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On Being a Self-Taught Writer:
Sulaiman Addonia in Conversation about *Silence is My Mother Tongue*

Elisabeth BEKERS and VUB students. Transcribed by Parham ALEDAVOOD.

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Introduction

Sulaiman Addonia is a novelist whose essays and reflections on language in recent years have featured regularly in the press in Flanders, Belgium, and beyond. Born in Eritrea to an Eritrean mother and an Ethiopian father, he fled the country strapped to his mother's back in 1976, the civil war having claimed his father's life a few months earlier. He spent his childhood in a arefugee camp in Sudan, relocating to Saudi Arabia with his family at the age of ten. As a teenager, he applied for asylum in the UK. Although he did not speak English upon arrival, he went on to obtain a BSc from University College London in 2009 and an MA from the School of Oriental and African Studies. With his Belgian partner he moved to Brussels, Belgium, where he now lives with his young family. His debut novel *The Consequences of Love* (Chatto and Windus 2008) was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, while his second novel *Silence is My Mother Tongue* (The Indigo Press 2018) was longlisted for the 2019 Orwell Prize for Fiction. A third novel, entitled *The Seers,* is forthcoming from Canongate in 2023 and the Flemish Film Fund has awarded a grant for *Silence is My Mother Tongue* to be adapted to the screen. In 2018, he founded a creative writing academy for refugees and asylum seekers and in 2019 he launched the annual

Asmara-Addis Literary Festival (in Exile). Both Brussels-based initiatives received special mention when Addonia was awarded the 2021 Golden Afro Artistic Award for Literature.

This interview took place during a webinar with the author on 7 December 2020 in the context of the "Postcolonial Literature in English" Master course taught by Prof. dr. Elisabeth Bekers, which in 2020-21 included *Silence is My Mother Tongue*. Students in the "Master Taal- en Letterkunde" and the international "Multilingual Master in Linguistics and Literary Studies" introduced the author to the guests in the audience (which included colleagues and students from VUB and beyond) and prepared and asked the questions.[1] Participants were invited to ask questions or share their observations regarding passages in the text that spoke to them in particular. Parham Aledavood subsequently transcribed the interview, which was later edited by Elisabeth Bekers.

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Elisabeth Bekers: Before we start, I just want to quickly check with you: how do we pronounce your last name? Because we were discussing this last week as well, and I forgot to double-check with you.

Sulaiman Addonia: [laughs] It's fine. I don't know. I would say Addoonia, but if you want to say Addonia it's fine. It's all the same. Can I just say, thank you so much for having me! I'm quite impressed with the variation in the class. it's amazing! You know, it's almost the world! I'm looking forward to hearing you guys, so please go ahead!

[1] Questions were asked by, in alphabetical order, Tara Brusselaers, Oindrila Goswami, Cassia Hayward-Fitch (introduction), Alieu Jarju, Nizar A. A. Milhem, Maja Ulasik and Hannah Van Hove.

Question: What struck me throughout *Silence Is My Mother Tongue*, was the hell that the characters are going through. Sometimes I was shocked and then the next thing came, and the next thing came. When they asked in class whether we liked the novel, I asked for a button to indicate I was thoroughly disturbed, and I liked it. What really struck me, was the little chapter "The Razor" in which the protagonist Saba receives a visit from the midwife and then in the next chapter when her best friend's grandmother tells her: "Be resolute inside yourself and strong but don't change your behaviour towards that man […]. Don't give him or anyone else the pleasure of knowing that they changed you." That, to me, was a powerful passage because, even though I was kind of shocked by what happened, I focused more on the advice that the grandmother was giving.

Sulaiman Addonia: I don't even remember the kind of emotion I had when I was writing it. The space where I was when I was writing this novel was quite strange actually, so maybe we get to talk about that. Looking back, I would say it's only when you come out of writing it that you realise that some passages are quite strong. I don't even understand how I had the kind of power to keep myself together when writing some of these scenes. Actually, the razor passage, and also the abuse the brother and sister go through, after I wrote them, it hit me how hard it must have been to write it.

Question: I was particularly struck by the part where you described that, by letting him dress her, Saba let the inner woman come out of her brother. I thought that was very beautifully written; it's a nice expression.

