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Nuruddin Farah as a Contemporary Novelist

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Abstract: *Nuruddin Farah, a Somali novelist and playwright, is widely regarded as one of the most prominent African contemporary writers whose works explored the themes related to the problems of contemporary society as the themes of identity and displacement and political oppression and corruption are the problems of global world or specially related to those nations who are previously colonised by European powers. These European powers erased or distorted the identities of such colonies by imposing cultural, religious, economic and political discourses upon them. Somalia was the victim of these powers and Farah's works, as a Somali writer, struggled to create the identity of his nation by exploring the themes of postcolonial political tension, individual as well as communal identity and gender dynamics. In his essay "Why I Write" he stated, "I write to put down on paper, for posterity's sake, the true history of the nation....I write because a theme has chosen me: the theme of Africa's upheaval and societal disorganisation. And I write in order to recover my missing half" (N. F., p. 01).*

I. INTRODUCTION

Somalia was the colony of European powers, including Britain, France, and Italy and its territory was divided into Southern Somaliland and Northern Somaliland. On July 1, 1960, these two regions united to form the Somali Republic, a historic milestone that ended colonial rule. But after the independence, the new government faced political instability and struggled with corruption and nepotism.

In 1969, Major General Mohamed Siad Barre seized power through a military coup, overthrowing the civilian government. Barre ruled as a ruthless dictator from 1969 to 1991. During his regime, he initiated a war against Ethiopia in July 1977, which ended in defeat in March 1978. This loss triggered revolts within the military, eventually leading to a civil war and clan-based conflicts. The collapse of Barre's regime created a power vacuum and a lack of central governance, resulting in a severe humanitarian crisis in Somalia. The fall of both Republic and Barre government and unsuccessful intervention of European power led the nation to prolonged civil war. These events led to widespread atrocities and violence against women, children and minorities affecting them physically as well as mentally causing severe psychological trauma and depression.

Nuruddin Farah is a celebrated Somali novelist, playwright, and essayist, widely recognized as one of Africa's most important contemporary literary voices. Born on November 24, 1945, in Baidoa, Somalia, grew up in culturally rich

environment. Fluent in multiple languages, including Somali, English, Italian, and Amharic, his works often explore themes of identity, exile, gender, politics, and the struggle of postcolonial Somalia.

Farah gained international acclaim with his debut novel, *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), which highlighted the plight of women in Somali society. His *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship* trilogy (*Sweet and Sour Milk*, *Sardines*, *Close Sesame*) and later works, including the *Blood in the Sun* trilogy (*Maps*, *Gifts*, *Secrets*), delve deeply into the socio-political turmoil and the human cost of dictatorship, civil war, and displacement. His *Past Imperfect Trilogy* (*Links*, *Knots*, *Crossbones*) deals with the diaspora and their struggle to restructure or to rediscover individual as well as national identity.

Exiled from Somalia in 1974 after voicing dissent against the Siad Barre regime, Farah has lived and worked in several countries, using his literary platform to advocate for justice, human rights, and the empowerment of women. A recipient of numerous awards, including the Neustadt International Prize for Literature, Farah's work bridges the local and global, offering profound insights into the complexities of Somali life and the broader challenges of contemporary African societies.

