

**A SOMALI TRAGEDY OF POLITICAL AND
SEXUAL CONFUSION:
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NURUDDIN
FARAH'S "MAPS" 1**

by Hilarie Kelly

One needs a lot of patience to read this novel: patience both with Nuruddin's difficult and sometimes obscure stream of consciousness style, and patience with the exasperatingly self-absorbed main character, Askar. Askar's dilemma represents the author's critical but compassionate analysis of what has gone awry in Somali society on the most personal of levels, but we cannot be sure if this character speaks for Nuruddin, as one marginal man speaking through another. This is not an easy read. It is full of pain, humiliation and the tortured dreams and illusions of a deeply troubled psyche. In the end, there are no real resolutions, as is typical of Nuruddin's novels. Indeed, that seems to be one of the author's more disturbing messages: in life, there are no resolutions, only struggle, doubt, grasping at straws, and terrifying visions that all too often come true.

Maps is a departure from the political focus of Nuruddin's previous trilogy, *Sweet and Sour Milk*, *Sardines*, and *Close Sesame*. His depiction of the callous corruption of life in Somalia under the leadership of "the General" is put aside in this book for a look at the devastating effect of political divisions on the Somali sense of personal identity. *Maps*, as the title implies, is about the lasting negative consequences of the colonial division of Somali occupied lands into five parts: former Italian Somaliland, former British Somaliland (these two joined at independence to form the Somali Republic), Djibouti (formerly the French Territory of Afars and Issas), Kenya's Northeastern Province (formerly part of Kenya's Northern Frontier District), and the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. The book is an ambitious inquiry into what it means to be an ethnic Somali in the Horn of Africa.

The main character of the novel is Askar, whose name means "a bearer of arms." Alas, Askar never lives up to his name, though he is

obsessed with the conviction that at some point in his life he will be morally compelled to do so. In spite of his lively, if bizarre, fantasies of violence, he is an amazingly passive young man who, for example, becomes bedridden with mysterious fevers at critical points in his life. In the end, Askar bears witness, not arms, in a war for personal and community integrity. *Maps* is his narrative, told alternatively in the first, second and third person.

There is a fascinating plot to this novel, but it is sometimes difficult to discern because the narrative does not proceed in a strict unilineal fashion and often gets bogged down in wearying stylistic embellishments, existential ruminations, and metaphoric imagery that nearly overwhelms the story. There are lengthy dream sequences and flashbacks, and the text is chock-full of symbolic allusions and philosophical rhetoric. The novel is rich in detail and touches on a plethora of political and social issues, many of which Nuruddin has shown himself to be concerned with in previous works. There are several levels of meaning. For example, *Maps*, more than any other of Nuruddin's novels, has a heavy psychoanalytic component. For clarity, I will begin by summarizing the basic story line.

The Story

Askar is a young Somali from the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. His father died before his birth, fighting in a guerrilla struggle against the oppressive Ethiopian administration. His mother died giving birth to him, leaving behind only a journal. Askar suspects that dark circumstances surround his birth, but he never actually reads his mother's journal in its entirety, never inquires too closely as to what his parents were really like. He prefers instead the kind of mythic fantasies so commonly manufactured by orphans and adopted children.

Misra becomes the surrogate mother for the newborn Askar, and the catalyst for his agonizing quest for an appropriate identity. She is not an ethnic Somali, though she is acculturated, if not wholly assimilated into the community. Her ambiguous position is a commentary on Somali ethnocentrism, a key dilemma for Askar, who in childhood sees Misra as his "cosmos." As Askar grows up, he is plagued by a need for separation, independence and an integrated Somali identity, a need so overwhelming that it perverts his relationship with Misra and eventually unhinges him.

Misra is a disturbing character, not so much for what she does as for what Askar imagines her doing. We see her only through Askar's eyes. Misra's name means "foundation of the earth." This is

metaphorically consistent with her role as Askar's surrogate mother, but it also suggests something more. She belongs, Askar tells us, to his "non-literate past." (p.164) She practices the ancient art of reading the future in the blood, butchered flesh, and entrails of slaughtered animals. She symbolizes the shared, Cushitic heritage of both the Oromo and the Somali.² But she herself has forgotten the Oromo language, and apart from Somali, she only knows Amharic, the language of the oppressors of both the Oromo and the Somali in the Ogaden. She teaches Askar the Somali language and a considerable amount of Somali traditional lore. Yet in spite of her acculturation as a Somali, she is never entirely accepted nor well-treated by that community.

