Chapter IV

FARAH'S RE-MAPPING OF THE BOUNDARIES

Of the recent, African writers and intellectuals have begun to realize that African literary and other forms of discourses are not in any way isolated from other systems of discourses. And instead of assuming that there is a unified African world view, African writers now tend to pay closer attention to the discursive systems, both native and foreign, through which, in the words of V. Y. Mudimba, “African worlds have been established as realities for knowledge”. Mudimba argues that such discursive systems are often the foundations of an African order of knowledge, and “today Africans themselves read, challenge and rewrite these discourses as a way of explicating and defining their culture history and being” (1988, xi).

Previous paradigms and literary ideologies such as negritude and the African personality, and the African narratives they generated were predicated on the assumption that African cultures and selves were natural and holistic entities which colonialism had repressed and which it was the duty of the African writer to recover in the period of decolonization. But now there is an urgent need to question the ideological foundations on which the narratives of decolonization are constructed.
In the nationalist period, it was taken for granted that the liberation of the nation was an important precondition for the generation of an ‘authentic’ African narrative. Thus nation, national consciousness and narration are inter-related in African literature. At the same time, there is an interpretation of past, present and future which constitutes one of the enduring reasons for the power and social importance of literature. Usually the later generations relatively create, or re-create a sense of the past, largely through art, and this created, simplified past in turn helps to create a sense of what the future could be.

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968) Frantz Fanon has explained that the colonial ideological machinery was driven by a perverted logic, one bent on distorting, disfiguring and destroying the oppressed people and their history. Thus in Africa particularly, where European powers created states without any regard for traditional borders or tribal enmities, a national consciousness has seemed an urgent need. Theses countries have had a united experience of colonialism but widely differing pre-colonial and colonial influences on their society. Thus, in short, they have no common collective sense of the past and in turn, no collective sense of the future. A number of contemporary third world writers have responded deliberately to this dilemma by trying to create for their societies a usable sense of the past. This might make these writers sound more didactic and engaged. Above all, these writers are traditional in the sense of affecting
their societies’ sense of themselves at an important and profound level.

When we take the works of major African writers like Achebe, Naipaul and Soyinka, we observe that a progression can be traced from direct treatment of the historical past to a more indirect concern with how the past continues to shape the present through tradition and custom. In each case, the aspect of the past taken as most important is the communal organization of pre-colonial African society. When we take up the works of Nuruddin Farah, we can see that it logically completes this progression, and though all his works are set in contemporary Somalia, it is centrally concerned with the ways the institutions of clan and tribe that shape Somali society.

Nuruddin Farah was born in 1945 in Baido which was then Italian Somaliland and educated in the Ethiopian ruled Ogaden and Mogadiscio as well as at the British Universities of Essex and London and the Punjab University of Chandigarh in India. Growing up, Farah learned Somali, Amharic and Arabic, then Italian, and English. Thus Farah has become one of the most multi-cultural and multi-lingual writers. He has written only one novel in his mother tongue Somali, Why Dead So Soon? (1966). All his other novels plus his occasional short stories, plays and film-scripts are written in English, his chosen medium of expression. Farah hails from an originally nomadic tradition and his travels, studies, and employments have, appropriately been nomadic on a global scale. He has
either lived or held academic appointments in Italy, Germany, the United States, Nigeria, Gambia and the Sudan.

Farah worked for the Somali Department of Education and subsequently left for India, where he studied philosophy and literature at the University of Chandigarh. While in India he wrote several plays in addition to his first novel, *From a Crooked Rib*, which was published in 1970. He returned to Somalia in 1969, the same year that the Soviets backed General Siyad Barre in a bloodless coup to take over Somalia’s government. Farah could not agree to the regime of Siyad Barre and he became a strong critic of the regime. This sentiment is expressed in many of his novels. In the mid 1970’s Farah moved to England to study theatre. Upon the publication of *A Naked Needle* in 1976, he was warned not to return to Somalia or he would be jailed. Thus he had to go into exile and he moved to Italy, where he continued writing plays, short stories and novels. A pre-occupying subject throughout his writing career, however, has been the oppression of his native Somalia by the totalitarian regime of General Siyad Barre, and this Somalia, which he left in 1974 and in which his own works are still unavailable, is the setting to which Farah has returned in novel after novel. His works have earned him the English Speaking Union Prize and the Neustadt Prize.

Nuruddin Farah is known as one of the most stimulating contemporary prose writers in Africa. His works mainly deal with the
subject of individual freedom in the face of arbitrary power that is relevant to Africans and non-Africans alike. Farah’s novels demonstrate a facility with poetic language and great intellectual depth, and frequently focus on political and social issues in his homeland of Somalia, a nation in the horn of Africa. They contain an undeniable political element – he does not preach a particular political vision for his nation. Farah’s experiences as a young person in Somalia give his writings an international appeal. The history of colonization and border conflicts in Somalia, coupled with Farah’s travels and educational opportunities, give him access to a wide variety of cultures and enables him to write about Somalia with a detached perspective too. The rich oral culture in Somalia and Farah’s command of several languages also makes his writing unique. His novels are also noted for their poetic and symbolic nature, and for their epic and satirical elements as well. The primary function of the African writer, according to Farah, is the creation of his nation’s enlightened opinion. Farah had been out and against injustices right from his early youth. He was a strong critique of the tyranny of the dictatorial regime of Siyad Barre.

Nuruddin Farah’s novels cannot be obviously absorbed into the popularly recognized categories of African fiction. We cannot trace the usual nostalgia for Africa’s traditional past which characterizes the first set of novels of the Cultural Nationalism School. Though in the novels of
1970’s there was an unmistakable note of the exultation of the past, particularly in works like Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) and *The Healers* (2000), Soyinka’s *Season of Anomy* (1973) and Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood* (1977) where African traditional culture is recommended as a foundation for regenerative development of African societies, we cannot discern any such glorification of the past in Farah’s novels.

Farah does not exalt the traditional culture in all its sense. He is critical of those value systems of traditional culture which are again predominantly oppressive for the various strata of the society, especially women. Kirsten Holst Peterson has observed thus: “He finds no virtue in traditional Somali social organization: indeed his two pet-hatreds seem to be the patriarch in the traditional Somali Muslim family and the concomitant subjection of women” (1981, 216). Farah has developed his own individual vision and techniques which make him stand apart from the mainstream of African fictional development. While taking into account his specific individual approach, his works can be categorized along with the post-independence critical realism and disillusionment, which anatomize the shortcomings of post-independence African social, political and economic order.

Rather than turning to the past which has its own serious drawbacks, the critical realists focused more on the contemporary scene. Their works manifest a clear insight into the needs of African society and
literature, and therefore, they paved way for a literary revolution. In Soyinka’s opinion, a writer is “the visionary of his people” and had the duty to anticipate the future and warn his society of the chaos ahead and if the need arises, he should partake “in direct physical struggle too” (1975, 156-57) in an attempt to reform society. Farah belongs to this class of writers. He is concerned with the present, holds an objective appraisal of its institutions and overall state of its society and its peoples. But Farah is essentially an individualist with an individual vision and approach to his art. His individualism may be derived from a national characteristic because “[t]he Somali are intelligent, sophisticated, subtle, inordinately proud and extremely individualistic” (Lewis, 1955, 150). Farah’s novels are essentially African. At the same time, they are thematically relevant not only to realities of African societies, but also to universal human conditions, in a manner which transcends the contemporary settings of his works.

It was at a time when the African literary tradition had overcome the euphoria of the early days of independence (i.e., the late 1950’s and early 1960’s) that Farah emerged as an important writer. It had not fully come to terms with the disenchantment of post-colonial politics in the 1970’s. The primary subject of his novels has consistently been the process by which nationalist euphoria became transformed into a discourse of loss and mourning. Farah’s novels seem to want to perform
an impossible task: that of bringing the tradition of nationalist literature into a productive confrontation with the art of post-colonial failure. Major African novelists like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong’o is seen to have made an obvious movement away from the ideologies of cultural nationalism to a radical critique of the post-colonial state. But Farah’s works are unique in their contemporaneous representation of both positions. Particularly in the early novels of Farah, the mapping, endorsement, and critique of nationalism are represented against the background of post-colonial decay and the utopian possibilities held out both by the Somali poetic tradition and a modern culture.

The complex history of the Somali nation – and its truncated nationalism – is, of course, a major concern in Farah’s works, but the novelist is also troubled by his (dis)location within the African tradition of letters because what makes his country different, especially within an East African context, is the multiplicity of its cultural and historical influences. Somalia is connected to other East African countries through what can be called the experience and trope of diasporas because a substantial number of Somalis live in parts of Ethiopia and Kenya. Simultaneously it is also connected through Islam and its geographic location at the Horn of Africa, to the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian Subcontinent. The country had been under the colonizing power of British and the Italians and its elite culture reflects the influences of these
imperial powers. Viewed against this backdrop, we can see that the sources of Farah’s art and imagination are multiple and complex. These artistic sources are an eclectic mixture of Somali oral traditions, Italian culture, and Anglo-Irish modernism.

Though we can observe that Farah’s works provide a critique of the Somali nation and the traditions associated with it, we simultaneously witness the imbrications of Somali oral culture in his works, especially “the legendary oral poets of his Ogaden childhood” (Wright, 1997,68). Farah is seen to value the oral tradition as a possible conduit to a world beyond colonialism and the politics of the post-colonial state. Since Farah attempts to use his novels to criticize the worlds associated with the traditional values sustained by orality, especially where they have joined hands with the culture of silence promoted by the post-colonial state, he invokes modernism as a counterpoint to tradition itself. Thus it is explicitly shown that while Farah’s works seem to go beyond the temporality of tradition they are also loaded with weight of Somali oral culture.

Farah’s novels present an appraisal of Somali society, traditional and modern. They bring for examination Islamic and traditional customs as they affect the life of women, like female circumcision, Islamic marriage laws, polygamous marriage, peremptory divorce which is an exclusively male prerogative, the subordination of the individual’s life to
community demands as well as the extreme materialism and corruption of the modern elite, and the modern fascist society. They expose the evils responsible for the present state of anomie in the African body politic. The writer sees the decadence of the African society, the unstable dictatorial and inhuman governments as the consequences of unbridled lust for power by a few megalomaniacs. Farah records and spotlights the nature of present day politics, thereby offering the reader an analytical insight into the lives and politics of his people. For his stark portrayal of the effects of patriarchal subjugation of women he stands out as one of the very few male writers willing to critique a patriarchal system.

