Parents and Power in Nuruddin Farah's Dictatorship Trilogy

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Abstract
Nuruddin Farah has never been one of those African writers who have looked to the traditional past for refuge and sanctuary from the evils of the post-colonial era and his fiction has been slow to recognize the positive strengths and reconstructive potential of traditional cultural values and modes of expression. Certainly, he has not conceived the latter as unsullied alternatives and possible modes of counter-discourse to the corruption, political tyranny and neo-imperialism which have overtaken his native Somalia since Syad Barre's Soviet-backed coup of 1969. Rather, the traditional forms have been implicated in the new trials and terrors of the independent state. In Sweet and Sour Milk, the first novel of the trilogy Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship, the repressive surveillance techniques and police terror of the General's military dictatorship thrive on the predominantly oral techniques of a still largely illiterate society, so that the oral tradition is effectively allied with the reactionary forces of tribal authoritarianism and obscurantism, and it is not until the Dulman episode of Sardines that the revolutionary possibilities of the oral mode are really explored. Moreover, throughout the trilogy the new political totalitarianism which post-revolutionary Somalia has drifted into is revealed to be but the old patriarchal (and matriarchal) despotism of the Somali family writ large, and the General is seen to answer to, and to represent something authentic in, Somali life. The collusion of family and state authoritarianism, and of domestic and political patriarchy, have become commonplaces of Farah's fiction.

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Nuruddin Farah has never been one of those African writers who have looked to the traditional past for refuge and sanctuary from the evils of the post-colonial era and his fiction has been slow to recognize the positive strengths and reconstructive potential of traditional cultural values and modes of expression. Certainly, he has not conceived the latter as unsullied alternatives and possible modes of counter-discourse to the corruption, political tyranny and neo-imperialism which have overtaken his native Somalia since Syad Barre’s Soviet-backed coup of 1969. Rather, the traditional forms have been implicated in the new trials and terrors of the independent state. In *Sweet and Sour Milk*, the first novel of the trilogy *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*, the repressive surveillance techniques and police terror of the General’s military dictatorship thrive on the predominantly oral techniques of a still largely illiterate society, so that the oral tradition is effectively allied with the reactionary forces of tribal authoritarianism and obscurantism, and it is not until the Dulman episode of *Sardines* that the revolutionary possibilities of the oral mode are really explored. Moreover, throughout the trilogy the new political totalitarianism which post-revolutionary Somalia has drifted into is revealed to be but the old patriarchal (and matriarchal) despotism of the Somali family writ large, and the General is seen to answer to, and to represent something authentic in, Somali life. The collusion of family and state authoritarianism, and of domestic and political patriarchy, have become commonplaces of Farah’s fiction.

The world which the reader is plunged into in *Sweet and Sour Milk* is simultaneously a tangled network of patriarchal and polygamous kinship structures presided over by a tribal oligarchy and a demented, deranged political nightmare of Orwellian unpersons, dawn disappearances and rearranged history controlled by a psychotic dictator. In the Prologue to the novel *Soyaan Keynaan*, economic adviser to the President, dies, apparently poisoned at a dinner with a government minister. By falsifying his last words and the facts of his life, the regime then
immediately proceeds to turn the dead man into a revolutionary hero, an undertaking which his father, ex-policeman and now informer to the dictatorship, is only too happy to collaborate with. Soyaan’s twin brother Loyaan, a country dentist with no experience of the labyrinthine passages of political life, embarks upon a reconstruction of the events of Soyaan’s last weeks. From coded messages in his brother’s diary, a seditious memorandum hidden in his clothes and evidence scrambled together from Soyaan’s mistress, a fellow conspirator and a suspicious doctor, it becomes apparent that the dead man had been a leading figure in subversive, anti-Soviet activities and was probably murdered, with the aid of a Russian doctor, as part of a government plot. In the atmosphere of fear and suspicion sown by the dictator, however, Loyaan is unable to trust the testimony of any of Soyaan’s confederates and confidantes, and, after a futile interrogative assault on the minister who was present at Soyaan’s last meal and a brief spell of detention, his lone quest for the truth peters out inconclusively with the government’s decision to pack him off to Belgrade as a ‘diplomat’ in the Soviet embassy. The exact motive and manner of Soyaan’s death remain unknown and, as Loyaan awaits his departure, the novel ends with an ominous, ambiguous knock on the door.