Misra herself has tragic origins. She is the product of a *damoz* union of convenience between an Amhara "nobleman" desperately seeking a male heir and an Oromo concubine. As Misra was born female, both she and her mother were abandoned. Then she was kidnapped by a Somali warrior, and was carried off on horseback to a town, where she was adopted by a wealthy man. When she reached sexual maturity, her adopted "father" made her his wife. Confused by "conflicting loyalties", she murdered him "in an excessive orgy of copulation." (A psychiatrist would have a field day with this story.) The youthfully arrogant Askar, citing these sordid facts, self-righteously brands this unfortunate and exploited woman with the "guilt" of incest and patricide. But it is in fact Askar himself who is haunted by Oedipal fantasies of Misra that involve sex, jealousy and murder.

Misra eventually became the "maidservant" and mistress of Askar's paternal uncle, Qorrax, a man who possesses the harsh and glaring qualities of the sun for which he was named. Qorrax is a character type that readers of Nuruddin's other novels will recognize: the selfish, unprincipled patriarch who is capable of selling out his own flesh and blood for personal aggrandizement. Misra also sleeps with Aw Adan, another Oromo, whose acceptance into the community is facilitated by his respectable role as a Koran teacher. Neither of these men are very sympathetic to Askar, who hates them in return with a fierce Oedipal passion.

By adopting the infant Askar, Misra acquires a more secure identity. He is both a substitute for the child she never bore and, it is hinted, a replacement for the husband she murdered. Askar joyfully basks in her undivided love and attention, but at the same time reflects uneasily on the seductive implications of her calling him "my man." (Not surprisingly, there are references in the book indicating that Askar and the author are quite familiar with Freud.) He ruthlessly manipulates

her, as spoiled children will, and solemnly tells her "To live, I will have to kill you...Just like I killed my mother - to live." (p.57) At times he seems to envision Misra as a "mother devourer" figure.³ He is morbidly fascinated with associations between Misra and blood menstrual blood, the blood of abortion, blood of slaughtered animals, blood she washes from him and blood she places on him. Ironically, by the end of the novel it appears that, in retrospect, Askar himself was symbolically the devourer.

The escalation of warfare in the Ogaden brings to an end Askar's childhood dependence on Misra. Askar joins his peers in cheering on the cause of Somali nationalism. Misra, already under suspicion because of her non-Somali origins, prophesies "One day you will identify yourself with your people and identify me out of your community. Who knows, you might even kill me to make your people's dream become a tangible reality." (p.95) Yet to her credit, Misra shows herself to be willing to release him to adulthood and to his destiny as a Somali.

Askar is sent to Mogadishu, the capital of the Somali Republic, to escape the chaos of war and to go to school. He lives there with his maternal uncle Hilaal, and aunt, Salaado. Like Misra, they too are childless, so Askar once again becomes the fussed-over focal point of an "incomplete" household that seems to need him as much as he needs it.

As their names suggest, Hilaal ("moon") and Salaado ("prayer") are calm, benevolent guides in Askar's young adulthood. Hilaal is a lecturer at the Somali National University. An exceptionally erudite and philosophical man, he becomes Askar's mentor. Both Hilaal and Salaado are highly Westernized. Most amazingly, they do not follow rigidly-defined Somali gender roles. Instead, each combines both male and female roles in an openly loving, sexually generous, mutually-supportive relationship. Askar is both puzzled and fascinated by this. It is a relationship completely outside of the range of his and, he implies, traditional Somali experience.

Askar loves life in Mogadishu, but dreams of joining the Western Somali Liberation Front (W.S.L.F.) to wrest the Ogaden from Ethiopian rule. Or at the very least, he hopes to become a scholar in the service of his people. He is torn between the choice of fighting on the front lines back in the Ogaden, and taking a scholarship to study abroad. He struggles emotionally and intellectually with the problem of what it means to be a Somali from the Ogaden as compared to being a Somali from the Republic or elsewhere. He pores over maps, which represent

his obsession with "the question of his birth" and the meaning of his life. He is convinced he is no ordinary Somali, even for his class and background, but imagines himself to be an "epic child" with some correspondingly epic destiny. If only he knew what that was.

