Emerging Perspectives on Nuruddin Farah

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THE SOCIOPOLITICAL EVOLUTION
OF A SOMALI WRITER

Peter J. Schraeder

Although traditional Somali society engendered a rich oral literature,
and in the colonial period certain authors adopted other
European languages and the Western novel form, the modern
writer Nuruddin Farah is unique as the first Somali author to publish
novels in English. Although his works have been favorably reviewed
for the most part, overviews of Farah’s novels have tended to discuss
only his earlier work or have centered on a particular theme in dis-
cussing only a limited number of his works. This article focuses
Farah’s evolution as a socially and politically engaged author, empha-
sizing the political content of his works. It proposed that Farah’s evolu-
tion as a novelist is not unique but rather is indicative of a process
potentially applicable to other African writers. As socially engaged writ-
ers perceive political authority as becoming increasingly authoritarian
in nature and unresponsive to popular needs, their novels will become
increasingly politically engaged and anti-government in nature. Farah’s
novels are analyzed according to three evolutionary phases: initial con-
cern for social issues, increased political awareness, and acute political
engagement with perceived political and social injustices.

Farah’s first novel, *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), typifies the first phase of his evolution as a socially engaged novelist. Although published in 1970, the novel was written in 1968 while Farah was a student of literature and philosophy at the University of Chandigarh, India, before the 1969 Somali revolution that gave power to the military and Siyan Barre. The novel presents less a political than a sociological study of the subordinate role of Somali women and the effects of urbanization during the 1950s, indicative of Farah’s commitment to social issues.

The central character of the novel is Ebla, a woman pastoralist from the Ogaden who desires emancipation from her subordinate role in Somali society. Ebla first runs away from her clan to the city of Belet Wene because she refuses to accept her “arranged” marriage with Giumaleh, “an old man of forty-eight fit to be her father” (p.9). Once established at the house of her cousin Gheddi, however, Ebla learns that, to pay off some debts, he had secretly offered her hand in marriage to a “broker” friend. Ebla thus flees a second time by eloping to Mogadishu with a civil servant named Awill, only to become infuriated when she learns that, on a government-sponsored trip in Italy, he cheated on her. Ebla reasserts herself and gains revenge by secretly marrying Tiffo, a wealthy man of the city with whom she trades sexual favors for money. Ebla has learned to manipulate men through a brand of prostitution in which she realizes that her body is “my treasure, my only treasure, my bank, my money, my existence” (p.160). Eventually Ebla discards Tiffo and confronts Awill upon his return to Mogadishu. Rather than bringing each other’s infidelity into the open, however, the pair leave resolution of this issue for “tomorrow” (p.179).

The subordinate nature of women in Somali society is clearly the dominant image of the book. This is emphasized continually in Farah’s authorial commentary, as when he asserts: “From experience [Ebla] knew that girls were materials, just like objects, or items on the shelf of a shop. They were sold and bought as shepherds sold
their goats at market-places, or shop-owners sold their goods to customers. To a shop-keeper what was the difference between a girl and his goods? Nothing, absolutely nothing" (p.84). Farah is particularly opposed to the continuing traditional Somali practice of circumcision and infibulation of young girls. This intense concern for women's rights is best expressed by Kirsten Holst Petersen: "He would seem to be the first feminist writer to come out of Africa in the sense that he describes and analyzes women as victims of male subjugation." Farah, in a 1983 interview, underscored the consequence of not treating women as equal partners: "We have to be aware of the opportunities that we lose by not using women to their full, for their contribution to the general welfare of humankind."