Sulaiman Addonia: I always tell people that Hagos, the brother, was the easiest character to write. When I was writing him, or when I found him, it felt like I was walking in the woods or the forest, and then suddenly I stumbled upon a river or a stream. It felt like he was just there, like he came to me ready; I didn't have to do a lot of work with him. Jamal, for example, was totally the opposite. I really had to work on myself as a writer to write Jamal, but with Hagos, it was very smooth; everything around him was so beautiful. Also, when he and his sister got together, there was something very sensual and very beautiful about it, that made the writing, I'm not going to say pleasurable, but it felt like it was flowing more. In that sense, Hagos was one of those characters a lot of writers would feel like blessed to work with.

Question: Did you feel while writing the novel that you're being 100% authentic in keeping certain values while describing it in English?

Sulaiman Addonia: That's a very interesting question. The thing is, I honestly lose myself when I write. If I can go back to the beginning: I had the idea of the novel when I was in London and had a thorough synopsis of the whole book, a sense of where I was going with the characters and stuff. But when I came to Brussels everything changed. I was on my own; although I came here with my partner, I was unfamiliar with the country, the language. She was working, so I felt like most of the time I was by myself, without my friends and family. So, there was this kind of alienation and there was a sense of departure from your usual self when you're in a familiar space. My idea of the novel started to take a different shape and I realised that the outline that I came with from London was not useful anymore, because I was changing myself.

For me as a writer, most of the work I do is before I start to write. When I write, I’m not aware of myself. Before I write, what I do is I try to look at the boundaries that we all have in terms of certain subjects and themes. When writing Jamal, for example, I really had to be confronted with this idea of taboos. I was extremely judgmental of characters like him. That's why I stepped back and submitted myself to the story. I can't emphasise that enough. When I’m writing, I’m totally unaware of what’s happening, so I can’t really say with certainty that I was aware of the whole question of authenticity. I wasn’t translating or explaining values; I wasn’t aware of writing in one language and taking characters from a different linguistic space. I was just writing. It’s all about flowing with the characters and seeing where the story goes. For me, the story matters. Although the question is very interesting, I don’t really have an answer because, I reemphasise, for me the strength in writing is submitting yourself to the story and not really becoming judgmental, but also not becoming too analytical with the characters. It’s about letting it flow.

Question: Yes, it felt very organically written.

Sulaiman Addonia: Absolutely. That’s for me the beauty about writing; how do you get yourself to that moment where everything feels really organic.

Question: I want to comment on the midwife. I know most of us don’t like what she does [i.e., she wants to perform a ritual genital operation on Saba), but I think she plays a very important role in the camp, and, most especially, with local traditions. If Saba can be seen as the protagonist in a bildungsroman, then the midwife can be seen as the villain. But it is also through her that we’re able to see the reasons why she was doing that. The midwife and the mother wanted Saba to be a

better person, in the sense that they wanted her to be in line with the traditions and the norms of their society. You can blame them, but partially you can also take into consideration that her mother has suffered a lot of misfortune, including the disappearance of her husband. In that context, we can understand the influence that the midwife has. Still, Saba's mother is persistent in not allowing the midwife to overinfluence her, in the sense that she did not agree to leave Saba behind. You can sense the bond of motherhood that she has towards her daughter despite the influence of society and the midwife.

Sulaiman Addonia: I think that's an important comment because with characters like the midwife or the mother one thinks how it is possible that people would act out of (what they think is) love, when the outcome of that love is so totally the opposite. In a way, they think that everything they're doing to Saba or to Hagos is because they love those children, but at the end of the day, love, when it's mistreated or misinterpreted, can be incredibly hurtful. That's where tradition comes in; that's where experiences, like you mention, the mother's misfortunes, also have an influence on the way we treat each other. One of the most interesting parts of writing this novel was actually tradition. When I started it, I remember that I had those characters fleeing from one country into almost a jungle, creating this kind of opportunity for them to redesign the society in whatever way they wanted to. The most interesting thing is that, even though the majority of them didn't come with any belongings, most of them have migrated with that kind of tradition. It became so powerful and that's where you begin to see humanity. When you're exiled to a place like the camp, what you really want is to hold on to things that make you feel like you're still human, that you still matter and that's what tradition does. That's why people become even more traditional than when they were back home. This is what I've discovered. Why do we hold on to tradition in the way we do

in certain communities when we are far away from home? Because tradition becomes the only reminder of the place we’ve left.

