

# SIGNS OF GENDERED VIOLENCE FROM THE THRESHOLD: THE EPIGRAPH IN NURUDDIN FARAH'S *FROM A CROOKED RIB*

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## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the meanings and symbolism of the epigraph in *From a Crooked Rib*. It demonstrates that this paratextual element reinforces the polyphonic allure of the story. It is also an expressive allusion to the gender-based inequality, at the core of patriarchal and religious metanarratives. Using, essentially, Gérard Genette's insightful postulates on the paratext, in *Palimpsest: Literature in the Second Degree* (1997), and *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997), the study puts into the limelight the intertextual connections between Farah's story and others. It probes into the epigraphic citations in each part of the story and argues that these liminal devices are expressions of a gendered violence against Somali women. The analysis comes to the conclusion that, by opening the frontiers of his book to anterior narrative discourses, Farah confirms the existence of commonalities in women's social malaise in male-centered societies. It affirms, in a final analysis, that *From a Crooked Rib* is an expression of its author's womanist principles.

## KEY WORDS:

Epigraph, Farah, Gendered violence, Genette, Intertextuality, Transtextuality.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude analyse les significations symboliques des épigraphes dans *From a Crooked Rib*. Elle démontre que l'emploi de cet élément du paratexte accentue l'aspect polyphonique de l'histoire. L'épigraphie est aussi une allusion parlante d'une inégalité basée sur le genre, au cœur des discours métanarratifs patriarcaux et religieux. En se fondant principalement sur les travaux de Gérard Genette sur le paratexte (*Palimpsest: Literature in the Second Degree*, 1997, and *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, 1997), l'analyse met en exergue les relations intertextuelles entre l'œuvre de Nuruddin Farah et d'autres. L'étude explore les citations épigraphes, placées au seuil de chaque partie de l'histoire, pour expliquer

que ces procédés liminaux sont une expression encodée d'une violence *genrée* contre les personnages féminins. En ouvrant les frontières narratives de son texte à d'autres discours narratifs antérieurs, Farah confirme l'existence d'un malaise social commun à toutes les femmes, en contexte patriarcal. L'étude arrive à la conclusion que Farah s'approprie les principes du womanism dans sa critique de la domination masculine.

## MOTS CLÉS :

épigraphe, Farah, violence genrée, Genette, intertextualité, transtextualité.

## INTRODUCTION

The literary output of Somali writer, Nuruddin Farah, puts into the limelight the condition of the African woman. With realism and authenticity, Farah depicts issues of womanhood and gender, to such a point that he was pegged Africa's first feminist male writer by Kristen Hoist Petersen (Petersen, as cited in Ben Meriem, 2016, p. 85). Farah is thought to be the fewest writers who have "done the greatest justice to female existence in his writing" (Okonkwo, as cited in Ben Meriem, 2016, p. 85). Farah's avowed interest is in those are denied their rights, be it women or men, and in the struggle behind it. Such a commitment to social and political justice, which forced him to exile, is much pronounced in all his productions, especially in his debut novel, *From a Crooked Rib*. Richard Dowden, in his introduction to the book, considers the novel as "a dazzling spark" (1970) of light in the dark tunnel of silencing women. The story is that of Ebla, the protagonist, and her multiple escapatory attempts and rebellion against arranged marriages and patriarchal dictates. Patriarchy, as a "system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby, as cited in Ben Meriem, p. 89), is exemplified in Farah's novel, in the family, marriage, society and religion. The Somali writer unveils the discourse of patriarchy, and looks into its discursive formation (Foucault, 1976), through the tumultuous life of Ebla but also through the latter's frequent monologues on the difficult existence of women. Indeed, he is conscious of the fact that "... in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize, and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of discourse" (Foucault, 1976, p. 93). Farah sets out to deconstruct the discursive structures of patriarchal power, through the creation of characters who not only put into question the established verities of their society but also who rebel, through actions and behavior, a defiance that can be easily approached as counter-discourse to male-centered language. *From a Crooked Rib* is, therefore,

about society and dictatorship. It focuses on the Somali society that says to its women that they are not equal to men and should not be treated as such (Samatar, n.d., p. 93). In this book as well as in *A Naked Needle* (1976), the Somali writer pinpoints forms of gendered violence, by bringing to the forefront issues such as forced polygamous marriages, female genital mutilation, sexual abuses. Such a narrative option is the author's determination to denounce those who sponge unashamedly on women in order to survive, using gender differences and roles to maintain patriarchal order.

