

## A CONTESTED SPATIALITY: THE REPRESENTATION OF MOGADISHU IN SOMALI ANGLOPHONE AND ITALIAN LITERATURE

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### **Sommario**

*In questo articolo si analizzano e paragonano le rappresentazioni letterarie di Mogadiscio nei romanzi di Nuruddin Farah e Garane Garane. Lo scopo è duplice: da una parte recuperare la memoria del colonialismo italiano in Somalia e riconsiderarne il ruolo e la funzione, dall'altra dimostrare come questi due scrittori offrano un quadro della città alternativo rispetto a quello fornito dalla narrativa dominante, che vede in Mogadiscio la città simbolo di distruzione, guerra civile e fallimento dello stato Somalo. Verrà quindi dimostrato come i romanzi di Farah e Garane contribuiscano a sviluppare una rappresentazione alternativa e complessa rispetto all'omogeneità della narrativa dominante, presentando Mogadiscio come città al centro di dinamiche globali neo-coloniali.*

**Keywords:** Mogadishu, postcolonial literature, mediascapes, colonialism, spatiality

### **Introduction**

“I tried to view the city [Mogadishu] as the principal character, and the people living in it or visiting it become secondary characters”, the Somali writer Nuruddin Farah said in an interview after the publication of *Links*, the first novel of his so-called “Past Imperfect Trilogy” (Appiah, 2004:54). This instance is no exception in the

overview of Italoophone and Anglophone Somali literature, since other Somali writers – such as Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, Igiaba Scego, Cristina Ubx Ali Farah and Garane Garane – show a particular attention to the representation of the same urbanscape. Indeed, all of them have featured Mogadishu as the main *topos* in their novels or short stories<sup>1</sup>.

However, urban spatiality has not been underscored with regard to the fictional representation of Mogadishu, a city which has been often looked at from a few perspectives. As scholar Garth Myers has noted, the capital city of Somalia has been studied according to a generalised logic, thus focussing on a few mainstream concepts such as slumification, corruption and state failure, as if “the differences between places and circumstances and history and geography just [didn't] matter” (Myers, 2011:3-4). Literature, consequently, has been considered marginally, as if the fictional representation of the city were ancillary compared with the political, architectural, geographical or historical standpoints. On the contrary, in the case of Somalia, literature appears to be a crucial tool to portray the numerous aspects that characterise, and have characterised, the urban life of Mogadishu. Moreover, since Somali authors write in exile, literature becomes the fundamental means to retrieve the past and the memories of Mogadishu before the disastrous civil war or, to use Farah's words, literature represents the attempt to “to keep [his] country alive by writing about it” (Farah, 2012).

So, by studying the novels written by Somali authors, I wish to show how literature features the complex transformations occurred in the city through the prism of Somali eyes over time and, moreover, I wish to highlight how the representation of Mogadishu challenges the homogeneous perspective that portrays the city as “the world capital

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<sup>1</sup> Nuruddin Farah has set almost all his literary production in Mogadishu; Shirin Ramzanali Fazel's autobiographical account has the telling title *Lontano da Mogadishu* (*Far from Mogadishu*, 1994); Garane Garane wrote *Il latte è buono* (*Milk is Good*), which is set in Mogadishu during the AFIS period (1950-1960); Igiaba Scego, even though Mogadishu is not the main setting of her novels, the city frequently appears in the memories of the diasporic characters she portrays, as in the case of *Oltre Babilonia* (*Beyond Babylon*, 2009) and *La mia casa è dove sono* (*My Home is where I am*, 2012); Cristina Ubx Ali Farah set in Mogadishu the short stories *A Dhow is crossing the Sea* (2011a) and *Mogadishu, Pearl of the Indian Ocean* (2016).

of things-gone-completely-to-hell” (Bowden, 1999:7). In other words, I argue that their novels work as “an attempt to destabilize dominant discourses” (Yeoh, 2001:457) about Mogadishu, which developed mostly following the civil war of the 1990s and the US military intervention (Myers, 2011).

In order to do so, I shall focus on the latest production by Nuruddin Farah, especially on the novels *Links* (2005) and *Crossbones* (2011), and on the novel by Garane Garane, *Il latte è buono* (*Milk is Good*, 2005). It will be shown how, even though being the “the geographical site of the collective collapse” (Farah, 2000:187), Mogadishu is indeed a lived space rooted in a global setting, where Somali people are not represented only as victims, terrorists or pirates. Furthermore, the section on Garane’s novel *Il latte è buono* aims to emphasise how Mogadishu’s colonial architecture has shaped Somalis’ identity during and after the Fascist administration.

