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Autocracy and the Limits of Identity: A Reading of the Novels of Nuruddin Farah

by
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Authoritarianism in the family as well as autocracy in the state against a background of an intense and passionate search for and assertion of identity by individuals and by groups form the alternating and often inter-locking angles of vision towards which the fiction of Nuruddin Farah is moving. The author's note at the end of Close Sesame tells us:

One last word. Close Sesame is the third part of a trilogy which began with Sweet & Sour Milk (1979) and whose second part is Sardines (1981). The overall title of the trilogy is: Variations on the theme of an African Dictatorship.¹

The clusters of linguistic resources mustered by Farah in all of his novels point in two directions which continually criss-cross along an enormous historical and spatial canvas. Elsewhere in a study of the symbolism and imagery of change in African literature a similar use of recurrent clusters of linguistic resources was termed "semiotic constants".² In the novels of Nuruddin Farah, especially in Sweet & Sour Milk, Sardines, and Close Sesame, the unnamed General casts a shadow over everyone and everything in Somalia. He is presented to us complete with his ninety-nine names and his slogans including one which tells us that "there is no general but our General".³ The General is a product of the peculiar circumstances surrounding the history of Somalia. In his manipulation and oppression of the people of Somalia, however, he belongs to a type which has become all too familiar on the African continent. Nothing, and certainly no one, seems able to dislodge him from the strangle-hold which he exercises on his country. It should surprise no one that he is able with impunity to blaspheme the discourse of Islam. His faith-like ideologies which he discards at will are only marriages of convenience. What really matters to him is a kinship system which dates back to nomadic times. His policies, such as they are, are built around a Machiavellian manipulation of the clan structure of Somalia. It has been observed that in "real" life General Siad Barre pays his greatest attention to three clans. These are:

- (a) the Marehan, his own clan
- (b) the Ogaden, his mother's clan
- (c) the Dulbahante, his son-in-law's clan.⁴

It is important to distinguish the novelist's General from that of historians and social scientists as failure to do so has often resulted in reviewers and critics insisting on reading or wanting to write books which they feel Farah should have written. Nuruddin Farah's General is the sum-total of the motifs, images, symbols, episodes, and even epigraphs employed in his novels.

In Sweet & Sour Milk, for example, Keynaan exercises his prerogative as a father and as a patriarch to cause pain to his sons. When they are young he vividly implants in their tender minds the image of absolute cruelty:

Loyaan was with Soyaan, and the twins were fighting over a ball. Towering above was this massive figure, their father, who snatched the ball from them and cut it in two.⁵

That such a cruelty is defended on cultural grounds enables Farah to neatly equate Keynaan with the General and to show how the General, like a typical authoritarian father, is dispensing cruelty, intrigue, secrecy as well as the rewards and punishment characteristic of a regime which thrives on sycophancy and the manipulation of ethnic divisions in society. Keynaan appropriates to himself the power of life and death over his wife and over his children in the same way that the General appropriates to himself the power of life and death over the people of Somalia. We are then able to see why Farah's General exercises such a strangle-hold over his country. Above all, we are able to seriously ponder over the real source of the "staying power" of some of Africa's more notorious dictators. Their authoritarianism is accorded a base in social arrangements which have long become a burden to contemporary Africa but which continue to exercise a great influence on the majority of Africa's populations. When the General decides to undermine Soyaan's standing among the members of his band of intellectuals who have resolved to "tackle" the regime, he uses Soyaan's own father to have the dead Soyaan posthumously made out to be a supporter of the regime's policies. Soyaan is falsely said to have uttered with his dying breath one of those very slogans he has been detesting all his life: "Labour is honour and there is no general but our General".⁶ The basis of the General's success here is to be found in the attitude of Soyaan's father, Keynaan, towards his sons. He feels and maintains that he can do with them whatever he wants, including handing over the story of Soyaan's life to the General's functionaries who "doctor" it according to their own image. His reasons for such a sacrilege are as old as patriarchy and the nomads' wells in the desert:

I am the father. It is my prerogative to give life and death as I find fit. I've chosen to breathe life into Soyaan. And remember one thing, Loyaan: if I decide this minute to cut you in two, I can. The law of this land invests in men of my age the power. I am the Grand Patriarch.⁷

