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Commentary on Felix Mnthali's "Autocracy and the Limits of Identity"

by
Hilarie Kelly

Dr. Mnthali's praiseful review of the works of Nuruddin Farah is enlightening and contains a number of provocative insights, many of which I agree with fully. However, even fans of Nuruddin's work (I count myself as one) must be allowed to exercise their capacity for critical thought, even if this means sometimes questioning the author's style and intent. Different readers often respond differently to a given piece of literature; one reader's enthusiasm does not necessarily negate the validity of another reader's reservations, nor vice versa. In the final analysis, all reviews are somewhat idiosyncratic and perhaps even irrelevant, since no one reader, nor even the author, can truly dictate to the others how to respond. In the spirit of open dialogue, I would, therefore, like to respond to some of Dr. Mnthali's comments about my analysis of Maps.

Dr. Mnthali states emphatically that "Nuruddin Farah does not 'fetishise' women." Perhaps Dr. Mnthali does not see it so, but neither does he discuss the exact significance of Askar's highly unusual dreams, fantasies and visions regarding menstruation, particularly in reference to Askar's attempt to answer the question: "Who am I?" A fetish is defined in Webster's New World Dictionary as "any object believed to have magical power." (1983:226) It is abundantly clear that Askar does indeed ascribe menstrual blood with extraordinary significance, above and beyond its simple biological function. Can Dr. Mnthali tell us why Nuruddin has Askar so obsessed with menstruation? Why Askar imagines himself menstruating or controlling it in women? Even more disturbing is the inclusion of political rapes in at least two of Nuruddin's works. My discussion of this issue was cut from the published article because of length considerations, but deserves examination elsewhere.

Dr. Mnthali dislikes my criticism of Nuruddin's stylistic peccadilloes. Specifically, he objects that there is nothing wrong with Nuruddin having the characters Hilaal and Askar refer to various Euro-American "gurus," since the one character teaches psychology and the other is a voracious reader. But Dr. Mnthali has missed the point, which was that these characters made only "passing reference to Freud, Jung, Levi-Strauss, Marx, Fraser, T.S. Eliot, Neruda, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Toni Morrison, Gunter Grass, Otto Rank, Wilhelm Reich, William James, and Adler - all in one paragraph!" (p.222) There was no indication in the narrative as to why these specific "gurus" were important, thus raising a fairly obvious question in the reader's mind:

why the name-dropping? This is a legitimate question, not a blanket condemnation. In a portion of my article that was cut from the published version, I went on to ask:

What is Nuruddin trying to tell us here? Perhaps he is subtly lampooning the desperate attempts of the intelligentsia to understand a violently chaotic world by reference to whatever abstract philosophies the West holds in vogue, but this is by no means certain, since similar references in the rest of the book appear to be intended seriously. The overall effect raises questions about Nuruddin's choice of characters, as well as his choice of audience. Nuruddin's jarring tendency to indiscriminately drop the names of prominent Euro-American writers has also been criticized by Somali reviewer, Abdulkadir N. Said in his article, "Sweet and Sour Milk." (Review of Sweet and Sour Milk.) Horn of Africa 4,3(1981); 38-40.

This brings us to the thorniest of Dr. Mnthali's objections to my analysis, that I err in asserting that Nuruddin's main characters are not "ordinary Somalis." He calls the concept of "an ordinary Somali" debatable, and in principle, I wholeheartedly agree with him on this. And yet he himself states that "in Farah's fiction very little seems to happen and yet we are shown a great deal of what constitutes the lives of ordinary people." This suggests that we both find the concept useful, however debatable. Our major disagreement seems to concern who is ordinary and who is not. Webster's New World Dictionary defines "ordinary" as "customary, usual, familiar, unexceptional, common." (1983:422) Deeriye, a major character in Close Sesame, is a nationalist hero, and such heroes are, by definition, distinguished and not ordinary, unless we make nonsense of the language. Of course, many ordinary people act heroically on occasion, and many even become heroes by public acclaim. It is their very un-ordinariness then that makes them notable, and this is also what makes them interesting characters in literature. Was Ebla ordinary? When From A Crooked Rib first appeared, many Somali readers criticized the book, saying that she was not at all a typical Somali nomad woman, indeed, that no nomad woman would have done what she did. I disagreed, knowing a few Somali nomad women, turned townswomen, whose lives were much like Ebla's.¹ But most readers of the book, Somali or not, were not nomads and were not women either. Dr. Mnthali's objection raises a quite legitimate issue: who determines what is ordinary?

