

Nationalism and the East African Writer: The Position of Nuruddin Farah

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Introduction

Introducing Karim Alrawi's article, "Nuruddin Farah: web of intrigue," the editor of *New African* states that unlike Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Armah, Nuruddin Farah is almost impossible to categorize. The playwright Karim Alrawi attributes this to Nuruddin Farah's artistic ambivalence. He observes that Nuruddin Farah challenges the rhetoric and poor practice of the Left, as well as the uncaring attitude of the Right.¹ In his communication to Hans M. Zell, Nuruddin Farah acknowledges his artistic complexity and states that he is a problem to his reviewers.² And yet asked whether he would describe himself as a Sayyidist, a Somali nationalist and Pan-Africanist, Nuruddin Farah responds: "I probably would."³

Nuruddin Farah's guarded acceptance that he can, after all, be classified as a nationalist calls for careful study. In this article, I will survey African literature in relation to nationalism, examine the spread of nationalism as a European phenomenon to Africa, and consider its influence on African creative writing down to the post-nationalist writers on the continent. For the purposes of this study, post-nationalist African literature is defined as writings whose primary concern is the betrayal, by leaders of independent Africa, of the African people's hopes and expectations. In this way it is hoped that this piece will not only establish Nuruddin Farah's position in the stream of African literary creativity, but also the kind of nationalism he espouses. It is the aim of this article to try and explain any discrepancy that may exist between the tale and the teller. The tale refers to the discourse of Nuruddin Farah's novels. The teller is Nuruddin Farah himself seen from his political statements outside his artistic works.

Nationalism as a European Phenomenon

Nationalism is a nineteenth-century European phenomenon. As a doctrine its objective is to provide standards by which a given

¹ Karim Alrawi, "Nuruddin Farah: web of intrigue", *New African*, 237 (June 1987): 12.

² Nuruddin Farah in Hans M. Zell (ed.), *A New Reader's Guide to African Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1983) 386.

³ Nuruddin Farah, "A Combining of Gifts," an Interview with Maya Jaggi in *Third World Quarterly*, 2.3 (July 1989): 175.

people in a given geographical location under a government of their own can enjoy that government's exclusive protection. Nationalism advances the view that for this to be possible, the people should exercise legitimate influence in state affairs and organize themselves in recognizable social structures. Doctrinal nationalism further presupposes that human beings are divided into nations that have attestable peculiarities and administration based on the concept of self-government. Although doctrinal nationalism is a European invention, it has assumed universal acclamation.⁴

The idea of nationalism is facilitated by the commonality of language. It is also facilitated by the ability of the speakers of that language to read and the availability of conscientizing reading material. In the spread of national consciousness in Europe, writing and printing played a vital role in filling the gap between the official language, Latin, and the spoken vernaculars which they raised from the inferior position to the position of power.⁵

This simply means that writing and printing enabled speakers of various dialects of the same language to realize their commonality and, in so doing, a sense of nationhood was created. Secondly, through writing and printing, language was given a permanent mark closed to the alteration and manipulation of the rulers of the day. Finally, dialects that had served as dividing lines were absorbed into each other, and the written language became the language of power. Once this was achieved, the printing of books carried the spread of nationalism even further.

When the book, be it the novel, poetry or drama, *et cetera*, concerns itself with the issue of nationalism, it often interprets the principles and formulae of civilization founded on universal knowledge. In so doing, the book internationalizes the issue at hand and calls upon the reading public to bear witness to the moral necessity of the call for nationalism in the geographical location of its setting. Nowhere can this observation be more fitting than in the African experience.

The Root of African Nationalism

The root of African nationalism is colonialism. African nationalism was, principally, a reaction to colonial rule. Its proponents were

⁴ Elie Kedourie comments in this regard that the ideas of nationalism: "have become firmly naturalized in the political rhetoric of the West which has been taken over for the use of the whole world." See Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (London: Hutchinson, 1961) 9.

⁵ Kedourie observes that reading and writing: "created unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars...gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation...created languages-of-power of a kind different from the older administrative vernaculars." *ibid.*, 48.

missionary- and colonially-educated youths who felt the shame of ever remaining under the subjugation of alien powers. Some such youths had served in the Second World War and witnessed the moral need for struggle for freedom. The target of their form of struggle was to free Africa from colonial shackles.

But before that could be achieved, African students in France had achieved a common front to articulate the potency of African culture. Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal, Aimé Césaire from Martinique and Léon Contran from French Guyana are three important people of the movement known as Negritude. Poetry is the primary artistic form the Negritude stalwarts took to express the moral and cultural values of Africa and Africans. Cultural and moral values naturally include political values, a point the Negritudists did not fail to articulate. Viewed from this perspective, the Negritude movement was not only a form of cultural nationalism, but also a base of political activity. The cultural base of political activity validates Elie Kedourie's observation that: "Culture is the process whereby man becomes really man, realising himself in utmost plenitude, and it is this realisation which is the perfect freedom."⁶ To illustrate this, we shall examine Senghor's and Césaire's poetry.

