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## SONG OF SURVIVAL: MELODIES OF IDENTITY, DISPLACEMENT, RESISTANCE, AND HOPE IN “WAVIN' FLAG” BY K'NAAN

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Abstract	Article Information
<p><i>This research explores the themes of identity, displacement, resistance, and hope within K'naan's song "Wavin' Flag" through a postcolonial lens and a historical biographical approach. Born in Mogadishu, Somalia, K'naan experienced firsthand the turmoil of the Somali Civil War, leading to his displacement and resettlement in North America. Drawing upon his personal experiences as a Somali diaspora individual, K'naan intricately weaves together imagery, narrative, and symbolism within the song to convey the complex realities of the diasporic experience. The analysis of the song's lyrics reveals a profound exploration of K'naan's connection to Somalia, his struggles with displacement, and his resilience in the face of adversity. For the approach, this study integrates postcolonial theory with historical biographical criticism. It aims to elucidate the intricate relationship among personal experience, cultural context, and artistic expression within the Somali diaspora community. In conclusion, this research underscores the significance of "Wavin' Flag" in portraying the complex realities of the Somali diaspora experience, while highlighting the transformative power of literature to foster cultural understanding, resilience, and social change.</i></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> <i>Wavin' Flag, K'naan, Postcolonial, Identity, Displacement</i></p>	<p><i>Received:</i> 21/02/2024</p> <p><i>Revised:</i> 21/03/2023</p> <p><i>Accepted:</i> 22/03/2023</p>

### INTRODUCTION

The issue of cultural identity within diasporic communities is complex and multifaceted, especially in the aftermath of significant historical events such as colonization. Postcolonial scholars have delved into the effects of colonization on cultural identity, highlighting challenges stemming from the aftermath of colonialism, including struggles with cultural authenticity, and reclaiming pre-colonial identities. The concept of diaspora itself raises questions about the formation of identity through voluntary migration and the intertwining of

selfhood with socio-cultural contexts (Cohen, 2008) Understanding diasporic cultural identity involves exploring how immigrant communities maintain connections to their homeland while navigating the complexities of their adopted cultures This complexity is further compounded by historical legacies, as colonial systems often disrupted communal bonds and identities, leaving diasporic communities to grapple with fragmented cultural narratives (Flajšarová, 2018). Within the evolving awareness of the diaspora, individuals continuously navigate fluctuating perceptions of their spatial or envisioned homeland, as well as their identity, culture, memory, and traditions. (Indriyanto, 2022, p. 88).

Diasporic individuals frequently experience a profound sense of alienation and a longing for their homeland, which shapes their journey of cultural identity formation amidst the intricacies of their new environments. This sentiment of displacement can lead to a profound identity crisis, as individuals find themselves torn between their heritage and the cultural dynamics of their adopted homes (Mathew & Pandya, 2022). Such experiences of diasporic identity are often characterized by a sense of disconnection and a desire to reconnect with one's roots, reflecting the ongoing struggle to reconcile multiple cultural influences and forge a cohesive sense of self. In the diaspora, trauma is deeply personal and influenced by the varied routes taken during the immigrant's journey, characterized by loss and mourning, representing the individual's lived experience of a traumatic event (Alghaberi & Mukherjee, 2022, p. 642). In navigating this complex terrain, diasporic individuals negotiate various aspects of their identity, including language, tradition, and belonging, as they strive to maintain a sense of connection to their cultural heritage while adapting to their new surroundings. As Ashcroft et al posits,

“Displacement occurs as a result of imperial occupation and the experiences associated with this event....The term is used to describe the experience of those who have willingly moved from the imperial ‘Home’ to the colonial margin, but it affects all those who, as a result of colonialism, have been placed in a location that, because of colonial hegemonic practices, needs, in a sense, to be ‘reinvented’ in language, in narrative and in myth (2013, p. 65)

One such individual whose narrative encapsulates the struggles and triumphs of the diaspora experience is K'naan, a Somali-Canadian artist whose music and life story intertwine to reflect the complexities of displacement, resilience, and cultural identity. Fleeing Somalia with his family as a child due to the civil war, K'naan's journey of adaptation and artistic expression serves as a testament to the resilience of diasporic communities. His music often addresses themes of displacement, cultural heritage, and social justice, offering a poignant reflection on the experiences of refugees and immigrants. K'naan's music often addresses themes of displacement, cultural heritage, and social justice, offering a poignant reflection on the experiences of refugees and immigrants. Through his artistry, he amplifies the voices of marginalized communities, shedding light on the complexities of diasporic identity and inspiring solidarity across borders. His music serves as a powerful testament to the resilience and cultural pride of the Somali diaspora, capturing the longing for home and the quest for belonging amidst conflict and upheaval.

