

“Doing History”: Nuruddin Farah’s *Sweet and Sour Milk*, Subaltern Studies, and the Postcolonial Trajectory of Silence

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that *Sweet and Sour Milk*, which should be understood as both a political and literary text, “does history,” which is not to say that it merely “tells” the history of postcolonial Somalia, but that it participates in a kind of historiography that is, to borrow a phrase from Edward Said, both “frankly revisionist” and “fiercely theoretical and intellectually insurrectionary.” In this paper, using the theoretical work of a group of Indian historians, collected in the journal of *Subaltern Studies* over the past two decades, I show how Nuruddin Farah’s *Sweet and Sour Milk* uses the trope of “silence” to dramatize the potentially fruitful (and problematic) process of writing histories “from below.”

How exactly should we read Nuruddin Farah’s *Sweet and Sour Milk*? Is it strictly a political novel? Or are we justified in analyzing merely its aesthetic, literary qualities? On the one hand, *Sweet and Sour Milk* dramatizes the troubling nationalist betrayal that authors like Frantz Fanon have identified as “the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period” (152). And in pointing to the invidious nature of this transfer, Farah is undoubtedly political and postcolonial. On the other hand, one must remember that Farah is not simply writing anti-neocolonialist propaganda or even journalism, but rather “literature,” and he thus participates in an entire system of contingent conventions, including techniques such as imaginative reconstruction, layered heteroglossia, artistic license, and irony—elements that necessarily complicate attempts to pinpoint the precise political “meaning” in Farah’s text.¹ Thus, for some, Farah’s work is evidence of a specific culture and political situation, while for others it represents a specific kind of “literariness,” not necessarily confined to its implied locale.

Readers of literary theorist Wolfgang Iser may perhaps identify these two trajectories as the dominant “trends” associated with the analysis of literature: on the one hand, there is an “attempt to grasp what is literary about it.” On the other hand, there is “the view of it as a representation of society” (x). Both of these methodologies, however, have severe limitations. According to Iser, the first method takes literature and “hypostatizes it,” that is, makes it into a separate, distinct object, somehow divorced from the mind and historical situation of the author. The second method—viewing literature as a mere representation of society—reduces literature “to the status of a document.”²

I introduce this dichotomy not because I intend to enter the debate, but rather because I think both forms of investigation imply that Farah’s text *does* something, rather than just means something. It is my argument that *Sweet and Sour Milk*, which is both political and literary, “does history,” which is not to say that it merely “tells” the history of postcolonial Somalia, but that it participates in a kind of historiography that is, to borrow a phrase from Edward Said, both “frankly revisionist” and “fiercely theoretical and intellectually insurrectionary” (v). In this paper, using the theoretical work of a group of Indian historians collected in the journal of *Subaltern Studies* over the past two decades, I intend to show how Farah’s text uses the trope of “silence” to dramatize the potentially fruitful (and problematic) process of writing histories “from below.”

The global, intellectual endeavor now commonly referred to as “Subaltern Studies” actually began in the early 1980s, the work of a relatively small group of revisionist Indian historiographers who published in a journal by the same name.³ In 1988, Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak collected and anthologized selections from the first five volumes of *Subaltern Studies*, which quickly became an important text for radical historians throughout the world, though especially so in Latin America and the United States. The reference to Edward Said in the previous paragraph is important here because in the context of his argument on the “fiercely insurrectionary” nature of these Indian historiographers he makes an important connection between the work of postcolonialism and the work of Subaltern Studies—a connection that is important to my discussion of *Sweet and Sour Milk* as a work that both dramatizes and reproduces revisionist historiography. In his introduction to *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, Vinayak Chaturvedi points out that it was Said’s foreword to *Selected Subaltern Studies* that finally solidified the connection between postcolonial scholarship and the Subaltern Studies collective.

One could argue, of course, that it was a comparison just waiting to happen. The thematic tensions between the lower classes and the national elite portrayed in the work of Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* and Ranajit Guha’s *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, for example, seem uncannily similar. The former is often referred to as *the* foundational text in postcolonial studies, while the latter is unquestionably one of the first and most important texts in Subaltern Studies. And while Fanon relies heavily on the implications of race and psychoanalysis, and Guha remains concerned primarily with historiography, there are several broad concerns that unite the two: as Said says, “None of the Subaltern Studies scholars [and we could add the postcolonial scholars] is anything less than a critical student of Karl Marx” (x). Thus, it makes sense to see Said’s Foreword as a look “forward” toward the more general postcolonial concerns in Subaltern Studies.

