

Nomads and Feminists: The Novels of Nuruddin Farah

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Nuruddin Farah has always been a difficult figure to absorb into the emerging categories of African literary discourse. To begin with, he is a Somali, and Somalis are not really expected to write in English, although the poet William Syad had already broken precedent by producing a book of verses, *Khomsin*, some years earlier. Indeed, the emergence of a written literature in Somalia is a recent event in any case, since there was no orthography for the language before the early seventies. Until that time, Arabic was the language of the literati, and its uses were homiletic rather than literary. What Somalia did possess was a particularly rich oral literature, most remarkable for its poetry.

The rarity of the Anglophone Somali writer as a species has placed Farah in a situation where his work cannot be seen in a national context, although the unpublished novel he wrote in Somali might have provided that basis for comparison, had its serialization not been stopped by the authorities. Again, Farah writes of a society in which nomadic values seem to be strongly enshrined as central to the national self-image, unlike neighboring Kenya or Ethiopia, where they are the values of a marginal minority, however beloved of the photographer and the tourist brochures. Lastly, and most significantly, Farah intruded a marked sympathy and sensitivity towards womanhood into African Literature, which has generally remained as male-dominated in its orientation as the societies producing it. Such eccentricity can be tolerated in a woman writer but is scarcely looked for in the work of an author who is not only a man but a Moslem too.

Farah's first novel, *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), will do as well as any other to localize these observations. Not only is its central character a girl in flight from her society, but she is one who has been entirely formed by a nomadic pastoral community. Ebla, however, seems to carry her nomadism into sexual matters, where it is scarcely expected of her, and thereby hangs the slight plot of the tale. She changes men with the insouciance of the innocent rather than with that of the libertine, but with no more moral anguish than the latter. Fleeing from bartered marriages with two men she does not accept, she ends up married to two others, simultaneously, who have no knowledge of each other's existence.

Farah tells the story of her sexual pilgrimage in a narrative style that is already unorthodox. The wide-eyed ingenuousness of the heroine is conveyed not only in her own thoughts and utterances, which predominate in the text, but in the naivete which pervades the narrative voice itself: "The lives of these people depended upon that of their herds. The lives of herds depended upon the plentiness [sic] or the scarcity of green grass. But would one be justified in saying that their existence depended upon green pasture — directly or indirectly? Yes: life depended upon green pastures."¹ The tone here is reminiscent of an oral tale, where the teller will often pause to examine rhetorically the truth of what he has just said, before going on

¹ *From a Crooked Rib* (London: Heinemann, 1970), p. 7. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text after the abbreviation *F.C.R.*

to confirm or modify it. This is the literary tradition in which Farah was reared, in which his mother was a well-known oral poet. Although touched from an early age by a multilingual and literary education, Farah still sometimes reverts to this ancient tradition when he writes; not only in his choice of material, but in his very way of presenting it.

Farah's narrative style may be compared with that in which he renders Ebla's own vaguely rebellious inexperience and lust for life. She is a girl who lives entirely in the present and who, having fled from the restraints of tribal life and the confining love of her grandfather, is without any guide to conduct except the usually self-interested advice of others: "Ebla thought over the question many a time, and finally she made up her mind. 'Asha doesn't have to tell me what to do and what not to do. I am twenty, or almost twenty. It is me who marries or is divorced, so she doesn't have to put her nose into my private business. I will tell her to keep out of it. In future I am responsible for whatever I do. Tomorrow, I will tell her. Tomorrow. In future I will be myself and belong to myself, and my actions will belong to me. And I will, in turn, belong to them.'" (F.C.R., p. 142).

All this is, of course, pure self-delusion. Adrift in the city, without means or family of her own, Ebla is a pawn in the hands of those around her. In the circumstances she is remarkably lucky to have been taken up by the personable young man Awill. But she convinces herself that he has "abandoned" her, merely because he has been sent to Italy by his government, and "divorced" her because she glimpses a photograph of him embracing a white girl over there. She conveniently forgets that he has sent her money through a friend. But her confusion is as much Awill's fault as her own. Typical of this society, he makes no attempt to explain things to her or discuss them with her. The promise of mutual "explanations" with which the book closes is perhaps unlikely to be fulfilled.