One of his most renowned works, the song "Wavin' Flag," epitomizes this sentiment, resonating with audiences worldwide with its poignant lyrics and emotive melodies. This song stands as one of K'naan's most iconic pieces, symbolizing resilience, hope, and unity in the face of adversity. The song's powerful lyrics and captivating melodies have touched the hearts of listeners globally, serving as a poignant anthem for those enduring hardship and striving for a better tomorrow. Its profound message transcends cultural and geographical boundaries, resonating with people from diverse backgrounds and experiences. "Wavin' Flag" encapsulates the struggles of individuals, particularly refugees and those affected by conflict, while also conveying a message of perseverance and solidarity. His song is not only an artistic endeavor but also a catalyst for unity and empathy, inspiring listeners to stand together in adversity and pursue a brighter future.

In this paper, the focus is on into the thematic elements of "Wavin' Flag" by K'naan, exploring its portrayal of cultural identity, displacement, and resilience within the Somali diaspora community. By contextualizing the song within K'naan's personal narrative and the historical backdrop of the Somali Civil War, this paper aims to illuminate the complex interplay between personal experience, cultural context, and artistic expression. Through an interdisciplinary approach, we seek to deepen our understanding of the profound impact of music as a means of cultural preservation, resistance, and solidarity.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Postcolonial theory provides a robust framework for understanding the intricate dynamics of cultural identity within diasporic communities. By scrutinizing the legacy of colonialism and its lasting impacts on migration, displacement, and cultural hybridity, postcolonial scholars offer critical analyses of how identities are constructed, negotiated, and contested in diasporic contexts (Jazeel, 2012). These insights illuminate the nuanced ways in which historical processes of colonization continue to shape the experiences and identities of individuals living in diaspora, highlighting the interconnectedness of power, representation, and cultural production. Quayson argues how central dialectic of the diasporic condition is that between integrity and discontinuity encapsulated in the form of deterritorialization (2013, p. 146). Postcolonial theorists emphasize the fluid and constantly evolving nature of diasporic identities, emphasizing how they are continuously reimagined and redefined through ongoing processes of interaction, negotiation, and resistance.

Stuart Hall underscores the dynamic nature of identity, emphasizing its ongoing negotiation and evolution instead of viewing it as fixed (1990). Hall's concept of identity as a production challenges rigid understandings of culture, asserting that it is in a perpetual state of flux. This perspective is particularly relevant in diasporic settings, where individuals navigate multiple cultural influences and experiences, leading to complex and multifaceted identities. Diasporic identities are constantly transforming and reproducing themselves anew through difference and transformation (Hall, 1997). By recognizing identity as a process rather than a static entity, Hall's framework allows for a more nuanced understanding of cultural

identity formation within diasporic communities, acknowledging the diverse factors that shape individuals' sense of self. In his own words,

“The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference (Hall, 1990, p. 235).”

Similarly, Homi K. Bhabha, a prominent postcolonial theorist, advocates for a nuanced comprehension of culture that transcends simplistic categorizations. Bhabha's concept of hybridity asserts that cultures are not monolithic entities but rather intricate amalgamations of various influences, resulting from processes of colonization, migration, and globalization (1994, p. 3). He contends that hybridity destabilizes fixed notions of identity and challenges hierarchical binaries, such as colonizer and colonized, by highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of cultural formations. Bhabha's emphasis on ambivalence underscores the inherent complexity of cultural interactions, suggesting that within the interstices of dominant discourses, marginalized voices emerge, disrupting hegemonic power structures. Through his theoretical framework, Bhabha encourages a reevaluation of cultural identity, recognizing it as a site of constant negotiation and transformation rather than a fixed and essentialized construct (Hermes, 2018).

In Bhabha's view, the recognition of hybridity and ambivalence in cultural formations offers a productive lens for understanding the complexities of postcolonial societies. By acknowledging the multiplicity of cultural influences and the interplay between colonizer and colonized, Bhabha challenges Eurocentric narratives and fosters a more inclusive understanding of identity. Furthermore, Bhabha's notion of hybridity invites a reconsideration of power dynamics, suggesting that marginalized groups possess agency and resilience in navigating and subverting dominant discourses. Through his work, Bhabha offers a critical framework for interrogating cultural phenomena, urging scholars and practitioners to recognize the fluidity and complexity inherent in human experiences of identity and belonging (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, pp. 15–20).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study employs a qualitative framework for literary analysis, focusing on textual reading on a song by K'naan with the title "Wavin' Flag,". According to Creswell and Poth, qualitative research focuses primarily on "investigating and comprehending how individuals or groups interpret and comprehend a social or human issue" (Creswell & Poth, 1998, p. 97). This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the song's message, particularly in the context of K'naan's personal experiences as a Somali refugee and his aspirations for his homeland. In this context, the qualitative approach is utilized to delve deeply into the nuances of the text and extract meaning. The data is in written words and sentences instead of numerical calculations. The primary data is the song itself while the secondary data are sources such as journals, books, articles which explore K'naan's background.

