Nuruddin Farah: Variations on the theme of return

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This article explores the role of the returnee protagonist in selected works of Nuruddin Farah. Nadine Gordimer described Farah as "one of the real interpreters" of Africa and this article argues that Farah's returnees operate as interpreters themselves, their liminality working to mediate between international readers and "local" subject matter. However, it also observes that Farah, who spent decades in exile, is often as preoccupied with writing non-belonging as he is with rendering Somalia itself. Farah's returnee narratives are, broadly, novels of redress, in which characters enact their return in an attempt to seek out the missing, rebuild the lost or reclaim the stolen, with imperfect results. In exploring these variations on homecoming, the paper investigates the ways in which Farah's body of work reflects shifts in identity politics over time, and the unique pressures these shifts exert on the homecoming arc. **Keywords:** Nuruddin Farah, Somalia, exile, return, homelands, postcolonial literature, African literature.

Introduction

This article explores the role of the returnee protagonist in selected works of Nuruddin Farah. Nadine Gordimer described Farah as "one of the real interpreters" of Africa (Jaggi 1), and the idea of literature as interpretation can be extended to describe the contribution of many of his central characters in explicating Somalia. Perhaps as a consequence of his own long exile, Nuruddin Farah's work is concerned with ideas of home and away, and with the conflict between individuality and belonging. This article will focus on a recurring figure in his fiction, namely the returnee. Farah's depiction of return is of a creative process, in which the returnees themselves must construct the version of home to which they wish to return. In this way, the novels conform to Edward Said's observation from *Reflections on Exile*, that "no return to the past is without irony, or without a sense that a full return, or repatriation, is impossible" (489). In the case of Farah's novels, the idea of "a full return" is not only impossible, but dangerous, as Farah contrasts the ambivalence of his protagonists with totalizing notions of nation and belonging. Conflicted notions of allegiance are therefore not only a side effect of exile, but form part of an ethical imperative to resist the weaponization of identity employed by the sectarian groups who have battled for primacy in Somalia: namely, the dictatorship of General Muhammed Siyad Barre, clan militias and al-Shabaab,

My discussion will revolve around the Past Imperfect trilogy, in which different protagonists return from abroad to grapple with what has become of Somalia in the period of their absence. These novels are set during successive revolutions of the "carousel of politics" (*Crossbones* 243). *Links* is set just after the fall of the Somali dictator, when new allegiances and leaders are coming to light in Mogadishu. *Knots* depicts the rule of clan-affiliated warlords and the rise of Islamic law, while *Crossbones* is set in the era of Somali piracy. Pervading the trilogy is a sense of incompleteness, and this unfinished quality is significant in two ways. Firstly, it contributes to the idea of Somalia as so complex as to be inexplicable. A complete picture of the country, Farah seems to argue, is impossible to render and dangerous to claim. In addition, the trilogy provides a rumination on the nature of return itself, which must always be partial and "putative" (*Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* 48), if ethical engagement is to be maintained.

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The returnee as interpreter

The novels in the Past Imperfect trilogy were published many years apart, with a space of several decades between the publication of the first and last novel. Although they depict very different periods of Somalia's history, their construction is strikingly similar: each book takes return as its central theme, and begins just as its protagonist has touched down on Somali soil. In *Links*, Jeebleh, a Dante scholar, returns to Somalia for the first time in many years, having previously been a political prisoner under the Barre regime. The opening scene of *Links* depicts the baptism of fire that is Jeebleh's return to Mogadishu in the period shortly after the General's fall. Mary Harper writes, "Siad Barre tried to replace the complex clan hierarchies with a personality cult. He promoted himself as 'the father of the nation'; the country was plastered with images of 'Comrade Siad', many of them displayed as a trinity alongside portraits of Marx and Lenin" (40). By the time Jeebleh enacts his return, the political landscape has changed dramatically: various clans have reasserted themselves, and are locked in a violent battle for primacy over the city. Before even leaving the airport, Jeebleh witnesses the random shooting of a ten-year-old boy, and this incident sets the tone for the rest of the novel, in which the violence continues unabated.

