



“Please do not judge us too harshly!” – The exile’s return to contemporary Somalia in *Links* by Nuruddin Farah

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ABSTRACT. In *Links*, Nuruddin Farah (2003) portrays a Somali back to his country after more than two decades of exile. The scenario he meets is a Somalia already free from the dictatorship that expelled him, but still immersed in a bloody civil war between rival militias. Farah’s narrative is largely built around extensive scenes of conversation and confront between this returnee and the Somalis who remained and became involved in the conflict. The current paper demonstrates that the reckoning made possible by these confrontations does not actually mean a leveling of blame, since Farah seems to be very specific about the main reasons for the nation’s current state of destruction.

Keywords: dictatorship, civil war, militias, confrontation, blame, reckoning.

“Por favor, não nos julgue tão duramente!” – O retorno do exilado à Somália contemporânea em *Links* de Nuruddin Farah

RESUMO. Em *Link*, Nuruddin Farah (2003) retrata um somali de volta ao seu país de origem depois de mais de duas décadas de exílio. O cenário que ele encontra é uma Somália já liberta da ditadura que o expulsou, mas ainda imersa numa sangrenta guerra civil entre milícias rivais. A narrativa de Farah é, em grande parte, construída em torno de extensas cenas de conversação e confronto entre esse repatriado e os somalis que permaneceram e se envolveram no conflito. O objetivo deste artigo é demonstrar que o ajuste de contas possibilitado por essas confrontações não significa de fato um nivelamento das culpas, uma vez que Farah parece ser bem específico a respeito dos principais motivos para o estado atual de destruição da nação.

Palavras-chave: ditadura, guerra civil, milícias, confrontação, culpas, ajuste de contas.

Introduction

Nuruddin Farah is perhaps the author responsible for making Somalia more known to the Western audience nowadays. Despite the fact that English is not one of the official languages within the Somali contemporary context, in which Arabic and Somali play all linguistic significant roles, both in domestic and public sphere activities, together with learning and the production of literature, he decided long ago to write all his works in it. The reasons that led him to do that combine personal and political aspects. Born in 1945 in Baidoa, which belonged at that time to Italian Somalia, Farah soon moved with his parents to Ogaden, a Somali-speaking territory in Ethiopia, where he learned to read and write in Arabic, Amharic and English, since Somali did not have a written form yet. Although Ethiopia was never a British colony, “[...] the Ethiopian school curriculum was not sufficiently developed, so we used the same English-language text-books as the British colonies in East Africa”

(FARAH, 2002, p. 2). After the unification of Italian Somalia and British Somaliland and the country’s independence under the name of the Federal Republic of Somalia, he moved to the capital Mogadiscio at the age of eighteen and then to India, where he studied English literature at the University of Punjab.

Farah had already published his first novel, *From a crooked rib* (1970), when Somali finally received an official Latin alphabet as one of the first achievements of General Siad Barre’s government (1969-1991). He and the intellectual elite of his country enthusiastically acclaimed the new regime, which presented itself as having a socialist orientation, aligning itself ideologically with the former Soviet Union. It seemed that it would bring all long-cherished social reforms to poverty-stricken Somalia. In this favorable political climate, Farah even felt himself encouraged to write a novel in Somali, published in serialized form in a local newspaper. However, the book soon incurred the wrath of the regime, which had already proved oppressive and persecutory. It was removed from

circulation when still in its first chapters. Thus his first and last attempt to write in Somali ended sadly. Farah's second novel in English, *A naked needle* (1976), was also censored, and he was warned not to return to Somalia after finishing a postgraduate course in Europe.

During his exile of more than twenty years, Farah devoted himself in portraying the plight of the Somali people and investigating diverse moments of Barre's government. His two subsequent trilogies, *Variations on the theme of an African dictatorship*, comprising the novels *Sweet and sour milk* (1979), *Sardines* (1981) and *Close Sesame* (1983), and *Blood in the sun*, comprising *Maps* (1986), *Gifs* (1992) and *Secrets* (1998), dealt with the General's nefarious influence on people's lives and the nation. Once free from the violent restrictions imposed by the regime, Farah seemed to have become Barre's biggest opponent outside Somalia, exposing to Western readers all the general's contradictions and failures as a political leader. In this sense, he was able to employ English, which had played so important a role in his education, as an amplifier of his criticisms, reaching a greater number of people. In his own words, "[...] writing in Somali and living in the country would enable the regime to silence me easily [...]", whereas, by using English, he could "[...] feel part of a wider world, one that cannot be totally stifled by [any] tyrannical regime" (FARAH, 2002, p. 12).

