



A nation of narratives: *Soomaalinimo* and the Somali novel

Christopher Fotheringham

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It is already obvious that the 21st century will be one characterized by massive migrations which will see the growth and consolidation of diasporic communities separated by the political and linguistic borders of their adopted countries and the rise of transnational diasporic nationhoods and cultural networks. If literature is a mirror of culture, literary scholars have to adapt to changed conditions and assume a transnational perspective on their field in order for their work to remain relevant. While verbal art in the Somali language has been dominated by a rich tradition of oral poetry, the Somali novel has arisen in exile in a variety of languages most notably Italian and English. Writers of the Somali diaspora living all over the world have produced a rich literature in the form of novels that record the history of the Somali people in their native land and in exile. This article focuses on novels written in English and Italian by Somali writers such as Nuruddin Farah, Nadifa Mohamed, Ubax Ali Cristina Farah, Igiaba Scego and Shirin Ramzanali Fazel. My contention is that these writers should be read together from a comparative standpoint as a transnational and translanguistic Somali novelistic tradition. Ultimately my contention is that Somalia is a nation that continues to exist in the imagination of its sizeable global diaspora and that this imagined nation is written into existence in the novels of these exiles regardless of language they have adopted for their literary production. I enlist the concept of *Soomaalinimo*, or Somaliness, as a framework within which to draw together the novelistic production of these diasporic writers. I trace what I argue to be a pair of literary manifestations of *Soomaalinimo* common to the works of the above-mentioned Somali novelists both of which operate to record, recuperate and valorize alternative perspectives on Somalia and its culture to the one which dominates the global imaginary. These manifestations come in the form of a conscious textual indebtedness to the oral poetic traditions of Somalia which all of these writers weave into their novelistic prose and in the form of lyrical accounts of Somali landscapes and material culture.

Keywords: Nuruddin Farah, Igiaba Scego, Ubax Cristina Ali Farah, Nadifa Mohamed, Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, Somali literature, diasporic literature.

Introduction

In this article I establish some points of contact between the novels of Nuruddin Farah and those of other writers in the Somali diaspora writing in Italian as well as Nadifa Mohamed, who writes in English.¹ I base my findings on extracts from their novels as well as statements from the authors in the press and in interviews in the academic literature. I trace the emergence of the Somali novel in the global diaspora. The case of the Somali novel is particularly interesting because it arises as a form outside of the ancestral home of its writers and has no direct literary antecedent within Somalia. The Somali language was only codified and equipped with an orthography in 1972 before which no novels were produced in this country of oral poets. Under the Muhammed Siyad Barre regime, which lasted from 1969 to 1991, some novels were produced in the Somali language but the repressive censorship of the regime limited the scope and quality of writing in the country and drove many intellectuals into exile. In 1991 Somalia descended into unprecedented levels of chaos as a result of war and sectarian violence from which it has never fully recovered (see Kapteijns). It is my contention that the Somali novel in exile is not only a means of, as Nuruddin Farah is often quoted saying, keeping Somalia alive, but is also simultaneously an artistic manifestation of and constitutive of a cultural ethic among Somalis the world over. I enlist the notion of *Soomaalinimo* (Mulki Al-Sharmani) which refers to a set of positive values and cultural traits associated with Somaliness, as a heuristic framework for a literary ethic which I observe in the works and statements of the authors considered here. I argue that Nuruddin Farah, of course, but also Nadifa Mohamed, Ubax Cristina Ali Farah, Igiaba Scego

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and Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, among others writing in a variety of languages are the exponents of a new transnational and translinguistic novelistic tradition which is borne out of the precipitous collapse of the state of Somalia and its society and the dispersal of the majority of the nation's intellectual elite to the four corners of the earth.³ I am concerned here with certain traces of Somaliness which manifest in common in the works of these diverse writers and which, I argue, have their roots in an inherited tradition of Somali oral literature on the one hand and, on the other hand, a profound sense of loss of an ancestral homeland either remembered first hand or inherited cross-generationally as family and community memory.

Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge (qtd in Vertovec 6) suggest that "diasporas always leave a trail of collective memory about another place and time and create new maps of desire and attachment". It is this trail of collective memory that I tentatively trace across the works of Nuruddin Farah and his co-nationals writing in Italian as well as Nadifa Mohamed who also writes in English.² Regarding his own literary relationship with memory Nuruddin Farah commented as follows in the 1989 interview with Maja Jaggi: "Distance, I think, has enabled me to focus much more clearly on Somalia, and distance has also enabled me to expel all the useless material embedded in my memory, keeping with me only the useful. (175)

While Italo-Somali writer Igiaba Scego, the daughter of refugees who fled Mogadishu to safety in Rome who dedicates her novel *La mia casa è dove sono* "to Somalia, wherever she may be", Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, who was forced to leave Somalia as a girl with her parents dedicates her novel *Nuvole sull'equatore* to "my Mogadishu that no longer exists but that I carry at all times in my heart".