But first, a point of clarification: it is not my plan to compare the “facts” represented in *Sweet and Sour Milk* with the “facts” represented in the same historical period in Somalia, and proceed to measure their adequacy or “fidelity” to some “real” and knowable final event or series of events. Such a process would at the very least invoke the suspicious (if expedient) ontological category of “Truth”—a task well beyond the scope of this study.⁴

Here I intend to focus more on the question of Farah’s “doing history,” which, as I use it here, implies two things: First, to “do things to history,” (as in “do a number on history”)—which is essentially revisionary; and second, to “do things that history does” (that is, produce a kind of text whose effects are similar to—though not entirely the same as—those of history, which has important discursive potential to change minds and attitudes). Thus, *Sweet and Sour Milk* should not be read as history, but it should be read as *doing* history. I emphasize this difference because I think it provides a necessary distance for our analysis, something that will keep us from reducing Farah’s text, as Iser says, “to the status of a document,” and, I hope, keep us from falling into the trap of historically deterministic discussions of literature, and from the endless, perhaps useless, debates about just how “accurate” a novel is in terms of the “reality” portrayed. The objective, then, is not to simply judge just how much Farah’s text reflects reality, but rather to evaluate to what degree its imaginative interventions into historiography dramatize the potential to shape reality. And in determining that degree I appeal to the work of the Subaltern Studies collective because, whether one agrees with their findings or not, their approach to Indian historiography has had real and lasting effects on the overall shape of Indian history.⁵

Before proceeding to a discussion of Farah’s text, I would like to turn to the trope of “silence” as it relates to the overall objectives and methodology of Subaltern Studies. As I see it operating in Subaltern Studies, “silence” forms the basis for a three-part trajectory: 1) There is an imposition of silence by a colonial or neocolonial state through mechanisms such as official historiography and middle-class discursive hegemony—a process fueled by domination and greed. This forced silence is largely the domain of the colonial elite, and is manifested in the entire field of discursive power in venues of official historiography, literature, journalism, documentation, etc. 2) An insurrectionary act of drawing attention to that silence, calling it out, mapping its genealogy, and identifying the hypocrisy of its boundaries—a process fueled by resentment. 3) A revisionary act of speaking from that silence, giving it a voice, an identity, and eliminating its absence—a process motivated by optimism (however naive). These last two trajectories are the domain of the postcolonial/subaltern scholar, writer, citizen, or intellectual. The processes and strategies invoked here take on similar shapes, mainly in revisionary historiography, literature, theater, etc., though they most often involve rereading documents that were intended to convey something entirely different, and infusing them with new significance—in short, inserting irony where none was intended.⁶ As C.A. Bayly describes it, “the Subalterns’ forte has generally lain in rereading, and mounting an internal critique, of the police reports, administrative memoranda, newspapers and accounts by colonial officials and the literate, which earlier historians had used for different purposes” (117).

In this three-part outline we see the underlying theoretical goal of Subaltern Studies. Much of the seductiveness of these studies, and part of the reason

that Subaltern Studies has become so well-traveled, is that by charting ways that “silence” is first, employed, second, signaled or exposed, and third, eliminated or overcome, we are actually charting a theory of change. This is why, not coincidentally, Spivak introduces *Selected Subaltern Studies* by arguing “The work of the Subaltern Studies group offers a theory of change” (3). And, I argue, in introducing this theory of change, the subaltern studies collective engages in the process of “doing” history.

Guha, for example, makes it quite clear that the discourse of counterinsurgency in colonial India effectively *silenced* any trace of rebel consciousness in the Indian peasantry. Notice, for example, Guha’s language in “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India” where he explains that the domain of subaltern politics demonstrates an entire “index of an important historical truth, that is, the *failure of the Indian bourgeoisie to speak for the nation*” (5; emphasis in the original). It takes very little imagination to see this national “failure to speak” as a moment of institutionally sanctioned silence. And Guha’s attempts “to acknowledge the peasant as the maker of his own rebellion,” which he says necessarily involves attributing “a consciousness to him,” are precisely attempts to uncover silence and give it a voice. Furthermore, in his explicit nod to Mao Zedong’s ill-fated attempt at introducing a multiplicity of “voices,” Guha writes, “*It is the study of this failure [of the Indian bourgeoisie to speak for the nation] which constitutes the central problematic of the historiography of colonial India.* There is no one given way of investigating this problematic. Let a hundred flowers blossom and we don’t mind even the weeds.”⁷ The point here is that Guha seems optimistically eager to allow for a sudden resurrection or flowering of “voices.” It is, in a sense, a call to eliminate the silence of the subaltern.⁸

In a later, more reflective essay entitled “The Small Voice of History,” Guha talks about the need for the Subaltern to develop an extra sensitive “ear” for certain “small voices” that he says are “drowned in the noise of statist commands” (3). For Guha, statism is the sinister vehicle for inflicting silence, and Subaltern Studies is the means to overcome that silence:

It is up to us to make that extra effort, develop the special skills and above all cultivate the disposition to hear these voices and interact with them. For they have many stories to tell—stories which for their complexity are unequalled by statist discourse and indeed opposed to its abstract and oversimplifying modes. (3)

