



Glocal Colloquies

For publication details, please visit:

<http://glocalcolloquies.com/>

Wrapped in a Single Cloth Woven Out of their Sorrows

Ganga, Geetha

D.G. Vaishnav College

Chennai, India

geethagan@gmail.com

Published online: 09 May 2015.

To cite this article: Ganga, Geetha. "Wrapped in a Single Cloth Woven Out of their Sorrows." *Glocal Colloquies* 1.1 (2015): 255-260. Web

Glocal Colloquies is a non-profit, international, double-blind, peer reviewed, refereed, open access E-journal. The journal is an initiative to create a shared space for scholars to engage in trans-cultural global literary conversations. The journal publishes critical and scholarly writings, interviews, book reviews on literatures and cultures from across the globe.

* The manuscript uploaded here cannot not be retransmitted or redistributed without written permissions from the paper's publisher/author. However, it can be used for research, teaching, and other academic purposes as long as it is properly acknowledged.

Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and the views of the author(s), and are not the views of or endorsed by **Glocal Colloquies.

Ganga, Geetha
 D.G. Vaishnav College, Chennai, India
 geethagan@gmail.com

“Wrapped in a Single Cloth Woven Out of their Sorrows”

Hiding in Plain Sight by Nuruddin Farah
 Riverhead Books, New York. 2014
 Pages 342 | Paperback \$ 14.77; Hardcover \$ 19.96
 ISBN 978-1-596-6336-2

Exiled Somali author Nuruddin Farah’s new book, *Hiding in Plain Sight* (2014), is set in Nairobi, which has become a port of Somalia, an entry and exit point into and out of the country. All of Farah’s novels are set in the complex postcolonial environment of Mogadishu fictionalizing crucial periods and events in Somali political history. Farah has written eleven novels so far, out of which there are three sets of trilogies, numerous essays, plays, opinion pieces, and one non-fictional work on the Somali diaspora. Recipient of the Life Time South African Literary Award in 2014, shortly before *Hiding in Plain Sight* was released, Farah has also received several other awards from various countries including the prestigious Neustadt Award in 1998, instituted by the University of Oklahoma which is the equivalent of the Nobel.

In the Prologue to the book, Aar, an UN logistics officer on official work in Mogadishu is killed in a barbarous manner by the Shabaab. The novel’s opening chapter commences with a loud wail and Bella, the sister of the deceased, and the closest relative of Aar, is shocked at how “flat-footed sudden death” (HPS 140), caught Aar unawares but reconciles to his death once she takes charge of his teenage children. The narrative moves on from that point to depict how the survivors of the deceased cope with the pain and cruelty in their guts and in the marrow of their bones and the gradual attempts made on their part to move on with their lives in a Nairobi contextualized in the novel as violent and a high rate of crime. Bella temporarily relegates her personal life and her interests to the background especially her career in photography making sure the children are emotionally secure; even providing them with a dark room to practice photography. The Somali diaspora identity-crisis especially the ones living in Kenya are other issues along with many others that come up within the framework of this narrative.

An impending sense of danger and violence engulfs the Prologue to Farah’s twelfth book, *Hiding in Plain Sight*, as Aar, an UN official on duty in a security-protected Mogadishu

apartment is in great trepidation of some unknown fear. In his dream, he corrals scurrying squirrels similar to the opening in *Gifts* (1991), where the central protagonist Duniya, has and is in a dream. *Gifts* is Farah's seventh; a stringent critique on foreign aid on the part of Western donors to Somalia. A somewhat similar narrative ploy is employed by Farah in his ninth novel *Maps* (1986), where the central protagonist Askar's fragmented psyche oscillates between dreams and reality. The mystery deepens as Aar surprisingly sees an image of his wife, Valerie, with whom he has lost contact through the years after she abandoned him and his two children for her partner Padmini, a Pondichery-based hotelier. Restless, he tries to "push his worry aside, walling off the nightmare and sidestepping his disorienting sense of dread," (*Hiding in Plain Sight* 5), yet his attention reverts to the envelope lodged in his subconscious, given to him by one of the UN drivers, earlier in the day. As if to make matters worse, the envelope contains a monosyllabic threat-note with the word 'deth,' misspelt deliberately, the serious implications of which we come to understand towards the end of the Prologue.