### **On Mogadishu**

From the onset of the civil war in the 1990s, Mogadishu aroused, in the collective consciousness, as a mere unruly and riotous space, as the fulcrum of riots and the centre of national collapse (Myers, 2011:138-151). According to Myers, the feature of being the foremost theatre of war in the whole Africa has prevailed in the Western discourse, fuelled by the American media after the downing of two US helicopters in Mogadishu, during the initiative “Operation Restore Hope” (5 December 1992-4 May 1993). From that moment onward, the global view of the city (and Somalia) has been persistently negative (Mohamed, 2012; Myers, 2011:138; Besteman, 1999:3-5). Also, in the Italian case, numerous articles in *La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere* supported this generalised narrative of collapse. Indeed, from 1984 to 1995 the main topic about Somalia’s reality in Italian newspaper is that of a wounded scenery of violence, war, famine, crime and turmoil, a failed and corrupted state ruled by tribalism and clannism<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> As one can find out through a [repubblica.it](http://repubblica.it) and [corriere.it](http://corriere.it) search.

Conversely, the novels by Farah and Garane provide images of Mogadishu far more composite and multifaceted than those expressed by the dominant Western narrative. In other words, the novels challenge the essentialist perspective of homogeneity that characterises the so-called “African talk” and they represent a counter-discourse to that of collapse (Ferguson, 2006:2).

Even though Farah’s last novels are set in Mogadishu, while Somali-Italian authors mostly look at the city as a place of loss and memory, all of them engage in the process of developing a non-Western centric vision. Indeed, they place Mogadishu as the privileged site to unravel the plots of their novels and, as this article will show, both Farah and Garane fashion complex and articulate perspectives on postcolonial and neo-colonial issues, by placing urban spatiality at the centre of their narratives.

This article then will be structured according to the chronological representation of the city and divided into two sections: the first one will be focused on Garane’s *Il latte è buono*, since his novel is set during the AFIS period (1950-1960) and immediately after Siyaad Barre’s coup; it will be analysed how the Italian colonial architecture shaped Somali people’s identity, customs and habits (Ali, 2016). The second part will study the idea of spatiality portrayed in two novels by Nuruddin Farah, *Links* and *Crossbones*, which belong, along with *Knots*, to the so-called “Past Imperfect Trilogy” (2003-2011). It will be argued that Farah, far from considering Mogadishu only as an isolated city devoured by internal conflicts, aims to represent it as the centre of global and neo-colonial dynamics.

### **Mogadiscio between the Italian Colonial Legacy and the Beginning of the Dictatorship**

*Il latte è buono* (*Milk is Good*) is the first novel by Garane Garane, published in 2005 in a book series edited by scholar Armando Gnisci, who identified it as “the first postcolonial Italian novel” (Gnisci, 2005). Indeed, *Il latte è buono* shares several recurring aspects of postcolonial narratives, such as the structure of a family saga, the unifying function of a symbolical and mystical ancestor, the recourse to orality both on the linguistic and the thematic level, the themes of

exile and belonging, and a mixture of fantasy and realism which “reconcile the myth with the story, [...] the magical reality of the postcolonial imaginary with the horrors of the history” (Albertazzi, 2000:18). Besides, *Il latte è buono* is a semi-autobiographical *Bildungsroman* that portrays the process of decolonisation both of Somalia and of the protagonist Gashan who, like Garane, studied in Mogadishu, in Florence, in Grenoble and ended up working in the United States of America as a literature professor.

In particular, the second chapter of the novel, entitled “Mogadiscio la noiosa” (“Boring Mogadishu”), is set roughly between the end of the AFIS (a UN Trust Territory administered by Italy from 1950 to 1960 following the dissolution of the former Italian Somaliland) and Siyaad Barre’s coup (1969). Mogadishu is described in two contrasting and conflicting ways, personified in the characters of Shakhlan and Gashan who, during their strolls through the streets, perceive and portray the fragmented urban transformations. In the novel, the description of the city is the essential means to convey the tension between opposite perspectives since, inevitably, the urban renovation “was not confined to the built form”, but it shaped “local cultural practices” (Ali, 2016:15). In other words, the urban transformation of the 1960s, as well as the legacy of the Italian urban plans of the 1930s, provided a specific identity of the city, which is experienced differently by Shakhlan and Gashan, who embody, respectively, the pre-colonial past and the post-colonial present. Accordingly, the architect Rashid Ali states that architecture “tells the story of Somalia’s journey from the traditional African nation, via colonisation and post-colonialism, to emergent independent state” (Ali, 2016:10).

