the authentic way to be Muslim. This summarily delegitimizes the decisions of Somali women who lack literacy skills. It creates a criterion for when a woman's decisions shall be considered valid. In this case, Somali women who cannot read are deemed incapable of making a sound decision. It is to say that if only they knew

better they would not be in support of circumcision. On the contrary, Somali women's decisions and life experiences are valid with or without the approval of Western actors.

The victimization of Somali women and denial of their life experiences demonstrated by Van Der Kwaak, Ahlberg, and Johnsdotter are remnants of colonial practices; it is a continuation of colonial justifications for the subjugation of non-White bodies. Castro-Gomez (2002) explains that the concept of race has been used in the colonial era to create a hierarchy of inferiority. Using the subjugation of Native Americans during the Spanish conquest as a key example, he says that hierarchical differences in the social division of labor correspond to perceived differences in the level of development. This means that groups deemed to be more advanced and modern are justified in the subjugation of those lower on the totem pole. Furthermore, this legitimizes the occupation of their land and resources because they are not "civilized" enough to harness all of the benefits that lie beneath their feet. Scientific racism fuels this line of thought as the colonized group is seen as the losers of the evolutionary game. Their supposed inferiority is an objective and empirically verifiable outcome of evolution (Castro-Gomez, 2002). This belief that Somali women are inferior and cannot help themselves serves as the ethical basis of Western interest in female circumcision in Somali society.

Development projects reiterate these same justifications, albeit in a more covert and palatable manner, as Maria Eriksson Baaz (2005) discovers in her examination of the paternalism and African otherness that is rife in development projects. She concludes that

the presence of Western development workers in African countries is motivated by underlying beliefs that they know how to better civilize African peoples and, more importantly, it is their duty to civilize them. What has been described as the White man's burden refers to this duty. Western populations, having been the supposed benefactors of evolutionary progress, now feel it is their job to ensure that all of humankind reaps the benefits of progress and modernity (Baaz, 2005). It is this reasoning that allows Western authors to deny outright the opinions and experiences of Somali women. They are interviewed by Western researchers under the guise of learning more about their motivations, only to be told they are wrong or lacking the understanding to make an informed decision. Due to their perceived lack of evolutionary progress, Western authors take on a paternalistic role. This, in turn, fuels eradication campaigns, which address issues that either do not exist or are not a priority for Somali women. Somali women are told what they should be concerned about, while their legitimate concerns are deemed irrelevant.

Similarly, the narrative of a weak and powerless Somali woman is a fixture of the articles written by Somali scholars. In the context of female circumcision, Somali women are spoken of as bodies subjected to the practice rather than willing actors. Hamilton (2011) attributes this inaccurate portrayal of the colonized subject to the separation of the devised representation from their actual reality. Gele exemplifies this separation of representation from reality by using the term "victim" to refer to Somali girls and women who have undergone female circumcision:

> "The victims of [female circumcision] suffer permanent and irreversible health damage that may negatively affect their health over the course of their entire life." (Gele, 2012, p. 8)

> "Accordingly, a prior study shows an extremely high maternal mortality rate of 31 deaths in 734 deliveries in Galkaayo, Somalia (4,223 in 100,000), with all the women in this study being victims of infibulations." (Gele, 2013, p. 3)

While it is true that female circumcision, particularly infibulation, can have many negative health consequences, not everyone who engages in the practice suffers these effects or perceives them as negative. As mentioned previously, there are various forms of female circumcision practiced in Somalia and there is an array of responses to the different forms. Participants in Gele's focus group share their opinions on infibulation, also known as Pharaonic circumcision, as well as milder forms such as *sunna*:

> "I do not support the total abandonment of [female circumcision], but I want the Pharaonic type to be abandoned. Girls should get the mild Sunna. It is harmless and it does not interrupt the daily work of girls. (35-year old female)" (Gele, 2013, p. 6)