Readers of *Subaltern Studies* should keep in mind that although the descriptive language of the Subalterns is often quite different, the underlying revisionary impulse, and its implicit move along the postcolonial trajectory of silence, is more or less the same. Partha Chatterjee, for example, argues that the task of the Subaltern involves a “filling up” where there is “emptiness” (79). Rosalind O’Hanlon expands Chatterjee’s metaphor, explaining that the Subaltern’s objective is one of “making an absence into presences, of peopling a vacant space with figures” (79). Gyan Prakash talks of the Subaltern’s attempt to “disclose [sometimes he uses the word “recover” (240)] that which is concealed” (180). Sumit Sarkar assigns the Subaltern the job of “widening horizons” in historical research (302). Said talks of the Subaltern’s penchant for restoring “missing narratives” (vii). Spivak similarly

points to the Subaltern's desire to counteract the "sanctioned ignorance" of colonial and neo-colonial historiography (6). David Arnold argues that one of the central characteristics of the notion of subalternity was "that such groups lacked autonomy" (30). But whether one speaks of learning to hear "small" voices, letting hidden flowers bloom, filling up emptinesses, disclosing what has been concealed, widening horizons, restoring missing narratives, counteracting officially imposed ignorance, restoring autonomy, or simply giving a voice to the heretofore voiceless, one is essentially articulating the same revisionary impulse to write history "from below," which, I argue, is an impulse that consistently operates within the aforementioned postcolonial trajectory of "silence."

Before examining how this silence operates in Farah's novel, it is important to point out that most discussions of *Sweet and Sour Milk* explore the elements of the novel that deconstruct the familiar oppositions of family and state. Derek Wright's insightful essay "Fathers and Sons," for example, argues that *Sweet and Sour Milk* exposes ways that the traditionally patriarchal structures of family, buttressed by the religious authority of Islam, and further strengthened by the boundary-forming structures of clan, are intricately complicit with the larger, more powerful authority of the modern police state (45). In a similar vein, Jacqueline Bardolph vividly illustrates how brothers and sisters in Farah's two trilogies "enjoy a privileged mode of communication, exchanging secrets in complete trust, much more freely than with their spouses or parents," which in turn displays important links between freedom and protection (727).

Some scholars have also begun to explore Farah's interventions into the larger concerns of African literature and postcolonial theory. For example, when Farah won the 1998 Neustadt International Prize for Literature, *World Literature Today* devoted an entire volume to Farah's work, including Simon Gikandi's essay "Nuruiddin Farah and Postcolonial Textuality," in which Gikandi points to an important feature of Farah's literature that approximates what I have outlined above regarding the postcolonial trajectory of "silence":

If it has taken long for Farah to be recognized as an important modern writer, this is perhaps because his novels seem to want to perform an impossible task: that of bringing the tradition of nationalist literature into a productive confrontation with the art of postcolonial failure. While the careers of other major African novelists—most notably Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o—have been defined by an explicit movement away from the ideologies of cultural nationalism to a radical critique of the postcolonial state, Farah's works are unique in their contemporaneous representation of both positions. In Farah's early novels in particular, the mapping, endorsement, and critique of nationalism is represented against the background of postcolonial decay and the utopian possibilities held up both by the Somali poetic tradition and a modern culture. In these works, terms such as modern and tradition, which have been the central paradigms in some of the most powerful commentaries on African literature, are constantly blurred and deauthorized. (753)

What Gikandi so brilliantly identifies as a "productive confrontation with the art of postcolonial failure," through the constant "blurring" and "deauthorizing" of tradition and modernity, could also be understood as an important intervention with the postcolonial trajectory of silence. Such a framework, I argue, is especially

helpful in reading *Sweet and Sour Milk*, since silence in that novel plays a crucial role in not only the thematic development of the narrative, but also in allowing us to understand the book's more powerful revisionary and insurrectionary qualities; in short, how the novel "does history."

Farah's novel begins with a violent imposition of silence. Soyaan, an official in the Somali national government, who we find out later has been secretly plotting resistance movements, is lying on a bed at his mother's home, violently ill, his stomach churning. Questions immediately crowd his thoughts: "What had he eaten? With whom had he eaten? What poisonous food had he been given?" (1). Soyaan will not recover from this illness, and the portrayal of his death has important symbolic repercussions in the novel, but before he dies, we are introduced to a few more equally important characters, members of Soyaan's family: his twin brother, Loyaan, and his father, Keynaan. Both of these characters take on a specific symbolic significance as the story unfolds. Loyaan becomes the crux of resistance in the novel as he searches for the reasons behind his brother's death, and Keynaan typifies the traitorous neo-colonial sycophant who "sells out" to the seductiveness of the "independent" dictatorship of Somalia. Soyaan's relationship to these two characters, and the distinct shape he assumes in their memories after his death eventually determines the relative volume of his posthumous silence.

Indeed, silence is ominously everywhere in this first chapter. At one point, Keynaan has come to see Soyaan, whose stomach pains are growing worse by the minute. Farah makes it clear that Soyaan is hardly pleased with his father's visit: "Of late," he writes, "the two had been on very bad terms" (9). The terms are complicated, but basically revolve around Soyaan's refusal to fund yet another marriage for his father who has begun courting a girl as young as his daughter. When Keynaan enters the room, their conversation becomes terse and flippant, eventually deteriorating into silence. Soyaan's reaction is interesting: "Silence. He couldn't take it, Soyaan couldn't. His itching nerve, Soyaan's inner impatience hazarded a move: he switched the radio on. He turned the volume unnecessarily loud. Keynaan, to be heard, spoke at the top of his voice. When his throat pained, Keynaan turned the volume down" (9). This exchange is small, but hardly incidental to Farah's overarching thematic concerns. Soyaan reacts to the silence almost violently, and his father (the symbolic puppet of hypocritical nationalism in this novel) starts to shout, eventually reducing Soyaan's rebellious noise to silence. When their conversation resumes, the poisoned Soyaan begins renouncing the dictatorship, hiccupping violently. To his father: "'Is this Africa or is this Stalin's Russia? I am disgusted. As soon as I feel better, I promise you. . . .' He hiccupped" (10). Keynaan responds by warning Soyaan to relent, to stop putting his neck on the line, to play it safe and abandon this insurrectionary attitude. Soyaan refuses, and the hiccups become more violent:

"As soon as I feel better, I *hic* will *hic* . . ."
 "Have a glass of cold water."
 Hiccup. "No." (10)

Keynaan leaves him, and Soyaan's brother, Loyaan, arrives and is with him during his last moments. Here Soyaan's hiccups become so violent that speech becomes extremely difficult:

"And how is Father?"

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

"A powerless *hic* patriarch, the grandest of them *hic* all. We are on the worst of *hic* terms."

"On account of [his new wife] Beyden?"

"Not only that."

"What?"

"The Politics of *confronhictation*."

"I don't understand."

"The demystification of *inhi*formation. Tell the *hic* masses in the simplest of terms what is happening. Demystify *hic* politics. Empty those heads filled with tons of rhetoric. Uncover whether hiding *hic* behind pregnant letters such as KGB, CIA, or other *hic* wicked alphabet of mysteries *hic*. Do you *hic* understand now *hic*?"

Soyaan's eyes were trained on Loyaan. "I'm not sure if I do."

A smile. A hiccup. Then:

"You will in *hic* time." (15).

This is not an easy passage to read. The hiccups, temporary seizures of voice—seizures in both senses of the word—puncture the text with stoppages, blockages, and Soyaan's eloquence gets difficult to decipher. Phrases like "Uncover whether hiding behind pregnant letters . . ." seem especially fragmented, confused, and ambiguous. Uncover whether *what* is hiding? Soyaan's addled conversation with Loyaan becomes, literally, a moment of an enforced "failure to speak," a silence that has been inflicted on Soyaan, deployed by the state through the poison in his body. And Soyaan's death, the final silencing of his voice ends on this same note:

"First, the warmth went out of Soyaan's hand. Then the brightness out of his eyes. Everything assumed an artificial quietness, for an unbroken fraction of a second.

And Soyaan hiccupped his last." (16)

It is not coincidental to this story that Soyaan's murder involves a systematic silencing of his voice, or, as the text has it, the imposition of "an artificial quietness." Farah's portrayal of Soyaan's death dramatizes the inevitable seizure of a dissenting voice in a neocolonial dictatorship.

The broken, difficult speech of Soyaan's final moments becomes even more interesting when we contrast it with the official version of his last words. In an insidious, though admittedly brilliant move to silence Soyaan's dissenting voice, the official media of the state immediately canonizes him as a national hero, faithful to the General even in death. When the Minister to the Presidency comes to see the body of Soyaan, he asks Loyaan pointedly about his last words: "Did Soyaan—God bless his soul—not stumble on the words 'LABOUR IS HONOUR,' just before he breathed his last? Did he not?" (43). Loyaan is naturally puzzled by the Minister's question, but when the official radio news program begins the next day with "A few words of eulogy about Soyaan the Revolutionary," words that include his final, supposedly pure and loyal, thoughts that "Labour is Honour," things begin to make more sense to Loyaan (61).

The grand machinery of official historiography eventually kicks into full gear, and the broken, seizure-induced speech of Soyaan is replaced by reports of his eloquent and final revolutionary thoughts. Loyaan reads in the official newspaper:

A carrier of the Revolutionary Torch; the Standard-bearer of Scientific Socialism; an advocate of Justice and Social Equality; a Believer in the General's interpretation of the country's needs: Soyaan Keynaan, Allah bless him, died two days ago. He died a premature death. He died, and his last words were praiseful of the General's policies: "Labour is honour and there is no General but our General. . . . The supreme Revolutionary Council has decided to name a street after Soyaan, the Hero of the Revolution. And on his tomb will be inscribed in gold the words: 'Labour is honour and there is no General but our General.'⁹

Notice also Keynaan's testimony of his son's final moments. In the same article, Keynaan testifies in an interview that "took up the available columns of the middle page" that Soyaan

remained to his last second an exemplary revolutionary who believed, without reservation, in the leadership of the General. . . . As for his last words, I was there by his bedside when he said them, when he spoke these words of wisdom. I was there. "LABOUR IS HONOUR AND THERE IS NO GENERAL BUT OUR GENERAL." (98)

Here the reconstruction of Soyaan's final words becomes progressively articulate and metaphorically propagandistic. It begins with a seemingly simple phrase, "Labour is Honour," related by an official voice over the radio. It then becomes, "Labour is Honour, and there is no General but our General," a phrase that has important theological echoes in Islam. And finally, it is amplified in loud capital letters: LABOUR IS HONOUR AND THERE IS NO GENERAL BUT OUR GENERAL.¹⁰ It becomes, in short, the opposite of silence—and it is precisely how elite historiography works.¹⁰ Later in the novel, a local official confides to Loyaan: "[T]hey are rewriting your family's history, Soyaan's and the whole lot like the Russians rewrote Lenin's, Stalin's or that of any of the heroes their system created to survive subversion from within or without. They will need your co-operation, I am sure" (106–07).