Farah's novels offer vivid portraits of Somalia and its people, revealing for Westerners a scenario that would otherwise be much more difficult for them to access. This paper aims to analyze the picture drawn by one of his latest fictional productions, *Links* (2003), in which he examines the context of contemporary Somalia in the aftermath of Barre's fall in 1991, deposed by opposing groups of armed militias. In the novel, after the General has fled the capital and the country, he is replaced by two rival warlords, Strongman North and Strongman South, who dominate the respective regions of Mogadiscio, throwing the population into a bloody civil war. With the justification of stopping the militiamen's carnage and 'doing God's work', UN forces, mainly led by Americans, landed in the city and started attacking the Somali guerrillas, which culminated in the debacle on the third of October, 1993. Thus, Farah uses a conflict that happened in real life in order to lay the groundwork for his fiction, without, however, ever naming the two warlords and offering instead his own interpretation of the events without bothering to seek legitimacy for it in real facts.

He exposes his view on the subject through one of his characters, Dajal, who states that "[...] the

American in charge of the United Nations operation ordered his forces to attack" StrongmanSouth and his militiamen (FARAH, 2004, p. 71). He also added that the October-third fight resulted in an impressive number of casualties: "[...] over a thousand supporters of StrongmanSouth were massacred, and eighteen U.S. soldiers lost their lives [...]" (FARAH, 2004, p. 66). The fact that it is a secondary character that advances what seems to be the author's point of view in a dialogue with the protagonist Jeebleh, who is an exile back to Somalia after living for more than two decades abroad, has a twofold function: to instruct him about what happened in his country during his absence and at the same time enlighten the reader about the same events.

Although Farah does not specify the date, Jeebleh's return to Somalia should have happened around 1997,¹ which makes it very close to Farah's own first visit to his motherland after his exile in 1996. Even if it is not possible to determine to what extent one's return reflects the other, it seems reasonable enough to assume that the setting visited by the two men was quite similar. Going back to Somalia and seeing it all ravaged by civil war must not have been easy for Farah as he had wagered all his chips during his literary career on the idea that the dictator's disappearance would bring the possibility of a new beginning for the country, establishing the horizon of a better future. Similarly to Farah, Jeebleh left Somalia still during the years of the dictatorship, also inaugurating a long period of exile. Differently from Farah, he was arrested and sent to one of the terrible prisons of the regime, only to be mysteriously released, probably through the intercession of Caloosha, who is the character closest to the role of villain in the story, and put on a plane bound for Nairobi and then the United States. Despite this particularity, Jeebleh's bitter conclusion must have been the same as Farah's, that Somalia was better during Barre's rule: "I admit things were a lot clearer when I was last here, in the days of the dictatorship" (FARAH, 2004, p. 32). So, who is to blame for the recent total disarticulation of the nation? It seems the novel will investigate the disastrous intervention of American troops during the civil war and, most importantly, the culpability of the 'incestuous', to use Farah's own expression, clannish structure of Somali society.

The Somali clan system and Farah's work

During the period of colonization one notion about Somalia became very common among Africanists and

¹The story mentions that Dajal's granddaughter was injured by the fall of a helicopter during the confrontations on October 3rd, 1993, when she was barely one year old. At a certain moment during his visit, Jeebleh goes to see her: "How old is she?" "Almost five and a half." Jeebleh didn't know what to say. "A baby does not suffer alone," the mother said" (FARAH, 2004, p. 273).

other scholars of colonial issues, or rather, the idea that it would be among the very few African countries that would easily adapt to the structure of the nation-state after their independence, due to an alleged ethnic and cultural unity, something that was virtually unthinkable in relation to most modern African nations. However, the idea proved to be fallacious because there were important factors in the Somalis' social organization that revealed that they could not be considered such a homogeneous people. According to Abdalla Omar Mansur (1995),

[t]he Somali population, which has a common language, culture, and religion, is considered to be a real and unitary state and is given the title of nation-state within the African context, but in reality it is contrary to a nation. The Somali people are internally broken up into clans and traditionally lack the concept of state as a hierarchical power (MANSUR, 1995, p. 107).

