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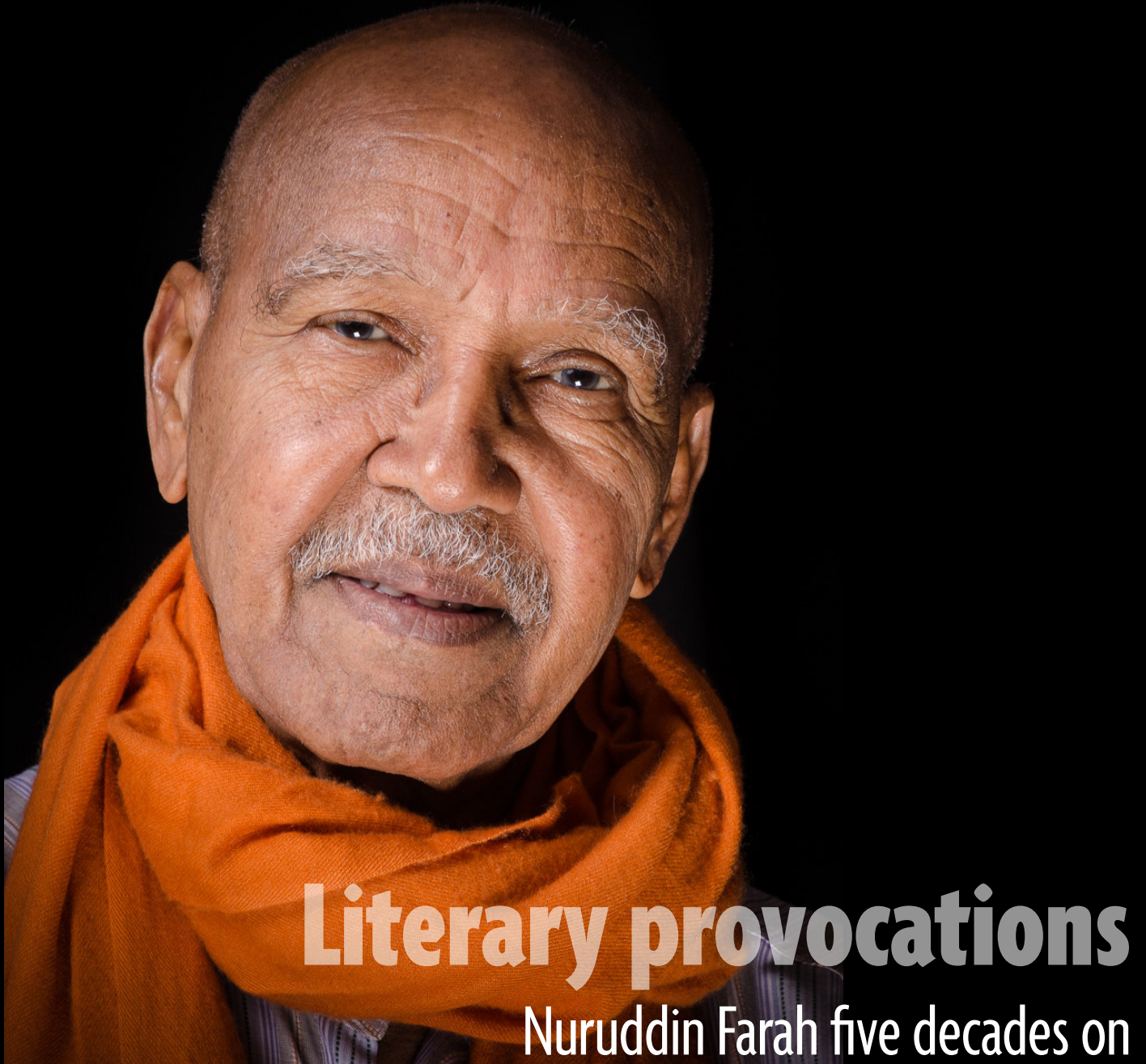
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57 (1) 2020 • Vierde reeks • Fourth series • Herfs • Autumn



# Tydskrif

## VIR LETTERKUNDE



**Literary provocations**

Nuruddin Farah five decades on



# Tydskrif

## VIR LETTERKUNDE

57 (1) 2020 • Vierde reeks • Fourth series • Herfs • Autumn

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## Introduction: Reinscribing Nuruddin Farah in African literature

F. Fiona Moolla

“Literary provocations: Nuruddin Farah five decades on” was a project conceived by *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* as a festschrift honoring the career of one of the most well-known, but also most underrepresented, authors in African literature. Farah has been a prolific author, with thirteen novels to date, translated into many world languages, and whose creativity in his seventies proceeds apace with another novel and a non-fiction work in progress. He has won prestigious literary awards, most notably the 1998 Neustadt Prize, and his novels in translation have won major Italian and French awards. Despite these international indices of recognition, Farah has not enjoyed the prominence in African literature circles of figures like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. On the international literary scene, Farah has a very strong presence in the American media with reviews of novels and publication of opinion pieces on Somali socio-political questions in major newspapers, and interviews at major literary events and on popular television chat shows. It is curious therefore that Farah has not been recognized through a special issue of an American literary journal where his reputation is probably strongest except for a special issue of *World Literature Today* (vol. 72, no. 4, 1998) on the occasion of Farah’s receipt of the Neustadt Prize.


The commissioning of a theme issue on the work of Farah in a South African literary journal therefore is noteworthy both in African continental and world literature contexts. Commemorating Farah’s career in *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* may be seen as an attempt at a reconsideration of Farah’s position in African literature, and an acknowledgement of the possible reconfiguration of Farah as a South African writer, in addition to his position as a “Somali” diasporic writer. Hein Willemse, former editor-in-chief of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, explains the journal’s interest in Farah mainly through cognizance of the relative disparities between Farah, on the one hand, and Achebe, Soyinka and Ngũgĩ, the canonized triumvirate of African authors, on the other. Willemse identifies three main reasons for Farah’s relatively marginal position: The first relates to the major focus in much of Farah’s fiction on questions of gender that up until the late twentieth century, mainly through the literature and activism of African women writers, did not receive much attention. Willemse suggests that:

Farah was published [...] towards the end of the first wave of Nigerian writing, and the first autobiographical writings of the post-independence generation of African writers. African literature as a discipline was still being established and much of the literary attention had been on Achebe, Soyinka, and the wave of post-independence writers, the apartheid struggle and people like Nkrumah, Kenyatta, Mandela and the like. The little-known Farah studied in India, wrote a slim novella on a woman’s struggle for liberation against male dominance. This in itself meant that Farah initially found himself outside the mainstream of this newly developing discipline which settled itself in London, and the east coast of the USA. The theme of his first work was not a major consideration for the first generation of writers or critics. Most of the critics were male, their attention was focused on independence realpolitik (postcoloniality as a distinct theoretical discipline did not exist), and defining African particularity (Leopold Senghor etc.) rather than issues of gender. (Willemse and Moolla)

The second reason Willemse identifies for the relative lack of attention to Farah lies in the particularities of the exceptionality of Somalia’s history and its history of colonization, in particular, where “its primary nexus is not the major colonial powers, the British or the French, but rather the Arabs and the Italians”. He suggests further that Farah falls beneath the radar for reasons linked with the genealogies of the study of African literature where “[...] the growth of African literature and critical attention was spawned not by publishers and critics in African locales but rather by diasporan metropolitan African intellectuals, and fellow travelers”. Willemse refers to the African intellectual communities that gathered in London, Paris, New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, where

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“the first impulses of African literature as a discipline” grew. He adds that it was in these metropolitan centers that “the key areas of African literary focus were established: West Africa (mainly Nigerian and Ghana, with the French looking at Leopold Senghor and Senegal), East African (mainly Kenyan literature) and Southern Africa (mainly anti-apartheid Black English writing)”. Willemse argues that “[t]he countries adjacent to these three main areas were neglected, just as the Mahgreb and Arab literature and Lusophone writing got little attention” (Willemse and Moolla). Against this background of regional “canonization”, the possibility that a writer from the Horn of Africa should emerge as a central figure in African literature, Willemse feels, would be highly unlikely.

A third factor mentioned by Willemse relates to the politics of publication. He suggests that if one considers the nationalities and relationships of editors of twentieth-century publishing houses and African literary journals, few of them would have had significant connection with Somalia and the Horn of Africa, more generally. Bearing in mind that literary canonization “has a lot to do with publishing and educational power”, Willemse concludes that the relative neglect of Farah is hardly surprising in the “quotidian processes of canonization” (Willemse and Moolla).

Thus, the theme issue was commissioned as a response to this scenario, but also in an attempt to redress a perceived imbalance in the literary “knowledge economy” where “the best and most consistent training and publication of African literature” occurs in the global north, with the input of major African critics, writers and resources. In this context, the “concentrated effort of developing African literature on the African continent has been somewhat neglected” (Willemse and Moolla). *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* as a South African journal with a commitment to African literature more broadly, would appear to be attempting a reconfiguration from the global south of the map of African literature drawn mainly in the global north. A related question, and one that will be picked up later in this introduction, is the question of the position of Farah in the South African literary landscape specifically.

The theme issue was also conceived as an incitement to look at Farah in daring and thought-provoking new ways. To a certain extent, transformed ways of thinking about Farah are a challenge presented by the author himself who, despite continuities, has struck out in alternative directions in his recent writing, and work in progress. The theme issue was conceptualized as a calling forth of voices that would interrogate the work of the mature, fully established Farah in the broader context of Somali, African and world literature, and in the context of new literary networks, more specifically. The contributions in this theme issue from emerging and established “globally located” Farah scholars signpost important new directions in a rapidly transforming twenty-first century literary landscape.

Many more questions remain: Unsettling familiar geographic frames of reference of a self-contained Africa with impermeable internal borders, shores as frontiers, and the Sahara as territorial divide, why should Farah not be considered part of a nomad network including the Libyan, Ibrahim al-Koni, the Egyptian, Sabri Moussa, or even the Saudi, Abd al-Rahman Munif? The constitutive creative matrix of a nomadic desert environment, refracted by orality, Islam and Arab culture, as well as common social concerns regarding the relationship between the truths of story and the political mononarratives of postcolonial tyrannies joins these writers into an alliance forged by similar alembics of personal formation, literary styles and social considerations. In this regard, Ali Jimale Ahmed reminds us of the “Arab factor” in Farah’s novels, citing Farah’s observation that in many ways his writing is closer to a North African aesthetic than a West African one, owing to the influences of Islam and the Arab legacy, captured in the *Thousand and One Nights*, which he read as a child (Ahmed 26). Another conceptualization of Farah in an Arab context is represented by Tayseer Abu Odeh in “The Pleasures and Pitfalls of Exile and Counterpoint in Farah’s *Maps*” in a recent issue of *Arab Studies Quarterly*. This essay frames Farah’s narrative of exile with that of Edward Said, and through Edward Said, with exile as it reverberates in the work of Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish. Scholarship of the novels of Farah’s early to mid-career underscores the keen and thoroughgoing focus on complex representations of female subjectivity. Given the focus on women in his work and his politics, why has Farah not been drawn into the center of current debates in African feminism and/or womanism, drawing his work into a sustained conversation with that of Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Bâ, and Bessie Head—a writer whose preoccupations and modes of writing could not be more similar to those of Farah? Farah’s novels and non-fiction essays and books also consciously privilege an understanding of cosmopolitanism that ought to draw him into the diasporic “Afropolitan” circle that includes Taiye Selassie, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, and others. Again, what imaginative constraints, apart from the difference in age, close off the conceptualization of such new literary networks?



I considered I considered relinquishing the dutiful (and predictable) preamble to any piece on Farah—but found that I could not. So here it is: Somali writer, Nuruddin Farah Hassan, was born in 1945 in the Italian administered town of Baidoa in the South of Somalia, after which his family moved to Kallafo in the Ethiopian-occupied Ogaden region mainly to further Farah's education, and that of his siblings. Farah then completed his secondary studies in Mogadishu, the capital of the Italian colonial south. (The greater Somalia has the unique distinction of having had four of its territories colonized—or occupied—by Britain, Italy, France, and Ethiopia, and the fifth territory ceded to Kenya by Britain. The lost territories are symbolically represented by each of the points on the five-pointed star of its flag.) Farah then proceeded to do an undergraduate Arts degree at Panjab University, Chandigarh, India, in preference to study in the United States for which he had received a scholarship—biographical information he discusses in some detail in the interview conducted for this issue. He has been outside of Somalia since 1974 and in exile since 1976 because of the threat of incarceration from the military dictatorship of Muhammed Siyad Barre after the publication of his second novel, *A Naked Needle*, perceived to undermine the regime for its focus on bourgeois rather than socialist-revolutionary issues. Since 1991, Farah has been a “refugee” of the catastrophic civil war that erupted when Barre fled Somalia. In the twenty-first century, Farah may be considered part of the Somali diaspora displaced from Somalia as a consequence of internal political disputes, inflamed and exacerbated by external political interests. In this extended period of his exile, Somalia has existed as the “country” of his “imagination”, being written into existence from cities in Europe, North America and Africa. (Farah maintains, as iterated in the interview for this theme issue, that, resident in African cities, he does not regard himself as exiled from Somalia.) Farah traces his origins as a writer to the influence of his mother's oral poetry, and the varied books he read in English and Arabic as a child. Farah read Egyptian writers and poets, and also read Fyodor Dostoevsky and Victor Hugo in Arabic translation. Other literary influences include the works of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and Samuel Beckett, among others, revealing a predilection, as the list shows, mainly for modernist writers. Unlike most other African writers whose oeuvres are varied, including short fiction, drama, poetry, children's fiction, life writing, and essays, Farah, after an early foray into theater has predominantly been a novelist with only a few forays into the short story, a number of essays, yet to be anthologized, and a non-fiction book on Somali refugees. Since the outset of his career, Farah's language of publication has been English, with an early novel in Somali, and a partially written early novel in Italian. (Farah is distinguished for being both the first Somali novelist, with the publication of *From a Crooked Rib*, and the author of the first novel in Somali that was serialized in the late 1960s in the leading Mogadishu newspaper.) A renowned polyglot, English is Farah's fourth language after Somali, Arabic and Amharic, and then later also Italian.

The obligatory preamble, routine though it may be, actually alerts one to a number of possible departures from conventional approaches to Farah. Notably, focusing more thoughtfully on Farah's extended absence from Somalia, one recognizes that the familiar category of “exile” may need to be alternately reconfigured. With the greater Somalia divided into the relatively stable Djibouti and Somaliland, and with ongoing tensions and violence in southern Somalia, Somali nationhood is as complex a question as ever it was. Farah's sojourns in various cities in various countries on various continents have never been so extended as to give him a “hyphenated”, diasporic identity. However, since 1999, Farah's time has been divided between Cape Town, where he has a family home, and the United States, where he has had teaching commitments. Farah's most recent published novels, *Hiding in Plain Sight* (2014), *North of Dawn* (2018), and the proposed new novel, are/will be set in Nairobi, Oslo, and Johannesburg respectively, and the protagonists of these novels are no longer Somali nationals. At what point does one question the knee-jerk classification of Farah as a “Somali writer”, or what literary “capital” does its continued use give the author? Since he has been resident in South Africa for more than twenty years, the critical establishment may need to begin thinking of Farah as a Somali-South African writer, a South African Somali writer, or even as a South African writer. In this respect, the South African state Department of Arts and Culture would appear to be ahead of the literary establishment, honoring Farah with a South African Lifetime Achievement Literary Award in 2014, where awards in all the other categories were given to South African authors in the narrow sense.

In this scenario, the transnationalism of South African literature also needs to be rethought and conceptualized more widely, paying attention to the multifarious and multi-directional lines of literary exchange and networked constructions of literary fields. In “Reimagining South African Literature?” a review article of three major surveys of South African literature, Duncan Brown highlights the complexities of the concept of South African literature both pre- and post-1994, where the idea of a unitary nation and the secure boundaries of that nation are

provocatively questioned in the literary scholarship he engages. In the context of issues of transnationalism being addressed here, only this dimension of Brown's overviews of South African literature will be foregrounded. Brown draws attention to Michael Chapman's introduction to *SA Lit Beyond 2000* where Chapman suggests that recent monographs like "Shane Graham's *South African Literature after the Truth Commission* [2009] and Monica Popescu's *South African Literature beyond the Cold War* [2010], [...] undertake a 'mapping, or remapping, of the literary terrain', both of which emphasise that South African literary studies is increasingly taking a 'transnational turn'" (Chapman qtd in Brown 1121). Brown observes further that: "Chapman argues that, post-2000, 'the current priority might be how to connect in a society which at the same time is alert to [a] "transnational" perspective'" (1121) in many works of South African fiction. But despite significant scholarly attention being given to the increasing transnationalism of South African literature post-1994, the potential transnationalism of South African literature from the other direction has escaped attention. There is a growing body of "migrant" literature, for example, Yewande Omotoso's *Bom Boy*, Novuyo Rosa Tshuma's *Shadows* and Farah's forthcoming novel about Somali migrants in Johannesburg that may signal the development of new literatures that might also form part of South African literature. The present introduction remains sensitive, however, to Brown's call for an attention to South African literature that is less "monumental and institutionally proclaimed", focused instead on "what it means to be human, humane, civil, compassionate" (1123). The present identification of general trends hopes finally to open up to more nuanced reflections of specific works in an extended South African literature. Reflecting, as his novels do, the inescapable transnationalism of the Somali experience, perhaps Farah is the writer whose own life and work highlight the increasing inapplicability of the conventional national model of literary classification. These are questions that the articles in this theme issue address from different points of view.

The question of language alluded to in the preamble is also opened up in new ways by current directions in scholarship. Farah's use of English as language of publication has always been somewhat contentious. Writing with the focused political intention of transforming hearts and minds in his natal country, critics both Somali and international, have observed the contradiction of writing in a foreign language for a largely non-literate, Somali-speaking society. In response, Farah has noted that Somali did not have a formalized script and orthography when he began to write, and that to write in an indigenous language would have trapped him in very local politics, simultaneously excluding him from broader international exchanges of ideas. However, pushing through linguistic borders, some of the essays and articles in this theme issue point at the ways that Farah's literary legacy may extend across languages. In particular, an interesting border-crossing between English and Italian is presently being undertaken and explored. Farah's closeness to Italian literature and culture is evident in all of his novels, going back to the first. This is the consequence of the Italian colonial foray into the Horn of Africa, which left its mark in local language, cuisine, and culture. The Italo-Somali work of authors like Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, Shirin Ramzanali Fazel and Igiaba Scego is being hailed as a postcolonial minority literature, in the sense of the use of the term "minor" by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. This literature is regarded as foregrounding a repressed Italian colonial history, and a racist, discriminatory anti-immigrant present. Farah's closeness to Italian society, evident in Italian literary and cultural allusions in most of his novels, the fact that most of his works have been translated into Italian, and his position as literary forerunner for a younger generation of Italo-Somali diasporic writers, have located Farah as pivotal in the world of postcolonial Italian letters even though he is an Anglophone writer. The comparative interest in the work of Farah with that of a new generation of diasporic Somali writers extends, however, beyond Italian literature to the British-Somali diasporic writing of Nadifa Mohamed and Diriye Osman, among others.

The publication of the Nuruddin Farah theme issue of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* has been timed to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *From a Crooked Rib*, the first Somali novel, published in the Heinemann African Writers Series in 1970. This novel, which drew on parts of drafts of an earlier novel, was written by Farah in a month and a half at the Panjab University in Chandigarh. Farah at this point in his life was spurred to write by his disillusionment with his studies and getting a degree, and his especial umbrage at Heinemann Nigeria's rejection of an earlier manuscript he had sent them. *From a Crooked Rib* is a story about Ebla, a young nomadic girl, who escapes her encampment and arranged marriage for the city of Mogadishu and its complex and contradictory freedoms, where she contracts her own multiple marriages. In his statement of nomination to the 1998 Neustadt jury, Ngũgĩ identifies Farah as "probably the leading writer in Africa in feminist consciousness" (716). Ngũgĩ goes on to say: "This is not a consciousness which he has acquired in the course of his writing; it is at the core of his writing from his very first work, *From a Crooked Rib*" (716). So convincing was Farah's debut novel in its repre-



sensation of female subjectivity, that often the author received letters addressed to “Dear Ms Farah”. As keynote speaker at an Ibsen conference in 2012 in Norway, Farah outlined the debt owed to Ibsen (and an unnamed female Indian student) in the composition of *From a Crooked Rib*. Farah recalls how he stood bewildered amidst the literary treasures of the Panjab University library. Drawn by the “sweet smile” of a female student, who notices his confusion, Farah entered into an exchange with her that led to her recommendation that he read Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*: “It’s a helluva play, fantastic, and you’ll enjoy it” (15). Farah describes the intensity of his engagement with Ibsen’s play of European female assertion of independence, which shed light on the character of Ebla, his protagonist, and charted her path to liberation in a remarkably different context:

Flushed with euphoria, fired up, I gave in furiously to an overpowering fever of writing, which flowed with ease. My daylight hours ran into my nights without pause, my notebooks filled with my hurried scrawls. [...] I decided to use [Ibsen’s] play as a template for my novel, beginning mine where he ended his. [...] As an aspiring young first time author ready to strike on his own, *A Doll’s House* had a great deal of resonance for me; it provided me with wings with which my imagination could fly at the same time that it supplied me with a kind of rootedness, a rootedness which allowed my plants to germinate and grow my own garden in my own soil. The long and short of it is that I could not have written *From a Crooked Rib* if I had not read *A Doll’s House*. (16–7)

The title of Farah’s keynote address is “Ibsen, In Other Words” which neatly sums up the relationship of *From a Crooked Rib* with *A Doll’s House*. *From a Crooked Rib* is *A Doll’s House* “in other words” and in another world. In the context of an African literature field that was dominated by men writing about “bigger” political issues of decolonization and neocolonialism, *From a Crooked Rib* caused as much of a stir among African feminist academics as Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* did when it was published almost two decades later. (In the interview conducted with the author for the theme issue, Farah voices disappointment in his experience with Heinemann, the first publisher of *From a Crooked Rib*, and its initial poor marketing of the novel. He also suggests that had his novel featured a young male character, it would have had the major initial impact of other African first novels. However, although *From a Crooked Rib* was not a novel that put African literature on the world map, it did distinguish Farah within the literary map of Africa, which up to that point had largely reflected a male ethos.) Farah’s entry into international literary circuits was aesthetically and politically bold and innovative, features that have persisted in his novels throughout his career. In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, Farah scholarship follows his lead into transformed literary, social and political geographies, as the overview of the articles in this issue in the essay by Reed Way Dasenbrock makes clear.

“Literary provocations: Nuruddin Farah five decades on” would not have been published without the perseverance and patience of the authors. Thank you for submitting articles which were a pleasure to read, and for bearing with me through all the house style rules that I grappled with piecemeal. Thank you also to Hein Willemse for recognizing the need for an intervention into Farah scholarship, and to Jacomien van Niekerk, editor of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, who, like the poet Virgil, alluded to in many of Farah’s novels, held my hand in the descent through the circles of the online submission system and the finer points of the guide for guest editors. From the seventh circle, I would not have come out on the other side without the help of Elham Hosseini, Elaine Ridge and Lisa Julie. Heartfelt appreciation is also due to the reviewers whose recommendations elucidated the key insights of articles. Thank you to you all: Tina Steiner, Aghogho Akpome, Rebecca Fasselt, Betty Govinden, Reed Way Dasenbrock, Harry Sewlall, Harry Garuba, Tommaso Milani, Bhakti Shringarpure, David Jalajel, Geetha Ganga, Shaheed Tayob, Lorenzo Mari, John Masterson, and Simone Brioni. To Alessandro Vescovi, my “Italian Connection”, appreciation for the introduction to Professor Itala Vivan, doyen of Farah studies in Italy, whose ill health prevented her from contributing some reflections on her engagements with Farah’s work. Professor Vivan, an Emerita of the University of Milan, has guided more than a generation of postcolonial and African scholars. Her interest in the work of Farah has been a sustained one over decades. Warmest appreciation also is due to Claude Lortie, whose cover photograph of Farah captures something of the spirit of the artist. Thank you to Christopher Forheringham for translating Ubah Cristina Ali Farah’s reflective essay. Finally thanks are due to the A. W. Mellon funded project, “Rethinking South African Literature(s)”, housed in the Centre for Multilingualism and Diversities Research at the University of the Western Cape, for generously supporting the copyediting of the articles.

This theme issue is dedicated to Professor Harry Garuba, my PhD supervisor, my intellectual mentor, and my friend. Harry passed away on 28 February 2020, just a short period before the publication of this theme issue, to which he contributed in hugely significant ways. To list Harry’s creative and scholarly accomplishments would

require many pages. Suffice it to say that he was a giant in recognizing and promoting the importance of African literature in world literature and culture—a giant on whose shoulders this dwarf was most privileged to be carried.

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## 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.





## Nuruddin Farah and Somali culture

Ali Jimale Ahmed

I am honored to participate in this project, a theme issue of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* on Nuruddin Farah. Farah's shadow looms over most of my work. He was my 9<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, and most of my writings—poetry and prose—seem, in some small way, to be a kind of rejoinder to his distinguished work. One of my first stories, “Nudged”, was written for him. If he does not remember, it won't be his fault, as it had all the hallmarks and insignia of a teenager's infatuation with the writing process. I, too, only vaguely remember the tenor and drift of that early story. In addition to that infatuation, it was written to impress a teacher who had just published his first novel, *From a Crooked Rib*. Reading Farah's first novel sent me on a storytelling path. That tendency, for sure, was already there, as both my parents were consummate storytellers. My contemplative essay in this issue, therefore, serves, in some modest way, to acknowledge the power a teacher could have on impressionable minds. It is uncanny to even reflect on the fact that my first book of poems, *Fear is a Cow*, was somehow a response to Farah's “Fear is a Goat”, a brilliant earlier article.

As Somalia's preeminent novelist, Nuruddin Farah has certainly internationalized the case of Somalia—the country, its literature, culture and politics, to the point that he has become the Somali countenance most easily recognizable in the world. Farah does not speak idly when he tells all and sundry that his writing keeps Somalia “alive”. And keep it alive he has. When the world all but forgot about the war-ravaged country, Farah refused to let go of Somalia. He was not concerned whether readers would be interested or not in reading about a country that had cannibalized itself to the brink of oblivion. Rather, his abiding concern has always been how to ensure that the Somali agony will not fade into a nether region or domain of “donor/humanity-fatigue”. And to that purpose he has devoted much of his work: starting with *Gifts*, which signals the beginning of the Somali collapse, and ending with his latest, *North of Dawn*. The seven novels about the destruction of Somalia comprise more than half of his total novelistic output, and have served to keep Somalia at the forefront of the world's gaze. In this he has succeeded, for the novelist is, to borrow from Milan Kundera, “an explorer of existence” (Kundera 44). Through his work, readers have been made privy to the trials and tribulations of humans swept up in a whirlpool of brutal existence, grim circumstances, and overall catastrophe. What Farah's characters reveal is the precipitous slope down which, more often than not, communities and nations tend to slide in times of war. Yet Farah's work equally reveals how nations and communities ignore their writers' warnings at their own peril. I have mentioned elsewhere (Ahmed, *Daybreak is Near: Literature, Clans and the Nation-state in Somalia* 95) that Farah's *A Naked Needle* could have helped Somalia and its then-leaders avoid the cataclysmic disorder that followed on the heels of the disintegration of the regime of Muhammed Siyad Barre. In short, he has succeeded to give victims of the civil war a platform on which their shattered humanity could be reassessed. This platform is rooted in history, even when the characters are not overtly perceived as sacrificial lambs on History's “slaughter bench”, to quote Hegel.

In his work, Farah reveals a deep understanding of Somali culture as, in his words, “metaphor-based” (Farah, Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 49). He correctly argues that Somali culture is not overtly “proverb-based”. It is possible that many Somalis—scholars or otherwise—did not give much thought to this dichotomy. Proverb-based cultures give prominence to exemplary nuggets of knowledge, a kind of pedagogic knowledge that derives meaning from a precedent, a past still capable of framing the future. (This does not, however, imply that proverbs are irrelevant to contemporary life, or that they do not impart metaphoric knowledge; rather, proverbs, employed as apodictic tools, tend to give, or be utilized as, an unambiguous last word to discourse or discussion.) A metaphor-based discourse, on the other hand, compels the individual to be aware of the ellipses that dot the landscape of any discourse. A metaphor is able to create connections where you least expect them. It also fosters discussion,

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as it points to multi-layered, polysemous meanings. A metaphor-based culture allows a community to associate ideas and things that are not necessarily thought of along the same axis.

This concept of culture allows Farah to read clan, for example, as a “text” that is both constrictive and emancipatory. He finds in his reading of clan a “dysfunctional family”, a mausoleum in whose crypt all kinds of ghosts and skeletons are buried. The image he employs in his description of those forces that plague the Somali psyche is the image of “atmospheric spirits” (Farah, *Maps* 122). In the process, the writer becomes an exorcist who tends to summon up ghosts and heals both the body and psyche of the nation. This allows Farah to see through the spectral history that has haunted Somalis for so long. In other words, his narrative speaks to the revenant and re-vanchist spirit that refuses to cease its perpetual roaming. He also understands that *tol*, clan, is that which is sewn together. This is important for Farah’s work: from here he is able to deny the corporate kin system an originary status, a mythic genesis or etymology. Rather, he shows how clan is, like any text, composed. The fictive contour of the clan system makes it an invention, a construct with a history, something with a beginning (in Edward Said’s sense of the term). This view of clan enables Farah to demonstrate the kind of absurdity that has its home in ossified forms of kinship mythologies. In its stead, Farah advances a kind of imaginative vision that privileges the “who” instead of the “what” of clan identity. In other words, his view of the individual preponderates over the person’s clan; it is the individual’s being and self-agency that interests him.

This is not something new in his work: early on, in *From a Crooked Rib*, Farah’s first novel, the protagonist, Ebla belongs to a circle of women, albeit dictated by expediency, in whose midst she acquires the basic survival strategies that help her thrive in Mogadishu. Granted, the two leading mentors she leans on are themselves liminal figures, but these are women who nonetheless do not depend for their survival on the patriarchy. Also, in Mogadishu, when Ebla commits the polyandric act, the wife of her “second” husband (Tiffo) is supported by a female support group who terrorize husbands and their secret lovers. It is no coincidence that Tiffo is a wealthy person and that Awill is part of the burgeoning intelligentsia and a member of the soon-to-be national bureaucracy, as his is the generation that will bridge the transition to independence. This, to my knowledge, is a novel way of looking at gender inequities through the prism of the dual structure that shapes and dominates individual and familial lives, namely the patriarchy and the modern nation-state. In both institutions, the gendered being is not consulted with but acted upon as regards their affairs.

Dictatorship in all its guises (social, familial, and political), postcolonial ambivalences, civil war and its messy aftermath constitute Farah’s work as the biography of the Somali nation. It is a willed biography that is intended to go against the grain. Both patriarchal and state institutions manipulate the dynamics and dialectics of the corporate kin system. And in *Sardines*, for example, Farah tries to circumvent the clan system by alluding to a founding in the form of Barkhadle, Medina’s father. This places Medina outside the corporate kin system, as both her parents are not directly implicated or shaped and formed in the grid of the Somali clan system. And examples of characters forming their own affiliations and associations at the expense of filiative bonds are found in his other novels, including his latest, *North of Dawn*; here, the Somali diplomat’s son and his wife create an alternative family in the name of al-Shabaab, the armed Islamists. (The theme of creating alternative forms of family reaches a crescendo in the make-up of Kalaman in *Secrets*, to be discussed later.)

This shows how Farah’s works share thematic concerns, and how they form a catena, as well as how Farah, through a form of austere vision, resurrects things, characters, and concepts in a multiplicity of ways and for various reasons. Farah’s goal is not so much to retell the empirical world that seems to inform much of his fiction as it is to mold it in the smithy of his vision. The contours of this vision manifest, at times, in human psychic perversions: the unraveling of the familiar, the disfiguring of language with new vocabulary unrestricted by any longitudinal bearings. In this sense, each successive novel in Farah’s oeuvre, I posit, is a distillation of what Farah and his characters had surmised in the preceding novel. In other words, knowledge in his novels is dialectical and incremental. This argument equally applies to whether a particular novel unveils a narrative of exposure, or of denunciation, or of hooliganism disguised as graffiti. It applies also when the narrative is of a postmortem kind in which the author and his characters attempt to come to terms with the disintegration of the Somali state. Living outside the country at the time of the civil war, Farah was spared the swoon that made, as the lyrics of a popular (and prophetic) song intimated, the collective and symbolic mouth of the poets and storytellers in the country go numb. In his civil war novels, Farah does three concatenated things that give his storytelling strategies their peculiar characteristics, namely, the novels, (1) limn the poetic composition and appraisal of the trauma that has singed the inmost recesses of the Somali (un)conscious; (2) take to task the kind of political formula that is bran-

dished as a way out of an intransigent and stubborn stasis; and (3) manage to put the civil war into conversation with history, politics, culture, rituals, and practices, some of which seem to belong to a different historical time, including the pre-Islamic history of Somalia.

I maintain that the novel that best captures the above-mentioned characteristics is *Secrets*, the novel that follows *Gifts*, set on the cusp of the civil war. *Secrets* furthermore is a profoundly Somali novel. And, without fearing in the least to contradict myself, I would say *Secrets* is also Farah's most diabolical, otherworldly novel, mixing scenes of bestiality with rape, deep-seated family secrets, and a cruel, tortuous history, hitherto never so explicitly and starkly propounded in his work. *Secrets* also brings to the fore Farah's narrative signature: of dislocation, alienation, and escape, molded and shaped by the author's oracular rhetoric and performativity. In *Secrets* coalesce various strands that pull the narrative in different and contradictory directions. In the process, the novel is both profoundly Somali and idiosyncratically Farah-esque, cosmopolitan and worldly. It employs Somali lore and cosmogony more robustly and consistently than any other novel in his oeuvre. In other words, *Secrets* points to a heightened imaginative excursion into the cosmogonic and etiological fables and allegories that elucidate the workings of the natural world and its connections to the lived experiences of the Somali. The novel, I argue, utilizes what I would call the "dialectics of the disemboweled man". It is said that a man who had been stabbed in the stomach came to a council of *xeerbeegti*, men well-versed in customary laws, adjudicating a case under the *geedka xeerka* (the tree of customary law). The man explained how he was attacked and then stabbed by a fellow from the homestead. Immediately, there were shouts for blood. However, an elder in the meeting cautioned against a rush to judgment. It could be, he said, that the other man, the accused, that is, is already dead. The Council acquiesced to the elder's suggestion that the wounded man's assertion could be that of a murderer. The injunction to hold judgment in abeyance points to a paradox: the open wound of the injured man should not elicit instant sympathy, since it is a wound that is transitive, that is, a wound whose authenticity is contingent on an absent entity or body. And so, the concept of deferring judgment until all questions relating to a case are thoroughly and exhaustively presented, heard, and examined, is now enshrined in traditional Somali customary law. Under this law, the litigants and witnesses are given ample time to speak, and the *xeerbeegti* then examine the case from all sides. Their verdict is more often than not final and legally binding.

*Secrets* takes this concept to heart. The war comes on the heels of what was previously suppressed, starting with the sudden flight of Nonno, Kalamán's grandfather, from another part of the country. If the secrets in *Secrets* point to masks and veils—"secrets threaded into a weftage serving as a veil" (*Secrets* 151)—Nonno's history has its roots in a moment of wrenching that was never laid to rest. Ironically, the refuge that Nonno hopes will foster an ambience of tranquility, an oasis of respite, is itself plagued with congenital problems of its own. Thus, the past and the present of Nonno, the patriarch of Kalamán's family, do not foster a new beginning, a new dawn. What could perhaps help Somalis to break out of the vicious cycle in which their individual and collective and symbolic life is mired, is a willed consciousness that could inaugurate a new way of looking at things. The narrative intimates that Nonno's first flight was not adequately accounted for, nor was it dealt with successfully. Nonno's arrival in the south acknowledges only a temporary relief, and not a long-term cure. His flight was the first symptom of a trauma that sooner or later would suppurate. Farah's technique of suppressing the characters' personal narratives—in essence, keeping them secret—is important. The narration of the ugly and painful story is couched in a national disaster: the nation is broken because of its crooked past. It is also important here to mention that the national story is tied to a gendered story. The dyad is carefully delineated only after the community's purported cohesion is shattered. It is as though no personal story would be possible so long as the individual remained an embodiment of society. Ebla in *From a Crooked Rib* severs her connections to her grandfather's hut, and, by extension, the whole homestead, the minute she verbalizes the disenclosure: "My God, I am out" (*Crooked Rib* 9). The ability to narrate individual stories takes place amidst the broken shards of the smashed carapace that symbolizes the social cohesion that previously held sway over the imagination of the people. In this sense, *Secrets* accommodates the conflicting and contradictory voices in Somali social, political, and historical exegesis. The secret then is in assembling the shards—*jilayo* in Somali—and endowing them with a tongue to narrate their past and present histories. In Kalamán's case, it is also to limn the contours of his and his loved ones' trajectory. Individually, the characters cannot divine a sacred and neutral space able to empower the telling of their diverse and often unsavory perspectives on events that deeply and painfully affect their existence. Thus, the characters are allowed to unshackle their individual tongues to narrate the cacophony of stories implicated in their past. By piecing the fragments together, they let the reader weave a story out of the puzzle, the mystery, of a life lived.

As mentioned before, *Secrets* uses Somali popular culture (astrology and pedagogic fables) to interrogate inherent beliefs and misgivings in Somali culture. In this short reflection, which is not a comprehensive analysis of this complex novel, but intended to pull strands from it for specific exegetic purposes, I will concentrate on *Secrets* as a narrativization of a trauma to the consciousness by means of storytelling. The secrets—as oppressive and repressive tools—give legitimacy to a fear motivated by a need to conceal something. What the characters in the novel endeavor to hide or deny expression to, ultimately resurface and violently come home to roost. Erstwhile secrets flourish through gossip and rumor, and with the return of Sholoongo from abroad, they gain poignancy and force Kalamán's family to confront the swirling rumors head-on. Pressing circumstances compel the characters to come to terms with the past. The disintegration of the social and political structures that purportedly gave them a semblance of cohesion, and the eventual implosion of shared moral codes, allows them to reflect on and in the process unearth an accursed past. The vocabulary, the syntax of their discussion of the past is not suffused with conventional war imagery. Rather, it is the grotesque residue of transgressions on the human and animal body, the bizarre coupling of human and animal species, the macabre insinuations of forbidden love trysts, and the unforgivable violations embodied in the rape of Kalamán's mother, which cast aspersions on his beginnings. The family's decision and willingness to tackle or confront directly the innuendos and unsavory rumor and gossip surrounding his birth find solace in or through abreactions that facilitate what the Somalis refer to as "revelation of truth". The family's incursion into the past also points to both a trauma and a way out of it. If in *A Naked Needle* Farah relies on Koschin's individual consciousness to account for personal and communal shortcomings, in *Secrets* he relies on the collective consciousness to exorcise the elephant in the room of their collective memory. (It is perhaps instructive to note here something I mentioned in my article "The Arab Factor in Somali Culture", that "most of Farah's novels, especially after the 'dictatorship trilogy,' have titles in the plural form: *Maps, Gifts, Secrets, Links, and Knots*. They reveal the author's view of reality as multi-layered, multi-dimensional, and to represent that reality, a writer has to capture the nuances of the ruptures and fragmentations that give any reality its specific or particular bent" (28). Farah's narrative in *Secrets* inverts the gaze, as the characters reflect on their own foibles and weaknesses. Through this technique, Farah demonstrates how the awaited barbarian at the gate is none other than one's neighbor who is already inside. The Somalis say, "*Runi isu ma kaa sheegto*" (Truth never calls attention to its presence). One has to be alert to and expectant of its coming. And truth is like wisdom, which according to the hadith (or narrative about the prophet of Islam), is a stray animal to whose whereabouts one is not privy. To accommodate the airing of their divergent views, the characters in *Secrets* are portrayed through a centrifugal perspective. As war clouds gather on the horizon, the characters become more willing to divulge the deep-seated secrets that had for so long hamstrung them. The sharing of secrets in this sense aims at creating a mechanism for installing a kind of memory for forgetfulness. Their rendition of past events is not intended to resuscitate the past, but rather to transcend a present that has long held them inert and captive.

The urgency of the need and desire to confront the past in order to manumit the human potential to soar is best explained in a fable from Baidoa, Farah's birthplace. The fable deals with the process of the *Run-dillac* (revelation of truth), a mechanism or contraption to which societies resort when they find themselves at a sticking-point. The crisis compels citizens to hold *laab-xaar* sessions in which they seriously rethink their quotidian lives and endeavor to find plausible exit strategies. The fable in question deals with a stasis that hampers a family's endeavor to succeed. It is about a father, mother, son, and their shepherd, whose shenanigans lead to the family's inability to deal with life. Finally, the father suggests that they confront whatever it is that is causing the disconnect and discord tearing them apart. At first, the rest of the family suspects a ruse on the part of a father intent on gaslighting the rest. After some discussion, they all agree to participate in the endeavor. The father speaks first: "You see this dead lizard; it will come to life if we all speak the truth." Sensing that no one will volunteer to speak first, he again volunteers to have the first stab at it: "You see," he says, "I have a secret wish that soon my wife would die, so that I will be able to marry a younger woman. It is a wish I have been entertaining for a long time, and one that hinders my being a good husband and father." The wife lets out a guffaw, and, looking at her husband, frames her desire in a contrary wish: "I have been for some time hoping that you die, so that I could marry a younger man." Here, the son joins the fray by spelling out a simple wish: "I, too, have entertained a wish that you both would die soon, so that I could inherit the wealth." The family's eyes turn toward the shepherd, who has been given a seat at the family gathering. His secret wish, he says, was "that you all die, and I'll be the sole owner of your livestock." At that moment, the lizard comes back to life. And, presumably, the family lives happily ever after: truth does indeed set them free.

In *Secrets*, the family and their interlocutors—Sholoongo, Timir, etc.—agree to unburden themselves of what, for all practical purposes, could be called “secrets in plain sight”, since from the very first chapter of the novel, the reader is provided with innuendos—concerning Kalaman’s birth, for example—that pan out later in the narrative. What the plot of *Secrets* and the Somali fable from Baidoa share is the simple fact that individuals, communities, and nations do not prosper without a real reckoning of their most hidden desires and traumas. In *Secrets*, Farah creates a narrative he knows to be inchoate; yet he hopes that the end of the impending civil war would dovetail with his creative solution to the problem. It is important to bear in mind that both *Secrets* and the fable about a dysfunctional family impart their messages through the “Rashomon technique”. Both demonstrate through multi-voiced narration the urgent need for a new covenant, one that rethinks the foundations upon which stand familial, clan, and national identity. What is needed, they seem to intimate, are introjected and internalized feelings of family, clan and nation, congealed subliminally in the consciousness of the disparate members of all three institutions. Both narratives are philosophical, emotional, and axiomatic depiction of a present and a hoped-for future society.

Farah’s amazing knowledge of Somali culture is seen through the allegorical names of his characters. The names are integral to the characters’ identity, history, idiosyncrasy, and their overall demeanor. *Secrets* is no different. Kalaman and Talaado, his intended, sport names that are laden with signification. Kalaman does not understand why Nonno named him such, to which the grandfather responds, “I had the foresight to call you Kalaman because I knew it would stand on its own, independent of your father’s name or mine” (*Secrets* 5). But that is not a sufficient response to assuage a boy’s inquisitive probing. More than halfway through the novel, we hear speculations about the name’s purported Islamic or pre-Islamic origins. “One man, *purporting to know more than the others*, made what was taken as a *facetious comment*, ‘I think it has something to do with the ABC of the Arabic alphabet’” (163, emphasis added). And therein lies the rub. For indeed the name without the vowels is part of *ABJAD*, a system that “ascribe(s) number values to each letter of the Arabic alphabet” (Mukhtar 22–3). *KLMN* (كلمن) is one of the “rhythmic mnemonic codes” of the *Abjad* (23). Transcribed in Somali, the name becomes Kalaman, which, in addition to its *Abjad* ancestry, becomes a quasi-Somali name, and a non-Arabic name at that. Hence the smart-aleck’s explication of the name’s pre-Islamic origins. *Kalamaan* (with a long vowel) is a compound word—*kala* and *maan*, meaning “of two minds”. *Kalaman* is the locus, the site of contradictions, of memory, of members of a family coming together, of a community forced to reckon with its sordid past, and, finally, the name represents a distillation from the past of a new chart on whose grid could be constructed a new future. What he does with the narrative that is now at his disposal points to the trajectory of the family and, synecdochically, the nation. Talaado (Tuesday) is his chosen partner. Contrary to apocalyptic endings, *Secrets* ends on an optimistic note. It is no coincidence that his intended is none other than Talaado. This is so, because, *Sanad Talaadaad* (a Tuesday Year) in the indigenous Somali calendar heralds a more propitious year. His refusal to sire Sholoongo’s hoped-for baby seals the fate of the old order. The secrets in this complex novel are to be found in a rigorous analysis of the shards—both in their pre-shardic lives and their post-shardic reconfigurations. Farah reveals through the actions of Kalaman that the corporate kin system as identity—what’s your clan? —is superseded by a more intrinsic identity—who are you? What do you stand for?

Both *Secrets* and the fable spearhead a new way of looking at the world. The narratives refuse to accept an injunction couched in a Somali proverb: *Abeeso haku cunto afka uma roona* (‘May a puffadder strike you’ is not good for the mouth). The fear is predicated on a belief that the enunciation might inspire thought of some sinister action. Breaking with the past is a requisite for averting danger; it will also allow citizens to speak their minds. *Secrets* and the fable create fictional mechanisms in which the slogan is: Speak woman! Speak Man! Speak Children! Speak O elephant of the savannah! Above all, speak the truth. It is only then that Somali society might find a way to deal with its traumatic past: the pastness of the foundational myth of Bucur Baceyr (Bu’ur Ba’ayr), pointing to a time when the *Yibir*, or as Farah calls them, the “griot[s]” (*Secrets* 160–1) reigned supreme in the land, of the Midgaan caste myth, of clan fictions, of Bantu Jareer suppression (Eno 177) or Shiidliana (from Shiidle, a Bantu Jareer group in Somalia), as Farah has it in *Secrets* (61), of the myth of Carraweelo, the queen who castrated men (*Secrets* 15). Avoiding apocalyptic doom by looking toward the future, by announcing it before its advent, in the hope that such enunciation will preempt its arrival, is tantamount to creating a “space [that] can only be reached through reliving that disaster and fashioning from it a miraculous weapon against its latter-day perpetrators” (Winks n. p.) *Secrets* and the fable must be read as a kind of *laab-xaar* (making a clean breast of it) as well as a shout of deterrence.

No doubt the connections between *Secrets* and Somali culture problematize the affiliation-filiation dichotomy between authors and their cultures. In Farah's work, the culture does not overwhelm the author's intentions, since all cultures radiate and anticipate some form of contumacy. In Somali culture, proverbs and oral narratives that point to and encourage distinct contrariness abound. A Somali proverb extols the virtues of the differences in human thinking and behavior: *Maan dadaad waa sida midabbo xoolaad* (The human mind is as variegated as the colors of animals). But neither does the writer forfeit knowledge of his culture. The dialectical tussle between Farah and Somali culture is best seen in the dialogic intentions of my title "Nuruddin Farah and Somali Culture". The "and" (*iyo*, in Somali) foregrounds the subtle contradictions in the two parts of the title, where the conjunction is both a copula that establishes a relationship, and a contradistinction that is worthy of a rival. This tussle, as I have argued elsewhere (Ahmed, "Introduction: Understanding the Horn through the Literatures of Its People" 7-8), is also evident in the Somali word for writer, *qoraa*. The etymology of the term *qoraa* is *qor* (*qoris* or *qorid*), write or carve. (Carving is not that far from writing, when we think of the origin of writing itself.) The root word gives two images, viz., that of a scribe, or an amanuensis, and that of a carver, of wood, for example. The first is seen as a mere recorder; the second image is somewhat problematic and needs clarification. The profession of the carver challenges edicts gleaned from scriptural injunctions: the injunction against the "graven image". The demotion of the *qoraa* (author) perhaps reflects or manifests a latent concern on the part of Muslims that authors will aspire to create a parallel world to that of the Qur'an, the Muslim Holy Book. Edward Said analyzes this concept of the author in relation to the *katib*, Arabic for author or writer. If the scriptures are to mediate between the believer and the external world, it is feared that an author, in Said's sense of the term, would advocate for his product a similar status (Said 81). Yet the genre as a non-autochthonous medium is given leeway, and Farah certainly challenges the culture even while simultaneously drawing from it. All in all, Farah is as much a Somali as he is a cosmopolitan writer. *Secrets* is a profoundly Somali novel, as it is a profoundly cosmopolitan, fiendish narrative. And there is no contradiction there.

I would like to end this essay with a poem I have written in honor of Farah.

### **Anthem of the Living Dead**

#### **For Nuruddin Farah**

Behind me, the clangor of hammers  
 Behind her, the clang of fire alarms  
 Behind us, a clank of sickening sounds  
 Bereft of hammers, bereft of fire alarms  
 Anthem of the ants, anthem of the living dead  
 Despondent, decidedly worldly  
 Tenebrous yet placid  
 Migrant scrolls  
 Mandate  
 The making of revised roadmaps  
 Without too much worrying  
 About the misty quality of tambalas  
 Now prevalent in the homestead  
 This, too, shall pass, as did  
 The old puzzle of the hen track that cracked open  
 Cracked open with the advent of the sign reader  
 Whose bag was full of tamarind seeds  
 "You see what you have," he said.  
 "Did you ask for what you could have?"

Ali Jimale Ahmed

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## Mogadishu as lost modern: In conversation with *A Naked needle*

Ubah Cristina Ali Farah

### Prelude

I met Nuruddin Farah for the first time in Rome: a city to which I had only recently moved. At the time I was only a student and the thought of becoming a writer had not yet even occurred to me. I am, for this reason, convinced that it was this first meeting with him and my passionate reading of all of his books that sparked an uncontrollable inward desire to investigate, through literature, the tragedy that had befallen Somalia. Nuruddin chose not to leave the African continent; he chose, for many years, not to renounce his Somali passport courageously facing the never-ending interrogations, risks and humiliations faced by his countrymen at every border and transit point. My first novel began to take shape in response to a question that is posed by Nuruddin in *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora*. In his non-fiction book the obvious protagonist of the piece is the present: the point where the past converges with the foundations of the future. The present is represented in the title of the work by a comma: time in the balance; indefinite. Perhaps it is in the present that we might find the key to unlock the vicious circle in which Somalis and everyone who has had anything to do with them (especially Italy, the former colonial overlords of Southern Somalia) now find themselves entrapped. The present invites us to take responsibility for our actions and stop trying to pin the blame on others. My novel, *Madre piccola* is a story centred on the diaspora in which three narrative voices are intertwined. Each narrative voice tells its own story twice, once to an interlocutor from a shared cultural context and once to an interlocutor external to its cultural context. Nuruddin writes in *Yesterday, Tomorrow*: “Still, I must ask what becomes of a man or a woman upon whose sense of imaginative being, upon whose night, no moths taps at the window to the universe of his or her creativity?” (49) Put differently, how can a person who has lost all their points of reference re-root themselves after beginning a new life? The protagonists in *Madre piccola* are searching for the answer to this question in their relationships. Relationships are how we gauge our sense of ourselves and our way of being in the world; our most authentic identity. Nuruddin has never ceased to inspire me with his poetic instincts, his empathy and integrity, his deep reflections on the diaspora and the civil war, the central catastrophe of our history which is rarely spoken about among Somalis as though talking about it might bring on a curse. In *Links*, the author explains the Somali term for civil war in the form of a dialogue between two characters:

“In a civil war, death is an intimate,” Af-Laawe said. “You’re killed by a person with whom you’ve shared intimacies, and who will kill you, believing that he will benefit from your death. And when you think seriously about an entire country going up in civil-war flames, then you’ll agree that “intimacy” is more complicated.” [...]

“Do you know the Somali term for ‘civil war’?”

“*Dagaalka sokeeye*.”

In his mind, Jeebleh couldn’t decide how to render the Somali expression in English: in the end he preferred the notion of “killing an intimate” to “warring against an intimate.” Maybe the latter described better what was happening in Somalia. (137–8)

The idea of the inherent intimacy of violence is extremely important. At this point, however, I would prefer to reflect on a different kind of intimacy: looking back at the past to cast new light on the present. What follows is an intimate dialogue with one of Nuruddin’s first novels *A Naked Needle*, and a tourists’ guide to Mogadishu to gain a fresh look at the Mogadishu of the 1970s.

