ISSN 2319-5339 (P), 2583-7591 (O) IIS Univ.J.A. Vol.14 (3), 147-158 (2025)

World(s) across Borders: Mapping the Transnational in Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*

Ritushmita Sharma

Abstract

The proposed study aims to lay out the approach of transnationalism in order to posit a critique of borders as a static structure, and accordingly, perceives the counter-intuitive thesis of transnationalism in sharp opposition with that of the preconceived conceptualisations on nation and national identity. To serve this end, this paper undertakes Nuruddin Farah's novel *Maps* (1986) to reflect on the idea that —as national borders are not static, therefore identities fluctuate and reproduce out of fluid transnational movement-oriented poetics. In this regard, an examination of displaced identities from Somalia, as presented in Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*, would encourage the construction of geographical dislocation of characters from the novel in a positive light, and it would further pave ways to understand the concept of 'border' in terms of its 'hybridness'. The paper predominantly argues that Farah's embracing geographical borders/boundaries as open kinetic systems are verily relativised by extensive dislocation of the Somalis as a result of which they have undergone a process of perpetual *becoming*. This furthermore enables us to engage in the conceptualization of a globalized world where there exists a dynamic web of social connections among individuals transcending national borders. Consequently, the entirety of this paper challenges the prevailing conservative notion that is centered around the model of "one nation, one identity" (Said 6).

Keywords: Border; Hybrid; Nation; Somalia; Transnationalism; Transnational selves.

The expanding body of literature on border studies have tried to address as well as respond to the query on how a border is constructed. Predictably, these studies have directed their response towards 'the state' as responsible for border construction. But there are recent critics who have

tried to bring forward multidisciplinary approaches with their sole focus concentrated on identifying border in terms of "networked connectivity" (Rumford 61). In this context, one can refer to Thomas Nail who, in his work titled *The Theory of the Border* (2016) has pointed out that borders must not necessarily be seen in terms of mere cartographical segregations imposed in between sovereign nation states. Instead one must look into the nature of border in terms of its hybridness which can be realised through the phenomena of global mobilisation and transnational mass migration of the present era. In consequence, adopting the stance of transnationalism is empowering in order to contradict border as a "geographically fixed national line largely intended to stop movement" or as static (Nail 221). Thomas Nail in another of his essays titled "Kinopolitics: Borders in Motion" (2016) has specified upon the function of border to *circulate movement* rather than to stop it (194) as he states,

> Borders function not to keep out but rather to circulate social motion. Borders, like migrants, are not well understood only in terms of inclusion and exclusion, but rather by *circulation* . . . Since the border is always in motion, it is a continually changing process.
>
> In practice, borders, both internal and external, have never succeeded in keeping everyone in or out. Given the constant failure of borders in this regard, the binary and abstract categories of inclusion and exclusion have almost no explanatory power. The failure of borders to fully include or exclude is not just an effect of the contemporary waning sovereignty of postnational states; borders have always leaked. (197)

Any issues on nation and national borders always add to a country's geographical and demographic structure. But at the same time, there are times when national borders are used to be understood as having no significance except its existence as mere arbitrary impositions. In the context of contested landscape like Somalia, its existence as a nation so far has been defined artificially and so does its border relations. The trope of arbitrary border significantly fits into Somalia since the time when the country has been divided and ruled by different colonial boundaries such as Italy, Britain and France too. The time when this trio of European powers annexed their colonies, it has come under the observation that Somali territories have been partitioned beyond any repair. As a result, Somalis being excluded or placed outside these boundaries were absorbed in by the adjacent border countries.

