

## Bibliographic Details

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### Farah, Nuruddin

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Nuruddin Farah's career offers a stunning dramatization of how the troubled processes of globalization and postcolonialism coincide with the local politics of language and tradition. Farah's intimate knowledge of the cultural and linguistic intricacies of postcolonial and neocolonial Africa comes by way of a complex and fascinating personal history. As a novelist and scholar, he has traveled the world, spending time in countless international locales and nearly a dozen African nations. For most of his career, he has been an author in exile, writing from afar about the political turmoil and cultural violence of his native Somalia. Farah's approach has consistently been vividly historical and trenchantly non-partisan, carefully avoiding the dogmatic orthodoxies of both the Left and the Right. In Farah's words, "The only thing one can do is to be aware and to struggle harder and harder against repression in whatever form it comes" (Moss 1828).





## F

Fantasy, Science

Fiction, and

Speculative

Fiction

**Farah, Nuruddin**

Feminism and

Fiction

Fernando, Lloyd

Fictional

Responses to

Canonical

English

Narratives

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Adaptation and

Fiction

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Born on November 24, 1945 in the Italian-controlled southern half of modern-day Somalia, Farah was fluent in spoken Somali by the age of 10 and could read four language scripts, including Amharic, Arabic, Roman (via English and Italian), and Cusmaniya (the eventual basis for official Somali orthography). At 13, he was reading Western classics by Dostoevsky and Hugo in English and Arabic translations. Like many Somalis who experienced the first nine years of Somali independence, Farah was initially optimistic about Siyad Barre's Soviet-inspired revolutionary takeover in 1969. After returning from studying in India, Farah was invited by the Barre regime to "write something favorable about the revolution" (Farah 1988, 1596). The result was his 1969 play *A Dagger in Vacuum*, which was immediately denounced by government censors as "scandalously unrevolutionary" (Wright 2004, 10). His 1970 novel *From a Crooked Rib* (the first ever published by a Somali writer) details the travails of Ebla, a woman who attempts to escape the tyrannical patriarchy of home life in the colonial 1950s; it was similarly condemned. In 1973, when he published an extract from a short novel in his native tongue, his work was declared "seditious," and by 1974 he decided to continue his work abroad. In 1976 a phone call warned him that his recently published novel *A Naked Needle* (1976), which portrays the zeal and optimism of the Somali revolution gradually dissolving into dictatorial corruption and bureaucratic messiness, had been condemned by the Barre dictatorship; returning home would mean risking a lengthy jail sentence. He has remained in exile ever since.

In Italy, Farah began writing the first two volumes of *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*, beginning with *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979) and *Sardines* (1981), with the final volume, *Close Sesame* (1983), being completed in Germany. Containing some of Farah's most vivid and powerful writing, the *Dictatorship* trilogy details the corruption of clan-based postcolonial leadership, demonstrating how traditional clan-centered values can become vehicles for tribal tyranny and corrupt nepotism. It also continues a recurrent theme in Farah's writing: the rich and collective voice of the Somali oral tradition, with oral poets acting at times as "the mouthpiece of the clan" (Farah quoted in Wright 2004, 13) – a poetic tradition that can be used to cut across clan lines, while at other times reinforcing the reactionary abuses of centralized clan-based power.



After the Dictatorship trilogy, Farah traveled and published widely. His Blood in the Sun trilogy included *Maps* (1986), written while in Nigeria and Gambia; *Gifts* (1992), written in Sudan and Uganda; and *Secrets* (1998), written in Ethiopia and Nigeria. Of these, *Maps* has become the most famous and critically well received. Written in a strikingly lyrical, shifting voice, it tells the story of Askar, an orphan whose parents died before he was born (his mother in childbirth, and his father during the conflict that separated Somalia and Ethiopia in the mid-1970s). Many critics have noted the novel's extremely complex and multidimensional weaving together of voices and multiple mythologies.

In 1998, Farah received the prestigious Neustadt International Prize for Literature. In his acceptance speech, he emphasized his own complicated colonial and postcolonial upbringing, exploring the links between his inherited multidimensional experience with language and his nation's troubled history. In his only non-fiction work, *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (2000), Farah further develops these intimate connections between personal narrative and postcolonial experience, reporting on a series of interviews he conducted with Somali refugees between 1991 and 1998. His recent novels *Links* (2003) and *Knots* (2007) emerge out of the painful revelations of these interviews, imagining the difficulty of the exile's return to a homeland forever changed by corruption and violence.

Critical attention to Farah's work continues to grow, garnering comparisons to authors such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and occasional rumors of a Nobel Prize nomination. His work, with its shifting and contradictory elements – their multivocal dimensions, their interweaving of the political, the religious, the gendered, and the domestic – has made important contributions to the larger traditions of international modernism and postcolonial writing. In imaginatively exploring Somalia's turmoil, Farah is as vividly political as Chinua Achebe and as deft at exploring language and personal experience as Ngũgĩ.

**SEE ALSO:** [Achebe, Chinua \(WF\)](#); [East African Fiction \(WF\)](#); [Historical Fiction \(WF\)](#); [Migration, Diaspora, and Exile in Fiction \(WF\)](#); [Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o \(WF\)](#); [Politics/Activism and Fiction \(WF\)](#); [Postcolonial Fiction of the African Diaspora \(BIF\)](#); [Postcolonialism and Fiction \(WF\)](#)



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