> "I believe the former type (Pharaonic) was better, the Sunna form is not good. In the Sunna form, there is no difference between old women and girls regarding virginity because both are open. When a mother of 10 children and a young girl cannot be differentiated regarding virginity, as both are open, it is a big shame. I support the Pharaonic form and I encourage mothers to subject daughters to Pharaonic. (20-year-old female)" (Gele, 2013, p. 6)

Evidently, the variations in female circumcision elicit an array of responses. While some may believe infibulation is harmful, there are other women who prefer more severe forms of circumcision. Using a blanket term to refer to those who have undergone any form of female circumcision effectively victimizes all Somali women. Gele seems to conveniently forget that Somali women are not a monolith and it is possible for them to view themselves as victims, empowered actors, and everything in between. Furthermore,

he invalidates Somali women's autonomy, just as Western authors did, by attributing the continuance of the practice to ignorance:

> "The continuation of [female circumcision] among Somalis has been largely associated with the community's view that [female circumcision] is a religious obligation. Thus, an improved knowledge regarding the religious aspect of [female circumcision] observed among Somalis in Oslo reveals that major progress toward the abandonment of [female circumcision] is being made in Norway." (Gele, 2012, p. 14)

Again, this line of thinking frames Somali women as beings who are not truly in control of their actions. It does not account for the women who are well versed in religious doctrine and still choose to practice female circumcision:

> "Pharaonic is a crime according to our religion and it is not allowed, but every person has his/her choice, I always support Pharaonic and I still support it. Let God punish me for that if God wishes."…(20-year-old female) (Gele, 2013, p. 6)
>
> "Islam does not accept Pharaonic circumcision. But each individual does what he/she thinks is safer and good for his/her daughters, and we feel that Pharaonic is more secure for us. I know what is good for my daughter, it is my responsibility to do it. (41-year-old female)" (Gele, 2013, p. 6)

Gele contributes to the trope of a weak and helpless female Other that, as Kapur (2017) poignantly notes, requires the assistance of foreign actors regardless of whether *she* actually wants it or not. The characterization of Somali women as perpetual victims of female circumcision conveniently excludes many voices, while also doing a disservice to those who may legitimately regard themselves as victims. This is because Gele uses a protectionist lens to deem Somali women as incapable of exercising agency. It is this protectionist view that ultimately leads to the failure of so called "liberating" projects and campaigns that target women as the supposed beneficiary (Kapur, 2017). While Western

development practitioners may be motivated by colonial justifications such as paternalism and the White man's burden, Somali practitioners fall prey to protectionist justifications. Regardless of the underlying motivation, the result is unfortunately the same. Rather than treating Somali women as a monolith of helpless victims, researchers and activists alike must ask how Somali women exercise agency even when they are victims.

Abubakar furthers the perception of weak and helpless Somali women by broadening the scope beyond female circumcision. In discussing a Somali woman's role in the traditional nomadic setting, she says the following:

> "In the nomadic settings, women also are responsible for the manufacture and maintenance of the temporary housing, household utensils and other items. This existence sets the stage for the nomadic Somali woman and her powerlessness: she is in charge of all the things that are temporary, and can easily be disposed of, such as wooden utensils and the hut, which is made of bamboo sticks and grass." (Abubakar, 2013, p. 480)

She attributes Somali women's powerlessness to their responsibility for maintaining the temporary household. This includes preparing food and managing household items such as utensils. According to Abubakar, this represents a lack of concrete power as power lies in permanence. On the contrary, it could very well be argued that the Somali woman is the anchor of a nomadic society as that lifestyle would not be possible without someone who is able to maintain a temporary dwelling as the family moves locations. By rendering Somali women powerless in general, Abubakar conveniently sets the stage for victimizing them in the context of female circumcision. If they are already viewed as having little power to begin with, it is that much easier to frame them as victims of

