

Zero Zones: Nuruddin Farah's Fiction

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THE 'ZONE' IN post-modernist fiction has been described in one recent book on the subject as a paradoxical, 'heterotopian' space in which are superimposed, by a kind of literary double-exposure, disparate and incompatible orders: the factual and the fantastic, the 'real' and imaginary, this and other worlds, or rival, overlapping subjectivities or solipsisms (McHale 43-45). Zones overlap and overstep conventional national and geographic as well as moral and ontological boundaries: into them may be projected any approximation to or misrepresentation of 'truth' in the encyclopedic sense, any interpolation or misattribution, so that 'reality,' in its zonal version, is anti-verisimilar in character, multiple in perspective and indeterminate in form. In the zone, it is possible for things simultaneously to be and not be true and for a person to be both one thing and another. A space is 'zoned' in the sense of being occupied by rival or even mutually exclusive and incommensurable presences — be it a place by incursive powers, a signified by a number of language-signifiers (or a signifier by more than one signified), or a character by different personalities — with the result that it may appear to be broken down into warring constituents or to be itself a component of some larger whole. "In such a state," writes Foucault, the originator of the concept of *heterotopia*, "things are laid, 'placed,' 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all" (xviii). It is implied in McHale's book that the heterotopian zone in the colonial and post-colonial contexts begins, in its inherent

multiplicity, either to correspond or at least to have certain points of contact with historical reality:

Objectively, Latin America is a mosaic of dissimilar and, on the face of it, incompatible cultures, languages, world-views, landscapes, ecological zones. Its condition is, we might even say, *intrinsically* postmodernist. Even a "straight" realistic representation of the continent would have to take this multiplicity into account; and from such a representation to a postmodernist one is only a few short steps. (52)

Much of this is, of course, also true of Africa, whose countries are even more nakedly the results of competitive historical zoning, their irrational frontiers freaks of colonial whimsy, their identities accidents of naming, their ethnic and geographical spaces subordinates to the free play of colonial signifiers, and their rival mediums of expression so many imperial superimpositions.

Arguably, the colonial concoction which issues in the post-colonial nation-state is everywhere an unreal zone insofar as it is a mere fiction of political geography — an imperial invention or imaginative construct which is more often than not, in Salman Rushdie's description of Q/Pakistan in *Shame*, "insufficiently imagined . . . a failure of the dreaming mind" (87). Exploiting the potential parallels between the political remaking and the fictional rewriting of history in the post-colonial era, Rushdie's own treatment of India and Pakistan in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* suggests how readily, nations which are themselves in some sense fictions, lend themselves to the most arbitrary and indeterminate of experimental fictional forms. Africa, more than most, has been peculiarly prone to the literary, as to the political, rezoning process, though its intrinsically post-modernist qualities have understandably been exploited in colonial and expatriate writing about Africa rather than in African writing itself. Notoriously, Africa has occupied in the European imagination a conceptual rather than a geographical space. It has been less an actual place than a protean literary zone which in Western fiction has been mined for its multiple possibilities, serving as a screen for the projection of imperial fantasies of adventure and exploration (Rider Haggard's romances and their contemporary counterparts); as a void which, confused with its blank space on the imperial map, is

made simultaneously to absorb the intruder's own imported nightmares and to provide him with an alibi for colonial occupation (Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*); and, more recently, as a playground for lexical and ontological improvisation (Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa*) or, with parodic deliberateness, as fodder for European fantasy-lore (Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman*). Some of these writers, it has been noted, have been troubled by the ease with which Africa has been re-invented by the non-African author and by a resulting imperialism of the imagination which re-enacts at a different level the political rezoning of the continent (McHale 54). Of course, African authors themselves naturally have a stake in such concerns, particularly when, like the Somali novelist Nuruddin Farah, they have skirted or skirmished with post-modernism in their own work. Like many more conventional African authors, Farah has been troubled by the imperial powers' expropriation of Africa's political and cultural space in both the colonial and post-colonial periods (namely, of his native Somalia by the British, Italians, Russians, and Americans), and by the different kinds of reinforcement which this process has received from both African intellectuals and despotic military regimes. Without wishing to claim Farah as a thoroughgoing post-modernist, which would be perverse in the light of his fiction's richly diverse origins, I propose in this article to touch upon some post-modernist tendencies in his work and to assess this writer's standpoint on the literary and cultural rezoning habit which has become a distinctive mark of the Western post-modernist imagination.