Of first importance throughout these proceedings is the Somali family. Specifically, the oral network of ‘Dionysius’s Ear’ uncovered in Soyaan’s Memorandum - a security corps of spies and informers recruited from illiterates working in the oral tradition and reporting rumour and hearsay - is rooted in domestic tradition. Soyaan’s fellow-conspirator Ibrahim explains that the ‘ears’ planted by the security system ‘sprout in every homestead’: in the absence of trade unions and other organized protest groups, informers are pressed from the family unit by threats to the safety of its members. At a more general and pervasive level, the novel devotes so much attention to the workings of families for the reason that familial and national politics are interdependent and mutually supportive. Farah insists that, for all the vaunted egalitarianism of Somalia’s traditional political institutions, the authoritarian family structure at the roots of Somalian society conditions people to the tyranny officially endorsed and institutionalized by military regimes. The twin repressive institutions of family and state invoke each other’s authority and sanction each other’s violence. After Farah’s usual fair-minded fashion, the patriarchal dragons, like the matriarchal ones of the next book, are allowed to have their say. ‘You have no common ideology and no principles,’ the father Keynaan tells Loyaan, anticipating what Idil says to Samater in Sardines. ‘You work for the interests of the countries in which you received your academic training.’ There is at least some truth in the first part of this statement: the new generation of dissidents
that looks to Western liberal humanism for its inspiration has little of its own to put in the place of the coherent tribal heritage which the Soviet-backed ideologues are careful to keep intact and appropriate for their own uses. Nevertheless, Farah is unrelenting in his pinpointing of patriarchal bigotry and brutality as the sources of current political authoritarianism and police-state terrorism. Closely linked by his dealings with those prime political patriarchs, the General and the Minister to the Presidency, Keynaan combines the roles of ex-torturer and paid informer to the regime and terrorizer of his wives and children. He appears to conspire with or at least connive at the death and defamation of his son, harmlessly dissolving Soyaan's secret subversive activities by allowing him to become posthumously a property of the state, a 'son of the revolution'. The embodiment of political and paternal tyranny in the same person makes for the efficient stamping out of subversion, simultaneously, at both public and private, state and familial levels. Along this patriarchal continuum, sexual power is seen as another extension and manifestation of political power. Somalia is a country where a widow (Beydan) is forced by the government to marry the policeman (Keynaan) who has murdered her husband, and where a woman (Amina in the next novel in the series) is pressed hard to marry one of the political dissidents who has raped her (rape is a political act and female circumcision one of its many forms). In Sweet and Sour Milk power is presented as a captive mistress who is pandered to, courted and finally seized by the General, and village brides are offered up to the sadistic whims of visiting African dictators like Amin: 'Come: take this key, the symbol of power, and open the clean and shaven legs of our womanhood. Come: take this sceptre, use it as the whip for the sado-masochistic rite to which you've been honourably invited' (p. 186). The Minister of Police, unwrapping a cigar, 'broke its polythene with the same cruelty as a rapist would deflower a virgin' (p. 180).

Farah has said in an interview that Sweet and Sour Milk is about those who do not compromise whilst Sardines, the next novel in the trilogy, is about those who do. Switching focus from fathers and sons to mothers and daughters, and from patriarchs to matriarchs, Sardines plots the paths of that compromise. The crucial compromising agent, however, remains the power of the familial and domestic context, now claustrophobically intensified by the helplessness of the Somali woman's position in society. Women such as Medina and Ebla own houses in Somalia but are allowed no public or political presence; drawing their strength from quite different sources, these two are in fact unusually independent figures in a culture where the position of women is negotiated entirely by their fathers, husbands and brothers. In such a society it is permissible for a rape victim to be regarded by her assailants, as
is the woman Amina, as a mere attribute or appendage of her father ('We’re doing this not to you but your father,’ they tell her), and for the crime to remain unpunishable and politically non-existent because of the low evaluation of the victim. Following the elimination of Soyaan and Loyaan by death and exile, it is now the turn of the women in Farah’s overlapping, discontinuous narrative to take up the struggle against the regime, but in Sardines active resistance has given way to a beleaguered impotence and the protests are more gestural than effectual: editing the General’s speeches in the national newspaper, abandoning house and husband, withdrawal from the national swimming team and, more dangerously, painting the dawn with anti-government slogans. Accordingly, the punishments and penances parcelled out to a group styled as ‘inferior beings’ by the regime are more moderate than death, prison or exile: for the central figure Medina, virtual house arrest; for the now middle-aged Ebla, the silence of the self-censoring private conscience, ‘worn on the inside’; for Xaddia, Medina’s sister-in-law, the pseudo-exile of work as an air hostess.

