

# THE ITALIAN LEGACY IN POST-COLONIAL SOMALI WRITING: NURUDDIN FARAH'S *SARDINES*

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## **Sommario**

*Scritta in lingua inglese, la prima trilogia dello scrittore somalo Nuruddin Farah, Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship, affronta il problema identitario nell'era postcoloniale che riguarda sia il singolo individuo che l'intera nazione, ora sconvolta dalla dittatura e da ideologie di dubbia matrice. L'Italia, la sua cultura e il passato coloniale, che sono ancora vivi nell'immaginario dei Somali negli anni Settanta in cui è ambientata l'opera, fungono da perno sul quale s'incentra tale argomento. È significativo in tal senso il secondo romanzo della trilogia, Sardines, dove il soggetto femminile, che subisce l'ignominia e le ingiustizie dell'asservimento – in Italia e in Somalia – prende coscienza della necessità di scegliere altre strade per ottenere l'autonomia.*

Contemporary novelist, short-story writer and playwright, Nuruddin Farah is the only Somali author to have achieved international renown for his works. Farah belongs to the second generation of modern African authors whose writings focus on post-colonial and post-nationalist concerns in their respective countries since independence from colonial rule. Their literary interests have shifted from, initially, the problematics of decolonization and nationalism to, more recently, those of self-rule. Simon Gikandi (2002:455) endorses this view and points out that the major concern of a contemporary African writer such as Farah is to break away from the paradigm of disillusionment with the ideals of nationalism, the latter no longer a manifestation of a common interest, and to turn instead to the issue of power and the

state.<sup>1</sup> The term 'post-colonial' in this context not only refers to the time or literature after colonialism, but also to written accounts of tensions arising from memories of the past and the utopian dream of the future. In cases of writers such as Farah, the thematic preoccupations aim to go beyond nationalistic aspirations and are more global in vision and style. Emphasis, therefore, is on the inward analysis of the present-day African setting, ranging from cultural identity to a longing to establish agency in the lives of individuals.

In most of his works, Farah's social critique deals with the way African resources continue to be held in check by local predatory politics and neo-imperialist designs by the West. Having personally experienced the enemies within his own country, Farah is hesitant to blame the West for all the damages it inflicted as a colonial power. Yet, Farah remains sceptical of the inherent bias that Westerners still hold about Africans today, a view which, in his opinion, is based on anti-black prejudice and racism and betrays the will to dominate and control. According to Edward Said, with specific reference to the Orient, but equally applicable to Africa, this attitude or mind-set by the West presupposes a "flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient [read Africa] without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (1995:7).<sup>2</sup> In other words, the hegemonising discourse which shapes the West's perception of the African still persists and justifies its continued involvement in Africa. The alliances and animosities between clans in the Horn of Africa,<sup>3</sup> along with decisions made by

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Gikandi in his essay (2002) gives a penetrating overview of recent African literary works concerned with changed political and social realities, and takes as a prime example of this form of writing Farah's novel *Maps* (1986), the first volume of his second trilogy, *Blood in the sun* (composed of *Gifts* [1992], and *Secrets* [1998]).

<sup>2</sup> In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said offers a sequel to his book *Orientalism* (1978), in which he considers further patterns of relationships based on imperialism between the West and other parts of the world, including Africa.

<sup>3</sup> Even today, as one can see from the ongoing civil war between factions, Somalia retains the vestiges of a typical nomadic society, held together by clans and sub-clans which, though following a traditional Islamic way of life, are yet separated by different allegiances, making for a fragile and tension-ridden inter-clan dynamics easily exploited during the Seventies and Eighties by the dictator General Siyad Barre with a thinly-veiled policy of divide and rule.

foreign powers, Italy included, during and after post World War II, have played a large role in shaping the long and deadly descent into chaos that has marked Somalia's more recent history. It is in this context that I wish to review Farah's construction of Italy and its legacy as an ex-colonial power in *Sardines*, published in 1981, the second novel of his first trilogy, *Variations of the Theme of an African Dictatorship*.<sup>4</sup>