Throughout ten years in Mogadishu, Askar remembers Misra in visceral detail, and writes letters to her that he never finishes, never posts. Eventually, the intertwined contradictions of his identity and hers come back to haunt him. War breaks out again in the Ogaden. As before, Somalis revel in a temporary victory, only to be disappointed by crushing defeat. Askar then hears bad news from the war-ravaged Ogaden. He hears from Karin, Misra's formerly sympathetic neighbor, that Misra had become the lover of a "young and dashing" but cruel Ethiopian officer. She alleges that Misra betrayed the W.S.L.F., resulting in hundreds of deaths. Karin is now the voice of the martyr demanding vengeance, reflecting the xenophobic extremes of Somali patriotism. But is her story true?

Askar agonizes over what to do. The tale of Misra's "young and dashing" lover enflames his old Oedipal jealousies, while the terrible accusation of treason revives feelings of revulsion. Askar vacillates. One moment he is prepared to be judge, jury and executioner, while the next he is desperately hoping that the story has some other explanation. Yet when he hears that Misra has come to Mogadishu and is looking for him, he retreats into a funk of indecision. He hides, becomes ill, anything but face reality.

Hilaal and Salaado urge Askar to hear Misra's side of the story, in the interests of helping him resolve his debilitating crisis of loyalty and identity. As Hilaal quite reasonably points out: "You've no proof, and you've asked for no proof. Men have always done that. They've condemned [women] unjustly and asked for no evidence." (p.178) Misra may be made a scapegoat, not only because of her non-Somali origins, but also because she is a defenseless woman. After all, no one questioned the loyalty of Aw Adan, a non-Somali, or of Qorrax, who subsequently collaborated openly with the Ethiopian victors. Will Askar succumb to the xenophobia and woman-blaming of patriarchal Somali culture without ascertaining whether or not Misra is really guilty?

Eventually, Misra sees Askar. She admits having loved an Ethiopian officer, but in a relationship that went much deeper than the simple lust that had brought Qorrax and Aw Adan to her bed. After living with the officer for two years, she discovered that he was, in fact, her half brother, the much sought-after male product of yet another *damoz* union contracted by her Amhara father. When the W.S.L.F. was betrayed to the Ethiopian forces, Aw Adan accused her of

complicity. Though she denied blame, she was gang-raped in revenge. Askar is shocked by all this, but at the same time the reader suspects that this twist of events has fulfilled some of his darkest, subconscious fantasies about Misra.

In fear for her life, Misra seeks to reassure him of her loyalty to the Somali community and to him. She is a refugee in the truest sense of the word. Their old roles are reversed: he is now her cosmos. She is received into the household by the kindly Hilaal and Salaado, but Askar is paralyzed with indecision and doubt. He cannot articulate his suspicions and avoids her whenever possible. His sympathy is mildly piqued when she must have a mastectomy. But while Askar is dithering about what to do, she is kidnapped from her hospital bed. After four days, her body is recovered from the sea, with its heart cut out. Characteristically, Askar has fallen ill and does not learn of her death until after the funeral.

Askar is then plagued by his own sense of guilt. In his agitated state of mind, he realizes that all of the major characters in his life have made significant sacrifices, all but he himself. Seeing these people defined by the sacrifices they made, he asks "Who is Askar?" At that moment the Somali state steps in in the form of a police inquiry, and Askar finally sees a chance to define who he is. He relates the entire story, over and over again, becoming defendant, plaintiff and juror. He bears witness to the personal tragedies of war and politics in the Horn of Africa. That is his sacrifice, that is who he is, the erstwhile "epi child."

This is the basic story. It is both fascinating and moving in its complex detail and in the issues it raises. Looking deeper, however, there are three problematic elements contained in this novel: Nuruddin's use of language and style; his treatment of women; and, ultimately, what he is trying to tell us about Somali political identity.