The importance of spatiality finds its place in the toponymy and in the simultaneous and contrasting references to Somali and Italian cultures provided in *Il latte è buono*. Indeed, a great amount of the second chapter is committed to the representation of the city during its post-independence years, before architecture was “largely seen as a way for the country to assert its identity” (Ali, 2016:10) in opposition to the Fascist urban plan of the 1920s and 1930s. A national identity that was subjected to contrasting trends and paradigmatic oppositions, as Garane highlights when he describes the role of clannism. In a

different way than Farah, who never mentions clan names and openly opposes the idea of a clan-based system (Carbonieri, 2014), Garane remarks their importance within the Somali tradition. Their removal, indeed, is evidently problematic, as if the urban reality of Mogadishu, no longer based on clan hierarchies, is deeply in contrast with the traditional social organisation of Somali people. Garane stresses this aspect through the sceptical eyes of Shakhlan, the mythical figure who symbolically represents the consciousness of the Ajuran people, who foresee the future turmoil caused by this problem at the heart of Somali society's development, namely the contrast between clannism and urbanisation. Indeed, Shakhlan Iman feels bewildered by the appearance of the new Mogadishu full of Fiat cars, instead of camels or donkeys, traffic lights, Italian schools and cinemas (Garane, 2005:44). Moreover, Shakhlan Iman notices that the traditional hierarchies which have governed the clan-based system are subverted:

“Everything is beautiful, here”, she thought: “But why should an Ajuran, the noblest above all, stop to give way to a Daarood or to a Hawiya?”

For her, Mogadishu now represented the lie, the nationalism, the reality mistaken for what? At the traffic light near Cinema Centrale, she had had to stop, to let the cars pass. In one of them, she saw an Arab [...]

“What a land!” said Shakhlan Imam to herself: “We have to stop even in front of an Arab, a *dhaga cas*! One who's got red ears!”. (Garane, 2005:44, translations are mine)<sup>3</sup>

Mogadishu is depicted as a place where – apparently – Somalis can live together without minding their own clan affiliation, playing *kalscio* (namely “football”, a loan word from the Italian “calcio”) and spending their free time eating and walking (Garane, 2005:44-46).

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<sup>3</sup> “Tutto è bello qui”, pensava lei, “ma perché un Ajuran, il più nobile di tutti, deve fermarsi per dare la priorità ad un Daarood od a un Haeiya?” Per lei Mogadiscio ormai il falso, il nazionalismo, la realtà scambiata per cosa? Al semaforo vicino al Cinema Centrale aveva dovuto fermarsi per lasciar passare le macchine. In una di esse vide un arabo [...] “Che terra!”, disse tra sé Shakhlan Iman, “Dobbiamo fermarci anche di fronte a un arabo, un *dhaga cas*! Uno che ha le orecchie rosse!” (Garane, 2005:44).

Along via Roma, there are clothing stores and ice cream shops, and “the long, wide thoroughfares previously used for ceremonial marches become appropriated for new local forms of social, economic and cultural practices” (Ali, 2016:10). So, while Mogadishu is living moments of independence, the legacy of the Italian colonialism remains ubiquitous, mostly in the toponymy and in the education system. This happened because, in Somalia, political, cultural and economic independence has not been the result of anticolonial struggles or protracted processes of decolonisation, like other African countries which freed themselves through conflicts. Instead, independence was the outcome of negotiations (Guglielmo, 2013:20-21) and the in-between phase from independence (1960) to dictatorship (1969) witnessed the co-existence of Italian legacy with the growing awareness of the idea of the nation. In the decade of the AFIS, Mogadishu experienced a period of transition and negotiation, when urban life consisted of a “context of intersection” (Simone, 2010:115) between opposite tendencies, well represented in *Il latte è buono* by the points of view of Shakhlan and Gashan, as the following passage shows:

Mogadishu was a ‘Little Italy’. The streets, the shops, the schools and the cinemas were Italian-like. Many new names had become part of the Somali culture: via Roma, Corso Italia, Cinema Centrale, Liceo Scientifico Leonardo da Vinci ... Garibaldi was more important than the Imam, even if both had had the same ideology of the leader. Shakhlan Iman glimpsed the future, full of death and catastrophe. In Mogadishu, every house, every electric wire, every person, every tree was part of a language, of a people, recalling Shakhlan to the glorious past. The difference was that here, in Mogadishu, electric lights had been added to the ancestors, Fiat’s noise and the *climatiseur*: the black skin wanted to turn white, the African into European. She saw whitened faces with a black mask. (Garane, 2005:45, translations are mine)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Mogadiscio era una «Little Italy». Le vie, i negozi, le scuole, i cinema erano all’italiana. Molti nuovi nomi erano diventati parte della cultura somala: via Roma, Corso Italia,

The city appears in all its bustling and contradictory transformation, as seen through the critical perspective of Shakhlan. While Gashan, the embodiment of the colonial discourse, feels a sense of belonging conveyed by toponymy, Shakhlan Iman, the embodiment of the pre-colonial period, experiences what Harry Garuba defines as “the postcolonial alienation” (Garuba, 2008:180-197). He uses this concept to describe “the alienation that results from *the wholesale transference of rural norms into the space of the city*” (Garuba, 2008:181). Accordingly, the character of Shakhlan Iman notices that the fracture within Somali society consists of the absence of any hierarchies between nomad and sedentary people, a dichotomy removed too fast and too easily in the new reality of Mogadishu. In other words, the newly freed country is experiencing a process where the traditional opposing key features of Somali society are coexisting (and got mixed up) with new ones: traditional (clan) and modern (socialism); agrarian communities and urban citizens; oral and written culture; finally, emblems of the past (colonial architecture) and new planning (modernism).