Negritude as a Form of African Nationalism

Senghor and Césaire were contemporaries. Both of them were products of colonial education, one in Senegal and the other in Martinique. The two met as university students in Paris where their destinies were to be determined. The coming together of Senghor, Césaire and other black students such as Birago Diop and Ousman Socé culminated in the founding, articulation and spread of Negritude as a movement.⁷

The duty of Negritude poetry was to celebrate blackness and to rediscover the lost and the neglected traditional qualities of African culture. Thus the beauty of the black African, that of the African landscape and African music and musical instruments preponderate in Senghor's poetry. Equally preponderant is the veneration of African ways, the exaltation of African belief in ancestral worship and the elevation of the image of the African woman. Senghor sees women as the centrality of not only African beauty but also of African culture. He says in "Black Woman":

⁶ *ibid.*, 58.

⁷ See Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith in their "Introduction" to *Aimé Césaire, The Collected Poetry*, trans., with Introduction and Notes by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (London: University of California Press, 1983) 2.

Naked woman, black woman
 Clothed with your color which is life, with your
 form which is beauty.⁸

The deliberate nakedness of the African woman is portrayed as far removed from the source of shame. In the view of the speaker in the poem, the woman's skin, which is her sole cloth covering itself, is not only beautiful but is also equated to life. What Western civilization portrays as shameful is all of a sudden turned into a source of pride by the poet. In Senghor's poetry, however, women function purely as the means by which male-dominated African culture is revamped by the poet. No attempt is made by the poet to give women voices.

Senghor, Césaire and their contemporaries from other French colonies were products of the French style of administration: assimilation. In her colonies, France provided a form of education that aimed at providing and instilling French culture in the colonized youths. That is assimilation in the simplest of words. While the process of assimilation must be seen as negative, for it denied the colonized their African identity, it nonetheless provided an opportunity for the colonized to acquire the tools with which to articulate their opposition to colonialism. Assimilation was, therefore, a blessing in disguise. Through assimilation, Senghor and Césaire understood the French people fully. They then launched a devastating cultural-cum-political campaign and carried it to its logical conclusion so as to recover the African political unconscious long repressed by colonialism.⁹

Senghor's and Aimé Césaire's Vision Juxtaposed

A distinction must be drawn between Senghor's and Césaire's blending of art and politics. Aimé Césaire is a Martinican grandson of a slave. His people are the deprived and despised lot in that racially-segmented island. Race, not merit, determines one's role in a society racially torn. Césaire's education in France, therefore, points to bleakness since it cannot obliterate his blackness.

Senghor, on the other hand, is an African from the continent where France was busy creating a *classe évoluée*, an elite

⁸ Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Selected Poems*, trans. and introduced by John Reed and Clive Wake (London: Oxford University Press, 1964) 6.

⁹ Gikandi observes, in this regard, that the duty of Negritude writers was: "to recover the African political unconscious, a fundamental history which colonialism had repressed." See Simon Gikandi, "The Politics and Poetics of National Formation: Recent African Writing," a paper presented at the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies Conference, University of Kent, Canterbury, 24-31 August, 1989, 2.

class with which to manage the colonies. Senghor's education in France is meant to incorporate him into this class. It is meant to prepare him for the role of the privileged scout of imperialism in French West Africa.

Now, whereas Senghor's political vision bases itself on the rationale of change through enlightened leadership, Césaire's vision is that of outright revolution against the existing system that oppressed and confined him to perpetual misery. Césaire sees salvation only in communism, while Senghor sees his in democratic socialism. It is because of this quality cultivated in Senghor that one reads in his artistic creativity the aspiration of his people and the manifesto of African consciousness.

Rather than wishing for the total destruction of the existing civilization by means of a revolution as Césaire does, Senghor would rather tame colonialism so that it resolves into affirmatives and not negatives. He would rather integrate Africa and Europe. To him, Africa is his natural sister and Europe his foster-sister, and the difference between the two is not clear to him, as can be evinced by his poem "For Koras and Balafong."¹⁰ The destruction of the system imposed on black people by Europe is not Senghor's wish. This is the principal difference between his brand of Negritude and that of Césaire. Senghor champions the culture of inclusivity whose sole goal would be the creation of a universal culture. Césaire on the other hand, is an iconoclastic revolutionary who wants to put the clock back.¹¹

To Senghor, whites are his: "blue-eyed brothers."¹² Even in his mother's tender smile, Senghor is captured by the white image and, although acutely aware of the homesickness his life in Europe entails, he is ready to travel back there. He says in "The Return of the Prodigal Son":

Once more the white smile of my mother
Tomorrow, I shall take again the road to
Europe, road of my Embassy,
Homesick for my black land.¹³

¹⁰ Reed and Wake, intro. to Senghor, *Selected Poems*, op. cit., 13.

¹¹ In 1956, Aimé Césaire broke from the Communist Party and started his own party, the Martinican Progressive Party (PPM), which championed the African brand of socialism. Since 1958 he has always been returned to the General Assembly by majority vote. For details, see Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith in their introduction to *Aimé Césaire: The Collected Poetry*, op. cit., 4-5.

¹² Senghor, *Selected Poems*, op. cit., 23.

¹³ *ibid.*, 25.

