



Anxiety and influence in Nuruddin Farah and younger Somali writers

Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo

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During his exile, Nuruddin Farah believed that he would return to a democratic Somalia once Muhammed Siyad Barre had been removed from power. However, this vision was lost when civil war followed the dictator's fall. Since then, Farah has made several return visits to Somalia. He claims in interviews and articles that he continues to care about Somalia whereas others have abandoned the country. The emotional engagement that Farah shows in his book on Somali refugees, *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* emerges again in his Past Imperfect trilogy. This can be seen in the ways in which older Somali characters interact with a younger generation, seeking to instruct, develop and protect them. This shows a certain anxiety about influence. It is as if Farah is attempting to re-assert his long-held position as the pre-eminent author and interpreter of Somalia and the Somali diaspora during a period in which there has been a proliferation of literary writing by younger Somalis. This essay examines Farah's trajectory from exile to cosmopolitan writer and his anxiety in the Past Imperfect trilogy and other writing. It further considers whether there are constructive linkages between Farah's work and that of selected younger Somali writers. **Keywords:** African literature, Cristina Ali Farah, cosmopolitanism, exile, Nuruddin Farah, Nadifa Mohamed, Diriye Osman, Somali literature, Abdourahman A. Waberi.

Introduction

For many years, Nuruddin Farah has been the most pre-eminent Somali writer. Indeed, one could argue that he has been *the* Somali writer. However, only one of his novels, his second, *A Naked Needle*, was written in Somalia. His first novel *From a Crooked Rib* was written when he was a student in India and his eleven other novels were all written after he had left Somalia. All of his novels were set in Mogadishu until *Crossbones* (2011) which divides the action between Mogadishu and the autonomous region of Puntland. All were set in Somalia until the publication of *Hiding in Plain Sight* (2014), which is set mainly in Nairobi.¹ Farah has said in many essays and interviews that he could not have become the writer he now is if he had remained in Somalia. In the essay "In Praise of Exile", he argues that away from home, it is possible "to create an alternative life for yourself" and "that way everybody else becomes *the other*, and you the centre of the universe. You are a community when you are away from home—the communal mind remembering" (65). He could not, he states, have written his novels in Somalia because his family would not have allowed him to do so and he would not have been prepared to join in with the "noisier than thou clapping of hands" of those supporting the dictator Muhammed Siyad Barre (65).

Writing in 2000, Derek Wright suggests that Farah balances "multifarious and often conflicting roles, managing to be at once nomad and cosmopolitan, native and exile, African-based Somali and international celebrity and laureate (of the 1998 Neustadt Prize), a writer who lives everywhere except in the place he writes about" ("Introduction" xix). In the years since Wright wrote this comment, Farah has moved more explicitly from being in exile to being cosmopolitan. However, he continues to insist that Somalia matters to him and that he matters to Somalia. The first part of this essay considers what the terms 'exile' and 'cosmopolitanism' mean to Farah and how they influence the way others see him. In order to probe Farah's anxiety as to whether he can still have influence on Somalia and Somalis, the middle section briefly considers Farah's representation of older Somali characters' efforts to educate the young in the Past Imperfect trilogy: *Links* (2003), *Knots* (2007) and *Crossbones* (2011, revised 2012). The third section discusses Farah's work and influence in relation to younger Somali writers who have emerged in the 1990s and 2000s.

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Exile and cosmopolitanism

Farah's status as exiled writer was contingent on his position as political exile. Ten years after writing "In Praise of Exile", Farah re-assessed his position, stating that since the fall of Barre, his status as exile was "more difficult to define or justify" ("A Country in Exile" 4). From 1996 onwards, Farah has been able to visit Somalia and in the Past Imperfect trilogy he delineates the return of the exile. Promoting *Crossbones* in an interview with Sarfraz Mansoor, Farah claims that "the thing about Somalia is Somalia is mine. Nobody can tell me I don't know it". He sees his own position as unique: "My friends, my sister, almost everybody considers Somalia to have died. They don't want to have anything to do with it. I've made it my job to continue writing about it and to remind people, even Somalis, what the place is like" (The Strand).

