



Nuruddin Farah: *A pas de deux across The World Republic of Letters*

F. Fiona Moolla

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Nuruddin Farah's life and work is used in Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* to exemplify the challenges of the dispossessed writer on the periphery of the hierarchical, binary, and highly agonistic world literary system she describes. However, precisely because of his unique position on the Somali literary periphery of the African periphery, Farah's work and career represent the practice of Casanova's theory in advance of its formulation. The Somali writer's negotiation of entry into the dominant world literary order since the publication of his first novel in 1970 suggests an implicit understanding of the literary system Casanova outlines only towards the end of the twentieth century. In other words, Farah does not derivatively illustrate the theory, but his career and novels preempt through practice the major insights of Casanova's theory. Farah's career, furthermore, suggests a wider polycentrism of influence than allowed in the hierarchical binarism of Casanova's model. Finally, the postcolonial aesthetic of "teacherliness", clearer in the late realism of Farah's mature work, signals a fundamental rewriting, rather than a derivative renewal, of modernist aesthetic modes privileging technique of the major cities of the global north. **Keywords:** Nuruddin Farah, Pascale Casanova, world systems, literary theory, postcolonial literature, translation.

Nuruddin Farah is one of a handful of world writers referred to by Pascale Casanova as illustrating the postcolonial dimension of the development of a world literary system described in *The World Republic of Letters* (2004), first published in 1999 as *La république mondiale des lettres*. The significance of Farah to Casanova's theory is such that Farah is alluded to at key junctures, and is cited extensively, including a lengthy quote used as an epigraph to one of the chapters. In her book, Casanova draws on readings of Farah's novels and essays, and an interview she herself conducted with the author. In some ways, Farah is the most exemplary of the authors used to elucidate the predicaments of writers on the periphery of the world literary system as analyzed by Casanova. Literary "mondialisation" exists in parallel with world economic and political systems, where the global literary system has hierarchies, binaries and flows independent of the geopolitics of globalization. Farah is one of the most significant 'partners' in the 'dance' choreographed by Casanova since he would appear to prove almost completely Casanova's theory of the literary deprivation of the margins. Casanova constructs the theory of the world literary system around four areas, namely translation, the existence of a national literature, language, and avant-garde narrative techniques. In every one of these areas, Farah seems to be a hyper-illustrative example of Casanova's claims, as the rest of this article will show. One could say that in the *pas de deux*, or dance of lovers, conducted across the world literary map, Casanova dominates the entrée, positioning Farah as evidence of a conception of world literature that is binary, hierarchical and agonistic. This world system is generally centered in the metropolitan cities of the global north but, for Casanova, Paris represents the undisputed capital of the world republic of letters. However, in Casanova's *pas de deux* with Farah across the world republic of letters, Farah can be seen to be in the lead of Casanova. The specifics of the literary negotiation Farah conducts across his career suggest a deep and preemptive intuition of the structures of dominance Casanova later describes (and, ironically, comes unreflectively to endorse in her world literary system). Farah's career thus is paradoxical, showing a sense of strategically entering the world system from the postcolonial edges, as Casanova suggests such writers are obliged to do. However, Farah's engagement of structures of literary power throughout his career implies a tacit understanding of key features of the system Casanova describes almost thirty years before she goes on to outline it. Thus Farah's novels and his positioning of himself as writer, are, in part, world system literary theory through literary practice. But, Farah also

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simultaneously reconfigures the world system through upending the dominant aesthetic as posited by Casanova from one that upholds mainly formal considerations of literary technique to one that reintroduces the social and political through the aesthetic of “teacherliness”, a concept proposed by African literature scholar, Harry Garuba.

Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* is based on her PhD thesis under the supervision and theoretical influence of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, especially Bourdieu’s literary ‘translation’ of concepts of cultural modernity. Bourdieu’s most significant literary intervention is the idea of the “literary field”; in particular, the development of the concept of the relative autonomy of literature, explored in greatest detail in *The Rules of Art*. Casanova’s model of world literary production is also influenced by the world systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein, best known for its analysis of globalization through the concepts of economic core and periphery. Reflecting the thinking of Bourdieu and Wallerstein, Casanova proposes that literature does not, through universality of ideas and literary merit of individual works, construct a neutral, democratic and open aesthetic field. Instead, literature is constituted by a highly competitive world system that controls the literary domain. This world system may be perceived only by looking at the field from a wider perspective than that of the individual work, the author, or national literatures. She suggests that, in looking from a “broader perspective”,

literary frontiers come into view that are independent of national boundaries, dividing up a world that is secret and yet perceptible by all (especially its most dispossessed members); territories whose sole value and sole resource is literature, ordered by power relations that nonetheless govern the form of the texts that are written in and that circulate in these lands; a world that has its own capital, its own provinces and borders, in which languages become instruments of power. Each member of this republic struggles to achieve recognition as a writer. Specific laws have been passed freeing literature from arbitrary political and national powers, at least in the most independent regions. Rival languages compete for dominance; revolutions are at once always literary and political. The history of these events can be fathomed only by recognizing the existence of a literary measure of time, of a “tempo” peculiar to literature; and by recognizing that this world has its own present—the literary Greenwich meridian. (4)