Farah has no grudge to speak for the rehabilitation of the most oppressed in Somali traditional society and, in this way, he makes use of all narrative options to make prominent gender-based violence, which labels the female gender as the "other of the other or... the unessential who never goes back to being the essential..." (de Beauvoir, 1972, p. 173). He was undoubtedly conscious that the structures of domination ruling his society were the same in other social organisations, which hold women in bondage, through the implementation of cultural discourses and practices meant to further enforce the powerful status of men. The discourse of patriarchal power and its vivid effects on female characters, and also the power of the counter discourse of Farah (and characters) in *From a Crooked Rib* are expressed in the thematic design and the esthetic allure of the text.

One aspect of the esthetic dimension of the story and which catches attention is a systematic use of the epigraph. *From a Crooked Rib* is a four-staged story, each movement corresponding to a crucial segment of the life of the protagonist, and each of the four parts is announced by an epigraph. Farah's text is polyphonic in so far as he opens his book to old texts, establishing thus a relation of cooperation, justified by the intertextual principle stating that a text like *From a Crooked Rib* is inspired from and leans on anterior works, which have implicitly influenced its author. Through this narrative attitude, Farah substantiates Foucault's argument about the heterogeneous nature of the book: "the frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the titles, the first lines, and the last full stops, beyond its internal configuration and autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network" (Foucault, 1976, p. 23). Roland Barthes adds that "[a] text is (...) a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them." (Barthes, 1997, p. 146)

The epigraph is part of transtextual devices that ensures transcendence of the text, and situates in world literary archive. French Theorist Gerard Genette expands on the preliminary work of Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva on intertextuality, and highlights the thematic and esthetic exchanges between *ancient* texts and *younger* ones. He

uses intertextuality as a transtextual network and produces groundbreaking analysis of para-textual elements, the liminal devices and conventions. These inscriptions at the outskirts of the work mediate the book to the reader and bear a connotative power. The epigraph, Genette argues, represents the book – it presents itself to the reader through its meaning, or sometimes, its counter meaning; it is an induction and even a summary of the book. But first and foremost, it is a sound, a primal word, a throat clearing before starting, a prelude or profession of faith (Genette, 1997, p. 145). Among the paratext is the epigraph, which is a hypertextual element bordering the text, and which is, mostly, connotative of the events in the story. The fragments of texts welcoming the reader at the hall of *From a Crooked Rib* constitutes the first contact with the latter. With their strategic position, and because of the fact that the semantic link with the text is not *a priori* signalled, the epigraphs in Farah's novel forcibly triggered burgeoning questions into the mind of the reader.

Therefore, this study leans on Genette's postulates and reconstitutes the meaning hidden in the textual fragments opening each part of the story. It explicates the citations, so as to reveal that the epigraph is, rather than *the* text, but *a* text providing indications of a gender-based domination. In doing so, the analysis foregrounds the double-fold function of the epigraph in Farah narrative work, as it is the expression of gendered violence and also a nascent rebellion of the protagonist against the shackles of oppression.

## **1. STRAIGHTENING THE CROOKED RIB: A COUNTER-DISCOURSE TO PATRIARCHY.**

This is the epigraph announcing the first part of the story in Farah's novel: 'God created Woman from a crooked rib; and anyone who trieth to straighten it, breaketh it.' This is a Somali proverb that the author uses to give a clue to his gender distribution in his society, but above all, the relationship of dependency binding the latter to man. By choosing such a proverb as a citation introducing the primal stage of the story, Farah gets immersed into the cultural heritage of his people and gives, through the textual fragment, a sketchy image of biased social structures.

