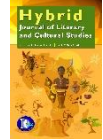




## Big players, small victims: Capitalism and the child character in Nuruddin Farah's Third Trilogy



### Review article



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### Abstract

All of Nuruddin Farah's thirteen novels are centred on adult protagonists which, as reflected in critical material on his works, illustrate recurring thematic issues connected to nationalism, dictatorship, culture, religion, gender, and on issues that directly touch on the central characters such as subjectivity, identity, individualism among others. The child character does not only suffer marginalization in the hands of the critic but s/he is represented in the whole trilogy as a mere pawn caught up between crossfires of the big, international capitalist players. This paper, explores the position of the child character in Farah's trilogy; *The Past Imperfect*, comprising *Links* (2003), *Knots* (2007) and *Crossbones* (2011). It interrogates the marginal spaces occupied by the child in the postcolonial discourse revolving around and driven by patronizing agencies of global economy. It operates on the hypothesis that Farah nuances this power play as the artery in fuelling and sustaining the political turbulence in imagined Somalia's political contours.

Keywords: capitalism, child character, postcoloniality, third trilogy

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### Public Interest Statement

The strength of this paper lies in its focus on shifting paradigms of the child marginalities from autobiographical testimonies to fictional narratives scaffolding conflicts that characterizes the globalized postcolonial African state. Vistas of armed and violent conflicts on the continent in the 1990s inspire the testimonial accounts of the child soldiers who took part in the wars. Interestingly, this child figure has also insinuated him/herself into the fictional prose revolving around the conflicts even though proportional critical attention has not been lacking. While filling this lacuna, this paper discusses the nexus between the global capitalist machinations and the causes and sustenance of mindless fighting in Africa, which is metaphorized in the third trilogy of Nuruddin Farah.

### Introduction

Most of the conflicts in the world are stoked by the capitalist appetite for profit. It is a 'universal truth' that Africa has always been a hot spot for conflicts where wars involving communities, nations, regions and many other disparate groups have been witnessed long before colonization. However, the scale and nature of these conflicts changed the moment the continent started getting visitors from the outside world ranging from explorers, missionaries, traders to colonizers. The relationship between Africa and the visitors was and has remained tilted towards not just benefitting the visitors but also made on the visitors' terms and conditions too in total disregard of the effect of the relationship on the inhabitants of the continent. After independence, the West continues with its ties with Africa in the same profit driven ways. For instance, when the greatest human tragedy to ever happen in the world, the slave trade and subsequent slavery that lasted three centuries was stopped, the Europeans moved in in 19<sup>th</sup> century and shared Africa amongst themselves one reason being to meet the growing demands of the emerging industries back at home.

Africa's relationship with Europe therefore has been a subject of many debates all of them unanimously starting from a point of convergence that the relationship is one sided and exploitative, to say the least. Walter Rodney, the Caribbean historian, in his book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1982), underscores the capitalist motives, the processes and course of this unequal relationship. He asserts:

... the peasants and workers of Europe (and eventually the inhabitants of the whole world) paid a huge price so that the capitalists could make their profits from the human labor that always lies behind machines. That contradicts other facets of development especially viewed from the

standpoint of those who suffered and those who continue to suffer to make capitalist achievements possible (Rodney, 1982, p.10).

Alternative ideologies like Marxism, which also came from the West anyway, were viewed favourably by many Africans as they seemed to be countering capitalism. However, the sheer power of capitalism propelled by big capital, which enabled the capitalists to influence favourable decisions and in case of resistance, to sponsor wars to subdue its opponents has ensured the continued thrive of capitalism in Africa. Any other ideology opposed to capitalism on the continent and elsewhere in the world has been reduced to mere abstraction; ineffective and unworkable; capitalism is the only system that works and naturally there are its ruins everywhere you look. However, sometimes there is symbiotic co-existence of these two cosmoses. This ambivalent relationship between Africa and the West is better captured by Appiah (2006) who points out in his introduction of *Cosmopolitanism*,

And the possibilities of good and ill are multiplied beyond all measure when it comes to policies carried out by governments in our name. Together, we can ruin poor farmers by dumping our subsidized grain into the markets, cripple industries by punitive tariffs, deliver weapons that will kill thousands upon thousands. Together, we can raise standards of living by adopting new policies on trade and aid, prevent or treat diseases with vaccines and pharmaceuticals, take measures against global climate change, encourage resistance to tyranny and a concern for the worth of each other (p.xiii).