Before moving to a detailed analysis of Farah's selected works to study the ethnocentrism and his feminist theology a quick look at his novels in general will give an insight into Farah's ideologies discussed until now. His first novel which came in 1970 is *From a Crooked Rib*. It examines the plight of women in traditional Islamic societies through the eyes of a young village girl, Ebla, as she struggles with the issues of female circumcision, arranged marriages and polygamy. The second novel *A Naked Needle* (1976) is centered on the protagonist, Koschin's, search for self-fulfillment and freedom within the social and political upheaval of contemporary Somalia. Koschin, the protagonist, struggles to remain free from all social, political and personal obligations. The next three novels that came in 1979, 1981 and 1982 are more overtly political.
They form a trilogy which was later published in 1992 as *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship* (1992). It portrays life under a dictator in all its aspects including the suspicion and fear that plagues those living in a fascist state.

The first one *Sweet and Sour Milk* recounts the repressive military regime of Somalia but does not provide any specific ideological position. *Sardines*, the second novel of the trilogy also surveys the problems of the military regime but again fails to promote an ideological stance. Once again, in this novel, Farah addresses women’s struggles through his main character, Medina – her suffering at the hands of the government, her husband and her mother-in-law. The third one *Close Seasame* is presented through the eyes of an aging tribal leader, Deeriye who opposes Somalia’s political dictator and who has visions of his dead wife and Allah.

Farah’s next trilogy is not as closely woven as the former. It is a more loosely related group of novels than the *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*. The first of the group *Maps* came in 1986. It recounts the story of a Somali orphan, Askar, who is brought up by a non-Somali woman named Misra. The novel explores several types of conflict: the political divisions caused by maps; the divisions between men and women; and the internal divisions between different parts of the self. In the second novel of this second trilogy, *Gifts* which was published
in 1990, Farah returns to the theme of subjugation in Somali society. The female protagonist, Duniya, has spent her life and three marriages at the mercy of men and their gifts. Duniya’s story becomes a metaphor for the plight of Third World Nations, which are at the mercy of gifts from the First World. The third one which appeared in 1998, *Secrets*, is set during the end of the General Siyad Barre’s rule as Somalia begins to break into warring clans. The main character spends the novel searching for his origin and his true clan.

One of the catching traits of Farah’s novels is that he is always telling stories where women are placed at the fulcrum. And what is most noteworthy is that his women are not passive objects submissive to the all-dominating patriarchal social and political system. They are vital subjects in the brilliantly imagined, fully realized, magical world of Nuruddin Farah. Except for a very few, all of the major African writers have tended to project an exclusively male, distorted view of that society. The proclaimed objective of African writing, especially in its early manifestations, was reclamation of an African world view that was already pushed to the margins. One aspect of African social existence that remained unquestioned for a long time is the life of women within the societies depicted in their creative works. Women characters were very few and whenever they made an appearance, they did so in subservient and insignificant roles. Serious efforts were never made to
illuminate their lives in any detail within the circumscribed role assigned to them in traditional society.

Two of Africa’s leading creative writers, Chinua Achebe, and Wole Soyinka, have not been able to perceive women as individual beings. They view women in terms of an appendage to man as in the case of Achebe, or as a prostitute, disguised or undisguised, as in the case of Soyinka. But sociological researches have tended to discredit the validity of the view of women conveyed in Achebe’s fiction in the light of the findings that women in traditional society wielded great power and functioned in the greater variety of roles than those ascribed in Achebe’s novels. In *Arrow of God* (1964), for instance, there are only three females, two of whom are quarrelling wives, and the third, a daughter who is a battered wife. If Achebe keeps his women suppressed, Soyinka offers her liberty, but of a dubious quality. His view of the matter is articulated in *Season of Anomy* (1973): “Vision is eternally of man’s creating. The woman’s acceptance, her collaboration in man’s vision of life results time and time again in just such periodic embodiments of earth and ideal” (1973, 82).

The general lack of respect with which women are regarded in Africa, both in reality and creative works may have its origin in the fact that, as Jomo Kenyatta has explained in *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), African philosophy is geared toward the practical and the utilitarian.
Nowhere in African history or creative works can we detect a phenomenon equivalent to that of what is usually called “courtly love,” in vogue in Western Europe in the latter part of the middle ages which. The cult of “courtly love” conferred importance on the woman for her intrinsic worth. As recently conceded by a Nigerian male critic, Femi Ojo-Ade: “The fact is, black man needed to be taught how to love, to see beyond the bulging back side, the feminine façade, the buxom bodies” (1983, 172). But some African male writers, notably, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, John Munonye, Sembene Ousmane, and Ayi Kwei Armah, have all gone beyond the above recommendation and have all attempted to understand the circumstances that determine women’s existence in their various environments and reflected it in their writings. They have all tried to regard women as important and relevant individuals in the African experience.

Though all these experiences mentioned above have tried to capture African women’s experience, the African writer who has done the greatest justice to female existence in his writing is Nuruddin Farah. The number of female characters he projects and the variety of roles accorded them as well as in the diversified attitude towards life, is remarkable. The perspective from which Farah projects his women is almost within the context of African creative writing. Except the cases of Sembene Ousmane and Ayi Kwei Armah, whose women possess some
vision on which they base their actions, Farah seems virtually above among African writers in depicting the progress which women have made within the constricting social landscape. Though these women have to face serious problems constantly, and for some it may be insurmountable, most of them succeed in scaling the hurdles before them. Farah lays bare the experiences of these women together with their achievements and the challenges with which they are confronted. He portrays these women and their causes in such a pervasive and consistent manner that he has been described as the first feminist writer to come out of Africa. He is counted as a feminist in the sense that he describes and analyses women as victims of male subjugation.

Farah’s propaganda for the cause of women is part of his crusade against tyranny and victimization not just of women, but all who are denied their legitimate rights – social and political, private and public. Regarding this commitment it is worthwhile to quote Farah’s own comment:

I am interested in an individual who has been denied what are his or her rights. Sometimes these happen to be women characters, and sometimes they happen to be men characters. But I’m interested in the struggle and in the relationships which form after that struggle. (1981, 81)

With his first novel From a Crooked Rib (1970) and the next three
which form a trilogy *A Naked Needle, Sweet an Sour Milk* and *Sardines*, a new trend in the large corpus of modern African creative writing is introduced. The central feature of this new trend is the demythification of the traditional and the communal concept of African life, the generally glorified African past, which over-idealized the beauty, dignity and excellence of African culture. He champions the cause of individual freedom and exposes such aberrations as nepotism, misused tribal allegiances, female suppression and materialism which are responsible for the debasement of humanity and the standard values of the modern Africa.

The suppression of women has been an important concern for Nuruddin Farah. In an interview to the *New African*, Farah made the following comment about the women in his novels: “Like all good Somali poets I used women as symbol for Somalis. Because when the women are free, then and then only can we talk about a free Somalia” (61). Three of Farah’s novels – *From a Crooked Rib, Sardines* and *Sweet and Sour Milk* – deal with the oppression of women and can thus be classified as feminist novels. At the time when Farah had started writing, i.e., in late 1960s, the position of women in African society was not a popular literary theme. Very few writers had adopted the theme of suppression of women for their literary material. Anyone who had read any of Farah’s novels will be aware that he is always telling stories that
have women at their center, and that his women are not the passive objects of his writings. Farah’s women are epitomes of Somali female experiences at large.

*From a Crooked Rib* examines the plight of women in traditional Islamic societies through the eyes of a young village girl, Ebla, as she struggles with issues of female circumcision, arranged marriages and polygamy. The novel takes its cue from the fact that in the society of its setting, a woman is the property of the man on whom she depends for livelihood and protection – father, brother, husband or a relation. She has no individual rights. It questions the validity of such an arrangement from a humanistic point of view. Thus the core of the novel is the quest of Ebla, the chief character who escapes the suppression of women in rural Somalia to achieve limited self-determination in the city, thus revolting against a male dominated society. Ebla has been nurtured entirely in a traditional nomadic pastoral community. We first meet her in a community of camel nomads where everything is determined by outside forces: the seasonal changes from draught to spring rains determine the annual life cycle, the needs of the camels determine the daily cycle of life, and the grandfather who heads the clan determines the social relations within the community.

The basic female problem, the uncomplimentary status accorded her in African society, is given a general treatment in *From a Crooked*
Rib. Although the major character of the novel, Ebla, sets out to extricate herself from the imprisoning women’s role in traditional society, her reflections on the matter delve into the general female predicament which exists in modern societies. The novel deals with Ebla’s moral and intellectual growth, detailing her progress as she quests for personal freedom and dignity. Escaping from the imminent imprisonment of an arranged marriage to Giumalel, who is an elderly man old enough to be her father and whose two sons had earlier courted her, she is nearly pawned to another consumptive man. But she has sufficient intelligence and strength of character to gradually work out her own destiny.

Ebla is introduced in a prologue through her grandfather’s musings about her flight from home. She is a member of a jes which is a unit of several nomadic families living together. She and her brother were orphaned early and were entrusted to the care of their grandfather. A detailed picture of Ebla, including her height, i.e., six feet, and her graceful individual personality are supplied. Although she is an illiterate and could neither read nor write Arabic, she knew her “suras” by heart. She is presented as intelligent, philosophical and self-willed. Her revolutionary outlook on life enables her to question the application of Koranic teachings to every details of social life. It is surprising that despite her rural nomadic background, she is capable of examining not only her individual plight, but also the place of women against the male
in society. We can see Ebla dealing with a number of issues. Such individualism and intelligence are at complete variance with the prescribed confinements of her cultural and religious environment.

When Ebla’s grandfather arranges her marriage to a man forty years her senior, she runs away to a cousin in a small town, only to go through the same experience again, until finally she arrives in Mogadiscio. Ebla’s quest unfolds in three stations – country, town, city. Following the typical structure of orality, she has to pass a test and prove herself at each of these stations. However, she proves herself by rejecting female submission to social conformity, in clear contrast to oral morals. Parallel to Ebla’s life cycle, Farah unfolds in exemplary fashion the life cycle of women from initiation to circumcision, marriage and births. On the one hand Ebla accepts what seems to her the inescapable demand on women, on the other she learns to transform her traditional gender role into a source of empowerment in that she can exert control over men with her sexuality. She thus arrives at a delicate equilibrium between her individual, sexual and moral responsibilities and her social conditioning. Ebla’s quest leads her from a simplistic revolt against the domination by her grandfather to mature womanhood with an elaborate set of behavioral codes that allow her to evade male domination.