Mansur does not seem to interrogate the Somalis' cultural, linguistic and religious homogeneity yet, as other theoreticians do,² but he affirms that they are internally split by the structure of clans, which can be a great impediment for the establishment of a centralized government. In the author's opinion, three factors contributed to what he calls the destruction of the Somali state: clanism, misconceptions about the nature of the state and international aid. Clanism, he explains, should not be understood as mere blood relationship, since it is actually based on the traditional way of life of Somalia's nomadic pastoralists. It was the outcome of a specific circumstance in which they lived and organized themselves: the need to seek forms of collaboration in order to protect their herds of goats, sheep and camels from the attacks of other groups. The experience of the clan as a unity stemmed, therefore, from the allegiance aimed at the survival of the community as a whole.

Mansur sees the transportation of this traditional notion to Somalia's contemporary reality as a great problem because this process would entail misconceptions about the nature of the state, causing each group to seek power only to opportunistically secure its interests and not to do the common good. The conflicts among rival clans, which traditionally turned around the looting of camels and skirmishes over the rights to water sources and pastures, are transposed to the often violent disputes over positions

of power. The nation becomes the stage for fierce and fratricidal competition, not the democratic space in which public welfare must be first ensured. Moreover, Mansur also states that international aid, especially that coming from the Soviet Union and the United States, eventually contributed towards the undermining of the Somali nation because the country became one of the most armed in the Third World. Even the less important heads of clans could become a great threat because they had access to an unprecedented amount of weapons, which gave the traditional rivalry among them a scope and persistence hitherto unseen. Foreign aid, Mansur adds, also created in Somalia a sense of dependency on imported products, preventing national industries from developing, and thus contributing towards the economic backwardness of the country.

Mansur considers clanism as a kind of cancer that must be excised from the nation's body so that the latter may develop a strong centralized power. In other words, he does not question the relevance of the structure of the nation-state and its applicability in the Somalian context, even though it is an apparatus imposed by colonization and finds no echo in the Somali people's traditional social organization. However, other authors understand that nationalism and development do not necessarily have to do with centralization of power. Ion M. Lewis (1994), for instance, states that

[n]ationalism has not to be confused with statehood. Unlike the peoples of the central Ethiopian highlands (and for that matter the 'Afar), the Somali people have no traditional commitment to state government: they are profoundly uncentralized and egalitarian, and historically their encounters with state structures have tended to be fleeting and predatory. Against this background, some Somali intellectuals, contemplating Somalia's disintegration in 1992, realistically concluded that the best hope for future probably lay in a loosely organized federal state, built up gradually from clan-based local councils (LEWIS, 1994, p. 233).

Lewis and other scholars seem to understand that the solution for Somalia is not by fitting the mold of Western strongly centralized nation-states, but rather the development of a looser federation that takes into account the existence of clans and local councils. The above mentioned author reports that the biggest problem is not the clan itself, but the way it has been used by several groups: clanism "is [...] an elastic principle, differently manipulated by ambitious, power-hungry individuals" (LEWIS, 1994, p. 233). Lewis also blames international aid or interference for worsening the situation, coupled with the inordinate ambition of some leaders and groups:

²Other authors question this alleged cultural homogeneity. Andrzejewski and Lewis (1964), for example, emphasize the existing cultural and economic differences between Somalia's North and South. Mohammed Haji Mukhtar (1995), on his part, affirms that this idea of homogeneity is a distorted generalization imposed by colonization and the dominance of Somali nomadic groups over sedentary ones during the post-independent period.

In the modern setting, with their privileged access to external sources of economic and political power, to sophisticated weapons and Swiss bank accounts, successful 'big men' – like Siyad [sic] and his successors, the so-called 'war-lords' – can in this egalitarian society pluck the strings of kinship to their own advantage to an extent and on a scale beyond anything realised before. They are able to exploit, and partially control, the interface between their own society and the world outside. At the same time, the pervasive if uneven distribution of modern weapons has greatly aggravated the bitterness and ferocity of group conflict, with casualties too numerous to record or easily repair in terms of traditional bloodwealth payments. This seems to exacerbate the difficulties of inter-clan peace-making and dispute settlement (LEWIS, 1994, p. 233-234).

As a matter of fact, Farah seems to share the same criticism of clans made by Mansur and Lewis. His characters are never identified by the names of their clans. The name of the clan, which is different from the individual's regular surname, is virtually effaced from all his novels. Besides, friendship or even family relationships among his characters often subvert clanism. One of his most recurrent motifs is the figure of the orphaned child or the one whose paternity/maternity is unknown or questionable. When it is not possible to trace with certainty a child's affiliation, he/she is necessarily outside the clan system, which is passed from one generation to another, mainly by paternal lineage, although the mother's clan also matters. Thus, the orphan, the bastard, and the foundling play a significant role in Farah's deconstruction of the importance of clans. They end up being humans regarded just as individuals outside the atavistic bonds of their communities, in relation to whom the only possible relationship is by affection.

