

The Personal and The Political: The Case of Nuruddin Farah

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN

“THE SOMALI are intelligent, sophisticated, subtle, inordinately proud and extremely individualistic.”¹ This quotation from a reputable ethnographical survey sums up the Western folklore image of the Somalis as kings of the Africans, but too proud for their own good. In such responsible literature these generalizations are followed by references to the lack of hierarchy in traditional Somali social structure and by the exigences of nomadic life, whereas the popular imagination dwells upon a Karen Blixen inspired oriental mysticism and the romanticism of fierce desert warriors, disappearing into a sun-drenched never-never. Another reality is suggested when Koschin, the hero of Nuruddin Farah’s *A Naked Needle*, quotes a colonial English saying that “Somalis are like Epsom salt, which spurts, foams and settles to the bottom in the time it takes to bat your eyelids” and he agrees: “we are a people that need constant changes in government, in leadership. We rise, we revolt against any power and eventually tend to accept it as our fate. . . . In short, we are a people of God.”² Although this statement, like others of Nuruddin Farah’s authorship is qualified and circumscribed and perhaps not really meant it is still true that in his novels the folklore Somali turns into a poverty-stricken city slum dweller or a Western educated African, hesitant and bewildered by his complex mixture of worlds. Another myth goes by the board, another area of Africa enters the mundane world of party politics and literacy campaigns. The contrast is all the more striking because of the characters’ (and perhaps the author’s) inability or unwillingness to commit themselves to a final point of view. One symptom of this

state of mind is the fact that the novels are not concluded, they simply fade out mid-plot, leaving the reader as bewildered as the characters. Nuruddin Farah sifts the modern Somali experience through an exceedingly sensitive mind, and it is not surprising therefore that he eschews easy solutions and instead poses a set of questions. The questions he asks are to a very large extent the questions asked by the majority of modern African writers, and his authorship is very much part of the established African literary tradition in which the educated élite takes a "critical-and-yet" view of their societies.

Nuruddin Farah's three published novels, *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), *A Naked Needle* (1976), and *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979) as well as *Sardines* (to be published shortly) deal with the role (or perhaps plight) of women in a Muslim society, the role of the educated élite, the corruption of the political élite and the repressive nature of the Somali revolution. Both by virtue of his educated background and his themes Nuruddin Farah conforms to the established canon of African writing, and a useful angle from which to investigate his work would seem to be to try and discover if he has added any new insight to it. Looked at in that way he is at least interesting when he discusses the tribalism and corruption of the military/political élite. His description of the alcohol, cars and fast women syndrome adds nothing to the already existing picture, except perhaps a well-chosen quote from Clemenceau to the effect that America "in only one generation" had "ceased being referred to as a barbaric nation and had qualified itself to be labelled decadent."³ The quotation is used with reference to Africa, but maintains the characteristic ambiguity found in all of the novels. A much more interesting point is the author's description of and developing attitude to the Somali Revolution and its leader.

The Somali revolution which took the form of a bloodless coup in 1969 was the result of growing despair over the increasingly obvious failure of the parliamentary model which Somalia had inherited from Italy when it gained formal independence in 1960. Despite obvious advantages of ethnic and linguistic unity the country fell apart into a large number of parties based on clan allegiances. In the 1968 election more than 70 parties contested

fewer than 130 seats. Like countless other coups in Africa the 1969 one was greeted with a sigh of relief, but unlike most of the other military take-overs which ended the post-colonial experiment in transferred democracy, this one did not content itself with trying to curb the worst of the political excesses. Instead it tried to steer an entirely different course and involve the hitherto ignored and fairly inaccessible nomadic masses of the Somali people. Trained in the Soviet Union Siad Barre and his colleagues developed their own brand of "scientific socialism." In doing this they had the co-operation of a small group of left wing intellectuals, and there can be no doubt about the idealism and also the promise of this new beginning. The spectacular achievement of the literacy campaign, following the long overdue agreement on a script for the Somali language in 1972 is a testimony to this idealism, as in the Supreme Military Council's concern for the rights of women. In 1975 the SMC decreed that women should have equal inheritance rights with men, something which caused much consternation in a Muslim society where such a decree amounts to a heresy. Thus, despite the regime's heavy leaning on Soviet aid and technical assistance Western observers tended to take a benevolent view of the Somali revolution.⁴ But the military regime also developed a repressive aspect, exhibiting the only too well known features of sudden arrests, torture, disappearances, censorship, and in 1980 power to detain without trial for 90 days. Members of the corrupt political class seeped back into power, and corruption and a clan-based nepotism flourished. This combination of positive and negative aspects created a complex situation in which one's answer will have to be the result of a careful weighing up of means and ends. Nuruddin Farah's two books which deal with the revolution, *A Naked Needle* and *Sweet and Sour Milk*, reflect a degree of uncertainty which, however, crystallizes into an opposition to the regime in the manuscript of *Sardines*.

