


# Chapter 7

## Digital Testimony and Vulnerability in Reinhard Kleist’s “An Olympic Dream”: Restorying Samia’s Journey Through Facebook Posts

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### **ABSTRACT**

*An Olympic Dream pieces together the story of the young female Somali athlete, Samia Yusuf Omar. In the absence of adequate information for her story coupled with Samia’s attempts to hide her identity, the digital traces left behind by the athlete serve as invaluable sources for the author. Weaving together Samia’s Facebook posts, text conversations, and information sourced from journalists, Reinhard Kleist recreates the lost story of an Olympian. This chapter aims to study the role of Facebook posts in disseminating Samia’s story to readers and creating a narrative arc for her Olympic journey. Employing the theoretical lens of Vulnerability Studies along with Digital Postcolonialism it attempts to unpack the athlete’s story. Through an in-depth study of the graphic novel characterized by its tenuous use of social media posts, this chapter examines how social discrimination, surveillance and marginalization render a refugee woman athlete from the Global South highly vulnerable.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The graphic novel *An Olympic Dream* (2016) by Reinhard Kleist is a semi-biographical account of the last few years of the life of the Somali athlete and refugee, Samia Yusuf Omar (1991-2012). Kleist is an illustrator based in Berlin, Germany whose style is inspired by pioneers like Will Eisner and Dave McKean. Well-known for blending biographical facts with imaginative components, Kleist has penned several graphic novel biographies including *Johnny Cash: I See a Darkness* (2009), *Castro* (2010) and *The Boxer* (2014). (Internationales literatur festival Berlin & Peter Weiss Stiftung e.V., 2022) *An Olympic Dream* is written in the same style and recounts the challenges faced by Samia as a sportsperson and as a woman from a conflict zone. Growing up in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, the narrative recounts her facing war and poverty along with sharp criticism for being a female athlete. After participating in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, she faced death threats by Al Shabab, the Islamist militia that controlled large parts of the capital. (Kleist, 2016, pp. 31) By 2010, Samia moved to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in search of a coach to help her train for the 2012 London Olympics. (Kleist, 2016, pp. 44-47) Further the graphic novel recounts her decision to move to Europe following failed attempts to receive support in the form of sponsorships. (Kleist, 2016, pp. 50-52) This was an arduous journey that was marked by perils; including when she was lost in the Libyan desert for five months, held in detention and most likely raped in custody. (Kleist, 2016, pp. 100-102) She finally decided to travel by boat to Europe, where the overcrowded boat ran out of fuel and Samia along with seven other co-travellers lost their lives. (Kleist, 2016, pp. 135-137)

In the absence of adequate and ‘officially-sourced’ information for her story coupled with Samia’s attempts to hide her identity, owing to threats to her life and family, the digital traces left behind by the athlete serve as invaluable sources for the author. Weaving together Samia’s Facebook posts, text conversations with her mother, and information sourced from journalists who had interacted with her, Kleist attempted to recreate the lost story of the Olympian. This chapter aims to critically analyse the graphic novel through the theoretical lens of Vulnerability Studies and Digital Postcolonialism, focussing on the role of Facebook posts, some of them fictionalized by the author, in disseminating Samia’s story to readers and creating a narrative arc for her Olympic journey.

This chapter also attempts to delineate the vulnerability of the central character in and through these social media posts as well as the silences, absences and erasures surrounding her physical and digital journeys. Kleist’s narrative forces readers to question the disjunction between the ‘official’ and the ‘unofficial’, as well as the ‘historical’ and the ‘personal’. While researching Samia’s story, the author admits that “...many descriptions of the events during Samia Yusuf Omar’s nearly one-year

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