circumcision. Unsurprisingly, the problem with this is that the individual is reduced to nothing more than a victim; any other articulation and nuance of who they are as a person is lost as they are perpetually regarded as a wounded and powerless subject (Kapur, 2017). While Abubakar uses the example above to "prove" the powerlessness of Somali women, it may very well be that she already concluded *a priori* that they were powerless and simply sought out a case to support this supposed powerlessness (Mohanty, 2003). It is telling that both Abubakar and Gele choose to portray Somali women as victims when they have the opportunity to reject that narrative. As Somali authors, they have actually become proxies for Western authors who typically relegate women from the Global South to object status while viewing themselves as the real subjects, with the power to create change (Mohanty, 2003); Abubakar and Gele's proximity to Western conceptions of freedom by way of being diasporic Somalis has afforded them subject status as they are now the ones who are categorizing Somali women as powerless. Ultimately, the narrative that Somali women lack agency and power in many aspects of their lives must be eschewed, as it is not only inaccurate, but also unhelpful in informing development practices in Somalia.

It is evident that Somali authors also use similar strategies to present Somali women as victims; both groups use language that victimizes and strips the women of their agency and they also attribute their valid choice to practice circumcision to ignorance. I would like to draw attention, however, to Abubakar's acknowledgement of a victim agency. Abubakar is the only author to explicitly mention that Somali women are not "perfect" victims. She highlights the way in which Somali women use female

circumcision as a tool to raise their position in society. In order to overcome social exclusion and shame resulting from not being circumcised, women choose to practice circumcision as a way to bring their family into the fold of Somali society. She concludes:

> "In that sense, the women who undergo [female circumcision] should not be viewed simply as victims at the mercy of others, but neither should they be seen as a people who have made individual choices to allow themselves to be circumcised or infibulated." (Abubakar, 2013, p. 478)

She raises a very important point that any scholar, particularly non-Somali authors, should keep in mind when writing about Somali women. The circumstances in which circumcision is performed may not always be ideal, but Somali women choose the best option for themselves and their daughters, among limited options. This is not to say they have total freedom in their decisions, for they are still bound by societal expectations, but they choose whether and how they should meet those expectations. Opting for the symbolic pinprick of the clitoris instead of the suturing of the labia is one example. They are able to choose a form of circumcision that is acceptable to them but also conforms to societal standards. By voicing the mere existence of a victim with agency, Abubakar works to dismantle the hegemonic representation of the victim subject (Kapur, 2017). Kapur (2017) expounds that this representation actually serves privileged White Western women because it excludes the actual concerns of marginalized women. It may not seem like a grand gesture, but what Abubakar has done is resist a colossal colonial discourse of domination to allow Somali women to be represented as they actually are rather than what they ought to be (Hamilton, 2011). It is one example of how greater representation

of Somali authors in development literature is the only way to transcend Eurocentric discourses.

Somali women as sexually oppressed subjects of Islam

I would be remiss if I examined harmful Eurocentric tropes in female circumcision literature and failed to discuss the ways in which Islam is presented. Abu-Lughod (2002) argues that the vilification of Islam is used to support various feminist "liberation" missions such as those targeting Afghan women living under Taliban rule. Islam is the perennial scapegoat as it is routinely presented as the root of all social malaises in societies where it is a dominant religion. Because Somalia is a Muslim majority country, it is expected that the prevalence of the practice would be inextricably linked to Islam. Unexpectedly, all but one of the Western authors acknowledge that Islam does not explicitly support female circumcision. With the exception of Ahlberg who refutes her participants' viewpoint that female circumcision in Somalia is motivated by culture rather than religion, the other authors clarify that the Quran does not actually mandate female circumcision. It could reasonably be argued, though, that the mere absence of female circumcision from the Quran does not absolve Islam entirely. What is truly impressive is that the Western authors go one step further and actually reference the presence of female circumcision in non-Muslim societies, as well as pre-Islamic Somalia:

> "Female circumcision is not customary in central Muslim countries in the Middle East, while a large number of non-Muslim societies in Africa practise female circumcision." (Vestbostad & Blystad, 2014, p. 25)