In case of displaced Somalis particularly belonging to Ogaden region (a space between Somalia-Ethiopian border and the Ethiopian Eastern Highlands), they often have been in the limelight for seeking independence from their colonial masters and most importantly their desire to reunite with Somalia under the category of 'one nation'. As these displaced Somalis of Ogaden have failed to identify with the reality of their bordered marginal space, they however continued to carry forward their Somali world-view as an intrinsic element of their identity. It is noteworthy that there are many other African countries which are subjected to border disputes on different grounds—'ethnicity' being one of the major reasons. Accordingly, many African countries which have managed to adapt with the constitutionality of these borders have nullified any endeavour to re-border on any specific grounds. But this is not the case with Somalia and its people as they present a sharp contrast to other African nations. As a matter of fact, they are of the opinion that Somalia is a nation which represents an atypical case of a country that is "virtually homogenous and has large ethnically related groups outside its borders" (Wallerstein 76).

Nuruddin Farah in his novels espouses an entirely contrasting ideology that discards many other African nationalist movements such as Decolonisation, Nkrumanism etc. which are modelled on the dialectics of national purity and cultural homogeneity. He instead proposes a new discourse that celebrates Somalia's cultural diversity/heterogeneity in the interest of establishing a sense of *newness* to identify with the works of postcolonial literature. Farah believes that Somalis are a displaced category of people scattered across different parts of the world and therefore cannot be territorialised under one unique national identity. Thus, he gives importance to transnational connections, cross-ethnic interactions in the context of his country Somalia and its people.

The notion of border is central to Nuruddin Farah's novel *Maps.* This novel demonstrates the accounts of borders and boundaries in a fictionalised form, and is expressed via the story of Askar, the protagonist and his relation with his foster mother Misra. Askar's story is an exemplar in situating a critique of the protagonist's yearning for a distinctive Somali identity. The desire however, has been enfeebled by placing his narrative in the demarcated space of Ogaden where he is born—a contested frontier region in-between Ethiopia and Somalia. As identical as Ogaden, which is a rootless territory, Askar's rootlessness is caused to him since his birth and can be examined from two perspectives. First, he feels displaced because he is born an orphan whose mother died giving birth to him, and whose father died fighting against Ethiopia from the Western Somali Liberation

Movement. And second, his pain of rootlessness is aggravated by the idea that, even though he is Somali by birth and origin, he is nurtured by an Ethiopian woman who speaks Amharic language. As Askar fails to possess a uniformised cultural ideal, his displacedness cannot be erased in a simplified way. Askar's homelessness is indicated in the initial pages of this novel when he has been described as "a creature given birth to by notions formulated in heads, a creature brought into being by ideas" (*Maps* 3). Moreover, Misra, his foster mother refers to Askar as "Perhaps his stars have conferred upon him the fortune of holding simultaneously multiple citizenships of different kingdoms" (11). Hence, the coexistence and mingling of these two conflicting worlds—one represented by Ethiopia (Misra) and another represented by Somalia (Askar)—gesture towards an undecided, unresolved, and open ended nature of their postcolonial yet postmodern identities. Both Misra and Askar share an eccentric nature of family structure, and their cross-cultural connections and co-existence with one another gives rise to their hybrid selves. It is to be noted that this hybridness has emerged neither from any family kindredship nor out of any common sentiment of nationalism. Infact, it has emerged out of an interstitial space which dismantles a nation's attempt at forming a coherent national narrative as well as its quest for cultural homogeneity. In this context, we can also deploy Askar's 'body' as a site of ambivalence wherein we find that Askar's sense of gender dissolves the time when he discovers blood on his groin and says: "I am a man. How can I menstruate?" (110). Then again on another occasion, we find a play of 'feminine/masculine' coinciding together in Askar's mode of being which posits his identity in terms of a deferred 'liminality':

> I have a strange feeling that there is *another* in me, one older than I—a woman. I have the conscious feeling of being spoken through, if you know what I mean. I feel as if I have allowed a woman older than I to live inside of me, and I speak not my words, my ideas but hers. And during the time I'm spoken through, as it were, I am she—not I. (158)

