



## Nuruiddin Farah: A lived commitment to Africa

Reed Way Dasenbrock

Literary criticism on contemporary writers necessarily has a dual focus not always found in work on other writers. The task of explication or interpretation remains: “this is what the work means”, or more cautiously, “this is a possible interpretive frame for the work”. But in addition, to write about a contemporary writer is consciously or unconsciously to engage in canon formation: “this work is worth reading”, or less cautiously, “this work is of value and will endure”.

Despite a rich and successful literary career, with all the prizes and awards delineated in the chronology to this volume, the second task is still necessary in the case of Nuruiddin Farah, whose rich and fascinating oeuvre does not have the broad recognition or place in postcolonial literature that the work of Chinua Achebe or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has among African writers, let alone the world-wide fame (or infamy, depending on the context) of a Salman Rushdie or a V. S. Naipaul. I begin with the issue of recognition because thinking about why this might be so helps identify both the lines of inquiry in this theme issue and their usefulness in an approach to understanding the works of Nuruiddin Farah. The work of recognition and the work of interpretation here go hand in hand.

We can start with his place of origin, Somalia, as one important reason. While “the sun never set on the British Empire” and therefore there are writers in English with origins all over the world, the writers who have risen to prominence have tended to come from the major outposts of the British Empire. This means that they are not coming from nowhere for most readers, who have some starting point to approach their work, some kind of an interpretive frame for it. This is important even when that interpretive frame is something the writer rejects: so Achebe writes against Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary, Ngũgĩ critiques the racism behind *Out of Africa* and *The Flame Trees of Thika*, but at least they have those cultural reference points to write against. But who knows anything about Somalia? Who even knows that it was (in part) a British colony? When Farah began to write, he did not even have misunderstandings or racist stereotypes to write against. Now, for good or for ill, Somalia does loom a little larger in our collective consciousness, given *Black Hawk Down*, the Ridley Scott movie based on the book by Mark Bowden, Al-Shabaab, stories about piracy, and more recently in the United States, the election of the first Somali-American member of Congress, Representative Ilhan Omar, a frequent object of attack by Donald Trump. Farah has begun to engage with some of these reference points in his later fiction, most pointedly in *North of Dawn*, a major focus of the research articles in this issue. But he began writing from what was for most readers an utter nowhere, a place we didn’t even have uninformed and inaccurate stereotypes about.

So one project of Farah criticism—made harder by the depth of ignorance I began by describing—is to recover and delineate aspects of Somali culture and history important for the understanding of his work. Several articles in this issue focus on this project. Ali Jimale Ahmed’s “Nuruiddin Farah and Somali Culture”, Christopher Fotheringham’s “A nation of narratives: Soomaalinimo and the Somali novel, and Annie Gagiano’s “Male ‘Somali-ness’ in diasporic contexts: Somali authors’ evaluative evocations” are the three articles in the issue which do the most in this direction. Any reader unfamiliar with Somalia or Somali culture—most of his audience—will find these articles of value for this reason.

Ahmed’s article explores what he calls the “dialectical tussle” between Farah and Somali culture. Touching on the full range of Farah’s oeuvre but focusing on *Secrets*, Ahmed shows how Farah, in narrating and attempting to come to terms with the disintegration of the Somali state, is putting that history in dialogue with the longer durée of Somali culture. How to celebrate the culture yet deplore the current state of affairs while understanding the intimate relation between the two? This calls for a “dialectical tussle” indeed, and Ahmed is very illuminating about how Farah’s critique first of the Siyad Barre dictatorship and the chaos that follows is deeply Somali in its way of working, without it denying the connections between that same Somali culture and the tragic history his