In "real" life the "Grand Patriarch" of Somalia cuts people in halves as if their lives did not mean very much. Between October 1969, when he took power, and the middle of 1980, Siad Barre had already executed sixty-one people and imprisoned without trial many more.⁸ There have been many more executions and detentions since then. In Sweet & Sour Milk Farah mentions only one execution, that of the ten sheikhs who are accused of using religion "for the purpose of breaking up the unity of the Somali people or weakening or damaging the authority of the Somali state".⁹ The seemingly muted voice which such a selection carries has its own quiet strength. It is not until the third part of the trilogy, in Close Sesame, that Farah takes us back to the murderous sanctions through which the General keeps the people of Somalia in perpetual fear of his secret police. In Close Sesame one of the people accused of a failed plot to assassinate the General happens to be a member of the clan which is in alliance with the General's own clan. This man is neither detained nor charged with any crime. The General simply orders the man's clan to "look into the matter" and the clan prevails on the man's father to kill his own son to appease the General. The logic behind this kind of cruelty is similar to the one used by Keynaan in Sweet & Sour Milk to desecrate his son's memory. A father's unquestionable right to deal with his son as he sees fit derives from his having been "the man who planted and watered the tree in question. If a farm is yours, what you do with your trees is primarily your business and no one else's."¹⁰ It is in Close Sesame that the General's manipulation of the clan structure of Somali society comes into its own. The remote and shadowy figure of the General is in everything and in everyone's life and yet the immediate impression is that of clans fighting among themselves while the real culprit continues to remain detached from it all. He resuscitates clan animosities by seeming to give power to the clans while closely monitoring their discussions and making sure that his secret police plants the right amount of fear in everyone's mind.

The power of Nuruddin Farah's fiction lies less in any of its plots than in the author's ability to compress time to a few days and space to a remarkably limited geographical area at the same time he covers events which encompass the lives of several generations and the landscape of the whole of Somalia. In Farah's fiction very little seems to happen and yet we are shown a great deal of what constitutes the lives

of ordinary people. Sweet & Sour Milk is the most accomplished example of Farah's handling of compression. We do not begin the story at the beginning but somewhere near the end which is itself a beginning. Most of our time will be spent not with the central character who suddenly "hiccups his last" after a food poisoning in which the hands of the General and his KGB advisers hover in the background, but with his twin brother who in arranging his brother's funeral comes face to face with the kind of intrigue, bureaucracy, and persecution from which his work as a provincial dental officer has until now shielded him. What we end up following with keen interest is the education of the dead man's twin brother into the intricate web of life and death in a police state. The twin brothers have similar sounding names: Soyaan and Loyaan. Indeed one of the mourners at Soyaan's funeral continually speaks of the deceased as Loyaan even after being corrected by Loyaan himself and by the other mourners. The national daily speaks of Loyaan when it means Soyaan and ends up canonising the wrong "martyr". What Farah is doing here is to make the individual identity of the victims of autocracy less important to the reader than their representational or symbolic significance. Soyaan becomes everyman, though by his education, training and position as an economist in the office of the President he belongs to his country's intelligentsia. Farah is consequently showing us that even this group is powerless before the General. Loyaan's father tells us that the General has nothing to fear from Somalia's intellectuals:

"The General fears no threat which might come from you and your lot. You have no common ideology for which you fight. You have no organised protest. Skirts. Air tickets to Europe. Posh cars. These are what you are after. Security provides them, and you are no threat. The General fears tribal chieftains or men of his age."¹¹

We have already seen how even those men of his own age can be made to do what the General wants them to do. Sweet & Sour Milk gives us not only an intellectual who represents the other intellectuals in his country but also manages to show us in what way these intellectuals are now "captives" in their own country.¹² We also see how one family has become the symbol of all the divided families in Somalia where children see one thing and their parents see something else. Soyaan's funeral enables us to see all classes of society and to gather both from what they say and what they can only say in whispers the atmosphere of silence and fear which the General's regime has inculcated in everyone. As the funeral arrangements slowly unfold and the procession unwinds its way to the cemetery we learn about the Byzantine ways of Somali

bureaucracy which bear an uncanny resemblance to other bureaucracies all over Africa. Farah's portrayal of autocracy shows how closely African dictatorships resemble one another. The scene at Soyaan's funeral could have taken place anywhere in Africa today. The obligations towards beggars and towards the poor are similar to those we see in Sembene Ousmane's Senegal. The treatment of beggars during the visits of foreign heads of state is also familiar. In some countries the police go so far as to lock up people with criminal records even though at the time of the visit such people have not actually committed any crime.