Farah is perhaps at his most openly 'post-modern' in the early *jeu d'esprit*, *A Naked Needle*. The most self-consciously 'zoned' of his fictions, the book both is and is not about the progress of the Somali revolution between 1969 and 1972, its 'truth to reality' problematized at the outset on a preliminary page by the disclaimer's enigmatic warning that there are "no real characters where none is intended" and "no true incident where none is mentioned." (What are 'real' characters and 'true' characters?) Farah's Mogadiscio, as presented by his erratic and mercurial guide Koschin, is a jumble of languages and cultures, ethnic quarters and ghettos, and of migrating embassy officials, foreign experts, and Italian-

ized intellectuals with English girlfriends, American wives, and Russian mistresses in tow. Even in its 'straight' realistic representation, it is a patchwork product of the colonial imagination and a post-colonial variant of those zoned postwar European cities that feature in American post-modern fiction (Pynchon, Hawkes, Vonnegut), in which the locales traversed are so diverse and disparate that they seem to belong (and often do) to different worlds. As if to compound the very arbitrariness of the colonial 'fiction,' Koschin undertakes the further re-imagining of the city and its post-colonial African context by the tried post-modernist technique of displacing and deranging customary historical and geographical associations. Written at a slight angle to historical reality, Koschin's narrative mischievously piles misquotation upon misinformation and mixes invented anecdotes with recorded ones, so that the facts are given to us more than a little askew. The Bakhtu-Rida secondary school in Khartoum where Koschin claims to have been schooled is not a secondary school and is not in Khartoum (Ewen 199), while the real Fanon's death was from leukemia, perhaps less romantic than the cigar-toting guerrilla's death from lung cancer which is substituted for it here. Nietzsche's famous quip about the whip is inverted — "Nietzsche said never wed a woman without *her* whip" (31; emphasis added) — to promote Fanon's stale sado-masochistic colonial paradigm of white mistresses and black love-slaves. The cameo of Mahed and his graceless Russian mistress is the only episode in the novel that upholds this stereotype, but each of the book's racially mixed relationships is passed as a matter of course through the post-modernist fiction's deconstructive sieve of stock literary types and tropes, reduced by time and over-familiarity to comic-strip level (here, the Dark Lady, the Colonial Mistress, the White Destroyer), with the effect that the symbolic or representative signifier is given priority over its referent — "How I hate what she represents" (58), Koschin thinks of the American woman Barbara. Koschin, moreover, devises for his visiting English girlfriend, Nancy, an unashamedly novelettish past full of grandfathers and fiancés martyred in the noble struggles of romantic Latin American insurrections, and it is left unclear whether or not these magazine-romance revolutions are to be seen as existing in the same world, and being

of the same order of experience, as the historical Somali revolution which she now finds herself in the midst of. The two revolutions come to co-exist in an impossible space which exists nowhere except in the projected fictional universe of the written text. What kind of narrative needle is Farah/Koschin using to stitch together the different orders of reality zoned in his novel?

Koschin expresses the wish not to be the needle of the novel's title and epigraph, the needle that "clothes others whilst it remains naked" (70) which takes in, from the illusionist mode of modern realism, the estranged Flaubertian and Joycean artists, denuding themselves of material for their art and remaining "naturally leafless, naked during all seasons and at all times, while on other trees flowers are conceived and blossom" (70). Of course, even if we allow for the novel's verbal pyrotechnics (the virtuoso alliteration, graphic onomatopoeia, and outlandish homonymic punning), Farah's committed stance is as far removed as is imaginable from Joyce's neutralized aestheticism. But the book does bear many of the hallmarks of the post-modernist metafiction, notably its self-preoccupied textuality and linguistic self-absorption (the incestuous literary allusions and interior word games) and its narrative reflexiveness. Nancy is described on the second page as "an epilogue that spoils the strong point of a novel," the book contains at least one reference to its own publisher and the series in which it appeared, and Koschin confesses to have written a thesis on Joyce. (This habit of incorporating a character's written work into the author's is repeated with Margaritta's thesis on African National Security Services in *Sweet and Sour Milk*, Medina's critique of the revolution in *Sardines*, and Askar's court defence on the last page of *Maps*, which refers us back to the novel we have just read.) Also conspicuous are the metafiction's playful, parodic manipulation of stock literary figures and the accompanying narrative needle that *unstitches* and pulls things apart. The Fanonian stereotypes exist in contradistinction with what substantial human reality is constructed in the illusionist mode and, insofar as they fail to develop the book's cross-racial sexual relationships as valid vehicles for social and political comment (on Russian and American neo-colonialism), they are *deconstructed* by them. During the geographical and historical tour of Mogadiscio in the last two move-

ments, in which the sexual centre of interest is virtually dissolved, the private relationships become unstitched from the political commentary and the flat 'literary' representations — the types and archetypes — come away from the more 'realistic' ones. The psychological interest has been taken out of the mythological arena and rezoned.

