



The marathoner not yet at the finish line: Nuruddin Farah in Rome

Nuruddin Farah & Ali Mumin Ahad

This interview with Nuruddin Farah was recorded on 12 March 2005, during the international conference “I confini della scrittura” organized by the University of Roma “La Sapienza”. The interview, now translated into English for the first time, was published in Italian in a special issue of the journal *Pulp Libri* in 2005 (Ahad). The interview, which was conducted in Somali, touches upon several issues regarding the writing of Nuruddin Farah. In particular, I try to explore with the writer the meaning of some very significant characteristics contained in his works, especially in the trilogy Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship, which comprises *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979), *Sardines* (1981) and *Close Sesame* (1983).¹ These are characteristics that may be meaningless to a non-Somali reader, but that are very important Somali cultural signifiers highlighting obstacles to the affirmation of democracy in Somali society. In addition, the interview covers topics like the civil war in Somalia (1991–2000): its causes and its consequences for Somalis. This includes the plight of Somali refugees in various parts of the world, as well as a comparison with the 1970s, when the author himself decided to live in exile rather than under a military dictatorship. In this conversation with Nuruddin Farah, I give the author the opportunity to present his personal views on the political and geographical divisions amongst Somalis into autonomous entities in the Somalia of the early 2000s. Finally, almost 15 years later, I try to contextualize the conversation with subsequent developments in Somalia, in general, and, in particular, those aspects which are already covered in the interview.

The interview revealed Nuruddin Farah to be highly personable, making clear that international success has not made him proud and unapproachable. Being introduced to him in person and conversing with him in Rome in his mother tongue was exceptional since most interviews with Farah are conducted in English. Although the interview was conducted in Somali, the questions were already written in Italian.

Translation is always a process in which one tries to minimize the loss of both the literal and the cultural meanings of words. This depends on the translator's level of knowledge of both languages. In this case, both of us have a deep familiarity with the Italian language. Needless to say, with the Somali language too. Because of this our communication in the interview was an experience of dialogue in two languages. Italian, thanks to its standard form, had allowed for direct and precise questions to be formulated. Responses from the author in Somali, had allowed for the communicating of nuances that otherwise would not have been possible to express in another language. Indeed, the Somali responses gave a certain informality to our interview-conversation.

AMA: Let us talk about the craft or the profession of writing. What it does mean today to be a writer in a globalized society, on the one hand, and a writer in a Somali society full of irremediable contradictions, deep economic differences and conflicts, on the other hand?

NF: I will start by saying that the Somali people do not fully understand the value of writing and, consequently, reading. A Somali person is capable of starting to read a book today, but is unable to finish it. Many people who are able to read something, only read newspaper articles and reviews rather than books. The Somalis who do read books are the new generation—those who have had the opportunity to study and consequently have a better approach to reading. My twelve-year-old daughter, for example, has already read all my books. As a writer, my target readership is an international audience. Somalis read little, but the admirable thing is that they hold respect for those who write. In 1996, after 22 years of exile, I went back to Mogadishu. On the street, people were stopping

Nuruddin Farah (b. 1945) is an internationally acclaimed author of Somali origin. Farah has published thirteen novels to date, as well as a non-fiction work on the Somali diaspora. He is a recognized essayist and socio-political commentator on African and global issues.

Ali Mumin Ahad is an honorary fellow at the University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia. He has published numerous articles and two books focusing on Somali history, literature, and historiographical writing.

Email: aahad@unimelb.edu.au

ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4213-3712>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/2309-9070/tvl.v5i1.7995>

and greeting me, some even physically touching me with their hands to demonstrate their kindness and welcome. These were people who had never read my books, but who were respectful towards me because of my craft as a writer.

AMA: *Your writing was an intervention in a long history of orality in Somali culture. Is the switch to writing in your work a sign that the barrier of illiteracy in Somali culture is being overcome? What are its objectives?*

NF: Certainly, one of its objectives was to overcome the long-standing illiteracy within Somali culture. The difference between writing and orality is this: in oral culture a person can say something today and deny it tomorrow; with writing this cannot happen. Therefore, writing implies the use of thought with reflection and rationality, with logic and measure. Somalis have the habit of boosting the number of their clan members relative to the others. Statements like this are possible where there is no existing census, where there are no records about the number of the population. The main goal of writing is to make people acquainted with the use of rationality, of logic and of a sense of measure.