My argument could be criticised for lumping together under one rubric a set of writers whose experiences of migrancy and diaspora are very different because they belong to different generations, have experienced different historical moments in Somalia or indeed have no direct lived memories of Somalia at all. Based on the content of their novels and statements in the press, I nonetheless have to conclude that these writers, regardless of the differences in the way they experienced Somalia and life in the diaspora, share a commitment to recording the memory and experiences of the Somali people as well as celebrating their Somali literary heritage. Indeed, it is important to remember that Nuruddin Farah himself has never again lived on Somali soil since his exile in 1976.

Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ argues for a mode of reading the works of diasporic African writers "whose imaginations are rooted in Africa and elsewhere yet have lived most of their lives outside the continent" (175) within a framework he terms "rooted transnationalism". He describes the potential of the reading practice of "rooted transnationalism" to enrich our readings of global African novels in the following terms:

An African novel then is freed to be read in relation to where it's coming from and in relation to other literatures of the world, and locally; as speaking to the place where it is being read. This way, world literature does not become a universe without local departures or even end points, where texts reveal universal lessons as if they are not formed by material histories and cultures at play. (wa Ngũgĩ 178)

The Somali novel in exile is fertile terrain for the application of wa Ngũgĩ's notion of rooted transnationalism for the reason that the works offer multiple avenues for enquiring into the relationship between literary imaginations and cultural and spatial geographies. Transnationalism is a theoretical orientation to global cultural phenomena which breaks with the view of nations as hermetically sealed and stable entities and posits a more fluid view of people and culture inhabiting shared spaces independent of (but naturally also restrained and conditioned by) political borders. Beck refers to these as "[...] transnationally integrated spaces of social action that circumvent or cross over postulated frontiers" (32). Transnationalism is consequently the most reasonable approach to take in considering the cultural formation of a global diaspora such as that inhabited by the Somali writers considered here. Writing in the early 1990s, Nina Glick Schiller, Lucien Basch and Cristina Blanc-Szanton provide a useful mode of viewing diasporas in the unfolding globalized world, a view which has become even more compelling as we witness the establishment of diasporas which are more connected than ever before in the history of migration thanks to the Internet. They write:

Our earlier conceptions of immigrant and migrant no longer suffice. The word immigrant evokes images of permanent rupture, of the uprooted, the abandonment of old patterns and the painful learning of a new language and culture. Now, a new kind of migrating population is emerging, composed of those whose networks, activities and patterns of life encompass both their host and home societies. Their lives cut across national boundaries and bring two societies into a single field. (1)

The writers considered here, who belong to the lettered elite of their society, seem clearly to share an ethical burden of testimony speaking on behalf of their ravaged and splintered community dispersed all over the world and of their struggles both at home in Somalia and in terms of their lives as refugees, exiles or immigrants in their host countries. It is only natural that the defining events of modern Somali history, namely, the violent collapse of the state and the consequent dispersal of Somalis across the world would come to dominate the narrative of Somali writers wherever they may find themselves. What makes this turn in the history of Somali literature interesting is that it corresponds with the adoption of the novel (a form alien to traditional Somali literary practices) and of European languages as these writers seek to penetrate the markets of their adopted homes and keep Somali stories alive in the global consciousness. What is also interesting is how, despite adopting the novel, the Somali novelists all acknowledge their debt to the traditional oral form of literature they inherited generationally in the form of folktales and verse, forms which permeate their novels and enrich their texture.

By reading Nuruddin Farah in concert with other writers of the Somali diaspora his work may take on new meanings and new avenues for inquiry might be opened responding to some cultural anxieties specific to members of the Somali diaspora globally. The writers selected here are by no means the only ones with whom such a comparative engagement might be enacted, and this line of enquiry should be extended to the many other writers working in the Somali Diaspora including figures like Garane Garane, Abdourahman A. Waberi, and Amal Aden among others. Amal Aden writing in Norwegian, for example, represents a voice of the large Somali community in Norway and could profitably be linked to Nuruddin Farah's latest work *North of Dawn* set in that country as well as drawing in the work of Somalis who are continuing the oral tradition of whom there are many.

The Somali novel and the nation

The frenzied pace of Nuruddin Farah's novelistic career has, according to the author, been fueled by a mission to keep Somalia visible and sensitively to represent its people and their unfolding history (Farah, "Why I write"; Jaggi; Manson). In an interview with Farah included in this theme issue, Farah very tellingly describes writing about Somalia as a *responsibility*. This echoes a statement he made in an interview already thirty years ago where he said: "Unlike the European poet or novelist, a poet in Somalia is considered to be a very responsible sort of person, the most level-headed, who—in addition to continuing the tradition of poetry—has a social function as the mouthpiece of the clan, and I was not expected to be that" (Jaggi 172).