The naked needle in the book of the same name is Koschin, a young Somali, living in Mogadiscio during the early days of the revolution. In the prelude, which is written in first person narrative, he states the two events which are causing him his present concern and which are the two interwoven themes of the book.

They are the revolution "to which I am loyal" and the fact that an English girlfriend, Nancy, whom he has invited to Somalia "on the whim of a day" has just sent a telegram announcing her arrival. These two events on their different levels are forcing him to make decisions, a thing he has never been able to do. This state of affairs is not much improved in the course of the book. On the political level he assesses means and ends by way of an image: "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). Loyalty to the revolution is considered necessary, and towards the end of the book a somewhat toothless and pompous stance is made. "Whoever will do any good for this country and for Africa, I shall back till I die. Go up to the pulpit, do something good and I shall certainly be on your side. If these fail to do that they owe us, I shall declare war against them, single-handed even though I am" (p. 152). The author is, of course, hiding behind his character, and there is no precise indication of his attitude towards him. On the personal level Nuruddin Farah discusses the problems of a small group of Somali/white couples to which Koschin belongs. This is given a political dimension, not in relation to Somali, although it is stated that white wives are a handicap, but in a wider perspective of sexual power-relations between races. However, here also there is a lack of a final point of view. The first half of the Somali man/American woman love story is very much in the vein of Armah's *Why Are We So Blest*, but the second part blames the man for trapping the woman in an alien society by not telling her the truth beforehand. The moral, as pronounced by Koschin is to make sure not to be trapped. "I prefer whoring to marrying, I, for one, feel free" (p. 32). There is nothing wrong with that as a solution, but the whole incident is yet another example of an irritating tendency in the book to touch on vital topics only to drop them in an offhand manner. The style also suffers from this indecision. Sentences like "I . . . blinded to his wishes by a belief that may be killed no sooner than to-morrow" (p. 34) leave one visionless.

Although some of these flaws are still present in *Sweet and Sour Milk* the higher degree of firmness in both character devel-

opment and statements of opinion makes it a more rewarding book to read. The book centres on a pair of identical twins, Soyaan and Loyaan, and their different attitudes to the revolution. The tone of the book is much more sinister, and arrests, imprisonments, tortures, informers and generally an atmosphere of fear prevail. Soyaan dies mysteriously in the beginning of the book under circumstances which indicate that he has been poisoned by the regime. Trying to ascertain the truth his brother traces Soyaan's movements using the few clues left to him — cryptic notes and coded messages found in his pocket. This is reminiscent of the detective story technique, but as well as finding out some facts about his brother. Loyaan also undergoes a reluctant and fumbling political development. The shadow aspect of the twin situation is stated explicitly: "One in two: Loyaan and Soyaan. 'My brothers in twins,' says their sister" (p. 53). Soyaan is the political activist who has seen through the regime and is trying to subvert it by writing illegal pamphlets, whilst Loyaan seems naive and without any real interest in political matters. He is driven by a personal wish to vindicate his brother, but the insight he gains into the machinations of the regime eventually force him to accept the vailidity of his brother's vision and try to incorporate it into himself. In a situation of stress he tells himself, "*you must help encounter and then fuse the talents of Soyaan and Loyaan; in you must encounter the forces of life (Loyaan) and death (Soyaan)*" (p. 102). To a reader who is used to more heroic stances against oppression, like, for example, Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, Loyaan's political maturing may seem excessively slow and naive, but Nuruddin Farah shares with Ngugi a concern for the doubts and failings of ordinary people who find themselves in extraordinary situations with which they cannot quite cope. Unlike Ngugi's characters, however, Nuruddin Farah's do not reach a definite point of view as a result of their deliberations. At the end of the novel Loyaan, despite his new insight, is still unable to act and the reader is still not certain just how much insight he has gained. The two novels represent a small and somewhat timid beginning of a crucial awareness which, however, in the Somali context, is enough to keep Nuruddin Farah in exile.

A critical view of present political powers, whether black or white, is a theme which in modern African literature is often combined with a search for roots, an affirmation of the validity of traditional society and its potential as a source for a new beginning which should replace the society under attack. One could mention writers like Achebe, Soyinka, Kofi Awoonor, Armah, and Ngugi. In this respect Nuruddin Farah differs radically from the established canon. He finds no virtue in traditional Somali social organization: indeed his two pet hatreds seem to be the patriarch in the traditional Somali Muslim family and the concomitant subjection of women. The patriarch or head of an extended family group as represented by Loyaan's and Soyaan's father is a petty tyrant with unlimited power over the members of his family, and in the larger context of the society he is a cowardly police informer. In the novel Nuruddin Farah connects these two social levels through a quotation from Wilhelm Reich: "In the figure of the father the authoritarian state has its representative in every family, so that the family becomes its most important instrument of power" (p. 98). This juxtaposition of negative aspects in traditional and modern society amounts to a heresy in African writing. It is closely connected with Nuruddin Farah's unique sensitivity towards the situation of women in traditional Somali society. Ironically, 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. Both the Nigerian writer Flora Nwapa and the Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo have dealt with the lives of women, but not with the same emphasis on their social victimization. This is obviously connected with the fact that they are attempting a synthesis of traditional values and modern life. The detached view of Nuruddin Farah's book, which coincides with the ideology and anger of the Western feminist liberation movement, has only become possible in West Africa with a second generation of writers, some of whom have gained enough self confidence to question and reject aspects of their heritage. The Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta's description of the subjugation of women in traditional Ibo society is a result of this development and so far the only approximation to Nuruddin Farah's work. *From A Crooked Rib* will I think go down in

the history of African literature as a pioneering work, valued for its courage and sensitivity.