II. IDENTITY AND DISPLACEMENT

The theme of identity and displacement is one of the recurring themes of contemporary writing in the world literature and Nuruddin Farah is not exceptional for this. His most of the novels explored the theme of national as well as individual identity and his masterpiece *Maps* is popular in the world that examines questions of identity, particularly in the context of migration and exile through the protagonist Asker who persistently, throughout the novel, asked the question *who am I?* and *why am I?* His journey is fundamentally about self-definition, self-discovery or self-invention so he frequently asked the question to his adopted mother Misra, his uncle Hilaal and Quraax. He is orphaned boy in the novel raised by Misra, an Ethiopian woman who gives him name, language, religion and society so his identity is shaped by her or these competing forces which influenced him in his childhood. His Somali heritage and Misra's outsider status create a tension within him that mirrors the broader struggles of national and personal identity in a postcolonial context. Farah portrayed his identity as fluid, a constructed one that evolves in response to his relationships with others and the sociopolitical dynamics around him. His sense of self is neither innate nor fixed but it is shaped by his interactions with others and his engagement with his surroundings. Misra, the Ethiopian woman who raises Askar, plays a pivotal role in shaping his identity. Askar oscillates between viewing Misra as a surrogate mother and as an "enemy" due to her Ethiopian heritage in the context of Somali-Ethiopian tensions. His love for Misra reflects his intimate dependency on her, while his growing disdain highlights his internalization of nationalist ideologies. He states, "*If I could only confirm her guilt, then I would be rid of this burden called love and this ailment called hate.*" This line reflects Askar's struggle to reconcile his affection for Misra with the nationalist sentiment that demands, he view her as an outsider. His identity is fluid here, shifting between personal loyalty and societal expectations.

Askar's life is marked by displacement from the beginning. His parents' deaths, his upbringing by Misra, and the eventual estrangement from her reflect his constant dislocation. This physical displacement is paralleled by an emotional and psychological sense of alienation. Misra, an Ethiopian living in Somalia, embodies displacement. Her status as an outsider in both cultures parallels Askar's struggles, creating a complex dynamic between them. Misra's plight forces Askar to confront his biases and the limitations of his understanding of belonging.

III. POLITICAL OPPRESSION AND CORRUPTION

The political oppression and corruption is one of the recurring themes of contemporary writers and Nuruddin Farah explored it in his first trilogy that entitled *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship* which includes three novels such as *Sweet and Sour Milk*, *Sardines*, and *Close Sesame*. In these novel Farah critiques authoritarian regimes, social injustices, and political corruption in Somalia and highlights the impact of tyranny on individuals and communities. The protagonists of these

novels were revolutionary. They secretly revolt against the dictator who is ruthless and tyrant to the common masses. The protagonist of first novel is Soyaan, a dentist who wants to know the reason of his twin brother's death who is economic advisor to the dictator and was aware about governments falls and corrupted agenda so he secretly wrote a memorandum against government for the member of his clandestine group. He is tortured and killed by the authority and his death is rendered as declared as martyr in the novel. All the members of his group are oppressed and brutally killed by the authority in this novel.

The same clandestine movement was continued in the second novel titled *Sardine* in which female protagonist Medina is the centre of this movement who is strong and active in the movement and by profession she is the editor of national newspaper but when she wrote against the dictator she is dismissed and harassed by the ruthless government. She continues her opposition through her intellectual work by translating world literature into local language and distributing it in her group. She become the mentor of her daughter Ubox to whom she taught at home instead sending in the government school and singing the same sycophant falls name of dictator in the prayer. To tortured her dictator used the clan elders and clan leader as her mother-in-law always threaten her and her modern lifestyle and threaten to performed the operation of infibulation on her eight years daughter.

Close Sesame (1983), the third novel of his *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship* trilogy explored the themes of political oppression and corruption vividly. The novel portrays the impact of authoritarian rule on both the individual and society, using the protagonist Deeriye's perspective to examine the moral decay and systemic injustice under a repressive regime. Deeriye, the protagonist of Nuruddin Farah's *Close Sesame*, is an elderly former freedom fighter who embodies resistance, morality, and the enduring struggle against oppression. Having spent over 20 years in prison for opposing colonial rule, he remains steadfast in his principles despite living under an equally corrupt post-independence regime. Deeriye is deeply spiritual, drawing strength from his faith, which shapes his moral clarity and fuels his critique of societal corruption and betrayal by political leaders.

As a man grappling with aging and his legacy, Deeriye's physical frailty contrasts with his unwavering resolve to stand against tyranny. His reflections on Somalia's cyclical oppression highlight his disillusionment with the betrayal of independence and the moral decay of his society. Through his character, Farah explores themes of integrity, resistance, and hope, making Deeriye a powerful symbol of resilience in the face of systemic injustice.