Whether or not as a youth he was expected to take up the mantle of the poet with a social function, he certainly rose to the occasion becoming the best-known voice of the Somali people in recent times, albeit as a novelist and not an oral poet. It is thanks to his adoption of the novel and of the English language that he has been able to project Somalia onto the world literary stage: a responsibility he has always taken seriously and which he continues to embody. It is also a responsibility that, he says in the interview included in this theme issue, he is very glad now to be sharing with other Somali writers from around the world.

In *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices of the Somali Diaspora*, Farah reflects on the concepts of country and nation from his position as a long-term exile and an enduring critic of state-sponsored nationalism (if not nationhood). He says: "I've always considered countries to be no more than working hypotheses, portals opening on assumptions of loyalty to an idea, allegiance to the notion of a nation" (48).

Where Farah alludes to "the notion of a nation" we could substitute the idea of an imagined community which is Benedict Anderson's term for a socially constructed national entity to which the people that believe in said entity belong and which is constructed by and supported by discourses (published texts in particular) that circulate within and without that community. Al-Sharmani undertook a study among the Somali refugees of Cairo to ascertain how this exiled community imagined themselves vis-à-vis their country of origin, their kinsmen in the larger global diaspora and those who stayed behind in the ruins of Somalia. His analysis of the discourses offered up by these refugees provides a very interesting framework for thinking about a shared ethic that permeates the work of Nuruddin Farah and the other Somali diasporic writers discussed here. He describes the self-imaginary of the diasporic Somalis in the following terms: "Meanwhile, *soomaalinimo* is always used by Somalis in Cairo to refer to a core of positive values and a behavior that characterizes what they imagine to be a community of Somalis. It seems to be first and foremost a moral rather than a territorial imagination of a particular community" (Al-Sharmani 84–5).

The idealized notion of *soomaalinimo* inscribes a cluster of positive values, termed a “moral imagination” by Al-Sharmani above, namely decency, integrity, honesty, piety, care for family and community and an Islam of love and brotherhood which is therefore at odds with the vision of the violent and unpredictable Somali in the global imaginary: “men wearing *macawiis* [...] with long dark faces and red eyes from long nights of killing and chewing *qad* [...]” (Al-Sharmani 84). It is this diabolical iteration of the imagined Somali that the work of the Somali writers reviewed here seeks to exorcise in an effort, perhaps, to recalibrate the vision of Somalia along the more positive lines of the moral nationhood inscribed by the concept of *soomaalinimo*. As early as 1989, in a now canonical interview, Farah similar to Al-Sharmani also alludes to a “notion of Somalia” as a “guiding principle” among members of the Somali diaspora abroad. He writes: “When in exile, they long to get back home: home to a notion of Somalia, commonly accepted to be the guiding principle of its people; when at home, they are eager to get away from the promiscuity of the-Somali-idea, the particularity of the Somalis’ world view” (Farah, “Why I Write” 1597–8).

The many émigré characters in his novels who go back and forth from Somalia observing the moral decay from the agonizing position of both insider and outsider could all potentially be understood better within a framework which takes the particular cultural anxieties of Somali people in the diaspora into account making the reading of Farah’s work against that of his fellow exiled co-nationals an essential project.

The archetype of *soomaalinimo* in all of Nuruddin Farah’s oeuvre has to be the character of Deeriye in *Close Sesame*: loyal, honest, honorable, patriotic, pious, fair, kind, and learned in the traditions and lore of Somalia. Farah’s oeuvre is animated by plots driven by difficult decisions and moral consequences in the face of the overwhelming pressure exerted on characters by the dysfunctional society that surrounds them: Loyaan’s quest for the truth about Soyaan’s death in *Sweet and Sour Milk*; Mursal’s grappling with the moral consequences of armed resistance in *Close Sesame*; Askar’s struggle with the demands of state-nationalism and family in *Maps*.

A sense of the importance of history, the continuity of the modern Somali writer with the oral literature of Somalia and the mission of literature to act as a conscience for the Somali nation as well as a clear sense of the interconnectedness of Somali literature from around the world as well as her acknowledgement of the foundational role of Nuruddin Farah is captured in the following extract from a 2019 online article on Somali literature written by Nadifa Mohamed. She writes:

The sense that words, poems, and books must have a purpose is a pervasive one amongst Somali writers; poets were the record-keepers, the teachers, the consciences of their communities and the same expectations are placed on other writers. Nuruddin Farah has been writing about Somalia since the 1960s (his first novel, *From a Crooked Rib*, appeared in 1970; his most recent one, *Crossbones*, in 2011), throwing a spotlight on the figures generally sidelined in society—women, ethnic minorities, wayfarers—and was forced into exile by Siyad Barre. The language of his novels is that of a polyglot; his characters often pursued by secrets, inhabiting a spiritual and physical hinterland—neither one thing nor another. (“On Somali writers”)

