

***The Yibir of Las Burgabo.* Mahmood Gaildon.  
The Red Sea Press, Inc., 2005, 153 pp.**

In this gripping tale of the life of a young Somali man of the northern *Yibir* clan, Mahmood Gaildon relates the story of the tragic collision between aspiration and personal dignity on the one hand, and the cold countenance of betrayal and social prejudice on the other.

The *Yibir of Las Burgabo* is the story of the sundry experiences of the victims of Somalia's potent, yet fairly inconspicuous, caste system.

Ali Geeddi, the central character, grows up an orphan – losing both his parents to the dictates of social norms that govern the codes of behavior and interaction between “lower” and “upper” caste groups. They are butchered with knives and spears after villagers find out that Geeddi had violated custom by marrying an *Aji* woman. *Aji* Somalis consider themselves of nobler social lineage than the *Yibir* to which Geeddi belonged.

The parents, as well as all their offspring, were to be murdered in order to preserve the “purity” of the upper castes. Ali and his older sister flee the village and become the sole survivors of the Geeddi family.

Ali is raised by his protective sister, Amina, who leads a sickly life, but is a strong-willed and determined young woman. Their identity as *Yibirs* condemns the siblings to a life of destitution as well as physical and psychological isolation from society. They live by themselves in a tiny shack that stands aside from other shanty dwellings of poor neighbors. Through various odd jobs as maid, servant, and waiter, they manage to eke out a bare threads existence that allows them to project a sense of pride and dignity, nonetheless.

Through most of his childhood, Ali is protected from finding out about the cruel fate that was dealt the rest of his family. His sister Amina wants him to get an education first and to develop the mental and emotional strength to cope with what his family's social status has bequeathed to them.

At school, Ali excelled in his studies and in soccer which accorded him some standing among his peers. His teachers and his principal regarded him highly. In spite of a keen awareness of his financial deprivation, he refuses to accept the social inferiority ascribed to him by virtue of his birth.

The walls of social prejudice, however, prove impenetrable. One day, Ali unceremoniously abandons all attempts at gaining acceptance by *Ajis* when, during a highly anticipated soccer match, a fan shouts a derogatory phrase meant to insult his heritage. This was the final straw for Ali. It was the last of a string of incidents in which Ali's identity as a *Yibir* provoked several affronts to his person and dignity from individuals that he knew. From then on, he resolved to make no more attempts at seeking accommodation with the majority *Ajis*. Exceptions to this rule included his

principal who not only detested bigotry but was a source of moral and emotional support for Ali and his sister.

Following a brainstorming session with the principal, Ali decided to focus his energy on improving the lot of the *Yibir* community of Las Burgabo. He wanted them to own and cultivate farmland so that they would supply the surrounding region with much of its food needs. Economic power, he reasoned, would be the ticket out of the misery and the state of servitude his people have always known. This was such a revolutionary idea for the *Yibir* of Las Burgabo that a meeting of all the men and women was called to collectively mull over the implications of this new direction for their lives.

No sooner had the *Yibir* elders adopted Ali's idea than he was taken into custody by agents of the National Security Services. He is charged with fostering anti-revolutionary activities by calling together a clan meeting. The assembly of *Yibir* elders coincided with a national campaign in the Somalia of the early 1970s that was aimed at rooting out tribalism. To be charged with promoting tribalism was thus a very serious matter.

Ali gets a 15-year sentence and his sister Amina is devastated. Her health deteriorates dramatically following Ali's incarceration. Within months, she loses her life. When Ali is pardoned shortly after his sister's death, he is all alone and broken in spirit. His dreams for self-fulfillment and for uplifting the lot of his extended family had been thoroughly shuttered.

The *Yibir of Las Burgabo* is a spellbinding story that gets very high marks for its realistic depiction of the social circumstances that defined the life of a mildly ambitious *Yibir* man in the Somalia of 30 to 50 years ago. Gaildon's superior grasp of Somali culture, coupled with his superb story-telling skills provides for a highly captivating reading for Somali and non-Somali readers alike.

Some of the nuanced depictions of the interactions of certain characters might be appreciated more by Somali readers, as the culture in Somalia passes for what the eminent social anthropologist, Edward Hall, referred to as a "high-context" culture. This is a reference to a culture that relies more on the use of implicit codes of communication that are best understood by those who are indigenous to it. Gaildon counterbalances this with the clarity with which he weaves his plot around common and universal human experiences.

The primary lesson of the story has an equally familiar universal appeal and relevance – that for a great many in the human family, their fates are determined for them; that irrational human perceptions have the power to cripple others' spirits and to deny still others the right to pursue life, liberty, and happiness.

Gaildon deserves much credit for this emancipatory prose which comes at a time in Somali history when social cleavages along clan lines are most pronounced and that the effects of culturally-based oppression cry out loudest to be laid out in the open.