Style

Nuruddin's style of writing has become more complex, especially when compared to the elegant simplicity of his first novel, *From a Crooked Rib*, now a virtual classic. Reviewers of his previous novel have admired his conspicuous facility with the English language and his ability to explore in great psychological detail the inner workings of his characters' minds through a stream of consciousness style. But there have been protests amidst the deserved praise that Nuruddin has

forgotten his readers⁴ and that his stylistic affectations undermine the power of the narrative.⁵

These criticisms apply as well to *Maps*. However, I would not suggest that Nuruddin (or any other African writer) should arbitrarily restrain his imaginative use of language or his attempts to deal with many difficult and complex themes. One of the joys of reading Nuruddin's work is his sensitive treatment of multi-dimensional political and personal relationships, his understanding of human ambivalence, and his enthusiasm for metaphor and other symbolic devices, when this is truly artful and meaningful. Many passages are lyrical, profound, and quotable in their own right. For example, in one passage, Askar thoughtfully ponders the meaning of photographs on identity documents, the bane of citizens the world over:

"I remembered the day the photograph was taken; I remembered how much fuss was made about my clothes; I remembered being forced to change the shirt and trousers which had been my favorites, then - thinking it wasn't I who wore them but they wore me...and I wondered if it made any sense believing that passport-size photographs would help identify a person? Are we merely faces? I mean are faces the keys to our identity? What of a man, like Aw Adan, with a wooden leg - would you know it from the photograph? What of a baby just born, a baby abandoned in a waste-bin, a baby, violent with betrayal - would you be able to tell who it was by wiping away the tear-stains and mucus, would you know its begetter, would you trace it to its mother and father?" (page 164-165)

In principle, I have no quarrel with Nuruddin's demonstrations of literary and intellectual virtuosity, but there is a very real problem of lucidity and intent in his writing. His habit of using paragraph-long, run-on sentences and endless chains of rhetorical questions often obscure the point he's trying to make, and indicate a lack of discipline as a writer. He is inordinately fond of rich imagery, which can be a pleasure to read until it becomes so convoluted as to be oppressive.

These stylistic peccadilloes are not just a question of form, but more seriously of content. For Nuruddin is not simply fond of demonstrating his command of the English language, but also his close familiarity with Western modes of thought. In *Maps*, for example, the author has Hilaal and Askar make passing reference to Freud, Jung, Levi-Strauss, Marx, Fraser, T.S. Eliot, Neruda, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Toni Morrison,

Gunter Grass, Otto Rank, Wilhelm Reich, William James, and Adler - all in one paragraph! (p.222) While these thinkers have clearly had some impact on Nuruddin, such references add very little when dumped en masse or willy nilly into the conversations and thoughts of the characters.

In all of Nuruddin's books, his main characters are never in any sense ordinary Somalis. For one thing, all of his protagonists but Ebla of *From A Crooked Rib* have been members of the urbanized, educated elite. This is frequently the case with writers the world over, who generally come from that class, but choice of characters can be especially problematic for African and other Third World writers coming from societies where the gap between the elite and the vast majority of the population is so wide. Yet even as members of the educated elite, Nuruddin's characters can hardly be thought of as "typical." They are often introspective to the point of being neurotic, the character of Askar being the most extreme example to date.⁶ Nuruddin's main characters are usually people who have been badly traumatized by some fundamental flaw in Somali society, like corrupted patriarchy, sexual repression, political factionalism and its twin, political opportunism. Emotionally, these characters are often suffering from extreme alienation, feeling like exiles in their own community, perhaps reflecting Nuruddin's own long and apparently permanent exile.

What are we supposed to make of his protagonists' atypical qualities, of their states of mind, which generally constitute a major part of the story in each of Nuruddin's novels? These characters are not so much heroes as warnings of how one can go tragically astray. Given the difficulties of Nuruddin's style, it is not always clear why the readers should be interested in the characters' dilemmas at all. Several times during the reading of *Maps*, I found myself wanting to throttle the whining, narcissistic Askar and shout "Stop dithering and get on with it! You're not the most important person in the world." I'm not at all convinced this was the reader response Nuruddin intended.

Another question raised by Nuruddin's style and choice of character is whether his protagonists are really not meant to be sympathetic, realistic or representative, but are instead mere vehicles for Nuruddin's detached and caustic view of what is wrong with Somali society, traditional and modern. If so, then Nuruddin may be the Somali equivalent of the brothers Naipaul, with all that implies, positive and negative. And if this is the case, then we must take a long, hard look at the ultimate message of Nuruddin's work, which according to Hussein A. Bulhan "reaffirms"...the banality of aborted dreams, stunted

personalities, unauthentic relationships, and festering wounds."⁷ The novel does not tell us anything about the capacity for individuals to transform themselves or for society to be transformed, unless the message is a purely negativistic one, i.e. that there can be no transformation.