In *Links* there is a similar subversion. Jeebleh and his friends are not orphans, but the alignment among them similarly disrupts blood links. Caloosha is Bile's half-brother, but as their fathers belonged to different clans, they are not considered to be of the same clan family, despite having the same mother. Jeebleh, on his part, has a different mother and father, but is related in blood terms to Caloosha because both have the same clan identity. Nevertheless, he feels much closer to Bile, who is his true friend, whereas he sees Caloosha as an enemy. It is another instance in Farah's works in which affection and friendship replace strict family ties. However, because of an arrangement between their mothers, they were all raised together, sharing childhood experiences. In their boyish years, Jeebleh and Bile already united to face Caloosha's

persecution and cruelty, which was always more intense in relation to his half-brother. When they were all grown-ups, it seems that Caloosha, as a member of the government, was somehow responsible for Jeebleh and Bile's imprisonment, a situation that is not completely clear in the novel. But few years later he also seems to have arranged for Jeebleh's release, leaving his own brother to languish in jail until the fall of the regime. Jeebleh's goals in returning to Somalia are twofold: to take revenge on Caloosha for all he did and to help Bile to recover his kidnapped niece, Raasta.

Furthermore, Jeebleh's father, from whom he was supposed to have inherited his clan identity, was in fact a gambler and "[...] a lowlife; he had sold the house the family lived in and the plot of land he had inherited from his own family to pay off gambling debts [...]" (FARAH, 2004, p. 93).

The result was that Jeebleh's parents got divorced and his mother tried to raise him in a strict though encouraging way so that he would grow up to be apart and different from his father. His father's absence seems to have led to the effacement of his clan identity by paternal lineage. When Jeebleh's clansmen go to see him at the hotel in Mogadiscio, they introduce themselves as his maternal relatives: "As it happens, we're from your mother's side of the bah! [...]" (FARAH, 2004, p. 127), 'bah' being a Somali word that means uterine or consanguineous family.

Jeebleh does not like his clansmen's attitude to come looking for him to ask for money to repair their battlewagons. He has no intention of sponsoring their fight or any clannish fight at all. Since a blunt refusal would be very unwise in his present circumstances, he pretends to be upset with the way they have addressed him:

'I am insulted by the way you've formulated my identity,' Jeebleh said. 'Why do I feel I am being insulted? Why do you continue referring to me as the son of my mother without ever bothering to mention my father by name? Don't I have a father? Am I illegitimate? We know what he was like and what kind of man he was, but still, he was my father and I bear his name, not my mother's! How dare you address me in a way that questions my being the legitimate son of my own father?' (FARAH, 2004, p. 128).

Jeebleh's strategy is to administer the same poison his elders intended to use against him. Appealing to his family honor and blood loyalty, Jeebleh employs the same repertoire as they, which reveals he knows, as an insider, the system of values this community cherishes. However, it seems quite obvious that he does not share it. What has caused the detachment between him and his original collectivity?

Was it the different way he was raised by his single mother in an environment highly dominated by male supremacy? Consequently, his thoughts while listening to his clansmen's litanies are very revealing:

[t]he elders failed to mention that they had blamed his mother for her husband's wild ways, accusing her of driving him first to gambling and then to the bottle (FARAH, 2004, p. 127).

The suspicion against his clansmen seems to have begun when they accused his mother of causing the failure in her marriage. For Jeebleh, it is highly hypocritical of them to ask him for money now after having refused to help his mother when she most needed.

Anyway, it does not seem to have been his experience of living abroad that caused his criticism or detachment in relation to clans. In the United States, Jeebleh also resents being pressured to take a specific clan identity:

'[t]o tell you the truth, I was fed up being asked by Americans whether I belonged to this or that clan,' Jeebleh continued, 'many assuming that I was a just-arrived refugee, fresh from the so-called clan fighting' (FARAH, 2004, p. 36).