Dr. Mnthali states: "We Africans should be excused the exasperation we often feel at not being considered 'ordinary' unless we are poor and live in the rural areas, a classification which has its roots in

colonial anthropology."² An understandable sentiment, perhaps, but of questionable relevance here. I certainly did not equate ordinary with poor. However, I do not consider the urban, educated elite of Somalia to be ordinary when compared to the vast majority of that country's population. Are educated, government-employed people of any country ordinary, or are they a relatively privileged elite? As humans they may be ordinary, but as a class they clearly are not. In his own article, Dr. Mnthali says that "they have been either politically marginalised by being isolated from the rest of society or co-opted into their countries' ruling and exploitative elites." Interestingly, Dr. Mnthali acknowledges, in reference to Nuruddin's previous works as well as Maps, the failure of "intellectuals all over Africa" who attempt to address their countries' ills and yet fail to broaden their support to include peasants and "people of the city." (This problem is by no means limited to Africa.) Putting semantic quibbling aside, I believe Dr. Mnthali and I are essentially in agreement.

I am not, by the way, suggesting that Nuruddin or other African writers should not write about educated, urban elites, but only that characterization in all literature raises important questions about audience and about reader response. Furthermore, I explicitly state in my article that Nuruddin's main characters are unusual even as members of the educated elite, because of the degree to which they self-destructively brood on the traumas which befell them, even to the point of behaving in a clearly neurotic fashion. Askar is the most extreme example. My argument is that if a character's behavior is too idiosyncratic, too unordinary in the reader's frame of reference, then readers will tend to lose interest. This point was ably made by Hussein A. Bulhan, a Somali psychologist who has written about Somalia's "captive intelligentsia" and the "dismembered psyche" of the Somali people as a consequence of colonialism. Dr. Mnthali himself praises Hussein as "the most perceptive reviewer of the novel, Maps." Yet, Hussein commented that "we may...understand Askar's travails, but we are hardly moved by them." In criticising the character of Askar, Hussein further describes how the novel's ambiguous style makes the character appear, perhaps intentionally, perhaps not, as one who

...gropes for brilliant insights and analyses; yet he only presents a pedantic marshalling of tangential details and inchoate reflections. He goes through personal crises; yet the crises are more intellectual than affective, more contrived than lived."

Dr. Mnthali argues that the corollary to my comments on who is ordinary is "the demand that writers eschew 'virtuosity' in favor of a certain bucolic simplicity...." In answer, I can only redirect his

attention to the passages in the published article (on pages 27-28) which explicitly refute this:

I would not suggest that Nuruddin (or any other African writer) should arbitrarily restrain his imaginative use of language or his attempts to deal with many difficult and complex themes. That would be paternalistic nonsense...In principle, then, I have no quarrel with Nuruddin (or any other writer) attempting to demonstrate his literary and intellectual virtuosity however he pleases, but there is a very real problem of lucidity and intent in Nuruddin's writing....

In conclusion, I agree with Dr. Mnthali that Nuruddin's gifts deserve to be enjoyed more widely, and I would encourage others to read his works. The author himself must bear some responsibility for making this happen.

NOTES

1 Nuruddin's story was perhaps prophetically ahead of its time, as war, impoverishment, and family disintegration have subsequently driven many women and men from nomadism into towns and cities, where they face many of the same dilemmas that Ebla faced.

2 We? That's a lot of people Dr. Mnthali claims to speak for. I claim only to speak for myself, but citations in my article do make clear that my opinions are shared by a few other critics, some of them Africans. Furthermore, I asked over two dozen African readers, at least half of them Somali, what they thought of Maps, and most confessed they could not force themselves to finish it because of the problems I discuss. Finally, his assertion that colonial anthropology is responsible for defining ordinary as poor and rural is cliched and debatable, but in this context irrelevant. Though I am an anthropologist, I was neither trained in "colonial anthropology" nor did I live or work in Africa in a colonial context.