Farah endows Ebla with innate intelligence, courage, resilience and perseverance and through her raises numerous sensitive questions about
women in this type of society – questions about female choice of marriage partner, divorce, attitude to polygamous marriage, husband and wife relationships and marital infidelity. The metamorphosis of this intelligent village girl underscores vividly her extreme individualistic spirit. Quite early in her development, Ebla exhibits a tremendous consciousness of her individual rights. The entire story is a delineation of her experiences as she attempts to emancipate herself from circumscribing traditional and Muslim obligations. Her rebelliousness induces her to escape from the narrow and restrictive confines of her jes – family and community — in an attempt to assert her individuality and be appreciated as a human being. She wanted “[t]o break away the ropes society had wrapped around her and to be free and be herself” (12).

Ebla’s grandfather arrangement for her marriage to the elderly man, develops in her a strong urge to escape. But more than an urge, it was a want, a desire. She envisions her escape from different angles: “Her escape meant her freedom. Her escape meant her new life. Her escape meant the divine emancipation of the body and soul of a human being” (13). In spite of Ebla’s being uneducated, she had a very independent perspective on life. She thought of a number of things no other woman of her background would ever think of. The meaning of “Ebla” is “graceful” and she always wanted her actions to correspond with her name. She was never a “weak-minded girl” (10) and never
waited for destiny or fate to shape her life. She believed that “[d]estiny and fate can be worked out” (15). She says: “good things and bad are bound to follow each other, just as the day is bound to follow the night. But I’ll shape the bad to be like the good – with God’s help and guidance. Amen!” (38).

Ebla had her own interpretation of life. For her life meant freedom – freedom to do whatever one wants to do in life. She had unique ways of forming ideas about things. A life of restraint was a life that has been poisoned. Ebla realized that her forced marriage with the elderly man would submerge her identity and strangle her personality. She regards all such submission of women to the dictates of the male, relegating womanhood to the status of beasts and household properties. She loathed the discrimination between the sexes. Traditionally, for them, the boys lift up the prestige of the family and keep family’s name alive. Even in the allotment of assignment, this discrimination was evident: a woman’s duty means loading and unloading camels and donkeys after the destination has been reached and usually it was goats for girls and camels for boys. Thus she desires to fly away “like a cock which has unknotted itself from the string tying its leg to the wall. She wanted to go away from the duty of women” (13). Ebla is indignant at the discrimination practiced against women, at the unfair attitude which considers a man, no matter how unintelligent, and moronic, woman’s superior. In her own
estimation, marriage normally considered a woman’s crowning glory is, for a woman, an enslavement. All her life a woman is expected to provide service and comfort to man, be it father, brother or husband. Though fettered to men and to duties, she obtains neither reward nor recognition for her endeavors. Men, on the other hand, have all the privileges and few encumbrances. She is vexed not at the idea of being a woman but at the unfair allotment of tasks which has demoted the status of women. She sets out to repudiate that arrangement.

Ebla’s flight from home is not just a simple matter of not wanting to marry Giumalel. It is her desire to assert her individuality, and also to be understood and appreciated as a human being:

Ebla became disappointed with life many times – in people more than a dozen times. But these occasions were not grave: the circumstances were minor, at least in the way she approached them. To her, a refusal did not matter. Neither would a positive answer make her pleased. But acceptance of her opinions, both by her relations and her would-be husbands, did not make her pleased. (8)

Ebla cannot comprehend the reason why she should be forced into a marriage which would strangle her identity and personality. We are made privy to her questionings:

But why is a woman, a woman? To give companionship to
man? To beget him children? To do a woman’s duty? But that is only in the house. What else? She asked herself. Surely a woman is indispensable to man but do man realize it? A man needs a woman. A woman needs a man. Not to the same degree? A man needs a woman to cheat, to tell lies to, to sleep with. In this way a baby is born, weak and forlorn. (12-13)

Defying her grandfather’s decision, Ebla escapes and reaches the town where her cousin lives. But her plight does not change for the better here too. Due to some unforeseen circumstances, here again her cousin promises her in marriage to a broker who was already sick with tuberculosis, and that too without her consent. Thus to escape it she finally chooses marriage to a young and educated man called Awill who was a clerk in the Ministry of Education, though she considered marriage an enslavement. But she hoped that he might be different from other men who considered women as merely objects for sale. She hoped to reform him into a human being. Thus she goes with him to Mogadiscio and gets married. But Awill soon leaves for Italy and from a photograph Awill sent, she learns that he had fallen in love with somebody else. So Ebla decides to avenge her plight. Her decision is not to take refuge in the ocean or kill herself. She decides to marry another man called Tiffo who was rich enough. Her attitude is that if man can sell woman, why woman
herself shouldn’t do it. According to the contemporary custom, men could practice polygamy but not women. If women did so it was prostitution. But Ebla decided to defy it. She marries more than one husband. But the second husband, who is already a married man, cannot accept her once he learns that she has been already married. According to him, “You [Ebla] is a woman and you are inferior to me. And if you have another husband, you are harlot” (145). Tiffo divorces her. After Tiffo leaves, the social morality in which she was brought personifies before her and she realizes that she has become a prostitute, but justifies herself. She cheats men because they cheat her. Finally when Awill returns from Italy he comes back to her and accepts her. Both know that they have their own secrets which they decide to share, but only later on. For the time being, Awill needs her. Ebla has been able to empower him.

After running away from her family jes, Ebla arrives in the city of Mogadiscio determined to be an independent woman. Once in the city, however, she discovers that she cannot survive as an independent woman without entering into patriarchal social structures that replicate the jes she left behind, structures built around ideas of family, kinship, marriage, and the dominance of men. Indeed, Ebla’s tragedy arises from the fact that she left her village to escape from imprisonment as a woman, only to discover that in spite of its modern façade, the city functions according to the same patriarchal rules. If she constantly “wished more than anything
else that she was not a woman” (97), it is because she realizes that the practices that give woman value within traditional culture, childbirth and sexual intercourse, for instance, “are accompanied by unprecedented pain and violence” (97-98). At the same time, however, it is only by being a woman and a wife that she can be recognized by her culture and be accorded the dignity and sense of identity she deserves. Her tragedy arises from the fact that once she conjoins life, love and marriage is the only source of her identity, Ebla ends up reinforcing the fatalistic logic that she had set out to transcend when she left her family.

The title and the action of the novel take its expression from a Somali proverb which emphasizes the subordinate existence of women: God created Woman from a crooked rib; and any one who tries to straighten it, breaketh it. Ebla’s revolt is aimed at the refutation of this guiding proverb, a male-chauvinist slogan. She demonstrates the feminine capability of self-assertion and independence. At a glance the title of the novel might be misleading regarding the view of the author. The title could be deciphered this way too: since woman is created from the crooked rib of man, she is crooked. But what Farah really aims at is the emancipation of women from the subordinate status of women as created from man. It is generally observed that since woman is created from man, she is to be at the service of man. Farah, through his works, re-examines this position of women. His concern for the denigrated status
of women is carried down to his future novels too. Ebla starts her journey
to freedom in the city, the symbolic emancipation of Somali women
begins. Her journey is, by extension, emblematic of the fight for freedom
of all women in a male dominated world. Her career presages a cultural
revolution which is imperative in the changing social, political and
economic situation in Africa.

Apart from Ebla the other women portrayed also demonstrate the
various aspects of women’s social positioning. Asha, the landlady who
comes to a close contact with Ebla after her marriage to Awill, presents
another face of woman in this novel. Although she is immoral and
greedy, her strong personality is striking. She is a confident and
psychologically stable matron who has fought her way to survival in the
modern, urban, dog-eat-dog environment. Farah creates a strong feminine
independence in Asha in order to portray the potential of individual
female achievement in a world dominated by men. Asha has a house in
town which Ebla rents on a tenant basis. Apart from the maternal role she
adopts towards her tenants, like Awill, she also controls them,
manipulates their love lives purse strings. She tutors Ebla on how to take
her revenge for her husband’s infidelity. Asha is never seen to bow
herself to the dictates of men or the male-dominated society. She has her
own outlook and perspective towards her own life and also she succeeds
to hold the string of the lives of those in her immediate circle. Once
Awill cheats Ebla it is she who instills Ebla with the moral strength to regain a foot-hold in her tossed life. On the other hand, Aowrolla, her cousin’s wife, and the widow next door are victims of the rigid Muslim culture. Both appear passive and indifferent to the plight of women. The widow has been subjected to Muslim peremptory divorce, and Aowrolla experiences the painful, agonizing chastisement of childbirth. Together they represent all women who have accepted the age-long inequality of the sexes, with a reward that comes only through children.

The marked sympathy for oppressed Somali womanhood made *From a Crooked Rib*, a pioneering piece of African fiction. The feminist concerns of the later trilogy and that of *Maps* were already close to the surface in the tale of Ebla’s determined flight from bartered marriages with elders and consumptives in a society where a woman’s only alternative to being sold by others as a chattel-wife is to sell herself as a prostitute. Farah said that he was at that time interested in people who are deprived of what they cannot exist without, in the personal struggle for survival, and in the Somalia of his first novel, marriage is the woman’s principle, and in some cases, only means of survival. The combined constraints of tribal patriarchy, Islamic law, and the hardships of nomadic pastoralism ensure that only in marriage is there (albeit limited) space for individual self-definition: thus Ebla, who loves to be a wife challenges her polygamous husbands with short-lived polyandrous experiments of
her own, although she hardly achieves any relief from her subjugated status.

At the outset of the novel itself Farah covers himself with a rather weak disclaimer, “She thought of many things a woman of her background would never think of” (8), in order to forestall the criticism that Ebla’s spontaneous notions of independence, the complementarities of the sexes, and the position of women in a male society, might appear to be uncharacteristic of an uneducated nomadic woman of the 1950s. Yet Ebla is wholly believable because she lives as an oral being, triumphantly alive in an oral culture glimpsed in its pristine, healthy state before its perversion by the General. The quirky, disjointed style of the narrative catches her living, minute by minute, improvising, expressing by turns ingenuousness, curiosity, tolerance, and amused contempt.