Casanova shows how a world literary system has been developing since the sixteenth century in Europe, in tandem with the development of capitalist modernity. The world literary system, however, has grown in relative independence from national politics and national power relations, both internally and internationally. “*Mondialisation*”, or the establishment of the world order, is strongly agonistic creating intense competition across literary hierarchies, languages, and regions of dominance and dispossession. For Casanova, the “Greenwich meridian” of literature is an aesthetic whose present (modernity) lies predominantly in Paris. Therefore, “The aesthetic distance of a work or corpus of works from the center may thus be measured by their temporal remove from the canons that, at the precise moment of estimation, define the literary present” (88). The world system described, from which by exception those works that achieve “classic” (92) status escape, may be perceived only if distanced from the confines of national definitions of literature. The transformation of vantage point from which Casanova reconfigures the study of literature is also not wholly original. She draws on “The Figure in the Carpet”, the 1896 essay by Henry James, that suggests criticism and aesthetics may be better conceived if one zooms out seeing the figure as constituted in and by the whole carpet.

Although the importance of Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* was acknowledged by most major scholars of world literature, the theory has also received considerable critique. Almost across the board, reviewers and critics of *The World Republic of Letters* question its self-assured identification of Paris as undisputed center of the literary world. Furthermore, Emily Apter’s *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* implicitly takes issue with Casanova’s uncritical incorporation of translation as a culturally neutral process in the operation of the world literary system. Postcolonial literary scholarship has, however, been most critical of the world system Casanova describes. Sunil Agnani provides the most detailed postcolonial critique of the book itself through his thoughtful review of it. Agnani suggests that Casanova’s entire enterprise undermines postcolonial scholarship which may find it “strangely aggravating [...] to read a study that occasionally states to the reader that its aims are the opposite of an ethnocentric view of the international field of literature [...] and yet seems on every page to document the inevitable paramountcy of the centre of the world republic of letters—Paris” (329). Agnani also criticizes the theory’s employment of a “progressivist notion of aesthetic development” with avant-gardist modes as the apogee (330). In these and other assumptions, Agnani argues that Casanova, despite her best intentions, falls prey to the “conceptual paradox” of conceiving world literature as “project[ing] a version of the template drawn from European (here, Parisian) history” (330). Agnani also observes that Casanova’s analogy, which compares the

world system to a republic, is wrong since her literary geopolitical map more closely resembles an empire (332). (Agnani is correct about the world “empire” of letters, but this article will continue to use Casanova’s terminology for the sake of consistency.) Other critics have also questioned the unrelenting binarism of the center-periphery model employed, arguing that it “would seem to be at odds with experience and reality, which would suggest a configuration more like a Venn diagram, in which the various literatures of the world overlap in places, with a central grouping of writers translated into virtually all languages, but with most belonging to semi-autonomous regional and linguistic groups” (Mulrooney 553). Robert Young observes that while “Casanova criticizes the post-colonial for being political at the expense of the aesthetic, she herself sometimes completely misses the aesthetic dimension in her readings, particularly with respect to language” (32). Edward Said furthermore suggests that in granting the world literary system “integral autonomy”, Casanova underplays “one of the hallmarks” of modernity where “at a very deep level, the aesthetic and the social need to be kept in a state of irreconcilable tension” and where “the writer, is still implicated, indeed frequently mobilized for use in the great post—Cold War cultural contests provided by [...] altered political configurations [...]” (20).

Peng Cheah’s *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (2016) presents a thoroughgoing post-colonial engagement of the debates that ensued on the publication of *The World Republic of Letters*. Cheah’s book brings together and expands the points made by Young and Said, namely, that there are significant losses when literature is treated primarily as an object of circulation and exchange, as it inevitably becomes in Casanova’s model, and other models of this type. Cheah stresses a focus not only on *how* literature circulates in the world as geographical space, but also *the ways in which* literature opens up readers to other worlds. In other words, like Young, Cheah foregrounds the emergence of specific aesthetic modes in the study of postcolonial literature, which may be different from Casanova’s exclusive focus on aesthetics as technique. Like Said, Cheah also highlights the implicit socio-political articulations of postcolonial world literature. Cheah foregrounds what he terms the “normativity” (read: potential ethical interventions) of postcolonial world literature. Cheah proposes “a more rigorous way of understanding world literature’s normativity as a modality of cosmopolitanism that responds to the need to remake the world as a place that is open to the emergence of people that globalization deprives of world” (19). Cheah analyzes the work of five postcolonial writers in the third part of his book, with an entire chapter dedicated to Farah’s novel, *Gifts*, which explores the impacts of humanitarian aid in Somalia, among other concerns. *Gifts*, Cheah argues, not only exposes the marketization of global aid initiatives, but also presents local alternatives of gifting, opening up new social possibilities. Thus, to reiterate in the context of the reading of *Gifts*, “Where world literature’s vocation is to think the force of worlding, postcolonial world literature’s normative task is to enact the unending opening of a world as a condition for the emergence of new subjects in spite of capitalist globalization” (309). But Farah’s literary formation, career and trends in his writing interrogate the dominant world literature model in other ways also as the mutual exchange between Farah and Casanova shows.

