

SELF IDENTITY OF WOMEN DURING WAR CRISIS IN NURUDDIN FARAH'S *KNOTS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the self-identity of women during times of war and crisis as portrayed in Nuruddin Farah's novel *Knots*. Set against the backdrop of Somalia's ongoing conflict, the novel delves into the lives of women who navigate personal and collective struggles amidst chaos and societal disintegration. The central character, Cambara, serves as a lens through which the narrative investigates themes of resilience, self-reclamation, and empowerment in a war-torn society. Farah highlights how women, despite being marginalized and oppressed, become agents of change and reclaim their identities through acts of courage, defiance, and solidarity. This paper examines the psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of women's self-identity in the face of displacement, violence, and loss. It also analyses how Farah's female characters challenge traditional gender roles and assert their autonomy in spaces dominated by patriarchal and militarized power structures. By focusing on *Knots*, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between war, gender, and identity in contemporary African literature.

Key Words: War Crisis, Displacement, Violence, Marginalization, Self-Identity, Self-Reclamation and Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION TO WAR AND IDENTITY IN *KNOTS*

Wars are fought not by the soldiers but indirectly by the common folks like children and women who sacrifice their lives for the nation's cause. Whatever happened on the border that affects the lives of common people in all war ridden countries. Somalia earlier a colony of British, French and Italy, formed its Republic in 1961 under the leadership of Shermarke. But the democratic government of Shermarke is overthrown by Siyad Barre, ruthless dictator who ruled the nation from 1969 to 1991. He waged war against Ethiopia in July 1977 and lost in March 1978. That led to the revolt in the army which eventually resulted into a state collapse, civil war and clan-based combat in Somalia that affects the lives of common masses, especially

the half portion of Somali society i. e. women who suffered a lot but struggle to create self as well as national identity by performing various tasks in civil war.

Before delving into the analysis of '*Knots*,' it is essential to provide contextual background of the novel and socio-political landscape of Somalia during the period in which the story is set. The novel is the part of *Past Imperfect Trilogy*, respectively comprises *Links*, *Knots* and *Crossbones*. All these novels captured sociopolitical turmoil of Somalia from the beginning of democratic government of Shermarke. Shermarke government failed to tackle the issues of poverty, corruption, economic difficulties, clan rivalries and regional disparities that led the widespread opposition from various factions, including the military. In 1969 Shermarke was assassinated by his own bodyguard. This event led to the military coup led by Major General Siad Barre on October 21, 1969, which effectively ended Somalia's experiment with democracy and led to more than two decades of military dictatorship. Though, dictatorial government of Barre initiated developmental agenda of social equality, widespread literacy but he became the ruthless and brutal leader to suppress his opposition. Military defeat with Ethiopia, governmental corruption, economic difficulties, international isolation and his favouritism with particular clan led to the downfall of his government in 1991. However, his ouster plunged Somalia into an even deeper period of chaos and violence, as various clan-based factions fought for control of the country. This marked the beginning of Somalia's descent into state collapse and the ensuing civil war and humanitarian crisis. This state collapse, civil war and humanitarian crisis captured the attention of Somali intellectual like Farah who globalize this crisis in his *Past Imperfect Trilogy*.

The main aim of this paper is to analysis Farah's *Knots* by focusing on women characters and their contribution to redefine and reconstruct the image of nation by performing charitable tasks of rehabilitation for affected masses of Somalia during the war crisis. He portrayed them as multi-faceted and complex characters in the novel. Through the characters of Cambara, Raxma, Kiin, Farxia, Arda and Jiijo, he offers a nuanced depiction of the challenges faced by them in a patriarchal society beset by violence and upheaval. The central character of this novel is Cambara, complex and multifaceted woman, who embarks on a journey of self-assertion and self-discovery by returning to her homeland and reclaiming her lost family property. The novel opens with her personal trauma that is the loss of her son, a tragedy that deeply affects her emotional state. This loss propels her to return to her homeland, Somalia, from Canada. Despite the dangers and instability in Mogadishu, she is driven by a sense of purpose to reclaim her family's property, which has been taken over by warlords.

