

Mapping the Self and the Nation through the Narrative in Nuruddin Farah's MAPS

Dr. Shima Mathew*

Assistant Professor of English, TM Jacob Memorial Government College, Manimalakunnu, Koothattukulam Ernakulam, Kerala, India

***Corresponding author**

Dr. Shima Mathew

Article History

Received: 11.12.2017

Accepted: 17.12.2017

Published: 30.12.2017

DOI:

10.36347/sjahss.2017.v05i12.013



Abstract: Nuruddin Farah's *Maps* is the story of the orphan Askar, a child of the Ogaden, a border territory claimed by both Somalia and Ethiopia. Askar is a child with magical, mysterious gifts, whose coming to consciousness is both a personal biography and a history of the fierce war of liberation being waged in the Horn of Africa between the Western Somali Liberation Front and the Ethiopian forces that presently occupy the Ogaden. This paper is an attempt to study Farah's concept of nation, self and identity in the narrative. It also studies the narrative strategy of endless telling and retelling from a variety of perspectives to map the concept of self and nation.

Keywords: Narration, Nation, Identity, Second Person Narrative, Narrative Perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

Nuruddin Farah, Somalia's internationally acclaimed and award-winning novelist describes his purpose for writing as an attempt "to keep my country alive by writing about it", and for Nadine Gordimer he was one of the continent's "true interpreters". Exiled from Somalia for his critical and satirical remarks against the Siyad Barre regime, in his second novel, *A Naked Needle*, Nuruddin Farah has continued writing only about Somalia, a coping strategy he adopted over the years, to overcome his grief and loss.

Despite being exiled for several decades now, Somalia has been the creative matrix for Nuruddin Farah and a psychic necessity too, as evidenced in all of his eleven novels, one non-fictional study on the Somali diaspora and several essays and articles. The *Blood in the Sun Trilogy*, labeled as 'body novels' by Farah, deals with specific historic events that caused a rupture in the politics of Somalia. The Trilogy comprises *Maps*, *Gifts* and *Secrets*. The first novel in Nuruddin Farah's "Blood in the Sun" trilogy, *Maps*, set during the Ogaden conflict of 1977, employs the technique of second-person narration for exploring questions of self, nation and cultural identity in the post-independence world.

Maps are the story of the orphan Askar, a child of the Ogaden, a border territory claimed by both Somalia and Ethiopia. His father was killed in the independence struggle against the Ethiopians in the Ogaden. His natural mother having apparently died in childbirth, he is found unwashed and unattended with bloody finger stains round his neck. Askar is lovingly raised by Misra, a lowly outsider of Ethiopian ethnicity. Their bond is so strong that little Askar sees himself as an extension of Misra's body; he calls Misra his cosmos. But when Askar is seven, the Ogaden War breaks out and he is sent to his aunt and uncle in Mogadishu,

modern intellectuals without children who love Askar as though he was their own son. In Mogadishu he strives to find himself just as Somalia struggles for national identity. His uncle wishes for him to receive a college education and become a teacher, but other family relatives want him to join the Ogaden resistance movement and carry on where his father left off in seeking to free the Ogaden from Ethiopia. On the eve of his decision regarding his future course of action, Misra arrives in Mogadishu and wishes to see him; this event complicates his life and his decision because she is believed to have betrayed a resistance cell to the Ethiopians and caused the deaths of 600 people. His final meeting with her and her subsequent fate lay the groundwork for his ultimate decision as to whom he is in all its senses and to what he will commit himself.

Farah uses the narrative strategy of endless telling and retelling from a variety of perspectives to map the concept of self and nation. From the dubious beginnings Askar negotiates his path through the fraught terrain of gender and nationality. The text spans the 18 or so years of Askar's life's experience. It begins with him recreating his origins and attempting to "conjure the past" (Farah p.3), and it ends with him naming himself to the police. He repeats the story until

"time grew on [his] face, as he told the story yet again, time grew like a tree..." until finally "allowing for his different personae to act as judge, as audience and as witness, Askar told it to himself." (Farah p.246). Askar's dilemma—whether to "belong" to his loving (Ethiopian) foster mother Misra or join the Somalian Liberation Front and emulate his father's selfless courage—is subtly explored by Farah. "Somehow, I felt I knew I had to betray one of them. I had to betray either Misra, who had been a mother to me, or my mother country." (Farah p.172). "I was at loss, I was very sad" (Farah p. 173). A tense narrative, *Maps* is alive with local colour that's both an affecting character study and a dramatic allegory of the confusions still plaguing a wounded and deeply conflicted society.