To understand what Nuruddin has to say to his readers, we must ask who are Nuruddin's readers? This question of audience is the quintessential dilemma of the African writer, and is a hotly debated topic among African writers themselves. There are many factors determining audience over which the author has minimal control, like the vagaries and inequities of national and international publishing and distribution. The author **does** have some control over language, topic, and cultural referents, all of which affect the accessibility of the author's work to various kinds of audiences.

All of Nuruddin's six novels have been published in English. At least one reviewer has suggested that Nuruddin's stylistic problems could be alleviated if he were to take up the gauntlet thrown down by Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiongo and write in his own language.⁸ However, Nuruddin's status as an exile, apparently sealed by his one Somali publication, makes this extremely difficult because publication and distribution of original literature in the Somali language outside of the Republic is severely limited. One reviewer commented on Nuruddin's dilemma: "Yet, there is also a circular logic in Nuruddin's situation. His novels, written in English, have obliged him to become an exile and thus reinforce his need to write in English so as to maintain a mass audience."⁹

Some reviewers have praised Nuruddin's works for incorporating elements of Somali poetry and story-telling,¹⁰ but only bilingual readers can tell us how faithful Nuruddin's characteristic style is to Somali oral tradition. The conversational style of some of the characters appears at times to be blatantly artificial, as Nuruddin transparently puts his words into their mouths, be they nomad women, children, or university lecturers. Verisimilitude is often sacrificed for effect. In one memorable example from *Maps*, a passenger in a lorry leaving the war-torn Ogaden suddenly waxes prolific:

"I am travelling, leaving behind me unburied corpses. The tombs are, you might say, those of history. That is to say, these are corpses that should be buried in the tomb of history but are not; corpses that, at any rate, will be undug every century or so...Waves of atmospheric spirits fill the air of any place where

the dead are not buried, ghosts, ferocious as hounds, hunt together in groups, in the dark and they frighten the inhabitants - it ill behooves a displaced soul to search for a body in which to take residence." (page 122)

It remains for some ambitious student of literature to compare Nuruddin's style to that of Somali poets, story-tellers, and prose writers in the Somali language.¹¹ However, it is clear that Nuruddin has been strongly influenced by a wide range of European and American writers, notably James Joyce, and especially by those who have shared his status of exile/expatriate.¹² More importantly, Nuruddin's worldview and the way in which he develops ideas and characters is clearly not based on any "traditional" Somali model. Nuruddin presents himself as an internationalist writer, and is obviously comfortable writing in English to an international audience of the Western educated elite. (He is something of a pan-Africanist as well.)¹³ His style, by and large, reflects this, although the main topics and settings of his novels are always specifically Somali.

The juxtaposition of Somali-specific content, written in complex English laden with Western philosophical concepts, suggests that Nuruddin aims at two audiences: literate non-Somalis (including other Africans) whom he would educate about modern Somali life and Western-educated Somalis, particularly those abroad or in exile like himself. Any audience can easily recognize the generalizability of many of Nuruddin's pet themes: the high costs to both men and women of sexual oppression and repression, the relationship between public and private corruption, the thin line between sanity and madness for individuals capriciously traumatized by society's injustices.

Nuruddin's previous works have been widely read by Somalis, but it is my impression that *Maps* has not done as well with this audience. Perhaps it is too ambiguous and obtuse, too psychoanalytical and obsessively concerned with metaphors that for cultural reasons are viewed as repugnant, e.g., menstruation, or are politically embarrassing, e.g. Somali ethnocentrism. Is Nuruddin deliberately trying to challenge his fellow Somalis to face the unglamorous aspects of their society? I would guess the answer to this is "yes." It would be too bad if this discouraged Somalis from reading this book, because in *Maps* Nuruddin is dealing with an urgent issue that has nowhere else, to my knowledge, been treated this sensitively: the conflict between national identity and regional experience and the relationship between ethnic Somalis and other peoples of the Horn.

Treatment of Women

As an author, Nuruddin has built a reputation for championing the cause of women's autonomy from the oppressive burdens of patriarchy, and for attempting to portray women's concerns, pain and vulnerability in sensitive detail. In *Maps*, we see a shift from women characters who are survivors, as was the case in Nuruddin's previous works, to a major woman character who is a perpetual victim. This is a disappointment, because the societal tendency to portray women as victims in literature, film, etc., all too often implies that women's victimization is inevitable, and that women may even bring this on themselves by their own inherent "flaws." Unfortunately, Nuruddin's ambiguity does not discourage such a conclusion.