His avoidance in identifying himself as a member of a particular clan is therefore not the result of living in a different cultural context, but an already internalized issue. In fact, the idea of a Somali that does not base his entire life on clans or is not willing to kill the members of other clans for whatever reason does not seem to be completely alien in the Somalian context. Jeebleh's memories, for instance, are immersed in peaceful days:

He remembered his youth, and how much he had enjoyed living close to the ocean, where he would often go for a swim. Time was, when the city was so peaceful he could take a stroll at any hour of the day or night without being mugged, or harassed in any way. As a youth, before going off to Padua for university – Somalia had none of its own – he and Bile would go to the Gezira nightclub and then walk home at three in the morning, no hassle at all. In those long-gone days, the people of this country were at peace with themselves, comfortable in themselves, happy with who they were (FARAH, 2004, p. 14).

Thus, there were times in which people lived in peace in Mogadiscio despite belonging to different clans. The destruction caused by the rivalry among clans was not always the reality in the city or country. In this sense, Farah seems to embrace Mansur and Lewis's beliefs about the responsibility of the greedy nature of some leading clannish groups and the nefarious influence of international aid for the current

situation of complete social devastation. However, he seems to disagree with Lewis and agree with Mansur in the sense that he also advocates the importance of establishing a centralized government in Somalia, using another secondary character such as Bile for uttering what seems to be his own ideas:

[t]he services may be faulty and faltering in other countries, but any central government, however weak it is, will do better than these murderous warlords and their cartels (FARAH, 2004, p. 153).

Even more importantly, Jeebleh also seems to share these ideas. Therefore, *Links* is a novel that portrays the return to the homeland of a Somali who represents a portion of the native population that does not consider the clan system in the same way as most of the country does. The narrative will then greatly focus on his encounters and confrontations with Somalis that remained on their country's soil and generally think differently.

Confrontations of different views

Derek Wright (2002) classifies Farah's works as "[...] novels of discourse and debate" (WRIGHT, 2002, p. 104). It means that they usually have a structure built around large scenes of conversation between two or more characters in which distinct points of view on the same subject are generally discussed. In another moment, Wright (2004) also refers to this issue as follows:

His novels are forums of debate which 'allow very many different competing views to be heard,' in the hope that truth will issue from the collision of opposing ideas; for truth in Farah's fiction is relative, ambiguous and open-ended (WRIGHT, 2004, p. 18).

In *Links* the general procedure is to put face to face, as has already been said, the Somali exile and other Somalis who had never left the country in order to cause different views on the national situation to be examined. It seems the main idea is to allow conflicting opinions and political stands to be heard and discussed to avoid simplified accusations of culpability. Different kinds of guilt or responsibility will be exposed in an attempt to make the nation come to terms with its past and present, a necessary requirement to achieve a better future.

The first of these confrontations already occurs when Jeebleh arrives at the airport in Mogadiscio where he meets the strange Af-Laawe, also known as the Marabou. Initially Af-Laawe introduces himself as Bile's friend, but soon he tells Jeebleh that Bile has many detractors who question the source of the money with which he set up the refuge where he helps war refugees. Without directly accusing Bile, Af-Laawe is

able to cause the alleged suspicions around him to come to Jeebleh's knowledge:

'His detractors speak of murder and robbery.'

'Bile murdering and robbing?'

'Civil wars have a way of making people behave contrary to their own nature,' Af-Laawe said. 'You'd be surprised to know what goes on, or what people get up to. At times, it's difficult to tell the good from the bad.'

'Not Bile!'

'You have heard about his niece?' Af-Laawe said. 'That she's been abducted, rumor has it, by men related to the people Bile has allegedly murdered and robbed? Supposedly, the kidnappers have said they won't set his niece and her companion free until he has given back the money he stole, or confesses to having committed the murders.' Af-Laawe watched silently as Jeebleh stared at him with so much distrust spreading over his features (FARAH, 2004, p. 7).

In contrast, Af-Laawe seems to draw a more positive picture of Caloosha: "He's a stalwart politician in the north, [...] and on the side acts as a security consultant to StrongmanNorth" (FARAH, 2004, p. 13). Af-Laawe even affirms that he would be very pleased to take Jeebleh to see Caloosha anytime he wanted. Despite being bothered by this display of intimacy between Af-Laawe and his greatest enemy, Jeebleh is impressed with what seems to be a wonderful act of generosity on his interlocutor's part when he offers to collect the corpse of a boy who was shot at the airport and quickly arrange his funeral, since he drives a van that is owned by a company called 'Funeral with a difference', which

'[...] belongs to a charitable organization that gives decent Islamic burials to the unclaimed corpses littering the streets of the city whenever there is fighting,' he said. 'I set it up in the early stages of the civil war, when there were bodies everywhere, at roundabouts, by the side of the road, in buildings. A large percentage of the dead had no relatives to bury them. They had belonged to clan families who had been chased out of the city' (FARAH, 2004, p. 18).