Historical biographical criticism is a literary analysis approach that examines an author's life and historical context to interpret their works (Tyson, 2006). By scrutinizing the personal experiences, cultural background, and socio-political milieu of the author, this method seeks to uncover the motivations behind their writing and the influence of external factors on their literary creations. It emphasizes understanding the text through the lens of the author's life, considering how their personal circumstances may have shaped the themes, characters, and narratives depicted in their works (Tyson, 2011, pp. 88–120). Historical biographical criticism enables scholars to gain insights into the complexities of literary production, providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between an author's biography and their artistic output. Through this approach, literary analysts can contextualize the text within the broader historical and cultural framework, illuminating connections between the author's life experiences and the themes explored in their work.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **K'naan's Background as Somali Diaspora**

K'naan's background as a Somali diaspora individual significantly informs the themes and motivations behind his song "Wavin' Flag." Born in Mogadishu, Somalia, K'naan experienced firsthand the devastating effects of the Somali Civil War, which erupted in the late 1980s and resulted in widespread violence, displacement, and instability. As a result of the conflict, K'naan and his family were forced to flee their homeland in search of safety and refuge when he was only 13. They eventually settled in North America, with K'naan establishing roots in Toronto, Canada.

Such experience as a result of the civil war undoubtedly shaped his identity and perspective. His musical works contextualizes how "the reality or the world" is constructed from his background as a diaspora (Indriyanto, 2020, p. 56)." As a member of the Somali diaspora community, K'naan grappled with the complexities of cultural identity, belonging, and resilience in the face of adversity. His personal journey of survival and adaptation in a new country, while still maintaining a connection to his Somali heritage, likely inspired him to explore these themes through his music. "Wavin' Flag" can be seen as a reflection of K'naan's own experiences and the experiences of countless others within the Somali diaspora. The song captures the longing for home, the quest for belonging, and the resilience in the face of hardship that are characteristic of the diasporic experience. Through his music, K'naan seeks to amplify the voices of those who have been displaced and marginalized, shedding light on their struggles and triumphs while offering a message of hope and solidarity.

In essence, K'naan's background as a Somali diaspora individual provides the context and inspiration for "Wavin' Flag," as he draws upon his own experiences and those of his community to craft a song that speaks to the universal themes of resilience, identity, and hope in the face of adversity. This research shall delve deeper into the song by dividing it into two bigger parts: Identity and Displacement then Resistance and Hope.

## **Identity and Displacement in Wavin' Flag**

Let us start by seeing the beginning of the song, it reads as

Born to a throne, stronger than Rome  
But violent prone, poor people zone  
But it's my home, all I have known  
Where I got grown, streets we would roam

In this section of the song, K'naan vividly describes his origins and upbringing in Somalia, effectively symbolizing his connection to his homeland and the experiences that shaped his identity. He asserts the significance and grandeur of Somalia by likening it to a throne, suggesting a sense of pride and resilience associated with his Somali heritage. However, K'naan also acknowledges the harsh realities of life in Somalia, where violence and poverty are prevalent, emphasizing the socio-political context of the country and the impact of conflict and instability on its inhabitants. Despite these challenges, K'naan reaffirms his deep attachment to Somalia, emphasizing the profound sense of belonging and identity he associates with his homeland. He reminisces about his upbringing in Somalia, depicting the streets as a place of exploration and growth, highlighting the communal aspect of his identity and the bonds forged within his community. Overall, this section of the song serves as a powerful evocation of K'naan's Somali origins, conveying a complex blend of pride, resilience, and nostalgia, and highlighting the profound impact of his upbringing on his sense of self and belonging.