In a 2012 interview, Farah comments on his protagonists' dramatic returns to Somalia, stating:

> [Jeebleh and Cambara] come from the comfort zone, and they go into a chaotic situation. They have problems in the comfort zone. You know Jeebleh [is] walking down the street when, in New York, he is almost run over. So he says: "I thought I would evade death, but I can't. If I can't do it in New York, I can just go visit my mom's grave." Cambara has a problem with her husband and then decides that she should go and repossess family property and then come back and deal with it. That is the idea. (Niemi 336)

The idea of two separate, juxtaposed "zones" is a significant one. In this trilogy, the "West" represents an imperfect "comfort zone" for its exiled characters: Farah's examples in the interview above suggest the difficulties that the characters encounter there, lending the term a certain irony. Broadly speaking, however, the sketch we are offered of the "West" suggests a place in which the rules are more legible, if only because the characters have spent so much of their recent past there. Somalia, in contrast, is a scene of "chaos" (Niemi 336) that requires quick-witted decoding on the part of the returnee, whose points of reference inevitably stem from an earlier time in the country's history.

In beginning each novel with a physical moment of return, Farah allows the reader to share in the disorientation of his protagonists. As the characters get their bearings, they simultaneously inaugurate unfamiliar readers into the Somali context. The fact that the reader departs the "comfort zone" in the company of each successive returnee reinforces Nadine Gordimer's vision of Farah as an "interpreter" (1). An interpreter's very mandate presupposes a lack of fluency on the part of their audience, as do the Past Imperfect narratives, which begin with a culture shock and gradually allow the protagonist to acclimatize to Somalia, taking curious readers with them. In these novels, the returnee protagonists serve as literary devices in a broader educational project. In his article, "Of Tamarind and Cosmopolitanism", Farah discusses the educative dimension of his writing, stating:

> We allude to "Carais Ciise", in the region of Somalia where I come from, when we wish to imply that so-and-so is bearing false testimony, or tells lies knowingly, and benefits from doing so. I can think of many such witnesses, among them a number of well-known writers. Not committed to telling the truth and lacking deep knowledge of the areas about which they write, these givers of "false testimony" are easily discerned, especially by locals. But not so for many of their readers, least of all those who are unfamiliar with the faraway areas about which these false witnesses write. I won't mention the names of these writers, because it would not be good etiquette to do so. What I would like to do, instead, is to give another kind of testimony in times when the notion of truth suffers unimaginable abuse at the hands of an entire community or a group of professionals and when truth is compromised. (70)

Here Farah frames his desire to correct "false witnesses" as a core part of his imperative as a Somali author. Further, his reference to "unfamiliar" and "faraway" readers makes it clear that this act of "writing back" is directed towards the world at large, rather than being limited to Somalia itself. Farah's intention to bring Somalia to a global audience is reinforced by his choice to write in his fourth language, English (Phillips 1). As Divanaze Carbonieri writes, this was a choice Farah originally made in the hope of "amplif[ying]" his criticisms of the Barre regime, during his time in political exile (84). Carbonieri goes on to state that Farah's work, as a whole, "reveal[s] for Westerners a scenario that would otherwise be much more difficult for them to access" (84).

Far from simply "translating" Somalia in a linguistic sense, Farah also acts as a political interpreter. Throughout the dialogue-rich Past Imperfect trilogy, the returnee protagonists aid in this interpretation by providing or

eliciting "testimonies" on the current state of the nation. Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo writes, "[t]hese returns are not just personal; they also provide a forum for political disquisition on the state of Somalia and on Somalia's geopolitical relations with the West, the East African region and the worldwide Somali diaspora" (67). Indeed, much of the dialogue between the returnees and those they encounter centers around these weighty themes. In a review of *Crossbones*, Mark Sarvas astutely captures the notion of Farah's novels as vehicles for "disquisition" (Dodgson-Katiyo 67). He begins by noting the need for educative material about Somalia, stating: "Most Americans, if they think of Somalia at all, know it only from 'Black Hawk Down,' the 2001 film adaptation of Mark Bowden's 1999 account of the bloody Battle of Mogadishu". Sarvas goes on to frame Farah's novels as an effort to "paint a more nuanced picture" (1), often through extensive in-text explication. Sarvas writes, "Farah has devoted long tracts of both narrative and dialogue to these explorations, which end up feeling more like reportage than lived experience. Characters are forced to give lengthy expository speeches which, though they paint a vivid picture of the country, form a less well-defined image of those speaking them" (1). Similarly, Hirsch Sawhney writes, of *Crossbones*, "tracts like this can feel didactic, but they are also provocative" (1).