As it has been widely demonstrated by scholars (Okpewho, 1992) in oral literature, proverbs are mostly relevant and widely used in written literature. Proverbs are a rich source of imagery, both used by the oral artist and the writer, to give the gist of cultural wisdom and knowledge and to also pinpoint, in the case of Farah's novel, the conception of world in Somali traditional society. These terse and sharp expressions are appropriated by people (the folk) because they contain a truth about life, accepted by them and calling to their imagination by their neat and beautiful aspect. From the proverb-epigraph in *From a Crooked Rib*, wafts the Somali people's truth about life, and such a truth, such a discursive formation springs from a certain

male-oriented interpretation of both religion, enhancing the patriarchal system. Actually, such a proverb is given credit by Islamic Scriptures where it's read that God has created woman from men's rib and as such it is easily understandable that women be always kept under man's wing.

In the patriarchal and Islamic Somali traditional society, it is not a surprise to have men dominating women, a situation of subordination which is justified by a sexist/culture oriented Islamic education of members of the community. They are socialized into accepting as normal women's dependence, and men's natural rights to dispose of the body and life of the latter.

Farah uses this hackneyed proverb in Somali oral tradition not only to comment on the experiences of the protagonist in the story, but also to comment the title of the book itself. This second function of the epigraph, outlined by Genette, is backed up by the prologue that serves as an introductory sequence, and provides an exposition in the dramatic sense of the work, most often in the form of a character's monologue. In the prologue, Ebla's grandfather, is monologuing and brooding his ire and deception stirred by the unexpected act committed by her grand-daughter who has escaped from the family house, as a way to react against her forced marriage to a much older man. Faced to what he considers an affront; the old man could not do but curse Ebla. The symbolic link between the epigraph and the prologue provides the reader with the necessary elements to step fully into the story, and attempt to decipher the experiences of the protagonist and that of other key characters, in relation to what has been previously hinted at in the paratextual elements.

Ebla's act of escape, her rejection of traditional structures, which are much oppressive to women, is her attempt to straighten the crooked rib. More, it is her endeavor to go against the grain of patriarchal and religious discourses, promoting women's natural dependency on men. This is how she expresses her utmost decision to rebel against cultural subordination: "Escape! To get free from all restraints, from being the wife of Guimaleh. To get away from unpleasantries. To break the ropes society had wrapped around her and to be free and be herself" (Farah, 1970, p. 10). Prior to her escape, Farah's protagonist is pondering over the unsympathetic and wretched social condition of women in her traditional society, where they are considered as less valued than cattle, a society that uses them as a source of enrichment, through arranged marriages.

As the proverb-epigraph much reveals it, the Somali traditional society is the enunciator of a powerful discourse meant to shape the woman's psyche into taking as natural and even divine, a certain commodification of the female figure. Indeed, Farah has understood, as Foucault, that discourse, pre-conceived truths are the instruments of patriarchal domination that turns women into the wretched of the land:

Power and discourse are the faces of the same coin; they stress each other: discourse of power and the power of discourse. Discourses gives the enunciator the ability but most important the privilege of enunciating a statement. Such enunciation is itself empowering to the enunciator, in the sense that to enunciate is to be advantaged and hence dominant. (Ben Meriem, 2016, p. 85)

Therefore, the epigraph, stating that woman was created from the rib of man, inspired by a biased interpretation of the Koranic text, constitutes a discursive statement sustaining patriarchal discourse, of which men are the empowered enunciators. In this, armed with such an advantageous position of voicing, enunciating, they maintain, through a set of socio-cultural structures and practices like forced marriages, circumcision, gendered violence, the freedom to have hold on the body and life of women. Consequently, Ebla's break with her community, and her rejection of nefarious practices, is, more than an open defiance, a counter-enunciation to magnify her human dignity. On the brink of escape, she is more than ever convinced that all that she hankers for is to step out of the suffocating social context. The narrator reports one of her frequent monologues:

‘A man needs a woman. A woman needs a man. Not to the same degree? A man needs a woman to cheat, to tell lies to, to sleep with. (...) But who or what should she escape from? This was the real question which needed to be answered. Inside her, she knew why she wanted to escape. Actually, it was more than a want: it was a desire, a desire stronger than anything, a thing to long for. Her escape meant freedom. Her escape meant her new life. Her escape meant her parting with the country and its harsh life. Her escape meant the divine emancipation of the body and soul of a human being. (Farah, 1970, p. 10)

