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VOICES FROM THE MARGINS: A READING OF MIGRANT WOMEN'S  
AGENCY IN NURUDDIN FARAH'S *FROM A CROOKED RIB AND  
NORTH OF DAWN*

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**Abstract**

In African literature of migration and gender studies, the stories of Somali migrant women have remained underreported for a considerable time. Accordingly, the representation of Somali women's feminism has surfaced quite a little in comparison to other forms of feminisms that have emerged out of other Third-world countries. One can refer to here the name of Nuruddin Farah, who with his stance as an advocate of feminist writers, appears to be among the foremost ones who have brought about an effective articulation on Somali women. Thus accordingly, this research paper is an undertaking to understand the relation between women and migration, and women's spaces of agency in Nuruddin Farah's novels like *From a Crooked Rib* (1970) and *North of Dawn* (2018). As migrant identities journey from one cultural setting to another, they come to enter into dialogue with different social factors at different cultural settings. Therefore, this study aims to discuss migration as a determinant factor of *change* (emphasis added) which may pave ways for a series of their self-discoveries. This idea afterwards may lead to findings which establish the phenomenon

of women migration as quintessential that endows women with knowledge of their 'feminist autonomy' and with a 'vision for the future.'

The trajectory of migration studies entails within it the concept of 'migration' as a subject of critical investigation across different disciplines. It however does not seem to have focussed much of its attention to the perspectives of feminism and for much of its history, the migration studies has seen to be blind to the dimension of gender. Even if a little focus is given to the experiences of migrant women, they are either primarily treated as a non-person or under-represented in the meta-narratives of migration. While on move, if men are on the one hand projected as decision makers, then women on the other hand are misrepresented as passive accepters. So this voicelessness in the meta-narratives about women migrants, the silencing of their voices in relation to their male counterparts in both literary and history writing has continued to be one of their most dominant identification. But with the beginning of early 1980s, feminist perspectives in migration studies claim to share the experiences of women who have managed to step out from their private space to the public dismantle the binary equation of male/female and their role-play in public/private sphere. The contemporary image of this 'woman-migrant-figure'—as the forcibly displaced, occasionally alone or in groups, or may be sometimes with her children clinging to her body—fleeing life endangering circumstances has come to be widely recognised in the present era. Thus, this paper aims to show how migration, especially in the context of Somali women, may open out new routes and at the same time spaces of agency, especially to women as they feel empowered to question the traditional norms and practices of a patriarchal family set up, and also to escape from forced child marriages, the horrid experiences of FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) etc in the country of their origin. And while doing so, the present analysis concentrates on the representation of Somali women in the literary works of Nuruddin Farah who are displaced both in local and global sense of migration, alongside their local sense of conflict and international dilemmas.

The society of Somalia has always been well-known for inflicting injustices and atrocities in its dealings with women. It has always been recognised as hellacious space for subjugating women to crimes like Female Genital Mutilation, rape and commodification. Not only this, Somali women who are bartered into forced marriages render them helpless and susceptible to the spousal ill-treatment and abuse. But a recent outright resistance by the women of Somalia comes into foreplay against this exploitative patriarchal social set up as they are now rebelling against it in order to liberate themselves from the shackles of subjugation which is best exemplified in the works of Farah. It is noteworthy that Farah himself is an exiled writer from his own native country who voices out the space of women in emancipating their dream and identities. He in his novels delineates the experiences of women who have moved across the national frontiers in fulfilling their dreams and who wish to achieve a different cultural space for them.

The first novel to discuss in this context is *From a Crooked Rib* wherein Farah is seen to be deploring a kind of 'nomad science' (the nomad science is borrowed from Giles Deleuze) which is in sharp contrast to the 'state science' or to be specific, the Somali society in particular. The setting of this novel is Somalia in the 1960s, a rural setting where people living there are mostly nomads. Accordingly, the protagonist of this novel Ebla is a pastoral nomad who is a member of the *Jes* (a Somali word which indicate several nomadic families living together) who "*had been on move from the time she was born*" (Farah 6; emphasis added). Ebla's nomadic consciousness is reflected in the ways in which she describes about her nomadic dwelling in the first place. She says

A dwelling. It was a dwelling, like any other dwelling in the neighbourhood . . . It was the dwelling of a certain *Jes* . . .

In the dark, the huts looked more or less like ant-hills, maybe of an exaggerated size. The huts were made of wattle, weaved into a mat-like thing with a cover on top. They were supported by sticks, acting as pillars. Each had one door—all of four feet high. It was a portable home, to be put on the hump back of a camel when the time came for moving to a pastoral area farther up or down, to the east or the west. It was the portable hut, unlike the stone house or mud hut in a town. (Farah 6)

Furthermore, Ebla's identity as a nomad can be examined as per the contentions of Kinopolitical theory of migration wherein social theorist Thomas Nail posits 'the nomad' as one of the figures of migrant identity and "the first figure of pedetic social force" (Nail 130). Nail argues that nomads come into existence not out of any primary territorial or social expulsion rather they are the products of their own self-imposed movement and accordingly keep on inventing new modes of social motion. This 'nomad science' or 'nomad thought' is evident in Ebla who via her nomad consciousness or migration questions the 'state science' of patriarchal Somali society. For instance, her flight from the state science which she encountered in the forms of patriarchy, FGM practices, forced marriage not only questions the western feminists' homogeneous representation of Somali women identities as the 'Other' but also debunk the patriarchal ideologies which have restricted the freedom of women and have treated them as inferior and marginal. Again Ebla migration from her cousin home in Belet Wene to Mogadishu initiates another instance of 'nomad thought' as she says

Escape! To get free from all restraints . . . To get away from unpleasantries. To break the ropes society had wrapped around her and to be free and be herself, to go away from the duty of women (Farah 12-13).