In Africa, the most vulnerable in the society have been the most affected by the side effects of this system: the women, children, the aged, and the disabled among others. This imbalance is always represented in disciplines such as political science, history and economics but it also forms the bulk of literary works from the former colonies. The Third World theorists (who either come from or are sympathetic of former colonies) seem to be reacting to capitalism ideology and practice, an element that also forms the unifying strand of the postcolonial studies. This paper, therefore, critically examines how capitalism as an ideology permeates the African literary text. It does this by showing how Nuruddin Farah, one of the most prolific authors of the second generation of African writers, mediates thematic issues of capitalism with a bias on its effects on the child character in his third trilogy. The motive to interrogate the effect

on the subjectivities of the child in the novel is undergirded by its symbolic significance on the futuristic bearing of the African continent.

### **Plotting the Child Subjectivities in Farah's Third Trilogy**

Globalization and postcolonial theories are useful in the reading of Farah's representation of the child subject in the novels of his third trilogy. Location of the child character in the plot of Farah's third trilogy is imperative for appreciation of the centrality of the child subject to the discussion of the capitalist negotiation in the globalization and postcolonial discourse. Gikandi (2001) postulates that "... globalization is appealing to social analysts because of what is perceived as its conjunctive and disjunctive form and function" (p.628). It is true that Somalia, which is the major setting of action in the novels of Farah's third trilogy has been at the centre of global activities for a millennium because of its strategic positioning in the Indian ocean. This interaction has come with both bright and dark facets as Gikandi (2001) asserts that "... the discourse of globalization seems to be perpetually caught between two competing narratives, one of celebration, the other of crisis" (p.629). The capitalist lust for profit blinds the big and global players to the adverse effects that their activities in the postcolony have on the hapless subjects of these states. In Farah's imagined Somalia, the child character is the symbol of this destruction.

The first novel of the third trilogy, *Links* (Farah, 2003), has many child characters that play an important role in moving the plot forward although the main character is Jeebleh who is in his 70s. In the setting of *The Past Imperfect* trilogy, which takes eight years from 2003 when *Links* is published to publication of *Crossbones* in 2011, the child character is utilised in widely varied ways. As soon as Jeebleh lands at the airport at Mogadiscio, he is exposed to the auxiliary role assigned to the child character in the society portrayed in the novel. The trigger-happy youths at the airport train their guns just for amusement because they are bored. When they hit their target, a small boy, they cheer and clap congratulating each other (Farah, 2003 pp.14-19). However, two children, Raasta and Makka, stand out in the plot of the novel. They are abducted from The Refuge, an establishment run by Bile and which provides shelter to people displaced by the war. Bile is Jeebleh's bosom friend and an uncle to Raasta. When Jeebleh arrives in Mogadiscio, he embarks on the risky mission of tracking the two little girls in order to bring them back home. These children's role, especially Raasta's, is greatly symbolic in the novel. She is a miracle child with precocious intelligence and perceptions. She stands for peace both at domestic level (between her mother, Shanta and father, Faahiye) and at national level. Ironically, it is this peace at national level that endangers her. Her abductors fear that Raasta's continued presence at The Refuge is

a threat to the wars which serve as their source of livelihood (Farah, 2007 pp.53-6). Another child victim of the war in *Links* is Dajaal's granddaughter who is dumb from an attack by American marines aboard a fighter helicopter (Farah, 2003 pp.73-4). Qasiir (an illustrious militia boy) is a brother to the dumb girl and, together with his age mates, take pride in their active role in the conflict. They provide cover and escort through dangerous areas (Farah, 2003 p.73). Other youths provide the same services too (Farah, 2007 pp.20,22,35,77). Of the minor characters in the novel, Caloosha plays a significant role as he is the most visible face of the warlords. He is second in command to the strongman north who is the warlord in charge of the northern part of Mogadiscio. He has three wives, the last having been abducted and forced into marriage by his militia group after murdering her family members and looting their property. She was only fifteen years old when Caloosha turned her into his wife (Farah, 2003 pp.100-111).