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## Movement #

“Dear guest, on behalf of the population of the city it is my pleasure to extend the warmest welcome and to wish you a pleasant stay in Mogadishu, Pearl of the Indian Ocean, Capital of the Democratic Republic of Somalia” (Giunale 4). These are the opening words to a bilingual guide of Mogadishu, published by Mohamed Sheikh Ali Giunale on behalf of the local government of Mogadishu in the early period of the regime of Muhammed Siyad Barre. More than forty years on, the formality of the address seems old-fashioned, yet the heartiness of the welcome is clear, “this guide is for you, appreciated guest of our city” (Giunale 12), and bathes us in a feeling of openness and hospitality. Similarly, Koschin, the protagonist of Farah’s *A Naked Needle*, says to Nancy, his European fiancée who has just arrived after two years of separation: “It would be a very good idea, I think, if I took you round the wonderful city of Mogadiscio and showed you the treasures as well as the hidden infirmities of this ancient African settlement” (89). These are the years when Somalia first embraced the version of socialism introduced by Siyad Barre, “for which many Somalis perished”, as Kaha Aden observes in her documentary *La quarta via, Mogadiscio—Italia*. Socialist Somalia was supposed to have created a break with colonialism and tribalism. “There is the Revolution to which I am loyal” writes Nuruddin on behalf of his character, Koschin, in the “Prelude” to *A Naked Needle*. And it was in this period, pregnant with hope, that my mother and I set foot in the country.

The first time that I saw Mogadishu I was only three years old—it was the summer of 1976. To be honest, I cannot remember anything about my mother’s feelings on that occasion, but she must have been very moved, since it was also her first time in Mogadishu. I was born of a Somali father and an Italian mother in Verona. My parents were both students when they met. In the years to come, my mother often spoke about that arrival, she spoke about the language, perhaps in the hope that her recollections could, in part, be similar to mine. My father, on the contrary, never spoke about anything, perhaps because he knew that his recollections couldn’t possibly be similar to mine. I said that I do not remember anything about my arrival, but in fact there is something that happened afterwards which is like a tiny ripple in my memory, something about the moment in which my first language mixed with the other language. They mixed so well that, if it were not for this vague recollection, I would think that the two languages had been born together inside me, like a single bush springing from two roots; *iskadhal*, this is what they call people like me in Somalia.

In this recollection, there is a small hedge, a hibiscus hedge, and behind the hedge one evening I hide, and I am alone in the house of my uncle Cali and my aunt Khadija. Alone—without my mother, I mean, and without my father, the ones who can understand me. My aunts and uncles are there, along with their six children and my grandmother Barni Xassan and a host of others. My cousins laugh; they don’t laugh out of scorn, but I don’t feel like laughing, I don’t want to laugh, so I run and hide behind the hedge. “Come here”, they say and I reply (in my mother tongue, which is not that of my father): “I understand nothing!” So my grandmother, who was with us that night, calls out to me, using a new name to soothe me, *Ubox*, flower, like the hibiscus blossoming on the hedge.

It’s no coincidence, then, that this is the only recollection I have where the two languages are distinct—I understand one; I make no sense of the other: I shout out in one, but I’m a mute in the other—a single memory of me hiding behind a little hibiscus bush. “Why did you call your daughter Susan?” Koschin in *A Naked Needle* asks Mohamed, a friend who has married an American woman, speaking Somali. “We made a deal,” he answers. “If a girl is born a Western name, if a boy is born a Somali name” (72).

A few months went by and then we moved to a home behind the Somali National Theatre: me, my mother, my father, his friend Cusman and my aunt Xamsa. The house behind the National Theatre stays with me today, with its small yard and its iron gate. One evening, my mother and I were coming back home in the dark. There can’t have been a show on at the National Theatre that day, but I didn’t know that as I was only three and still had many things to learn. As we got to the entrance, my mother realized that the gate was ajar, but she didn’t have time to be frightened. She was frightened afterwards, when two rangy, dark men rushed out, wearing shirts and *osgunti*. They must have been two peasants, my father said later, otherwise they wouldn’t have dared to scare a young Italian woman so near to the National Theatre, a *dumashi* (sister-in-law) with her daughter hiding away behind her legs.

I am not your brother-in-law. [Says Koschin to Barbara, an American married to a Somali.]

You cannot convince me you are not.

No need of proof. I’m not your husband’s brother.

Every Somali is either my brother-in-law or my sister-in-law, depending on the sex, depending on the sex of course, Take it or leave it.

I am not, I said. (59)

The two men had run off with only the living-room curtains, as there was nothing valuable in that first house where we had gone to live. Hiding behind my mother's legs, I had understood the language in which the two men spoke, and that of my mother, who was concealing me, this time hoping that I had different memories to hers.

Mogadishu was a seaside town, "stretched out along the coast" in the words of Kaha Mohamed Aden, a Somali political activist and writer based in Italy. "The revolutionary government is to be appreciated for the beautification and the modernization of the city with monuments for the dead, dignity for the living, bread for the bereaved and roads for the *motorizzati*" (*A Naked Needle* 94). One of the monuments referred to above was for Xawa Tako, the heroine who died on 11 January 1948, and after whom my primary school was named. We all wore white and blue uniforms and sang hymns to the Revolution and when we came out of school, lots of us crowded round the wandering street-vendors, who, for a few kumi, dispensed sesame snaps and milk gums: "They deify the Old Man, [says Koschin,] sing his name to the skies. They make him into a God. [...] The Old Man is decent, honest, wishes to leave behind a name, wishes to do something for the country. [...] But it is his subalterns!" (80).

In hindsight, what struck me was how the town of Mogadishu was experienced by my mother, an Italian woman, as positively as she came to experience it. To my child's eye, she was always safe out on the streets of the cosmopolitan Mogadishu, both when in a shared taxi and when she drove her old, red Vespa some time later. One day she even asked a passer-by if she could take a photo of me beside him in front of the ancient Sheikh Abdulaziz mosque. The mosque stood not far from the Catholic Cathedral, where my mother would go every Sunday. In the years running up to the civil war, such a request would have been out of the question. "That dome, can't you see [says Nancy, Koschin's fiancée], the publicness of a church, the reverence and sacredness in the surroundings, the silence even, the quietness of a place of God?" (109).

Talking of taxis, they are easily distinguished by their yellow and red livery. The guide to Mogadishu is quite clear: "On no account should the fare exceed Som. Sh 20 within the city of Mogadishu. No tips are to be paid to taxi drivers, nor is anybody else entitled to a tip in the Democratic Republic of Somalia." (Giumale 12). The guide presents Mogadishu as a welcoming and predictable place. This definitely was how my mother experienced it.

There were always hordes of people at home, friends and relatives, some of whom stayed a short while, others stayed for longer periods. There is an exchange that takes place between Koschin and Barbara, the American wife of his friend, where Barbara relates the experience of the foreign wife, she refers to as "Vanity", of Barre, a man with whom she has had an affair:

What with the number of relations one has to be loyal to, the number of unwritten codes and laws a woman from a foreign land has to abide by, the dull life one has to lead, the rigid customs of this nomadic nation, Barre's dislike and Vanity's demands to go out to the movies together! On top of all this, Vanity couldn't bear living with her mother-in-law, and Barre's brothers and sisters who number over ten. (64)

In the recorded letters found in my grandmother's drawers back in Verona, my father's brother can be heard briefly greeting the family and describing my mother as follows, "The subject in question is a really kind young woman. We really like her." She was not perceived as the European wife and girlfriend represented in Somali plays, as the symbol of the danger and corruption of the West. She had become part of the family. Her experience was not the experience of the "foreign wives" (28) depicted in *A Naked Needle*. Here is Koschin speaking to his friend, Barre:

They make you cut off your ties with your brothers and sisters, they insinuate the idea from the moment they set their feet here that you must live your own life with them, without anyone ever coming to stay with you, without anyone ever freely dropping in to lunch or to tea any time any day as is our case. (28)

Even though many aspects of the city may have been unknown to my mother, Mogadishu was a cosmopolitan town which had adopted and "localized" different cultural habits and institutions. My mother would have been familiar with the custom of spending the evenings in the centre, with its more renowned cinemas and cafes, ordering macchiato or kabushiini. Bread was purchased at the bar-patisserie-restaurant-roofgarden-take-away-cheesemaker's-bakery called Azan, the only establishment that would even make fresh pasta to order. In those years I hadn't even heard of the Casa d'Italia, a club reserved for Italians, as was clear from the name. Just because

he'd married a young Italian woman, it didn't mean that my father stopped being allergic to certain places linked to the colonial past. Nuruddin expresses it thus in *A Naked Needle*: "It is not decreed, of course, by the Mussolini leftovers that no native may apply and become a member of the club, but discrimination has its own subtleties—economic apartheid" (107).

If you wanted to see a film, the choice was more than ample, from the Cinema Centrale, the Equatore and Il Missione, as well as many others, all showing films directly in Italian. I preferred to go to the cinema with my cousins, rather than my parents: on Thursday evenings my uncle would take us all to see an Indian film. Obviously, he left us at the entrance and came back to pick us up when the film ended. Sentimental Bollywood love stories were not his thing. Our heroines were actresses with long, raven-black hair and the finest filigree jewellery, like the handmade jewellery of the artisans in the gold market. As Koschin points out to his fiancée, Nancy: "And that is Teatro Somalia which shows Hindi movies mainly, caters for the women-folk and the children-folk who adore Hindi movies" (97).

Occasionally, in the late afternoon, we'd go and watch my big cousin play tennis and we used to frown at her opponents in the vain belief that our eyes alone were enough to make them lose.

I can't tell how my mother lived in Mogadishu, because, as I mentioned, my recollections are undoubtedly different from hers, and then the final few years there greatly blurred the initial sensations. Perhaps the sea that she described is still the same, "without any beach parasols" and beautiful, despite the risk from sharks. "Unlike the overcrowded beaches in Europe and other countries in affluent society, here there is ample space for long walks without having to climb over other human bodies and without the threat of pollution" (Giumale 50). There is no doubt that the sea was the major element of my childhood: hours spent lying on the beach observing what the sea washed up, the futile begging with my aunt Xamsa, who was dead against sunbathing. In the early years, we used a beach cabin reserved for employees of the Somali Central Bank, where my uncle worked. The cabins were terraces overlooking the sea and there was a bar and changing rooms.

This is what Koschin tells Nancy about the banks in Mogadishu: "I found the banks pretty noisy. Instead of a congregation of businessmen in friendly dialogue, soft and whispering, very civil and sophisticated, here in the banks it was like a vegetable market in Southern Italy" (119). The Somali Central Bank was where letters for my mother arrived, given that P.O. boxes were in short supply at Mogadishu. "The Central Post Office, in Corso Somalia, is normally open from 07.00 to 12.30 and from 4 to 6pm every day except Friday, providing the following services: Air mail, Surface mail, Parcel post, Registered mail, Sale of stamps [...] Satellite telephone connection is available at the following time: Mogadishu—Rome (direct) from 11am to 3pm" (Giumale 16). As you might imagine, the Mogadishu central post office played a key role in my mother's existence. I remember it as an imposing, saffron-coloured building with oleander bushes and yellow bellflowers outside the front. Climbing a short staircase, you entered the main hall, and this is where my mother used to sit with her long brown hair, waiting her turn after paying for her call in advance. (The choice was limited, either three, five, or at most, ten minutes). The operators would call out people's names when their turn came and then you would slide into the assigned cabin for the duration of the call. During this lengthy wait one day, I remember going outside to explore the garden. My father was there outside, chatting with a friend, who was wearing a long tunic, the baggy sleeves of which seemed empty. "Where are your arms?" I asked him in horror. "The shark ate them," he answered, "If you want, I'll show you the stumps." They both burst out laughing at the look of terror on my face. If, on the other hand, you wanted to send a letter or a card, or to view the latest issue of stamps, you had to go to the counters on the left: the young ladies were very polite and showed you splendid images of the flora and fauna of Somalia, as well as many other things too. In the building's lateral wings there were long rows of P.O. boxes, each one numbered. These were not individual and, as I mentioned above, our mail went to the P.O. Box of the Central Bank, where my uncle worked.

My grandmother in Italy used to send us all presents on special occasions. The opening of these parcels was a cause for great excitement at home. At the very moment the cardboard box was cut or torn open, a mysterious aroma emerged, a mix of strawberry and talcum powder, the smell of Italy. Once, my grandmother sent a musical box as a present. It was a little purple box covered in sateen. A ballerina in a pale pink tutu, wearing a diadem in the middle of her forehead, danced whilst looking at herself in a small, gold-framed mirror. The moment you opened the box, she began to revolve, dancing to the notes of Doctor Zhivago. It was monsoon season and her presence in my room seemed exotic and out of place. I loved her all the same.

In the decade before our arrival, the city had undergone major expansion and the Somali theatre was at the height of its splendour. This explosion peaked in 1967 with the inauguration of the Somali National Theatre,

constructed under a Chinese cooperation programme. As a new art form, it perfectly met the demands of the newly urbanized population. Koschin informs Nancy on their walk through Mogadishu: "Housing capacity of the theatre is about three thousand, but at times when Baxsan, Marian Mursal, Hibo, Magol or the Moge Brothers take part in a play, some four or five thousand people are unkindly packed in" (103). It was the period when the best works were written, the most famous songs were to be heard and the most famous artists emerged. The new literary genre reached out to a vast public and supplanted the role formerly played by poetry in providing entertainment and cultural models, stimulating debate on contemporary issues such as colonialism, development, relations with the West and women's rights. The performances dramatized common desires and tensions, blurring the boundary between the self and the other, the self and the nation. These temporary arenas allowed the establishment of "communities of feeling" (Berezin 93), that created a sense of communality and belonging that called upon Somalis to embrace "*soomaalinimo*", a national Somali identity (Kapteijns 103). The Somali popular theatre was, from the very beginning, the expression of a new urban youth that saw Mogadishu as a place of promise, the desire for an optimistic urban future.

Whatever else cities may be, they almost always represent an aspiration, a desire for a better future. Exploitation, domination, poverty, malnutrition, and violence may be the daily reality for many city dwellers, but cities are also spaces of hope where millions of willing and unwilling migrants seek a better life (Prakash 499). Retrospectively some people try to deny that Mogadishu was this kind of modern cosmopolitan hopeful city. However, this is not correct and in this period it was popular culture that expressed some of the tensions that would prove so destructive later on and mediate them in a way that preserved the unity of the nation.

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## Reflecting back, projecting forward: A conversation with Nuruddin Farah

Nuruddin Farah & F. Fiona Moolla

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

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

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

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

NF: It had changed a great deal.

*FFM: For the better or for the worse?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NF: Sure.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NF: Yeah!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FFM: *You think so?*

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

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

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

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

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

FFM: Okay. Yeah.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NF: Theatre, you mean.

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

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

FFM: *And three computers!*

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

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

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

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

NF: I don't.

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

NF: Yes.

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

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

FFM: *(Laughter.) Okay!*

NF: And that's how they were produced.

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



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

*FFM: Thank you for your time, Professor Farah.*



## The marathoner not yet at the finish line: Nuruddin Farah in Rome

Nuruddin Farah & Ali Mumin Ahad

This interview with Nuruddin Farah was recorded on 12 March 2005, during the international conference “*I confini della scrittura*” organized by the University of Roma “*La Sapienza*”. The interview, now translated into English for the first time, was published in Italian in a special issue of the journal *Pulp Libri* in 2005 (Ahad). The interview, which was conducted in Somali, touches upon several issues regarding the writing of Nuruddin Farah. In particular, I try to explore with the writer the meaning of some very significant characteristics contained in his works, especially in the trilogy *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*, which comprises *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979), *Sardines* (1981) and *Close Sesame* (1983).<sup>1</sup> These are characteristics that may be meaningless to a non-Somali reader, but that are very important Somali cultural signifiers highlighting obstacles to the affirmation of democracy in Somali society. In addition, the interview covers topics like the civil war in Somalia (1991–2000): its causes and its consequences for Somalis. This includes the plight of Somali refugees in various parts of the world, as well as a comparison with the 1970s, when the author himself decided to live in exile rather than under a military dictatorship. In this conversation with Nuruddin Farah, I give the author the opportunity to present his personal views on the political and geographical divisions amongst Somalis into autonomous entities in the Somalia of the early 2000s. Finally, almost 15 years later, I try to contextualize the conversation with subsequent developments in Somalia, in general, and, in particular, those aspects which are already covered in the interview.

The interview revealed Nuruddin Farah to be highly personable, making clear that international success has not made him proud and unapproachable. Being introduced to him in person and conversing with him in Rome in his mother tongue was exceptional since most interviews with Farah are conducted in English. Although the interview was conducted in Somali, the questions were already written in Italian.

Translation is always a process in which one tries to minimize the loss of both the literal and the cultural meanings of words. This depends on the translator’s level of knowledge of both languages. In this case, both of us have a deep familiarity with the Italian language. Needless to say, with the Somali language too. Because of this our communication in the interview was an experience of dialogue in two languages. Italian, thanks to its standard form, had allowed for direct and precise questions to be formulated. Responses from the author in Somali, had allowed for the communicating of nuances that otherwise would not have been possible to express in another language. Indeed, the Somali responses gave a certain informality to our interview-conversation.


AMA: *Let us talk about the craft or the profession of writing. What it does mean today to be a writer in a globalized society, on the one hand, and a writer in a Somali society full of irremediable contradictions, deep economic differences and conflicts, on the other hand?*

NF: I will start by saying that the Somali people do not fully understand the value of writing and, consequently, reading. A Somali person is capable of starting to read a book today, but is unable to finish it. Many people who are able to read something, only read newspaper articles and reviews rather than books. The Somalis who do read books are the new generation—those who have had the opportunity to study and consequently have a better approach to reading. My twelve-year-old daughter, for example, has already read all my books. As a writer, my target readership is an international audience. Somalis read little, but the admirable thing is that they hold respect for those who write. In 1996, after 22 years of exile, I went back to Mogadishu. On the street, people were stopping

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

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and greeting me, some even physically touching me with their hands to demonstrate their kindness and welcome. These were people who had never read my books, but who were respectful towards me because of my craft as a writer.

*AMA: Your writing was an intervention in a long history of orality in Somali culture. Is the switch to writing in your work a sign that the barrier of illiteracy in Somali culture is being overcome? What are its objectives?*

NF: Certainly, one of its objectives was to overcome the long-standing illiteracy within Somali culture. The difference between writing and orality is this: in oral culture a person can say something today and deny it tomorrow; with writing this cannot happen. Therefore, writing implies the use of thought with reflection and rationality, with logic and measure. Somalis have the habit of boosting the number of their clan members relative to the others. Statements like this are possible where there is no existing census, where there are no records about the number of the population. The main goal of writing is to make people acquainted with the use of rationality, of logic and of a sense of measure.

*AMA: As one of the first Somali writers in a country where writing itself was perceived as an act of subversion of tradition, what have been the difficulties that you have had to overcome?*

NF: Our people do not comprehend writing because they do not understand the value of writing. This ignorance, however, is not their fault. Indeed, they have a great deal of respect for the written word. I will tell you an illuminating story. When I was a child, there was a newspaper in Arabic which was circulating in Somalia. The Arabic alphabet is very familiar to the Somalis, even to those who cannot read or write Arabic, but who follow the learning of their children in the Koranic schools. My mother, whenever she would find a page with Arabic writing lying on the street, collected it and kept it in a safe place, because the Arabic characters were the same characters as in the Koran.

*AMA: It is true, I too have seen my mother and other people who could not read or write doing the same. Leaving behind the closed environment that Somalia was in the 1970s, in Europe, beyond freedom of opinion, were there difficulties that you had to face as an African writer who had yet to achieve success?*

NF: The craft of writing is not recognized as a profession everywhere and in the same measure. Take Italy, for example, where writing is not a profession. All the great writers of this country, in fact, are people who practise other professions. Alberto Moravia was a journalist, Umberto Eco is a university professor.<sup>2</sup> And so on. When I came to Italy, though I had already published something, I could not introduce myself as a writer, because no one could understand that as a profession. Consequently, they could not give me the “*permesso di soggiorno*”, a residency permit. I think it is still the same now: writers are not welcomed; their craft is not recognized as a profession here. In another countries, conversely, you are welcomed as a writer and given the opportunity to improve your talent.

*AMA: You always have written about Somalia and Somalis. If I recollect one of your goals as a writer was “writing the name of Somalia on the skin of the world in an indelible way”. To a certain extent, I believe that you have succeeded, but are you satisfied with your representation of Somali society or are there still pieces that are not inserted in the depiction, and traits yet to be defined?*

NF: The marathoner who has not yet arrived at the finish line, though he can see it, cannot say that he has achieved his goal. The same goes for me. I would like to have written more than I actually have up to now. There are still many things to say and to write.

*AMA: Starting from the trilogy *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*, which comprised *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979), *Sardines* (1981) and *Close Sesame* (1983): your work clearly reflects a profound link to a Somali nomadic world and culture. Is it a reference to an affective and personal link (which for a writer is important), or is it something related to the already dominant imagery of a Somali society consisting purely of pastoralists?*

NF: I have not had any personal experience of the nomadic life in Somalia. I only have indirect reflections of the nomadic life. Indeed, I was born in the city of Baidoa. A writer researches the things he writes about and in his writing is able to analyse the context. When I wrote that work, what was clear to me—and what I wanted to put in evidence for the readers—was the fact that the dictatorship itself had its roots in the pastoralist nomadic culture.

AMA: *To an attentive reader of the work of Nuruddin Farah, those figures in the margins—the “People of the River”, as they are called in their rare appearances in the trilogy—are not out of sight. They represent the Somali population of African heritage that we still continue erroneously to associate with slavery, notwithstanding the historical evidence of their autochthonous origins.*

NF: The People of the River in my works are part of our selves, a section of the Somali people, not different from us at all. The problem originates from that pastoralist culture which resists work of any kind; it stems from the nomadic lifestyle in which people do not like to work, but only to talk. For this kind of people, whoever works is a slave. This is the tragedy [of Somalia], the ignorance which needs to be rooted out. It is about an entire culture that must be changed. Look at how our culture treats the question of gender—for example the submission of women. For such a change to happen, peace and stability are required, and the affirmation of the rule of law. In the case of discrimination, a strict application of the law by the state is enough. Some types of discrimination were banned even during Mohamed Siyad Barre’s dictatorship period.

AMA: *Within the Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship trilogy, Somali intellectuals are given a space for the role they played in opposing the military regime and in representing the hope for a democracy in Somalia. That regime fell, but democracy did not follow. However, this overthrow caused a civil war with disastrous consequences and a decade-long institutional crisis. What happened to those intellectuals according to Nuruddin Farah? Has their role been exhausted with the fall of the regime?*

NF: Somali intellectuals are either refugees or spokesmen for warlords. This leads me to a clarification of the term ‘intellectual’. The intellectual, as the term itself indicates, is a person who makes use of his intelligence, not a person who has simply taken exams. In fact, it is not the [university] certificate which makes a person an intellectual. We have many graduates who, as you know, cannot be called intellectuals. Many of them have not even read a single book. Intellectuals are those who make use of their intelligence. When I write something, I feel like a student. I feel the need to go to the library, to read, to do research. Could a person who does not read anything be defined as an intellectual?

AMA: *Given our common origin from a borderland, that part of Somalia which was divided since the colonial era, I have the perception that you, more than others, bear the burden of a nation already broken up and that risks self-destruction. How much does this burden weigh on you?*

NF: That perception is correct. The weight is the civil war, and the conditions created by the civil war. All borders will disappear with peace and stability. Communications and commerce, the movement of people from one side to the other, will erase the borders. Some time ago I received an invitation to go to Somaliland by the highest authority of that administration. I could not accept, because as long as other Somalis—from Kismayo, from Baidoa, from Mogadishu, from Beled Weyne, from Galkaio, from Bosaso—cannot go in that area, it seemed disrespectful for me to go. I find nothing wrong with defining oneself according to regional affiliations, in a unitary national context. When the inhabitant of Genoa or of Liguria wants to distinguish himself from that of Piedmont or Turin, does he not define himself as Genoese? In the same way, it seems to me acceptable that those from Somaliland want to define themselves as such, as do those of Puntland, and so on. The important thing is that every Somali has the same rights as the others, including the right of residency and property in any part of the country.

AMA: *Somali literature, despite the introduction of a written form of the Somali language in 1972, continues to be generally oral. It is not widely circulated even among Somalis and is absolutely not translated into other languages. I know you write in English, and your audience is international: are there Somali translations of your works for an audience of Somali readers who have no chance to read you in English?*

NF: There are no translations in Somali. *Refugees (Rifugiati*, published by Meltemi, Rome, in 2003) is the first that is being translated into Somali, but the work is difficult so I don’t know when it will be completed by the translator.<sup>3</sup>

AMA: *In the second half of the 1970s, in order to avoid being trapped by the military dictatorship, you chose a life of exile in Italy. Why then did you have to leave this country with which Somalia has a history and a long association?*

NF: If they stop me on the street and ask me who I am and I answer, “I am Somali”, they immediately think I am a refugee looking for a subsidy and if I say I’m not, they think I am lying. So it is today, as yesterday. For this reason I prefer to reside in Africa. I am not a European, I am a Pan-Africanist. In an African country I am not subjected

to the same inquisitorial attention nor am I treated differently by the citizens of that country. In South Africa, where I currently live, I feel very comfortable. It is possible that unpleasant incidents also happen, but surely, they are incidents that can be traced back to a very small number of people with set goals. [Farah refers to episodes of intolerance of which Somali migrants have been victims of xenophobia in South Africa.]

AMA: *Your works have also been translated into Italian. The Italian reader is able to discover a new Somalia because it is represented by a Somali rather than an Italian writer. Do you think these translations can convey an image true to your idea of Somalia?*

NF: Actually, I don't read my books in their translations, or their reviews. It would take up a lot of valuable time.

AMA: *The period of your Italian residence in the late 1970s certainly influenced your writing (I think of the various characters in the trilogy and their relationship with Italy and the Italian language). Has that influence left anything in your later works or has it finally passed with that experience?*

NF: It was the Italian of Mogadishu. Do you remember the *cappuccino* of the bars of Mogadishu? And of the *pastasciutta* [...] it was the Italian of the Somalis. The climate that was breathed in those years.

AMA: *The work Refugees, a reportage on the Somali diaspora in Europe, offers a key to understanding the dispersion and desperation of a generation of Somali intellectuals and young people. Are they really so resigned to their refugee status and loss of role in their own country? In your opinion what has changed in the behavior of the Somali diaspora today compared to that of the 1970s that you masterfully described in the first trilogy?*

NF: Not everyone is so resigned. However, many of those who call themselves intellectuals are not such. Many who are unhappy with their refugee status today were also unhappy in Somalia yesterday. However, a person's situation also depends on the place and on the opportunities they have had. For example, those who took refuge in Canada or the United States are not at all unhappy. As you well know, many in those two countries, with the opportunities offered to them, have regained a role. They teach in American and Canadian universities, or are professionals who exercise their respective professions. They are not at all resigned. The same could not be said of those who remained in Europe. In Italy, not even 1% of Somalis managed to find employment. Regarding the second part of the question, the difference between the two points in time (the 1970s and today) is significant. In the diaspora of the 1970s, refugees for political reasons constituted a very small number. Many, instead, were immigrants, especially in the Arab countries. While today, given the conditions, refugees make up the majority and are almost entirely in the United States, Canada and in Europe.

AMA: *In Refugees there is a certain disaffection for Italy, compared to Switzerland and Sweden which are described more passionately. Is it the feeling of you, the author, or of the subjects of the interviews?*

NF: In some countries, in addition to Somalis being interviewed, even the authorities and important figures in the refugee protection system agreed to be interviewed about the problem and, in particular, about their contact with Somalis; in other countries this has not happened.

AMA: *In the Somali diaspora, including the one in Italy, a new generation of writers is beginning to express themselves in the language of the host country in order to offer, in turn, a representation of Somalia and of Somali society. What advice you would like to offer them?*

NF: To the young people of the new generation, I would advise them to also be the forerunners of future generations.

AMA: *Is writing in English a necessary condition for a writer's success?*

NF: In the condition of the colonized there is no choice in the working language. We have been colonized by Italians, by English (British) and also by the Arab. Each of these languages has been imposed on us. They are the vehicular languages of education, of work. Learning one or the other language depends on which part of Somalia one was born into or raised and educated. Later, everyone adopted the language through which they received their education, in the absence of a written Somali language. The writing of the Somali language took place only in 1972. Answering your question, of course, English is an international language compared to the others.

AMA: *One of your last works as a Somali writer, the novel Links (2005), is almost a report from a country destroyed by civil war, a society torn and dominated by violence. In questioning the nature of that violence and the civil war in Somalia, what is the answer you can give?*

NF: Power. The chase for power, together with the ignorance of the instruments to govern a society or the inability to use them.

### Contextualization and update

Although Nuruddin Farah writes of Somalia and Somalis, his readership, as he himself admits in this 2005 interview in Rome, is not made up of Somali readers. The international popularity of Farah is due to two important choices he has made. The first choice was his self-exile from Somalia in the 1970s, an environment that certainly did not favour freedom of expression for writers not sympathetic to the regime. The second choice was his use of English as the language of his novels and, consequently, his readers. If he had remained in Somalia in the 1970s, or had written his novels in Somali, in Italian or in Arabic, rather than in English, it would have been difficult for him to achieve international fame as a writer. It is thanks to these two choices regarding where he lived and his language of composition that Farah is known to the world and that has allowed him to become the precursor for Somali writers.

Farah represents the breaking point with oral tradition, which was made necessary for him by the lack of a written Somali language when he began his career. However, Farah's narrative style still strongly resonates with the Somali oral tradition of storytelling, embroidered with proverbial wisdom, which gives his writing a special flavour and fluency. Before the Somali language had been given an orthography in 1972, the languages of instruction in Somalia were Italian, Arabic and English. The latter was used especially in the former British protectorate of Somaliland. Despite these languages providing—to those who had the opportunity to take advantage of schooling—the ability to read books, the availability of libraries has always been limited, even in the major cities. In addition, the predominance of oral culture encouraged people to practise oral poetry over reading and writing.

Farah's perspective on the general disinterest in reading in Somali society reflects the truth—at least up until the time of our interview. In fact, from then on, potential readers have emerged among young Somalis in the diaspora, particularly those educated in American, Canadian and British schools and universities, who can read in English. Not only have there been changes in this aspect, but also in terms of writing. The picture that our 2005 interview presents is different from today's situation. Today, in Somalia and the diaspora, there exists a second generation of young writers. Following Farah's example, these young writers have the opportunity to be known to the world. Between 2005—the time of the interview—and today many things have changed across Somalia. The Somali unitary state—the restoration of which was still hoped for in 2005 after the civil war—is undergoing a profound transformation process from regional units to federal states according to a yet-to-be completed federal constitution. The linguistic and cultural homogeneity cherished by foreign scholars seems to have been supplanted by an ethno-cultural revival whereby each tribal entity reaffirms the characteristics of its local dialect and customs. One example is the once regional capital Baidoa, which is now the capital of the South-West State of Somalia according to the new federal provision, and is the place of birth of Farah, where the language/dialect form Af-Maay has re-assumed centrality as a language. While the Somali language, in its written form since 1972, is recognized as the official language of Somalia, there are a large number of dialects, some of which are defined as languages in their own right. Examples include the Af-Maay, the Juiddo, the Chimini language spoken in the area of Brava town, the Bajuni of the area of Kisimayo, the Mashunguli of the Juba River valley, the Garre, the Tunni and the Dabarre languages. Some of these local languages make use of the Arabic script and some others the Latin script.

One of the most important points of the interview is Farah's depiction of Somali society, particularly in the trilogy *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*. The trilogy hints at certain ethnic and social stratifications within Somali society that were inherited from colonialism and consolidated by the postcolonial state, namely, the division of Somali society into two social components. One component includes those of nomadic and pastoral origin, and the other component includes farmers and artisans. This division of Somali society is often characterized by ethnic and racial typologies. The colonial heritage has generated a culture of discrimination against particular ethnic and social groups within Somali society. The first Europeans who introduced the term

slave (*adon* in Somali) when describing a black population of farmers were the James brothers (1884), followed by Robecchi-Bricchetti (1888) who, indeed, believed that *adon* was the ethnic name of the population of farmers they encountered on the upper course of the *Webi Shabelle* (Shabelle River) on their first entrance into the inland Somali territory hitherto perfectly unknown to Europeans (Cruttenden). The attribution of the term *adon* to this population of farmers derived, of course, from the perception of their guides and informants who were native to the North, where both nomadic populations and inhabitants of the small coastal towns like Zeyla and Berbera, had experience of the slave trade from the hinterland of Abyssinia by Arabs who established themselves in the ports of these coastal towns. Later on, in the South, the Italian colonial regime applied the term *liberti* (freed slaves) to all Southern farmers and agriculturalists in order to deprive them of their right to the land which the Italians themselves were seeking. The studies conducted by the colonial anthropologists and administrators were producing hypotheses to confirm this fact and to make a free labour force available to the Italian-owned plantations in the South. Only Tommaso Carletti and Enrico Cerulli, two of the most distinguished Italian scholars of colonial studies, firmly rejected that hypothesis which suggested that the agriculturalist population of southern Somalia were former slaves. The Fascist colonial period (1920–41) produced into the Somali mind a division within society between pastoralists regarded as ‘pure’ Somalis and agriculturalists of the fertile lands regarded as former slaves. That schematization was a politically motivated colonial perspective that, unfortunately, became a general understanding of the constitutive fabric of Somali society, and it is the source of the social and ‘ethnic’ discrimination among Somalis themselves.

As Farah is a writer who not only writes novels, but also has something to say about Somali society throughout his novels, his silence on this ethnic discrimination is very troubling. In the interview he explores his beliefs in the oneness of the various components of Somali society. He acknowledges the fact that discrimination exists within Somali society. However, he identifies the source of that discrimination as the ignorance that is prevalent among the populace and, in addition, the indifference of the political elite. With serious law enforcement by the Government, the injustice of discrimination would simply disappear, according to Farah. The fact is, though, that such injustices have their historical origins in colonialism and in the political system inherited from colonialism. These injustices are perpetuated within the postcolonial state. I suspect that an attempt to end the social, ethnic and racial discrimination in Somalia would have required at least a strong denunciation by an author like Farah, whose voice has international prominence. State collapse and civil war have pushed Somalia back in time. The clan and tribal systems which were formalized in colonial times, and which remained intact in the first phase of the Republic, and were then challenged in vain by the military regime in the second Republic, have regained an institutional character today.<sup>4</sup> For some this institutionalization would be a temporary choice to exit the long political and institutional crisis that started with the fall of the Barre regime and civil war. For others, it would be the only way to build, on a more democratic basis, a federal state within which the various social components (of tribal and clan groups) would have recognized themselves. Farah’s position on the unity of the Somali state can be inferred from his refusal indicated in the interview to accept the invitation to go to Somaliland until this privilege is extended to all other Somalis.<sup>5</sup>

In 2005, at the time of this interview, Farah hoped for a configuration of a unitary state in Somalia, a state that, among other things, could enforce laws to eliminate the discrimination discussed above.

#### Acknowledgement

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#### Notes

1. The Italian editions that I accessed were, respectively, of the 1993, 1996 and 1993 Edizioni Lavoro, Roma.
2. At the time of the interview with Farah, Umberto Eco (1932–2016) was still living and considered one of the best-known Italian writers and scholars worldwide.
3. In this collection, Farah explores the lives of Somali refugees in different parts of Europe. It offers a key understanding of the Somali diaspora.
4. Here I refer to the tribal system as the social structure of Somali society, while clan is the political subjectivity within a tribal organization.
5. Somaliland is the former British protectorate and North-Western Region of Somalia, which has been unilaterally trying to secede from the Somali Republic (since 1993) after the civil war. Somaliland holds that it joined the union with the former Italian Somalia in 1960 as a newly independent state.



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## Lost years of a nomad: Exploring Indian experience in Nuruddin Farah's oeuvre

Asis De

### Lost years of a nomad: Exploring Indian experience in Nuruddin Farah's oeuvre


To honor Nuruddin Farah's fifty-year-long writing journey, this article explores his time in India (1966–69) and the influence it had on making him a leading postcolonial writer. My approach is largely biographical. I begin with his decision to turn down a scholarship at an American University, which some critics view as immature or even eccentric. I challenge this view of his choice instead to enroll for a degree in philosophy, literature and sociology at the Government College of Panjab University at Chandigarh in 1966 and to make what was then a country of poverty and even famine his first diasporic destination. I argue that this was a well-thought-out, politically correct and wise decision in the global context of international relationships in the 1960s. I also explore Farah's brief association with Indian culture and the knowledge he acquired of Indian philosophy and literature to explain his decision to adopt a feminist perspective to write on injustice against women and the powerless and religious intolerance rather than focus on issues such as independence realpolitik like leading African writers at the time. His first manuscript, published in 1970 as *From a Crooked Rib*, was a Penguin modern classic by 2004. I argue that this novel was importantly shaped by his Indian experience. I also explore the influence of two novels on the young Farah, on his personal life, ideology and writing even before he went to India: W. Somerset Maugham's novel *The Razor's Edge* (1944) and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's classic *Chemmeen* (1956). This is the first substantial investigation of the effect of Farah's Indian experience. **Keywords:** biographical criticism, Indian experience, nomad, cosmopolitan.

When he was a schoolboy, long before Somalia gained its political independence from Britain and Italy, Nuruddin Farah Hasan (1945–) dreamt of becoming a writer. He is now about to celebrate the golden jubilee of his career as a writer. To date, Farah has published fourteen novels, a non-fiction book and several plays. He was named after a prince in *One Thousand and One Nights*. When he was being interviewed by Ahmed I. Samatar in 2001, he revealed that he used to delight in cutting out the name “Nuruddin” from pages in *One Thousand and One Nights* and gluing the small pieces of paper onto the cover pages of his exercise books (Samatar 87). He also enjoyed giving the animal characters in his English language textbooks human names and attributes. His linguistic talent was evident from an early age. As is well known, Farah assisted his mother to compose *buraanbur* or Somali oral poetry that is sung during social celebrations and community rituals. By the time he was a teenager, he was able to converse equally well in five languages: Somali, Arabic, Amharic, Italian and English. However, Farah found the local education system disappointingly alien. He comments sadly that “the textbooks we were taught from, belonged in the mind and culture of other people” (“Why I Write” 3). Though the mind and culture of “other people” initially shaped the vision of Somalia's first Anglophone writer, Farah has written about Somalia and Somali characters for most of his career. Several decades of diasporic separation have not weakened Farah's bond with Somalia and its people, just as almost fifty years of being away from Indian soil has not dimmed his memory of the people there.

His time as a graduate student at the Government College of Panjab University might have gone unnoticed had he not written his debut novel during his stay on this campus and later become one of the leading African writers of his generation. Those who knew him at the time would probably not have guessed that he would return to the campus at the age of seventy-two to receive an honorary doctorate from Panjab University in 2017. His success as a writer is often ascribed to two ‘immature’ decisions that he made. The first decision concerns his choice to enroll at Panjab University in India rather than take up a scholarship to study at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

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in the USA. Many scholars and Euro-American critics of Farah consider this one of the most whimsical decisions he has ever taken. His contemporaries from other African countries (Farah is usually considered to be the first Somali Anglophone writer) like Ngũgĩ, Emecheta, Armah or slightly more senior African writers like Achebe and Soyinka chose to move to the UK or the east coast of the USA as their first diasporic destination. The decision by this young Somali to go to India thus seemed foolish. In the course of this article, I will argue that this was not an 'immature' or whimsical decision but a well-thought-out, politically correct and wise decision in the global context of international relationships in the 1960s. The second decision considered immature by some was taken during Farah's stay in India. Whereas the established African writers mentioned above wrote on serious issues like independence realpolitik (postcolonial studies did not exist as a theoretical discipline then), African nationalism, African cultural identity and even psychological decolonization, this young Somali's debut novel explored the 'trivial' issue of marginality and liberation of women from a feminist perspective. His choice of subject matter may appear 'immature' in the scenario of African literature at the time, but I argue that Farah's choice should be seen in a different light. I show that were it not for his Indian experience, he might never have written *From a Crooked Rib*, a novel that has secured a place for him in the African literary scene as the "leading African writer of feminist consciousness" (Ngũgĩ's phrasing in the nomination for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature).

In 1969, after a four-year stay in India, Farah returned to Somalia with his Indian wife and the manuscript of his first novel, *From a Crooked Rib*. This was the year Muhammed Siyad Barre, a major general of the Supreme Revolutionary Council of Somalia, came to power following a coup d'état after the Somali President Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke was shot by a member of the armed forces. The country moved through chaotic, post-coup transitions, but gradually adopted scientific socialism as its political and economic base. During Barre's early years of military rule, some positive changes were made such as the modernization of industries and the nationalization of banks and most importantly, the standardization and promotion of Somali as the official language of Somalia. Initially, there was no evident animosity between Farah and the new leaders. However, their increasingly autocratic action made Farah worry about the future of the country. He decided to leave the country to do a master's degree in theatre studies at the University of Essex. He began writing his second novel there, which was set in the context of post-revolutionary Somalia in the mid-1970s. The news that Farah was portraying current Somali life in a harsh light in his new novel reached Barre in no time. Because of Barre's furious response, Farah was warned not to return to Somalia. His second novel, *A Naked Needle* (1976), was subsequently banned in Somalia. He was compelled to live in exile outside the geopolitical borders of Somalia until 1996, twenty-two years in total. This not only because of the danger Barre's despotic regime posed to him, but also because of the civil war that ensued when Barre fled the country in 1991. Even though "Farah's travels and tenancies—in Europe, North America, India, and (since 1981) seven African countries—have given him access to many diverse communities, cultures and ideas" (Wright xv), Nuruddin Farah remains a located cosmopolitan voice still spinning his yarns to keep his "country alive by writing about it" (Jaggi n. p.).

A "wanderer through the world's literatures" (Wright xvi) writing ceaselessly on the people and places of Somalia "both as object of the operation of power and subject of transformation" (Moolla 187), Farah is culturally a nomad who has settled in Cape Town, not as an exile but as a diasporic writer of Somali ethnic origin. It is not his ethnic connection with a nomadic pastoralist clan of Somalia that makes me see Farah as a nomad figure, but his belief in the imaginative relationship between mobility and liberty, his stateless status and his belief that society can be transformed by eradicating the traditional differences between the socio-cultural power structure of a community and the subject-position of an individual. Farah's constant quest for freedom and his desire to uphold values like equity, justice and rights, secularism and openness of mind, particularly in depicting the emancipation of women of an underprivileged, economically underdeveloped nation with a complex colonial history, have given him a unique status among the diasporic African Anglophone *littérateurs*. Though Somali people from the Horn of Africa occupy the central presence in Farah's works, Fiona Moolla observes that Farah negotiates a position through his art that enables him to find "his home 'everywhere'" (189). In subscribing to this proposition, I wish to emphasize both Farah's borderless, geo-cultural approach to people and their histories in his fictional works, and his personal nomadic experiences across countries and cultures, even though conceptually a nomad lacks a settled 'home' rooted in a particular geopolitical origin.

The scholarly approach in this essay is largely biographical in that it focuses on Farah's student years in India (1966–69). The study also enquires into the socio-cultural influence India had on Farah's life and fictional works. In a number of interviews Farah seems to disavow that his 'Indian phase' had any particular importance

as opposed to his diasporic experiences in other countries. This article considers Farah's 'Indian experience' as noteworthy not for the simple reason that this "period saw his marriage and the birth of his son Koschin", but also for the reason that these "four years of study at Chandigarh [...] helped to determine his choice of English as the language of his first novel" (Moore 4).<sup>1</sup> In a more recent essay entitled "Ibsen, In Other Words", Farah acknowledges how his stay in Chandigarh, especially while he was studying at Panjab University, helped him to develop a taste for literature and to become a voracious reader. He admits in the essay, "I felt like a child in a candy store hungering after the sweets he knew he couldn't have" (15) until he met a "female fellow student" (15) who introduced him to the plays of Henrik Ibsen. She directed his attention to the play, *A Doll's House*. Before this, Farah was like a "lost child" (15) who was utterly bewildered when selecting a proper book from the shelves of the library: "I had admitted that I had no inkling which of the thousands of books written in a babble of tongues I should borrow and immerse myself in: Samuel Beckett, Virginia Woolf, Albert Camus, one of the Bronte sisters, William Faulkner, Simone de Beauvoir or Rabindranath Tagore" (15). Without a doubt, this Indian phase shaped the genesis of Somalia's first Anglophone writer of international repute. Farah's brief association with Indian culture, and his gaining of knowledge of Indian philosophy and literature, and, perhaps, of the secular aspirations of the dominant Indian politics of the time contributed to the young writer becoming firmly opposed to religious intolerance. Moreover, during his stay in India, Farah met eminent writers like Anita Desai and Ruth Praver Jhabvala, who, as he recollects, "were all kind", but, more importantly, were deeply inspiring: "Ruth Jhabvala lent me the first book by an African writer that I read, Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, and then said to me, 'If you're interested in writing, that's it.' This would have been 1968 when I first read a novel by an African south of the Sahara" (Alden and Tremain 36). Farah adds in the essay about being introduced to Ibsen while in India: "I've always written my significant works in relation to other works, glad that I could piggyback on other writers and forge my own ideas out of the smithy of the ideas garnered from them" ("Ibsen" 19).

If reading Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* in India in the early days of his career provided Farah with sufficient confidence to have his first novel, *From a Crooked Rib*, published, it is Ibsen's *A Doll's House* that served "as a point of reference as well as a fountain of inspiration" ("Ibsen" 16) for his first novel. This emerges clearly when Farah candidly confesses: "I could not have written *From a Crooked Rib* if I had not read *A Doll's House*" ("Ibsen" 17). In a recent interview published in the same issue of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* in which this essay appears, Farah suggests that his interest lay "in creating some kind of a bridge between Africa and Asia" rather than "creating a bridge between America and Africa," which makes him feel an "attachment to India" even today: "The greater benefit that I received from my presence in India for four years is the patience towards work, is the communal commitment that people have towards one another, and the fact that India as a subcontinent contains the world! There is no country like India. I still go there" (Farah and Moolla 19). In the same interview, Farah indicates that he turned down an American scholarship and chose to go to Panjab University instead because he was interested in the cultural pluralism of India (19). Farah's initial engagements are eastward with India, compared to the 'usual' westward engagement of contemporary, senior African writers like Ngũgĩ or Soyinka and Achebe to London and the eastern coast of the USA. Farah's uniqueness lies not just in his signature literary treatment of feminist consciousness and women's marginality, but in his singular choice to go to the other side of the globe to learn what 'communal commitment' means.

Farah's decision to come to India for higher education, rejecting the option of an American scholarship to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, may seem immature and even quite eccentric to aspiring young writers or scholars today. But, in the Somalia of the late 1960s, it was a 'politically correct' decision. Since gaining its independence from the colonial rule of Britain and Italy in July 1960, the government of the Republic of Somalia has had economic and military ties with the Soviet Union:

The growth of Soviet influence in Somalia dated from 1962, when Moscow agreed to provide loans to finance the training and equipping of the armed forces. By the late 1960s, about 300 Soviet military personnel were serving as advisers to the Somali forces [...] about 500 Somalis received military training in the Soviet Union. [...] The Soviet Union also provided non-military assistance, including technical training scholarships, printing presses, broadcasting equipment for the government, and agricultural and industrial development aid. (Metz 30)

On the other hand, the USA's continued support of Ethiopia, Somalia's hostile neighbor, could not have endeared it to a young Somali. The intensification of the Cold War and the consequent anti-communist policies of the United States in the early 1960s made the political relationship between the USA and Somalia even tenser. Opting

to take up a scholarship to study at an American university may not have been a politically wise decision. By contrast, the Indian political scenario in the late 1960s probably seemed more acceptable as India was still following the Nehruvian model of a socialist economy. As far as international political relationships were concerned, India was on very friendly diplomatic terms with the Soviet Union as was Somalia. The political relationship between India and Somalia was also quite good in the 1960s. The Prime Minister of Somalia, Dr. Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke, along with the Minister of Information, visited India for the first time in 1963, and again in 1968 when he became the President of Somalia. So, however foolish or eccentric it may appear today, it was quite common in the Somalia of the 1960s for a young Somali to go to India to do a degree.

Leaving aside the political issues, I now concentrate on some literary and philosophical dimensions that might validate Farah's decision to go to India instead of the USA. In an interview with the eminent American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah at the New York Public Library in 2007, Farah comments that reading Somerset Maugham's novel *The Razor's Edge* (1944) and *Chemmeen* (1956) by the legendary Jnanpith-winning Indian (Malayalam) novelist Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai in his teens, substantially influenced his decision to choose India, rather than the USA, as his first diasporic destination (Appiah, "Princeton Professor K. Anthony Appiah interviewed African novelist Nuruddin Farah about his recently released novel, *Knots*"). In reply to the question asked by the narrator-protagonist in Maugham's novel: "What made you go to India in the first place?" (266), the fictional character Laurence Darrell, the American from Illinois who had the experience of spending a little more than three years in India, answers: "Chance" (267), and "an intense conviction that India has something to give me that I had to have" (283). It is possible that Farah's logic was strikingly similar to that of Larry Darrell in Maugham's novel. In reply to the identical question: "What brought you to India?" posed by Professor Rumina Sethi of Panjab University in a programme hosted by the Department of English on 28 March 2017, Farah replied that before he decided to leave Somalia for India more than fifty years before, he had thought "to come to India and to spend three-four years in India will be a once-in-a-lifetime option. So, I took that option" (Sethi). Farah also tells Sethi that he wanted "to feel the pulse [...] to learn from the experience on a daily basis and therefore, turn that treasure into something worthy of reading" (Sethi). This urge "to feel the pulse" of Indian life and the desire "to learn from the experience" of Indian people is probably the result of reading the English translation of Pillai's *Chemmeen*, a novel that describes the love story of a low-caste Hindu fisherman's daughter, Karuthamma, and her Muslim lover, Pareekutty, a local fish trader, in the context of a poverty-stricken coastal hamlet of Kerala in India<sup>2</sup>. The novel seems to fascinate Farah not so much for its treatment of communal issues, but probably more for its representation of the local cultural tradition regarding women's chastity in a peripheral fishing community of India: if a married woman is unfaithful while her husband is at sea, the mythical sea-goddess Kadamma would consume him.<sup>3</sup> The way in which a society restricts its people's choices, particularly women's personal choices using an age-old religious 'superstition' and the double-standard of condemning women's infidelity, while it is silent on patriarchal domination, maltreatment and violence, is the basic issue that *Chemmeen* addresses. Is this not the message in Farah's first novel, *From a Crooked Rib*, which he wrote during his stay in Chandigarh? Possibly the desire to present the plight of women in peripheral societies and the urge to voice a literary protest against the 'traditional' practice of silencing women in the domestic space of the family became more powerful after the aspiring writer read Pillai's novel *Chemmeen*.

In Pillai's narrative, Karuthamma, the heroine of *Chemmeen*, cannot escape her arranged marriage with the local fisherman Palani, and is forced to sacrifice her love for Pareekutty. But, when she later finds Pareekutty standing on the doorstep of her hut, she cannot resist her long-suppressed desire for her lover, and thus violates the tradition of remaining true to her husband. Palani is at sea. His life, like those of Pareekutty and Karuthamma, ends tragically that very night as a result of a thunderstorm. The bodies of the lovers, still in close embrace, are found on the shore next morning. The death of Karuthamma is without dignity. Pillai the novelist reflects this in the title of his novel *Chemmeen*, meaning 'small sea-prawn' in Malayalam. It is just feasible that this Indian novel in translation caused Farah sufficient pain to make him consider writing on the issue of the desires of poor and peripheral women and their quests for individual identity. This was probably intensified by his sojourn in India and his personal experiences with Indian people, particularly women. The necessity to respect women's dignity, however peripheral and poor they may be, the issue of women's individual identity and empowerment, and the contribution of women to the lives of men, find expression in every novel of Farah. I have little doubt that Farah decided to make feminist consciousness a major issue in his writing while he was in India. At this point in the discussion of the issues of power and individual identity of women, I cannot but draw attention to a political

connection, however flimsy and conjectural my argument may appear. Throughout Farah's four-year stay in India, Indira Gandhi, the daughter of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, was the Prime Minister. Although what Farah wrote during his stay in India is patently a work of fiction that depicts a peripheral woman's struggle for identity, there is some justification for seeing the hopeful image of a strong, empowered Indian woman as Farah's motivation for depicting Ebla's liberation.