These self-conscious reconstructive and deconstructive energies are not confined to Farah's apprenticeship-fiction but can be seen also at work, in more hallucinatory and nightmarish contexts, in the more solid achievement of the sombre trilogy of novels, *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*. These works reveal many of the standard features of the post-modernist fiction, notably the collapsing of ontological boundaries by multiple, superimposed orders of reality, the conspicuous and ingenious play of analogic motif and parallelism, the 'transworld' identities of characters who reappear in novel after novel, and the favouring of fragmented, composite characters — spaces inhabited by multiple presences — over unitary personalities. As regards Farah's network of trans-novel characters, or *retour de personnages* (Alter 99), it is perhaps worth noticing that, although on one level there is maintained the realistic illusion of the characters' continuing lives outside the texts, the characters' essential properties seldom carry over from one text to another (Medina, Margaritta, and Dulman are merely names in the novels where they make no appearances) and characters do not always correspond with their intertextual signifiers (the mature Ebla of *Sardines* seems to have little continuity with the adolescent Ebla of the early *From a Crooked Rib*), so that the fictional ontology is alternately reinforced and destabilized and the novels' intertextuality is of both the 'zonal' and the illusionist kind. As Ian Adam has observed, Farah patterns his people compulsively into pairs, establishing bold identifications between rival fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, domestic and political patriarchs, victims and avengers, teachers and pupils, in ways that put the Western reader in mind of alternative mirror-worlds or parallel universes ("Intertextuality" 40-42, "Murder" 205-07).

This tendency is most marked in *Sweet and Sour Milk*, where confusions of identity amid a malaise of political misinformation cause Loyaan to fear that he may not be an autonomous being but

is perhaps really part of a composite imaginative construct put together from the literature of twins, a Siamese-soul called Soyaan-Loyaan, with interchangeable parts. In *Sardines*, Farah provides not a collection of individuals but a composite portrait of Somali womanhood in which all the women, packed into the same suffocating social sardine tin, become aspects of one another, their characters interpenetrative and complementary. Farah has said that "everyone contains different things — the woman in the child, the man in the woman and so on," that in his novels "an intellectual and psychological debate is going on between two selves — the woman's self in the man, the man's self in the woman" (Moss 1827-28). In *Sardines*, Westernization brings out the latent feminine in Samater and the masculine in Medina. In *Maps*, however, even these conventional categories are dissolved and the bounds of the realistic frame burst both by collapsing ontological divisions and by interchanging sexual roles. "Every image floats vaguely in a sea of doubt," runs the epigraph from Conrad, and on the dreamscapes of this novel everything is of transitional and indeterminate identity, melting from one form into another.

Even in the twilight zone of *Close Sesame*, the third volume of the *Dictatorship* trilogy, the reality/metaphor axis turns on a fine but firm line (between, for example, the mysterious Khaliif's literal madness and symbolic sanity), whereas in *Maps* sexual, national, and ontological boundaries are straddled — by the hero Askar, a child of the disputed territory of the Ogaden — in such a way as to dissolve the distinctions between the things they divide. Askar is simultaneously male and female, Somali and Ethiopian, and, "half-man, half-child" (57), he is both a real child and the epic miracle-child of his adoptive mother's oral tales, endowed with supernatural insight and able to argue metaphysics at the age of seven. Born out of his mother's death and thus having "met death when not quite a being," he is a liminal creature, an occupant of the between-worlds space of the zone, a multiple character who has the privilege of "holding simultaneously multiple citizenships of different kingdoms" (11). In this novel, what has formerly served as an analogic order is actualized and the frontier is collapsed into the border territory of the mind, where the imaginary and fantastic are made fact, metaphors literal, the surreal real.

Consequently, the trans-sexual spirits in the *mingis* ceremony at the centre of the book are not merely symbolic of the way that we live inside one another as a result of the physical intimacy of the crucial early years (male in female, the childless surrogate-mother in the motherless male child). Neither is menstruality merely a metaphor for the indiscriminate effects of the world, political and cosmic, upon the human body (though it is this).

There is a deliberately puzzling indeterminacy in *Maps* as regards where metaphor ends and literal reality starts, where mindscape (or dreamscape) passes into landscape and, in this epic of the human body, where the personal becomes the public body. In the excessively ordered reality of superimposed layers which Farah has interpolated from the history of the Ogaden in this work, there is a constant erosion of physiological into topographical space, of organs into organisms and menstrual into military maps, so that the death-cycle of Misra's body is made to correspond exactly with, and therefore to signify, the deaths of the six hundred she is accused of betraying in the Ogaden War. Askar's extraordinary psychic rapport with his adoptive mother is expressed in his sympathetic menstruation and his illness during the week of Ethiopia's reoccupation of the Ogaden; Hilaal, who takes the feminine role in his marriage to Salaado, undergoes a quasi-menstrual depression at Misra's disappearance, and there is an eclipse of the moon at her murder. Askar's maps seem to denote the distancing and the deathly mental control of reality through the imposition of false boundaries and it becomes apparent from Hilaal's shrewd observations that Misra corresponds to the young partisan's moral map of her no more than the Horn of Africa corresponds to the Somali ones: both are mental fictions. But Askar's consciousness is *our* map in the novel and here it is the map that determines reality, the sign's conceptual space that annexes the human signified and decides the shape of the world, not the other way round. Zoned as she is into so many figures, Misra is a floating signifier that expands to take in rival fantasy embodiments — mother, martyr, betrayer, national enemy — and it is difficult to say exactly what does constitute her reality or if a coherent constructed reality that resists Askar's ontological inversion has been provided for her at all in the book. On the novel's last page, as Askar struggles to free

himself to blame for her death, his own personality fragments in like manner into defendant, plaintiff, juror, witness, judge, and audience. Like the dreamscapes of the novel, the improbable space where alone they can have their existence, their reality is finally unboundaried and unmappable.