With the caveat that much more detailed analysis needs to follow in future to bear out the validity of these preliminary observations, what follows is a tentative exploratory foray into this comparative reading project. I read across English and Italian. I isolate evidence in the works of Igiaba Scego, Ubax Cristina Ali Farah, Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, and Nadifa Mohamed of a shared cultural and literary sensibility that could tentatively be described as elements of the novelistic expression of *soomaalinimo* in the diasporic Somali novel. The first concerns an aesthetic sensibility, typical of immigrant literature, characterized by a melancholic nostalgia (see Hron) in the form of richly textured, lyrical and sensory descriptions of Somali landscapes and material culture. The second concerns the influence of (or at the very least conscious indebtedness to) Somali orature on the writing of these diasporic novelists and on Nuruddin Farah.

The Somali poetic tradition and the diasporic novel

Two pieces published some thirty years ago in *Third World Quarterly* remain invaluable statements of Nuruddin Farah’s simultaneous rootedness in Somali literary traditions and his internationalist outlook. In “Why I Write” he acknowledges the influence of his mother, who was a well-known poet in the Somali tradition (1592). He goes on to explain how he then became a voracious reader of novels from many different global traditions and his reasons for adopting the novel in English as his means of expression. In “A Combining of Gifts: an Interview”, the Somali author comments on his orientation to the literary influences that shaped his novelistic production, on

the one hand Somali and on the other hand international. He says, "What I wanted to do was to combine what I received from others with the gifts that I was given by the Somalis, and to unite them in me, in my work and my creativity" (Jaggi 172). I think it is no exaggeration to call Nuruddin Farah the father of the Somali novel and statements of the kind cited above indicate how his work was a crucible in which an entirely new novelistic tradition was forged.

Whether owing to direct influence or to similar circumstances in terms of the input of literary influences, on the one hand Somali and on the other hand Western, other Somali writers in the diaspora exhibit a strikingly similar orientation of "rooted transnationalism" in their novels. Uba Cristina Ali Farah, referring to the mixture of Somali language and Italian language "roots" within her, speaks of the satisfaction of creating an Italian through which the structure, tone and patterns of an underlying Somali voice emerges. She says:

Having two languages greatly influences my writing. In the act of translating, what one perceives most are the differences in the rhythms of the two languages: the way of narrating and the construction of the syntax changes and different layering used. I rediscovered these varied roots within me when I began collecting the narratives of immigrant women in Italian. While transcribing their stories, I heard a layer of mother tongue: not so much perceptible in the form of lexical imprecisions but rather in the rhythm of the language and in the sentence construction. This has a powerful poetic potential if worked with care. (qtd in Ellero 5; translation mine)

Igiaba Scego also makes direct reference her rootedness in the Somali oral tradition in *La casa è dove sono* where she remembers her mother telling her Somali fables. She recalls:

I can picture her from when I was little, rolled up into a ball like a hedgehog, ears pricked up listening to thousands of stories from the Somali oral tradition. Wise tortoises, shrewd women, perceptive donkeys, repentant birds of prey. It was like being in *Alice in Wonderland*, on the one hand peril on the other hand magic. A happy ending wasn't always guaranteed. The stories could end badly. What really mattered was the moral of the story. Every story had a practical lesson: a lesson that a nomad might find useful sooner or later. (Scego, *La mia casa è dove sono* 67)

Scego's books, like those of Nuruddin Farah, are peppered with Somali words, expressions and allusions to the stories, fables and poetic traditions of Somalia indicating their rootedness in the *Soomalinimo* of a deep-seated affective affinity with the literary traditions of their homeland. The same can be also be said for Uba Cristina Ali Farah whose latest novel *Il comandante del fiume* is a reconceptualization of a Somali legend set among the Somali diaspora in Rome and London: a good example of a rooted transnationalism.⁴ In *Lontano da Mogadiscio*, a novel recounting her youth in a lost Somalia, Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, describes the relationship between the Somali people and the art of oration in the following terms:

The Somali have always been a highly imaginative people, gifted with great eloquence and an inborn love of expressing themselves. In the wilderness the camel drivers would gather under the acacia trees improvising poetry and rhetoric competitions and the winners would be rewarded with livestock and fame. At weddings, births and funerals there were always story-singers present. Children never wanted for new nursery rhymes or enchanting fables. Lovers recited verses to their beloveds. Improvised rhymes were used to mock and jibe. During the dictatorship singer-songwriters used clandestine satire as their only weapon against the regime. The dialects of Somalia are rich in colorful expressions and proverbs abound. Love, fidelity, betrayal, peace and birth, everything was turned into poetry. (Ramzanali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio* 14; translation mine.)