Askar's ambivalence advocates his identity not in terms of fixity but in relation to an endless possibility. Askar's 'body' as a "queer, liminal" site challenges a nation's atavistic desire to divide and displace "the body" of a country's population "along national lines" (Thiruvarangan 704). To examine Askar's borderlessness in this connection, one may refer to philosopher Thomas Nail who refuses to understand border in terms of static denominations. Nail mentions, "Borders are always and everywhere in motion. It is precisely the mobility of borders themselves as nonhuman

agents that continuously modulates and multiplies social flows. . . The border is so malleable and fluctuating— continuously moving between the two sides it separates—that it ends up changing the topology of the two sides and thus the figures defined by them ("Kinopolitics: Borders in Motion" 194). Reflecting on what Nail has argued, we can explicate the same idea with Askar who does not have any fixed signification. Instead, he creates a sense of borderlessness for he does not fit into one commonplace identity. Nuruddin Farah's further delineation of Misra and Askar's bodily intimacies is empowering in which their fluid selves refuse to abide by any form of *stasis*,

> Misra who eventually tucked me into the oozy warmth between her breasts . . . *so much so I became a third breast*; Misra who, on account of my bronchial squeamishness, engulfed me in the same wrapping as her breasts . . . as the night progressed towards daylight . . . and I would find myself somewhere between her opened legs this time, *as though I was a third leg*. (24)

In this extract, the two bodies converge and thus elongated to embrace a "third"—which in the process delivers an anomalous space i.e., the 'third world.' Here the idea of 'third world' does not adhere to any theoretical connotation. Instead, 'third world' can be deciphered as a fertile ground wherein Askar's relation with his foster mother is conveyed via a bizarre malformed description of the "third leg" and "third breast" (Farah 59). This designated space of 'third world' however, is a prerogative site that nourishes the idea of "international consciousness" (Fanon's 17). Given the blurring of selves and the breaking of bodily boundaries between Askar and Misra, we have been given the scope to reconsider their national identities. As both their identities are uprooted and situated on a conflicted border location, their subject positions get perfunctorily incorporated into the intersectionality of cultures and to the logistics of transnationalism. Another matter of fact, in this regard, is that of how Misra has kept Askar's presence in her life an unspoken secret due to the relation of hatred shared by each other's countries. Misra as an Ethiopian hides her adopted son's Somali identity by strategically naming him 'Askar' to avoid a specific cultural determinism. Misra says,

> You were the whisper to be softly spoken. Your name was to become two syllables no one uttered openly, which meant that not only were there no Koranic blessings said in either of your ears to welcome you to this world but your presence here in this universe was not at all celebrated.You did not exist as far as many were

> concerned; nor did you have any identity as the country's bureaucracy required. Askar! The letter "s" in your name was gently said so as to arouse no suspicions; whereas the "k" was held in the cosiness of a tongue couched in the unspoken secrets of a sound. As-kar! It was the "r" which rolled like a cow in the hot sand after half-a-day's grazing. Askar! (8)

Therefore Misra's act of naming Askar is symbolic as it signals out his Somali personality undergoing change since the moment he has been chosen by Misra, thereby penetrating into Ogaden's diversity. Again Misra, a border person is a hyphenated mongrel for she is born out of a *damoz* marriage between an Oromo woman and an Amharic man of noble birth (72). Just like Askar who is Somali by birth and a foreign identity in Ogaden territory, Misra's relation too with Ogaden is a fraudulent one due to her mix Ethiopian origin. So a sense of double displacement can be located in Misra, first because she is an Amharic speaking Oromo primarily living in Ethiopia who migrated to Ogaden, and second, her identity as an 'Ethiopian' which later on is denounced in the hands of Somali ethno-nationalistic discrimination.