Farah is used as an exemplary case in *The World Republic of Letters* of the intense and anxious strategies and negotiations of the dispossessed writer to gain entry into the world’s literary capitals. Drawing on an interview Casanova conducted with Farah, and on Farah’s 1990 essay, “Childhood of my Schizophrenia”, first published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, and using its French translation which appeared in 1993 in *Le serpent à plumes*, Casanova hones in on Farah’s predicament as a translated man. In an interesting instance of the complexities of translation, Casanova underscores the aptness of the French translation of a phrase used by Farah in “Childhood of my Schizophrenia”. Farah describes his situation growing up in Kallafo under Ethiopian domination, with Somali as a home language, but being educated in other languages: Amharic was the language imposed by an oppressor, Arabic was the language of religion, and English was another language of colonial oppression. Farah describes himself therefore as “a schizophrenic child living in the age of colonial contradiction” (1264). The English translation of Casanova’s book that uses the French translation of the essay highlights Farah’s concept of the “contradictory unsuitabilities” of the peripheral writer—which is the English translated into French, retranslated into English of “colonial contradiction”, the expression used in Farah’s essay:

It is in this sense, that the fine phrase—disillusioned and realistic—of the Somalian novelist Nuruddin Farah, who described his own identity as a dominated writer among dominated writers as consisting in a series of “contradictory unsuitabilities” is to be understood: not only are the impoverished—whether their poverty is literary, political or linguistic—never truly at ease in the literary world; more than this, their various unsuitabilities are themselves contradictory, forming an inextricable web of malediction, unhappiness, anger, and revolt. (Casanova 185)

The tone of anguished frustration identified above is captured also in what Farah says in an interview with Casanova: “Writing is a minefield of betrayals. I betrayed my mother in becoming not an oral poet but a writer, and a writer in English, which is to say in a language incomprehensible to her [...] I regret having written in English [...] I regret that you, my mother, died before I could see you again” (254). Casanova’s analysis of Farah’s complex position in the world literary system is in many ways illuminating, but Farah’s position and negotiation of the system also reveals the ways the model may be inadequate. Although *The World Republic of Letters* alludes to Farah mainly in the context of translation, it nevertheless outlines three other areas in relation to which Farah’s writing career may productively be considered. These are centered around questions of a national literature, language, and narrative techniques. Each of these areas will now be considered, as well as further complexities of the question of translation.

Paradoxically, even though the becoming-visible of the world literary system requires that one think transnationally, entering the world republic of letters is strongly connected with the richness of the literary history of the nation. Referring to an essay by Paul Valéry, Casanova suggests that: “Age is one of the chief aspects of literary capital: the older the literature, the more substantial a country’s patrimony, the more numerous the canonical texts that constitute its literary pantheon in the form of ‘national classics’” (14). In addition to the depth of a nation’s literary history, Casanova also cites the “prestige” conferred by “the existence of a [...] professional ‘milieu,’ a restricted and cultivated public, and an interested [...] enlightened bourgeoisie; on salons, a specialized press, and sought-after publishers with distinguished list, [...] on respected judges of talent [...] and, of course, on celebrated writers wholly devoted to the task of writing” (15). It should already be clear from Farah’s autobiographical reflections cited above that as a Somali, subjected to multiple colonizations and alienations, Farah was egregiously dispossessed of a national literary patrimony. While Somali oral poetry captures enormous cultural wealth, and is unique in many ways compared with other oral literatures of the African continent, it exists only in the context of performance, and thus had/has no significant literary presence through script. In his early work, especially *From a Crooked Rib*, Farah drew on Somali oral sources, symbolisms and conventions, to construct the oral ‘bridge’ into literature, familiar in many postcolonial literary contexts. Farah’s literary heritage, for this reason, was a heritage created out of the patrimony of other nations, a feature that will be discussed further in relation to other dimensions of the question of translation. Of any writer alive today, Farah probably enjoys the unique distinction of being the author of a first national novel in a foreign language and the author of the first national novel in the national language. (Farah’s 1970 Anglophone novel, *From a Crooked Rib*, was the first Somali novel. He is also the author of a first novel in Somali when a script and orthography were officially recognized for the language. The serialization of this novel in a Somali newspaper was stopped by the dictatorial regime of Muhammed Siyad Barre.)

As an author, thus, Farah quite literally is a self-made man, though constructed out of multinational influences—the literary patrimony of nations not his own. Farah is deprived of the foundation (or baggage) with which most other writers come, even in a postcolonial context. Most Arab writers or Indian writers write against the backdrop of literatures that go back centuries. The Latin-American ‘Boom’ writers parodied the popular romances of their nineteenth century. Even *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Achebe’s ‘first novel’ in a largely West African oral context could draw on the “popular pamphleteering”, in E. N. Obiechina’s memorable phrase, of the Onitsha Market literature that existed from the period of the end of World War II. Achebe also wrote against the background of more ‘highbrow’ literature in the form of Cyprian Ekwensi’s *People of the City* (1954), and the literature published in *Beacon* (1956–) and *The Horn* (1957–), magazines published by the University of Ibadan, edited for a time by John Pepper Clark. Farah, by contrast, writes in a national literary vacuum. He thus is unable to enter, as Casanova puts it, “into international competition armed [...] with his entire literary ‘past’: by virtue solely of his membership in a linguistic area and a national grouping, [where] he embodies and reactivates a whole literary history, carrying this ‘literary time’ with him without even being fully conscious of it” (40–1). Furthermore, since Farah did not have a national linguistic patrimony against which to define himself, either by appropriation or by rejection, Farah constructed himself as writer *ab initio* in a world literary, not national, context predominantly in relation to the European modernists. Farah takes to an extreme, given that he is dispossessed even of a national literary background, the point made by Casanova that books “produced by the least literarily endowed countries” are “improbable” and the fact that they “manage to emerge and make themselves known at all verges on the miraculous” (12). This situation has changed since Farah published his first novel, with a fair number of novels

now available in Somali and, mainly in the twenty-first century, a growing number of novels by other, younger, diasporic Somalis in English and Italian.

