Understanding Nuruddin Farah

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Reading Nuruddin Farah: The Individual, the Novel & the Idea of Home

By F. Fiona Moolla, James Currey, 2014, 210 p.
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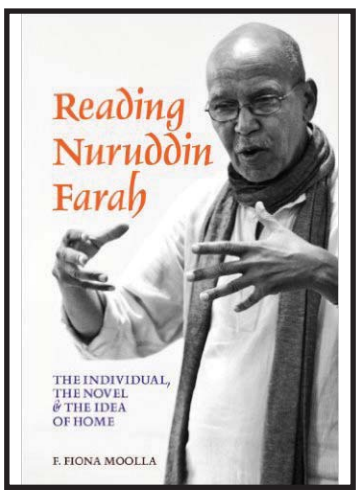
Fiona Moolla's book, *Reading Nuruddin Farah* is a must read for a variety of reasons. First of all, Nuruddin Farah, whose *oeuvre* spans over 45 years of mostly fiction writing on women's emancipation, is one of the most iconic literary figures from Africa. He is reputedly a perennial nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature, which he certainly deserves, in addition to the many other literary awards he has already won, including the prestigious Neustadt International Prize for Literature. Although Somali by birth, Farah is the quintessential *African*, having lived in several African countries in almost all the sub-regions of the continent. In a 1976 interview in Rome, following the Somali Government's declaration of him as a *persona non grata*, he reportedly told the interviewer, Stephen Gray of the *Publishers Weekly*: 'If I couldn't go back home then I would systematically make the rest of Africa my country'. In addition to Somali, Farah is fluent in English, Italian, Arabic and Amharic, and was the first-ever Somali novelist to write in the English language.

It is also notable that all of Farah's novels are set in Somalia, even though he has lived a substantial part of his life in exile outside his home country. One of Farah's often-quoted statements is: 'I have tried my best to keep my country alive by writing about it'. Among African countries, Somalia is one of the most fascinating, if for largely painful reasons. Several times in its history, it has held high promise only to fall off the edge into deep political disaster. Given the country's harsh environmental and climatic conditions, Somalis have a reputation for exemplary resilience even though decades of incessant and devastating civil wars have pushed out large numbers of Somalis into exile and refugee camps, the most notable being the Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya, the largest refugee camp in the world with a population of some 500,000 at its peak. On the other hand, the fact that Somalia has the longest coastline on the African mainland makes it a strategically located country in Eastern Africa and the Horn of Africa in particular, and a maritime gateway to the Middle East and Asia. Somalia's cultural, historical and political trajectories also offer many important lessons regarding the dynamics of the Cold War, post-colonial nation building and global cultural interactions, among others.

Farah's novels, taken together, provide an illuminating template for accessing and upholding 'the other', with a strong moral core featuring a quest for paradigm shift by protagonists who are mostly independent-minded women who rebel against oppressive cultural, social and religious traditions. He has so far produced eleven internationally acclaimed novels and one non-fiction book. The novels are Farah's first two – *From a Crooked Rib* (1970) and *A Naked Needle* (1976), plus three trilogies. The first trilogy, titled 'Variations on the Theme of African Dictatorship', comprises *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979), *Sardine* (1981), and *Close Sesame* (1983). The second trilogy, titled 'Blood in the Sun', is made up of *Maps* (1986), *Gifts* (1992) and *Secrets* (1998); and the novels of the third trilogy, 'Past Imperfect', are *Links* (2003), *Knots* (2007), and *Crossbones* (2011).



Each of Farah's novels has received extensive reviews and analyses by literary critics, but Fiona Moolla's book provides the first and most expansive discursive analysis of all of Farah's novels. To be sure, one can legitimately ask: Why read an analysis of a writer's body of work before directly reading the writer's work? Fundamentally, Moolla, who is a notable specialist in the theory of the novel as a genre, offers in her book very deep insights into Farah's body of work, which greatly helps to situate Farah's oeuvre within a clearer historical, literary and epistemological landscape.

