

The Somalian Writer, Nuruddin Farah

A Dreamer For His People

Helen Fallon

On a visit to Sierra Leone earlier this year, I was struck by the sign, "Hand your weapons to security before entering the bar", above the entrance to the Silver Wings in Freetown.

I was reminded of that experience as I read Nuruddin Farah's *Links* which tells the story of Jeebleh's return to Mogadiscio (Mogadishu) after an absence of twenty years. The grounds of his hotel are marked off from the street "by a large sign, handwritten in Somali, Arabic, English and Italian, warning that no one bearing firearms would be allowed onto the premises."

A SOMBRE RETURN

The once gracious city he has held in his mind – through his exile – is now, following the fall of a dictator and a failed US military intervention, a living hell run by two rival warlords, StrongmanSouth and StrongmanNorth; a place where gun-toting, qaat-chewing youths roam "derelict streets lined with vandalised buildings."

Jeebleh has come home to find his mother's grave and make peace with her spirit and to see his oldest friend Bile whose niece Raasta and her playmate have been kidnapped. "He had felt a strange impulse to come, after an alarming brush with death. He had nearly been run over by a Somali, new to New York and driving a taxi illegally. He hoped that by coming to Mogadiscio, the city of death, he might disorientate death."

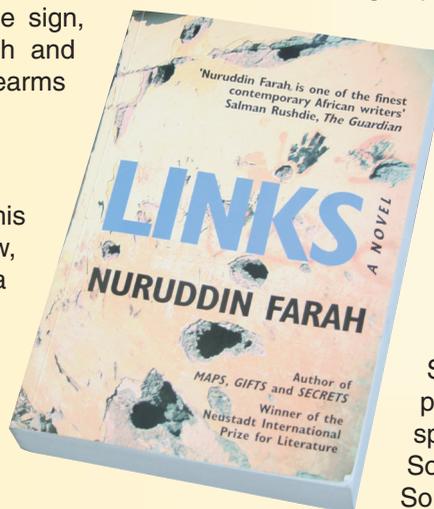
Bile's sinister half-brother Caloosha has thrived under the protection of the dictator and his successor StrongmanSouth. Jeebleh suspects Caloosha may have played a part in his own imprisonment and subsequent exile.

Before Jeebleh leaves the airport he witnesses the murder of a child, the result of a game in which a group of youths take pot shots at random targets. "The three youths were overjoyed, giving one another high fives, two of them extending congratulations to the marksman. Meanwhile, the woman and her surviving child were screaming so loudly that the heavens might fall."

Like his character Jeebleh, the writer Nuruddin Farah is no stranger to exile. He was born in 1945 in what is now Somalia. Various European and world powers had carved African into different spheres of influence. There was an Italian Somalia, a British Somalia, an Ethiopian Somalia and a Kenyan Somalia. A number of languages and alphabets shaped Farah as a writer, including Somali, Arabic, Amharic, Italian and Punjabi and later other African and European languages.

AFTER A LONG EXILE

His first novel *From a Crooked Rib*, published in 1970, the year he graduated from the Punjab University in India, tells the story of a young country woman who comes to town to escape from marriage to an old man



and to carve out an independent life for herself in a society dominated by men.

The title of the book comes from a Somali proverb which Farah translates as “God created woman from a crooked rib; and anyone who trieth to straighten it, breaketh it.” This traditional proverb was seen to carry values the society cherished and Farah’s questioning the position of women in Somali society was perceived as very radical. Serialised in a local newspaper, the book was promptly banned by government censors.

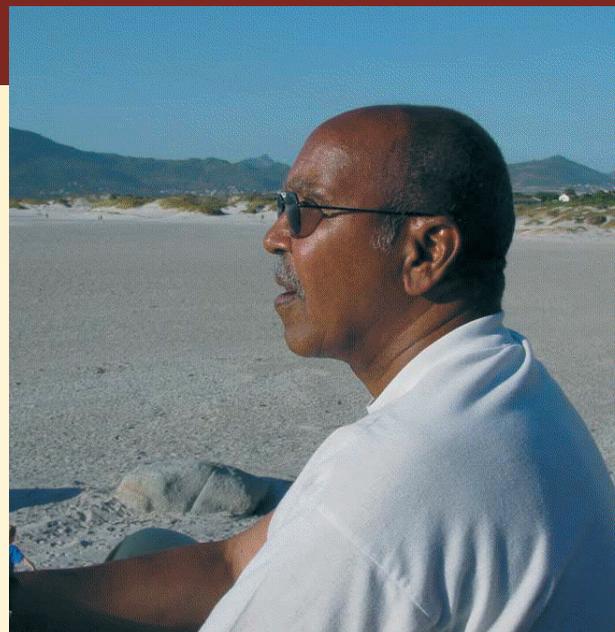
In 1974 he travelled to England on a scholarship to do postgraduate theatre studies. The following year he published *A Naked Needle*, a novel that angered Siyad Barre, the dictator who ruled Somalia from 1969 to 1991. He postponed, initially for a week, his planned return to Somalia on the advice of his brother in Somalia. This turned into a twenty-two-year exile, which ended in 1996, five years after Siyad Barre’s departure had plunged Somalia into crisis.

Farah spent three years studying in Italy, before travelling to the United States where he began to write filmscripts. During two decades he has moved between Britain, America, Nigeria, Sudan, Uganda, Gambia and South Africa.

He has written that he feels “closer to Somalia the longer I am away from it – in fact, I have the weird sensation that I don’t miss Somalia because I carry it with me in the manner of an eagle high in the sky with a rich catch in the clutch of his claws.” During those years he kept alive the “country in his mind” and in his books, only to discover it no longer existed when he came back to Mogadiscio in 1996.

UNCERTAIN TIMES

Jebbleh, in *Links*, also finds a city he cannot recognise. Now a university professor with an American wife and two children, he finds himself caught up in a sinister web of deceit when he tries to find the grave of his mother, a woman who “possessed no more than a brick-and-mud single-room hut, a barn with two cows and a calf tied to poles buried in the earth, an outdoor latrine, and an undying hope in her son’s future success.”



The Somalian author Nuruddin Farah.

(Photo: Courtesy Duckworth)

Farah vividly depicts Somalia’s tangled and dangerous network of clans who terrorise the population. Early in his visit men from his clan came to visit him to get money for arms. Al-Laawe, an undertaker and one of a strange cast of characters he encounters, explains “It’s like a fashion... Every clan family feels that it has to form its own armed militia because the others have them.” Jebbleh offends his relatives by cutting short his meeting with them.

“So where was the clan when Jebbleh’s mother sang her sorrow, a single mother raising him, and later a widow isolated from the subclan? The first time a member of his subclan ever visited him was when he returned from Italy with a university degree. When he incurred the dictator’s wrath and was thrown into prison and sentenced to death, they had all deserted him, hadn’t they? He knew that clan elders were self-serving men, high on selective memory and devoid of dignity.”

In 1998 Farah received the International Neustadt Prize. *Links* is his ninth novel. He lives in Cape Town with his wife and children.

In an interview he stated, “A writer has to be the dreamer for his people...I see writing as a gateway to dialogue, to tolerance, to democracy, to justice.” ■

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