The second dominant image of *From a Crooked Rib* is the problem of urbanization and the rural-urban dichotomy. Ebla, who sees fleeing to the city as her salvation, loses the security of her clan and is forced into various forms of prostitution to support herself. Kenneth Little puts the newly urbanized woman's plight in perspective: "By entering into a modern type of marriage or by migrating, [women] have exchanged family and other traditional forms of security for the prospect of personal liberty. However, as a result of the deal, they are more dependent upon their own resources." Ebla epitomizes the problems faced by the newly urbanized individual who wishes to escape certain aspects of traditional Somali culture (for example, arranged marriages), while retaining other aspects of traditional life, such as the affection felt for beasts of burden. Ebla asserts: "People here in Mogadisco and in the towns don't have the slightest idea how to take care of beasts, how to milk them, how to love them, how to sacrifice their own lives to make the beasts happy and fat and healthy. They know how to eat meat and drink milk, but that is all they know. How ignorant and proud they are! A white man's language is no knowledge" (p.178).

Farah's second novel, *A Naked Needle* (1976), was written in Mogadishu in 1972, enabling him to have digested the preliminary successes, failures, and effects of the 1969 military revolution. The
book represents the second phase in Farah’s evolution. He remains socially engaged, and portrays an increased political awareness, typified by a general questioning of the revolution’s “successes.” Farah’s description of continued political corruption and tribalistic practices at the highest levels of government, despite official statements to the contrary, put him in conflict with the ruling regime (this and all his subsequent novels were banned in Somalia). Whereas From a Crooked Rib stresses Ebla’s individualist struggle against traditionalism within Somalia, A Naked Needle emphasizes “national identity and national unity” within an “expansive and internationally oriented world.”

The main character of the novel is Koschin, a teacher and fervent revolutionary committed to the advancement of socialism and the welfare of the masses. Espousing an idealist faith in the goals and aims of the 1969 revolution, Koschin is appalled by the tribalist and immoral tendencies of his college Principal, ultimately choosing to resign his position rather than compromise his revolutionary standards. In addition, Koschin is nervously awaiting the arrival of Nancy, a woman he had met in London and had agreed to marry if within two years neither had found someone else. Koschin wonders how Nancy, a white non-Muslim who has never been to his country, will fit into Somali society. The rekindling of their relationship is set against those of Koschin’s Somali friends and acquaintances who have married foreign white women.

These relationships with foreign white women seem to symbolize Somalia’s external relationships with foreign powers. Barre’s relationship with his “American” wife is fraught with problems and viewed with disdain by Koschin. Similarly, Warsan’s “Soviet” wife irritates Koschin with her overbearing manner, despite the existence of a “political alliance between Russia and Somalia” (p.167). Mohamed and his “British” wife, although enjoying a successful relationship, disgust Koschin with their reactionary statements concerning the revolution. Koschin thinks only British-born Barbara, with her lower class origins and socialist sympathies (her former fiancé and her father were both revolutionaries), understands the true principles of
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the Somali revolution. Shunning the reactionary nature of the United States and the overbearing, doctrinaire nature of the Soviet Union, Farah, through the character of Barbara, seems to extoll an independent path of socialist development reminiscent of some traditional British socialists of the 1930s and 1940s.

Rather than denouncing the 1969 revolution as a failure, *A Naked Needle* represents the increasing political engagement of Farah as he probes several questionable aspects. As already stated, Koschin is disturbed by the tribalistic practices of his superior and the revelation that the top echelons of the government are hesitant “to take any steps to bring this ill-practice and what it entails to an end” (p.17). Koschin states unequivocally: “I do not owe any loyalty to any tribe...I owe loyalty to the nation, the government in power” (p.14). In fact, a general dialogue between Koschin and his friend Mohamed is perhaps indicative of Farah’s attempt to sort out the necessity of the revolution. Koschin states that “Somalia very badly needed a revolution,” and Mohamed replies: “Was Somalia in need of terror and horror from dawn to dusk?” (p.149). The reader is reminded by Koschin that “a revolution, y'know, is a pill that tastes bitter, the benefits of which are felt only when one has gone through the preliminary pain and pestilence” (p.4). “If this one doesn’t remain loyal to the basic truths of a Somali-African humanity, then it must be denied the rights to dominate the minds of the honest ones” (p.149). One therefore receives the impression that although there are negative aspects of the revolution, a “wait-and-see” attitude is appropriate in order to judge whether it will degenerate or remain true to its goals. For example, one result of the revolution viewed favorably by Farah is the introduction in 1972 of a written Somali script. Koschin proclaims: “Why, Somali is a written language! Bless the Revolution” (p.134).