In *Reading Nuruddin Farah*, Moolla uses a well-crafted multi-disciplinary framework for reading, understanding, appreciating and connecting with the numerous books by Farah. It is a book that would appeal first and foremost to literary experts and theorists as well as students who are aiming for and working their way to such intellectual and literary heights; and yet it should have sufficient appeal to the average novel reader. In addition, even those who already know Farah's novels will find the book helpful to gain a deeper and globalist understanding of them after reading this book and will go back to re-read Farah's novels. Each novel is deeply analysed and at the end a holistic grasp of all the novels is attained.

The introduction of the book lays out how Farah's oeuvre reflects the history of the development of the novel as a genre, and provides an elaborate framework for reading Farah. The conceptual offerings are extensive and include orality, feminism, exile, individualization, polyphony and *Bildungsroman* (a German term that refers to a 'novel of formation, education, culture').The first chapter provides the theoretical and conceptual tools to make sense of Farah's novels by zeroing in on individualism, modernity and morality. It covers the historical development of the individual, drawing mostly from the analysis of Charles Taylor in his book: *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Chapter 2 is a dialectical analysis of Farah's first novel, *From a Crooked Rib,*with a focus on Farah's commitment to the quest for individual development and how that achieves closure, stressing the contradictions, tensions and dialectics inherent in such quest.Ideologically progressive or radical readers of Farah would be delighted to see Moolla quote Karl Marx as the preface of this chapter:

> …although at first the development of the species takes place at the cost of the majority of human individuals and even classes, in the end it breaks through this contradiction and coincides with the development of the individual; the higher development of individuality is thus only achieved by the historical process during which individuals are sacrificed … (p. 48).

Chapter 3 covers the gynocentric *Bildungsroman* quality of two novels from Farah's first and second trilogies: *Sardines* and *Gifts*. Chapter 4 is about modernism in *A Naked Needle* and *Sweet and Sour Milk*; and Chapter 5 looks at the representation of heteronomy in *Close Sesame*, which is the closing novel of Farah's first trilogy. Chapter 6 is on the subject of 'dissolving the boundaries of self and nation' in *Maps* and *Secrets* – the first and last novels of the second trilogy. Chapter 7, the final chapter, provides a collective analysis of the third trilogy (*Links*, *Knots* and *Crossbones*) and how reconstructing the individual subject is differently articulated.

Thus, Moolla's analyses straddle the different novels and picks across the trilogies as much as possible to establish the connecting links. The analysis of each novel covers all aspects of structure, including plot, narrative, characters, description, themes, imagery, dialogue, and diction. She also utilizes some key conceptual and analytical optics and questions that the readers of Farah would find illuminating. The first, obviously, is how Farah's novels throw a reflexive light on the thread that runs through all the novels as well as on the novelist himself. Here, regular readers of Farah probably need less guidance because his life and novels are very well known to be about the quest for individual (especially women's) emancipation from oppressive systems and traditions of patriarchy, dictatorship and gerontocracy. What might be more of a surprise is Moolla's 'revelation' that the novel, as a literary genre, was initially not Farah's preferred medium because his passion was for drama: 'One could say, against the inclination Farah has shown for other genres, that the novel chose Farah since it is the cultural form which symbolically represents the conception of the person which powers Farah's worldview' (p. 23). One could therefore say that, dialectically, Farah's cultural and global literary inheritance trumped his inner spirit of personal choice and preference in determining the narrative vehicle for expressing the importance of individual agency in the Somali tradition-bound context.