Farah's association with Italy, and hence with the West, goes back to the time of his birth in 1945 in Baidoa, a city in the region of Southern Somalia that was under Italian administration until 1959.<sup>5</sup> Farah, who frequented the Italian Istituto Magistrale in Kallafo, grew up in a multi-lingual environment and speaks Somali, Amharic, English, Italian and Arabic. Multilingualism, especially after Farah was condemned to exile in the mid Seventies, becomes therefore a recurring feature in Farah's trilogy and a means of looking into Somalia from the vantage point of the outsider. Farah, however, uses multilingualism to further cement the connection between present-day Somalia and the outside world as he does with Italian spoken by his Somali characters in *Sardines*. With the exception of an earlier novel in Somali, all of Farah's works have been subsequently written in English, testifying to the persisting contacts of Africa with Europe and to his own rootless status as a Somali and as an exile. What characterizes Farah's stance vis-à-vis his art in general is his attempt to integrate the various phases of development which have marked the

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<sup>4</sup> The first novel of the trilogy, *Sweet and Sour Milk* was published in 1979 and the third, *Close Sesame*, in 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Italian presence in southern Somalia began in 1885. Like the English in the north of the country, Italians obtained commercial advantages through treaties with individual sultans and Somali chiefs who, in exchange, placed their territories under Italian protection. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the boundaries of the protectorate were further defined, the Italian Government assumed direct administration, giving the territory colonial status of what became known as Italian Somaliland. Italian occupation of Somalia gradually extended inland and culminated in the annexation of Ethiopia in 1936. In 1941, during World War II, the British took control of Italian Somaliland and with the 1947 peace treaty Italy renounced all rights to the colony. In 1949 the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution recommending that Italian Somaliland be placed under an international trusteeship for ten years, with Italy as the administering authority until the end of 1959. The Somali Republic gained full independence in 1960 and elected democratically a government which was overthrown in a bloodless coup by Major General Siyad Barre in 1969.

transition towards independence in Somalia. Rather than rejecting, by means of a radical critique of the *status quo*, the cultural nationalism adopted by the postcolonial state and its subsequent failure, Farah, as insider and outsider, consciously searches to inhabit both positions simultaneously (Gikandi, 1998:753). In other words, while tradition, tribal oligarchy, the legacy of colonialism, the liberation struggle, nationalistic aspirations and the subsequent disenchantment with patriotic ideals are all manifestly embodied in his works, in his view, there can be no advancement towards future possibilities without memory of the past. Hence, one of the main functions of Farah's use of the Italian element in *Sardines* is to connect the past to the present and vice versa.

Moreover, Farah's perception of contemporary Somalia reflects the country's "unusual relation to the culture of colonialism" and "the multiplicity of its cultural and historical influences" (Gikandi, 1998:753). In his works, Farah acknowledges the complexities of Somalia's present social fabric which he identifies with its geographic location, its long-standing interaction with the Arab peninsula and India through Islam, the diasporic status of its people in adjacent African states, and the contentious relationship with various colonial powers, Italy not least as will be presently discussed. The confluence of so many different factors which shape modern Somali identity are nonetheless in synchrony with Farah's own personal experience as a writer attuned, because of his own voluntary homelessness, to interrelate with other traditions and cultures. Farah, says Simon Gikandi,

extends his literary and philosophical referents to make postcolonial Somali culture part of a cosmopolitan discourse that is a crucial ingredient of what it means to be an African in the modern world. (1998:758)

The cosmopolitan theme is conspicuously present throughout his trilogy, *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*, and in *Sardines* in particular, wherein Farah illustrates unambiguously the impact of Italy and its legacy on his characters up to the present day

in order to underpin the development of modern Somalis' sensibility in their search for self-determination.<sup>6</sup>

Set in the Seventies, the writing of the trilogy coincides with the time when Farah was staying in Italy, a factor which may have determined his inclusion of the Italian component in his work.<sup>7</sup> In it he traces the activities of members of a clandestine group opposing General Siyad Barre's oppressive regime, a regime which had increasingly come to be characterized by contradictions, by suppression of information as well as of individual rights, by the presence of a repressively brutal security force and widespread corruption. Farah's main characters in this work are Somalis who, having studied in Italy, have a command of the language of their ex-colonial masters. They are intellectuals and their experience of a cosmopolitan way of life clearly reflects the author's own position.<sup>8</sup> They moreover express the need to rid themselves of the fetters of nationalism which they know have reduced Africans to a state of servitude to the whims of a dictator, not different from that imposed by yesteryear's colonial masters. Like Farah, because of their intimate knowledge of the Italian way of life, they are also conscious of the fact that a unilateral concept of the Other<sup>9</sup> as exhibited, not without

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<sup>6</sup> The term cosmopolitanism raises difficult conceptual issues and to date there is still no agreed definition as to what the word actually means. Broadly speaking, however, and for the purpose of this study and in the context of the African diaspora, any discourse on cosmopolitanism deals with the relative importance of ideas about world citizenship and of questions about cultural identities. The term, moreover, indicates the need for any subject of any community to imagine entities other than their own that go beyond cultural and national boundaries, thus presupposing a shared morality. See Gikandi (2002) and Appiah (2006).

