

UNRAVELING IDENTITY, POWER, AND SILENCE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF NURUDDIN FARAH'S *SECRETS*

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Abstract

The article analyses how the novel *Secrets* by Nuruddin Farah engages in a conversation about the related concepts of identity, memory, trauma, and gender in the socio-political context of Somalia. Via the conflicted voice of the narrator Kalamán and the character Sholoongo, the novel brings to light the role of silence in shaping the private history and the manipulation of patriarchal power structures in doing so. Truth becomes a contested site of politics in the context of family. Via a discussion of the literary techniques used by Nuruddin Farah in his novel such as fragmented memories, non-linear timeline, and symbolic characters, the article shows how *Secrets* by Farah offers a challenge to dominant cultural discourse. Critical theoretical insights from African feminists and post-colonial scholars have also been considered in the analysis of the novel.

Keywords

Feminist criticism, postcolonial identity, narrative power, patriarchy, family politics.

Introduction

As one of the continent's most renowned postcolonial novelists, Nuruddin Farah employs fiction as a tool of questioning the intricacies of Somali identity in terms of its socio-cultural and political dimensions. *Secrets* takes the family and makes it the mirror of the country, illustrating the connections between personal suffering and the country's political instability. The novel begins with a murder, but only because the murder provides a gateway to a world built on secrets, lies, and loyalties. The reader gets an insight into the power of secrecy to affect memory and identity through Kalamán's experiences as the story's narrator. Farah's story is highly interwoven, intertwining personal memories with the larger history of the nation. The arrival of Sholoongo, the childhood friend and strange reflection of Kalamán, shakes the carefully constructed world of the hero. This makes him look into the past and the suppressed memories that create the unstable structure of the story he creates. Farah employs such a plot to show the nature of memory distorted by trauma, silence, and power. The book itself emphasizes the role of women in the context of patriarchal societies and provides examples of such characters as Sholoongo and Damac. Through the use of post-colonial

theory and African feminism, this article will look at how the text *secrets* is a challenge to the normal conventions of authority, morality, and identity. This article will be based on the idea that far from being historical, the discussion on secrecy presented in this novel is a fight for truth in a society torn apart by civil strife and sexual politics.

About the Author

Nuruiddin Farah was born on November 24, 1945, in Baidoa, Somalia. Having been raised in a multilingual society, Farah learned Somali, Amharic, Arabic, Italian, and English languages, and his mastery of these languages contributed immensely to his literary achievements. He started his writing career at an early age and became known throughout the world through his literary works such as *From a Crooked Rib*, *Maps*, *Gifts*, *Secrets*, *Links*, *Knots*, and *Crossbones*. Nuruddin Farah's condemnation of dictatorship and social injustices made him a subject of exile for years, but that did not discourage him from writing about his native Somalia's history, culture, and people. His immense contribution to literature was acknowledged internationally when he won Neustadt International Prize for Literature and many other prizes.

The Politics of Family, Loyalty, and Betrayal in Farah's Narrative World

The novel *Secrets* by Nuruddin Farah begins with a world where the future of individuals is shaped by loyalties to their families and clans and the honor that they have inherited from previous generations. The book is about how one's own identity is used as a battleground where the reality of life is denied due to the expectations of society. Right at the start of the novel, Farah places the reader in the midst of the conflict between moral values and the reality of life. The murder of Nonno, Kalamán's grandfather, sets off the narrative in the book. The narration by Kalamán depicts his dilemma, which consists of the conflicting feelings of love towards his mother Damac and the confusion caused by her irrational behavior. Kalamán feels confused since "My mother became distant from me because I made her feel like an injury that had failed to heal" (p. 27). This quote serves as the manifestation of the effect of trauma on the relation between a mother and a child and highlights the gap created by gendered silences in the Somali society.

Farah creates the family as a political institution, in which each individual is turned into a symbol. Nonno, a renowned oral historian, is the embodiment of patriarchal ideology. Nevertheless, Nonno too is able to cover his mistakes, which will later contribute to the moral decline of the family. As Kalamán narrates about the perception of Nonno by other people, "they celebrated him as one who held the truth of morality in trust, although he had his own secrets that were never revealed" (p. 41). In this case, the family environment serves as the focal point through which Farah investigates the national breakdown. According to literary critic Lee Nichols, "Farah portrays the private sphere of family life as a microcosm of the divided nation, where the use of secrets is employed as a political tool" (Nichols, p. 112). With this statement, one can see that Farah makes family conflicts a symbol of the political breakdown of Somalia. However, in the development of the story, it becomes clear that the family's silence favors the abusers more than the victims. Inherited loyalty to Nonno puts the burden on Kalamán and Sholoongo to deal with the past that never belonged to them.

