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*African Dynamics in a Multipolar World*

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## **DECONSTRUCTING AL-SHABAAB: FARAH'S CRITIQUE OF ISLAMIC MILITANCY**

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## **Abstract**

*Somalia has been the issue of both local and international debates since colonization, but has recently become the symbol of Islamic fundamentalist activities in the region. This ongoing conflict in Somalia, with the invasion of Ethiopia and the intervention of international forces, has led the corruption and misuse of the area by traditional clan elders and armed clan militia. The 'statelessness' of Somalia is the result of this inconvenience, so the region has become indefensible to different kinds of dilemmas. This paper argues the influence of Somali crisis on both local and diasporic Somalis, through the narrative of Nuruddin Farah. In his latest work *Crossbones*, Farah points out the superficiality of Somali piracy, digs out the real causes behind the apparent scene, and adds "religionists' militancy" to the picture.*

**Keywords:** Somali, Al-Shabaab, piracy, Farah, *Crossbones*, African diaspora.

The political instability and the identity search of the ex-colonial countries have dragged them into a deadlock. The intervention and support of UN, USA, and other world powers also reinforced the crisis and contributed to the impending conflicts. Those former colonized African countries had to define their identities in the postcolonial period, while showing great effort to protect themselves against external powers. Somalia- one of those countries-faced this identity crisis as well, and the strife between the clans in this region reinforced the instability. Besides, the abuse of Islamic doctrine of some groups built a bad reputation for Somalia, coming to be dubbed "the center of Islamic terrorism." Moshe Terdman (2008) has summarized Somali's situation as follows:

The unprecedented active involvement of foreign players in Somali domestic affairs, the immediate local, regional, and global circumstances at hand, and the critical role radical Islam has played in the conflict have turned Somalia into one of Africa's tragic stories. (p.7)

Hence, this paper aims to discuss some of the important contemporary aspects of Somalia like identity crisis, clannism, radical Islamic groups, and piracy, through Farah's narrative.

Nuruddin Farah is a Somali author who writes about Somalia, 'a country of his imagination.' He frequently repeats that he writes to keep his country alive by writing about it. His novels portray a contemporary view of Somali politics and politicians. His political stance against the regime has caused his exile from homeland but nevertheless, he has continued to write about his country's dramatic circumstances. As Juliet I. Okonkwo (1985) has pointed out, he has achieved a good reputation for writing "by bringing his creative imagination to project characters who move about in the mainstream of politics within a realistic setting." (p.57)

In his latest novel *Crossbones*, Farah recounts the story of a family on their way to Somalia from USA, to seek their son who decides to be an Al-Shabaab member. While picturing

the risky journey of the family in Somalia, he discusses the insolvable subjects that occupy the agenda of the country and how those issues influence the lives of Somali people who are beside the point. Although the events that take place in the novel seem to be in secondary position in comparison to the facts that Farah handles, the plot of the book gives sufficient idea about the existing circumstances.

The instable government of Somalia has been the result of Islamic fundamentalists' and clans' intervention in politics, and this has regrettably led to an economic decline. As Farah (2000) states,

As a people, we've been at the mercy of the traffickers in human misery, cowboy politicians who have cut up our country into fiefdoms run by a cabal of criminals who claim to have the mandate of the clan as their constituency. (p.viii)

The economic backwardness has caused the search for new ways of livelihood; as a result people have become either refugees or pirates. Otherwise those who prefer to live in Somalia struggle to survive by defining themselves as either a member of a clan or a member of a radical Islamic group. It may seem a never-ending circle, but apparently the main reason for this situation is the crisis of defining oneself in the post-colonial system.

Especially in Somalia, the identity crisis has reached multiple dimensions. First of all it is necessary to point out that Somalia is a comparatively homogenous country; the Somali population shares a common citizenship, culture, and religion with Muslim majority. Yet, it contains wide range of clans within itself, and these clans constitute the key figures in reconstructing Somalia. The country feels the hardship of defining herself since she was occupied by many countries and the conflict among clans contributed to this hardship. Lewis

(2003) has stated that during the UN presence in Mogadishu, local warlords have taken benefit of the public and private resources so in a way they have taken advantage of this identity conflict.