But this compromise position of qualified optimism could not last; the rather hopeful “wait-and-see” attitude of *A Naked Needle* is firmly rejected in the subsequent trilogy *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*. This trilogy represents the third phase in Farah’s evolution; he comes out adamantly opposed to the Barre

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regime, writing his novels from self-imposed exile in England and Italy. The trilogy goes beyond the mere social engagement of *From a Crooked Rib* and the subdued political themes of *A Naked Needle*, portraying instead an intense awareness of perceived social and political injustices.

The pivotal factors in this stage of Farah’s development were events occurring within Somalia between the writing of *A Naked Needle* in 1972 and the publication in 1979 of the first volume of the anti-government trilogy. Opponents of the Barre regime claim that, from 1974 onward, various instruments of the Somali government, such as the National Security Service (NSS), the National Security Court (NSC), the Somali Revolutionary Council (SRC), and the *Gulwadhayal* (Victory Pioneers) “were increasingly being perfected and their full weight brought to bear on what the regime had classified as ‘anti-socialist,’ ‘anti-revolutionary,’ and naturally anti-Siyad.”

Opponents cited numerous examples of political excess by the government: April 1974, the imprisonment of thirteen teachers on the charges of organizing and taking part in strikes; January 1975, the execution of ten Muslim leaders on the charge of “exploiting religion to create national disunity and subverting state authority”; October 1978, following Somalia’s defeat in the Ogaden war, the public execution of seventeen army officers for attempting a coup; late 1978, the execution of five students on the charge of anti-government demonstration. The Somali regime in mid-1978 was said to be “exposed for what it really was: a repressive, frightened and desperate government unable to take chances with anyone, however apolitical.”

The first part of the trilogy, *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979), won the 1980 English-Speaking Union Literary Award. The novel is representative of Farah’s third phase, in which he virulently attacks the tribalistic and authoritarian practices of the Barre regime, its links with the Soviet Union, the traditional patriarch of Somali society, and the elites who have sold themselves to the government. Conversely, Farah now portrays those who write and distribute anti-government pamphlets as the heroes and future salvation of Somalia.
The novel begins with the mysterious death of Soyaan, an economic adviser answerable only to the General and a leading member of a clandestine opposition movement composed of Somali intellectuals and professionals. Soyaan's twin brother, Loyaan, is gradually drawn into a personal investigation of the circumstances surrounding his brother's death, eventually learning that his brother was "silenced" by the regime because he secretly wrote and distributed anti-government pamphlets. In order to discredit the movement and keep Soyaan's true actions from reaching the general populace, the government proclaims him a "hero of the revolution" whose last words were "Labour is honour and there is no General but our General." Loyaan's efforts to keep the government from making a mockery of his deceased brother's true political beliefs eventually bring him into direct opposition with the regime. The novel ends with Loyaan facing either exile overseas or imprisonment if he refuses to leave.

*Sweet and Sour Milk* reveals how a burgeoning opposition within the educated upper class of Somalia prepared and distributed clandestine material which violated national security statutes. Farah's opinion of the ruling elite is summarized in a secret memo penned by Soyaan: "Clowns. Cowards. And (tribal) upstarts: these are who I work with. The top civil service in this country is composed of them. Men and women whose pride has been broken by the General's security; men and women who have succumbed and accepted to be humiliated" (p.38). Special ridicule is reserved for the national leader. In Soyaan's words: "Listen to these ludicrous eulogies of the General...The father of the nation. The carrier of wisdom. The provider of comforts. A demi-god. I see him as a Grand Warden of a Gulag" (p.15). Even more disturbing to Farah is the degree of control and influence that the Soviets maintained over the Barre regime. This is portrayed in the novel by Loyaan's anger when told that an accomplice of Soyaan was arrested for anti-Soviet activities. Loyaan proclaims: "But we are not in the Soviet Union. We are in the Somali Democratic Republic, a sovereign African state. Not in the Soviet Union. We are not" (p.198).
The role of the patriarch in traditional Somali society, as well as traditional authority in general, is attacked in the character of Keynaan, the father of Soyaan and Loyaan. Keynaan epitomizes the patriarch who rules his family with an iron hand and has become a willing instrument of the clannish policies of the Barre regime. Furthermore, Keynaan is portrayed as oblivious to the valuable role of women in Somali society. He asserts: “Women are for sleeping with, for giving birth to and bringing up children; they are not good for any other thing” (p.84). The father summarizes his position in Somalia in a conversation with his son. “And remember one thing, Loyaan: if I decide this minute to cut you in two, I can. The law of the land invests in men my age the power. I am the Grand Patriarch” (p.95).