In Angela Carter's novel *The Passion of New Eve*, the heroine, who is also engaged in a kind of literary cartography, reflects after travelling across a futuristic America of warring zones that she has "lived in systems which operated within a self-perpetuating reality, a series of enormous solipsisms, a tribute to the existential freedom of the land of free enterprise" (167). Into this epistemological wilderness the denizens import their own significances, all believing themselves to be in possession of the 'true' reality. Medina and Sagal, in Farah's *Sardines*, engage in much the same sort of mental activity in the quite different political environment of totalitarian oppression, though the post-modernist indexings to 'objective' reality are here more political than cultural and psychological, and the peculiar affirmation of spirit essentially private and dualistic rather than public and collective. In *Sardines*, we are aware, as with Loyaan's reassembling of Soyaan's life in the previous book, of minds self-consciously engaged in the quasi-fictional reconstruction of reality after the event. It is another of Farah's novels of discourse and debate (with Medina as a more serious, female Koschin), written at an intellectual distance from and on a theoretic slant to events. Sagal, whose element as the national swimming champion is water, is conceived by Medina as "wearing a watery grin, squinting slightly" at an imperceptive angle to reality and is much given to "inventing futures for herself" (128), while in the psychology of her mentor fluidity and fixation paradoxically mingle. On the one hand, it is Medina's habit to fictionalize her own past and reconstruct a multiplicity of possible motives for her actions, none of which is apparently to be preferred above the others, and she is abetted in this by the plurality of oral versions of her doings (notably, her abandonment of Samater) which are rumoured into circulation hot on the heels of the event.

Delighting in her existential doubts, Medina appropriates others' versions of her own actions (Sagal's, Nasser's) as is convenient (63, 82). The flexibility, however, is born of fixation. Medina is

the bookish intellect caged by political repression, struggling to construct its own human reality to rival the political unreality outside but, in the process, driven paranoiacally in upon itself to the point where it confuses the personal with the political and starts to mistake its own fictional reconstructions for fact. According to Ebla, "Medina was offered the pen with which she wrote herself off" (41). Placed under a banning order and virtual house arrest, Medina writes herself out of the public, political world and into a private, fictional world, where she has but a single disciple, her protégé Sagal, and a captive audience of one, her eight-year-old daughter Ubx. From the boundaried isolation of a room in her brother Nasser's house — "In Medina's mind the world was reduced to a room" (24) — Medina proceeds privately to restructure the world in the light of a few narrow, self-righteous ideological principles:

She reconstructed the story from the beginning. She worked it into a set of pyramids which served as foundations for one another. Out of this, she erected a construction of great solidity and strength. She then built mansions on top of it all, mansions as large as her imagination and with lots of chambers that led off corridors in which she lost herself. . . . She roamed about in the architecture of her thoughts. (2)

If the house is Medina's life — "a life defined like the boundaries of a property" (6) — and the room her mind, in which her thoughts walk up and down unhindered, its spaces are the blank pages on which will be constructed her book criticizing the revolution (*this* book, in effect, since her consciousness occupies the largest space in it), and the furniture signifies whatever inconveniences distract the writer from her obsession: "one's mind bumped into things, was distracted by the material things around" (17). It is all, in reality, a giant solipsism, a monstrous projection of the subjective will which claims immoderately to have shaken the foundations of the national house of Somalia, overrun by Soviet "white ants" — "the ground below her shook with seismic determination" — and rendered her "a full and active participant in the history of her country" (250). The room is, finally, a reductive metaphor for the intransigent idealist's and self-absorbed novelist *manqué's* selfish rearrangement of others' lives, as if they were

merely the furniture of her own brain, and of her own life in a way that is heedless of the effects upon others who come into contact with it: "She has created a habitat in which she alone can function. . . . She put the chair in the wrong place in the dark. When Samater awoke he stumbled on it and broke his neck" (243).

The challenge to the regime issued by Medina's desertion of house and husband amounts to little more than a self-indulgent ideological gesture that takes little account of the circumstances at hand — does she expect Samater to wink at the wiping out of his clansmen by refusing the ministerial appointment? — and finally leaves the enemy (Idil and the General) in charge of the spoils (Samater and Somalia). Sagal, who learns well from Medina's doctrinaire vision of the whole of reality as political and all the nation's ills as explicable in terms of the dictator's personality, even deceives herself into interpreting her seduction of an ill-treated West Indian visitor as a political act — the child she bears him will "prick the nation's conscience with guilt" (116). But what is doubly disturbing about this fantasy-ridden politics is that it shares the totalitarian state's own frightening capacity for making a merely nominal sense of reality prevail over the actual, for promoting principle irrelevantly over particulars, ideology over instance. (Significantly Medina, in the first chapter, is described as being as unbending as her patriarchal father.) Medina's ability, illustrated in the room imagery, to proliferate metonymic motifs regardless of occasion is evidenced, ominously, in the political rape of Amina, who is regarded by her assailants merely as a metonymic attribute of her father, so that the attribute becomes the thing it stands for: "We're doing this not to you," they tell her, "but your father" (119). It is also present in the wilful official fiction perpetrated by the state that a sixteen-year-old American-born daughter of Somali expatriates on her first trip, as a tourist, to the land of her ancestors is really a Somali citizen on whose person they have licence to perform a brutal circumcision.