Farah's first novel, *From a Crooked Rib*, centers on the story of Ebla, an eighteen-year-old Somali girl, who runs away from home after she discovers that her grandfather has promised her in marriage to Giumaleh, a man of forty-eight. Ebla first escapes from her nomadic community to a nearby village, and then moves to the town. During her stay in the town, she discovers that her cousin has arranged her marriage to another man. She decides to find her own husband and flees to another city with a man she met only a few days earlier. After only seven days of marriage, she finds herself feeling despondent when Awill, her husband, tells her of his forthcoming assignment in Italy. In the city of Mogadishu, Ebla befriends a lady called Asha in the same apartment block. After a few days, she learns that her husband has had an affair with an Italian woman. It is Asha who convinces Ebla to take revenge on Awill by marrying someone else. Ebla marries a man named Tiffo, who does not tell Ebla about his wife and children. When Ebla finds out about Tiffo's family and realizes that she is nothing but his mistress, she recognizes that she needs to take control of her own life and regain her dignity as a woman. She seeks a divorce from Tiffo and breaks with Asha before Awill returns to Mogadishu from Italy. The narrative ends with the projection of Ebla and Awill (though husband and wife) locked in conjugal embrace: "[T]hey got under the same cover and Ebla wondered if tomorrow's sun would rise with happiness [...] and welcome his hot and warm world into her cool and calm kingdom" (162–3). Ebla also resembles Karuthamma, the heroine of Pillai's novel *Chemmeen*, in her sexual indulgence with Tiffo, while Awill, her husband, was away across the sea in Italy on a teaching assignment. A question arises at this juncture regarding how one can connect Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, which had a major influence on Farah and his first novel, *From a Crooked Rib*. Although Farah was immensely fascinated by Nora's character and her bold dialogues in *A Doll's House*, somewhere he felt that imitating Nora's personality would hamper the portrayal of his "Somali, nomad girl, an African and a Muslim" ("Ibsen" 17), the character Ebla, rather than substantiating it. Unlike Nora, who as a Norwegian housewife can slam the door "on her society and tradition, and tell her husband off" (17), Ebla has no "door to slam—nomadic huts have no doors of which to speak; only a cloth discreetly serving as a door" (17). But Farah also agrees that Nora and Ebla have one thing in common: "Both are strong-minded women" (17). It seems that the differences Farah identified while reading and re-reading Ibsen's play, actually enabled him to understand the way Ibsen had dealt with 'realism' in his play. This understanding helped Farah to depict the socio-cultural reality of a Somali woman in his first novel. In his essay "Ibsen, In Other Words", Farah clearly differentiates between Ebla's reality and that of Nora's: "But like Nora, Ebla wouldn't be comfortable with the generic identity in which a woman in Somalia is addressed with the derisory word intended as a put-down: 'Naayaa!'—meaning 'Hey you woman!'" (21).

It is no coincidence that Farah's Ebla resembles the Indian character Karuthamma in many respects. Moreover, the fictional character of the 'savant' (close to the idea of the 'Sant' or the Holy Man in India) in Mogadishu, as Farah depicts him in *From a Crooked Rib* (chapter 26), resembles an Indian Sikh: "The man had a thick beard, untrimmed but combed nicely with the wooden comb which he had on his head: he looked like an Indian Sikh" (134).<sup>3</sup> A prominent female character in *From a Crooked Rib* is Asha, a common name in India. The meaning of 'Asha' in India is 'hope, or even 'hopefulness', which in the context of Farah's novel becomes implicitly connected with a hope for freedom (though at the expense of her reputation) from traditional feminine subservience in Somalia. It is Asha, who makes Ebla "aware" that hoping for freedom and equality is possible: "Ebla could not help being fond of Asha [...] she made Ebla aware of what she was" (109). The post-Partition trauma of a conflict-torn, north-western India can be compared with the violence and horrific activities in civil war-torn Somalia, as represented in the novel *Secrets*. The repeated references to famine and the scarcity of food, not only in *From a Crooked Rib*, but also in Farah's later novels, most particularly in *Gifts*, may remind the reader that, like Somalia, India was a country hit by food shortages and famine when Farah visited and stayed at Chandigarh. In the light of this it seems significant that Farah maintains a strange silence about the 'Green Revolution' that was taking place in the late 1960s India when Punjab was its center. To the son of a pastoralist, a writer who has childhood memories of farm-life, the prominent agrarian movement that helped India greatly increase crop production and farming was of great interest. Farah also found the issue of 'family planning' and its campaign very interesting. Farah tells Sethi in the interview, that he had been commissioned by the All India Radio (Chandigarh unit) to write stories on

family planning.<sup>4</sup> John C. Hawley—one of the ablest critics of Farah, observes Deeriye’s defiance in *Close Sesame* (1983) as quite “akin to conscientious objection, a Gandhian nonviolent resistance and refusal to cooperate with the imposing power” (193), despite his active political past when he was intensely involved in the anti-colonial movements against the Italian occupation. As Appiah observes in his appreciation of Farah’s writing, “[w]riting is always more about identification than identity” (n. p.). Exploring the ‘Indian experience’ in Farah’s life and works depends more on historical identification, where the question of a single national identity seems to be limited. If the Eurocentric notion of ethnic identity implies a stasis rooted in a specific geopolitical base, then Farah certainly belies it as a writer with a geocultural approach to feminist consciousness.

In *Links* (2003), there are several references to the Indian cultural space in relation to the female character Miss Mira Meerut, a diasporic of Indian ethnic origin, who visits Mogadishu as a UNICEF consultant: “[S]he was from southern India, culturally speaking [...] her parents had migrated from Gujarat, in western India” (129). The very spontaneous comparison of Seamus’s beard with that of a “devout Sikh [...] on a Guru’s remembrance day” (131) substantiates Farah’s easy cultural movements across time to his past everyday experience of finding bearded Sikhs in Chandigarh. Farah has lived in as many as six countries of Africa, each being a unique cultural unit; in Italy and short term stays in other European countries like Norway and Ireland and in India as a student and as an aspirant writer. But he remains culturally rooted in Somalia and in no way has dissociated himself from the socio-political spaces of Somali people, either inside the country, or in diasporic condition. While it is true that in many interviews (see Gray; Alden and Tremaine; Jaggi; Appiah; Farah and Moolla), Farah does not ascribe any particular importance to his Indian phase in relation to his literary oeuvre, it is quite clear that India is often injected into the experiences of many of his fictional characters. It is also interesting to note that some minor characters of Indian ethnic origin who appear in his novels, are all women and at the same time, diasporic.

*Hiding in Plain Sight* (2014) is a novel in which the character Padmini, like Mira Meerut in *Links*, is of Indian ethnic origin. Though Padmini was born in Uganda, her family members belong to a diasporic Indian merchant-community known as the “Dukawallahs”—the “small-business men and shopkeepers hailing principally from the Indian subcontinent” (71). Named after “the famous actress” (*Hiding* 73) of India, Padmini is shown as being in a “partnership as being on a par with marriage” (74) with Valerie after her failed “arranged marriage” to an Indian called Rajiv.<sup>5</sup> The reference to Padmini and Valerie’s movement to the Indian city of Pondicherry, famous for its association with Sri Aurobindo, is another link between the narrative and the Indian space of spirituality. The references to Valerie wearing cotton multi-colored “sari”, the “Indian restaurant called Tandoori House”, to the Sanskrit word “Nirvana”, to the Indian way of saying “namaste”, and to Indian cuisine—“chicken tandoori, plus a fish curry and a rich array of vegetarian dishes, including lentils, chickpeas, and an assortment of Indian finger foods” (*Hiding* 186) remind the reader of Farah’s close association with knowledge of Indian culture and cuisine. In his highly engaging book *The Long Space: Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form*, Peter Hitchcock asserts that the “borders of the individual and that of a culture are less the sign of exclusion but of socialization itself” (92), and this is what happens in *Hiding in Plain Sight*, as Farah’s representation of Indian culture, though quite exotopic, appears integral and sufficiently socialized. In the final chapter of the narrative, as Padmini talks about the multicultural and cosmopolitan nature of Indian society, the reader apprehends that it is Farah’s own impression of India which he expresses through one of his major fictional characters: “India has suffered a great number of invasions. [...] It is a subcontinent with an ancient civilization, a huge population, and diverse cultures and faiths. I would say the cuisine reflects this multiculturalism. India boasts cosmopolitanism far beyond that of many countries in Europe, including England” (186).

The words and phrases Padmini utters in *Hiding in Plain Sight* such as “an ancient civilization” (181), “diverse cultures and faiths”, “multiculturalism” and above all, “cosmopolitanism far beyond that of many countries in Europe” may appear to be Padmini’s personal compliments to the country of her ethnic origin. However, these phrases collectively emphasize Farah’s own impression of India even before his first arrival in India for graduate studies in the late 1960s. Quite similar to the character of Larry Darrell in Maugham’s novel *The Razor’s Edge*, it becomes clear, that Farah was fascinated by the spiritual but secular, multicultural but cosmopolitan, diverse but unified nature of Indian culture. Farah’s novels are aesthetic responses to the ambiguities of life at large and individual identity. Jacqueline Bardolph observes in one of her deeply engaging commentaries on his works: “this African writer does not oppose modernity and superstition, but looks for coherence, complementarity, an on-going creativity in the effort to understand the world” (171).



Derek Wright, a penetrating critic of Farah's work, views his literary oeuvre as a kind of "nomadic fiction, drawing upon many cultural and religious sources and upon readings in many of the world's literatures" (176). Beginning with the Indian cultural scenario and literature in his early twenties, Farah has travelled widely and taken up temporary residence in several countries of Africa, Europe and America, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes due to political circumstances. Through experiencing other people's cultures, Farah the novelist with Somalia in his heart, has been able to place his own ethnic culture and people in a much wider frame. Farah is a different kind of nomad, not in the sense of being a representative of the Somali pastoralist clan, but as someone who wishes to learn about other countries and their people by staying there. He acquires first-hand experience, and then uses his creative imagination to fill the spaces with Somali people and their transforming culture spaces. What makes his approach unique is that Farah does not attempt closely to capture the historical, political and cultural details of the places to which he travels and in which he stays, but he is meticulous about the representation of the Somalis, their culture and their relation to people of other ethnic groups. It is a fact that he spent more than three years studying in India. He married an Indian woman and even wrote the manuscript of his first novel there, but it is also true that he carefully omitted any depiction of contemporary India in that novel. It is equally true that he did not incorporate any penetrating depiction of the historico-political reality of Apartheid in South Africa although he has been based in South Africa for about two decades (since 1999, with his second wife Amina Mama and two children). In response to a question posed by Stephen Gray: "How do you take to being called the world's most famous nomad?", Farah replied: "I don't know if I'm a nomad as much as a mover-about [...] my movements have been in all directions and quite often decided by me—well, occasionally by other, political forces" (133). A global writer by temperament, Farah has shown no particular attachment to any country other than Somalia, whether he inhabits that country for some time, or travels there on a short visit. Though *Hiding in Plain Sight* (2014) is set in Kenya, *North of Dawn* (2018) is set in Norway, and the forthcoming novel is to be set in Johannesburg in South Africa, Farah's concern is with the cultural spaces of diasporic or refugee Somalis inhabiting those places and their relationships with people of other ethnicities, in examining the transformation of the present-day Somalis living beyond the geopolitical border of Somalia. In an interview with Appiah in 2007, Farah explains his stand on being a global writer quite explicitly. While complimenting Farah on having "a huge, worldwide audience", Appiah added, "You've made Somalia a real place for people who otherwise would never have thought about Somalia except for what they hear on the news from time to time". Farah responded in his uniquely sensitive and perceptive manner:

In my cynical way, I say that the world needs a Somali, a Ghanaian, a Frenchman, a Mexican, a Chinese and an Indian—to mention a few writers from these nationalities. There is a party to which the world invites one or two people from each place. I am the Somali invited to this party, and you are perhaps the Ghanaian. That's why you and I are who we are—world writers. (Appiah, "Princeton Professor")

My discussion in this article explores Farah's writing during four years of his life that have not hitherto enjoyed scholarly interest. The Indian experience reflected in Nuruddin Farah's literary oeuvre is far more extensive than a handful of references to Indian people or the cultural dimensions in the novels. It has made Farah a leading postcolonial voice in world literature. It is at an Indian university that he had the opportunity to read Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*, setting aside his earlier reading of the English translation of Pillai's novel *Chemmeen*. It seems more than mere conjecture that a politically conscious writer like Farah drew inspiration from the strong image of the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, while drafting his debut fiction on the issue of the liberation and restoration of dignity of a Somali woman named Ebla. This male writer, who was a member of a pastoralist clan in a small Islamic country in Africa, writes from a feminist perspective. He focuses on the liberation of the poor and powerless women, on patriarchy and the violence men sometimes inflict upon women, on cross-cultural movements across countries. These are mysteries that continue to produce an ever-increasing readership marveling at a geocultural world writer beyond geopolitical borders or time.

#### Notes

1. Farah had met Chitra Muliyl (his first wife) in Chandigarh, where she was "a student from Bangalore". He appears to have had a very easy relationship with Muliyl's father: "her father and I played chess" (Jaggi). The name of Farah's son is known to every reader of Farah, as Koschin is the protagonist of Farah's second novel *A Naked Needle* (1976). In an interview with Patricia Alden and Louis Tremaine, while commenting on his days at Panjab University in Chandigarh, Farah admits: "All I remember is that I didn't think I learned much from the university. [...] But the only other thing

- I remember from university is that I was doing English literature at one point and taking a novel exam—there was a course [...] ‘The English Novel’” (35).
2. An interesting similarity between Pillai and Farah: the story goes that the Indian novelist Pillai wrote *Chemmeen* in just 8 days, while Farah took 28 days to write *From a Crooked Rib*, from 19 March to 15 April, 1968. (Vetticad)
  3. The “wooden comb” on the head of the ‘savant’ resembling “an Indian Sikh” in *From a Crooked Rib* is one of the five articles of faith (Five ‘K’s: *Kesh* [uncut hair], *Kara* [steel bracelet], *Kanga* [wooden comb], *Kachera* [cotton underwear] and *Kirpan* [ceremonious steel sword]) according to the religio-cultural practice of the Khalsa Sikhs in India.
  4. When Farah was staying in India, the Fourth Five-Year Development Plan (1969–74) accelerated family planning efforts by establishing a separate Department of Family Planning within the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Naturally, new campaign strategies were adopted to bring the target of family planning to fruition. During my recent trip to Chandigarh in March, 2019, I visited the Chandigarh office of the All India Radio (now called Prasar Bharti), which purportedly had archival material on Farah’s works. To my astonishment, the responsible officer informed me that documents related to the production and broadcasting history of a time fifty years back were not there. The explanation given was that the papers, which dated back to a pre-cyber age, had been burnt as useless rubbish that was taking up office space.
  5. Padmini Ramachandran (1932–2006) was a famous Indian actress and dancer who performed in more than 250 Indian films. Later she settled in New Jersey with her physician husband and started a school of Indian classical dance known as the Padmini School of Fine Arts.
  6. Padmini Ramachandran (1932–2006) was a famous Indian actress and dancer who performed in more than 250 Indian films. Later she settled in New Jersey with her physician husband and started a school of Indian classical dance known as the Padmini School of Fine Arts.

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## Dante in Mogadishu: *The Divine Comedy* in Nuruddin Farah's *Links* Marco Medugno

### Dante in Mogadishu: The Divine Comedy in Nuruddin Farah's Links

This article aims to explore the complex network of intra-textual and intertextual references to Dante's *The Divine Comedy* in Nuruddin Farah's novel *Links* (2005). By analyzing the quotations from the poem, this essay wishes to show how the *Comedy* informs the novel at various levels, from the paratext (since Dante's tercets from *Inferno* are chosen as an epigraph) to the text itself (since *Inferno* appears to be deeply constitutive of *Links*). The analysis then suggests that, on the one hand, Farah employs Dante's poem to address, represent and understand the civil-war context of Somalia from the protagonist's point of view. On the other, he subverts and re-contextualizes *Inferno* to create new meanings and to distance his novel from Dante's literary antecedent. Therefore, by analyzing the practices of intertextuality between the two texts, this essay aims to investigate both the converging and conflicting strategies enabled in the novel. **Keywords:** Farah, Dante, Mogadishu, intertextuality, re-contextualization, paratext, epigraph.

### Introduction

In Nuruddin Farah's *Links* (2005), a particular element of the paratext, the epigraph, is exceptionally rich. It is made up of twelve quotations by four different authors, and it establishes a multilayered relationship between the plot of the novel, its protagonist, and the intertexts, i.e. the sources of the epigraphs. There are several intertextual resonances between the novel, the protagonist and Dante Alighieri's *La Divina Commedia* (*The Divine Comedy*). Dante's *Inferno*, in particular, can be considered as the major source of signification for the novel, as it "appears to be part of the mental universe" of the protagonist (Moolla 158–9). Therefore, to read *Links* without it would mean to diminish the novel's significance.

This article then proposes an investigation of how Farah's intertextual practices work between *Links* and the *Comedy*. First, by cross-reading the novel and the poem, the analysis attempts to shed light on the specificity of Farah's employment and understanding of the *Comedy*. Second, it wishes to examine the host of multilayered relations and practices uniting the two texts built upon Dante's representation of Hell. In the *Comedy*, the Florentine poet recounts the speaker's allegoric journey through the three realms, to which he commits three canticles: *Inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory), and *Paradiso* (Paradise). By employing the interlocking three-line rhyme scheme called *terza rima*, the *Comedy* provides a comprehensive overview of the knowledge of the Middle Ages, but also offers an understanding of Dante's worldview and vast erudition about literature, politics and religion. Born in Florence in 1265 and expelled from his city due to political reasons, Dante spent his life in exile until his death in 1321, after years of wandering and unceasing writing; in exile, he conceived most of his literary production, including his preeminent work, *The Divine Comedy*.

The presence of exile emerges as an apparent association between Dante and the protagonist of *Links*, the diasporic Somali Jeebleh, who fled Mogadishu at the outbreak of the civil war to settle in the United States. Moreover, it recalls Farah's life, as he began an exile that would last for 22 years after being warned by the Somali government that he would be arrested over the content of his novel, *A Naked Needle* (1976). In *Links*, however, Farah does not uphold this association explicitly, thus leaving the shared biographical aspect of exile in the background. *Links*, in fact, is a novel about homecoming and describes the experience of Jeebleh's return home, rather than his

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life in New York as an expatriate. As Fiona Moolla has rightly noticed, *Links* overturns the grounding premise of the *Comedy*: “Dante the Pilgrim descends into Hell and discovers that it looks remarkably like his native Florence. Jeebleh, by contrast, returns to his native Mogadiscio and discovers that it looks remarkably much like Hell” (158). Moolla’s observation about the two texts clearly points out that Farah does not aim to rewrite the *Comedy*. Accordingly, there are no systematic correspondences, for example, between the poem and the novel in terms of structure: while the *Comedy* is divided into three canticles consisting of 33 *cantos* (34 in *Inferno*), *Links* is made up of four parts and an epilogue, for a total of 31 chapters. The plot itself does not reflect Dante’s symbolic journey through the three realms of the dead, nor does it embrace its allegorical scope. Ultimately, Farah jettisons several of the pivotal assumptions grounded in Dante’s medieval ethos, drawing upon Christian theology and Thomistic philosophy, such as the ubiquitous role of God, the divine and rational order of the afterworld and the logic of *contrapasso*, i.e. the principle by which punishments are assigned. Despite this divide, the *Comedy* represents the primary literary source that triggers a process of intertextuality. According to the French theorist Gérard Genette, the latter notion, multiple and split, does not represent only “a relationship of co-presence of one text within another” (*Palimpsests* 1), but it engages with a series of different practices within the variable system of textual analysis and interpretation. In the case of *Links*, as Lorenzo Mari appropriately suggests, Farah employs intertextuality as a means to build a metaphorical-metonymic conversation between the poem and the novel through some extra-textual elements, such the epigraphs, which are significant for its in-depth interpretation (103).

The focus of this article is to show that the complex intertextual network should certainly be investigated, as Mari indicates, as a dialogue between the novel and the poem, but *from* the protagonist’s point of view. More specifically, the *Comedy* provides the lens through which the war-torn setting of Mogadishu and Somalia is portrayed in the novel, and it also rises as a powerful diegetic device to support the protagonist’s point of view, the latter being a Dante scholar. Indeed, Jeebleh looks at *Inferno* as his principal source to unravel the complex skein of Somalia’s reality, to grasp the events he witnessed, and to describe the characters he met during his journey. However, this process occurs at two different levels, namely that of the author and that of the protagonist. Indeed, on the one hand, Farah supports his protagonist’s analytical understanding of Mogadishu’s civil war by fostering a parallel between the latter and medieval Florence through Dante’s *Inferno*. On the other hand, he implies a degree of incommensurability between his novel and the poem by suggesting the limits of Jeebleh’s perspective based on Dante’s references. This practice can be retrieved in the *Comedy* as well: in the poem, even though the author is the protagonist, Dante the poet distances himself from the character; in *Links*, this distance is paralleled (or recalled) by Farah’s attitude towards his protagonist, both to underscore the latter’s limited perspective and to endow him “with sufficient voice to express an understanding, particular to [him], of what it means to be human and to play roles in human communities” (Alden and Tremaine 161). In other words, the tercets from *Inferno* aim to give, from the protagonist’s point of view, “shape and significance to the immense panorama [...] of anarchy” into which Mogadishu and Jeebleh are plunged (Eliot 483). Drawing upon the imaginative richness of Dante’s poem, the protagonist deciphers and interprets his experiences in the city. Farah fosters this view by weaving a multilayered thread of intratextual and intertextual connections, both allusive and explicit. At the same time, I argue, Farah also disturbs the rationale behind Jeebleh’s interpretation. He prompts the readers to place his novel against the backdrop of Dante’s poem, by using the latter as the primary literary resource to structure *Links* and Jeebleh’s “mental universe” (Moolla 159), but he also distances himself from the *Comedy*, thus attesting its insufficiency to represent the actualities of Somalia’s condition. The following analysis will show how this double strategy occurs, and how Farah both articulates similarities and parallels with *Inferno*, but also unsettles his protagonist’s understanding by implying his one-sidedness. Specifically, Farah reveals that Dante’s view is partially incomplete and inadequate to understand the realities of Somalia unless one employs different practices of intertextuality; this article aims to examine mainly three of them, namely subversion, simplification, and re-contextualization, which can be considered as key practices to elucidate the relationship between the *Comedy* and *Links*.

The choice of the *Comedy* as the primary intertext, at this point, could appear unclear due to the apparent differences and the necessity to modify and adapt it. However, I argue that Farah’s choice to draw on Dante’s poem relies on its ability to cross time, space and language through its eschatological scope and universal claim. Pascale Casanova notes how Dante has come to represent one of the universal classics. These classics, once canonized, “lose a part of their historical context and, as a result, a part of their power of subversion” (328). However, later authors such as Joyce and Beckett have retrieved this power, since they were able to put the classics “to new and specific uses” (Casanova 328). Accordingly, Farah turns the *Comedy* to his own advantage and, to rephrase Casa-

nova, employs it to the new and specific context of Somalia. He finds in *Inferno* a rich set of imaginative resources and visionary images that help him to represent, dramatize and reflect on a present-day condition that resembles an infernal experience. In the case of *Links*, Farah does not look at Dante's subversive power concerning his linguistic and literary project, as Casanova suggests, but considers Dante in relation to his ability to intertwine universal aspects with the local context of medieval Florence. By invoking a universal and human condition of suffering, Farah resolves the complete separation between the two texts and fosters their intertextual link. Accordingly, Farah does not provide a close reading of the poem, denoting a lack of philological interest in retrieving the original political and historical context of Dante's times (Mari 102). As well, instead of reclaiming the theological, teleological, and allegorical scope of the *Comedy*, Farah shows interest in Dante's fictionalizations of the relationship between humans in an ill-fated time of grief and sorrow. Therefore, the following intertextual analysis aims to stress "interpretation rather than [...] the establishment of particular facts" between the poem and the novel, in order to retrieve and examine "the cultural codes which are realized (and contested) in texts" (Frow 46).

### Farah and Dante between exile and translation

Before examining Farah's interpretative process in the *Comedy*, I wish to highlight three aspects of the novel concerning the theme of exile, the narrator and the edition of the poem used by Farah. Concerning the first aspect, Jeebleh shares with Dante (and with Farah) the same condition of exile, as noticed by Moolla (158). However, as the analysis will clarify, the quotations from Dante's poem never refer to this biographical connection, thus leaving the shared feature of exile in the background. Farah aims, instead, creatively to employ the visionary and symbolic force of *Inferno* for investigating and representing Somalia's hard reality. On the one hand, by presenting the Somali civil war as a modern-day Hell along with the paired comparison between Dante's Florence and *Inferno*, Farah suggests a profound interconnection between past and present, but also between Italy and Somalia, along with a transnational and trans-historical analogy. On the other hand, Farah emphasizes the need for a re-contextualization, suggesting that his intertext is also partly inadequate to the task of wholly describing Somalia's contemporary reality. This latter aspect surfaces due to the high degree of re-contextualization, but also in a network of intertextual links that encompass several other references to, for example, Somali folktales, American television news, newspapers, films, Irish fables and the Koran. In other words, "Although Dante's *Inferno* constitutes a prominent literary intertext of *Links*, the latter also integrates references to media representations of the war, in a way deploying them as another subtext" (Mzali 95).

While the protagonist recognizes in Mogadishu an earthly Hell drawn upon Dante's description of the netherworld, Farah implies that this perspective is confined to Jeebleh's point of view. Indeed, different characters may have engaged with a diverse representation of Mogadishu, derived from their own beliefs and vision of the afterlife. For example, in a dialogue of the novel, Farah explores three different ideas of Hell according to Jeebleh, Bile and their friend Seamus (*Links* 57). The first, as shown, shares Dante's imaginative creation unfolded in *Inferno*, building a bridge between the representational level of the fictional character and the paratextual element supplied by the author. The second, Bile, draws his interpretation from the Koran, which enables a relationship between 'Hell' and 'fire', and lastly, Seamus argues that Hell should be considered as "a state of mind" by telling an Irish fable (57). This example, along with the limited third-person narrator, who provides the reader with the thoughts and actions of the protagonist alone, further supports the understanding of the novel as predominantly focused on Jeebleh's point of view. He is the focal character and always appears on the scene, so that the events of the plot are described through his perception; the reader, then, comes to know about the offstage actions when and if other characters tell them to Jeebleh once they have happened. The *Comedy* surfaces as a bridge between the "mental universe" of Jeebleh and that of the reader, via intertextual and intratextual practices (Moolla 158). The reader, in turn, plays an active role in unraveling this multilayered intertextuality made up of allusions, subversions and recontextualizations.

An example of how the *Comedy* occupies the mental universe of Jeebleh may be found in the passage of the novel, also pointed out by John Masterson (153), when the protagonist states: "I recited a verse from Dante's *Inferno*, in which enslaved Somalia was a home of grief, a ship with no master that was floundering in a windstorm" (*Links* 193). To be precise, these metaphors have a different source: while "a home of grief" is the translation of "*doloroso ospizio*" in *Inferno* (Canto V, 16), the image of the ship is taken from *Purgatory* (Canto VI, 77) and translates the line: "*Nave senza nocchiere in gran tempesta*" (ship without a helmsman in harsh seas). According to Mari, the reference

to *Purgatorio* can also be read as Farah's attempt to "further deconstruct the neocolonial imagery of failed nations as exclusively related to the post-colonial *koine*" (106). In other words, Farah analogizes Somalia to Italy via the metaphorical use of the "home of grief" and the ship left adrift, so to debunk the idea that the concept of "failed nation" can be applied only to postcolonial countries. This trans-historical analogy supports the argument that Farah employs the *Comedy* as a source that allows him to develop a universalizing process: by drawing a parallel between thirteenth-century Italy and contemporary Somalia, Farah points out the joint historical trajectories occurred by both the metropole and the so-called colonial periphery.

Finally, the third aspect concerns the issue of language. Farah employs Allen Mandelbaum's English translation of the *Comedy*, instead of the original Italian version, as he acknowledges in the final "Author's note" (335). The choice of using the translation, despite knowledge of the Italian language by both Farah and the protagonist, seems to overshadow the role of Dante as a former colonial author. The latter term, in this case, should be understood as a reference to the Italian canonical authors who were employed in the "colonial" education in Somalia, as well as during the Italian trusteeship administration (1950–60). Indeed, as Ali A. Abdi has noticed, "one of the first formal colonial schools operating in Somalia was opened by the Italian Dante Alighieri Society in 1907 to teach Somali children the Italian language" (331). However, in *Links*, Farah minimizes this scholastic role of Dante, avoiding any specific reference to the presence of the Tuscan poet in the colonial educational system, as instead explicitly highlighted by other Somali authors, such as Garane Garane in his novel *Il latte è buono* (47). As the following analysis will show, Farah focuses his attention on how the *Comedy* represents both Jeebleh's affiliation to Italian culture and as a diegetic device to provide the symbolic background to read Mogadishu through the eyes of his protagonist. More than a colonial author imposed by the former Italian cultural supremacy in Somalia, Dante appears as a transnational model to represent human suffering, along with an extensive tradition of authors who have re-actualized and re-interpreted the *Comedy*, such as James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Primo Levi, Osip Mandelstam and Derek Walcott. This universalizing feature of the poem is then the shared starting point to trigger the following intertextual analysis, focused on the particular and personal approach employed by Farah to adapt the *Comedy* for his purpose.

Concerning the epigraph, Genette, in his essay *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997), defines the epigraph as "a quotation placed *en exergue*, generally at the head of a work or a section of a work" (144). In *Links*, the corpus of quotations of the epigraph section may be divided into two groups, according to the source, location, and function. Farah places three quotations from different authors before the title and after the dedication:

If you don't want to be a monster, you've got to be like your fellow creatures, in conformity with the species, the image of your relations. Or else have progeny that make you the first link in the chain of a new species. For monsters do not reproduce.

MICHAEL TOURNIER

The individual leads in actual fact a double life, one in which he is an end to himself and another in which he is a link in a chain which he serves against his will or at least independently of his will.

SIGMUND FREUD

A dog starved at his master's gate  
Predicts the ruin of the state!

WILLIAM BLAKE

I argue that Tournier's, Freud's and Blake's functions are "of commenting—sometimes authoritatively—and thus of elucidating and thereby justifying not the text but the *title*" (*Paratexts* 156). Also, they disclose the identity struggle of the protagonist, but they do not reappear as intratextual references, and they do not seem to belong to the imaginative universe of the characters. Even though interesting, they are beyond the scope of this paper and, thus, they will not be discussed here. The quotations with a higher "illocutionary force" (*Paratexts* 1) are, in fact, those from Dante, which represent the primary subject of this analysis. They are all taken from *Inferno*, and they share the same position, being located before each of the four parts and the epilogue.

### Quoting from *Inferno*: A Somali civil war re-contextualization

Farah sets *Links* in the middle of the conflict that broke out after Siyad Barre's fall in 1991, when armed factions began competing for authority in the power vacuum. Two rival warlords, Mohamed Farah Aidid and Ali Mahdi Muhammad, whose real names are replaced by the monikers Strongman North and Strongman South, fight to control their respective zones. At the time of the story, Mogadishu is the battleground where a disastrous war of power—deemed an ethnic conflict—extinguishes any form of public services, social practices and sense of community. Citizens live in the Hobbesian condition of *bellum omnium contra omnes*, namely the “continual fear, and danger of violent death” (Hobbes 83). Additionally, United Nations forces, chiefly led by the Americans, increase the fighting, embroil civilians in the conflict and galvanize the rivalry between different factions.

The protagonist Jeebleh, a Somali professor who lives in New York, returns to his native Mogadishu after twenty years of exile to visit his mother's grave. However, he rapidly becomes involved in a rescue operation, after Raasta, the niece of his childhood friend Bile, has been kidnapped. Farah describes this “murky present” (113) of warfare by employing the rich imaginary of *The Divine Comedy* as the primary intertextual source to portray Jeebleh's journey through Mogadishu, which can be considered a secularized version of Hell. In order to examine the intertwined practices of subversion, simplification, allusions and re-contextualization, I suggest looking at the first four epigraphic quotations from Dante's *Inferno* placed before Part 1. The first is made up of the lines 1–3 of Canto III (*Links* 1):

Through me the way into the suffering city,  
Through me the way to the eternal pain,  
Through me the way that runs among the lost.

These words are engraved on the gate of Hell, as they appear to Dante the pilgrim and the Latin poet Virgil, his reliable and sage guide through the netherworld and the embodiment of reason (Alighieri XXII). In Part 1, Jeebleh is represented at the beginning of his journey, as he has just landed on an airstrip nearby Mogadishu and waits for a lift to the city. The first Dantean allusion is suggested by Jeebleh himself, who refers to the capital of Somalia (written with the Italian spelling Mogadiscio) as “a place of sorrow” and as “the city of death”, directly rephrasing Dante (*Links* 5, 70).

Farah then stretches another allusion when introducing the character of Af-Laawe, who appears as a shadow, like Virgil when he materializes in the first meeting with the pilgrim (*Links* 4; Moolla 158). Jeebleh himself supports this allusion further by noticing that Af-Laawe's name means “the one with no mouth” and that, “to a Dante scholar” it “might allude to the *Inferno*” (*Links* 23). However, the latter correspondence remains obscure. As in the case of the metaphors of the ship and the house, Dante is used by Jeebleh almost inaccurately or without precise references. This imprecision supports the fact that Farah is not interested in a philological rewriting of the *Comedy*, and that Jeebleh himself uses Dante's lines to describe the Somali context loosely. Mari suggests that, in fact, Af-Laawe represents the “negative parody” of Virgil and that his name refers to the dictator, Muhammed Siyad Barre, whose nickname was Afweyne (Big mouth) (104). However, starting from this interpretation, a reader who is familiar with the poem may spot another similarity, namely, that between Af-Laawe and Charon, the mythological boatman who ferries souls across the river Acheron. As in the *Comedy*, Af-Laawe does not drive Jeebleh to the city and he only manages to organize a lift for him, similar to Charon's role as psychopomp, who withholds from Dante, being a living body, a trip in his boat. In the poem, the crossing of the river Acheron is left undescribed, since Dante faints, waking up on the other side, at the beginning of the next *canto*. The comparison between the mythological ferryman and Af-Laawe is also reinforced, as the latter is presented as transporting the corpse of a ten-year-old boy, senselessly murdered at the airport, in his funeral vehicle (*Links* 18).

The same uncanny resemblance and degree of uncertainty also affect the analogy with Virgil. In fact, the latter has no direct equivalent in *Links*. Since no one can be trusted, because lies are the norm in a city where friendship, family, loyalty, betrayal, violence and hatred are complex terms, Jeebleh cannot be wisely guided through Mogadishu. Besides, “distrust was the order of the day, and everyone was suspicious of everybody else” (51). The ubiquitous presence of conspiracy and machination suggests one of the causes at the heart of the civil war: “the betrayal of one Somali by another” (Moolla 159). The last quotation of the epigraph further buttresses the cloak and dagger background of the novel: “They said he was a liar and father of lies.” Dante, in Canto XXIII (line 144), employs this single-line periphrasis to describe Lucifer, but Farah discards the context of the *canto* and uses the fallen angel as a benchmark to refer to the former dictator Siyad Barre. As well as Lucifer, who is not mentioned

in that line, Barre is a *presentia in absentia*, since his role and legacy are only implied (Mari 104). However, Farah shows that the dichotomy between good and evil, defined in the Comedy according to the Christian more code, does not subsist in the novel. Indeed, *Links* suggests that the characters are an amalgam of evil and good, polarized in two extremes: the antagonist warlord Caloosha, described as an evil monster, and Raasta, the miracle child. Bile himself—regarded as of the most reliable character—is suspected of murdering and robbing, thus spoiling his reputation as being a trustworthy person (*Links* 6–7).

The ethical framework in which Dante's Hell is inscribed, quite the reverse, is a rigid theological and philosophical scheme that sets the normative moral code to regulate how sinners should be punished. In *Links*, instead, whether Jeebleh explicitly places betrayal in the foreground to describe his fellow Somalis' behavior, Farah makes him a liar and a traitor in the first place. Jeebleh tells half-truths to his wife in New York regarding his business in Mogadishu (*Links* 178); Caloosha, the antagonist, repetitively calls him a liar (102) and implies that Jeebleh's mother may have died thinking him a traitor (237); finally, he "wouldn't hesitate to lie if he believed that by doing so he might serve a higher purpose" (48). This latter idea leads him, in the end, to even justify violence for the sake of justice (332). Farah then dramatizes how Jeebleh becomes progressively involved in the social and moral codes of the civil war, so that, "paradoxically, the quest for justice draws him closer and closer to the Devil" (Moolla 123). On the contrary, Dante's gradual proximity to the pit of Hell, where Lucifer dwells, does not correspond with his resulting moral corruption, since the poem allegorically represents the soul's journey towards God. This attention placed on the human aspect, rather than on the dogmatic feature that underpins the poem, is retrieved in the epigraphic quotation from Canto III:

For we have reached the place ...  
where you will see the miserable people  
those who have lost the good of the intellect.

These lines (16–18) re-contextualize the lost souls of Hell as the inhabitants of Mogadishu, thus acquiring the function of "commenting on the *text*, whose meaning it indirectly specifies or emphasises" (*Paratexts* 157). Jeebleh himself, rephrasing Dante's words and stressing the intratextual references, describes his fellow Somalis as "dwelling in terrible misery" and as people who have lost their ability to "remain in touch with their inner selves" (*Links* 15, 70). The latter description paraphrases the word "intellect", but, again, Farah recontextualizes the term, distancing it from Dante's meaning: while, in the tercet, "intellect" means God or the Supreme Good (Sapegno 31), in the novel it denotes the capacity to choose between right or wrong, good or evil. The harsh judgement made by Jeebleh about Mogadishans further shrinks the spectrum of human feelings and reduces the inhabitants, due to the cruelty of the civil war, into non-human beings who, "living in such vile conditions, were bound to lose touch with their own humanity" (*Links* 201).

The third and last quotation of Part I, from *Inferno* X, further underscores the symbolic association between the sinners' souls and the people of Mogadishu:

"Your accent makes it clear that you belong  
among the natives of the noble city ..."  
My guide—his hands encouraging and quick-thrust me between the sepulchers toward him  
Saying ... "Who were your ancestors?"

Farah assembles the tercets himself by accurately choosing the lines of Canto X (25–6; 37–9; 42) more suitable to highlight Jeebleh's struggle with his identity. To better elucidate this strong intertextual link, the more general discursive structure of Canto X should be considered.

Dante and Virgil stand in the sixth circle, where open tombs engulfed by flames surround them. Here lie the heretics, meaning by heresy the "self-separation from that with which we should be connected (city, God, family, friends)" (Barolini, "Inferno 10"). This explanation echoes Jeebleh's expression referring to the inhabitants of Mogadishu, who lost the ability to live according to the rules of the society, and "showed little or no kindness to one another" (*Links* 201). In this regard, Farah relies on the translation "noble city" for "*nobil patria*" (noble homeland), overturning Dante's generic allusion into an explicit reference to the urban context. Mogadishans have restored ill-fated clan logics, and everyone has become suspicious of friendship, due to the primary importance assumed by blood affiliation. They "care[d] little about one another" and are affected by an "incurable apathy", thus stressing that, according to Jeebleh's point of view, Mogadishans are unable to either recognize or under-



stand their fellows' sorrow (*Links* 237). Correspondingly, when in Canto X Dante stages a meeting with Farinata and Cavalcante de Cavalcanti, the two souls are described as self-centered and ignorant of each other's suffering (Musa 85). Concerning the epigraph and the dialogue with Farinata (the "him" in the quotation, a member of a noble family and a military leader of the Ghibellines), Farah transfers the meeting into the new context. In the *Comedy*, the meeting with Farinata allows Dante the poet to stage his affection for his place of origin, doomed by the conflict between the factions of White and Black Guelphs, the former supporting the Pope and the latter opposed to his influence. After the Guelphs defeated the Ghibellines, they began infighting. Dante was among the supporters of the White faction, thus causing his exile after the Black Guelphs took control of Florence. Similarly, Farah dramatizes Jeebleh's affection and nostalgia towards the cosmopolitan Mogadishu of the 1970s (*Links* 14, 35), but he shares with Dante the same distress and disillusionment at the destruction of the city due to fratricidal conflict. Farinata recognizes Dante the pilgrim thanks to his "accent", thus introducing another primary theme of *Links*, namely language.

Language, both in *Inferno* X and in *Links*, may be considered as a "weapon of choice" that can prevent any form of dialogue and hinder any real possibility of conversation (Barolini, "Inferno 10"). This negative feature stands out in the novel since Jeebleh often finds himself in the condition of being misunderstood, misinterpreted or even not listened to at all. For example, at the very beginning, he is overcome by the almost monologic conversation he holds with a driver nicknamed Major; the latter persistently questions Jeebleh's identity and overpoweringly articulates his opinions, while the protagonist tries to avoid answering him and remains "silent and sullen" (*Links* 26). Moreover, Jeebleh has difficulty in translating the Somali expression *dagaalka sokeeye* (killing an intimate) from his native tongue into English (137–8). He also struggles with the use of Somali pronouns, trapped in the uncertainty between "we" and "they" to denote Somalis in general or clans, respectively (*Links* 12, 41, 219). However, the most suitable example to clarify the relationship between "accent" and "belonging" can be retrieved in the words of Bile, Jeebleh's oldest friend:

In Somalia the civil war then was *language* [...] At one point, a couple of armed men flagged me down, and one of them asked, "Yaad tahay?" I hadn't realized that the old way of answering the question "Who are you?" was no longer valid. Now the answer universally given to "Who are you?" referred to the identity of your clan family, your bloody identity! (*Links* 119)

Bile's statement, after experiencing seven years of imprisonment because of his opposition to Barre's dictatorship, builds a cross-cultural and multilingual link between the question in the last line of the quotation from *Inferno* X: "Chi fuor li maggior tui?" (Who were your ancestors?) and the Somali sentence "Yaad tahay?" (Who are you?) as understood by Bile during the civil war. The puzzling question, as bewildering as the resulting strenuous quest for a proper answer, represents one of the key themes of the novel, since it concentrates the subject of clannism as tackled and deconstructed by Farah in *Links* (Mari 105). Indeed, Jeebleh, who feels "no clan-based loyalty himself—in fact, the whole idea revolted and angered him" (*Links* 11), cannot avoid being questioned about his origin by other characters, such as Major, Af-Laawe, his antagonist Caloosha, and by clan elders. In his only consultation with them, Jeebleh explicitly clarifies his opinion "of distrust of clan", continuously reiterated throughout the whole novel (Dodgson-Katiyo 70). Jeebleh's repulsion by clannism isolates him from the community and his fellow Somalis, recurrently described as assembled in crowds or mobs (*Links* 16, 96, 117, 130, 135, 195–200). As Dante the pilgrim is the only living body among the souls who often gather together in groups or flocks, Jeebleh is depicted as the only one who stands out from the crowd. This same difference is ironically alluded to in *Links*: "What distinguished [Jeebleh] from the men in the crowd, apart from the fact that he had neither a club nor a firearm, was that they were all wearing sarongs. He had on trousers" (196). Also, the protagonist's name suggests his singularity, meaning "the one with pockets" (95). This distinctive feature, which underlines the physical dissimilarity of Jeebleh, also allusively foreshadows the incommunicability with his fellow Somalis.

The recurrent presence of crowds leads us to the first quotation of Part 2, assembled by Farah himself, taking lines 16, 19–20, 22–3 and 26 from Canto XIV (*Links* 147):

O vengeance of the Lord ...  
I saw so many flocks of naked souls,  
all weeping miserably ...  
Some lay upon the ground, flat on their backs;

some huddled in a crouch, and there they sat  
... supine in punishment.

In the *Comedy*, Dante and Virgil are in the third ring of the seventh circle, and the groups of souls gathered in flocks are those guilty of the three kinds of violence against God: the blasphemers lie on their backs; the usurers are crouching and the sodomites, omitted in the quotations, ceaselessly wander (Musa 119). Again, this quotation shows that Farah does not retrieve the moral judgment placed upon the souls, since the original reference to the sins is entirely removed. The focus is instead placed on the wretched human conditions, rather than on the divine *contrappasso*.

Similarly, the quotation before Part 2, taken from Canto XXIV (lines 88–93), underlines the same condition achieving a universalizing significance:

With all of Ethiopia  
or all the land that borders the Red Sea—  
so many, such malignant, pestilences.  
Among this cruel and depressing swarm,  
ran people who were naked, terrified,  
with no hope of a refuge or a curse. (*Links* 147)

Canto XXIV deals with the seventh *bolgia*, a deep, narrow, concentric ditch or trench where thieves dwell, and Dante's allusion to Ethiopia is a reference to the significant number of serpents which inhabits the seventh *bolgia*—so many to overcome the number of snakes that live in the Ethiopian desert. Farah omits this hyperbole and manipulates the tercet to open up the novel's geopolitical context. Accordingly, he modifies the original last line ("with no hope of a hole or heliotrope") so to remove completely any reference to the snakes and the heliotrope, a supposed magical stone that could cure one from a snake's venom and give invisibility (Sapegno 270). Thus, the "land that borders the Red Sea" should be re-contextualized and understood, instead of Arabia, as Somalia, which engaged with Ethiopia an abiding territorial and political dispute over the Ogaden region, a territory comprising the eastern portion of Ethiopia predominantly populated by Somalis. The "people who were naked, terrified" represent, rather than Dantean thieves, the countless displaced people of that region, who have been experiencing war for decades and nowadays have "no hope of a refuge". Moreover, Farah aims to a more pragmatic reterritorialization of the Ogaden region by subverting the Orientalizing denotation that informs Dante's description (Alighieri 718).

While this example illustrates Farah's re-contextualization of *Inferno*, the closing lines of Chapter 23, the last before Part 3, shows the employment of an intertextual allusion unrelated to the epigraphs. The chapter ends with a sentence that subtly paraphrases lines 141–2 of *Inferno* V: "*Io venni men così com'io morisse / E caddi come corpo morto cade*" (I fainted as if I had met my death / And then I fell as a dead body falls). Farah rewrites the lines describing Jeebleh while collapsing: "Finally he fell, forehead first, as though he were dead" (*Links* 241). It should also be noted that Jeebleh often faints, much like Dante the pilgrim during his journey through Hell. In the case of *Inferno*, Dante relates the loss of consciousness in response to terrifying, distressing or overwhelming situations. This shared physiological response between Jeebleh and Dante the pilgrim brings the comparison between the two characters to the fore along the intertextual axis and, moreover, suggests the attempts by Farah to deflate the sensationalism of the representations of war as conveyed by the mass media. The motif of fainting, therefore, allows Farah to emphasize his character's humanity and to reflect on the traumatic effect of violence unfolding an anti-sensationalist narrative (Mzali 98).

The abrupt and anticlimactic conclusion of Chapter 23 leads the reader to the quotation before Part 3, in which the lines from Canto XI (37–8; 40–1; 52–4) refer again to the inhabitants of Mogadishu in terms of a negative connotation:

... Murderers and those who strike in malice,  
as well as plunderers and robbers ...  
A man can set violent hands against  
himself or his belongings ...  
Now fraud, that eats away at every conscience,  
is practiced by a man against another  
who trusts in him, or one who has no trust. (*Links* 243)

The fact that Farah himself—once again—assembled the terset, allowing the choice of the more relevant images to suit the novel's thematic spectrum, further supports the idea that the context in which Virgil exposes the structure of Hell is not relevant for the novel. Instead, the quotation fosters an all-embracing and evocative description of Mogadishians, without relating them to sins and punishments. Again, the symbolical parallel is drawn upon persons and objects rather than deities, since the sinners who have been violent against God are omitted. The word “belongings”, in this case, acquires particular importance concerning the role of private property in *Links*. As Farah highlights, private houses, in particular, embody a critical problem in Mogadishu, where brutal expropriations and unlawful dispossession are means to achieve power and to establish one's control over an urban area or neighborhood. In terms of this perspective, the place that Bile and Seamus call “The Refuge” gains symbolical meaning, becoming an object, or a *bene* (a material good), which needs protection from depredation and human violence, “a place of peace and communal harmony” (*Links* 332).

Afterwards, Dante mentions fraud, which he relates to reason because of its premeditation and purpose to betray both friends and strangers (Sapegno 125). As already highlighted, during his stay in Mogadishu, Jeebleh seems to be surrounded by fraudulent sinners, as described in the last two lines of the quotation. Due to an overall situation of fraud, betrayal and half-truths, everyone should be looked at with suspicion, thus fostering the presence through the whole novel of a leitmotiv of mistrust. Whether the quotation mentioned above from Canto XI refers metaphorically to the inhabitants of Mogadishu as suggested through the whole novel, the following quote from *Inferno* XXVIII (lines 1–6) may be read, specifically, in relation to Chapter 26. The latter, as well as the canto, is committed to unfold the issue of how to represent horror (Sapegno 308):

Who, even with untrammelled words and many  
attempts at telling, ever could recount  
in full the blood and wounds that I now saw?  
Each tongue that tried would certainly fall short  
because the shallowness of both our speech  
and intellect cannot contain so much.

This acknowledgement of being unable to describe exhaustively “the blood and wounds” bonds both Jeebleh and the pilgrim, “overwhelmed by the sight of mutilated, bloody shades” (Musa XXIX). Correspondingly, Chapter 26 tells of one of the crudest episodes of the novel, namely the account of the brutal American military intervention that occurred in 1993, culminating in the Battle of Mogadishu, which saw the downing of two helicopters and several casualties among the Somalis. The chapter is a retelling of the incident from Somalis' point of view, as both a counter-discourse to the dominant American narrative (Bystrom 413; Myers 138–9) and a counter-representation to that, mono-logic and sensationalistic, of the media (Mzali 96–8). The lines in the epigraph, which appear at the beginning of the *canto*, resonate in the very last part of Chapter 26 of the novel. Jeebleh plays the role of the listener, allowing two witnesses of the event to tell—like the souls of Hell revealing Dante their story—how the “horrific terror” occurred when the two Black Hawk helicopters were downed (*Links* 275). A five-and-a-half-year-old girl, daughter of the witness, suffered from damaged hearing because of the cacophonous noise of the helicopter, thus preventing her from being able to speak again (*Links* 272–3). The rotating blades and their razor-sharp noise resemble the “blade of the devil's sword” in Canto XXVIII. Farah describes Jeebleh in the act of visualizing the episode as if he becomes himself a witness of the event: “Jeebleh imagined the boy”; “Jeebleh was able to imagine” and he “could hear the sound in his own mind”. However, Farah also deflates the sensationalism of the baleful account by preventing Jeebleh from imagining it: “Jeebleh stared, dumbfounded, unable to imagine the terror” (*Links* 275). In this case, therefore, the epigraph underscores the diegetic bond that connects Jeebleh to Dante, both unable to describe and imagine the horror.

The Epilogue further highlights this analogy, when the protagonist draws his conclusion upon the political view that underpins the *Comedy* and states that “his own story lay in a tarry of other's people tales, each with its own Dantean complexity” (331). This analogy encourages the comparison with the civil war that has been consuming Florence. In Mogadishu as well, the civil war is fought between groups who share the same religion, Islam, (as Catholicism linked the White and Black Guelphs in Florence), and who share the same language and place of abode. For Dante, the pope and the members of the Church were corrupted and immoral, seeking temporal power; political leaders, as well, were interested in their goods while ignoring their people's needs. Dante's conception of the correct politics implies that the church's sole mission should be to take care of religious matters rather than

secular ones. In his times, both the emperor and the pope were neglecting their duties, resulting in the moral and political disorder he witnessed (Musa 162). Accordingly, Jeebleh seems to embrace this overall interpretation of Dante, since both religion and politics are accountable for the current hard reality of Somalia. Farah, by considering religion as one of the causes of the civil war, proposes a universalizing comparison between two usually antithetical cultural systems. In *Links*, indeed, the faults that Dante ascribes to the religious leaders of Christianity are re-centered onto the religious leaders of Islam, who share with the former the same longing for the temporal power to the detriment of transcendental, or spiritual, concerns. Religious and clan elders are to be blamed for the collapse of the state and the betrayal of their fellow Muslim Somalis, since they “were in cahoots with a cabal of warlords to share the gain they could make out of ordinary’s people miseries” (*Links* 331). Jeebleh’s understanding of the Somali context with regard to religion is then built upon Dante’s ideas about religion, and the political role of the Church, as mentioned above, and supported in the Epilogue.

However, when *Links* concludes, the plot seems to lack a proper denouement, thus suggesting a relevant difference between the poem and the novel. The central events of the story—the kidnapping, the following release of Bile’s niece, and the death of his arch-enemy Caloosha—happen without Jeebleh being present. The protagonist, furthermore, looks less resolute than after his arrival, in a sort of inverse trajectory to that of Dante the pilgrim. Accordingly, the line that rapidly closes the last quotation of the novel, from Canto XX (124–6; 130), matches the quickness of Jeebleh’s departure from Mogadishu: “Jeebleh quit Mogadiscio the following morning (*Links* 334):

But let us go; Cain with his thorns already  
is at the border of both hemispheres  
and there, below Seville, touches the sea.  
... Meanwhile we journeyed.

The extensive astronomical periphrasis used by Dante to express the moment of sunrise, when the moon reaches the horizon and is about to descend, parallels the final lines of *Links*: “He left as soon as he sensed the sun intruding on the horizon of his mind” (*Links* 334). Moreover, the periphrasis from Canto XX is used to express 6 a.m. (Musa 171), and the closing lines of *Links* show that the departure of Jeebleh occurred at the same time. After the days spent in Mogadishu, Jeebleh leaves as he senses the sun shining and “before the mist in his mind cleared” (*Links* 334). The enigmatic closing lines foster the characteristic indeterminacy of the novel and deflate the “classic denouncement [...] where the narrative ascribes deeds to doers” (Mzali 100). At the very end of the story, Jeebleh appears confused and insecure, as Dante’s pilgrim at the beginning of his journey. In this sense, Farah subverts the incipit of the *Comedy* by representing his protagonist as “lost, unable or unwilling to decide which road to follow” (as the pilgrim “had lost the path that does not stray”) (333). It seems that, in the end, Jeebleh is in need for a guide, a role that this time is performed by Dajaal, who offers to accompany him, hold him by the elbow, and show him the way. Like Dante with Virgil, Jeebleh cannot but “silently follow Dajaal” (333).