Meanwhile, Loyaan has become aware that in the last weeks before his death Soyaan had written a series of insurrectionary memorandums, exposing damning evidence of corruption in the General's regime. It then becomes Loyaan's quest to locate and resurrect these memos, attempting to reclaim his brother's history, and, in effect, restore his voice. It becomes a fight for his "soul" (109).

To read *Sweet and Sour Milk* as a dramatization of this trajectory of silence is also consistent with the more traditional interpretations of the novel. As mentioned before, one of the most obvious, and most often examined themes in this novel is the relationship of the family and the dictatorship. The domestic and the national become the two most important realms of patriarchy in this novel, the former often justifying and reinforcing the latter. As Keynaan reminds his son: "I am the father. It is my prerogative to give life and death as I find fit. I've chosen to breathe life into Soyaan. And remember one thing, Loyaan: if I decide this minute to cut you in two, I can. The law of this land invests in men of my age the

power. I am the Grand Patriarch" (94). There are obvious religious implications in Keynaan's warning, which forms yet another realm of patriarchy in this novel.¹¹ And, to make the connection between the domestic and the national even more obvious, Farah begins section two of the novel with this epigraph by Wilhelm Reich: "In the figure of the father the authoritarian state has its representative in every family, so that the family becomes its most important instrument of power" (95). Clearly, then, Farah sees the structures of patriarchy as intimately connected to the forms of power that grant nations their sovereignty. It makes perfect sense, then, that the form of Soyaan's official history would be manifested in his father's testimony. That is to say, the silence imposed on Soyaan's insurrectionary agenda comes directly from his father. The paternalism of the state becomes the perfect tool for infantilizing (and thereby silencing) Soyaan.

This patriarchal imposition of silence may help to explain the significance of another event in the novel, a scene that seems inserted somewhat anecdotally, between ellipses. In this scene Loyaan and his deceased brother's former lover, Margaritta, are at a restaurant discussing Soyaan's memory. What happens next is important:

A little girl of barely four, with not a stitch of clothing on, entered the restaurant and went straight to the table at which Loyaan and Margaritta were seated. She picked up Loyaan's glass, and, with one single choking gulp, sent the fruit juice down her noisy throat. Margaritta and Loyaan silently stared at her, whereas the waiter came down upon her with a subordinate's unjustified fury. With one wise move, lifting her hand, Margaritta managed to arrest the man's raised arm: she told him to leave the little girl alone. The little girl, for her part, walked out *defiant and silent* as when she had entered. She behaved as though she had done nothing wrong. She looked at the furious waiter just before she disappeared into the howling dust and wind of the night. Loyaan and Margaritta were impressed. (118; emphasis added)

This entire scene occurs in silence. The only speaker, really, is the waiter, and he is soon silenced by a silent gesture from Margaritta. We see a child, "defiant and silent," expressly ignoring her "place" in society, and proceeding within that silence to subvert the conventions that would starve her. The child does not speak, is not allowed to speak, but remains defiant.

Later in the novel Loyaan is not only impressed by this silent defiance, but actually learns from it, allowing it to become an important part of his subversive and revisionary tactics. When Loyaan arrives at the office of the Minister to confront him about his brother's death, he sits in a chair, allowing his mind to wander. "Nothing, no idea, not a thought. Loyaan and the Minister avoided each other's eyes. Then a cynosure of his wandering gaze: the globe. Keynaan. Soyaan and Loyaan as children. The Memorandums. What Soyaan said or didn't say" (175). The phrase "Soyaan and Loyaan as children" is most likely intended to reflect Loyaan's thoughts on when they were children, as Loyaan will often reflect on events from his childhood interaction with his father and brother. But the phrase could also be taken as a simile, that is, Soyaan and Loyaan *as if* they were children, *as if* appropriated by a violent paternalistic apparatus intending to silence them. But like the little girl in the previous passage, Loyaan is determined to respond with silent defiance. After some initial small talk, a silent gloom settles over Loyaan's

conversation with the Minister: "Now where does one start? Answer: with silence. Make him nervous, give him no chance to know what you've come for. He will speak. He will begin fidgeting in his throne of temporary convenience. He will tremble with worry. Start with silence. End with silence."¹² Eventually the Minister breaks the awkward silence by informing Loyaan that his father, Keynaan, has been "rehabilitated," and will soon be working for the state again. Loyaan's response: "Silence. Bait thrown. A pause long enough to elicit Loyaan's comment, to allure his trapped mind to say something 'against' his father" (176). The Minister then tells Loyaan that Keynaan has been arguing that the street named after Soyaan should be widely trafficked, "In the good view of the public." He asks Soyaan what he thinks. "Silence. You have no thoughts on this, Loyaan. You have none. Not until you've heard a good reason why a street is to be named after Soyaan" (177).