In my opinion the influence of clans on political power has an important role in the unsettled lives of Somali people. Farah (2000) claims that most of the Somalis had to define themselves as “refugees”, who had to pack up their belongings and escape from their home country but who were also unwelcomed in the neighboring ones (p.36). When the colonial power harmed the region, Somaliness became a hyphenated identity: French Somaliland, Italian and Ethiopian Somaliland. Farah has also said,

I came to understand that colonial subjects die a kind of death when they lose the birthright to define themselves in the terms of their birth, as they are made to respond to the multiple identities imposed upon them by others: when they are forced to see themselves as someone else's invention. (2000, p.51)

Farah discusses in *Crossbones* that identifying oneself with his clan also harmed the country and led to a controversial situation. Because of the instability in the government and with the intervention of Al-Shaabab-which is also interconnected with a specific clan, individuals tried to define themselves with their clans as a solution for their lack of self-definition, but this led to inter- clan rivalry in their struggle for control of political power. For Somalis, belonging to a clan means protection, access to water and good land, and political power. Clan membership also symbolizes an identity within Somali identity; since unless being a member of clan; a person is not accountable as a part of Somali society. Therefore, Somalis think that identification with the clan is a solution for their identity problems. But nevertheless Somali people are aware of the harm that clans have been doing in their country. In *Crossbones*, Judith says “That unfortunate

country, cursed with those dreadful clanspeople, forever killing one another and everyone around them” (p.12).

The clan factor in Somalia has always been a problematic issue. The colonization of Somalia by clans is more dangerous than the colonization by outsiders. Clannism is contrary to the idea of nationalism; that is why Somalia is struggling to re-imagine itself as a permanent nation-state. Besides, the outside world had unfortunately ignored what was going on in Somalia, paying little attention to the competing forces in the region. They have taken advantage of this conflict; besides some Western countries have supported certain clans so that the conflict would last indefinitely and this has led an ungovernable country:

Jeebleh has often contended that you can trace all of Somalia's political instability over the past twenty years to this very district. Feisty and belligerent, its natives have between them contributed several of Somalia's most obdurate warlords, deadliest head pirates and wealthiest businessmen, each in their way sworn to making the country ungovernable. (Farah, 2013, p.17)

While Somali people are in the dilemma of defining themselves within the region, the ones who were successful in escaping have also faced a similar difficulty. The virtual destruction of the state in Somalia has caused many Somalis to leave their homeland behind and settle in the Western. Even if they are in safe, their loyalty to Somalia has continued. The reason is that the political situation in Somalia influences their relations with the countries they live in. Khadra Elmi (2010) states in one of her essays, “In countries like Denmark, Sweden and Norway, Somalis were simultaneously the first substantial African and Muslim immigrants, which often brought a host of problems relating to debates on integration and belonging” (p.99) and she continues,

Younger Somali generations who left Somalia as children or were born and raised overseas have different identity issues and methods of engagement with the homeland. Socialized and educated in Western countries, they often find themselves between two cultures and do not feel a complete part of either. Therefore questions of 'who are you?' and 'where are you from?' evoke different responses depending on which country they reside in, their relationships with their parents and their understanding of Somali identity. (p.100)

These young people can find themselves in the dilemma of identity and in some cases; this conflict carries the tendency to be transformed into a radical susceptibility. According to the survey of Canadian Friends of Somalia (2011), there are three elements which lead to the radicalization and participation to al-Shabaab. First is the failure to successfully integrate their Western identity with their own identity. Second is the interest in Islam, which may sometimes lead find out to find out radical Islam idea. The last reason is the desirability of jihad, 'which emphasizes bravado, adventure, and the glorification of violence.' (p.5) Apparently there is a growing tendency among Somali youths to join radical groups like al-Shabaab, who have become engaged in their own Somali communities as a way of forging feelings of "belonging." Obviously the situation of Somali children in the diaspora is difficult. The parents try to carry on their way of being in the host country but the children are punished at home, humiliated at school; their families are not interested in raising their children. The children who were born in the host country or just moved in when they were too young are very different from their elders. Elmi further says:

Many young diaspora Somalis are raised in single-parent homes and role models for young boys in particular are hard to find. Somali youngsters are also involved in crimes and currently form the highest ethnic minority in juvenile detention centres in the UK. These

structural factors can be instrumental in creating a sense of alienation among young people, in addition to the pressures of Islamophobia, discrimination and racism. (2010, p.100)

They question their beliefs and try to find a 'pure Islam', but most of them fall into the trap of Islamists, like Taxlil in *Crossbones*. Taxlil, the young boy in the book, has joined the volunteer Somali youth group, chosen from Somali communities in the diaspora to be trained as jihadis. When his family finds him, he is in a distressful condition. He doesn't talk to anyone, or eat anything. When he becomes conscious, then he is aware of what he has witnessed. Farah depicts the members of al-Shabaab as impressionable and inexperienced young people who are afraid of their leaders and who are trying to prove their bravery, so they can kill anyone without hesitation. Farah also shows us the group's degenerate view of Islam: for instance they don't put on seatbelts because 'belting up is un-Islamic; accidents happen and deaths occur when Allah wills them' (2013, p.17). Actually fatalism is banned in Islam and only this attitude proves how the radical Islamic groups like al-Shabaab manipulate religion.

Like Taxlil in the book, many Somali children are abused by al-Shabaab. As Farah states in one of his interviews with *London Guardian*, "susceptible teenagers were told they were fighting an enemy: infidels, unbelievers, Ethiopians, the federal government. The militant leaders are hypocrites, who leave their own sons and daughters in school, and recruit other people's children." The group's political intervention is also effective in sabotaging international aid groups coming for famine relief efforts in the region. The problematic southern Somalia, which is controlled by al-Shabaab, is struggling with famine because of ecological and climatic reasons, but al-Shabaab's paranoid attitude towards international NGOs aggravates the disaster.

Illegal fishing activities by foreign vessels are also the result of the chaos in which al-Shabaab has played a pivotal role, and the solution found by the Somalis is piracy. Piracy



developed only after the Mogadishu upheaval of late December 1990 and the subsequent collapse of the regime led by Muhamed Siyaad Barre. But Marchal (2011) suggests that

Piracy first started as an informal alliance between fishermen (or coastal communities) and militias. The former were able to handle sea navigation while the latter were instrumental in hijacking the ship and dealing with the hijacked crew onshore. The moral economy of piracy had consequences for the way in which ransoms were divided, since the respective shares were determined following the very rules applied in the fishery industry (beginning with distinctions between the owner and the fishermen, offshore operators and onshore personnel selling the catches, and so on.) (p.39)

Piracy in Somalia has some reasons that many of us may not know. To be reasonable, if Somali is active in piracy and ransom, why is the country still deplorably undeveloped? The other question is, "Why do Somali pirates choose this way?" Marchal (2011) says, "Hence, piracy is usually presented as a symptom of "state collapse" and a breeding ground for global jihad, while its moral economy is disqualified and the reconfiguration of a transnational Somali economy simply ignored." (p.31) As Farah states in his novel, Korean, Japanese and European fishermen have made use of the conflict in Somalia; they have poached in Somali territories, dumped their chemical waste and caused the extinction of different kinds of fish by illegal fishing. Further he says, "...this unchecked robbery has caused joblessness among fishermen and led them to piracy." (2013, p.74). Piracy is a particular concern not just for Somalia but for the entire world. Farah claims that piracy is taken as an advantage by external powers; the ransom taken is shared among European parties so Somali pirates have either small amounts or nothing. "I am already wondering where the money said to be pouring in from piracy and hostage-taking

has gone”, says one of the main characters in the novel when he is talking to a local Somali (2013, p.97). Marchal says,

In this context, piracy played a paradoxical role. Although it represented a relatively marginal aspect of the Somali crisis and was mostly rooted in a region of the country where Islamists were driven underground, piracy triggered a genuine process of international cooperation and policy emulation. (p.33)

As I have tried to discuss above, the plot of the novel is interconnected with the contemporary catastrophe of Somalia. The events that take place in the story are not fiction but the truth. The characters in the novel come across with the contemporary issues in Somalia like al-Shabaab, piracy, suicide bombings and extremists, and Farah defines these with a realistic style and makes us look at the recent situation in Somalia from a different perspective. Finally I hope that this complicated atmosphere in the region turns into a promising one.

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