From the day Soyaan dies after coming home complaining of stomach disorder to the day his brother Loyaan is forced into the splendid exile of a minor diplomatic posting takes only a week. Yet it is within the space of that week that we are able to learn a great deal not only about the twin brothers and their family, but also and especially about their unhappy country. It is everyday life we see in Farah's novels. What is new and refreshing is how in presenting everyday life Farah manages to take us on a journey of exploration through the intricate tangles of life in the Mogadiscio which the General's repression and ethnocentrism have created. We see how ordinary people have learned to distinguish fact from the regime's fiction. We see the social life of all classes of society especially that of the country's middle-class intelligentsia. Above all, we see how the regime closely watches the movements of this intelligentsia and how it succeeds in neutralising whatever thoughts of resistance such an intelligentsia might be capable of organising. Soyaan comes across as a lonely figure and it is easy to see how an unscrupulous regime would find it advantageous to co-opt him posthumously and destroy his standing among his friends. He has been fighting lonely battles with the General trying to humanize what is essentially an inhumane way of running a country. During one such confrontation the General is irritated by Soyaan's insistence on constitutionalism and by his protest at the execution of the ten sheiks who had been accused of using religion to undermine the unity of the people of Somalia. We find the General resorting to the kind of argument dictators have used throughout history:

"... have I ever introduced myself to you, young man? I am the constitution. Now you know who I am, and I want you out of here before I set those dogs of mine on you and you are torn to pieces. Out."¹³

Fighting lonely battles is as frustrating and as futile as attempting to change autocracy from within. The problem with the "captive intelligentsia" of Nuruddin Farah's Somalia as with their equally captive

brothers and sisters in other parts of Africa is that they have been either politically marginalised by being isolated from the rest of society or co-opted into their countries' ruling and exploitative elites.¹⁴ In such a situation any meaningful attempt at influencing change is bound to lead to the sort of bizarre preoccupation with secret memoranda and "kamikaze" attempts at assassinating the General which form the bulk of the "detective" layers of both Sweet & Sour Milk and Close Sesame. The ennui of a life in which revolution and discussions on change are confined to the closed doors of the houses of a close-knit band of intellectuals can be seen in the demandingly slow pace at which Sardines moves. Little happens here--precious little that we do not already know from earlier novels about the repression and ethnocentricity which characterize the General's rule. What Farah achieves in Sardines although the novel is part of the trilogy concerning dictatorship is a dramatization of the kind of narcissistic "much ado about nothing" which now takes up most of the time of Somalia's frustrated intellectuals, especially that of women such as Medina and her disciple and protege Sagal who appear to be steeped in mere frivolities.

We need to take a closer look at Farah's intellectuals. They are determined to do something about their country's repression but what they actually plan does not measure up to the magnitude of the repression going on in Somalia. That is why a close examination of Soyaan's famous memoranda may throw some light on the failure of Soyaan's group to bring about any meaningful change. Initially there seems to be only one memorandum which has now become the bone of contention between Soyaan's twin-brother Loyaan and the regime represented by the Minister to the Presidency. We later see that there are, in fact, several memoranda including one on which Soyaan had been collaborating with one of the General's Vice-Presidents. Taken together these memoranda accurately describe the level of repression going on in Somalia. They are also fairly detailed on the kind of culture of fear and silence which the regime has created.

"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 with no sense of dignity, nor integrity; men and women whose pride has been broken by the General's Security; men and women who have succumbed and accepted to be humiliated. Are you married? Do you have children? How many? Five? A wife and a mistress? Plus the tribal hangers-on who have just arrived and whom you support? Listen to the knock on your neighbour's door at dawn. Hearken: the army-boots have crunched grains of sand on the road leading away from your house. Listen to them hasten. When will your turn

come? Yesterday was your colleague's turn. You saw his wife wrapped in tears, you saw how she averted her eyes. Does she know where they have taken her husband? She goes from one police station to another. The police know who she is, and what she is seeking, but no one will tell her anything. Hearken: the army boots have crunched grains of sand on the pavement by your window. They've taken another. When will your turn come?"¹⁵