The dichotomy built on opposing elements experienced by Somali society is also mirrored in the stylistic structure of this passage: the first paragraph includes the recent and active Italian influence, while the second underlines the hidden presence of the practices which belonged to Somali tradition. Garibaldi finds his place along with the Imam in juxtaposition; finally, the last paragraph makes the contradiction manifest, bringing to the surface all the contrasting but coexisting elements in the new Mogadishu (the cult of the ancestors and the electric current dwell side by side). In this passage, three other aspects should be noted: the alarming allusion to the imminent civil war – placed right in the middle of the two paragraphs, as an

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Cinema Centrale, Liceo Scientifico Leonardo da Vinci... Garibaldi era più importante dell'Imam, anche se tutti e due avevano avuto la stessa ideologia di tutti i capi. Shakhlan Iman intravedeva il futuro, pieno di morte e di catastrofe. A Mogadiscio, ogni casa, ogni filo elettrico, ogni persona, ogni albero faceva parte di un linguaggio, di un popolo, che riportava Shakhlan alla gloria del passato. La differenza stava nel fatto che qui, a Mogadiscio, agli antenati si erano aggiunte le luci elettriche, il chiasso delle Fiat e il *climatiseur*: la pelle nera voleva trasformarsi in pelle bianca, l'africano in europeo. Vedeva facce imbiancate con una maschera nera.” (Garane, 2005:45).

imaginary glimpse of the future between past and present – foreseen by Shakhlan as the result of the unsolved contradictions of that time. Finally, the slightly twisted reference to Frantz Fanon and his famous work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) underlines the specific influence of the postcolonial context and the use of Italian toponymy.

The imperial Mogadishu is crossed by roads that recall Rome and by names derived from the Fascist period, with an unceasing recurrence of Italian cultural context broadly. This use of toponymy in the exercise of colonial power is well described in *Il latte è buono* and embodied in the character of Gashan. Indeed, Garane himself explains his relation to toponymy, i.e. his “luoghi prediletti” (“favourite places”):

His nephew was quick-witted. He ended up attending the Italian school in Mogadishu too. Somali wasn't a written language. Gashan memorized poems by Dante, Petrarca, Pascoli... He attended Casa d'Italia. It was like the passport to civilisation [...] He liked pasta more than Somali corn mush. He was proud of being a young Italian. [...] He read greedily and he knew about Italy more than the Italians who used to attend Casa d'Italia. He bought Italian newspaper by Croce del Sud: he read more about Italy than about Africa. (Garane, 2005:47, translations are mine)<sup>5</sup>

In this passage, Garane makes clear the role of Italian influence in shaping Gashan's identity. Both places (Casa d'Italia, hotel Croce del Sud) and culture (books, newspapers) actively contribute to making Italy Gashan's inner homeland. As it is clearly underlined by the

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<sup>5</sup> “Suo nipote aveva l'aria sveglia. Anche lui finì nelle scuole italiane di Mogadiscio. Il somalo non era una lingua scritta. Gashan memorizzava le poesie di Dante, Petrarca, Pascoli... Frequentava la Casa d'Italia. Era per lui come un passaporto verso la civilizzazione. [...] Preferiva la pasta alla polenta somala. Era fiero di essere un piccolo italiano. [...] Leggeva con avidità e ne sapeva sull'Italia più degli altri italiani che frequentavano la Casa d'Italia. Comprava i giornali italiani alla Croce del Sud: leggeva di più sull'Italia che sull'Africa” (Garane, 2005:47).

sentence: “It was like the passport to civilisation” in reference to Casa d'Italia, colonial spatiality still shapes Mogadishu cityscape and cultural practices of Somalis.

The insistent focus on colonial place names and on some particular buildings over time, in order to describe Mogadishu during the AFIS as well as in the present days, appears as a way to link the fragmented experiences of the diasporic present with the narrative of a common past. This seems true above all for the Somali-Italophone authors, who seek to tell and re-tell the colonial history, to challenge the unawareness of the Italian consciousness but also to find a common memory to share. Thus, the strong ties with Italy could not be overlooked, as colonialism has shaped Mogadishu's cityscape and influenced the local cultural practices, until the onset of the civil war in the 1990s. Garane, in particular, pays attention to the importance of that past by considering architecture as the deposit for the memories of the colonial period. He seems to agree with the words by Somali urban planner Mohamed Abdulkadir Ahmed on cultural heritage, for whom it “represents an integral part of cultural and economic development. Architectural and environmental goods are part of cultural heritage. Each of these aspects is critical for the development of any country – an inevitable resolve for each country development” (Ahmed, 2016:21).