AMA: *As one of the first Somali writers in a country where writing itself was perceived as an act of subversion of tradition, what have been the difficulties that you have had to overcome?*

NF: Our people do not comprehend writing because they do not understand the value of writing. This ignorance, however, is not their fault. Indeed, they have a great deal of respect for the written word. I will tell you an illuminating story. When I was a child, there was a newspaper in Arabic which was circulating in Somalia. The Arabic alphabet is very familiar to the Somalis, even to those who cannot read or write Arabic, but who follow the learning of their children in the Koranic schools. My mother, whenever she would find a page with Arabic writing lying on the street, collected it and kept it in a safe place, because the Arabic characters were the same characters as in the Koran.

AMA: *It is true, I too have seen my mother and other people who could not read or write doing the same. Leaving behind the closed environment that Somalia was in the 1970s, in Europe, beyond freedom of opinion, were there difficulties that you had to face as an African writer who had yet to achieve success?*

NF: The craft of writing is not recognized as a profession everywhere and in the same measure. Take Italy, for example, where writing is not a profession. All the great writers of this country, in fact, are people who practise other professions. Alberto Moravia was a journalist, Umberto Eco is a university professor.² And so on. When I came to Italy, though I had already published something, I could not introduce myself as a writer, because no one could understand that as a profession. Consequently, they could not give me the “permesso di soggiorno”, a residency permit. I think it is still the same now: writers are not welcomed; their craft is not recognized as a profession here. In another countries, conversely, you are welcomed as a writer and given the opportunity to improve your talent.

AMA: *You always have written about Somalia and Somalis. If I recollect one of your goals as a writer was “writing the name of Somalia on the skin of the world in an indelible way”. To a certain extent, I believe that you have succeeded, but are you satisfied with your representation of Somali society or are there still pieces that are not inserted in the depiction, and traits yet to be defined?*

NF: The marathoner who has not yet arrived at the finish line, though he can see it, cannot say that he has achieved his goal. The same goes for me. I would like to have written more than I actually have up to now. There are still many things to say and to write.

AMA: *Starting from the trilogy Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship, which comprised Sweet and Sour Milk (1979), Sardines (1981) and Close Sesame (1983): your work clearly reflects a profound link to a Somali nomadic world and culture. Is it a reference to an affective and personal link (which for a writer is important), or is it something related to the already dominant imagery of a Somali society consisting purely of pastoralists?*

NF: I have not had any personal experience of the nomadic life in Somalia. I only have indirect reflections of the nomadic life. Indeed, I was born in the city of Baidoa. A writer researches the things he writes about and in his writing is able to analyse the context. When I wrote that work, what was clear to me—and what I wanted to put in evidence for the readers—was the fact that the dictatorship itself had its roots in the pastoralist nomadic culture.

AMA: To an attentive reader of the work of Nuruddin Farah, those figures in the margins—the “People of the River”, as they are called in their rare appearances in the trilogy—are not out of sight. They represent the Somali population of African heritage that we still continue erroneously to associate with slavery, notwithstanding the historical evidence of their autochthonous origins.

NF: The People of the River in my works are part of our selves, a section of the Somali people, not different from us at all. The problem originates from that pastoralist culture which resists work of any kind; it stems from the nomadic lifestyle in which people do not like to work, but only to talk. For this kind of people, whoever works is a slave. This is the tragedy [of Somalia], the ignorance which needs to be rooted out. It is about an entire culture that must be changed. Look at how our culture treats the question of gender—for example the submission of women. For such a change to happen, peace and stability are required, and the affirmation of the rule of law. In the case of discrimination, a strict application of the law by the state is enough. Some types of discrimination were banned even during Mohamed Siyad Barre’s dictatorship period.

AMA: Within the Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship trilogy, Somali intellectuals are given a space for the role they played in opposing the military regime and in representing the hope for a democracy in Somalia. That regime fell, but democracy did not follow. However, this overthrow caused a civil war with disastrous consequences and a decade-long institutional crisis. What happened to those intellectuals according to Nuruddin Farah? Has their role been exhausted with the fall of the regime?

NF: Somali intellectuals are either refugees or spokesmen for warlords. This leads me to a clarification of the term ‘intellectual’. The intellectual, as the term itself indicates, is a person who makes use of his intelligence, not a person who has simply taken exams. In fact, it is not the [university] certificate which makes a person an intellectual. We have many graduates who, as you know, cannot be called intellectuals. Many of them have not even read a single book. Intellectuals are those who make use of their intelligence. When I write something, I feel like a student. I feel the need to go to the library, to read, to do research. Could a person who does not read anything be defined as an intellectual?