It is in the area of what needs to be done that the memoranda reflect weaknesses which are common to the thinking of intellectuals all over Africa. Those who become aware of the problems around them rarely come around to broadening their support among the peasants and the "people of the city" in their countries. There is in Soyaan's memoranda no mention of any recruitment drive beyond the circle of those intellectuals who know one another well. There is no analysis of the country's economic, social and political needs beyond the regime's repressive practices and the inordinate influence of the Soviets and their KGB. Admittedly when the power of the secret police is as extensive as it is in Farah's Somalia, proper organization and a thorough analysis of a country's deep-seated malaise become extremely difficult. What Soyaan's memoranda tell us about his group's programme of action as well as about its membership does not give us reason to expect any momentous change. His friend and close collaborator, Ibrahim "il Siciliano", tells Loyaan that the clandestine group of intellectuals and professionals who have taken an oath "to serve not the interests of any superpower but this nation's" would collect, disseminate and eventually publish information about the regime's atrocities:

"We can foretell that the written word, more powerful than the gun, will frighten them. In the chaos ensuing from that, and just as they start their purge, we will announce our clandestinity and publish a leaflet of our intention, and you will see that more people will adhere to it. Then we will baptise it as a movement, we will give it a name."¹⁶

No sooner are these words said than the speaker is taken into detention and Loyaan is forced into exile. The regime is not only ruthless but efficient in its ruthlessness. By the end of *Close Sesame*, which is also the end of Farah's trilogy devoted to the ways of the Siad Barre dictatorship, Soyaan's group has neither embarked on a recruitment drive nor expanded its membership beyond the confines of its own class, that of the petit bourgeois intellectuals. That makes the group an easy target for the regime's secret police and it comes as no surprise that

by the end of the trilogy the group has been decimated through detentions, exile, co-optation, and murder. Meanwhile the regime is saturating the nation with its propaganda and its slogans. Its Green Guards are busy turning their head of state into a god against whom all assassination attempts will prove futile. Against such an objective situation the kind of resistance chosen by Soyaan's group assumes the puny stature of the helpless little creatures pitted against implacable forces dramatized in the epigraphs to the chapters of Sweet & Sour Milk. Nowhere is the futility of attempting to assassinate the General made more poignant than in the final chapter of Close Sesame. In this chapter a nationalist hero who has distinguished himself in the struggle against colonialism and who has also suffered at the hands of Somalia's post-colonial rulers is drawn into his son's plot against the General after his son is killed in yet another unsuccessful attempt at assassinating the General. The old hero, Deeriye, comes quite close to shooting the General. He succeeds in infiltrating the presidential guards and is standing at attention as the President is awarding medals to heroes of the land. Deeriye also fails to assassinate the General and his failure brings home to Farah's readers one of those quirks of irony which come perilously close to lending ambiguity to the author's point of view. Deeriye pulls out, "by mistake, prayer-beads instead of a revolver to shoot the General..."¹⁷ In a different version of this tragic episode we are told that "the prayer-beads like a boa-constrictor, entwined themselves around the muzzle of the revolver-- and Deeriye could not disentangle it in time."¹⁸ As the old hero slumps to his death his body is nearly cut in half by the machine-gun fire of the presidential guards.

It would not be correct to see in the old hero's manner of departure both from the trilogy and from the political scene any questioning by Farah of the old man's combination of righteous indignation against political chicanery with religious devotion. After all, one of Deeriye's greatest charms is his attachment to both his religion and his nationalist principles. Indeed one of the articles found on the old man's person is "a pamphlet on the underground activities of the ANC."¹⁹ What Farah is most clearly emphasising here is the fact that Soyaan's group has been out-manuvered at every turn in its struggle against the regime by forces which were not carefully taken into account when the group formed. The regime's use of the tactics of "divide and rule" through both cooptation and ethnic rivalries is such a force. Its ability to "mobilize" the population against any particular group of people is another. Its ability to manufacture slogans and any hotch-potch of "ideologies" to disguise its reliance on and exploitation of the country's clan structure is yet another. The list is endless and Farah appears to acknowledge his intellectuals' short-comings by allowing them to explain their own position. An examination of the thinking of

one of them will shed light on some of the causes of the group's failure. The physician Ahmed-Wellie maintains the following position:

"Against the ethics of political violence, the weak have no means of survival other than to collaborate, up to a point, with the powerful. It is while collaborating that strategies can be studied...I consider it symbolic: that I wash the blood they shed; that I bandage the sores they they open; that I nurse the wounds they inflict upon the innocent..."²⁰