Farah's national literary struggle has been unlike that of most other peripheral and semi-peripheral writers. The national question in relation to Farah's corpus is unusual since his novels simultaneously need to construct and deconstruct the idea of the Somali nation. Thus Farah's cannot be the impudent posture of Arno Schmidt, quoted by Casanova as saying: "I hereby solemnly protest against the term 'German writer' by which this nation of stupid fools will seek one day to claim me as one of their own" (331). In order to gain literary value in the world literary bourse, Farah needed to constitute Somaliness, at the same time that he distanced himself from nationalism, in part, through the subversive politics and modes of his European literary influences that, according to Casanova, endow dispossessed writers with literary capital. *From a Crooked Rib* may be read as the novel that allegorically charts the coming into existence of the modern Somali nation-state. *Maps*, the Farah novel that created the greatest scholarly stir, by contrast, is the novel that explodes every precept upon which the Somali nation (and nationalism generally) is constructed. Paradoxically, in order to "achieve literary existence, to struggle against the invisibility that threatens [peripheral writers] from the very beginning of their careers" (Casanova 177), Farah has had both to be invested in Somaliness and to divest Somaliness as an essentialized national identity.

Given the extent of Farah's literary deprivation as revealed in his autobiographical essays, where it is clear he lacked the passport for entry to the world republic of letters, it is almost unthinkable that as a young man he set himself the goal of making a living only by his writing. James Currey, editor of the Heinemann African Writers Series at the time in which *From a Crooked Rib* was published, states that: "[Farah] rejected state employment in Somalia and was one of the first writers from Africa to set out to support himself as much as possible by his writing. [...] He has continued to write with a professional intensity and to have his work published, reviewed and win prizes in Europe and the US" (155). Clearly, Farah needed singlehandedly, and without the support of an aesthetic context and literary resonances of a national literature, to create a place for himself in the world economy of letters. In short, he had singlehandedly to overcome literary dependence. Farah's youthful intuition at the outset was that the world republic of letters was not "an enchanted world, a kingdom of pure creation, the best of all possible worlds where universality reigns through liberty and equality" (Casanova 12). This is clear from his earliest encounters with writing. In "Why I Write", one of the most detailed accounts of his early formation, Farah relates an anecdote about how, when he was ten years old, in his desperation to see his name in print, in a context where everything he read was about other people in other cultures, he "cut out the name Nuruddin [from a copy of *A Thousand and One Nights*] and glued it to [his] exercise book", telling his friends, "See, see my name is in print!" (1). The challenges involved in getting his name in print in later life, are evident from the fraught nature of his exchanges with most of his early mentors and publishers. Farah refers to an exchange with Canadian writer, Margaret Laurence, who had read his second short story and recommended that he cut the final paragraph if he wanted her to try to get it published. He refused and subsequent communication was acerbic. Farah also relates his offense at the tenor and contents of the rejection letter from Heinemann Nigeria, where he had submitted his first manuscript. Subsequent dealings with Heinemann appear to have been marred by misunderstandings, suggesting Farah's sense of being an undermined contestant in the world literary race.

His early feeling of exclusion from the aesthetic innovations of the literary center is also suggested by another anecdote related in "Why I Write". When he was in his early teens, an American schoolteacher asked the class to write essays to be entered into a competition. Since he had been reading Ernest Hemingway at the time, Farah "lifted a couple of longish passages from one of his [Hemingway's] travelogues" ("Why I Write" 3). The teacher gave him a C, saying "We don't express ourselves in this manner, in English", but dropped his grade to a D when he showed her that she was actually censuring the idiom of an internationally acclaimed modernist master. The incident highlights the expectation at the time of the kind of aesthetic that was suitable for the colonies, and also implicitly makes it clear to the young Farah, the radical avant-garde modes he would have to employ in order to catapult himself from his eccentric position into the center of the world literary order.

In Casanova's analysis of world literary production, a singularly important role is played by translation. Going back to Goethe's conception of a *Weltliteratur*, Casanova confirms the twentieth-century applicability of Goethe's observation that it is necessary "to consider each translator as a mediator seeking to promote [a] universal spiritual commerce [read European episteme and civilizational aspirations], and setting himself the task of assisting its progress" (14). Translation thus is integral to the construction of world letters, the complexities of which have been further explored as noted above in Emily Apter's *Against World Literature*. However, in the context

of the world literary system created by Goethe's ideal of the harmonious exchange created by translation, Casanova highlights the overtones of tragedy for peripheral writers, which shadows translation in world literature. In an earlier section, Farah's feeling of betrayal in adopting English as his language of writing and publication was quite clearly shown. But Casanova emphasizes how this is part of a larger systemic problem:

All literary authors in small [indigenous] languages are therefore faced in one form or another, and in some sense inevitably, with the question of translation. As "translated men," they are caught in a dramatic structural contradiction that forces them to choose between translation into a literary language that cuts them off from their compatriots, but that gives them literary existence, and retreat into a small language that condemns them to invisibility or else to a purely national literary existence. (257)

In Farah's case, the question of translation is taken to almost vertiginous depths, and undermines the foundations of Casanova's world system in some ways. Farah relates the story in the autobiographical essay, "Why I Write", of reading Fyodor Dostoevsky's Russian world and Victor Hugo's French culture in Arabic translation, with Arabic translations of introductions that had originally been written in English. Farah himself would have been reading the Arabic as his second language, since his first language, Somali, at that point in time had no script and orthography. As a writer thus, Farah is a wholly translated man since, when he first started writing, he could not write in his home language, with Arabic, Amharic, English and Italian as the possible alternatives. Given Farah's determination to enter the economy of world literary production, English was the obvious language of choice since writing in any of his other languages would have restricted him to the smaller and less prestigious spheres of Arabic or Italian letters, or the completely localized world of Amharic literature. (Complexities of translation continue into the present, where in an interview published in this theme issue, the interviewer, Ali Mumin Ahad, posed questions to Farah in Italian, Farah's fifth language, and Farah responded in Somali, his first. The Somali was translated into Italian for the Italian magazine publication of the interview, and the Italian published interview was translated into English for publication in this theme issue of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*).

From Farah's foregrounding of questions of translation in his interviews and autobiographical essays, it is clear that he is fully conscious of the potentials and the pitfalls of translation. In many novels in his corpus, there is a decided underscoring of issues of translation with many characters themselves translators. One of the earliest translators among Farah's characters is Medina, the protagonist in *Sardines*, who translates world classics into Somali. Included among these classics is the translation of Achebe's Igbo story of the tortoise and the birds as it appears in *Things Fall Apart*. Medina gives the Somali version of the story the title, "He", alluding to the Somali dictator, Barre, highlighting the universal tendency towards greed and the desire for power, exemplified by the dictator and the tortoise in the folktale. Jeebleh in *Links* also is a translator figure, having translated Dante's *Divine Comedy* into Somali for his PhD dissertation. The translation of the *Divine Comedy* presumably is a worthwhile task since the translation makes it accessible to Somalis, who, thereby, are alerted to the similarities between their own world and Dante's world of internecine battles and faction-fighting, as these get allegorized in the "Inferno", in particular. The wider significance of translation is carried into Farah's most recent novel where one of the protagonists, Mugdi, a Somali diasporic in Oslo, translates a Norwegian classic into Somali. *Giants in the Earth* by Ole Edvart Rølvaag is a story of nineteenth-century Norwegian migration to the Dakota Territories in North America. It is translated into Somali by Mugdi to give Somalis in Norway confidence in their position as immigrants, knowing that Norwegians themselves had been immigrants elsewhere carrying with them similar cultural shortcomings to those of Somalis and facing comparable problems in their host lands. Translation thus for Farah is a double-edged sword where the necessity and betrayal represented by his English 'translatedness' to negotiate a position in the world economy of letters, is offset by the value to Somalis of translation of the world's literary riches.

The fact that Farah's work itself has been translated into more than seventeen languages suggests that he has succeeded in creating a space for himself in the world map of literature. As explained by Casanova: "Translation is the foremost example of a particular type of consecration in the literary world. Its true nature as a form of literary recognition (rather than a mere exchange of one language for another) [...] goes unrecognized on account of its apparent neutrality" (133). Farah thus has achieved considerable recognition in the major centers of world literature, attested by the translation of his novels, but also by the important prizes he has won.

Farah's first major award was the English-Speaking Union Literary Award for *Sweet and Sour Milk* in 1980. He also won the 1991 Tucholsky Prize awarded in Stockholm for work as a literary exile. Most notably, he has won

the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1998, second, it is said, only to the Nobel Prize for which he has reportedly been nominated a few times. Casanova identifies the Nobel Prize as “the greatest proof of literary consecration, bordering on the definition of literary art itself” (147). The Nobel, she notes, is held in such high esteem, that various eccentric nations like South Korea and China have launched national campaigns to promote its writers for the prize in an effort to “accumulate a national stock of literary capital” (147). Farah’s literary identity as a ‘translated man’ at a number of levels is confirmed also by the prizes awarded to his novels in translation, including the Premio Cavour in 1994 for the Italian translation of *Close Sesame*, the Premio Mondello in 2001 and the Premio Napoli for the Italian version of *Links* in 2005 (Fotheringham 151–2). He has also won the St. Malo Literary Festival Award for the French edition of *Gifts*, which went on to be the book of the month (June) for all French libraries. The prizes both in the world of English letters and prizes for work in translation confirm Farah’s possession of considerable literary capital in the republic of letters. Casanova terms the “magical transmutation that consecration” through translation and prizes brings, “*littérisation*” (127). *Littérisation* has given Farah considerable standing in the world republic of letters, but it has not allowed him to achieve full autonomy. In African literature, one of the peripheries of the Euro-American literary centers in Casanova’s model, Farah occupies a position on the periphery of the periphery occupied by the more canonical corpuses of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, a consideration discussed in more detail in the introduction to this theme issue.