The use of the term "didactic" is an interesting one in the context of Farah's novels. In "Teacherly Texts: Imagining futures in Nuruddin Farah's Past Imperfect Trilogy", Harry Garuba argues that the texts in the trilogy are not "didactic", but rather "teacherly". In defining this term, Garuba writes,

> Briefly described, then, the teacherly text is a text that is positioned (or that positions itself) as responding to or intervening in a field constituted by a set of prior questions or issues. To be able to think of fictive texts in this manner requires a shift in orientation from the crude didacticism that sees the text as providing some kind of lesson, moral or ideological, about the world out there. Instead, we need to think of the teacherly text as operating within a discursive field of knowledge or power that is constituted by issues covering the spectrum from the sociohistorical, the aesthetic, the moral and ethical, the ideological and political, and so on. (27)

Farah's Past Imperfect trilogy is concerned with "interven[tion]", in that it engages in complicating and unraveling assumptions, rather than replacing them with other easily-packaged "truths". As I write in "Going to Pieces: Narrative disintegration in Nuruddin Farah's *Crossbones*", "by focusing on the dissolution of symbols and expectations, Farah implicitly undermines the singularity of stereotype" (9). Far from offering the "crude" simplicity Garuba associates with literary didacticism, these novels provoke anxiety and uncertainty, providing more questions than answers. The "corrective" dimension of the trilogy can be considered "teacherly", per Garuba's formulation, because it counters simplicity with multiplicity, rather than providing an easily absorbed "lesson" for its readers. This is not to say that they are by any means objective: Garuba acknowledges that, while "the preoccupation of this trilogy named after the past is to imagine forms of sociality and community for the future [...] there is no doubt, it must be said, that the author's bias or his preference for a particular form is clear in the novels" (19). However, through their eschewal of narrative authority, the novels acknowledge their own subjectivity and stress that no one text can hope to provide a comprehensive view.

The very act of writing about Somalia is problematic. In the course of the novel, Malik undertakes to speak with as many locals as possible in pursuit of his story, inviting "testimony" wherever he goes. We are never shown Malik's newspaper articles, nor given much idea of their contents. His ambitions are broad: he wants to "[write] about every aspect that touches on the lives of Somalis. The civil war and its repercussions. The Ethiopian invasion. The piracy and who funds it, where they get their intelligence before launching their attacks, how they receive the ransom payments" (75). This gives him a plausible motive for asking almost any question about the country. Fiona Moolla suggests that, "[i]n writing the novel, Farah follows the methods of the investigative journalist, involving detailed research and interviews [...] The protagonists in *Crossbones*, Malik and Ahl, imitate the skills of their author" (183). Thus, the novel as a whole takes the form of a fact-finding mission, with the effect that the reader is faced with many "lengthy expository speeches" (Sarvas 1) that do not advance the central plot, but rather provide extensive background "disquisition" (Dogson-Katiyo 1) on "everything Somali" (*Crossbones* 23).

The centrality of the returnee protagonists works to make contextual space for these educative "tracts" within the bounds of each story. Even lacking the conceit of Malik's journalistic project, the other returnees require advice and instruction from those they meet in Somalia. Jeebleh, Cambara Malik and Ahl all return to the country with concrete, and often dangerous, objectives in mind. Cambara wants to wrest her family property back from the warlord who has seized it. Ahl is in search of his stepson, Taxliil, who has joined al-Shabaab. Jeebleh is looking for his mother's grave (and, it emerges, hopes for revenge against Caloosha, his childhood bully and former jailer).

In pursuing these objectives, each returnee must consult and observe the locals at every point of their journey. Cambara refers to these forays as "reconnoitering missions" (183), emphasizing their focused intention. In *Links*, as Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo writes, "Jeebleh can only traverse the war zone of Mogadiscio [sic] through reliance on (although not necessarily trust in) those who know how the city now functions" (68).