### **Mogadishu as a City in a World of Cities**

This section shows how Farah connects Mogadishu to the neo-colonial dynamics which are ruling present-day Somalia and, at the same time, how he symbolically represents the city not just as an isolated case study, but in connection with a strong literary precedent, i.e. Dante's Florence. However, before the analysis, a few words about Farah should be provided, for a better understanding of his literary background.

Nuruiddin Farah was born in 1945 in Baidoa, in Italian Somaliland. As a child, Farah attended schools in Kallafo, in the Ogaden region, a contested territory between Somalia and Ethiopia. During his childhood, he studied English, Arabic and Amharic, while Somali, which became a written language only in 1972, was mainly spoken.

After staying in Mogadishu for a couple of years, he moved to India in 1965. There, he pursued a degree in philosophy, literature and sociology at Panjab University in Chandigarh. Farah then came back to Mogadishu, to teach as a professor in school. However, he subsequently went to England after becoming *persona non grata* for the regime of Siyaad Barre, and he never returned to Somalia until a short visit, in 1996 (Jussawalla & Dasenbrock, 1992). During his career as a writer, even when living abroad, Farah placed Somalia and Somali people at the core of his writings, trying to connect his country, in his novels, to a broader global perspective. His first trilogy, entitled "Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship" (1980-83), describes the harsh period of the regime of Siyaad Barre during the late 1970s. The second trilogy, "Blood in the Sun" (1986-99), is mainly set during the Ogaden conflict and explores the issue of cultural identity in post-independence Somalia. Finally, his most recent trilogy, which comprises *Links* (2005), *Knots* (2007) and *Crossbones* (2011), deals with the civil war, covering roughly a period of a decade, from 1996 to 2005.

Starting with *Links*, Farah tells the story of the exiled Somali Jeebleh, a scholar of Dante, who lives in New York and decides to come back to Mogadishu, after two decades of exile. Once in Somalia, he struggles with his own identity, being an American citizen who studied in Italy and who left his own country years before; he meets two of his best friends, Bile (a Somali doctor) and Seamus (an Irish polyglot) and eventually gets involved in the pursuit of two kidnapped girls. Farah's *Links* fictionalises the anarchy and the clan-collapse during the civil war, after dictator Siyaad Barre fled the country. The novel directly engages and challenges the representation of Somalis and Mogadishu made by the American media, with a direct reference to the film *Black Hawk Down* by Ridley Scott (2001) and to the non-fiction book of the same title published by Mark Bowden in 1999. As Garth Myers notices, *Links* re-represents an episode of the alleged "Operation Restore Hope" from the Somali perspective, by re-telling the moments of the attack and the tearing down of two American helicopters on 3rd October 1993. Thus, Farah gives voice to the Somali victims of that operation, not focussing only on the American side of the story that prevails in the Western

imagery. Farah's enduring attempt to provide a counter-discourse for Somalia and to deconstruct the abovementioned generalised logic of the African talk, surfaces also in the always critical perspective he uses to portray Somali people and society over time. Indeed, *Links* questions also a fundamental theme connected with Somalia, that of clannism. According to his long-running effort to portray the multifaceted aspects of Somali reality in contrast with the supposed homogeneity of Somali society (Markovitz, 1995; Ahmad, 1995; Besteman, 1999), Farah challenges and aims to overstep the trope of clannism – one of the main local traits supposed to represent Somali society – by showing how clan-based logics (and their legacy) have caused the collapse of the state (Farah, 2008:10). In *Links*, this situation is well emphasised on a spatial level by the description of a Mogadishu halved by a green line that divides the northern and the southern territories. To paraphrase Wole Soyinka, “the lust for power [...] needs a bounded estate to manifest itself” (Soyinka, 2012:14), and so appears Mogadishu, as a battlefield where a ruinous war of power – deemed as an ethnic conflict – takes place: two rival warlords, whose real names are replaced by the monikers Strongman North (Mohammed Farah Aideed) and Strongman South (Ali Mahdi Mohamed), fight for the control of their respective zones driving the population to a bloody civil war.