In the second novel of the third trilogy, *Knots* (Farah, 2007), the death of Dalmar, nine years old, forms the leitmotif that harmonizes the plot of the narrative. It plays the central role in influencing the protagonist, Cambara's decision to move from Canada to Mogadiscio, a place considered too dangerous for any sane person to venture to, this is asserted by Aida, her mother and Raxma, her closest friend (Farah, 2007 pp.14-15). The death of Dalmar, thus, forms the background of the story in the novel. Another child that we meet in the early parts of the novel is the little girl with one leg, foregrounding the traumatic effects of the war (Farah, 2007 pp.14-15). Also, many youths are represented in the novel as militiamen doing all sorts of jobs, for example, providing security to homes, escorting civilians and warlords, collecting tolls among other duties (Farah, 2007 p.90). It is on such a mission when a group of armed youths is escorting Cambara to reconnoitre her family property currently occupied by a minor warlord, Cudcur, that she develops an interest in one youth just the age of her late son. The boy is coming out of an unfortunate circumstance of defecating on himself out of fright caused by a gun that goes off inadvertently. The boy whose real name is Agoon but christened SilkHair by Cambara because of his silky hair is promptly adopted by Cambara (Farah, 2007 pp.90-106). At Maanta hotel where she moves from her cousin, Zaaq's place, Cambara gets another boy also of the same age with Dalmar who has lost his parents. Gacal, as the boy is called, interests her immediately, she takes him in and starts looking after him as if he was her own son. She psychologically seems to replace her late son with Gacal (Farah, 2007 pp.228-246). There are also Sumaya and Nuura being raised in the protected environment of the middle class. They are protected from the violence that is all over their neighbourhood and taken to good schools where they are taught by highly qualified teachers while the poor people's



children only attend Koranic classes (Farah, 2007 pp.236-246). Cambara also encounters four youths on the way to her family property. One of the boys is armed with a gun while another one has a club, the other two are not armed and do not support the intentions of their older companions. The two's intention is to sexually molest Cambara but she effectively defends herself by applying her martial skills on the boys (Farah, 2007 pp.163-169). Another character who mediates the perspective of a child is Jijjo whose real name is Khadija. She has children with a minor warlord. Her story is a sad one having been forced into this marriage for survival after serial raping ordeal by a group of child militia. She is also married when she is still simply a child and in accordance with the Somali culture even though she had a more open-minded father (Farah, 2007 pp.175-182).

The last novel of the trilogy, *Croosbones* (Farah 2011) has two important child characters: one is Kahin who is known by his pseudo-name YoungThing derived from the magnitude of what he does as compared to his tender age while the other one is Taxliil, a stepson to Ahl, one the protagonists of the novel. Taxliil is a boy born and brought up in the USA but who joins Shabab and flees to Mogadiscio to join their army of fighters, a good number of whom are suicide bombers. This leads his stepfather to travel all the way from USA to Bosasio, the capital of Somaliland, to search for him. This visit to Bosasio forms almost half of the whole narrative in the novel and reveals important details about Somali's relationship with the capitalist global north. The trope of piracy and its nuances on the child character is mediated in this text. The space of YoungThing, on the other hand, as he navigates himself into the cultural images of the Western imbued codes flags a new facet of the Somali child. This contradictory depiction of the child subject renegotiates the ambivalence towards the two worlds of rigid Islamic worldview and the protean Western value system that pull the Somali child to either side. This is witnessed in the representation of YoungThing who is heavily clad in Western attire while, ironically, on a mission to assault the targets of the West epistemology in Somalia.

