



Reflecting back, projecting forward: A conversation with Nuruddin Farah

Nuruddin Farah & F. Fiona Moolla

F. Fiona Moolla interviewed Nuruddin Farah at his Cape Town apartment on the afternoon of 25 March 2019.

*FFM: Professor Farah, I'm working on a theme issue of the South African journal *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*. The response to the call for articles reveals significant interest in your Indian experience. Every student of your work knows you did your undergraduate degree in India at the Panjab University in Chandigarh, and your personal connection with India was entrenched when you married an Indian woman, but we'd like to know more about the time you spent there and also possibly the kinds of influence that Indian literature, culture and politics may have had on your worldview.*

NF: Well I suppose whatever influence ... I received after spending ... between three and four years in India is not as interesting as the interest that I had in India before I went to India. The reason is I went to India at a time when it was not fashionable for Africans and third world people to go India. I went to India, instead of going to America, because I had an American scholarship to go to America and do my undergraduate degree in America, and chose not to take up the American scholarship but to apply for a scholarship to go India. Probably this was because I was interested in creating some kind of a bridge between Africa and Asia more than I was interested in creating a bridge between America and ... I was interested in Hinduism, I was interested in Buddhism and having been trained as a child, a youngster, in Islamic studies ... my family having decided in fact I would ... in every Somali family one person is more or less devoted, more or less made to devote himself, usually men, to the study of Qur'an—I thought I would benefit a great deal more if I went to India and much less if I went to America; and this proved to be the case. When the American professor who organized a scholarship for me to go India discovered that I was ... that I had declined to go America, he wagged his finger at me and said: "Mr. Farah, you will never become a great writer." To his great surprise, four years later he was walking down the street in London when he found *A Crooked Rib* [*From a Crooked Rib*] ... on the window shelf of ... is it called Fowles, Foleys ... or (FFM interjects: Foyles) Foyles ... there we go. Yeah, so India was not easy, it was not easy. People tended to be racist but I disregarded all that because ... in Somalia people are also racist and I knew that there is nowhere in the world that you could live peacefully without racism. The greater benefit that I received from my presence in India for four years is the patience towards work, is the communal commitment that people have towards one another, and the fact that India as a subcontinent contains the world! There is no country like India. I still go there ... in fact received an honorary doctorate from there, my old university only recently, received it from the hand of the President of the Federal Republic of India, who gave it to me, so I have that attachment to India.

FFM: And when you went back to Chandigarh recently, did you find that it had changed very much?

NF: It had changed a great deal.

FFM: For the better or for the worse?

Nuruddin Farah (b. 1945) is an internationally acclaimed author of Somali origin. Farah has published thirteen novels to date, as well as a non-fiction work on the Somali diaspora. He is a recognized essayist and socio-political commentator on African and global issues.

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NF: I would say for better in the sense that you know ... it's a bigger city now, the university is much much larger, more varied ... the ... well, obviously, noisier. And I taught at the university for nearly four weeks in the Department of English on my recent visit ... and travelled around.

FFM: *Okay. So often in your novels there are references to India, and, of course, I think the interest in India culminates in the Indian character, Padmini, in Hiding in Plain Sight. Things Indian in your novels ... is that a conscious choice on your part or ...*

NF: Well ... I mean, obviously everything that goes into a book, because you live with a book for two, three years, you become conscious of it, but I think there isn't anything inherently Indian about the character in the novel, she just happens to be a woman and an Indian one, I could have ... you know... said she was a Cape colored woman. (FM interjects: Okay.) But ... there wasn't anything inherently Indian except for the fact that, you know, the two women live in Pondicherry, so it would be good if one of them actually had some Indian roots.

FFM: *So you are saying Indian culture doesn't significantly impact on your ideas for your novels?*

NF: Well the ideas ... first of all the characters in the books have to be well informed about the subject they are speaking about and I have never had a character who is talking about India because nearly everything that I write would be seen through the eyes of someone who has done this and that and the other. So that if I wrote about an elderly man who is an intellectual and who is Somali nearly everybody thinks this must be autobiographical. So sometimes one has to avoid scenes and subjects like that because I am conscious of the interpretations given to the text when the text is produced, which is also one of the reasons why, on occasion, I prefer to have female characters because no one would say this is autobiographical.