IV. FEMINISM AND GENDER DYNAMICS

Nuruddin Farah portrayed the female charters as protagonist in his most of the novels who challenged traditional gender role by revolting against patriarchal structure. Farah's works often challenge traditional gender roles and advocate for women's empowerment. His first novel *From Crooked Rib* created his identity as a feminist writer in which the protagonist Ebla revolt against the social norms of bartered marriage system by running away from her caravan to Belet Wane and from Belet Wane to Mogadiscio but she was cheated by Awill her third and chosen husband but her desire for being wife is distorted when he enjoyed his life with white women in Italia. To challenged him she married secretly with Tiffo and told him to assert her equality as "You have another wife and I have another husband" (p. 145). She finds life in marriage and so assert as "I love life and I love to be a wife. I don't care whose" (p. 125). To assert her freedom she said, "One thing they could not pay for is my indispensability. I am a woman. And I am indispensable to man [...] life meant freedom, freedom of every sort. One should do whatever one wants to that is life. That is what I love. (p. 106, 126)"

The second novel that focuses on gender dynamic is *Sardines*, the second volume of his Variation Trilogy in which Farah challenged political oppression through his female characters. The protagonist, Medina is powerful who challenged dictator and his falls strategies of controlling society by spreading clan conflicts and giving more privilege to clan leaders and elders. Elders and clan leaders are presented as dictator on whom the authority is bestowed but Medina challenged her grandfather's

exploitation by revolting against him taking education and accepting foreign lifestyle in Islamic culture. She challenged her mother-in-law who is the carrier of dictatorial authority, by controlling her husband Samtar and protecting her daughter Ubaq from the oppression of infibulation that Idil wants to performed as a dictatorial authority. Medina also worked as a mentor to Sagal and other members of clandestine group. She translated many classical books and provide them as an intellectual material against dictator's oppression.

The third novel that focus on gender dynamic is *Gifts*, the second volume of Blood in the Sun trilogy in which middle aged nurse Duniya is the protagonist who challenged patriarchal control through her marriage with Bossaso, though her earlier two marriages embodied her acceptance of patriarchal control. In her second marriage with Taariq, a journalist and tenant come husband, she divorced him on the ground of his heavy drunkard nature and sexual more demanding man. Her first marriage was the arranged marriage by her father with Zubair an old man who died bearing twins to her and from Taariq a daughter Yarey. Being a single parent, she brought these three children humbly and equally in this war ridden city. The novel explored the theme of gift giving and gift receiving in which reciprocal relationship is accepted by the author. The marriage between Bossaso and Duniya symbolically represent the reciprocal relationship of gift giving and receiving in the novel as both of them equally treated each other by giving respect and accepting individual autonomy of each other. The dependant condition of Duniya is compared to dependant condition of dictatorial government who totally depends on foreign aid and foreign donation but to glorify the image of nation Farah symbolically used female character like Cambara who reject unwanted and non-generous gift.

The next novel that captured the theme of gender dynamic is *Knots* in which female protagonist Cambara's journey from Canada to her homeland Mogadiscio is explored as her quest of self-identity, self-discovery or self-invention. She returned to Somalia to reclaim her family property usurped by war lord in civil war chaos. Her journey is symbolically represented as her quest to reconstruct or rebuild the image of nation exposed by foreign media as fail state. She explored her quest of peace building and peace keeping activities with the help of Kiin, Raxma and Farxia. Her work of rehabilitation is symbolical challenged to the patriarchal authority who are involved in war and clan conflicts. She adopted SilkHair and Gacal, orphan boys who lost their parents in civil war atrocities. She used them in her play as a character who performed the play and left their uncivilised and barbaric nature.