AMA: Given our common origin from a borderland, that part of Somalia which was divided since the colonial era, I have the perception that you, more than others, bear the burden of a nation already broken up and that risks self-destruction. How much does this burden weigh on you?

NF: That perception is correct. The weight is the civil war, and the conditions created by the civil war. All borders will disappear with peace and stability. Communications and commerce, the movement of people from one side to the other, will erase the borders. Some time ago I received an invitation to go to Somaliland by the highest authority of that administration. I could not accept, because as long as other Somalis—from Kismayo, from Baidoa, from Mogadishu, from Beled Weyne, from Galkaio, from Bosaso—cannot go in that area, it seemed disrespectful for me to go. I find nothing wrong with defining oneself according to regional affiliations, in a unitary national context. When the inhabitant of Genoa or of Liguria wants to distinguish himself from that of Piedmont or Turin, does he not define himself as Genoese? In the same way, it seems to me acceptable that those from Somaliland want to define themselves as such, as do those of Puntland, and so on. The important thing is that every Somali has the same rights as the others, including the right of residency and property in any part of the country.

AMA: Somali literature, despite the introduction of a written form of the Somali language in 1972, continues to be generally oral. It is not widely circulated even among Somalis and is absolutely not translated into other languages. I know you write in English, and your audience is international: are there Somali translations of your works for an audience of Somali readers who have no chance to read you in English?

NF: There are no translations in Somali. Refugees (Rifugiati, published by Meltemi, Rome, in 2003) is the first that is being translated into Somali, but the work is difficult so I don’t know when it will be completed by the translator.³

AMA: In the second half of the 1970s, in order to avoid being trapped by the military dictatorship, you chose a life of exile in Italy. Why then did you have to leave this country with which Somalia has a history and a long association?

NF: If they stop me on the street and ask me who I am and I answer, “I am Somali”, they immediately think I am a refugee looking for a subsidy and if I say I’m not, they think I am lying. So it is today, as yesterday. For this reason I prefer to reside in Africa. I am not a European, I am a Pan-Africanist. In an African country I am not subjected

to the same inquisitorial attention nor am I treated differently by the citizens of that country. In South Africa, where I currently live, I feel very comfortable. It is possible that unpleasant incidents also happen, but surely, they are incidents that can be traced back to a very small number of people with set goals. [Farah refers to episodes of intolerance of which Somali migrants have been victims of xenophobia in South Africa.]

AMA: Your works have also been translated into Italian. The Italian reader is able to discover a new Somalia because it is represented by a Somali rather than an Italian writer. Do you think these translations can convey an image true to your idea of Somalia?

NF: Actually, I don't read my books in their translations, or their reviews. It would take up a lot of valuable time.

AMA: The period of your Italian residence in the late 1970s certainly influenced your writing (I think of the various characters in the trilogy and their relationship with Italy and the Italian language). Has that influence left anything in your later works or has it finally passed with that experience?

NF: It was the Italian of Mogadishu. Do you remember the *cappuccino* of the bars of Mogadishu? And of the *pasta-ciutta* [...] it was the Italian of the Somalis. The climate that was breathed in those years.

AMA: The work *Refugees*, a reportage on the Somali diaspora in Europe, offers a key to understanding the dispersion and desperation of a generation of Somali intellectuals and young people. Are they really so resigned to their refugee status and loss of role in their own country? In your opinion what has changed in the behavior of the Somali diaspora today compared to that of the 1970s that you masterfully described in the first trilogy?

NF: Not everyone is so resigned. However, many of those who call themselves intellectuals are not such. Many who are unhappy with their refugee status today were also unhappy in Somalia yesterday. However, a person's situation also depends on the place and on the opportunities they have had. For example, those who took refuge in Canada or the United States are not at all unhappy. As you well know, many in those two countries, with the opportunities offered to them, have regained a role. They teach in American and Canadian universities, or are professionals who exercise their respective professions. They are not at all resigned. The same could not be said of those who remained in Europe. In Italy, not even 1% of Somalis managed to find employment. Regarding the second part of the question, the difference between the two points in time (the 1970s and today) is significant. In the diaspora of the 1970s, refugees for political reasons constituted a very small number. Many, instead, were immigrants, especially in the Arab countries. While today, given the conditions, refugees make up the majority and are almost entirely in the United States, Canada and in Europe.