Eventually, however, Loyaan recognizes that he will have to respond. His thoughts at this point are interesting: "Loyaan would now have to say something. Take your time, though. Be the inconvenience he never imagined you could be. Look at him cross and uncross his legs nervously. Look at his anxious face. Power is in your hand" (177). When Loyaan finally does speak, he informs the Minister that he knows of the Memorandums that Soyaan wrote before his death. Here, then, Loyaan moves from the contentious exposition of silence, that is, from drawing attention to the silence and making it known, to actually introducing documents that will revise the silenced history and give it a voice. Soyaan, though dead and gone, suddenly has the potential for speech again, and the Minister reacts with fury: "The Minister leaned forward. 'You have the Memorandums? Do you have the Memorandums?'" (181). To which Loyaan's reply is somewhat ambiguous: "The wrong set of people, a group of jealous friends. . . ." The Minister responds with "irrepressible anger":

"What is all this? Do you or don't you have the Memorandums?"

"If you calm down, Mr. Minister, everything will become clear."

The Minister threw his pen across the room in rage. His face when still *silent*, fell into wrinkles reminiscent of an ants' nest into which and out of which flowed unholy thoughts—un-whole! (181; emphasis added)

Now things are suddenly inverted, and the word "silent" is used in reference to the Minister, in this case the organ of the national historiography, the effects of that silence wrinkling the Minister's face into inhuman and voiceless forms.

In these passages, Farah provides a brilliant dramatization of the process of anti-neocolonialist historiography, which is essentially what the Subaltern Studies scholars have been trying to do all along: recovering a silenced subject by amplifying its silence, drawing attention to it, and then eliminating it by giving it a voice, and allowing it to speak. Loyaan's silent intimidation of the Minister, and his exposing and unveiling certain gaps and absences in his nation's history is Farah's way of drawing our attention to the "small voices" of history, of "recovering that which is concealed," of "filling up emptiness," of "making absences into presences," and of recuperating "missing stories." In other words, *Sweet and Sour Milk* is a drama of restor(y)ing the past.

Now having outlined this three-part trajectory of silence, and having tried to show that it forms the basic structural impulse of Subaltern Studies, and having pointed to its striking dramatization in Farah's *Sweet and Sour Milk*, I would like

to turn and puncture that argument, break it down, and attempt to complicate its deceptive simplicity. But before launching into a critique of my own (arguably oversimplistic) three-part trajectory of silence, I will point out that there is certainly nothing wrong with creating simple, structural paradigms, testing them out, and then moving on to complicate and dissect them. If anything, *that* is what has really happened in Subaltern Studies. For example, in the years since the first volumes of *Subaltern Studies* were published, the term “subaltern” itself has been both useful as a classifying term, and subject to poignant complications. Notice Arnold’s attempt to gauge the usefulness of Gramsci’s term in the context of Guha’s work:

This bipartite division [between subaltern and elite] of a society as complexly hierarchical as that of colonial India is not without its problems. To take but one obvious example, the rich peasants who appear as subalterns in their relations with a landed elite of the *zamindar* type are in themselves an elite in their dominant relations with the poorer rural strata of landless laborers and village artisanal and service groups. Any given society may divide in different ways in different situations, but, consistent with Gramsci’s theorization, the central problematic is seen to lie in the fundamental and persistent division of society between the subordinate, laboring, cultivating groups and the classes that exercise economic and political domination over them. (34–35)

In other words, of course, there are problems with an equation as simple as A/B, but there is something useful in starting with such an equation, particularly if it is used to launch more complicated and interesting critiques.

There have been several Subaltern Studies scholars who have drawn attention to the problematic nature of attempting to simply give a voice to “silence.” In “Recovering the Subject: *Subaltern Studies* and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia” O’Hanlon raises the obvious question of from where, exactly, these new “voices” are to emerge. That is, within what subjectivity are these new, or forgotten voices to be reconstructed? In her words, “how are we to configure their presence, if it is not to be in terms of liberal humanist notions of subjectivity and agency [?]”¹³ By situating her critique among Marxist debates in a European context, O’Hanlon argues that “the problem of experience, separated from that of agency, might be more fruitfully thought without the notion of universal human subjectivities” (74). Exactly what she means by differentiating “experience” and “agency” is perhaps less interesting here than is her move to complicate what she understands as the fundamental—and fundamentally simple—paradigm of Subaltern Studies. By ignoring these complications, she says, we run the risk of simply lapsing into “classic” forms of “liberal humanism” (80).