This is at least the explanation Af-Laawe gives for his business. However, later on, Jeebleh will hear a different version. According to Shanta, Bile's sister and Raasta's mother, Af-Laawe belongs to a cartel that smuggles human organs. Thus, the speed with which he collects the bodies would be explained by the necessity of removing the organs when the person is not completely dead yet. No evidence is provided to these accusations throughout the novel, as also happens with most issues involving Bile. Although this uncertainty in both cases seems to

indicate that there is no closed truth in Farah's narrative, the reality is that the reader is led to believe more in Bile's innocence and Af-Laawe's guilt because of their connections and actual deeds. Bile confesses to Jeebleh to have taken almost one million U.S. dollars from an empty house after his release from prison, but it is this sum he used to set up his charitable refuge. Further, the owners of the house were probably members of the government that had fled after the dictator's fall, leaving behind some of what they had gained in corrupt expedients. Bile also has on his side all the alleged good guys of the story, including Jeebleh himself and Raasta, who is considered a special child who brings peace wherever she is, whereas Af-Laawe is directly connected to Caloosha, a man full of evil intents.

Another important confrontation happens when Jeebleh takes a lift from the airport to the hotel in a vehicle full of gunmen. The leader of the young fighters is the Major, who ends up personifying those who defend the causes that led to the civil war. But he does not confront Jeebleh alone. Along with him there is the driver, who represents the part of the Somali resident population that seems to be much more sensible, lamenting the fight and its consequences:

'We're all shell-shocked on account of what we've been through – those of us who stayed on in the country. I hope people like you will forgive us our failings, and we pray to God that He'll forgive us for our trespasses too' (FARAH, 2004, p. 21).

The same spirit will be found in a character Jeebleh will meet later at the hotel. It is Ali, the manager, who addresses Jeebleh as follows:

'[...] 'Please do not judge us too harshly!'

'But of course not,' Jeebleh replied.

'Times were' – Ali gestured out toward the gates [...] – 'when you knew who was bad and who was good. Such distinctions are now blurred. We are at best good badmen, or bad badmen' (FARAH, 2004, p. 40-41).

Ali's last sentence is the key to understand the many characters in the novel. They can only be at best classified as 'good badmen, or bad badmen', which obviously means that they are all bad men, the difference among them being one of degree and not of kind. Thus, despite committing some serious mistakes, maybe even crimes, Bile is evidently not as evil as Caloosha and Af-Laawe, something that will be gradually clearer to the reader throughout the novel. Even the protagonist Jeebleh has his failures though and is not really in a position to judge his countrymen because he was given the opportunity to

escape the conflict. The fact that he accepted Caloosha's help makes him, like it or not, closer to those members of the deposed regime he abhors and had formerly opposed.

The Major, whose nickname indicates, as Jeebleh wisely realizes, that he belonged to the army of the extinct government, is one of those fellows. He confronts Jeebleh as follows:

'To someone like you,' the Major started up again, 'we're all nuts, we're ranting mad. You probably think we're all fighting over nothing of great importance. You'll say, 'Look, your country is in ruins, and you keep fighting over nothing.' Those of us who've stayed on and participated in warring against the invaders of our territories feel maligned. We feel belittled when those of you who left, who have comfortable jobs, and houses with running water and electricity, somewhere else, where there is peace, speak like that. Has it ever occurred to you that some of us carry our guns, as the good everywhere must bear arms, to fight and die for justice? [...] We're fighting for a worthy cause, the recovery of our territory. We're fighting against our oppressors, who're morally evil, reprehensibly blameworthy, every one of them. I see StrongmanSouth as evil for wanting to impose his wicked will on our people' (FARAH, 2004, p. 27-28).

Although the Major has a good point in complaining that those Somalis who left the country to live a more comfortable life somewhere else cannot really understand the plight of those who stayed on and had to fight, he does not seem very agreeable to the reader because he is full of rage and bitterness. Jeebleh is also perhaps an object of criticism since he preferred his relaxed way of living in the United States (though the alternative would obviously be dying or remaining years in prison), but he represents, nevertheless, a more balanced consciousness in the novel, thinking about what seems to be a reasonable argument:

[...] [Jeebleh] knew that the Major's armed movement was engaged in acts equally reprehensible as those of StrongmanSouth's militia, knew too that [...] it had 'cleansed' its ancestral territory of those hailing from other regions (FARAH, 2004, p. 28, emphasis in original).