However, all Farah's characters “are never identified by the names of their clans” (Carbonieri, 2014:86) and *Links* makes no exception, since Farah denotes Jeebleh as the spokesman of this belief, in sharp opposition to that clannish logic (Farah, 2005:30, 41-42, 95-95, 128-129). Again, it is a description of a place – a past Mogadishu – that suggests the possibility of a clan-free society for Somalia:

He remembered his youth, and how much he had enjoyed living close to the ocean [...] Time was, when the city was so peaceful he could take a stroll at any hour of the day or night without being mugged, or harassed in any way. As a youth, before going off to Padua for university – Somalia had none of its own – he and Bile would go the Gezira nightclub and then walk home at three in the morning, no hassle at all. In those long-gone days, the

people of this country were at peace with themselves,  
comfortable in themselves, happy with whom they were.  
(Farah, 2005:40)

The overall feeling of nostalgia for a lost and peaceful past collides with the present situation of destruction. The presence of nightclubs and quiet streets convey also a difference in terms of society, based on the Somali word *tol*, meaning both “kinship” and “to stitch together”, in opposition to *clan*. In order to stress this particular situation of Somalia during the 1990s, plagued by infighting, Farah draws an intertextual parallel between Dante’s *Inferno* and Mogadishu. As Fiona Moolla correctly notes, Dante and the *Divine Comedy* are part of the “mental universe of a number of the characters” (Moolla, 2014:158) and this intertextuality comes to light, for example, in the numerous and explicit references that Farah makes to Dante’s poem. Indeed, before each of the four parts which *Links* is made of, there are quotations from Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* as epigraphs. This choice can be read, first, as a way to support the link between the experiences of the protagonist Jeebleh, who is a scholar of Dante and a political exiled as Dante himself, and Dante’s journey through Hell (Moolla, 2014:158-159). Second, these epigraphs can be read as an introduction to the following part of the novel, since they suggest and partially reveal the themes and the events deployed in the plot. Finally, the presence of *Inferno* as the main subtext to describe Mogadishu is deeply constitutive in terms of spatial description, since the capital city of Somalia is often described using Dantesque periphrases, such as “the city of death” or “the place of sorrow” (Farah, 2005:5, 20, 35, 70). Moreover, Mogadishu is symbolically organised in circles, according to the structure of Dante’s Hell, where souls dwell according to the weight of their sin. In this regard, the case of the epigraph which appears before the first part of *Links*, i.e. Jeebleh’s arrival in Mogadishu, may be telling, since it is the famous quotation from *Canto III*, which reports the inscription written on the gate of Dante’s hell: “Through me the way into the suffering city/Through me the way into the eternal pain/ Through me the way that runs among the lost” (Farah, 2005:1). Furthermore, the trope of void and of the lifeless emptiness of Hell, which can be found also in

Farah's description of Mogadishu, is present in Book VI of the *Aeneid* by Virgil (Dante's guide in *Inferno*), in which the entrance of Avernus is described as: "perque domos Ditis uacuas et inania regna" ("through the void domiciles of Dis, the bodiless regions", Book VI, line 269): "The road had no names. No flags flew anywhere near where the car was now parked, and there were no sheds, however ramshackle, to mark the spot" (Farah, 2005:76).

The city has been abandoned by its inhabitants and turned into a battlefield. The semantic field that denotes Mogadishu is related to decay, as it can be noticed in the scene before the meeting between Jeebleh and his old friend Bile, where Farah uses the words "devastation" and "destruction" five times in the same paragraph (Farah, 2005:79). Dante, again, can be considered the main source of intertextuality: the lines of the *Divine Comedy* placed as epigraphs in *Links* refer to the circles of Hell encompassed inside "la città c'ha nome Dite, coi gravi cittadin, col grande stuolo" ("the city that bears the name of Dis is drawing near, with its grave citizens, its great battalions", *Inferno, Canto VIII*, lines 68-69). This view of destruction instils in Jeebleh a nostalgic feeling for a peaceful Mogadishu, which is embittered by a sense of hopelessness conveyed by the ethical decay of its inhabitants.

Many houses have no roofs, and bullets scarred nearly every wall [...]. The streets were eerily, ominously quiet. They saw no pedestrians on the roads, and met no other vehicles. Jeebleh felt a tremor, imagining that the residents had been slaughtered "in one another's blood", as Virgil had it. He would like to know whether, in this civil war, both those violated and the violators suffered from a huge deficiency – the inability to remain in touch with their inner selves or to remember who they were before the slaughter began. (Farah, 2005:70)

So, the recurring lines from *Inferno* to depict Mogadishu suggest that Dante can be considered as the meta-textual common point that links and encompass experiences, languages and traditions coming from different backgrounds. Indeed, Dante appears to be a leitmotiv also

for the protagonist of Garane's *Il latte è buono*, Gashan, who often quote the very first lines of the poem ("Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura": "I found myself in a dark forest", *Inferno*, *Canto I*, line 2) to stress Gashan's feeling of uncertainty and misgiving during some precise moments of his life (above all, when the coup occurred and Siyaad Barre took power, in 1969). Moreover, in a passage of *La mia casa è dove sono* (*My Home is where I am*, 2012), the author Igiaba Scego describes the neighbourhood of Wardhingleey by using references to the *Divine Comedy* (Scego, 2010:27). In another novel, *Adua* (2015, and *Adwa*, 2016), Scego refers to the Italian language using the periphrasis "the language of Dante" (Scego, 2016:12) and she quotes the same tercet from *Canto III* by Dante used by Farah in *Links*: "Per me si va nella città dolente" ("Through me the way into the suffering city" (Farah, 2005:1; Scego, 2016:34).