Women who are powerful in Nuruddin's novels, especially mother figures, are often depicted as being vaguely suspect.¹⁴ In *Maps*, Misra's hold over Askar is powerful, and possibly, it is hinted, perverse. Askar makes repeated mention of her supposed "guilt", of her "bloody" inclinations and incestuous habits. This becomes Askar's apparent rationalization for his callous behavior towards her and his inability to offer her succor when she is denounced, raped, and surgically mutilated. The implication is that she **might** have deserved it.

Askar's fixation on menstruation deserves some comment, because it is an example of how Nuruddin fetishizes women. Menstruation here is a metaphor for control over the forces of life and death, something that is made explicit in Askar's fantasies and dreams. It is also a universal metaphor for the "otherness" of women. Askar wavers between the negative and positive connotations of menstruation, sometimes envying Misra, sometimes despising her for it.

On yet another level, there are psychoanalytic elements in the author's treatment of menstruation. Misra, Askar reveals, suffers excruciating pain at that time of the month, when she becomes bad-tempered and "ugly." Menstruation is thus a metaphor for destructive femininity, frustrated motherhood, and Misra's warped, sacrificial devotion to Askar rather than to a husband or child of her own. Interestingly, her customary pain ceases after Askar leaves, suggesting her willingness to accept their inevitable separation. Since this respite coincides with the appearance of her Ethiopian lover, however, Askar interprets her lack of pain as further evidence of her betrayal and sexual "guilt." In a classic case of unresolved Oedipal conflict, the boy child

wants to separate himself from the mother, but he cannot accept her separation from him.

Askar is at times torn between the masculine and the feminine, an interesting psychological theme not often found in African novels. He often expresses immense sympathy for women. As a powerless orphan, he identifies with women victimized by brutish and exploitative men like Qorrax and Aw Adan, who also threaten and beat young Askar. He even imagines that he has menstruated once, and dreams of being transformed into a young woman. But the familiar male fear of women also creeps into Askar's narrative, expressed at times as sexual disgust and supercilious fastidiousness. We see the limits to his sympathy, for example, when he ponders whether the "menstrual blood" he imagined he had found on his thighs might in fact be the product of a urinary tract infection. Misra astutely comments "It means you prefer being sick to being a woman." "Naturally," he replies, "Who wouldn't?" (p.107) Indeed, who wants to be a victim forever? Clearly, not Askar, whose identification with women's travail seems to end when he himself is no longer a victim of patriarchal brutality, i.e. when he becomes an adult man.

Most disappointingly, the woman Askar chooses as a girlfriend turns out to be a mere cipher, though an educated one. She listens to him endlessly "pontificate" (his own word), doesn't ask questions, safeguards his copies of Playboy without commenting or opening them, flatters his vanity, is "worshipful" (again, his word), and may even follow him into battle out of adoration for him rather than principle. (p.211-212) Some might have the temerity to suggest that these are admirable qualities, but even so, where is this woman's personality, especially when we stand her next to Misra or Salaado? Her name, Riyo, means "dream." As Askar's dream woman, she offers him a very conventionally safe, uncomplicated and distanced relationship with the "opposite sex," her education and class notwithstanding. So miniscule and colorless is her contribution to the story, that we must ask why she is in it at all, unless it is to show up Askar for the confused hypocrite he is.

The sexual confusion that Askar experiences derives not only from his childish gender role conflicts and Oedipal strife, but also from his attempts to understand what sex and gender mean to one's social identity. Hilaal attempts to help him through this muddle, notably by treating Askar to impromptu lectures on his favorite theme: "Sooner or later, sex," a kind of folksy Freudian analysis of the problem. But by the end of the book, in spite of his sympathies for women and his hatred of the harsh irrationalities of patriarchy, Askar identifies himself firmly

and very conventionally as a Somali male, specifically as one of the intellectual elite. Ultimately, Askar compromises the female "in" him (which he alternately identifies with his mother, Misra, and the girl who appears in his dreams) for male privilege and emotional remoteness, just as he compromises the warrior in him for the safety of abstractions and an academic life. In choosing this path, he fails as an "epic child."