Jeebleh himself recognizes his need for instruction, saying "I've come here to learn and to listen" (35) Because Jeebleh is committed to "learn[ing]" and "listen[ing]" rather than simply acting on what he already knows, the reader is versed in the logic (or often, illogic) of the "war zone" alongside him. Carbonieri comments on this process in her discussion of a scene from *Links*, in which a local man, Dajal, explains clashes between Somali militias and UN forces to Jeebleh. Carbonieri writes:

> The fact that it is a secondary character that advances what seems to be the author's point of view in a dialogue with the protagonist Jeebleh, who is an exile back to Somalia after living for more than two decades abroad, has a twofold function: to instruct him about what happened in his country during his absence and at the same time enlighten the reader about the same events. (84)

In addition to the testimony given by such "secondary character[s]", much of the "disquisition" on the history of the country is supplied by the returnees themselves. In each novel, life in Somalia is refracted through a chronoschism, as the central characters adjust to the ways in which the country has changed in their absence. Jeebleh, arriving just after the fall of Barre, reflects that "the world in which he and Caloosha would be meeting today, if they met at all, was very different both from the one in which they had met as children, and the one in which Jeebleh had been a political prisoner and Caloosha his jailer" (90). Jeebleh prepares himself to encounter his old jailer in the full knowledge that the dynamics of Somali society have changed, rendering even the once-familiar "new". Jeebleh also embodies the chronoschism in *Crossbones*, since Ahl and Malik's return is ancestral rather than actual. In its opening pages he is astonished by the orderliness of the airport, which is now under the control of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), and shows no hint of its former lawlessness.

In *Knots*, Farah uses chronoschism to place a fierce emphasis on Somalia's cosmopolitan history. Dodgson-Katiyo states, "In a recent talk in London, Farah reiterated his view that the loss of cosmopolitanism was the most important consequence of the civil war [...] In his work, he attempts to recover that cosmopolitanism, representing it, in part, through the erudition of Jeebleh, Bile [Jeebleh's childhood friend] and other older Somalis" (78). In *Knots*, whose protagonist is younger than either Jeebleh or Bile, Farah emphasizes the concept of cosmopolitanism through the use of juxtaposition, as Cambara compares her childhood to life in a city that has been divided among warlords: "She concludes that the city, from her encounter with it in the shape of most of its residents, appears to have been dispossessed of its cosmopolitan identity and in its place has begun to put on the clannish, throwaway habits of the vulgar, threadbare semi-pastoralists" (132–3). Cambara's observation is snobbish, but her very horror of being associated with "semi-pastoralists" also suggests that nationality alone has not historically implied unity or similarity among different strata of Somali society.

Knots is set during the ascent of the UIC and, as well as critiquing clan politics, Farah's use of chronoschism suggests that the newly implemented Islamic laws have no intrinsic basis in Somali history. In trying to get to grips with the strictures of the UIC, Cambara says, bluntly, "I am not clear what exactly is forbidden in Islam and what is not" (305). Ironically, she has to ask Seamus, an Irish friend living in Mogadishu, to explain things for her. The wearing of the veil is also a new experience for Cambara. She has had to purchase some abroad in preparation for her homecoming, buying "one in Dearborn, Michigan, the other in Nairobi" (18). In the course of the novel she describes the "body tent" as "her disguise, her guile" and ruminates on her "invented identity of a veil-wearer" (*Knots* 118). The novel as a whole is preoccupied with themes of theatre and pageantry (Moolla 172): Cambara is an actress and makeup artist by profession, and she perceives the act of veiling as yet another performance, rather than an external manifestation of the "national character" or a shared history.

Knots portrays the UIC's strictures as performative impositions, and Farah's portrayal of the veil strongly echoes Hobsbawn's formulation of invented tradition. Hobsbawn describes invented tradition as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past" (1). By filtering this period through the consciousness of a woman returnee in her mid-forties, Farah makes a powerful

point about the supposed historicity of veiling in Somalia. Critically, Cambara perceives it as a disruption of "continuity" with her own past rather than as a return to "tradition".

This is emphasized in a scene in which Cambara watches her friend strip away her outer clothes. Here, Kiin's unveiling is described in terms of a temporal return: "Maybe Kiin wants to believe that she is returning to the person she has been for much of her life: a Muslim woman and a Somali one at that. After all, her own kind have not been given, until recently, to the habit of putting on *khimaar* and *shukka*" (253). Cambara's long absence and her attendant capacity for surprise lend drama to the idea of the veil as a jarring imposition. We are introduced to it through her eyes, rather than watching it gradually acquire vogue in Mogadishu, and thus Farah suggests the strangeness and suddenness of its ubiquity. However, it is crucial to note that Cambara does not reject the veil as wholly foreign. Rather, she emphasizes its role in Somali history, but notes that the identity it once signified was once more complex: "When she was young, it was uncommon for Somali women to wear one: mostly Arab women and a few of the city's aboriginals did" (9). The critique therefore rests on the idea of the veil as an "all-hiding" (*Knots* 115) uniform that effaces cultural and personal differences among Somali women and demands a performance of sameness among women, rather than an acknowledgement of difference and complexity.