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works depict. In an apposite phrase, Ahmed sees *Secrets* “as a narrativization of a trauma to the consciousness by means of storytelling”. Fotheringham, in a more anthropological vein, focuses on just one strand of this dialectic, defining *soomaalinimo* as a “cluster of positive values” found in Somali culture in contrast to the darker images of Somalia in the “global imaginary”, and he relates aspects of that *soomaalinimo* to the strong presence of orature and oral poetry in Somali culture. He presents the diasporic fiction of Farah and a number of younger Somali writers as providing a kind of contemporary equivalent for that older oral poetry. Returning to the darker side of the dialectic, Annie Gagiano employs a more psychological register. Like Fotheringham placing Farah in the context of other, younger Somali diaspora writers she focuses on his most recent novel, *North of Dawn*, and sees it as a psychological analysis of what is wrong with male Somali culture. She is actually rather critical of *North of Dawn*, viewing the younger Somali writers she goes on to discuss as providing more nuanced, balanced portraits of the gender dynamics at work in the Somali diaspora. In my judgment, Ahmed’s article does a better job of the complex task of discussing a particular work in the context of the entire oeuvre than Gagiano’s, but both she and Fotheringham provide a different and valuable context for Farah’s work in the work of other Somali writers. These three articles work together to take us some way into the Somali (and Somali diaspora) context of Farah’s fiction. Somalia is a complex place with a complex history and culture, and we are better readers of Farah if we are more knowledgeable about that essential context.

A second reason for our difficulty in making sense of Farah’s work reflects the peculiarity of Somalia’s colonial history: although part of Somalia was a British colony, the major colonial power in Somalia was Italy, which means that the European frame of reference for Farah himself and for many of his characters is, in the first place, Italian. Although Farah of course chose to write in English, nonetheless, aspects of Italian culture are important for understanding his work, and this introduces one more complexity into our apprehension of his work. The Italian colonial enterprise is not one that looms large in our collective awareness, and the overlap between readers interested in contemporary postcolonial writing and those with an immersion in the traditions of Italian culture is not enormous. I happen to be one of the people with that overlap, as Italian is my best language other than English and I have published both on postcolonial literature, including Farah, and on the influence of the Italian classics on literature in English from the Renaissance to the present. So if I can sound a personal note here, the articles that explored this important context for Farah’s work were of particular interest to me.

The historical trajectory of Italian culture may be less important for Farah than the lived contemporary intersection of Italy and Somalia, given Italian colonization, the importance of Italian intellectual culture for the Mogadishu elite in the immediate aftermath of colonialism (probably seen best in Farah’s first trilogy, *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*), and the role of Italy as an important new home for the Somali diaspora, including Farah himself from 1976 to 1979. But less important is not unimportant, and one article in this issue, Marco Medugno’s “Dante in Mogadishu: *The Divine Comedy* in Nuruddin Farah’s *Links*”, addresses Farah’s use of the *Commedia* in his novel *Links*. Dante certainly provides an apposite frame for conditions in Mogadishu after the fall of Siyad Barre, given the chaos that ensued as Somalia slid into the condition of a failed state. This is an excellent piece of literary criticism that certainly provides a valuable interpretive frame for the fascinating novel, *Links*. One of the two interviews in the issue, Ali Mumin Ahad’s “The marathoner not yet at the finish line: Nuruddin Farah in Rome”, unobtrusively sketches the contemporary Italian context, by virtue of being conducted in Rome with the questions written out in Italian although the interview was conducted in Somali. The easy passage between the two languages for both the interviewer and writer, characteristic of educated Somalis of Farah’s generation (and before, of course) is essential for understanding Farah, I believe. Of particular interest in this context is Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo’s “Anxiety and influence in Nuruddin Farah and younger Somali writers”. Dodgson-Katiyo discusses the work of a number of younger Somali diaspora writers writing in European languages who are influenced by Farah. This was completely new material to me, also discussed in the articles by Fotheringham and Gagiano, and learning about the Italian-language work of Igiaba Scego and Uba Cristina Ali Farah, the latter of whom is clearly influenced by Nuruddin Farah, leads one to realize that the lines of influence between Italian language literature and Farah is now two-way. Uba Cristina Ali Farah has herself contributed to the issue, with a beautiful piece that describes the Mogadishu of her childhood in a way that mirrors the portrait of the city found in Nuruddin Farah’s early work. Younger Somali writers in Italian are thus in dialogue with Farah, who is now—as one of the articles remarks—about the age of perhaps my favorite character in all of Farah’s works, Deeriye, the elder statesman who represents the best of Somali traditions but is nonetheless cosmopolitan, fluent

in Italian and aware that the tragedy of modern Somalia has components due to Italian colonialism and others due to aspects of Somali culture.