CAMBARA AS A SYMBOL OF RESILIENCE

Most of the novels of Nuruddin Farah deals with the struggle of female protagonist who assert their existence in civil war atrocious patriarchal Somali society by revolting against the oppressive structures of patriarchal domination. The protagonist of his first novel *Ebla*, *From Crooked Rib* (1970) revolt against the patriarchal nomadic pastoralist marriage system by running away from her caravan to be free from bartered marriage system in which she is sold like cattle to Giumaleh. The protagonist of *Sardines* Medina revolt against dictatorial government by writing against his hypocrisy and patriarchal domination by protecting her daughter Ubax from the oppressive nomadic system of infibulation. The protagonist of *Gifts* Duniya rejects gifts or aid provided by any men or distance uncle calling it as a 'corpus food'. And the protagonist of present novel *Cambara* revolt against patriarchal domination by performing humanitarian and rehabilitative tasks by adopting parentless children like Gacal and SilkHair and culturing and nurturing them in this war ridden country.

The protagonist of this novel, *Cambara*, an artist, actor, director and business woman, is representative of all women in war torn country like Somalia. She is portrayed as strong, well-educated and determine woman who takes her courageous journey from Toronto to Mogadiscio to overcome, in particular her personal loss, the death of her son Dalmar and in general to reclaim her family property. Her journey is symbolic one that represents her resilient, defiant and courageous nature in the novel. *Cambara's* defiant and courageous nature is projected through her journey to Mogadiscio where common masses are looted on check-points by warlords and untrained child soldiers. But *Cambara* as an independent and strong-willed woman took on a leadership role, not just in reclaiming her family's property but also in helping other women and children affected by the political turmoil conflict. Her actions reflect her commitment to make a positive impact in her community despite the challenges.

To project the defiant nature of *Cambara*, writer compared her to the character of *Zaak*, who is weak, inactive and nomadic man addicted to all manly habits of smoking, drinking and chewing 'qaat' and did not dare to control or dominate *Cambara*, instead she is presented as very strong, powerful and rebellious lady. Her *on-paper marriage* or contractual marriage with *Zaak* is a kind of revolt against patriarchal domination and assertion of femaleness in which she dramatically helped and protected him from being refugee in Mombasa and Kenya. This marriage was an adjustment to please her mother *Arda* and to provide *Zaak* Canadian citizenship. *Cambara* did not like this relationship but as an actress, she pretended in the Somali

society as a wife to Zaak but maintained her distance. Zaak's comment highlighted her defiant nature in the novel. He said, "*she was loyal only to her mother and close friend Raxma and thinks of her as a woman capable of exemplary generosity, most loyal, above all, to her mother, very devoted to her close friends, especially to Raxma*" (K, p. 04).

Cambara's quest for self-identity and her individual autonomy is shown through her relationship with Wardi, her husband. Through this relationship, Farah explored Cambara's personal struggles and her determination to assert her autonomy despite cultural, familial, and societal pressures. After her freedom from the ordeal of Zaak (on paper wife), she explained Raxma her true feeling for Wardi but Arda did not accept. She challenged her mother's expectations and plans for her life. Despite Arda's disapproval of Wardi and her insistence on controlling Cambara's choices, Cambara stands firm, declaring, "*It is my life, Mother, and I will do with it what I please*" (G. p. 44). The tension between mother and daughter is primarily resolved by Raxma but after Cambra's pregnancy her mother started to help her financially and emotionally as narrator stated, "*They did their window-shopping, their arms linked, and Arda showered Cambara and the unborn baby, sex yet unknown, with gifts galore*" (K, p. 56). But after the death of her son Dalmar because of Wardi's negligence and his interest in Susannah, brought the end to their marital relation. Knowing Wardi's carelessness, she became furious and "*struck him more fiercely, paying him in the currency of his aggression and causing him pain where men hurt most, in the whatnots*" (K, p. 56).

Through the experiences of both marriages Cambara identify the constraints placed on women within their cultural framework and revolt against that by choosing her own spouses. Her this decision of choosing a spouse independently and dealing with his betrayal reflects her quest for freedom from traditional and patriarchal norms. The breaking away from these norms symbolizes a broader search for personal identity. Cambara's life straddles different geographical and cultural contexts—Geneva, Ottawa, and Toronto. Her attempts to integrate Wardi into her life in Toronto reflect the challenges of navigating identity within a transnational space. The tensions between Arda's traditional perspective and Cambara's modern, cosmopolitan lifestyle illustrate the complexity of negotiating national and cultural identities. The tragic death of Dalmar marks a turning point in Cambara's life, forcing her to reevaluate her decisions and relationships. This devastating event underscores her vulnerability and her resilience in reconstructing her sense of self. It also reflects the deep emotional toll of navigating relationships and responsibilities in a fragmented cultural identity.