## Conclusion

The analysis has highlighted the complex intertextual interplay at work in the novel *Links*. By providing a close cross-reading of both the *Comedy* and *Links* and an investigation of the practices of re-contextualization, subversion and allusions, the article has underscored the both opposing and converging tendencies between the two texts. In doing so, this study wishes to open up to potential future analysis along the comparative axis between Farah and other (modern, postmodern or postcolonial) authors who have engaged with Dante’s *oeuvre*. As well, it may suggest moving Italian studies outside national borders, so as to retrieve the several literary influences that Italian literature has affected across the globe and, especially, in postcolonial contexts. Unfortunately, the almost total absence of studies about Farah in the field of Italian studies is remarkable, highlighting the latter’s unwillingness to engage with postcolonial theory or grasp its relevance for contemporary writing in Italian and Italian influenced writing in a more world-wide context.

The article has shown how re-contextualization can produce a dialogue between a canonized work of literature such as the *Comedy* and a new present-day context. In this particular case, the civil-war and hell-like scenario of the 1990s Mogadishu trigger a fruitful comparison with both the representation of the suffering sinners in the netherworld, as imagined by Dante, and with the city of Florence, consumed by infighting, in the fourteenth century. This link between the poem and the novel, as shown, opens up to several interpretations and further com-

parative readings, due to the breadth of allusions, references and images drawn into the novel from the *Comedy*. Among them, the special relationship between the narrator and the author, as well as between the paratext and the text, has been pivotal to show how intertextual practices operate in *Links*.

Farah decontextualizes the poem, omitting any references to its allegorical, historical, cultural and theological specificity, and then re-contextualizes it as a diegetic device to support the protagonist's understanding of the Somali conflict. The magnitude and universal scope of the *Comedy* is then both retrieved and recreated to position local Somali infighting on a wider cultural scale. This process, substantially achieved through the intertextual interplay between the two texts, allows Farah to move the context of Somalia from the periphery—where it is usually relegated—to the center of both literary and historical dynamics. However, the transcultural and transnational dialogue between the two texts, as shown, is also disturbed, as Farah implies the need for an adaptation and a re-contextualization. Accordingly, he assembles several tercets from *Inferno* by himself, as to underscore the significant influence of Dante's poem but, at the same time, to point out its incommensurability.

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## A nation of narratives: *Soomaalinimo* and the Somali novel Christopher Fotheringham

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

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

### Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **The Somali novel and the nation**

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

### **The Somali poetic tradition and the diasporic novel**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Landscape and loss in novels of the Somali diaspora**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Conclusion

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

## Notes

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

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

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## Anxiety and influence in Nuruddin Farah and younger Somali writers

Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo

### Anxiety and influence in Nuruddin Farah and younger Somali writers

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup> 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 exorcise 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 1 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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## Male ‘Somaliness’ in diasporic contexts: Somali authors’ evaluative evocations

Annie Gagiano


### Male ‘Somaliness’ in diasporic contexts: Somali authors’ evaluative evocations

Addressing five texts by four Somali authors—Nuruiddin Farah’s *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (2000) and *North of Dawn* (2018) in juxtaposition with three novels by female Somali authors, i.e. Safi Abdi’s *Offspring of Paradise* (2003), Cristina Ali Farah’s *Little Mother* (2011; Italian original 2007) and Igiaba Scego’s *Adua* (English translation 2017, Italian original 2015)—this article assesses the work these texts do to enhance contemporary understanding of the complex, evolving phenomenon that is the diasporic Somali presence in Western Europe, focusing on Somali men. How do the authors portray and (implicitly or overtly) evaluate how diasporic male Somalis cope in foreign, non-Muslim and culturally Western environments—against the backdrop of Somalia’s state collapse and social disintegration? Somali men’s experiences have generally been given less attention than those of their female counterparts, hence the focus here on male-gendered characters. This focus serves to link the two Nuruiddin Farah texts and the three novels by Somali women—a textual grouping and focus not previously attempted in critical studies of Farah’s work. This brief essay assesses the five texts’ respective combinations of evaluative evocation, affective intensity and epistemological detail, approaching these works as complementing social science researchers’ efforts in depicting diasporic Somali men’s lives. By deepening understanding of the impact of the diaspora on individual Somali men, the five texts convey significant psychological, social and moral insights into lives of Somali men in foreign contexts. **Keywords:** Somali men, diaspora, affective intensity, evaluative evocation.

Diaspora and its adjunct states—such as exile, refugee/ism and (most recently) placelessness—are among the most intensively debated conditions of our time.<sup>1</sup> The diaspora of an estimated two million Somalis from their homeland under the pressures of violent mayhem and state collapse in 1991 (and since) has been approached from a number of contexts. Studies by academic authors from perspectives including cultural studies, masculinity or gender studies, broad literary or African studies, anthropology, psychology, refugee/diaspora or postcolonial studies have been added to historical studies (such as Mark Bradbury and Sally Healey’s article “Endless war: a brief history of the Somali conflict”). The ‘betweenness’ or ‘lostness’ so characteristic of at least the initial stages (but often lingering effects) of national-cultural displacement cannot be readily captured in a category such as ‘postcolonial’; as Erin Glanville writes, the “theoretical intersection between diaspora and postcolonialism hinges on discussions of identity”; she remarks on “diaspora’s awkward categorization as a geographical subset of postcolonial studies” (128). Alternative terms such as ‘transnational’ or ‘postnational’ are equally unsatisfactory—especially as applied to Somalis, who (it seems) generally continue to identify in terms of a Somali affiliation of some kind.<sup>2</sup> In an interview Nuruiddin Farah stated: “[A]s a Somali I do reside in my Somaliness” (“Nuruiddin Farah” 188); while one of Cristina Ali Farah’s central characters, in the opening words of *Little Mother*, reiterates the proud claim of a Somali poet: “Soomaali baan ahay” meaning “I am Somali”—from a “1977 poem by Cabduulaqaadir Xirsi Siyaad, also known as ‘Yamyam’” (*Little Mother* 1). However, it remains necessary (in the words of Stuart Hall) to recognize “identity as constituted, not outside but within representation” (236). Diasporic Somalis, men in particular, have acquired a highly unappealing ‘image’—both among fellow Somalis (mainly women) and in the international media. For those emerging from the extremely violent civil war, itself brought about by tyrannical oppression, followed by bloody postwar mayhem and social breakdown—in all of which men were the dominant and directing participants—adapting to Western European dispensations where this negative image of Somali savagery prevails, has proved difficult. Perceptions or experiences of racism and other forms of social contempt

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towards Somalis in turn provoke resentment against host societies—as a number of social science studies show.<sup>3</sup> Even mistakenly perceived contempt affects victims (such as members of immigrant minorities): “the insult is received, the slight acknowledged, [...] and the body/mind mobilizes its destructive and devious response in cavernous interiors” (Stokes qtd in Fangen 71). As Paul Zeleza writes: “African immigrants pay a cultural tax, the devaluation of their human capital in a society where things African are routinely negatively stereotyped and despised” (41). While a “Somali story in the West” may be “an emerging [...] narrative”, it remains the case (as both social science studies and literary works by Somali writers reiterate—if not in the same terminology or style) that “diasporic tensions” tend to “racialize black bodies against hegemonic whiteness” (Langellier 89, 69).

For this Nuruddin Farah theme issue, the present article foregrounds firstly his path-breaking work *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (2000) and secondly his recent novel, *North of Dawn* (2018), in both of which there is greater concentration on experiences and perceptions of Somali men (than those of women) in diasporic contexts. The next part of the article considers Safi Abdi’s *Offspring of Paradise* (2003), Cristina Ali Farah’s *Little Mother* (2011 translation) and Igiaba Scego’s *Adua* (2017 translation) for their perspectives on Somali men also located in various Western European societies, to complete this exercise in “relational comparison” (Shih 431). Shih remarks pertinently that “world literary cartographies can be about the ways in which literary texts from different parts of the world relate to each other as seen through the lens of a specific [...] set of problematics” (434). While it has been noted that “research concerning the situation of Somali men seems scarce in comparison with the well-documented and easily accessible data regarding Somali refugee women” (Svenberg, Mattson and Skott 286), a few good studies by scholars in social sciences making points contextually informative vis-à-vis the literary authors’ works are available. One such is the article by Nauja Kleist, referring inter alia to “[Somali] men’s difficulties” resulting from “a transfer of male authority to ‘the system’—various welfare state institutions—reflecting *female empowerment and male misrecognition*” (187, emphasis added)—the point highlighted here is frequently reiterated, e.g. by researchers Fangen (87) and Svenberg, Mattson and Skott (286).<sup>4</sup>

In attempting to delineate the particular, complementary perspectives provided by literary authors, the article addresses their affective intensity and powerfully evocative portrayal by means of Maria Pia Lara’s concept of “illocutionary force” (6, 19, 34): a term she employs to refer to writing that is powerfully moving (emotionally) and achieves vivid characterization and contextualization to “seek a connection with the interests of others” (74). In short, such writing persuades readers to feel concerned about and to recognize the *public* interest (see her full title) of the topic. Lara suggests that “as agents of cultural contact, narratives work across the boundaries of their own culture, as well as of those cultures that incorporate them” (152)—the latter point especially pertinent to narrative portrayals of persons from minority cultures within diasporic contexts. A political philosopher, Lara notes the effort required to achieve cultural boundary-crossing; she writes that “recognition must come first as a struggle over *re-signifying the spaces of appearance*” (143 emphasis added).

In his 1998 essay “A Country in Exile”, Nuruddin Farah stated that he “developed [his] writing skills in the crucible of nostalgia” at a time preceding the “flood of Somalis [...] seeking [...] refuge somewhere, anywhere!” (713). The important text suggestively titled *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* that appeared two years later proves Farah’s shift from “nostalgia” to a position of publicly expressed concern for refugee Somalis and the effort he made in using his literary skills to communicate not only his conversations with compatriots in different Western European countries, but his assessments of their situations and his reflections about the significance of what had happened to them (and to himself) in Somalia and in the diaspora. The text is dedicated “To Somalis, whoever and wherever they are” and to the memory of a dear friend. It is a deeply moving document, written under the sign of a shared loss, despite the author’s often hard-headed questions and the fierce moral and political criticism that he interweaves with renditions of testimonies of suffering imbued with unspoken compassion. Initial interviews (evoked in the next sentence and the paragraph below) took place in Kenya. Sometimes Farah’s bare reporting—e.g. of a fifty-year-old man describing his own torture, in which the thought of “his female folk, all raped, including his four-year-old granddaughter” (11)—is the most appropriate way of referring to atrocities.

The “illocutionary force” in one dignified middle-aged man’s words enables Farah (and the reader) to grasp the particular kind of mayhem that overtook civilized life in the formerly cosmopolitan capital city, Mogadishu, and why there was no choice but to flee from there. The interviewee describes “violence-as-a-spectacle”, “a substitute for elusive power” and a manifestation of “power-greed, pure and simple” that “turned [the city] into an abattoir” (16, 17). Farah notes elsewhere in *Yesterday, Tomorrow* that years earlier (in 1978) when he and his parental family were forced to evacuate their home in the Ogaden region, Mogadishu had been their “new place

of refuge” where they could “reconstitute [their] identities from an idealism [rooted in a ‘newly’ developed] sense of nationalism” (50)—in stark contrast with how conditions in the city impinged on other Somalis in the 1990s. Evoking the somatic response of an interviewee, Farah describes how in “the pain of fresh memory [...] his whole body began to tremble”, registering “an anger fiercer” than his “pain” (18). The man’s eight-year-old niece, a rape victim whose parents were murdered in her sight, is with him; the girl is speech-impaired. Farah witnesses the “well of tears” expressing this man’s “sorrow”—himself struck silent. By contrast, a former member of one of the youth gangs that roamed Mogadishu boasts that he has “no regrets” for the murders and mutilations “of men and women” and horrific “humiliat[ion] of minors” that he committed. Safi Abdi has a comparable character—incongruously named “Little Hirsi” (198)—who calmly admits to “nine years of *shaitanic* merriment” (devilish jollification) during this time.

Another clear contrast between admirable and despicable attitudes among diasporic Somalis features in the seventh chapter of *Yesterday, Tomorrow* (66–76), contrasting the enterprise, self-sacrifice and familially responsible conduct of an educated Somali woman who, in Italy, works in house-keeping, with that of her four unemployed, “lie-abed” brothers (71) whom she accommodates in the flat she rents. For each of her six siblings’ smuggled transfer from Somalia she paid 3,000 dollars from her savings, yet the men refuse to do “degrading” paid housework to contribute to their upkeep. No wonder the sister (a former school headmistress) refers to her brothers and others like them (along with her female friends) as “exploiters, liars lazybones” (76). When she rebukes her brothers for “the mess they had created” (70) in her flat, readers recall an older Somali man’s reference to post-civil war Somalia as a “tragic mess” (14). Evident authorial disapproval of such parasitical male conduct in young men contrasts with seemingly more “forgiving” attitudes permeating researchers’ accounts of male status loss in the Somali diaspora. Farah’s disdain is probably understandable in terms of his own willingness to ‘reinvent’ himself when it was no longer possible for him to return to Somalia and he found himself stranded (penniless) in Italy, working in all sorts of employment to pay his keep, like other interviewed Somali men prepared to work in lowly jobs in contrast with former high status employment in Somalia, *also* contrasting with the conduct of “layabout” men—mainly younger, uneducated and unemployed, even at home. Another older man concerned with maintaining “tradition” (87) insists that although General Muhammed Siyad Barre was indeed “an evil dictator”, responsibility for the country’s ruin lies with the entire Somali people, “since we, as a nation, did not safeguard our sense of nobleness” (88). Another man’s acceptance of communal responsibility (he “runs a mosque principally for the Italian Somali community” in his “spare time” 91) contrasts with the sinister, predatory figure of Imam Yasiin in *North of Dawn*, but resembles the devout, humane leader Abdirahman in Abdi’s *Offspring of Paradise*.<sup>5</sup>

What has been termed the “psychic loss” (Gagiano, “Surveying the contours of ‘a country in exile’: Nuruddin Farah’s Somalia” 259) suffered by Somali refugees is illustrated in the example of “an elderly Somali” whom Farah (*Yesterday* 167) describes as “a pillar of his community”. The man came to Sweden as “the head of a family”, experiencing his newly low status and the endless bureaucratic delays of being ‘processed’ into the local system as “very, very embarrassing and difficult”; “hostile to one’s honour” and “destr[uctive to] one’s soul”—only to find himself later “a shooting target [for Swedish] youths”. The police, to whom he reported the pot shot, never returned his call. Another of Farah’s interlocutors does admit that “We Somalis have a penchant for attracting negative publicity, and act as though we were a nobility in exile” (174). Still, even though the Somali youths loitering in noisy groups at the stations are resented by the hardworking Swedes who know their subsistence is state-paid (they probably never worked in Somalia, either), Farah more forgivingly surmises that “they were busy, taming their sense of alienation, entombing their despair” (175). Compare Taageere, one of the three main narrators in Cristina Farah’s *Little Mother*, who does do lowly work abroad although he seldom keeps these jobs. In Sweden, the refugees are, in any case, not allowed to work without “personal numbers” (174), hard to obtain. The worst experiences to which Somali refugees in Sweden are subjected (described as “harsh”, “inhumane”, “claustrophobic” and even “subhuman”) are conditions in “camps” set up for refugees (175–8). Such experiences confirm the melancholic observation of a refugee who had been “one of Somalia’s well-known cineastes” (42): “a nation in distress is accorded no respect among other nations” (44).

Sadness permeates the lives of the Somali refugees so compellingly evoked in Farah’s text. In *Yesterday, Tomorrow* he over and over draws attention to the incurable sorrow particularly as felt by older men—thus pointing forward to Mugdi, the main narrator of *North of Dawn*, who “thinks of himself as a man born to grief” (13). Farah himself, contrastingly, asserts several times in the course of the earlier text that he is not a refugee, whom he defines as “a person who has lost the ability to express the fullness of his being”, since *as a writer* he “is no refugee”.

He has moreover taken on a great task—that of “keep[ing his] country alive by writing about it” (50). His “imaginative powers” have “afford[ed him] the privilege [of] creat[ing] another country” out of his “displacement”—the condition he admits sharing with his refugee compatriots (49). Farah has remained faithful to his “vow” to continue, despite obstacles, to write “about the destiny of the Somali nation” as “a Somali exile writing about Somali refugees” (127). He transforms “the deep depressions of an exile” through “creativity” (192–3). The profound caring Farah evinces for Somali refugees is unforgettably conveyed in *Yesterday, Tomorrow*; demonstrating Lara’s remark that “the aesthetic effect of ‘disclosure’ can provide a new way of understanding justice” (5).

Farah’s novel *North of Dawn* appeared 18 years after *Yesterday, Tomorrow* and evokes diasporic male Somali lives contrasting with those depicted in the earlier text. It is much closer to a single-voiced text than Farah’s usual literary practice, with the former Somali Ambassador Mugdi (living in Oslo) the dominant narrator. Unusually (for Farah), its female characters are quite sketchily presented. The title *North of Dawn* possibly alludes to the Nordic setting and the text’s muted, often gloomy tone. The fact of Islamic terrorism is the work’s context and preoccupation, centering on Somali men’s attitudes concerning this internationalized, shrouded war. *Yesterday, Tomorrow*’s main Dedication to *all Somalis* contrasts with *North of Dawn*’s to a single Somali victim—Farah’s sister Basra, “killed [in 2014] by Taliban terrorists” in Afghanistan. Linking directly with this is the novel’s opening sentence: “IN SOMALIA, THE BOMBS HAVE BEEN GOING OFF FOR MONTHS, ROADSIDE devices killing and maiming anyone unlucky enough to be in the vicinity” (1). Whether the [originally] capitalized opening line is a typesetting accident, or an intended effect required by the author, is unclear, but the shocking impact would be much the same if lower case lettering were used. The disgust evinced at the evidently indiscriminate nature of the killings is Mugdi’s, but aligns him in grief, fury and horror with the author and endows this expatriate male Somali’s voice (he is no refugee, though diasporic) with authority.<sup>6</sup> The novel is in my view the weaker for the extent to which this alignment corroborates a didactic purpose, whereas it makes the main character’s weaknesses and faults (and information gaps in Farah’s portrayal of him) difficult to interpret. Mugdi appears to have remained an ambassador for the tyrannical Barre government until 1988, but this association is not used to tarnish his image—contrasting with *Yesterday, Tomorrow*’s authorial exposure of former Barre government profiteers through probing questions and cutting comments.<sup>7</sup>

Mugdi and his Somali wife Gacalo (who works in a Government Department) live largely in isolation from other Somalis, with the exception of their dear friend Himmo and her three children. In her inconsolable mourning for their only son Dhaqaneh, who killed himself in a suicide bombing in Somalia, Gacalo insists on bringing her son’s widow and two stepchildren to Norway—an expensive and dubious plan. She goes an extra mile to fulfill her promise to Dhaqaneh—a section leader of the al-Shabaab terror group—that she would “look after” his family if he died. Mugdi opposes what he evidently foresees as an unwelcome, intrusive and risky disturbance to their somewhat placid lifestyle. Gacalo in the end kills herself, her grief seemingly intensified (125) by her realization that their son’s widow’s presence has seriously compromised them in her formerly unsuspected association with al-Shabaab terrorism. Mugdi goes on to a new life with a new (Norwegian) female partner. Despite occasionally indicating a (not terribly deep?) sense of carrying some responsibility for Dhaqaneh’s radicalization and stating “regret” (not guilt) at having partly blamed his wife for this (180), Mugdi’s general self-righteousness is unappealing. There is also a clear contrast between his kindly, tolerant and loving way of treating his step-grandson Naciim (who is perhaps ‘too good to be true’) and his either neglectful or puritanically disapproving (past) attitude towards his teenage son. Mugdi’s supportive role in Naciim’s life may be read as unconscious, belated compensation for his paternal failures with Dhaqaneh (177), for whom he admitted caring less than for his daughter Timiro (58). Especially revealing is Mugdi’s disquieting feeling that he “*should be sorrowing over [...] [a destroyed] Somalia*” *instead* of being “*concerned* about the death of a son or the arrival of a widow” (14, emphases added). The point is disquieting in that it is surely normal to care at least as much about one’s only son’s death as about one’s country’s ruin (and most people would care more about the loss of a child). Readers are left wondering why Mugdi has never “fully [...] shared” with Gacalo what exactly “happened between father and son” when he and Dhaqaneh had their final, furious quarrel before the latter conclusively left Norway. Dhaqaneh is likely at the back of Mugdi’s mind in the remark that “It has always disturbed Mugdi that Somalis in Norway tend to attract bad press, and seem relegated to the lowest rung on the economic ladder, unable to see beyond their ideological and religious constraints”, whereas “he feels certain that Naciim and his generation of fresh-faced ambitious young Somalis will change all that” (177).



Naciim's clearly approved emotional and intellectual growth in Norway; his appreciative and graceful adaptation to conditions in this country and fondness for his 'local' relatives, make him the next most fully portrayed male Somali in this novel (after his mentor, Mugdi). He is open-minded, eager to learn, sensitive, perceptive, intensely intelligent and impatient of ideological rigidities. While generally convincingly portrayed as a charming youngster, Farah occasionally overdoes Naciim's idealization (as one may see it)—as when the boy's enjoyment of his first Norwegian winter is described as "frenzied joy" (307) and when he makes a quite priggish speech to his mother about Somalia's once "good" people (when his mother was young) regressing into a state where "the weak are massacred with impunity." He tells her that Somalis "pay lip service to the [Islamic] faith [...] [and that this is] why the strife in our land rages on unabated" (349–50). The sentiments are indeed valid, but the voice is not Naciim's own, appearing ventriloquized.<sup>8</sup> The boy seems unmoved when seeing off his mother for probably the last time (admittedly she had endorsed his recent brutal, unjust flogging by Imam Yasiin), but even uncaring about his sister's grief at the parting—describing both of his closest female relatives dismissively as "these weepy women in all-black body tents" (367). Farah adds a kind of endorsing detail two pages on, when signs of the mother's probable absorption into al-Shabaab are reported to Mugdi by Naciim.

Little narrative space is allowed to evocations of Dhaqaneh. Since Mugdi's voice dominates the narrative, readers get few glimpses of him untinged by Mugdi's detestation of his son's ultimate ideological choices and acts and his earlier disapproval. Quite innocuous and typical teenage behavior that raise no eyebrow with Mugdi in Naciim, are evoked as repellent in his son (e.g. watching pornography, and fighting back when attacked by neo-Nazi gang members). Interestingly, Naciim speaks out to describe Dhaqaneh angrily stopping desecration of "enemy" (non-Muslim) remains in Mogadishu—even at a dinner-table in Norway where members of al-Shabaab (which Dhaqaneh had joined) are referred to as "barbarians" (179). In contrast with Imam Yasiin—who clearly took sadistic pleasure in administering fifty lashes to Naciim in unjust chastisement—the boy recalls only "smacks" from his stepfather (53) to discipline his boyhood transgressions, while it was Dhaqaneh who taught him chess and a love of reading. He also had no inkling that (his stepfather) "the man whom he had loved and called 'Dad' was a terrorist" (236), thus Dhaqaneh had never indoctrinated the boy with al-Shabaab ideology. This indicates responsible fatherhood, although it is said to be the group's practice to keep family members ignorant and unaware of their participation in its activities.

Minor male diasporic characters (in Norway) are stereotypically evoked and often dismissed with a label—apart from the awful, fanatic Muslim cleric Yasiin, an elderly man lusting after Saafi (Naciim's teenage sister), we have Mugdi's son-in-law Xirsi—soon divorced by his pregnant wife Timiro and dismissed as a "scoundrel" (190) by both her parents—and Imam Yasiin's deputy Zubair, a friend and al-Shabaab comrade-in-arms of Dhaqaneh, who beats up and soon secretly marries Dhaqaneh's widow Waliya and whose "shifty eyes" (123) repel Gacalo. Zubair is arrested for his links with Muslim terrorists. He is something of a parallel figure to Dhaqaneh in being to *some* extent a similar product of deficient parenting—a version of Zubair's 'history' in Norway is related to Gacalo by Himmo (109–13). In fact, the cursory dismissal of the above figures (along with the obese drunkard and bore Suudi, shown attending Gacalo's wake, 266) seems harshly one-sided. Mugdi's younger brother Kaluun—a privileged diasporic (like his brother)—proclaims that, *because* they are routinely despised for being "Muslim and black [...] the onus is on Somalis to improve their chance of success wherever they are" (224). In this rather snobbish remark, *North of Dawn* contrasts with Farah's more balanced, nuanced portrayal of diasporic Somalis in *Yesterday, Tomorrow*. Contrast Farah's denunciation in the earlier text (54–5) of "the racist logic to the immigration laws" of Europe (55).

Unlike Farah's truly impressive earlier old man characters—such as the political hero and deeply spiritual Deeriye in *Close, Sesame* (1983) and the magnanimous, life-loving Nonno in *Secrets* (1999), Mugdi's is a rather pinched soul. For example, Mugdi tells his Norwegian friend Johan, after Gacalo's death, that he and she had "had no problem severing all ties with Somalis, including those who are here [in Norway]" (259)—and in his case (unlike Gacalo's) even with their own son. His endlessly unfinished, futile-seeming literary translation efforts appear unlikely to contribute much to Somali-Norway bridge building. In this he contrasts with his prolific author, Nuruddin Farah, who unflaggingly pursues a writerly duty to increase understanding of the unfolding Somali national saga—or tragedy. In comparison with *Yesterday, Tomorrow*, it seems unlikely that Farah would say of this somewhat bloodless novel (as he had concerning the compilation of anguishing Somali testimonies in the earlier text) that it was "not an easy book to write" (*Yesterday* vii–iii). The impression stems from the predominantly

calm, low-key tone of the dominant voice in *North of Dawn*—Mugdi's, giving it lower "illocutionary force", as if (for him) Somalia has been 'written off'.

In Safi Abdi's novel *Offspring of Paradise* (2003), the voice most clearly articulated is the adolescent girl Hana's—and even though few depictions of diasporic Somali males feature in this text, the girl's fury against Somali men (and what it stems from) permeates the novel—which can be seen as taking up a moral enquiry. Abdi's novel has been read along with Cristina Ali Farah's *Little Mother* and Nuruddin Farah's *Knots* as being "gynocentric" and "condemn[ing] what are perceived [...] as the phallogocentric [...] swaggering, ruthless and competitive 'macho' culture ascribed by the [mostly female] characters to a majority of Somali men [who are held responsible for] [...] the destruction of the country as a 'liveable location'" (see Gagiano, "Three Takes on Somali womanhood in the eddies of the Black Atlantic" 279)<sup>9</sup> As a six-year-old girl, Hana witnessed her beloved father pulverized when a hand grenade blew him apart in the onset of Somalia's internecine violence. Her father's brother, who assumed the paternal protector's role to try and drive Hana, her pregnant mother and her elderly grandmother to safety—because their family were seen as belonging to the 'wrong' (Barre's) clan—was shot and killed by roaming clan vigilantes; young thugs who seized their vehicle and proceeded to gang-rape her mother. Her mother went into shock labor and gave birth to a dead boy; crazed by the horrors inflicted on her, she crawled away in the dark night and little Hana was left to help her grandmother bury the dead. Years later, when Hana is living with her grandmother in a refugee center in an unnamed but obviously Western country, she sees her lost mother and dead sibling in the televised images of Somali women and children "with ropes for arms", whispering: "Her baby will die" (11). Hana's generalization—casting all Somali women as victims and Somali men as evil—is validated by Abdi's narrator in informing the reader that "clan cleansing" escalated "into a wholesale bloodbath", adding: "the killing and maiming of all forms of life became the norm, and the dishonoring of women an honorable feat" (17).

Abdi engages in an interesting way with international condemnation of the brutalities of the Somali Civil War. Hana's symbolization of Somali men and women as contrasting emblems of innocence and guilt is validated by first-hand experience and unlike apparently similar, yet cursory generalizations by some earlier researchers.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, when the girl's *Ayeyo* (grandmother), her succor and mainstay, passes away, it is only Abdirahman, a man who has assumed the spiritual leadership role in the small Somali refugee community, who can prize Hana's hands from the body and counsel her comfortingly to accept Allah's will. Abdi's representation of Abdirahman as a man of deep faith, integrity and sensitivity to refugees' plight endorses the small diasporic Somali community's sense of his stature.

The narrator describes the Somalis who live in "The Wall" (as the refugee center is dubbed) as "inter-related", adding that "*they* alone could make [sense] of what drove them into that wall" (original emphasis): each one of them "carried a [...] wound ... a personal scar that sensitized only that entity, and none else. Each entity hating the warlord of the other, yet caring for each other in spite of the warlords" in a "love-hate relation that only a victim of Somalia's present condition could feel or even hope to understand" (80 original ellipsis). Of the two young male Somali refugees evoked in the novel, one helps to push Hana into a fanatic "Christian" woman's clutches, while the other helps to rescue her from this monstrous person. Both are former victims of the (white) woman's indoctrination; one frees himself while the other—the abovementioned "Little Hirsi", who is unrepentant about yet haunted by the violent deeds he committed as a member of a Mogadishu youth gang—slyly exploits the "Christian" woman and her organization's aid to help fund a warlord in Somalia. Abdi's unusual, passionate writing carries persuasive power and adds nuance to our sense of a morally bewildering condition that troubles Somalis and puzzles outsiders.

One important conversation with Abdirahman somewhat softens Hana's reproaches when this "upright" man breaks down in tears, showing himself "remorseful"—in Hana's description and to her surprise (235). She will not give up her fight for Somali women, challenging Abdirahman with fierce questions: "How many times have you *good* guys of all [Somali] tribes ever met over tea and mourned for the children of our nation? And when was the last time you put yourselves in your mothers' shoes?" (236; original emphasis). These questions suggest a fierce view of most Somali men as morally tarnished, despite Abdirahman's plea for forgiveness, and Hana's memories of her father and uncle.

Condemnation and accusation of "Somali men" in texts like the above link with Svenberg, Mattson and Skott's observation that "research regarding the situation of Somali refugee men seems scarce in comparison with the well-documented and easily accessible data regarding Somali refugee women" (15). Cristina Ali Farah's *Trans. Little Mother* (original Italian title *Madre piccolo*) does indeed give considerably more space to the voices of her two



principal female characters, cousins who as little girls lived as sisters, but her portrayal of Taageere (whom Domenica Axad later marries) is much more detailed and extensive than Abdi's evocations of relocated Somali men. The diasporic male the reader first encounters in *Little Mother* is mute, injured and under police guard in the hospital where Barni, the title character, works as a midwife. From a sense of the burnt man's resemblance to her cousin Axad's father, and because her own mother died in a fire, as well as in recognition of the "traumas" (23) he must have suffered, Barni feels connected to the man. She tries to help the injured stranger and addresses him in Somali as *Walaal* (brother). Only later does she find out how heroic a role the man had played in the life of Luul, Taageere's vulnerable younger sister, who had given birth in an old car on a street in Rome. Maxamed had got badly burnt when he self-forgetfully rushed to the rescue of Luul and her newborn, believing them trapped inside the wreck when it caught fire—only to incur local police suspicion that he is a "terrorist."<sup>11</sup>

Maxamed as an admirable man contrasts with authorial evocations of Taageere as immature, irresponsible and feckless—even though Cristina Ali Farah's character evocation is neither unempathetic nor uncomplicated. It is a particular accomplishment of this text that Taageere is portrayed at once so vividly and in so nuanced a manner. The first chapter of three conveying Taageere's voice evokes his hectoring phone call to his ex-wife Shukri; a monologue both hilarious in its emotional ineptitude and deplorably sexist (51–85). Only at its end does he reveal the real reasons for his call: that he has married a second wife (Domenica Axad) who holds an Italian passport, but that without having Italian divorce papers to prove the annulment (done by Muslim rite and over the telephone) of his first marriage, this second union cannot legally facilitate his re-entry into Italy. Farah does not allow the reader (or Domenica—as Taageere always refers to her) to be sure whether his second marriage was merely a ploy to allow his return to Rome—where his ex-wife lives with their nine-year-old son (whom he has never seen, Taageere having left Italy before their arrival) and where Luul (his younger, newly widowed sister) has now also arrived and given birth. Acknowledging her "suspicion" about Taageere's true nature and real motives (and having discovered his disingenuousness in not informing her earlier of his previous union), Domenica Axad appears unperturbed about building a life in Italy with her little son and Barni as a co-parent, without Taageere. Yet she accounts for his initial strong appeal to her by describing how undemanding she found his company. Despite sensing his incapacity for "responsibilities" and his "weak will", she felt able to reveal her full self to him, "unbridled" and trusting in his seemingly uncomplicated nature (116). The reader (and probably Barni) can recognize that Axad is implicitly contrasting Taageere with their mutual cousin Libeen, who took charge of her life in a stifflingly domineering manner when she became emotionally unmoored after her frustrated attempt to return to Somalia on the eve of their country's collapse. She lost the chance to reunite with her father, who since died in the conflagration. Libeen's controlled and controlling manner ensures his own success in "the West" (Holland), but his patriarchal temperament is ill suited to Axad's freer spirit.

Libeen also contrasts with Taageere because the latter is much more conscious of having been detrimentally affected by geographic and cultural transplantations. Authorial empathy for Taageere is evinced in the power of the expressions conveying his pain, such as his reference to "a deep and shabby sadness" reminiscent of the "sorrow" dominating refugees' lives noted by Nuruddin Farah (*Yesterday* viii). Taageere's shame at his own "dirty" state (57) and his exilic loneliness are expressed as "rage" and "[self-]disgust" (84). Taageere's psychic uprooting exemplifies how "life in exile has entailed not only a loss of language but also a deficiency of cultural anchorage" (Lilius qtd in Svenberg, Mattson and Skott 286) and resembles its effect upon Domenica, suggesting affiliation between them. His drug peddling, his foolish money-making attempts and unappreciative reliance on other Somalis housing him, combine to paint him as a loser undeserving of sympathy; nevertheless, Cristina Ali Farah balances this impression by allowing Taageere's voice the opportunity (in her novel's central chapter) to speak a moving lament for Xamar—as Somalis call Mogadishu, the cosmopolitan core of a former gentle, widely shared Somali culture and civilization (*Little Mother* 120–7).<sup>12</sup> An especially endearing aspect of Taageere's character is his generous willingness to help those he cares for and to take risks on their behalf; his tenderness towards women in need and children and his great sorrow at the violent death of his dearest friend—killed in a haphazard shooting by one of the packs of young, drugged thugs who roamed Mogadishu's streets after Barre's downfall. While Libeen, Barni's ex-husband and Taageere's friend Saciid Saleebaan allow clan dictates to enter their lives and destroy love relationships, even abroad, there is no sign that Taageere has interest in this ethos or its violent manifestations.

At the end of this novel, Domenica Axad decides that her (and Taageere's) son must be circumcised, "to mark his belonging [as Somali and Muslim] on his body" (223). Through the child, she and Barni reconnect with their uncle Foodcadde (a *family* rather than a *clan* elder), and also with Domenica's Italian mother—straddling cultural

divides. The baby is named Taariikh in a symbolic revival of Axad's admirable father, lost in and to Somalia's harrowing collapse, but perhaps auguring a more hopeful future for diasporic Somali men where admirable, familiarly and socially responsible conduct will no longer be exceptional. Mugdi's expressed conviction that, despite most Somalis faring badly in Norway, "unable to ever really advance [...] he feels certain that Naciim and his generation [...] will change all that" (177), corroborates this impression.

Igiaba Scego's novel *Adua* proceeds from very different premises, looks at a longer history of Somali diaspora and uses a "diary entry" style in order to juxtapose a father's and a daughter's experiences as Somalis in Italy. *Adua* originally appeared in 2015; the English translation in 2017. As Zeleza remarks, diasporas change over time: "the emotional and experiential investment in 'here' and 'there' [...] in their [various] complex intersections [...] changes in response to the changing materialities, mentalities, and moralities of social existence" (32). Zoppe's and *Adua*'s respective experiences of diasporic existence illustrate the point: Zoppe's during the 1930s and *Adua*'s from 1977; hers perhaps concluded by a return to Somalia in the present to parallel her father's, earlier. Marta Ghiroldi distinguishes between "female experiences of migration" involving mainly "body, violence and depression" and "male migrants' experience" in which "humiliation and [...] the feeling of danger as a constant element" predominate (51).<sup>13</sup> Indeed, "humiliation" more than physical pain is mentioned on the novel's first page, evoking Zoppe's brutal assault by three Italian soldiers. However, both father and daughter experience what Fongang identifies as "the overwhelming social isolation of African migrants in various metropolises of the West" ("Cosmopolitan Dilemma: Diasporic Subjectivity and Postcolonial Liminality in Teju Cole's *Open City*" 145). Zoppe had dreamed of getting to Rome; delighted at the opportunity to do translation work for the Italian army in the great city. Well groomed, educated and plurilingual, he is reduced to a butt for the blows of the soldiers to whom he is a mere "dumb nigger" (7). Ironically, as a boy, "in Mogadishu he felt like a foreigner"—disdained as a yokel from the south by locals (138). Only when he returns to Somalia from Italy, many years later (though still in the service of the Italians on the eve of the Abyssinian War), will Zoppe grasp that in doing his translations, he betrayed his fellow Africans (148, 163). His decadent, aristocratic employer Anselmi forces Zoppe to wear a blue turban like a colonized Sikh—a garment he finds humiliating, like the nauseating suggestion (vaguely hinted at) that he will be made to "serve" Anselmi sexually (79), possibly infecting him with an STD (90).

Having exhibited Zoppe's eventual acknowledgement of the shameful part he played as a servant of duplicitous, ruthless but powerful Italians, Scego indicates that this realization probably facilitated Zoppe's partial moral redemption in his later castigating of the tyrannical effects of Barre's embrace of Russian Communism—at the cost of incarceration. This brave, politically risky stance exhibits how diasporic experience had morally educated Zoppe through his sufferings (94). *Adua*, who had not understood her father, nevertheless stole "the blue turban he always wore" (98) to wear as a keepsake, in Italy—unaware of Zoppe's dream vision, years earlier, that made him see this "hate[d] turban" as a symbol of his betrayal, which he thus wore in penance (146–7).

One other diasporic male plays a significant but somewhat lesser role in *Adua*'s later life in Rome—the young man she (middle-aged by then) marries: "he was a Titanic, someone who'd risked drowning at sea to come" to Italy, who needed (in *Adua*'s words) "a house, a teat, a bowl of soup, a pillow, some money, hope [...] relief. He needed a mama, a *hooyo*, a whore, a woman, a *sharmutta*, me" (21).<sup>14</sup> In return, the young man gives *Adua* sexual attention, comfort, companionship and compliments.<sup>15</sup> She cooks Somali food to please him and brews his favorite *shaah* (Somali herbal tea), well aware that one day he will move on, and indeed pays for him to do so by the end of the narrative. Ahmed is furiously indignant when by chance the porn film in which *Adua* acted (as a young, newly arrived woman in Rome) is broadcast on TV; unable to recognize the parallels between their respective refugee situations. Yet he is concerned for her honor and shows loving appreciation when, upon his departure, he gives *Adua* the gift of an expensive video camera, saying: "Now you can [...] tell your story however you think" (171). This is strongly reminiscent of Libeen's gift, also of a video camera, to Domenica Axad in *Little Mother*—and she, too, uses it to tell her own story and create her own documentary account of the lives of diasporic Somalis. The incident concludes the novel by aptly and deftly intertwining *Adua*'s story with that of her father. Like him, she had worn the turban as a type of expiation; she calls it "the sign of my slavery and my old shame"; "the yoke I had chosen to redeem myself" (170). Before he leaves, Ahmed explains that, by *not* retrieving the turban, he had helped *Adua* to free herself from her past and her guilt—Scego thus depicting sensitivity, generosity, gender awareness and political sophistication in a young, expatriate male Somali.

## Conclusion

“I don’t think any nation is saved by one book”, Achebe wisely warned, years ago (25). Whilst none of the featured works can ‘save’ diasporic Somalis and solve their individual and communal problems, yet—individually and as a composite ‘mosaic’ of implicit analyses vividly evoking impressions that convey moral evaluation and socio-political insight along with understated psychological interpretation—the writing contributes uniquely valuable knowledge concerning Somalis of the diaspora. The present article focuses on male exiled Somalis as an as yet under-analyzed topic in both African Masculinity Studies and Diaspora Studies and exhibits how these intersect with literary aesthetics. A majority of Somali writers (Nuruddin Farah, Abdi and Cristina Ali Farah among them) place men at the heart of the diasporic community’s problems of adaptation, also holding them primarily responsible for the country’s collapse into violent anarchy and the lingering problem of Somali disunity. While this point is not contested by the chosen texts, their portrayals insist on the non-hegemonic nature of diasporic Somali masculinities. Somali women may adjust better than their male counterparts in the diaspora, but women need the co-operation of the men with whom most of them share their lives.

The works discussed compellingly prove their authors’ profound commitment to deepening Somalis’ as well as international understanding of the handicaps incurred and opportunities created by diasporic Somalis, while depicting the extent to which they remain bound to and haunted by their country’s plight. Mugdi’s wise reply (in Nuruddin Farah’s *North of Dawn*) to his step-granddaughter Saafi’s question why Somalia is taking so long to recover from its “[collapse] into total anarchy”, tells her (and her brother) to consider that an “implosion” of such “magnitude” has had “repercussions for every [single] Somali”—including those who had “sought refuge in other lands”. All are “haunt[ed]” by its “seismic consequences” and because “the disintegration of Somalia” is “still unfolding”—adding that the “oblivious” world has been unable to “decipher the signposts” of the disaster (293–5). Mugdi’s words apply as a description to the insights all five novels addressed here, convey—and likewise to the “illocutionary force” of these compositions.

Although we must avoid “fencing off migrant literature” from its connections with people and writers in the homeland, as Giuliana Benvenuti cautions (133), combined efforts of many writers and social agents—in both literary work and across disciplines and professions—are needed if we are to address intractable seeming issues of pernicious conflict and arduous social readjustments required in the wake of its dislocating effects, which texts like the five evoked here compellingly convey.

## Notes

1. Lyndsey Stonebridge’s *Placeless People: Writings, Rights and Refugees* (2018) examines how the changed and changing notion of “exile” and its gradual devaluation was registered by earlier twentieth-century writers such as Arendt, Kafka, Orwell and Beckett. *The Postcolonial Subject in Transit: Migration, Borders, and Subjectivity in Contemporary African Diaspora Literature* (2018) edited by Delphine Fongang features no Somali authors.
2. Bill Ashcroft’s “transnation” concept accords, he believes, with “the smooth spaces [of] memory” (as contrasted with “the striated space of history” that accompanies “the nation state and all structures of fixed identity” (83). However, even as diasporic Somali “identity” is not “fixed”, it remains bound to memories both of the destroyed Somali “nation state” and the painful (rather than “smooth”) personal acts and moments of recollection with which these remain entangled. In his book on Nuruddin Farah and B. Kojo Laing, Francis Ngaboh-Smart describes Farah as a “postnational” writer (52). I argue that, without being a Somali nationalist, Farah retains a Somali national affiliation. Compare Frantz Fanon’s warning against leaders of “underdeveloped countries [who] imprison national consciousness in sterile formalism” (165) and his insistence that “national consciousness [...] is not nationalism”, since “it is at the heart” of the former “that international consciousness lives and grows” (199).
3. Especially impressive because this very detailed and carefully constructed study conveys an impression of the researcher’s empathy is Katrine Fangen’s “Humiliation Experienced by Somali Refugees in Norway”, in which “humiliation” is associated with “discrimination, exclusion, derision, and stigmatization” (70). Compare Haideh Moghissi’s observation referring to diasporic Muslim men’s “deep emotional vulnerability” and her statement that “the sense of insecurity is sometimes expressed through hostile reactions to the host country” (3, 4).
4. Assessments of “African Masculinities” such as Ouzgane and Morrell’s 2005 collection are broad (generalising) assessments or focused on other (non-Somali) masculinities, while a more recent article concerned specifically with “transnational” African Masculinities notes that “in the UK, African migrants, particularly men, have been positioned as significant ‘problems’ within the media, political, and health discourses”, adding that these trans-national “African masculinities are somehow captured through an Orientalizing gaze as immutable, violent, patriarchal, and oppressive” (Pasura and Christou 527). The latter finding comments broadly on African men in the UK and, while pertinent to noted perceptions of Somali men elsewhere in Western Europe, is not specific to men from Somalia.
5. Masterson (in an otherwise excellent study of *Yesterday, Tomorrow*) mistakenly asserts that “fathers and husbands are invariably shown in neglect of their responsibilities” (233, emphasis added). Farah’s text is more balanced in its depiction of Somali men than this generalization suggests.

6. While Farah's sister was the victim of Islamic terrorism, Mugdi's son died as a terrorist *participant* and is held responsible by Mugdi for many terrorist murders (never detailed).
7. On p. 14, it is unclear whether it is Mugdi's "detest[ation of] Somalia's dysfunction" (a euphemism?) or the governmental "dysfunction" that is referred to as "unrelenting since 1991"—when Barre fell. Farah from as early as 1976 explicitly opposed the Barre government, unable for years to risk returning (*Yesterday* 58), whereas by contrast Mugdi seems to have continued using his Mogadishu flat up to 1990.
8. In *Offspring of Paradise*, Hana's revered, sage-like Ayeyo (grandmother) expresses a similar point (113), but her deep piety is convincingly established before this. So is that of Abdirahman, the community leader who teaches Hana: "We cannot blame [the Somali] tragedy on Islam. [...] Rather, it's the lack of true Islam" (235).
9. Nuruddin Farah's recurrent denunciation of Somali patriarchy and misogyny have been widely noted—see in particular Alden and Tremaine's chapter (123–56) and Juraga's "Patriarchy" (283–7).
10. Pauline Ada Uwakweh statement outlines this (fortunately, increasingly outdated) practice: "A notable problem in African migration studies is the tendency of researchers to essentialize Africans, thereby imputing monolithic characteristics on African migrants" (4).
11. Taageere's conduct in Italy and the USA accords with Nuruddin Farah's reporting about diasporic Somali males' parasitical, dirty, lazy *qaat*-chewing habits (*Yesterday* 66–76). Nevertheless Cristina Ali Farah's Taageere is a more complex portrayal (Gagiano, "Three Takes" 295).
12. Compare (in Abdi's novel) Mulki's memories of life as lived in a once "peaceful Somalia" (108–9).
13. Once again recalling Fangen's fine study on more recent forms of "humiliation" that refugees experience.
14. Compare Barni's powerfully affective, nightmare visions of the victims of these dangerous journeys as discussed by both Gagiano ("Three Takes") and Tembo.
15. Their marriage is not frowned upon by other Somalis in Rome, Adua testifies, since everyone understands it as a mutually beneficial arrangement. In contrast, Nuruddin Farah reports that Somali women working in Italy, while expected to house any and all unemployed male relatives, are harshly denounced as "tagsis" if they provide accommodation for lovers unrelated to them, or non-Somalis (*Yesterday* 76; original italics).

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## Nuruiddin Farah: Variations on the theme of return

Kamil Naicker

### Nuruiddin Farah: Variations on the theme of return

This article explores the role of the returnee protagonist in selected works of Nuruiddin 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:** Nuruiddin Farah, Somalia, exile, return, homelands, postcolonial literature, African literature.

### Introduction

This article explores the role of the returnee protagonist in selected works of Nuruiddin 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, Nuruiddin 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” (Dodgson-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 Mogadishu [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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## Perceiving precarity and extremism in Nuruddin Farah's *North of Dawn*

Nick Mdika Tembo

### Perceiving precarity and extremism in Nuruddin Farah's *North of Dawn*


Somali citizens, both at home and abroad, have been reduced to a life of uncertainty, instability and insecurity. This article considers Somalis as part of the 'precariat' (as theorized by Pierre Bourdieu, Guy Standing, and others). Drawing on critical terrorism and trauma scholarship, the article gauges the experiences of the precariat subject, highlighting how these experiences affect the daily lives of the Somali migrant community in Nuruddin Farah's *North of Dawn* (2018). The aim of this article is to consider the relationship among precarity, extremism and the postcolonial émigré with regard to the contingent and fractious relations established by and between the Somali migrant characters and their hosts in the novel. Whereas predominant framings of precarity are characterized by labor insecurity, lack of any stable economic identity, and the fear of losing what one has, my argument in this article is that extremism is both a response to and attendant agent of precarity as presented in the novel. My contention is that Farah engages the precariat as extremist in the narrative present of the novel, highlighting the ways in which those that face social identification and marginalization are both *at risk* and *risky* to others. **Keywords:** precariat, Somali migrant community, extremism, social marginalization, African migration literature, trauma.

### Introduction

The novelist, essayist, poet, playwright and social critic, Nuruddin Farah, is no stranger to many scholars. His popularity is not a result of the numerous awards he has garnered over the years—he is the recipient of several literary prizes, besides being a perennial nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature—or skills in fiction writing, but mainly a result of his unwavering commitment to chronicling the effects on ordinary lives of his country's social and political upheavals. This article offers a reading of Nuruddin Farah's *North of Dawn* from the perspective of precarity and extremism. It is about how the novelistic genre explores what Hanna Arendt calls "the banality of evil" in human affairs. I will argue that, at its best, Farah writes terrorist subjectivities in the novel that openly embody violence, cruelty and intentional infliction of human suffering on others "as the only means of escape from the maddening paradoxes of their societies" (Zulaika 95). In the narrative context of *North of Dawn*, these "maddening paradoxes" emanate from the way the Somali postcolony is configured in scholarship on Somalia. According to Hassan Mohamed, Somalia stands out as the only African country that was partitioned into five separate parts during the colonial period: British Somaliland in the north; North Frontier District (NFD, which was later ceded to Kenya by Britain); Italian Somaliland in the south; French Somaliland (now Djibouti); and a large region known as Ogaden of which all three European powers relinquished portions to Emperor Menelik of Ethiopia as a reward for his collaboration (Mohamed 7). Out of these five, only two parts of the Somali nation—the former British Somaliland and former Italian Somaliland—gained independence and united, on 1 July 1960, to form what came to be known as the Somali Democratic Republic. In pointing out the destruction of Somalia and the fabric of the Somali nation, Mohamed suggests that the real causes of civil strife in Somalia lie less with the nature of clan segmentation and more with the impact of the partition of the Somali nation; the manipulation by the ruling elites of the Somali segmentary social system; the marginalization of the indigenous social system; and the inadequacy of the mediating role of the rulers and the state mechanisms that replaced it (Mohamed 10). This emphasis on the reasons behind internal fissures in Somalia is also echoed by Ken Menkhaus, who notes that the country has lacked a functioning government since the ousting from power of President Muhammed Siyad Barre in 1991, and, in his view, this is partly due to the legacy of Barre's regime: "The harsh repression of the government of Moham-

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med Siad Barre fueled sharp resentment toward and fear of the state itself in the Somali public. The Barre regime's divide-and-rule tactics stoked deep interclan animosities and distrust, and are held partially responsible for the failure of clans to unite in a post-Barre government" (Menkhaus 78–80). The two writers above draw attention to the fact that Somalia and her people were thrown in a state of precarity and precariousness since "competing factions and anarchy filled the resulting vacuum" (Lyons and Samatar 7) left by Barre, which has led to violence, looting and millions of people dying while some of them flee the country every year. Nuruddin Farah appears to underscore this point in the opening paragraph of *North of Dawn*, noting that "no one knows how many people have been injured or how many have been killed" (1) ever since the implosion started.

Edward Said argues that terror "has spawned uses of language, rhetoric and argument that are frightening in their capacity for mobilizing opinion, gaining legitimacy and provoking various sorts of murderous action" (Said 149). Writing about terror and the postcolonial, Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton seem to extend Said's argument when they reckon that "terrorism has not only been constituted as an object of contemporary knowledge, but [...] it [also] defines the twenty-first-century Western zeitgeist" (Boehmer and Morton 7–8). These observations ring true in many scholarly engagements with the term. What remains surprising is that for a phenomenon that is so pervasive not only in the West but also on the African continent, terrorism is relatively understudied in African literary criticism. In most countries, much of this terror is significantly marked by a fractured relationship between the state and its citizens. Extremism, then, is enduringly described through the terror it strikes in people. For Boehmer and Morton, this terror induces affect. The two scholars presciently note how "extreme fear, galvanizing shock, vengeful anger, displacement, and [...] paranoia" (Boehmer and Morton 1) are among the affective repercussions of terror. This article gauges the vicarious experience of extremism and its attendant motivations, highlighting how it affects the daily practices of the Somali migrant community in the narrative context of *North of Dawn*. Spatially, the article traces what happens to the people fleeing conflict and violence when the world they have known all along appears to have gone missing and they are forced to lead a precarious life in a relocated environment. It also explores what is at stake in the representation of precarity and extremism in African writing.