This contrasts sharply with Césaire's reference to the color white in derogatory terms. Césaire denigrates the color white and sees it as symbolic of death: "Death expires in a white swamp."¹⁴

In an act of loyalty to France, Senghor took up arms to fight in the Second World War, a war that was essentially European, but a war that culminated in African national consciousness among the African combatants who survived. Little wonder that Senghor's heart was always in Africa as testified to by the poem "Chant pour Naett."¹⁵ It is this restless heart of Senghor that plunged him into active politics culminating in his election as an MP for Senegal to the French Constituent Assembly, and later as the president of independent Senegal.

Aimé Césaire's brand of Negritude is articulated in his *Return to my Native Land* in which he powerfully portrays his anger and hateful vengeance. *Return to my Native Land* projects Césaire's contempt for and rebellion against French colonialism. It expresses a deep yearning for human dignity, honorable life for himself and for his race. Césaire's cultural and political philosophy is that of violent emancipation of all oppressed people so that once free, they can form a collective and inclusive family of brotherhood.¹⁶

What seems to characterize Césaire's oppressed people is the squalor and disease resulting from abject poverty. These three are the source of Césaire's rebellion. He describes his parents' house as "that wooden carcass"¹⁷ in which roaches roam. Using concrete images, Césaire describes this house in a manner that invokes the reader's sympathy for the poet and a feeling of revulsion about the situation. Precisely because of the boundless squalor, Césaire sees Martinique as a powder keg, a political volcano bound to explode and send the system imposed on her scattering in oblivion. He thus urges his people to be active participants in the history-making struggle and warns against fence-sitting and collaboration with the enemy under the disguise of a "very good Negro." Once this unity of purpose has been

¹⁴ Aimé Césaire, *Return to my Native Land* (Paris: Editions Presence Africaine, 1968) 51. Emile Snyders also makes note of this when she says that to Césaire, the color white is: "synonymous with physical death, spiritual atrophy, and cultural decadence." See "Aimé Césaire: 'The Reclaiming of the Land,'" in Rowland Smith (ed.), *Exile and Tradition* (London: Longman, 1976) 36.

¹⁵ Senghor, *op. cit.*, 55.

¹⁶ Césaire's family of brotherhood would include:

"a jew-man
a kaffir-man
a hindu-man from Calcutta
a man-from-Harlem-who-doesn't vote."

See Aimé Césaire, *op. cit.*, 37.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 23.

achieved, Césaire can then loudly declare the race to be finally free. Césaire posits that with the oppressed blacks' joint effort, they will certainly shake themselves free:

upright
and
free.¹⁸

It is not surprising, therefore, that in 1945, Césaire was elected Mayor of Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique, and député (MP) to the French Constituent Assembly.

Despite significant differences between Senghor and Césaire, the two men are acutely conscious of their Africanness and sensitive to their predicament as the colonized and enslaved. Both men proposed Negritude as the most fitting ideology to heal the wounds inflicted on the blacks everywhere. The apparent divergence in views held by each over the form of Negritude to be adopted elucidates the manner in which personal circumstances permeate into art and political vision. The divergence notwithstanding, Senghor and Césaire remain great literary and political personalities who championed black national consciousness. Both men had an ideology and their goals were clearly mapped out. They were not as ambivalent as Nuruddin Farah who does not appear eager to reveal the ideology he espouses. Although he holds Europe responsible for the ills of Africa, Nuruddin Farah does not exonerate the continent from having a share in the creation of the very ills.¹⁹

Nuruddin Farah's fear of identifying his ideology in concrete terms exacerbates his apparent ambivalence. While in *Sardines* he associates the preposterous Sandra with colonial links by ancestry and behavior, Nuruddin Farah allows her political prerogatives and a journalistic monopoly to the exclusion of both her local and foreign counterparts. Even in matters of cultural conflict, Nuruddin Farah remains ambivalent. In *A Naked Needle* (1976), he accuses European women married to Somali intellectuals of domineering over and weakening their husbands at the family level; yet, by the end of the novel, Nuruddin Farah allows Koschin and Nancy to marry.

Nor does he romanticize culture in the Negritudist fashion. In the celebrated *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), Nuruddin Farah

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 135.

¹⁹ Nuruddin Farah is on record for having said: "I am tired of having all these ills placed at the doorsteps of the colonial powers. They are surely responsible for sabotaging the structures of African society, but we have been independent for however long now, and we are surely responsible for the things we have done." See Nuruddin Farah, "A Combining of Gifts", 186.

promotes cultural dissent as attested to by Ebla's rebellion. Because of these divergences, one cannot include Nuruddin Farah in the mainstream of Negritude artists. Nor can one include him in the stream of cultural nationalist novelists characterized by Camara Laye, William Conton and Chinua Achebe as I shall now proceed to explain.

Pan-Africanism and African Nationalism

It is clear that Negritude as a form of nationalist writing was championed by African scholars from French colonies. In the English colonies, a related movement, Pan-Africanism came into being. Pan-Africanism was articulated by three important people, namely, Kwame Nkrumah from Ghana, Jomo Kenyatta from Kenya, and George Padmore from the West Indies.