FFM: *Alright, good. I think the Italian influence on your work is considerably stronger than the Indian influence.*

NF: Because Italy has had more of an impact on Somalia than India has had. India may have had influence on me but not on Somalia or Somalis.

FFM: *But even that influence in your later works seems to have waned. In the earlier works there are far more references to Italy and ...*

NF: Yeah. Because this was when one was talking about Fascism and the impact it had on Somalis, obviously that would be integral to the history of Somalia or Somalis.

FFM: *Is it possible that one could say that you are not writing so much about Italy any longer because there is a younger generation of Somali-Italian writers who are writing about...*

NF: Sure.

FFM: *Okay, and have you read any of these authors?*

NF: I read Igiaba [Igiaba Scego, author of *Adua*] and a young woman called Cristina Ali Farah [author of *Little Mother*] who will be here for several months. She arrived in January and she'll be here for six months.

FFM: *I wasn't aware of that. That's interesting. So have you read these authors in Italian or in English translation?*

NF: I have read in Italian, Cristina Ali Farah and Igiaba both.

FFM: *So ... for a very long time Nuruddin Farah was the only Somali writer, writing about Somalia for an international audience. Now, of course, there are many other contenders, how do you feel about that?*

NF: I love it! The responsibility is being shared and if there are weaknesses in my books, say I haven't written about a given subject, I'm glad there are other people who will write about it. I happen to be older than they are but I'm very pleased to have their companionship imaginatively.

FFM: *So apart from yourself probably the most well-known Somali writer, writing in English, is Nadifa Mohamed.*

NF: Yeah!

FFM: *Have you met her? ... Do you know her?*

NF: I have met her a couple of times. I have read her first novel, I haven't come around yet to read her second one. And I love the work. I really love the work.

FFM: *Would you say that you stand in the same relation to this younger generation of mainly female writers—would you say that you stand in the same relation to them as Achebe does to a younger generation of Nigerian writers?*

NF: I do not know what Achebe's relationships with other writers are ... but I know ...

FFM: *In a literary sense, I mean.*

NF: Yeah! That I really ... I truly enjoy their success. And it is not an easy thing to create success as a novelist. It is very, very hard! It's a lot easier to write the first book than it is easy to write a second and a third. And when you continue to write in the way I do, you know, every three years a book, you lose count of lots of things, it become something like a ... well... an automat. You do it, you're aware of it, but sometimes you are not as emotionally involved in it ... as I might have been when I first published my first novel.

FFM: *Why do you think it is that the new generation is mainly female, the new generation of Somali writers?*

NF: Well, there are men writers too but it's possible that not many people know about them.

FFM: *So what do you think accounts for the international success of these female Somali writers?*

NF: I do not know. It's probably part of the times. The times ... You know these days one is more generous towards women ... writers. Communities are more open to hearing the stories of women. When I first published *From a Crooked Rib*, if I had written about a boy, a Somali boy, uh ... I would have been accepted a lot easier. I would have been thought of as a great writer if my first novel was about a boy, growing up in Somalia.

FFM: *You think so?*

NF: Oh yes! I'm sure. Absolutely sure.

FFM: *You mean you would be accepted as a great writer among Somalis or internationally?*

NF: Internationally, and especially in Africa, and the reason is when *Crooked Rib* was published, it was never, has never been reviewed on its own ... *Crooked Rib* made ... you know ... journeyed across a difficult terrain on its own without help from anyone including the publishers. The editor James Currey forgot it from the book that mentions all the books he had published. He forgot to include it in the list of the books that were published by James Currey himself. So *Crooked Rib* made its own history. It made its own history because when it was being taught at universities—in East Africa it used to be taught in the Department of Philosophy. And in Nigeria when they were teaching it, it used to be taught by the Department of Islamic Studies. And the reason is I was the only one among the African writers publishing at that time who was from a Moslem background, and not only that but who had no British education, because I grew up in the Italian parts of Somalia. So these things, each of them had its own effect on the book, ... isolated it. And I am absolutely happy that *Crooked Rib* had no friends, because it meant that unlike many African writers who published one book and then became great authors, or were considered to be famous and great, I had to work very hard to make my way into the world of letters, and the first time that *Crooked Rib* was reviewed was after I published *Sweet and Sour Milk*.