A summary of the plot of Sardines does scant justice to the novel’s poetic intricacy or to the complexity of its intellectual debate. Removed from her position of editor and placed under a banning order for tampering with the regime’s national editorials, Medina flees with her eight-year-old daughter Ubax to the house of her brother Nasser, leaving her house and husband at the mercy of her tyrannical mother-in-law Idil. The latter has threatened to have Ubax circumcised and her husband Samater, to avert a political purge of his kinsmen, has reluctantly accepted a position in the government and has thus compromised Medina, who is writing a book criticizing the regime. Idil promptly brings into the house a replacement wife for her son, whereupon Samater throws her out and, in the process, brings the wrath of the regime down upon his head: he is stripped of his office, arrested and brutally interrogated. Medina, meanwhile, imparts doctrine to and debates tactics with her intellectual proteges and, like one such disciple (Ebla’s daughter Sagal), continues to influence events from the sidelines whilst others become the casualties of her quest for freedom. Not she but her brother Nasser and the singer Dulman are arrested and sentenced to death for disseminating subversive material; in parallel fashion, her pupil Sagal stands agonizing by whilst her competitors in the Somalian swimming team are arrested for painting incendiary slogans. In the novel’s uncertain ending, Samater is released from captivity and returns to reconstitute the broken nuclear family, putting at least one house back in order:  ‘Medina, Samater, and Ubax behaved as though they needed one another’s company...’

Sardines teases out and pinpoints unerringly all the hypocrisies of compromise. Accepting the post of Minister of Constructions to prevent the decimation of his tribesmen, Samater tries to hide behind the pretence that he is really helping to moderate tyranny from within but knows in his heart that truth must be owned: 'We the intellectuals are the betrayers; we the so-called intellectuals are the entrance the foreign powers use so as to dominate, designate, name and label; we the intellectuals are the ones who tell our people lies.... We are the ones that keep dictators in power' (p. 72). The indecisive Sagal finds her thunder stolen by her rivals and, already pregnant by a visiting West Indian photographer who has compromised with the regime, can do no more than feebly withdraw from the championship, whereupon another girl is immediately nominated in her place. Meanwhile, Medina, by using the national newspaper as a vehicle of protest within three days of taking up the editorship, does exactly what is expected of her and acts out the General’s scenario for her silencing: ‘Medina was offered the pen with which she wrote herself off,’ comments the astute Ebla (p. 41). By then abandoning Samater to the monomaniacal Idil, she succeeds only in precipitating the conflict between husband and mother-in-law which will lead to Samater’s public disgrace and detention. That these things, and the arrest of Nasser and Dulman, happen as a result of her own actions and lie upon her own conscience seem not to occur to her for the greater part of the book, through which Medina steers a charmed and blithely unconcerned passage. Protected as she is by her privileged position as one of the country’s leading writers and intellectuals and aware that the worst that can happen to her are banning orders and sexual harassment from Samater’s kinsmen, she can afford to lambast the General as ‘backward and fascist’ and ‘an uneducated imbecile’ and do much else that is politically simplistic and productive of nothing except for her own self-glorification. At the extremes of the picture, moving beyond compromise to total sell-out, are the Italian journalist Sandra and the black American Atta, respectively the credulous white stooge and black spy of the ‘revolution’ and both mistresses of the same government minister: these two connive at tribal elitism, clan nepotism and the Islamic subjugation of women in the name of Marxism and Africanity (‘my race remembers’), both of which the dictatorship lays claim to at different times.