The cultural significance of oral recitation of poetic compositions among the nomadic Somali has long been noted and the quality of their compositions admired by scholars (Laurence; Andrzejewski and Lewis; Samatar; Andrzejewski; William). In a discussion of the role played by orally transmitted poetry in terms of social cohesion among disparate nomad clans of the Somali desert, the great Polish scholar of Somali poetry B. W. Andrzejewski ("The poem as message: verbatim memorization in Somali poetry" 30) cites a verse by Ismaaciil Mire (a commander in the dervish army of the warrior-poet Sayid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan) in which the poet comments on the remarkable efficiency with which poetic compositions, learned and transmitted verbatim from one reciter to the next, would spread through the Somali-speaking region despite the great distances involved and the isolation of the audiences.⁵ The poet writes:

Although the territories are wide apart the words have flown from there to here.

They were carried by the travelers, by the blowing winds and breezes ... (Andrzejewski, "The Poem as Message" 30; original poem in Somali can be found in Axmed Faarax 81)

Without being overly deterministic or reductive, it could be constructive to view modern Somali prose produced in the global diaspora as a continuation of the tradition of orally-transmitted poetry in traditional Somali society for maintaining the lines of communication and national cohesion. This is by no means to suggest that prose written by members of the Somali diaspora in English, Italian or any other language has come to replace the traditional forms. Indeed classic oral forms like the *gabaay* and more modern forms like the miniature love poem, the *helloo*, remain popular and Somalis, who had already taken enthusiastically to the audio-cassette in the last century, are making ample use of online media-sharing platforms to record and disseminate oral compositions both pre-existing and original. The “mystic wind” alluded to by Ismaaciil Mire in the poem cited above by which it was said rumor, news and poetic compositions were carried across the deserts of Somalia reaching isolated nomads with remarkable alacrity, has found a powerful ally in the form of modern media which is helping keep Somaliness alive among the modern nomads of the global Somali diaspora. My contention is that the prose novels of writers like Nuruddin Farah and the second generation Italo-Somali writers discussed here represent a modern literary technique enthusiastically adopted by a people that has always valued literature as a technology for national cohesion. As Fiona Moolla writes, “[t]he novel form which Farah inherits is inaugurated in another geographical space. It does not emerge from the social and material conditions of the Somalia Farah writes about” (49). The growth of the novel out of oral literary forms under suitable material conditions (infrastructure for printing and a dispersed reading public) is the basis of most established theories of the emergence of the novel as is the link between affordable printing, mass-media and the emergence of nationhoods in the modern sense. Olankule George states in this regard:

A certain relationship to the domain of orality also governs established accounts of the emergence of the novel in Western Europe literary history. In this account, the novel “evolved” as a literate mode from the domain of orature—the domain, in other words, of folklore, epic and romance. Versions of this understanding of the origins of the European novel can be found in theorists ranging from Ian Watt to the early Georg Lukacs and Michael McKeon. Indeed, Benedict Anderson’s theory of nationalism as the consolidation, through print, of an “imagined community” also embraces this account. (George 15)

Jacqueline Bardolph notes that “[...] it is interesting to observe how, although Farah writes in English, he establishes a continuity with the aesthetic and rhetoric modes of his country’s poets in the oral tradition and “the characters [of his novels] are modern and also shaped by several world views, by Islamic texts and pre-Islamic beliefs, tales, poems, *The Arabian Nights*, and, for some, contemporary media in European languages” (Bardolph 163–4). Moolla also traces the development of Nuruddin Farah’s novelistic prose style to a rootedness in the tradition of oral Somali poetry. She notes:

Reviews and criticism of *From a Crooked Rib* at its publication emphasized the oral features of the novel. These include the use of alliteration, the hallmark of Somali oral verse, as well as symbolism and imagery from the oral poetic tradition. Somali proverbs and folktales also feature prominently in this novel. Some early critical responses to *From a Crooked Rib* imply the autochthonous emergence of the novel form out of the semi-desert sands of the Horn of Africa. The idea of the development of Farah’s novels out of orality gathers credibility from the fact that Farah’s mother was a well-known oral poet. (Moolla 1)

As Moolla implies, it is not possible for the novel to have emerged from a vacuum and it is clearly the fruit of Nuruddin Farah’s literary curiosity which saw him ranging widely between the literary traditions of the world from Somali oral tales and poetry, great works of the Western canon, the Holy Qur’an and other classics of Arabic literature, and Indian literature from his time as a student in Chandigarh. The lecture given by Farah upon winning the Neustadt prize in 1998 provides ample justification to support the idea that Somali oral tradition is an important influence of Farah’s work, but one among many:

Sadly, I admit to having become more fascinated by the written variety of literature, perhaps because, as with all new converts, I was attracted to the barely familiar in preference to the oral tradition which was everywhere around me. There was a freshness to the stories in the books every time I read them. I was a child apart, my parents two wordsmiths, in their different ways, each forging out of the smithy of their souls a creative reckoning of the oral universe. It was in deference to their efforts that I lent a new lease on life later to the tales told to me orally, tales that I worked into my own, all the more to appreciate them. (Farah, “Celebrating Difference: The 1998 Neustadt Lecture” 18–9)

Farah is describing a momentous occasion in the literary history of a nation: the birth of the novel. Moolla argues that *From a Crooked Rib*, published in 1970, though written in English-Somali not yet possessing an official orthography when it was written—is the first Somali novel in history (Moolla 48). If *From a Crooked Rib* is the first Somali novel in the broad sense, the distinction of the first published Somali novel in the Somali language goes to a 1974 novel set against the backdrop of Sayid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan’s dervish rebellion *Aqoondarro waa U nacab jacayl*, translated into English by B. W. Andrzejewski as *Ignorance is the Enemy of Love*, by Farah Mohamed Jama Awl (sometimes written *Faarax M. J. Cawl*). *Aqoondarro waa U nacab jacayl* was a part of a deliberate intervention on the part of the Somali Government to promote literacy and the use of the new orthography for the Somali language that had been launched two years prior to its publication. The story is about a soldier of Cabdulle Xasan whose illiteracy causes him to inadvertently disgrace his lover when he asks her own relatives to read him a love letter she had sent him. The lovers are separated and both die tragically. In the story, ignorance of the written word causes the tragic death of the lovers.⁶ A preoccupation with the tension between traditionalism and modernity which is exhibited in this early work of Somali literature is also a key thematic thread in Nuruddin Farah’s *Close Sesame* in which the dervish rebellion forms a backdrop to Deeriye’s youth and in which an elderly Deeriye is seen listening to a recording of “Death of Corfield”, a poem by the Sayyid. Nadifa Mohamed also nods to the father of modern Somali nationhood and the national poet of her ancestral language in her novel *Black Mamba Boy* where she quotes a *gabay* (a chanted poetic form usually reserved for serious themes) by Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan in the epigraph which evokes the hostility of the Somali landscape in terms strikingly similar to her own description of the landscape of Somaliland cited in the section below:

Now you depart, and though your way may lead
Through airless forests thick with hagar trees
places steeped in heat, stifling and dry
Where breath comes hard, and no fresh breeze can reach
Yet may God place a shield of coolest air
between your body and the assailant sun.

She also includes in the epigraph a quote from the second verse of a poem by Rabindranath Tagore, “Stray Birds”, that is interesting in the context of this discussion of literary influence and exile literature: “O troupe of little vagrants of the world / Leave your footprints in my words”. The inclusion of these two verse quotes in Nadifa Mohamed’s novel indicate that she, like Nuruddin Farah, is conscious of the literary debt she owes to the nomadic bards of Somalia but also to the ‘footprints’ of other literary traditions. Similarly, Igiaba Seego’s *La mia casa è dove sono* acknowledges her debt to Nuruddin Farah in the form of a quote from *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices of the Somali Diaspora* included in the paratext of *La mia casa è dove sono*. The quote reads, “I took up residence in a land with uncertain borders which I can only define as the country of my imagination” and reflects the theme of the novel which is an autobiographical account of difficulties of defining an identity growing up the daughter of Somali refugees in Rome, where she also felt alienated by Italian citizens.

Landscape and loss in novels of the Somali diaspora

Indicating the transnational reach of her literary influences as well as her debt to Nuruddin Farah, a writer who was born in the same year as her father, Ubax Cristina Ali Farah’s novel *Madre Piccola* is introduced with quotes by African American novelist Toni Morrison, Brazilian novelist João Guimarães Rosa and an extract from Nuruddin Farah’s *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices of the Somali Diaspora*. In a 2015 interview published in *Wardheer News*, an English-language online focused on Somali issues and aimed at the Somali diaspora, Ubax Cristina Ali Farah discusses the inclusion of this quote and reflects on the value of the novel and the importance of community:

I reckon that every novel is a quest, an attempt made to answer a question. Nuruddin Farah asks in his non-fictional book, *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora*, “Still I must ask what becomes of a man or a woman if no moth taps at the window to the universe of his or her creativity?” (which is quoted at the beginning of *Madre Piccola*). In other words what happens when you get displaced and you lose all your references, your family, your friends, your city, all your given understanding of your surroundings? I have reflected on it long and hard and I came up with the belief that the thing that really anchors you to a place is the relationships that you have.