In *Sardines*, the solipsisms are realistically framed, the paranoia politically placed. Medina and her pupil compulsively ideologize everything because they are victims of a confusion of the personal and the political, which has become a standard feature of existence

in a country where it is no longer possible either to challenge the dictator's power or to disentangle private matters from his stranglehold on public life: hence the equations "Idil *in* the General, the personal *in* the political" (245). Moreover, the uncertainties are mainly of the epistemological kind, the results of ideological fixations, alternative rumoured versions of the same event, and speculative reconstructions of motives. In *Sweet and Sour Milk*, however, it is the individual's ontological hold on the world that is rendered insecure; the questions raised are ones of existence rather than identity, not of knowing but being; what is now uncertain is not who but what and *if* people are. In this novel, we are back squarely in the literary terrain of the zone.

According to the system of 'Dionysius's Ear' (135), the surveillance network uncovered in Soyaan's Memorandum, a barely literate General recruits his security corps of spies and informers from illiterates working entirely in the oral medium. Nothing is written down: there are no death certificates, no arrest warrants (telephoned instructions suffice), no lists of detainees or recorded particulars. A detainee, Loyaan reflects, "might be here for six months, a name untraceable, a person unregistered, a man inexistent" (196). Everything is done on rumour and hearsay, and gossip and libellous speculation are deliberately fostered to sustain the atmosphere of suspicion and uncertainty, of being "kept guessing" (*Sardines* 140), required by the dictator. (In *Sardines*, a Somali poet notes that the ear, the organ of both the oral culture and the general's police system, is shaped like a question mark.) In this oral malaise the underground Group of Ten who challenge obscurantist authority pin their faith to the written word, which Ibrahim wishfully thinks "more powerful than the gun" (139), because there is nothing else with which to fix the flux, or even prove the existence, of human experience; nothing to insist that people really lived and events really happened. But it becomes clear that the real sources of power, and the means of determining public perception of reality, lie elsewhere. The fate of literate protest against unalphabetized tyranny is, in fact, sounded ominously during the retrospective beach scene between Soyaan and Margaritta at the beginning of the book, where the narrative voice hints chillingly at a distant police presence just as Soyaan's name is washed

from the sand by the tide: "The solidity of his body in the water's transparency flowed into ripples of fantasy" (12). Here, in the novel's Prologue — in the dissolving of solid, stable realities into fantasy, the washing away of words, the symbolic erasure of the written text — the pattern for the book is set. In this work, Farah pursues the implications for texts — for his own text — in a mode of reality built on oral discourse and asks what happens to language when nothing is happening — in the sense of being written — in it.

One possible option is for the text to retreat deeper and virtually disappear into its 'writtenness.' Partly in imitation of, partly in resistance to, the totalitarian political reality, it becomes darkly hermetic, an opaque hieroglyph whose meanings have vanished into cryptic underground codes: the John Wain poem scribbled by Soyaan on the back of Marco's photograph; the mysterious monosyllables dropped down the telephone by Xassan, minimally echoic to thwart the General's Dionysian cave of listening devices; and Soyaan's secret "alphabet of mysteries" (71) — "I/M" (Ibrahim/Medina/Mulki?) and "M to the power of 2" (Margaritta and Marco, Mogadiscio and Moscow?). Given the paranoid context of persecuted print where written texts are both threatening and threatened, Farah's own narrative develops into a correspondingly obscure and evasive text in the face of the reader's interrogation of it for possible clues, so that the uncertainty of the questing protagonist becomes the reader's own. Much of the text is taken up by questions but they are, in Loyaan's phrase, "[w]hys and no wherefores" (51) and "endless questions, unprovidable answers" (62). The book itself retreats into Soyaan's secret codes, recreating the atmosphere of confusion and mistrust spread by the General, and, as Ian Adam has observed, the awaited clarifying closure of the political thriller and detective novel encouraged by the book's form is finally dissolved in a polygraphy of possible meanings (209-10).