The fact that each successive novel is filtered through the eyes of a different protagonist further underlines the complexity of the country's history: each generation has its own interpreter (or set of interpreters, in the case of Malik and Ahl) but none of them is able to capture a definitive image of the country. In "Teacherly Texts", Garuba writes, "since none of the novels offers the kind of closure or neat resolution that the ideologically driven programmatic text requires, it would appear that their open-endedness is deliberately offered as an invitation to discussion and debate" (19). Indeed, the many reconnaissance missions in the novels never 'add up' to a full picture, but rather provide a polyphony of voices to contradict some of the popular stereotypes that surround the country and abound within it. Farah's returnees do not provide definition, then, but rather contribute texture to the reader's conception of Somalia. They give detail to the country's representation, without presuming to define or grasp it in its entirety.

Dodgson-Katiyo notes that, even after his own return journey, as chronicled in *Links*, Jeebleh "proves to be an inadequate guide" (75) when he returns once again with his son-in-law in *Crossbones*. In part, this is due to the many upheavals that have taken place during his second absence, but Jeebleh's panicked disorientation is also a nod to the fact that the returnee protagonists are themselves "inadequate guides" in their capacity as interpreters. Their lack of authority is, in itself, a political statement: in *Links*, Jeebleh describes a skirmish between clans as part of an epic battle for narrative. He observes that "the family-thread was woven out of a mythical ancestor's tales, and seldom knitted society into a seamless whole. He assumed that the driver and the wounded warrior had stayed out of the dispute because their sub-clan was loyal to an altogether different narrative structure" (37). Wary of the consequences of myth-making, characters like Jeebleh describe post-collapse Somalia as "a fragmented land without a unifying theme" (*Links* 40), and the novels' unfinished quality and eschewal of narrative authority reflect this.

The returnee as visionary

In the Past Imperfect trilogy, Farah depicts both the appeal and the dangers implicit in homecoming, as the protagonists negotiate their past and present feelings about Somalia and search for modes of ethical engagement with the "homeland". In discussing the relationship between nationalism and nostalgia, Svetlana Boym writes, "nostalgia is paradoxical in the sense that longing can make us more empathetic toward fellow humans, yet the moment we try to repair longing with belonging, the apprehension of loss with a rediscovery of identity, we often part ways and put an end to mutual understanding" (6). The returnee protagonists of the Past Imperfect trilogy find creative ways to connect with Somalia which acknowledge their longing and loss, rather than trying to disappear into an exclusionary idea of "home". Throughout the novels, they maintain a careful balance between distance and engagement, taking care not to be absorbed into totalizing narratives of belonging.

In "The Pleasures and Pitfalls of Exile and Counterpoint in Farah's *Maps*", Tayseer Abu Odeh writes, "as manifested in the works of Farah, exile is a nomadic form of non-reconciliation, resistance, and non-identity, whereby they dismantle and challenge all forms of geographical and biological filiations, fixed identity, official nationalism, and historical mystifications" (137). However, through some of the trilogy's minor characters, Farah also notes the dangerous allure that a "fixed identity" can offer, particularly for those whose experience has been of diaspora rather than exile. In a 2014 interview with Garuba, Farah states:

> The largest number of active Shabbab groups, especially the young ones, are Somalis who've come back from America, from Canada, from Norway, from Europe, where they have the absolute possibility and chance to live a life bereft of violence, bereft of hopelessness, and yet they come back. So my interest is: What is it that makes them come back to this? And then to compare the generations of the young Somalis who come back to join Shabbab to the older Somali generation—you know, my generation and the ones who are ten, twenty years younger than I am, those who are now in their forties. Those who left when Siad Barre was still in power, but who have built an alternative life to the one they had in Somalia and who now live a better life. ("Dreaming on Behalf of the Community: A Conversation with Nuruddin Farah" 2)

