

WITNESSING CONTEMPORARY SOMALIA FROM ABROAD An Interview with Nuruddin Farah

by Minna Niemi

The following interview was conducted at the Gothenburg Book Fair in Sweden in September 2010. This event, which concentrated on African literature, gathered together approximately seventy authors from many African countries as well as locations throughout the African diaspora. Somali author Nuruddin Farah was invited to participate in this event as one of the main guest authors. Over the course of the Book Fair, we met to discuss his career, his most recent trilogy, and the political situation in contemporary Somalia.

NIEMI: You have very often been asked why you write in English and not in Somali. But as we know there are strong reasons behind your decision to write mainly in English. First of all, you wrote your first novella *Why Die So Soon?* in 1965 and published your first novel *From a Crooked Rib* in 1970 before the Somali language had a script. After the Somali orthography was established in 1972, you wrote a novel in Somali, but you ran into troubles with this novel, and switched back to English. This question of English versus indigenous African languages evokes the language disputes first discussed on a larger scale at a Conference of African Writers of English Expression held in Makerere in 1962. Since then, for instance, Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o have openly disagreed on the language question, i.e. whether African authors should or should not feel free to use former colonial languages, particularly English, in their writing. I am wondering what is at stake today in the decision to write in English rather than in Somali or another indigenous African language.

FARAH: My position is obviously not taking sides. What matters in fact is not often the language, but the content of what one writes. Obviously language matters in determining the nature of the content, but I think in a current situation in Africa sometimes it would be very, very difficult to write in indigenous languages and remain neutral in political questions. And the reason is because in a multi-ethnic, multi-language country like Kenya, somebody speaking a different language from Ngũgĩ might think, “Well are he and I of the same mental mold?” And the other thing is that there is a great deal of jingoism and national jingoism in local languages. Which obviously does not necessarily happen when you are writing in European languages.

NIEMI: Your career now spans over four decades. Most of that time you have spent in exile, but have been able to visit Somalia a few times since 1996. You have called Somalia “a country of your imagination” and have also said that you would like your “books to

be a commentary on Somalia and the history of Somalia” (Alden and Tremaine 43). And your work has followed and reflected upon the changes the country has gone through during these last four decades, as your three trilogies have covered different historical aspects of the country. Your first trilogy examines the dictatorial regime of Mohammed Siad Barre, your second trilogy features the civil war following the overthrow of Barre’s regime, and the more recent status of the country is examined in your newest trilogy. I keep thinking that your work has a certain strong ethical component to it, as it has now for decades witnessed the changes taking place in the country and as it persistently keeps Somalia “alive” in contrast to the media messages that have for a long time most often depicted the country in a pessimistic light. Do you feel that you as a Somali author have a certain ethical responsibility to witness the changing states of the country?

FARAH: It is not only a certain ethical but a moral, ethical, and also philosophical responsibility. The reason is that different situations require different standpoints because when the game changes the language and the approach that the author takes toward certain things also must change. And the debate also changes. For that reason, now the big debate is: should Somalia be a secular state or an Islamic state? These questions that arise pose challenges that are different from the earlier days.

NIEMI: You have always been a very independent thinker and writer, and have attempted to avoid partisanship. For example, you avoided taking sides during Siad Barre’s regime, when you wanted to avoid writing praises to the dictator but also to avoid writing pamphlets for the opposition party—yet you seem to retain a certain loyalty to Somalia. Has this decision to follow your own views and to remain loyal to your own artistic voice helped you to view various angles of the evolving status of the country?

FARAH: It is a lot easier if you are loyal to your own ideals. You don’t need to change the tune because someone else has changed his attitude. Also people who usually are fellow travelers in politics tend to fall out with one another. And then there is always this blaming one another. So when I am on my own, even if I change my attitude sometimes, it is very useful because what you do is to change a few of the words. Whereas if you are with many other people and you fall out, you cannot get away with changing only a few words. And then you have to apologize.

The Second Trilogy “Blood in the Sun”: From Explosion to Implosion

NIEMI: Let’s talk about your second trilogy, “Blood in the Sun.” These three novels are somewhat more loosely related to one another than the three novels of the first trilogy that all examined the dictatorial regime in one way or another.