Alternatively, the public oral code begins to infiltrate the written text, which in turn takes on certain selected characteristics of the oral modes of discourse privileged by the regime: notably, the oral narrative's reconstructive and reinventive capacities, its talent for the improvisation of alternative versions in the retelling of tales;

the subsequently unstable order of meaning, susceptible to variation, omission, changes of emphasis and shifts of shape; the vagaries of characterization and fluid indeterminacy of form; and, most dangerous in the present political context, the interpretative openness that follows inevitably from a form of discourse which is audience-orientated rather than performer-centred. "Let everybody interpret things as they wished," Loyaan despairs at the systematic misinterpretation of the facts of his brother's life by their policeman-father and the police-state that he serves (138). In this novel lives, like plots coming and going in an epic narrative, are reimaginable and in theory infinitely interpretable. *Sweet and Sour Milk* is full of reinterpretable microcosmic oral 'texts,' notably the symbolic vignettes of weather and skyscape that follow the epigraphs, and the riddlingly eloquent butcher's 'text' of the tribal goat, tortured for its own enlightenment before being ritually slaughtered:

I am training her so that she can grasp the meaning of death before I slaughter it. Your father has, with the money he paid for her head, taught her what it means to be separated from where she was born and her tribal masters. She grasped that being dragged here. Now I've cut the tribal ear. A little later, I shall gladly administer death to her. (209)

The butcher's parable is perhaps most obviously and immediately interpretable as a pat exemplum for Loyaan who determines not to be surprised by anything: "Unlike Soyaan whom death had surprised, Loyaan would be ready for it" (208). But a few pages on the text shifts slightly when Margaritta tells him: "There is this wrong notion that Soyaan was unprepared for death when it came. . . . He wasn't surprised by death. You yourself have seen the poem he copied on the back of Marco's photograph" (225). In the light of this information, Soyaan himself becomes the goat in the fable, either as a sacrificial martyr to a spurious revolution or as a scapegoat, focusing the wrath of the regime on the rising tide of anti-Soviet activities and issuing a warning to the other members of the underground Group of Ten. Alternatively, the butcher's text may present a broader image of modern Somalia, decaying and moribund under a tribal dictator, and of all of its Westernized

intellectuals, uprooted from their birthplaces but still psychologically scarred by their tribal heritage and facing a choice of deaths: the atrophy of exile or torture and execution. Of course, the episode may be merely a gratuitous exhibition of personal sadism. But the point may be that the regime's political imbecility resists intelligibility in any terms other than those of personal power mania. The parable of the goat stands reflexively, perhaps, as a sinister paradigm of Somali reality under an obscurantist dictator and of a regime which is fundamentally uninterpretable — and therefore infinitely interpretable. In *Sardines*, the oralist Idil, a mental as well as a cultural nomad and the matriarchal representative of the General on the domestic front, is fully at home in this many-versioned reality, which she can easily remould into the shape of her own obsessive vision:

And by the time you were ready to ask her a question, you would discover that she had already moved on . . . she had changed residence and had nomaded away, impermanent. . . . (7)

Idil's ball of thread rolled away. . . . She began to thread-draw in her mind a past with patterns different from the one she had the intention of re-narrating. . . . Idil counted the number of holes she had to jump in order to form a pattern. (78)

In the tangled webs of both the General's and Idil's oral texts, the 'holes' or lacunae, the interpretative spaces and absences around the words, are as important as the words themselves in the forming of patterns. The anti-matter generated by the text is equal to the matter — indeed, *is* the matter. The oral mode is, in a very post-modernist way, an uncentred or off-centred form of discourse, subject to the law of the omitted centre or excluded middle, and there is in *Sweet and Sour Milk* a prevailing motif of uncentredness which ties together its protagonist's psychological and philosophical dilemmas, its political themes, and its indexings to oral conventions. The ontological crisis is not merely a personal phenomenon here but is part of a broader national and continental malaise.

In Margaritta's polemical monologue and Loyaan's reflected responses, Somalia (and modern Africa which it serves as a microcosm of) is itself envisaged as a centreless and featureless void, a kind of zero-zone into which anything can be put and of which

anything can be made. It is a space inhabited by so many inauthentic foreign and indigenous presences but without any inner core of reality: after the British and Italian colonizers come “KGBs and CIA espionage networks” to take up residence alongside “wizardry and witchcraft and hair-burning rites of sorcery” (148) and the “make-believe” lives of Western-educated élites who turn Africa into “a textbook reproduction of European values and western thinking” (124). The history of the ancient European world as presented through the twins’ Italian education is a mass of solid documentation: “. . . history as chiselled out of the harshness of rocks, come the Greeks themselves, the Sicilians, the Normans, the Arabs . . .” (168). At school “they were told they had no history” (131). Its past envisaged as an oral blank, Somalia has no history or, alternatively, has too much history and in too many variant versions for any of it to be certain. Its pre-literate, pre-colonial history is conceived as an endlessly reinvented narrative, improvised over a factual vacuum and on which each successive regime plays its own variations before an obliging mass audience. Its more recent, post-colonial history is reconstituted at the whim of dictators, frequently in terms of the flat, cartoon-like fictions that inform Keynaan’s traditional pre-heliocentric view of the universe — “the flat universe of Father’s calculable dimensions” as against “the oval-shaped one of solar and lunar evolutions and revolutions” (106) — but even these are imitative of foreign propagandist practices: “Loyaan refers us to the Hungarian Uprising and Prague Spring (one might add the recent Beijing Massacre), and to the “official” government version’s polarization of the population into heinous reactionary rebels and heroic “revolutionary” armies (103, 106). Soyaan, Loyaan observes wryly, died of revolutionary heroism.