Farah appears to believe, though, that his role is not simply that of writing about Somalia. He has an exalted position as writer, political commentator and, to some extent, diplomatic mediator. Although he has never worked directly through political parties or movements, Farah has attempted to take on negotiating roles. In the late 1980s, when he was teaching in Uganda, he met with the Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni, and asked him, in his role as Chair of the Organisation of African Unity, to bring Barre and the opposition militia forces together. After Museveni had, in Farah's words, chosen to become "a big player on a bigger stage", Farah publicly criticized him for not concentrating on peace-making in Africa; he refers to this in chapter 12 of an interview recorded for the "*Grand entretiens Afrique(s)*" series of the French National Audiovisual Institute (INA). In 1991, Farah met members of his family who had fled to Mombasa from Somalia. In Kenya, he spent his evenings "with Somalis, counselling peace" (*Yesterday, Tomorrow* vi) and his days with Kenyan government ministers asking them to bring an end to the hostilities in Somalia. In 2006, Farah again became involved in politics. He was contacted by an executive member of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) and asked to "carry fire between the two sides", in other words, to mediate between the UIC and the transitional government. He had accepted the challenge because he was "excited at the thought of doing more than writing about Somalia to keep it alive" ("My Life as a Diplomat"). He left Somalia, intending to return and restart the negotiations but, before he could do so, Ethiopia invaded Somalia.

Farah's dedication to keeping Somalia alive in both his writing and his diplomacy has given him symbolic capital. He describes the way in which people reacted to his presence on his return to Mogadishu:

Somebody had this bright idea and this bright idea was I would be given a table, some kind of an office under a tree. And then somebody came and did an interview and then people knew that I was in Mogadishu. In different parts of the city, there was fighting going on but because people had always heard about the name—some had read some of the books but many of them had never read the books; they only heard interviews that I had given and had respect more for the name than for the work—I remember touching moments when some people came and they would touch [demonstrates] and say how good it is that you are still alive [...] you know, they made me forget about all the years of exile, all the pain [...] people came and simply, you know, you became a miracle, a kind of miracle bringer. (INA)

Farah's opposition to patriarchy, especially the link he makes between authoritarianism in the family and state tyranny, is well known. *From a Crooked Rib*, he says, was written to address "injustices to women and the injustices that the adult community imposes on the young" (Here on Earth). However, the description of his reception in Mogadishu which suggests that some people saw him as a quasi-savior begs the question of whether Farah is now a benign father figure, bearing some similarity to his character Deeriye, the devout, elderly protagonist of *Close Sesame*.

Derek Wright suggests that in his representation of Deeriye, Farah "gives us patriarchy with a human face" (*The Novels of Nuruddin Farah* 87). Deeriye's imprisonment has given him public respect and a certain celebrity. As Wright observes:

The imprisonment which absented Deeriye from his personal life in the past has given him a very public presence in the here and now, turning him into a living legend whom young hero-worshipping disciples approach on the street to express their reverence and admiration. He has become—albeit at some cost to his privacy—a historical personality and mythic figure, a national celebrity whose life is no longer his own but the property of the community. (90–1)

Farah is secular, not religious, but his claim in "In Praise of Exile" that prison is "another form of exile" (67) links him to Deeriye. In the years that have passed since the publication of *Close Sesame* in 1983, Farah's recollection of the way in which Somalis greeted him on his return bears some similarity to the way in which Deeriye is seen

in the novel. It has to be acknowledged that Farah is not universally admired by Somalis. He has spoken in interviews of the criticism he has received, especially for his strong support for the emancipation of women and opposition to female genital mutilation (Garuba, “Dreaming on Behalf of the Community”: A Conversation with Nuruddin Farah” 8; Niemi 334; Vickers). Nevertheless, he is a “national celebrity”. He knows that in visiting Somalia, he puts himself in danger but he says that he has the courage to go back there because people risk their lives in order to give him protection. This, he suggests, means that his life is not just his; it also belongs to those who have faith in what he stands for (*The Story*).

In *The Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual*, Zeina G. Halabi describes the figure of the intellectual-prophet, the writer who is exiled and away from the centre of power but who holds out the possibility of future emancipation. She questions whether it is possible to retain that vision when the hope of a better future remains unrealized. The prophet-intellectual “carries tragically the burden of his aborted prophecy, stranded in a dystopic present, unable to move to the future”. Moreover, “intertwined and enmeshed, the prophetic past, the dystopic present and the stalled future are temporalities that operate as a reminder of the intellectual’s interrupted journey toward emancipation” (xviii). She argues that this situation has come about because of the “collapse of the secular nation-state” (1). It is not just the exiled writer himself who suffers as a result of the unrealized vision: it has also led to a younger generation of Arab writers displacing the figure of the prophet-intellectual. Farah’s position is, in some respects, similar. During Barre’s dictatorship, he had held fast to the belief that once the dictator was overthrown, democracy would return to Somalia and he would be able to settle in the country again. In *Yesterday, Tomorrow*, a book based on interviews he conducted with Somalis throughout the world, he wonders whether “my years of exile have been futile, now that there is no ‘country’ to return to” (7). In Lucerne, he thinks of the “cross of my long exile slowly descending on me”. He fears that life will be incomplete “if I am not able to tie the various strands of my history into a unified knot, the rich past fully complementing the impoverished present and the uncertain future” (130).