> "The custom existed before Christianity and is said to have been brought via trade routes to the ruling groups in Sudan and Somalia. Through Arab migrations Islam was introduced into Sudan as it was in Somalia and pharaonic circumcision and beliefs in spirits and ancestors were incorporated into the Islamic belief system." (Van Der Kwaak, 1992, p. 780)

> "Female circumcision is the general term for a wide range of practices involving female genital mutilation among Muslims, Christians and Jews in different parts of the world, as well as among groups with non-scriptural religions." (Johnsdotter, 2003, p. 362)

It is refreshing to see Western authors actually present Islam in a rather neutral manner, given the tendency to associate the religion with violence against and oppression of women. By emphasizing the presence of the practice in various religious environments, the normative discourse of Islam as an all-encompassing oppressive force is rejected. Van Der Kwaak counteracts this narrative of oppression and says, "the viewpoint that women have to be protected from their own nature, and that their sexual desires must be curbed is of course not alien to Western culture with its Judeo-Christian roots" (Van Der Kwaak, 1992, p. 781). In order to avoid what Mohanty (2003) describes as "falsely universalizing methodologies" that only serve the interests of the dominant class, frank discussion about the oppressive elements of Western religions and cultures is required. By identifying the same destructive structures and elements in Western contexts, the notion that Muslim women alone must be protected loses credibility.

The majority of selected Western authors manage to discuss the intersection of female circumcision and Islam in a way that does not reinforce harmful Eurocentric tropes about Muslim women, but the question still remains: does this mean they have a right to speak on these issues? Following Amina Mama (2007): is it ethical to study Africa? I firmly argue that it is not ethical for Western authors to occupy this academic

space even if they are approaching the topic at hand in a fair and unbiased manner. This is because, at the root of it all, a gross fascination with what they regard as African barbarism fuels their interest in studying Africa. The sheer overabundance of academic literature on female circumcision in Somalia and the wider African subcontinent points to the desire to expose the grotesque morbidity of African cultures. Somali issues are worth studying only when they further stereotypes of barbaric pre-modern savages. In many ways, this is the academic equivalent of the human zoos run by European colonial powers in the 19th and 20th centuries (Sanchez-Arteaga, 2010). These attractions reduced Black bodies to nothing more than freaks whose sole purpose was to entertain the White civilized masses. While human zoos are relics of the past, the same fascination continues to be exhibited under the thin veneer of scholarly pursuits. African scholar Achille Mbembe (2001) attributes this to the fact that Africa is only ever interpreted through a negative lens. By viewing the African subcontinent and its inhabitants are inherently lacking, primitiveness is the category of analysis through which everything else is understood; when Africa is seen as possessing things, it is often of minimal worth (Mbembe, 2001). By excluding native Somali researchers from academic spaces, the focus can continue to be on issues that endorse this image of Africa as a disease-ridden wasteland riddled with social malaises. Underrepresentation of Somali scholars is a deliberate move that ensures female circumcision continues to be an issue even if it is not a huge priority for Somalis.

The study of Africa can only be ethical if African authors are in control of setting the academic agenda; it is their situated knowledge that allows them to determine what

the relevant issues are and how to present them in an unbiased manner. In the context of Somali authors writing about Islam, Abubakar and Gele also manage to discuss the role that Islam plays in a fair manner. Rather than attempting to link the prevalence of the practice to the religion, they both emphasize that Islam is mischaracterized in Somali culture. This notion is very important as it works to undo the narrative of what Mohanty (1984) describes as women being perpetual victims of religious ideology. She contends that Western authors tend to unify Islam as a singular religion that equally affects, or does not affect, women in a singular manner. This kind of analysis results in nuance in religion and personal specificity being lost as all women are subjected to a narrow interpretation of Islam (Mohanty, 1984). In the following quotes, Abubakar and Gele bring nuance to the discussion by describing the intersection of Islam and culture in the context of female circumcision:

> "Finally, misrepresentations of religion also have played a role in the perpetuation of FC. Historically, defenders of FC have argued that Islam mandates this procedure. In fact, it does not, but in societies with high rates of illiteracy such misrepresentations die slowly." (Abubakar, 2013, p. 479)

> "The motives for the practice are complex and vary between different communities, contexts, and over time. These motives are all rooted in tradition and culture, though none of them carries a religious or scientific basis." (Gele, 2013, p. 1)

The Somali authors' acknowledgment of the various factors involved in the continuation of circumcision allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the practice. Futhermore, Gele is cognizant that the tradition predates Islam and says, "Although [female circumcision] predates all contemporary global religions that practice it today, the majority of Somalis believe that [female circumcision] is mandated by Islam" (Gele,

2012, p. 8). Similar to the Western authors who also discussed the existence of female circumcision in other religions, Gele subverts the Islamophobic belief that Islam is the root of any and all social harms. What really sets the Somali authors' analysis of circumcision apart from that of Western authors is the discussion of women's sexual freedom in Islam. Gele explicitly counteracts the general tendency to portray Islam as a force that oppresses female sexuality and explains:

> "Still, the important point to note is that Islam safeguards women's rights to sexual enjoyment and health, and if female circumcision violated those rights it would automatically be considered as being forbidden." (Gele, 2013, p. 8)

If Islam is not outright blamed for the harmful effects of female circumcision, then stressing Islam's conservative stance on sexual relations implies it. It is important that native Somali authors speak frankly about the sexual freedoms that Muslim women enjoy as this singlehandedly dismantles the idea that Somali women are victims of female circumcision by way of Islam's oppressive stance on sexual freedom. What is perplexing and noteworthy is that Abubakar does not discuss Islam and sexual freedom at all. It is perplexing because, as a Somali woman, it is almost expected that Abubakar would speak on the nexus of religion and oppression against women. In this absence, however, lies an unspoken expression. It offers the viewpoint that Islam may not be the big bad wolf as is often portrayed in Western media and pop culture, especially in relation to issues such as female circumcision. Surely, if Abubakar believed it to be an inherently oppressive force, she would have raised it in her discussion of female circumcision. Again, it is this nuance in viewpoints and experiences that is necessary in order to paint a more accurate and comprehensive picture of female circumcision in the Somali context.

The above quotes are a testament to the importance of native voices in international development literature. While Western authors may bring many valid points to the female circumcision discussion, it is Somali authors and, in particular, women Somali authors, who are able to set the agenda of what is relevant in the discussion of female circumcision. For example, when Gele notes the safeguarding of women's sexual rights in Islam and Abubakar does not even provide any commentary, they are both affirming the issues surrounding female circumcision that actually matter to Somali women. To illustrate how this is done, I return to Mohanty's (1984) point about the universalization of religion and its effects on third world women. Mohanty gives the example of Pirzada women who practice purdah, a social practice that entails the seclusion of women by way of clothing or physical segregation. She explains that a universalized interpretation of Islamic ideology is used to justify the practice of purdah when, in reality, the practice was tied closely to the personal security it afforded Pirzada women (Mohanty, 1984). Similarly, while non-Somali authors may erroneously attempt to locate justifications for female circumcision in Islamic ideology, it is Somali authors who are able to understand just how much or how little Islam influences certain social practices. Abubakar demonstrates this when she discusses the many factors that influence a Somali woman's decision to undergo circumcision:

> "There also is an economic incentive for the perpetuation of FC. For example, Somali circumcisers—who typically are also birth attendants or midwives— are given gifts in cash or kind." (Abubakar, 2013, p. 478)

> "In the Somali situation, there are also accompanying rituals that do not involve tangible gifts, but still are of significant value. For girls following the ritual of their circumcision,