So Somalia and Italy are two important reference points that need a good deal of recovery work to make them available for most readers of Farah, and the articles in the issue help flesh out our understanding of both. But Farah himself didn't make it any easier (on him or on us) by his own personal voyage. The typical postcolonial writer either stays home or moves to the metropole (though sometimes oscillating between the two), and those two poles mark out the characteristic space of postcolonial literature: is it produced by the former colony for audiences in the former colonial power (or the West more broadly)? If so, how 'postcolonial' is it? Or is it written for 'home consumption' as it were, in which case the question is whether it is of interest or value to the vast majority of readers who are outside that context. Farah was different from the start, first by receiving his education in India rather than the West, and then by his insistence—sometimes in difficult circumstances—on living in Africa, not the more customary Britain or US. He obviously couldn't stay home, for political reasons, as he was in exile from Somalia after the publication of his second novel, *A Naked Needle*, in 1976. (However, after two decades of exile, he has been able to travel to Somalia occasionally from 1996 on, despite the complex and chaotic conditions in Somalia). After many years of a kind of nomadic existence, with stays in (at least) England, Italy, Germany, Nigeria, the Gambia, Sudan, Uganda, and Ethiopia, Farah has lived mostly in Cape Town, South Africa since 1999. This means that by now Farah has actually lived in South Africa for twice as long as in Somalia (leaving aside the bulk of his childhood in the Somali-speaking Ogaden in Ethiopia). How the years of wandering and his long sojourn in South Africa has affected his work is a fascinating question, and several articles touch on aspects of this. The South African context comes out in the interview with F. Fiona Moolla, "Reflecting back, projecting forward: A Conversation with Nuruddin Farah", but also in the fact that this is a theme issue of a South African literary journal edited by Professor Moolla, a faculty member at the University of the Western Cape. The one article on one of the non-Somali, non-Italian sojourns of Farah and its influence on his work is Asis De's "The Lost Years of a Nomad: Exploring Indian Experience in Nuruddin Farah's Literary Oeuvre" which does a good job identifying the ways in which Farah's years as a student in India affected his work, with particular attention to his recent novel *Hiding in Plain Sight*, set in Kenya with an important Indian character. As valuable as this article is, an area to explore in future Farah studies is the effect on his work of his long residence all over Africa, especially in his new home of South Africa.

A considerably more theoretical and abstract approach to the issue of Farah's place or placelessness is found in F. Fiona Moolla's "Nuruddin Farah and Pascale Casanova: A pas de deux across the world republic of letters". Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* (first published in French in 1999, translated into English in 2004) is an ambitious attempt to develop a theory of a world literary system influenced by the work of Wallerstein and her doctoral supervisor Bourdieu. Farah happens to be one of the few world writers Casanova refers to in her study, which provides the hook for Moolla's exploration of how Farah fits into Casanova's system and how it helps explain the pattern we have already discussed in which Farah occupies a kind of peripheral position even among writers on the periphery. Although I am not entirely persuaded by Casanova's model, particularly her, to me bizarrely francocentric notion that Paris is still the center of the world literary system she describes, Moolla's pioneering application of this model to Farah's work is exactly the kind of theoretically informed but also grounded approach we will need to fit this doubly *périphérique* writer into the canon going forward.

Those are some of the imposing external and contextual challenges Farah's work presents, and I hope my brief discussion of the articles in the issue show that they taken as a group constitute a solid advance in our awareness of the importance of Somali, Italian and other national and cultural contexts for his work. But the challenges that his work poses to the interpreter are not entirely external or geopolitical. The work taken on its own terms provide some as well.

First, there is a lot of it. Farah's writing career has reached the half-century mark, and he continues to write, publish and develop as a writer. This means that Farah has a body of work the size of which is atypical among postcolonial writers, particularly among African writers. As a result, critical attention has not and should not be focused on a single work. With writers with slighter bodies of work, it is easier for readers to focus on a single text, *Things Fall Apart*, say, and this makes it far easier for that single text to have a prominent place in the canon. Readers of Farah now have thirteen novels to absorb (as well as a play, some short stories and a fair amount of non-fiction), and no one of those works has emerged as a clear candidate for canonization, for a place in, for example, a survey course on postcolonial or African literature.

