

**POLITICAL TURMOIL AND CONFLICT: A NEO-COLONIAL STUDY OF
NURUDDIN FARAH'S SECRETS**

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Abstract:

Nuruddin Farah is a well-known playwright and novelist from Somalia, known for his wide range of works that examine subjects including politics, identity, and the effects of social and historical factors. In “Secrets,” published in 1998, Farah examines the subject of social and familial secrets in light of Somalia’s political unrest. The book explores the intricacies of interpersonal connections and individual pasts. The central plot of Secrets centres on Kalamán, the main character, and his quest to learn the truth about his true identity, a fact that his parents have chosen to keep hidden. Farah situates Kalamán’s identity quest within the conflicting forces of Somalia’s globalization and the covert weights preventing the country from developing a coherent identity. This research article seeks to explore the societal and individual conflict faced under the influence of globalization and neo-colonialization.

Keywords: Conflict, Politics, Identity, Interpersonal, Globalization

In the novel, the protagonist Kalamán is an entrepreneur residing in Mogadiscio. His kitchen cabinet is brimming with international cooking materials, and he has many female acquaintances. However, his house is closed off to distant family members:

I occupied a first-floor two-bedroom apartment in one of Mogadiscio’s most sought-after residential zones, and seldom entertained anyone claiming to be from either side of my parents’ extended families, clansmen and clanswomen whose demands would range from being out up and fed for months to having their medical and their children’s school bills footed. I would remind them that I was no member of a clan, and that I was a professional. (Farah, Secrets 26)

These petit-bourgeois claims are contrasted with Kalamán’s anxiety over severing his ties to his clan after learning the truth about his origins:

How would people react to the news that I was the issue of a gang rape?... Naturally, it would confound a lot of simple minded, clan-obsessed persons who might feel cheated of their right to know the name of the rapist, my biological father, if only to assign me to the one of the clans. If they pitied me, it would be because I was the poor sod who hadn’t a blood family to be loyal to, to kill and die for, in this epoch of clan-kill-clan! How would my employees receive the news? I could only compare it in my experience to learning the X, a friend, had AIDS. What do you say to

someone afflicted with an identity crisis like mine, akin to AIDS in that it points to a kind of death? (Farah, *Secrets* 236-237)

Kalaman's apprehension over losing recognition in the eyes of others is juxtaposed with Nonno's self-confidence, which opposes assimilating into group identities like clan: "I can't bear the thought of generalizing. I am a person, a clan is a mob. Talk to me, sell things to me, I am reasonable. Clans are not" (Farah, *Secrets* 297). Similar to the historically aware Deeriye from *Close Sesame*, the historically conscious Nonno likewise serves as Farah's ambassador since he resists the need to abstract his identity by embracing a collective existence while retaining his individuality. Farah challenges the taboo of blood affinities in Somali society, which emerged as a significant issue during the civil war, through the character of Nonno. When Nonno learns that Misra is suspected of betraying the Somali forces at the Ogaden, he poses the same questions to Kalaman as Askar does about their relationship:

As an animal with a high sense of taboo, will you be upset if you learn that you are somebody else's child, not Yakut's? Will doubts shatter your certainties? What will become of your relationship with us, your kith and kin all your life? Will you kill me or your father if it turns out that your family is at war with ours, in the current struggle for political power? (Farah, *Secrets* 203).

In contrast to Askar, who has completely surrendered his sense of self to the impersonal concept of a collective Somali body politic, Kalaman possesses a well-established collection of signifiers derived from both his past and future experiences that enable him to redefine himself under new conditions. Unlike Askar from *Maps*, Kalaman chooses to strengthen his compassionate relationships with Yakut and Nonno rather than seeking retribution after learning from his mother that she was never married to the man he has always known to be his father and realizing that he was born into a gang rape: "I suppose it is high time I married Talaado and gave you a grandchild, and made Yakut another Nonno!" (Farah, *Secrets* 265, emphasis in original).

It is important to remember in these relationships because Kalaman's birth gave his grandfather the moniker Nonno. Similar to Duniya, Kalaman experiences a progressive shift in his self-narrative as he comes to terms with his realisation. From his self-denial and absorption into cults and taboos, which caused him to act like an adult by having sex with Sholoongo and drinking her menstrual blood; from his childish plea for a sibling and his voyeuristic pleasure at seeing his parents make love, despite their unbreakable secrecy around him; When Kalaman makes the decision to create a family and, in doing so, redefine his relationship with his parents, he experiences a profound transformation in terms of his sense of self and identity. An agonistic agency of coping and survival is suggested by this self-reconstruction, which takes into account his own identity as well as the reciprocal interactions he has with Damac, Yakut, and Nonno.