One of the things Farah stands for is cosmopolitanism. It is this that provides him with a bulwark against the “uncertain future”. However, this is what he fears Somalia has lost. He argues: “now that cosmopolitanism is dead, it’s the greatest casualty because you cannot reconstruct it because you have to reconstruct the Somali person and it is not possible. Because twenty years of civil war means that children who were born, who were supposed to feed into that stream of cosmopolitanism, they’re not doing that” (INA). Farah blames this loss on the people he refers to as religionists who have imposed a particular form of Islam on Somalis. The cosmopolitanism that Farah espouses has a long history. In his essay “Of Tamarind and Cosmopolitanism” he writes of “the unmistakable cosmopolitan orientation” of Mogadishu dating back to the tenth century, stating that “it was an open city with no walls, to which anyone could come, provided he or she lived in harmony and at peace with those already there” (11). Farah’s historically located cosmopolitanism relates to Kwame Anthony Appiah’s notion of an inclusive cosmopolitanism which “begins with the simple idea that in the human community, as in national communities, we need to develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association. And conversation in its modern sense too” (*Cosmopolitanism* xvii).

Farah’s endorsement of the pleasures of exile and of cosmopolitanism might seem to contradict Edward Said’s warning against seeing the literature of exile as humanistic, as “good for us” (174) when, for many, exile and migration are painful and result in permanent feelings of displacement. Lyndsey Stonebridge explicates Said’s point: “The value of Said’s political moralism is precisely that it keeps any claims that literature might want to make over historical experience in check or, at the very least, in productive tension. What is also checked is the risk of erasure between forms of literary cosmopolitanism and the historical reality of forced migration” (32). Stonebridge’s term “productive tension” is helpful in thinking of Farah’s position. Farah speaks of cosmopolitanism as someone who lives in Cape Town, makes a living as a highly successful writer, has held professorial posts at US universities and can travel on different passports. Said writes of exile as a metaphoric, as well as actual, state of displacement but this is not how Farah now describes his own position.

In an event at the Newcastle Centre for the Literary Arts in 2015, Farah rejected an audience member’s use of the term “displaced”, saying that it was a privilege to be away from one’s country.² However, Farah recognizes that displacement describes the position of many exiles. John Masterson points to Farah’s statement in *Yesterday, Tomorrow* that he tried to avoid visiting Somalis at times when they were serving food because the food that impoverished people eat affects his stomach. Masterson suggests that in writing this Farah displays “a refreshing degree of class honesty”. For Masterson, this is an example of the way in which “Farah acknowledges the importance of

rigorously differentiating his own exilic passage from those of his fellow Somalis" (238). Farah is fully aware of the difference between the fêted cosmopolitan writer and the marginalized and displaced. Nevertheless, he does not let go of the idea that literature can liberate or, at least, do some good. Writing of the wretchedness that Somalia and Somalis have suffered is painful but he perseveres. In *Yesterday, Tomorrow*, he explains that sorrow had often made him think of abandoning the project of interviewing refugees. However, he adds:

If I haven't let go of it it is because I wish somehow to impose a certain order on Somalia's anarchy, in syncopated assumption of the wisdom that the person whose story has been told does not die. So here are the voices of the refugees, the exiles and the internally displaced: I serve them to you with humility, I serve them raw, tearful, pained. (viii)

Anxiety in Farah's post-2000 fiction

The physical and mental toll Farah experienced in carrying out empirical research, often in adverse conditions, and in writing *Yesterday, Tomorrow* indicates that this was a period of crisis and re-assessment, a working through of Farah's own understanding about his relationship to Somalia. There is further evidence of this in Farah's fiction, particularly in the Past Imperfect trilogy. In *Links*, Jeebleh returns to Somalia to visit his mother's grave and take revenge on a minor warlord. In *Knots*, Cambara returns after the death of her young son in Canada. In *Crossbones*, Jeebleh returns to Mogadishu ten years after his first visit, accompanying his journalist son-in-law, Malik. At the same time, Malik's brother, Ahl, searches for his missing stepson in Puntland. Farah has warned against making too close an identification of art with life. Commenting on *Links*, he states that things have happened in Somalia which are not part of Jeebleh's or his own past (France 24). However, in a BBC World Book Club programme focussed on an earlier novel, *Maps*, he admits that "edges of life" touched that novel. Despite Farah's warning, more than "edges" seem to touch the Past Imperfect trilogy. In *Links* and in *Crossbones*, Jeebleh no longer recognizes the city that is now devastated by the civil war. Farah has said that after he returned to Mogadishu, "the city and I had grown apart"; it had changed drastically since he had last seen it (INA). Farah's anxieties about what has been lost and cannot now be recovered are also Jeebleh's anxieties.

