Women in movement in Nuruddin Farah's writing
by Abdourahman A. Waberi

Surpassing the clichés surrounding the great Somalian writer's vision of women,
Abdourahman A. Waberi, the writer from Djibouti, sets the records straight.

Of this gifted author, great novelist of the human condition, the first writer in the modern sense of the
word to write in his mother tongue, Somali, people still and always remember his sympathy - in the
original sense of the word - for women. For those who regularly peruse the mysteries of the Farahian
exegesis, this comment has become firstly a characteristic trait, then a common theme, and finally an
architectural vault on which the whole body of his work rests. More or less inspired critics have made
immoderate use of this empathy considered natural in this man who, what is more, is from a
patrilineal society that is very finicky over the chapter of the liberalities granted to women. It is
unleashed, this empathy grows. More often than is necessary, it is raised to the ranks of fetish,
password, or magic key opening all the doors of the Farahian house.

But let's begin in the beginning. This view also has its history, and, consequently, it is possible to trace
its path, book by book, remark by remark, lying in wait for its appearances, speculating on its
disappearances. It apparently all started with a misunderstanding, a very Anglo-Saxon gag. Shortly
after the publication of his first novel From a Crooked Rib (1970) written in 1968, Nuruddin Farah
received a letter via Heinemann, his London publishers of the time, addressed to him and which began, "Dear Mrs Nuruddin Farah". The author of the letter, an English or American woman moved by
the novel - which narrates the life of an ingenuous young nomad who leaves her hostile environment
to escape a forced marriage - who didn't know a thing about the young novelist, automatically
assumed that he could only be a woman. The "feminist" Farah myth was thus born, and even though
he does not use this political, often reductive, and, at times, too Western label himself, the native of
Baidhoba does nothing to deny it either.

Quite on the contrary, the stubborn facts are there, disseminated in his oeuvre. The female characters
are there too, each always finer, stronger, more humanly profound than the rest. From Ebla in the first
novel to Ladan (Sweet and Sour Milk), from Sagal, Sandra, Atta and Medina (Sardines) to Zeinab and
Natacha (Close Sesame), to Misra (Maps) to the unforgettable Duniay (Gifts), to the latest good spirit
Sholongoo (Secrets), the beautiful and strong women - "the braided heads" - to coin an expression by
the elder Hampaté Bâ, are the pillars of the Farahian house.

In the Europhone literary landscape, dominated for many years by male writers, portraits of women
were poorly sketched, or even deliberately blackened. Male chauvinism ruled undividedly. Men of
letters were more concerned with the major political and philosophical questions to let themselves be
distracted by domestic subjects, secondary characters (female, of course) and their ancillary tasks.
Read Les Bouts de bois de Dieu (Gods Bits of Wood) or L'Aventure ambiguë (Ambiguous Adventure)
again, both published in 1960, for example. We had to wait nearly twenty years to see the first female
writers emerge on the Francophone literary scene, notably with the Senegalese Nafissatou Diallo,
Mariama Bâ, and Aminata Sow Fall (De Tilène au Plateau/a Dakar Childhood (1975), Une si longue
lettre/So long a letter and La grève des Battu/The Beggars Strike, 1979, respectively). Things have
changed considerably since. Thank goodness.

Nuruddin Farah sees himself as successor to his mother's profound voice. He unquestionably wishes
to provide an echo chamber for Faduma Aleeli, poetess in the tradition of the great Ogaden poets and
poetesses, his family's region of origin. An affectionate mother who succeeded in composing an ode to
each of her ten children. In his case, there is something of a passing on of the flame. To remain worthy
of it, he mobilizes all the artistic resources available to him, makes the most of all the literary traditions,
makes his honey out of all the nectars. Let us cite Arthur Rimbaud's universal phrase to back our
argument, not simply for pleasure: "When woman's infinite serfdom is broken, when she lives for and
by herself (...) she too will be poet". Faduma Aleeli, for her part, was already a poet.

In Somali culture, we can note that the female camel (and, consequently, woman - sometimes lover
and sometimes mother) is metaphor of the national community. More or less inspired poets have
used and abused this narrative motif. And the panegyric names given to the female camel are also
(first)names given to young women, such as Mandeeq, Idil or Koraan.

In Nuruddin Farah's work, women are often sisters to men. That is to say that, more than the simple
familial relation, they are absolute soul mates, a source of light and a haven of peace. This is the
certainly the case with Ladan for her twin brothers (Sweet and Sour Milk), Medina for Nasser
(Sardines), Zeinab for Mahad and his gang (Close Sesame), Nasiiba for Mataan (Gifts), Duiya for
Abshir (Gifts). Even separated, distanced, or in exile, their presence reassures or illuminates the men's lives, a divine halo, to be precise - as is the case with Nadiifa and the old Deeriye in Close Sesame. There are plenty more examples. Let's listen to Kalamu, the narrator of Secrets, speak of his relation with Sholoongo and the strange spirit he shares with her: "She unraveled mysteries, taught me the basics about what I took to be something akin to the Sufi tradition, offered me the clearest feminist interpretation of the Caraweelo myth yet. Caraweelo is the queen to whose reign may be traced the period when the male order of society in the Somalia of old replaced the country's matriarchal tradition, with women accused of betraying the vision of society and of failing to rule in a just manner" (Secrets, p.15) The wheel of history has come right round: Caraweelo no longer exists as the "devouring mother" with the toothed vagina, the castrating queen in the present of shared traditions. Popular songs have it that she used to sell young males (she too was a slave-trader!) decimating the male kind. Farah's whole artistic quest appears transformed by the ardent desire to abolish this present time, this time of anaemia and amnesia, in order to merge with the days of old, the days of a matriarchy accepted by all. The days before Caraweelo. Let's let the author, or rather one of the characters he has the secret for, have the last word: "All stories", concluded Abshir, "celebrate, in elegiac terms, the untapped sources of energy, of the humanness of women and men" (Gifts, p.242).


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