Medina’s consciousness, exasperatingly, occupies the largest space in this portrait of embattled Somali womanhood: in fact, characters such as Sandra and Atta, who appear in only a couple of scenes, have virtually no existence outside of her characterisation of them and seem to exist merely to prove true what she says about them. Medina’s status in the novel is, accordingly, problematized, for Farah has warned us in
the early pages of her egotistical possessiveness towards her daughter and the self-absorbed ideological purity of all her actions: she appears to leave husband and home not only because of Idil’s threat to circumcize Ubax but because she cannot write a book critical of the government whilst married to and living in the same house as one of its ministers. No account is taken by her of the extenuating factors of Samater’s dilemma, which raises the awkward question of whether she expected him to allow his clansmen to be wiped out. In terms of hard facts, Medina’s challenges to the regime are merely flamboyant and self-indulgent ideological gestures which leave the enemy (Idil, the General) in possession of the spoils (Samater, Somalia) and which, as Xaddia observes, others usually pay the price of:

‘You pawn and pawn and pawn until there is nothing or nobody left to put up to auction. Yesterday, it was Samater; today, Nasser and Dulman; tomorrow - who knows? - maybe it’s my turn; the day after tomorrow, Sagal. When will you stop being obstinate and start seeing reason? Will you never concede or accept defeat?’ (p. 246)

The problem is that so much of the narrative is presented from the perspective of this intransigent idealism and coloured by Medina’s priggish self-righteousness that these, particularly in the closing paragraphs of the book, come to have a ring of doctrinal finality and authorial approval: ‘Medina a hostess? Why, when she altered the position of the chair the house fell in on her and the ground below her shook with seismic determination. No, she wasn’t a guest any more. She was a full and active participant in the history of her country’ (p. 250). Has Medina, from the boundaried isolation of her private room, really shaken the Somalian earth on which her house stands? What has she finally achieved apart from the private fulfilment of a renuclearized family and how long will it be before the General takes punitive action against his disgraced minister? Is Farah’s closing chorus of praise genuine or ironic?

If the answer is not a simple one it is because the sealed sardine tin of Somali society, denying women a public outlet, forces them inward into a suffocating intimacy and this generates such a tangled network of inter-relationships and conflicts - personal, political and religious - that no single character or set of relations can be considered and evaluated in isolation. Sardines is Farah’s most formidably planned, patterned and argumentative novel (though what is finally proved may not be clear). It pairs off mothers and daughters (Medina and Fatima, Sagal and Ebla, Ubax and Medina) more painstakingly than the brothers and sisters of the previous book and breaks down a large cast of characters into couples facing each other over poles of interest which define
their identities and oppositions: Medina and Idil over Ubax; Idil and Samater over Medina; Medina and the General, like lizards in their ‘varanian dance of death’, over the destiny of Somalia. In his analogical treatment of character, and most especially of Medina, lies the full complexity of Farah’s vision, for the oppositions drawn up are complementary rather than diametric or absolute and reveal continuity at the heart of apparent contrast. Packed inescapably together as they are in their claustrophobic casing, all the women are aspects of one another, forcibly alike to the extent that they are all in the same tin: the outcome is that all become, in some way, part of a single repressed but irrepressible Somali character.

Farah has said that ‘everyone contains different things - the woman in the child, the man in the woman and so on’, that in his novels ‘an intellectual and psychological debate is going on between two selves - the woman’s self in the man, the man’s self in the woman’. Thus Westernization brings out the latent feminine in Samater and the masculine in Medina, a theme to be explored further in the interchanging sexual roles of Salaado and Hilaal, Misra and Askar in *Maps*. The motherless intellectual figurehead Medina sees herself as complementing the fatherless athletic torchbearer Sagal, as the childless parent and parentless child will do in *Maps*; Sagal is also seen as teenage protege and proxy by Medina (with Ubax as a younger version) and, under her mentorship, as successor and inheritor in the struggle against dictatorship. Even in the novel’s sliding scale of maternal authority, which ranges from Idil’s psychopathic domination through the moderate Fatima’s non-interference to Ebla’s enlightened tolerance, the categories prove to be more fluid than fixed. Hence the liberal adaptability which we might expect from the free Somali nomad we find instead in the purdah-strangled Yemeni woman from the Arabic tradition (Fatima), and the obsessive rigidity looked for in the purdah-victim is discovered to be entrenched in the nomad (Idil).