Harry Garuba has referred to the Past Imperfect trilogy as a teacherly text, arguing that a "new modality of teacherliness [...] sets in motion a process through which a new unlearning and learning may begin" ("Teacherly Texts: Imagining Futures in Nuruddin Farah's Past Imperfect Trilogy" 29). According to Farah, the novel is a democratic genre and is cosmopolitan "in that quite often you have many ideas that advance progress; that advance change; ideas that come out of open discussion" (Odhiambo). In an interview with Sarfraz Mansoor, Farah states that *Crossbones* is "opening a dialogue between Somalia and the rest of the world" (The Strand), adding that he wants people to read the novel and find out how they have been misled about Somalia. However, it is not only the reader who is educated. Through Cambara's nurturing, networking, and her theatre craft, and through Jeebleh and Bile's disquisitions on history and literature, an older generation passes on what they know to younger characters, both poor children in Somalia for whom there are only Koranic schools (Cambara to SilkHair) and young educated men born in the diaspora (Jeebleh to Malik).

Malik and Ahl cultivate cosmopolitan identities but they use their multilingualism to communicate "in whichever language would exclude those they did not wish to understand them: Somali when among Arabs, Chinese when among Somalis, and English with each other and when they wanted to be understood" (*Crossbones* 38). This utilitarian and exclusionary cosmopolitanism differs from that of the older Somali characters in the novels. Their cosmopolitanism is historically located like Farah's and based on the two senses of conversation that Appiah advocates, living together and talking to each other. This is shown in Jeebleh's interpretation of Malik's dream of itching and Jeebleh and his friend Bile's discussion of piracy. Jeebleh suggests that Malik has dreamt of itching because he has heard a derogatory term "*Injirray*" (lice) which Somalis use for Ethiopians. He explains how historical name-calling between Somalis and Ethiopians has played a part in the politics of the region. Jeebleh then remembers that during the Ogaden war Somalis "found laughter in the treacherous nature of head lice, and discovered the punning potential about speaking figuratively about matters of political import" (112). In conversation with Malik and Cambara, Jeebleh and Bile put the international condemnation of Somalia for piracy within the context of antiquity and history through allusion to Cicero, Thucydides and the Chinese woman pirate Ching Shih (Mrs Cheng) to demonstrate that piracy is neither a new phenomenon nor specifically Somali (74-6).

However, after Jeebleh has left Somalia, Jeebleh and Bile's discussions are replaced by a university professor's opinionated monologue on nationalism and sacrifice written by Farah with satirical intent. The novel progresses at a frenetic pace and reasoning and argumentation based on shared cosmopolitan histories are overtaken by vi-

olent events resulting in death and injury. This juxtaposition of contemplative thought and violence indicates an anxiety on Farah's part that his influence, vision, and erudition may be lost in a fast-moving globalized world in which unreflective action and simulation dominate.

After the Past Imperfect trilogy, Farah wrote two further novels centred on inter-generational relations; both *Hiding in Plain Sight* and *North of Dawn* (2018) are set in diaspora communities. This turn towards the diaspora for the settings of his recent novels does, to some extent, position Farah more firmly as a diaspora writer than has been the case in the past. In *Hiding in Plain Sight*, Bella's method of instructing her nephew and niece, which involves using the tenets of political correctness is, at times, closer to preaching than teaching. The representation of Bella verges on being a stereotyped characterization of the Westernized, glamorous Somali woman. This, together with the inclusion of a lesbian inter-racial relationship and the depiction of a hyperactive Nairobi, leaves the reader with the thought that Farah might be trying to catch up with the younger generation of writers. His prolificacy is a risk. Chinua Achebe's fifth and last novel was published twenty-five years before his death; his standing as a founding father of modern African literature was unassailable after his death. In continuing to write in his 70s, Farah runs the risk that he will produce fiction which will be seen as weaker, more indulgent or less relevant than his previous work. The younger Somali writers know their work will in all probability be compared unfavorably to Farah's canonical novels but his new and future work will be in competition with theirs in a crowded global marketplace.

Farah and younger Somali writers

In *Crossbones*, when Jeebleh is about to depart from Somalia, Malik gives him a printout of an article he has written "in the manner that one gives a precious gift to a respected elder, with both hands and head slightly inclined" (117). Is this the way that younger Somali writers would offer their work to Farah or do they now want to exorcize or deconstruct the 'intellectual-prophet' who speaks for Somalia? Before answering this question, it is instructive to consider the way in which Farah now views his own early career.