The link between Pan-Africanism and African nationalism is strong. Both sought a relentless struggle against colonialism. However, Pan-Africanism went further and sought the unity of all independent African countries into a joint continental nation under one rule and the same political and economic program. The Pan-Africanist movement's ideal culminated in the founding of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963.

Because the OAU espouses the nation-state and undermines the broader ideal of a continental nation, the OAU contradicts the principal tenet of the Pan-African movement. The OAU promotes and supports the establishment of micro-nationalism at the expense of Pan-Africanism.²⁰ Other than fulfilling the powerful economic and political role the founders of Pan-Africanism had intended Africa to take, the OAU now functions as a ceremonial body at which heads of state in Africa periodically meet to exchange polite hugging and consult each other on how to strengthen their nation-states. The crucial issue of Africa's economic and political unity is always glossed over.²¹

Cultural Nationalism: Nationalist Movements as the Raw Material for Artistic Creativity

²⁰ Abiola Irele laments in this regard: "it is one of the most interesting ironies of African history that our leaders came to accept the partition of Africa, decided upon at the Berlin conferences of 1885, as the only workable basis of the new political order." See Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (London: Heinemann, 1981) 122.

²¹ Irele remarks that this makes the OAU operate simply: "as an ideological relic of African nationalism than a meaningful source of political values and action." Abiola *Ibid.*, 119.

In the 1950s and 1960s, nationalist movements on the African continent provided the raw material for artistic creativity to African writers. Writers from both French and British colonies generally profited from this raw material, a clear validation of Benedict Anderson's observation that: "fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations."²²

I shall cite a few such writers and some of their works: Chinua Achebe from Nigeria and his *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964), Ngugi wa Thiong'o from Kenya and his *The River Between* (1965) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), Camara Laye from Guinea and his *The African Child* (1953), William Conton from Gambia and his *The African* (1960) and Peter Abrahams from South Africa and his *A Wreath for Udomo* (1956). Camara Laye's *The African Child* and William Conton's *The African* stem from Negritude and concern themselves with cultural nationalism rather than doctrinal, political nationalism. The apparent romanticization of the African past of these two novels points to the underlying idealism in them. The purity, innocence and beauty of the African and his past are stretched to the point of exaggeration. The stance taken by Laye and Conton relegates objective analysis to an inferior position below the assumed supremacy of subjectivism.²³

Camara Laye's and William Conton's novels find comparison and contrast in Chinua Achebe's and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's early novels. *The African Child*, *The African*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *The River Between* are all written in the critical realist tradition. But whereas both Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *The River Between* concern themselves with the issue of cultural nationalism, they do not in the least present a romanticized picture. Both Achebe and Ngugi, unlike Laye and Conton, give a balanced view of Africa and Africans, except in so far as they marginalize female figures.

Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* is presented as a man blinded by the zeal to be seen as great. He thus commits social crimes that project him as disgusting and unlikable. Quite a

²² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Editions, 1985) 40.

²³ This prompts Gakwandi to comment that William Conton wastes so much time": persuading the reader to see the extraordinary beauty of the African personality." See Shatto Arthur Gakwandi, *The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1977) 54-5. Emmanuel Ngara also comments that: "Laye's ... portrayal of the beauty and positive qualities of the African past is often subjective and falsified." See Emmanuel Ngara, *Art and Ideology in the African Novel: A Study of the Influence of Marxism on African Writing* (London: Heinemann, 1987) 111.

number of elements in the Igbo society are portrayed as negative, while others are portrayed as positive. Obierika, Okonkwo's friend, is an example of a realistic person in *Things Fall Apart*. This is also true of *Arrow of God* which has positive and negative characters. The destabilization of the Igbo society is not merely presented as the work of Europeans. Ezeulu and Nwaka are both Igbo. Their rancorous conflict and, in particular, Ezeulu's pride, have a part to play in the destabilization of their society.

Balanced critical realism, a characteristic of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's early writings, is central in *The River Between*. The age-old traditional conflict between Makuyu and Kameno ridges wrecks the roots of Kikuyu stability. The narrow mindedness and conceit of Kabonyi, the fanaticism of Joshua and the missionaries' ignorance about Africans and African ways are catalytic in this wreckage. Ngugi wa Thiong'o does not simply lump the source of discord at the threshold of European missionaries' quarters.

The River Honia, that physical symbol of the division between Makuyu and Kameno, has, in any case, existed since time immemorial. Ngugi wa Thiong'o asserts that when Chege and Waiyaki reached the sacred grove, "Kameno and Makuyu were no longer antagonistic. They had merged into one area of beautiful land." This characterization is wishful thinking, a mirage unattainable. Hence, "the ancient rivalry continued, sometimes under this or that guise."²⁴

Clearly, therefore, for both Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, tribal and clan affiliation, individual differences, prevailing political and historical realities, along with religious beliefs, combine to destroy structures that are traditional to Africans. It is worth noting that both Chege of *The River Between* and Ezeulu of *Arrow of God* send their sons to the missionary schools to acquire the white man's skills so that they and their people can use them to fight the white man and his system. Cultural nationalism, therefore, seems to have assumed an important role in African fiction, especially in Achebe's novels. However, to view Nuruddin Farah as belonging to this category of African writers would not be correct. Although, like Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his early novels, Nuruddin Farah sees tribal and clan affiliation, individual differences, prevailing political and historical realities as a combinatory force that wrecks Somali society. His emphasis is, primarily, on independent Somalia and not on colonial Somalia. Even in *Close Sesame* (1983), where colonial brutality is felt, the

²⁴ The two quotations are taken from Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *The River Between* (London: Heinemann, 1975) 16 and 69 respectively.

general social malaise is acute after independence. We must now turn to doctrinal nationalism in the African novel.