Though uninformed, Ebla’s intelligence is original and questing. Her medley of psychological ‘asides’ shows how her instinctive wisdom and insight are fed by remembered anecdotes, proverbs and moral fables imbibed with the oral culture of her childhood. This culture remains a positive source of value in the first two novels, and, although it acquires darker dimensions in the two novels, its potential for good persists. Farah says that “[you] cannot divorce the oral and the literary from one another” (Moss, 1986, 1827-28). In his novels the presence of folklore, narrative strategies and ideas about sequence and seriality in Somali oral
literature is significant. From Ebla to Dulman in *Sardines* and Misra in *Maps*, the strength and vitality of the oral tradition are abiding forces in Farah’s fiction.

The female characters in *From a Crooked Rib* are relatively few, but their varied outlooks and roles are sufficient to illustrate Farah’s ability for comprehensive portrayal of women’s roles and characters. In his fiction generally it is possible to identify three distinct categories of women: the traditional African, the emancipated modern African and the foreigner or the West European. Farah places the traditional African women against the emancipated, stronger, individualistic women in order to draw the distinctive quality of the latter. In all his novels, where we witness the liberated, powerful women, we can see the traditional ones too. The traditional women have already been observed in the widow and Aowrolla. Another striking instance is that of Idil and Fatima bint Thabit of *Sardines*. They play a striking role as instruments whereby the repressive regimes of their setting are highlighted. They are suppressed second-class citizens of traditional Muslim culture, presented in the stifled protests of their private home backgrounds.

In most of his novels, Farah has used the plight of women as metaphors for the general condition of the Somali society. He has tried to demonstrate the necessity of women’s liberation for the total emancipation of Somalia. He illustrates women’s attempts towards this,
which sometimes meets its aim, but at the same time, pinpoints all the hypocrisies of compromise within the most embattled section of Somali womanhood, through the figure of Medina in *Sardines*. In *Sardines*, we encounter mostly a society of women, Medina, Sagal, Ebla, Amina, Idil, Ubax, Sandra and so on. The revolutionary schemes are presented mainly through the point of view of these women. The novel presents not merely women with independent outlook, and who are in the struggle to maintain the woman in them, and also characters like Idil and Fatima bint Thabit are conservative women in their own way. The major characters like Medina, Sagal and Amina are strong individuals, ready to take up the cause of the nation in spite of themselves. We find each of them providing moral support to the other in a sense of sisterhood.

In the opening pages itself we get a clear picture of Medina:

Medina was as strong-minded as she was unbending in her decisions, and she guarded her secrets jealously. She was, in a manner, like her father Barkhadle. She was confident as a patriarch in the rightness of her decisions. (6)

Referring to her confidence as that of a patriarch’s, might not do justice to Medina’s ideals because while fighting for a social cause, she is also fighting for the woman in her, whatever the cost she might have to pay. The novel focuses on Medina’s search for a room of her own: “A room of one’s own. A life of one’s own” (10). Medina is portrayed as a
strong individual capable of standing on her own. She is highly qualified and regarding anything that occurs around her, she is capable of having her own individual opinion voiced and boldly opposes the General at the earliest chance she could come across. She brings up her daughter in a similar manner to grow up to become an independent woman like her mother. All this has evolved from Medina’s childhood experiences:

It was then . . . Medina said that the one reason why she opposed the present dictatorship was that it reminded her of her unhappy childhood, that the General reminded her of her grandfather who was a monstrosity and an unchallengeable patriarch who decreed what was to be done, when and by whom. “I want Ubax to be free of all that,” she had said. “I want her to live her life like a dream. I want her to decide when to wake up, how to interpret her dreams.” (17)

Medina’s revolt against patriarchy and her insurmountable fury is the outcome of the unrelenting severity and dominance essayed by her grandfather upon the women in the family:

He was unkind to Medina and to the women in the household; he was the cruellest man these women had ever known. He was the typical authoritarian patriarch. “A woman needs a man to intercede for her and present her to Allah; a woman’s God is her husband,” he would go as
misquoting the Koran. She hated him. (57)

It is from this microscopic experience she inhaled within her family that she disembarks on revolutionary modality. Thus she takes up her responsibility in the social scenario, directing her talents and knowledge in the uplifting of her people. Her search for her self and her attempts at establishing her womanhood is a matter of unprecedented search for the nation’s identity and emancipation from the dictatorship of the General. The General is the macrocosmical counterpart of her grandfather Gad Thabit. Medina found vent to her hatred against her grandfather by trying to poison his food. And now she has taken up her pen to find an outlet for her vengeance against the General. Medina’s friend, Sagal, rightly describes Medina’s emotions in this context:

Because he had taken full possession of your young souls just as the General has taken possession of the nation’s – and you planned to kill him to recover that for which he would himself crush you. (59)

Medina, along with ten others had formed a clandestine group. Each had hoped in his/her own different way that the arduous journey they have taken up would enable them “to give political expression to their lives, their education, their dreams” (48). While some of them withdrew, unhappy and compromised, others survived through sheer strategical moves and others had to face the naked violence of power and
confronted death, Medina was the only woman of this movement. And in 
this society of man Medina had almost always maintained herself as a 
woman. But the General had almost always overlooked the power of 
Medina and dismissed her activities as unnoteworthy only because she is a 
woman. The General knows that Medina is aggressive and uses harsh 
language against him. In the words of Medina:

The General’s power and I are like two lizards engaged 
in a varanian dance of death; we are two duellists dancing a 
tarantella in which they challenge their own destiny. He is as 
aggressive towards me as I am towards him. He uses violent 
language and so do I. He calls me a dilettante bourgeois,’ ‘a 
reactionary,’ I call him ‘fascist’ and ‘dictator.’ Why has he 
ever put me in prison? The General is primitive . . . in 
thinking that women are not worth taking seriously, which 
all the more proves that he is backward and fascist and, 
worse still, an uneducated imbecile. (48)

The women in Sardines do not resort to blood-shedding or violent 
activism, and this is a common thread through almost all his novels 
which place women at the center. As women take over the struggle 
against tyranny, active resistance gives way to a beleaguered impotence, 
protest becomes gestural than practical. For instance, editing the 
General’s speeches to be put in the daily newspaper, abandoning her and
husband in search of a room of one's own as in the case of Medina and an undeclared withdrawal form the national swimming teams. And for them punishments are also milder than death, imprisonment, torture or exile. Medina is subjected to a virtual house-arrest only, in spite of her public opposition of the General through the newspaper of which she is appointed the editor. At the extremities are the people who connive at elitism, clan nepotism and the Islamic subjugation of women in the name of Marxism and Africanity. Medina stands at an advantageous position because she is one of the leading intellectuals of the country and a journalist and knew six foreign languages. She knew that though she opposed the General’s regime with austerity, the worst that can befall her is house arrest and sexual harassment by her husband, Samater’s, kinsmen:

She was young and beautiful. By the standards of anyone anywhere in the world, she was well-read, one could even say she was very learned. Professionally she was a journalist. She had taken a degree in literature, then applied her talent to writing for the press; she freelanced while still a student in Italy and when she returned to Somalia got a newspaper job. Two and a half years later she was appointed acting editor of the only daily in the country. She came into a head-on confrontation with the authorities over the paper’s
editorial policy. She was sacked. (4)

While Medina influences events from the sidelines, her brother Nasser and the singer Dulman are sentenced to death for disseminating subversive material and become the real casualties of her quest for freedom.

Through his portrayal of educated women like Medina, Sagal, Amina and their associates, Farah presents a penetrating study of the conflict between traditional Muslim culture and the encroaching Western influence. Medina, from all indications, is emancipated, as are the other female characters in her group, to a certain extent. They all enjoy some degree of personal freedom, having been liberated from ignorance of the intellect. This is a major outcome of education. They are also free of economic dependence. In comparison to their older counterparts represented by Ebla, Aowrolla, Qumman, Beydan, Idil and Fatima, they have made remarkable progress. Medina has the benefit of university education, and exposure consequent upon the fact that she is the daughter of an ambassador. She is privileged to have been uprooted from her traditional background and nurtured in the glittering society of many European capitals. She is lucky to enjoy the love and understanding of a humane husband and her country’s recognition of her talent which earns her the editorship of Somalia’s national daily newspaper. Indeed, Medina has a country, and an enviable identity. Her efforts, therefore, are for the
silent majority who submit to the oppressive laws of the fascist state. She regards her mother-in-law, her clan's traditions and the General as obstacles in her ideal world. They are as much her enemies as the general's militia men or the security services. As an active member of a revolutionary group that is not only critical of the General's regime but also actively opposed to it in *Sweet and Sour Milk*, her finest hour comes when she is made the editor of the government's main propaganda machinery. Her genuine revolutionary tendency propels her to challenge the editorial policy of daily singing the General's praises.

Medina is conscious that sacrifice is indispensable in any concerted struggle against established authority. She applies her talent and proficiency in languages and literature into translating twenty world classics from six foreign languages into Somali, thus bringing knowledge closer to the people. She offers counsel and protection to young students who participate in protests against the tyranny of the government. Thus we find Medina a representative of those Somali women who take an active interest and an essential role in the affairs of their society. Their concern with the women's affairs at the domestic level is as responsible as at the public and national levels.

Another strong female individual, relatively obscure, is Dulman. Though she appears only for a short while, the aura created by this illiterate person is noteworthy. She was a singing artist who had once
been in the troupe of Hadraawi where she sang the “General’s sycophantic lyrics” (165). This offer she had accepted because she was in dire need of money and before long, she was announced “The Lady of the Revolution.” Her tour to the Middle East was organized by the Ministry of Information and National Guidance. This tour proved to be epiphanic for her. She witnessed how Somalis live in abject misery in Riyadh, Rome, Geneva, Nairobi and Abu Dhabi. But once the General formed a troupe of younger artists who were more willing to please, Dulman was accused of having clandestine collaboration in Hadraawi’s underground play. She was made to realize that she was powerless. But Dulman becomes an activist in her own way. She defected and joined the struggle against the regime by smuggling abroad tapes of subversive poems that are subsequently worked into unscripted theatrical pieces of performances outside the country.

