

The Literary Treatment of History in Nuruddin Farah's *Close Sesame*

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Close Sesame is the third novel in a trilogy started with *Sweet and Sour Milk* and *Sardines*. This time, Farah has attempted a novel centred on history, the history of Somalia, with dates, and known facts and texts, yet a novel which is properly a historical novel since the central characters are entirely fictitious. The plot shows that the book encompasses two perceptions of time. On one hand, we have a few days in the life of Deeriye, an old man, ailing with asthma. Most of the action takes place within the house of his son Mursal and is very static: talks with family and friends, who try to understand the current turn of events, as his son's friends, then his son, come to tragic ends. A tense few days, but very little action from the main character, who seems to be a passive or powerless witness to outside events. But as a counterpoint to the static core of the plot, the reader is made to explore the history of Somalia from the remote past of King Wiil-Waal, to the days of the Dervish movement, from the Italian fascist occupation to the present time, with references both to the history of the African continent at large, and to the early years of Islam and the Caliphate. This massive use of real facts could easily unbalance any novel. We shall see how these known data are interwoven in the reflexion and dreams of the imaginary characters, how the apparently timeless waiting inside the household is examined and given meaning by the vast panorama of facts, myths and memories through which the protagonists try to understand the present and decide for a course of future action.

To give coherence to various perceptions of time, the whole narrative is focused on the point of view of the old Deeriye. From the first lines, we are immersed in his subjective vision of things, which in itself is an experience of displacement for the reader: this kind, pious muslim patriarch as seen from the inside, is very new to fiction. So, modestly we share his experience of physical time, time as dictated by the rhythm of the body, with the difficulty breathing, the naps and dreams that punctuate the day of an old man. But this man is no slave to natural time and his day is ordered and regulated by prayer. The cycle of each day, from dawn to sunset, takes into account both the natural law of ageing and the religious ordering of each moment. This frame is important, because there will be the same search for meaning and ordering on a wider time scale, the scale of centuries.

The first chapter also establishes another scale by which to measure time: that of a lifetime as seen by an old man at the close of his days. This vision of human

life from a religious and philosophical distance is not shared by all the characters, especially the young ones, and it is not necessarily the vision of the book as a whole, but it serves as a frame of reference from which the tensions and agitations of his modern children who « never have the time » can be seen. The acute consciousness Deeriye has of being at the sunset of his days gives both urgency and serenity to his final attempt at understanding and acting.

The long life of the protagonist also gives unity to the novel through the various moments of meditation when he looks back on his past. Especially his « twelve to fourteen years imprisonment » in the days of Italian Somalia, then in the days when Somalia was a UN Mandate Territory, and again « a couple of years ago », have made him paradoxically a privileged observer, through the clarity of vision given by this displacement, just as when Medina in *Sardines* moved house to find herself. The memories of the old man underline the theme of the importance of action: is one passively carried by the flux of history, or are there choices to be made that could alter its course? Deeriye was first thrown in jail for opposing the Italians, not in violent fighting, but by his refusal to betray in giving the name they wanted. Can this action, praised as heroic by the new generation, provide him with a reference for future decisions? For him, the incentive to act or resist does not stem from abstract political theories, but from strong moral issues, from a personal code of honour and from faithfulness to one's past deeds and commitments. Will his past heroic act be a guide? In the novel, a choice once made seems to live with you for ever, and even lives through one's descendants. The concept of free choice, of the momentous historical decision to be made seems at times to be contradicted in the fiction by the more ancient notion of the curse determining men's lives from one generation to another.

Deeriye is the memory of the novel, comparing independent Somalia and Colonial days, always aware of the long history of his nation as he is driven through the streets of Mogadiscio, a town which to him is like an open history book. His life is also used in an allegorical manner. In the same way as Ebla's journey to Mogadiscio and freedom in *From a Crooked Rib* can be seen as an evocation of the various stages of Somalia's independence. Deeriye's life is deliberately conceived in symbolic terms: he was born in 1912, the year when the Dervish movement of the Sayid defeated the British, and when the ANC was formed in South Africa. Under such auspicious beginnings, he is clearly meant to be remote from the mere politics of clan or tribe: he stands for nationalism and Pan-Africanism. His life history can be paralleled to the fate of the nation, as he was jailed by the Italians, released by the British in 1943, jailed again by the Italians. This invites the reader possibly to see a similar allegorical meaning in his recent term of detention, his present sickness, but here he is not guided so firmly in his decoding.