Doctrinal and Political Nationalism

Peter Abraham's *A Wreath for Udomo* (1956) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* are examples of African novels that artistically interpret changes resulting from nationalist movements. Set in Panafrica, an imaginary state in Africa, *A Wreath for Udomo* traces a particular African nationalist movement from its moribund existence in England to its activities in Africa and its gaining of independence for Panafrica. The novel then plunges into political problems in independent Panafrica, laying bare the destructive forces that the conflict between traditionalism and international politics can unleash on a well-intentioned leadership.

The discourse of *A Wreath for Udomo* is political in the extreme. Udomo's and Lanwood's choice of words points to the Pan-African ideology in *A Wreath for Udomo*: "Africa is my heart, the heart of all of us who are black. Without her we are nothing: while she is not free we are not men. That is why we must free her or die."²⁵ Lanwood says:

The one thing you people (Colonial masters) seem congenitally incapable of understanding is the question of freedom. There is no substitute for it. The colonial people are on the march ... in the direction of freedom ... We must be negative and destructive until we are free.²⁶

The key word for both Udomo and Lanwood is freedom—the decolonization of Africa. Udomo speaks of "Africa" and Lanwood speaks of "the colonial people" and not of "Panafrica" or "Panafricans." This wider nationalism, however, disintegrates and micro-nationalism takes root primarily because the growth of national consciousness in Africa found expression in colonial boundaries, a fact that gives rise to the concept of nation-states.

Such consciousness in turn finds expression in ethnic loyalties in the novel, giving rise to tribalist politics in Panafrica. Seen from this perspective, *A Wreath for Udomo* highlights constraints involved in the realization of the Pan-African dream and in the maintenance of an independent nation-state espoused by

²⁵ Peter Abrahams, *A Wreath for Udomo* (London: Faber and Faber, 1956) 57.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 74 - 75.

the OAU. The clash of interests is conspicuous in the novel, and Pan-Africanism gives way to tribalism and tribal consideration for the cohesion of the micro-state. In this way, even the sanctity of micro-nationalism gives way to the supremacy of tribal oligarchs as, increasingly, the tribe and nation function as rivals for the people's loyalty. What is most disheartening in this rivalry is that the tribe always wins.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* carries the micro-nationalist cause a step further. It plunges into the betrayals and predicaments in a national liberation war. Covering a four-day period before Kenya's independence on 12 December 1963, *A Grain of Wheat* exposes the background to the anti-British Mau Mau war. The author presents the Mau Mau war not only as just, but also as inevitable: "Waiyaki and other warrior leaders took up arms. The iron snake spoken of by Mugo wa Kibiro was quickly wriggling towards Nairobi for a thorough exploitation of the hinterland."

The iron snake, the railway, symbolizing colonialism, requires the muscle of men like Waiyaki to destroy it. In pursuance of this cause, the historical figure, Waiyaki was not only arrested but also most inhumanely buried alive, head first, at the Kenya coast, far from Kikuyuland. Although this inhumanity was meant to deter other revolutionary trouble-makers, the results were the opposite simply because "Waiyaki's blood contained within it a seed, a grain, which sprang from a bond with the soil."²⁷ It is the likes of Kihika, the central figure around whom the story in the novel revolves, who brought about Kenya's independence. In this way, in *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has written a text whose principal aim is to interpret his country's history in the most favorable terms possible.

History is central in *A Grain of Wheat* because it is a valuable raw-material for the artist. Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Nuruddin Farah are examples of writers who put to good use this raw material. In the early writings of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the history of the Kikuyu's encounter with the white man forms the basis of cultural conflict, a fact which is clear in *The River Between*. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the history of the Kikuyu's armed revolutionary struggle to get rid of every white man forms the basis of the theme of betrayal.

Likewise, in Nuruddin Farah's *Close Sesame*, historical contextualization is overtly specific as the novel maps out the implications of the Somali armed revolutionary struggle (the

²⁷ The two quotations are taken from Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat* (London: Heinemann, 1975) 12 and 13 respectively.