The second framing optic has to do with the question of where and how we can locate Farah's novels within the historical and philosophical trajectory of the novel genre. Running through the book is the idea that Farah's *oeuvre* can be located within several historical and philosophical frames ranging from the works of Mikhail Bakhtin to Charles Taylor, René Descartes, Plato, St. Augustine, John Locke, Alasdair MacIntyre, Ferdinand Tönnies, Wilhelm Dilthey, and many more. Moolla also elaborates on the existentialist import of Farah's work – the idea that human beings must feel completely free to define their own individuality and existence without the controlling and shaping influences of culture, society and religion. In addition, Moolla shows how Farah's oeuvre reflects the history of the novel genre, from its qualities of proto-realism to modernism and postmodernism and circling back to realism. As she puts it, 'Farah's novels…encapsulate a history of the novel in the career of a single author' (p. 16) – a quality that can be attributed to only a few novelists globally.

Another framing and guiding optic is how the plots of Farah's novels handle the dialectics of both individual transformation and national development in the Somali context. Farah's novels are situated within the imperative of 'internalisation of moral sources' as the female protagonists engage in a quest for freedom, self-realisation and individual identity in the context of patriarchal and gerontocratic traditions, norms and systems that allow little space for difference and emancipation. Related to this, one of Moolla's illuminating frames is the role of Farah's novels in the reconciliation of binary opposites: 'How does the novel resolve the contradiction of character and plot, individual life and overarching pattern, *sjuzhet* and *fabula*, self-determination and socialization, soul and the world of conventions/forms, realism of presentation and realism of assessment, the organic and the architectural?' This optic constitutes a very handy means of making sense of virtually all of Farah's novels, which are of the *Bildungsroman* sub-genre.

At the same time, as Moolla's analysis shows, Farah's novels (except for his first novel, *From a Crooked Rib*) break new ground because they extend beyond the limited narrative and plot boundaries of the traditional male-centered *Bildungsroman* model: '…Farah's novels move away from the classical *Bildungsroman* template since multiple limitations seem to be attached to this

pattern. Most significantly, the classical model allows the genre which narrates individual freedom to be foreclosed by an ending where tradition curtails freedom'. Hence, Farah's novels have an innovative female *Bildungsroman* model; and Moolla identifies how Farah adeptly situates three of his novels with 'central female protagonists' in the middle of his trilogies, literally 'sandwiched between novels with a male hero'.

Beyond the individual level, Moolla's book also identifies the variant ways in which Farah's novels cover the narratives of post-colonial Somali national development, and highlights this point with a pertinent quote from Derek Wright's edited book, *Emerging Perspectives on Nuruddin Farah*, in reference to the protagonist of Farah's first novel (*From a Crooked Rib*), Ebla, whose character is presented as 'a symbolic analogue for Somalia on the eve of independence, her various polyandric marriages mirroring the nation's oppressive relations with imperial masters'.

Moolla's book is therefore, without a doubt, the most authoritative and illuminating analysis of Farah's novels. It has the highest standard of scholarship. Yet, it is a tough read in terms of conceptual understanding (especially in the first chapter) and in terms of textual expressions. Two random quotes from the early parts of the book will give a sense of this:

> This book will attempt to show that individualism in Farah's novels, while trying to escape the 'rational' sovereign self-constituting subject, in fact invisibly entrenches its domination; simultaneously occluding the social codes external to the self in relation to which the person is formed (p. 10).

The analysis of Farah's novels, embodying as they do a history of the novel, shows that the external ethical background is not dropped with the development of individualism but rather that trying to make the social-transcendental ethical background invisible determines the course of the development of the novel out of its mode in its eighteenth-century origins (p. 17).

Reading Nuruddin Farah, therefore, requires careful and slow reading in order to fully take and digest its many enlightening offerings. This is, however, a small price to pay in reading and re-reading a book that offers so much in knowledge of literary theory and a fuller understanding of one of the world's most important and creative writers. Fiona Moolla herself is a novel theorist par excellence, and her book is a pivotal contribution to the analysis of African literature, although it still does not quite fill the existing gap of analyzing the *oeuvre* of an important African literary figure like Nuruddin Farah within a literary theoretical frame emanating from the continent itself.