So, Mogadishu, due to this network of intertextuality and its association to the famous literary antecedent of Florence and its factions, reaches the symbolical status of the wounded city connected with universal themes of betrayal, violence, individualism, evil and hope. By linking Mogadishu to the strong antecedent of the *Divine Comedy*, Farah tries to portray the "hard realities of today's Somalia" (Farah, 2005:43) in order to dismantle the idea of Mogadishu as a mere hopeless and isolated case.

The effort to link Mogadishu to a broader perspective can be noticed also in the way Farah places the capital city in relation to global dynamics. In this regard, the following passage of *Link* underlines how the city, because of its seaward position, has always been a crossroad of influences, invasions and trade: "It was from the ocean that all the major invasions of the Somali peninsula had come. The Arabs, and after them the Persians, and after the Persians the Portuguese, and after the Portuguese the French, the British, and the Italians, and later the Russians, and most recently the Americans [...]. In any case, all these foreigners, well-meaning or not, came from the ocean" (Farah, 2005:124).

This wide-reaching perspective is strongly emphasised in *Links* as well as in *Crossbones*, because of the broad historical matrix of both stories, since Somalia is at the centre of a crucible of relations that involves several foreign countries, such the US, Ethiopia, Italy and

the UK. One can read the tripartite plot of *Crossbones* from a non-sectarian perspective, both in terms of narrative style – since it does not present a single story – and in a geographical way. Indeed, Farah portrays three different stories: one of Jeebleh (the same protagonist of *Links*) and his journalist son-in-law Malik, who aims to write an article about Mogadishu (ruled by the Islamic Courts); the second of Ahl (Malik's brother) in Bosaso, which deals with the quest for Taxiil, Ahl's adopted son recruited by Al-Shabaab; the third tells the events of YoungThing, a boy enlisted by Al-Shabaab too and his tragic death in Mogadishu.

In essence, *Crossbones* appears to be an attempt to widen the viewpoint on Somali reality and to open it up to various trajectories in terms of time and space (Garuba, 2008; Woods, 2011; Proglío, 2011). In doing so, Farah displays the unfulfilled processes of negotiation between the different and fast-moving dynamics that occur on a global level and the legacy of the past of colonialism and dictatorship on a local scale. If in *Links* Farah tries to deconstruct the clan-based system, in *Crossbones* he questions the role of Islam in Somali society and “attempts to debunk several myths pertaining to piracy off the Somali coast and the alleged collaboration of Al-Shabaab with the pirates” (Ganga, 2013).

Farah, once again, sets the novel primarily in Mogadishu and opens *Crossbones* with a geographical mistake (Norridge, 2012), which would inevitably lead to a fatal error: YoungThing, a young boy enlisted by Al-Shabaab, loses himself in the streets of Mogadishu on his way to secure a house, from where the jihadist fundamentalist group could eventually launch attacks against the transitional government and Ethiopian troops. The boy, while trying to follow his orders and find the right way in a desolate Mogadishu with no signs of any kind, meets by chance Cambara, the protagonist of the previous novel, *Knots*. She eventually shows him the wrong way, grasping the intention under YoungThing's query. Later in the plot, in what can be considered as a little slip that results in a dreadful consequence, we discover that Cambara has sent him involuntarily to death. Indeed, YoungThing reaches the wrong house and this mistake causes the tragedy: Al-Shabaab man in chief – identified as BigBeard – punishes the boy by shooting him. These events allow Farah to draw a parallel

with the story of Ahl, who seems to be lost in the quest of his son (recruited by Al-Shabaab from the US) in Bosaso, a city ruled by hidden logics that find their *raison d'être* in tangled relations between Somali pirates and global powers.