Cambara's defiant and courageous nature is apparent when she successfully handled the behaviour of Zaak's armed youths who are addicted to '*qaat*' chewing (kind of alcoholic plant that stimulate them) and vulnerable to common masses. But Cambara diverted them in positive and rehabilitative works such as sweeping, mopping, dish-washing, cooking etc. She cleaned the apartment of Zaak with the help of these soldiers who are not ready to performed female works but tactically she inculcates among them humanitarian habits. Her confrontation with three armed youths, named Red-Eyed Randy, Armed Companion and Mere Boy who are eager to harass her and violate her personal space and dignity by removing her veil shows her defiant and courageous nature. When they approached, she became violent and delivered a fierce kick to disarmed them. This physical confrontation highlights Cambara's evolution from a position of vulnerability to one of empowerment, demonstrating resilience, resourcefulness, and the capacity for decisive action when faced with threats.

The theme of motherhood is central to the novel and used to explore the subtheme of self-determination, self-invention, self-identity and resilience. The protagonist, Cambara, returns to her native Somalia after years of living abroad in Canada, grappling with the loss of her son and the disintegration of her marriage. Her journey is deeply influenced by the loss of her son that haunts her emotionally and psychologically. This loss becomes a catalyst for her search for meaning and her desire to reconnect with her homeland. Her maternal instinct is used to develop the other relations with whom she encounters and felt sympathy. She takes a maternal role toward vulnerable individuals like SilkHair and Gakal who had lost their parents in civil war and clan conflicts. Her struggle to brought up them in this war ridden country is her successful attempt to redefine or rediscover her individual identity. Farah used this theme of motherhood in a symbolic way to represent Cambara's relationship with her homeland. Somalia, like a wounded mother, is in need of care and restoration. Cambara's efforts to reclaim her family's property and bring order to her surroundings mirror her attempts to nurture and rehabilitate her inner self and her broader environment. The struggles of Somali women, who often bear the brunt of conflict while striving to hold their families together, echo the sacrifices and resilience associated with motherhood.

The theme of self-identity is explored through Cambara's charitable work to both Gacal and SilkHair to whom she adopted and taught the rules of civilised world. She is able to remould the character of SilkHair by removing his AK-47 and providing him alternative works of moping, chopping, washing, shopping, cleaning, slaughtering chicken and lastly being the part of cultural performance of the play *The Eagle and the Chicken*, her dream project. She

also remoulds the behaviour of Gacal by showing her sympathy and providing him food, shelter and clothes of Dalman. Cambara's involvement in theatre is a significant aspect of her rehabilitative work in this novel. She uses the art as a tool for healing, empowerment and social changes particularly for women and children who have been traumatized by the conflict. By organizing and participating in theatrical performances, Cambara provides a platform for expression, catharsis, and community engagement. The play "*Eagle and Chicks*," is performed by Cambara, Seamus, Gacal and SilkHair. All these characters are affected by the civil crisis and facing personal or social trauma in their life. Gacal's performance and SilkHair's utterance of dialogues show positive changes in their characters. They forgot their past trauma and engaged themselves in reconstructive works like Cambara whose journey begins with her personal loss and end not only with the reclaiming of family property but the reclaiming of her lost heritage of Somalia.

The theme of rehabilitation in Nuruddin Farah's work is intricately explored through both the physical and emotional states of the characters, particularly Bile, Cambara, and the nation of Somalia. Rehabilitation is portrayed as a multifaceted process that encompasses physical recovery, emotional healing, and societal restoration. At a symbolic level, the characters' struggles parallel the devastated condition of Somalia, which is portrayed as a nation reliant on foreign assistance for its survival and progress. Bile, once a physician and a figure of strength, is shown in a vulnerable and debilitated state, reflecting the broader societal decay. His physical and emotional deterioration represents not only personal trauma but also the collective suffering of a war-torn society.

Cambara emerges as a symbol of hope and agency in the process of rehabilitation. Her care for Bile—cleaning him, feeding him, and tending to his physical needs—becomes a metaphor for the nurturing and rebuilding required to heal a broken society. Her actions highlight the intersection of compassion and practicality, as she takes charge of his recovery with determination and care. The act of cleaning and feeding transcends mere physical care; it signifies emotional restoration and a reclamation of dignity. In conclusion, the theme of rehabilitation in Nuruddin Farah's narrative is explored through the intertwining stories of individual characters and the symbolic representation of Somalia's plight. It emphasizes the importance of compassion, agency, and emotional connection in overcoming trauma and rebuilding lives. Rehabilitation is depicted as an ongoing and collective effort, requiring resilience, care, and a willingness to confront both personal and societal wounds.

