Salvaging Mogadishu from Ruin and Rubble

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Crossbones
by Nuruddin Farah
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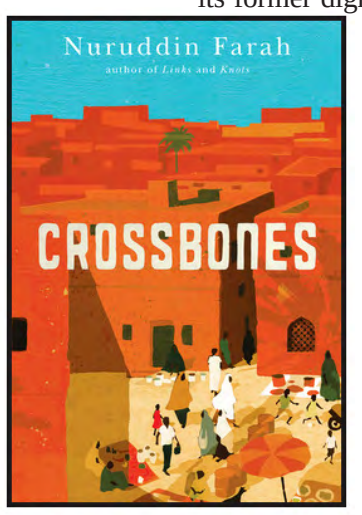
For decades, exiled author Nuruddin Farah has dreamt, written and carried Somalia, 'the country of his imagination,' throughout his nomadic existence. His eleven novels, one non-fictional study of the Somali diaspora, articles, essays, broadcasts and interviews bear testimony to this fact and are literary manifestations of the tragic turn of events in postcolonial Somalia. He was forced to flee Somalia, after having incurred the wrath of Mohamed Siyad Barre, for his satirical and critical remarks against the Barre regime in his second novel, *A Naked Needle* (1978). Today, Farah has earned a distinguished and rightful place for himself among Anglophone-African writers and internationally. *A Naked Needle* is one of his least Somali novels and a very silly work, (when compared to his later works that engage explicitly with Somali politics, culture and society), as Farah puts it across in a conversation with Kenyan author and journalist Binyavanga Wainaina.

Farah's trilogies entitled, *Variations on the theme of an African Dictatorship* (1978-83), *Blood in the Sun* (1986-93) and the latest, *Past Imperfect* (2004-11), are fictionalized accounts of the chaotic and turbulent periods of Somali history – the autocratic and tyrannical regime of Siyad Barre (1969-91), the war with neighbouring Ethiopia over disputed Ogaden (1977-78) and the pitfalls of nationalism, the neocolonial dependency of the 1980s, the civil war of 1991, and the subsequent state-collapse of Somalia in 1992. On a broader basis, the books deal with the culture of silence and fear imposed by dictators on the people and other representations of dictatorship, the pitfalls of nationalism and how foreign aid can thwart cultural development and cause an erosion of self esteem in people's psyche and much more. The three books comprising the *Past Imperfect* trilogy – *Links* (2004), *Knots* (2009) and *Crossbones* (2011), historicize Somalia's post-collapse era starting from the abrupt withdrawal of the U.S. troops in 1993, and the UN forces in 1995, in Mogadishu to the infighting that followed much later between the Transitional Federal Government and the hard-line Islamist factions.

An overwhelming sense of foreboding and gloom descends on *Crossbones*, the final book of the trilogy, as the narrative revolves around the disappearance of a young Minnesota-based Somali lad, rumoured to have joined the Al-Shabaab, the booming piracy business off the shores of Somalia, the alleged collaboration of pirates with Al-Shabaab, and the impending Ethiopian invasion of Somalia of 2006. The Somalis' resentment towards their "age-old enemy Ethiopia," "the bully next door," further complicates matters in the Somalia contextualized in *Crossbones* (120). The Somali radical religionists are waiting for a confrontation with Ethiopia in the hope of pitting the Muslim world against Christian-led Ethiopia, in spite of the fact that Ethiopia has a stronger military power, is an ally of the United States and has definitely more chances of gaining an upper hand in the face-off (25). The Muslim world is clearly at a crossroads as they split into radicals and moderates and it is against this turbulent background that the narrative of *Crossbones* is set. Clearly, there is no place more dangerous than Mogadishu considering the circumstances, especially for journalists reporting the war. Malik refers to the numerous slain journalists as 'heroes of obtrusiveness' as they are a highly endangered breed (247).



Farah's novels are generally set in Mogadishu against specific historical time-frames, However, in the latest, *Past Imperfect* trilogy, Mogadishu gains more prominence as it stands as a metaphor for the political vacuum and hollow authority of stateless Somalia. So, when diaspora-returnees Jeebleh of *Links*, Cambara of *Knots*, Jeebleh and Malik, of *Crossbones*, are made to (re)visit Mogadishu, after decades, a deliberate strategy on the part of Farah, they are startled and emotionally pulverized as Mogadishu is nothing short of an inferno, having borne so much of the brunt of the violence and mayhem during and after the civil war. Things have fallen apart and Mogadishu, the erstwhile centre cannot hold any longer and is a breeding ground for warlordism, religious extremism, militancy, various kinds of criminality and mindless violence just as tartar-infested and 'diseased gums are rich with pockets in which germs find homes ...' (112). In *Secrets* (1998), the final instalment of the *Blood in the Sun* trilogy, which is largely Farah's complex artistic response to his personal visit to Somalia after many years, he is speechless at the Somali obsession with lineage and genealogy. Hence, in *Secrets*, we see the termite-eaten fundaments of the Somali nation's state-structures on the verge of collapse owing to the clan-eat-clan politics of the early nineties that degenerated into the civil war. The civil war led to more clan-based animosities and violence.