The aporetic nature of Misra's name finding its vestiges from Ethiopian, Somali and Arabic extractions exhibits her eclectic position and her engagement with a wider generic group. For instance, Misra's name is a controversial topic within her community relations because for "To many members of her community . . . her name wasn't even Misra . . . who was she really?"(11). Again for Askar too, Misra's name has remained a paradox, as he says "Who was Misra? A woman, or more than just a woman? Did she exist as I remember her? Or have I rolled into a great many other persons . . . Misra? Masra? Misrat? Massar? Now with a "t", now without! (256)". In this context, Farah accounts the nous behind this interrogation to Misra's identity, and in so doing, reflects that how Misra prefers to introduce herself either as 'Misra' or 'Massar' when she lives among the Somalis, and then again switching to 'Misrat' among the Ethiopians. Moreover, Misra having her way in to Somalia through Askar and then having access to Ethiopia by entering into a relationship with an Ethiopian security officer also problematises the idea of national borderlands. One can reason out that Misra is a living embodiment of cultural mosaic, and fractured identities like hers and Askar's are to be found only in mongrelised, movement oriented spaces like Ogaden. Misra's self straddling in between Ethiopian, Oromo, and Somali cultures thus cannot be enclosed within the cartography of maps and borders.' As a result, their identities get clinched into the exigencies of understanding border

as not static but fluid. Moreover, Ogaden is an intervening space and as a space of mixed culture, its attributed border identity itself becomes a questionable concept. Therefore, Misra who moves in between the two sides that Ogaden border separates, Askar crossing Ogaden in quest of his self-discovery gives evidences of dissolving boundaries. Thus, borders do not express a single line of demarcation or limit, they are rather "sites of continual negotiation, slived differences, and movement" (Nail 195). As the border identity moves, their cross-border movement and dialogue subverts the static nature of border.

In studies of border theory, border location are deemed to be sites whereupon established ways of thinking are disrupted with the potential risks of crossing. Accordingly, it resists the essentialist, dominant and traditional interpretation of discourses on 'nation' and 'nationalism' on the pretext of a globalised world—a province that appraises the idea of transnationalism. With relevance to this study, it is vital to consider that these ideas of transnationalism, globalisation seem to be more relevant areas of discussion with respect to African countries in the sense that they suggest the nation state's losing its grip over its people, border, territories etc. The principal African nationalist movements such as 'Negritude' proposed most unusually by Aimé Césaire from Martinique, Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal have laid stress on reviving Africa's primeval standards. They have identified the ideals of Negritudism to be the sine qua non primarily to gain independence from colonial rule, and then secondarily to constitute the base for a cultural homogeneity and collective national identity. After Negritude, Pan-Africanism is another movement initiated by Kwame Nkrumah, the grassroot objective of which is to promote 'collective self-reliance,' and unite all independent African countries under one programme. But one cannot neglect the lacuna on part of these nationalists' excessive preoccupation to regenerate indigenous identities. In their desire to put back the 'African identity' in an unfeigned cultural space and to glorify their blackness exclusively, they have failed to realise that they are allocating the same totalising ideologies of their colonial masters. This manner of spreading nationalism in the Third World countries of Africa, as Partha Chatterjee argues, could not fill the void caused by imperialism (7). But contrarily with the rise of post-colonial dictatorships, the hopes of these countries' people have been falsified by the controllers of the independent African nation-states. These inadequacies residing in the nationalistic discourses of Third World countries which have not been addressed by African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o etc. grabbed attention of writers like Nuruddin Farah. It is for this reason that Farah and his writings cannot be clubbed under the category of na-

tionalist literature. His works rather fall under the genre of post-nationalist literature wherein he has expressed his cynicism towards his country's nationalist schemes and agendas and while doing so spurns away all the possibility to valorise ideas on nation, pure ethnicity, homogeneity etc.