K'naan struggle continue in the next part of the song, as in the next part he writes that

Out of the darkness, I came the farthest  
Among the hardest survival  
Learn from these streets, it can be bleak  
Accept no defeat, surrender, retreat

Here, K'naan reflects on his journey from Somalia to the United States and Canada in the word "I came the farthest", highlighting the displacement as he needed to leave his own country as a result of the civil war. By saying that he merges "*out of the darkness*," K'naan symbolizes his physical and emotional distance from Somalia, emphasizing the arduous journey he undertook to escape the turmoil and violence of his homeland. He acknowledges the challenges and obstacles faced during his migration, describing it as "*among the hardest survival*." This phrase underscores the extreme circumstances K'naan encountered, including threats to his safety and well-being, as he navigated the complexities of leaving his homeland behind. Despite these challenges, he adopts a mindset of perseverance and resilience, refusing to succumb to defeat or despair. The repetition and the emphasis of "*accept no defeat, surrender, retreat*" underscores K'naan's unwavering determination to survive and thrive, highlighting his refusal to be defined by his circumstances and his commitment to forging a better future for himself. Overall, this section of the song effectively captures

K'naan's experiences of displacement and resilience, celebrating the strength of the human spirit amidst adversity.

K'naan's strong motivation and perseverance however, it is not without reason, the next part of the song, the pre-chorus. show the reason why

So we struggling, fighting to eat  
And we wondering when we'll be free  
So we patiently wait for that fateful day  
It's not far away, but for now we say

In this segment of the song, K'naan expresses his longing to return to Somalia and his hopeful anticipation of a future where freedom and peace prevail. The lyrics convey a sense of struggle and uncertainty, as K'naan and his community endure hardships and fight for survival. The phrase "*struggling, fighting to eat*" encapsulates the daily challenges faced by individuals living in conflict-ridden environments, where basic necessities are often scarce. Amidst these struggles, K'naan and his peers ponder when they will experience liberation and freedom, symbolized by the poignant question, "*when we'll be free.*" This longing for freedom reflects the collective desire of the Somali diaspora to return to their homeland and reclaim a sense of autonomy and sovereignty.

Despite the uncertainty of their circumstances, K'naan and his community maintain a sense of patience and resilience, patiently awaiting "*that fateful day*" when their dreams of freedom and liberation will be realized. The phrase "*It's not far away*" suggests a sense of optimism and hope for the future, indicating that despite the current challenges, a brighter tomorrow is within reach. However, K'naan acknowledges the need to endure the present realities while holding onto hope for a better future, as reflected in the concluding line, "*but for now we say.*" Overall, this section of the song captures the complex emotions of longing, hope, and resilience experienced by K'naan and the Somali diaspora. It underscores the enduring spirit of hope amidst adversity, as individuals navigate the uncertainties of displacement while holding onto dreams of returning to a homeland free from conflict and oppression.

In conclusion, the analysis of K'naan's "Wavin' Flag" reveals a profound exploration of identity, displacement, and resilience within the Somali diaspora community. Through vivid imagery and emotive lyrics, K'naan articulates his deep connection to Somalia, symbolizing his homeland as a throne of pride and resilience amidst the harsh realities of violence and poverty. Despite the challenges faced, K'naan's unwavering determination to survive and thrive is evident, as he navigates the complexities of displacement and migration with resilience and perseverance. His longing for freedom and peace is palpable, as he patiently awaits the day when he can return to Somalia and reclaim his sense of autonomy and sovereignty. However, amidst the uncertainty of their circumstances, K'naan and his community maintain hope for a brighter future, believing that liberation is not far away. Overall, "Wavin' Flag" serves as a powerful anthem of resilience, capturing the enduring spirit of hope and perseverance amidst adversity.

Transitioning to the next part, the song continues to resonate with themes of identity, displacement, and resilience as K'naan's strong motivation and perseverance are fueled by a deeper sense of purpose: resistance and hope. While the latter is already being discussed slightly in the previous part, the former have not. Therefore, both of them will be heavily discussed in the next session

### **Resistance and Hope in Wavin' Flag**

This section of the research will discuss how Wavin' Flag discusses resistance and hope. The resistance part can be seen on

So many wars, settling scores  
Bringing us promises, leaving us poor  
I heard them say, "love is the way"  
"Love is the answer, " that's what they say

But look how they treat us, make us believers  
We fight their battles, then they deceive us  
Try to control us, they couldn't hold us  
'Cause we just move forward like Buffalo Soldiers

In this section of the song, K'naan confronts the themes of resistance and hope amidst the broken promises and deception faced by the Somali diaspora community. The lyrics depict a narrative of disillusionment and betrayal, as K'naan reflects on the empty promises and false assurances made by external forces, symbolized by the ambiguous "they." These external forces, often portrayed as authoritative entities or figures of power, bring promises of peace and prosperity but ultimately leave the community impoverished and disenfranchised. K'naan's use of the phrase "love is the way" and "love is the answer" mocks the superficial rhetoric espoused by these forces, highlighting the hypocrisy and insincerity underlying their actions.