*North of Dawn* is Nuruddin Farah's latest novel. Like most of his books, it is a "commentary on Somalia and the history of Somalia" (Alden and Tremaine 43), following and reflecting the changes Somalia has undergone since independence. The novel tells the story of a Somali migrant family torn between kindness and doing the right thing. Tension is brought to its head between Gacalo and Mugdi, the migrant couple who go out of their way to shelter the wife of their radical son, now dead. Gacalo has the tenderness and love of a woman that wants her son's widow, Waliya, to come and stay with them in Norway, while Mugdi fears that Waliya's presence would only remind him of their son's involvement in terrorism. After their son had killed himself in an al-Shabaab-sponsored bomb attack in Mogadishu, Mugdi had vowed not to show sorrow for his death. In the end though, kindness wins as Mugdi reluctantly concedes to taking in their daughter-in-law. This is how Ron Charles highlights Mugdi's aversion towards Waliya through a palpable tension that also sets the tone of the novel, when the two meet at the airport:

Mugdi is thrust into the awkward role of welcoming a daughter-in-law poisoned by the same radicalism that turned his son into a killer. She arrives from a refugee camp in a state of terrified bewilderment, fully cloaked, unwilling to speak to him—or any man—directly. Even before they've left the Oslo airport, we can see the clash of secular and religious values that will confound this awkward new family. ("North of Dawn by Nuruddin Farah, Review" n. p.)

In the event of reading *North of Dawn* then, the reader experiences the uncomfortable situation Mugdi and Gacalo put themselves in, perhaps wondering if the two of them will not be misconstrued as terrorists by association. The narrative present is constantly interrupted by memories and fears—notably, fears from Gacalo, Mugdi and a host of other naturalized Somalis in Norway—about how they might be perceived by their hosts if they do not behave according to the expectations of the Norwegians. Needless to wonder, the novel's narrator notes that "the onus of is on Somalis to improve their chance of success wherever they happen to be" (Farah 224). These fears are encountered within the diegesis of the novel, articulated through the eyes of the novel's principal characters.

The book's title adds to the narrative ambience of the plot of the novel. Farah makes a play on the words *north* and *dawn* to suggest that something is literally *out of joint* on the other side of dawn. In literary studies, dawn conjures notions of illumination and hope, the beginning of a new day and thus a chance for happiness and improvement. Something on the north of dawn is, in this case, out of sync with hope or a new beginning. It is a morning that brings with it some sort of uneasiness. It is this uneasiness that sustains the novel's plot as the

author works to articulate Somalia's social ills as a nerve center that inaugurates the irrepressible rage that his characters demonstrate in the novel. Farah reads Somalia as a place of hell because of the folly of a few misguided individuals at the top. Somalia is, as Farah presents his imaginary state through the character of Mugdi in *North of Dawn*, "just as frightening to the victims caught in the snares of its cruelty" today (295). Presented this way, Somalia's violent past imputes a burden of unexpressed anger on the present generation, and has been a source of pain and resentment to the Somali community both at home and abroad. Farah uses the creative medium as an ideological weapon to present an authentic and balanced view of his country without embellishing or romanticizing anything about it. In his writing, especially his long fiction, Farah has consistently taken umbrage at the Somali leadership, accusing it of not doing enough to save Somalia from degenerating into further clan-based anarchy. He underscores this point in *North of Dawn*, where he maintains that Somalia is ravaged from within by its clan-based leaders, leaving dire consequences in its wake. For Farah,

the implosion has not been limited to the country and those who live in it. The collapse has had repercussions for every Somali around the world, no matter if they are still in the country or if they abandoned the country to its tragic fate and sought refuge in other lands. These seismic consequences haunt even those Somalis who have never known the country, whether because they left when very young, or were born elsewhere to parents who had fled fighting. (*North* 294)

These "seismic consequences" have in some ways produced the kind of precarity that engages and transcends the palpable anxieties, traumas and frustrations that directly bear on the postcolonial/raced Somali émigré. Although *North of Dawn* is concerned with the difficult questions of forgiveness and recovery in the aftermath of violence, in this article the figuring of the ravages of terrorism will be my primary concern. I argue that Farah engages the precariat as extremist in his new novel as a way of re-envisioning Somali anxieties in exile.

Farah's singular achievement in *North of Dawn* is to show how the novel's characters react in the face of past frustrations that appear to follow them all the way to far-flung places. The article reflects on the question of re-placing Nuruddin Farah vis-à-vis other Somali émigrés. I use the term re-placing in the sense of discursive re-locations of Somalis from their natal homes to other 'homes' outside the political and geographical spaces of Somalia, focusing on how this class relates both with the host society and its homeland. Farah himself has been living outside his country for over forty years, having left Somalia in 1974. Over the years, his compatriots have followed suit, becoming refugees in Africa, and parts of America and Europe.

I make this argument about how Farah and his compatriots' migration is an act of re-placing Somalis in three distinct ways. First, I concur with Farah's observation that Somalia is a country in a state of flux. This population has precariously re-placed itself elsewhere, in the sense that re-placing is here understood as the act of finding a new place, a new home away from home. Second, and related to the new Somali émigré, Somali migrants are being replaced discursively by a new crop of Somalis "born in one country, brought up in another as a refugee, and now thrust into a third" (*North* 150). This is a new class of people that appears to have no inkling about what drove their parents out of Somali; but who, nevertheless, have to contend with their persona non grata status and they reinvent themselves and their identity in their new environments. What sort of relationship do all these Somalis have towards both their host countries and their ancestral or natal home? Finally, Somali émigrés and 'Somaliness' are being re-placed and/or re-engaged institutionally, as an academic discipline. In various disciplines, scholars are bringing the Somali phenomenon into academic discourse through journal and book length issues dedicated to its study, conferences organized around research on it, and overall consideration of the implications of its changes for how they conceptualize their disciplines. This theme issue on Nuruddin Farah is perhaps one such endeavor aimed at examining Somali studies in the academy.

The words *precarity* and *precariat* will need a brief explication. Precarity, awkwardly translated from the French word *precarité*, "came into wide circulation in Europe in the 1980s in response to labor reforms and the reduction of welfare state provisions" (Han 335). It refers to "the predicament of those who live at the juncture of unstable contract of labor and a loss of state provisioning" (332). Pierre Bourdieu explicates precarity in terms of the "weight of the world" that embodies "social suffering in contemporary society" through degradation of work, a fractured and racializing citizenship, and excessive human vulnerability. Nicholas Ridout and Rebecca Schneider seem to extend Bourdieu's views, describing precarity in terms of an existence without the predictability of security. For them, precarity is a "situation wherein your tenancy on your land is in someone else's hands" (n. p.). The precariat, therefore, is a social group formed by people suffering from precarity. Guy Standing defines the precariat as a *class-in-the-making* or a *class-for-itself* that is characterized by labor insecurity, lack of any stable economic



identity, and the fear of losing what one has (*The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* 63). This article does not so much focus on the anxieties surrounding (un)employment as given in the two definitions, more so since Waliya, one of the characters involved in extremism in the novel, is “not interested in seeking a job or even working” (*North* 105); rather, it traces the various connotations of loss, in-between-ness, marginality, feelings of abandonment, and the attendant rage brought about by the condition of precarity.

The central tenets of precarity and risk society can help enrich our understanding and analysis of conditions of civil conflict and migration and, in turn, enliven the narrative plot of *North of Dawn*. In the next section, I aver that Farah’s latest novel focuses on the pathology of the traumatized subject. I also explore the fear, anger and seething discontent that reverberate through a community alienated from and living on the fringes of the host society. This explains why I propose that radicalism is both a response to and attendant agent of precarity in the novel. My attempt at retheorizing precarity and risk society, therefore, will take up this understanding, exploring the pestilence that has dogged the Somali postcolony which has, in turn, produced the precariat as extremist.

### **‘Risk society,’ trauma and haunting in *North of Dawn***

In analyzing the thematic core of Farah’s latest novel, it is useful to think about German sociologist Ulrich Beck’s construction of the term *risk society*, a term that suggests fear and uncontrollability in human beings. According to Beck, the risk society “epitomizes an era of modern society that no longer merely casts off traditional ways of life but rather wrestles with the side effects of successful modernization—with precarious biographies and inscrutable threats that affect everybody and against which nobody can adequately insure” (*World at Risk* 8). For Beck, these risks can only be understood and managed through science. In his book titled *Risk and Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Beck notes that we live in a world where “science becomes indispensable, and at the same time devoid of its original validity claims” (*Risk* 165). He uses unemployment to illustrate the deteriorating living conditions in European modern societies in the wake of science and technology. He specifically points to

an ongoing process in the job market, where unskilled or low-qualified jobs are outsourced or replaced by machines, so that the low-income groups in society do not have any opportunities for getting a job. Thus, they do not experience integration into society and identity building through work anymore, and they fall into a category of people that are left over and irrelevant. They form a group of people where the old differentiation between work and capital, rooted in industrialized modernity and its class society, does not have the same meaning anymore (Wimmer and Quandt 338).

Beck calls this new state of affairs “reflexive modernization” or the unintended unforeseen side-effects of modern life on modernity itself which has affected the way human beings live and perceive reality. Beck is of the view that human beings “do not experience a linear modernization, but a reflexive one, where a successful working society already carries the seeds of its own dissolution, of its own change through unwanted side-effects” (Wimmer and Quandt 338). He further states that “this reading of the events is not limited to France or Europe, but it can be applied to other parts of the post-industrialized world as well” (338). Beck, of course, is not alone in his observations. Anthony Giddens also recognizes this strange paradox in late European modern society, noting that risk might in fact be increasing due to technology, science and industrialism rather than be abated by scientific and technological progress.

Beck and Giddens’ views of the risk society appear to suggest that there is a close affinity between people at the receiving end of the social consequences of reflexive modernity on the one hand and, on the other, migrants, since both groups suffer from marginalization and/or exclusion due to class, gender, race and other bases of social inequality. In the assessment of Aaron Doyle, the marginalized “are often seen as being both at risk and risky themselves” (Doyle 8). Doyle’s construction of this category of people is that they “are exposed to more risks, but are also themselves categorized as bad risks: this constitutes part of the process of their exclusion. Thus, they are people who are [...] seen as a threat” (8). Ironically, people who face social identification and marginalization have a high likelihood of joining terrorism. According to Andrew Silke, there will always be those within the marginalized communities “who will be receptive to radical ideologies advocating changing or reforming the established, mainstream social system” (“Becoming a Terrorist” 39). In my focus on Somali migrants in Norway therefore, I demonstrate how the novel’s central characters are either implicitly or explicitly construed to be a threat to social peace and, consequently, they are kept under surveillance by their host country.<sup>1</sup>

Implicit in Beck’s conception of risk society is a second key concept, namely trauma. In other words, the assumption behind anticipating danger is that the more unsafe one feels, the more anxious one will be, and vice

versa. Indeed, it could be said that a society *at risk* lives in doubt and fear, always wary of the lurking danger. Such a 'way of living' induces trauma and frustration in people. In the context of *North of Dawn*, these frustrations are both self-willed and the result of Somalia's fractured collective past which pushes its citizens into spaces where they are made constantly to question themselves in the wake of their loss. Much of the novel is spent on how the central characters' fractured pasts are brought to bear on their present lives. This past is the civil war that Mugdi, Gacalo and a host of other Somalis living in exile (in the narrative context of the novel) experienced in Somalia, either first hand or by proxy.

One thing that needs reiterating then, is that Somalia is a country violently riven from within, and the community in Farah's *North of Dawn* is, at best, *at risk*. The specificities of risk for the characters in the novel revolve around the kinds of social exclusion they face wherever they go, or the way they are defined and differentiated with reference to the violence they escaped back in Somalia. The effect of this violence is that it causes inner damage to individuals. Most experts agree that key to understanding this inner damage is by understanding the traumatic events or experiences that caused it. In psychological terms, trauma is a deeply distressing or disturbing experience, as well as the mental and emotional after-effects of that experience.

It would seem fair to say, then, that *fear*, *anxiety* and *risk* have a way of creating the traumatized subject. This subject can be an individual, a society or even a culture. From this perspective, the catastrophes that have happened in Somalia must be seen as creating different symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorders (PTSD) in the postcolonial Somali community both at home and outside it. In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the American Psychiatric Association's construction of PTSD is that it is a potentially serious debilitating condition that usually occurs in people who have experienced or witnessed a natural disaster, an accident, war, or any other infraction in their lives. Such people often have flashbacks, sadness, anxiety, depression, guilt, anger, grief, fatigue, pain, confusion, despair, loss of self-esteem, loss of trust, nightmares or recurrent and intrusive memories of the traumatizing event.

For such people, a disturbed personality follows them, and its relationship to the violence that informs their lives is undeniable. In the narrative context of *North of Dawn*, what makes trauma so difficult to forget is that the social and political context that forms the backdrop to the novel is riven with violence and, to date, the body politic is yet to recover from the pestilence that followed in the wake of the carnage in 1991. Farah engages with the postcolonial predicament of the Somali nation when the narrator of *North of Dawn* notes that "the disintegration of Somalia remains a live issue, very much still unfolding. Nothing quite like it has happened elsewhere before, in Africa or anywhere else—an entire country collapsing in on itself like a tower of cards" (294).

Overall, understanding risk society in relation to living in fear lends itself to a precariatized view. Here, the precariat is, or becomes, a danger both to him—or herself and his or her society because, as Standing also observes, the precariat are habituated to a life of uncertainty, instability and insecurity. More crucially, they are "floating, rudderless and potentially angry, capable of veering to the extreme right or extreme left politically and backing populist demagoguery that plays on their fears or phobias" (*Precariat* 4). They are also very much capable of venting their frustrations on others. Psychologists use the word projection to refer to the kind of behavior demonstrated by people such as the precariat. The thinking around the term is that people who find certain thoughts, beliefs, and ideas unacceptable, get rid of these by placing them onto others. If someone believes that he or she is worthless, the person is likely to place this feeling of self-worthlessness onto others. Part of what is so interesting and troubling about projection is that once the hated characteristics, thoughts, and feelings that are unacceptable to one's self are placed in the outside world, they take on a life of their own. As I discuss in the next section, Waliya and her fellow fundamentalists act the same way. They resort to committing violence against foreigners because they feel frustrated and neglected. Farah's text thus seems to suggest that there is a post-1991 fragmentation in the psyche of most Somalis; one that, according to Judith Herman, "tears apart a [person's] complex system of self-protection that normally functions in an integrated fashion" (34) and leaves him or her lead a haunted life.

### **Walking the path of radicalism in *North of Dawn***

In Eastern Africa, violent Islamist extremism seems to have found a fertile ground to flourish because of the interpenetrating contours of war and violence due to the region's fluid, unresolved and contested borders.<sup>2</sup> Al-Shabaab mentioned in *North of Dawn* is just one of the terrorist groups that have found a good niche in the region, with most its activities concentrated in Somalia. The group in question is opposed to the Somali government and carries out attacks in and around Mogadishu.<sup>3</sup> The fact that Farah makes reference to the group—through Dhaqaneh's

involvement in a bomb attack outside Mogadishu—is a clear indication that he is aware of the threat such groups pose to society. For Farah, this awareness is real considering that he lost his sister Basra Farah Hassan to a terror attack in 2014 when a Sunni Islamic fundamentalist organization called the Taliban bombed a restaurant in Kabul where she was working for UNICEF. Spatially then, the narrative texture of *North of Dawn* brings out elements of radicalism through the pestilence that prevailed in Somalia since Barre was ousted from power, which replicates itself in the novel's characters in their invocation of distorted interpretations of Islam to engage in violent extremism. Peter Hitchcock opines that reading Farah's fiction, "one can correlate these excesses of characterization with the ambiguities of national identity itself" (90). In his writing, Farah seems to relate with observations made in the UN Secretary General's report on Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, that, "Nothing can justify violent extremism, but we must also acknowledge that it does not arise in a vacuum. Narratives of grievance, actual or perceived injustice, promised empowerment and sweeping change become attractive where human rights are being violated, good governance is being ignored, and aspirations are being crushed" (United Nations, "Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism" 2–3).

Commensurate with the observations made above, Farah engages with the postcolonial predicament of the Somali nation to argue that violence in Somalia has taken on a monstrous aspect that continues to produce a ripple effect on its citizenry both at home and abroad. What seems to baffle Farah (and the world at large) is that Somalia is arguably the most homogenous society on the African continent: "The world could not decipher the signposts. A people with the same singular culture, the same religion, and the same language tearing into one another for reasons that make no sense to those outside the peninsula: that is why. As the saying goes, a stream cannot rise above its own source" (*North* 295). This does not mean that cultural homogeneity cannot be given to filial conflict. There is dynamism in cultural homogeneity. Therefore, revolution is bound to happen. However, one wishes that conflict and lack of governability that are synonymous with the postcolonial Somali state were resolved within this dynamism. In all, Farah sees a nation whose citizens are left to wander through the debris of fratricidal violence running the risk of causing more harm unto themselves and those around them.

Somalia, having once been termed "a country in exile" by Farah ("A Country in Exile") could be said to have produced what Standing has elsewhere called *nostalgics*, which, in his view, is a curious faction of the precariat that largely consists of "migrants and beleaguered minorities, who feel deprived of a present time, a home, a belonging" ("Meet the Precariat" n. p.). Standing is of the view that once the precariat recognize their supplicant status, "they mostly keep their heads down politically. But occasionally the pressures become too great and they explode in days of rage" ("Meet the Precariat" n. p.). One major issue that Farah deals with in his novel then, is that of the irrepensible rage some of his character express through violent Islamist extremism.<sup>4</sup> This concept of violent Islamist extremism, in which Reid Hutchins contends, martyrdom and suicide terrorism are erroneously perceived as "a basic yet lethally effective strategy among radical jihadists to inflict maximum casualties and damage to increase the shock value" (Hutchins 7) can be connected to the character and actions of Dhaqaneh and Waliya in *North of Dawn* in several way, as I discuss later in this article.

*North of Dawn* foregrounds Eurocentric perceptions of Africa (Herodotus, Joseph Conrad, Joyce Cary, etc.) dotting the text, which seem to suggest that Africa is not only different, but also threatening, uncouth, full of savagery, bestial and dangerous. The novel's special claim is that the actions of the radical Muslim groups get greater condemnation if the perpetrators are Muslim and black. As Kaluun, one of the characters in the novel observes, "[w]hen you are Muslim and black, in the way Somalis are, you belong at one and the same time to the two minority groups most hated nearly everywhere" (*North* 224). The condemnation is almost lukewarm and less visceral where a European citizen is involved in acts of terror. According to Kaluun, "[W]hen a native European is responsible for such a rampage, every attempt is made to prove that he was suffering from some form of mental disorder or is emotionally impaired" (*North* 222). This is further exemplified in the novel through the character and actions of Anders Behring Breivik, a Norwegian far-right terrorist behind the 2011 Norway attacks in which seventy-seven people lost their lives. Breivik "detonated a bomb close to the Norwegian premier's office in the center of Oslo, in which eight people lost their lives" (209). Thereafter, he headed himself "to the wooded island of Utøya, where the young acolytes of the country's governing Labor Party were attending youth camp, and proceeded to mow down sixty-nine more, most of them teenagers" (209). Kaluun wonders that if Breivik is described by his compatriots as mad, "the radical Muslim groups should be described as mad too rather than 'haters of the West' or some such" (222). The point Farah appears to emphasize through the character of Kaluun here is that the demonization of Islamist extremism will always be ill-suited if it is limited to foreign radical Muslim groups as

perpetrators of evil, leaving out right-wing native purists like Breivik. What is most troubling is that stereotypes about all terrorists being Muslims have tended to resonate in most Western societies.

These observations notwithstanding, a more nuanced analysis of radicalism in *North of Dawn* has to focus on Dhaqaneh and Waliya's association with radical jihadism (and how Mugdi, Gacalo and other naturalized Somalis must comport themselves among their western friends and acquaintances); because this is the nerve center around which the lines feeding the conflicts, tensions and mapping out of identities converge.

Given the current reality of terrorism as defining of the zeitgeist of the twenty-first century (Boehmer and Morton 8), themes of precarity and extremism are gaining traction in African writing. Yet, as Islamist extremism becomes the new norm, its attendant woes—risk, terror and trauma—seem to be on the rise as well. The implication here is that the possible comforts of being in a risk-free environment are being challenged by changes in both postcolonial state formations and the way citizens react to the social ills prevalent around them, thereby making peaceful living a complex process that challenges human life. In a helpful review of terrorists, Silke notes that they “are essentially normal individuals” (“Cheshire-cat logic: The recurring theme of terrorist abnormality in psychological research” 53). His observations are strengthened by research done by Nasr Hassan who also asserts that “[w]hat is frightening is not the abnormality of those who carry out the suicide attacks, but their sheer normality. They are so normal for their communities and societies” (n. p.). These views point to an increasingly prevalent tendency in explaining the psychology of terrorists: they are normal people who are not driven by some psychological disorder. In actual fact, most of the suicide terrorists have emerged from secular backgrounds; their profiles do not fit that of the suicidal individual we later come to know (Zulaika 98).

In *North of Dawn*, Dhaqaneh seems to reflect this terrorist normality since nothing untoward is said about his childhood or the reasons why he took the path of radicalism. We learn that as a child, “he never said his prayers” and “he wasn't in the least religious [...] until much later, as a grown man, just before he joined the Shabaab” (*North* 131). More crucially, he is portrayed as a man of peaceful disposition who always “thought of himself as a bridge-builder, a bringer-together of peoples from different beginnings, a Somali proud of his place in Europe” (180). His sanguine nature is further shown by the fact that, as a young man, he used to be very upset with anyone who “was so uncaring and emotionless that he could bring himself to kill an Arab” (180). Although these words are spoken out of youthful exuberance, they carry a kernel of truth, and using the Arab world Dhaqaneh could be said to be against acts of terror so often wrongly associated with people belonging to his religion, preferring a peaceful coexistence instead. This element of calmness and tolerance wears off with age. He gets radicalized after joining a terrorist cell in Oslo and, later, develops a strong aversion for Christianity which he considers a religion for infidels, to the extent that “he cannot bring himself to carry a [Norwegian] passport whose cover is adorned by a cross, such a flagrant Christian symbol” (2). He instead chooses to keep a Somali passport and remain in Somalia because the country “was the closest [Somalis had] to an Islamic state, after Iran” (3). Dhaqaneh is probably alluding to Somalia's close affinity to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a Sunni Islamic organization known for using violent ideology to construct and consolidate Jihadism over the Muslim world.

The sense of becoming a suicidal terrorist gains traction in the novel when Dhaqaneh, in what Melanie Finn suggests to be a proxy war “for the global clash between fundamentalism and secularism” (n. p.), stands up to his father and tells him that he, Dhaqaneh, would not hesitate to exterminate non-Muslims because he views them “as creatures bereft of souls” and, therefore, “he wouldn't hesitate to exterminate [non-Muslims]” (*North* 20). Dhaqaneh declares that “Islam was the one faith that would save the world and everyone on it from perdition and, if need be, he was prepared to kill to achieve this” (18). He further starts using these threats after he gets indoctrinated by a religious mentor who was “suspected of links to one of the 9/11 bombers” (19). Painted here is a picture of violent Islamist extremism which construes all “non-Muslims and ‘wrong’ Muslims [...] as eternal enemies of ‘true’ Islam and therefore fit to be exterminated” (Wilkinson 53). Thus, it comes as no surprise when we later learn about the explosions in Mogadiscio becoming “more frequent and deadly, with fingers of blame pointing at him” (*North* 3). The point to be made here then, is that Dhaqaneh embraces a religious rhetoric of Islamist extremist groups that conflates the Islamic concepts of sacrifice, martyrdom and Jihad to propagate a narrative of violent self-sacrifice, redemption and divine reward for its followers.

Many scholars regard sacrifice, martyrdom and Jihad as “Islamic concepts that have been distorted and exploited by [terrorist organizations] to pursue an extreme Pan-Islamic vision” (Hutchins 7; Haleem 164). According to Hutchins, these Islamist movements have deliberately “misconstrued and exploited the intended usages and true meanings of these Islamic concepts for recruitment purposes. Their erroneous claims and propaganda

have misled their followers into believing that suicide terrorism is morally permitted and justified” (Hutchins 7; see also Haleem 164). In the narrative context of *North of Dawn*, these erroneous claims trouble the strict designations of Islam as a peaceful religion, creating Islamophobia instead. They also invite us to read the novel as writing terrorist subjectivities; one that “offers a counter-narrative to the clash-of-civilizations explanation of Islamist extremism” out of its insistence that “there is nothing *distinctly* Islamic about Islamist extremism, much less to excuse its violence and brutality” (Haleem 164; original emphasis). This is exemplified in the text through the character of Mugdi who is disgusted and affronted by his son’s involvement in terrorist activities. Mugdi asks, “how can I mourn a son who caused the death of so many innocent people? It makes no sense to grieve his death. I explode into rage every time I remember what he did” (*North* 91). Unlike Gacalo, who has a soft spot for her son, Mugdi does not grant operations that in effect sanction the killing and maiming others for religious or political gain. Besides, he knows that associating himself with his son’s warped beliefs and what they represent will not put his name in good stead among his white Norwegian friends.

Waliya, Dhaqaneh’s wife, is the character over whom we watch Gacalo and Mugdi literally fight and almost ruin their marriage in the novel. Like Dhaqaneh, she not a fundamentalist by birth. She gets radicalized by her husband after a long period of ambivalence and living a life of prostitution in a refugee camp in Kenya. When Waliya arrives in Norway, she makes a good contrast between Europe and Africa.

She also praises Gacalo’s generosity, saying: “[T]his is the first time that each of us has a proper bedroom, with beds much larger than any we’ve ever slept it. This is also the first time when we’ve lived without frequent power outages and when we could pray without fear” (101). She again thanks Gacalo for providing her and her children “with so many of these comforts” (101). Unfortunately for Gacalo, Waliya drastically revises the terms of the older woman’s hospitality towards her. She disavows and rejects her parents-in-laws out of her belief that they are not Muslim enough. In her view, her parents-in-law belong to the ‘wrong’ or deficient Muslim group; one that “is not politically engaged in the establishment of the Islamic State” due to its association and collaboration with the non-Muslims (Wilkinson 70). She thus begins to regard them as “apostates” (263) or “the ‘impure,’ ‘damned’ camp of the infidel” (Wilkinson 71) who, through their association with the non-Muslims, have failed to maintain the purity in Islam. Needless to say, Waliya takes a “perverse resolve to cut off all ties to Gacalo and the rest of the family” (*North* 263) and aligns herself with “the ‘true’ Muslim ‘in-group’ [...] committed to establish an Islamic State” or its equivalent into existence (Wilkinson 78). In calling them apostates, they are easily “turned [...] into vulnerable clay pigeons, fair targets that Jihadi terrorists could take potshots at” (*North* 263).

Waliya’s reversion happens soon after she finds herself “among her people” in Norway by which the narrator means that she has reconnected with Imam Zubair, described in the novel as Dhaqaneh’s “comrade in arms” (363). Soon afterwards, Zubair—a man wanted by the Norwegian antiterrorist unit for engaging in terrorist activities—and Imam Fanax begin to support “her refusal to accept social welfare benefits from a non-Muslim entity such as the Norwegian state” (124). As expected, Waliya’s apartment complex in Norway is soon turned into a rendezvous for the two extremist imams and her neighbors lodge a complaint with the authorities for “disturbing the entire neighborhood through a recitation of the Koran via a loud sound system” (*North* 89). Slowly, but consistently, she begins to disapprove of her son’s association with Christians who make him eat “their haram food” (101). For Waliya, the West is full of “nativist skinheads so violently opposed to foreigners in their midst” (148). Needless to wonder, Charles describes the novel as “bracingly honest about the difficulties of assimilation, the way hospitality curdles into condescension and gratitude sours into resentment” (“North of Dawn” n. p.) for the radicalized Somali migrant.

In realigning and reconnecting with Imams Zubair and Fanax in Norway, Waliya seeks to perpetuate the “good work” she and her husband started back in Somalia. Unfortunately for the trio, they are rounded up by Norwegian antiterrorist authorities, who put the two imams behind bars, while Waliya is repatriated to Somalia. The impression the reader is left with about Waliya even in the closing pages of the book is that her new job as “a concierge in Mogadiscio” (*North* 365) is only as a conduit for more acts of terror. In this instance, at least, the idea exists of Somalia as “a country that’s at war with itself” (365) which, in turn, creates collateral violence on those that lie directly in its path is of some value.

It is interesting to consider the extent to which Waliya’s and Dhaqaneh’s actions impact on their immediate family members and the other Somalis living in Norway. For Mugdi, the perception he has of his daughter-in-law does not change throughout the novel since, as I have previously mentioned, she reminds him of the past. This reminder becomes more poignant in the novel when Waliya is associated with the deaths of both Dhaqaneh

and Gacalo in the narrative context of the book.<sup>5</sup> Mugdi further thinks that “by associating with Waliya and, by extension, Zubair, Imam Fanax, and Arla, [he] has crossed a line that now makes him of interest to the police” (355). The point that Farah makes through the character of Mugdi here is that Waliya’s actions have a ripple effect on those she comes in contact with. Gacalo is left in a state of shock when she learns of the younger woman’s fraternization with the two imams. She feels “like a purchaser of contraband goods from an illegal outlet bought at bargain prices, with no warranty period to return them, if they turn out to be unsuitable” (249). In taking the word “contraband” as a foundation for his reflections about Waliya’s character in Norway, Farah appears to bring up aspects of illegality and secrecy which are often associated with migrant lives to account for the precarious substance of such lives.

If precariousness, or some variant of it, can be regarded as creating fear and risk in people, then it could be said that Farah’s latest novel inflects the form of anxiety that leaves every Somali wondering what the future holds for them. Thus, *North of Dawn* warns of the dangers of radical jihadism as a ‘way out’ in a fatally fragmented Somali postcolony. Over a quarter of a century after Barre was deposed from power, Somalis are still haunted by its legacy. As Terrence Lyons and Ahmed Samatar assert in *Somalia: State Collapse, Multilateral Intervention, and Strategies for Political Reconstruction*, after the collapse of power in 1991 “the Somali people suffered the horrible brutality of living in a Hobbesian world without law or institution to regulate relations among groups or to protect the most vulnerable from the most vicious” (7). In the context of this article, violent Islamist extremism places the novel’s characters’ atypical identities in a state of precarity that requires reframing the postcolonial/raced Somali émigré.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, precarity and extremism play an important part in the construction of the dislocated Somali subject in Nuruddin Farah’s *North of Dawn*. The precariat condition of the characters in the novel induce feelings of rage, which push some of them into acts of terror. I have shown in this article how the author’s decision to write terrorist subjectivities endorses the assertion that Somalia’s internecine conflicts have over time produced a curious faction of the precariat, some of which have become a danger both to themselves and their immediate neighbors. The novel thus highlights the manner in which dislocation, marginalization and social identification have the power of turning the quiet subject into an explosive character.

## Notes

- 1 A disclaimer is needed here: speaking of a Somali migrant community in terms of being associated with extremism is by no means painting all Somali émigrés with one brush.
- 2 I use the term Eastern Africa in this study to refer to the vast region extending from Sudan in the north to Tanzania in the south. The study understands the region as comprising of Burundi, Comoros, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Of course, this demarcation has its own downside, with Tom Odhiambo and Godwin Siundu observing in their editorial to the inaugural issue of *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* journal that countries such as “Eritrea, Djibouti; or even the eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Comoros or Seychelles” fall outside “the common understanding of [what is called] eastern Africa” (1). In this study, then, “Eastern Africa” is not a settled term.
- 3 I am constrained by space and the focus of this paper from examining the reasons behind al-Shabaab attacks in Somalia and its reach across other parts of Eastern Africa, or the reasons why Dhaqaneh and Waliya join the group in the narrative context of *North of Dawn*.
- 4 According to Matthew Wilkinson, violent Islamic extremism is “the extreme Manichean Islamist ideology by which the cosmos is constructed as a manifestation of the Eternal Struggle between Islam and Unbelief (*Kufri*)” (Wilkinson 53).
- 5 Back in Mogadiscio, before she fled to Norway, Waliya was the one who was tasked with the task of detonating the bomb that took so many innocent lives. She was reluctant to take up this mission and Dhaqaneh, her husband, took up the assignment instead. Later in the novel, Gacalo dies of grief and shock upon learning about her daughter-in-law’s involvement with extremist elements.

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## Trajectories of radicalization and resilience in Nuruddin Farah's *North of Dawn* Vivian Gerrand

### Trajectories of radicalization and resilience in Nuruddin Farah's *North of Dawn*

Situated within a body of writing that is preoccupied with engagement with terrorism, this article considers the ways in which Nuruddin Farah's novel, *North of Dawn* (2018), explores trajectories of radicalization and resilience to violent extremism. Written from an interdisciplinary cultural migration studies perspective, the article understands violent extremism as a complex networked phenomenon. It makes an original contribution by highlighting the role of belonging in trajectories of radicalization and resilience, bringing sociological studies of radicalized violence and resilience to such violence into dialogue with a cosmopolitan literary framework including the works of other diasporic Somali background European writers such as Cristina Ali Farah and Igiaba Scego. **Keywords:** radicalization to violent extremism, resilience, Nuruddin Farah, belonging, conviviality, fascism.

Set in contemporary Oslo, Nuruddin Farah's novel, *North of Dawn* (2018), explores the radicalization and resilience of Somalis living in Europe. Somalis have resettled in Norway since the mid-1980s, and now number approximately 40 000, including the children of Somali migrants (Tellander and Horst 142). In Oslo, where they are most concentrated, Somalis are now one of the biggest immigrant groups and have high levels of Norwegian citizenship acquisition (143). Narrated polyphonically, predominantly through the eyes of its male protagonists Mugdi and his step grandson Naciim, the novel tells the story of what happens when a Somali Norwegian family loses its son to involvement in terrorism, and explores associated questions of identity and belonging or lack thereof in the diaspora.

If the dynamic interaction of different cultures and languages has become an everyday reality for diasporic Somalis in the increasingly cosmopolitan societies in which they dwell globally, so have fear and resistance to such diversity, both within and outside of the diaspora. Indeed, the perceived existential threat posed by interaction with difference is a critical authorial concern in *North of Dawn*. Farah's valorization of humanist cosmopolitanism, and convivial democratic coexistence, challenges the fascist ideologies shared by neo-Nazi and jihadist extremists alike. His novel enables readers to understand the ways in which belonging is sought both in destructive trajectories of radicalization to violent extremism and in cosmopolitan inclusiveness that enables resilience to such violence.


As in Farah's earlier works, questions of gender and generation are central preoccupations, and inform tensions between family members and their responses to the traumas inherent in the characters' experiences of living in exile. Drawing on earlier work on representations of Somali belonging (Gerrand, "Representing Somali Resettlement in Italy: The Writing of Uba Cristina Ali Farah and Igiaba Scego" and "Mending Mogadishu. Somali Belonging in the twenty-first century") and on recent research with the families of young people who joined violent extremist conflict (Gerrand and Grossman), this article explores Farah's treatment of the dynamic trajectories of radicalization and resilience to violent extremism in the twenty-first century.

### Violent extremism in 21<sup>st</sup> century literature

Violent extremism is a complex, increasingly networked, phenomenon. Radicalization to violence has been the subject of considerable sociological research (Cottee; Nilsson; Joosse *et al.*; Ranstorp; Thomas) and, to a lesser extent, the subject of cultural analysis focused on the subjects, objects and techniques of representation. Fiction is an ideal arena for challenging dominant assumptions about who turns to terrorism and why, and can get to the

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heart of the motivations and environments that permit such trajectories of engagement with violence in a manner that is hard to pin down in sociological research.

In recent years, writers such as Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie have explored the nuances of the dynamics of terrorism in their respective works of fiction: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and *Home Fire* (2017). Published ten years apart, Hamid and Shamsie's novels both address jihadist terrorism but differ in their focus: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is set in the Al-Qaeda era, while *Home Fire* takes place in the context of the Daesh group's influences. Even more recently, author Hassan Ghedi Santur's 2019 novel, *The Youth of God*, takes as its subject matter the radicalization trajectory of a teenaged Somali-Canadian boy and explores the ways in which lack of belonging and Islam have been exploited for political gain by al-Shabaab. In different ways, each of these authors pushes readers to think globally while suggesting local, pro-social, potential mitigating contributing factors to radicalization processes.

Farah in *North of Dawn* is less concerned with any one brand of terrorism. Instead, the author successfully addresses the ways in which the contemporary actions and rhetoric of extremist groups feed each other's processes of what some scholars of terrorism have controversially called "reciprocal" radicalization (Knott; Lee and Copeland 5). Whether or not one agrees with this idea, Somali-Norwegian protagonist Mugdi's reflections on such processes are a leitmotif in the novel: "I would say that the violent culture of right-wing groups here in Europe is very much like Shabaab's," says Mugdi. "I am of the view that the two radical groups feed off each other" (*North* 180).

Farah is alert to the fact that violent extremism is not limited to any particular ideological or religious denomination. The author's decision to stage *North of Dawn* in Norway reflects this. On the one hand, the country was a victim of far-right lone actor Anders Breivik's terrorist attack in July 2011. On the other, an unusually high number of radicalized young Norwegians travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the so-called Islamic State, suggesting the extent to which right-wing xenophobia may contribute to Islamist radicalization (Fabricius).

Farah does not shy away from the role of Islamophobia in Western societies that has legitimated the narratives of incompatibility fostered by far right and Islamist extremist organizations. Indeed, far right and Islamist actors have taken explicit advantage of misunderstandings of Islam perpetuated in dominant media, strategically deploying images that are designed to heighten antagonism towards Muslims, in order to further marginalize Muslim minorities living in the West for political gain (Wignell *et al.* 17). Attention towards this strategy is a leitmotif in the novel: "Silent, all three are aware of the battle lines that have been drawn between two minority groups: on one side, the neo-Nazis, with their anti-Islamic, anti-immigrant smear campaigns, and on the other, the jihadis, small in number when you think of the world's Muslim population of a billion plus. These two are at war and the rest are victims" (*North* 93). Both groups seek to escalate conflict between monolithic categories such as the West and Islam, and dismiss attempts to understand the complexities of dynamic historic relations between religion and society.

Farah challenges the apocalyptic aims of such extremists through exposition of their fascist hypocrisies, and the ways in which these are casually reinforced by "a cottage industry of populist politicians [...] who aim their propaganda at the least educated among their citizenry" (*North* 226). In *North of Dawn*, calculated attempts to polarize the world into black and white in order to destroy the gray zone of democracy (Arts House) are denounced and resisted. Farah sustains this resistance by privileging the gray contours of conviviality that emerge through the humanity of his complex characters. In the following sections, I analyze the novel's cast of characters considering, in particular, who radicalizes and who remains resilient to violent extremism.

### Trajectories of radicalization to violence

At the outset of *North of Dawn*, the Somali background protagonist, Mugdi, and his wife, Gacalo, receive the news that their son, Dhaqaneh, has died in a suicide attack. After fleeing to Somalia, Dhaqaneh joined the al-Shabaab terrorist organization and was married to a local woman, Waliya. Having grown up with empathetic and supportive parents, in a well-resourced home full of "books in all sizes in every genre, in Italian, English, Russian, Somali, Arabic, and Norwegian" (53), Dhaqaneh's radicalization to terrorism may seem unusual. Farah's decision to have a middle-class character radicalize affirms the fact that people from all backgrounds can be vulnerable to recruitment, especially when they feel there is "no room for them in society" (Khosrokhavar 175). Indeed, a small minority of young people have found cultural belonging in taking on and being socialized into the ideologies of extremist groups such as the Islamic State Group (IS), whose sophisticated marketing includes social media apps

to befriend and indoctrinate and specifically targets disenfranchised Muslim youth (Galloway; Grossman *et al.*). Studies of why people become involved in violent extremist organizations reveal that they most often join to be part of something, that is, for social rather than ideological reasons (Barelle, Grossman, *et al.*; Cottee; Nilsson). Recent research finds that a weak sense of national identity and civic belonging increases the vulnerability of first and second-generation immigrants to such mechanisms of socialization (Nilsson 350).

As Muslims with sub-Saharan African heritage, Somalis are visibly different from the dominant communities in which they have settled in the West. With a strong visual presence, identity development in the diaspora is complex and Somalis are commonly viewed as outsiders, leading them to be considered as among the most marginalized of Muslim migrant minorities and vulnerable to radicalizing influences. In addition to the struggles surrounding belonging in their host societies, Somali communities tend to be fragmented along clan lines. At the same time, as will become clear in the next section, Somalis are more often than not highly resilient, having dynamically pioneered new networks and possibilities for belonging in the twenty-first century (Gerrand, *Possible Spaces of Somali Belonging* 232).

The “signs” of Dhaqaneh’s radicalization include behaviors such as social isolation. In the manner of many adolescents, Mugdi recalls that “when puberty took total command of his [son’s] mind and body”, he would spend “more and more time alone in his room, the curtains drawn, listening to loud music, surfing the internet, and watching porn” (*North* 16). It is significant that Dhaqaneh is described by his father as a “person of extremes” from a young age, who would “insist on eating nothing but spaghetti for weeks on end, only to announce that he wanted no more spaghetti for months” (18). This penchant for extremes resonates with the finding in a recent Australian study that interviewed the family members of young people who joined violent extremist conflict that black and white thinking is a common feature of people who radicalize to terrorism (Gerrand and Grossman 14–7). In comparison to his sister, Timiro, Dhaqaneh is the lower achiever of the two. Mugdi wonders whether his son was finding it difficult to live in the same house as her: “For she was dutiful and he was not; she was hardworking at school and he was not; she excelled in everything at which she tried her hand and he did not; she showed future promise, he did not. Dhaqaneh hated being compared to her and hated her guts too” (16). Of the view that it will help their son, Gacalo takes Dhaqaneh on a number of trips to Somalia. On return from one such trip, Dhaqaneh tells his father he wishes to “purify Islam’ from Western influences” (18). Mugdi recollects: “One evening at dinner, when conversation touched on Al Qaeda’s bombing of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam and the 9/11 massacre, Dhaqaneh declared that Islam was the one faith that would save the world and everyone on it from perdition and, if need be, he was prepared to kill to achieve this” (18). Moreover, Dhaqaneh considers “all non-Muslims [...] creatures bereft of souls” who are not “full humans”. His zero-sum thinking is on display when he admits to his father that he “wouldn’t hesitate to exterminate them” (20). Whilst in Somalia, Dhaqaneh was likely influenced by a shift to “a different Islam from the one [his family] were raised on” (61). This Islam is characterized by a new set of Salafi customs, foreign to the Sunni Islam with Sufi elements hitherto practised in Somalia, that become visible once Waliya arrives in Norway. Waiting for Waliya to answer their knock at the door of her apartment, Gacalo explains: “Whereas in former times, Somalis were relaxed about the genders mingling and spaces were not necessarily allotted to specific genders, our people have recently adopted the more conservative, stricter, Wahhabi tradition, which stipulates that different entrances are assigned to the two genders” (62).

This shift in attitudes is symptomatic of the devastating conditions produced by two decades of civil war, which have displaced approximately two million Somalis who now live in the diaspora. It has also damaged Somali heritage and culture. Isakhan argues that the destruction of cultural heritage by extremist groups such as the so-called Islamic State arguably plays a key role in violent extremism insofar as it erases the cultural memory of human groups’ rich traditions, creating a vacuum which may be readily filled with propaganda (242). Somalis both within and outside of Somalia may be vulnerable, therefore, to groups and ideologies that fill this vacuum. Moreover, understanding Dhaqaneh’s trajectory of radicalization to violence requires that we appreciate the European context he left, in which migration is routinely perceived as a threat, rather than a source of strength and opportunity. Dhaqaneh’s family friend, Fredrik, sums up this predicament: “[H]ere in Norway, the Somalis are very much unwelcome, being black Muslim refugees at a time when migration is now viewed both as a political problem and as a threat to the Norwegians’ continued existence as a “pure race” (183). Within such dominant discourses of national identity, the racialization of Somalis as “incompatible” results in the stigma of being “excluded [...] harassed” and “discounted as a person” (Fangen 71–2). Unlike natives, the worst is expected of them. Following the Breivik far right terrorist attack, Mugdi’s brother Kaluun muses on this double standard: when “a

native European is responsible” for a terrorist attack, “every attempt is made to prove that he was suffering from some form of mental disorder or is emotionally impaired” (222). Muslim minorities, on the other hand, are already “suspect” (Hickman *et al.* 91) and are thus not given the benefit of being able to appeal to mental illness.

A lack of equal treatment or opportunity follows such discrimination, producing a dynamic of humiliation to which Somalis are subjected. Islamist groups such as al-Shabaab promote the offer of a new life of possibility, agency and dignity outside of Norway; their appeal to a minority of Somalis has its roots in this reality of discrimination and humiliation. Indeed, Dhaqaneh finds greater sense of purpose, legitimacy and belonging outside Europe, in his parents’ homeland, Somalia. The extremist ideology into which Dhaqaneh is socialized provides a “set of justifications that legitimises an in-group, which is primarily expressed through texts, including both the written and spoken word” (Berger 7). According to Berger, a sense of legitimacy is thus frequently granted to otherwise disenfranchised people through extreme movements. The extreme ideologies underpinning such movements may be used selectively as “a tool [...] by violent extremists to construct their ‘system of meaning’ in response to psychosocial and strategic factors” (7). Dhaqaneh’s perceived lack of legitimacy underpins his radicalization to terrorism which occurs when the pull of the opportunity of joining al-Shabaab combines with the push of discrimination. His radicalization trajectory recalls the reports of families interviewed for an Australian study that online violent extremist influences presented an “exciting picture of what [young family members] could do with their lives.” These influences appeared to offer: “a much-needed sense of adventure, belonging, dignity and purpose through [...] redemptive narratives which served to instil in these vulnerable young people the idea that they can become heroes by joining a violent extremist movement” (Gerrand and Grossman 11).

In the aftermath of his suicide, Dhaqaneh’s parents argue about whether to bring his wife and stepchildren, Naciim and Saafi, whom they have never met, to Oslo. Mugdi is “at loggerheads” with Gacalo over whether they should allow their son’s wife and her children to join them in Oslo by sponsoring them with a family reunion category visa. Mugdi worries about “what may become of [them] if Waliya turns out to be a troubled person, or, even worse, a terrorist” (4). Mugdi’s fears are well-founded. Waliya is an easily-led opportunist who swings from promiscuity to austerity, often neglecting her children’s needs. Taking her tea with “three sugars” (100), Waliya is hardly a model of piety: her chequered past is regularly alluded to, and her radicalization to Wahhabism appears to be an attempt to redeem herself from it. Her son, Naciim, in conversation with Gacalo, reflects that prior to meeting his stepfather Dhaqaneh: “Mum was always more into nightclubbing than praying and [...] seldom set foot in a mosque” (131). In replacing one set of extreme behaviors with another, her agency is often limited to what she can do for men. In Oslo, her authoritarian approach alienates her from her son, whom she reprimands for prioritizing his studies over the punctual performance of his five daily prayers. Naciim is prepared to say his prayers later in the day, acknowledging that “Islam allows that, but my mother doesn’t” (131).

Waliya’s trajectory is not unique. An Australian study that interviewed the family members of young people who joined violent extremist conflict found that some of these young people turned to devout practices in an effort to distance themselves from past substance abuse (Gerrand and Grossman 10). Waliya’s history of trauma, inability to adapt to her host country and zero sum thinking make her vulnerable to terrorist recruitment. Such thinking is evident in her derision of her son’s plan to participate in Norway’s Constitution Day celebrations:

Naciim’s eagerness for tomorrow’s festivities is tempered by the fury he feels at his mother and the way she mocked him for preparing to join the Constitution Day celebrations. She practically forced him out of the house with taunts meant not only to wound his pride but also to question his very identity—for how could he now consider himself a Somali, or even a Muslim, his mother demanded. (154)

When Waliya finds some of the Norwegian flags Naciim has purchased to take with him, she destroys them on the grounds that she will have “no cross in [her] house” (154–5). Her black and white worldview that non-Muslims, and Muslims who do not strictly adhere to Salafism, are evil manifests in disrespect towards Naciim’s friend, Edvart: “When [Naciim] recalls how rude his mother was to Edvart, chasing him out of the apartment as if he were a tramp, merely because his friend is not a Muslim, he decides that her attitude is no different from that of the neo-Nazis, those nativist skinheads so violently opposed to foreigners in their midst” (148).

After Waliya begins a new relationship with terror suspect, Zubair, this worldview sharpens into violence towards her own son. When Naciim returns home smelling of alcohol, after a friend spilled wine on him, Waliya instructs her “charlatan” friends, Cumar and Imam Fanax, to administer “fifty lashes”. Sadistically delighted at the opportunity to “punish the boy”, belt in hand, Fanax: “strike[s] him with as much force as possible [...] He wants

everyone to know that the belt has made its mark, and the longer it takes for Naciim to issue a groaning sound of pain, the harder he will be hit” (234). With Gacalo and Mugdi’s assistance, Naciim reports the attack to the police, before going to the hospital emergency unit where a nurse takes photos of his injuries “noting the discoloration on his back and the cuts that will require care for a month at least” (235). Akin to her friend Arla, whom Naciim observes to “cause havoc wherever she goes” (198): “Waliya is forever creating havoc, unable to come to terms with her new country’s climate, culture or faith, nor able to tear herself loose from all that defined her back in the land where she was raised” (195). However, unlike Arla, who refers to herself as “a woman for all seasons”, and switches between the *dirac*, traditional Somali *guntiino* and “the full Muslim outdoor gear”, Waliya’s religious convictions impair her flexibility. They do not even allow her children to listen to music and “she discourages them from watching TV because they may glimpse men or women in flimsy summer wear” (304).

Having rejected life in Norway, Waliya eventually departs Oslo to return to Mogadishu, where she ostensibly has a job in a hotel. She calls her children intermittently, but they are unable to reach her on her mobile number: “Naciim presses the redial a moment after she rings off, with the purpose of checking if his mother’s number works. It doesn’t. A week later, his mother telephones again, using a new number. When he asks her about these numbers, his mother is cagey, unprepared to tell him where she is, or why her numbers keep changing” (369). The novel ends with her son’s reflection that his terrorist stepfather, Dhaqaneh, used to change his number often too.

The rise of far right and Islamist populist rhetoric has fortified ‘either/or’ thinking that risks encaging diasporic Somalis as illustrated by Dhaqaneh and Waliya’s trajectories of radicalization to terrorism. The next section highlights what enables the resilience of characters who reject violence in spite of vulnerability in *North of Dawn*.

### Trajectories of resilience

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an age characterized by global connectivity, it is increasingly common to live in between cultures, and to uphold multiple affiliations. Moreover, this experience is no longer limited to people who have migrated from one place to another (Amin 13). And yet, in the face of uncertainty, the need to solidify and fix identity as being of a particular place and genealogy has assumed prominence in the turn of some towards nostalgic movements that reify exclusivist, racialized and nativist identities (Bauman 3; Glick Schiller 104). In light of this, akin to a number of European Somali-background authors, Farah’s privileging of multiplicity challenges thinking that seeks to partition cultural groups through Manichean reasoning.

Studies that have sought to understand the resilience of Somali communities to violent extremism have been undertaken by Grossman and Tahiri and Grossman *et al.* in Melbourne, Australia, by Weine and Ahmed in Minnesota, the USA, and by Joose *et al.* in Canada. Two recent studies have examined Somalis’ vulnerability as well as resilience to violent extremism in the contexts of the United States and Australia: Weine and Ahmed’s study “Building Resilience to Violent Extremism Among Somalis in Minneapolis-St Paul”, and Grossman, Stephenson and Tahiri’s “Harnessing Resilience Capital: An Investigation of Resilience and Cultural Diversity in Countering Violent Extremism”, in Melbourne, Australia. These studies pioneered a framework for researching violent extremism in relation to community resilience. Weine and Ahmed devised a model, Diminishing Opportunities for Violent Extremism (DOVE), to identify protective resources that can help mitigate the risk factors for involvement in violent extremism (2). These studies found that having a positive cultural image and identity, including family and community support networks, and access to traditional knowledge, are key to being resistant to violent extremism. At the same time, Grossman *et al.* found that the emphasis on bonding within the Somali community in the form of loyalty to the collective family and community, when it overrides individual wellbeing, can produce expectations of conformity to traditional norms that may not, in fact, be desirable for young Somalis for whom bridging capital is as important in their diasporic contexts. Bridging capital was defined in this study as “the capacity to link and interact meaningfully between communities with different backgrounds, values and belief systems” (18) Grossman *et al.* found that when bonding capital is privileged at the expense of bridging capital, young people within their Somali communities may experience alienation or expulsion from their family groups, placing their cultural resilience at risk (18). Flexible, as well as complex, cultural identities are vital, then, in enabling young Somalis to experience healthy cultural identity and belonging—factors that prevent socialization into violent extremism—in their Western contexts. Such complex, flexible identities have become an everyday unremarkable reality in many parts of the world, and are on display in a growing number of literary works that consider the predicament of Somalis in the diaspora.

Within the Italian context, for example, Igiaba Scego has modelled such bridging capital through a championing of complexity that is central to her activism, short stories and novels. Scego draws on her deep insight into what it means to be African and European and at home “where one is” (Carroli and Gerrand 8), to write characters who negotiate with varying degrees of success their Somali-ness in European and Somali contexts (Gerrand, *Possible Spaces* 153). Likewise, the novels of Cristina Ali Farah feature characters who are thoroughly of their European location—be it in London, Rome or Belgium—while maintaining their Somali heritage (Gerrand, “Representing Somali Resettlement” 292; “Mending Mogadishu” 24). Kaha Mohamed Aden is another Italian Somali writer who has imagined in between understandings that build bridges and thereby contribute to convivial co-existence. As in Nuruddin Farah’s novels, identity in Aden’s, Ali Farah’s and Scego’s works is dynamic and responsive. Such works might be considered in terms of an aesthetics of adaptation, as they feature characters who have found belonging beyond an *either/or* struggle which allows them to be *both* here *and* there on trajectories of resilience.

