There is no shelter/home without woman – *Haween la’aani waa hoy la’aan* (A Somali proverb)

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Key words home • Somali • qualitative research • gender

In my home, the living room or lounge reflects an ongoing battle between two competing notions of purpose. When we first moved to the house it was set up as a public-facing space within an otherwise private domain: a front room. In selecting the furniture, I gave priority to middle-class aesthetics and display over comfort: the small TV screen was dwarfed by bookshelves and an indoor plant I had owned for 20 years; the artefacts held no material value but each had its own back story steeped in family history; the pictures were of kith and kin on symbolic occasions of family formation and maintenance. Over the years, this performance of identity has been overrun by the demands of the room's everyday function as a family space. The plant, neglected, has died; my grandmother's Chinese-style cabinet overflows with children's games; a sculpture carved by my father competes for attention with Lego® figures, pens and game controllers, and the room is now dominated by a large TV screen. It is a busy room which, empirical studies indicate, is typical of the display of family life in the UK as a classed performance of function and ideal (Pink, 2004; Gabb, 2008).

During the fieldwork for my ethnography on marriage and intimacy among Somali migrants in Bristol, carried out between 2013 and 2016 (Carver, 2017), I was invited by many of the female participants to sit and take tea with them in their front/living rooms. As a research opportunity, this seemed ideal, for as Gabb (2008: 42) has observed, 'if the family is largely experienced at home, what better place to document it?' But while I was made welcome, these rooms presented me with a dilemma: there was precious little to document. In dramatic contrast to the front/living room of my own home as well as the numerous front/living rooms I have had occasion to visit over my lifetime, these rooms were cleansed of clutter, and any indications that they might have functions other than for the reception of guests were minimal. Typically they contained nothing more than a television, a sofa, a coffee table, and occasionally an Islamic text on the wall. In all of the houses, aside from a small standing room-only kitchen (similarly sparse), this was the main living space of the family, and yet evidence of family was scant. There was no material trace of children beyond their physical presence. No toys, no photographs, no ornaments, no...
bookshelves, no pictures, no décor, no adornments: no signs at all of what I understood as family life, either functional or ideal.

I pondered if the lack of personalisation of the family space was an indication of reluctance to belong, perhaps indicative of a temporality of residence that reflected the transitory nature of ‘refugeeness’, the precariousness of the UK rental market and thus the foregrounding of a transnational identity. It would have been an easy conclusion to reach and one that has been assumed by several scholars of diaspora Somalis. Certainly some participants had invested in property development in Somalia/land, while only one participant owned their own property in the UK. But this reflected practical concerns including a combination of religious prohibition against mortgages and a lack of sufficient income. The property market in Somalia/land was more readily accessible due to the smaller sums required: others kept savings in jewellery or gold. The ‘display’ (Finch, 2007) of family and intimacy in these homes took some time for me to comprehend: indeed, it initially appeared as non-existent. But to interpret this lack of display as a lack of belonging, as a sign of not being ‘at home’, would be misleading. Such a reading revealed more about my conceptions of home and family life than it did about those of my participants. And such mis-readings are common, and not just within academia.

When Ayaan arrived home one day in Mogadishu from selling bread in the market, she found her house on fire. Her mother was weeping outside over the dead body of her father. A neighbour had kindly rushed in after the attackers had left and managed to rescue a bag from the fire, which he pressed upon Ayaan. In the bag were what she described as ‘old clothes’ along with a crumpled black and white photograph taken six months earlier, showing Ayaan and her husband on their wedding day. Ayaan’s husband had been kidnapped by Al-Shabaab a few months after the wedding and they had never managed to move in together into their own home; Ayaan remained living with her parents.

Ayaan was subsequently granted asylum in the UK, and, after remaking contact with her husband, applied for him to join her. But the Home Office decision-maker and the Immigration Judge who heard the appeal found the story implausible. There were just too many loose ends. Why was the only photograph she had of her wedding day stuffed in a plastic bag along with old clothes? How come it had been this bag that the neighbours had rescued? Was she claiming this to be a lucky coincidence? Why had they never lived together? They did not accept that he was her husband or that they had been married.

In the UK, photographs of significant occasions are normally displayed on the mantelpiece or the wall, old clothes are consigned to the back of an upstairs cupboard, and married couples live together ideally in their own home, at least initially. From Ayaan’s perspective the signifier guri (meaning ‘house’) or gurigeyga (‘my house’) did all the work necessary to render her narrative plausible.¹ For the decision-makers, their concept of ‘home’ made the story incredible. No one thought to ask Ayaan what ‘home’ meant to her.

Ayaan’s parents’ house was a one-room domed hut inside of which there was no furniture. She kept all her worldly possessions (her one change of clothes and the precious photograph) in a single bag to protect them from the dusty uncarpeted floor that had to be watered every few days. In Somalia, there is typically a gap between the wedding and the moving-in together, the length of which differs according to the ability of the husband to provide a home for the bride. They could not live together
because they did not have their own home, and their respective parents and siblings occupied the (one-roomed) family home. This story showed me that ‘home’ is a floating signifier – something that doesn’t refer to an actual object and the meaning of which cannot be fixed. Like masculinity or femininity, its meaning differs in and between cultures, languages, classes and genders, and changes over time.

I was further helped over my confusion one day at a community centre lunch, when two participants were arguing in Somali over identity. One turned to me and said (in English) of the other woman,

‘Oh please! She says she is so British, but she is not. She says she has grown up here, but she is more Somali than me, she is more Somali than anyone I know. You walk into her house and it is clean, clean, clean!’

Evidently they were as aware as I was of the contrast between their own homes and those of the British families around them. This comment gave me pause for thought, and I began to understand that an equally gendered and classed performance was occurring in these homes. Femininity in Somalia is displayed through cleanliness of house, children and self (Hansen, 2008). The only, but nonetheless significant, gesture that I encountered towards this space as an intimate domain was the dress code of the interviewees. Most of the women, who wore full-length abaya and hijab outside the home, wore thin, sometimes low-cut dirac and loose hair coverings as they spoke with me in their homes. Their change of dress clearly indicated we were in a private home space. The clean bare rooms reflected a positive claiming of space, and a hybrid rather than transitory identity.

It took Ayaan and her husband several applications and appeals to be successful and reunited in person. Now, after several years in the UK, she talked often, as did many of my participants, of ‘back home’ when speaking about Somalia. “What do you call here,” I asked them, “when you are there?”

“My country!” came the firm reply.

**Note**

1 *Guri* is used to refer to both house and home in preference to *hooy* (‘home’).

**Acknowledgement**

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council.

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