In this complex scenario, Farah succeeds in combining both the local and the global, in order to place Mogadishu (and Somalia) at a crossroads between several global dynamics. It is worth considering Farah's approach in terms of the key concept of *mediascapes* as theorised by scholar Arjun Appadurai. He proposes five dimensions of global cultural flows as a framework for understanding the contemporary disjuncture between economy, culture and politics: *ethnoscapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescape*, *ideoscapes* and *mediascapes*. The latter refers "both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film-production studios), and to the images of the world created by these media" (Appadurai, 1990:299). Accordingly, by focussing on descriptions of places (airports, streets, markets, neighbourhoods) and paying attention to numerous references to mass culture production (above all films and books) Farah allows Mogadishu to cross national borders and join a transnational public sphere (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992:9). Hence, for example, YoungThing holds his gun "the way he has seen it done in movies" and he mimics some behaviours "from watching videos on a jihadi website" (Farah, 2011:8-9). Other youths linked to the Court are described while "mimicking a movie they have seen or some jihadi documentary they have been shown" (Farah, 2011:21). In the case of *Crossbones*, representations coming from different devices and sources affect the lives of the two boys. In other words, *Crossbones* shows how pervasive the power of image-centred narrative is, and how "the lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes are blurred" (Appadurai, 1990:35). Indeed, the references that Farah displays to constantly link the local to the global can be found in the frequent mentions of newspapers and tv news (Al Jazeera, the BBC, the CNN, *Le Monde*, *Star Tribune*) which strike the reader as being the main sources of information about Somalia from an outer perspective. The result, then, is twofold: to counterbalance the inward look of the protagonists and to dismantle the orthodox idea

that the notion of culture can be contained within national and regional borders (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992:7-8).

So, YoungThing appears to be the embodiment of a polarity, the upsurge of the diasporic condition. He is – at the same time – lost *in space*, in a Mogadishu where streets with no names can lead anyone to a fatal destination, and lost *in time*, like many Somalis of his generation who become victims of psychological manipulation by terrorist groups. According to Farah, the boy “has no home he can call his own” (Farah, 2011:9). However, this idea of homelessness toward the dismantled spatiality of Mogadishu is shared also by the generation who lived under the Italian rule during the 1950s and 1960s. In the following passage of *Crossbones*, Dhoorre, the old man who lives in the house mistaken by YoungThing, is described during a daydream moment. Farah again emphasises the coexistence of different time levels. Indeed, before his meeting with the boy and at the very beginning of their misfortune, Farah depicts Dhoorre’s nostalgic dream about “one of his favourite Italian movies, Vittorio De Sica’s *Shoeshine*” (Farah, 2011:47). Again, “the city with no innocents” (Farah, 2011:48), or rather a place where sinful people dwell, can be read as one of the numerous references to hell made previously in *Links*.

In this sense, in *Links* and *Crossbones*, Farah represents what Achille Mbembe in his *On the Postcolony* (2001) calls *durée*, i.e. a series of “discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another and envelope one another” (Mbembe, 2001:10). Indeed, Farah locates Mogadishu and Somalia at the intersection of multiple trajectories, by displaying characters of different generations, upbringings and nationalities in a background of both local and global perspective.

## Conclusions

As has been shown through the fictional representation of Mogadishu in the novels by Farah and Garane, the city emerges as a lived space that overcomes the dominant narrative of collapse. If in Farah’s vision the city represents a composite urban reality globally connected (both symbolically and practically) and in continuous development, in

Garane's portrayal it features as the main *locus* where colonial discourse has been employed during Fascism and post-war Italian administration. Both Farah and Garane aim to counterbalance the view of a city "outside the norms of social order" (Myers, 2011:138) by reimagining Mogadishu as a complex and multifaceted site where intimate and domestic relation should be reinvented and reconstructed. At the same time, they question the existing relationships and affiliation within Somali people, as well as they address the ubiquitous presence of Italian colonialism and its legacy to the present. In doing so, they place the urban spatiality of Mogadishu as the main subject. If Farah tries to give a broader perspective of Mogadishu by describing its cultural, economic and historical influences and by placing it at the centre of present-day neo-colonial dynamics, Garane describes a postcolonial Mogadishu that has not been represented in literature yet. In Farah, for example, Jeebleh – the exiled Somali who lives in New York – in *Links* tries to restore the meaning of his Somaliness but struggles with his American citizenship (Farah, 2005:36); his friend Bile – who did not leave during Barre's dictatorship – aims to keep a place, called The Refuge, away from the conflict to re-establish a sense of community, a *tol*; at the same time, Bile struggles with the feeling of belonging to Somalia, his native country, to the new reality of a devastated post-1991 Mogadishu; Malik deals with a city and a nation that he does not consider his home, but toward which he feels both a sense of belonging (he knows the language) and unfamiliarity.

In the case of Garane, instead, toponymy plays a fundamental role, according to the idea that the built form could not be confined to the architectural level but is strictly linked to cultural and social practices. The Italian spaces, which were used for "celebrating the triumph of the Fascist state" (Ali, 2016:13), are described from a Somali perspective, through the eyes of Gashan and Shakhlan Imam. Garane shows how "the café culture, cuisine (pasta become a staple Somali diet) and the unhurried Mediterranean tradition of evening strolling to shop, see and be seen" (Ali, 2016:13) were problematically adopted by Somali people.

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