Though space and time are restricted to a few days in a house, suspense builds up as Mursal, the son, and his friends seem involved in mysterious doings and as one after the other, characters are reported missing, with no clear indication as to their fate. This dramatic waiting helps to underline another dimension of history: the meaninglessness and confusion of history in the making for the direct participants. Texts, legends, and collective knowledge make sense of the past century, and by contrast the hours lived now seem totally formless. It is impossible to establish clear links between events, what is more, it is impossible to be certain of the events themselves. Characters are shown trying to decode the news bulletin and to deduce from what is said, not said, or implied. Witnesses are not reliable

or speak with innuendoes and hints which are not easy to decypher. There are several versions of the same incident, none of which is attested or refuted within the text. Up to the last page, as in *Sweet and Sour Milk*, there are contradictory reports on the deaths of the protagonists, Mursal and Deeriye. The reader, like the characters, is left to grope and infer, left to the responsibility of the plot he thus traces and the conclusions he comes to. The certainty of history books and national heroic myths is not for the present.

If much of present history is pieced together with difficulty by the characters and reader alike, the comments on past history are given explicitly, mainly in the long debates Deeriye has with the generation of his children, and chiefly with his son Mursal. From the first pages, it is clear their discussion will revolve around the justification or not of violent action, with examples taken from the history of the Caliphate being compared to modern egalitarian ideologies. For Deeriye, an action must be in agreement with the fundamental tenets of Islam if it is to be justified and to represent the culture and nation it sets out to protect. The debate about the right to violence and the justification of *lex talionis* is saved from being too abstract by the constant interplay between historical references and fictional events.

If the relationship between Deeriye and his son helps to establish two widely separated ideological starting points, which in their attempted convergence provide an intellectual frame to the issues in the novel, the bond between Deeriye and his grandson Samawade is of a very different nature. Here the warmth of the old man, and to a great extent, the warm tone of the novel, is established mainly through Deeriye's caring relationship with his family and old friends: the daughter, the Jewish daughter-in-law, the brother-in-law Rooble, the old friend from another clan. The daily contact with the young Samawade, promise for the future, also helps to introduce another vision of history: at the end of his days, the old patriarch feels he has to transmit the culture of his people to the very young. This is why he narrates traditional tales and fragments of history. This oral storytelling is as much an expression of his love, in the warm closeness of their daily contact, as of his concern for Samawade's future life. In that way the novel can integrate two full length texts about King Wiil-Waal. They function within the plot as indirect moral lessons to the young boy, in the same way as the long tale about the blind man, also quoted in italics. But they also fit the general pattern of the book by extending the time-span of Somali identity and showing at least ten centuries of national pride.

In the exchanges between grandfather and grandson, history is repeatedly referred to through another device, the cassettes the old man listens to. Cassettes here are symbolic, belonging both to the oral modes of transmitting and feeling, but also to modern technology. The earphones isolate Deeriye from the everyday bustle around him and connect him, in an immediate manner, to the Egyptian who reads his favourite Sourah or to the rhythm and beauty of the poem he is most fond of, « The Death of Corfield », by Sayyid Muhammad 'Habdille Hassan, the « Mad Mullah ». Cassettes are not too dissimilar to the voices he hears in his dreams, especially that of his dead wife, but they are also material objects: he nearly throws them like stones at Khaalif, the mad man — can one lapidate with revered texts? Deeriye has read widely in prison, and the mention of the biographies echoes again the whole issue of leadership: the lives of the Sudanese Mahdi, Shaka Zulu, Ataturk, Garibaldi or Napoleon. Yet somehow, paradoxical-

ly, books are dismissed as sources within the novel, maybe because they were once given to him by his jailers.