Farah explores this question in *Crossbones*, in which the emotional dimension of return is explored primarily through the character of Taxliil. Taxliil's decision to join al-Shabaab is a full-immersion attempt at belonging, aimed at "reconcili[ng]" (Odeh 137) the contradictions of hyphenated identity and life in an often-hostile diaspora. Like *Knots*, *Crossbones* depicts identity as a mixture of projection and performance, rather than something essential. Taxliil's journey from Minnesota to Somalia (and his transformation from schoolboy to *jihadi*) is portrayed as the end result of a series of psychological traumas. His best friend, Samir, becomes a suicide bomber as a way of avenging his family, who were killed at a US checkpoint in Iraq. The FBI casts Taxliil as a terrorist in the wake of Samir's death, and the injustice of this, ironically, moves him to solidarity with al-Shabaab. Embracing Islam becomes a way for Taxliil to reject the USA and claim solidarity with the friend he has lost.

The first novel of the trilogy, *Links*, is prescient in its exploration of the relationship between alienation and radicalization: when Jeebleh sees child soldiers fighting for their clans in the wake of the Barre dictatorship, "he couldn't help concluding that they had lost their way between the stations of childhood and manhood. Many of them, he thought, would prefer dying in the full glory and companionship of their kin to being alive, lonely and miserable" (35). In *Crossbones*, the young men in question are fighting for a different cause, but evince the same hunger for glory and kinship. "Lonely and miserable" in the diaspora, Taxliil sets out to find a home, envisioning a glorious return. This raises the question as to whether earlier generations' attempts to "dismantle and challenge" (Odeh 137) assumptions of belonging have inadvertently caused their displaced children and grandchildren to crave acceptance all the more. As Edward Said states, "all nationalisms in their early stages develop from a condition of estrangement" (3537), and in *Crossbones* we witness the relationship between estrangement and blind allegiance in characters like Taxliil.

Jeebleh and Cambara, contrastingly, do their utmost to maintain their independence—or, as Odah describes it, "non-identity" (137)—even as they travel back to Somalia. Farah's amorphous, unstable rendering of Somalia has implications for the idea of return and the forms it may take. In *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora*, Farah writes: "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: a people pledging their eternal vows to a locality that happens to be where they were born and which they choose to call home, a place with whose climate, physical geography and vegetation they are familiar" (48). The Oxford English dictionary defines a "hypothesis" as "a supposition or proposed explanation made on the basis of limited evidence as a starting point for further investigation" (1). The trilogy format, with its recurring characters, suggests the necessity of periodic "further investigation" into what the country has become. The protagonists' returns must always remain unfinished, because they know better than to perceive belonging as anything but notional. As Dodgson-Katiyo writes, "[f]or Jeebleh, and, one suspects, for Farah too, the desire for Mogadiscio [sic] is always deferred" (80).

Jeebleh and Cambara's reappearances throughout the trilogy suggest that return is an ongoing journey. Throughout the novels, they face the challenge of positioning themselves in creative ways in relation to Somalia, even though various groups are constantly angling for their allegiance. At best, their discomfort with national and sectarian categories positions them as visionaries of the future and ethical observers of the present, but in order to remain so, they have to avoid becoming so "familiar" with the "climate" (*Yesterday, Tomorrow* 48) of Somali society that they cease to interrogate conventions that others may take for granted. In *Links*, Jeebleh remembers words his mother once spoke to this effect: "'Be your own man' she would say, 'not anyone else's'" (90).

When Jeebleh is visited by a group of clan elders he finds himself heeding his mother's advice: "the spokesman of the clan elders now talked about Jeebleh's important place and the positive, commendable role he could play in the politics of the clan. Jeebleh lapsed into a private mood, becoming a man in his own space. He did his utmost not to display a public unease at the thought of privileging blood over ideology" (119). Jeebleh's "unease", enhanced by his intense wariness of his new surroundings, resonates with Adorno's famous assertion, in *Minima*

Moralia, that "the highest form of morality is not to feel at home in one's own home" (112). Despite all the advantages these powerful allies can give him, he deliberately maintains an observer's position. Moolla writes, "Jeebleh's self-realisation involves much more than just a renewed link with the motherland. It involves, more fundamentally, finding ways to link with others which do not compromise the authentic self" (165). Indeed, in the course of the novel Jeebleh finds a way to negotiate the chaos of the present, with the help of his "community of choice" (91), which includes his friends Bile and Seamus, both of whom are committed to humanitarian work in the city.