Of course, one could also argue, perhaps with an appeal to Spivak’s machiavellian “strategic essentialism,” that there is something ultimately more practical and necessary in simple constructions like my three-part trajectory of silence. Such an argument, however, is perhaps a misunderstanding of Spivak’s initial argument, though my purpose is not to try to clarify Spivak on this point, except to say that her own essays in *Subaltern Studies* seem to dramatize the necessary move *away* from paradigmatic strategic essentialism. O’Hanlon, however, refuses to see this, and thus allows her own complication of the paradigm to serve as a warning against Spivak. O’Hanlon writes, “[W]e should certainly hesitate before

accepting Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's suggestion," even though in the context of Spivak's essay, her now-famous phrase is always descriptive rather than prescriptive. My point here is not that O'Hanlon is wrong, or that Spivak is right, but rather that both of them seem to be doing two things: 1) pointing to something useful—though decidedly simple and essentialist—in the early Subaltern Studies paradigm, and 2) making an attempt to introduce new and creative ways to complicate that earlier simplicity. And they are certainly not alone. C.A. Bayly similarly argues,

Down almost to the very bottom of society every subaltern was an elite to someone lower than him. [. . .] Stressing the autonomy of 'the peasant,' as the Subaltern authors have done, has served a valuable purpose in enriching what was in danger of becoming a somewhat mechanical and abstract historiography. Simply to stress that autonomy, as they are sometimes inclined to do, however, is not very helpful in any attempt to specify the nature of historical change. (126)

Here, again, we see a characterization of an early paradigm's simplicity and usefulness, followed by suggestions for complication and revision.¹⁴ Prakash follows suit by arguing that the early Subaltern Studies strategies were able to "break the undivided entity of India into a multiplicity of changing positions which are then treated as the effects of power relations" (179), but then goes on to argue that we must move beyond such simple "foundational" histories, toward something supposedly more heterogeneous and "post-foundational" (174–75).

The main complications that emerge are as follows (and I will use O'Hanlon as an example of each): First, the recognition that in the elimination of certain silences, other silences are enforced or ignored, or that, more simply put, not everyone can talk at once. In O'Hanlon words, we must be wary of the possibility that the construction of a peasant community involves "the suppression of those not counting as the 'individuals' [. . .] women, untouchables, laborers and so on" (98). Second, that in attempting to give voice to that silent "other" we run the risk of simply speaking for and from ourselves. As O'Hanlon argues, "we must ask ourselves whether we are in danger in using it [that is, the textual space opened up by the new "voice"] to turn the silence of the subaltern into speech, but to make their words address our own concerns, and to render their figures in our own self-image" (96).

So how does Farah's *Sweet and Sour Milk* hold up under this necessary complication? How do these problematics alter our understanding of the novel as a dramatization of the tripartite postcolonial trajectory of silence? The answer to that question is that *Sweet and Sour Milk* is still quite useful, and can quite easily sustain a more complicated, "post-foundational" reading, though in some of these complications we may be going beyond questions of authorial intent. First, we should point out that the characters in Farah's novel are hardly successful in restoring a "voice" to Soyaan. In the end of the novel, Loyaan is offered a "position" in the government somewhere out of the country. The reader is not quite sure, however, whether that "position" will involve Loyaan's murder (they told Soyaan the same thing before his death), or whether he will actually capitulate, becoming yet another silenced victim, and move abroad where he cannot cause any more trouble. Either way, however, the optimistic notion that Soyaan's voice could be

restored, that his “silence” could be overcome, is certainly put into question at the end of the novel. We hardly end on an optimistic note of recovered “voice.”

There is also another element of Farah’s novel that radically dramatizes the more complicated situation we have introduced, though it is here that Farah may disagree with our reading. I am speaking of the fact that although Farah’s novel appears six years after the establishment of an official Somali script, *Sweet and Sour Milk* is written in English, further alienating the text from any more general or subaltern readership in Somalia. How is it, we might ask Farah, that *Sweet and Sour Milk*, a literary text of significant complexity and insurrectionary impulses, is written in the language of a colonial elite? Now, one could argue, as does Chinua Achebe in 1975, that English remains the most important vehicle for the possibility of an “African” literature:

Those of us who have inherited the English language may not be in a position to appreciate the value of the inheritance. Or we may go on resenting it because it came as part of a package deal which included many other items of doubtful value and the positive atrocity of racial arrogance and prejudice which may yet set the world on fire. But let us not in rejecting the evil throw out the good with it. (58)

But while the transnational possibilities of English are undeniable, the question of the actual readership in English, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o argues in *Decolonizing the Mind*, is not quite as easy to explain. That is, there can be no denying that the predominant venue for Farah’s work is predominantly the “West.” Who, exactly, is Farah trying to convince in this novel? Who is it that finally hears the “silence” that he has pointed to here? It may be that the eradication of silence is as much a process of “hearing” as it is a question of voice.

NOTES

1. *Heteroglossia* is an English approximation of the Russian *raznorecie* (literally translated as “multilingualness”), introduced by M. M. Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination* (259–422). The term refers to the necessary tension and competition between the linguistic and discursive multiplicity of a given people and the official though often superficial “unity” of a national discourse. According to Bakhtin, the novel as a literary genre is best able to exploit the deconstructive effects of heteroglossia. One could also include in this list of qualities inherent in literature the articulation of a “minor” language as articulated in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* (see ch. 10). For a discussion on figurative language in literature, and a general theorization of the “imaginary,” see Miller, *On Literature* ch. 2: “Literature as Virtual Reality.”