The determination of the character is whispered in the analogical allure of the passage (*her escape meant... her escape meant... Her escape meant...*). Such a desire to set herself free is gnawing at Ebla as she has come to knowing that “women were objects to a discourse enunciated by men; this discourse emphasized a highly significant division between men and women in terms of the division between mind and body. Men are seen as the site of intellectual powers but also of physical status. Women are seen as lacking the mental capacities and just reduced to their bodies” (Ben Meriem, 2016, p. 87). It is this form of unfair social division and gender categorizations that the Somali writer smothers and deconstructs throughout his fictional production, specifically in the novel under study. As Gloria A. Mixion correctly puts it, “because of his consciousness of what *should* be the role of women in society and his awareness of what is the role of women in society, Farah challenges the traditional social and political dominance of patriarchy and supports African women’s issues” (1987, p. 74). Thus, Ebla’s consciousness of her oppressive condition pushes her to escape from the tyrannical oppressive hold of her grandfather. Her determination to step over obstacles and try to straighten the crooked path of her life, is “indeed foreign to

nomad culture because she is mandated to submit to the dictates of Somali culture” (Odinye, 2019, p. 121). But, however dauntless a survival strategy it is, whether considered right or wrong, escape, from a feminist perspective, “is the only decision she has to take to salvage her honour and protect her psyche” (Odinye, 2019, p. 122). This position is corroborated by Kate Millet’s insightful approach to escape, she considers as the new space for the oppressed woman; she argues that escaping from the subjugation of the family as a unit of the society gives the female gender a desired freedom and space. (Millet, as cited in Odinye, 2019, p. 123)

Thus, the epigraph then opening the first part of the story, serves to explain the title of the book but also to express the patriarchal mindset ruling Somali traditional society. The epigraph is also an intertext of the Bible, where the same assertions are expressed. Eve is believed to be created from Adam’s ribs. Located at the bank of the first part, it sets the tone of the story, signals that *From a Crooked Rib* is a gendered text, the movements of which is unveiled by the prologue. It is a textual fragment which has allowed the author to hint at the abusive patriarchal discourse over women, and to justify a bit the bold desire of Ebla to straighten the crooked rib, even if it risks breaking. The experiences and unfulfilled expectations of the latter in her “new space” (both in Belet Wene and Mogadiscio), are as well implicitly said in other citations, inspired by other literary works, placed at the thresholds of each of the following sequences of the story.

## **2. TRAMPLED UNDER MEN’S BOOTS: THE SHATTERED LIVES OF SOMALI WOMEN**

This second level of the analysis of aspects of the paratext in Farah’s story encapsulates parts two and three. The option to make a combined study of the relationships between the epigraphs and the content of the story is justified by the dialogic continuity noted between those two citations and which both spotlight the exploitation of women and the subsequent disconnected thread of their lives.

The epigraphs introducing the reader into the second and third sections are literary borrowings from Samuel Becket’s *Waiting for Godot* (1952) and Arthur Miller’s *After the Fall* (1964). From the outset, the reader, as competent as he may be, cannot immediately figure out the links between the events in Farah’s book and the meanings encoded into the textual fragments. These are *allographic* epigraphs (Genette, 1987, 147), as they are not the creation of the Somali writer, but are rather attributed to well-known authors.

The intertextual reference to Becket’s opus reads like this: “There’s a man all over for you, blaming his boots the faults of his feet.” This excerpt is much enigmatic and emblematic as it raises a mine of questions in the reader. However,