FARAH: Well, the only major difference is that the “Blood in the Sun” trilogy shares a thematic concern, whereas the other trilogies share characters also, in addition to the

thematic concern. So that, for example, “Blood in the Sun” could be called “Pre-collapse” because the country is collapsing little by little, with *Maps* (1986) describing the explosion in terms of war. Somalia’s war against Ethiopia can be seen as an outward explosion. And then with the return, there is *Gifts*. It covers a period in which the consequences of the explosion were detrimental to the continued survival of Somalia as a vital state, and therefore needing to have foreign aid: gifts, food. Because for one and a half years, two years, the entire country, Somalia, was veering towards the war between Somalia and Ethiopia. So no farming was done, nobody was busy. And therefore as a consequence there was famine, and the famine was not because the rain didn’t come or something like that, but because people were not busy farming. Because the young men were recruited into the army and they were fighting against Ethiopia in the Ogaden war. And then as a consequence of that, people were blaming Siad Barre. Because the defeat usually produces blaming, blaming someone else. And people said that Siad Barre is responsible for it. And this led to the implosion. Because the explosion led to the implosion.¹

NIEMI: Let’s talk about *Maps* a little bit more. All of these novels are related to the question of wars in one way or another. *Maps* depicts the explosion and then the later novels are related to the upcoming civil war, the implosion. Like Askar, the main character of *Maps*, you also spent your childhood in the area of Ogaden. And like Askar in the novel, your family also had to flee the area because of war between Ethiopia and Somalia.²

FARAH: In 1964.

NIEMI: Yes, and *Maps* then depicts the later Ogaden war taking place between Somalia and Ethiopia in 1977–1978. You have written elsewhere that this conflict-ridden geographical region, Ogaden, has known much more of war and civil strife than peace. Also the novel, tellingly titled *Maps*, draws readers’ attention to these territorial conflicts that can be traced back to colonial history, as the withdrawing British empire left the map of Ogaden arbitrarily drawn, initiating future conflicts between Ethiopia and Somalia.

FARAH: It is the same as India and Pakistan and the current Kashmir situation because there is a Pakistani Kashmir and an Indian Kashmir.

NIEMI: Yes, it is a very similar situation. What I was fascinated by was the fact that within these haunting settings of territorial conflicts, your novel *Maps* avoids simply claiming that one party is guilty.

FARAH: I usually think that there is nothing black and white, but there are always grey areas in between.

NIEMI: What were the particular aspects of this crisis that you wanted to draw attention to and did you intend to complicate the existing view of them?

FARAH: Actually, one should be able to tell from the novel and the way Somalis dealt with Ethiopia then that this was not the end of the story. You knew sooner or later Ethiopia would come back. And Ethiopia came back in 2006 and invaded Somalia.³

NIEMI: There is a man Askar meets when he is escaping the war in Ogaden. This man—when asked why he leaves Kallafo in order to move to Mogadishu—explains that the territory of Ogaden is in a constant state of upheaval: Somalis and Ethiopians come and go every fifty years or so. And this will continue in the future as well.

FARAH: It has now happened.

NIEMI: In the “Blood in the Sun” trilogy you also continue to experiment with the form of the novel. *Maps* as a novel plays with the traditional conventions of fiction writing. The main character Askar has problems in terms of keeping his story together; he is unsure of his own identity and cannot trust his own memory. The narrative structure moves from first-person narration to second- and third-person narrative structures. It is also a story of war and the catastrophic effects of war, and at some point in the novel, the main character refers to Picasso’s *Guernica*. The parallel between this painting and *Maps* is an interesting one: both rely on fragmentation as a formal strategy, and both are largely concerned with the issue of war. Is there an especially strong relation between the form of art and the content here?

FARAH: True, there is.

NIEMI: You also refer to Picasso’s famous painting in your essay “A Country in Exile,” published over a decade later in 1998, when you write that this is the painting that comes to your mind when you think about the civil war in Somalia. Did Picasso’s iconic image of war inform your work primarily on a formal level—or do you see a specific relationship between the Spain Picasso sought to depict in 1936 and Somalia?