The problematic border-issue between Ethiopia and Somalia is fictionalized in *Maps* using the mother-child dyad. The orphaned Askar, though of Somali origin, is reared by Misra, an Oromo in Kallafo, in the Ethiopian-administered Ogaden. Askar's relationship with Misra is described with savage tenderness and a brilliant accumulation of intimate detail. Askar is a kind of wonder child, a boy-man, in some ways the Somali messiah, the "wise child of his people," obsessed with the circumstances of his birth, possibly his own midwife, perhaps even his own creator, since the existence of his parents is problematical. Askar enjoys a relationship with Misra so close as to be almost incestuous and sufficiently powerful to cut them off from the rest of the world. Askar is emotionally inseparable from Misra, but as he comes of age, he gets deeply involved in the nationalistic struggle of the Somalis in the Ogaden and this focused concentration requires that he sever ties with her. Caught between conflicting loyalties of mother and motherland, Askar's life 'becomes a war of sorts.' *Maps* are in part a tale of divided loyalties, of a young man's struggle to define identity in relation to these opposing forces.

"Maps" is a narrative about borders, boundaries and territorial ambitions, what Nuruddin Farah calls "pastures of the imagination". It deals with "everything" about the author's home country and achieves this by means of a discursive and varying narrative technique. The ultimate symbol in this novel is the map, a metaphor for identity. Maps can be destructive when they are drawn by those bent on unprincipled exploitation, just as identities imposed by a self-serving power or "other" can be destructive. The maps in this book stand for the conflict over his native Ogaden, which according to the official map is part of Ethiopia, but according to the Somalians part of their country. The novel sets out to delineate the anguish of living on a continent where national boundaries have been drawn by foreign hands, where geography merges with politics and where, even though the old imperialists have departed, their successors have inherited not only their powers but their maps. In short, this is a novel of modern Africa, in which the growing pains of the

orphan boy, Askar, and his fragmentary memories of his dead parents reflect the wider tragedy of a dismembered Somalia - a country split among the competing owners of its various territories. Empowerment, Askar learns, consists of drawing one's own map. Unfortunately, Askar is far better at mechanically redrawing maps than he is at defining his own identity. Farah implies that the political and sexual confusion suffered by Askar is not his problem alone, but also plagues the Somali people as a whole.

In Farah's *Maps*, the concept of the nation is protean and even elusive given the case of the postcolonial Somalia. In *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha seeks to refine our understanding of the relation between the emergence of the nation and the role of narrative. He notes that the emergence of what he calls "the political rationality of the nation" can be depicted as a form of narrative—that is, through its use of textual strategies, metaphoric displacements, sub-texts and figurative stratagems—which leads to a more subtle understanding of the indeterminate nature of nation building that is always in formation rather than the rigid structures one encounters in traditional, authoritative sources. Hence his contention:

To encounter the nation as it is written displays a temporality of culture and social consciousness more in tune with the partial, overdetermined process by which textual meaning is produced through the articulation of difference in language; more in keeping with the problem of closure which plays enigmatically in the discourse of the sign. Such an approach contests the traditional authority of those national objects of knowledge—Tradition, People, the Reason of State, High Culture, for instance—whose pedagogical value often relies on their representation as holistic concepts located within an evolutionary narrative of historical continuity. Traditional histories do not take the nation at its own word, but, for the most part, they do assume that the problem lies in the interpretation of 'events' that have a certain transparency of privileged visibility." [2].

Conceiving the nation in narrative terms, allows us to speak of it in a more tentative and less totalizing manner. It allows us to remember that the nation or nation building is always an un-finished, in-completed task. Structured in such a way, it remains ready always to absorb the varied and ambivalent cultural strands which, in the process, are always re-forming and re-formulating the nation. This is one reason why there can never be a fixed narrative of the nation. Salman Rushdie in his essay "*Notes on Writing and the Nation*" compares the development of a story through the pages towards its culmination "to the self-image of the nation moving through history towards its manifest destiny" [3].