It is surprising infact that despite her traditional background, Ebla is capable of examining her individual plight from which she seeks to get away. She decides for herself that she should not force herself into a marriage which is going to submerge her identity or strangle her personality. Ebla's further demonstration on why she wants to flee is

explored via a set of questionings which is seen to be quite at variance with the rigid patriarchal confinements of her society:

But who or what should she escape from? This was the real question which needed to be answered. Inside her, she knew why she wanted to escape. Actually it was more than a want: it was a desire, a desire stronger than anything, a thing to long for. Her escape meant her freedom. Her escape meant her new life. Her escape meant her parting with the country and its harsh life. Her escape meant the divine emancipation of the body and soul of a human being.

She desired, more than anything, to fly away; like a cock, which has unknotted itself from the string tying its leg to the wall . . . She wanted to go away from the duty of women . . . she should escape.

To escape. To be free. To be free. To be free. To escape. (Farah 10-11)

This instance indicates Ebla's initiation of rhizomatic space which endows her with a vision of a world free from 'unjust hierarchies' and at the same time opens up vistas where she analyses that in the binary between men and women, no subject position is superior to another. In fact her migration opens up for her many exploratory possibilities which allows her identity to grow and evolve and gives her a space of agency wherein she succeeds in destabilising the commonsensical understanding of women migrants just as passive victims of patriarchal societies.

Now coming to understand migration of Somali women migrants in diaspora constitutes another significant aspect of this study. Diasporic spaces are always a fertile ground to examine the cultural construction of masculinity and femininity of migrant identities. Avtar Brah in this context underlines the predicament of masculinity and femininity on the dole in Great Britain in the late twentieth century wherein she criticises the ideology of the male as the sole bread winner in order to legitimate their male dominance. Furthermore, she points out from her other surveys that for the male migrants, the obligation to provide extends beyond spouse and children to include a range of designated kin in the extended family. As they fail to do so, they suffer from the crisis of masculinity, and they feel more emasculated when they see women migrants of the same community and families earning more wages whereas they cannot. This reversal of role in the adopted country is a crucial marker of many women migrants' attempts of emancipation. For instance, in *North of Dawn* by Nuruddin Farah, we get to encounter women characters like Gacalo and Himmo who in their process of managing their rootless life in Norway results in creating a lively sense of cosmopolitanism. It has been discussed by Farah that both these two women characters share a sense of altruism to improve upon the economic fates of their relatives who did not wish to escape or failed to do so. Firstly in case of Gacalo, she is the sole earner of the family and it is only via her, Mugdi her husband managed to obtain nationality of Norway. This we may see in the case of Himmo who chooses to exile to assist her

family back in Somalia. Himmo says that she was quite young when she first arrived in Norway. With no profession to speak of, she initially tried to be proficient in reading and writing Norwegian language. Then after being trained several years as a nurse, she now earns enough to raise her children, to pay for her mortgage, and also to send money home once every two months to her elderly aunt, who is bedridden. Himmo's stance is illustrated in the following example:

It was easier having children back home, with an extended family to assist . . . Many couples come to a head because the husbands don't put in their fair share in holding the family together; they seem unable or unwilling to play their role, many showing more interest in clan politics, not in raising their young families. This is why women with professional careers have found themselves in impossible situations, with many choosing to divorce. Personally I . . . work tirelessly to put food on the table, look after children, make sure they attend school, stay out of trouble, with little or no help from male partners. (Farah 11)

The aspiration to improve upon their lives is the main motive behind the decision to migrate of many Somali women. This is a very important aspect which should be taken into account to understand the dynamics of identity formation among the women of Somali diaspora.

Again, the narratives of other women migrants of Somali diaspora, for example, Cambara, the women protagonist of the novel *Knots* who says *I am a civil war child. I survived murderers. I survived hunger, I survived diseases, I survived refugee camps. I survived many borders. I am strong. I stand strong.* (Farah 23)

Then on another occasion, when she was asked about her sense of self, if after all the years in Canada she felt more Canadian or more Somali, her response was this:

I am both. If I am at a party with Somali women, I would truly be a Somali woman; I would wear a *dirac* and makeup. I will do the henna; I will take part in the conversations they are in. I am completely Somali. My professional identity is in the office: I talk certain ways... Is it healthy? They're both healthy. (Farah 25)

Cambara's sense of self is based on different identifications, expressed in a performative way, and on the particular context where she finds herself in. As she herself says, this is not a schizophrenic self but one that is able to generate different sets of identifications according to specific situations.

All of these women migrants which have been discussed in the present analysis are, or were at some point, forced migrants from a country normally portrayed as the epitome of the failure of the nation-state. The political chaos that came after Siad Barre was overthrown from power, alongside the frequent droughts and consequent famines, and the rise of Al-Shabaab have made thousands of Somalis leave their country, making Somalia into a "refugee producing nation" (Hopkins 2010, 323). Therefore, nowadays, Somali migrants can be found, not only in refugee camps in Northern Kenya but in many of the big metropolises around the world: in London, New York, Minnesota, Victoria, Stockholm or Toronto and also in African urban hubs such as Cairo, Nairobi and Johannesburg.

Coming to the conclusion, it can be said that identifications of these Somali women migrants are not fixed but constantly constructed in a dialogue with the different factors or intersections at different cultural spaces. This as a result open up a space for their individual subjectivities to emerge, which challenges the “taken for granted” dominant discourses about Somali women, offering a counter narrative which shows the influence of migration on their lives, and to consider how it had been a factor of change. As migrant identity journeys from one cultural setting to another, their travel and relocation contribute to their emancipation and endow them with vision for the future and in the process, they formulate new understanding and maturity concerning their space and identities.

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