For Dulman, the assertion of her womanhood meant becoming a mother. But the knowledge that no doctor can help her, instilled into Dulman, more strength and determination in her role in the anti-revolutionary movement. Medina’s brother Nasser meets Dulman after many years and he observes thus:

. . . she was more determined than he had known her, and she appeared confident of her decisions; she knew what she liked, what she hated. And the doctor she had consulted in
Geneva had told her, he knew anyway, that there was nothing any doctor could do for her. So probably this helped her to be more determined, helped her to face life with courage – and alone. (177)

In the barely literate, vivid figure of Dulman, Farah presents the image of an ancient oral Somalia. Despite the contradictions regarding the preservation of traditions in Somalia, oral tradition is one of its rich heritages which is passed on at all times. More than the written medium, it is the oral one that reaches out to the Somalis more effectively. This fact is stated through the words of Dulman: “Russians read, Somalis don’t, for our tradition is oral. One can communicate with the hearts of Somalis only through their hearing faculties” (178). The orality tradition stands out in a century of high technology and thus it must turn to its own account if it is to survive. Significantly she fights despotism with its own weapon, and the slogan painting girls sign themselves with her name, suggesting that the power of the spoken word, the voice of protest from a still vital oral tradition, can be joined to that of the written one.

The educated liberal minded and independent women of *Sardines* are placed against traditional women like Idil and Fatima bint Thabit. This enables Farah a canvas for drawing the need for women to break through the shackles of the inhibiting role entitled them to attain a total emancipation for Somalia. Idil, Medina’s mother-in-law and Fatima bint
Thabit, her mother, react to the restrictions of Muslim religion and the traditional cultural norms by channeling all their emotional resources towards the nurture and protection of their children. Their emotional ties to their children work as a type of blackmail. Idil, for instance, is domineering, and her love for Xaddia and Samater is overbearing. Her interference is responsible for the breakup of Xaddia’s and Samater’s marriages. She is obsessed to have a grandchild from Xaddia that she consults an herbalist on Xaddia’s behalf and goes into an uncontrollable rage when she discovers that Xaddia has been taking pills to prevent pregnancy. Her insistence on having Ubax, Medina’s daughter, circumcised drives Medina and Ubax away from their home. In Medina’s absence she takes complete control of the household and attempts to get her son married to an uneducated and, in her view, more docile and malleable wife. Idil is a representative of traditional authoritarian power.

Fatima, Medina’s mother, is obscure and quiet, as though she “. . . lived in the innards of a whale which hardly went ashore” (153). She is firmly rooted in tradition. Her father has instilled in her that a woman is an inferior being and should never be certain about anything. They should never be given the reason to feel that they are certain about anything and we find Fatima bint Thabit always uncertain. Thus she never had a firm opinion about anything and “. . . never fought over a question of principle or anything which required high ideals or abstract
thoughts” (144). She declares: “The tradition of my people encages me in a four-walled prison and makes me the exclusive property of a man” (144) and admits to Medina:

You are a prisoner of your principles and your secret dreams, Medina; I am a prisoner of a tradition, that I won’t deny. One is always a prisoner of one thing or another: a prisoner of acquired habits or a prisoner of the hope which chains one. (152)

She is chained ankle, wrist and foot to the solidity of her homestead – a typical matriarch born into a slave-owning family. Fatima is of the opinion that the younger generations, no matter how hard they try, can never create any “culture-substitute as faultless and whole as the one Somali society has developed in the past few centuries, any substitute with which to replace the traditional culture” (6). Economic dependence on their men is shown as partly responsible for the submission of their women. The rootedness in tradition is more ardent in women especially these elder ones because it has been nurtured in the deepest recesses of their minds from their early childhood itself and they have no sources of exposure to any other conceptions. Joyce Cary in The Case for African Freedom (1944) observes: “The conservatism of woman is more formidable than that of man because it is anchored to her deepest feelings and to natural responsibilities” (120). Thus they cannot release
themselves from their bondage due to psychological factors because it is difficult to purge oneself of ideas that have been imbibed throughout one’s life. Women like Fatima bint Thabit and Idil play a striking role as instruments whereby the repressive regimes of their settings are highlighted.

Serenely independent and prosperous from her divorces, the Ebla of *From a Crooked Rib* next turns up twenty years later in the all-female cast of the latter novel, *Sardines*. She is loosely attached to Medina’s circle through her daughter Sagal. Knowledge of Ebla’s fate in *Sardines* tends, in fact, to problematize the ending of *From a Crooked Rib*. The Ebla of *Sardines*, appears as a wise liberated matron, educated by her city experience her marriages and divorces. However, it is not clear whether her resumption of her marital relationship with the Italian-educated Awill at the end of the earlier novel is to be seen as entry into another form of sexual slavery or whether traditional structures have been transcended by a new kind of understanding – whether the ‘crooked rib’ stands straight and is entirely her own or whether it is permanently bent into servitude to another.

The choice of rape as a political weapon against the General by three young rebels is significant for two reasons: it indicates that they share his sexual politics, and it re-enacts the original circumcisional violation that serves as an instrument of patriarchal tribal power over
women. In Medina’s doctrinaire vision, her reasons for leaving Samater – her desire to protect Ubax and her disgust with Samater’s acceptance of a government position – are really the same, for societies that terrorize women with circumcision also produce patriarchal monsters like the General. Medina stands up not merely against the patriarchal regime but also the matriarchal power politics too. Her concern is to create free breathing space for women, and so her movement out of Samater’s house to have a room of her own becomes symbolic.

The rigidity of Idil’s tyrannical attitude is the main cause of her revulsion towards Idil. The domineering matriarchs are as autocratic as the patriarchs themselves. Idil always tries to impose her ideals and her power over her two children and tries to tyrannize them. Medina insists upon the presence of “. . . Idil in the General; the personal in the political” (258). Furthermore, the Somali power system, of which the General is merely one manifestation, is as evident in the passive power of the matriarch – the right to be listened to and obeyed, to profit from a son’s prosperity, not to be ejected from his house – as it is in the active power of the patriarch, and political pressure will surely be brought to bear upon any member of the family who breaks with tradition. The gestured struggle of Medina against her mother-in-law is an attempt, at least partially, to defy the authoritarianism of the Generalissimo. Idil rules her son, Samater, with an iron fist and enthusiastically supports the
General. One of the reasons Medina has left her husband is that he is a minister in the General’s government. But Samater is not a supporter of the government. He accepted the position in the face of life-threat against many of his tribesmen. Thus the question in *Sardines* is not whether to oppose the General as much as it is whether one is strong enough to stand free from entanglement with him, and those who value the lives of their family and community too strongly may not be able to do so. The public reason Medina has left her husband’s house is that she is afraid that Idil will have their daughter Ubax circumcised. The two reasons are not so very different, for a society that circumcises women is the same society that produces a dictator like the General. Medina shocks her mother and her mother-in-law by treating Ubax as her equal, her friend. And just as the authoritarian father or mother helps the General to preserve his authoritarian rule, Medina sees her un-authoritarian way of rearing Ubax as a way to break down the authoritarian, clan structures of Somali society. Thus what Medina wants is a home wherein her thoughts can have free outlet without inhibition and fear; a home where no patriarchs and matriarchs will ever set foot.

While *From a Crooked Rib* and *Sardines* have a feminist view point wherein women play the role of liberators, the next novel taken up for this study *Maps* (1986) draws on memory and the past. Artistic creativity had depended on memory from time immemorial. At the time
when written literatures had not yet developed, the orators also relied on memory, which sought the aid of art and architecture and was also dependent on visual memorization. Especially in Africa, memory has always played a vital role in oral tradition. The act of poetic creativity is described by Thomas Hobbes, the seventeenth century philosopher, as a process which involves turning over images stored in the memory, "... as one would sweep a room, to find a jewel; or as a Spaniel ranges a field, till he find a scent; or as man should run over the Alphabet, to start a rime" (Macpherson, 1968, 97). In *Maps*, Farah draws generously on the restorative powers of memory, but they go further to manipulate memory and use it for creative ends. Memory thus becomes a vehicle and tool in the hands of the artist. The simple act of recollection also becomes a complex process of self-questioning. Association of ideas, the re-telling of an old story embedded in the mind becomes revision. Apart from individual memory, collective memory also becomes the source of creativity. Historical and imperialist forces impinge on the consciousness of the artists and on that of their protagonists. The central characters, Askar and Misra, are individuals in their respective societies, and are at the same time mythical, embodying popular belief. The restorative power of memory is fully explored in this novel. Nuruddin Farah’s world of childhood and youth in *Maps* is also explored through the workings of memory. Farah deftly manipulates memory as a tool for artistic
creativity, replacing the traditional figure of the author by a series of counter narratives. The perspective in the novel shifts between the first, second and third person points of view – the You, I and He converge in Misra, the surrogate mother, a central character. In this novel also Farah exploits dreams and visions in such a way that everyday events become symbolic – the archetypal and the mythic are never far away. Farah also employs allusion and flash back to construct his fictional identities.

On the opening page itself the author tells that the past is conjured. The personal past of the character/person/author becomes identified with the past of a nation, i.e., Somalia, and with folk traditions. T. S. Eliot’s notion of the historical sense being an awareness of the “pastness of the past” (1969, 49), and of its presence simultaneously, comes close to Farah’s conception here. Through the main character, Askar, past is restored, and through his fertile imagination, the reader is taken on journeys of discovery. “The journey takes you through numerous doorways,” says the narrator, “and you are enabled to call back to memory events which occurred long before you were a being yourself” (4).

Since the fiction of Farah is a nomadic fiction, drawing upon many cultural and religious sources, it is a testament to cultural mongrelization which has become a standard feature of the colonial and post-colonial world. The novel Maps, a novel of the 1976 war in the Ogaden, dramatizes the resistance to this phenomenon by resurrected
ethnocentrism. One of the most significant consequences of the recent breakup of the Central and Eastern Europe have been the release of the resurgent micro-nationalisms and a reversion to absolutist ideas of the “ethnic nation,” ideas that have habitually taken uncharitable views of “migrant” or “minority” cultures. In the case of “Soviet Literature” the whole concept is gradually displaced and consequently questions of national identity, like Ukranian, Kazakhstani, etc., will be drawn along exclusive ethnic, cultural and religious lines as alternatives to those framed by political ideology and legated by Soviet imperialism. If we are keen enough it can be observed that this has already happened in the African continent, where tribal nationalisms have long over-ridden the constructs of political geography. African literature has recorded this process in a spectacular manner. *Maps* is one such instance.