AMA: In *Refugees* there is a certain disaffection for Italy, compared to Switzerland and Sweden which are described more passionately. Is it the feeling of you, the author, or of the subjects of the interviews?

NF: In some countries, in addition to Somalis being interviewed, even the authorities and important figures in the refugee protection system agreed to be interviewed about the problem and, in particular, about their contact with Somalis; in other countries this has not happened.

AMA: In the Somali diaspora, including the one in Italy, a new generation of writers is beginning to express themselves in the language of the host country in order to offer, in turn, a representation of Somalia and of Somali society. What advice you would like to offer them?

NF: To the young people of the new generation, I would advise them to also be the forerunners of future generations.

AMA: Is writing in English is a necessary condition for a writer's success?

NF: In the condition of the colonized there is no choice in the working language. We have been colonized by Italians, by English (British) and also by the Arab. Each of these languages has been imposed on us. They are the vehicular languages of education, of work. Learning one or the other language depends on which part of Somalia one was born into or raised and educated. Later, everyone adopted the language through which they received their education, in the absence of a written Somali language. The writing of the Somali language took place only in 1972. Answering your question, of course, English is an international language compared to the others.

AMA: One of your last works as a Somali writer, the novel Links (2005), is almost a report from a country destroyed by civil war, a society torn and dominated by violence. In questioning the nature of that violence and the civil war in Somalia, what is the answer you can give?

NF: Power. The chase for power, together with the ignorance of the instruments to govern a society or the inability to use them.

Contextualization and update

Although Nuruddin Farah writes of Somalia and Somalis, his readership, as he himself admits in this 2005 interview in Rome, is not made up of Somali readers. The international popularity of Farah is due to two important choices he has made. The first choice was his self-exile from Somalia in the 1970s, an environment that certainly did not favour freedom of expression for writers not sympathetic to the regime. The second choice was his use of English as the language of his novels and, consequently, his readers. If he had remained in Somalia in the 1970s, or had written his novels in Somali, in Italian or in Arabic, rather than in English, it would have been difficult for him to achieve international fame as a writer. It is thanks to these two choices regarding where he lived and his language of composition that Farah is known to the world and that has allowed him to become the precursor for Somali writers.

Farah represents the breaking point with oral tradition, which was made necessary for him by the lack of a written Somali language when he began his career. However, Farah's narrative style still strongly resonates with the Somali oral tradition of storytelling, embroidered with proverbial wisdom, which gives his writing a special flavour and fluency. Before the Somali language had been given an orthography in 1972, the languages of instruction in Somalia were Italian, Arabic and English. The latter was used especially in the former British protectorate of Somaliland. Despite these languages providing—to those who had the opportunity to take advantage of schooling—the ability to read books, the availability of libraries has always been limited, even in the major cities. In addition, the predominance of oral culture encouraged people to practise oral poetry over reading and writing.

Farah's perspective on the general disinterest in reading in Somali society reflects the truth—at least up until the time of our interview. In fact, from then on, potential readers have emerged among young Somalis in the diaspora, particularly those educated in American, Canadian and British schools and universities, who can read in English. Not only have there been changes in this aspect, but also in terms of writing. The picture that our 2005 interview presents is different from today's situation. Today, in Somalia and the diaspora, there exists a second generation of young writers. Following Farah's example, these young writers have the opportunity to be known to the world. Between 2005—the time of the interview—and today many things have changed across Somalia. The Somali unitary state—the restoration of which was still hoped for in 2005 after the civil war—is undergoing a profound transformation process from regional units to federal states according to a yet-to-be completed federal constitution. The linguistic and cultural homogeneity cherished by foreign scholars seems to have been supplanted by an ethno-cultural revival whereby each tribal entity reaffirms the characteristics of its local dialect and customs. One example is the once regional capital Baidoa, which is now the capital of the South-West State of Somalia according to the new federal provision, and is the place of birth of Farah, where the language/dialect form Af-Maay has re-assumed centrality as a language. While the Somali language, in its written form since 1972, is recognized as the official language of Somalia, there are a large number of dialects, some of which are defined as languages in their own right. Examples include the Af-Maay, the Jiiddo, the Chimini language spoken in the area of Brava town, the Bajuni of the area of Kisimayo, the Mashunguli of the Juba River valley, the Garre, the Tunni and the Dabarre languages. Some of these local languages make use of the Arabic script and some others the Latin script.