<sup>7</sup> "I was in Italy," says Farah, "from 1976 until October or November, 1979, working on the trilogy" (Alden & Tremaine, 2002:41). Again he explains: "*Sardines* underwent a great deal of change. At one point, one of the versions was wholly set in Milan" (Alden & Tremaine, 2002:43).

<sup>8</sup> Simon Gikandi reiterates Farah's position: "in his fiction," he says, "[he] does not seem troubled by its identity: his artistic sources are an eclectic mixture of Somali oral traditions, Italian culture, and Anglo-Irish modernism" (1998:753).

<sup>9</sup> According to Emmanuel Levinas in his theory of ethics, and specifically in *Totality and Infinity* (1969), which deals with the concept of the Other in person to person contact, the Other remains always a separate being. It is imperative, therefore, that the difference in the foreignness of the Other be fully accepted. Hence, the face-to-face relation with the Other is

hypocrisy, by neo-colonial powers, whose presence in Somalia is openly encouraged by Barre himself,<sup>10</sup> disregards the “process of cultural hybridization which is a standard feature of the postcolonial world” (Wright, 2002:98). Central to Farah’s concern in *Sardines*, is the dual components of his vision which inform his subjects, that is, as insider and outsider simultaneously, and their awareness of the nature of oppression which besieges modern-day Africans.

While Farah is painstakingly attentive to the conflicts lacerating the very fabric of modern Somali society, he is particularly concerned, as a writer, to showcase possible alternative paths open to the individual that may offset the yoke of tyranny. By way of confirming the author’s particular stance, John Hawley (2002:77) adds that

Farah is interested in charting the effects of modernity and neo-colonialism on the members of his own generation [...] – those who have been faced with an increasingly secularized world, a national oppressive government, and a few roadmaps that would suggest a direction in which to take oneself and, by extension, one’s ‘emerging’ nation.

This he does in an exemplary manner in *Sardines* where Italian and its legacy constitute an integral part of the plot and are instrumental in determining the direction taken by Medina, the main character of the novel, in her attempt to assert her own individuality. The frequent use

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always asymmetrical, that is, the Other cannot be reduced to the same which is the result of the inability to perceive and recognize the Other in his or her specificity or uniqueness. This inscription of the Other in the same is also alluded to in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1995) when speaking of the homogenising power of Western discourse.

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noticing that the link with Italy had never been interrupted since independence. Italian influence, especially during the trusteeship years from 1950 to 1959, had continued in areas of social and cultural affairs. Thanks to Italian grants, Barre himself had frequented a military academy in Italy in the Fifties, following a custom which has seen and still sees many Somalis, including Farah’s characters in his trilogy, furthering their studies in Italian institutions. Italy also provided economic assistance in the form of direct foreign aid and imports of Somali goods, and was instrumental in sponsoring Somalia’s association with the European Economic Community with preferential status for its exports.

of Italian terms and expressions by a number of characters of the novel is indicative not only of the link with the past that is still significant for many Somali subjects, but also of the precarious position occupied by the African intellectual in the context of their 'emerging' nation. These characters have either studied in Italy or are still living in Italy or see Italy as a land in which they can seek future asylum away from the tyrannical present. Ironically, Italy, despite its colonial past, represents in the aspirations of these individuals, at least on the surface, the positive alternative to the unbearable realities of daily life in Somalia.

In light of the ambivalent standpoint adopted by his characters with respect to Italy, its language and culture, Farah is impelled to probe into Somalia's alliance with the West and the enduring presence of its colonial past. If Italy, Italians and the Italian language and culture are systematically evoked by Farah's characters, their function is to provide a backdrop against which such ambivalence is played out. There is an incident in *Sardines* which throws light on the entrenchment of things Italian in the Somali consciousness. The scene, casually domestic, is between Medina and her young daughter Ubax who asks:

"What are you doing in the kitchen?"

"Cooking."