FARAH: An artist [Picasso] trying to cope through art with tragedy, catastrophe, encapsulates it in a grander theme, something that quite easily can be moved from one context to another, from one country to another. In the same way as Picasso’s *Guernica* can be carried from one room to another a novel can be translated into different languages. That tragedy belongs to many different people at the same time. In other words, you could have 10,000 people reading *Maps* in the same day, in the same way as you can have prints and copies of *Guernica*. It is a reproduction. In other words, it is no longer a Spanish matter. In the same way as *Maps* is no longer a novel by a Somali but a novel to which the reader also contributes.

NIEMI: . . . and brings his or her own meanings to it. Let’s turn to your novel *Gifts* (1990), the second novel in the trilogy, which depicts the implosion. Or was that the term you used?

FARAH: The Pre-implosion. And the reason is that it has not yet happened. The civil war—the implosion—has not taken place yet.

NIEMI: Many critics have read your use of Marcel Mauss' notion of the gift that comes along with a debt as a critique of the West's involvement in Somalia, which comes as a form of "help" that indebts its recipient. Without denying the relevance of that reading, I am wondering whether this notion of the gift and the debt that accompanies it is related to the female central consciousness in the novel—and specifically to the fact that the entire story takes place imaginatively, as it were, in her head? Is this narrative paradigm related to the notion of gift and debt?

FARAH: The narrative is imagined; the gift is concrete. The gift is concrete in the sense that there is a finger that points in every gift, in news reportage in the novel. The love side of the story is imagined. This is a woman who has been married several times, is alone, unhappy, poor, and she becomes rich through her imagination.

NIEMI: Is she giving herself a gift?

FARAH: Well, you could say that. [*Laughter*]

NIEMI: Wars are a central focus in this trilogy. In these novels, you also bring up the treatment of women in Somalia, an important topic that has been common to your whole career. In the "Blood in the Sun" trilogy, you seem to highlight how women in these situations of acute crisis may suffer the most. In *Maps*, an Ethiopian character, Misra, is tortured to death by nationalist Somali forces, and in *Secrets* (1998), a gang rape by angry clan members, which leads to the conception of the main character, is the biggest secret in the novel. You seem to be suggesting that in war, women are most vulnerable, but in *Secrets* you also seem to say that a society that allows such treatment of women is prone to collapse into a civil war. Or am I reading too much into the novel?

FARAH: . . . is prone to self-destruction, not necessarily to a civil war. Self-destruction.

NIEMI: In *Secrets*, the third novel of the trilogy, the main character is trying to resolve the secret of his own origin, and his family story turns out to be full of secrets. Is this some sort of mirror image of society in any way at all?

FARAH: Well, I would say that when I was speaking two days ago in Oslo, one of the Somalis in the audience got up and said that I am giving away the national secrets in print to foreigners. In other words, he was saying that I was washing our dirty linen in public, meaning that he thinks that people do not know that Somalis circumcised their female children, that there is female circumcision in the country. And the fact that I talk about these subjects openly indicates, he says, that I was an enemy of Somalis.

NIEMI: How did you respond to him?

FARAH: I said that almost everybody knows everything that I have written about Somalia and agrees with the truth. And the truth is not a secret.

NIEMI: I could imagine that there are also many Somalis who agree with you and think that these issues need to be discussed.

FARAH: They are very ambivalent about it, many of them, because they think that I am harsh in concentrating, they think, on some of the bad things.

NIEMI: But your most recent novel *Knots* (2007) is a very hopeful novel: Somalis re-integrating again and learning to live together in Mogadishu and building trust.

FARAH: Well, that has been destroyed by the invasion of Somalia by Ethiopia.

The Third Trilogy and the Question of Diaspora

NIEMI: Let's turn to the third trilogy and the question of diaspora. You have lived in exile since 1976 . . .

FARAH: . . . since 1974, and the reason is that for the first two years, I was doing my graduate studies. I didn't go back, even if I was supposed to go back in 1976. I didn't manage to get back. I don't know if I would consider myself to have been in exile for all those years, for having lived in Africa.