Several Somali poets and songsmiths have sung the glories of the Mogadishu of the past whilst bemoaning its present devastated state. Lidwein Kapteijns shows how these poems by representing Mogadishu's past in many ways also envision and try to influence the future. Mogadishu becomes the site of memory-making for the future because of its centrality to history. One of the most popular and celebrated Somali poets, Hadrawi, has a verse that runs thus: 'You, umbilical cord of my country, nerve centre of my people, Mogadishu how are you?' (Kaptjeins: 40). One might argue that Nuruddin Farah's novels do something similar for different time periods.

The stark and grim images of the protracted warfare are inscribed on the city, observes Farah and is now deprived of its former dignity and glory and devoid of character. Note Farah's own shock and dismay at Mogadishu's sad plight: in his own words: '…I am aware of its unparalleled war-torn decrepitude: almost every structure is pockmarked by bullets, and many homes are on their sides, falling in on themselves' (Farah, *The City in My Mind*).

In an analytical study of 'ruins' in war and post-war Lebanese novels, Ken Seigneurie, contends that ruin and rubble provide key links in an implicit narrative and are indicators of atrocities committed in the past, ruin in the present and, most importantly, necessity for action, to prevent what happened from happening again, a future utopia. 'As metonyms of the past, ruins can be memory's and art's point of contact with historical experience' (Seigneurie:18). Farah's nostalgic written piece, on the Tamarind Market, one of the prominent landmarks of Mogadishu, in the good old days, reads like a dirge as he laments the murder and death of the spirit of cosmopolitanism, once a unique and distinct feature of Mogadishu.

In Farah's opinion, what has killed Mogadishu's cosmopolitanism is nothing but intolerance (58). While a synagogue in neighbouring Djibouti, inhabited by a Muslim majority, is preserved by its tolerant residents, the ancient Catholic cathedral in Mogadishu was looted and razed to the ground during the early phase of the civil war. An Italian bishop, head of a Catholic-funded orphanage, one of the oldest institutions in the city, was killed. An Al-Shabaab-operative had desecrated the Italian cemeteries after they gained power in the early 2000's, by digging up bones and scattering them around in a sacrilegious manner. Television programmes aired on al-Jazeera featuring Somalis had in the foreground ruins of the 12th century Arbaco Rukus mosque, destroyed in the 1991 civil war (99). Thus we see not only violent histories emerge out of this chaos and destruction but also a cultural retrogression problematized in *Crossbones*.

The Bakhaaraha Market area, the prime location of the war has emerged as a public monument and artifact as evidenced by the visit of the Task Force Rangers, of the infamous 'Battle of Mogadishu', to commemorate the twentieth anniversary and, as an act of remembrance, revisited the war sites and wreckage, around this area which is also a recurring theme of the *Past Imperfect* trilogy. Hence we find, Jeebleh of *Links*, Cambara of *Knots*, Jeebleh, Malik and Ahl of *Crossbones*, go around the city to survey, contemplate and to tarry around the ruin and rubble and also to learn of things firsthand, in contrast to the biased and partisan outsider perceptions of the ongoing conflict in Somalia. 'Standing by the ruins' or 'stopping by ruins', in Seigneurie's opinion, is one of the ways in which societies address the dark chapters in their history.

Besides, their visits to Mogadishu are timed when the city is tossed among the warlords, religionists and the American and Ethiopian interventionists, though sadly there is hardly any difference among the religionists, warlords or the Federalists as opined by Bile, an old acquaintance of Jeebleh, in both *Links* and *Crossbones*. Journalist Malik's impromptu remark, 'Mogadiscians have seen warlords of all varieties…', sums up the bitterness and disillusionment experienced by the Somalis caught in the crosshairs of various tendencies (225, 57).

However, the Mogadiscio that Koschin, the central protagonist in *A Naked Needle*, inhabits was totally different from what Jeebleh gets to see of the same city twenty four years later.

> Mogadiscio had known centuries of attrition; one army leaving death and destruction in its wake to be replaced by another and another and yet another, all equally destructive: the Arabs arrived and got some purchase on the peninsula, and after they pushed their commerce and along with it the Islamic faith, they were replaced by the Italians, then the Russians, and more recently the Americans… (*Links* 14-15).