One of the most important points of the interview is Farah's depiction of Somali society, particularly in the trilogy *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*. The trilogy hints at certain ethnic and social stratifications within Somali society that were inherited from colonialism and consolidated by the postcolonial state, namely, the division of Somali society into two social components. One component includes those of nomadic and pastoral origin, and the other component includes farmers and artisans. This division of Somali society is often characterized by ethnic and racial typologies. The colonial heritage has generated a culture of discrimination against particular ethnic and social groups within Somali society. The first Europeans who introduced the term

slave (*adon* in Somali) when describing a black population of farmers were the James brothers (1884), followed by Robecchi-Bricchetti (1888) who, indeed, believed that *adon* was the ethnic name of the population of farmers they encountered on the upper course of the *Wabi Shabelle* (Shabelle River) on their first entrance into the inland Somali territory hitherto perfectly unknown to Europeans (Cruttenden). The attribution of the term *adon* to this population of farmers derived, of course, from the perception of their guides and informants who were native to the North, where both nomadic populations and inhabitants of the small coastal towns like Zeyla and Berbera, had experience of the slave trade from the hinterland of Abyssinia by Arabs who established themselves in the ports of these coastal towns. Later on, in the South, the Italian colonial regime applied the term *liberti* (freed slaves) to all Southern farmers and agriculturalists in order to deprive them of their right to the land which the Italians themselves were seeking. The studies conducted by the colonial anthropologists and administrators were producing hypotheses to confirm this fact and to make a free labour force available to the Italian-owned plantations in the South. Only Tommaso Carletti and Enrico Cerulli, two of the most distinguished Italian scholars of colonial studies, firmly rejected that hypothesis which suggested that the agriculturalist population of southern Somalia were former slaves. The Fascist colonial period (1920–41) produced into the Somali mind a division within society between pastoralists regarded as 'pure' Somalis and agriculturalists of the fertile lands regarded as former slaves. That schematization was a politically motivated colonial perspective that, unfortunately, became a general understanding of the constitutive fabric of Somali society, and it is the source of the social and 'ethnic' discrimination among Somalis themselves.

As Farah is a writer who not only writes novels, but also has something to say about Somali society throughout his novels, his silence on this ethnic discrimination is very troubling. In the interview he explores his beliefs in the oneness of the various components of Somali society. He acknowledges the fact that discrimination exists within Somali society. However, he identifies the source of that discrimination as the ignorance that is prevalent among the populace and, in addition, the indifference of the political elite. With serious law enforcement by the Government, the injustice of discrimination would simply disappear, according to Farah. The fact is, though, that such injustices have their historical origins in colonialism and in the political system inherited from colonialism. These injustices are perpetuated within the postcolonial state. I suspect that an attempt to end the social, ethnic and racial discrimination in Somalia would have required at least a strong denunciation by an author like Farah, whose voice has international prominence. State collapse and civil war have pushed Somalia back in time. The clan and tribal systems which were formalized in colonial times, and which remained intact in the first phase of the Republic, and were then challenged in vain by the military regime in the second Republic, have regained an institutional character today.⁴ For some this institutionalization would be a temporary choice to exit the long political and institutional crisis that started with the fall of the Barre regime and civil war. For others, it would be the only way to build, on a more democratic basis, a federal state within which the various social components (of tribal and clan groups) would have recognized themselves. Farah's position on the unity of the Somali state can be inferred from his refusal indicated in the interview to accept the invitation to go to Somaliland until this privilege is extended to all other Somalis.⁵

In 2005, at the time of this interview, Farah hoped for a configuration of a unitary state in Somalia, a state that, among other things, could enforce laws to eliminate the discrimination discussed above.

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Notes

1. The Italian editions that I accessed were, respectively, of the 1993, 1996 and 1993 Edizioni Lavoro, Roma.
2. At the time of the interview with Farah, Umberto Eco (1932–2016) was still living and considered one of the best-known Italian writers and scholars worldwide.
3. In this collection, Farah explores the lives of Somali refugees in different parts of Europe. It offers a key understanding of the Somali diaspora.
4. Here I refer to the tribal system as the social structure of Somali society, while clan is the political subjectivity within a tribal organization.
5. Somaliland is the former British protectorate and North-Western Region of Somalia, which has been unilaterally trying to secede from the Somali Republic (since 1993) after the civil war. Somaliland holds that it joined the union with the former Italian Somalia in 1960 as a newly independent state.

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