The aforementioned ideology of Farah is duly evident in his *Maps* wherein his characterisations of fluid identities such as Misra and Askar have outgrown the ideas that are centered around 'cultural nationalism.' To refer to Charles Sugnet in this context, he too in his article titled "Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*: Deterritorialization and 'The Postmodern'" has pointed out how the narrative of *Maps* has overthrown "the sacred text of nationalism, with its mobilization of subjects" (741). Alongside Sugnet, Francis Ngaboh-Smart in his *Beyond Empire and Nation* (2004) also has probed into the questions of "flexible identity . . . transnationality, and the reimagining of national myths and values" in case of Nuruddin Farah and his oeuvre (ix). He contends that Farah in his works especially the ones from *Blood in the Sun* trilogy and *Past Imperfect Trilogy* espouses a newfangled postcolonial philosophy that gives interest to 'cultural diversity' (86). In a manner, therefore, Farah's works bear a critique of the quandaries ingrained in the jingoist nationalism of Somalia ensemble with that of African nationalism as a whole. In the context of *Maps,* for example, "Who am I?" or "Where am I?" are two existential or more preferably 'national' questions that keep on buzzing in Askar's mind (45). He has always been muddled with questions about identity for his cultural displacement in an unusual family structure—the mother belonging to hybrid Amhara-Oromo community and the son to Somali origin—and sometimes considering his self to be an extension of Misra. It is however, in his progression towards adulthood, symbolically hinted through Askar's undergoing circumcision, via which, he first realises the nature of his 'divided identity' and then about his country of origin. Askar says,

> The truth . . . was that I had . . . become two persons—one belonging to a vague past of which Misra was part, of which painlessness was a part, a vague past in which I felt so attached to Misra I couldn't imagine life without her. The other person, or if you prefer, the other half, was represented by the pain which inhabited the groin. I held the citizenship of the land of pain, I was issued with its passport . . . (94)

From the stated instance, it appears that prior to circumcision, Askar has recognised himself to be unified with Misra. But his 'divided identity' surfaces as soon as he undergoes circumcision which symbolically indicates

his separation from Misra. In his process of self-discovery, there is another episode when he seeks to replace the mother-figure Misra with Somalia, the nation:

> In a month or so, especially now that his manhood was ringed with a healed circle, the orgies of self-questioning . . . gave way to a state in which he identified himself with the community at large . . . What mattered, he told himself, was that now he was at last a man, that he was totally detached from his mother figure Misra . . . In the process of looking for a substitute, he had found another—Somalia, his mother country. It was as though something which began with the pain of a rite had ended in the joy of a greater self-discovery, one in which he held on to the milky breast of a common mother that belonged to him as much as anyone else . . . (*Maps* 100)

With this shift in Askar's perspective, it is seen that he now wishes to absorb himself in the narrative of Somali nationalism and accordingly decides to cross the border territory of Ogaden to be unified with his Somali national identity. While living in Mogadiscio, Askar owes much to his Uncle Hilaal who informs his worldview by providing an essentialist interpretation of Somali nationalism. Hilaal explains that Somali identity is unique and it makes no difference if Somalis are divided by any border. It does not count if Somali people are separated by distance, or are living in diaspora speaking rule-bound bureaucratic language, they can still have their partaking to the ethnic nationality as for "the soul of a Somali is a meteor shooting towards the commonly held national identity" (174). Hilaal's emphasis however, seems problematic here, because how is it feasible for a country like Somalia to profess an unified ethnic-Somali nationalism in the light of its high yielding traumas of dislocation since colonialism, and its bearing of an image as a failed nation-state in the current global scenario? Nuruddin Farah however, in this novel has tried to warn against this insularity and menacing reverberations of Somali nationalism. Farah herein allows his authorial voice to intervene and point out the distasteful consequences that may get triggered in the remaining other countries of Africa if Somali speaking people are permitted to devise "a state of their own nation" (156). Furthermore, Farah put his emphasis on how language may work as a counter to one's identity construction. To cite an instance, this conceptualisation is reflected on how language circumvents Askar's sense of patriotism and his nationalist aspirations. In Askar's dualistic mode of being, one on Ogaden and other on Mogadiscio, he has not been able to be equipped with one unique language. In Oga-

den, he has lived amidst diversified groups such as Arabic, Somali, Amharic, Oromifa and Gurage and while in Mogadiscio, his new language trainer Cusmaan introduces him to the playfulness of linguistic signifiers and therefore no opportunity to preserve one *pure* linguistic form. In this respect, it can be said that Askar's quest for national identity remains unfulfilled. Moreover within this same model of language and nationalism, we may broach a little on the subject of Askar-Misra's relationship. This is so because to a greater extent in Askar's life, his identity has been moulded under Misra's hovering influence upon him. Therefore, when he gives effort to gesticulate Somali gutturals, his speech gets interrupted with Misra's Amharic speaking personality.