Apart from a few early attempts to write in Somali and Italian, English has been Farah’s language of creative expression and publication. As noted above, Farah regarded English as an alien and alienating language, whose literature described a foreign culture. Farah provides a number of reasons, however, explaining why it was inevitable that he wrote in English, rather than in any of the other languages with which he was familiar. Importantly, writing in English would insert the Somali experience into world history. He suggests in addition that writing in English was a way to escape the censorship of ideas that would occur under the dictatorship had he written in Somali. Furthermore, he claims that, whether he wrote in English or Somali, he would have been read only by the very small class of literate Somalis (Jaggi 174–5). More practically, since a standardized script and orthography became available for Somali only in 1972, Farah could not at the outset write in his home language (“Celebrating Differences: The 1998 Neustadt Lecture” 18). He has also jocularly remarked that when he started to write, the only functioning typewriters he could access were Roman script typewriters, making English the obvious language for publication.

Coming from a nation with no literary patrimony, Farah was forced to borrow from the literary wealth of other languages and other countries. As an Anglophone Somali writer, Farah could potentially gain entry to London and New York, two of the lesser literary capitals of Casanova’s world of letters, given that Paris was outside his sphere, French not existing in his polyglot repertoire. Unable to challenge the linguistic domination of English directly, Farah challenged the dominance of English aesthetically through his literary influences. Unlike his African counterparts, Achebe and Ngũgĩ, whose work and biographical data suggest a strong influence from the central national canon of English literature, Farah’s influences have mainly been the modernist challengers of English, largely realist, aesthetic domination. These subversives include the Americans Faulkner and Hemingway, and, of course, the Irishmen, Joyce and Beckett. The Irish influence on Farah at the level of technique and content is probably the strongest, with many references in his novels to Irish postcolonial peripherality. This perception of a common literary deprivation Casanova calls the “international” of small nations, that is, strategic alliances of nations on the edges of literary space. She suggests that: “The special perceptiveness of contestants on the periphery enables them to detect affinities among literary (and political) spaces. Their shared literary destitution leads them to take each other as models and historical points of reference to compare their literary situations, and to apply common strategies based on prior experience” (247). Beckett and Joyce, like Farah, did not write in their indigenous language, Gaelic; and Beckett and Joyce radically rewrote, through modernist iconoclasm, the realist aesthetic of English linguistic domination. Thus, from a range of reasons for Farah’s writing in English, crucial among them is the access it represents to the centers of the world literary system. Yet, through identifying with revolutionary influences that have, from a similar periphery as his own, challenged and came to enjoy standing in the dominant position of English letters, Farah has negotiated citizenship for himself in the world republic of letters.

In terms of Casanova’s analysis also, the Irish modernists occupy a unique space in the world literary system, foremost among the group she terms the “revolutionaries” (324). Joyce, Beckett (and Heaney) draw their subversive potential from Dante, who was the first writer to challenge linguistic domination, in this case, the

domination of Latin in the early modern period. The Irish modernists are leaders of later “innovators who undermine the forms, styles and [linguistic] codes accepted at the Greenwich meridian, thus thoroughly changing, renewing, sometimes even shattering the criteria of modernity and, as a result, the practices of world literature as a whole” (326). Referring to Joyce, Casanova states that he “carried out a revolution so great that the measure of literary time itself was profoundly altered” (326). Joyce’s innovation thereby becomes a touchstone for other writers seeking recognition in the world of letters. The Irish writers, and avant-gardists, more generally, form an “international genealogy [...] that includes all the great innovators honored as true liberators in the peripheral lands of literary space, a pantheon of great writers regarded as universal classics (such as Ibsen, Joyce, and Faulkner) that writers from outlying countries can oppose both to central literary histories and to the academic genealogies of national pantheons” (327–8). The list of innovators cited by Casanova duplicates the list of writers Farah cites as his most significant formative influences. What Farah achieves through modeling his own work on the formal iconoclasm of the modernists is, according to Casanova’s theory, a very rapid acceleration of literary time in his national periphery, moving from a context of non-literariness to the high velocities of radical innovation as they exist at the literary Greenwich meridian. Farah thus is an example of Casanova’s writer who “living [...] on the edges of the literary world [...] learned to confront the laws and forces that sustain the unequal structure of this world and who are keenly aware that [...] in order to have any chance of surviving as writers, [they] should be the most sensitive to the newest aesthetic innovations of international literature [...]” (43). It is Farah’s early adoption of avant-gardist modernist and postmodern techniques that sets him apart from the realist modes of most of his African contemporaries.

In the ways discussed, Farah almost too perfectly exemplifies Casanova’s theory of the operation of the world literary system, and the position of the peripheral writer in this system. However, because of the uniqueness of the specificities of his artistic formation, and because of the trends and departures in his corpus, there are ways in which Farah has been positioned also to rewrite the laws of the world republic of letters. To explain how this is achieved, one needs to start at the beginning—again. The perception of the existence of a world literary system with an economy and laws of its own requires, Casanova suggests in the preface of her book, a shift of focus from the implicitly assumed national unconscious of literature to the “lost” transnational dimension (xi). To do this, one needs to zoom out from closely focalized analyses to see the position and relation of the figure of the individual text in the carpet as a whole—to use Henry James’s analogy employed by Casanova. As she explains:

A literary work can be deciphered only on the basis of the whole of the composition, for its rediscovered coherence stands revealed only in relation to the entire literary universe of which it is a part. The singularity of individual literary works therefore becomes manifest only against the overall structure in which they take their place. Each work that is declared literary is a minute part of the immense “combination” constituted by the literary world as a whole. (3)