Farah's itinerary is clearly political and these personal borders spillover, fuse with the larger issue of national borderlands. He traces a route which traverses both the realm of personal identity characterized by diffused boundaries and liminal psychic zones and the realm of politics where the Somali Nation is in search of its state. However, in a conversation between Askar and Misra, they both talk about identity:

I asked, 'your people, my people –what or who are these?' 'One day,' she said, speaking of a future in which we would meet, 'one day, you will understand the distinction [...] 'you will identify yourself with your people and identify me out of your community. (p. 95).

As Edward Said asks “when did we become "a people"? When did we stop being one? Or are we in the process of becoming one? What do these big questions have to do with our intimate relationships with each other and with others?”[4], almost exact midpoint in the text, Askar asks his surrogate mother, “Misra, where precisely is Somalia?” His poignant question pinpoints a problem which resonates throughout this work; can one define the borders of one's self if one cannot define the borders of one's nation?

Salman Rushdie opines in *Step Across this Line: Collected Nonfiction 1992-2002* that “[g]ood writing assumes a frontierless nation. Writers who serve frontiers have become border guards” [5]. Askar's parallel search for national as well as personal identity could in theory lead him towards nationalistic insularity. *Maps* demonstrate the drive and desire for, as well as the inefficacy of borders- whether lingual, temporal, corporeal or psychic. Farah's political quest is a demonstration of Frantz Fanon's belief that “National consciousness which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension...It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness grows and grows. And this twofold merging is ultimately the source of all culture” [6]. This meshing of the national with the international consciousness creates a larger entity. Farah in *Maps* concentrates on the 'inside' space of the nation in order to move beyond, 'outside' to the globe. Farah, exiled from his nation is already writing from 'outside'.

The most notable feature of *Maps*' strange, poetic and passionate narrative is the extraordinary way in which Nuruddin Farah transforms what might in other hands be an angry political treatise into a sensitive account of an orphan in search of his self and nation. The juxtaposition of history and individual through the medium of surrealism appears to be Farah's attempts to come to terms with the Somalian politics. Askar is a child with magical, mysterious gifts, whose coming to consciousness is both a personal biography and a history of the fierce war of liberation being waged in the Horn of Africa between the Western Somali

Liberation Front and the Ethiopian forces that presently occupy the Ogaden. Among the powers possessed by the boy Askar is his ability to move backward and forward in time, to be present at his own birth and to peer into the future. This narrative strategy reminds us of Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. *Maps* like *Midnight's Children* and *The Tin Drum*, attempts to retell the nation's history by linking it to the story of the birth and growth of a child. The effect of this technique is an emerging pattern of history, the author's particular interpretation of the history of his own nation.

Maps develops the theme of identity in its many manifestations -- personal, family, and national - through Askar's story which is narrated through stylistically complex means, and in so doing explores the various aspects of its central theme in depth while raising significant questions about the multiple nature of identity. The multiple viewpoints allow for a variety of interior views of Askar and his meditations on various aspects of the central theme of identity, beginning with questions about the relationship that exists between mother and child, both physical and emotional, and opening out into questions of personal identity and later issues of family, tribe, and national identity, as well. These interior meditations are really the center of the work, with the narrative serving to present occasions for Askar's attempts to understand his place in a complex world of multiple and often shifting identities.

Yes. You are a question to yourself. It is true. You've become a question to all those who meet you, those who know you, those who have any dealings with you. You doubt, at times, if you exist outside your own thoughts, outside your own head, Misra's or your own. It appears as though you were a creature given birth to by notions formulated in heads, a creature brought into being by ideas. (Farah p.3)

However, Askar sees that within him there are many “Askars”, he perceives himself as many selves: “For a long time, your selves argued with one another, each offering counter arguments...” (Farah, p.58). Then Askar adds: “...If only there were no mirror to divulge the secrets of your inner torments...” (Farah, p. 58). This reflects his mental disorder. Also, Askar's confusion can be reflected by Farah in the following quote: ‘and you- who are you?’ one of the shadows asked you. You answered, ‘I am a foreign body.’ ‘Now what does that mean?’ You paused. Then, ‘It means that I am in a foreign country.’ ‘I was once a young man –but I lost my identity’ (Farah p. 61).