Somalia’s political uncentredness is matched by the decentred lives of its intellectuals. Margaritta, limiting the relevance of her past affair with the Minister in the matter of Soyaan’s death, marginalizes her influence — “I am not central to all that has taken place” (228) — while Beydan has a recurring dream in which she is not only not the centre but is not even there, and at his funeral, Soyaan was “the centre of this festivity although, just like Beydan in her dream, he too wasn’t there” (231). Because

there is no route by which his writings might pass into the oral discourse privileged by the regime, Soyaan's fate is that he will be remembered, not by their complex truths, but by the oral slogans that refashion him into a myth. These lives are not centred upon themselves but are satellites of other forces, rotating in an interpretative void, and their meanings are not traceable to any single stable order of reality but float in a multiplicity of versions. The manufacturer of this many-versioned malaise and the ringmaster of its peculiar epistemological circus is, of course, the General. Somalia's Islamic militarism is centred on key political and religious signs in a written code, but the General's substitution of his own personality for the constitution — "I *am* the constitution" (226) — and his bowdlerization of the Koran into a collection of slogans and hackneyed praise-songs — "There is no General but our General" (100) — has had the effect of decentring Somalia's political reality, placing phrases like "radical governments" and "revolutionary socialism" (19) in parentheses and inverted commas that hold them at a remove from the real thing. A similar indeterminacy informs characterization. Under the stage-management of the General, "Mulki," the sister of Ibrahim who allegedly types Soyaan's secret memorandum, is an active character enclosed in inverted commas. She is wholly 'oral' in conception, a character for whom there is neither documentary evidence, in photographic or written records, within the contexts of realism nor any other form of narrative confirmation, and who suffers — indeed, exists — solely on the doubtful hearsay of police informers and government spies.

Farah has said in his recent essay "Why I Write" that "Somalia was a badly written play" and "Siyad Barre was its author . . . he was also the play's main actor, its centre and theme; as an actor-producer, he played all the available roles" (1597). The more precise analogy that suggests itself in the novel is of the General as a species of debased oral performer; a malevolent, diabolically inventive kind of oral historian, ringing endless surprises and variations on the theme of silencing dissidents, fabricating imagined alternatives for the lives of his trampled victims and, with the help of men like Keynaan, breathing life into lies that travesty their real ones. An astute and wily performer, he serves up for his na-

tion's oral epics, sung by his "griots in green," new "heroes and legendary figures about whom one tells stories to children and future generations" (183). In Farah's dark parody, however, there is none of the usual reciprocity between teller and listener. Instead of the griot's self-effacing assumption of a common identity with his audience and his instilling of a common sense of reality into it, the aim is, through sheer imposition of the dictatorial will, to render the audience's hold on these things unsure. The General's ideal audience consists not of active, contributing participants but of passive assenters who can rearrange themselves into any shape required or, alternatively, have none to begin with: brainwashed buffoons mouthing official dogma; political stooges like Keynaan, men with no core of identity who will stoop to any baseness to ingratiate themselves with power; and beggars, who are so compliantly impressionable and manipulable that it is impossible to surprise them. "Here was an audience willing to hear anything" (231), says Loyaan of the latter. Appropriately, those who are most attuned to the General's protean oral reality are themselves adept shape-changers who, in one symbolic scene, actually transform themselves before Loyaan's eyes in response to the visitations of power: "The beggars no longer resembled the remnants of a plane-crash. No, they were the passengers of a third-class train, stirring forward, jerking, shaking, speaking. . . . Power had chosen to visit them. The Minister to the Presidency and his entourage of cars and security men had arrived" (229). Loyaan notes that beggars, unlike Beydan, Soyaan, and Margaritta, "are the centre of their dreams" (234); but it is a hollow centre, a void where identity should be, a blank ready to be moulded into any form. In the centreless world of oral-based totalitarian power, the beggar becomes the image for the average citizen.