"Should I tell you everything, Awill?" Ebla asked after a long silence. "Maybe tomorrow when you have thoroughly decided," he said . . .

"Tomorrow," said Awill, moving towards her with desire.

"Tomorrow. We will tell each other everything tomorrow. You'll tell me everything, and I shall tell you everything."

Ebla smelt his maleness. She touched his forehead and, as usual, he was hot with desire . . .

"Yes. Tomorrow," Ebla murmured and welcomed his hot and warm world into her cool and calm kingdom." (F.C.R., p. 179).

Farah's own inexperience as a novelist shows in that last, would-be balanced sentence, where "hot" and "warm" conflict with rather than complement each other. *From a Crooked Rib* was completed in India in 1968, when the author was twenty-three. The same period saw his marriage and the birth of his son Koschin. The four years of study at Chandigarh are not directly reflected in his work, but it must be supposed that they helped to determine his choice of English as the language of his first novel.

The path which led Farah to become an Anglophone writer in a society still dominated by Somali oral tradition was a complex one. At the time of his birth in 1945 his native Ogaden, like the whole of Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia, was under British military administration. Hence Somalia's claim to the Ogaden and Eritrea's to independence, both the causes of bitter wars since, were temporarily suspended. Everyone held his breath for the European departure which, beginning in Ethiopia, culminated in the independence of a unified Somalia in 1960. At the British withdrawal from Ethiopia, the Ogaden was transferred to the Ethiopian Empire. Amharic was then imposed on the area, as the official language of the Empire. Arabic was acquired through the Koranic School and Italian through the educational system

in most of Somalia. Last came English, but this last was the only possible preparation for higher studies in India.

The language and culture which are transliterated in that first novel are, however, Somali, Islamic, and nomadic. The reader is made to feel as strange and ill-at-ease in Mogadiscio as Ebla herself. By contrast, Koschin, the protagonist of his second novel *A Naked Needle* (1976), is a sophisticated, urbanized young teacher, a "been-to" who has studied in England and acquired an English mistress there. Nancy, this last, has firmly taken up Koschin's youthful offer of marriage if neither of them finds a partner within two years of his departure from England. When the novel opens, her arrival is imminent and throws Koschin into a welter of confused emotions every time he hears a plane arriving.

Farah's formal experiments here are far more radical than in the rather simple chronicle of his first novel. There, Ebla's muddled reflections alternated with passages of colloquial, mundane dialogue, as limited in its references as the speakers were in their experience. By contrast, the long monologue through which Koschin conducts the newly-arrived Nancy on a walking tour of Mogadiscio exhibits a wide and often rather showy ingenuity. But through it we gain as sharp a picture as African literature has yet given us of a desperately poor society, boasting only one real city with a few thousand meters of tarred roads before the sand begins; full of prostitutes, suddenly enriched bureaucrats and competing, often bullying foreign aid missions:

But Nancy, the Russians, with all their political piracy have agreed to construct a dam, Fanoole Dam ... Russian know how to sing their own praises, as Dawn has said. Whereas the Chinese, Nancy, are a very honest people. That dam ...

—Is it half as big as that of Egypt?

—Aswan?

—Is that what it is called?

—Yes

—Is it?

—Not even a quarter. And they haven't even started a plan. They take their sweet time just like the Americans, the Russians do.

—What friends, the Russians!

—And this is the Chinese Embassy in Mogadiscio, red-starred flag and all; and a little farther up is the Korean Embassy. Neighbours even in the grave, eh, Nancy!

—Romeo and Juliet died separately for the same cause.

—Cause, you said?

—Love is a cause.

—Let us march on, servants of the Lord that we both are, although with different beliefs and different hues, and may He be pleased with him that he sent to preach to all mankind.

—Amen!

