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The port and the island: identity, cosmopolitanism and Islam among Somali women in Nairobi and Johannesburg

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Abstract

This thesis explores how the Somali diaspora constitutes itself as a collectivity by analysing identity formation processes in an interconnected postmodern world, where migration has become much common than before, where identities are not as certain as they used to be and where a trans- local sense of being connected surpasses fix national borders.

I propose the concept of the cosmopolitan refugee in order to explore how Somaliness is constructed in diasporic contexts, based on the interweaving of cosmopolitan, vernacular and national identifications. Moreover, Somaliness cannot be understood today without the influence of Islam, the cosmopolitan and political implications of belonging to the *umma* and the importance of being seen as a "good Muslim".

Using ethnographic and narrative data, this research takes a gendered approach and moves beyond the prevailing representations of Somali women in the global imagination by presenting alternative discourses and narratives that explore the dynamics of identity constructions these women undergo in relation to cultural, religious and gender practices in the two urban contexts of Nairobi and Johannesburg. These are two interconnected cities for the Somali diaspora that metaphorical operate as a port and as island. Both places are transitional places for Somalis and in both cities the creation of the "little Mogadishus" of Eastleigh, in Nairobi, and Mayfair, in Johannesburg, generates a particular trans-local situation in which collective identity, through the repetition of cultural and religious practices, is able to transform the urban space, at the same time that the implementation of these practices makes these places to be connected between them, to the lost homeland in Somalia and to any other place in the world Somalis inhabit these days. However, due to the bigger Somali population and the historical and geographical links with Somalia, Somalis in Nairobi develop greater feelings of belonging than in Johannesburg, where isolation seems to be the more widespread feeling. Somalis in Nairobi are more exposed to cosmopolitanism due to the relationship they have with the city, the fact that Eastleigh is a point of constant transit and an important commercial hub across the Somali diaspora all around the world, and the presence of Somalis belonging to different backgrounds. In Johannesburg, the Somali population is much smaller and the isolated situation most

Somalis find make them use Somaliness as a way of resilience and demarcating difference, resulting in certain vernacular and religious practices being strengthened. In this sense, Nairobi is experienced by Somalis as more cosmopolitan than Johannesburg.

Nevertheless in both contexts Somaliness is constructed around a sense of unity based on: a common place of origin and mythical past, a common language, religion and "culture", implemented in the everyday life by the *habitus* of cultural and religious practices. This *habitus* together with a narrative of the nation being constructed in the virtual spaces of Facebook and Instagram creates a strong sense of belonging to an "imagined community". Somaliness resides not within the boundaries of a nation-state but in a trans-local sense of being connected.