Sweet and Sour Milk, Ian Adam argues at the end of his penetrating article "The Murder of Soyaan Keynaan," uses the forms of the detective novel, and the mystery-suspense and political thriller, only to depart from them, and it does so, I think, because its ontology is essentially more complex and sophisticated than theirs. Adam expresses a reluctance to reduce the novel's rejection of final answers to the hermeneutic scepticism of the *nouveau roman* and thus to 'post-modernize' Farah's text in any hardline way, arguing

that the novel's comparative lack of closure is more ethical than epistemological in origin: Farah, he contends, "clearly sets the notion of collective activity, of collaboration and consensus" against the detective novel's relatively egocentric and authoritarian notion of a single leader and rescuer (a General-figure) who "ties up all the loose ends" (210). It is certainly true that, even though the clandestine organization has been decimated at the end of this novel and lies dormant in the next one, the ideal of collective resistance to one-man rule is kept alive as a positive force throughout the trilogy. It is also true, of course, that the figure of authority in Farah's novel could hardly fill the detective's role of tying up loose ends since he himself is the creator of them. Here the patriarchal messiah-figure is himself the mystifier-criminal element in the plot, the fabricator of an obscurantist order of reality, and there exists no other authoritative hermeneutic agent to counter his fabrications and provide a definitive version of events. Thus it is to be wondered (and Adam partly concedes so much) if Farah really intends us to be much closer at the end of the book than at the beginning to a true account of the events surrounding Soyaan's death. It is surely significant that Soyaan's fatal injection, like Mulki's torture, is presented in the form of frenzied dream and delirium in the protagonist's consciousness — he raves of "pale, ghostly beings which jabbed [him] with needles" (17) — so that unreality is deliberately conferred upon it, blurring the true and the imagined. There is finally no way that we can distinguish the 'real' from the merely represented, theatricalized Mulki, the incompetent actress who is wheeled onto the set at ministerial cue in the "badly written farce" (199) of the interrogation scene; and, given the elusiveness of the Prologue as a touchstone for 'objective' reality, there are ultimately no means by which we can know the 'real' Soyaan from the revolutionary artifact and mythical government property into which he is transformed. In what senses other than their outward representations can these persons be said to have existed since the facts of their lives are but figments of the General's personal scenario? Is Farah not undermining the whole idea that a knowable and verifiable personal reality is still discernible behind a coercive system of mystificatory political representations?

Even if the novel's vaporous, polymorphous political reality is not in excess of the requirements of the detective and political thriller genres, the highly poetic meteorological matter in which it is reflected surely is. Cloud formations, the night's phantasmagoric skylscapes and the sun, which "poured its blazing vapouriness upon everything" (146), constantly assume different shapes — camels, trees, garments, pillars, skulls — to the imagination playing its variations upon them. Like the regime's political enormities, they keep the beholder guessing, keeping always one step ahead of Loyaan's imagination which walks "the untrod landscape of the unknowable" (59). But when night falls "in a veil of darkness," Loyaan discovers, at one of the novel's crucial reflexive moments, that the art-work is really shoddy, the scenery badly painted, and that, like the political order of which it is a metaphor, there is really nothing behind it: "Empty at my touch like a soap bubble, everything reducible to nought, nothing. Inexistent at my remembering, like a dream" (143). Somali reality under the dictator constitutes not so much a slippery and confusing multiplicity of signs as a signless void, providing no forms in which coherent meanings can be expressed:

The night unrolled like a cotton thread, unfolding inch by inch; the night wove words of thready thoughts; the night stitched for him a blanket of comfort and warmth. . . . Every movement he heard had a meaning, and if it didn't he gave it one. The Security men were following him and making sure he stayed indoors, in one version. (205-06)

Then, right before Loyaan's and the world's eyes, all suddenly began to disintegrate like a worn-out piece of cloth a thick set of fingers has pulled asunder. (210-11)

The sun's sudden dismantling of the "fabric of schemata" (211), the text written upon the night by Loyaan's imagination, is indirectly an image of Farah's own text deconstructively unstitching itself. What looks like an unfolding of meaning turns out to be an unravelling of the entire fabric in which meaning should reside: the novel's ontological barriers are themselves breached and the proliferation of 'versions' precludes the literary representation of reality as the discovery of indivisible truths.

"You always lose hold of your own reality," the dying Soyaan was informed by his mother, and those who try to track down the facts of the dead man's life — Loyaan, the reader — find their own hold upon the world weakened. As Loyaan is unable to unravel the butcher's tortuous text of the goat, so the novel's narrative plot is unable to unravel the details and motives of the political-criminal plot to murder and mythologize Soyaan. We are told in the final chapter that only Ladan, who has hidden Soyaan's writings in a place known to herself alone, will be able to resume control of Loyaan's narrative quest and restitch the true text of Soyaan's life — "Ladan is that Solomonic thread which connects all, which stitches the holes its needle has made" (225) — but we do not hear of Ladan again in the trilogy and the precise whereabouts of Soyaan's scripts (and written texts like this one) are left uncertain and ill-defined: "The sky is too high to reach and hide them in, the earth too earthy and too exposed" (224). At the end of *Sweet and Sour Milk*, Beydan, as in her dream, dies giving birth to a child called Soyaan who twenty years later, Loyaan speculates, may or may not recover the truth about his dead namesake (218). What alone is clear at the end of the book is Farah's intention that what is finally delivered or brought to fruition — the truth about Soyaan, the revival of the written word that will give it expression, or this book which keeps such hopes alive — should be left unclear. What survives may be all or none of these. At the end of the zone may be a multiple or a zero.

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