*Maps* is the story of Askar, an orphaned Somali child of the disputed Ogaden, and his shifting relationship with his adoptive mother Misra, an Oromo woman from the Ethiopian Highlands who is doubtfully accused of betraying the Somali army to the forces of her homeland during Ethiopia’s re-conquest of the Ogaden and is murdered by the Western Somali Liberation Front, of which Askar is a member. But on the last page of the novel we witness Askar being arrested by the Mogadiscio police, on grounds of suspicion of having had a hand in her murder.

The narrative strategy Farah uses in the novel, is that of
retrospective narrative, which is told by turns in the first, third and speculative second person. It recounts the traumas and triumphs of his Ogadenese childhood spent with Misra, and more briefly his adolescence, in Mogadiscio with an adoptive uncle and aunt. The narrative is haunted throughout by memories and intuitions of his foster mother’s physical presence and of a sometimes excruciating intimacy with her, dating from the crucial early years. This bodily closeness, which allows the motherless male child and the childless surrogate mother to live, complementarily inside each other, later resists the abstract intellectual hatred of creed and country that are awakened by the Somali-Ethiopian War in the Ogaden.

In Farah’s fiction it is not surprising to see that domestic and political patriarchies are mutually reinforced. In this novel also, the relations between a nation and its members are expressed through the roles of parents, or guardians, and children. The post-colonial nation is parented, or more precisely, foster-parented. Nationality categories are more accurately read through the positions assumed by the novel’s various surrogate parents towards their charges. Conversely, the destabilization of these categories is perceived through a series of pseudo-incestuous role-reversals that subvert these positions.

The post-colonial territory of Askar’s birth is, like Askar himself, without natural parentage. Neither is it self-creating, as Askar fancies
himself to be – “I had made myself, as though I was my own creation” (23) – though it may have the opportunity to take charge of its own destiny. Such territories are, in reality, the imaginative constructs of colonial and post-colonial cartographers (British, Italian, Ethiopian, Somali), conceived not biologically but intellectually: Askar who is the human analogue of the Somali Ogaden, describes himself as a “creature given birth to by notions formulated in heads, a creature brought into being by ideas” (3). Such creatures are adopted beings with adopted identities defined by adoptive parents, and Farah sustains the analogues between the child’s ties with family and the individual’s more artificial ties with the nation only by replacing Askar’s real parents with a range of surrogates and guardians. These are his foster-mother Misra who, albeit in a purely nominal way, represents the Ethiopian occupier; the childless Mogadiscio intellects Hilaal and Salaado, who represent the modern Somali Republic, seeking to complete itself by the addition of the motherless child of the Ogaden; the Koranic teacher Aw-Adan, who represents the unifying power of Islam; and the brutal Ogadenese Somali Uncle Qorrax. At the end of the novel, each of Askar / Ogaden’s five guardians has had parts of him/herself chopped away. Misra undergoes a mastectomy (and is then murdered and mutilated, her heart torn out); Hilaal has had a vasectomy, his wife Salaado hysterectomy; Aw-Adan has had a leg amputated; and Qorrax has had blood exacted. These
truncations seem to signify allegorically, the further dismemberment and fragmentation of the Ogaden.

In the thematic allegoric scheme, Askar, representing the Ogaden, is born to two patriotic martyrs who give their lives for the cause of its liberation from Ethiopian occupation; his father dies on the day of his birth and his mother soon afterwards. He, thus, becomes the posthumous mythic offspring of Somali nationalist aspiration and the mother republic, and he signifies what is salvaged by his country from the colonial carve-up of the Horn of Africa. Askar-Ogaden is then, strangely, entrusted by her to the “enemy” in the form of the Oromo-Amhara woman Misra. She is considered an “enemy” only in the literal sense of not of the same blood as the child, either in the matrilineal or ethnic sense, or of being an Ethiopian.

As a child, Askar’s budding nationalist aspirations are grounded in the special stifling, suffocating intimacy generated by the one-parent-one child family. Thus, the gender-confused male child first identifies with and then seeks to exorcise the oppressively close maternal presence. As he grows up Askar feels the intense maternal affection to be stifling and develops a natural need to live a life independent of Misra and expresses the desire of each man to kill the “mother” in him: “To live, I will have to kill you” (57). But these emotions get mixed up with an imperative urge to shoulder the burden of his biological inheritance, left him by his
natural mother, by defending his country from the people of his nurturing mother; even though he has only the most theoretical sense of the former, compared with the intensely felt proximity of the latter. That is why he remains utterly indifferent and rather ruthless in his attitude when towards the end of the novel Misra is raped by a gang of Somali youths and her part of the house was burnt suspecting her of treachery: “We’re not asking her to play the heroine in a tragic farce, no, we’re not. We’re asking her, if we’re asking her anything at all, to prove that she didn’t give away an essential secret. Prove” (195). Askar’s whole world disintegrates when he hears that his ever so affectionate motherly Misra has betrayed. His Somali blood forces him to believe it rather than questioning it:

Once, long ago, I said to myself, Misra “was” my cosmos. She was good, she was kind, she was motherly and I loved her warmly, I cared about her tenderly. Now that cosmos has been made to disintegrate, and Misra has betrayed. What am I to do? I, who still love her! . . . Nothing was clear in my head. One moment, I was young and with Misra; the next moment, I was allowing a country to be born inside of my thoughts. (180-81)

Askar has a strange obsession with the idea that there is a woman living inside him. But this has little to do with Misra, the woman who is
most physically present in his life. It seems rather to be tied up with an
abstract guilt complex over the spectral figure of his biological mother,
“. . . she who claimed she ‘lived’ in him who had survived her” (110),
and whom he accuses himself of killing at his own birth: “I feel as if my
mother’s death was my birth, or, if you prefer, her death gave birth to
me” (158). The feeling is thus filial than sexual: it is specifically the
mother, rather than the woman in him, whom Askar desires to preserve.
Allegorically he is trying to preserve the spirit of Somaliness in him, the
spirit of his motherland. Misra had predicted this slant of outlook in
Askar long back itself and it is only this prediction coming true when he
rejects Misra on the guilt of suspected betrayal. He identifies himself
with the outlook of Somali liberation group:

“One day . . . one day, you will understand the distinction,
you’ll know who your people are and who mine are. One
day,” she prophesied, speaking into that void of a future in
which she hoped she would meet again, “you will identify
yourself with your people and identify me out of your
community.” (99)

At his circumcision, which is his first lesson in frontiers, Askar is
ritually separated from Misra and begins to define his “specific” Somali
adult maleness against his “generic” Ethiopian mother-figure. These are
the terms used by his uncle Hilaal, who argues that, “Somali . . . is
specific. . . . Somalia is unique. It is named after Somalis, who share a common ancestor and who speak the same language – Somali” (156) while

Ethiopia is the generic name of an unclassified mass of different peoples, professing different religions, claiming to have descended from different ancestors. Therefore, ‘Ethiopia’ becomes the generic notion, expansive, inclusive (155).

After his painful separation from his adoptive mother, he is given his first maps and calendars and these become the “mental charts” on which he measures, in time and space, both “the uncoverable distance between Misra and himself” (101) and the Somali advances and retreats in the Ogaden. Significantly as the war in the Ogaden escalates, the seven-year-old Askar is physically moved to Mogadiscio and his childhood dependence on Misra comes to an end. Thus the first steps to his psychological independence initiated an involvement with his homeland’s political independence, and from the moment of his arrival in the Somali capital, national military progress in the Ogaden is measured symbolically by the distance that has grown between the Somali child and the adoptive Ethiopian mother whose foreign presence within him he feels he must get rid of. This physical distance becomes increasingly a perceptual distance between her physical reality and his mental picture of
her. When he meets her again in the capital, years later, he feels “totally detached” and weaned from his “mother-figure,” for “in the process of looking for a substitute he had found another – Somalia, his mother country” (100). He now feels that he can espouse one of his rival adoptive mothers only by denying the other, and the earlier ominous words of his childhood, “To live, I will have to kill you,” now becomes dressed in sense, in the quite different context of her suspected betrayal of the Somali army, in the tone of patriotic duty. But still, his sense of his separate identity is continually undermined by his long and deep intimacy with Misra and, when placed beside this, his claims for the primacy within himself of his unknown biological mother are less than persuasive. Indeed, Askar is culturally formed and molded by Misra in his upbringing. For example, his fantasy that he is one of the races of epic miracle children who kill their mothers at birth is implanted in his mind by Misra’s Oromo oral tales and folklore: thus even the idea of his natural mother’s special moral claim upon him derives from the culture of his adoptive mother.

In the historical period covered by the novel, Askar, like his beloved Ogaden, is separated from both his mothers – from his Somali motherland and from his Ethiopian stepmother at her death. During the so called tragic weekend in which Russian-backed Ethiopian forces retake the Ogaden, six hundred Somali patriots are betrayed to the enemy and
massacred, and among the refugees flooding into Mogadiscio, is Misra, the one accused of betrayal. Embarrassed by her arrival in the capital and by reports of her reputed treachery, Askar is further traumatized by her final abduction and death at the hands of the Liberation Front. Her mutilated corpse is fished out of the bay. Askar falls mysteriously and evasively ill at each of these crisis points. Later on it is transpired that one of the things he had been evading may be his ill-defined complicity with Misra’s murder.

The association of Misra with the foreign occupation of the Ogaden is ultimately a spurious one. She is, after all, an Amharic speaking Oromo, not a full-blooded Ethiopian, and she has more natural affinity with the occupied zone than the occupier. She is herself an occupied possession on Somali as an Ethiopian territory, a slave girl, sexually colonized by a host of “uncles”: the Ogaden’s symbolic guardian is herself and the guarded property, violated by various occupying patriarchal wardens. Misra also, like Askar, is an uprooted orphan and her Oromo culture, like the Somali one, has been historically marginalized by its orality and oppressed by a literate Ethiopia. She is, in fact, doubly displaced: first as an Oromo living in Ethiopia and forced to speak the language of the dominant Amharic culture, and then, as an Ethiopian reviled by Somali ethno-centrism. Ironically, Misra is a fitting image of the Ogaden that she is accused of betraying. Just like the
Ogaden, Misra is brutally abused by Somali patriarchy, is raped by her supposed defenders, and is finally mutilated and dismembered, her heart torn out by war. For the bigoted members of the Liberation Front, who remain convinced that they need no proof of Misra’s guilt, she is the diseased part of Somali heritage, to be surgically removed.