NIEMI: That has been a very interesting decision because often African authors who have to leave their home countries emigrate to the United States or to Europe, but you have decided to stay in Africa, and close to Somalia.

FARAH: As close to it as it has been possible.

NIEMI: In 2000, you published a book on the notion of diaspora, titled *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora*. The diaspora theme is also relevant to your latest trilogy, which you have written after your visit to Somalia in 1996. The main characters of *Links* (Jeebleh) and *Knots* (Cambara)⁴ are both returning to the country after years spent abroad in North America. How does the latest trilogy relate to your earlier ones? Is the country examined differently in these latest novels, when it is seen through the eyes of the Somali characters who have spent a long time abroad?

FARAH: Yes, because Somalis who have lived continuously in Somalia and have lived through the earlier stages of the civil war feel a certain bitterness towards the regime or

towards some of the clan of families whom they accuse of tormenting them or killing their brothers or sisters because in the civil war so many got killed, whereas the ones who lived abroad feel less dirty. They come with a clean conscience. They were not involved in the killings of other people. Nobody can accuse them of working for Siad Barre. So that is the big difference.

NIEMI: Is there at the same time some type of alienation involved? Are these main characters also disconnected?

FARAH: No. They are connected, but in a different way. They are connected because they know the past, and they want to compare the past, when Somalia was peaceful and beautiful, with the present-day situation, when Somalia is in chaos. But because of their distance, they feel they are objective. They become part of the story when they have been there long enough. Because at some point in *Links* Seamus says to Jeebleh, "Now you are part of the story," when he gets into a fight with his own clan, with his own sub-clan.

NIEMI: In both *Links* and *Knots*, the main characters undertake a journey to the unknown. The reader follows Jeebleh's and Cambara's journeys from North America to Somalia.

FARAH: They come from the comfort zone, and they go into a chaotic situation. They have problems in the comfort zone. You know Jeebleh walking down the street when, in New York, he is almost run over. So he says: "I thought I would evade death, but I can't. If I can't do it in New York, I can just go visit my mom's grave." Cambara has a problem with her husband and then decides that she should go and repossess family property and then come back and deal with it. That is the idea.

NIEMI: But both of the novels end in Somalia. They don't show the aftermath, so to speak.

FARAH: You will see that in the third.

NIEMI: *Links* and *Knots*, are they introducing the contemporary Somalia to people living in the diaspora? The two characters take a trip to the unknown and both of the protagonists have anxious feelings regarding their safety, etc. But they both (and particularly Cambara) end up having a successful time in the country and completing their tasks. Is this framework used didactically, to introduce contemporary Somalia to readers as a place where people can live and operate?

FARAH: Yes. Mogadishu has a population of two million. And when people say to me, "how can anyone live there?" I say, two million people live there day-to-day. In a civil war situation, there are certain areas to avoid, but you can operate quite well.

NIEMI: I don't want to undermine the darker elements and tones you very realistically represent in the two novels, and particularly in *Links*. After all, Dante's *Inferno* is used as a subtext in *Links*, as the Dante scholar, Jeebleh, returns to Mogadishu and travels through

the city with various guides who serve the role of Virgil. The novel seems to create a parallel between Dante's Hell and contemporary Mogadishu. You also refer to Jewish and Islamic notions of hell. Of all these notions of hell, was Dante's *Inferno* in particular the paradigm you had in mind?

FARAH: Well, I suppose because Jeebleh is a Dante scholar, he gives emphasis to that.

NIEMI: So it comes through him?

FARAH: Yes, it comes through the character. Each character is to decide their own place in the narrative.

NIEMI: In *Links*, this infernal situation is created by various forces. For instance, the novel very openly questions the involvement of the US Army in the relief operations that took place between 1992 and 1994. To what extent is the "hell" created in the novel by the US forces that came to Somalia soon after the Gulf War without having a clear plan in the first place and started their operation as a relief attempt but later ended up killing innocent people? Is it related to the West's own characterization of itself as providing "help" that is somehow underappreciated by its recipients? Is this merely an extension of earlier colonial and Cold War projects or does it represent a new paradigm of western intervention?