Moments later, two of his UN colleagues invade his apartment to warn him of being a prime target of terrorists. Well aware of the fact that there are hordes of Shabaab recruits in the UN, Aar intuitively makes numerous frantic calls to his closest relative and half-sister, Bella, his teenage children and the principal of the boarding school in Nairobi, but his calls remain unanswered, for all but one. Desperate, he leaves Mogadishu the following day but not before entering his office to retrieve a few personal photographs of himself and his lover Gunila, which is kept discreet. The tragedy strikes when Aar unsuspectingly walks into the jaws of death, choreographed by the Shabaab. Strange is the nature of death, observes Marcella, a close associate of the family, but Bella thinks differently as "Aar's death adds terror to the idea of death, the idea of dying, because he was unprepared for death and did not deserve to die in that infernal manner (HPS 23). As for Aar's survivors - Bella and his two children - they too were so "ill-prepared for such a huge loss" that Bella keeps asking herself questions such as: "Why death, and why now?" (HPS 37).

Chapter One opens with a grief-exchange between Bella and Marcella; "each wailing louder than the other--their lamentation a survivor's threnody expressive of so huge a loss" (HPS 207). The 'drop-dead gorgeous' Bella, a professional photographer and a modernized travelling citizen, "plumbsthe depth of her grief alone," by interrogating the meaning and quality of life, unlike Marcella, their family friend who went into a 'mourning hibernation,' when she lost her husband (HPS 27). The coincidence might seem strange because Farah himself lost his beloved sister Basra Farah, during a bombing in a Kabul restaurant by Taliban terrorists in June 2014. and clearly, *Hiding in Plain Sight*, pays homage to victims of such repression. Journalist Malik in Farah's previous novel *Crossbones*, refers to the numberless slain journalists' reporting war in Mogadishu and calls them "heroes of obstrusiveness" as they are a highly endangered breed (*Crossbones* 247).

After a ‘full-blown mourning,’ the devastated Bella rushes to Nairobi to take charge of Aar’s children leaving everything behind except for her expensive cameras. Once Bella brings the children to their own home from the boarding school, Salif and Dahaba are more at ease, “as if they feel unbound, unchained” though Bella knows for sure that “their father’s death will hit one or the other of them hard and knock them around.” Likewise, for Bella, one of the biggest challenges awaiting her is “the revisiting of sorrows and emptiness” (HPS 100). She allots a space for everyone in Aar’s home, even to Valerie who is unfriendly and hostile to Bella at the beginning but soon sobers down as she has no grounds to exercise her legal rights over her children. Bella creates a cosy network with everyone who mattered to Aar - Gunila his lover, their friends, Mahdi, Fatima and the couple’s children, the warm school principal Kariuki and his wife. No time is wasted in fondly remembering Aar, and ‘unearthing memories and anecdotes.’ Bella studies Aar’s photographs “with death-inspired intensity,” as they help her to engage with a distant past and a distant era (HPS 44). She also recollects the philosophical wisdom of Roland Barthes who saw people’s interest in photography pointing to “a preoccupation with death because it attests to the past existence of an object, person, or image in a never-ending present, but not necessarily to its continued existence” (HPS 44). Aar’s personal computer, mobile, photographs, will, and other relics of the past are cherished by Bella and the children.

Bella not only teaches the children the art and practice of photography but also converts one of the rooms in Aar’s house into a dark room for her nephew and niece, Salif and Dahaba, to print negatives. Photography, Bella believes is yet another means of self-expression in everlasting images. In the novel, photography becomes therapeutic like any other creative or artistic medium. Bella fondly describes non-digital photography’s artistic and aesthetic merits to the children thus: “There is something hauntingly beautiful about the process itself: the feel of the photo paper, the smell of the chemicals, the anticipation of the details that will be revealed” (HPS 259).