Dervish movement) against British and Italian colonialism. The historical context of a work of art, therefore, is as important as the form and content of the very work. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* is a creative interpretation of national history, so is Nuruddin Farah's *Close Sesame* a re-working of national history. But the re-working of history is used by Nuruddin Farah only to provide the yardsticks with which to interpret contemporary Somalia.²⁸

The difference between Ngugi wa Thiong'o's use of history in *A Grain of Wheat* and that of Nuruddin Farah in *Close Sesame* calls to mind Chidi Amuta's observation that "to the extent that a certain historical context defines the African novel, the narrative mediations of that context into definite works (i.e. content plus form) are bound to bear the stamp of their specific determination."²⁹ Specific determination in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* and in Nuruddin Farah's *Close Sesame* are clear. Ngugi wa Thiong'o aims at demonstrating the shattering experience of a war forced on the people by a tyrannous alien force of occupation. The shattering experience is both physical and psychological. Nuruddin Farah's narrative aim, on the other hand, is to demonstrate the manner in which the same experience permeates or seeps into the future history of the nation. In so doing, Nuruddin Farah not only informs but also provides history as a means with which to understand the present so as to shape the future.³⁰

The ending of *A Grain of Wheat* carries the seed of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's later novels, plays and essays. The ending warns against further betrayals of the people's struggle. It warns politicians against land-grabbing since in independent Kenya, "the men at the top are a tribe of operators and manipulators who in their own narrow interests are replacing colonialism with neo-colonialism."³¹ This fact preponderates in Nuruddin Farah's novels. The ending also warns against the possible emergence of entrepreneur capitalist tendencies in the new nation, lest a few exploitative individuals live on the sweat and blood of millions of Kenyans.

²⁸ This sort of link between literature and history was observed by Wellek and Warren when they said, "Used as a social document, literature can be made to yield the outlines of social history." See Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982) 103.

²⁹ Chidi Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature: Implication for Practical Criticism* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1989) 120.

³⁰ Thus the observation that "art not merely reproduces life but also shapes it." See Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *op. cit.*, 102.

³¹ David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o, An Exploration of his Writings* (London: Heinemann, 1983) 69.

An interplay of loyalty and betrayal preponderates in Nuruddin Farah's novels. Askar in *Maps* is torn between his loyalty to Misra, his adoptive mother, and patriotism to his country. Loyalty or betrayal to friends and political ideals which form the hallmark of all Nuruddin Farah's novels assume a historical dimension.

The history of betrayal begins with the advent of literacy and education. The two introduce the concept of petty rewards and competition for profit-making which destroy the traditional tenet of trust.³² It is the absence of trust that, in Nuruddin Farah's novels, wrecks the Somali nation. It would seem that what Ngugi wa Thiong'o warned against in *A Grain of Wheat* is what happens in the Somalia of Nuruddin Farah's novels. It would be logical therefore to compare Nuruddin Farah with Ngugi wa Thiong'o after *A Grain of Wheat*.

The Artists' Disenchantment with Post-Colonial Leadership in Africa

A year before *A Grain of Wheat* was published, Achebe published his *A Man of the People* in 1966. The very year *A Grain of Wheat* was published, the Ugandan poet, Okot p'Bitek, published his celebrated *Song of Lawino* (1967), and later *Song of Ocol* (1970). In *A Man of the People*, Achebe castigates African political leaders for their greed and dishonesty. Achebe clearly shows that the nationalist leaders, even at the micro-level, have betrayed the voters.

While calling for nationalist feelings in *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, Okot p'Bitek does not only promote Africanness but also hits back at Europe and projects the European ways as unfitting to the African norm. He clearly portrays the African ways as far superior and more suitable for the African. Without compromising the African image, Okot criticizes African leaders. Without mincing words, he portrays the colonial- and missionary-educated African politicians as narrow, regional, tribal, clannish and outright sell-outs who have betrayed the voters. The neo-colonial Africans at the helm of state affairs, under the influence of European and Christian ways, have eroded the African culture and traditions. The new-fangled ways of doing things are scorned by Okot p'Bitek through the character of Lawino.

Okot p'Bitek and Chinua Achebe, therefore, seem to have paved the way for a new tone in African literature, the tone of protest against not only foreign ways, but also post-independent

³² Nuruddin Farah, "A Combining of Gifts," 185-186.

African leaders. The two artists' disenchantment with powers that rule in Africa seems to have marked the beginning of the post-nationalist African writing as exemplified by Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977) and *Devil on the Cross* (1981) and Ayi Kwei Armah's novels.

As said earlier, post-nationalist African literature is, in this study, defined as writings whose primary concern is the betrayal of the African people's hopes and expectations by independent African leaders. The cry of post-nationalist African literature is not so much for the economic and political unity of Africa. Its concern is not the exploration of the constraints involved in the formation and maintenance of nation-states but the cry for respect and dignity of the individual person in independent African nation-states. Such literature is not a protest against colonialism but against post-colonial experience. The agents of such experience are either the former proponents of African nationalism or their successors. Post-nationalist African literature, however, does not absolve centers of colonialism from the experience but only emphasizes the culpability of African governments for the ills affecting their countries and people.

Armah and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in fact, see the link between colonial anarchy and post-colonial misery as an inescapable reality, the former having created the latter. Both writers, however, castigate post-colonial African leaders for the failure to extricate themselves from the mesh of colonialism in which they were entangled. To convey his message clearly and effectively, Armah constantly incorporates in his works experimental forms of the African oral artist's storytelling.³³ Armah, like Nuruddin Farah, who views Europe and America as factories that manufacture African intellectuals in the form of state machinery spare parts for Africa,³⁴ sees Africa's problems as emanating from Europe's oppression and Africa's self-betrayal. He is an acute observer and his writings, especially in *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) and *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972), carry with them an aura of Frantz Fanon's militaristic stance to liberate Africa and its people from colonialism and neo-colonialism and the consequent iniquities.