THEME OF SELF-IDENTITY THROUGH OTHER FEMALE CHARACTERS

Farah explored the theme of self-identity through tragic life story of Jijjo. Once an ambitious young woman with a bright future loses her self-control and get pregnant out of wedlock. To save the dignity of her family, she aborted her unplanned pregnancy and cause a terrible illness. Unfortunately, after her marriage, she lost her father and husband in civil war and became the victim of civil war atrocities and physical violence in war-torn Somalia. She suffered as a kept woman to the armed youths and later to Gudcar, one of the minor warlords and faced the repeated abuse, humiliation, and exploitation by armed men and later her husband, Gudcur. She narrated her pathetic condition to Cambara as *“I do not know who you are or why I am pouring out my heart to you. You could say that misfortune is my second name. If I am holding back nothing, it is because I know that nothing can hurt me more than I hurt already”* (K. p. 179). But her encounter with Cambara serves as a turning point in her life. Cambara, with the help of Kiin’s network, rescues Jijjo, symbolizing a reclaiming of Jijjo’s agency and a step towards healing and self-rediscovery amidst the chaos of war and societal oppression. Cambara's leadership qualities are evident in her efforts to support and uplift other women and children affected by the conflict. She builds alliances with other women, highlighting the importance of solidarity and collective action in addressing gender specific issues and fostering communal healing. With the help of women’s network and the support of Kiin and Farxia she helped Jijjo and rescue her from the sexual exploitation and gang rape of warlords.

The other female character in the novel who embodies the theme of self-identity, resilience, solidarity, and the strength of Somali women amid chaos and patriarchal domination is Kiin. She is a successful businesswoman, single parent of two daughters, and key member of the Women’s Network, serves as a stabilizing force for Cambara, offering her emotional and practical support in war-torn Mogadishu. Despite facing societal pressure, marital struggles, and patriarchal expectations, Kiin maintains her identity through her dedication to community welfare and women’s empowerment. Her actions—providing Cambara with shelter, facilitating Jijjo's rescue, accepting Cambara’s plan of two boys, and supporting Cambara’s puppet theatre project—highlight her role as a leader and a symbol of hope. Kiin’s journey reflects the theme of self-identity as she navigates societal constraints while asserting her agency and contributing to collective healing and resilience.

The next female character in the novel that helps to explore the theme of resilience, adaptability, and the power of solidarity in reclaiming self-identity is Raxma. Despite personal and professional setbacks, including systemic barriers in Canada and a broken marriage, Raxma rebuilds her life as a successful businesswoman and dedicated mother. Her resourcefulness, emotional intelligence, and ability to provide practical advice make her a guiding figure in Cambara's journey of self-discovery and reclaiming her identity. Raxma's support, both emotional and strategic, bridges Cambara with her Somali roots and empowers her to confront challenges in Mogadishu. Through her character, the novel emphasizes themes of perseverance, female solidarity, and the importance of maintaining one's identity amidst societal and personal struggles.

The next female character is Arda who represents a complex blend of traditional values, maternal authority, and resourceful pragmatism, reflecting the theme of self-identity through her matriarchal role. As a shrewd strategist and financial manager, she ensures her family's stability amidst displacement and conflict. Her efforts to secure a future for her nephew Zaak and her insistence on Cambara's professional success highlight her protective yet controlling nature. However, her relationship with Cambara is marked by tension, as her traditional outlook often clashes with Cambara's independent spirit. Arda embodies the struggle between generational values and personal autonomy, illustrating how self-identity is shaped by cultural expectations, family duty, and the challenges of adapting to a new life in exile.

CONCLUSION

The role of all these four female characters is multifaceted and significant in this novel, even though they are suppressed and mentally and physically tortured by male dominated world and Civil War atrocities, their contributions span across various domains, including peacebuilding, caregiving, activism, and survival strategies for their families and communities. They worked as mediator to maintain the peace in the country, they worked as an economic contributor by performing various jobs and running business and most importantly they worked as humanitarian aid provider to the affected people in the civil war and performing cultural practices as a rehabilitative works in the novel. And all these roles played by them highlighted their struggle for self and national identity throughout the novel.

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