FARAH: I would say it represents the clumsiness of the American attitude towards complicated situations. There is something clumsy about the way in which Americans dealt with it. They think that almost anything can be solved with a heavier gun.

NIEMI: To further complicate the issues raised in my last question, I am wondering how you would characterize the West's attitude toward Somalia at present. Since the 9/11 terrorist acts, the West has lived in its terrorist paranoia, and Somalia has sometimes been perceived "as playing host to a terrorist network," as you wrote in your *New York Times* article "Another Little Piece of My Heart" (August 2, 2004). You further stated that because of the lack of a functioning government, Somalia's borders are not respected, but the country is rather considered as a "free-for-all country," to use your own term. Is this yet another infernal situation? Is it a continuation of colonialism in the sense that the Western countries do not need to respect the territory of Somalia, but can come and go as they please?

FARAH: I don't think that it is a continuation of colonialism. I think that it is the protraction of indifference. There was indifference because the initial collapse of Somalia coincided with the first Gulf War. So almost everybody's eyes were focused on the first Gulf War. Somalia fell into chaos, but the world did not know about it. That indifference has continued with the exception of George Bush when the Americans secured the expulsion of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait. When he [Bush] finished that, then, he said, "Now we will do 'God's work,'" and you know it was a failure. That has continued. In other words, the international community comes with a huge attempt, and they want something to happen over the weekend, and if nothing happens, they say: "This is hopeless."

NIEMI: Is that somehow narcissistic on their part? They want to “do good.” Is this doing good more important than actually helping the country?

FARAH: Well, you need patience when doing good. And there is no patience. You need understanding, but there is no understanding.

NIEMI: Let’s talk about *Knots*, which seems to be a very hopeful novel. When Cambara travels from Toronto to Mogadishu to reclaim her family house, everyone warns her of Mogadishu, claiming that it will be impossible to live there, but Cambara’s return is a story of trust won back and humanity restored to the people living in the run-down city. Is this strategic optimism? Rather than contributing to the “nothing-good-comes-out-of-Africa” litany—a term the main characters use when referring to the BBC news covering Africa—does this novel strategically contradict that image of the African horn as a place only of horror and pain?

FARAH: I think one could take it in two ways. One is to say, someone with cancer can have a relapse and then recover. And you think, “oh my God. They have done it.” The body has coped. And then a day later you hear the news: “so and so is dead.” So *Knots* could actually be when the relapse is defeated, in other words.

NIEMI: Do you mean that when everything goes so well towards the end of the novel, there is actually something odd about it?

FARAH: Yes, calmness before the storm. Because, as I said to you, what happens to a person with cancer before dying seems like an Indian summer. Everything is good, and then everybody begins to relax.

NIEMI: This is interesting because I thought that it was a very optimistic novel.

FARAH: Well, it is in the same way you are optimistic if you have a friend or a parent who is sick and you have visited them in the hospital, and then one day they wake up and say, “I am fine actually. I am fine.” You have an Indian summer.

NIEMI: When we get a chance to read your next novel, will we find out what happens after this Indian summer?

FARAH: Yes, there will be an answer to whether the Indian summer continues, or not.

NIEMI: Feminism has been a long-lasting theme in your fictional work and is also celebrated in *Knots*. You have mentioned that in each trilogy, there is one part that concentrates on a “female central consciousness.” How would you situate the character of Cambara, an educated, modern, and wealthy woman returning from the West, among the other major female characters in your work, such as Ebla in *From a Crooked Rib* or Duniya in *Gifts*?

FARAH: I could compare her to Medina in *Sardines* (1981). She is closer to Medina than to others.

NIEMI: Cambara is also struggling with particular types of issues, with the question of the burqa, for instance. She says in the novel that decades earlier, when she was living in Somalia, women didn't need to wear one.

FARAH: They did not need to wear one until 1995.

NIEMI: Oral tradition has been an important part of your writing, as you have often combined elements from vernacular traditions with modern themes in your fiction. In *Knots*, too, there is an old tale of an eagle and chickens that plays an important role in the novel as a subtext and as a metaphor for hope that the novel strongly underlines, at least according to my reading. Could you say more about the tale? Why did you want to select this story as central theme for the novel? Who are the "eagles" that have forgotten their real powers?⁵

FARAH: Well, it could also be that once peace comes, Somalia could take off again. That if you were great before, you are likely to be again; there is a period of difficulties and you have to overcome that. If the circumstances pull you down, there is hope that you go back to the previous situation. People in Somalia can become another eagle, instead of remaining a chicken.