the fog invading the mind of the reader is progressively dissipated, once he gets the gist of the major events befalling the protagonist in Belet Wene, the town where she lands after her elopement. There, Ebla is hosted by a distant cousin Gheddi, who accepts the young girl, mostly as a house keeper for his pregnant wife. Full of hope and realistic, Ebla strives to adapt to the new context but is soon to discover that life in her native country and in Belet Wene is not that different. The same pressures and acts of violence are heaped on women, who have to bear lack of care and objectification by men. The case of Aowralla, Gheddi's wife, suffering all alone from childbirth, hunger and ignorance from her husband, utterly shocks Ebla. The inclement situation of Aowralla, symbolizing women in marriage, and the widow, with whom Ebla holds the first exchanges about unjust social practices and demeaning traditions, bring Farah's protagonist to take the full dimension of the tribulations upon the female gender in the socio-cultural fabric of Somali society. Ebla is aware that women, both in the rural and urban context are crushed, and trampled by men, who, as Gheddi, do not blink to sell them, in their lust for economic power. Worse, they use women as scapegoats or even commodities, to be sold to the highest bidder. The narrator explains the situation of Ebla, forced to accompany her cousin to a meeting with some dealers (Farah, 1970, pp. 51-4). She is used by Gheddi, as a good for all, and she does not have the choice but accepts what is befalling on her, as a consequence of her decision to leave the country. Worse, subsequent to his failure to get the smuggled goods for his shop, Gheddi sells Ebla to a broker, Dirir, another forced marriage upon the neck of Farah's protagonist. However, whatever difficult her life is in Belet Wene, whatever deep her deception about life, her society and men is, Ebla once again stands firm in her refusal to be sold, and exchanged for commodities. Her curt exchange with the Widow, is mostly illustrative of her dogged balking at men's tyranny:

'The broker paid him some money for your hand. As dowry or something.'

Ebla was paralyzed in the region of the mind which gives one suggestions for things to do and paths to follow.

'Do you want to escape? Asked the widow. (...) You might get a husband.'

'I don't like this sort of marriage (...) I don't want to be sold like cattle.'

'But that is what we women are – just like cattle, properties of someone or other, either your parents or your husband.'

'We are human beings.'

But our people don't realize it. What is the difference between a cow and yourself now? Your hand has been sold to a broker.' (Farah, 1970, p. 71)



Therefore, women in Farah's society are marginalized. They are no more than cow, cattle, objects to be used, abused, and throw away. For Emecheta, "a girl is no more than a piece of property" (1980, p. 37). They are "nothing else than boots for men – so important to their feet, yet when things go wrong, it is easy to blame the victim" (Ahmed, 1996, p. 78). They are "boots" so useful to protect men's feet and yet, the latter do not blink in crushing them. Such a debasing treatment of women is caustically denounced by the male feminist writer, in his crusade against gender oppression, here expressed in the allure of a psycho-narration by Ebla:

From experience she knew that girls were materials, just like objects, or items on the shelf of a shop. (...) What an agony, what a revolting situation! Naturally women are born in nine months (unless the case is abnormal) just like men. What makes women so inferior to men? Why it is a must that a girl should refund a token amount to her parents in the form of a dowry, while the boy needs the amount or more to get a woman? Why is it only the sons in the family who are counted? For sure this world is a man's- it is his dominion. It is his and is going to be his as long as women are oppressed, as long as women are sold and bought like camels, as long as this remains the system if life. Nature is against women. (Farah, 1970, p. 75)

The revolted protagonist is the voice of the author, castigating women's systemic and systematic subordination by cultural discourses and practices at the heart of traditional Somali society. This passage is a feminist tirade against the socio-cultural structures, (which the characters takes as nature). In her innocence and naivety, she cannot make the distinction that nature(biology) is not the crux of the problem but a powerful discourse of patriarchy and the subsequent pecking order of gender, so degrading and harmful to women.

Not only does the references to *Waiting for Godot* serves as allusion to the over-exploitation of the female gender, but it is also a device used by the committed author to put into the limelight the contradictions, injustices and arbitrariness inherent in patriarchal grand narratives and some cultural practices. For Farah, nothing is no longer as sure and true as it was in the days gone by, with the attitude of characters as Ebla, Asha, and the widow, who do not shiver to produce counter-discourses, debunking the all-set verities about gender relationships. The intertext from *Waiting for Godot* allows a postmodern reading of *From a Crooked Rib*. Indeed, as Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for Godot, the "sole power, which is expected to save and enrich them and change their dystopia into utopia" (Houti & Torkamanah, 2011, p. 47), Ebla is in quest for God's salvation, so as to be free from arbitrary social conventions, traditional attachments. Likewise, the Irish playwright reminds us, through his two actors, that there exists "people who seem to be simply moving and living creatures, but indeed lack the sense of existence in their lives." The Somali writer is in tune with Becket, with the portrayal of a female figure, made vulnerable by the oppressive system, and who lacks the sense of existence if her life, following her many elopements. She profoundly reflects upon the ridicule and absurdity

of women's plight, face to the tragic reality of their inclement condition. Ebla is entrapped in dilemmas, uncertainties about life itself, and such an agitation fraught also Becket's characters who express the tragedy of their existence through words and endless dialogues, as echo of the humdrum existence.