Memory, Silence, and the Making of Personal Truth

One of the most pronounced themes of the book is Farah's consideration of the concept of memory. The fragmented nature of Kalamán's narration, uncertainty, and self-contradictions are reflective of the nature of trauma itself. The memory of his childhood is highly unreliable and unpredictable, which implies that remembering things is not about facts but rather a matter of finding a compromise between truth and protection. Kalamán says, "I no longer know whether the memories I carry are mine or someone else's stories repeated so many times that they become mine" (p. 79). This quote lays the foundation for the unreliability of memory as one of the techniques of the novel.

Furthermore, Sholoongo, who appears again in Kalamán's adulthood as an alarming figure, continues to make Kalamán's memory unreliable. By asking him to confront his memories, she states: "You fear what you cannot name, and the past is full of names you dare not speak" (p. 93). It becomes clear that the memory is not just about something passive but rather something which requires facing. Indeed, this represents Farah's larger critique of postcolonial identity. Memory becomes a battlefield on which the individual struggles to understand the history that has been stolen from him or forced upon him. Scholar Derek Wright asserts, "Farah's characters exist in a world of destroyed memory, in which the fall of the state apparatus mirrors the loss of personal history" (p. 67). This idea allows one to interpret the psychological conflict in the novel. The conflict is not between people but between competing truths.

In the novel, silence serves as a tool for protection and isolation at the same time. Damac's silence concerning Sholoongo's past and Kalamán's childhood makes her psychologically distant but protects her from pain. Damac's reluctance to speak about trauma symbolizes the social silence imposed on many Somali women. The author demonstrates it explicitly, stating, "my mother's silences were heavy, heavier than her words; they filled our shared rooms" (p. 58).

This contrast of silence and memory brings out the relationship that exists between truth and power. Those who have power, either as elders, men or storytellers, are those who decide whose memories will become official. Therefore, this novel shows how patriarchal oppression is not only about physical domination but also about domination through narratives. As this section comes to a close, Farah has succeeded in bringing out the idea that memory is not an archive but a process. In order to understand oneself, one has to bring out the hidden truths and question the inherited narratives.

Farah's Feminist Lens: Gender, Body, and Resistance

Although the narrator of this book is a male, Farah's *Secrets* are centered around issues of the women's agency, trauma, and politics of the body. In contrast to many narratives where women are depicted as passive victims, Farah portrays Sholoongo and Damac as women existing within oppressive structures and struggling for control over their bodies and lives.

The protagonist Sholoongo becomes an example of resistance against social pressure.

Her non-conformist behavior and attitude show Farah's criticism of patriarchal culture and expectations. As Kalaman says: "She frightened me as a child because she refused to live like other girls, and she frightens me now because she refuses to live like any man expects" (p. 115). Thus, it becomes clear that Sholoongo's resistance is also a political act as it disrupts boundaries of gender roles and makes men feel scared about the independence of women.

Another act of resistance is performed by Damac who does not want to meet the expectations of society in relation to mothers. Farah writes: "Damac wore her dignity like armor, stitched together with her silence" (p. 142). Through this metaphor, the author underlines the double meaning of silence as self-defense and communication tool. Farah's feminist view can also be observed in his criticism of sexual abuse. The fragmented memories of Kalaman of her encounters with Sholoongo when she was a child give rise to many disturbing issues about consent, power, and vulnerability. Farah's story does not provide easy answers to those issues; however, he presents the complexity of trauma in which the roles of victim and perpetrator may be confused in memory but still based on inequality.

The secondary scholar Florence Stratton argues that "Farah's fiction questions the patriarchal discourse through the depiction of how women create alternate identities through resistance, silence, and storytelling" (Stratton, p. 154). This idea is consistent with the representation of Sholoongo who challenges family and societal hierarchies.

In addition, Farah criticizes the way in which Somali society regulates the bodies of women and disregards the actions of men. For instance, the way in which Nonno behaves is concealed from scrutiny, whereas women have to suffer because of men's actions. Farah shows this hypocritical view through Kalaman's memories: "In our home, sins committed by men were called mistakes; sins committed by women were called shame" (p. 189). Overall, through gender, Farah explores the way in which systems of power influence personal identity.

Conclusion

The novels *Secrets* by Nuruddin Farah are complicated explorations of memories, trauma, gender, and the politics of truth. In the entangled stories of Kalaman, Sholoongo, Damac, and Nonno, Farah investigates how individual stories get formed through silence and narratives. This novel reveals the concealed violence inherent in family solidarity and the patriarchal systems that regulate the women's identities. Farah's works remain one of the defining postcolonial African literatures because he never reduces trauma to anything simple; rather, he sees identity as an attempt at reconciliation of stories we receive and truths that must be reclaimed.

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