NIEMI: Another story that has a significant role to play in the novel is Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*. Cambara, who has very traumatically lost her own son in Canada, takes under her wings two Somali boys in Mogadishu, Gacal and SilkHair, who have both lost their parents, and the latter has belonged to an armed gang. Your novel, in a fascinating manner, seems to parallel the lives of some of the child soldiers in Mogadishu with the character of Pinocchio. Like Pinocchio, they have to struggle to find their way into a "real" life.

FARAH: I think in a sense of *Pinocchio* being created out of wood and becoming a child of great imagination and so forth. In the case of the young boys, they are both created into killers, but they are given a different outlook, a different shape, by the presence of Cambara who helps them to live up to their potential.

NIEMI: *Crossbones*, your newest novel, will complete this trilogy. In this novel, you write about the piracy question.

FARAH: It is about many things including piracy.

NIEMI: Piracy as a topic is very frequently discussed in relation to contemporary Somalia in the Western media. It is a complicated issue, nevertheless, relating to, for instance, the illegal fishing in Somali waters, which, as an activity, has harmed the livelihoods of So-

mali fishermen, and consequently some of them have turned to piracy. Is this novel your response to the common Western association between Somalia and piracy? Is it your goal to complicate this commonly held image of Somalia in *Crossbones*?

FARAH: Many other aspects will be discussed in the novel as well, but you have to wait until it comes out.

NOTES

1. Farah is referring to the Somalian civil war with the term “implosion.” The country was engulfed in civil war after the overthrow of Siad Barre’s dictatorial regime in 1991. The country has lacked a functioning government since then, and according to Ken Menkhaus, this is partly due to the legacy of Barre’s regime: “The harsh repression of the government of Mohammed Siad Barre fueled sharp resentment toward and fear of the state itself in the Somali public. The Barre regime’s divide-and-rule tactics stoked deep interclan animosities and distrust, and are held partially responsible for the failure of clans to unite in a post-Barre government” (78–80).
2. Great Britain handed Ogaden over to Ethiopia in 1948, but Somalis felt that Ogaden was a rightful part of their country. These competing claims on the Ogaden territory led to a war between the two nations in 1963, and also forced Farah’s family to move to Mogadishu. Due to this colonial inheritance, namely the drawing of arbitrary borders, Somalia and Ethiopia have been pushed against each other and provoked to constant fights over the location of national borders.
3. Ethiopia invaded Somalia in 2006 and withdrew in 2009. The cause of the war remains unclear although the historical burden of border issues and the Ogaden war have infected the relations between the neighbors. The Ethiopian invasion was undertaken with the help of the United States. Napoleon A. Bamfo argues that to “compensate Ethiopia for its effort, the United States provided military and economic help and continues to do so” (61). The invasion didn’t bring a victory to the Ethiopian forces, but it further contributed to the chaotic situation in Somalia by complicating the country’s internal relations. The civil population living in the Ogaden territory was subjected to brutal violations of human rights, and meanwhile a large number of Ethiopians continued to suffer from malnutrition. Bamfo writes: “In May 2008, the United Nations reported some 3.2 million people there [in Ethiopia] being in urgent need of food, a number that had gone up from 2.2 million in April” (64).
4. Farah mentioned in the course of the interview that the name Cambara comes from amber, the precious stone. The English word amber derives from the Arabic word *amber*.
5. This old fable, known in various African countries, is a story of an eaglet raised up as a chicken which forgets its own identity as an eagle—a bird that belongs to the sky rather than on the ground. The story underlines the meaning that the eagle should not forget its own power as an eagle, as it should live up to its own potential and fly. One of the most well-known variations of this fable is Christopher Gregorowski’s *Fly, Eagle Fly!: An African Tale* (2000). The same fable has also inspired Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo who published a children’s book entitled, *The Eagle and the Chickens* in 1987.

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