The characters through whose eyes *North of Dawn* is narrated, namely Mugdi and his step-grandson Naciim, are both highly resilient. Since Mugdi met Naciim at the airport, “he knew right away that they would get along” (303). Naciim displays resilience in his ready affiliation with Norway’s customs, while maintaining his Somali identity (153–4). As noted in the previous section, Naciim dedicates himself to learning the local language and customs, forms friendships, and a relationship with a local non-Somali Norwegian, while maintaining loyalty to his heritage. Naciim’s embodiment of cosmopolitan belonging and futurity in Norway impresses Mugdi:

It has always disturbed Mugdi that Somalis in Norway tend to attract bad press, and seem relegated to the lowest rung on the economic ladder, unable to see beyond their ideological and religious constraints, and so unable to ever really advance. As Mugdi steps aside for Gacalo to enter the Niensens’ home, he feels certain that Naciim and his generation of fresh-faced, ambitious young Somalis will change all that. (177)

Mugdi likewise lives a cosmopolitan existence, with friends of a variety of backgrounds. Working as a translator into Somali of his “favourite Norwegian novel”, Ole Edvart Rølvaag’s *Giants in the Earth* (1927) helps to take his mind off his son’s fate and to put into perspective his migration to Norway by comparing it with the historic context of Norwegian migration to Minnesota (9). Following the death of his wife, Mugdi struggles with grief, but still manages to begin a new relationship with a non-Somali Norwegian woman, Nadia, a friend of mutual friends Birgitta and Johan who is “head of the special reference collections at the National Library, responsible for antique, rare, and irreplaceable books” (302). While connecting with Nadia does not lessen Mugdi’s loss, it enables him to share life once more in the present with an empathetic companion who is also his intellectual equal. Nadia’s presence in Mugdi’s life also protects him from Arla’s sinister late-night attempt to infiltrate his home after Gacalo’s death (349).

Naciim’s sister, Saafi, is significantly more traumatized when she arrives in Oslo, having been gang raped in the refugee camp where she was living. Nonetheless, Saafi too proves to be remarkably resilient, supported as she is by Gacalo and Mugdi and their daughter, Timiro, when she visits Oslo from Geneva. For Saafi’s mother, Waliya, the only cure to her daughter’s PTSD would be “from reading the Koran” (60). Behind Waliya’s back, Gacalo takes Saafi to see a Somali psychologist, Qumman, who is a friend of Timiro’s. Qumman succeeds in helping Saafi’s “memories scare [her] less than before” (96) and in regaining “her sense of self” (191). After Gacalo takes her step-grand-daughter shopping, Naciim tells Gacalo that he has observed Saafi putting on “one of the four dresses you bought for her and spend[ing] several hours each day in front of the standing mirror in Mum’s room, admiring herself” (121). If we think of changing clothes as a metaphor for identity as a dynamic process, Saafi embarks on a healing trajectory that gives her the courage to try on different ways of dressing, and of being herself in the world. This trajectory of resilience is enabled by the preservation of her Somali cultural identity and her adaptation to Norwegian society.

Saafi’s newfound interest in clothing contrasts with her mother’s dress code. Farah challenges stereotypes about piety of women in *niqabs* through the female Somali characters such as Arla and Waliya. The author highlights the vacuity of equating piety with any particular garb, the paying of “lip service to the faith” while living “a life of lies” (350) and privileges instead the piety of character demonstrated by Mugdi and Gacalo. Farah is not critical of religion per se, but rather of the ways in which people distort and exploit religion for self-serving ends (Pucherova 33). The example of Somali Muslims drinking alcohol in social situations is an important case in point in *North of Dawn*. Mugdi and Gacalo do not adhere to traditional Muslim codes such as abstaining from alcohol, nor do they misuse alcohol. Their occasional social drinking is appropriate to their social context. At Gacalo’s

funeral, alcohol is served in mugs, for example, catering at once for those who drink while expressing sensitivity towards those who abstain (266). In this sense, Farah's depiction of Islam resonates with the critique of critical Muslim Studies scholars who contest essentialist understandings of the religion by attempting to move beyond Arab-centric interpretations of the consumption of alcohol (186). The scholars in question take into account a variety of Islamic contexts in which it is intoxication, rather than alcohol itself, that is prohibited (Sheikh and Islam 187). In this sense, the author upholds the view that there are as many ways to practise Islam as there are Muslims (Sweid 29).

This view departs significantly from the religious perspective adopted by characters such as Waliya to whom a strict literal Wahhabist interpretation, and reification, of Islam appeals. Indeed, reified identities do appeal precisely because they appear to promise security to vulnerable, uncertain and insecure people living at the margins of societies in a globalized world. These people may be recent migrants like Waliya, but in Europe they are more often nativist white supremacists like Breivik, whose terrorist attack is responsible for killing one of *North of Dawn's* most resilient and hopeful Somali Norwegian characters, Mouna:

Anders Behring Breivik, a native Norwegian, after a lengthy planning process, first detonated a bomb close to the Norwegian premier's office in the centre of Oslo, in which eight people lost their lives, before heading to the wooded island of Utoya, where young acolytes of the country's governing Labor party were attending youth camp, and proceeded to mow down sixty-nine more, most of them teenagers. One of the dead was Mouna: charming, exuberant, barely eighteen, soccer-playing Mouna, Himmo's daughter, loved deeply by all who knew her, especially Naciim. (209)

Mouna's mother, Himmo, "a woman of dignity" (211), is another beacon of resilience in *North of Dawn*. For Mugdi: "the key to understanding Himmo, as a woman and a human being, is in understanding her marked commitment to her children's well-being, her absolute devotion to her career, and her insistence that her future depends on her own hard work and her efforts as a Somali-Norwegian." In contrast to Waliya, Himmo takes responsibility for her children and for her career and, significantly, "can no longer think of herself as Somali without also thinking that she is Norwegian" (212). The bridging capital she cultivates represents a departure from the straightjacketed mentality of Waliya, who refuses to learn the local language and discourages her children from joining Norwegian society out of fear this will annihilate their Muslim and Somali identities, Himmo raises her daughter "to embrace her hyphenated identity" (212). Mugdi reflects on his relationship with Himmo:

Many memories revisit Mugdi: Himmo as a young girl asking him to lend her books to read; Himmo as a basketball player in Mogadishu, leading her team from the front and scoring points; Himmo visiting them in Bonn on a few months' refresher course, staying up late practicing her German to ensure that she mastered the language in the shortest time possible; Himmo announcing the collapse of her first marriage, and then her second, both times working hard to pull herself together and succeeding. No matter the challenge, she has always survived, and she produced three wonderful children. The tragedy is that one of them is now dead at the hands of Breivik. (225)

Farah privileges the capacity to negotiate multiple affiliations of characters who are at once cosmopolitan, and yet very much rooted in their European national realities. Unlike the "cosmopolitan cast" of the author's 2014 novel *Hiding in Plain Sight*, in which not one character is "born, works, marries and dies within a fixed locale" (Moolla 69), *North of Dawn's* characters could hardly be described as "post-national". The 2018 novel's protagonists' ties to their adopted or abandoned countries are consistently upheld, even in the face of recent migration. As we have seen, identity for Waliya is an either/or proposition: she rejects Norway in favor of her homeland, Somalia, while her children embrace their new country, developing bridging capital by learning the language and coming to identify with being *both* Norwegian *and* Somali.

In this way, Farah echoes critical understandings of identity as a product of both routes and roots, and therefore regards both alienation and assimilation as dead ends insofar as neither response accommodates the realities of belonging in the twenty-first century. Gacalo and Mugdi's Somali-Norwegian friend, Suudi, who has completely rejected his heritage is an example of the undesirability of assimilation. Suudi lives with his Norwegian partner, Ingrid, and tells the tale of their dog "shar[ing] their bed at night and eat[ing] its food off their plates." (265) Kaluun thinks there is "nothing wrong in [his friend] stressing how he has struck out on his own, but what good has Suudi done for other Somalis, culturally, politically, or in any other way? None" (266). Mugdi, Gacalo, Timiro, Naciim, Saafi, Himmo and Mouna on the other hand enact a third way of developing bridging capital, that comprises multiplicity, complicating singular affiliation. In conversation with an academic family friend, Fredrik,

who is working on a comparative analysis of the first Norwegians to settle in Minnesota and the more recently arrived Somalis, Frederik tells Gacalo and Mugdi he is “coming around to the idea that you can’t do well in a new country if you don’t have a good measure of the one you left behind” (183).

A 2017 Australian-Canadian study that pioneered a measure for understanding youth resilience to violent extremism affirms that living identity as a dynamic process, with an ability to maintain social networks across multiple affiliations, or bridging capital, is a key factor in what makes young people resilient to violent extremism (Grossman *et al.* 13). A principle danger to resilience to violence, therefore, is the brittleness, embodied in *North of Dawn* most emphatically by Dhaqaneh and Waliya, that comes from needing to define oneself as one or another thing, without ambiguity. It is well-recognized that violent extremist groups exploit such fragility; it is what allows their offers of uncomplicated belonging to go unquestioned in their recruitment of a minority of people.

Farah’s *North of Dawn* privileges the lives of characters who successfully inhabit their Somali and Norwegian affiliations, and in so doing, subvert reified identities. At the same time, as might be expected, Farah critiques the paths taken by characters who refuse to adapt, and instead seek refuge in extremist ideologies that take them towards violent action. These characters are as destructive when they gravitate towards the ideologies of the far right, as they are when joining Somalia’s al-Shabaab movement. In the face of this, Farah’s protagonists Mugdi, Gacalo, Timiro, Naciim, Saafi, Himmo and Mouna display a range of strategies for belonging and identification in Norway that enable them to retain fluency across their multiple cultural affiliations, affording them resilience.

Dialectical thinking about identity is thus critical to understanding the logic of Farah’s characters’ trajectories. As we have seen, those incapable of it are given short shrift. Mugdi’s son, Dhaqaneh, removes himself from his Norwegian upbringing, rebelling against it to become a fighter for a terrorist organization that promises him renewed dignity. A suicide bomber who has rejected his upbringing in the West and embraced the black and white jihadist ideology, Dhaqaneh dies before the timeline of the narrative begins. His wife Waliya fares little better. And his stepchildren thrive when they begin to adapt to their new country, all the while maintaining their Somali cultural heritage. The characters Farah most valorizes display an aesthetics of adaptation, having found belonging beyond an *either/or* struggle which allows them to be *both* here *and* there on trajectories of resilience.

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## Nuruddin Farah: *A pas de deux across The World Republic of Letters*

F. Fiona Moolla


### Nuruddin Farah: *A pas de deux across The World Republic of Letters*

Nuruddin Farah's life and work is used in Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* to exemplify the challenges of the dispossessed writer on the periphery of the hierarchical, binary, and highly agonistic world literary system she describes. However, precisely because of his unique position on the Somali literary periphery of the African periphery, Farah's work and career represent the practice of Casanova's theory in advance of its formulation. The Somali writer's negotiation of entry into the dominant world literary order since the publication of his first novel in 1970 suggests an implicit understanding of the literary system Casanova outlines only towards the end of the twentieth century. In other words, Farah does not derivatively illustrate the theory, but his career and novels preempt through practice the major insights of Casanova's theory. Farah's career, furthermore, suggests a wider polycentrism of influence than allowed in the hierarchical binarism of Casanova's model. Finally, the postcolonial aesthetic of "teacherliness", clearer in the late realism of Farah's mature work, signals a fundamental rewriting, rather than a derivative renewal, of modernist aesthetic modes privileging technique of the major cities of the global north. **Keywords:** Nuruddin Farah, Pascale Casanova, world systems, literary theory, postcolonial literature, translation.

Nuruddin Farah is one of a handful of world writers referred to by Pascale Casanova as illustrating the postcolonial dimension of the development of a world literary system described in *The World Republic of Letters* (2004), first published in 1999 as *La république mondiale des lettres*. The significance of Farah to Casanova's theory is such that Farah is alluded to at key junctures, and is cited extensively, including a lengthy quote used as an epigraph to one of the chapters. In her book, Casanova draws on readings of Farah's novels and essays, and an interview she herself conducted with the author. In some ways, Farah is the most exemplary of the authors used to elucidate the predicaments of writers on the periphery of the world literary system as analyzed by Casanova. Literary "mondialisation" exists in parallel with world economic and political systems, where the global literary system has hierarchies, binaries and flows independent of the geopolitics of globalization. Farah is one of the most significant 'partners' in the 'dance' choreographed by Casanova since he would appear to prove almost completely Casanova's theory of the literary deprivation of the margins. Casanova constructs the theory of the world literary system around four areas, namely translation, the existence of a national literature, language, and avant-garde narrative techniques. In every one of these areas, Farah seems to be a hyper-illustrative example of Casanova's claims, as the rest of this article will show. One could say that in the *pas de deux*, or dance of lovers, conducted across the world literary map, Casanova dominates the entrée, positioning Farah as evidence of a conception of world literature that is binary, hierarchical and agonistic. This world system is generally centered in the metropolitan cities of the global north but, for Casanova, Paris represents the undisputed capital of the world republic of letters. However, in Casanova's *pas de deux* with Farah across the world republic of letters, Farah can be seen to be in the lead of Casanova. The specifics of the literary negotiation Farah conducts across his career suggest a deep and preemptive intuition of the structures of dominance Casanova later describes (and, ironically, comes unreflectively to endorse in her world literary system). Farah's career thus is paradoxical, showing a sense of strategically entering the world system from the postcolonial edges, as Casanova suggests such writers are obliged to do. However, Farah's engagement of structures of literary power throughout his career implies a tacit understanding of key features of the system Casanova describes almost thirty years before she goes on to outline it. Thus Farah's novels and his positioning of himself as writer, are, in part, world system literary theory through literary practice. But, Farah also

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simultaneously reconfigures the world system through upending the dominant aesthetic as posited by Casanova from one that upholds mainly formal considerations of literary technique to one that reintroduces the social and political through the aesthetic of “teacherliness”, a concept proposed by African literature scholar, Harry Garuba.

Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* is based on her PhD thesis under the supervision and theoretical influence of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, especially Bourdieu’s literary ‘translation’ of concepts of cultural modernity. Bourdieu’s most significant literary intervention is the idea of the “literary field”; in particular, the development of the concept of the relative autonomy of literature, explored in greatest detail in *The Rules of Art*. Casanova’s model of world literary production is also influenced by the world systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein, best known for its analysis of globalization through the concepts of economic core and periphery. Reflecting the thinking of Bourdieu and Wallerstein, Casanova proposes that literature does not, through universality of ideas and literary merit of individual works, construct a neutral, democratic and open aesthetic field. Instead, literature is constituted by a highly competitive world system that controls the literary domain. This world system may be perceived only by looking at the field from a wider perspective than that of the individual work, the author, or national literatures. She suggests that, in looking from a “broader perspective”,

literary frontiers come into view that are independent of national boundaries, dividing up a world that is secret and yet perceptible by all (especially its most dispossessed members); territories whose sole value and sole resource is literature, ordered by power relations that nonetheless govern the form of the texts that are written in and that circulate in these lands; a world that has its own capital, its own provinces and borders, in which languages become instruments of power. Each member of this republic struggles to achieve recognition as a writer. Specific laws have been passed freeing literature from arbitrary political and national powers, at least in the most independent regions. Rival languages compete for dominance; revolutions are at once always literary and political. The history of these events can be fathomed only by recognizing the existence of a literary measure of time, of a “tempo” peculiar to literature; and by recognizing that this world has its own present—the literary Greenwich meridian. (4)

Casanova shows how a world literary system has been developing since the sixteenth century in Europe, in tandem with the development of capitalist modernity. The world literary system, however, has grown in relative independence from national politics and national power relations, both internally and internationally. “*Mondialisation*”, or the establishment of the world order, is strongly agonistic creating intense competition across literary hierarchies, languages, and regions of dominance and dispossession. For Casanova, the “Greenwich meridian” of literature is an aesthetic whose present (modernity) lies predominantly in Paris. Therefore, “The aesthetic distance of a work or corpus of works from the center may thus be measured by their temporal remove from the canons that, at the precise moment of estimation, define the literary present” (88). The world system described, from which by exception those works that achieve “classic” (92) status escape, may be perceived only if distanced from the confines of national definitions of literature. The transformation of vantage point from which Casanova reconfigures the study of literature is also not wholly original. She draws on “The Figure in the Carpet”, the 1896 essay by Henry James, that suggests criticism and aesthetics may be better conceived if one zooms out seeing the figure as constituted in and by the whole carpet.

Although the importance of Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* was acknowledged by most major scholars of world literature, the theory has also received considerable critique. Almost across the board, reviewers and critics of *The World Republic of Letters* question its self-assured identification of Paris as undisputed center of the literary world. Furthermore, Emily Apter’s *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* implicitly takes issue with Casanova’s uncritical incorporation of translation as a culturally neutral process in the operation of the world literary system. Postcolonial literary scholarship has, however, been most critical of the world system Casanova describes. Sunil Agnani provides the most detailed postcolonial critique of the book itself through his thoughtful review of it. Agnani suggests that Casanova’s entire enterprise undermines postcolonial scholarship which may find it “strangely aggravating [...] to read a study that occasionally states to the reader that its aims are the opposite of an ethnocentric view of the international field of literature [...] and yet seems on every page to document the inevitable paramountcy of the centre of the world republic of letters—Paris” (329). Agnani also criticizes the theory’s employment of a “progressivist notion of aesthetic development” with avant-gardist modes as the apogee (330). In these and other assumptions, Agnani argues that Casanova, despite her best intentions, falls prey to the “conceptual paradox” of conceiving world literature as “project[ing] a version of the template drawn from European (here, Parisian) history” (330). Agnani also observes that Casanova’s analogy, which compares the

world system to a republic, is wrong since her literary geopolitical map more closely resembles an empire (332). (Agnani is correct about the world “empire” of letters, but this article will continue to use Casanova’s terminology for the sake of consistency.) Other critics have also questioned the unrelenting binarism of the center-periphery model employed, arguing that it “would seem to be at odds with experience and reality, which would suggest a configuration more like a Venn diagram, in which the various literatures of the world overlap in places, with a central grouping of writers translated into virtually all languages, but with most belonging to semi-autonomous regional and linguistic groups” (Mulrooney 553). Robert Young observes that while “Casanova criticizes the post-colonial for being political at the expense of the aesthetic, she herself sometimes completely misses the aesthetic dimension in her readings, particularly with respect to language” (32). Edward Said furthermore suggests that in granting the world literary system “integral autonomy”, Casanova underplays “one of the hallmarks” of modernity where “at a very deep level, the aesthetic and the social need to be kept in a state of irreconcilable tension” and where “the writer, is still implicated, indeed frequently mobilized for use in the great post—Cold War cultural contests provided by [...] altered political configurations [...]” (20).

Peng Cheah’s *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (2016) presents a thoroughgoing post-colonial engagement of the debates that ensued on the publication of *The World Republic of Letters*. Cheah’s book brings together and expands the points made by Young and Said, namely, that there are significant losses when literature is treated primarily as an object of circulation and exchange, as it inevitably becomes in Casanova’s model, and other models of this type. Cheah stresses a focus not only on *how* literature circulates in the world as geographical space, but also *the ways in which* literature opens up readers to other worlds. In other words, like Young, Cheah foregrounds the emergence of specific aesthetic modes in the study of postcolonial literature, which may be different from Casanova’s exclusive focus on aesthetics as technique. Like Said, Cheah also highlights the implicit socio-political articulations of postcolonial world literature. Cheah foregrounds what he terms the “normativity” (read: potential ethical interventions) of postcolonial world literature. Cheah proposes “a more rigorous way of understanding world literature’s normativity as a modality of cosmopolitanism that responds to the need to remake the world as a place that is open to the emergence of people that globalization deprives of world” (19). Cheah analyzes the work of five postcolonial writers in the third part of his book, with an entire chapter dedicated to Farah’s novel, *Gifts*, which explores the impacts of humanitarian aid in Somalia, among other concerns. *Gifts*, Cheah argues, not only exposes the marketization of global aid initiatives, but also presents local alternatives of gifting, opening up new social possibilities. Thus, to reiterate in the context of the reading of *Gifts*, “Where world literature’s vocation is to think the force of worlding, postcolonial world literature’s normative task is to enact the unending opening of a world as a condition for the emergence of new subjects in spite of capitalist globalization” (309). But Farah’s literary formation, career and trends in his writing interrogate the dominant world literature model in other ways also as the mutual exchange between Farah and Casanova shows.

Farah is used as an exemplary case in *The World Republic of Letters* of the intense and anxious strategies and negotiations of the dispossessed writer to gain entry into the world’s literary capitals. Drawing on an interview Casanova conducted with Farah, and on Farah’s 1990 essay, “Childhood of my Schizophrenia”, first published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, and using its French translation which appeared in 1993 in *Le serpent à plumes*, Casanova hones in on Farah’s predicament as a translated man. In an interesting instance of the complexities of translation, Casanova underscores the aptness of the French translation of a phrase used by Farah in “Childhood of my Schizophrenia”. Farah describes his situation growing up in Kallafo under Ethiopian domination, with Somali as a home language, but being educated in other languages: Amharic was the language imposed by an oppressor, Arabic was the language of religion, and English was another language of colonial oppression. Farah describes himself therefore as “a schizophrenic child living in the age of colonial contradiction” (1264). The English translation of Casanova’s book that uses the French translation of the essay highlights Farah’s concept of the “contradictory unsuitabilities” of the peripheral writer—which is the English translated into French, retranslated into English of “colonial contradiction”, the expression used in Farah’s essay:

It is in this sense, that the fine phrase—disillusioned and realistic—of the Somalian novelist Nuruddin Farah, who described his own identity as a dominated writer among dominated writers as consisting in a series of “contradictory unsuitabilities” is to be understood: not only are the impoverished—whether their poverty is literary, political or linguistic—never truly at ease in the literary world; more than this, their various unsuitabilities are themselves contradictory, forming an inextricable web of malediction, unhappiness, anger, and revolt. (Casanova 185)

The tone of anguished frustration identified above is captured also in what Farah says in an interview with Casanova: “Writing is a minefield of betrayals. I betrayed my mother in becoming not an oral poet but a writer, and a writer in English, which is to say in a language incomprehensible to her [...] I regret having written in English [...] I regret that you, my mother, died before I could see you again” (254). Casanova’s analysis of Farah’s complex position in the world literary system is in many ways illuminating, but Farah’s position and negotiation of the system also reveals the ways the model may be inadequate. Although *The World Republic of Letters* alludes to Farah mainly in the context of translation, it nevertheless outlines three other areas in relation to which Farah’s writing career may productively be considered. These are centered around questions of a national literature, language, and narrative techniques. Each of these areas will now be considered, as well as further complexities of the question of translation.

Paradoxically, even though the becoming-visible of the world literary system requires that one think transnationally, entering the world republic of letters is strongly connected with the richness of the literary history of the nation. Referring to an essay by Paul Valéry, Casanova suggests that: “Age is one of the chief aspects of literary capital: the older the literature, the more substantial a country’s patrimony, the more numerous the canonical texts that constitute its literary pantheon in the form of ‘national classics’” (14). In addition to the depth of a nation’s literary history, Casanova also cites the “prestige” conferred by “the existence of a [...] professional ‘milieu,’ a restricted and cultivated public, and an interested [...] enlightened bourgeoisie; on salons, a specialized press, and sought-after publishers with distinguished list, [...] on respected judges of talent [...] and, of course, on celebrated writers wholly devoted to the task of writing” (15). It should already be clear from Farah’s autobiographical reflections cited above that as a Somali, subjected to multiple colonizations and alienations, Farah was egregiously dispossessed of a national literary patrimony. While Somali oral poetry captures enormous cultural wealth, and is unique in many ways compared with other oral literatures of the African continent, it exists only in the context of performance, and thus had/has no significant literary presence through script. In his early work, especially *From a Crooked Rib*, Farah drew on Somali oral sources, symbolisms and conventions, to construct the oral ‘bridge’ into literature, familiar in many postcolonial literary contexts. Farah’s literary heritage, for this reason, was a heritage created out of the patrimony of other nations, a feature that will be discussed further in relation to other dimensions of the question of translation. Of any writer alive today, Farah probably enjoys the unique distinction of being the author of a first national novel in a foreign language and the author of the first national novel in the national language. (Farah’s 1970 Anglophone novel, *From a Crooked Rib*, was the first Somali novel. He is also the author of a first novel in Somali when a script and orthography were officially recognized for the language. The serialization of this novel in a Somali newspaper was stopped by the dictatorial regime of Muhammed Siyad Barre.)

As an author, thus, Farah quite literally is a self-made man, though constructed out of multinational influences—the literary patrimony of nations not his own. Farah is deprived of the foundation (or baggage) with which most other writers come, even in a postcolonial context. Most Arab writers or Indian writers write against the backdrop of literatures that go back centuries. The Latin-American ‘Boom’ writers parodied the popular romances of their nineteenth century. Even *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Achebe’s ‘first novel’ in a largely West African oral context could draw on the “popular pamphleteering”, in E. N. Obiechina’s memorable phrase, of the Onitsha Market literature that existed from the period of the end of World War II. Achebe also wrote against the background of more ‘highbrow’ literature in the form of Cyprian Ekwensi’s *People of the City* (1954), and the literature published in *Beacon* (1956–) and *The Horn* (1957–), magazines published by the University of Ibadan, edited for a time by John Pepper Clark. Farah, by contrast, writes in a national literary vacuum. He thus is unable to enter, as Casanova puts it, “into international competition armed [...] with his entire literary ‘past’: by virtue solely of his membership in a linguistic area and a national grouping, [where] he embodies and reactivates a whole literary history, carrying this ‘literary time’ with him without even being fully conscious of it” (40–1). Furthermore, since Farah did not have a national linguistic patrimony against which to define himself, either by appropriation or by rejection, Farah constructed himself as writer *ab initio* in a world literary, not national, context predominantly in relation to the European modernists. Farah takes to an extreme, given that he is dispossessed even of a national literary background, the point made by Casanova that books “produced by the least literarily endowed countries” are “improbable” and the fact that they “manage to emerge and make themselves known at all verges on the miraculous” (12). This situation has changed since Farah published his first novel, with a fair number of novels

now available in Somali and, mainly in the twenty-first century, a growing number of novels by other, younger, diasporic Somalis in English and Italian.

Farah's national literary struggle has been unlike that of most other peripheral and semi-peripheral writers. The national question in relation to Farah's corpus is unusual since his novels simultaneously need to construct and deconstruct the idea of the Somali nation. Thus Farah's cannot be the impudent posture of Arno Schmidt, quoted by Casanova as saying: "I hereby solemnly protest against the term 'German writer' by which this nation of stupid fools will seek one day to claim me as one of their own" (331). In order to gain literary value in the world literary bourse, Farah needed to constitute Somaliness, at the same time that he distanced himself from nationalism, in part, through the subversive politics and modes of his European literary influences that, according to Casanova, endow dispossessed writers with literary capital. *From a Crooked Rib* may be read as the novel that allegorically charts the coming into existence of the modern Somali nation-state. *Maps*, the Farah novel that created the greatest scholarly stir, by contrast, is the novel that explodes every precept upon which the Somali nation (and nationalism generally) is constructed. Paradoxically, in order to "achieve literary existence, to struggle against the invisibility that threatens [peripheral writers] from the very beginning of their careers" (Casanova 177), Farah has had both to be invested in Somaliness and to divest Somaliness as an essentialized national identity.

Given the extent of Farah's literary deprivation as revealed in his autobiographical essays, where it is clear he lacked the passport for entry to the world republic of letters, it is almost unthinkable that as a young man he set himself the goal of making a living only by his writing. James Currey, editor of the Heinemann African Writers Series at the time in which *From a Crooked Rib* was published, states that: "[Farah] rejected state employment in Somalia and was one of the first writers from Africa to set out to support himself as much as possible by his writing. [...] He has continued to write with a professional intensity and to have his work published, reviewed and win prizes in Europe and the US" (155). Clearly, Farah needed singlehandedly, and without the support of an aesthetic context and literary resonances of a national literature, to create a place for himself in the world economy of letters. In short, he had singlehandedly to overcome literary dependence. Farah's youthful intuition at the outset was that the world republic of letters was not "an enchanted world, a kingdom of pure creation, the best of all possible worlds where universality reigns through liberty and equality" (Casanova 12). This is clear from his earliest encounters with writing. In "Why I Write", one of the most detailed accounts of his early formation, Farah relates an anecdote about how, when he was ten years old, in his desperation to see his name in print, in a context where everything he read was about other people in other cultures, he "cut out the name Nuruddin [from a copy of *A Thousand and One Nights*] and glued it to [his] exercise book", telling his friends, "See, see my name is in print!" (1). The challenges involved in getting his name in print in later life, are evident from the fraught nature of his exchanges with most of his early mentors and publishers. Farah refers to an exchange with Canadian writer, Margaret Laurence, who had read his second short story and recommended that he cut the final paragraph if he wanted her to try to get it published. He refused and subsequent communication was acerbic. Farah also relates his offense at the tenor and contents of the rejection letter from Heinemann Nigeria, where he had submitted his first manuscript. Subsequent dealings with Heinemann appear to have been marred by misunderstandings, suggesting Farah's sense of being an undermined contestant in the world literary race.

His early feeling of exclusion from the aesthetic innovations of the literary center is also suggested by another anecdote related in "Why I Write". When he was in his early teens, an American schoolteacher asked the class to write essays to be entered into a competition. Since he had been reading Ernest Hemingway at the time, Farah "lifted a couple of longish passages from one of his [Hemingway's] travelogues" ("Why I Write" 3). The teacher gave him a C, saying "We don't express ourselves in this manner, in English", but dropped his grade to a D when he showed her that she was actually censuring the idiom of an internationally acclaimed modernist master. The incident highlights the expectation at the time of the kind of aesthetic that was suitable for the colonies, and also implicitly makes it clear to the young Farah, the radical avant-garde modes he would have to employ in order to catapult himself from his eccentric position into the center of the world literary order.

In Casanova's analysis of world literary production, a singularly important role is played by translation. Going back to Goethe's conception of a *Weltliteratur*, Casanova confirms the twentieth-century applicability of Goethe's observation that it is necessary "to consider each translator as a mediator seeking to promote [a] universal spiritual commerce [read European episteme and civilizational aspirations], and setting himself the task of assisting its progress" (14). Translation thus is integral to the construction of world letters, the complexities of which have been further explored as noted above in Emily Apter's *Against World Literature*. However, in the context

of the world literary system created by Goethe's ideal of the harmonious exchange created by translation, Casanova highlights the overtones of tragedy for peripheral writers, which shadows translation in world literature. In an earlier section, Farah's feeling of betrayal in adopting English as his language of writing and publication was quite clearly shown. But Casanova emphasizes how this is part of a larger systemic problem:

All literary authors in small [indigenous] languages are therefore faced in one form or another, and in some sense inevitably, with the question of translation. As "translated men," they are caught in a dramatic structural contradiction that forces them to choose between translation into a literary language that cuts them off from their compatriots, but that gives them literary existence, and retreat into a small language that condemns them to invisibility or else to a purely national literary existence. (257)

In Farah's case, the question of translation is taken to almost vertiginous depths, and undermines the foundations of Casanova's world system in some ways. Farah relates the story in the autobiographical essay, "Why I Write", of reading Fyodor Dostoevsky's Russian world and Victor Hugo's French culture in Arabic translation, with Arabic translations of introductions that had originally been written in English. Farah himself would have been reading the Arabic as his second language, since his first language, Somali, at that point in time had no script and orthography. As a writer thus, Farah is a wholly translated man since, when he first started writing, he could not write in his home language, with Arabic, Amharic, English and Italian as the possible alternatives. Given Farah's determination to enter the economy of world literary production, English was the obvious language of choice since writing in any of his other languages would have restricted him to the smaller and less prestigious spheres of Arabic or Italian letters, or the completely localized world of Amharic literature. (Complexities of translation continue into the present, where in an interview published in this theme issue, the interviewer, Ali Mumin Ahad, posed questions to Farah in Italian, Farah's fifth language, and Farah responded in Somali, his first. The Somali was translated into Italian for the Italian magazine publication of the interview, and the Italian published interview was translated into English for publication in this theme issue of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*).

From Farah's foregrounding of questions of translation in his interviews and autobiographical essays, it is clear that he is fully conscious of the potentials and the pitfalls of translation. In many novels in his corpus, there is a decided underscoring of issues of translation with many characters themselves translators. One of the earliest translators among Farah's characters is Medina, the protagonist in *Sardines*, who translates world classics into Somali. Included among these classics is the translation of Achebe's Igbo story of the tortoise and the birds as it appears in *Things Fall Apart*. Medina gives the Somali version of the story the title, "He", alluding to the Somali dictator, Barre, highlighting the universal tendency towards greed and the desire for power, exemplified by the dictator and the tortoise in the folktale. Jeebleh in *Links* also is a translator figure, having translated Dante's *Divine Comedy* into Somali for his PhD dissertation. The translation of the *Divine Comedy* presumably is a worthwhile task since the translation makes it accessible to Somalis, who, thereby, are alerted to the similarities between their own world and Dante's world of internecine battles and faction-fighting, as these get allegorized in the "Inferno", in particular. The wider significance of translation is carried into Farah's most recent novel where one of the protagonists, Mugdi, a Somali diasporic in Oslo, translates a Norwegian classic into Somali. *Giants in the Earth* by Ole Edvart Rølvaag is a story of nineteenth-century Norwegian migration to the Dakota Territories in North America. It is translated into Somali by Mugdi to give Somalis in Norway confidence in their position as immigrants, knowing that Norwegians themselves had been immigrants elsewhere carrying with them similar cultural shortcomings to those of Somalis and facing comparable problems in their host lands. Translation thus for Farah is a double-edged sword where the necessity and betrayal represented by his English 'translatedness' to negotiate a position in the world economy of letters, is offset by the value to Somalis of translation of the world's literary riches.

The fact that Farah's work itself has been translated into more than seventeen languages suggests that he has succeeded in creating a space for himself in the world map of literature. As explained by Casanova: "Translation is the foremost example of a particular type of consecration in the literary world. Its true nature as a form of literary recognition (rather than a mere exchange of one language for another) [...] goes unrecognized on account of its apparent neutrality" (133). Farah thus has achieved considerable recognition in the major centers of world literature, attested by the translation of his novels, but also by the important prizes he has won.

Farah's first major award was the English-Speaking Union Literary Award for *Sweet and Sour Milk* in 1980. He also won the 1991 Tucholsky Prize awarded in Stockholm for work as a literary exile. Most notably, he has won

the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1998, second, it is said, only to the Nobel Prize for which he has reportedly been nominated a few times. Casanova identifies the Nobel Prize as “the greatest proof of literary consecration, bordering on the definition of literary art itself” (147). The Nobel, she notes, is held in such high esteem, that various eccentric nations like South Korea and China have launched national campaigns to promote its writers for the prize in an effort to “accumulate a national stock of literary capital” (147). Farah’s literary identity as a ‘translated man’ at a number of levels is confirmed also by the prizes awarded to his novels in translation, including the Premio Cavour in 1994 for the Italian translation of *Close Sesame*, the Premio Mondello in 2001 and the Premio Napoli for the Italian version of *Links* in 2005 (Fotheringham 151–2). He has also won the St. Malo Literary Festival Award for the French edition of *Gifts*, which went on to be the book of the month (June) for all French libraries. The prizes both in the world of English letters and prizes for work in translation confirm Farah’s possession of considerable literary capital in the republic of letters. Casanova terms the “magical transmutation that consecration” through translation and prizes brings, “*littérisation*” (127). *Littérisation* has given Farah considerable standing in the world republic of letters, but it has not allowed him to achieve full autonomy. In African literature, one of the peripheries of the Euro-American literary centers in Casanova’s model, Farah occupies a position on the periphery of the periphery occupied by the more canonical corpuses of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, a consideration discussed in more detail in the introduction to this theme issue.

Apart from a few early attempts to write in Somali and Italian, English has been Farah’s language of creative expression and publication. As noted above, Farah regarded English as an alien and alienating language, whose literature described a foreign culture. Farah provides a number of reasons, however, explaining why it was inevitable that he wrote in English, rather than in any of the other languages with which he was familiar. Importantly, writing in English would insert the Somali experience into world history. He suggests in addition that writing in English was a way to escape the censorship of ideas that would occur under the dictatorship had he written in Somali. Furthermore, he claims that, whether he wrote in English or Somali, he would have been read only by the very small class of literate Somalis (Jaggi 174–5). More practically, since a standardized script and orthography became available for Somali only in 1972, Farah could not at the outset write in his home language (“Celebrating Differences: The 1998 Neustadt Lecture” 18). He has also jocularly remarked that when he started to write, the only functioning typewriters he could access were Roman script typewriters, making English the obvious language for publication.

Coming from a nation with no literary patrimony, Farah was forced to borrow from the literary wealth of other languages and other countries. As an Anglophone Somali writer, Farah could potentially gain entry to London and New York, two of the lesser literary capitals of Casanova’s world of letters, given that Paris was outside his sphere, French not existing in his polyglot repertoire. Unable to challenge the linguistic domination of English directly, Farah challenged the dominance of English aesthetically through his literary influences. Unlike his African counterparts, Achebe and Ngũgĩ, whose work and biographical data suggest a strong influence from the central national canon of English literature, Farah’s influences have mainly been the modernist challengers of English, largely realist, aesthetic domination. These subversives include the Americans Faulkner and Hemingway, and, of course, the Irishmen, Joyce and Beckett. The Irish influence on Farah at the level of technique and content is probably the strongest, with many references in his novels to Irish postcolonial peripherality. This perception of a common literary deprivation Casanova calls the “international” of small nations, that is, strategic alliances of nations on the edges of literary space. She suggests that: “The special perceptiveness of contestants on the periphery enables them to detect affinities among literary (and political) spaces. Their shared literary destitution leads them to take each other as models and historical points of reference to compare their literary situations, and to apply common strategies based on prior experience” (247). Beckett and Joyce, like Farah, did not write in their indigenous language, Gaelic; and Beckett and Joyce radically rewrote, through modernist iconoclasm, the realist aesthetic of English linguistic domination. Thus, from a range of reasons for Farah’s writing in English, crucial among them is the access it represents to the centers of the world literary system. Yet, through identifying with revolutionary influences that have, from a similar periphery as his own, challenged and came to enjoy standing in the dominant position of English letters, Farah has negotiated citizenship for himself in the world republic of letters.

In terms of Casanova’s analysis also, the Irish modernists occupy a unique space in the world literary system, foremost among the group she terms the “revolutionaries” (324). Joyce, Beckett (and Heaney) draw their subversive potential from Dante, who was the first writer to challenge linguistic domination, in this case, the

domination of Latin in the early modern period. The Irish modernists are leaders of later “innovators who undermine the forms, styles and [linguistic] codes accepted at the Greenwich meridian, thus thoroughly changing, renewing, sometimes even shattering the criteria of modernity and, as a result, the practices of world literature as a whole” (326). Referring to Joyce, Casanova states that he “carried out a revolution so great that the measure of literary time itself was profoundly altered” (326). Joyce’s innovation thereby becomes a touchstone for other writers seeking recognition in the world of letters. The Irish writers, and avant-gardists, more generally, form an “international genealogy [...] that includes all the great innovators honored as true liberators in the peripheral lands of literary space, a pantheon of great writers regarded as universal classics (such as Ibsen, Joyce, and Faulkner) that writers from outlying countries can oppose both to central literary histories and to the academic genealogies of national pantheons” (327–8). The list of innovators cited by Casanova duplicates the list of writers Farah cites as his most significant formative influences. What Farah achieves through modeling his own work on the formal iconoclasm of the modernists is, according to Casanova’s theory, a very rapid acceleration of literary time in his national periphery, moving from a context of non-literariness to the high velocities of radical innovation as they exist at the literary Greenwich meridian. Farah thus is an example of Casanova’s writer who “living [...] on the edges of the literary world [...] learned to confront the laws and forces that sustain the unequal structure of this world and who are keenly aware that [...] in order to have any chance of surviving as writers, [they] should be the most sensitive to the newest aesthetic innovations of international literature [...]” (43). It is Farah’s early adoption of avant-gardist modernist and postmodern techniques that sets him apart from the realist modes of most of his African contemporaries.

In the ways discussed, Farah almost too perfectly exemplifies Casanova’s theory of the operation of the world literary system, and the position of the peripheral writer in this system. However, because of the uniqueness of the specificities of his artistic formation, and because of the trends and departures in his corpus, there are ways in which Farah has been positioned also to rewrite the laws of the world republic of letters. To explain how this is achieved, one needs to start at the beginning—again. The perception of the existence of a world literary system with an economy and laws of its own requires, Casanova suggests in the preface of her book, a shift of focus from the implicitly assumed national unconscious of literature to the “lost” transnational dimension (xi). To do this, one needs to zoom out from closely focalized analyses to see the position and relation of the figure of the individual text in the carpet as a whole—to use Henry James’s analogy employed by Casanova. As she explains:

A literary work can be deciphered only on the basis of the whole of the composition, for its rediscovered coherence stands revealed only in relation to the entire literary universe of which it is a part. The singularity of individual literary works therefore becomes manifest only against the overall structure in which they take their place. Each work that is declared literary is a minute part of the immense “combination” constituted by the literary world as a whole. (3)

What is evident is that Farah’s unique position as first published Anglophone author and first fiction writer in the Somali language has forced his frame of reference to be constitutively transnational rather than national, as is the case for almost every other twentieth and twenty-first century writer, whether in the metropole or on the periphery. Farah could not define himself against a national literary tradition as other writers do since a Somali national literary tradition simply did not exist. Instead, he positioned himself in relation to Russian, German, Arabic, African, English, and French literatures, with often-convoluted translation histories. For this reason, among others, his work has been drawn into the spheres largely of Anglo-American and African letters, but also, more recently, into the spheres of Italian and Arab literatures. An intuitive sense of the functioning of the world literary system, and his location in it, was thus part of his constitution as a writer—Farah was ‘zoomed out’ from the start. This intuition is signposted in his corpus through its international literary allusions and self-reflexive references to literal and cultural translation. The world literary system thus is built into Farah’s writing through a transnationality of practice, rather than theory. So rather than the world literary space giving form and meaning to his texts, his texts are maps of the world literary space, perhaps most pointedly exemplified by the self-reference in Farah’s second novel, *A Naked Needle*, the novel that led to his exile from Somalia. In this novel, the protagonist Koschin visits the apartment of an American woman married to a Somali, whose bookshelf carries a novel titled *A Naked Needle* in the Heinemann African Writers Series, a publishing initiative to which Soyinka disparagingly referred as the “orange ghetto”, alluding to the distinctive color of the covers of all the books in this series. Farah’s novels thus carry the world system within them—as the literary (un)conscious of their own constitution.



Farah's personal transnationalism has also played a part in signposting some of the ways in which the world literary system, as described by Casanova, may be transforming. Farah has lived in the metropolises of Europe and America, but he has also lived extensively in African capitals, having spent the longest period (since 1999) in Cape Town where he writes. (Part of his year is currently spent teaching at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson in New York.) Having been out of Somalia for forty-four years, and now writing about protagonists who are not Somali nationals and based in locales outside of greater Somalia, Farah demonstrates the outmodedness of national literary models, upon which Casanova's world literary system paradoxically continues to be based, despite the exhortation to a zoomed-out transnational perspective. Although Farah continues to be published largely in the United States, novels in his oeuvre have also been published by African publishers, including Serif in Harare, and Kwela in Cape Town. Farah's literary awards from peripheral centers of letters, like the award for *Gifts* as best novel in 1993 in Zimbabwe, an honorary doctorate in 2018 from the Panjab University in Chandigarh, and, quite significantly, the South African Lifetime Literary Achievement Award in 2014, suggest a sea-change in the world of letters. These honors suggest a wider polycentrism of "consecration" than that suggested by Casanova, with the South African award implying that Farah may be more a South African writer than a Somali one. With Farah's novel in progress, set in Johannesburg, among the large Somali community in this South African city, and, indeed, significant numbers of Somalis throughout South Africa, Farah would appear to be confirming the implication of the South African Lifetime Literary Achievement Award that Somalis are South African citizens, and that Farah is a South African writer. Farah's significance, in addition, on the Italian literary scene and the number of Italian awards he has won, indexes recognition also in a European "suburb" of the world literary capitals, complicating the binary center-periphery model even further. Thus Farah has not, like Joyce, Faulkner and Beckett, needed to be consecrated in a competing metropolitan literary capital (Paris) in order to achieve prestige in the "home" capital (London). As Farah's experience shows, institutions conferring prestige may increasingly be located on the periphery, the continued significance of international awards like the Nobel and the Booker notwithstanding. Most recently Farah has received the 2019 Lee Hochul Literary Prize for Peace, a South Korean award indexing even wider remapping of the world literary map and its centers of recognition.

Crucially, Farah may be illuminating an alternative aesthetic in his recent work contrasted with the avant-garde aesthetic which, for Casanova, constitutes the dynamic present of the literary Greenwich meridian (based in Paris) against which the relative aesthetic distance of all who belong to the international of letters is measured: "the prime meridian determines the present of literary creation, which is to say modernity" (88). Although Farah in his early and mid-career largely constituted his literary patrimony out of the aesthetic innovation of the Euro-American modernists like Joyce, Ibsen, Faulkner, Hemingway, Beckett and Woolf, confirming Casanova's conviction that "authors on the edges of the literary world" have to be "the most sensitive to the newest innovations of international literature" (43) in order to succeed in a world context. His later career has seen a shift to the 'flat' realist modes for which African literature of the twentieth-century was negatively viewed, as was its nationalist and ideological commitments. Farah's return to realism, first embodied in the proto-realism of *From a Crooked Rib*, Farah's first novel, was already signaled in *Past Imperfect*, the third trilogy (Moolla 175–6) consisting of the novels *Links*, *Knots* and *Crossbones*. The shift to realism after an intensive exploration of modernism, postmodernism and magic realism in the intervening novels, has been accompanied by what Harry Garuba identifies as an alternative aesthetic with a distinctive African/postcolonial genealogy. Drawing on Chinua Achebe's well-known essay "The Novelist as Teacher" (1965), Garuba posits the development of an aesthetic of "teacherliness" in the cultural production of the decolonizing nation-states. Using Casanova's term, which is Garuba's only reference to Casanova in his article, Garuba goes on to assert that for:

postcolonial literatures or literatures from emergent literary spaces [...] literary value inheres as much in the teachability of the text as it does in whatever other aesthetic qualities it may possess; that is, the text's ability to illustrate, rework, or represent some theme or issue considered to be of major significance and to open it up for teaching—about empire, nation, and identity, or postnation, diaspora, and globalization [...] [This] is as much a source of value as any of its other formal qualities. (17; emphasis in original)

Garuba presents teacherliness as an alternative aesthetic value, rather than the conventional predisposition to see "it in a negative light" (18). Through an analysis of Farah's *Past Imperfect* trilogy, Garuba shows that teacherliness "is not something outside the text, such as the lesson it intends to impart; it is internal to the text in the sense that it is a structuring and organizing principle or criterion for distinguishing between 'serious' literature,

and ‘nonserious’ texts” (27). The fact that Garuba singles out Farah’s later work to make this general point about literatures from “emergent spaces” suggests that the aesthetic of teacherliness is more pronounced in Farah than it is in the work of other eccentric authors. Teacherliness as an aesthetic value also strongly shapes the first two novels of the fourth trilogy—*Hiding in Plain Sight* and *North of Dawn*.

Therefore in Farah’s mature production we see the expression of a modern (not modernist) postcolonial aesthetic that reformulates the literary laws of the republic of letters. Where for Casanova, writers carved out their freedom through avant-gardist literary techniques that rewrote the literary present of the Greenwich meridian, we see that the later Farah replaces the “revolutionary” aesthetic of the Euro-American modernists with teacherliness—an aesthetic that is not concerned with that which defines Casanova’s literary modernity. In foregrounding the aesthetic of teacherliness, Farah is also not replicating the success of the Latin American ‘boom’ writers who “managed to achieve an international existence and reputation conferred on their national literary spaces [...] a standing and influence in the larger world [...] incommensurate with [the relative importance] of their native countries in the international world of politics” (38–9). Neither is he constituting his later work as “classic”, namely, “a work that rises above competition and so escapes the bidding of time” (Casanova 92). Instead, what Farah, in this respect, seems to achieve is a complete reappraisal of what constitutes aesthetic value at the literary Greenwich meridian, rather than renewing or challenging the dominant aesthetic of the metropolitan centers. The fact that Farah’s most recent novels continue to be reviewed in the literary segments of the major Anglo-American and European newspapers attests the standing he has achieved through the earlier phases of his career where his negotiation of the republic of letters conformed more closely to the precepts Casanova outlines.

The *pas de deux* conducted between Nuruddin Farah and Pascale Casanova suggests at one and the same time an exemplification and a departure from the theory of *The World Republic of Letters*. Casanova’s world literary systems approach proposes a distant view of literature that brings into perspective the operation of an international competitive politics of writing. This world system forms a constitutive order within and in relation to which individual literary works are composed, published, and achieve recognition. The system is strongly hierarchical with the former Anglo-European colonial and American imperial centers dominating the world republic of letters. Postcolonial literature occupies a periphery that needs to be validated by the metropolitan centers in order to achieve recognition. Validation requires that dispossessed writers catch up with literary modernity by imitating the avant-gardist models that mark the present of the literary Greenwich meridian. Peripheral literature that succeeds in renewing time at the center is consecrated and wins standing unrelated to the status of the nation-states of which they are citizens.

Nuruddin Farah’s work could be regarded as a case study of the inequalities and possibilities of the world system mapped by Casanova. Farah is a translated man at many levels, who has used translation to escape his position as a Somali on the periphery of the African periphery of the world republic of letters. With no literary language of his own and without a national literary patrimony, Farah gets constituted as a world writer at the outset of his career. He seeks and achieves consecration in the world’s centers through radically accelerating literary time on his periphery by adopting the modernist techniques of the radicals of the center. However, Farah’s lack of a national literary history and his formative transnationalism also position him as a writer whose career and work represents a transnationality of practice that carries a consciousness of the world system within itself—it is a practice that does not derivatively illustrate, but instead preempts Casanova’s theory. Furthermore, as a consequence of colonial and postcolonial politics that have forced Farah’s life and stories into a transnationalism beyond the usually double hyphenated identities of the global diaspora, Farah’s career and his narratives force a recognition of the inapplicability of national models that remain a part of the unconscious of Casanova’s theory. A translated man through and through, *littérisation* achieved through translation of his work into world languages, and consecration through prizes, for example, in Italy, a European ‘suburb’ of the world literary capitals, highlights a much more polycentric world order than the one described by Casanova. Consecration in the peripheries of South Korea, South Africa, India and Zimbabwe, may be evolving to constitute more significant literary capital on the edges than on the bourses of the center. Most importantly, the trend in Farah’s mature work signals a rewriting rather than a renewal of the literary laws of the center from multiple and complex peripheries. The aesthetic of “teacherliness” that relies on a return to realism rather than the modernist and postmodern techniques that have up until recently distinguished Farah on the African literary scene, points to a fundamental rewriting of the present at the literary Greenwich meridian, and even more crucially, the possibility of multiple tempos in

multiple meridians. In the *pas de deux* between Casanova and Farah, Casanova seemed to lead the entrée, but Farah leads the coda.

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## Chronology: Nuruddin Farah

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- 1945 November 24. Nuruddin Farah born in Baidoa (Italian-occupied area of Somalia).
- 1947 Family moves to Kallafo in the Ogaden (British-occupied; handed over soon afterwards to Ethiopian control). Attends Qur'anic school.
- 1960 Independence gained from Britain and Italy—now Republic of Somalia.
- 1963 Due to war, family moves from the Ogaden to Mogadishu; Farah completes secondary school education.
- 1965 First short story, "Why Dead so Soon?" completed and published in *Somali News*.
- 1966 Attends Panjab University, Chandigarh, India. Studies Literature and Philosophy, funded by an Indian government scholarship.
- 1969 Marries Chitra Muliyl (Indian student). Receives BA degree. Returns to Somalia, where Muhammed Siyad Barre is in power after military coup. Writes the play *A Dagger in Vacuum*—denied licence to produce it.
- 1970 Publishes first novel, *From a Crooked Rib*. Son Koschin is born. Teaches at National University in Somalia and secondary schools.
- 1972 First marriage ends. Somali is codified as written language.
- 1973 Serialization of Somali-language novel *Tallow Waa Talee Ma* in *Somali News* stopped by government censors.
- 1974 Leaves Somalia for next twenty-two years. Wins UNESCO Fellowship and enrolls in University of London, attached to Royal Court Theatre.
- 1975 Postgraduate study continued at University of Essex. Play *The Offering*, written in lieu of thesis, produced at Essex.
- 1976 Novel *A Naked Needle* published. Warned by brother not to return to Somalia after enraging Barre regime by publishing *A Naked Needle*—moves to Italy for next three years.
- 1976–9 Translator and English language teacher in Rome and Milan.
- 1978 *A Spread of Butter* broadcast by BBC African service.
- 1979 Novel *Sweet and Sour Milk* published. Moves to Los Angeles; writes film scripts.
- 1980 *Sweet and Sour Milk* wins English-speaking Union Literary Award.
- 1981 Novel *Sardines* published. Teaches at Bayreuth University, West Germany for six months as Guest Professor. Draft of *Close Sesame* completed. Moves to Jos in Nigeria.
- 1982 *Yussuf and His Brothers* written and produced at Jos, where he is Visiting Reader at the university.
- 1983 Novel *Close Sesame* published; work begun on novel *Maps*.
- 1984 German broadcasting commissions his play *Tartar Delight*. Moves to Gambia; completes *Maps*.
- 1986 *Maps* published. Moves to Khartoum, Sudan, where he teaches at the University. First draft of *Gifts* written there.
- 1989 Moves to Kampala, Uganda.
- 1990 First draft of *Secrets* completed in Berlin; receives German Academic Exchange Service fellowship there. Novel *Gifts* is first published in Swedish in Stockholm. Mother dies in Mogadishu. Meets sociology professor, Amina Mama.