What is evident is that Farah’s unique position as first published Anglophone author and first fiction writer in the Somali language has forced his frame of reference to be constitutively transnational rather than national, as is the case for almost every other twentieth and twenty-first century writer, whether in the metropole or on the periphery. Farah could not define himself against a national literary tradition as other writers do since a Somali national literary tradition simply did not exist. Instead, he positioned himself in relation to Russian, German, Arabic, African, English, and French literatures, with often-convoluted translation histories. For this reason, among others, his work has been drawn into the spheres largely of Anglo-American and African letters, but also, more recently, into the spheres of Italian and Arab literatures. An intuitive sense of the functioning of the world literary system, and his location in it, was thus part of his constitution as a writer—Farah was ‘zoomed out’ from the start. This intuition is signposted in his corpus through its international literary allusions and self-reflexive references to literal and cultural translation. The world literary system thus is built into Farah’s writing through a transnationality of practice, rather than theory. So rather than the world literary space giving form and meaning to his texts, his texts are maps of the world literary space, perhaps most pointedly exemplified by the self-reference in Farah’s second novel, *A Naked Needle*, the novel that led to his exile from Somalia. In this novel, the protagonist Koschin visits the apartment of an American woman married to a Somali, whose bookshelf carries a novel titled *A Naked Needle* in the Heinemann African Writers Series, a publishing initiative to which Soyinka disparagingly referred as the “orange ghetto”, alluding to the distinctive color of the covers of all the books in this series. Farah’s novels thus carry the world system within them—as the literary (un)conscious of their own constitution.

Farah's personal transnationalism has also played a part in signposting some of the ways in which the world literary system, as described by Casanova, may be transforming. Farah has lived in the metropolises of Europe and America, but he has also lived extensively in African capitals, having spent the longest period (since 1999) in Cape Town where he writes. (Part of his year is currently spent teaching at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson in New York.) Having been out of Somalia for forty-four years, and now writing about protagonists who are not Somali nationals and based in locales outside of greater Somalia, Farah demonstrates the outmodedness of national literary models, upon which Casanova's world literary system paradoxically continues to be based, despite the exhortation to a zoomed-out transnational perspective. Although Farah continues to be published largely in the United States, novels in his oeuvre have also been published by African publishers, including Serif in Harare, and Kwela in Cape Town. Farah's literary awards from peripheral centers of letters, like the award for *Gifts* as best novel in 1993 in Zimbabwe, an honorary doctorate in 2018 from the Panjab University in Chandigarh, and, quite significantly, the South African Lifetime Literary Achievement Award in 2014, suggest a sea-change in the world of letters. These honors suggest a wider polycentrism of "consecration" than that suggested by Casanova, with the South African award implying that Farah may be more a South African writer than a Somali one. With Farah's novel in progress, set in Johannesburg, among the large Somali community in this South African city, and, indeed, significant numbers of Somalis throughout South Africa, Farah would appear to be confirming the implication of the South African Lifetime Literary Achievement Award that Somalis are South African citizens, and that Farah is a South African writer. Farah's significance, in addition, on the Italian literary scene and the number of Italian awards he has won, indexes recognition also in a European "suburb" of the world literary capitals, complicating the binary center-periphery model even further. Thus Farah has not, like Joyce, Faulkner and Beckett, needed to be consecrated in a competing metropolitan literary capital (Paris) in order to achieve prestige in the "home" capital (London). As Farah's experience shows, institutions conferring prestige may increasingly be located on the periphery, the continued significance of international awards like the Nobel and the Booker notwithstanding. Most recently Farah has received the 2019 Lee Hochul Literary Prize for Peace, a South Korean award indexing even wider remapping of the world literary map and its centers of recognition.

Crucially, Farah may be illuminating an alternative aesthetic in his recent work contrasted with the avant-garde aesthetic which, for Casanova, constitutes the dynamic present of the literary Greenwich meridian (based in Paris) against which the relative aesthetic distance of all who belong to the international of letters is measured: "the prime meridian determines the present of literary creation, which is to say modernity" (88). Although Farah in his early and mid-career largely constituted his literary patrimony out of the aesthetic innovation of the Euro-American modernists like Joyce, Ibsen, Faulkner, Hemingway, Beckett and Woolf, confirming Casanova's conviction that "authors on the edges of the literary world" have to be "the most sensitive to the newest innovations of international literature" (43) in order to succeed in a world context. His later career has seen a shift to the 'flat' realist modes for which African literature of the twentieth-century was negatively viewed, as was its nationalist and ideological commitments. Farah's return to realism, first embodied in the proto-realism of *From a Crooked Rib*, Farah's first novel, was already signaled in *Past Imperfect*, the third trilogy (Moolla 175–6) consisting of the novels *Links*, *Knots* and *Crossbones*. The shift to realism after an intensive exploration of modernism, postmodernism and magic realism in the intervening novels, has been accompanied by what Harry Garuba identifies as an alternative aesthetic with a distinctive African/postcolonial genealogy. Drawing on Chinua Achebe's well-known essay "The Novelist as Teacher" (1965), Garuba posits the development of an aesthetic of "teacherliness" in the cultural production of the decolonizing nation-states. Using Casanova's term, which is Garuba's only reference to Casanova in his article, Garuba goes on to assert that for:

postcolonial literatures or literatures from emergent literary spaces [...] literary value inheres as much in the teachability of the text as it does in whatever other aesthetic qualities it may possess; that is, the text's ability to illustrate, rework, or represent some theme or issue considered to be of major significance and to open it up for teaching—about empire, nation, and identity, or postnation, diaspora, and globalization [...] [This] is as much a source of value as any of its other formal qualities. (17; emphasis in original)