Links is set in a Mogadishu with tell-tale marks of the American 'intravasion'. Jeebleh, the central protagonist sees for himself 'the bullet-starred, mortar-struck, machine-gun showered' three-storey building and pieces of metal of the black hawk helicopters that were shot down during the infamous Battle of Mogadiscio of 1993, the subject of the film *Black Hawk Down*, showing the war from a totally American perspective (*Links*: 71).

But when Malik, the journalist in *Crossbones* with expertise in reporting from the major conflict areas of the world – (Afghanistan, Congo and Iraq), wants to focus his concentrated energy 'on boning up everything Somali,' he encounters a city that is 'disoriented by fresh ruins from the latest confrontation between the warlords and the Courts ...' (26). As in a typical war novel or a film that lingers over houses with their insides caved in or a bullet-riddled statue, Malik, in deep contemplation, muses over the rubble which 'seldom divulges the secret sorrows it contains' (26).

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What is most tragic about the victims of civil war or natural disasters or calamities, according to Nuruddin is that often no one knows how many have perished. What is worse, 'One never gets to hear the last words that passed their lips, or what, in the end, caused their death: a falling beam, a failing heart, a spear of bullet-shattered glass. Or sheer exhaustion with living in such horrid circumstances day in and day out?' (26). Sadly, forensic technology is unable to help in such matters and inadequate documentation on the dead intensifies the tragedy.

As the governance of the city passes from one hand to the other, Mogadishu, acquires a different dimension and character which in turn is reflected in 'the attitudes of the city's residents, their dress habits and even… diet… depending on the politics of the country's competing factions (Farah, *The City in My Mind*). Hence, in *Links*, Jeebleh is privy to the great-divide in Mogadiscio, indicated by a green line demarcating the territories controlled by the two major warlords, Mohammed Farah Aideed and Ali Mahdi. And, by the time veiled Cambara of *Knots* is in Mogadiscio, the power-scales have tilted towards the Islamists and the Union of Islamic Courts, UIC, imposing rigorous cultural codes and taboos, especially on women, but also making up new ones.

A pervasive sense of authoritarianism enforced by the puritanical-religionists is strikingly evident in the first few pages of *Crossbones*, even as Cambara, propped in a body tent which appears more like a theatre prop or just a mere costume, saunters along the run-down East Wardhiigley district of Mogadiscio. Crossbones contextualizes the time period during which the UIC took over the reigns of Mogadiscio, in the early 2000, and had expanded the rule of Sharia law making veiling *de rigueur*. Women in trousers and less restrictive dresses were whiplashed for supposedly sabotaging the Islamic way of life and 'American-inspired bra contraptions' were condemned.

Beard-sporting youth clad in white robes are a common sight in the Mogadiscio depicted in *Crossbones* while some others are in military or 'ill-matched uniform assembled from various post-collapse loyalties' (26). Overall, Mogadiscio's political contours have changed, suggesting 'an empire of a different thrust …' at work in Somalia (25). One hears echoes of the general frustration of many Somalis oppressed by the religionists through Bile's words when he states that he prefers a spineless secular state to a religionist one run by a bearded cabal (120). It is important to state here that are several variations among the Islamists' and not all are radical or violent as al-Shabaab.

Is statelessness a boon or a bane is the pertinent question raised in *Links*. The immense potential of women as peace brokers is the central underlying theme of *Knots*, dedicated to the cause of women, while *Crossbones* is a narrative that is interwoven with recent news reports on Somali pirates. Furthermore, the diaspora engagement towards peace and reconstruction is also suggested in these books.

Jeebleh of *Links* reappears along with his journalist son-in-law Malik in Mogadishu and, in the process, attempts to debunk several myths pertaining to piracy off the Somali coast. Dumping of charcoal and toxic wastes, illegal fishing around Somalia's coast are all issues that need to be highlighted and Farah wonders who are the real pirates and locates the stories in Puntland, one of the piracy towns in order to unearth the rackets behind the expeditions and trace the involvement of organizations in the developed countries who get the lion's share from the proceeds.

Crossbones adds to the existing rich international popular culture on piracy, including the recent film *Captain Philips* (2013). Farah has always contested and challenged prevalent stereotypical images of Somalia and Somalis and wonders if it is right to call the Somalis, *burcad badeed*, sea bandits. He attempts to provide the Somali version of the piracy stories in circulation, as they have been rendered voiceless. 'We are cast as villains of the piece and no one listens to our side of the story' (215**).**

Infuriated by the media's penchant for cheap sensationalism, Farah's literary mouthpiece, Malik, wishes to write about every aspect touching the lives of the Somalis**.** (In *Gifts,* the irate journalist Taariq chastises and lambasts the media for its internationalization of Somalia's poverty and starvation). He finds fault with the Western interpretation of the Muslim world and wonders if it is in the genetic make-up of Muslims to terrorize. Time and again, Farah has expressed his dismay and distaste at the subjection of Somalia to media overexposure, 'the intimate affairs of this nation are fodder for gossip, shock, amazement and newspaper headlines elsewhere but not to the victims of strife' (319).