Cambara fares similarly, although, as the only returnee who aims to return to Somalia permanently, her vision is more concerned with the future. Her plans to recover her family property initially seem "ill-advised", "mad-cap" and even "suicidal" (10), but she eventually achieves her goal. In the end, her use of the house proves to be far more than an act of blind reclamation, or an attempt to clutch at the past: instead of trying to turn it into a conventional home, she opens a theatre, in a nod to the idea of belonging as performance. As Garuba writes, "retaking ownership of the family home also masks her deeper aspiration to use this property as the literal and metaphoric staging ground for performing her vision of a future Somalia, freed from the clutches of clan warlords, with a blossoming civil society built around women" ("Teacherly Texts" 22). As Garuba notes, her foray into the site of the past is, paradoxically, an attempt to put "her vision of a future Somalia" into practice.

The space Cambara finally creates is one of joyful precariousness, created in defiance of the warlords and the Islamic Courts. Like Farah himself, who, in reference to his own prolonged absence from Somalia, has stated "I developed my writing skills in the crucible of nostalgia" ("A Country in Exile" 713), Cambara uses storytelling as a way to assuage various kinds of longing and loss. Like Farah, also, she conceives of her art as a moral imperative: she wishes to contribute to the "well-being" (*Knots* 212) of the country. As Moolla writes, "by the end of *Knots*, it appears that staging a play in the ballroom of the repossessed family home is the true purpose of Cambara's return to Mogadiscio [sic]. In this context, she is able to construct an ideal non-authoritarian, liberatory community out of 'like-minded' performative selves" (173).

The theatre is set up between two periods of extreme violence in Somalia, and there is no knowing how long it will survive. Addressing the apparent optimism implicit in the ending of *Knots*, Farah refers to its denouement as an "Indian summer" between two storms (Niemi 338). This is confirmed when we meet Cambara in *Crossbones*, which depicts the US backed invasion of the country and the last days of the UIC. Her ability to thrive in this atmosphere of danger is directly informed by what she has lost in the course of her life: her arrival in Mogadishu is precipitated by the death of her young child. We are told that she "she overcame what she might describe as everyday fear when she buried it with her son, Dalmar" (365). Years after settling in Mogadishu, she still resists the ease and safety offered by conformity. Despite receiving threats and harassment for "living in sin" (*Crossbones* 28) with Bile, she refuses to marry him, preferring to operate on her own terms. Cambara argues that, in the fight against religious extremism, "*we* are the front line" (123), emphasizing that the preservation of one's "own space" (*Links* 119) in the face of social pressure is both a personal and a deeply political act. Annie Gagiano writes:

> [Farah's] is never a romantic, falsifying nationalism: he never suggests that the humane Somalia of his imagination has, or has yet had (even in the 'precolonial' past) an actual incarnation. Its seeds are there, in the courage and integrity of individual Somalis, but the possibility that such seeds may come to flourish still seems far remote. Even so, every one of Farah's texts enjoins upon Somalis the duty of contributing towards the rebuilding of their nation—and exhibits individuals who do so. (253–4)

In the "courage and integrity" of characters like Cambara, Farah depicts considered non-conformity not only as a form of resistance, but as the first defense against tyranny. Like Jeebleh's personal "space", which stands apart from the one offered by the clan members, the world of Cambara's imagination offers an ethical alternative to essentialist ideologies and rigid discourses of belonging, suggesting a multiplicity of ways in which "Somaliness" (Gagiano 253) can be created and enacted.

Conclusion

In the course of his career, Nuruddin Farah has made repeated literary returns to Somalia, with each intervention differing from the last. By turns hopeful, utopic and melancholy, these novels enable their protagonists to introduce readers to various incarnations of Somalia, and later to the Somali diaspora at large. In their uncertainty and liminality, the returnee protagonists featured in *Links*, *Knots*, and *Crossbones* operate as imperfect interpreters for a global readership. Much of their educative potential is realized through the use of testimony and chronoschism,

as each returnee eagerly updates their knowledge of the "homeland" upon arrival. However, by granting them only partial authority, and leaving their character arcs "unfinished", Farah illustrates the complexity inherent both to the idea of return, and to the dynamics of a conflicted country. In this way, Farah's sprawling trilogy is able to address questions associated with home and belonging, while also insisting on a complexity and elusiveness particular to Somalia itself.

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