This seems to be the kind of position most likely to play into the hands of any repressive regime. By choosing to ameliorate the wounds of repression Ahmed-Wellie is conceding to the regime the initiative for change. From such a position to one of collaboration is only a step away. Although in Sweet & Sour Milk we last see Ahmed-Wellie being taken into detention there has been so much ambivalence about him that Loyaan concludes he is an informer, a conclusion which like Soyaan's national honour sows confusion among the members of his group. What we see in Farah's Somalia is fascism gone wild. To confront such a fascism Soyaan's group needs a much better organization and greater dedication than we are allowed to see.

It is no doubt for a realisation of the Herculean task confronting all those who seek change that the edge of gloom intrudes on Farah's fiction. The allegorical thrust of the epigraphs which precede every chapter in Sweet & Sour Milk is that a wall of insecurity surrounds everyone and everything, especially around those little things and little people who have no way of defending themselves, let alone confronting unaided, the immovable forces around them. Among the most vulnerable members of society featured in these epigraphs are women and children. In the epigraph to the novel's prologue we see deception which prepares us for the policy of exploitation through "divide and rule" contained in the epigraph to Chapter One. Dried twigs and grass fly helter-skelter around a lonely tree in the epigraph to Chapter Two and in their own way prefigure the fate of the week-old baby who is dumped into a garbage-bin in the epigraph to Chapter Three. In the epigraph to Chapter Four we come to a kind of "homo homini lupus" popularized by the "social contract" school of political philosophers. A victorious cat walks away licking its whiskers as it leaves behind it the dead rat for which it was fighting as well as its rival whom it has viciously killed. It now flaunts a majesty born out of cruelty and ruthlessness. With the epigraph to Chapter Five we come to a child who is a victim of his own curiosity. He is gazing helplessly at a toy which he has dismantled but can no longer put together because he has lost the toy's crucial part. In the epigraph to Chapter Six a lonely

child is swallowing dangerous pills while the adults in the room are consummating what turns out to be a disappointing sexual union ending in the woman's shrieking cry of "I didn't come, I didn't. It is unfair." With the epigraph to Chapter Seven we return to yet another baby facing imminent danger, that of drowning. This danger is as frightening as the famine which stalks the child in the epigraph to Chapter Eight who must depend on a stranger's milkless breasts. In the epigraph to Chapter Nine more danger stalks the tiny and the helpless. The only visible guardian of a child who is crunching and munching naked radio wires is a bed-ridden hundred-year old woman. In the epigraph to Chapter Ten we see a fetus which may turn out to be either a child or a miscarriage. In the epigraph to Chapter Eleven we see one ant trying to rescue another. Both are in the end swept away by a roaring river. We begin Chapter Twelve with the picture of a child about to move from a gecko to a scorpion, of similar metaphorical import is the epigraph to Chapter Thirteen, where a butterfly which has lost a wing and a feeler is to be smashed by the boy with a tennis racket. The crowning epigraph is the one to Chapter Fourteen where a crow on a minaret sits pretty as the stones thrown by the attendant to the mosque keep falling on the thrower. We have in all a picture of those without power or authority being abandoned to the mercy of those who have.

It would be unfair to Farah to ignore these epigraphs because whether they come into the novel consciously or unconsciously they form part of the author's total vision. Whether they are taken singly with the chapters which they precede or together with the novel as a whole they deserve attention. At one level they are part of the funeral oration which might have been made for Soyaan. At another level they are a critique of power in Somalia and at yet a slightly different level they are a measure of the task confronting Soyaan's group. It would not be correct to read their meaning in the manner of Gloucester in Shakespeare's King Lear:

"As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport."²¹

Farah is less concerned with fate, fortune, divinity and things of that nature than he is with the authoritarian state now prevailing in his country. One of the epigraphs to Part Two of Sweet & Sour Milk is 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."

Although the intellectuals who decide to take up the cudgels against the General's regime do not make any meaningful dent into that regime's entrenchment in the national life of Somalia we remain aware of an intense and passionate search for and assertion of identity in all of Farah's characters. The sphere of identity is the sphere of freedom and in denying freedom to the people of Somalia the regime is limiting the extent to which the people can assert their identity. The sphere of identity is also that of personality and Nuruddin Farah devotes a great deal of space and time to the denouement or unfolding of his characters' personalities through dreams, premonitions, fantasies, regrets, hopes and fears.