*Sardines* (1981), the second part of the trilogy, is an intensification of the political engagement characteristic of his third phase. Reiterating many themes from *Sweet and Sour Milk*, the novel breaks new ground by exploring the role of Somali women in opposing the ruling regime. Farah blends his understanding of women’s issues with the polemics of politics to create a powerful novel.

The story revolves around Medina, an avowed feminist and sole female member of the clandestine anti-government movement composed of members of Somalia’s educated upper class. Medina has been banned from publishing and fears that Ubax, her daughter, will be “forced” to undergo the traditional circumcision and infibulation performed on nearly all young women in Somalia. Medina also guides the intellectual development of her friend’s daughter, Sagal, who is a nationally recognized swimming star. Sagal is a potential representative for the “Africa-Comecon Meet” in Budapest, and dreams of “painting the dawn” with anti-government slogans. Furthermore, Medina’s husband, Samater, has been blackmailed by the government to accept a cabinet position—from which he ultimately resigns, only to be jailed.

Like *Sweet and Sour Milk*, *Sardines* portrays the growing political opposition and activities of the educated elite. In the latter novel,
however, the primary elements of opposition studied are women and female students, representative of Farah's concern for this segment of the Somali population. Medina, for example, typifies the educated, cosmopolitan woman who wishes a better life for her daughter. Medina is concerned about the intellectual freedom of Ubaax and is disgusted with the traditional customs which call for the subordination and circumcision of women: "I want to spare my daughter these and many other pains. She will not be circumcised. Over my dead body" (p.59).

Individuals comprising a second group of opposition within the novel are female students, indicative of Farah's impression of growing student unrest in Somalia. Sagal, who has always dreamed of "painting the dawn" with anti-government slogans, is extremely jealous when her two closest competitors are arrested for committing this act. The girls had painted the slogan: "Down with the one-man, one-tribe dictatorship! Down with the General's regime" (p.125).

Despite the rise of opposition groups within Somali society, Farah warns through Samater that most of the intelligentsia are corrupt and self-serving: "We the intellectuals are the betrayers; we the so-called intellectuals are the entrance the foreign powers use so as to dominate, designate, name and label; we the intellectuals are the ones who tell our people lies" (p.72).

Finally, Farah emphasizes the extreme pressure put upon individuals of the ruling hierarchy by members of their clan to amass wealth and manipulate the patronage system to their benefit. Samater's mother, Idil, epitomizes this aspect of Somali clan politics: "And what are you a minister for? How many more months will you hold this important position, occupy the throne of power? Why don't you use it? Why don't you get richer while you can, amass the wealth that is yours by right? Or have you taken to heart what the General says about socialism?" (p.65)

_Close Sesame_ (1983) is the final novel of Farah's trilogy and is the most politically engaged work of his third phase. Rather than discuss mere protests or the distribution of secret memoranda, the novel
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seemingly calls for the leader’s assassination and seeks to rationalize such a call.

Once again, one can hypothesize that the primary impetus for Farah’s increased political engagement stems from his perception of events taking place in Somalia. Opposition groups have described the period between 1981 and 1983 (during which Close Sesame was written) as one in which “mass discontent with the regime intensified to such an extent that it has become a national phenomenon.”