Somali Political Identity

Maps is a tragedy of separation - Askar from Misra, and the Ogaden from the Somali motherland and from its Ethiopian step-mother. Confusion occurs because Askar's primal, Oedipal link to Misra is never fully resolved, and what should be a healthy separation becomes perverted into a deadly but ambiguous betrayal. Similarly, the status of the Ogaden vacillates as Somali victories alternate with defeat, while social relations in every day life become perverted by the expediencies of a regional struggle for power. The personal mirrors the political.

This novel could well have been inspired by two incisive articles published in 1980, one on the Somali "dismembered psyche" and the other on the "captive intelligentsia", written by Hussein A. Bulhan.¹⁵ Hussein, who is from the Ogaden, is worth quoting on the character Askar:

"He continues to ruminate about his identity and the suffering of his people but, typical of the Westernised, he searches for solution in alien concepts and world-views. In the end, he neither resolves his conflicts of identity nor contributes to the struggle for self-determination...He exemplifies ordinary Somalis with similar background and education. He has pretensions of being a revolutionary scholar; yet he remains hopelessly captive to the ethnocentrism of his community. He talks about freedom and a willingness to die for it; yet he reveals the pathetic inaction and indecision of the contemporary intelligentsia."¹⁶

A concluding statement in his article on the "captive intelligentsia" could also be applied to Askar: "Most choose to avoid any rehabilitating, collective stand. **The result: guilt for inaction or opportunistic action.**"¹⁷

Hussein's comments indicate that he interpreted *Maps* fairly literally. There are other levels of interpretation possible as well, based on a more symbolic reading of the novel. Nuruddin courageously

portrays some profound truths about Somali identity, and ethnocentrism, and much of this is said metaphorically or obliquely, through representative characters. Askar, son of Cali Hamari (Ali of Mogadishu), represents the Ogaden, with blood ties to the Somali Republic. Misra represents Ethiopia in its diversity (i.e. as not solely Amhara but more fundamentally Oromo), and she also suggests the profound historical and present links between the Oromo and Somali people. Hilaal and Salaado are the modern Somali Republic, north and south united and complementary, but needing Askar/the Ogaden to be complete. Qorrax is reactionary patriarchy and opportunistic traditionalism, threatening to betray the future of Somalis. Aw Adan stands for the unifying power of Islam, but also its dangerous and hypocritically judgemental tendencies when misinterpreted.

Some of the characterizations raise the important and painful issue of relations between Somalis in the Republic and those from outside, e.g. those from the Ogaden and Kenya/Tanzania. These relations are not always smooth. The regional experiences of Somalis from outside of the Republic sometimes seem to separate them from Somali-born nationals. Hilaal tells the Ogaden-born Askar: "The Somali in the Ogaden, the Somali in Kenya both, because they lack what makes the self strong and whole, are **unpersons**." (p.167) While one may appreciate Hilaal's overall kindly intent, one wonders if the persistence of such attitudes among Somalis in the Republic isn't part of the problem. Cusman, Askar's tutor in Mogadishu, is a smugly arrogant, armchair militant who espouses pan-Somali nationalism but condescendingly labels Ogaden Somalis as "refugees" and demands that they return to fight for liberation from Ethiopia on their own, rather than enjoying the comforts of life in the Republic. Here Nuruddin shows that political wisdom can sometimes be subverted by hypocrisy and a mean spirit. Cusman's own tutor at the university is a Somali from Tanzania, a country where Somalis live scattered among the other citizens and speak Swahili as frequently as Somali. The tutor is ridiculed mercilessly for his awkward use of the Somali language, and for his non-Somali sense of etiquette; more ominously, he's vaguely rumored to be a "traitor," primarily because "he was respected greatly by foreigners." (p.161) These characterizations provide glimpses of another dimension of the tragedy in the Horn: the self-defeating nastiness of Somali ethnocentrism and factionalism **from within**.

Unfortunately, Nuruddin's characteristic ambiguity could allow some potentially objectionable interpretations of these metaphoric characters. For example, to the extent that Misra represents the Oromo people, what are we to make of her being the product of a *damoz* union?

Is the author endorsing the opinion expressed in some quarters that the Oromo have a compromised identity, that they are an ambivalent by-product of Amhara imperialism rather than the legitimate heirs of an independent Oromo nationality? The only Oromos in this tale are sorry individuals indeed: Misra's abandoned concubine mother, the pathetic Misra herself, and the crippled, unsympathetic Aw Adan. Misra and Aw Adan only redeem themselves in the end, and even this is not certain, as sacrifices to Somali chauvinism, thus obliterating their identities as Oromo. Redemption through death is a trite and often reactionary theme in literature.