FFM: *I wasn't aware of that. Uhm ... In our time chatting together you keep coming back to From a Crooked Rib and so it seems to me that it occupies a very special place in your oeuvre.*

NF: Well you know, when a parent has produced ten to fifteen children, that parent can't talk about all the children all the time ... every now and again (laughing).

FFM: Okay. Yeah.

NF: In any case it is, it's [a] book ... that has meant a great deal more to more people than some of the other books, you know ...

FFM: *Apart from the first two novels, everything else has been written as trilogies. At the end of your career, reflecting back on your writing, do you think ... Why do you think it is that form of the trilogy has served you so well?*

NF: Well, *Crooked Rib* and *A Naked Needle* [the second novel published] were also part of a trilogy. The third part never got written, and the reason why it never got written is because when I was thinking of writing it ... before I went ... before I did a great deal of work on the third part of the trilogy, I was told I could not go back to Somalia and therefore I abandoned that book, and wrote *Sweet and Sour Milk* which is about, directly about a dictatorship. Because I had been threatened physically, sentenced first to thirty years and then to death.

FFM: *Okay. That's interesting! I didn't know that the first two novels were potentially part of a trilogy ... and so might it not retrospectively be possible to complete that trilogy now?*

NF: It is very possible. If I can't think of any other story! But I haven't re-read the books.

FFM: *Right. It would be an interesting exercise though, I imagine.*

NF: It would be. It would be. But someone else can write it (laughter).

FFM: *But to come back to the fourth trilogy, and you indicated earlier when we spoke informally that this also would be a trilogy—could you give me the title of the third novel and tell me a little more about it?*

NF: Though the draft is more or less done, I can't talk about it in great detail much as I would after finishing it. Suffice it to say it will be set in Johannesburg, and also the provisional title for the third part of the trilogy is *In the Scheme of Things*.

FFM: *You didn't answer the question—why does the form of trilogy continue to serve you so well?*

NF: Because it gives me the possibility of looking at a theme, a subject, a topic from different perspectives. From the perspective of women, from the perspective of an older person, from the perspective of a younger person, and, therefore, if you were to write about dictatorship, I would like to study the impact a dictatorship like Siyad Barre's would have on young people, on women, on older members of society, on so called clan elders, on the educated middle class and so on and so forth. That gives you different perspectives and you could concentrate on these without ... uh ... damaging, the possibility of becoming long winded ...you know... every book is self-contained. You can read any of these books, on their own, without needing to read parts one and two if you see what I'm saying. So because of that I'm at liberty to ... uh ... take women as a central consciousness of one of the novels, and then I could take an elderly man like *Close Sesame*, you know, from the perspective of an old man who is absolutely unlike me because at the time I wrote that book I was around 34, 35, I'm a secularist, this man is, you know, wholly devoted to Islam and it's considered to be the most Islamic novel of any novel written by anyone and yet it comes from a pen of a secularist. And that is ... it makes it possible for me to do trilogies in that way. The perspective is the thing that counts.

FFM: *Nuruddin Farah always is referred to as a Somali writer. Do you still consider yourself to be exiled from Somalia?*

NF: No I didn't think of myself as exiled from Somalia, from the day I decided no longer to live in Europe, from the day that I moved from Europe to Nigeria in 1981. As long as I have lived somewhere in Africa, I didn't consider myself in exile. It's only when I lived outside the continent, and remember I have lived voluntarily in a number of African countries.