Looking back on *From a Crooked Rib*, he admits that he was "as naïve as the young nomadic girl about whom I was writing" and "as innocent about the world as she was" (Here on Earth). Reflecting on his practice as a young writer, it is not unusual for Farah to blame what he sees as his mistakes on his youth and immaturity, most notably in his self-criticism in relation to *A Naked Needle*, a novel which became "a bible for misogynists" and which he has insisted should not be re-published. Farah confesses: "I thought I was a clever young man [...] I was twenty-seven or twenty-eight when I wrote it, but I've regretted writing that book" (Ajibade 346). The reception of *A Naked Needle* may have contributed to the cautious approach Farah then took towards his work. He tells Garuba: "When I started out as a writer, I never gave interviews. I had refused to give interviews or go to conferences for a long while until I was certain of my own footing, of where I was". When the well-known critic Gerald Moore wanted to write about his life, Farah responded: "I am not worthy of being written about at the age of twenty-eight, with only two novels to my name" (Garuba, "Dreaming" 8).

With the exception of Abdourahman A. Waberi, each of the younger writers still has only a small literary output. In a recent interview, Farah tells F. Fiona Moolla that he welcomes the company of other writers, that their work complements his, and that they do not necessarily have to cover the same territory (22–3). He has in the past been generous to some of them, writing the foreword to Waberi's translated short story collection, *The Land Without Shadows*, supplying a recommendation for Diriye Osman's *Fairytales for Lost Children* and commenting positively on the work of Waberi and Cristina Ali Farah (Farah, "By the Book").

The oldest of the new writers, Waberi, who was born in Djibouti in 1965, has published fiction and poetry in French. Farah is a dedicatee of *The Land Without Shadows* and Farah's influence can be seen in this early work. Despite Farah's desire not to see *A Naked Needle* republished, Waberi wrote the prologue to the French translation *Une aiguille nue* which is still in print. Both writers are preoccupied with their native countries. In an interview with Mohammed Hirchi, Waberi describes his relationship to Djibouti as "*intense, obsessionnel, et compliqué*" (intense, obsessive and complicated). Appropriating a phrase Farah uses in his 1992 essay "A Country in Exile", he adds:

Djibouti ne se résume pas à la République actuelle et réelle, ce que j'appellerais à la suite du Somalien Nuruddin Farah 'le pays de mon imagination' va au-delà et dans le temps et dans l'espace.

Djibouti does not come down to the present or actual Republic; what I would call following the Somali Nuruddin Farah 'the country of my imagination' goes beyond, in time and space. (Hirchi 602)

Farah now seems to be adopting a position that is similar to Waberi's. After the effort of reporting on the 'real' Somalia in *Crossbones*, he explains: "the Somalia that I carry in my head [...] feeds me with a neurosis that keeps my creative juices going, I think that's a lot more interesting than the Somalia in real life with its dust, and its heat, and its gun-wielding youths" (Here on Earth). As an academic, Waberi has researched and published on Farah's work and his criticism of Farah draws on Somali aesthetics. In his own words, he provides "an extracultural critical eye with the intracultural eye of a critical insider" (Waberi and Schoolcraft 780).

The Somali-British writer Diriye Osman also acknowledges Farah's influence. He has explained that, having suffered a serious psychotic episode, he asked himself who was representing him in writing: "I found myself thinking 'Where are the Somali writers?' Sure, we have Nuruddin Farah, who's a legend, but beyond that there was no one I could look up to as a creative role model from my community" ("No Victimhood—Writing a Proud Gay Somali Experience"). Osman's short stories focus on gay sexuality, homophobia and mental illness. Although Farah has written a short story centered on a gay relationship, "The Start of the Affair", and included a lesbian relationship in *Hiding in Plain Sight*, he does not write explicitly of gay sexual experience in the way that Osman does. Writing as an openly gay Somali man, Osman says he is "offering a window into the lives of young people who happen to be African and gay in the midst of considerable hostility but still managing to hang on to their identity" ("Why We Must Tell Our Own Stories"). Osman says that he starts with "autobiographical experiences" and "bend[s] them" into fiction" (Ali) whereas Farah claims that he does not like to write fiction about himself. In "Your Silence Will Not Protect You", a story which includes details corresponding with Osman's life, a young Somali man suffering from psychosis reveals that he is gay and is rejected by his family. Osman was an artist before he became a professional writer and continues to work in drawing, painting, video and body art. His black-and-white illustrations to *Fairytales for Lost Children* centre on female and male bodies and some of them incorporate Arabic calligraphy (see Ali). Osman is covering different territory from Farah, not only in his writing but in his art and his performative self-presentation as a gay man. However, Farah's representation of fluid sexualities and gender identities in *Maps* and *Secrets* is a precursor to Osman's 'transgression'. In this sense, Farah's work has provided an opening for Osman.