People like Misra, who live fragmentarily, through a number of cultures as Misra does, always have missing parts of themselves elsewhere, on the other side of some border, as in her case, whether in Mogadiscio or in Ethiopia. Misra is not a unitary being who can be comprehensively enclosed and defined by maps, but represents the various parts of cultures and countries – Oromo, Ethiopian, Somali – which are to be found in mongrelized, migration prone areas like the Ogaden. Farah has said that the Kallafo of his Ogaden childhood “boasted a Somali speaking civilian population, a large community engaged in business, as well as Amharic speaking soldiers . . . recruited from all the ethnic groups of the Ethiopian empire” (1990, 1264). Askar likes to think of Ethiopia as a patchwork country, but it is really the Ogaden – crossed, as a veteran soldier remarks, by different waves of migrants twenty, fifty, or a hundred years apart over a period of centuries – which expresses the hybridization of cultural reality. This irretrievable cultural hybridization is most keenly represented by Misra.

Misra is born to an Amhara nobleman and an Oromo servant. She
lives with a Somali family and has Qotto and Ethiopian lovers. Consequently she has access to and concourse with all of the fertile neighbouring micro-cultures and tribal nationalisms by which the Ogaden is hedged around and diversified, in spite of its narrowly ethnocentric efforts to resist them. Creative energy, it seems lives along these borders: Askar notes that two thirds of Somalia’s major poets come from its marginal territories and that one such peripheral people, the Boran, provide the Mogadiscio “mingis” with its ceremonial language. Appropriately, the Ogaden, which is a collection of border territories, is symbolically entrusted by Askar’s natural mother to a border person, to one of mixed descent and therefore, with a choice of identities. This entrustment by a Somali woman to an Oromo servant girl, reaching across artificial boundaries erected by nationalistic obsessions, is done in recognition of their common Cushitic heritage and interpenetrating cultures. The reputedly “specific” Somali culture which uncle Hilaal theorizes about is seen, in reality, to participate in a border generic group and it is surely no accident that, for all his talk of specificity, there are actually few “pure” Somalis in the novel. And those who exist are surrounded by people of Oromo, Qotto, Boran, Adenese, Arab and Ethiopian extraction. Misra’s name exists in three of these languages and in its Somali form is an incomplete version of the Ethiopian “Misrat” meaning ‘foundation of the earth.’ It refers to the elemental and the
non-partisan, unmapped and unfrontiered earth; it is an appropriately loose signifier for an area as diverse as the Ogaden.

The two key motifs in the novel contest this linguistic and cultural hybridization and play contrapuntally against them in the text: the first is incest, the other is maps. Askar says quite early in the novel itself that Misra regards the fabric of Somali society as basically incestuous. In the course of his narrative, incest becomes an expressive image of the narrow, inward-looking ethnocentrism of Somali culture, its failure to diversify itself by recognizing its kinship with neighboring people in a broader generic family. It is also used to demonstrate the way in which the patriarchal abuse of power in the Ogaden shores up micro-national divisions among its chequered subjects. The region’s paternal guardians seem to make a habit of abusing the foreign wards entrusted to their care and protection, thus committing a figurative incest and identifying the national or the ethnic other as a mere object of degradation. Misra is the good guardian because, unlike her shifting political counterparts, she is sufficiently conversant with and tolerant of all her people’s cultures to make allowance for their different partisan relevancies and myopias. When she admits to buying milk for the Ethiopian soldiers she protests that “she was doing something for ‘her people,’” and then adds the comment, “The problem is, who are my people?” (193). The phrase is, of course, deliberately ambiguous. Both sides are “her people” and she
provides both with what they must need: milk for the Ethiopians and money for the Somalis. Misra serves all members of her larger, generic Ogaden “family” giving to each what is good for them and overriding the incestuous inwardness of Somali ethnicity.

Another stronger bastion of resistance to cultural and linguistic diversification is Askar’s maps. In an interview with Patricia Morris, Farah has said of the colonial maps of Africa that “[w]e should redraw [them] according to our economic and psychological frontiers carved out of our regions” (1996, 54). And yet it is no accident that Askar has a nostalgic hankering for the time, during World War II, when all of the Somali territories except for Djibouti were under a single, colonial administration. His own politico-linguistic map of Greater Somalia is, in reality, as much a fiction of cultural geography as the colonial maps were figments of political geography. History, Hilaal reminds us, “is made by those who have access to sign-systems” (168) and is imposed upon those who have not, and the coercive cartographic enclosure enforced by the newly-literate Somalis override socio-political (and increasingly cultural) divisions as the old Western imperial ones overrode ethnic and linguistic barriers. The Somalis of the WSLF regard their people as united by language, divided by maps and the independent nation state of the Somali Republic imagines that its cultural-linguistic “specificity” gives it a unique claim on those territories where Somali, in one fashion or another, is still
spoken.

The chief objection to this new cartographic hegemony is that it claims to unite people who, both linguistically and in other respects, are becoming more and more diverse — who have in fact become irredeemably mongrelized — while it artificially sets apart other groups of people who, in reality are much more closely bonded. In the former category belongs the Somali scattered through Kenya and Tanzania, like the tutor Cusmaan, Askar’s intellectual mentor in Mogadiscio. They use a bastardized, ungrammatical form of Somali similar to that spoken by the Ogadenese Somalis, and their subscription to Somali cultural values is as adulterated and compromised by the dominant host-cultures as is that of the Ogadenese marginal groups, the Oromo and Qotto, by the Somali one. But the westernized urbanites of Mogadiscio, at the hub of the nation-state, do not identify closely with their Ogadenese brethren, but snobbishly regard them not only as linguistically incompetent, but also as lacking in self-sufficiency and wholeness. No sooner as Hilaal declared categorically that “[y]ou are either a Somali or you aren’t” (155) than he proceeds to postulate a halfway classification of extra-territorial “unpersons” who cannot be admitted to a full Somali identity. All the indicators suggest that the linguistic homogeneity and cultural exclusiveness of Greater Somalia, if they ever existed, are rapidly disintegrating.
Conversely, in the second category there is Misra, a non-ethnic Somali speaker, who though fully acculturated, is automatically mistrusted and is denied a place on her ward’s identity papers that she has done more than enough to earn. Misra fosters a Somali child and teaches it its national language and folk-lore, slaves in a Somali-Ogaden household where she is sexually abused by Somali men, and is, at last, doubtfully accused of treachery by them and murdered. Meanwhile, in the same Greater Somalia where children are made to learn their genealogies by heart as proof of their ethnicity, honorary citizenship is granted to another non-ethnic Somali, the sullen Qotto school teacher, Aw-Adan, for no other reason than that his Arabic input into Somali culture is, politically more acceptable than Misra’s Amharic one. And significantly, it is this Aw-Adan, whose loyalty is never questioned, who accuses Misra of treachery, thereby making his own insecure position a little safer by denouncing another foreigner.

Now the most significant question arises: what is a Somali and what does it mean to be one? It opens up a Pandora’s Box of political, ethnic and moral quandaries. Is it to speak or to read the language, or to be born in the homeland or one of its territories? Very few of the novel’s Somali speakers are Somali’s by birth. Is it to be a patriot in the cause of the Ogaden? Then does Qorrax, who openly collaborates with the Ethiopian conquerors, have any right to his Somali identity? Who, if
anyone, is fit to be the political guardian of the disputed Ogaden territory to which Somalia lays claim? Who can claim to have “authored” it parentally? The criteria for nationhood postulated by Askar, Hilaal and the WSLF patriots are as erratic and capricious as the Somali map of the Ogaden, which ignores its multilingual character and fifty percent of Amharic speaking population. There is little ground left for belief in anything that could be described as a “pure,” “authentic” or “natural” Somali identity. In one way or another, each of the novel’s character stands, like a girl-apparition in one of Askar’s many dreams, in a borrowed skin, and the Somali map, in its peculiarly monolithic contours and fine disregard of multiculturalism, provides an inexact, inadequate model of reality. Maps, like the wars fought over them to redraw national terrains, distort and destroy, and they are appropriately, attended by funeral images throughout the book. The “notional truths” expressed by the Somali maps correspond to the political actuality of the Horn of Africa as little as Askar’s moral conception of Misra coincides with the real woman. Misra, like the political map of the territory of which she is the figurative custodian, is in his consciousness a suitably floating signifier, zoned into many stereotyped figures and rival fantasy embodiments: on one side, mother martyr and victimized nation; on the other, wicked step-mother, betrayer, and national enemy. A nominal sense of reality so prevails over the actual, and the signifier over its
referent, that at one point Askar even thinks of her as “... a creature of his own invention” (112) and it is difficult to say exactly what does constitute her reality, since she seems (like the Ogaden) to have her being explicated solely through the guardians and wards who control her existence in one or another. While filling the papers of his identity card, against the space of “Nationality,” it was typed “Somali.” Askar was not sure whether his foster mother of his “illiterate past” (172) would also be able to move along with him to Mogadiscio as a Somali. What right has Misra to a Somali identity? Uncle Hilaal’s answer to his doubts goes thus:

A Somali . . . is a woman or child whose mother tongue is Somali. Here, mother tongue is important . . . . Not what one looks like . . . . The Somali are a homogeneous people; they are homogeneous culturally speaking and speak the same language wherever they may be found. . . . If her [Misra’s] language is as good as yours, then I doubt if any bureaucratic clown would dare stand in her way or dare deny her what is hers by right. (174)

But the truth is that Misra is disintegrated in spite of the Somali speaking criteria of Somaliness just because of her Amharic genealogy.

*Askar “is almost always satisfied with the surface of things . . . a mirror in which your features, your looks, may be reflected” (136). For*
him Misra is an image of the Ogaden in so far as both are mirrors in which the beholder sees his own desired reflected, and maps like mirrors reflect the dispositions of their makers. Hilaal concedes he identifies a truth in the maps he draws, but is aware of the dangers of ethnocentric myths. He adds: “The question is does ‘truth’ change? . . . . The Ogaden, as Somali, is truth. To the Ethiopian map-maker, the Ogaden, as Somali, is untruth” (228-229). In the allegoric scheme of the novel, Askar represents a chauvinistic Somali concept of the Ogaden, as his real mother represents the dead dream of an ethnic nation, of “Mother Somalia” (101) as the Ogaden’s natural (101). Misra is the signifier of a broader hybrid, generic concept of the Ogaden as a place of mixed ethnicity, and her hybridization signifies everything that Askar must resist and destroy to realize his sectarian Somali dreams. “One day, you will identify yourself with your people and identify me out of your community,” she prophesies, “you might even kill me to make your people’s dream become a tangible reality” (99). What Askar does is tantamount to these things. Together with his uncles, he “Others” Misra, misogynistically and xenophobically, as woman and foreigner, as a sexual and political territory to be invaded and colonized; and this separative process, even as it destabilizes roles in the parent-child relationship, reaffirms divisive gender and nationality categories. Meanwhile, like Misra, the neutral ground of the disputed strip of land
does not discriminate between its diverse occupying nationalities and the rival maps that overlay it like the layers of a palimpsest. The “truth” of maps is, finally, a highly subjective, ethnocentric kind of truth, and the stable identity presupposed by the idealistic vision of the map-maker is non-existent.