> there is a period of convalescence, when the girls will not have any chores and somebody is at their beck and call." (Abubakar, 2013, p. 479)
>
> "Ideas of beauty, hygiene and honor also are implicated in the practice of FC. This includes the belief that the clitoris is unclean and could poison infants during birth…" (Abubakar, 2013, p. 479)

Rather than eliminating specificity in Islam in order to use it to explain complex practices, it is imperative that scholars unpack issues to get to the root of the various factors involved. Somali authors such as Gele and Abubakar add tremendous value to the discussion of female circumcision in Somali society because they understand better than anyone else how religion, social practices, and norms interact. Instead of a regurgitation of Islamophobic tropes, both authors shape the discursive agenda by speaking about issues that are actually worth discussing. This underscores the importance of native Somali voices in Somali-focused research. It is evident that Somali authors offer a more nuanced analysis of subjects that are misrepresented in Western academic research. Space must be made in the academic world to allow for native authors to tell their own stories, histories, and experiences.

Conclusion

In this paper, I examined the ethical and practical consequences of underrepresentation of Somali authors in Somali development research and argued that increased representation of Somali authors ultimately results in research that is of a superior quality. I analyzed harmful narratives and rhetoric in female circumcision

research focusing on Somalia authored by Western and Somali academics. Using a postcolonial and intersectional feminist framework, I concluded that Somali authors produce academic research on female circumcision in the Somali context that is less biased than Western authored texts. By examining the way that both groups of authors propagate harmful narratives such as female circumcision as a barbaric and non-Western phenomenon, Somali women as resistless victims, and Islam as a sexually oppressive force, I argued that, despite internalized Eurocentrism, Somali authors still offer a more nuanced analysis of female circumcision. While, at times, Somali authors employ the same damaging rhetoric that the West uses to portray practitioners of female circumcision as backwards savages, there are instances where they subvert this representation and showcase the practice as a loving act. Additionally, they recall the existence of the practice in Western history to dismantle the Eurocentric belief that so-called harmful practices exist only in the Global South. Somali authors also dispel the belief that third world women are perfect victims by discussing the ways in which Somali women exercise agency in their choice to practice circumcision. Lastly, Somali authors discuss Islam in a neutral manner much like their Western counterparts, but Gele goes one step further to highlight the sexual freedoms to which Muslim women are entitled. While I attributed Somali authors' use of hegemonic tropes and imagery to a lingering colonial mentality, I also stressed the instances where they break free from colonial representations of Somali women and practices as moments of subaltern resistance (Spivak, 1988).

The impetus for this comparative discourse analysis stems from Markus Hoehne's (2015) assertion, which began the introduction, that there are not many Somalis who qualify as serious academic scholars. Making Hoehne's statement even bolder is the claim that Somalis do not value scholarship. I contend that it is not that Somalis do not value scholarship, but that Western academia does not value Somali scholarship. There is a dire need for the inclusion of native voices when the subject of study is situated in the Global South. In the case of female circumcision literature in the Somali context, the disparity between the number of Western authored texts and Somali authored texts alone attests to the disdain with which the Western academic world regards native voices. It is Western counterparts, such as Hoehne, who act as gatekeepers to Western dominated academic circles. Colonial and institutionalized racism means that Somali voices are deemed unimportant unless our stories are seen through Western eyes. Somali people have effectively been excluded from shaping their own narratives. Instead, Somali practices such as female circumcision are exoticized and vilified by Western academics, and Somali authors must conform to harmful narratives in order to be heard. Essentially, they are forced to submit to the will of Western scholars if they want their stories to be told at all. Somali people, and all other marginalized voices, must reject this paltry offer and demand full reign of their narratives. The question posed by Somali academics in response to Hoehne's diatribe remains: can the Somali speak? My answer is a resounding yes; not only can the Somali speak, but inclusion of the Somali voice in academia ultimately results in higher quality research. And to anyone who may still have doubts about whether Somalis value scholarship, I leave you with this Somali proverb: *aqoon la'aan waa iftiin la'aan* -- to be without knowledge is to be without light.

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