Similarly, Sagal and Medina partake of the natures of their opponents. Sagal invokes the ‘sacrificial element of history-martyrdom’ in her celebration of her rival swimmers’ heroics, thus espousing the regime’s own ‘mother-martyr mentality’ which she affects to despise and incurring her mother’s pragmatic rebuke: ‘I would say they succeeded if they wrote their message and got away’ (p. 128). Medina, in Samater’s reverie, is identified with a cosmopolitan eclecticism which clutches at the flowers of different cultures but prefers not to be rooted in any of them, and there is some justification in Gerald Moore’s argument that such a person, not deeply in and of the society but wilfully seeking ‘a life defined like the boundaries of a property’, has little claim to its intellectual leadership. Yet the truth is that, for all her foreign
education, Medina’s attitudes and temperament are rooted deeper in Somali culture than she herself is aware of. She is described in the beginning as ‘unbending’, as the female equivalent of her father Barkhadle: ‘She was as confident as a patriarch in the rightness of all her decisions’ (p. 5). Although Farah would appear to have a preference for the nuclear over the extended family and pins his faith to the displacement of authoritarian methods of socialization by egalitarian ones, he demonstrates that the single-parent variant of the nuclear unit can be as dictatorial as the clan-based polygamous one. The freedom which Medina forces prematurely upon Ubax is at times almost as oppressive as the obedience Idil has forced upon Samater, her emotional and intellectual tyranny over her daughter as stifling as its physical counterpart, and it is perhaps no accident that Farah’s metaphor for the freshly-translated world classics force-fed to her daughter - ‘she gave them to her hot like maize cakes from the oven’ (p. 3) - is taken straight from Idil’s own entrepreneurial undertakings, supporting herself ‘by baking maize cakes on commission from a restaurant’ (p. 7). In a country of pontifical parents, Medina terrorizes her young daughter with knowledge, as does Idil with the circumcisional knife, and uses English and Italian to place her in a linguistic purdah which is the cultural equivalent of Fatima’s religious one. Her Idil-like employment of her powers to interfere with and manipulate the lives of others (Sagal, Nasser, Dulman) casts her, in fact, as a new kind of matriarch.

‘You are a prisoner of your principles, Medina,’ her mother observes shrewdly. ‘I am a prisoner of tradition, that I won’t deny. One is always the prisoner of one thing or another’ (p. 144). Compulsively ideologizing everything, Medina - and Sagal under her tutelage - fall victims to a confusion of the personal and the political that has become a standard feature of life in a state where it is not only no longer possible to challenge the dictator’s powers but it is not even possible to disentangle personal affairs from his stranglehold on public life. Thus Sagal is tricked by her buoyant imagination into interpreting even her seduction of Wentworth George as a political act and wonders absurdly if she should ‘have a child to prick the nation’s conscience with guilt.... I felt it my national duty to keep the man company for that one night, and so I slept with him (pp. 116, 129). Clearly Sagal has learned well from Medina, in whose doctrinaire vision the whole of reality is political and all evils derive from and are to be explained in terms of the General’s personality: ‘The General is who I blame for everything.’

‘Too simplistic, too categoric,’ the author allows Samater his doubts but is himself not without his ‘Mediniz’ tendencies. Farah has said that he has ‘used women as a symbol for Somalia because, when the women are free, then and only then can we talk about a free Somalia’;
and elsewhere: 'I see women as the symbol of the subjugated self in everyone of us.' The enslavement of Somali women can of course be seen as instrumental in, and therefore analogous to, the political repression of the whole Somali people: at an immediate practical level, the immensely powerful influence of women on the young is capable of damaging the national psyche and adversely effecting the nation's destiny if it is exercised by a class of people who are continually violated and degraded (a theme to be pursued in Maps). It is at a more abstract and doctrinaire level, however, that the Medina-Sagal theorem translates women victimized by clan patriarchy into metaphors for Somalia under the heel of tribal dictatorship. For them, and perhaps for Farah too, the issue at stake here is not economic class oppression (from his treatment of Sandra, Farah would appear to have few Marxist sympathies), but the oppression of women by patriarchal tribal oligarchies and of Somalia by the regime, which two things are at times so closely allied as to be virtually indistinguishable. The masses, women and children, 'like any inferior beings ... must be kept guessing,' said Medina's grandfather, anticipating the General (p.140). What the clan does to women the clannish dictator does to the nation: freedom from one will therefore automatically spell freedom from the other. Hence, it seems, the swift movement from microcosm to macrocosm in the two powerful anecdotes of Amina's unpunished rape and the brutal circumcision of the visiting American-Somali girl which together are made to sum up both the plight of Somali womanhood and, more tenuously, the condition of the Somali people, drawn up along broad politico-sexual lines: 'The pain is ours, the fat and wealth and power is the men's.' To her father's comment that this particular rape is political, Amina replies: 'But which rape isn't?' The choice of rape as a political weapon against the General by the three young rebels is significant partly because it indicates that they share his sexual politics, but principally in that Farah depicts rape as a re-enactment of the original circumcisional violation of womanhood which is an instrument of tribal patriarchal power over women. Hence the two are associated in the thoughts of Amina, which run the pain of the earlier violation into that of the later, and earlier in Medina's comment: 'Life for a circumcised woman is a series of de-flowering pains, delivery pains and re-stitching pains' (pp. 119, 59). Thus perhaps, in Medina's doctrinaire vision, her two reasons for leaving her home - the protection of Ubax and Samater's forced acceptance of a place in the government - are really the same reason, since societies that terrorize women with circumcision also produce patriarchal monsters like the General. Hence her equation: 'Idil in the General; the personal in the political.' Yet the danger of this intellectual extrapolation of abstract or symbolic meanings from acts like rape and circumcision,
which is a constant feature of the novel’s debates, is that the metaphorical correlative of the outrage - moral violation, political coercion - is liable to blunt the edge of the barbarity itself. A thing must first be itself before it can be made a symbol of something; it must be felt for what it is before Medina can abstract its ‘significance’. Perhaps not unaware of this, Farah, without going into lurid details, makes the two barbarities suitably savage and shocking.