In the novels of Nuruddin Farah individuals and groups search for and assert their identity. Children are fascinated by their childhood and try to find out in what way it makes them different from adults and above all why such a difference should be the cause of the "raw deal" given to them by adults. Women are concerned about the discrimination meted out to them on the grounds of their sex. They do not wait for anyone to acknowledge their rights. They assert these rights. It is in the process of acting out this search and assertion of identity that Farah compresses both time and space making us see how "in the choir of the nation's sad song...a million waves broke on the sandy shores of the nation's discontent..."²² In Close Sesame our attention is focused on Deeriye whose heroism goes back to colonial days but who in his last days is haunted by the fact that in spite of his achievements in the national interest he has been absent from his family on all the important occasions on which his presence might have meant a great deal to his children. His identity as a father is now in question. It is, in fact, partly to assert that identity that he finds himself drawn into his son's plot to assassinate the General. The details of Deeriye's youth and manhood are a way of showing us the extent to which both the objective reality around him and the subjective inner world created by his background have led him to the kind of decisions which he now makes, including the decision to assassinate the General. Deeriye is a man surrounded by both history as contained in the deeds of men and history as the sum-total of our aspirations, our dreams, our fantasies, our frustrations, and our fears. In this sense he prefigures Askar the central character of Maps who is surrounded by dreams, premonitions, and the kind of fears which suggest an unending search for identity. Deeriye's visions invariably come to pass. He is able to tell his family about events which only someone who had been present when the events occurred would know--and yet he had been in detention for the best part of his life. The most lingering vision in his life is that of his dead wife Naadifa who becomes the guardian of his principles and the symbol of his aspirations for his country. She is the anchor of his identity:

"What is Naadifa but honour, good memory,
and faith in life, trust in love and friendship?"²³

We see here the source of the strength which has enabled Deeriye to survive eight years in colonial prisons and four in post-independence jails. Askar, the central character of Maps does not possess this kind of strength. What he does have is a thorough and passionate desire for identity as manifested in all his boyish longings as well as in his extraordinary premonitions and fears. Askar's dreams and fantasies are the kind of material out of which reputations in the study of psychology are made and yet his maternal uncle who is doing research in psychology burns all his notes when Askar tells him that he once menstruated. All the uncle can say at this point is that "wars are rivers that burn...rivers whose waters, rough as crags, distort reality..."²⁴

The most perceptive reviewer of the novel Maps is Hussein A. Bulhan who recognises the scars of oppression and war which produce personalities like that of Askar.²⁵ In the authoritarianism of Askar's paternal uncle Qorrax we are reminded of Keynaan who in Sweet & Sour Milk claims the right to inflict pain on his children. Bulhan sees in Maps "the unexplored contours of oppression in the Horn of Africa".²⁶ We come face to face with those indelible scars which in the end leave us with an Askar who remains an unfulfilled dream, a "soldier" whose emotional and spiritual paralysis render him ineligible for the great mission of liberation for which both his name and the extraordinary circumstances of his birth have prepared us. Askar does not complete his quest for identity and the most haunting question he leaves with us is: "Who is Askar?"²⁷ This question has been with us from the very beginning of the novel Maps right through its intricate and ground-breaking narrative design. Askar repeatedly asks himself, "Who am I?" His dreams and his day-dreams, his fears, his fantasies as well as his premonitions continually conspire to ask him the same question. His fascination with menstruation is part of that questioning and not, as one critic maintains, "an example of how Nuruddin fetishises women."²⁸ Nuruddin Farah does not "fetishise" women. He creates situations in which they assert their identity with all the consequences which such an assertion brings from a male-dominated world. Ebla in From A Cooked Rib is a case in point. Medina in Sardines is another. The Hilaal household in Maps is organized along complete equality between husband and wife and a mutual caring which enables Hilaal to choose a vasectomy to prevent the suffering which comes to his wife with pregnancies which invariably end in miscarriages. The fate of Misra does not imply that Farah has now deviated from his usual understanding of women in

society. Misra's situation has to be understood in relation to Askar's quest for identity. She is the mother Askar never had, a symbol of tangible human love with which Askar is being called upon to identify himself as opposed to the abstract notion of a greater Somalia which at any rate he fails to honour. Hilaal his maternal uncle acts as the understanding father Askar never had, a foil to the cruel and authoritarian paternal uncle Qoraax and to the other men in Misra's life such as Aw-Adan and the "father-husband" before Aw-Adan. As in Sweet & Sour Milk, we are here covering a vast expanse of space stretching all the way from Ethiopia and the Ogaden to Mogadiscio. The time-scale is just as vast. It takes in the childhood of both Misra and Askar and includes the war in the Ogaden which is won and lost to Somalia with all the attendant problems of displaced persons of whom Misra is one and towards whom Askar is a passive spectator.