FFM: *I think in the period—especially after the civil war—you frequently have said that you keep Somalia alive in your writing. Why is it that the recent novels have moved out of Somalia entirely. They're no longer set in Somalia?*

NF: Probably because there are young Somalis who are writing the kinds of books I might have written if I were basing them in Somalia. This is a benefit that you have when there is ... when there are other Somalis who are writing, in other words, we are complementing one another. To understand a society, you have to have many different writers writing about it, so that each author gives you ... you know ... covers a certain territory. And the territories that I cover need not be covered by others. And this is a hotch-potch, you know, each one contributing their portion, their part ...

FFM: So ... *Hiding in Plain Sight* was set in Kenya, and *North of Dawn* is set in Norway, and the new novel is going to be set in Johannesburg, are there more novels in the making and can they go back to Somalia?

NF: It's very possible I will go back to writing about Somalia, after I have finished this trilogy. And the reason is there is an experience that Somalis ... have grown to develop, have developed, moving out of Somalia. And I think this is a very necessary experience and the reason is because there are no less than two million Somalis who now live abroad. You need to write about that community, that community must be given a voice, and I'm not saying this is the only voice. What I am saying is this is the beginning of a voice, and therefore other Somalis will also contribute, for example, ... I'm hoping that if one were to read Igiaba's or Cristina Ali Farah's novels in conjunction, in tandem, with my works, then there is a complete Somalia—a more complete, one gains a more complete picture about Somalia. If you were to take Nigeria, for example ... in Nigeria ... Uh ... Nigeria is a complex country, but lately the writing that comes out of Nigeria is not. The writing does not match that complexity, which is of a piece with Nigeria.

FFM: Okay. Let's just come back to Somalia (laughter). One of the hallmarks of your early novels is that they tended to be quite closed ... often quite claustrophobic, if one thinks of *Sardines*, for example, set in the central character's home. But increasingly with your later novels there is a lot more movement, a lot more mobility, and there are number of terms that one could use to refer to the mobility of these characters—one could refer to it as exile, one could refer to these Somalis on the move as migrants, as refugees, as diasporic. When writing about these Somalis on the move, are you conscious of the distinctions between these different terms for movement.

NF: One is conscious of these movements that usually, in fact, the majority of them take place in confined spaces, over dinners, with a predetermined theme of conversation, and if a novel like *Sardines* is compact, and, as you put it, "claustrophobic", it is because it represents the claustrophobia that was the dictatorship in Somalia. So there was no oxygen allowed into the lungs, because the characters are themselves subject to daily tyranny. Now, writing a novel like *Hiding in Plain Sight*, you must also take into account that my deep knowledge about some of these areas may be limited. Whereas when you think of *me* writing about Somalia, Somalia is vast and the experiences are there and I can imagine everything about Somalia. Now when I'm writing about Norway, and Kenya, and Johannesburg I have to use more artistry than historical knowledge, than emotional knowledge and so on and so forth, and these are I think quite important to keep in mind.

FFM: Alright, so obviously among your cast of Somalis on the move there are exiles, there are migrants, there are refugees and there are diasporics, but in what way are these Somali characters different from the Norwegian characters in the Norwegian novel, *Giants in the Earth*, that you refer to in *North of Dawn*, in what way are these Somali characters different from the characters described in *Giants in the Earth*—the characters in *Giants in the Earth* are settlers. What makes a settler different from ...?

NF: Well there ... they became settlers first of all because they were white. If they came from, you know, the Dark Continent or India or somewhere else, they would have been referred to as migrants. The characters in *Giants in the Earth* are exiles, no different from the Somalis who are in Norway. They are just as superstitious as the Somalis are. The Norwegians were superstitious at that time and the Somalis are superstitious now, and therefore I have been trying to draw a comparison between what can you learn from a novel like *Giants in the Earth* compared to a novel like *North of Dawn*. What do these people have in common? These are people who have been displaced by poverty, these are people who had to go out of where they were born and brought up, to go somewhere else and to do jobs that are different because the majority of the Norwegians who migrated to North Dakota ... North and South Dakota ... were fishermen and they had to adapt to a new thing, you know becoming a farmer in an area which is alien to them. Somalis find snow in the streets of Oslo as alien. The Norwegians found locusts as alien. So the alienness, the lack of familiarity, displacement, superstition are the same. The major family in *Giants in the Earth*, the husband