The stories of YoungThing and Taxliil are the stories of Somali youngsters living outside Somalia and turning towards radical Islam. YoungThing is 'small in stature' but 'huge in ambition' and is barely able to walk with his explosives-stuffed bag. Yet, at this tender age, he is clearly 'aware of the huge difference between martyring oneself, and making a blunder of things and getting oneself killed' (*Crossbones*: 1). By depriving YoungThing of a name and thereafter an identity, Farah indulges in a certain amount of caricaturing to convey the fact that people lose their sense of self-direction and a sense of identity when a nation begins to murder itself: 'nervous, self-murderous, on edge' (293). BigBeard, TruthTeller, FootSoldier and KalaSaar are a few other characterizations; they do not sound like the names of individuals but are rather pointers to a degrading culture in stateless Somalia.

In the early 1990s, the functioning principle was the 'primacy of the clan', which was replaced by 'the primacy of religion,' and *Crossbones* is a work of art that is representative of this major paradigm shift within Somali political history. The killer becomes a *mujahid*, and if killed, a martyr. Ahl, who has lost his son Taxliil, to the Al-Shabaab tries in desperation to trace his son's whereabouts and engages in a conversation with one of the locals KalaSaar, burrowing into the structures of the militant group. They try to find a clear distinction between words like 'insurgents' and 'terrorists'. They theorize about the discontent Somali youth who are indoctrinated into becoming suicide-bombers. The reason for this is self-hate, which results in 'the nation murdering itself, and in the process of doing so, the individual committing suicide becomes a metaphor for the death culture' (*Crossbones*: 315). In the earlier novels of Farah, the family unit becomes a microcosm of the country's political upheavals.

Farah takes to task the nation's politicians, intellectuals, its clan elders, the imams, its rudderless youth and mainly the women who have foolishly let their nation down very badly. The veil-wearing submissive Somali women of the present generation are retrogressive, unlike the progressive Somali women who were at the forefront of politics in Somali nationalist history. He even reproaches the present generation and the so-called intellectuals for a lack of a vision for a better tomorrow: 'We're culpable in that we, who think of ourselves as educated secularists, have not inspired the younger generation, who are responding to our failure with rebellious rejection of everything we have so far stood for' (314). This is Farah's prognosis for ailing Somalia**.**

Jeebleh's empathetic 'listening' while his traumatized friends narrate their war-stories during the infamous Battle of Mogadishu, the traditional practice of communal eating in *Links*, story-telling and healing in *Knots* and Taxliil, reuniting with his parents after renouncing militancy in *Crossbones,* are joyful little tales superimposed on the war and horror stories of Mogadishu. Farah tries the same with himself. Disturbed at the denigration and shame Mogadishu has been put through in the last two decades, Farah superimposes images of the city's peaceful past over the city's present crass and crude realities, to stay at peace during troubled, uncertain times.

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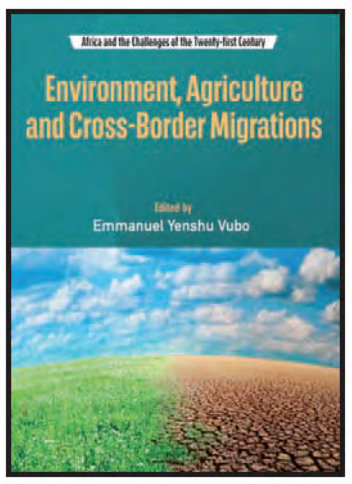

Environment, Agriculture and Cross-border Migrations

Edited by Emmanuel Yenshu Vubo

This book brings together contributions on the challenges of the environment, agriculture and cross-border migrations in Africa; key areas that have become critical for the continent's development. The central theme running through these contributions is that Africa's development challenges can be attributed to its human and natural ecology. Contrasted with the Cold War epoch, current developments have ushered us into a world of long and uncertain transitions characterized by a search for new pathways including investment in large-scale agriculture by big finance, attempts to revitalize existing agriculture and reworking of social policy. A major twist relates to environmental questions, especially climate change and its global effects, leading to all forms of cross-border migrations and the emergence of new areas of strategic interest such as sub-regional developments as in the Gulf of Guinea. This book provides some intellectual clues on how to interpret these emerging predicaments and chart a way forward into a new era for Africa.

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