

Nuruddin Farah

Sweet and Sour Milk

Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1992. Pp. 243. \$12.00

Sardines

Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1992. Pp. 264. \$12.00

Close Sesame

Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1992. Pp. 241. \$12.00

Reviewed by Rudolf Bader

This is the first U.S. edition of Farah's brilliant trilogy entitled *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*, which was first published in Britain by Allison and Busby in 1979, 1981, and 1983. Though works of fiction, these three novels certainly possess a high degree of topicality with the civil war in Somalia raging on at this very moment.

All three novels in the trilogy are indeed political novels with an undertone of accusation. Set in Somalia in the 1970s, they select the fates of a few individuals engaged in a secret opposition movement against the cruelly fascist military regime of a dictator referred to as "the General." Basically, their predicaments resemble one another: the struggle of the young intellectual who has tasted freedom and democracy during his or her student days in Italy, through the influence of intellectual friends, or through the channel of political writing. The three novels also resemble one another in their narrative focus, their tone of seemingly hopeless resignation, and their careful use of subversive irony.

In *Sweet and Sour Milk*, Loyaan, a young dentist in Mogadishu, begins to harbor serious suspicions about the sudden death of his twin brother Soyaan and the persons and events surrounding his death. Death introduces the trilogy and remains omnipresent throughout. The somewhat naive protagonist is with his brother to the last, and when the government paper reports Soyaan's last words as having been a praise for the dictator, he has a first inkling of foul play. The official cause of death ("He died of complications") and the fact that the regime wants to make Soyaan into a martyr of the revolution, along with certain notes scribbled down by Soyaan before his death: all these indications create a sense of suspicious in Loyaan. He embarks upon a course of investigation against the regime, against the activities of the State Security, and against his own father's opportunism. He is finally betrayed by the doctor who refused a postmortem on his brother's body, and he ends up being deported from Somalia by an appointment to a job in the Somali embassy in Yugoslavia. The central narrative thread presents us with a political learning process, and the final tone of resignation at the ineffectiveness of the opposition movement directs the reader's backward glance more clearly to the human factor behind all those crimes in political disguise. In the end, personal honesty and integrity, along with other qualities of the human character, emerge as the only acceptable yardsticks within such an Orwellian context of political frustration.

Sardines employs a different narrative perspective. Medina and Samater, a young couple, both intellectuals with an experience of the Western world, go through a crisis in their marriage. This domestic predicament is but a thin emblem of the rotten sickness of the entire country. The apparently banal and at times even farcical conflicts between Medina and her mother-in-law Idil are relatively harmless parallels of the deep rift between the Somali people and their regime. Medina and Samater are members of the same opposition group as Soyaan, now dead. Medina realizes that she is in opposition against the General mainly because he reminds her of her own grandfather. This parallel between the generational conflict within a family and the political conflict within a country like Somalia becomes more and more obvious through the novel. Just as the present young generation appears as real and human, so does the Somali people; and just as the older generations, in the first instance that of traditionalist Idil and of Medina's mother Fatima bint Thabit but then also the even stricter and harsher one of the grandparents, emerge as unreal and inhuman, so does the General. There is an atmosphere of oppression; we are always waiting for something terrible to happen. The theme of oppression and uncertainty is extended to other areas of life, most obviously to the role of women in a country that ranks highest among those still practicing the atrocious crime of infibulation. Through the metaphor of the room of a house, a room of one's own, the essentials of a life under such inhuman conditions are laid bare, and the novel's overall questions remain: What is the meaning of a commitment? What sacrifices are justified for the sake of one's commitment? In its larger philosophical implications as well as in the rich resonance of its appropriate narrative voice, this second volume certainly emerges as the artistic center of the trilogy.

With *Close Sesame*, the trilogy returns to the male world of perception, although the female characters remain very strong and intelligent. The metaphor of the room from the preceding volume is altered and extended to a room with a view. Deeriye, an old widower and former nationalist hero with a long prison experience, sits at his window and observes the outside world. As a philosopher he is unable to grasp the mechanism behind violence. He is constantly afraid of a little boy, Yassin, who lives in the house next door. As if to confirm Deeriye's fear, Yassin one day hurls a stone at the head of the old man at the window and hurts him. This act of senseless aggression appears as a parallel to all the political acts of violence that seem to encircle the novel's plot like a fence of barbed wire: mysterious killings disguised as suicide by the Security, open murder committed by the Security, and the martyrdom of countless good men and women. Other themes touched upon are the cynical meanings of words like "peace," "elections," or "information" in Somalia. However, at the most honest and essential level of the novel, the deeply un-Islamic nature of the General's regime is unmistakably exposed, and this in a volume full of the ideas, views, and memories of old Deeriye: a Sayyidist, a Somali nationalist, and a Pan-Africanist all at the same time.

The trilogy is a convincing, terrifying, and accusing account of human existence in extremis, at a high artistic level, very rich in human experience and wisdom, and as such emotionally capable of supporting the weak political saplings called faith and hope.