Cassettes can be listened to collectively and listening to them is an action that involves one physically and emotionally as when Deeriye listens again and again to « The Death of Corfield » in the company of his son. The emotion is evoked within the novel for the Somali reader by an extract of eleven lines, untranslated. All readers are reminded of the way this poem acts as a fundamental intertext for the whole of *Close Sesame*. The heroic deeds of the Sayyid, his nationalist courage, the beauty of the text itself act as touchstones to all that occurs in past and present history. The third book of the trilogy, in contrast to the more cosmopolitan flavour of the others, is thus entirely centered on this seminal national text, as if any relevant understanding had to be looked for essentially in Somali values.

As a touchstone, this poem gives rise to whole series of parallels between past and present events. The most important is established by the old man who listens alternately to the Koran and the poem, historical Islam and Somali nationalism being to him the two solid stones on which to found the judgment of current events. The story of the « Mad Mullah » and the sourah of Yassin help him to ponder on the general theme of madness: does history consider as « mad » the heroes who succeed? There are many parallels dealing with the problem of traitors, or the prerogatives of a ruler. Some parallels are drawn when the whole issue of madness is raised by Khaalif, the mad man, and his rantings in the streets: is he inspired in his raving accusations like the « mad Mullah » was? The acts of Mursal and his friends Mahad and Mukhtaar are also weighed according to this criterion: is Mahad's action « a premeditated act of madness », like the « courageous charge of the guns of the Somali nationalist dervishes »? Yet, the Sayyid's British-termed « madness » was not the lunacy of a man alone. Mukhtaar's act, the placing of a bomb, if it was mad, is not in the Sayyid's tradition, being too isolated, « which means that Mukhtaar had crossed the frontier Khaalif had crossed before him, a frontier Deeriye hadn't gone beyond, or the Sayyid or Wiil-Waal, for that matter » (p. 109).

This last example is typical in the way it blends history and fictional characters, adding verisimilitude and a sense of urgency to the debate. Again, it shows the exploratory nature of the whole narrative: from the same premises, young men feel justified to resort to violence, — sane or mad —, whereas to the last Deeriye finds his strength in connecting the Sayyid with resistance, but a resistance which is not necessarily the shedding of blood — Ghandi is among the figures he takes as a guide.

As we have seen, if the history of Somalia is essential to the novel, it is presented in a very complex manner, lit from many different angles. The most obvious effect is to make the history of the Somali people better known to the English-reading public, in Africa and elsewhere, who had read Farah's previous novels. Not only are the facts mentioned but also the way in which history is perceived by the people and to an extent fashions their lives. As we have seen, it is made not only of the scholarly reporting of facts, as in the erudite books mentioned in the postface, but also in the well-known texts that belong to oral culture: tales, epic narrative, verse by famous poets. History is thus shown to be not the prerogative of specialists confined within the pages of serious books, but as the fruit of a collective effort at memorizing, commenting, choosing what is to be

remembered and what is to be forgotten in genealogies, past conflicts and heroic deeds.

Close Sesame is not however a historical novel, in the way there are ethnological novels about Africa. History is questioned for the answers it may give for the present. Underlining the book, as with the other works of the trilogy, is the certainty that there is a meaning in human lives which has to be decyphered. History here is not an absurd sequence of chance occurrences, as it is with pessimistic philosophers, nor is it a rigid concatenation of cause and effect which would leave no freedom of action and render moral decisions irrelevant. The novel underlines the idea that there is a latent meaning to history by pointing repeatedly at coincidences, parallels, echoes, facts that through decades seem to refer to one another. One may feel at times that the writer, playing the part of the omnipotent Creator, accumulates too many coincidences. There are several such occurrences direct similitude between past and present incidents, but they do not seem contrived because the writer, in his freedom to invent, only gives expression to a feature often found in his culture, as in some others, the propensity to look for meaning or signs in the echoes and coincidences of real life.