Appiah describes Farah as "a feminist novelist in a part of the world where that's almost unknown among male writers" ("Nuruddin Farah"). If this is an apt description, then we might expect Farah to read the work of Somali women writers and they, in turn, to read and be influenced by his work. There is a strong affinity between Farah and the Somali-Italian writer Cristina Ali Farah but not between Farah and the Somali-British writer Nadifa Mohamed. When prompted by Moolla, Farah says he has read Mohamed's first novel, but not the second (Farah and Moolla 21). Mohamed and Farah have very different histories. She was born in Hargeisa, now the capital of the self-proclaimed Republic of Somaliland, and has lived in the UK since the age of four. Her fiction to date has been largely influenced by her family's experiences, her father's in *Black Mamba Boy* and her mother's and grandmother's in *The Orchard of Lost Souls*.

The Orchard of Lost Souls is set in Mohamed's birthplace, Hargeisa, a city she often visits. Mohamed has explained in an interview that during the dictatorship, power was concentrated in Mogadishu and other parts of the country were left undeveloped (Taylor). In Part One of the novel, there is a description of Mogadishu which emphasizes its grandeur, its beauty and its allure, culminating in "the place has enchantment, mystery, it moves backward and forward in time with every turn of the feet; it is fitting that it lies beside an ocean over which its soul can breathe, rather than being hemmed in by mountains like a *jinn* in a bottle" (15). The description is focalized through the most unsympathetic of the central characters, the soldier Filsan, who is from Mogadishu but is stationed in Hargeisa. The narrator tells us: "Filsan hates the squatness of Hargeisa [...] here everything clings to the earth, cowering and subservient, the cheap mud brick bungalows often left unpainted as if the town were inhabited by giant termites that cobble their dwellings together with dirt and spit" (14–5). The contrast between the two cities, told from the perspective of an arrogant, dislikeable character, puts the enchantment of Mogadishu, so often celebrated by Farah, into a broader and more critical context. There is a Dickensian irony in the passage, partly derived from the phrase "it is fitting". In the reader's mind, this may change to "it is not fitting" because the comparison implies that the disparity is not only about geography; it is also about relations of power.

Mohamed has researched the history of the pre-independence Somali community in Cardiff and has written a novel, as yet unpublished, set in the ethnically diverse Cardiff area of Butetown. Describing her research, she states: "I have become a stalker of old men. I seek them out in community centres, cafes and mosques, in their cluttered flats and dark alleys. I don't want anything nefarious with them, just to capture their memories" ("The

Town That Pioneered Multiculturalism”). The short section of *Yesterday, Tomorrow* which describes Farah’s interviews with Somalis in Cardiff would provide her with little inspiration since Farah refutes the idea that there were Somali communities in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: “I have no problem with the assertion that an odd assortment of Somalis, predominantly male, settled in London’s East End, or Cardiff’s Butetown, or Liverpool’s Toxteth at that time. But I would not describe this assorted collection as a ‘community’” (*Yesterday, Tomorrow* 98). For Farah, “Theirs is a truly tragic story, as sad as the guttural sorrow of present-day Somali refugees” (99). Some of these men refused to talk to him; Farah surmises that this was because he “is a non-believer when it comes to clan politics and affiliations” and he is “from the south and they from the north” (102). He describes them as “a miserable lot [...] playing cards in a teahouse which was ready for demolition half a century ago” (102). Farah’s assessment misses what Mohamed’s research has uncovered, that there was a community association and organized Somali political resistance to racism in Cardiff.

A further difference between the older and the younger writer is that Farah has talked and written about Somalia and Somalis throughout his adult life whereas Mohamed now refuses to generalize about Somali experience. In a panel discussion during the Somali Week Festival in London in 2014, she stated that early in her career, after she had written articles on issues such as female genital mutilation, she came to realize that the British press focused obsessively on Somali women’s bodies. She then decided to concentrate on books rather than journalism. She followed this up later, saying in an interview:

Being a spokesperson for Somali issues around the world is not something I ever wanted to do or felt qualified to do. [...] I don’t want to be talking about Somalis as a problem, and I think that’s how people phrase it. I don’t want to be explaining strange Somali customs or behaviours or talking about how Somalis need to be better at finding employment in Scandinavia. You can end up talking about rather random topics that you’re not qualified to talk about. (Rollmann)

There is no reason to believe that this is a direct attack on Farah. However, it does implicitly express some irritation towards prominent Somalis who speak generically about Somalia and Somalis regardless of the differences within and between Somali communities.