Breaking taboos as a way to reconstruct identity serves purposes beyond Kalaman rearranging his family ties to avoid the taboos surrounding rape and sanguinity. Deeper levels of breaking taboos are present in intimate, private domestic and interpersonal settings, and they point to a growing trend in the direction of self-assertion via self-narrative. One such instance is the identity that Nonno has had all of his life. Nonno, who follows Islamic law and customs, has resisted the allure

of using clan names. Nonno's rejection of both his clan identification and the identity on papers is noteworthy because it suggests a gradual tendency towards positive self-assertion, in contrast to Hillal's insistence on the exclusivity of the Somali identity and the significance assigned to Askar's identity card in *Maps*. When comparing this to Farah's insistence on a reconstructed existence that combines fiction and fact, which Duniya accepts as an essential agonistic coping mechanism following the foundling's death in *Gifts*, Nonno's sense of self can also be seen as an agonistic survival strategy that Farah refers to as a "working hypothesis," particularly given this trilogy's prolonged obsession with sanguinity and blood ties.

In this sense, Sholoongo serves as another illustration of a transitory existence. Sholoongo, who came to America as a shape-shifter and has a mysterious birth connected to beastly energies, not only crosses boundaries between identities but also figuratively portrays postcolonial Somalia as a country with a hybrid identity that blends factuality and fast globalisation with a mythical past. By using her, Farah not only breaks the long-standing taboo in Somalia, which is linked to enigmatic, independent women who are seductive creatures, but she also undermines the patriarchal structure of the community by opposing the primarily male practise of raping from the front, or *hor-gur*, as an alternative to the more traditional practise of raping from the back. In this way, Sholoongo's rape of Nonno in Kalaman's bed implies a challenge to the oppressive social norms that appropriate women's identities. However, as noted by Alamin Mazrui, by raping Nonno in Kalaman's bed, "Sholoongo, the collective representation of the Somali(an) woman turned-American, rapes in order to reproduce Somalia in its new globalized womb" (Mazrui 625, parenthesis in original).

Sholoongo's AIDS-related illnesses and the text's overall obsession with the disease, along with its focus on bodily fluids like blood, sperm, and pus, all help to conceptualize how biopower is entangled in the current national issue and turns it into a perceptive commentary on the disorder in the larger scheme of things. Any kind of communal existence, whether it be national or clan, is merely a "working hypothesis," in Farah's words. (Farah, "How" 28). He further elaborates:

Clan is not a definer. Clan is not an organizer of people. These are a disparate group of persons who are brought together by circumstances, like a rain shower. We are standing together under a jetty. . . and we could become friends for a few minutes because there is a thunderstorm and we are all seeking shelter under the jetty from the thunderstorm. We share as many things, features, as clanspeople do. And yet we are there temporarily, for fifteen minutes, when the downpour makes us stay there. That's how clans work: for a very short period of time. No one represents a clan. Neither does anyone represent a nation. (Farah, "How" 29)

The family of Damac and Yakut, which is created on the basis of attachment, love, correlation, and trust rather than socio-cultural ties in conventional marital terms, represents this idea of the functional presence of collective forms of self. The way Damac and Yakut are shown as cohabiting in a largely Muslim community while pretending to be married to one another points to a reconstitution movement in both the micro and macro aspects of the issue. When Kalaman realises this, he responds as follows:

“It doesn’t matter whether you married or not. You are my father, and I love you” to which Yakut answers: “I love you most dearly too, and have loved your mother all these years more than I might have loved her if she had been my wife” (Farah, *Secrets* 259).

While Kalamán initially wants to avenge the rapists and blackmailers, Yakut puts emphasis on healing and coping through the reconstruction of the domestic and personal space: “It wouldn’t serve any purpose punishing beasts like them’, he said, ‘for they are no different from millions of others, criminals in cahoots. I was more interested in Damac healing, and in the three of us staying close, a well-knit unit of love and affection, trusting and loving, not avenging” (Farah, *Secrets* 260). Coupled with Kalamán’s wish to start a family and thereby giving a new meaning to the familial bonds, such attempts suggest the formulation of agonistic agency towards coping and asserting the self in a positive narration.

Alden and Tremaine have pointed out:

At the core of Farah’s politics, we have shown, is the principle of individual autonomy, and it is in self-narration that that autonomy expresses itself. By self-narration we mean a form of reinvention, the conscious construction in words and ideas of a story of the world, transforming the world as we find it into one in which the narrating self plays a chosen and meaningful role. To reinvent both the self and the world in which the self plays its definitional role is necessarily to reinvent others who cohabit the same world and to do so in interaction with their own narratives. (157)

The author’s journey towards achieving a sense of fulfilment regarding his sense of self against the context of his conflicting personal and national spheres is parallel to Farah’s journey towards a progressive self-narration for formulating a satisfactory self-definition against a contested context, which remains her central concern throughout the “Blood in the Sun” trilogy. Parallels can be drawn between Farah’s appropriation of identity during the early days of his education, when he cut and pasted the name Nuruddin from the book *One Thousand and One Nights* on his copy books, and Askar’s sense of absorption into the collective national identity that is so prominently expressed in Askar’s tattooing the map of Somalia on his body, with all its appropriating temptations. Farah’s personal inclination to embrace written culture at the expense of his oral heritage since childhood can be linked to the temptation of identity dissolution within a communal awareness. This study thus focuses on how Farah, via his act of narrating, advances towards an agonistic reclaiming of the self by reconstituting the dilemma of his national identity, thereby marking a paradigm change in this trilogy from external politics to internal power relations.

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