—Business streets, Nancy, seldom annoy me. In fact, I am fascinated by them, with everybody girded up as if in a hurry, intent on fighting against the current of time.²

This is generally effective, though one wonders who or what "Dawn" is supposed to be. The relaxed, humorous, observant and noncommittal tone is equally typical of Koschin whether speaking or thinking. It is what keeps him at a distance from Nancy and from all others with a claim upon him. It is what prevents him from

² *A Naked Needle* (London, Heinemann, 1976), p. 105. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text after the abbreviation *N.N.*

giving sincere advice to Barre, a friend who has contracted a disastrous marriage to an American woman, and which prevents him from any real intimacy with Mohammed and Barbara, a much more successfully mixed couple who are frankly and deeply in love. It permits him also his barbarous rudeness to an old man who comes to make tribal claims upon his pocket. Finally, perhaps, it protects him from a full and serious exposure to Somalia itself. The gradual penetration of his defences by Nancy's patient tenderness may be exactly what he needs. The novel ends upon that possibility.

In *From a Crooked Rib*, Farah had already begun to intersperse dialogue with monologue in a manner ultimately derived from Joyce. We are required to jump constantly between what Ebla says and what she thinks but does not dare to articulate. In *A Naked Needle*, monologue becomes really the dominant mode through which we get to know Koschin. It would not be true to say of the above passage that the first and last paragraphs, framing the direct exchanges between Nancy and Koschin, are sharply differentiated from them. They differ in being *cast* as monologue rather than dialogue, but Farah has already begun to move away here from any hard distinction between what is thought and what is spoken. The opening chapters of the novel, for instance, abound in monologues addressed to Nancy before she had even arrived in Somalia. Koschin is addressing the idea of Nancy, whom he has not seen for two years. They mingle dread with hope, for Nancy's imminent arrival will certainly force him to alter his drifting existence, for better or for worse: "He replaces the book under the pillow, he heaves heavily under the white sheet that now covers him up to his waist. — An epilogue that spoils the strong point of a novel, that is what you are to me, Nancy. However, I do hope that I am wrong in my judgement: that you have changed since we last met" (*N.N.*, p. 2).

This deliberate blurring of the familiar distinctions between the modes of fictional discourse is carried further in the later novels. Passages of dialogue are sometimes so poetic and elaborate in their imagery that they strike the reader as more like thought or authorial description than actual speech.

A Naked Needle was written during 1972, when the Somali Revolution of October 1969 was still fresh in its impetus, although its cost to civil liberties was also growingly apparent. In the following exchange, Farah does not manifestly take sides between Mohammed's humanism and Koschin's revolutionary zeal. The latter's attitude towards the Revolution is one of fairly open-minded respect. He does not deny its excesses, but prefers to dwell upon its necessity and its achievements:

Koschin sits forward

—Somalia very badly needed a revolution

—Was Somalia in need of terror and horror from dawn to dusk?

—A revolution, any revolution anywhere at any time, thrives on loyalty. Loyalty is the first code of a revolution's law ... To intellectualize about a revolution is certainly trifle-sweet, but to plunge into the depths of its bitterness, only a few can stand. Che Guevara and Fanon, you once said, were your men ...

—But they were great!

—What context? What place? Where? For Somalia?

—The world.

—First here. Then elsewhere!

—Do you believe in all that?

—Yes.

(*N.N.*, p. 149)

Even Mohammed here displays none of the deep anger which we find later among the embattled heroes and heroines of *Sweet and Sour Milk* or *Sardines*. He registers the terror, but his own life within the novel does not convey the impression that it is all-pervading, penetrating every thought and every action. The leader is still

"The Old Man" rather than "the General". Farah's approach to the truth about his society has been circumspect because, like Koschin, he recognized the Revolution as a stage in its development from the old tribal politics of 1960-69. A national movement and ideology seemed to be the only way forward, but that ideology has not been made any clearer by the abrupt switch away from Russian and International Communist influence, back to the former American sponsorship, which followed the Ogaden war of 1976. At the time of writing *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979), however, Farah was unaware of that imminent reversal. Russian influence is not only strong but dominant, extending to penetration of the whole machinery of security, interrogation and incarceration. *Sweet and Sour Milk* is relentless and terrifying in its presentation of tyranny. This is no longer the tragicomedy of revolutionary rhetoric in the midst of obstinate underdevelopment. Rhetoric here is only the least of afflictions to a people who live in the constant presence of fear. What is a boring speech or two, compared with the dawn disappearance of friends headed for detention or execution? The political illusions which present Fascism in the guise of dedicated revolutionary struggle are something more deadly than failure; they suggest that there was never even the promise or prospect of success. Relentless power manipulation, backed by Soviet example and "technical assistance," is what this novel exhibits in daily action and intimate detail. As if to underline the change of mood since 1972, the Koschin of *A Naked Needle* is now in detention and believed by his friends to be in serious danger.