These sentiments of loss and displacement and the recuperative possibilities that novel writing offers could be seen as the basis of an ethic and aesthetic common to the writers of the Somali diaspora discussed here. There is a palpable urgency in the project of these writers to preserve the stories of their ancestral home for posterity and to dignify the Somali literary and cultural heritage by weaving elements of this heritage into the most modern of literary forms, the novel, and by liberally accenting the languages they use by including words, phrases, proverbs etc. from the Somali language and allusions to traditional Somali literary forms. Along with this ethic of recording and valorizing their patrimony, the writers in question also share a sensory aesthetic that seems designed to conjure up and recuperate scenes of Somali life that are faintly remembered and seem to have been idealized by the passage of time and the pain of loss. These could all form part of the structure of affective identification with homeland in literature which Neil Lazarus, in a discussion of the state and nation in postcolonial literature, describes in the following terms: “One can see, in grappling with landscape and seascape, flora and fauna, in the identification, indexing and weighting of these, and also of objects and relationships, history and memory, a forging of the imaginative currency, the symbolic capital, of national(ist) identification and self-understanding” (65)

A uniquely Somali “imaginative currency” pervades the work of the writers of the Somali diaspora in the form of descriptions of the strikingly harsh landscape of Somalia: the desert and its vast, stark and arid landscapes and the openness of the blue desert sky. One such beautifully woven scene where the stark beauty of the desert is conjured appears in *Black Mamba Boy*:

Jama looked around him; Somaliland was yellow, intensely yellow, a dirty yellow, with streaks of brown and green. A group of men stood next to their herd of camels while the lorry overheated, its metal grill grimacing under an acacia tree. There was no smell of food, or incense or money as there was in Aden, there were no farms, no gardens, but there was a sharp sweetness to the air he breathed in, something invigorating and intoxicating. This was his country, this was the same air as his fathers and grandfathers had breathed the same landscape, they had known. (Mohamed, *Black Mamba Boy* 49)

There are also frequent allusions to powerful olfactory memories, like Proust’s madeleine, from a land that has been famous since deep antiquity for the quality of its incense. Igiaba Scego describes a moment of synesthesia in her childhood where immersion in her mother’s Somali stories transports her and she smells the heady fragrances of the Land of Punt: “Listening to mother I smelled the heavenly aroma of incense and *unsi*: fragrances for which Hatshepsut of the XVIII dynasty launched an expedition to Somalia” (Scego 154; translation mine).

In *Rhoda*, Scego describes a scene where the characters Barni, Faduma and Rhoda prepare and enjoy a session of chewing *qad*, a psychoactive leaf enjoyed across the Red Sea region. The intoxicating immersiveness of the scene points to a desire to recreate, for a time, the illusion of being in Somalia. The cultural significance of the *qad* ritual is dear to the characters who are consequently scathing of Somalis who view the practice negatively. Scego describes the symbolic importance of the ritual to her characters as follows:

The coffee table in front of the sofa had been removed to make room for an enormous red rug. The space was adorned with three multi-cultured cushions which were as soft as only branded plush toys can be. This scene was set in honor of some high quality *qad* with which they would while away the evening. Barni always got very angry when some *gaalwoobay* Somali, said with disdain, “It’s a drug!”⁷ For Barni, Faduma and Rhoda, yes for Rhoda too, it was a ritual. The scene had to be set. The rug and cushions, but also a peaceful atmosphere, a pot of good ginger coffee and lots and lots of time to waste. (Scego 65; translation mine)

Like the characters described by Scego in *Rhoda*, relishing elements of their material culture they are able to source in the West, Ali Farah describes how the nexus of Somali life in Rome is the massive Termini train station where a community of shopkeepers, as always happens with immigrant communities, has sprung up to cater to the need for the comforts of home and serve as symbolic and affective links back to Somalia:

Qamar’s shop, I can give you the address if you’d like, sells everything that a Somali women could desire. Bright *shaash*, sheer floral *garbasaar*, *diric Jibuti*, beaded satin petticoats, long *goonooyin*, *guntiino* made of coarse material which everyone used to scorn but which now—because things become precious when they are difficult to come by—are back in fashion. And there are necklaces of yellow amber, silver bracelets, Johnson’s Baby Oil, incense burners, every fragrance of *catar*, creams for straightening hair, egg lotion, rose water, cream for dry hands, *cillaan* powder, stencils for decorating the skin, colorful hairbands. (Ali Farah 29–30; translation mine)⁸

Powerfully evocative scenes like these serve to create a Somalia of memory and imagination and to inscribe the material artifacts and cultural practices and ethics of Somali life within the experience of migrancy contributing to drawing the literary contours of the nation that has been lost but that is remembered with a palpable sense of loss.