Kelly finds Farah's virtuosity in Maps tainted with "stylistic peccadilloes" which are to her "not just a question of form, but more seriously of content."²⁹ The example given for such an observation is a conversation in which Hilaal and Askar refer to gurus like Freud, Jung, Otto Rank, Toni Morrison and Adler. This criticism becomes more disturbing when the critic regards people like Hilaal and Askar as distinct from "ordinary Somalis" and asserts, "In all of Nuruddin's books, his main characters are never in any sense ordinary Somalis."³⁰ However debatable we may wish to make the concept of an ordinary Somali we must grant that those who can discuss Freud or Toni Morrison still qualify to be ordinary especially if, as in the case of Askar's uncle Hilaal, they happen to teach psychology and are looking after a precocious adolescent who is also a voracious reader. We Africans should be excused the exasperation we often feel at not being considered "ordinary" unless we are poor and live in the rural areas, a classification which has its roots in colonial anthropology. In literary criticism the corollary to this classification is the demand that writers eschew "virtuosity" in favor of a certain bucolic simplicity, a practice which Ayi Kwei Armah has lampooned in the novel Fragments. In Maps Farah has reached a new height in the development of technique. Askar's search for identity is dramatized in his dreams, his fantasies, and his premonitions. Above all it is dramatised in the structure of the narrative which flows along four streams marked by three voices and a string of dreams with all their Freudian implications.

At the end of Maps we are told that we have come to the beginning of the story of Misra/Misrat/ Masarat and that Askar tells it first to the police, and then to lawyers:

"And time grew on Askar's face, as he told the story yet again, time grew like a tree, with more branches and far more falling

leaves than the tree which is on the face of the moon. In the process, he became the defendant. He was at one and the same time, the plaintiff and the juror. Finally allowing for his different personae to act as judge, as audience and as witness, Askar told it to himself."³¹

We have here Farah's own explanation of his narrative design. The voices we hear are those of Askar but an Askar wearing different masks and in his own youthful and sometimes confused way going over his life and judging it, sometimes severely, sometimes leniently, but never with sentimentality or self-pity. He recognizes the suffering inflicted on Misra both by those who wrongly accuse her of betraying Somali combatants and by his own cold withdrawal from her. The variations on the name of Misra are important since they stand for the concept of both "motherhood" and "motherland" which exercises Askar's mind and leads his uncle into making the distinction between an essential and a generic nationhood. Misra is a symbol of both motherhood and nationhood. In distancing himself from her Askar is creating a distance between himself and all the deep human and humane values which both nationhood and motherhood stand for. In the end the question seems to be not whether Askar is right or wrong in identifying himself with the one or the other, but whether the identification measures up to the expectations we have of him from all the linguistic resources that have gone into his creation. It does. A precocious child is, after all, only a child and no amount of promise will remove the possibility of his ending up as a disappointment. He has indeed been given an epic stature from the opening of the novel and it is this stature which is linked to his association and fascination with maps and with the sea:

"Perhaps his stars have conferred upon him the fortune of holding simultaneously multiple citizenships of different kingdoms: that of the living and that of the dead; not to mention that of being an infant and an adult at the same time."³²

Askar has also been afflicted with dreams presaging failure and disappointment, insecurity and helplessness. That path of the narrative is powerful enough to remove any doubts about Askar's "ordinariness." He is, to paraphrase Nietzsche, "human, all too human". That is why when he adopts the mask of a second-person narrator he also continually criticizes himself as if he is not at all sure that he is telling the whole truth. He accepts his fallibility which is a foil to any delusions of grandeur. The first-person and third-person narratives are checked and cross-checked by this second-person voice and vice-versa. Dreams and premonitions enlarge the novel's universe of discourse. The world of