Garuba presents teacherliness as an alternative aesthetic value, rather than the conventional predisposition to see "it in a negative light" (18). Through an analysis of Farah's *Past Imperfect* trilogy, Garuba shows that teacherliness "is not something outside the text, such as the lesson it intends to impart; it is internal to the text in the sense that it is a structuring and organizing principle or criterion for distinguishing between 'serious' literature,

and ‘nonserious’ texts” (27). The fact that Garuba singles out Farah’s later work to make this general point about literatures from “emergent spaces” suggests that the aesthetic of teacherliness is more pronounced in Farah than it is in the work of other eccentric authors. Teacherliness as an aesthetic value also strongly shapes the first two novels of the fourth trilogy—*Hiding in Plain Sight* and *North of Dawn*.

Therefore in Farah’s mature production we see the expression of a modern (not modernist) postcolonial aesthetic that reformulates the literary laws of the republic of letters. Where for Casanova, writers carved out their freedom through avant-gardist literary techniques that rewrote the literary present of the Greenwich meridian, we see that the later Farah replaces the “revolutionary” aesthetic of the Euro-American modernists with teacherliness—an aesthetic that is not concerned with that which defines Casanova’s literary modernity. In foregrounding the aesthetic of teacherliness, Farah is also not replicating the success of the Latin American ‘boom’ writers who “managed to achieve an international existence and reputation conferred on their national literary spaces [...] a standing and influence in the larger world [...] incommensurate with [the relative importance] of their native countries in the international world of politics” (38–9). Neither is he constituting his later work as “classic”, namely, “a work that rises above competition and so escapes the bidding of time” (Casanova 92). Instead, what Farah, in this respect, seems to achieve is a complete reappraisal of what constitutes aesthetic value at the literary Greenwich meridian, rather than renewing or challenging the dominant aesthetic of the metropolitan centers. The fact that Farah’s most recent novels continue to be reviewed in the literary segments of the major Anglo-American and European newspapers attests the standing he has achieved through the earlier phases of his career where his negotiation of the republic of letters conformed more closely to the precepts Casanova outlines.

The *pas de deux* conducted between Nuruddin Farah and Pascale Casanova suggests at one and the same time an exemplification and a departure from the theory of *The World Republic of Letters*. Casanova’s world literary systems approach proposes a distant view of literature that brings into perspective the operation of an international competitive politics of writing. This world system forms a constitutive order within and in relation to which individual literary works are composed, published, and achieve recognition. The system is strongly hierarchical with the former Anglo-European colonial and American imperial centers dominating the world republic of letters. Postcolonial literature occupies a periphery that needs to be validated by the metropolitan centers in order to achieve recognition. Validation requires that dispossessed writers catch up with literary modernity by imitating the avant-gardist models that mark the present of the literary Greenwich meridian. Peripheral literature that succeeds in renewing time at the center is consecrated and wins standing unrelated to the status of the nation-states of which they are citizens.

Nuruddin Farah’s work could be regarded as a case study of the inequalities and possibilities of the world system mapped by Casanova. Farah is a translated man at many levels, who has used translation to escape his position as a Somali on the periphery of the African periphery of the world republic of letters. With no literary language of his own and without a national literary patrimony, Farah gets constituted as a world writer at the outset of his career. He seeks and achieves consecration in the world’s centers through radically accelerating literary time on his periphery by adopting the modernist techniques of the radicals of the center. However, Farah’s lack of a national literary history and his formative transnationalism also position him as a writer whose career and work represents a transnationality of practice that carries a consciousness of the world system within itself—it is a practice that does not derivatively illustrate, but instead preempts Casanova’s theory. Furthermore, as a consequence of colonial and postcolonial politics that have forced Farah’s life and stories into a transnationalism beyond the usually double hyphenated identities of the global diaspora, Farah’s career and his narratives force a recognition of the inapplicability of national models that remain a part of the unconscious of Casanova’s theory. A translated man through and through, *littérisation* achieved through translation of his work into world languages, and consecration through prizes, for example, in Italy, a European ‘suburb’ of the world literary capitals, highlights a much more polycentric world order than the one described by Casanova. Consecration in the peripheries of South Korea, South Africa, India and Zimbabwe, may be evolving to constitute more significant literary capital on the edges than on the bourses of the center. Most importantly, the trend in Farah’s mature work signals a rewriting rather than a renewal of the literary laws of the center from multiple and complex peripheries. The aesthetic of “teacherliness” that relies on a return to realism rather than the modernist and postmodern techniques that have up until recently distinguished Farah on the African literary scene, points to a fundamental rewriting of the present at the literary Greenwich meridian, and even more crucially, the possibility of multiple *tempus* in

multiple meridians. In the *pas de deux* between Casanova and Farah, Casanova seemed to lead the entrée, but Farah leads the coda.

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