Mohamed does, though, promote Somali literature. In a short article in an online journal, she shows more enthusiasm for memoirs by three women writers and the work of the classical poet Hadrawi than for Farah’s work. She cannot, of course, ignore Farah, so she simply explains that:

Nuruddin Farah has been writing about Somalia since the 1960s [...] throwing a spotlight on the figures generally sidelined in society—women, ethnic minorities, wayfarers—and was forced into exile by Siad 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. (“Nadifa Mohamed on Somali Writers”)

Farah has read the work of Igiaba Scego and Cristina Ali Farah in the original Italian. He suggests that reading Scego or Ali Farah “in conjunction, in tandem, with my works” would give the reader “a more complete picture about Somalia” (Farah and Moolla 23). His interest in Somali-Italian writers can perhaps be attributed to the fact that he was born and brought up in parts of Somalia and Ethiopia, which were colonized by Italy. When asked why he writes in the colonial language, English, he has pointed out that English was not *his* colonial language (NCLA). His influence is easier to detect in the work of Ali Farah than that of Scego. She is the diaspora writer to whom Farah appears to be closest and he has said that she “writes fantastically” (INA Chapter 5). Born in Italy, she was brought up in Somalia, unlike Scego, and now lives in Europe. Her novel *Little Mother*, which is set in Rome, tells the multiple stories of Somalis through three narrators, two women, Barni and Domenica Axad, and a man, Taageere, who had all lived in Somalia in their youth. Asked by the Somali news organisation Wardheer-News to name the writers who had inspired her, Ali Farah replied:

I still remember when I first listened to Nuruddin Farah at a conference in Rome. At the time I was still a student and I didn’t know anything about postcolonial writers. So I started devouring his novels, I read them all, and from then on I read all the African writers that were available in Italy [...] It was an important starting point, a way of re-thinking our collective stories putting them into a wider context. (“An Interview with Cristina (Ubox) Ali Farah” 2)

In the introduction to the English translation of *Little Mother*, Alessandra DiMaio refers to Farah as “Somalia’s literary patriarch” (xxiii). Even if Farah is not a patriarch, Ali Farah can be said to be his literary daughter. One of three epigraphs that preface *Little Mother*, a quotation about potential loss of creativity, is taken from Farah’s

Yesterday, Tomorrow. Farah acknowledges that his sisters sacrificed themselves to look after his father in a way that he would not have done and he sees this generosity as typical of Somali women:

Part of me was relieved that the generous-spiritedness of our womenfolk never failed to allay our worst fears, the women mending the broken, healing the wounded, taking care of the elderly and the sick, martyrlly women, forever prepared to sacrifice their lives for the general good of the entire community. [...] I asked myself: what would become of us without the mitigation, the kindly interventions of our women? (5)

It is especially in the chapters of the book on refugees in Italy that Farah points to the indolence of Somali men, drawing the conclusion that they are prepared to live off the earnings of women who have taken menial jobs in order to provide for them.

In *Little Mother*, Ali Farah too represents the weakness of men and the care women provide. The midwife Barni explains:

It's so difficult for our men to invent a role for themselves. To adapt. To accept themselves. To humiliate themselves. Because you see, for us women, in the end, those fixed points, our home, our daily life, motherhood, the intimacy of our relationships, they are like little signposts that save us from getting lost.

And for someone like me, who is not a mother and who hardly had a mother—more like a mother fragmented among many women—nurturing, caring for others, is a way for me to remain grounded. It is like a feeling of omnipotence, it makes me feel invulnerable. When you take care of someone you have the upper hand [...] It's the others who depend on you, they need your solace. It's the others who accept things done your way. (30)

Ali Farah's representation of the relations between Somali men and women is more progressive. She shows understanding of the reasons for men's weaknesses, even for their aggression, by delineating the violence and suffering Tageere experienced in Somalia during the civil war and later in the diaspora. Moreover, as the above quotation illustrates, women's nurturing is more embedded in self-preservation and empowerment than in sacrifice. In her representation of Domenica Axad, Ali Farah also reveals a different Somali-Italian identity to that described by Farah in *Hiding in Plain Sight* in which Bella is shown to be affluent, successful, and in control of her life and her lovers. In contrast, the identity crisis of Domenica Axad leads her to commit acts of self-mutilation.

Ali Farah's work is close to Farah's in two further aspects: firstly, their writing comes from the experience of forced exile from a country they have known and loved and, secondly, they both feel an intense nostalgia for the city of Mogadishu (known locally as Xamar).³ DiMaio suggests that the characters created by Ali Farah "share a history of trauma, exile, nostalgia, a desire to keep their country alive through collective memory" (xxi). Despite being from different generations, Farah and Ali Farah too share this history and this desire. Ali Farah, unlike Farah, was present at the fall of Mogadishu and had to flee with her newly-born child, an experience recreated in her poem "Rosso". Even if they are now more easily identified as cosmopolitan, they both experienced what it is like to be in exile.