"Cooking? But who's coming?"

Medina pointed at a piece of paper on the kitchen table.

"A *guest*."

"Who?"

"Read the note yourself."

Ubax picked it up and squinted at an arrangement of the alphabet which made her feel illiterate.

"It's foreign."

"It is not. It's Italian."

(*Sardines*: 199)

Medina's retort to her daughter reveals how Italian is ostensibly part of her identity. Yet Italian, in this scene, is both familiar and foreign

depending on the individual speaker, and as such it serves the dual purpose of inclusion and exclusion in the modern Somali context.<sup>11</sup>

Having studied and lived in Italy for twelve years, Medina often turns to Italian when speaking to her husband Samater or to her brother Nasser, who is still living in Italy and brings back Italian wines “from Tuscany, Umbria and Lombardia” (*Sardines*: 89). Farah strengthens his characters’ familiarity with Italian with frequent references to places like *Roma*, *Milano*, *Vigevano*, cities frequented by Medina, Samater and Nasser as students; to weeklies like the *L’Espresso* which mark their left-wing political affiliation (95); to films such as Vittorio De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* (178) and Gillo Pontecorvo’s *Queimada*, a 1969 film about slave uprising in the Caribbean (220). Interspersed in the novel, are an infinite number of Italian words and phrases, all italicized but not translated into English: ‘*come [g]li ho fottuti*’ (22), ‘*basta*’ (37), ‘*un colpo di fulmine*’ (59), ‘*guarda caso*’ (102), ‘*Dio mio!*’ (142), and so on. Allusions to the students’ revolt of 1968 are coloured with support for dissident American poet Allen Ginsberg and with Marxist ideological slogans: ‘*bandiera ro[s]sa*’, ‘*com[m]iz[z]i*’, ‘*egemonismo*’, ‘*sacralimperialismo*’ (89), ‘*confronto-scontro*’ (199), ‘*avanguardia*’ (199), ‘*compagni*’ (200), ‘*sfilata*’ (237). References to the Somali regime or to Barre himself also make their appearance: ‘*l’ideologo*’ (218), ‘*Viva Generalissimo*’ (233). It is in topographical names such *Mogadiscio*, written with an Italian spelling rather than English, or names of the city’s districts like *Villaggio Arabo* (149), or of suburbs like *Alto Bondheere* (152), *alto* as against *basso*, or recreational centres such as *Centro Sportivo* (228) that one is able to take the measure of the extent to which the Italian colonial imprint has made its mark on Somali society as a whole.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Itala Vivan argues that Farah aims “to writ[e] the nation in more ways than one” and that the novels of the trilogy are built on “variations on the theme of identification” whereby he “chooses language as a construct based on the principle of exclusion” (1998:786). Far from refuting Vivan’s thesis, I shall argue that it is precisely because of her awareness of this ‘exclusion’ that Medina is able to come to terms with her own predicament.

<sup>12</sup> Claudio Gorlier gives an extensive list of these words and expressions found in Farah’s first trilogy, and points out that, besides the Italian imprint which distinguishes numerous members of the Somali intelligentsia, Italian in Somalia “whose [indigenous] language attained its full status as late as 1972, [...] holds on at least idiomatically and was taught in

Associated with evocations of the present, Farah embeds this link with Italy with open references to the consequence of Italian expansionism, thus exposing the darker side of colonialism. Memory of past subjection and humiliation, therefore, acts as an alienating device which further highlights the ambiguous position held by the ex-colonized in relation to the Italian legacy in Somalia. For instance, the Barre regime's insistence on a daily broadcast of Somalia's national anthem composed by Giuseppe Blanc, who also wrote *Giovinezza*, the Italian Fascist anthem, is a source of vexation for Sagal, a young athlete and Medina's friend. She cannot identify with, nor take pride in, the wordless and untitled anthem imposed on the Somalis by the ex-colonial power on the day of independence in 1960:

The signature-tune which marked the end of the afternoon's news-cast was played, then came the national anthem (how could anyone call that thing Somalia's national anthem? Perhaps not many people knew that it was composed by an Italian and that there were no words which could be sung to the piano music of the man's composition). (*Sardines*: 129-30)

Neither is there a sense of honour when mentioning Samater's father as an *askari* or *dubat*, a native soldier who served in the Italian colonial army.<sup>13</sup> For his wife Idil "he was a *si-com[m]andante*" (*Sardines*: 78), a man without a will of his own, a man who brought shame on his family for his submissiveness towards foreign authority. Shame and anger are also aroused by acts of collusion by a previous generation of colonizers and colonized, that is, between Medina's own grandfather who traded in slavery, legally forbidden by the

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schools until a few years ago" (1998:781, 784). Itala Vivan also attempts to answer the following question about the trilogy: "What is Italy's role in this design?" (1998:786).