Elisabeth Bekers: You see this often in literature of migration that writers point to this fact that traditions, which ordinarily may be evolving in the home country, become so rigid that they can’t evolve anymore when they are transplaced into a new context. I think you’re right that the problem between Saba and her mother is really centred on the value of tradition. I was wondering, because I did my PhD on female genital excision in literature: you clearly suggest that the first time they try to excise Saba, the sheet catches fire and the operation is not carried out, but it wasn’t very clear, to me at least, whether or not the second time around it is successful. The way the narrative develops suggests that maybe she hasn’t undergone the operation after all, that even the second time it wasn’t carried out. Is this something that you want to comment on or is it something that you would like to remain quite enigmatic?

Sulaiman Addonia: It's a very valid comment to make. I remember that scene where she goes to the sex worker. I actually spoke to a friend of mine, she is a woman, before I wrote it, before I even thought about writing about it. And I deliberately left it in the way I did, but if I were to make a comment, then I would say I would go with your first hunch.

Elisabeth Bekers: I really like the fact that you are not explicit about it and that it’s something for the reader to think about. It’s a very refreshing change from those contemporary writers who are extremely militant, but simply offer the character a way out by making them migrate to Europe or the United States and removing them from Africa.

Sulaiman Addonia: I want to say something about that, the ending. I'm quite shocked that a lot of people thought that Saba was actually coming to Europe which surprised me. I would like to have a healthy relationship with the reader, in the sense that I honestly don't think about the reader when I write. So, if a reader decides that this is what they think about the ending or that the ending led to this, then I don't want to argue with them. But I think to myself, really, is Saba coming to Europe? That's not the feeling I have about it.

Elisabeth Bekers: This also makes the novel unique in literature about refugees; a lot of refugee fiction is about refugees in the West and in your novel they move from one part of Africa to another part of Africa. For me, there is no suggestion that she goes to Europe.

Sulaiman Addonia: One of the things I was incredibly interested in when writing this novel was the intimacy because when we write about Eritrean, Ethiopian or African characters, we tend to focus more on the epic, the history, the wars, the colonial years and so on. But I felt like, for once, I actually wanted to go deep into our bodies, our minds, our hearts. This for me was the focus. When I started writing the novel in London, I wanted to do an epic. Eritrea was colonised by four different countries, the Turks, the Italians, the Brits and I think the Egyptians at a certain stage. I thought that this colonial history was big, so I wanted to do something about it, but then I felt like, for me, intimacy is epic and that's power of the individual. I wanted to focus on African characters. When you write about refugees, you don't go and say "okay, I'm writing about refugees." They're just human beings and I think that's the power: you transcend all these banal ideas, black and white ideas, and you go into that complex grey area and that's where you find interesting characters and

interesting themes. You also become very bold, because once you go into the grey area, that's when you really have to have a bold personality to carry certain of those ideas through.

Question: I was wondering how you go about finding the form for the story that you want to tell? You were describing writing as something which almost becomes you as it were, and I wondered if it was the same regarding the form and the shape of the story and is this something that comes organically, or is it something that you work out before you start writing? My second question is more related to what you have just been talking about, which is this classification of your writing as refugee literature, and I wondered how you felt about labels like that. Do you find them helpful or do you have certain questions about them?

Sulaiman Addonia: The second part of the question first: When my first novel came out in 2008, I was seen as an African writer, and then the label became something else, it became a black writer, and then it became a refugee writer. I have a Muslim background as well, so ... honestly, it's all noise, for me. People will describe you the way they describe you and you just have to decide where to spend your energy because energy is very valuable. Life is short. I spent ten years working on this novel, and I think my energy totally was with the characters, making sure that my sentences were reflecting the characters' thoughts, that I was doing justice to the story in my hand. That was where I spent my energy, day and night. Going through insomnia for years, not being able to sleep, sleeping for only 3, 4 hours. I never ever worried about whether they were going to call me a black writer or a refugee writer, whatever. My only concern was, and still is – and I owe it to my characters – to be focused and disciplined and 100% determined to do them justice. That's where

my power lies, the influence that I have. It's about me and my relationship with my characters. The rest really doesn't interest me at all.