Moreover, K'naan emphasizes the resilience and strength of the Somali community in the face of adversity. Despite the attempts to control and subjugate them, the Somali people refuse to be held back, embodying a spirit of resistance and resilience akin to that of "Buffalo Soldiers." This reference to Buffalo Soldiers, historically African American soldiers who fought in various conflicts, including the Indian Wars and World War II, carries connotations of strength, fortitude, and defiance in the face of oppression. By likening the Somali people to Buffalo Soldiers, K'naan celebrates their resilience and tenacity, highlighting their ability to persevere and overcome despite facing formidable challenges.

Furthermore, the comparison to Buffalo Soldiers also draws parallels to the historical experiences of the Somali people, who have endured centuries of colonization, conflict, and exploitation. Like the Buffalo Soldiers, who fought against injustice and discrimination, the



Somali people have resisted oppression and fought for their freedom and dignity. Through this comparison, K'naan pays homage to the strength and resilience of his community, affirming their ability to withstand adversity and continue moving forward despite the odds stacked against them. Overall, this section of the song serves as a powerful declaration of resistance and hope, celebrating the indomitable spirit of the Somali diaspora community in the face of adversity.

Continuing the topic about hope, the pre-chorus that have been discussed in the previous section of this paper *But we struggling, fighting to eat/And we wondering, when we'll be free/So we patiently wait for that faithful day/It's not far away but for now we say* is showing how K'naan exhibits patience and resilience as they await the realization of their dreams for freedom and liberation, maintaining hope despite present challenges. Despite acknowledging the need to endure current realities, they hold onto optimism for a brighter future, reflecting a complex mix of emotions including longing and resilience. The true anthem of hope however, comes from the chorus of the song,

When I get older I will be stronger  
They'll call me freedom just like a wavin' flag  
And then it goes back, and then it goes back  
And then it goes back, oh

The chorus of "Wavin' Flag" emerges as a poignant anthem of hope, resonating with themes of resilience and determination amidst adversity. Through the repetition of the empowering declaration, "When I get older I will be stronger," K'naan instills a sense of optimism and confidence in the listener, portraying a belief in personal growth and inner strength over time. This phrase encapsulates the transformative journey of individuals within the Somali diaspora community, suggesting that through perseverance and resilience, they can overcome the challenges they face and emerge stronger than before.

Moreover, the imagery of being called "freedom just like a wavin' flag" evokes a powerful sense of liberation and empowerment, symbolizing the ultimate triumph over oppression and injustice. By likening freedom to a waving flag, K'naan portrays it as a dynamic and enduring symbol of hope and resilience, capable of inspiring individuals to strive for a better future. The repetition of the phrase "And then it goes back" further underscores the cyclical nature of struggle and resilience, acknowledging that setbacks may occur but ultimately, hope and resilience prevail. This chorus serves as a rallying cry for the Somali diaspora community, urging them to hold onto their dreams of freedom and resilience, even in the face of daunting challenges.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, K'naan's "Wavin' Flag" serves as a profound exploration of identity, displacement, resistance, and hope within the Somali diaspora community. Through vivid

imagery and emotive lyrics, K'naan articulates his deep connection to Somalia and the experiences that have shaped his identity as a diaspora individual. The song functions as an anthem of resistance, confronting themes of deception and betrayal faced by the Somali diaspora community, while also emerging as a true anthem of hope, resonating with themes of resilience and determination amidst adversity. "Wavin' Flag" stands as a testament to the resilience, strength, and hope of the Somali diaspora community, offering a message of solidarity and perseverance in the face of adversity, and reminding us of the enduring spirit of the human experience. As a suggestion to future researchers, further exploration of "Wavin' Flag" could delve into its reception and impact within the Somali diaspora community and beyond. Investigating how the song has been interpreted, embraced, and utilized by individuals and communities could provide valuable insights into its significance as a cultural artifact and a source of empowerment and solidarity. Additionally, comparative analyses with other works of art and literature within the Somali diaspora context could offer a deeper understanding of the thematic and aesthetic dimensions of "Wavin' Flag" and its place within broader cultural narratives. Furthermore, interdisciplinary approaches that integrate perspectives from musicology, cultural studies, sociology, and diaspora studies could enrich our understanding of the song's multifaceted meanings and implications. By building upon existing research and engaging with diverse methodologies and perspectives, future scholars can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the cultural, social, and political significance of "Wavin' Flag" within the Somali diaspora and beyond.

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