### **Back for the School Bag or Gun?**

The literary representation of capitalism and the spaces of the child character in Farah's third trilogy interweave the paradoxical conjunction of the colonial agents of modernity. It juxtaposes the Western education and its predetermining perimeters in futuristic wellbeing of the child subject in the African postcolony with the new warfare, which comes with more lethal and harmful weaponry. The back of such a child subject then symbolically becomes a scenery of destruction having switched its object from school bag to an Ak 47 rifle. The endless war in Mogadiscio which broke out in 1991

when General Mohammed Siyad (also referred to as Siad Ingiriis (2019)) Barre was ousted was the beginning of this turmoil funded and sustained by various multinational companies interested in selling their arms and other war accessories. This goes on while others help themselves on Somalia's resources such as the illegal fishing and dumping of industrial wastes in Somalia's waters. Farah thus models the novels of the trilogy on the above realities in Somalia as Fiona Moolla observes in her critical book, *Reading Nuruddin Farah* (2014). This is what breeds the child that we finally have in the trilogy; the child soldier; child pirate or the victim of rape, alienation and sheer brutality. These circumstances what impel one to observe that such a child easily transposes the spaces for his school equipment into those meant for war accessories. This imagery (in the reader's mind) of the gun on a boy's back is the replacement of the bag (of school equipment); it is easily strapped on the shoulders and the dwarfing size of the boy makes its upward pointing nozzle more foregrounded, more menacing and its carrier more powerful, perhaps more than the teacher. This is the image we see at the outset of the novel *Crossbones* where one of the significant child characters in the novel's narrative is seen laden with weapons of war in a bag. He is a boy who has absconded school after being indoctrinated by the sheikh at his local mosque, choosing to be a martyr instead. The woman he meets, Cambara, on his fateful mission clearly captures the image of this boy soldier, '... a small-boned, four-and-a-half-foot-tall figure – a dwarf, she thinks at first – hoisting a carryall bigger and heavier than he is' (Farah, 2011 p.2).

The effects of capitalism on the child character are also felt in *Knots* when the protagonist, Cambara, emigrates back to Mogadiscio from Canada after losing her only child, Dalmar, in a drowning incident. She had left the child with her philandering and irresponsible husband, Wardi. The narrative voice penetrates Cambara's inner thoughts, 'Has she not come to Mogadiscio in hope of chancing upon a noble way of mourning her loss, not in anger but while recovering the family property to devote herself to the service of peace?' (Farah, 2007 p.189). The loss of her beloved son is the real reason for Cambara's going back to Mogadiscio although she uses the opportunity to recover the family house that had been appropriated by a minor warlord. By recovering the house, Cambara feels that she contributes towards peace in Mogadiscio. As the events in the novel reveal later, the contribution is hinged on rehabilitation of two child characters: SilkHair from a child soldier and Gacal from a trump with a potential to engage in socially perverted activities such as watching pornographic movies and doing virtually anything to get the bare essentials such food. As we read in *Links*, the whole war economy is driven by large capital:

“Money runs the civil war’s engine, all right,” Bile agreed. “There are the corrupt commissions paid to the warlords for a start, the money they make from hiring out militiamen to foreign delegations on visits. There’s the money paid to the warlords in the form of tributes by foreign firms operating in the country. And Mogadiscians also pay other tributes to the warlords, who levy road tax and duties on everything imported through the entry points of the city, which they control” (Farah, 2003 p.152).

Whichever reasons given for the war whether in reality or the literary imaginaries of the author thus become a fictional commentary on the real motive behind global agents’ participation; which are power and wealth. The presence of external interference with the aim of power peddling is seen in the kind of forces displayed in Mogadiscio for instance during the USA invasion in the early 1990s to dislodge the government of Islamic Courts themselves heavily supported by the radical groups in the Arab world and later mutating into Shabab, a radical group affiliated to Al Qaeda which is also a known group of fundamental Islamists. From Achille Mbembe’s imaginings of a postcolonial state Somalia, as represented in Farah’s oeuvre by Mogadiscio, is a model of such state. Such that when Mbembe (2001) asserts that “... the postcolony is also made up of a series of corporate institutions and a political machinery which, once they are in place constitute a distinctive regime of violence” (3), the idea of capitalism crystallizes in one’s mind allowing for appreciation of the violence the system has and continues to unleash to the children and other vulnerable groups in the poisoned political ecology. Farah thus dichotomizes the main players and castigators of the war in Somalia into outsiders propelled by their deep pockets while Somalis themselves are mere pawns with the children being hopelessly entangled in this game of big players effectively metaphorizing the arrested future of the nation. He illustrates this in *Crossbones* when the narrator says,