For the first question you asked, it's very interesting because I think it's a reflection also of the kind of books that I love, the kind of literature that I've always been attracted to, the kind of writing that really makes me come alive, the kind of themes that, when I am reading, I feel that this is what I want to write. I'm talking about Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing,* for example, or George Bataille's *Story of the Eye* or Pauline Réage's *Story of O,* or Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North,* or Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero.* Those are books that perhaps not millions of people will read, but the authors are incredibly passionate about their subject and themes. That's what I love. The structure of my book comes from reading them, from this idea that I love to experiment. I love Man Ray, the photographer, the artist. I like the way painters experiment with the form, with the colours, with the landscape, with the shapes of the body. I think I've learnt a lot from that; I've learnt a lot from cinema, from the way that certain films are structured. When I wrote this novel, my influence didn't come from reading a very typical mainstream novel. I think it comes from a lot of areas, like painting, cinema, but also books that I'm very passionate about. In that sense, there's a lot of work that happens when you come to decide what kind of art you consume. You are doing the work, by observing, by noticing, by going through the journey of watching a film. Sometimes I watch an entire film without sound or subtitle. I think it's very boring, but it teaches you the power of the image, because by negating the sound or the subtitling of a foreign film, you're just focusing on the body or the relationship to the landscape, you're focusing on the colour, you're focusing on the feeling or the features, the expressions of the hands. It's hard work but, without you knowing, you're learning something

about the structure, you're learning something about the image, and that's why I think there's imagery in my prose, because of all the work that I do other than just reading the novels.

Elisabeth Bekers: I don't know how intentional this was, but in the discussion last week, it was suggested that you could see the cinema in the opening chapter as a kind of narrative frame, pulling you into the events that have preceded and are about to be related, with the screen that Jamal has created serving as a see-through canvas through which you are then taken into the story of the novel. So, the first chapter works as a narrative frame, but also in a very visual manner, and in a film the camera would then be moving through the screen and taking you into the camp from the top of the hill.

Sulaiman Addonia: That's great! I don't want to talk too much about the framing, but I think this is a very interesting observation that you made. That's to me the power of cinema and my love for cinema came through there, I think.

Question: How do you feel when people read your works and give them meanings, themes and motifs that you have never intended?

Sulaiman Addonia: I think I've briefly touched on that. The struggle that a lot of writers go through is when we're constantly told to think about the reader. When you deliver your first draft, you are told: "But did you think about the reader? This is going to be difficult for the reader…" That's when I decided to end my relationship with the people I was working with initially and decided to write this novel without agents and only show it or send it to people afterwards. I just

wanted to have a relationship with my characters, not with the readers. I think this is a sign of respect when you're honest with the readers and tell them: "I don't really think about you when I write." So, if you come back to me after you have read my work and say to me: "You know, Sulaiman, you gave me that feeling," then I'm not going to fight you because I also have respect for you, because you take from it whatever you want to take from it. I think that's a healthy relationship and I think that the novel itself is very wide, it's very open. The most important thing is that I left cracks for the reader, like the light, where you come into the novel and take from it what you really want.

Elisabeth Bekers: I think it also gives you a sense of freedom. I mean there's no editor breathing down your neck and telling you what to do and what to change. Do you want to comment on how much of that actually happens later on in the process, how much editors and publishers push you regarding the choice of title, cover, etc.?

Sulaiman Addonia: It took me about 8 years to come up with the title. I was very patient with it. I remember I was walking at night, around the Ponds of Ixelles, and it just came to me and I loved this title. With the cover, it's a very interesting story because before my editor at Indigo acquired the novel, she wanted to meet with me; I think it was in London the day after Boxing Day in 2017. One of the things that we discussed was the cover. I had had a bad experience with the cover when my first novel came out and I noticed that the publishers in the West just go for the stereotypical thing because they want to sell the novel. I was seriously worried that they were going to choose a cover that would represent their idea of a refugee camp, not the idea in the book of what a refugee camp is about. I was very open about my concerns. Even though publishers usually have the power

to decide on the cover, she said to me: “It's fine, I respect it, I respect what you told me.” So, when they came up with the cover, they were inspired by the surrealistic aspect in the book and that’s why the designer was thinking about Dalí. When in the beginning of the book Saba takes her clothes off in the cinema, she hangs out her clothes and the character Jamal starts to talk about the dispersing of the sadness. The guy [designer] was inspired by that and he saw this vision of Dali’s work in it and that’s why the cover was really beautiful and very artistic. That's why I love working with Indigo because they took my concerns very seriously.

The same happened with my American publisher Graywolf and I’m really proud that they took me seriously. When you set a novel in places that have a kind of stereotypical image, then it always becomes problematic because you’re then explaining to people and trying to put your foot down. As a publisher, you should really think about what’s in the book and what the book is trying to communicate, so the designer should actually focus on the book, not what they have an image of.