Furthermore, these groups assert that numerous anti-government demonstrations, ambushes of military convoys, and bomb explosions in Mogadishu “provide good examples of the nation-wide manifestation of discontent with the regime.”

The plot of Close Sesame revolves around Deeriye, a nationalistic Muslim pan-Somalist and pan-Africanist who has been a “Sayyidist” all his life. Unfortunately, Deeriye has paid for his beliefs by spending eight years in colonial prisons and four in post-independence jails. A respected man within Somali society in the 1980s, Deeriye is confronted with a personal dilemma when he learns that his son Mursal, with three accomplices, is plotting the assassination of the General. Originally stating that he would never make use “of violent means to overthrow a tyrannical regime” (p.13), Deeriye changes his political opinions as the regime seeks, for self-serving tribalistic purposes, to isolate him from his clan and discredit his public image. Upon learning that his son has been killed, presumably by the regime, Deeriye is finally driven to an assassination attempt on the life of the General, “not to avenge his son but to vindicate justice” (p.180). He dies in this unsuccessful attempt.

Close Sesame is an especially powerful novel because the call for the overthrow of the ruling regime comes not only from upper class intellectuals but also from Deeriye—an extremely nationalistic Somali, a hero of the revolution revered by his peers. Drawing parallels with the colonial past, the plot shows how the regime’s attempt to isolate and intimidate Deeriye replicates what the Italian colonialists had done to him in 1934. Just as the Italian authorities had want-
ed Deeriye to hand over a suspected assassin and dissociate himself from the individual’s actions, so the present government is portrayed as attempting the same thing. “The only difference, if there is a difference, is that in 1934 the enemy and the famine-creating power was colonial and foreign; and now it is neo-colonial and local” (p.147). In essence, Farah is condemning the Barre government for committing the same or worse crimes against the Somali people as did the colonial powers. Farah accuses the regime of presently attempting to defuse legitimate and ideologically-based nationalist movements by isolating a certain act as tribally based, thereby “denying it a national base by showing its tribal support” (p.79). Furthermore, the regime’s ability to control the flow of information keeps “the populace underinformed so you can rule them...imprison them with shackles of uninformedness and they are easy to govern” (p.68).

All of Farah’s novels embody certain themes: the subordinate role of women in Somali society and a need for their emancipation, the disastrous effects of clan competition and struggle, the role of the traditional authoritarian patriarch, and the pivotal role of the educated intelligentsia in acting as both a force of opposition to and a maintainer of the ruling regime. What differs among the novels is the amount of emphasis placed upon the various common themes. The social concerns of Farah’s earlier works, although represented in his later novels, have given way to explicit political issues in his evolution.

More important, we can derive through an examination of Farah’s evolution a general model potentially applicable to other socially and politically engaged African writers. At the beginning of this article, it was suggested that as a socially engaged writer perceives political authority becomingly increasingly authoritarian and unresponsive to popular needs, his or her novels will become more politically engaged and anti-government. The evolution of the political content of Farah’s novels supports this hypothesis. Indicative of a primary phase in which the socially engaged author examines the society’s cultural defects is From a Crooked Rib, primarily concerned with the
subordination of women within Somali society. With the advent of a revolution (or peaceful transfer of power which entails a radical political departure) and the installation of a new regime, the socially engaged author will enter a second phase, questioning the various social and political aspects of the revolution in general and the new ruling regime in particular. This phase is represented by *A Naked Needle*, following the 1969 Somali revolution. A third evolution occurs when the author perceives the revolution or the new government as not remaining true to its original objectives. As the regime is perceived as incrementally resorting to coercive and authoritarian practices in the face of growing domestic dissent, the socially engaged author writes increasingly about anti-government political involvement. This development is represented by Farah’s *Dictatorship* trilogy. Unfortunately, the writer who does become politically engaged and takes a negative stance against the ruling hierarchy, as Farah did in Somalia, is often banned and forced to write in exile.\(^{15}\)

Somali officials generally have declared that Farah’s novels are unrepresentative of Somalia’s true conditions. A common claim is that Farah has been out of the country so long that he is unable to interpret events as only an insider can. Furthermore, Farah is described as an intellectual who would rather highlight the negative aspects of the revolution than recognize the “advances” that have been made since 1969 (for example, the institution of a written Somali script).