In *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o is appalled by the fact that the Mau Mau freedom fighters' heroic struggle has been betrayed and their victory

³³ Because of this experimentation, Armah has been described as "a startling writer, a fearless and unpredictable *enfant terrible* at drastic odds with the literary establishment." See Robert Fraser, *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* (London: Heinemann, 1980) ix.

³⁴ Nuruddin Farah in Ikhenemko Okomilo's review of *Sweet and Sour Milk*, "Power Game in Somalia", *Africa*, 101 (January 1980): 78.

hijacked. He does not so much blame European colonialists as he does the Kenyan neo-colonial masters. Ngugi wa Thiong'o accuses the ruling class in Kenya and the Kenyan bourgeoisie of colluding with the imperialists and international finance capitalists to rob Kenya of its wealth and to subject the Kenyan masses and workers to perpetual squalor.³⁵ Unlike Nuruddin Farah who is ideologically ambivalent, Ngugi wa Thiong'o posits that: "capitalism ... is a system of unabashed theft and robbery."³⁶ He uses the two novels to call upon the masses' and workers' indomitable spirit to rise up again and fight the "monster" unleashed on them by a combinatory force of the "robbers" not only from Europe and Africa, but also America and Japan. For example, Nyakinyua, the old woman in *Petals of Blood*, is categorical in this new struggle as she emphatically says: "My man fought the white man. He paid for it with his blood ... I will struggle against these black oppressors."³⁷

How does Nuruddin Farah fit into this broad categorization of African creative writing in relation to nationalism? How does he respond to the question of national identity in his works of art? These are the questions we must now attempt to answer.

Nuruddin Farah has seven novels to his credit. Apart from *A Crooked Rib*, which examines Somali society from the 1950s when echoes of independence for Somalia began to be heard, the rest of Nuruddin Farah's novels deal with events in independent Somalia. *A Naked Needle*, for instance, concerns itself with the mediocrity of Somali intellectuals. Bewildered by political inefficiency and tribalism in their country, the armchair intellectuals salute the grabbing of power by half-literate military chiefs only to be absolutely confounded by the latter's sinking of the nation in a worse state of inefficiency and the exaggeration of tribalism to "clannism." This is a post-colonial issue that Achebe also addresses in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988). For both Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah* and Nuruddin Farah in most of his novels, African dictators are held to be more responsible for post-colonial African problems than colonialism. It would be fitting, therefore, to categorize Nuruddin Farah as a post-nationalist writer much as Ngugi wa Thiong'o is, beginning with *Petals of Blood*.

To carry the argument further, we realize that like Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* which examines the crude methods and

³⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong'o has repeatedly said, "I believe that our national economy reflected in our national culture should feed, clothe, and shelter Kenyans." See, for instance, Ngugi wa Thiong'o in an interview with Magina Magina, *Africa Report*, 90 (February 1977): 30-31.

³⁶ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (London: Heinemann, 1981) 135.

³⁷ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (London: Heinemann, 1977) 276.

primitive gimmicks of military regimes in Africa,³⁸ Nuruddin Farah's *Sweet and Sour Milk*, *Sardines* and *Close Sesame* examine post-colonial African dictatorships, hence the collective title of the trilogy—*Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*. *Sweet and Sour Milk* examines the intricacies used by dictatorial regimes to muzzle and liquidate its opponents. It examines the methods used to deter politically-minded and inquisitive individuals from understanding state affairs and from unraveling the very crude tricks used to silence dissenting voices.

The laying bare of dictatorial methods of rule in Somalia continues in *Sardines* and *Close Sesame*. Both patriarchy and matriarchy are used by the author to illuminate the power and ruthlessness of African dictators. To such rulers, the subjects, the citizens, are inconsequential and can be harassed, tortured, jailed, exiled or murdered without recourse to any court of law. Such dastardly behavior by rulers takes place in an independent country. An artistic highlighting of the viciousness of such rulers, therefore, cannot be wholly categorized as nationalistic writing neither in the Negritude sense nor in the Pan-Africanist view.

There is, however, a sense in which Farah, though judged from his extra-literary statements espousing territorial nationalism, seems to be unclear about territorial nationalism and micro-nationalism. In *Maps* (1986), he highlights the horrors of the war between Ethiopia and Somalia over the border issue. He also touches on the Shifta war between Somalia and Kenya. Nuruddin Farah is on record elsewhere for having expressed his displeasure at the treatment of Somali people both in Kenya and Ethiopia. He suggests that to solve the problem, either the Ethio-Somali and Kenya-Somali borders be changed so that all Somali people in the region may live under one government, or Somali people in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia and those in the Northern Frontier District of Kenya be accorded full citizenship and rights accruing from it in the respective countries.³⁹ Evidently, if borders are changed and all Somali people and their land fall within Nuruddin Farah's first wish which, incidentally, is also the wish of the first

³⁸ For a detailed account see Raymond Ntalindwa, "Chinua Achebe: The Artist," *Financial Review* (November 7, 1988): 37-39. See also Raymond Ntalindwa "African Regimes Exposed," *Financial Review* (December 5, 1988): 39-40.

