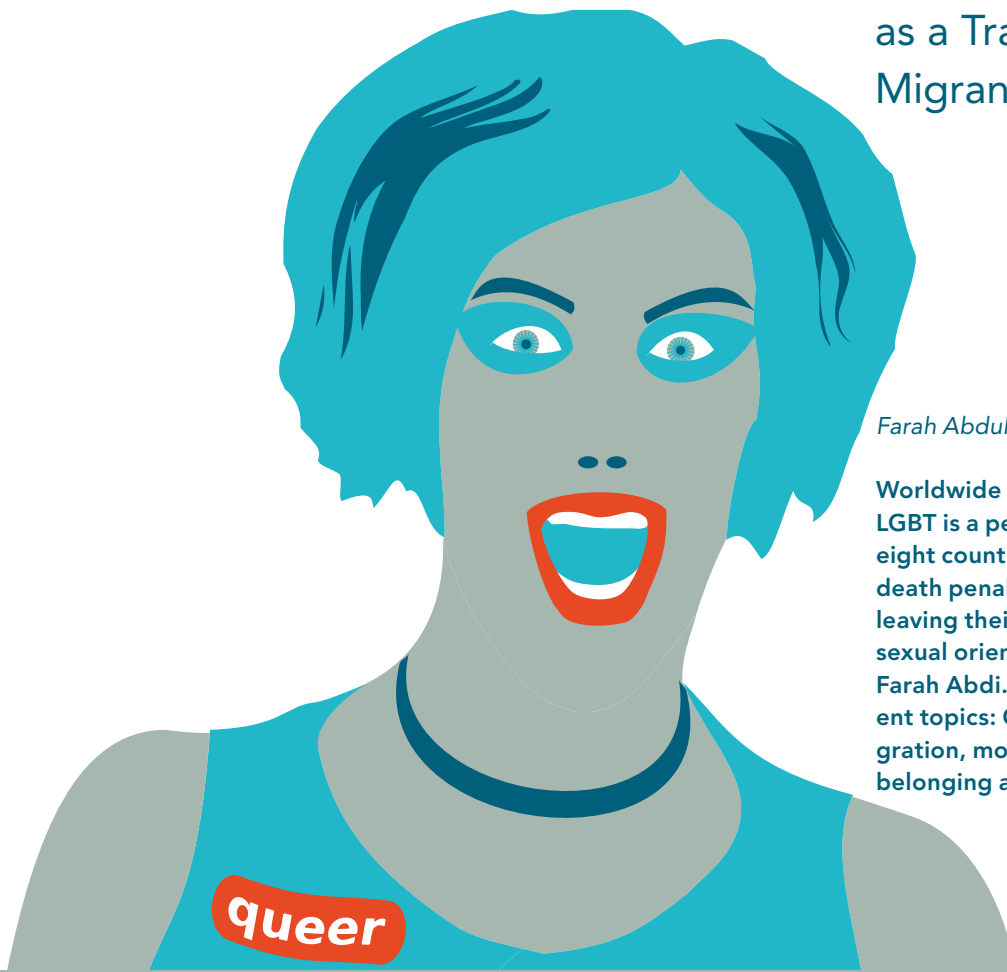




Emancipation of Me

Moving and Living
as a Transgender
Migrant



Farah Abdullahi Abdi

Worldwide in 75 countries being LGBT is a persecution ground – in eight countries it is punishable by death penalty. So many people are leaving their countries because of sexual orientation. One of them is Farah Abdi. S/he reflects on different topics: Gender identity, immigration, movement, integration, belonging and a lot more.

I left home Kenya four years ago in search of a place that would not only tolerate what I thought was my sexuality at the time, but also celebrate this part of my identity. I arrived in Malta after nine months of a difficult and dangerous journey across countries, the Sahara and sea. At this point, I was a wounded warrior masquerading as a survivor. More than a decade of internalized homophobia stemming from my conservative roots had done its damage.

I come from a Somali community that has been emotionally and psychologically traumatized by decades of civil war, mass migration and displacement. In my community, a girl without a headscarf is a harlot-in-training. Such retrogressive taboos become minuscule in comparison to homosexuality. Being gay is not only an amoral form of psychic and sexual corruption, but also an act of perverse, Western mimicry. Any form of sexual difference is considered not only repugnant, but also devious.



It took me more than two years of intensive therapy after my arrival in Malta to make peace with my "gay" identity. After this, I was supposed to live the proverbial happy ever after life. Unfortunately this was not the case. There was a missing link that I could not verbalize. The risk of sinking into depression sent me running to my

therapist once again in search for answers. Months of deep soul searching brought me to the realization that I was identifying as gay because I was afraid of exploring my femininity. This again stemmed from my conservative roots. In Somali culture, hyper-masculinity is the most desired attribute in men. Femininity signifies softness, a lightness of touch: qualities that are aggressively pressed onto young girls and women. When a woman does not possess feminine traits, it is considered an act of mild social resistance. This applies equally to men who are not overtly masculine but the stakes are considerably amplified. If a Somali man is considered feminine he is deemed weak, helpless, pitiful: The underlying message is that femininity is inferior to masculinity. In order for me to embrace who I truly was, I had to go through the painful but fulfilling process of unlearning the toxic pillars that root my culture.

This was a painful process because it meant cutting ties with family and community. It is extremely difficult for a Somali to do this because family and community gave us a home, when our country did not; when our nation state Somalia disintegrated and ejected us, those with whom we escaped with became our nation with borders that re-collected us in the enormity of loss. So what do you do when first, the nation, then one's family and community reject you? I had always thought of family and community as a fixed, all-powerful entity. I was raised in a culture where family and community was the most important thing. Rightly so. But in order for me to embrace my transgender identity, I had to learn that nothing in life is fixed, especially family and community. Embracing this allowed me the possibility to become my authentic self.

Another challenge I encountered during the process of soul searching was coming to terms with living in a country, continent and world that will readily accept one part of my identity, but force me to discard the other. This is

especially true in Malta at a time when it's okay to be transgender, but xenophobia and racism is at an all time high. The mother of all cures – time – ended up taking care of this.

After four years in Malta, I was becoming Maltese through osmosis. Not through naturalization, integration or registration. The Maltese government and people were able to deny our rights as refugees and ignore us all they wanted. I noticed one minuscule change after the other – like consistently saying „Isma“ (Maltese slang commonly used to get someone's attention when trying to start a conversation).

The passage of time continued to affect the change until I appeared another person all together. Do butterflies and moths suffer this perplexity? This 'how did I get here?' and 'who am I?' crisis? They seem to beat their wings just twice and then take to the air. I felt weighed down, burdened, not so much by what I did have but what I didn't, a dearth that I couldn't describe.

The cloud finally lifted when I looked at myself in the mirror and spoke to my reflection. "Four years ago when you first arrived in Malta, you were expatriated, diffident, beautiful, full of longing for a home, and hopeful that your new home – Malta – would one day make a place for those like you whom it rejects, realising that it itself would be no home for anyone, and estranged from itself – if it had no place for those like you."

So, clearly I don't have a problem with who I am today; and if my native Somali community or my adoptive Maltese community have a problem with me being me, then so be it.

Literaturtip: Farah Abdullahi Abdi (2015): *Never Arrive*. San Gwann: Kopin.

On the author: Farah Abdullahi Abdi is a transgender author and blogger who lives in Malta. On her blog „Malta today“ Farah Abdi describes the destiny of migrants. 2015 Farah Abdi received the Bremer peace prize in the category „unknown peacemaker“. In a few months she will call Island her new home.