Gunila’s present of an album with some special photographs of herself, Aar and his children during a family trip, is invaluable to the new family, Bella constructs, as a means to move forward during times of crisis. Similar peaceful imagery have been employed in all three books of the *Past Imperfect*, set against a background of turbulence that emanated during the post-collapse era in Somalia. In *Links* (2004), the first book, ‘listening’ becomes an important recuperative strategy as Jeebleh, the American-Somali listens empathetically to his traumatized friends narrate their war-stories during the infamous Battle of Mogadishu. Canadian-Somali Cambara in the second book *Knots* (2009), has the guts and the gumption to navigate through the dangerous terrains of Somalia infested with religionists where she indulges in story-telling and healing while Taxliil, the young Somali lad raised in Minnesota reunites with his parents after renouncing militancy in the final book *Crossbones* (2011).

The narrative in *Hiding in Plain Sight* is set against a multicultural global context spanning several cities unlike Farah’s earlier novels which abound in physical descriptions of Mogadishu. In the novel, Farah chooses to depict the violent face of Nairobi with its escalating crime, chaotic

traffic which is “atrocious, disorderly, and murderously slow” and a lack of an intellectual climate evident in the absence of second-hand book shops but full of second-hand clothes shops. Dubbed as a ‘self-help city’ by some urban anthropologist, in Farah’s description, Nairobi, is an “in-between place, with many different tendencies pulling its residents in diverse directions”(HPS 38). Also, on the novel’s map are Kampala, Nairobi, Pondichery, Rome, Geneva and Italy. The same sex relationship of Valerie is considered illegal in Kampala and they languish in jail until Bella uses influence and by paying a high price makes sure they are not within the purview of Ugandan jurisdiction. Ironically, Kenya their next-door neighbour, thrives as a gay capital.

The novel is also an ode to the countless displaced Somalis who fled the country to all parts of the world during the warring phase in Somalia in the early 90s. The Somalis are “a necklace that broke off whose pearls have been scattered all over the world,” to borrow Italian author Christina Ali Farah’s imagery she often employs to describe the Somali diaspora. The pain of resettling and the ambiguous positions and identities faced by the Somalis in host countries, is one among the most pressing concerns of the twenty-first century. “Our hearts are not where our papers are,..” expresses Salif, who feels it is unfair that the present generation Somalis do not even have access to the cultural nuances of the country to which they actually belong and unable to even visit due to the imminent risks and dangers involved (HPS 245).

Despite the fact that Somalis constitute six per cent of the population in Kenya, the Kenya-Somalis are socially and politically marginalized and excluded from the body politic of the Kenyan nation. Aar’s father lived in Kenya for decades as an undocumented refugee. (In India, the Somali refugees numbering around 750, are in a state of limbo as there are no specific refugee laws or rights. Sadly, they are unable to take up any kind of employment despite being well qualified in a few cases and simply abhor the idea of living on charity). Salif, who seems well-versed about the Somali situation elsewhere is quick to point out to his mother about the everyday challenges faced by young Somali boys in Britain where they are viewed with suspicion and mistrust and frequently interrogated by the police. Somali-British singer Aar Mantaar, addresses this particular issue in his EP album, *Deeqa: Songs from the Somali Diaspora* (2014).

Aar could never really associate with Mogadishu or consider it home though it is his ‘natal country;’ he is uncomfortable affiliating himself with ‘a country broken into fiefdoms,’ and where there is absolutely no place for people like him with his thoroughly secular outlook, a cosmopolitan temperament and modern thinking. In the post-civil war era, Somalia has been run by a “confederacy of clans in cahoots with religious renegades” (HPS 142). Farah has always lamented the loss of Mogadishu’s former cosmopolitanism; his nostalgic piece, *Of the Tamarind and Cosmopolitanism* is privy to Farah’s ache over the vanishing pride and glory of Mogadishu, once the pearl of the Indian Ocean.