Due to a mixture of Islamic law and the needs and hardships of nomadic life the position of women in traditional Somali society would seem to be extremely low. A woman is the property of a patriarch. As such she has no individual rights, but she is protected as a member of her lineage group against outside abuses. Thus blood compensation in slaughtered camels is demanded if she is murdered, even though the amount is only half of the blood compensation demanded for a man. Marriages are arranged by the patriarch who also settles the bride price. Nuruddin Farah incorporates into *From A Crooked Rib* the ethnographical information which is necessary for an understanding of the dilemma of the main character. This information coincides with what one can learn from reading an ethnographical survey, but his use of it is strongly coloured by his attitude. The information that "the engagement and marriage are ratified by a series of presentations"⁵ is expressed in the following way in *From a Crooked Rib* :

From experience she 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 the goods to their customers. To a shopkeeper what was the difference between a girl and his goods? Nothing, absolutely nothing.⁶

The main character in the novel, Ebla, a young nomad girl, is sold several times in the course of the story, and when she understands the connection between her human value and money she draws the logical conclusion. "She scratched her sex, then chuckled 'This is my treasure, my only treasure, my bank, my money, my existence'" (p. 160). This realization is made probable by the story. In order to avoid a forced marriage to an old man, Ebla flees from her nomadic kinship group to the city. By doing this she becomes a woman who is not owned by anybody, and as such she has no legal protection. She joins the marginal group of widows, spinsters and divorced women whose only means of survival is prostitution or shades of it. Ebla marries a student who soon after leaves for Italy, and she is left to fend for herself. Mar-

riage is the purpose of her life, but she has confused ideas about it, and the book is somewhat contradictory on this point. On the one hand she says "I love to be a wife. I don't care whose" (p. 125), but on the other hand she also has Western ideas about individual choice and love: "I won't marry a broker. Unless I choose him, I cannot think of anything else to do" (p. 80). These ideas do not easily fit into Somali society, and Ebla's choice (or choices, for she marries twice) are not based on a knowledge of the men chosen but rather forced by circumstances she cannot control. Marriage may be the purpose of her life, her only means of self definition, but she is to find no satisfaction in it. "Enslavement was what existed between the married couples she had met. The woman was the slave" (pp. 83-84). Women in Somali society are not only slaves, they are also sexually abused. The Somali practise clitorization and infibulation, and the book stresses the physical pain attached to these customs. After the consummation of her marriage (which, incidentally, according to tradition is preceded by her husband beating her up), Ebla wishes that she were either an old woman or a man so that the experience would not have to be repeated. None of her problems are solved in the course of the book, but the reader is left with a very clear vision of the narrow space within which a Somali woman can define herself, and the virtual impossibility of breaking down the walls of tradition and widening the space.

With no sympathy for traditional society and a critical attitude towards the Revolution, Nuruddin Farah must be a lonely man in Somalia. Pushed by his own sympathy and sensitivity, but not pushed too far, anchored to a modified Western bourgeois ideology, he battles valiantly, not for causes, but for individual freedom, for a slightly larger space round each person, to be filled as he or she chooses. It is a thankless task, and Nuruddin Farah stands guard over liberty in Somalia like the camel owner of an anonymous traditional Somali song:

One of my she-camels falls on the road
 And I protect its meat,
 At night I cannot sleep,
 And in the daytime I can find no shade.⁷

NOTES

- ¹ I. M. Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa* (London: International African Institute, 1955), p. 150.
- ² Nuruddin Farah, *A Naked Needle* (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 21. All subsequent references will be to this edition and cited in the text.
- ³ Nuruddin Farah, *Sweet and Sour Milk* (London: Heinemann, 1979), p. 149. All subsequent references will be to this edition and cited in the text.
- ⁴ See for example Colin Legum and Bill Lee, *Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (New York, London: Africana Publishing Company, 1977) and Basil Davidson, "Notes on the Revolution in Somalia" in *The Socialist Register* (London: The Merlin Press, 1975), pp. 198-223.
- ⁵ Lewis, p. 135.
- ⁶ Nuruddin Farah, *From a Crooked Rib* (London: Heinemann, 1970), p. 84. All subsequent references will be to this edition and cited in the text.
- ⁷ B. W. Andrzejewski and I. M. Lewis, *Somali Poetry: An Introduction* (London: O.U.P., 1964), p. 142.