Related to this is one of the unusual formal aspects of Farah's oeuvre, which is that it is made up primarily of trilogies. Of his thirteen novels, eleven belong to trilogies, with three complete (*Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*, *Blood in the Sun*, *Past Imperfect*) and a fourth currently underway. I think this reliance on a trilogy structure makes canonization of a single work even harder since the single work suffers on its own without the enriching context of the rest of the series. But it is also a fascinating phenomenon which has not received the attention I think it deserves. The multi-volume work is characteristic of an older model of fiction writing, but trilogies are fairly unusual even among those writers who have written connected works or multi-volume series. So this is an area that cries out for additional analysis. Quite a few years ago, I wrote an article comparing the first two of his trilogies, and a valuable complement to the thematic analysis found in this issue would be more formal analysis focusing on the question of why Farah is so reliant on the form of the trilogy. Has his sense of trilogy structure changed across the arc of his career? Perhaps this is a question better answered with the completion of the trilogy now two-thirds complete.

But even without this one piece of formal analysis (perhaps something that I alone am looking for), the articles in the issue do a commendable job, paying attention to the full range of his oeuvre. His most recent novel, *North of Dawn*, emerges as a particular point of focus, with articles by Nick Tembo, "Re-Placing Nuruddin Farah: Precarity and Sense of Extremism in *North of Dawn*", and Vivian Gerrand, "Trajectories of Radicalisation and Resilience in Nuruddin Farah's *North of Dawn*", focusing exclusively on the novel in addition to analyses of it in articles by Fotheringham and Gagiano already discussed above. *North of Dawn* represents a significant departure for Farah, as it is the first of his novels not set in Africa (and just the second not set in Somalia), as it depicts the life of Somali refugees in Norway. Farah is clearly engaging in this novel with the images of Somalia the world now knows, and Tembo and Gerrand usefully take different but complementary approaches to the novel. Tembo's key concept is the precariat, a way of capturing the precarious existence of the more recent wave of refugees from Somalia, and he focuses on relating this to notions of trauma, showing Farah as trying to depict the conditions that lead to radicalization on the part of many who fall into this category while at the same time not endorsing that radicalization. Gerrand maps the characters in *North of Dawn* according to their (explicit or implicit) theories of identity, finding that Farah continues to privilege those who have a more dialectical understanding of identity, refusing the either-or of tribalist ideologies (of whatever complexion) in favor of an acceptance of plurality. The fact that Farah's most recent work of fiction receives more critical attention than any other work of his shows that the critics gathered here are eager to come to an understanding of the twists and turns of Farah's evolution, not content to wait for a patina of age to settle over the works before discussion commences.

But this focus on *North of Dawn* doesn't mean that the other novels are neglected. Far from it, as the discussion of the articles so far should show. Also worth mentioning here is Kamil Naicker's "Nuruddin Farah: Variations on the Theme of Return", which focuses on the third trilogy, *Past Imperfect*, and its central theme of Somali-born emigres or exiles returning 'home' to a Somalia very different from the one they left, as was true for Farah himself. And without any formal division of attention to all thirteen novels, the articles taken as a whole work well to introduce the full range of Farah's oeuvre.

I have structured this essay around the many aspects of Farah's work that make it perhaps less accessible for many readers than more familiar figures in postcolonial literature. The articles in this collection address these issues in a variety of ways, and do a great deal to help us understand both the external contextual factors and the internal aspects of Farah's work that relate to these aspects. They go a long way to giving us the tools to come to a richer appreciation of this fascinating writer. And I would like to close by suggesting that every issue I have identified as a potential barrier to appreciating Farah can also be seen in a different way, as a reason to do the work needed to understand him.

He does come from a part of the world less well understood (and perhaps not even misunderstood), so reading Farah is a fascinating way into a fascinating part of the world, Somalia. His Italian frame of cultural reference enriches our sense of the colonial experience beyond the usual anglophone and francophone frames of reference, and also shows a more complicated Italianness than one normally gets in the English speaking world. His personal courage and integrity in his places of residence deserve praise and respect: his is a lived, not ideological, commitment to Africa. His body of work—capacious and complex, full of intellectual references and full of ideas—demands a careful reading that this issue makes an important contribution to. Farah is a great writer, and I hope you have enjoyed the voyage through his work offered in this issue as much as I have.