In Farah's opinion, what has killed Mogadishu's cosmopolitanism is nothing but intolerance evidenced in the ruin and destruction of the ancient Catholic cathedral and the oldest mosque during the early phase of the civil war in Somalia, issues which crop up in *Crossbones* (2011), An Al-shabaab-operative had desecrated the Italian cemeteries after they gained power in the early 2000s by digging up bones and scattering them around in a sacrilegious manner (*Crossbones* 99). The conclusive study from all of this according to Aar is that "Somali society has taken a giant step backwards, not only as a consequence of the long-running civil war but also because it lags far behind most other countries in education and the other parameters that measure social progress" (HPS 172).

Just as it is the prerogative of survivors of the deceased to honor the dead, a practice of most communities and also salute them in the best way possible, the novel, *Hiding in Plain Sight*, honors and salutes not only the slain journalists and officials in Somalia but also the undying and indomitable spirit of the Somali diaspora community namely - refugees, asylum seekers, new citizens, migrants –all managing to survive against all the odds. To Farah what intensifies the tragic deaths of victims during bomb blasts, terror attacks, or war and disaster is that one never gets to know how many have actually perished. Neither can technology help with the compilation of statistical information. What adds to that pathos is that, "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." (*Crossbones* 26).

'Death' hides in plain sight in places such as in Somalia and in Nairobi. "Death in Somalia seldom bothers to announce its arrival. In fact, death calls with the arrogance of a guest confident of receiving a warm welcome at any time, no questions asked" (HPS 22). In Nairobi, visitors are warned against unprecedented episodes of violence as there is "a violent strain running in its veins," one of the reasons for this being "terrorists acting in the supposed name of religion, nationalism, or ethnic loyalty" (HPS 38,221). The attack against students of Garissa University in Garissa, Kenya on 2nd April, 2015, is the latest and the worst among the series of earlier terror-attacks in Kenya. Despite the setbacks and limitations of living in a globally complex world, Farah in *Hiding in Plain Sight* chooses to express the utopian dreams and the wistful longing of the Somalis in particular and human beings in general for a "future uncomplicated by deaths, diseases, civil wars, and other sorrows" (HPS 209).

References

- Bernstein, Roberta. "Seeing acutely in Farah's *'Hiding in Plain Sight.'*" *USA Today*. November 2, 2014
- Devries, Colin. Review. "Nuruddin Farah's *'Hiding in Plain Sight'* delivers on storytelling — with a clear message." *New York Daily News*. November 4, 2014.
- Farah, Nuruddin. *Hiding in Public Sight*. New York, USA: Riverhead books, Penguin, 2014.
- Farah, Nuruddin. *Crossbones*. New York, USA: Riverhead books, Penguin, 2011.
- Farah, Nuruddin. "Of the Tamarind and Cosmopolitanism." June 2004, <http://www.africancitiesreader.org.za/reader/chapters/02_NF.pdf>
- Ganga, Geetha. "Salvaging Mogadishu from the Ruin and Rubble." Review of NuruddinFarah's *Crossbones*. *Africa Review of Books*. Dakar, Senegal: Codesria, March 2015. (Forthcoming.)
- Lalami, Laila. Review of "Nuruddin Farah's *'Hiding in Plain Sight.'*" 21 November 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/23/books/review/nuruddin-farahs-hiding-in-plain-sight.html?_r=0>
- "Novelist Nuruddin Farah: Facing A Blank Page Is 'Bravest Thing' A Writer Does." Interview. October 25, 2014. <<http://www.npr.org/2014/10/25/358322551/novelist-nuruddin-farah-facing-a-blank-page-is-bravest-thing-a-writer-does>>
- Roble, A. Faisal. "Nuruddin Farah: A Shining Star in a dim Nation." <<http://www.wardheernews.com/nuruddin-farah-shining-start-dim-nation>>

Geetha Ganga is Assistant Professor of English at D.G. Vaishnav College, Chennai. She has a PhD. from the University of Madras for her thesis on Nuruddin Farah.