Farah undoubtedly does not present an “exact” image of Somali society and politics. For example, in *From a Crooked Rib*, Ebla responds to a query made by nomads as she is fleeing her clan that she is going to the city to get injections and buy some clothes. The nomads enquire, “For your wedding?” and Ebla responds, “Yes” (p.20). In Somali society in the 1950s such a question would not be asked because the marriage outfit could not be bought by the woman; it was ordered well in advance and paid for by the man. Likewise in the political realm, certain of Farah’s images may be
exaggerated or unrepresentative of actual occurrences. The writer, however, need not be expected to deliver mere documentary realism. Rather, it is by capturing the concept and the image, such as the subordinate status of women and the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Barre government, that the author presents his case to the public, which can then judge it upon its own merits. The author is not a recorder of events but an interpreter acting upon his perceptions of them. While the Barre government may have stated that it banned Farah’s novels because they misinterpreted Somali society, Barre’s opponents might note that they were banned because they represented Somali society all too well.

Deviating from the political, one of the most interesting aspects of Farah’s novels is that they often represent a continuous story; characters live on from novel to novel, and those whose fates are not resolved at the end of one volume may be resolved in the next. For example, the reader does not know at the end of *Sweet and Sour Milk* whether Loyaan will accept exile overseas in terms of a government post or whether he will continue to fight for the vindication of his twin brother’s name and risk a lengthy jail term. The story ends thus: “It was seven in the evening. There was a knock on the outside door” (p.237). In *Sardines*, however, the reader learns that Loyaan has been jailed by the government, intimating that he refused to accept exile. In similar fashion, Ebla, who remains unsure of her destiny at the end of the first novel, shows up in *Sardines* as the mother of Sagal. She had left Awill, remarried, and then divorced. The reader familiar with Farah’s previous works will gain a better understanding of the secondary characters in the latest novel.

Farah’s ongoing exploration of the social and political evolution of Somalia continues to generate much discussion; whereas critics may dismiss his novels as unrepresentative of Somali society, supporters will argue that they are completely on target. In any case, Farah’s novels remain an important aspect of Somali studies, serving as a unique means for transmitting one man’s interpretation of Somali politics and society. Indeed, espousing his perceptions of the
state of the field, Farah characterized African writers (and undoubtedly himself) as managing to "touch the raw nerve of the reader." Alluding to what drives his critical fiction, Farah stated: "There is something virgin about writing in Africa. There are certain aspects of the writing which are like social documentation, writing about things which have never before been written about."¹⁶

NOTES


2. For a general overview of this topic, see David F.Beer, "Somali Literature in European Languages," Horn of Africa 2 (October-December 1979), 27-35.

3. The editions of Nuruddin Farah’s novels employed in this article are as follows: From a Crooked Rib (London: Heinemann, 1970); A Naked Needle (London: Heinemann, 1976); Sweet and Sour Milk (London: Heinemann, 1980); Sardines (London: Heinemann, 1982); and Close Sesame (London: Allison & Busby, 1983).

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5. For a review of this topic, see Raqiya Hahi Dualeh Abdalla, Sisters in Affliction: Circumcision and Infibulation of Women in Africa (London: Zed Press, 1982).

6. Petersen, 98.

7. "Close Sesame: The End of a Trilogy" (Interview), Africa Now 32 (December 1983), 82. Okonkwo is another critic who has put Farah's beliefs into proper perspective: "Farah's championing of the cause of women is part of his crusade against tyranny and victimization not just of women, but of all who are denied their legitimate rights—social and political, private and public." See Juliet I. Okonkwo, "Nuruddin Farah and the Changing Roles of Women," World Literature Today 58, 2 (1984), 215-21.


9. Cochrane, 73.

11. Ibid., 5.

12. Ibid., 5.


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