Hence, with the displaying of two life narratives in the multicultural character of Ogaden, the writer aims to highlight the urgency to transcend beyond fixed identitarian nationalistic convictions, and appeals to celebrate transnational ideas such as plurality, cultural difference and so on. Farah's *Maps* carries the ethos of transnationalism in its placing of two main protagonists who do not belong to one cultural life and experience, but co-exist together and foster one another. Especially in the case of Misra, it may be said that she has always dealt with her transnational mode of being in hybrid terms, not adhering to any nationalism but by constructing her identity in relation to people whom she encounters. This is evident when Misra says, "For me, my people are Askar's people; my people are my former husband's people, the people I am most attached to" (193). Thus Misra's transnational inventiveness includes not only herself, rather it encapsulates her father's Amharic belonging, her mother's Oromo origin, then Askar and his Somali community, and finally an alternative community of Misra and Askar together which is depicted in relation with their bodies. This in turn empowers Farah to posit transnationalism as a viable replacement to nation-state claims for a unique national identity; or in essence, Farah's narrative advocating the transnational ideal presents a contrasting argument to the standardized concept of "one nation, one identity" (Said 6). Given the fluid nature of these ideas, there also seems to be no logical explanation on the subjects being enmeshed within the border politics of inclusion and exclusion. Hence one can argue that Farah's treatment of transnational consciousness represents a divergent philosophy which dismantles the essentialist mode of identity as set by the totalising pontifications of nation.

Works Cited:

Alden, Patricia, and Louis Tremaine. *Nuruddin Farah*. Twayne Publishers, 1999.

Beck, Ulrich. *The Cosmopolitan Vision*. Translated by Ciaran Cronin, Polity Press, 2006.

Fanon, Franz. "On National Culture." *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*, edited by Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair. Berg Press, 2005, pp. 198-219.

Farah, Nuruddin. *Maps*. Arcade Publishing, 1986.

---. "The World as a Writer's Home." *African Commentary*, vol.19, no. 3, 1990, pp. 53-60

Nail, Thomas. *Theory of the Border*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

---."Kinopolitics: Borders in Motion." *Theory of the Border*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

Ngaboh-Smart, Francis. "Nationalism and the Aporia of National Identity in Farah's *Maps*."*Research in African Literatures*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2001, pp. 86-102. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3820426. Accessed 28 October 2023.

Said, Edward. ---. *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. Vintage, 1994.

---. *Out of Place: A Memoir*. Granta Books, 1999.

Sugnet, Charles. "Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*: Deterritorialization and "The Postmodern"." *World Literature Today*, vol. 72, no. 4, 1998, pp. 739-46. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40154264. Accessed 30 June 2023.

Thiruvarangan, Mahendran. "Imagining against the nation state: radical singularity and transnationalism in Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 53, no. 6, 2017, pp. 702-14. https://doi.org/ 10.1080/17449855.2017.1354230. Accessed 23 October 2023.

Wallerstein, Immanuel. "Nationalism and Ethnicity." *Annual Review of*

Sociology, vol. 19, no.3, 1993, pp. 71-89. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2083387. Accessed 25 October 2023.

Wright, Derek. "Parenting the Nation: Some Observations on Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*." *College Literature*, vol. 19/20, no. 3/1, 1992, pp. 176-84. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25111998. Accessed 17 August 2018.

---. *The Novels of Nuruddin Farah*. Bayreuth African Studies Series, 1994.