Writing specifically on *Close Sesame*, Waberi interprets the role of Mogadishu in Farah's work: "Mogadiscio always functions as an 'actant' in its own right, with its own life, genealogy, personality, feelings, worries, etcetera" (Waberi and Schoolcraft 776). This can be said of several of Farah's novels but it is also true of Ali Farah's work. Reading Ali Farah's short story "A Dhow Crosses the Sea" and *Little Mother* together with *Links*, *Crossbones* and Farah's essays, especially "Of Tamarind and Cosmopolitanism", the reader discerns the authors' shared sensibility towards Mogadishu. For both writers the tamarind market is a marker of the cosmopolitan city they knew. In *Little Mother*, Barni says to Domenica Axad: "Who knows if you remember the goldsmiths' market [...] The tamarind market with that beautiful portico and, beneath the arches, the goldsmiths' shops" (131).

Moreover, a similar refrain to Jeebleh's comparisons of the past and present of the city in *Links* and *Crossbones* is presented in Tageere's lament for the war-stricken Mogadishu. This shifts between his memory of the past of Xamar, a "city where everyone lived in peace and harmony" to a "defiled" Xamar: "[They have defiled you. Filled you with bullets, destroyed and burned you, devastated your neighbourhoods, sacked your treasures" 127). However, nostalgia for the city is not solely based on memories. For both Farah and Ali Farah, Mogadishu is an almost mystical city, which they know and yet cannot really fully know. This is why the city fascinates Farah:

There are very few things that we know with absolute certainty when it comes to Mogadiscio. A city with several names, some ancient and of local derivation, some hundreds of years old and of foreign origin. The city claims a multiplicity of memories and sources, some of which are derived from outside Africa, others native to the continent. [...] Does its local

name Xamar define a city built on “red sand”? Or does the red colour implicit in the word Xamar refer to a people of reddish hue? (“Of Tamarind and Cosmopolitanism” 11)

Since it seems unlikely that Farah will live in Mogadishu again, he can now more confidently be described as a Somali diaspora writer. The comparison of Farah and four younger writers, suggests that three of them, Waberi, Ali Farah and Osman, acknowledge his influence and regard him as a “respected elder”, and possibly also as a friend. He appears not to have influenced the fourth writer, Mohamed; she draws on other sources, especially those more relevant to British-Somali and Somaliland experience. However, she does not dispute Farah’s canonical status. It is clear that the environment has changed since Farah was the only internationally known Somali writer. There are groups and organizations promoting Somali culture throughout the diaspora and the annual Somali international book fair is held in Hargeisa, not Mogadishu. Writing presciently in 1998, Waberi suggests that with the break-up of Somalia it is perhaps “more judicious” to consider Somalia “a cultural area of ‘Somalias’, of Somali-phone groups and still others as well” (“Organic Metaphor”). However, the publication of the Somali translation of *From a Crooked Rib, Feedh Qalloocan*, in 2016 is perhaps a small countervailing move, suggesting that this novel can be seen as the originary text in modern Somali literature.

Conclusion

Farah’s position has changed along with external circumstances. The status of exiled writer was in Farah’s case both a painful and a privileged one. It licensed him to speak out against a brutal regime and to project a better future for Somalia. Even after his vision did not come to fruition, Farah still had symbolic capital as a prominent Somali who was internationally acclaimed and who continued to strive to improve the situation of Somalia and Somalis. Farah’s recent fiction reveals an anxiety about whether he will continue to be as influential as he has been in the past. This stems not only from the loss of the Somalia he remembers but also from his realization that his new work co-exists with other literary and cultural versions of Somalia. However, he is still the pre-eminent writer within the field of Somali literature. Younger Somali writers do not appear to want to exorcize or deconstruct his work. For his part, Farah expresses the desire to work convivially with them in the spirit of cosmopolitanism.

Notes

1. There are also short scenes in *Crossbones* set in Djibouti (361; 384–7). In *Hiding in Plain Sight*, the Prologue is set in Somalia and Chapter I in Rome.
2. Farah’s friend, Abdulrazak Gurnah, who shared the platform with him, disputed this response. He said there was a sense of unhappiness and tragedy in Farah’s work and that he was not sure “that what he is saying is the full sense of what he feels” (NCLA). Farah did not reply to this comment.
3. This could also be said of Shirin Ramzanali Fazel. Her first, short novel *Lontano da Mogadiscio* is the subject of a conversation between Jeebleh and Bile’s sister Shanta in *Links* in which Shanta tells Jeebleh that even though Fazel is partly of foreign origin, she is a “deeply hurt Somali, like you and me”. The exchange focuses on inclusion but Jeebleh is condescending in his praise of the novel, “thinking that it was no mean feat for a housewife” to write about her life. Jeebleh is pleased that Somalis are writing about their experiences “meager as [...] [their efforts] might seem” (226). Jeebleh’s view is not necessarily Farah’s, but the reader is left with the impression that *Lontano da Mogadiscio* is a slight work.

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