The idea that the nation can be signified by its maps comes up for closer scrutiny in Farah’s novel. The Somali nation lacks the authority of a state since its people are spread across different countries, hence the ironic suggestion that the Somali people “. . . have a case in wanting to form a state of their own nation” (156). One could of course argue, as many Somali nationalists have done, that Somalia needs to redraw its maps to reinvent its nationhood. But such an act of reinvention would also threaten the mythology that gives the Somali idea its doctrinal hold—that the Somali are a homogeneous people. Does this mean that an Ethiopian who adopts the Somali culture and language can also be considered a Somali? This is the problem posed by Misra in the novel: although she will not be accepted as a Somali, by all the indices used to determine a Somali, Misra is surely one. But she is always denied this identity because of her Ethiopian origins. And it was for this one reason that she was considered a traitor:

“‘The problem is who are ‘my people’?” she said. “For me my people are Askar’s people; my people are my former
husband’s people, the people I am most attached to. Those who were looking for a traitor and found one in me, rationalize that because I wasn’t born one of them, I must be the one who betrayed.” (193)

Misra is the figure Farah uses to deconstruct the hegemonic doctrine of Somali national purity.

Furthermore, Misra allows Askar to recognize that given identities have an adverse effect too, especially when they deform the self, and that national identity is a strategy that goes beyond the cultural text and territorial claims. An important strategy of national formation in Maps is the use of human body as a third site of identity formation, a site beyond Askar’s individual fantasies about Somalia as signified by maps and official doctrines of the Somali nation as a natural entity. In examining the relation between Askar and Misra, in ‘bodily’ terms, the narrative questions the ‘wall’ that is supposed to separate Ethiopians from Somalis. This wall, it seems, has been elected at the expense of human bodies which the state finds it easy to dispense with to realize its ideals. To ally himself with the ‘notion of nationhood,’ Askar is momentarily forced to detach himself from “his mother-figure Misra” (100). His desire now is to become “a fully grown man, a man ready for a conscription into the liberation army, ready to die and kill for his mother country, ready to avenge his father” (110). The ideal of manhood which underlies
nationhood is, nevertheless, perverse – its logic demands that Askar should even be ready to kill the woman who has been his mother because she is of Ethiopian origin. It is also the source of acute anxiety, an anxiety that forces Askar’s body to recoil from the doctrines of manhood as he begins to menstruate, an act that dissolves the binary opposition between men and women. If men can menstruate, then the biological division between the sexes is called into question; and if such natural divisions can be collapsed, then the fixedness of the Ethiopian / Somali chasm cannot derive its legitimacy from the laws of nature.

In the end, Askar’s body seems to reject notions of nation formation as defined by the state for three reasons: the ideals embedded in such notions can only be achieved at the expense of human bodies whose collective desires the state claims to represent; he cannot countenance his separation from the woman whom he has called mother just because she was born in another country; and because he realizes that the Somalia which Said Barre has scripted is an ideological practice which the regime uses to justify its authoritarian grip and stifling of the Somali people. When Askar makes Misra, the Ethiopian woman, the heroine of his narrative – “Misra was the heroine of your tale now and you played only a minor supporting role” (148) – he begins to acknowledge that the official idea of the homogeneous and unique Somali nation is quite arbitrary, if not false. Like other recent writings
from Africa, *Maps* is a narrative whose goal is to critique, rather than simply valorize, the notions of African identity inherited from a colonial past and sanctioned by independence. In the process, the modern state becomes. In the words of Jean Franco, “a kind of illusionist which needs the past only as a lament and whose miracle is the economic miracle of dependency” (Veeser, 1989, 206). *Maps* foregrounds Somalia’s aspiration to true nation-statehood and the ensuing anxieties by neighboring states about Somali irredentism. The Somali people were divided among four different imperial powers, the British, the Italians, the French, and Imperial Ethiopia. At independence, only British and Italian Somali land were joined together as the Republic of Somalia. The five-pointed star in the national flag always reminds Somalis of the other three territories still under foreign domination: Northern Kenya, the Ogaden, and Djibouti.

Farah thematizes all these facets of national identity in *Maps* by focusing on the Ogaden War of 1977. He concentrates on the internal conflict, but the international involvement of the United States and the Soviet Union makes itself as an implied issue. The global conflict between capitalism and communism and the vicarious wars, together with the love of many African potentates for self-aggrandizement by playing the Russian-American rivalry card, constitutes the background to *Maps*. The plot summary is misleading, since Farah no longer follows a
linear narrative pattern. The time sequence and narrative perspective—time and space, events and characters present themselves with a variety of contradictory associations. Meaning becomes ambiguous, multi-layered and inconclusive.

The plurality of meanings and voices manifest themselves through the three narrators: Askar appears as a first person narrator, a self-centered egotistic chatter-box persona. His narrative stance is contrasted by a third person authorial narrator with an uninvolved, condensed narrative voice, addresses his/her counterpart with a familial “you.” This should be Misra, the mother, addressing Askar and the children of the nation. The family, highlighted as the central institution in the socio-political fabric in the dictatorship novels, now falls victim to fragmentation: all the major characters are fatherless, motherless, or childless. Social organization is not based on the Somali extended family, nor the nuclear family, but on an amputated dual or triangular personal relationship. Farah even expands the image of amputation and fragmentation: Misra suffers amputation of one of her breasts due to cancer; Aw-Adan, teacher of the Qoran, loses one of his legs; Uncle Qorrax’s fingers are hacked off. All these images are revealed as illustrations of different readings of the Somali national mythology, as it was passed on in the oral poetry of “The Sayyid.” Sayyid and Farah celebrates Somalia as a beautiful and liberal woman who has affairs with
five suitors. Three of the affairs end in miscarriages – a parable for the aborted dreams of “great Somalia.” When Farah retells this story from the oral tradition, he injects relativistic or divergent connotations on two levels. First, it is Misra, the Oromo-Amharic bastard who educates Askar about his national heritage. Secondly, he likens Misra to the mother Somalia of the oral tradition. Misra too has affairs with five different men, representing the various ethnic, social and religious groups at the Horn of Africa. It is not Misra who betrays her suitors, but the suitors who enslave her, betray her, rape her, force her into abortion. Through Farah’s retelling, the national epic acquires a new unheroic dimension. The moving story of the nation that has to forego the perfection of national unity is turned into a tale about intrigues, betrayal and blackmail, where national pride is whipped up and strangers are prosecuted. Farah elaborates the metaphor of the nation as mother when he parallels the events and recurring cycles in Somalia’s history with the pregnancies, miscarriages and menstruation cycles of Misra. Farah even embarks on a gender oriented interpretation of history.

With Askar’s circumcision and initiation into adulthood, another set of images is imported into the narration that provided the title of the novel: maps. The prominent gift for his initiation is a globe, a map of the world. Maps are perceived as particularly reliable replicas of reality, and yet maps too are only reconstruction of reality. Farah emphasizes this
aspect of maps as reconstructed reality. He shows us Askar and his freedom fighters plugging flags onto the maps pretending to document the progress of the Ogaden war while they are really indulging in nationalist wishful thinking. Farah uses the one-dimensional medium of the map to inscribe broader dimensions by mapping out social, cultural and mental spaces. Farah’s post modern narrative stance leaves it to Askar to unveil his naïve enthusiasm for a national awakening of Somalia and ethno-fundamentalist attitudes. Farah also provides us with an insight into rifts and cracks within Somalian society that resulted in the balkanization of the country and this is the topic of Secrets.

Against the backdrop of the Ogaden war and the nationalist craze, Farah took up the issue of the ethnic purity with Oromo-Amharic mongrel Misra and the pure bred Somali Askar in Maps. Now we get an inclusive idea of what actually a Somali identity is. On going through the novel we can see that more than anybody else, it is Misra who emerges as a true Somali. Only by birth she is a non-Somali. In all other sense she is one. So now we rethink about the homogeneity of maps too. Some recent writing from the post-colonial world, particularly that from the white Commonwealth of Australia and Canada (Malouf, Atwood, Kroetsch) has challenged the homogeneity of ethnocentric colonial discourses by projecting spaces other than those inscribed on the prevailing hegemonic map. These resistive readings celebrate the diversity and mixed ethnicity
of formerly colonized cultures previously ignored or stigmatized by the dominant colonial one, and indicate a shift away from cultural homogeneity. In the contemporary Africa of *Maps*, however, the new dominant discourse is itself insularly and oppressively ethnic. For Farah, ethnicity here becomes the hegemonic and re-territorializing power, not the revisioning agent or counter-discourse: the regional map is the instrument of new, post-colonial ethnocentrism and false cultural homogeneities forced upon a hybrid, mongrelized reality. Thus Farah’s novel offers us new maps for old.

Thus we witness Farah successfully culling the feminist and ethnic attributes to establish the true identity of an ethnic nation. His works are conditioned in favor of women. His understanding of the inner turmoil of women in a strangling atmosphere of the old conventional community is remarkable. He champions the cause of women through his nationalistic fervor and the cause of the nation through his feminist ardency. As said earlier, Farah is proud of the typical Somali character – intelligent, sophisticated, subtle, proud and individualistic. And these aspects are attributed to his women too alike – Medina, Ebla, Sagal, Duniya, etc., and his women participate in the nationalist struggle as like any man in the Liberation Front. The employment of oral tradition is an important aspect of Somali cultural heritage or rather of Africa itself and it is an important tool employed by Farah in the revival of the tradition. And
through *Maps* we have seen the creation of a Somali identity through Misra. Misra is constantly under the question of her cultural and national identity even though the Somali society in which she lives should have been convinced of her Somaliness when she brought up Askar as a true Somali. So it can be concluded that Farah’s vision seems to be to re-draw the maps of Somaliness, based not on the principles of birth and nationality, but that of sensibility.