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- 1991 Barre flees Somalia. Second draft of *Secrets* completed. Resigns Makerere position and moves to Ethiopia after criticism by Ugandan President. Gives lectures on Somali refugees' plight at Oxford university. Awarded Tucholsky prize in Stockholm for work as a literary exile. Brief reunion with his father.
- 1992 Publishes *Gifts* in English in Zimbabwe. Moves to Kaduna, Nigeria. Marries Amina Mama.
- 1993 Father dies in Mombasa, Kenya, two days before departure for USA. Daughter, Abyan, born. *Gifts* wins Best Novel award in Zimbabwe.
- 1994 Wins Premio Cavour prize for Italian edition of *Close Sesame*. Serves on Neustadt Prize jury, strongly supporting Toni Morrison for the award.
- 1995 Son, Kaahiye, born.
- 1996 After twenty-two years' exile, returns to Somalia.
- 1998 February: selected as fifteenth Neustadt laureate. May: publishes *Secrets*. May: *Gifts* (French edition) wins St. Malo Literary Festival award; named Book of the Month for all French libraries. October: wins Neustadt Prize at Oklahoma University. *World Literature Today* dedicates Autumn issue to Farah and his work.
- 1999 Moves to Cape Town, South Africa.
- 2000 Publishes *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora*.
- 2001 Wins the Italian Premio Mondello prize for best foreign author.
- 2003 Second prize winner of the Lettre Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage.
- 2004 Publishes *Links*.
- 2005 Wins the Italian Premio Napoli award for the Italian translation of *Links*.
- 2010 Publishes *Knots*. Winton Chair in the Liberal Arts University of Minnesota. (Till 2012.)
- 2011 Publishes *Crossbones*.
- 2013 Sister working for UNICEF in Kabul, Afghanistan, killed in a bomb blast.
- 2014 Publishes *Hiding in Plain Sight*. Wins South African Lifetime Achievement Award.
- 2017 Awarded Honorary Doctorate by alma mater, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India.
- 2018 Publishes *North of Dawn*.
- 2019 Awarded the third Lee Hochul Literary Prize for Peace at a ceremony in Seoul, South Korea.



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**Sol Plaatje: A Life of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, 1876–1932.**

Brian P. Willan.

Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2018. 711 pp.

ISBN 978-1-4314-2644-7.

“It is safe to say that Dr Brian Willan is easily the most well researched on one of Kimberley’s most iconic struggle heroes,” wrote the young local newspaper, the *Solomon Star*, on June 26, 2018, reporting on the launch of Willan’s biography of Sol Plaatje (Moraladi). Historian and honorary research associate at the Institute of the Study of English in Africa at Rhodes University, in Makhanda, Eastern Cape, Willan has been a Plaatje scholar for 40 years. It would also be safe to say that his painstaking and dedicated research has substantially contributed to making Plaatje into something of an institution, certainly within the academy. For those who engage in Plaatje research, as is evident in biographies and secondary criticism that have appeared over the years, Willan is our touchstone. With this publication he extends knowledge to a wider public and that is thrilling. It is my view that the epic, 18-chapter, 711-page long biography, represents Willan’s *magnum opus*. His two earlier landmark works, the 1984 Plaatje biography and the 1996 *Sol Plaatje, Selected Writings* are superseded by this accessible, informative, elucidating and reader-friendly book. Nothing has been lost in dropping an academic register and everything gained in simply ‘telling the story.’

In addition to accessibility to a broader audience, Willan adds new information gleaned from his research over the past 34 years, updating the rather episodic 1984 biography and creating a seamless fabric of Plaatje’s life, without leaps in time or gaps in understanding. Beyond telling Plaatje’s life story in immense detail, Willan devotes two chapters to his Setswana and English literary works. In chapter 16, he renders a textual analysis of what he calls Plaatje’s “re-imagining and reimagining” of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* in his Setswana translation, *Diphosphoso*. Comment on this chapter must be sought amongst Setswana language and literary scholars. In chapter 17, Willan shares a delightful unpublished and incomplete Plaatje manuscript, “With other people’s wives.” He allows the reader to enjoy the story both for its own sake—a

history of the Bhaca people of the Eastern Cape who experienced miracles similar to the Biblical parting of the Red Sea—and in terms of what it might have meant to Plaatje, as a source of race pride.

For those already familiar with Plaatje’s life, the newness Willan brings is context, specifically in terms of the social, political and economic climate which shaped Plaatje as a man, a pioneer black journalist, an advocate and voice for his people, and a scholar. The value of this context is to enhance the reader’s appreciation of how Plaatje was compelled to swim constantly against the tide. He breathed an atmosphere of obstructionism, insult, derision, control, hostility, high-handedness, salt-in-the-wound, attempted and outright sabotage that was the diet colonialism fed its black so-called ‘subjects.’ The biography abounds in events that illustrate this degrading, demoralizing and debilitating context. As an example, Willan relates Plaatje’s experience in the wake of the 1920 Native Administration Bill whose ultimate aim was the re-tribalization of Africans (legalized some three decades later under Verwoerd’s Grand Apartheid) (chapter 15). The Bill which Plaatje said was indeed worse than the 1913 Natives’ Land Act, permitted only whites to serve as ‘native’ (i.e. African) representatives. The government gestured to Africans by consulting with *dikgosi* and a few carefully-selected African leaders at annual conventions. The purpose of those conventions, however, according to the Chamber of Mines, was to use those very Africans to control industrial action: perfect evidence of colonialism’s strategies of divide and rule using black intermediaries. Willan relates that, at the 1925 convention Plaatje elucidated the African view of two new ‘Hertzog Bills’ presented: one to remove Africans from voting and the other to give Africans additional land. Plaatje spoke eloquently to the point that it was not that Africans did not need land—he knew better than any how desperately they did need land—but that losing the franchise was too high a price to pay. Plaatje used an analogy to drive his point home: when a Dutchman wants to catch a jackal, he said, he holds out a piece of mutton that has poison on it, and the jackal walks round and round but does not take the bait. Should he and his fellow African consultants capitulate to the ‘Hertzog Bills,’ Plaatje declared, they would be more foolish than the jackal! Always clearly and painfully aware of hidden motives and

agendas, Plaatje wrote in the press, as if for posterity: “We shall this time let white politicians do their own fell work [...] so that when the tears of many victims of the Union’s legislative efforts at length draw retributive justice from the heights, no Prime Minister may say that we, too, have had a hand in this transaction.” (458).

There are also incidents narrated where the economic context and conditions colonialism bred, caused tensions and divisions among Africans themselves. Many clashes within the nascent South African Native National Congress (SANNC) surfaced in the struggle over scarce resources including employment, income and opportunity. Willan successfully surfaces the disempowering context of colonialism again and again.

This brings me to what I see as the greatest strength of Willan’s book. Whereas the 1984 biography left me despondent, this volume filled me with hope. I became intensely aware of how Plaatje rose even while his circumstances declined. Whereas conditions of life for blacks worsened, reading this biography one feels unmistakably the steady evolution in Plaatje in terms of accomplishments. Undeterred by setbacks, limited resources, and hostilities, he exuded a hope that seemed to ‘spring eternal.’ During his years as editor of *Tsala*, 1908–15, Willan tells us, his newspaper endeavour succeeded, even while he was compelled to invest time and energies in co-founding and organizing the SANNC, as its Secretary-General (chapter 8). During the World War I years in England, he rose to heights in terms of scholarly accomplishments even while he sustained a busy public speaking tour where he truly became the “great hearted fighter for the rights of his people,” as George Simpson remembered him (chapter 10). The hope and optimism, the rising as journalist, writer and scholar, even while the political, social and economic climate deteriorated became the pattern in Plaatje’s life, as Willan reveals, chapter after chapter. Struggling to support himself in England and publish his account of “native life” in South Africa, he had opportunity and doors open to him through a circle of loyal supporters who provided the intellectual, moral and occasionally financial support needed to ensure his progress (chapters 9 and 12). Back home, despite financial and all the other obstacles, *Diphosphoso* was published and enjoyed success and longevity in schools in Bechuanaland (today Botswana) as well as South Africa (chapter 16). This message of hope—that it is possible to rise, achieve and accomplish in spite of an unjust “settled system,” as Plaatje called it—is reminiscent of Charles van Onselen’s message in *The Seed is Mine*, his biography of the courageous and dedicated sharecropper, Kas

Maine, who struggled and survived with triumphant dignity in the very same South African context (albeit a few decades later), where whites were self-enriching while blacks were relegated to poverty.

What are the weaknesses of Willan’s biography? Among his most powerful claims, Willan reiterates and substantiates a claim he has consistently made over the past 40 years, namely, that Plaatje believed it was his purpose to be a bridge between white and black communities and that he demonstrated evenness in critiquing both blacks and whites. I concede that Plaatje was a bridge- and community-builder across the races but I see Plaatje differently, in that I read in his biting critiques deep insight into the evils of white supremacy, imperialism, colonialism and eurocentrism. I read in his self-sacrifice, his hope and his persistence an understanding of ‘evil,’ if I may quote Langston Hughes:

Looks like what drives me crazy  
Don’t have no effects on you—  
But I’m gonna keep on at it  
Till it drives you crazy, too.

Plaatje used the masters’ tools, such as the press and the written word; he used irony extensively to probe hidden agendas; he travelled widely to publicise the very real grievances of black Africans; he aimed to empower Setswana children via Setswana language... I believe that until we have plumbed the depths of his large “treasure-trove” of Setswana journalism as Willan calls it, we risk overstating the case for his diplomacy and evenness. The scholarly excavation of his Setswana journalism may take time, however, since priority has been given to collecting his English language journalism, a mammoth project undertaken by the Sol Plaatje Educational Trust (SPET) of Kimberley, official steward of the Plaatje legacy. My only other minor quibble, I would like more of Plaatje’s own words. All who read Plaatje in his own words cannot help but be moved, much in the way people never fail to be stirred by the power and spirit in Martin Luther King’s voice. Otherwise, and overwhelmingly, I have nothing but praise for this book which has stirred and spurred my Plaatje studies. As *Diamond Fields Advertiser* journalist, George Simpson, said at the unveiling of Plaatje’s tombstone, one feels that “his soul goes marching on” in Willan’s witnessing.

As regards audience, I believe this volume will appeal broadly to the reading public as well as to students and scholars (for whom there are 89 pages of Notes), not only of South African history but to students and scholars across the humanities, the social sciences and law. The significance of this publication lies first

in the message of hope it can offer individual readers, especially those suffering still in the aftermath of colonial and Apartheid disenfranchisement and dispossession. Secondly, it broadens the field of Plaatje studies by making him accessible to general readers who will hopefully respond in various genres, media and modes. Together with Willan and thanks to Willan, Plaatje enthusiasts never cease to be inspired by the genius, brilliance, actions, relevance, thinking, intellect, elucidating writing and words of this lodestar and iconic struggle hero, Sol T. Plaatje.

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#### From the Spice Islands to Cape Town: The life and times of Tuan Guru.

Shafiq Morton.

[Cape Town]: National Awqaf Foundation of South Africa, 2018. pp. 169.

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Even though Islam at the Kaap de Goede Hoop was repressed and driven underground during the jurisdiction of the Dutch United East India Company (the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, VOC) it firmly established itself among free blacks and a burgeoning underclass population of slaves. It is logical that South-east Asian labourers, slaves, convicts and political prisoners would pass on their faith tradition to their new world. It is generally accepted that Shaykh Yusuf of Makasar who resisted the imposition of VOC rule in Banten and was subsequently exiled to the Cape with an entourage of 49 people in 1693, laid the foundations of Islam at the Cape.

For much of the time of VOC rule the Muslim faithful, when they had the opportunity, gathered clandestinely in the homes of free blacks, or surrounding forests and secluded spots on !Hoerikwaggo, the mountain in the sea. It is said that they were publicly dis-

tinguishing themselves by closely upholding the central tenets of their tradition, the manner of their dress, their social behaviour and their artisanship. It was only in 1804 during the Batavian interregnum that Muslim adherents were allowed to practice their religion openly. It is further notable that in South Africa the history of colonialism, slavery, Islam and the development of Cape Dutch (later: Afrikaans) is intertwined.

Shafiq Morton's historical study *From the Spice Islands to Cape Town* deals, as the subtitle indicates with "the life and times of Tuan Guru", one of the key figures in the history of Islam at the southern point of Africa. 'Abdullah Ibn Qadi 'Abd ul-Salam, later known among Cape Muslims as Tuan Guru (Grand Teacher), was born in Tidore in 1712. For much of his life he was an advisor to Sultan Jamal al-Din, the ruler of the spice revenue-funded Sultanate of Tidore on the tropical Maluku islands in the Southeast Asian archipelago.

At a time of struggle for control over the spice trade, the Sultan and several of his courtiers allegedly collaborated with the opposing English against the corporate designs of the VOC (known colloquially also as "Vergaan Onder Corruptie") (see 42–46; 49). The Dutch, in order to subvert the recalcitrant sultan's power, exiled him to Ceylon (today's Sri Lanka), and banished Tuan Guru and three other Tidorese advisors without their families "tot nadere orde" (until further instructions) initially to Batavia (today's Jakarta) and later to the Cape (49). At the age of 68, Tuan Guru landed at the Cape on board *De Zeepard*. As political prisoners, he and his fellow courtiers were immediately incarcerated on a bleak and windswept Robben Island, a place he referred to as *Pulau Aylan*. He was released a year later, during a period of an impending English attack against the Cape way station. Later, he was sentenced to the island for a further spell of banishment from 1786 to 1791.

Between 1667 and 1793 hundreds of Southeast Asian slaves and convicts were confined to the Cape as a place of enslavement and as a penal colony, as were "182 princes, emirs, advisors and imams" (11). By 1790 the Muslim community comprised 2 460 persons, growing to 6 000 by 1842, a third of the Cape Colony's population (12). These people were often literate and introduced to the Cape literacies different to the dominant Dutch or other European literary traditions. Tuan Guru arrived at the Cape at a time that Morton (12–13) regards as a time of "urbanisation and expansion", and in a place where the Islamic faith was suppressed even if tolerated. At the time, Islamic communal leadership operated covertly, education was neglected, and the



observances of religious and cultural practices were tenuous.

On his release from his second spell of banishment Tuan Guru played a pioneering role in organising and educating the faithful, making him “our country’s first recorded urban activist” (13).

On his release Tuan Guru stayed on at the Cape, “a place of sadness” (105) and would turn his exilic loneliness, homesickness and estrangement into a force for good. As an exile of royal descent he was apparently not sentenced to hard labour and used his time to write his *Ma’rifat al-Islam wa’l-Imān* (The Knowledge of Islam and Faith), a manuscript consisting of 613 handwritten pages dealing with Islamic law and religious practices, written in black and red ink on folios in Arabic with translations in Malayu and Buginese (see 99–III). Early Islamic leaders and teachers regard the *Ma’rifat* as “the definitive text on Islam in South Africa” and the historian Achmat Davids suggested that “no other book had a more seminal influence at the Cape than this handwritten manuscript” (110).

Further, as a Hafiz ul-Qur’an, that is one who has memorised the Holy Book, Tuan Guru wrote down the entire text of the Qur’an of 6 000 verses from memory, thereby formalising the local Hifz tradition of Qur’anic memorisation (60–61). The existence of the Qur’an (and a further four) to the Bible of the dominant and despised Dutch left an impression on the faithful, and its symbolism amidst religious suppression was undeniable: “We can just imagine the impact and authority of a Qur’an in the 1780s [...] Tuan Guru’s Qur’ans were weighty textual declarations of social identity” (67). Today, one of Tuan Guru’s handwritten Qur’ans is exhibited in the Awwal mosque in Cape Town.

On return from his second spell of imprisonment Tuan Guru, then 79, took Keijda van de Kaap as his wife, and she bore him two sons. By 1794 he was living in a place on Dorp Street in Bo-Kaap, one of two adjacent properties bought by the free black, Coridon of Ceylon. It was here that he established the first madrasah, that is, a Muslim religious school, in South Africa in 1793. By 1825 the student roll amounted to 491. For the diverse Muslim community whose adherents came from Southeast Asia, parts of Africa, several Indian Ocean islands and elsewhere, the Awwal madrasah and the mosque became the centre of their activities. Their doctrinal practices were encompassing of local and received traditions, so that Tuan Guru who died in 1807 constructed “a space within the existing socio-colonial one in which slaves and free blacks, the Cape underclass could exist” (82). The madrasah and mosque became “an inclusive institution in an exclusive colo-

niast society” and under his guidance “a unique Cape Town identity” developed, coalescing the diverse free black and slave community into “a recognisable group” (99).

Morton tells, for those readers interested in the underclass history of the Cape, an engrossing tale of Tuan Guru’s history in Tidore, the world of his upbringing, his banishment, his supposed spiritual powers and his leadership. He spends a full chapter, Chapter 10, on the meaning of *Ma’rifat al-Islam wa’l-Imān* and traces the considerable impact of Tuan Guru and his descendants on life in the Cape Muslim community and the broader South African society. Through the Arabic orthography the Awwal madrasah played a pivotal role in developing an alternative communal literacy tradition that gradually changed from Malayu to Cape Dutch and gave rise to what we today know, as the Arabic-Afrikaans scribal tradition. Beginning with Tuan Guru, successive imams and Muslim leaders established the local Islamic education tradition and network of community support organisations that outlasted the Batavian, British and the early South African administrations and are still flourishing well into the 21st century.

Morton’s account is well-written and worthy of the story of a remarkable man whose legacy lives on through his writings, the religious and educational traditions he fostered and through the achievements of his many descendants. It is a welcome addition to the growing collection of biographical and historical works on underclass figures and communities.

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**Race, Nation, Translation: South African Essays, 1990–2013.**

Zoë Wicomb.

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ISBN 978-1-77614-324-5.

It might be useful to read Zoë Wicomb’s collection of essays, *Race, Nation, Translation: South African Essays, 1990–2013* (2018) through the lens of transdisciplinarity. My suggestion here is rooted in the reality that Wicomb and Andrew van der Vlies, the collection’s editor,

come to the construction of the text with the intention of surfacing interconnections evinced in their prioritisation of intertextuality, which is given pre-eminence throughout the second section of the collection. My review subsequently takes its cue from this theoretical predisposition, surfacing the political, sociological and philosophical components of the collection. While the first section might not seem like an intertextual reading of South African reality and identity, the thematic analyses and Wicomb's considerations of South African reality cannot be fully understood without an appreciation of intertextuality and how it lends itself to understanding fully and completely the South African context, and I would go so far as even suggesting—the South African condition.

In chapter 4, "Reading, Writing, and Visual Production in the New South Africa", Wicomb makes an observation that is sociological, philosophical and political in nature when she avers "[what] passes for the testing of literature is none other than 'the social conventions of a dominant class, rather than universal logic'" (67). The political and sociological in this assertion lie in the surfacing of the power dynamics that define the politics of knowing and the knowledge project. From the vantage point of an educational theorist, I would also add the politics of pedagogy that can only be fully apprehended when one appreciates, as Boughy and McKenna (1–9) suggest, the factuality that education is both a political and historical undertaking that is defined by deeply personal understandings (I am certain at this point that my reader begins to appreciate the reasoning behind my supplication that we read the text from a transdisciplinary approach). The philosophical component then, lies in the observation of literacy as a standardisation of the social conventions of the dominant class, which invites the questioning of the contemporary South African condition. From here on out, I read the text as a response to this condition for as Van der Vlies notes, Wicomb's writing negotiates the political as she was "transported from the vulgarity of apartheid by books—books opened up different worlds, and brought freedom from an oppressive social order" (12).

The philosophical question in Wicomb's observation inaugurates a consideration of the dominant social class presently that is defined by a dearth of imagination and intellectual sophistication seen in the dominant anti-intellectual vulgarity of the political elites. The philosophical lies in an attempt at discerning what this dearth of imagination and anti-intellectualism means for the contemporary South African academe. Wicomb raises this concern, albeit implicitly, in her

interview with Van der Vlies at the end of the text when she observes "[as the theorists of South-South/inter-epistemic dialogue] say, the north *needs* our input, but populist denigration of 'western knowledge' that surfaced during the [recent] student rebellion is alarming" (277).

The depravity of an anti-intellectual culture in South Africa may be traced back to what Wicomb describes as a culture of violence in our context when she writes, "[if] we think more broadly of culture, the way in which people behave, then it may be more appropriate to talk about our ravaged culture of violence" (63), an observation she comes to owing to an analysis that attempts to understand "Culture Beyond Colour" (chapter 3 of the collection). The intertextuality that defines Wicomb's thinking in the collection, fully surfaces the philosophical along with the psycho-social components that characterise the neuroses that afflict the South African polity.<sup>1</sup> *Race, Nation, Translation* therefore, cannot be understood out of these boundaries of intertextuality and reveals the death of imagination and theory in our context.

The reader might wonder how I come to read Wicomb's work as surfacing/highlighting the death of imagination and theory in the Republic? There are three things that can be said as a mode of substantiating this claim. First, this reading finds substantiation through a close textual analysis of the collection, beginning with the first chapter, wherein Wicomb traces the path "From National to Official Culture". She writes "... as Fanon so persuasively argues, the nostalgic desire for the past is misguided, the very fact that it exists implies its representability, if only with the deployment of irony" (40). Historically, as South Africa sought to define its identity in the international arena and with the looming task of democratic liberation, the mission of fashioning national culture harked back to historical misreading(s), that subsequently were imposed as official culture. Officialdom inaugurated the essentialist and fundamentalist readings of culture that are symptomatic of Mudimbe's observations in *The Invention of Africa* (1988) and Mamdani's notion of a post-colonial state that continues to be ensnared in colonial categories of thought. The death of imagination in this regard is heralded by a return to these essentialist modalities of thought seen in the desire to preserve a utopian conception of African subjectivity through the decolonial discourse—which in and of itself signals the death of theory in our midst. While this might be read as a bold claim, I hold to its applicability in our context owing to the reality that decolonisation has been framed as a return to a pre-colonial Africa, without a sophisti-

cated reading of our conceptions of pre-coloniality as inventions of European domination and subjugation that defined and shaped African subjectivity, being and socio-political economies of ontology and metaphysics.

The second aspect surfacing (even signalling) the death of imagination and theory is the need to grapple with the City State—the University—that imposes micro-management regimes that privilege quantity above quality in the publication regimens of intellectuals contemporarily. In the failure of intellectuals to read beyond their disciplinary silos, evinced (from my disciplinary vantage-point) in philosophical treatises that ignore historiography, political theory and literature along with art theory; social theory in South Africa has become vacuous and meaningless. This observation echoes Wicomb's assertions when she writes, "the reflectionist model of cultural expression, that it simply mirrors what we experience, conveniently conceals the relationship between culture and power" (47). Wicomb's astute observation highlights two things, the death of novel and innovative theory generation, the generation of theory that is cognisant of the socio-political and socio-historical conditions in which we are located. This observation undergirds the second intervention that is surfaced by an intertextual reading of Wicomb's work; the anti-intellectual culture that has firmly taken root in the City State that is the University. This being the reality that frames intellectualism as the object of attack by institutional administrators that would have us (academics and intellectuals) service clients (students) who come into the university, no longer to acquire culture and incisive intellectual training but rather degrees that are hollow and meaningless in the "project of humanity—the project of culture" (Readings 5).

Thirdly and finally, Wicomb surfaces the death of imagination and theory as envisaged in the dearth of intellectual work in the Social Sciences, specifically, that read contemporary societal problems in a holistic fashion. This is to say that Wicomb's work, like many of the literato she makes reference to, i.e. Njabulo Ndebele, Bessie Head and Nadine Gordimer, takes seriously a series of social questions as they defined and continue to define South African social existence—these being education, literacy, feminist thinking and existential reality, along with poverty and social inequality. While Philosophy as discipline, which arrogantly enough claims the status of 'mother of all disciplines', may think through the moral and ethical afflictions that define the reality of the South African polity, the discipline does little to surface the interconnections of the abovementioned questions, maintaining rather the

notion of thinking for thinking's sake. This cowardly move that is used by contemporary literary scholars, art theoreticians and practitioners along with philosophers, would define these disciplines as apolitical and ahistorical—choosing rather to address their subject matter as aesthetic objects that are devoid of the political.

Wicomb's *Race, Nation, Translation* highlights that this move is nothing short of an intellectually trite laziness that ought to be chastised for its part in the maintenance of an anti-intellectual tradition that is arresting the South African academe. Wicomb opines pertinently, albeit an opinion that might be symptomatic of a generational misreading, when she avers, "indeed, I am not sure if culture is of much interest to the generation of born-free black South Africans" (266). I frame this observation as a generational misreading on the premise of cultural spaces that have emerged to interrogate culture and its role in the continued growth and development of the South African polity. I would suggest that the disinterest in the traditionally defined cultural domain by Black/Indigenous youth stems from a deracinated reading of cultural and historical artefacts as aesthetic artefacts that are both apolitical and ahistorical—as framed by disciplinary domains that would claim a second order disciplinary make-up. Put differently, in the move that frames Philosophy, Literary Theory, Art Theory and Practice as second order disciplines that are not concerned with the political, the intellectual genuflects to an anti-intellectual tradition that divorces the political and historical from their intellectual pursuits—a move that was and continues to be contested by the contemporary politically conscious student body.

In sum, I would suggest that any intellectual who is invested in the project of theory generation in the South African context, or theory that is concerned with thinking through and about South African reality, do themselves a favour and engage systematically—through reading and rereading *Race, Nation, Translation*. My recommendation comes from the desire to reinvigorate the South African academe with insightful and innovative theory developments that are genuinely and authentically invested in finding questions that will lead to a modicum of novel theory emanating from the global South—and specifically from South Africa.

#### Note

1. These neuroses are evinced in the anti-intellectualism that has gripped South Africa— with intellectuals, specifically Black intellectuals, being framed as anti-Black, Afro-pessimists, and 'educated' Blacks. Furthermore, this culture is seen in how intellectual

training in the City State that is the University buys into the condescension that would have us read and teach secondary texts or interpretations as opposed to the actual texts themselves. I suggest that this framing underscores my claim of the death of imagination and theory in our context.

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#### Death and Compassion: The Elephant in Southern African Literatures.

Dan Wylie.

Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2018. 267 pp.  
ISBN 978-1-77614-218-7.

Dan Wylie's exploration of the representation of elephants in southern African fictional and non-fictional literature is not only simultaneously academic and witty, but also excellently ascertained in its goal. In his introduction, Wylie frames his point of departure as the "philosophical contestation between death and compassion, between those who kill and those who protect" (3). The term 'compassion' is thoroughly outlined, and Wylie is sensitive to this term's resemblance to sympathy, empathy, pity and reverence. However, in this book, compassion is "a more holistic term, a response that takes a more conscious place within an overarching schema of ethics" (6). In conjunction with 'compassion', terms such as 'sentimentality' and 'anthropomorphism' are also discussed. Whilst 'sentimentality' is aligned with "the ineffectuality of pity" (6), 'anthropomorphism' is regarded as a tool of "imaginative identification" (7). Both terms are explored throughout the text.

In nine dense chapters, Wylie analyses various texts from southern Africa, ranging from folktales and game-ranger memoirs to teen fiction and poetry. It is

through these analyses that our concepts of elephants and compassion are enlivened. The first chapter explores compassion in precolonial texts. Wylie is highly aware (and critical) of the processes of translation inevitably interfering with a modern reading of folktales. He dissects works translated by Wilhelm Bleek, such as *Reynaerd the Fox in Africa* and texts in the Bleek-Lloyd archive. He contrasts many of these works with other versions by, amongst others, Laurens van der Post. What becomes clear is that, although these stories, proverbs and rock art may have had elements of compassion towards elephants, the modern translations and interpretations portray more so the character of the translator and interpreter than that of the precolonial indigenous authors.

In chapter two, Wylie analyses travelogues, such as those written by François la Vaillant, Anders Sparrman and John Barrow. The accounts of these, and many other travellers during the early 1800s, rather portray a severe lack in compassion for elephants fuelled by naturalism, the advent of science, and zoology. Wylie (44) calls the slaughters described by these travellers nothing short of a "holocaust". Apart from Sparrman, who incorporates a story of indigenous peoples' belief that elephants weep in a similar way to humans, most descriptions of elephants are, according to Wylie, evidently in service of the promotion of the white masculine leader with little to no evidence of compassion.

Chapter three is closely linked to chapter two, exploring hunters' tales, and specifically the entwining of hunting and conservation efforts. Here Wylie explores theories of masculinity, postcolonialism and whiteness without jarring the analysis away from his search for compassion. Whereas anthropomorphism is often the basic tool used to evoke a compassionate representation of elephants in later works, in the hunters' tales it is often used as a "self-serving [...] projection" (73) of the hunter himself. Where the elephant is described as graceful and noble, it functions to highlight the nobility and grace of the hunter, and in so doing, supports the power relationship between human and nonhuman. Much like the novels about elephants explored in chapter four, such as Laurens van der Post's *The Hunter and the Whale*, along with Stuart Cloete's *The Curve and the Tusk*, these narratives are "not very good at remorse" (88).

Wylie finally finds elements of compassion in teen fiction. In chapter five he explores the "pedagogical values embedded in a selection of southern African novellas" (119). It seems that the key to portraying compassion in any narrative is the ability to conjure up imaginative identification with elephants in read-

ers. What so-called compassionate texts have in common, is their use of anthropomorphism, metaphors and fantasy. In teen fiction, compassion is often evoked through the recognition of the elephant's face, as is the case in *The Elephant's Tale* by Lauren St John. In John Struthers' *The Boy and the Elephant*, compassion is evoked through the emotional resemblances between human and nonhuman.

The game-ranger and field-research memoirs of chapter six and seven explore the ways in which knowledge about animals are used to evoke compassion, but ironically, also to justify the culling of whole herds of elephants. In this sense, these memoirs are similar to the hunter's tales discussed in chapter three. Chapter eight is devoted to the representation of the Knysna and Addo elephants. Wylie discusses how legends and myths about elephants fuel our compassion for them: "our compassion is dependent on the animal's capacity to exist as a symbol" (198). The poetry analysed in chapter nine supports this argument, considering the level to which the elephant is elevated to a legendary figure, or is described with quasi-human features, both aspects evoking compassion.

In some ways *Death and Compassion* is an overwhelming text. The level of insight with which Wylie navigates the vast number of narratives in search of compassion is commendable. Whilst the book is primarily academic, his use of humour allows this dense exploration to feel like an informal conversation about "elefriend[s]" (1). Apart from presenting insightful research on the ways in which elephants are represented in literature, Wylie also broadens the reader's understanding of the role of compassion with regards to human-nonhuman relationships in literary studies.

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## Literature and the Law in South Africa, 1910–2010: The Long Walk to Artistic Freedom.

Ted Laros.  
Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2018.  
231 pp.  
ISBN 978-1-6839-3015-0.

Aanvanklik wil mens hierdie boek lees as een wat binne die Reg en Letterkunde-beweging val. Ten spyte van die titel, val hierdie publikasie egter nie binne wat tipies as Reg en Letterkunde beskou word nie. Die boek lewer eerder 'n bydrae op die gebied van mediareg en vryheid van uitdrukking. Ten opsigte van laasgenoemde is die bydrae verfrissend, aangesien die meeste vryheid van uitdrukking hofsake en studies op kwessies rondom laster en haatspraak toegespits is.

Die Reg en Letterkunde-beweging onderskei gewoonlik tussen twee verhoudings tussen die reg en letterkunde, naamlik reg *in* letterkunde en reg *as* letterkunde. Reg *in* letterkunde ontwikkel uit die sogenaamde 'Great Books'-benadering. Hiervolgens bestudeer studente regs kwessies en regsonderwerpe in 'n lys van klassieke Westerse letterkunde: Kafka, Melville, Dickens, ensomeer. Hierdie boeke help dan om standaardregstemas soos wraak en skuld te verstaan. Reg *as* letterkunde, daarteenoor, beskou die reg primêr as taal, as ontologies dieselfde as letterkunde, soos Maria Aristedomou sê. Beide is immers woorde op papier. Die reg is volgens hierdie beskouing daarom ewe interpreteerbaar en onbepaalbaar as letterkunde. Ted Laros, met sy verkenning van verskeie sensuursake, ondersoek 'n derde verhouding, naamlik die reg teenoor letterkunde, oftewel reg *v* letterkunde in die adversatiewe verhouding wat 'n hofsak daarstel. Dit ondersoek dus die letterkunde in die reg, soos Laros dit stel (200).

Hierdie verhouding tussen die reg en letterkunde belig Laros se sentrale vraag, naamlik of 'n selfstandige literêre veld in Suid-Afrika ontwikkel het. Hier betrek hy hoofsaaklik die werk van Bourdieu om die konsep van 'n veld (*field*) te omskryf. Met verwysing na die klassifikasie van Dorleijn, Grüttemeier en Korthals Altes, toon hy aan hoe die letterkunde interne, eksterne en estetiese selfstandigheid verkry deur hierdie regsgedinge. Die vertrekpunt van die boek is dat literêre konsepsuele selfstandigheid (slegs) 'n relatiewe selfstandigheid daarstel (11). Dit blyk duidelik uit die feit dat artikel 16(2) sowel as artikel 36 van die Suid-Afrikaanse Grondwet van 1996, beperkings plaas op vryheid van uitdrukking (182). Laros is steeds optimisties oor die moontlikheid van 'n selfstandige veld en die wyse waarop die boek gestruktureer is,

sowel as die titels van die hoofstukke, vertel 'n verhaal van vooruitgang: “Despite Rollback Efforts”, “Legal Groundwork”, “Hesitant Legal Recognition, 1955–1975”, “Despite Rollback Efforts, Ongoing Recognition, 1975–1980”, “Decisive Legal Recognition, 1980–2010”. Die boek kom tot die gevolgtrekking dat daar in Suid-Afrika wel 'n selfstandige literêre veld in die Afrikaanse en Engelse letterkunde ontstaan het en dat hierdie veld hoofsaaklik in die 1960s en 1970s tot stand gekom het. Laros kwalifiseer hierdie gevolgtrekking egter en sê dat daar verdere navorsing nodig is ten einde dit oontseeglik te bewys (199).

In die ontwikkeling van die argument, gaan Laros regsvergeelykend te werk en vergelyk Suid-Afrika met Duitsland, Nederland, Frankryk en België op grond van die feit dat hierdie lande se politieke-, letterkunde- en regstelsels gebaseer is op ideologieë wat breedweg uit die Verligting spruit (16). Die teks verduidelik egter nie hoe hierdie verligtingskonsepte, waaruit die reg op vryheid van uitdrukking spruit, skakel met die pluralistiese bestel, insluitende die gewoontereg en die inheemse reg, wat die 1996 Grondwet daarstel nie.

Laros gaan noukeurig met die toepaslike wetgewing en verskuiwings in reguleringstrukture om en verbind dit met die politieke en regime veranderinge wat hierdie verskuiwings teweeg gebring het. Wat duidelik uit die boek blyk, sonder dat dit eksplisiet genoem word, is dat die selfstandige literêre veld wat ontstaan het, te wyte is aan die spesifieke hofsake wat dit wel tot in die howe gemaak het en gerapporteer is. Laros beweer dat hy alle hofsake (siviël en strafregtelik) aangaande letterkunde, wat tussen 1910 en 2010 plaasgevind het, sistematies analiseer (4). Hy fokus egter in die besonder op die sake van Can Themba, Wilbur Smith, Etienne Leroux en André Brink. Themba se saak was die enigste strafregtelike saak. Die ouditeur-generaal het dit in 1964 in die landdroshof aanhangig gemaak. Laros vra wel waarom hulle strafregtelike stappe geneem het en nie net 'n saak voor die Publikasiesbeheerraad gebring het nie. Die ander drie skrywers kon almal met behulp van hulle uitgewers die bevinding van die onderskeie administratiewe liggame in die hof aanveg. Smith se Britse uitgewers appèlleer teen die Publikasiesbeheerraad se bevinding oor sy boek *Lion* en dit word in die Kaapse hooggeregshof in 1964 aangehoor. Daarna word 'n latere werk van hom, *When the Lion Feeds*, weer in die Appèlhof in Bloemfontein aangehoor. André Brink se *Kennis van die aand* is deur die Publikasiesbeheerraad as onwenslik verklaar, waarna Buren, die uitgewers wat bereid was om die boek uit te gee, hierteen appèlleer na die Kaapse hooggeregshof. Leroux se *Magersfontein, o Magersfontein* is na die nuwe

Publikasiewet van 1974 verban. Human & Rosseau het na die Transvaal Provinsiale afdeling (Pretoriase Hooggeregshof) appèl aangeteken.

Buiten vir die rol wat mag, ras, geslag en sosiale stand speel in die bevegting van 'n hofsake, is daar natuurlik ook 'n hele politiek rondom die prosesse wat bepaal welke hofsake gerapporteer word of nie. In hierdie opsig is dit behulpsaam om die reg as 'n vorm van letterkunde te beskou. Verder skep nie alles wat in elke gerapporteerde hofsake genoem word, 'n presedent nie. Die terloopse opmerking (*obiter dictum*) uit die *Rex v Webb* saak van 1934 op bladsye 38–9 is 'n goeie voorbeeld hiervan. Die uitgewers en skrywers wat Laros uitlig was almal in 'n posisie om die sake op appèl te neem. Vergelyk hiermee die posisie van Miriam Tlali, die eerste swart vrou om 'n roman in Suid-Afrika te publiseer, wie se *Muriel at Metropolitan* in 1979 verban is. Die rol wat hierdie magsverhoudinge gespeel het in die skep van 'n selfstandige literêre veld word nie eksplisiet aangeraak nie.

As eerstejaarregstudent moes ek 'n opdrag oor die Wet op Films en Publikasies as deel van 'n Regsvaardighede kursus voltooi. Die doel van hierdie opdrag was om enersyds vir studente blootstelling aan die kompleksiteit van wetsuitleg te bied terwyl dit hulle ook attent moes maak op die dilemma van die spanning tussen die reg en moraliteit. Laros se boek vermag iets soortgelyks. Selfs al is die reg as letterkunde nie die fokus van Laros se boek nie, is daar wel 'n hele paar waardevolle aspekte wat hierdie verhouding toelig. Vir die regsgeleerde is die volledige bespreking van die hofsake veral waardevol vir die wyse waarop dit kompleksiteite in interpretasie uitwys. Die rol wat die kontekstuele benadering speel en die ontwikkeling van konsepte soos die redelike, gemiddelde man teenoor die waarskynlike leser is belangrik in hierdie opsig. Wat baie mooi na vore kom, is die rol wat verskillende persoonlikhede gespeel het in die uitkomstes van die sake en die gevolglike totstandkoming van 'n selfstandige veld. Voorbeelde hiervan is sy bespreking van die afsonderlike regters se standpunte in die Brink-saak waar daar 'n volbank regters voorgesit het en ook die groot verskil wat dit gemaak het toe die (meer liberale) Van Rooyen in 1980 as die voorsitter van die Publikasiesappèlraad by die (konserwatiewe) Snyman oorgeneem het. Die uiteenlopende hofsake van die pre-uniewording tydperk is veral interessant omdat mens dit nie geredelik in ander bronne vind nie. Dit herinner terselfdertyd ook aan Martin Chanock se *Fear, Favour Prejudice: The Making of a South African Legal Culture 1902–1936* (2001).



Die boek is op die outeur se doktorsale proefskrif, in 2013 aan die Carl von Ossietzky Universiteit in Oldenburg verwerf, gebaseer en sluit 'n volledige bibliografie en indeks in. Die volop gebruik van Latynse terme laat mens tog wonder wie die eintlike teikengehoor van die boek is. As deel van die Farleigh Dickinson University Press se reeks *Law, Culture and the Humanities* sal 'n wye gehoor waarde kan put uit Laros se boek. Op die omslag van die boek pryk 'n foto van die Kaapstad Hooggeregshof en, anders as in die Kafka-kortverhaal, staan die deur van die reg wel oop. Laros nooi mens in die regswêreld van sensuur en sedisie in Suid Afrika in en sluit 'n rykdom van fyn besonderhede in die ver naamste hofsake in die veld van reg v letterkunde oop.

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### **Like Family: Domestic Workers in South African History and Literature.**

Ena Jansen. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2019. 384 pp.  
ISBN 978-1776143511.

South African poet Gabea Baderoon (173–88) writes that, in South Africa, the house is a haunted place of silences, ghosts and secrets. It is a space made possible by the invisibilised labour of the black domestic worker (and before her, the slave) who leads a shadowy existence within, but on the margins of, white private life. These haunted intimacies between white and black loom large in the South African psyche and have given rise to a complicated archive of literature and art engaging with the institution and its history. It is this archive that Ena Jansen enters and lingers in with her book *Like Family: Domestic Workers in South African History and Literature* (2018) (a translation of Soos familie, published in 2015), which reveals to the reader a rich and layered cartography of literary, historical, personal and artistic representations of the domestic worker. Taking particular note of the growing body of autobiographical works by black authors, Jansen pores over the contradictions, ambiguities, complexities and textures of the domestic worker narrative as it emerges

from the vexed South African archive, through and despite of its “silences and violences” (5).

As a way of countering the erasures effected by slave/colonial/apartheid history through which the black woman is referred to collectively and is rarely remembered by name, *Like Family* focuses on the stories of individual domestic worker characters, while expressly locating their personal narratives in the political. Jansen works to reveal the (often concealed) everyday oppressions and indignities suffered by domestic workers at the hands of the ‘white madam’ and her family, while also foregrounding the creative modes of resistance and negotiation, cunning gestures and transgressive desires through which domestic workers manage to tip the balance of power, advance their own interests and unsettle white authority. The book therefore functions as a “biography of domestic workers” (279), but also contains a strong autobiographical element. The author makes her own presence explicit in its pages, carefully situating her project in relation to her own experiences as a white South African woman from the “madam class” and her own complicated relationships to various black women who have worked for her. The book therefore becomes more than an intellectual exercise or scholarly exploration, it is also a beautifully written personal account that moves, confronts and engages the reader in ways that most academic texts are unable to do.

*Like Family* contributes to crucial memory work in the South African postcolony. The book provides a long history of the South African institution of domestic work, tracing its founding assumption (the assumption of white South Africans that tedious manual labour should be done by black hands), its racial dynamic and many of its practices (like the renaming of the ‘domestic worker’, and the ‘living-in’ arrangement), to South Africa’s slave history. In this way Jansen resists the amnesia that characterises the South African popular imagination, contributes to the slow undoing of the systematic repression of slave memory. *Like Family* also reveals and deconstructs the erasures of the white nostalgia that so often accompanies public discourse about domestic work in South Africa, where white people reflect sentimentally on individual black women who cared for them as children and use family descriptions to frame these relationships (for example ‘she is like family,’ or ‘she was like a mother to me’). *Like Family* does important corrective work in the hegemonic white imagination by assembling and interpreting texts that expose the distortions and violences of white paternalism, thereby enabling radically new remembering of these relationships. This troubling of

white memory opens up the possibility of confronting the inequalities of the 'post-'apartheid present: "Every black woman who carries a white child on her back or pushes a buggy is a reminder of the ongoing predicament of black women in South Africa" (267).

Perhaps the most interesting, ambitious and important aspect of the book is its commitment to think from within the borders. Where Mary Louise Pratt (4) uses the term "contact zones" to describe the threshold spaces where interactions between "maids and madams" generally occur (kitchens and backyards in white middle class neighbourhoods), Jansen prefers to think also in terms of "borders" and "frontiers", words that convey something of the negotiation, separation and power imbalances that these threshold spaces signify. *Like Family* is interested in domestic workers as go-between figures between white and black, rich and poor, coloniser and colonised, urban and rural; as connectors, intermediaries, pivotal points of contact, "outsiders within" operating "at the crossroads of everything that has to do with difference in South Africa" (267). *Like Family* therefore reads the domestic worker as occupying an inbetweenness, a space of complicated and tense entanglement, which also has its roots in seventeenth-century slavery when enslaved women moved in and out of settler homes (267). In her selection and exploration of texts, Jansen centres the issue of borders in its many senses (legal, spatial, cultural etcetera), and foregrounds tales about everyday contact situations and the resultant "stories dealing with uncomfortable choices, or experiences of exclusion and exploitation, where authors dare to engage with the full implications of entanglement" (272). *Like Family* can therefore be said to be committed to "border thinking" (a concept originating from the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and developed by Walter Dignolo and many others), thinking that emerges from "fraught frontier areas," knowledges produced from the dichotomous locus of enunciation that the domestic worker inhabits. In this sense *Like Family* has the potential to contribute to the difficult process of destabilising colonial territorialities and hegemonic epistemologies, the importance of which cannot be overstated in contemporary South Africa where the ongoing and painful work of decolonisation feels more urgent than ever.

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#### This Mournable Body.

Tsitsi Dangarembga.

Johannesburg: Jacana, 2018. 296 pp.

ISBN 978-1-4314-2830-4.

*This Mournable Body* (2018), the latest novel by Tsitsi Dangarembga, closes her trilogy preceded by *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and *The Book of Not* (2006). The trilogy deals with the life of Tambudzai, who grows up amidst the complexities of race, gender and class that mark the colonial and postcolonial reality of Zimbabwe.

In *This Mournable Body*, Tambudzai is now a middle-aged woman, single and unemployed, who is confronted by the scarce opportunities to succeed in an increasingly adverse labour market. The means to survive and sustain her life with a certain degree of dignity are not enough, and so Tambudzai is forced to navigate this precarity using different strategies that are, nevertheless, disempowering.

At the beginning of the novel she is forced to leave the hostel in which she has been living due to pressure from the matron because of her age and financial situation. After this, she moves to a shared house but, still unemployed, she finds herself surviving only thanks to the vegetables that she manages to take from the landlady's garden. Things are so bad for her that, eventually, she feels compelled to accept a job for which she is not fully qualified and in which she is not interested at all: she becomes a Biology teacher at a secondary school. Through this process, the reader witnesses the deteriorating mental and physical health of Tambudzai as a result of her struggle to survive, and of the frustration that arises in the face of the impossibility of being a successful woman in her country. The precarity that the protagonist experiences is not only objective, in the sense that she does not have enough income to support herself, but it is also a mental and social space in which she is positioned by a system in which her life is disposable, and in which all the sacrifices she made and efforts that she went to to obtain a university degree do



not matter, because that is just not enough. She is just not enough.

The violence that leads to her being rendered disposable by society has an impact on her experience as a woman, and so she becomes indifferent to all other manifestations of violence that happen around her (sexual and gender based violence towards her housemates, physical and emotional violence towards her landlady, etc.). She herself becomes the perpetrator of violence against one of her students, which causes her to have a mental breakdown and stay in a psychiatric institution for a while.

During her psychological breakdown, the reader also sees another dimension of Tambudzai's precarious existence: the lack of a community that really understands her and on which she can rely. Some of her relatives visit her, and her cousin Nyasha invites her to stay in her house for a recovery period. Still, all of these interactions are meaningless to Tambudzai, who feels misunderstood and absent. Later in the book, when she has another job, her relation to her colleagues is marked by competition and rivalry. Tambudzai is mostly alone with her doubts, shame, and frustration, revealing in this way the isolated condition of her precarious life.

After recovering from the mental breakdown, things seem to be changing for her. She finds a new job in a travel agency and, although she is doing well in terms of income, she is still restless in her efforts to prove to her boss the value of her work and her potential to be successful. Her boss, on the other hand, constantly reminds her that she needs to add value to the business because, once again, her efforts are apparently not enough: it is not enough to be productive, responsible or efficient because, more than that, she needs to be 'employable': to show that she has the proper attitude towards her job, that she is happy working there and, more importantly, that she is able to use her own creativity in service of the company.

The deep association between herself and her job becomes more evident when, in an effort to expand the business, her boss asks her to be in charge of a project aimed at providing a "true, real African experience" to European tourists. Tambudzai is now called the Queen of the Village, as her main responsibility is to coordinate this new branch of the business and bring tourist to her own village. The success that she has been waiting for seems so close now that she ("you", as the book is written in the second voice) "*surrender to this new task, as though the job was the God whom you met for the first time decades before when you arrived at your uncle's Methodist mission*" (emphasis in original). This god also asks her for her entire soul but, unlike the god from the Methodist

mission, this one is crueller and only offers the vague promise of success if, and only if, the market allows it.

*This Mournable Body* is a relevant and painful testimony of the precarity that marks contemporary neo-liberal existences, in a context in which privileges like higher education and work experience are not fulfilling the promises of social mobility that they once offered. It is not a coincidence that the book is called *This Mournable Body*, entering into conversation with authors like Teju Cole and Judith Butler who, from different fields and disciplines, have reflected on the vulnerability of bodies that, according to society, do not deserve to be taken care of, sustained, or even mourned.

Even though this is a powerful book that echoes many themes characteristic of our times, the fact that it is the final part of a trilogy makes it difficult to understand this Tambudzai without comparing her with the Tambudzai that we met in *Nervous Conditions*. I missed that Tambudzai, not only because she is now a disappointed and frustrated adult woman, but mostly because in this book the character has lost one of her most powerful characteristics: she is not a reflective human being anymore. If the Tambudzai of the first book was a very clever girl, able to critically reflect on her context and come to radical understandings of sexism and colonialism, the Tambudzai of *This Mournable Body* is actually running away from any process of reflection and of healing, trying to silence her inner voice, and to entertain herself with the fantasy of success and social mobility. Maybe being precarious also means losing our own sense of humanity, and our own ability to be critical of our world.

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### **Chinatown.**

Ronelda S. Kamfer.  
Kapaastad: NB Uitgewers, 2019. 64 pp.  
ISBN 9780795709500.

In Ronelda Kamfer se nuutste digbundel, *Chinatown*, tref die verse gelaai met woede die leser soos 'n vuishou in die gesig. Jy hoor die pyn in haar stem, voel die breek in haar buik en proe die bitter op haar tong.

Die draak op die omslag gee jou 'n eenrigting vuilkyk en die groen-bruin kleure van die agtergrond simboliseer genesing, groei en nuwe lewe. Dit is as't ware asof daar deur hierdie bundel 'n nuwe era vir Kamfer aangebreek het. Nie net fokus sy meer op die vaderfiguur nie, maar sy bring ook die kwessie van *femicide* onder die loep. Kamfer open die bundel met 'n gedig getiteld "Chinatown", wat aansluit by die titel van die digbundel, en gebruik ook die woord meer as twee keer in die bundel self. Die herhaalde gebruik van die woord is veral funksioneel vanweë die digter se soeke na egtheid—in haar lewe, maar ook in haar digkuns. Volgens Hambidge (12) hou die bundel verband met Polanski se 1974 flim, *Chinatown*. Myns insiens hou die bundel nie net verband met Polanski se flim se ondersoek van bloedskeide en geweld nie, maar ook met die "Chinese" winkels en die spesifieke *Chinatown*-winkel waarna die spreker gereeld terugkeer, 'n plek waar mense gewoonlik namaaksels en goedkoop produkte kry.

Kamfer ondersoek in hierdie bundel die bestaan van die bruin mens en al die ellendes wat dit inhou. Waar haar vorige bundels meer klem gelê het op die moederlike figuur, grondverskuiwings en apartheid, fokus hierdie bundel sterk op die vaderfiguur en die hedendaagse diskoers rondom *femicide*. Gedigte soos "Chinatown daddy" (11) spreek die harde realiteit van afwesige vaders aan. Verder meer sluit Kamfer aan by die huidige situasie in Suid-Afrika rakende *femicide* soos gesien in gedigte soos "DIY 3-step rape kit" (25), "terrorist attack" (26), "safe word" (34) en "laat die wit meisies huil" (47) waarin sy nie net die harde realiteit van verkragting aanspreek nie, maar ook die nagevolge en letsels wat dit agterlaat.

Verder meer verbeek Kamfer in *Chinatown* die stiltes wat in die verlede geskep is deur vanuit 'n voorheen-gemarginaliseerde stem te skryf. Die gemarginaliseerdes van die verlede vind dus deur middel van haar werk 'n geleentheid om hul eie verhale te vertel. Haar werk gee dus nie net aan die Afrikaanse leser die kans om na vroeër ongehoorde stemme te luister nie, maar verteenwoordig ook 'n ander perspektief op die verlede en die hede. Gedigte soos "Babes" (39), "try dié" (52), "Mr Brown en sy pyn-Barbie" (16) en "meire" (24) verskaf nie net inligting oor die gemeenskap nie, maar ook oor die spreker self.