Although Farah has given the opportunity to the Major to express his point of view, the author employs Jeebleh's conscience to assess the whole situation, equating both rival militias because of their clannish orientation and gratuitous destruction. In this sense, as his view seems to be more sensible, readers are more prone to identify themselves with Jeebleh and agree with him.

Another confrontation worth discussing is the one between Jeebleh and the nefarious Caloosha. In their

encounter, Caloosha is undoubtedly portrayed as a wicked man. In fact, it is noteworthy that his ugliness is described by the third-person narrator exactly as it is perceived by Jeebleh's consciousness because of a sophisticated use of free indirect speech:

He [Jeebleh] was looking at a man [Caloosha] with a more prominent nose than he remembered, a much fatter man, with so distended a paunch it spilled over his belt and lay flat in this lap. His face was puffy, the hair was thin on his skull, patchy, and peppered with gray at the sides. He could easily have done a send-up of a Buddha, only he had no wisdom to impart. Alas, the years had not humbled the fool in the least. [...] Caloosha's distended belly was filled with sentiments of war and wickedness, which was why he looked so ugly, and so unhealthy. Attrition retarded his brain, evil dulled his imagination, did not sharpen it (FARAH, 2004, p. 101-102).

As the narrator's limited omniscience, focused on Jeebleh's conscience, does not allow a different view on Caloosha to arise in this particular episode, readers are much more inclined to form the same opinion of him. However, maybe we should be more cautious about the establishment of a definite truth precisely because of it. Things are seen and felt through Jeebleh's senses and mind, and he is far from being neutral about Caloosha, since

[e]ver since childhood they [both] had been at loggerheads, and the memory of how Caloosha had again and again hurt him returned with a vengeance (FARAH, 2004, p. 101).

If this is true, it is also true that when Caloosha uses his own voice he also says things that seem very awful to the reader, as the way he relates his first encounter and relationship with his junior wife:

'She's somewhere in this villa, the latest acquisition of an old man ready to retire.' [...]

'How did you *acquire* her?' Jeebleh asked.

'We blundered into each other,' he replied.

'Blundered into each other?' [...]

'I found her alone after looters had emptied her family home and killed her parents. She was fifteen years old at the time, and was hiding in the attic, frightened out of her wits. [...] She's been a blessing to me in my old age, my young thing' (FARAH, 2004, p. 104-105).

It is impossible not to realize the subtext that lies behind the story of love and generosity Caloosha intends to tell: the fact that he acquired his wife as a material possession, that she was too young to marry and that she was looted exactly as all the stuff taken out from her house. So, it seems quite enough to place him among the 'bad badmen' of the story. Nevertheless, Caloosha is also given a chance to voice his own

defense on everything he did during the dictatorship. According to him, he was a military man, only obeying the instructions given to him by his superiors, and nothing more. In this case, he explains that it was the dictator himself who decided to lock Jeebleh and Bile up, releasing the former and keeping the later in jail. If this makes him less guilty or not is something readers have to decide.

Further, the subsequent occurrences will lead to the impression that Caloosha is responsible for kidnapping Raasta and her friend Makka, even if it is not completely clear. The unfolding of the events surrounding the solution of the kidnapping remains wrapped in a kind of haze, since no definite explanation is offered for the girls' disappearance or release. However, there seems to be enough evidence that Caloosha is behind everything. Raasta reports having received in her captivity "[...] occasional visits from the fat man. He never showed his face to them, but [she] concluded that he was the head of the visiting entourage" (FARAH, 2004, p. 300). Only after Jeebleh is taken by Af-Laawe to what seems to be his deceased mother's fake housekeeper and grave at the cemetery, receiving an injection that makes him fade away, he will meet Raasta's father, who will take him to her. Next Jeebleh is able to take the girls back home without anyone creating any hindrance. The kidnapping seems to be solved too easily, which, despite opening the possibilities of reading, is still a loss for narrative tension, leaving the reader without knowing why things were finally resolved and why they were not before.

If there is still any doubt about Caloosha's culpability, even remotely, the same does not apply to the Americans' role in the operation to contain the civil war. It seems that most of the characters agree that the American soldiers were capable of committing atrocities in Somalia while claiming to be defending peace. Farah puts his more righteous characters talking about it:

'I've my misgivings about saints and angels,' [Seamus, Jeebleh and Bile's Irish friend] said, 'especially as I fear that people describe the Yankees as 'good angels' come on a humanitarian mission, to perform God's work here. [...] When do angels cease to be angels and resort to being who they are, Yankees?' [...]