Askar is as fascinating as a Dickensian novel of growing up and yet it also remains an adult world of the "here and now" where values are revalued and traditions overturned by the hand of war, of repression, and of geopolitical calculations. In Maps, as in Sweet & Sour Milk, Nuruddin Farah has ascended to a new level of artistic power. This power derives from clusters of linguistic resources centred on certain recognizable motifs. Reference has already been made to the omnipresence of the General and his paraphernalia of repression in Somalia. The authoritarianism prevailing in the traditional Somali family has also been looked at and an attempt has been made at linking the authoritarianism of the family with the autocracy in the state. The search for and assertion of identity stand as foils to the repression now prevailing in Somalia. Men, women, and children in Farah's novels search for and sometimes successfully assert their identity. This is particularly true of women and in that respect Farah enjoys the distinction of placing the women of his novels in a position where they not only talk about their identity but are seen to assert it. The same cannot be said of other male writers who are only now beginning to wake up to the reality of women's rights. Medina in Sardines, Soyaan's sister in Sweet & Sour Milk, Ebla in From A Crooked Rib, Deeriye's daughter in Close Sesame as well as Salaado in Maps are all women who are no longer tied to the whims and/or egos of men. They act and are seen to act in their own right. We have also looked at Farah's intellectuals and examined their weakness in the light of the enormous responsibility facing them and have sadly concluded that they have not shown themselves to be equal to their task either in terms of organization or in terms of expanding their recruitment beyond their own class of the petit bourgeois intellectuals, a weakness which they share in good measure with other intellectuals all over Africa. A writer who has given us this amount of "food for thought" deserves to be read more seriously than he seems to be at the present time.

NOTES

¹ Close Sesame, Allison and Busby, London, 1983, p.208 N.B. All later references to Close Sesame will be to this edition.

- 2 Mnthali, Felix: "Semiotic Constants and Perceptions of Change: A Study of the Symbolism of Change in African Literature. " AFRICA DEVELOPMENT", Vol.XI, No.4, pp.133-173.
- 3 Nuruddin, Farah: Sweet & Sour Milk, Allison and Busby, London, 1979, p.99. All later references to Sweet & Sour Milk will be to this edition.
- 4 Mohamoud Hassan: "The Status of Human Rights in Somalia", HORN OF AFRICA, Vol III, No.2, 1980 pp.3-11.
- 5 Sweet & Sour Milk, p.53.
- 6 Ibid, p.99.
- 7 Ibid, p.95
- 8 Mohamoud Hassan, "Status of Human Rights in Somalia", HORN OF AFRICA, 3, 2, p. 5.
- 9 Sweet & Sour Milk, p.93.
- 10 Close Sesame, pp.117-118.
- 11 Sweet & Sour Milk, p.93.
- 12 Hussein Abdillahi Bulhan, "The Captive Intelligentsia of Somalia", HORN OF AFRICA, pp.25-37.
- 13 Sweet & Sour Milk, pp.226-227.
- 14 A paper read at the First Symposium of the Special Committee on Africa meeting in Nairobi in March, 1985. It is soon to be published by CODESRIA. It is : "Change and the Intelligentsia in African Literature: A Study in Marginality." In this paper I try to show that as of now the African Intellectuals are a marginalized group as far as the important decisions affecting their countries are concerned.
- 15 Sweet & Sour Milk, pp.38-39.
- 16 Ibid, p.139.
- 17 Close Sesame, p.207.
- 18 Ibid, p.207.
- 19 Ibid, p.207.
- 20 Sweet & Sour Milk, pp.159-160.
- 21 King Lear, IV, 1, lines 38-39. Shakespeare is here using a line from Pautus: "Dil nos quasi pilas homines habent."
- 22 Sweet & Sour Milk, p.56.
- 23 Close Sesame, p.26.
- 24 Nuruddin Farah, MAPS, New York, Pantheon Books, 1986, pp.151-153.
- 25 Hussein A Bulhan in AFRICA EVENTS, July, 1987, pp.78-79.
- 26 Ibid, p.79.
- 27 MAPS, p.245.
- 28 Hilarie Kelly, "A Somali Tragedy of Political and Sexual Confusion: A Critical Analysis of Nuruddin Farah's MAPS, in UFAHAMU, XVI, 2, p.231.

29 Ibid, p.27.

30 Ibid, p.28.

31 MAPS, p.246.

32 MAPS, p.11.