Jeebleh is aware that among the Somalis with whom he has discussed the subject of piracy, many without reservation condemn the illegal foreign vessels fishing in the Somali Sea. They say that this unchecked robbery has caused joblessness among fishermen and led them to piracy. In fact, Somali fishermen appealed to the United Nations and the international community to help rid them of the large number of foreign vessels, estimated in 2005 at about seven hundred, engaged in unlicensed fishing off the country’s southern shores. The country profile



compiled by the United Nations' own Food and Agricultural Organization in 2005-6 confirmed that not only were these vessels plundering Somalia's marine resources but many of them were dumping rubbish – nuclear and chemical waste (Farah, 2011, p.78).

The result of all these is having the kind of children we see in *Links* who play about with rifles and machine guns aiming at live targets as one of the characters explains;

“Our city's armed youths are in the habit of picking a random target at which one of them takes a potshot, then the others aim and shoot, one at a time. It's a sport to them, a game to play when they are bored. The one who hits the target is the winner.”

“And that is what they are doing now?”

“I suspect so.”

...

Whatever the case, the first bullet struck the woman's eldest son. The crowd at the foot of the stairs exploded into panic. Two of the youths trained their guns on anyone who might dare to approach or dare to disarm them. The people cowered, silent, frightened.

The three youths were overjoyed, giving one another high fives, two of them extending congratulations to the marksman (Farah, 2003 p.17).

The author captures the African world where the child is the victim of another child and as we can see from the above quotations ambivalent representations of the victim cum culprit image of the child spells doom to a future of Africa. The absurd machination of the global economy is even reflected in imaginations of the narrator where the war feeds the unimaginably grotesque industry dealing in human bodies. This shows the profane facet of capitalism as African culture would not stand anybody desecrating the body of the dead, which is expected to transport the soul in its pure and entirety to the other world. Shanta in a conversation with the protagonist of *Links*, Jeebleh, reveals this dark side of capitalism:

“The business interests of the cartel are suspect,” she said. “Initially established by Af-Laawe as an NGO to help with ferrying and burying the city's unclaimed dead, it's recently branched out into other nefarious activities. The cartel, my reliable source has it, sends all the receipted bills to a Dutch charity based in Utrecht. But that doesn't bother me.

What bothers me is what happens before the corpses are buried. Terrible things are done to the bodies between the time they are collected in Af-Laawe's van and the time they are taken to the cemetery. A detour is made to a safer house, where surgeons on retainer are on twenty-four-hour call. These surgeons remove the kidneys and hearts of the recently dead. Once these internal organs are tested and found to be in good working order, they are flown to hospitals in the middle east, where they are sold and transplanted" (Farah, 2003, p.209).

When a continent or a country has these kinds of visitors, it becomes easy to think of Appiah's mission of making it "harder to think of the world as divided between the West and the Rest; between locals and the moderns; between a bloodless ethic of profit and a bloody ethic of identity; between 'us' and 'them'. The foreignness of foreigners, the strangeness of strangers: these are real enough" (Appiah, 2006 p.xxi) as mere abstractions of non-existent realities especially as long as the teleological motives of the so-called globalization continues to be the decimation of the already marginalized groups embodied in a child who is already suffering from the inconsiderate demands of the culture and the generally harsh environment.

### **Conclusion**

Evidently, the impact of capitalism on the fictional world of the African artist cannot be gainsaid. Farah is one of the authors who, with highly sophisticated literary finesse, manipulate this political and economic ideology to represent his subjects and the realities of the day-to-day life that they have to grapple with. The powerful forces that negotiate their agenda in the African spaces may not be aware of or do not care for the harm they are causing to the invisible yet significantly symbolic subjects in these spaces such as children. Capitalism, therefore, plays a vital role in shaping the literary art in the African space.

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