Kamfer se verse is egter nie sonder ironie nie. In "my poems is nie confessions nie" (50) dig die digter oor haar helde wat nooit Hertzogpryse wen nie en hoe sy "fokkol vir 'n wit vrou wat mooi gedigte geskryf het" voel nie, tog bedank sy Antjie Krog aan die einde van die bundel. Verdere ironie kan gesien word in gedigte

soos "Chinatown op 'n Sondag" (33) waarin sy haar pa se behepthed met wit mense onder die loep bring. Dit is vir die leser geen geheim dat die digter teen iets re-belleer nie. Haar onbeheersde woede en haat teenoor wit mense vloei van *Noudat slapende honde* in 2008 tot in *Chinatown*. Haar pa se obsessie vuur dié woede aan:

my pa volg die leftovers  
van die wit man se toxic masculinity  
hy is trauma se experimental phrase  
sy legacy gaan wees: die mistress van wit manlikheid  
die always-a-bridesmaid vir die bride van wit patriarchy (11)

Kamfer se behepthed met wit mense is egter nie sonder teenstrydighede nie. Ten spyte van haar haat en woede teenoor witmense erken die spreker in "moenie my misverstaan nie" (43) dat nie alle dinge van witmense haar afsit nie:

moenie my misverstaan nie—boeremusiek is kak  
versin but daai Beaufort Wes nommertjie is nomme (43)

Wat die tipografiese inhoud en struktuur van die bundel aanbetref, wyk Kamfer nie net af van standaardafrikaans nie, sy skep ook 'n gehibridiseerde taal (Kaaps) wat lynreg staan teenoor taalsuiwerheid. Kamfer neem met ander woorde die taal van die kolonialiseerder, pas dit aan en maak dit dan haar eie. Tipografies is haar gedigte meestal sonder leestekens en reëllengtes wissel. Verder vloei gedigte in mekaar in, wat dit soos verhale laat lees. Die tematiese materiaal in die bundel is egter nie nuut nie en die woede oor pyn, swaarkry en rassisme is steeds nie uitgewoed nie. Tesame met gereelde temas wat met Kamfer se werk geassosieer kan word, spreek sy in hierdie bundel ook nuwe temas soos geestesgesondheid aan.

Kamfer kruip nie weg agter verdraaide verse of paradokse nie. Sy is eerlik in haar woede en maak die leser deel van haar aggressie. In haar postkoloniale geveg raak sy soos in *grond/Santekraam* ook die kwessie van grond in *Chinatown* aan:

jy exist in die regte wêreld  
die een waar al die leaders doodgaan  
die een waar almal kaalvoet  
loop op gesteelde grafgrond (54)

Sy klassifiseer haarself as die Ander en verwys na die wit mense as "julle/ hulle". Steeds, soos in die eerste gedig in *Noudat slapende honde*, "waar ek staan", verafsku sy die tafel waarby hulle sit en vind sy maniere om hulle ongemaklik te laat voel. In "Prince Myshkin" (36) noem die spreker dat sy lief is vir baklei. Baklei kan in hierdie opsig geassosieer word met die postkoloniale opposisionele posisie wat die spreker teen die samelewing en

die kanon inneem. Kamfer baklei nie net 'n fisiese geveg nie, maar voer ook 'n stryd teen die monsters in haar kop (“gaan aan” [46] en “bamboo” [14]).

*Chinatown* vorm nie net 'n voltooide siklus met gedigte wat in gesprek tree met mekaar, soos gesien in “ek soek nie 'n plek langs die tafel nie” (28) en “straatmeid” (29) nie, dit daag ook verskeie stereotipes en norms uit. Myns insiens bou dit voort op vorige bundels, maar bring ook vernuwing na die tafel. Dit is 'n bundel waarin Kamfer standpunte inneem en waarin sy nie net die literêre kanon uitdaag nie, maar lesers ook aanmoedig om verandering teweeg te bring; radikale verandering ten opsigte van geestesgesondheid, afwesige vaderfigure en verkragting. Vir Kamfer is 'n plek langs die tafel te normaal—sy nooi eerder die Afrikaanse literêre gemeenskap uit om vuur te maak buite.

#### Geraadpleegde bron

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#### All the Places.

Musawenkosi Khanyile.

Cape Town: uHlanga, 2019. 55pp.

ISBN 9780620838719.

As the title indicates, Musawenkosi Khanyile's debut collection is preoccupied with place and space. A grainy black and white cover photograph captures a lone figure as he traverses a bare landscape towards a smattering of buildings hunched together in the middle distance, where the flat horizon bisects a sky the colour of bleached bone. This image captures the mood and highlights the themes of the collection. The blurb describes the work as a “poetic Bildungsroman” that unfolds as a series of snapshots and memories. The single narrator takes the reader on a linear journey through the “rural”, “township” and “urban” spaces of his childhood and youth. These geospatial divisions signal the movements and developments in the speaker's life, and thus foreground the important connection between place and memory. The collection itself is organised along these same divisions.

The first poem, “A School Visit” (9), in the “Rural” section, introduces most of the primary themes and preoccupations of the collection. The speaker describes in first-person a visit that he makes to a school where every class “had a window with a hole in it, / a broken desk, / and something wrong with the door”. Holes in walls, windows and clothes, broken desks and beds, and doors that cannot shut properly are images that repeat in many of the poems and link to the themes of poverty, distance and lack that the cover photo evokes so effectively.

When the speaker is introduced to the children as “an important guest”, he states that he “tried to put on the face of someone who has figured out this life thing, / attempting the walk of those who know where their lives are going”. This comment introduces a recurring concern in the collection, namely the disjuncture between what the speaker feels himself to be, and what he perceives as the expectations of others.

The poem continues to recount how the speaker “took the exercise book of a little girl / who smelled of paraffin and looked at the tree she had drawn— / a leafless tree with no bird in it”. The barrenness of the tree reinforces the impression of an environment in which nothing can thrive, and thus offsets the pathos of the final stanza: “She said *Doctor*, spitting out saliva, / when I asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up” (emphasis in original). The discrepancy between the child's apparently hopeless environment and her hope of becoming a doctor is rendered sharply poignant by the fact that Khanyile, who grew up in the township of Nseleni in Kwa-Zulu Natal, holds a Master's degree in Clinical Psychology from the University of Zululand and works as a student counsellor at the University of Cape Town, where he is pursuing an MA in Public Health. He thus represents those like the little girl in the poem, whose dreams are bigger than their circumstances.

The work is boldly autobiographical: it is dedicated to “Zamo, my brother”, and two of the poems in the collection are also addressed to Zamo. The second poem, “The World Opens Up” (48–9), is found in the “Urban” section, and speaks of the township as a place where people are “walled in”, where you have to “carve your way out / like a prisoner committed to an escape plan”. The speaker is “on this side of the rainbow now, / where the world is generous with itself”. The collection's preoccupation with space and place is reflected in the way that the township and the urban spaces are juxtaposed against each other in this poem. Furthermore, the poem hints at the ways in which access to

capital leads to command of a kind of cultural capital that can obscure the speaker's history of hardship:

I sit at the table with people who don't know leaking roofs  
and the waiter hands each of us the same menu.

From my office window I see cars speeding on the highway  
and think how awesome it would be, brother,

to drive with our arms stretched out like wings,  
the air fanning us,

brushing against our black skin—  
who would tell that I left you a dining room floor to  
sleep on?

These poems for Zamo speak of the visceral experience of poverty, which is linked explicitly to race—one of the many damaging legacies of apartheid. The knowledge of those circumstances continually informs the speaker's experience of the world.

The speaker, who must negotiate radically discordant worlds, adopts a marked shift in point of view, from first-person to third-person, in the final section of the collection, where his "Urban" experiences are recorded. Khanyile's minimalist vignettes create the illusion of transparency, and the reader appears to get unmediated access to the experiences of the single, autobiographical speaker. When shifts in point of view thus do occur, the reader is particularly aware of the distancing effect.

In the poem "Emptiness" (46–7) for example, the third-person point of view is used to reflect on the speaker's worries

[...] about silly things.  
Even about his English which runs out like airtime while he speaks.  
He's ashamed of everything,  
including the master's degree that he obtained from a rural university  
which sits at the bottom of the list.  
Now he's at a top university where they needed the colour of his skin  
to push their agenda of transformation.

This poem again foregrounds the enduring link between poverty and race in South Africa, and points to the kind of psychological and emotional damage that living in these circumstances inflicts on the psyche. As in "A School Visit", we note here the speaker's sense of inadequacy about his comportment, his background and his credentials. His existential emptiness is mir-

rored by the space of his flat, "that only has a bed and a barstool" (47).

The last poem in the collection, "When You Finally Make It Into The Boardroom" (55), is addressed to a "you", and reads as a series of suggestions for how to talk about growing up in the township. The poem registers the dissonance between the two worlds of the boardroom and the township. The reader is advised to "Speak of growing up in the township as if it was an achievement. / Say that it was because you made it out alive". The speaker tells the reader to "Correct those who ask you: *What was it like growing up in the township?* / Say the appropriate question is: *How did you survive the township?*" (emphasis in original). This advice sets up the parameters within which one is expected to talk about growing up in the township. There are also restrictions: "Wall in the tears. Keep tears to yourself". This line introduces the notion of repression, and how repression functions in this particular narrative of self.

The poem continues to play off this idea of repression by listing the things that you can and cannot speak about in the boardroom: talk about the mother "who prayed for you on your way to school", but keep to yourself the thoughts of "those from the same block who amounted to nothing" and "street corners where bodies lay bloodied and cold". At the end, the reader is told:

Be the first one to say: *None of that matters anymore.*  
Gobble down a glass of water.  
Move on to another topic.

The disjuncture between external and internal—between what the speaker thinks and what he says—highlights the immense distance that the speaker must attempt to breach between the township and the boardroom. In my reading, the poem comprises a series of rules on etiquette, designed to protect the boardroom audience from the full knowledge of the township experiences that still haunt the speaker. In this way, the collection ends with a device that asks the reader to confront their own expectations of the speaker and those whom he represents, like the little girl in the rural school who dreams of being a doctor.

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## Die kinders van Spookwerwe.

Lize Albertyn-du Toit.

Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau, 2019, 352 pp.

ISBN 9780798177207.

*Die kinders van Spookwerwe* (2019) is die debuutroman van Lize Albertyn-du Toit. Die verhaal handel oor die Kaliempie-gesin en speel in die 1970's af. In die Bo-Karoo woon Mieta en Hennerik Kaliempie op die plaas Spookwerwe. Milano is hulle oudste seun wat reeds skoolgaan en baie lief is vir stories, en die tweeling of "linge", Gysie en Grietjie, is nog babas. Die Kaliempies se wortels is diep geskiet op die plaas, en hulle volg 'n geroetineerde bestaan. Mieta is versorger van hulle werf en huis, en wanneer die eienaars van die plaas kom kuier, is dit haar werk om die hoofhuis skoon te maak. Hennerik sien om na verskeie plaasdiere. 'n Tragedie tref egter die gesin en daar daal 'n swaarte op die plaas neer. Die tragedie gee ook aan die titel van die roman 'n dieper betekenis. Sekere 'spoke' bly altyd op die werf en bly by die karakters spook.

Die plaas is vir die Kaliempies uiteindelik 'n belangrike deel van hulle identiteit—op Spookwerwe bly en leef hulle, beleef hulle ook verliese en moet hulle leer om te leef met die hartseer: "Die Kaliempies moes nuwe voetpaadjies begin uittrap so tussen die verliesplekke en brakkolle deur" (27). Omdat die liefde vir die Karoo so diep ingeboesem is by sig bewoners is dit swaar wanneer juffrou Meintjies vir Mieta en Hennerik kom sien omdat sy besorg is oor Milano se opvoeding. Die plaaslike skool maak toe, maar juffrou Meintjies meen die Kaliempies moet nie Milano se opvoeding afskeep nie. Hy het goeie potensiaal, soos sy liefde vir lees en stories aandui. Hennerik beraam 'n plan om die gesin na die Swartland-area, in Riebeek-Wes na die plaas Tweefontein, te verhuis. Hennerik sal as 'n arbeider op 'n wingerd kan werk, en Milano sal sy laerskoolloopbaan kan klaarmaak en daarna met hoërskool begin.

Die roman het 'n derdepersoonverteller, en dit is veral Mieta se belewenisse wat vertel word. Die Kaliempies moet opnuut wortels skiet in hulle nuwe huis en in die nuwe omgewing wat so anders is as die Karoo. Mieta is versorger vir haar gesin, 'pleegma' vir die mishandelde Geraldine en tree sonder huiwering op teen geweld teen vroue. Sy is beskermend oor die diere op haar werf en duld nie enige skinderstories van buurvroue nie. Dit is interessant om te merk hoedat hierdie roman in dieselfde jaar as 'n nuwe rolprentweergawe van *Fiel se kind* verskyn. In die roman is daar ook 'n sterk fokus op 'n ma-en-kind-verhouding, veral die verhouding tussen 'n ma en haar seun, en in die opsig is daar 'n verband tussen hierdie

twee verhale. Die grootste verskil is dat *Die kinders van Spookwerwe*, anders as *Fiel se kind*, nie die narratief volg van 'n bruin ma wat vir 'n wit kind sorg nie. In hierdie resensie wil ek nie 'n vergelykende studie tussen die verhale, in hulle verskillende mediums, doen nie, maar slegs wys op een ooreenkoms tussen die verhale.

In 'n artikel wat Bibi Slippers geskryf het oor die jongste rolprentweergawe van *Fiel se kind* besin sy oor die waarde van nog 'n verfilming van dié bekende verhaal. In die 1980's het Katinka Heyns 'n rolprentweergawe van *Fiel se kind* gemaak en met die verskyning van die jongste rolprent het die vraag ontstaan of daar werklik nóg 'n rolprent nodig was. In haar artikel meen Slippers egter dat die jongste film 'n ander perspektief op 'n bekende verhaal gee. In die jongste film is daar bietjie meer te sien van die pyn wat die Komoetie-gesin moet deurmaak wanneer Benjamin, Fiel se wit grootmaakkind, weggeneem word van hulle. Die film fokus inderdaad meer op die pyn van Fiel se biologiese kinders om hulle broer en, nog meer, hulle ma te 'verloor' aan pyn en hartseer omdat sy gedurig wag op Benjamin se terugkeer. Tog is daar kritiek dat die film nie die volle uitbeelding van die komplekse emosies van die Komoetie-gesin vasvang nie (Slippers).

Met die lees van *Die kinders van Spookwerwe* is daar te bespeur hoe die roman aandag gee aan die komplekse gevoelens van verlies en hartseer wanneer die ma van 'n bruin gesin haar (biologiese) kinders verloor. 'n Roman bied natuurlik meer ruimte om emosies te omskryf, maar dit is belangrik om te merk dat hierdie roman gemoed is daarmee om omskrywings van komplekse innerlike emosies te gee. Na die tragedie op Spookwerwe die Kaliempies diep geraak het, word Milano byna die spilpunt van haar en Hennerik se bestaan. Ter wille van die hoop op 'n beter toekoms vir Milano trek die gesin na 'n nuwe dorp, weg van die spoke wat hulle geanker gehou het op hulle werf in die Bo-Karoo.

Die Kaliempies bly egter self 'kinders' wat afkomstig is van Spookwerwe. Soos hulle aanpas en voortgaan met hulle lewens op Tweefontein verstaan hulle hulself en vorm hulle hul bestaan rondom Spookwerwe. As mense vra waar hulle vandaan kom, soos wanneer Milano in die hospitaal beland en die verpleegster aan Mieta die vraag stel, is die antwoord: "Maar ons kom eintlik van Spookwerwe af in die Karoo" (254). Die roman lewer kommentaar op waar mense behoort, waar hulle tuis voel en hoe moeilik dit kan wees om opnuut 'n lewe en 'n bestaan te probeer voer—veral as daar 'spoke' op 'n ander werf is wat in mens se geheue bly. In 'n stadium ontmoet Mieta 'n vrou van Kaapstad wat vertel hoe sy geraak is deur die vernietiging



van Distrik Ses. Die vrou het 'n kind verloor en dra ook 'spoke' rond.

Hierdie roman vertel nie 'n bloot eenvoudige verhaal van 'n gesin se bestaan nie. Die roman beskryf iets van die komplekse emosies wat met verlies gepaard gaan en toon aan hoe belangrik grond vir identiteitsvorming is. Albertyn-du Toit het 'n roman geskryf wat maklik lees, maar eindelijk dieper kwessies aanraak.

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#### There Goes English Teacher: A Memoir.

Karin Cronje.

Cape Town: Modjaji Books, 2018. 293 pp.

ISBN 978-1-928215-61-5.

The story of going to teach English in Korea is near folklore, for South Africans with or without the strong 'r'. Any book on the topic would by now be received with great interest, but Karin Cronje's memoir, *There Goes English Teacher*, does so much more than inscribe urban legend. The confessional narrative takes the reader inside the very workshop of identity, offering glimpses of the self's doing and undoing.

For those who wish to exchange war stories, the book is scattered with nostalgic references: the shoebox apartment that comes with the previous tenant's stuff (and, often, the previous tenant); the shady *hagwon* boss; the first whiff of kimchi; the jolly expat bar; the glories of *ondol*; release letters and visa runs to Japan; ordering *bibimbap* over the phone by reading a script; somehow, unexpectedly, finding yourself at home.

But it would be a mistake to pick up this book hoping to get an account of South Korea. It is not a travelogue or a guide. And the autobiographical narrator (also called Karin), is unreliable by design. Instead, what the author has painstakingly detailed here, is the experience of losing and finding oneself in a radically

foreign environment. The book is broken up into three parts, "Gweng-song" (the rural town where Karin has her first *hagwon* job), "Seon-chang" (the city where she finds work at a university) and "Home?" (the permanent return to South Africa). These geographical divisions roughly correspond with the familiar sequence of culture shock, adapting and reverse culture shock. What the narrator manages to do is to stay present and conscious and reflexive throughout, divulging experiences that are very hard to relate while the experiencer, the self, is going through processes of disintegration and reintegration. (This results in a stream-of-consciousness writing at times.)

In Gweng-song she initially finds herself in a state of "pre-language." Gone are the reference points of identity: house, dog, son, Table Mountain, friends, beggars on the street. She comes to suspect that what is left inside when all that is familiar has been stripped away is really "a kind of nothingness." Although, vestiges of the old self still assert themselves, as she feels disgust and moral disapproval at the otherness of this culture: the dirty windows, communal eating, the upright mop in the bus; the coyness, the hierarchy, materialism ... She is aware of her cultural arrogance, projecting onto a culture she has no position from which to comprehend. But without any grasp, how is she to live as herself?

The signs of a transformation are subtly woven through the first two parts of the book. The title refers to one aspect of the conversion, as Karin starts to see herself from the other side: oversized, inept, sweaty, wearing "practical Clarks," she shuffles along doing all the most basic things completely wrong. She has to laugh at the "farce," the "spectacle," of people in their apartments looking out and seeing this "foreign figure." She begins to objectify her own foreignness: "Who *are* these English teachers? We are an endless sea of indistinguishable whiteness: the tide comes in, the tide goes out. One Western face after another. [...] With us come our problems. A tide of them. No sooner have you got your teacher through her food poisoning than she is looking for a mattress for her son." (emphasis in original).

As she becomes more accustomed to her new life, the positives become more apparent. There is freedom in being without one's past, one's world. She realises that her old reference points "had become meat hooks in carcasses." A lightness emerges: "Here I am just Karin." A new identity takes shape as she discovers kinship with the significant Korean people in her life. No longer just representations of a larger entity to be understood, these characters are presented as persons who have their own active relation to the cultural environ-

ment, ranging from submissive to defiant, themselves subjects of their own interpretations. Two characters stand out. There is Hye-Mi, the twenty-year-old private student, who is learning to negotiate her femininity: "Men not threatened by me, because I am still friendly to them. If I'm very interested in him, he still thinks I am concerned and care for him. Just a different way. Submissive."

And there is Karin's yogi, the formidable Dae-ho, who "embodies the best of Buddhism" and introduces Karin to many cultural treasures (inextricable from traditions that are also oppressive). He teaches her about breathing and accepting, the key to her transformation. "You showed me a life free from words, where feeling need not be spoken or written, because there is being," she tells him in the tea house upon their farewell.

Karin's decision to return to South Africa is driven by the publication of the book that she had been finishing while working in Korea. From the beginning of the memoir, the narrative of a writer's "never-ending saga" with her writing runs parallel to the one of an English teacher in Korea. There is a thematic affinity between writing and identity disintegration; writing is a way to keep the identity alive: "When you write, you take the forgettable and make it into the meaningful. And with that you rescue potential for understanding and order from the quicksand of daily confusion." But writing is also "dangerous." It has a life of its own and threatens to overwhelm the writer.

The final part of the book interweaves the themes of writing and reverse culture shock. The result is slightly disjointed and at worst detracts from the thematic arch established by the first chapters. Yet, a generous reading may still find unity between Karin's grappling with her writing, and the identity struggles present throughout the narrative. Perhaps Karin's initial decision to leave her whole life behind and go to a completely unfamiliar place like Korea runs parallel to her commitment to writing: both are a leap into the subconscious, away from the predictable, the symbolically fixed structures of an ordinary life; both constitute a choice to "shatter the self you are," and hope for a new self to emerge.

Karin Cronje is no literary lightweight (as her Jan Rabie/Rapport prize for *Alles mooi weer* [2008] attests) and *There Goes English Teacher* is a complex work that explores the themes of identity, language and creativity in unexpected ways. While aspects of the writing are challenging, there is more than enough wit and crafty storytelling to still give anyone an enjoyable read.

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### Lagos Noir.

Chris Abani (ed.).  
Abuja: Cassava Republic Press, 2018. 217 pp.  
ISBN 978-1-911115-73-1.

The cover image of *Lagos Noir* (2018) depicts a bustling, dusty street scene in sepia tones. From a slightly elevated vantage point, as if looking through a window, the reader gazes upon countless street vendors whose little umbrellas dot the sidewalk and partially deck a river of pedestrians flowing by underneath. There is a defunct bulldozer stranded in the middle of it. A string of cars and buses crawls along to the right. (Lagos's traffic jams are, by now, world-famous.) One is left to imagine the many clashing sounds and smells. Foregrounded in the middle of the picture stands a solitary man, carrying his things in a plastic shopping bag, besides an empty minibus taxi. He looks forlorn, staring blankly in your direction, beckoning you.

*Lagos Noir* is a collection of thirteen short stories by various authors which takes the reader on an unflinching, at times unsettling, exploration of "this beautiful, chaotic, glorious, resplendent, mess of a city," (15) as editor Chris Abani describes Lagos in his introduction. While firmly rooted in its specific locale, the stories in *Lagos Noir* have a universal and eerily familiar ring to them, even for one, such as myself, who has never been to Nigeria.

As we embark on this 'tour', the reader might expect to stumble upon thirteen corpses along the way, because preceding the table of contents is a map of the Greater Lagos area with little icons of dead bodies strewn across it. The bodies indicate where each of the stories takes place. But not all the crimes committed in these pages amount to murder. 'Crime', as we shall see, comes in many shades of noir.

How are we to understand the titular phrase, "Lagos Noir", anyway? 'Noir fiction' is a term derived from Marcel Duhamel's *série noire* books which Gallimard began publishing in France at the end of the Second World War and is often associated with violent crime. But Philip Simpson (189) explains that noir fiction is not necessarily defined by its portrayal of violence,

rather, noir is stamped by its prevailing mood of pessimism, personal and societal failure, urban paranoia, the individual's disconnection from society, and cynicism:

Noir's universe is bleak, divested of meaning. It addresses social issues, such as class inequities and the motivations behind adultery, in an explicitly uncompromising fashion typically not found in mainstream fiction. Flawed human beings in these stories must somehow make moral decisions with no transcendent foundation of morality on which to base them. The consequences of those decisions are frequently fatal and always tragic to someone.

The four stories comprising Part 1 ("Cops & Robbers") plunge the reader into exactly such a world devoid of any transcendent moral foundation.

There is the story of an honest cop who is cornered by a system of perpetual bribery and of turning blind eyes ("What They Did That Night"). A motorbike driver, trying to scrounge his way out of poverty, tragically runs into the greedy arm of the law ("Heaven's Gate"). A proud, larger-than-life character is compelled to flee the country with fantastical results ("Showlogo"). A neat-freak winds up in a rat-infested apartment with a sadistic landlady ("Just Ignore and Try to Endure"). The latter is perhaps one of my favourites in the collection, precisely because it is such an effective and entirely non-violent psychological thriller.

Part 1 is thus reminiscent of the American hard-boiled detective fiction of the 1930s because it is similarly shot through with the kind of widespread corruption and moral degradation brought about by rapid urbanisation and modernity. In this case, there is also the spectre of colonialism and vast socio-economic disparities that seems to hang over Lagos like smog.

The five stories in Part 2 ("In a Family Way") are loosely tied together by the thread of domestic and familial crime, which includes such sins as spousal and/or parental abuse, adultery, envy and lust.

"Eden" by Uche Okonkwo, for instance, is a tale of two siblings in early adolescence who come across their father's secret stash of pornography. They cannot resist its lurid spell and so lose their childlike innocence irrevocably. But the fact that they are jointly culpable leads to an awkward sense of intimacy between them with subtle hints of incest. It is shocking, and quite unforgettable.

I was particularly impressed by the hard-hitting social commentary in some of the stories. Oppressive patriarchal attitudes are coldly undercut in Adebola Rayo's feminist revenge fantasy ("What Are You Going to Do?"), while Onyinye Ihezukwu's "For Baby, For

Three" might be read as a critique of the traditional belief systems that facilitate the exploitation of the faithful: A desperate mother will do almost anything to save her baby, but she might herself fall victim to fraudsters posing as men of God.

The third and final part of the book ("Arrivals & Departures") does not seem to have an overarching theme, but I would argue that these last four stories are all darkly comical.

A man laughs deliriously upon witnessing a bus robbery and a woman being molested. Why? Because he, too, was once molested and so succumbs to a kind of insane *schadenfreude* ("Choir Boy"). A man is killed for his diamond-encrusted walking stick, ostensibly given to him by a warlord. But who would kill for a walking stick, and are the diamonds even real? We never find out, and we are left to ponder the absurdity of it all ("The Walking Stick"). A naive British teacher falls for one of the internet phishing scams we have all heard of, but things take an unexpected turn in "Uncle Sam". And finally, a pet chimpanzee murders his owner in "Killer Ape" but things are not as they seem. In the end, justice becomes a slippery notion, and we as the readers are left feeling ambivalent. (Incidentally, "Killer Ape" by Chris Abani contains two overt intertextual references to canonical crime fiction texts i.e. Sherlock Holmes, and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders on the Rue Morgue".)

I would be remiss if I did not mention a couple of the interesting narrative strategies employed in *Lagos Noir*. In "Joy" by Wale Lawal, for instance, the story is told from the unusual second-person perspective, thus placing "you" in the uncanny position of the narrator/victim: It is "your" life that is being coveted, "your" husband that is being seduced, and "your" child that is being snatched. Pemi Aguda's "Choir Boy", on the other hand, is written in the form of a dramatic monologue and the reader becomes a fellow passenger on the bus with the narrator.

A review such as this might create the impression that *Lagos Noir* is a terribly depressing read, since it shows us a world that is bleak and divested of meaning, one that is populated by fallible, flawed characters. On the contrary. The stories in this collection are both thrilling and deeply human, at times surprising and bizarre, and utterly haunting; not to mention well-written and flawlessly edited. It is noir at its best.



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## I Turned Away and She Was Gone: A Play.

Jennie Reznik.

Cape Town: Modjaji Books, 2019. 62 pp.

ISBN 978-1-928215-70-7.

Theatre performer, director and playwright Jennie Reznik is a renowned and acclaimed presence on the South African theatre scene. In her MA dissertation published in 2012, Reznik (3) writes that her study explores her "obsession with teaching the physical theatre body over the past twenty-five years"; it follows that her plays and performances emphasise the centrality of the body in theatre. Having trained at the Diploma École Jacques Lecoq in Paris, Reznik's published articles and book chapters offer provocative discussions of the value of Jacques Lecoq's work for South African physical theatre pedagogies and for creative work, particularly in how Lecoq infused her own creative projects at Magnet Theatre in Cape Town. Reznik is a founding member of Magnet Theatre, which "has been associated with innovative attempts to give physical expression to often unspoken or unrecorded memories and experiences" (Flockemann 134).

Reznik's play *I Turned Away and She Was Gone*—published in 2019 but first performed in 2016—deals with the body, memory and womanhood as these forces shape the lives of three South African women drawn from pre-existing archetypes. These women represent not only a particular social role (mother, caretaker, nurturer) but offer narrative echoes of Greek mythology: Demeter, Kore (later Persephone) and Hecate. Or, as the play's publisher's summary describes it: the women in the play as incarnations of women that haunt each other in various ways. These women co-exist across temporalities while inhabiting trajectories that honour each women's individuation process. The play text contains 16 episodes—or segments—of varying length that provide the thematic thread of the dual

process of loss and becoming who one is supposed to be (hence the play text's references to the notion of individuation): "[f]or Persephone to become a woman," Reznik explained in an interview on *Morning Live* (SABC), "she has to leave the mother ... to become the person that she is". The opening segment of the play is titled "Demeter's Dream", while the last segment carries the weighty and beautiful title of "The terrible, terrible noise".

Reading a play is of course quite different from watching a live performance of the same play (especially when the production makes use of video projections), but Reznik's text is intellectually stimulating, evocative and emotionally involving. Numerous black-and-white photographs provide the reader with a clear idea of the set and the stage space, as well as of how Reznik—playing all the characters, including the Actress performing the characters in the play—would occupy and perform in this space. The text is also instructive and decisive in describing the actions and movements that happen across the stage, and how the performer would engage with the available props and décor.

Reading the play already provides a sense of the intimacy the performed play would provide, and that it requires; an intimacy that makes it possible for a performer to communicate themes such as ageing and the pervasive threat of abusive men to an audience in a safe space. Discussing her play on *Morning Live*, Reznik talks about how "audiences feel very engaged and very involved" in the play in part as a result of its use of space, and she discusses the myth of Persephone and Demeter as "[holding] many of the ideas we wanted to speak about". Reznik extracts from the myth the interrelatedness of women's lives beyond the social descriptors of daughter, mother, grandmother: Hecate was the one to witness Kore's abduction, an event that is adapted for the play in a textual precursor to the #metoo movement. Here, Reznik highlights how women are caring for young children as well as for older women (Kore is abducted during the period that her mother Demeter is caring for Hecate). Reznik manages to give each woman her due as a character, yet it is Demeter who remains the most central character as she binds the past and the future together: while Kore pursues a burgeoning sense of self that culminates in the construct of Persephone and Hecate bemoans how she has been reframed in her advanced age ("I was glorious once / Until you reconfigured me as an this old hag"), it is Demeter who wears the Janus-face towards what was and what will be, caught between two women that she knows well, and not that well at all. In the end, this visually rich

and poetic play presents the reader not with an apotheosis but something altogether more rewarding and though-provoking: a thematically layered tale about women (and the bodies that make them) and the necessity of surrendering into a seeming paradox of vulnerability and strength.

*I Turned Away and She Was Gone* was nominated for four Fleur du Cap Awards, including Best New South African Script, and was nominated for a Naledi Award for Best Cutting Edge Production.

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#### Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun.

Sarah Ladipo Manyika.

Abuja: Cassava Republic, 2016. 126 pp.

ISBN 978-1911115045.

Sarah Ladipo Manyika is a British-Nigerian writer. Her second novel, *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun*, is a stunning exploration of memory and recollection. We meet the protagonist, Morayo, who is a retired English professor living in San Francisco with the yearning for smells, experiences and sights long past.

As a womxn who was born and raised in Nigeria and later married to a man 19 years her senior, she grapples with life as an older womxn. She actively lives as a soldier of a small revolution that will not let old age determine the trajectory of her life. This revolt occurs through maintaining a youthful body, a battle to not shrink herself but to rather walk tall, adorned in colourful cloths that still carry the lingering smell of a Nigerian market place. She flirts openly and is well

acquainted with the way in which her body can meet pleasure. There are some things in her life which are characteristic of old age such as the staggering accumulation of bills, the thousands of dollars donated to a non-existent charity and the mystery of money stashed everywhere in the house, to the horror of a young friend and the delight of mice incisors.

Morayo seems to have a grasp on the past, through contemplating how her current situation would unfold if she was twenty years younger. It is a living memory, the voracious manner into which she delves into the past and wills it into the present. At a glance, this is another story about an old womxn holding on to dust and torn pages, however Morayo is a womxn who feels and experiences. Sex and sexuality are themes which are pervasive in the book, which is extraordinary in a world that bundles the bones of old folk into closets of asexuality, their desires and orgasms topics of taboo that are locked away. Morayo, however, speaks of sexual intimacy in a less than ordinary way which subtly robs the reader of the ability to be cognisant of the age of the character. However, the ever-present anxieties remind us of her age and the plight of a 75-year-old womxn whose independence is threatened by a letter from the DMV demanding to know her fitness as a driver. Again, her anxieties manifest when she suffers an injury characteristic of people her age that forces her to spend time in a rehabilitation clinic with people her age and older. However, Morayo fights to keep her youthful demeanour by defying expectations and sulking over the oversized hospital clothes that are devoid of the colour and intrigue she is constantly building around herself.

The beauty of San Francisco does not fall on blind eyes as Morayo recognizes the way in which she is greeted by kindness, the boys who have green nail polish and are often the first to compliment Morayo on her colourful outfits and regal nature. It is through the eyes of different characters that the reader is also afforded the luxury of seeing the protagonist. She regards herself as a worldly person, once married to an Ambassador and having lived in many places. The voices of these various characters reflect the diversity that she speaks of. Her lost books end up in the hands of a homeless white womxn, her favourite exchanges happen with the Chinese mailman and more than a lingering glance is shared with a Caribbean man.

This novel is riddled with charming sentimentality and has a way of reminding the reader of life not being over until it really is.

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### Die dao van Daan van der Walt.

Lodewyk G. du Plessis.  
Kaapstad: Tafelberg, 2018. 368 pp.  
ISBN 9780624082521.

Daan van der Walt is op redelik gevorderde ouderdom in 'n komplekse ambivalente stryd met homself gewikkel, 'n stryd wat veral gekenmerk word deur die voortdurende spanning tussen balans en wanbalans in sy lewe. Wanneer hy 'n vertigo-aanval kry tydens 'n besoek aan sy seun, Jan-Willem, wat in China woon, laai laasgenoemde hom af by Die Tempel van Ewige Vrede waar meester Yang hom tai chi leer in 'n poging om sy balans te herstel. Dit is tydens sy verblyf by die monnike dat Daan begin om sin te probeer maak van sy lewe deur twee dagboeke (of "historias") te skryf wat ook die struktuur van die roman vestig.

Die eerste historia, gerig aan Daan se gestorwe hond, Kaspaas, bestaan uit 22 hoofstukke wat elk gevolg word deur 'n brief aan sy oorlede vrou, Magrieta. Die tweede historia bestaan uit agt dele wat elk vernoem is na een van die agt bewegings in die *Bā Duàn Jīn* oftewel die *Agt stukke brokaat*—'n tai chi-beweging wat na bewering die ewige lewe kan gee wanneer dit elke dag beoefen word. Daan se bewussynstroom, soos dit in die onderskeie hoofstukke en briewe manifesteer, sleur die leser mee op 'n ontdekkingsreis wat insig in sy binnewêreld verskaf. Sy outobiografiese geskiedskrywing bied aan hom (sowel as die leser) welkome ontsnapping van 'n hede waarin hy ontuis voel: "Ons ou mense ontkom die hede wanneer ons terugtree in die verlede" (10).

Hierdie (en vele ander) verwysings na homself as 'n "ou mens" dui op 'n diepe bewustheid van sy veroudering en die gepaardgaande uitdagings (en bevrydings) wat dié proses inhou. Veroudering bring onvermydelik marginalisering mee en wanneer Daan se vloeiende seksualiteit later in die roman onthul word, vind 'n soort dubbele marginalisering plaas—

nie noodwendig deur die samelewing en mense wat hom liefhet nie, maar deur homself. Sy worsteling met seksualiteit vind neerslag in verskeie uiteenlopende vorme soos die studente-ervaring met sy kamermaat en 'n teologiestudent op universiteit; sy huwelik met Magrieta; die teleurstellende, dog insiggewende, ontmoetings met Boerseun; 'n Viagra-insident tydens 'n besoek aan 'n ou vriendin; en die intergenerasionele verbintenis met 'n jong *gong fu*-instrukteur in China. Daan se oorbewustheid van sy ouerwordende liggaam lei tot pogings om sy verlore jeug en tyd te herwin deur ontmoetings met veral jonger mans wat herinner aan die gebruik van die Antieke Grieke waar "die volwasse *erastes* sy jong *eromenos* onderrig, nie net in die krygskuns en hoe om soos 'n held op die slagveld te sterf nie, maar ook in die kuns van die liefde tussen 'n jonger en 'n ouer man" (220).

Die verouderingsproses kan beskou word as die brug tussen lewe en dood wat die twee spilpunte is waarom die roman wentel: "Die mens is op reis, die dood net 'n verposing, 'n tussenwerpsel in die tog na die ewigheid. 'n Man moet rigting hê, en 'n bestemming, anders verloor hy die weg" (8). Hierdie "weg" is die "Dao" waarop meester Yang hom geduldig begelei, want in der waarheid is Daan 'n ontheemde Afrikanerman wat probeer om sy konflikterende denke en emosies met mekaar te versoen. Die leser moet egter deurentyd in gedagte hou dat Daan in beheer van die narratief is en dat hy sy herinneringe en ervarings soos 'n kurator noukeurig selekteer en op subjektiewe wyse aanbied want "n [m]ens skryf in 'n bekentenis net soveel as waarmee jy dink jy kan wegkom" (281).

Daan se historias dien egter volgens hom 'n selfs groter doel as persoonlike narratiewe terapie, naamlik om die geskiedenis van sy mense te vertel "anders sterf ons geskiedenis saam met ons en word dit dalk misgekyk of verdraai of eensydig in ander se litteken-literatuur neergeskryf" (233). Die intellektuele manier waarop Du Plessis Afrikanermities ontmitologiseer en beide die klassieke en meer eietydse plaasroman herskryf, is boeiend en verfrissend. Veral sy geloofstryd staan sentraal in argumente wat hy met homself voer en hy erken ook: "Ek is nie gereformeerd nie, ek is getransformeerd [...]" (157). Die fyn ossilasie tussen religie en mite maak 'n belangrike deel uit van die roman en deurentyd word parallelle getrek tussen Christelike en Oosterse geloofstelsels. Vanuit Jungiaanse perspektief kan die roman beskou word as 'n uitbeelding van die individuasiestelsel waar die jin en die jang in ewewig met mekaar gebring word.

Die roman is voorts 'n inventaris van intertekstuele verwysings wat 'n breë spektrum onderwerpe

in verskeie dissiplines dek, insluitende religie, politiek, letterkunde, beeldende kunste, musiek, filosofie, psigologie en sosiologie. Die aantal intertekstuele verwysings kan enersyds die leeservaring vir die ernstige leser verryk, maar andersyds oorweldigend en te uitgesponne wees vir die gewone leser. Desnieteenstaande word die roman 'n herinneringsdokument waarin heelwat kulturele artefakte (onder andere Latyn) aan die vergetelheid ontruk en in 'n nuwe vorm in die kollektiewe onderbewuste bewaar word in keurige, poëtiese en soms argatiese Afrikaans. In die nabetraging verduidelik die skrywer waar die stories en ander inligting vandaan kom en gee hy erkenning aan die hulp wat hy vanuit verskeie oorde ontvang het.

Lodewyk G. du Plessis (pseudoniem) se debuutroman is met beide die UJ- en Eugène Marais-debuutpryse bekroon wat gelei het tot oudregter Andries Buys se onthulling dat hy die skrywer is. *Die dao van Daan van der Walt*, wat ook die W. A. Hofmeyr-prys verower het, beeld die vele fasette van die menslike ervaring en toestand op meevoerende wyse uit. Daan se aangrypende storie vul 'n gaping in die Afrikaanse letterkunde wat betref die uitbeelding van veroudering soos beleef deur hedendaagse nieheteronormatiewe Afrikanermans.

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### **Gam se tjind.**

Aubrey Cloete.  
Westville: Reach Publishers, 2019. 66 pp.  
ISBN 978-0-620-82897-0.

Aubrey Cloete is 'n boorling van die Kaapse Vlakte, maar het sy matriek in Upington by Saul Damon Senior Sekondêre Skool voltooi. Na skool het hy onderwys aan die destydse Bellville Onderwyskollege studeer en het hy sy verdere studies aan die Universiteit Wes-Kaapland afgesluit. Benewens sy passie vir die onderwys, droom Cloete sedert sy tienerjare om homself ook as 'n skrywer te vestig. Sy droom realiseer in Maart 2019 wanneer hy debuteer met sy novelle *Gam se tjind*.

In sy debuut takel Cloete die kwessie van seksuele mishandeling, die langtermyn gevolge daarvan en die verwerking van hierdie traumatiese gebeurtenis.

Terence Jacobs, die hoofkarakter, is in sy veertigs en het 'n byna volmaakte lewe. Hy is passievol oor sy werk as 'n onderwyser en is gelukkig getroud. Onder die oppervlak van sy volmaakte lewe krap daar egter herinneringe wat hy vir jare onderdruk het. Hy wroeg met die wete dat hy sedert vyfjarige ouderdom deur 'n familielid seksueel gemolesteer is. Met die verloop van die boek word Terence se verhaal vertel. Terugflitse van sy kinderjare word afgewissel met 'n uitbeelding van die hede, waar hy as volwassene die trauma van sy verlede probeer verwerk en later besluit om sy molesteerder te laat boet.

Hoewel *Gam se tjind* die potensiaal het om 'n nodige gesprek te begin, is daar 'n oorweldigende aantal probleme met die boek, wat wissel vanaf verwarrende vertelling, sinnelose terugflitse, 'n onduidelike storielyn en swak karakterontwikkeling. Ek gaan hier slegs op die onduidelike storielyn en swak karakterontwikkeling fokus.

Volgens die agterblad van die boek word die leser op 'n lewensreis geneem, waar ons Terence se verwerking van sy trauma saam met hom beleef. Ongelukkig ervaar die leser nooit Terence se beloofde “paradigma-verskuiwing” nie want sy reis tot bevryding word deur enkele verwysings na geestestoestande, 'n oorvloed van sekstonele en 'n bisarre klimaks geskets.

Vroeg in die verhaal sien die leser hoe Terence se verlede steeds by hom spook, wat moontlik 'n posttraumatische stresversteuring (PTSV) suggereer. Hy noem ook netso terloops dat hy obsessief-kompulsiewe steuring (OKS) het (12). Hoewel navorsing toon dat daar 'n moontlike skakel is tussen seksuele molestering en die ontwikkeling van PTSV en OKS, word dit nooit in die boek verklaar nie. Hierdie geestestoestande word bloot as versiering vir Terence se karakter gebruik—daar word nooit verduidelik hoe dit sy lewe en verhoudings affekteer nie.

Hoewel 'n vrees vir, of vermyding van, intimiteit ook soms na seksuele molestering manifesteer, is dit glad nie die geval in Terence se huwelik nie. Intendeel, Terence en Madeleine het 'n baie gesonde sekslewe. Die uitbeelding van hul aktiewe sekslewe word egter goedkoop gemaak deur die oorbodige amper hygromanagtige beskrywings wat die leser wil laat ineenkrimp, byvoorbeeld: “ ... haar warm, sagte lippe en liggaam protesteer effens toe sy die bloed in sy Chinos voel wakker word. Hy trek haar egter stywer vas en laat haar die kroon van sy manlikheid vir 'n goeie wyle voel ... ” (25).

Die ontknopping van die storielyn veroorsaak een van die grootste probleme met die boek. Die neem van wraak teen 'n molesteerder is nie 'n buitensporige sto-



rielyn nie, maar die wyse waarop Cloete dit hier hanteer beklemtoon nóg 'n probleem met die boek: swak karakterontwikkeling.

Die verhaal fokus uitsluitlik op Terence, met ander randkarakters soos Madeleine wat bloot as 'n seksobjek funksioneer, en Terence se vriend Denver wat uit die bloute verskyn en 'n beduidende rol in die ontknopping van die verhaal speel. Terence word deurlopend uitgebeeld as iemand wat deur die trauma van sy verlede verteer word. Hy neem geen pro-aktiewe stappe om sy verlede te verwerk nie. Dit verander skielik na hy op Denver afkom wat 'n slapende Jabu seksueel molesteer. As leser verwag jy 'n heftige reaksie aangesien Terence self seksueel gemolesteer is, maar die teenoorgestelde vind plaas en hy troos Denver, wat dan sy seksuele oriëntasie onthul. Dit wil voorkom asof hierdie insident Terence se genesing simboliseer. Alhoewel historiese trauma verwerk kan word deur 'n soortgelyke gebeurtenis waar te neem, is dit in swak smaak om Jabu se seksuele molestering as 'n genesingsmeganisme vir Terence te gebruik.

Dit is egter die wraak-plan wat uit 'n lokval met “gemanipuleerde, gesiglose kaalfoto's van tienerseuns ... ” (64) bestaan, wat die leser laat terugsit en kop skud. Terence is seksueel gemolesteer en wil nie kinders hê nie, want hy dink nie die wêreld is veilig vir kinders nie (28). Dit is sinneloos dat hy kinders op dié wyse sou gebruik. Dit is ook onduidelik hoe Terence, met sy skynbare beheersende karakter, Denver sou toelaat om beheer te neem van die wraakplan. Verder word die sentrale tema van die boek ondermyn deur kaalfoto's van minderjarige seuns as wraakplan te gebruik aangesien onskuldige kinders hier as weggooi-seksobjekte in 'n wraak-spel gebruik word. En tussendeur al die bogenoemde vreemde optrede is dit steeds nie duidelik of Terence uiteindelik vryheid bereik het nie.

Aubrey Cloete roer hier 'n tydige gesprek aan, maar ongelukkig word die verhaal nie op 'n oortuigende wyse vertel nie. Ondanks die nuttigheid van sy proutuit-skrystyl om nie doekies om te draai nie, is dit by tye kras en verloor die verhaal die nodige deernis. Met die hulp van 'n redakteur kon *Gam se tjind* 'n waardevolle toevoeging tot die huidige diskoers gewees het.

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## Ek kom terug.

Adriaan van Dis. Vertaal deur Daniël Hugo.  
Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis, 2018. 256 pp.  
ISBN 978-1-4853-0767-9.

*Ek kom terug* is uit die Nederlands vertaal (*Ik kom terug* [2014]). Soos in Adriaan van Dis se ander Indiese romans is daar weer 'n rekonstruksie aan die orde: die boek is 'n familiegeskiedenis, naamlik die verhaal van 'n seun (die ek-verteller) wat sy ma se storie wil neerskryf. Die ma het in Nederlands-Indië oor die kleurgrens getrou. Die seun sê daaroor: “Haar lewe in die trope het my ook gelitteken. Ek is daar verwek. Die [Indonesiese onafhanklikheids]oorlog het jare lank saam met ons aan tafel geëet” (183).

*Ek kom terug* het nie 'n romantiese *tempo doeloe*-sfeer nie. Stories loskry, die soektog na 'n verlede en 'n identiteit, lyk soos rondskuiwery op 'n skaakbord. In die opening van die boek tref die ma haar seun gebukkend voor haar Nederlands-Indiese kis met 'geheime' aan, waar hy aan die geroeste slot karring. “Dit is my kis!”, skreeu sy, “Ek onterf jou!” Tog wil sy terselfder tyd “haarself verlos van 'n storie wat op haar gemoed lê” (164). 'n Sielkundige stel dit aan die seun: “Sy steek die sleutel weg, maar wil hê jy moet dit vind” (135). So begin die gestoot, getrek en gestoei.

Een van die boek se motto's is: “You must sacrifice your family on the altar of fiction” (David Vann). Dit is interessant dat Van Dis in 'n onderhoud met die Nederlandse koerant *NRC* stel dat die boek (outo) biografies is (Jaeger). Van Dis is in 1946 gebore van ouers wat mekaar in Nederlands-Indië leer ken het. Hy debuteer met die novelle *Nathan Sid* (1983), wat gaan oor sy Indiese jeug. Die onafhanklikheidsoorlog (1945-1949) het 'n groot invloed op die gesin. Van Dis se pa, wat getraumatiseer is in die oorlog, slaan hom. Sy ma maak of sy dit nie sien nie. *Ek kom terug* is die eerste boek in Van Dis se oeuvre wat, meer as *Indische duinen* (1994) en *familieziek* (2002), die ma in die middelpunt stel.

Sentraal staan die moeisame heling van die verskeurde band tussen die ma en die seun deur die rekonstruksie van 'n verlede, van 'n trauma wat nie verwerk is nie. Sy sê: “Die dinge uit die verlede, ja, die verlede maak seer.” (133) “Verlang jy [na Nederlands-Indië] terug?’ vra ek. ‘Nee’, antwoord sy fel. ‘Ek is nie 'n koloniale swymelaar nie’” (164-5). Oor haar dogters uit 'n vroeër huwelik met 'n inheemse man merk sy op: “Die meisies verloor [na die Indonesiese onafhanklikheid] hulle land. Waar hoort hulle nog tuis? Donker, maar ook Westers—onsuiwer in die oë van die fanatici” (208). Die ma was trots, maar voel nou skuldig.

Teen hierdie agtergrond is dit interessant dat die seun hom daarvoor bekommer dat sy weergawe van sy ma se storie nie noodwendig háár waarheid is nie. “Wees eerlik”, staan daar ses keer in hoofstuk 5, en die ma kla:

“My herinneringe sweef in alle rigtings ... voor jy dit weet, vertel jy dieselfde storie op drie verskillende maniere”.

“En mag ek dan struktuur daaraan gee?”

“Nee, jy moet dit net so neerskryf soos wat ’n mens ’n storie vertel—soms vooruit, soms agteruit—dan eers is dit reg” (215).

Dié historiese werklikheid bestaan nie, en die seun weet sy ma vertel net wat sy wil vertel.

*Ek kom terug* is ’n eksplisiet poëtikale, historiese roman wat veral duidelik maak dat Nederlands-Indië verby is, maar dat herinneringe steeds hernu word, en dat nuwe herinneringe voortdurend gemaak word. Die omstrede voormalige kolonie is ’n belangrike *lieu de mémoire* in die Nederlandse nasionale, kulturele bewussyn. Baie Nederlanders, onder wie gewilde skrywers soos Hella Haasse en E. du Perron, beskou Nederlands-Indië as hulle land van herkoms, of het daarby betrokke geraak deur familieledede. Van oudsher het Nederlanders deur tekste in kontak getree met die oorsese dele van die koninkryk. In hierdie konteks is Van Dis se boek baie betekenisvol.

Ook die aktualiteit van *Ek kom terug* in ’n Suid-Afrikaanse konteks het my getref. In die NRC skryf Van Dis oor sy band met Suid-Afrika: “Ik vond in die apartheid, in de taal van Breytenbach, iets terug van dat Nederlands-Indische van mijn familie, die enorme kleurgevoeligheid”. Die ma vertel: “Kleur. Ons het gemaak asof dié woord nie bestaan nie” (165). Oor haar eerste inheemse eggenoot sê sy: “Vir my was my donker Just Nederlands-Indië, en ek vir hom Holland. So eenvoudig was dit en terselfdertyd so ingewikkeld. Ek kon nie voorsien dat hy in sy eie land iemand anders sou word nie, en ek ook” (206). Dit is ook die tragiek wat die seun ervaar: wanneer die ma sterf en hy haar kis se sleutel in die hande kry, is die storie klaar, maar daar is nie noodwendig klaring gevind nie: “Ek veg my eie oorlog. Lankal reeds: ’n Kwartier in die oggend, ’n kwartier in die middag en snags om drieuur ’n kwartier

lank. Wanneer miljoene mense wakker lê. Alleen” (226).

Die belang van ’n geofende vertaler vir so ’n ryk storie blyk regdeur die boek. Daniël Hugo vertaal gewoonlik sin na sin, sonder om die boek eers te lees. Dit het ’n baie noukeurige vertaling opgelewer wat die boek se styl weerspieël. Daar is pragtige beeldspraak: “Tuinmaak is om stories oor te vertel, aarselend, maar hulle kom onvermydelik los terwyl jy in die grond woel” (150). Die weergawe van die Nederlandse onvoltooide verlede tyd as die historiese presens in Afrikaans pas baie goed by die drang wat die seun voel om die stories van sy honderdjarige ma te bemagtig: “als ik nog meer van haar wou weten, moest ik opschieten” (52) het geword, “as ek meer van haar wil weet, sal ek moet vinnig speel” (46). Waar tipiese terme die begrip in Afrikaans kon belemmer, is daar ’n toeligting: “*pasar*, die mark”, “*nondeju* (in godsnaam)”, “Kaffee mit Kuchen (koffie met koek)”. So is die verhaal se leesbaarheid gewaarborg.

*Ek kom terug* is ’n uiters menslike reis en kroniek. Dit is ’n veelseggende toevoeging tot Van Dis se oeuvre en tot die literêre tekste oor Nederlands-Indië. Die vertaling is nog ’n veertjie in Afrikaans se veelkantige hoed.

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