The detail is intimate because here the apparatus of terror is literally "in the family." Keynaan, the father, is a retired security officer, soon to be reemployed by a grateful government. His two sons, by his senior wife, are the twin heroes of a mythic quest, in which Loyaan restlessly searches for the key to his brother Soyaan's sudden and mysterious death.

Because of the novelist's fluid approach to time, the lost Soyaan is as much present to our imagination as the questions of Loyaan, although his death is described in the opening chapter. Moving step-by-step with the survivor, we too piece together the scanty evidence until we are convinced—though without conclusive proof—that Soyaan was eliminated by a government plot, with the aid of an obliging Russian doctor. Handily, the devout Muslim family refuses a postmortem as sacriligious, so the cause of death remains unknown. The government shows its guilt, if anywhere, by its calculated appropriation of the dead Soyaan, who was a secret but active dissident, as a "Hero of the Revolution." His father eagerly collaborates in the process, and the unpoliticized family cannot really understand Loyaan's indignation and disgust at this betrayal of his brother's memory. After all, the possession of a dead hero should at least bring them some measure of protection, or even patronage. Loyaan's persistence in his quest earns him, however, not patronage, but enforced departure as a supernumerary diplomat in the Moscow embassy. The facade of the regime remains intact and the epic journey in search of truth breaks off inconclusively, lacking any cyclical fulfillment. In the world of "the General" and his advisers, there can be no ritual renewal, because there is no perception of their own decay.

And yet the book does close on a hesitant note of renewal, something a little more definite than a question mark. We are not certain whether Loyaan will after all acquiesce in his "deportation" even though the alternative might be an indefinite imprisonment in which he will ask himself a hundred times a day what good his gesture has done, for himself or his society. In the moments preceding the arrival of his escort to the airfield, his stepmother gives birth to a boy who is duly named Soyaan. Father and son even discover a possibility of communicating with each other. All three of these developments converge with the knock on the door which ends the book.

But a synopsis of *Sweet and Sour Milk* can give little idea what it's about. As much as anything, it is about the art of narration. Farah's control of time, tense and space keeps us continually moving between obsessive recollections of the boys' childhood; Soyaan's last days of life, with their involvement of his political collaborators, his mistress, and his child; and Loyaan's own discoveries as he moves about the city and gradually discerns the lineaments of his half-known brother's personality and significance. This inclusiveness is not achieved by means of rigid flashbacks, but by the seamless weaving together of impressions, memories, premonitions, and desires. Here the dying Soyaan contemplates telling his brother about their father's impending marriage to a third wife:

No. He chose not to tell even Loyaan about the young woman whom Keynaan proposed to marry. That would only make matters worse. Soyaan: a man of intrigue, rhetoric, polemic and politics. Loyaan: a man of melodramatic scenes, mundanities and lost tempers. Loyaan would insist, for instance, on removing all inverted commas from phrases like "revolution in Africa," "socialism in Africa," "radical governments," whereas Soyaan was fond of dressing them with these and other punctuational accessories; he was fond of opening a parenthesis he had no intention of closing. Years ago as a matter of fact it was Soyaan who had suggested that Loyaan should avoid politics as should a patient unprescribed drugs; "You stay where you are, in that region of Baidos, you do your job well and you are the most revolutionary of revolutionaries"—inverted commas removed! Hiccup. Soyaan lay quiet under the sheet like a tucked-in child. Hiccup ...

"And how is Father?"

"He was *hic* here a while ago,"

"How is he?"

A powerless patriarch, the grandest of them *hic* all.

"We are on the worst of *hic* terms."³

Here we move in a few lines from the immediacy of Soyaan's decision of silence to his (or the author's) ironic reflections on the differences of temperament between the twins which have shaped their recent careers (Soyaan as a high government functionary, Loyaan as a provincial medical officer). Soyaan's silence returns to our attention at the end of the paragraph and is made louder by his brother's sudden question and his evasive reply. Irony returns to patch over his reticence, which protects his identity right up until the ensuing moment when he "hiccups his last," clutching the hand of the brother he hardly knows, and perhaps thereby drawing him after, filling Loyaan's mouth with questions he had scarcely dared to ask before.