<sup>13</sup> *Askari*, meaning 'fighter' in Arabic, was the name given to a native soldier serving in the armies of colonial powers in Africa. However, the term most frequently used in Somalia for these soldiers recruited into the Italian colonialist regime, was *dubats*, Somali for 'white turbans', descriptive of their prescribed attire. "The Italians," says I.M. Lewis, "drew heavily upon their Somali subjects to staff their police and military units" (2002:317, n.15).

Italians, and her Italian friend Sandra's grandfather, who, as administrator of the area, found it convenient to compromise with local men of importance such as the perpetrator of human trafficking.<sup>14</sup>

If Farah's objective in his novel, in which the Italian component acts as conduit to self-determination, is to elucidate the response of the modern Somali subject in the face of oppressive contemporary circumstances, then his choice of an educated and sophisticated female figure like Medina as the centre of consciousness adds further complexities to this exercise. All major events in the story are filtered through the focalizing gaze of Medina, a left-wing activist and a journalist who is sacked for refusing to print the General's speeches in full. By adopting the viewpoint of a woman, Farah is able to show how public and private events are intertwined and how freedom of the individual should precede that of the 'emerging' nation if a new space is to be created within it. Medina on her return to Somalia, after years of sojourning in Italy as a student, is constrained to confront life in a traditional Islamist society intent on 'packing' her and all women alike in a tin like sardines, within the confines of home and motherhood (Wright, 2002:99).<sup>15</sup> What is particularly relevant to the topic of the present study is Medina's independence of mind, predetermined by her stay in Italy, her demeanour as a woman of the world, and her own imaginative pursuits. These traits will single her out amongst the women at home when confronting their narrow vision of life and their submission to male authority. Her excellent knowledge of Italian, moreover, and by extension of Western culture,

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<sup>14</sup> Around 1895, the Italian colonial authority in Somalia began the abolition of the age-old practice of slavery following suit with the Belgium protocol drafted in 1890. However, a report commissioned by the Italian Government in 1903 revealed that in Somalia slavery was still flourishing and that slaves were bought and sold with the sanction of the local Italian authorities. This was a scandal and thereafter the Italian Colonial Government issued three ordinances outlawing the slave trade much to the ire of Somali clans.

<sup>15</sup> Itala Vivan (1998:790) explains that "[...] the word *sardine[s]*, on the surface indicat[es] a kind of edible fish, but at a deeper level the name of Somali children's game *dhundhunmashaw*, a sort of hide-and-peek". The title of this novel, therefore, qualifies, yet again, the boundaries circumscribing Medina's actions: involvement in a power game of hide-and-peek with politics in the sphere of public life, and the confined existence, as a woman, in the domestic sphere.

put her in a position to counterbalance both the misplaced and sentimental yearnings for a return to the roots of the Afro-American Atta and the ideological grandstanding of Sandra, an Italian friend from her student days abroad.

A critique of Medina's Italian experience in the novel and the degree to which her 'cultural hybridization' becomes a positive tool in her personal struggle against oppression cannot be fully appreciated without first taking into account Farah's broader vision of the context in which her conflict takes place. His choice of a female figure as his main character is not arbitrary, nor is his selection, unique to the novel and the entire trilogy, of an impressive array of female characters that make up her immediate surroundings. These female figures act as counterfoil to Medina's actions against which she is able to measure her progress towards autonomy. They also serve to ground Medina's intimate and public milieu, her cosmopolitanism gained by her Italian experience, individually portray, some even emblematically, convergent facets of modern Somali society such as traditional and progressive values, the will to self affirmation and collective responsibility, political ideals and utopian yearnings.<sup>16</sup> Farah, who has been often dubbed one of the rare male feminist writers in Africa for his sensitive rendering of female aspirations, is adamant, when speaking of Somali women, that there can be no freedom when half of the country's population is enslaved.<sup>17</sup> He thus overtly connects the subjection of women within the patriarchal family to state and other forms of oppression, which in Italy's case is confirmed by its stake as an ex-colonial power in present-day

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<sup>16</sup> According to Florence Stratton, the most outstanding feature of *Sardines* is "the extent to which Farah has made it a woman's novel. Not only do all of the ideas and actions originate with women – even the children are female – but Farah has given the novel a feminine ambience by suffusing it with female images" (2002:147).