V. GLOBALIZATION AND MODERNITY

The theme of globalization and modernity in Nuruddin Farah's novels explores the tension between traditional Somali culture and the forces of modernity shaped by global influences. His works often highlight the disruption caused by colonial legacies, economic dependence, migration, and transnationalism. Farah portrays how globalization affects individual identities, family structures, and societal norms, emphasizing the struggles of navigating a fragmented cultural landscape. He examines the benefits and challenges of modernity, showing characters striving to reconcile their roots with the pressures of a globalized world, often reflecting broader issues of displacement, hybridity, and resilience. In *Links* and *Crossbones*, Nuruddin Farah delves into the themes of globalization and modernity by exploring Somalia's fractured identity in a post-civil war context. Both novels highlight how globalization intensifies the nation's challenges, such as foreign interference, economic exploitation, and cultural disintegration, while also offering possibilities for renewal. In *Links*, Farah portrays Mogadishu as a microcosm of a globalized world where warlords, NGOs, and exiles navigate overlapping local and international interests. The protagonist, Jeebleh, struggles to reconcile his diasporic modern identity with the traditional and war-torn homeland he revisits. In *Crossbones*, Farah examines modernity through the lenses of piracy and global commerce, as Somali pirates become symbolic of both resistance to and complicity with global capitalist systems. The novel also contrasts the lives of diasporic Somalis with those who remain, showing how globalization impacts individual and collective agency.

VI. TRAUMA AND HEALING

The theme of trauma and healing is central to Nuruddin Farah's novels, reflecting the psychological and social scars left by Somalia's civil war, displacement, and political upheavals. Farah's characters often grapple with personal and collective trauma, navigating loss, exile, and fractured relationships. In *Links*, Nuruddin Farah explores it through the protagonist Jeebleh's return to Mogadishu, a city ravaged by civil war and chaos. Jeebleh, haunted by memories of his late mother and his exile, must confront the psychological scars of his past and the collective trauma of his homeland. The novel captures how war has fractured not only the physical landscape but also familial and societal bonds. The theme of healing in is portrayed as a deeply personal and communal process. Jeebleh's efforts to reconnect with his roots, help a friend in need, and navigate the moral ambiguities of a violent environment reflect the slow and difficult journey toward reconciliation. Farah suggests that healing requires confronting painful truths, rebuilding trust, and fostering acts of compassion in a fractured world. His second novel, *Crossbones*, Farah explores Somalia's ongoing struggles with war, piracy, and political instability. The novel examines how the characters, including diaspora members and those who remain in the homeland, grapple with the psychological and social wounds inflicted by conflict and displacement. The trauma of fractured identities, loss of loved ones, and the moral complexities of survival permeates the story. The two brothers, Malik and Ahl, each deal with the lingering impacts of exile and their relationship with a homeland they barely recognize. Additionally, the young Somali pirates represent a generation shaped by desperation and global exploitation, highlighting collective trauma.

VII. STORYTELLING AS RESISTANCE

The theme of storytelling as resistance is pivotal in Nuruddin Farah's novels, where storytelling becomes a tool to challenge oppression, reclaim identity, and preserve history. Farah portrays narratives as a way to resist the erasure caused by war, dictatorship, and colonialism, highlighting how personal and collective stories empower individuals and communities. In *Maps*, Farah uses the theme of identity, history, and the struggle for self-determination. The protagonist, Askar, grows up in a fragmented Somali society and navigates questions of belonging and identity against the backdrop of Ethiopia's annexation of the Ogaden region. Storytelling in *Maps* becomes a way to resist both personal and collective erasure. Through oral traditions, memories, and internal monologues, Farah weaves fragmented narratives that challenge dominant histories and colonial ideologies. The shifting perspectives and nonlinear structure reflect the complexity of reclaiming Somali identity in a divided world.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Nuruddin Farah's novels are a testament to the power of literature to illuminate the human condition and provoke meaningful dialogue about society's most pressing challenges. As a contemporary novelist, Farah not only preserves the rich cultural heritage of Somalia but also expands the boundaries of African literature, establishing himself as a leading voice in the global literary canon. His work resonates with readers seeking to understand the intersection of history, politics, and personal identity in an ever-complex world.

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