The quest motif means that the consciousnesses of the two brothers dominate the action. Having diverged in adult life, they gradually converge again as Loyaan discovers more and more details of Soyaan's public life and of his private convictions, which are profoundly against the whole trend of the Revolution. A scrap of paper found under the pillow of his deathbed reads in part: "The withered hope of a dream leafy as autumn. Our throats have pained, the latest encomium is too long to give an encore to. Listen to the knock on your neighbour's door at dawn. Hearken: the army boots have crunched grains of sand on the pavement by your window. Listen to them hasten. Listen to the revving of the engine. They've taken another. When will your turn come?" (*S.S.M.*, p. 39). The path of Loyaan's quest, however, is illuminated mainly by the women who have loved his brother. Their sister Ladan has had to content herself mainly with a domestic role, but has radiated upon him a deep and

³ *Sweet and Sour Milk* (London: Alison and Busby, 1979) pp. 19-20. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text after the abbreviation *S.S.M.*

piercing tenderness. Understanding both brothers and needing what both represent, she takes refuge in imagery to express it: "To Ladan, Soyaan was the braille of her otherwise unguided vision. Loyaan was the brother who enabled her to sow her moons and bright days with nightly stars" (*S.S.M.*, p. 17). More actively involved with Soyaan's projects and concerns is his emancipated mistress Margaritta, a divorced Italian — Somali journalist who has borne him a son. Margaritta is protected to some extent by her wealth and her Italian citizenship, but it is rumored that she is also, or was, protected by the Minister to the Presidency. This Russian-trained politician seems more and more likely to have been involved in Soyaan's murder (by a lethal injection), and is certainly involved in the plot to "steal his soul" by proclaiming him a posthumous Hero of the Revolution whose last words were "Labour is Honour." Hampered by his own hot temper and indiscretion, ill-suited to assume his brother's mantle, Loyaan is well aware that he is walking through a minefield in quest of Soyaan's ghost. When a man cannot trust his own father, whom is he to trust?

The dialogue in *Sweet and Sour Milk* (images of the two brothers, perhaps?) is generally tauter than that of *A Naked Needle*, with its ironic digressions and more relaxed tempo. Words here are used to locate the other person in a kind of moral darkness where few are what they seem. Occasionally Farah's search for the poetic phrase to decorate the speech of his characters goes a bit off the rails, however. His aim, though, is to articulate the images which glow in the minds of his character, but which may not rise into speech in everyday reality.

Just as Koschin was used to provide a frail link between the action of the last two books, so Medina provides a bridge into the next one. She has been mentioned by Margaritta as a sophisticated journalist, but the reader has not encountered her. In *Sardines* she occupies the center of our attention. This Balzacian device of slightly overlapping casts of characters helps to give Farah's work an air of comprehensiveness in its treatment of the Somali scene over the past two decades. A reflection of Medina's about whom to put into the rooms of her imaginary house brings the reader up to date on what has happened to the principal cast of *Sweet and Sour Milk*: "She crossed out the names of Soyaan (dead), Loyaan (forced into exile), Moschin (in prison), Siciliano (in prison), Dr. Ahmed-Wellie (traitor)..."¹ So we learn that Loyaan did after all accept to be silenced and neutralized in Moscow, that his suspicions of Ahmed-Wellie were well-founded, that two members of Farah's earlier casts are in prison. But there, with the labels attached in that early paragraph, we leave them. Our concern in *Sardines* will be principally with Medina and her search for "a room of one's own. A country of one's own. A century in which one was *not* a guest" (*S.*, p. 3).