Farah creates a fictional world which is also an image or a metaphor for the real one: there is meaning for those who try hard to make sense out of fragmented experience, especially by interpreting cycles and situations which are repeated across the years. In a way, in this search for meaning, past and present are coexistent. The quest for knowledge or even revelation of the old man is like that of the blind man with his stick in the last tale, who tries to understand both the world made by the creator and the mound of earth made by the minute *aboor* insect. If the writer seems to mimic in his fiction the powers of the Creator, allotting names and destinies to the creatures of his brain, he is also in the text, humbly, the blind man of the fable, or possibly even the lonely madman, or the isolated detainee who *names* the world to attempt understanding and just to keep sane: « The very old and the very small: they keep sane by constantly naming the objects and things they come into contact with lest they lose touch with the reality they know » (p. 116). The protagonist at times, seems to stand for the writer himself, « displaced » for many years. « To speak of that about which others are silent and to remain sane at the same time is a very difficult task » (p. 200).

Close Sesame can thus be said to dramatize a cognitive quest, an old man's attempt at reading the world. Yet this quest is not a gratuitous, dispassionate philosophical exercise. On the contrary, the book imparts a feeling of the urgency of this understanding. Page after page, people have to make dramatic choices; they suffer, they love: « We are not only ourselves, we are others too, those whom we love, those who have influenced our lives, who have made us what we are » (p. 202). They are goaded by this sense of their interdependence. Their collective future is at stake in each decision made, and that is why an understanding of history is so essential to read the present, which in contrast to the mythical past is confused, painful: « Is there no avoiding that one should belong in one camp or another? Is there no avoiding belonging on the *inside* or *outside* of this camp? » (p. 167).

One of the merits of *Close Sesame* is to make one feel how a reference to history, far from being an imaginary escape into the more tolerable past is part of the life and blood of men confronted daily with difficult and urgent choices. History in such a novel steeped in emotion, is made flesh, and its understanding

is shown to be a task in which all members of society are involved - elders, but also young men, women, children even.

The feeling of urgency in other situations has led novelists to a more and more militant tone. Here a space is created for the reader to analyse and decide, by the function the central character plays in the novel: Deeriye is a positive centre, yet he is not the only holder of truth in the book, no mere « spokesman » for the writer. He is a complex character; in all the serenity of his faith, he is tortured: « It is the prerogative of God alone to be sure of anything. / ... / I am only a human. And therefore I am in doubt » (p. 202). The uncertainty about the cause and meaning of his death at the end — did he finally attempt to shoot at the President when his gun was found entangled in his prayer beads? — does not let us know if his prayer has been answered: « ... Help us, a God. The ways of the soul are mysterious and so are Yours. Make us wiser, make us understand, o God, the contradictions in which we find ourselves » (p. 165). In its treatment of history, *Close Sesame* is committed, but not didactic. The novel gives us too much a sense of the complexity of human interaction for that.

The book, with its direct historical reference, far from being a pamphlet, is more a meditation on time and history. The subject in Somalia, but the scope can be extended to the whole of post-colonial Africa. It can be read also, more generally, as a dramatisation of the human consciousness of the past and of the fleeing of time. The subject is ambitious, but in presenting a protagonist who was a national hero and is a mystic, the book presents us with both a sense of eternity as felt in the repeated moments of prayer and of the sequences of human conflicts and achievements. Some of the best passages, blending the awareness of the minutiae of daily life and the feeling that there is an overall meaning to human endeavour, as there is for the *aboor* « constructing an ant-hill with her own saliva after nightfall », are passages of poetry, close to the poetical vision and rhythm of the great texts of the Somali tradition taken as models:

« ... / Time was also the abyss with the open door; it was human for it had hands: one for seconds to give the minute and another for minutes to tell the hour, fingers praying deferentially to the God who created the hands that are in motion, like a clock's, losing; gaining time; eyes of quartz in the darkness of a room; ears of ticking time, adding a second only to take the same from the life who have experienced it, who have lived through it. Time was also the rest of sleep, a cat-nap, the night-cap, the uncounted heads of cattle chewing the cud in peace and quiet, the prayerless screams, the absent father-husband and the loved wife. / ... / Time was history; and history consisted of these illuminated prints - not truths; ... » (p. 86).

References

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