<sup>17</sup> There are many critics who have recognized Farah's concern for women's rights. One such critic is Kirsten Holst Petersen (2002:249) who writes of Farah's unique sensitivity towards the situation of women in traditional Somali society: "He would seem to be the first feminist writer to come out of Africa in the sense that he describes and analyzes women as victims of male subjugation". Florence Stratton (2002:143-4) quotes Farah himself on this issue: "Like all good Somali poets I used women as a symbol for Somalia. Because when women are free, then and only then can we talk about a free Somalia".

Somalia. Patricia Alden (Alden & Tremaine, 2002:362) elaborates further:

Farah's larger canvas allows him to represent a wide range of women's experiences and so to register contradictory ways in which their oppression mirrors and sustains dictatorship and sometimes leads them to challenge it.

The view of paternal authority as the central tool of Siyad Barre's broader political agenda is evidenced by the general's encouragement of traditional Islamic practices in the family which, contrary to the state's Marxist ideals, sees control and obedience as a God-given way of life. Paternalism is equally present in Italy's 'positional superiority' (Said, 1995) which it exerts in its relationship with the ex-colony.

Farah's message in *Sardines* is unambiguous: the repression of women in Somalia is characterized by the multiple layers of their servitude – to their fathers, brothers, their husbands and to the head of state – placing them, as objects of possession, at the lowest rank of the social hierarchy. A woman such as Medina, therefore, experiences a triple subjection: at the hands of tradition, the state and the ever-present homogenising discourse of Italian by representatives of the ex-colonial power. Yet, ironically, as I have intimated earlier, it is her knowledge of the dominant discourse, of Italian and of its culture in which she is simultaneously an outsider and an insider, that will lead her to reassess her position with respect to the other two forms of constraint with which she, both as an individual and as a modern African woman, has been forced to come to terms.

It follows, however, that influence of Italian in the 70s on Farah's Somali characters as a continuing historical presence since colonial times "does not give rise to cultural plurality", or multiculturalism as it is also called, "for culture", in the case of Medina, "is no longer a clearly bordered mosaic, but an overlapping of boundaries instead, which constantly calls forth the struggle between the dominant and the emerging" (Xie, 1996:158). As a modern educated woman, as a Somali who has lived in Italy for a considerable stretch of time,

Medina's relation to Italian culture and language is characterized not by assimilation, but by her intermediate status, "forever exiled, ambivalent, subaltern subject of cultural difference" (Xie, 1996:155). Indeed, speaking to her brother Nasser, Medina recollects how her left-wing friend Sandra explicitly proclaimed her exclusion from matters pertaining to the host country during the 1968 student uprising:

Do you remember how Sandra used to make all the fuss in the world when you or I or Samater made unwarranted remarks about Italian politics? Do you recall the heated argument she and I had in the piazza of Vigevano? 'You have no right,' she told me, 'to discuss internal Italian politics, since you don't understand it'. (*Sardines*: 88)

Again, Medina is reminded of her status as outsider during a dispute with Sandra in present-day Mogadiscio:

"Let's keep Italy out of it, Mina."  
"But why?"  
"You've never understood Italy."  
"I've never *what*?"  
"You've lived in this country off and on for the past twelve years, you speak the language as perfectly as a native, you've read everything on every bend and curve of its ruins. But you don't understand Italy and you never will. It isn't easy." (*Sardines*: 204)

As a subject, therefore, Medina experiences a series of interdictions in relation to Italy that relegate her to a position which, according to Homi Bhabha, is "beyond the boundary" of the dominant culture. It is this liminal space, this being 'in-between' which constitutes a challenge to Medina as she finds herself, "in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (1994:1). What marks Medina's existence at this stage "is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction [...]: an

exploratory, restless movement [...] hither and thither, back and forth” (Bhabha, 1994:1). The point of contact with Italian culture in this interstitial place occupied by Medina creates what Bhabha (1994: 36-9) calls a ‘third space’ of enunciation, the hybrid, indeterminate space of signification. According to Vivan,