The ultimate symbol in this novel is the map, a metaphor for identity. Maps can be destructive when they are drawn by those bent on unprincipled exploitation, just as identities imposed by a self-serving power or "other" can be destructive. Empowerment, Askar learns, consists of drawing one's own map; it also consists of defining one's own identity, of "giving birth to oneself" as Askar puts it. Unfortunately, Askar is far better at mechanically redrawing maps than he is at defining his own identity. The novel implies that the political and sexual confusion suffered by Askar is not his problem alone, but also plagues the Somali people as a whole.

Truth be told, Misra's story in *Maps* is really more compelling, more "epic" than Askar's. But Nuruddin may be telling us that those most deserving of our compassion are not necessarily the obvious victims who are most attractively and conventionally sympathetic. It may be as important for us to understand the suffering of the survivors as that of the martyrs.

NOTES

1. Nuruddin Farah, *Maps* (London: Pan/Picador, 1986.)
2. Mention of an up-dated linguistic map of Africa (page 166) may be a reference to recent theories on this issue. Also relevant are comments (page 201-202) on the use of the Boran Oromo language instead of Somali in the *mingis* spirit possession ceremony.
3. J. Bardolph, op. cit., sees this as one dimension of Nuruddin's depiction of women. (Bardolph, op. cit.: 432-435)
4. Tony Troghear, "Sardines." (Review, *Sardines*.) *Horn of Africa* 6,1(1983):50-52.
5. Jim Crace, "Drowning in Style." (Review, *Close Sesame*.) *South* April 50 (1984). Nuruddin's jarring tendency to indiscriminately drop the names of prominent Euro-American writers has been criticized by Somali reviewer Abdulkadir N. Said. (Review, "*Sweet and Sour Milk*.") *Horn of Africa* 4,3(1981);38-40.
6. Somali psychologist Hussein A. Bulhan describes Askar as "neurotic" in his review of *Maps* in *Africa Events*, July 1987:78-79.
7. Hussein A. Bulhan, op. cit.:1987:79.
8. Crace, op. cit.:50
9. Karim Alrawi, "Nuruddin Farah: Webs of Intrigue." *New African* June 1987:12-13.
10. Bardolph, op. cit.:429,440. See also Julie Kitchener's review of Nuruddin's *Close Sesame*, "Variations on a Theme." *New African*, Dec. 1983:52.
11. This could be done in English, using translations of Somali poetry provided by John Johnson's *Heellooy, Heelleelloy: The Development of the Genre Heello in Modern Somali Poetry*. (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1974), B.W. Andrzejewski and I.M. Lewis's *Somali Poetry: An Introduction* (London:Clarendon Press, 1964) and Margaret Laurence's *A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose* (Nairobi: The

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Eagle Press for the Somaliland Protectorate, 1954.) Also useful is Andrzejewski's translation of Hassan Sheikh Mumin's play *A Leopard Among the Women* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974) and his translation of Faraax Cawl's *Ignorance is the Enemy of Love* (London: Zed Press, 1982.)

12. Somali writer Ali Jimale Ahmed pointed this out to me. The similarity to Joyce's style has also been noted by David F. Beer, "Aspects of Somali Literature in European Languages." In Thomas Labahn (ed.) *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Somali Studies*, vol.I, (Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag, 1984) 411-428.

13. Reviewer Julie Kitchener, op. cit., notes Nuruddin's internationalist perspective. Nuruddin's pan-Africanism is explicit in his article "The Life and Death of Words" (*South*, April 1984:54) and in an interview by Patricia Morris, "Wretched Life." (*Africa Events*, Sept. 1986:54-55.) In a well-written passage in *Maps* that demonstrates Nuruddin's broad familiarity with African themes, Hilaal cleverly cites the Mwendu and Sunjata epics to puncture the balloon of Askar's fantasy that he was born an "epic child." (p. 21)

14. Bardolph, op. cit., has gone into this in great detail.

15. Hussein A. Bulhan, "The Captive Intelligentsia of Somalia." *Horn of Africa* 1980a:3,1;25-37 and "Partition of Land and Psyche in Somali Society." *Horn of Africa* 1980b:3,4;13-21.

16. Hussein A. Bulhan 1987, op. cit.:78.

17. Hussein A. Bulhan 1980a, op. cit.:36.