Medina’s typifying and ideologizing approach to character and event explicitly formulates the links between parental and political tyranny which emerge more subtly from the narrative of Sweet and Sour Milk. In Sardines the doctrinal axioms fly fast and furious: Power as a system, power as a function.... The sky would fall in on anyone who upset a pillar of society - in this case Idil’ (Medina, p. 52); ‘In an authoritarian state, the head of the family (matriarch or patriarch) plays a necessary and strong role; he or she represents the authority of the state’ (Sagal, p. 62); ‘There is one thing society will not forgive him: for disobeying the authority of an aged mother. Idil represents traditional authority, and it is in the old and not the young that society invests power’ (Samater, p.23). The power system which is built into the Somali social fabric, and of which the General is merely a manifestation, is as evident in the passive powers of the matriarch - the right to be listened to and obeyed, the right to profit from her son’s prosperity and not to be ejected from his house - as it is in the active ones of the patriarch, and political pressure will be brought to bear upon any member of the family who breaks with tradition. But Farah is sufficiently fair-minded to Idil to give her an existence beyond her political stereotype. Monster though she may be to the Western mind, her grasping materialism is made comprehensible in the context of her history of privation, and her responses to the Western challenge to her kind of civilisation at least score more points than Keynaan’s in the previous book:

I am what and who I am. I am the product of a tradition with a given coherence and solidity; you, of confusion and indecision.... What is more, your generation hasn’t produced the genius who could work out and develop an alternative cultural philosophy acceptable to all the members of your rank and file; no genius to propose something with which you could replace what you’ve rejected. (pp. 77-78)

Idil cannot reasonably be expected to cast off her Islamic faith for a secular alternative or accept a son who cooks and lives off his wife’s wealth in his wife’s house. In the New Year Festival that envelops the novel the corpse of the slaughtered year, representing the senile old age institutionally invested with power by the regime, must be allowed to burn itself to ash before the youthful fires of renewal can be lit.
Moreover, the regime may not, in fact, be a monstrous aberration from Somali traditions since those traditions are at least better able to cope with dictatorship than the habits of Western individualism (‘Tradition stays and wins in the end,’ warns Idil). They are also, through the extended family’s group economics and imperatives of hospitality and assistance, better equipped to deal with the crises of famine and refugees, though at a cost to privacy and property rights which Samater (and perhaps Farah himself) finds unacceptably high.

The same complementarity and antinomy attends the novel’s analogic motifs of rooms and furniture, clocks and currents, lizards and beached whales. Across the elementalising typology taken by Fatima from the Arab tradition (in which Medina is fire and pillar, Nasser water, and Samater/shimbir the bird), this ambivalent imagery weaves a baroque course. Water, the element of Sagal as national swimming champion, is associated with moving currents and bridges to the future (Medina is imaged as a structure, Sagal as a process). But it also signifies the blur and rust of unreality which mark Sagal’s hyper-active, over-inventive imagination, always ‘wearing a watery grin, squinting slightly’ at an imperceptive angle to reality (p. 44). Farah rings most of the changes, however, on the pervasive house-room-chairs complex of motifs. These radiate out in a series of concentric circles from the human brain, in which Medina’s thoughts may walk up and down unhindered, to the ‘room of one’s own ... a room (and a century) in which one was not a guest’, a separate inner space where patriarchy, matriarchy and the power of the regime have no place; to the claustrophobic domestic space in which Somali women are confined and where they must construct their own human reality to rival the political unreality outside (‘In Medina’s mind the world was reduced to a room’); thence to the stone ‘city of righteousness’ which takes in the Muslim religious meaning of Medina’s name and the national house of Somalia overrun by Soviet ‘white ants’; and, a few pages from the end, to the room which serves as a metaphor for Medina’s selfish rearrangement of her own life, heedless of the effects on others who touch upon it:

Medina has changed the position of a chair. That is all. She has created a habitat in which she alone can function, she has created a condition in which she alone can live. No room for either Samater or Ubax. How has she done this? She put the chair in the wrong place in the dark. When Samater awoke he stumbled on it and broke his neck. (p. 243)

In the course of these widening and shrinking spirals the motif gathers a fair weight of irony. Perhaps one of the ‘bombs that explode in the face of the reader’, to use Medina’s phrase for good writing, is her telling argument with Xaddia, after which the closing claim that the
restructuring of her private world has shaken the state, making her at last ‘a full and active participant in the history of her country’, has a hollow ring.

After the focus on varying modes of matriarchy in *Sardines*, Farah closes his trilogy with a last look at the patriarchy and, perhaps to redress the balance of the first two books, presents what is a unique specimen in his writing: a patriarch who is not a tyrant. Up to this point in the trilogy the patriarchal model has been the grotesque Keynaan who in the first book mouths the General’s banalities thus:

I am the father. It is my prerogative to give life and death as I find fit. I’ve chosen to breathe life into Soyaan. And remember one thing, Loyaan: if I decide this minute to cut you in two, I can. The law of this land invests in men of my age the power. I am the Grand Patriarch. (p. 95)

Loyaan’s recurring childhood memory of Keynaan tyrannically bursting the atlas-covered, egg-like ball played with by the twins not only contrasts the two generations’ rival cosmologies of round and flat earths but opposes the fully-rounded human personality to the ‘flatness’ of ignorance and propaganda, and the creative potency of the still fertile brain to the anti-creative, brute force of the ‘Grand Patriarch’. For the latter the round world is ‘an egg that awaits your breaking it’; he chooses to ‘breathe life’ not into his dead son but into a lie that travesties his life (pp. 103, 110). Keynaan is a destructive, life-denying force. But in Deeriye, the hero of *Close Sesame*, Farah gives us patriarchy with a human face and his most endearing hero. The familiar doubling of children and parents couples in this work the two sons, Mursal and Mukhtaar, and their respective fathers. Whilst Mukhtaar’s father is the prototypical patriarch who both gives and takes his son’s life, Deeriye is at once devout Muslim and traditional Somali, loving monogamous husband still mourning his dead wife and beloved grandfather living harmoniously with children and grandchildren in a non-authoritarian household. Most importantly, though his own period of political activism is in the distant colonial past - he is a veteran and national hero of resistance to the Italians - he remains an outspoken opponent of the General’s regime.

Meanwhile, the active opposition to the dictatorship is carried out, as in the other two novels, by the younger generation and though the gestural protest of *Sardines* has here graduated to full conspiracy, the results are as ineffechial. Deeriye dies at the end of the book after living just long enough to see his son, a remnant of the underground Group of Ten, die a futile death, but not before certain positive strengths in traditional Somali culture have been celebrated. Foremost among these are the heritage of anti-colonial struggle that makes
Deeriye a traditional rallying point and source of opposition to tyranny, and the Islamic ideology of brotherhood and neighbourliness which, as instanced in the Mursal-Mukhtaar friendship, cuts across tribal divisions and demonstrates that the power of a divide-and-rule regime is not absolute and unchallengable. But at least of equal importance for the vision of the trilogy as a whole is the positing, through Deeriye's behaviour in the family and at the Council of Chiefs, of an alternative, non-authoritarian model for both the domestic and the national household; parents, in their dispensation of domestic power, pose the most significant threat to the totalitarian power of the state because it depends upon them to validate its authority. None of these forces, no more than the questing integrity of young manhood in the first book and the vitality of Somali womanhood in the second, suffice to overthrow the General. But Farah, in his valediction to African dictatorship, wants them to be noticed, praised and viewed as possible sources of hope before he moves on to the Ogaden of the next trilogy.

NOTES