'They ceased to be angels,' [Shanta] said, 'which they weren't in any case, and became who they were, Americans, when they used overwhelming force in such an indiscriminate fashion and lots of innocent Somalis died.'

Bile agreed, adding that, from the moment they landed and started putting on a circus for the benefit of prime-time TV back home, you felt they couldn't have come to do God's work (FARAH, 2004, p. 260).

Examining the responsibility of the Americans, who mostly made up the UN peacekeeping forces, is a way to include the international community in the story, making it recognize its share of blame in Somalia's current situation. Thus, the kind of reckoning Farah undertakes in this novel is not restricted only to nationals. The main idea seems to be that Westerners cannot really judge the Somalis since they are responsible as much as they are – or perhaps even more – for the devastation brought up by the consequences of the long civil war. The way the West dealt with Somalia's dictatorial regime and the conflict that followed it was negligent and disastrous, to say the least. Although there were foreign characters in his previous novels as well, this seems to be the first time in which Farah turns Somalia into a more fluid context in which the movements and deeds of agents coming from different places will be assessed. Strict national boundaries are then diluted to give way to a more permeable space made of the distinct experiences of foreigners and of resident and diasporic Somalis.

Final considerations

Links seems to be Farah's attempt to make the world listen and understand the Somalis who decided to remain on home soil and fight the civil war. In order to do that he focuses his narrative on an exiled Somali who returns to the country during the conflict, thus reuniting two kinds of his countrymen: those who stayed on and those who left. As this returnee lives in the United States, he also represents somehow the American and Western consciousnesses, also summoned to account for their influence on the development of events in contemporary Somalia. In this sense the experience of the diaspora seems to be very important in this novel, probably in a more intense way than in his previous works. According to Avtar Brah (1996),

[a]t the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey. Yet not every journey can be understood as diaspora. Diasporas are clearly not the same as casual travel. Nor do they normatively refer to temporary sojourns. Paradoxically, diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about putting roots 'elsewhere' (BRAH, 1996, p. 182, emphasis in original).

Thus, the journey that is at the core of the diaspora represented in *Links* is a travel undertaken by the Somalis who had to abandon their homeland because of political persecution during the dictatorship and settle down in other countries, also encompassing the return of these refugees now that the tyrannical regime is over and people are fighting a civil war. In this

narrative there is then the portrayal of a diaspora space, "[...] inhabited not only by those who have migrated [...] but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous" (BRAH, 1996, p. 181). As Brah puts it, the diaspora space "[...] includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'" (BRAH, 1996, p. 181, emphasis in original). In this sense, Farah builds his novel at the intersection of many narratives or discourses of dispersion and permanence, as has been seen.

However, his intention of leveling the blame of those who stayed on and the ones who left is not fully completed. Despite the fact that characters involved in the civil war or the previous government are offered the opportunity to voice their defense, it is very clear that there is an authoritative critique of their methods and motives. The criticism against blind loyalty to clans and the destruction brought out by it emerges throughout the narrative, assessing everything the characters say or do. Farah makes an effort to demonstrate that Jeebleh is not as good and noble as we might at first think, trying to turn him into one of the bad men in the story, but his share of evilness is simply to arrange for Caloosha to be killed. As Caloosha is represented so negatively and because all the evil deeds he seems to have committed, his death brings relief for characters and readers. The fact that Jeebleh does not kill him with his own hands, employing instead Dajal's services, also seems to attenuate his guilt, especially since there seems to be a misunderstanding as Dajal seems to have gone beyond what had been agreed or executed the plan at a time when Jeebleh had already forgotten it.

Besides, Caloosha somehow occupies in this novel the place General Barre has held in Farah's previous works. Since the coup that deposed him did not take his life, Farah symbolically performs this killing in his narrative through Caloosha's execution. His disappearance at the end of the story opens up the possibilities of a new beginning for the other characters, as Barre's departure opened up the possibilities for Somalia. In this sense, this deed does

not compromise Jeebleh's integrity as a central consciousness in the narrative, according to which the other fictional figures' statements and actions are investigated and evaluated. Much worse than the murder of this particular villain are the random killings carried out by clannish groups and American soldiers. At least that is what Farah seems to want us to believe after reading his novel.

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Received on December 1, 2012.

Accepted on October 1, 2013.

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