Paul and his wife Beret—she became pregnant, she didn't, you know—she would have been killed [in Norway] if she had had a child out of wedlock. So they escape! They are not different from the Somalis who escape, you know.
FFM: *So you are saying that the difference between a settler and a refugee is purely based on race. (Laughter.)*

NF: Sure, and economy. And economic potential, yes, economic potential. You see because ... uh ... Graham Greene lived in France, Samuel Beckett lived in France, but they were never referred to as exiles. They were referred to as expatriates. These words define the economic potential and the racial dynamics. I am an exile and the reason is because I can't get back to Somalia. No, rather I say Somalia is just one country in the continent of Africa and I am an African.

FFM: *Two final questions: You seem to have been pulled over your career—there seems to be a kind of tug of war going on—between the novel and drama ...*

NF: Theatre, you mean.

FFM: *Theatre, yes. Two radically different genres. So what is it about each of these genres that fascinates you?*

NF: If you write for theatre, you need a community of persons, who are interested in staging your plays. You need a home base. It's very difficult to write theatre when you are living outside of your home base. Because when I write a play and I give it to the Baxter Theatre, [for example], they would say: "What would this play say to a Cape Town audience? We are not interested." Because my neurosis as a playwright, as a novelist ... I am Somali, although I have lived in Cape Town now for 21 years, and, despite the respect that they may have for the name, [Nuruiddin Farah], they are not going to invest in a play, for the production, of a play by me. They are likely to invest in a production of a play by European, imported from America or Europe, because it's the same neurosis that creates it. You know, the white mentality, white guilt in Cape Town is not really very different from what you find in England, in America and in Europe, and so on and so forth. And in any case the people who see these plays are the educated elite, and so on and so forth. Whereas when I'm writing a novel, all I need is a desk and all the better if I can have two desks.

FFM: *And three computers!*

NF: Yes, three computers (laughter). So that's the big difference. I would have continued to write more plays if I had lived on in Somalia.

FFM: *Because you'd have a community.*

NF: And you would have a base, a home base. People who would be interested in investing in the production of that culture.

FFM: *You mentioned earlier when we were chatting informally that you don't have the scripts of your early radio plays any longer.*

NF: I don't.

FFM: *But you did mention to me that you have recently written two plays...*

NF: Yes.

FFM: *Do you mind giving me the names again?*

NF: One is called *A Stone Thrown at the Guilty* ... and the other one is called *Antigone in Somalia*. They were produced in America at the University of ... when I was given a job and I said I would accept it on condition they produce my two plays.

FFM: *(Laughter.) Okay!*

NF: And that's how they were produced.

FFM: *Good, and now the final question: you mentioned that you are working on a non-fiction book about political detainees in Ethiopia ... could you tell me a little bit more about that?*

NF: Well ... it's uh ... In Ethiopia there is a history of prisons going back to 1921, when the first one was created. And Ethiopia has had dictatorial, authoritarian regimes, one after the other. And for the first time in the history of Ethiopia, which has a population of one hundred million, the new administration has opened the doors for all political prisoners. It has allowed freedom of expression, freedom of thought, and the possibility to identify yourself with any ideology, and so on and so forth. I am interested in the dynamics of moving from an authoritarian, totalitarian regime to one of openness, potentially democratic, and so on and so forth. And that is what the book will be about. Basically it will concentrate on the prisons and the history of the prisons, torture, and all these things that were done by various regimes in Ethiopia, from about 1899 up till this day. So I'll be based in Ethiopia for a couple of months to do the research, and then I'll teach a course on Ethiopia at the college where I teach.

FFM: Thank you for your time, Professor Farah.