2. See x–xi. Iser thus attempts to solve the problem by introducing a third category: “Because this interaction [between fiction and reality] produces far more than just a contrast between the two, we might do better to discard the old opposition of fiction and reality altogether, and to replace this duality with a triad: the real, the fictive, and what we shall henceforth call the imaginary. It is out of this triad that the text arises” (1). According to Iser, the real benefit of viewing literature this way is that it frees us from the need for a metaphysical, transcendental position when making an analysis: “The old opposition between fiction and reality presupposed a tacit knowledge of what constituted each of them, with the fiction being basically characterized by the absence of those attributes that defined the real” (2). This “tacit knowledge” implies a nontextual

element that a community must agree upon in order to successfully delineate the fiction from the reality in the text, which is always a metaphysical position. My contention that Farah's text "does history" is an attempt to acknowledge the necessarily *imaginative* procedures of revisionary historiography.

3. The word "subaltern," borrowed from Antonio Gramsci and sometimes used to refer to a concept as vague as the "people," is usually defined by Subaltern Studies scholars in contrast to the term "elite," which in a colonial or postcolonial situation signifies "dominant groups, foreign as well as indigenous" (Said 44). The "subaltern," then, represents "the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those [. . .] described as 'elite.' Some of these classes and groups such as the lesser rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper-middle peasants who 'naturally' ranked among the 'people' and the 'subaltern,' could under certain circumstances act for the 'elite,' as explained above, and therefore be classified as such in some local or regional situations—an ambiguity which it is up to the historian to sort out on the basis of a close and judicious reading of his evidence" (44). The difference between Subaltern Studies and *Subaltern Studies* in current discourse can also be confusing. As I am using it here, *Subaltern Studies* refers to the specific work published in the journal by that name in India, while Subaltern Studies refers more generally to the work done by historians who have contributed to the journal, but who have often done substantial historiography outside the journal as well. Ranajit Guha, for example, was one of the founding editors of *Subaltern Studies*, but has also published several monographs that could be categorized under the more general rubric of Subaltern Studies.

4. In this sense, I am referring to the inherent problems in characterizing history as the "truth" of what happened "out there." As Richard Rorty argues, "We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there. To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations. Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false" (5). In other words, there is no history outside of language and discourse, so the question of "truth" in historiography will always be mediated by human contingency.

5. One could even argue that works of "fiction" like Farah's may be every bit as revisionary and insurrectionary as works of "history" like those of the Subaltern Studies scholars. In fact, since Farah's work is "literature" and therefore already "non-foundational," it is perhaps not quite as troubled by the kinds of critique that Prakash identifies in the work of some historians (see Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories"). Thus, this ability to launch a critique of the "real" from the perspective of the "imaginary" becomes the strength of work like Farah, who, in the words of Jacqueline Bardolph, "as created an imaginary world that is immediately recognizable" ("On Nuruddin Farah" 120).

6. See p. 6, emphasis in the original. One could argue, though I do not have the time or space to do it here, that because the Subaltern Studies collective involved a process of insurrectionary ironization, it was able to "travel" more than other theories of revisionary historiographies have. For a related discussion, see Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*.

7. The quote could be read as a somewhat ironic revision of Mao, since, clearly, Mao *did* mind the "weeds," and imprisoned and killed quite a few of them after launching the Anti-Rightist campaign in the late 1950s.

8. Following Guha's lead, Dipesh Chakrabarty even points out that paying attention to "silence" actually comprises one of his most basic methodologies as a scholar of subalternity: "[R]uling-class documents often used for historical reconstructions of working-class conditions can be read both for what they say and for their 'silences'" ("Conditions" 179; emphasis added).

9. See p. 97. If there were time and space, we could perhaps connect the "event" of Soyaan's death (and its subsequent theorization) to Shahid Amin's brilliant work, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922–1992*. As Amin points out, the violence of Chauri Chaura is *immediately* appropriated by official historiography, made into a didactic metaphor and carefully inscribed in the local collective memory. Likewise, in Farah's text, Soyaan's death becomes instantaneously a metaphor, and his father's "memory" of the event becomes crucial for the official historiography.

10. For a detailed examination of the discursive mechanics of elite (as opposed to subaltern) historiography, see Guha, "On Some Aspects" and "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," both collected in *Selected Subaltern Studies*.

11. One should also remember yet another realm of patriarchy implicated in this story, namely, the international. Chatterjee's *The Nation and Its Fragments* makes it clear that the authoritarianism of colonialism was always couched in paternalistic rhetoric (17).

12. See 175–76. Italics are in the original, unless otherwise noted.

13. See p. 74. Raising a very similar concern, Kamala Visweswaran takes as her "starting point the problematics of retrieving speech, and of constituting certain gendered subjects as subaltern" (84). In asking how certain forms of subalternity are "inflected by gender," Visweswaran acknowledges the necessarily complex reality of constituting or recovering the "small voices" that other Subalterns (like Guha and Chatterjee) seem confident they can locate, identify, and amplify.

14. Bayly makes an interesting move as well that seems to characterize much of Subaltern Studies "revision"—the move to discussing Subaltern Studies scholars in the third person (e.g., *They* were on the right track, however naïve, but *they* should revise according to *my* new and creative complications). This is something endemic to the move to complicate Subaltern Studies—scholars speaking of themselves as marginalized, as subaltern to the Subaltern.

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