³⁹ Nuruddin Farah, "A Combining of Gifts", 171-187. In an interview in *African Concord*, Nuruddin Farah presents a contradiction in the concept of borders. His desire for the elimination of colonial borders calls, at the same time, for the redrawing of other maps, hence the re-establishment of alternative borders. This is far from the Pan-African continental nation. He says: "We shouldn't have these borders. We should eliminate them. We should redraw the maps according to our economic and psychological and social needs and not accept the nonsensical frontiers carved out of our regions." See *African Concord* (April 24, 1986): 40 [emphasis mine].

and second Mogadishu governments, the creation of "Greater Somalia" will sanctify Somalia as an enlarged micro-nation-state on the continent. Equally, if Somali people in Ethiopia and Kenya are accorded respect and treated as members of the Ethiopian and Kenyan nations, the resulting territorial stability will sanctify the consolidation of Kenya and Ethiopia as multilingual nation-states. It will not, however, contribute in the least to the Pan-Africanist wish of Africa's political and economic unity. In this light, in *Maps*, Nuruddin Farah is seen as a writer forced by historical realities to accept the OAU's principle that aims at consolidating and strengthening nation-states in Africa.

Yet in his micro-nationalistic stance, Nuruddin Farah differs very markedly from the early militant nationalist, Seyyid Muhammed Abdille Hassan, whose activities against colonialism at the beginning of this century mark him as the founder of Somali nationalism. Seyyid Muhammed Abdille Hassan combined poetry, politics and guerrilla militarism to assert the will of his people. He fought both the Italians and the British colonialists so heroically that his eventual defeat by helicopter gunships was a relief not only to Britain and Italy, but also to France which had carved out Djibouti as its colony.⁴⁰

Nuruddin Farah, unlike Seyyid Muhammad Abdille Hassan, is neither an armed militant nor a politician. He is an artist whose imagination works on reality and is on record for having expressed his contempt for those writers who mix up political activity and creative writing.⁴¹ He sees the position of an artist, a writer, as that of the depository of the nation's memory. He, therefore, believes that once a writer involves himself/herself in active politics, he/she will certainly compromise his/her position as the nation's memory and promote, instead, his/her own political and personal prestige. This explains why, although apparently sympathetic to the Somali National Movement (SNM),⁴² Nuruddin Farah's name has never been associated with any of the very many armed political groupings that fought to overthrow General Muhammad Siad Barre's regime in Somalia. Yet it is because of his dislike of Barre's method of rule that Nuruddin Farah lives in exile. It is because of his literary attacks on Siad Barre's regime

⁴⁰ See for instance Said S. Samatar, *Oral Literature and Somali Nationalism: The Case of Seyyid Muhammed 'Abdille Hassan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) and Patrick K. Kakwenzire, "Colonial Rule in the British Somaliland Protectorate, 1905-1939," Ph.D. Thesis, University of London, 1976.

⁴¹ Nuruddin Farah says, for instance: "I am against writers getting involved in day-to-day mundane politics." See Nuruddin Farah, "A Combining of Gifts," 187.

⁴² *ibid.*, 177-78.

that his life has in the recent past been at stake with Siad Barre's agents scattered all over the world.

Conclusion

The paper has set out to establish Nuruddin Farah's position in the stream of African creative writing. With this view in mind, it has traced the emergence of nationalism as a European phenomenon and its spread in Africa. As the source of artistic creativity in Africa, nationalist writing found expression first in Negritude poetry and later, in prose forms whose authors championed cultural nationalism. Cultural nationalism championed the fittingness of African culture in the colonial state but also called for a reassessment of certain outmoded cultural aspects to suit the new realities. In this regard the paper has demonstrated that Nuruddin Farah can neither be regarded as a Negritude writer nor as a cultural nationalist.

Citing examples of doctrinal and political nationalist writings that deal with pre-independence issues in Africa, the paper has also demonstrated that Nuruddin Farah cannot fit in this category. Admittedly, echoes of certain themes in such books can be heard in Nuruddin Farah's novels, but they differ in period setting. Nuruddin Farah deals, principally, with issues in post-independent Somalia. The problems he highlights are purely of a Somali nature. He, therefore, cannot be categorized as a nationalist writer in the same way as the political novelists who championed the decolonization of Africa are.

The paper examined writings that concern themselves with issues in independent Africa. This is the post-nationalist phase. In this phase, the African writer is deeply disenchanted with post-colonial leaders in Africa. The writer is bitter. He objects to the leaders' deliberate betrayal of the people's struggle against colonialism. The writer speaks out against all forms of injustice, abuse of power and mismanagement of national issues. Nuruddin Farah is such a writer. He is, therefore, categorized as a post-nationalist writer who, both by content and form, demonstrates his disenchantment with leadership in independent Somalia.