Italian is used [in the novel] not to connect, but to disconnect; not to communicate, but to declare communication impossible; not to identify, but to offer variants of or variations on identification. (1998:786)

It is this very function of Italian and its legacy in the novel that offers Medina a view of the way forward. Her predicament as a divided subject, the precariousness of her living in the realm of the beyond, in between her Somali heritage and her Italian experience, in other words, her own cultural hybridity, renders “possible different, subversive interpretations and appropriations of the dominant discourse” (Xie, 1996:157). Medina’s command of Italian, her intimate knowledge of its culture and the acute awareness on her part of both inclusion and exclusion as a speaking subject, enable her to take possession of the other’s discourse and to use it on her own terms to challenge prejudicial and ideological conformity. However difficult and disconcerting her position might be, Medina finds agency through the autonomous expression of her difference.

As a result, she claims this space when confronting both her immediate surroundings as well as her Italian friend Sandra who, having come to Somalia, has associated herself with the General’s Marxist ideology, serving as a journalist in its propaganda campaign to strengthen national unity. Medina cannot accept Sandra’s totalizing, neo-colonial discourse and the mechanical assumption that the hegemony exerted by Europe over African nations in matters concerning power and knowledge needs no justification. She expresses her resentment to her brother Nasser:

Years later, guess what? An identical situation in reverse: Sandra, Samater and I in Somalia. Sandra this time is hysterical as power and she talks longwindedly,

nonsensically about Somali politics, so I challenge her. I ask how come she is discussing internal Somali politics. I remind her of Vigevano. She raises her voice; and I, mine. She loses her temper; and I, mine. [...]  
She said my mistake was to look for her in the mirrored history of her grandfather's colonialist and paternalistic attitude to the African. And she went on: "I am a Marxist and as such have the right to share my acquired experience with a government which calls itself Marxist-Leninist. [...] What I do is work with my Somali comrades [...] Collaborate with the government as Marxists, yes. As Marxists," she said, "regardless of colour, creed or country, we try to exploit the contradictions for the benefit of the masses." (*Sardines*: 88)

Sandra is bolstered by her own self-importance as a European and as a member of the Barre inner circle, and is impervious to the ironic implications of her words. Informed by the perceived legitimacy of her own superior perspective, her conduct mirrors ironically the paternalism of her colonial grandfather:

I don't wish to belittle the political significance of nationalist liberation struggles in Africa [...]. But African fascist, neo-colonial dictatorships are a direct result of this total absence of programmed, ideologically sound Marxist thinking. [...] (*Sardines*: 203)

And again when responding to Medina's objection, "Yet you're talking about Africa. How can you –," she replies:

I'm not talking about Africa. I'm talking about Marxist theory, the Marxist ideology which is basically European, both in its outlook and philosophical development. Hegel, Marx, Engels, Lenin. They are all European. (*Sardines*: 204)

Consequently, Sandra is equally incapable of seeing how Siyad Barre exploits ‘the tribal contradictions’ within Somalia, not as Marxist ideology demands ‘for the benefit of the masses’, but in the name of Scientific Socialism, a theory which, rather than redress the imbalances produced by colonialism, serves above all to entrench his own personal power. The General’s concept of nationhood, moreover, which is equally contradictory, presupposes the existence of “homogenous, holistic, and historically continuous traditions” (Perloff, 1999:109), in other words, of Somali culture and community as “expressive of unitary collective experiences” (Bhabha, 1994:142). His need is to mythicize the relevance of traditional nomadic, tribal and religious practices of the people, and to instrumentalise them for ideological ends, a need which is not uncommon in African states after independence.<sup>18</sup> In this context, for example, a popular dissident (in *Sweet and Sour Milk*) killed by security forces is re-appropriated by the regime and, by way of damage control of the state’s image, is acclaimed as a national hero in order to retain the people’s trust. Sandra’s intransigence towards divergent opinions and her indiscriminate acceptance of the General’s brand of pseudo-Marxism makes a mockery of the principles for which she and her Somali friends fought during the student revolts of 1968.