Askar's struggle is expressed in the constantly changing narrative perspective. *Maps* stands out distinctly as using three narrative voices that take turns to tell the story. Each chapter switches in its use of the personal pronoun: Askar is variously "you", "he" and "I

". The narrative voice seems to interrogate one another persistently as they grapple with the theme of identity in the novel. The time sequence and narrative perspective are disrupted—time and space, events and characters present themselves with a variety of contradictory associations. The alternation between first-, second- and third-person segments of the narrative prevents the establishment of a uniform "point of view" in *Maps*. Askar's voice of narration is not anchored in a definite here-and-now as it alternates between first person and second person, and the concluding passage of the narrative, Askar's arrest, is reported within the final third-person segment, where it merges the three grammatical persons in a concluding paragraph of "mythic" quality

Farah's interest in exposing the ideological basis of the Somali nation necessitates the second person narrative form. Second Person narrative or You-narrative may be defined, provisionally, as the narrative in which the second-person, personal pronoun "you" is used to identify and directly or indirectly address a protagonist. The "second person" has a Protean, shape-shifting quality, a "sloppy identity", that can defeat our attempts to specify and identify, as a hermeneutic imperative, to which the "you" is uttered. It is a mode in which it is unclear whether the "you" is a character, the narrator, a reader/narratee, or no-one in particular - or a combination of these - so that its utterances are at once familiar and deeply strange. Critical and analytical literature about the "second person" attests that the "second person" can at times affect the reader to produce a deeply unsettling experience of reading, a feeling of being "moved in some profound way by the verbal gesture" [7].

A second-person text has an explicit communicative level on which a narrator (speaker) tells the story of the "you" to the "you" protagonist's present-day absent or dead, wiser, self. The you in *Maps* is not anchored to a virtual narratee, to a generalized "you" that might appeal to the reader as an identificatory option: it exclusively refers to the protagonist [8]. Mary Frances Hopkins and Leon Perkins in their 1981 article "Second Person Point of View in Narrative" straightforwardly characterize the narrative "you" as "an actant by definition" and therefore "internal to the story" (whereas the addressee in most third-person narratives is external to the story), but they go on to note that "the relationships of this 'you' to the external reader may vary within the text, providing a source of complexity in the texture of the story" [9]. Askar's experiences are specific, they are narrated as having occurred in the past, and there is even a slight distancing, a hint of interpretation, evaluation, and ignorance in relation to the Askar of the past. However, no personalized narrator appears on the scene, nor can we be entirely certain that the distancing proceeds from an Askar of a later point in time looking back on his own experiences.

*You wondered if the man had made sense to the others since you didn't understand him. You were looking at the other faces for clues when Misra's image came right before you, placing itself between you and the men you were staring at. You would remember the same image when, years later, at school and in Mogadiscio, you were shown the pictures of Egyptian mummies by one of Salaado's relations, namely Cusmaan. The image which insisted on imposing itself on your brain was that of a Misra, already dead, but preserved; a Misra whose body, when you touched it, was cold as ice, as though it had spent a night or two in the mortuary.... You rationalized that your mind conjured up these ugly images because you felt guilty at parting with her, guilty at leaving without her. Then you told the image to vanish—and it did. And you were staring at the men's faces, in silence, in the kind of thankyou-God hush which comes after a Muslim has sneezed (Farah, *Maps* 123).*

A sentence like "You would remember the same image when, years later, at school . . . you were shown . ." presupposes a perspective later than those school days, but the temporal location and consciousness attached to this perspective remains vague, allowing both for the existence of a very covert narratorial voice and for the postulation of multilevel reflectorial self-analysis on Askar's past, who, one could argue, remains the internal focalizer throughout the novel [8].

Through multiple shifts in narrative voice, the "you", "he" and "I" of the single narrator, Farah weaves us back and forth in a shifting temporal perspective from Askar's mysterious birth to his writing present. Farah, the literary-historian, seeks vital and relevant clues for a proper understanding of the chaotic self and nation through the different narratorial voices. Farah refers to himself as a writer who "in essence has accepted the duality of his role: that of belonging to a particular country occupying a marked latitude on the globe, and of being a denizen of the world which he calls his home...I am home everywhere and everywhere is home"[10]. With the textual experimentation of narratorial voices and the ambiguity of resolution, Farah finds an aesthetic parallel to Frantz Fanon's politico-Global expansiveness in *Maps*. Farah's allusive, playful style in which the narrative moves between past and present with great rapidity distinguishes this tantalizing and original novel, and makes it a journey into what Farah calls the "territory of pain" where he maps the concepts of self and nation.

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