The trouble with this search, as the reader perceives it, is that everyone and everything around Medina becomes the casualty of it. By abandoning her husband Samater for ill-defined reasons, she deprives her daughter Ubox of a father whom she desperately needs to counterbalance her mother's voracious attention. By fleeing from her own house and moving to her brother's, she leaves Samater to the mercy of his implacable mother Idil. Medina indeed *has* a country, Somalia, but has become alienated from it both by upbringing (mainly overseas) and temperament. The latter is summed up by an aside of the author: "She was, in a manner, like her father Barkhadle. She was as confident as a patriarch in the rightness of her decisions" (*S.*, p. 5). Such decisiveness would be all very well if her decisions did not so often strike the reader as ill-considered and poorly-motivated. In a rare flash of self-knowledge,

¹ *Sardines* (London: Alison and Busby, 1981), p. 8. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text after the abbreviation *S.*

Medina wonders at one point whether her search for “a life defined like the boundaries of a property” may make her “harsher towards herself, unfair to Samater, obsessive about Ubx” (S., p. 6). All these doubts are well founded. Samater loves her deeply and her desertion causes him to deteriorate rapidly. His acceptance of a ministerial post earns Medina’s outright condemnation, but no account is taken of the real difficulties of the choice. Leaving aside the steady pressure of friends and clansmen to accept a promotion which will benefit them also, there is the more complex question of allegiance. Above a certain level of education, an individual is likely to find that refusal to serve the regime amounts to a refusal to participate in the nation’s development in any capacity. Active opposition will certainly not be tolerated and can only end in death or imprisonment. The alternative of exile too often leads to a situation where one is contributing to the development of other countries rather than one’s own. There remains the choice of covert opposition, of doing good by stealth and avoiding open confrontations with authority. This was Soyaan’s choice, and nothing in the book indicates to us that the well-intentioned Samater was incapable of making it. Medina’s own action in accepting editorship of the national daily and immediately using it as an instrument of challenge seems flamboyant rather than useful. She cannot seriously have expected the regime to let its one national organ be used in this way. Unless she was more intent on self-glorification than on positive activity, she would have done better to reject the post.

Later, we learn that by accepting it she was to some extent playing out a scenario written for her by the General. Two weeks after sacking her and placing her under a banning order, he offered Samater the Ministry. But it was understood that his refusal of it would entail imprisonment and perhaps death for some of his tribesmen. These realities are clearer to the uneducated Ebla, heroine of Farah’s first novel who now reappears as a middle-aged mother, than they are to the sophisticated but self-absorbed Medina.

As for Medina’s obsession with Ubx, the following exchange conveys it as well as any:

You want me to be just like you, remember titles of all the books I see, remember every story anybody tells me, remember who said what to whom ... Leave me alone. I’m only eight years old.

Of course I want you to be like me. But I want you to grow up healthy and independent. I want you to do what you please.

Why don’t you let me go and play with Abucar, Omar and Sofia?

When you come home, your language suffers from lack of originality. You keep repeating yourself, saying the same thing. I want you to speak like an enlightened child.

Why don’t you let me go to school like the other children, then?

Because schools teach you nothing but songs of sycophancy and the praise names of the General. And because I can teach you better than they ... (S., pp. 12-13)

Thus Ubox is harnessed to the chariot of Medina's search for independence. Denied a father, playmates, toys, or normal schooling, she is in effect denied a childhood, in exchange for an enforced precocity and a devouring possessiveness.

The fact that Medina occupies center stage for so much of the book's action creates, therefore, certain problems. The reader is likely to be exasperated quite as often as sympathetic. Her self-righteousness seems to make her incapable of seeing the reality which others, lacking her privileged and alienated upbringing, are forced to inhabit. Hence her example, if intended as a bravely feminist search for liberation, is unlikely to be of much use to them. Leadership there has to come from those who are deeply in and of the society, rather than from those who wilfully seek "a life defined like the boundaries of a property," something quite beyond the possibilities of most Somalis.

To take one example, Medina's flight from her ménage with Samater and Idil is seen by her as a noble act of self-liberation. But it can equally be seen as a flight from the challenge of the situation. Nor can the old lady be expected to throw her traditional education aside and embrace a secular way of life she has been brought up to consider sacrilegious. What is called for, then, from the younger, better-educated and supposedly more flexible woman is tact, understanding, and sympathy. Idil does, after all, love Samater in her own peculiar way. Perhaps the core issue of the fight, the refusal to have Ubox circumcised, could have been won by such an approach. Medina prefers to give up both the fight and Samater, leaving Idil in full possession of the field. Her own mental imagery accepts this:

"The General's power and I are like two lizards engaged in a varanian dance of death"—the emphasis on power and not on the General, power as a system, power as a function. Was Idil part and parcel of that power? The sky would fall in on anyone who upset a pillar of society—in this case Idil. So Medina would go about with care; they were like monitor lizards in combat, each dancing the tango of its strategy, chest to chest, face to face ... She would rather be like the matador who gives way when the bull charges at him blind as red blood. (S., p. 52)

To the relationship of Medina and Ubox is counterposed that of Ebla and her daughter Sagal. Circumstance rather than choice has forced intimacy upon these two. Ebla has borne only one living child and, long divorced from Awil, has been widowed of her second husband. A deep physical love and sympathy binds Ebla to Sagal, but she is careful to avoid the sort of mental and emotional tyranny which Medina often displays. And Sagal has taken the intellectually dominating Medina as her mentor; the prompter of her reading, her ideas, her generous but confused ideals. She does not recognize that Medina is in some way using her as a teenage proxy, just as Ubox is her proxy in the younger generation. In her anxiety to protect these two from the sort of traditional subjection she suffered as a child, Medina has fallen into the role of a new-style matriarch.

Sagal believes herself to be all head and her mother Ebla all heart. But Ebla's radiant common sense has a much juster picture of Sagal's nature: "Her ambition knew no limits, her daydreams knew no end, her goals were unreachable. She was never realistic, never walked with her feet on the ground, never woke to reality when she had dreamed" (S., p. 40). Farah's other full-length portraits of women in this novel include the raped girl Amina who, in defiance of her society, has rejected her rapist but kept her child. There is Samater's sister Xaddia, whose job as an air hostess enables her to act as courier for friends and whose use of the pill has caused a bitter quarrel with her mother Idil. There is the rather dubious Black American girl Atta, whose conspicuous seduction of Samater leads to his disgrace and her deportation.

There is Sandra, the Italian communist who has known Medina and Samater at university, who waltzes into Mogadiscio as a privileged visitor whose approval is valuable to the threadbare regime, and whose air of condescension towards her friends is especially responsible for Medina's sense of being a guest in her own continent and her own century. Of all these, it is Xaddia who surprises Medina with a few home truths about herself:

"I cannot take it any more," Xaddia said.

"What? What is it that you can't take any more?"

"The charade. Your politics. The fact that you will not accept defeat. You are a gambler who having won thinks that another win is in the offing. You are a habitual gambler."

"You don't understand anything," Medina said.

"No, my dear Mina, and I am not a Sagal or one of those you give a book to read when something goes wrong," shouted Xaddia ...

When Medina didn't say anything Xaddia continued:

"You pawn and pawn until there is nothing or nobody left to put up to auction. Yesterday it was Samater, today Nasser [Medina's brother] and Dulman; tomorrow—who knows?—Maybe it's my turn; the day after tomorrow, Sagal. When will you stop being obstinate and start seeing reason? Will you never concede or accept defeat?"

(S., pp. 245-46)

Medina comes badly out of this exchange. Yet beneath Medina's arrogant defiance may linger a recognition that she has for too long confused the personal and the political; that the price to others is somehow always higher than to herself. That this is not a specifically feminist insight on Farah's part is shown by comparison with the rather similar manipulative role of Yussuf in his recent unpublished play *Yussuf and His Brothers*, produced at the University of Jos in 1982. The constant manipulation of others, in whatever cause, is a form of domination which perpetuates the power relations that both Medina and Yussuf claim to oppose. The last pages of *Sardines* gleam with a faint recognition of this in Medina's mind as she and Ubx are reunited with Samater at last.

But if the feminism of *Sardines* can be, and doubtless will be misconstrued, the book remains a powerful and ranging account of embattled Somali womanhood. In that sense, it is a nice complement to Farah's first work in which, on an obscure impulse of revolt, Ebla crept out of the nomadic encampment all those years before. Ironically, the illiterate Ebla has proved to be a more effective feminist than the sophisticated Medina. She demands less from her society, yet she has succeeded in winning from it a space in which to live her own life. As a mother too, she displays a clearer understanding of the respect owed to others' personal freedom. In her, nomad and feminist have achieved a curious fusion.