Medina is equally displaced in relation to her own community in Mogadiscio for the “hybrid subject identifies neither with the colonized nor with the colonizer; rather he/she occupies a liminal position, a third term that negates the colonizer and the colonized at the same time” (Bhabha in Xie, 1996:164). If she has felt resentment towards Sandra for her sense of superior knowledge, she is equally at a loss at home where she equally envisages her position as a ‘guest’:

*In this century, the African is a guest whether in Africa or elsewhere. A guest. [...] If not a guest, then a slave to a system of thoughts, a system of a given economic rerouting. It was too early to forecast what would happen; but a week after her arrival, Sandra had become*

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<sup>18</sup> I am thinking in particular of democratic states such as South Africa where a common African heritage, though understandably expressed to recover a lost sense of identity, is often politically exploited and equally mythicized.

the host and they the guest – maybe this sufficiently indicated the precarious position of the African in his own continent. [...] A guest in Milan, a guest in Mogadiscio. She was a ‘guest’ in the Marxist ideology which she couldn’t twist as she pleased for she needed the Soviet or the Chinese or the Yugoslav stamp to give it credibility, she needed the approval of the European intellectual left; in that ideology, at any rate, there wasn’t enough space in which she could spread her mat and her exhausted bones. (*Sardines*: 206-7)

Medina’s journey towards self-knowledge, her scepticism towards the West and its dominant discourse, aided by her awareness of her hybrid status with respect to Italian and its culture, is equally put to the test in relation to those figures in the novel that resist transformation.

In *Sardines*, which includes a melding of intimacy and political breadth, Farah has focussed on social issues facing African women, some yearning for emancipation, others firmly anchored to traditions. Without facing up to the challenges posed by a traditional way of life, Medina’s efforts would not be complete, nor could she ever attain her personal freedom. Her hard-earned status as an intellectual and a cosmopolitan, her Italian experience, and her ability to view things simultaneously as an outsider and as an insider, would be meaningless in the face of the opposition she encounters at home in her own familiar circle. She therefore confronts the despotic Idil, her mother-in-law, a nomad who threatens female circumcision for her granddaughter, Ubax, and who claims allegiance to the tribe of her son Samater even at the cost of losing his wife and daughter. There is also Medina’s own mother, Fatima bint Thabit who, in her daughter’s view, abjectly conforms to the norms of Islamist society and who equally expects docility and submission of her own daughter in the face of adverse circumstances.

The discovery that betrayal also happens within the family circle, is in turn equated by Farah with the Somali nation: betrayal issues no longer directly from colonialism, from the influence of Italy past or present, no longer from outside, but from within. And the cure must

also be found from within. For Medina, contact with Italy and its culture has empowered her to address the present from the position of a new time frame, a new narrative. Through the ‘process of cultural hybridization’, in which Italian and its legacy have played a pivotal role, Medina has discovered her autonomy and authenticity as a subject.<sup>19</sup> Her lack of ease in her own country and among her own people leads her to abandon the home she shares with her husband, for Samater’s acceptance of a government post to protect his family and the clan from state reprisal has heavily compromised his own position as a dissident which he once shared with Medina. At the close of the novel, much like Virginia Woolf, Medina will claim for herself that space, that ‘third space’, the only one where renewal and freedom of the imagination is possible:

She left to dwell peacefully in a notion, find a home in it, a home to which she could bring her life’s treasures, like a bower-bird other birds’ feathers, a room that she could call her own and in which she was not a guest; a home in which her thoughts might freely wander without inhibition, without fear; a home in which patriarchs like Gad Thabit and matriarchs like Idil [*whom she saw as representing the authoritarian state*] were not allowed to set foot. (*Sardines*: 242)

As a liminal figure of contestation, therefore, as a product of ‘cultural hybridization’ through her contact with Italy, Medina affirms her own agency by rejecting not only the “transcendent or metaphysical authority” of political ideologies (Bhabha, 1994:145) proclaimed by the Somali dictatorship and neo-colonial powers embodied in the novel by her Italian friend Sandra, but also the narrow bind of a traditional way of life, fostered for expedient means by the regime. By choosing a woman as his main character, Farah’s novel could thus be

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<sup>19</sup> In her article on Farah’s novel, Annie Gagiano (2011:4) pays close attention to alternative paths towards emancipation open to women under a dictatorship, and to what constitutes ‘autonomy’ and ‘authenticity’. Quoting from theorist, Maria Pia Lara, she puts forward the following definitions: “One is autonomous when one can determine one’s life and when one’s ethical project finds recognition”; and “authenticity [can] be conceived as a performative claim for recognition”.

viewed as an effort to dismantle narratives about colonialism and neo-colonialism, about the nation, about blood kinship, and the patriarchal family.

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