Elisabeth Bekers: It's exactly what I tell the students also when we’re reading. Don’t work with your idea but read what’s actually in the text, what we’re told in the text, not what you’ve heard or learned. I want to quickly ask you about the cover of the British paperback edition of the novel, published by Indigo Press, because you were talking about the hardback. Did you choose this as well, and what does that refer to? It is a black cover with a white canvas.

Sulaiman Addonia: I didn't decide on that cover but it’s like I said, I was happy with the first design because it was very artistic. The designer is a Nigerian designer and I think he’s a very artistic designer. He’s worked with Granta, with Jonathan Cape, so he has that kind of really artistic

background and I was happy with it. He was inspired by a paragraph in the book that reminded him of Dali, so he put the two together. I prefer the first one, but I think they just wanted to do something different with the paperback edition, so they added the black background, which makes it interesting and I have no issues with, but my favourite one is the first one.

Elisabeth Bekers: Thank you for shedding light on this as well. I'm very much aware that what we read into covers is not always what the author intended to be there. I keep on telling the students that writing, and publishing, is very much a business...

Sulaiman Addonia: With the cover, for example, it's 100% with the publishers, but because there has been an outcry, more and more publishers are taking writers' concerns very seriously, especially writers with my background because we've had really bad experiences with it, so we say you can't do that. Represent what's in our books, not your own ideas! So, I think today they're listening more and more.

Question: Maja has a question about your writing academy. She wants to know if it will pick up again after the lockdown. She's a budding writer herself. She's not a refugee but she would love to hear more about your academy.

Sulaiman Addonia: Yes, that's the plan. We definitely want to pick up after the lockdown. I'm already going to have a few meetings next week, or the week after. I'll keep in touch. Please share. The way we worked before it was 100% people with refugee backgrounds, but then we used the

academy to bring the community together. That's why in our last master class, we had 20% local or people who've been here for years. We're trying to open it up little by little.

Question: I am wondering if you see yourself as partly reflected in the novel. You too have this thing about silence and a very strong relationship with your grandmother and a passion for education, and we see the characters in similar circumstances in a refugee camp. So, do you see yourself in the character of Hagos, and in Saba as well?

Sulaiman Addonia: I see myself in the energy and the determination they have. If you survive a place like a refugee camp, you come out with a stamina and a determination. That's why it took me ten years and I never lost faith, I never came close to giving up because I just have that kind of drive and I think it's natural in me now. I think that I share that with Saba and Hagos. I also share their love for their grandmother. I don't know if you know that, but I was brought up by my grandmother. Actually, my grandmother was one of my first literary influences. We don't talk a lot about the power of oral storytelling and the power of alternative stories that we tell each other. We human beings are storytellers by nature. Whether you have a pen, whether you've got a camera, whether you've got a telephone. For example, I wrote my third novel on an iPhone. So, there are always ways in which we communicate with each other because we've been storytellers. Even the Quran came through stories, and the Bible. My grandmother was an incredible storyteller. People talk about fantasy or science-fiction as new to Africa, but actually my grandmother would tell me fantastic stories that, I remember, would leave me scared but that were empowered by the power of imagination, by her ability to use images in her stories. I think my love for her comes from

there, also from the fact that she was an incredibly strong and powerful woman, very giving, very generous.

I'm a self-taught writer. I remember when I decided to become a writer. In London in those days, we had what we called the Borders bookshop, I think it's an American bookstore there. They would allow you to get a coffee and read. I would be there from four to eleven, teaching myself grammar, teaching myself how to write. That's why I love self-taught artists. We're not classically trained, but I think we always have stories to tell and I think there's a space for us. It's the energy and the power and the drive with which you tell them that's powerful.

Elisabeth Bekers: I so agree. I don't know how we can add anything to this. These were such powerful words to conclude your discussion here. I wish there were more writers like you who would pick up their phones and start writing on their phones. I want to commend you for having written such great fiction and for having shared so many thoughts with us and making us think about so many things that maybe we hadn't thought of before. I really want to thank you for that. Keep on writing, please do!

Sulaiman Addonia: Thank you so much and maybe one day we'll have a conversation live when the whole Covid thing is over. I appreciate your questions and all your comments. Keep it going and see you soon!