Conclusion

In this exploratory study I have aimed to illustrate that Nuruddin Farah shares with a set of other Somali writers in the global diaspora a broad set of thematic and aesthetic concerns which can be clustered under the concept of *soomaalinimo* or Somaliness: understood in this context as an affective or imaginative currency (to use Lazarus's term) which helps preserve the memory of and valorize Somali cultural traditions, history and, most importantly perhaps, its rich heritage of oral literature. As a result, any common threads that can be traced within the prose of this generationally, linguistically and geographically dispersed group of writers has to be attributable to a cultural and aesthetic sensibility inherited from the oral traditions and a shared affective experience of the loss and nostalgia imposed by exile and the destruction of a cherished homeland. There is also evidence of a transnational network of influence and mutual respect among the writers of the Somali diaspora contributing to a shared ethical and moral imperative that underlines their writing.

Notes

1. For a detailed discussion of these migrant and other writers and their contributions to growing area of postcolonial Italian literature see Parati; Ponzanesi; Portelli.
2. See Coser on the topic of collective memory.
3. Nadifa Mohamed was born in Hargeisa in the de facto independent region of Somaliland. Her family moved to London in 1986 for what was meant to be a temporary stay but the outbreak of civil war in Somalia in 1991 meant that Britain would become her home. Ubax Cristina Ali Farah was born in Verona in 1973 to a Somali migrant family. Igiaba Scego was born in Rome in 1974 to a family of Somali origins. Her most famous works include the novels *Rhoda*, *Oltre Babilonia* and *La mia casa è dove sono*. Shirin Ramzanali Fazel was born in Mogadishu in 1959. She is of Pakistani and Somali origin. She grew up in the Somalia of the Italian trusteeship and at age ten her parents were forced to leave Somalia during the Barre regime. She is one of the only first migrant writers to write in Italian without the help of an Italian speaker. Her most famous work is the nostalgic *Lontano da Mogadiscio* which describes her childhood in a city that has long since ceased to exist in the form she remembers it. Her experience of imposed exile and her project of memorialising the Somali crisis requires that parallels be drawn with Nuruddin Farah. Nuruddin Farah makes specific reference to Ramzanali Fazel's *Lontano da Mogadiscio* in *Links* where the protagonist claims to have found the memoir to be a worthwhile read owing to its lack of focus on clan politics. In addition to this several other Afro-Italian writers including Ubax Cristina Ali Farah, Igiaba Scego have acknowledged their debt to Fazel's work as the first significant Italo-Somali voice.
Some other well-known international Somali novelists, among others, include: Amal Aden author of several novels in Norwegian; Garane Garane, Italo-somali author of *Il latte è buono*; Waris Dirie, activist against female genital mutilation and author of an autobiography entitled *Desert Flower* (written in German); Abdourahman A. Waberi (author of several critically acclaimed novels in French); and Abdi Abdulkadir Sheik-Abdi (Somali-American writer of a collection of Somali tales retold entitled *Tales of Punt*, and author of a number of scholarly works on the life and writings of Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan).
4. The legend, passed down orally from generation to generation, holds that owing to the scarcity of water in Somalia, the locals entrusted two wise men with the task of creating a river. The wise men performed the miracle as requested but the river was infested with crocodiles. This meant that someone needed to be chosen to manage the crocodiles, allowing the people to access the water. The people chose a commander with the power to govern the crocodiles and kill them if they failed to obey his commands. In Ali Farah's novel, the protagonist Yabar hears the story from a young age and interprets it to mean that good and evil have to coexist. At the age of eighteen Yabar, an unruly and disobedient young man who was raised by his mother Zahra having been abandoned by his father, is sent to live with his aunt in London where he finds himself immersed in a traditionalist Somali community and uncovers a terrible family secret.
5. Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan is considered the national poet of Somalia. Offensively labelled by the British with the dismissive title 'The Mad Mullah', Sayyid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan and his dervish freedom fighters became a rallying point of nationalistic pride while his own poetry and the poetry he inspired are the stock in trade of Somali nationalistic literature (Samatar). Poems attested to be those of Cabdulle Xasan and other important national poets were transcribed and collected in a book entitled *A Collection of Somali Literature: Mainly from Sayyid Mohamed Abdille Hassan* by Muuse Xaaji Ismaaciil Galaal in 1964. Another collection of the poems of Sayyid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan was produced ten years later in 1974 (this time in the new official Somali orthography instituted in 1972) by Jaamac Cumar Ciise with the title *Diiwaanka Gabayadii Sayid Maxamed Cabdulle Xasan*.
6. Another novelist writing in the same period in the Somali language and whose work could potentially be brought into conversation with the diasporic Somali writers is Maxamed Daahir Afrax.
7. *Gaalowoobay*: a Somali who has adopted the customs and habits of the West
8. *Shaash*: light shawl for covering the head and shoulders; *garbasaar*: silk scarf with which married women cover their heads; *diric Jibuti*: large garment for women with large sleeves made with light fabric; *goonooyin*: dresses (from the Italian *gonne*);

guntiino: woman's suit; *catar*: strong perfume used in India, the Middle East and parts of Africa; *cillaan*: henna used for dyeing the fingernails or palms of the hands and feet.

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