The epigraph then functions as a commentary of the story, of which it gives an implicit meaning. More than this, the citation from *Waiting for Godot* makes more accurate the characterization in Farah's opus, as it alludes to the psychology, the obsessions and aspirations of characters.

The feeling of angst and loss of characters as Ebla is further pronounced by the epigraph opening the third movement of the story, corresponding to her second elopement with Awill, her future husband, from Belet Wene to Mogadiscio. It is a thread of a play by American Arthur Miller, *After the Fall*. This is how it reads: "Why do I think of things falling apart? Were they ever whole?" This quotation placed *en exergue* is evocative of the hectic life of Ebla, upon her arrival in Mogadiscio, with the Widow's nephew, Awill. As in the preceding cases, the epigraph hardly provides indications on the nature of the experiences and events undergone by Ebla in the capital city, ciphered in epigraph. Its deciphering then, requires from the reader a capacity to weave his own interpretation of the connotative aspect of the citation.

*After the Fall* is a play which, like *From the Crooked Rib*, raises insightful questions in the reader, through the dramatic situation of the protagonist Quentin. It's Quentin, in the throes of existential doubts, who utters the statement used as epigraph by Farah. The interrogations in the epigraph allows the reader to see the inner workings in the brain of Quentin. He looks at his life a different way and reevaluates specific decisions that he has made. The play puts the stress on the different ways people strive to cope with past decisions and to find hope. "After the Fall is concerned with failure in human relationships and its consequences, large and small, by way of McCarthyism and the holocaust" (Luebering, 2020). Miller "combined social awareness with and searching concern for his character's inner lives" Miller's hero, Ebla is caught in a network of doubts and uncertainties, as she experiences a new movement in her hectic life: her coming marriage with Awill, the widow's nephew she met in Belet Wene. Though unplanned and abruptly befalling on her, because triggered by the difficult circumstances she underwent in her cousin's, Ebla is hopeful that life with Awill will bring light into her gloomy existence.

However, on the very first day in the capital city, things start to fall apart, when Awill demands to sleep with her, whereas they are not yet married. Faced to the refusal of the girl, the future husband beats her up and rapes her. This is how the narrator describes the atrocious scene:

But this is not my husband- not yet. May be later. (...) Ebla's attempt at jumping over him and running away was not successful. (...) Awill stood

up straight and showered hard blows upon Ebla-in the mouth, at her head, on her belly. He gave her a kick or two on the belly as she tried to bite him; (Farah, 1970, p. 86)

This violent attitude of Awill can be analysed in the light of Foucault's insightful argumentation in the history of Sexuality, where he affirms that rape is not a question of sex but a question of power. It is because Awill is vested with certain rights and power to abuse of the woman, that he takes it as *natural* to physically abuse of the girl. Kate Millet's sound affirmation in *Sexual Politics* corroborates the opinion of Foucault, when she holds that "patriarchal power is ubiquitous and that sexuality, ideological indoctrination as much as economic equality is the site where male power is often exercised" (Millet, as cited in Ondinye, 2019, p. 33). Due to the ideological indoctrination of women, Ebla could not but yield to Awill's domination. Indeed, "even in her acquiescence, she is again victimized by practices of the Somali society; she is victimized by the cultural allowance of husbands to beat their wives and by the practice of female circumcision which involves clitorization and infibulation" (Mixon, 1987, p. 84). Farah's heroin has had a fragmented life. Entrapped by Awill, deeply-grounded bits of patriarchal discourse came into her mind, entreating her not to resist the man Awill is, because "[a] woman never fought with a man, she should be submissive and never return his blows. A good woman should not even cry aloud when her husband beats her" (Farah, 1970, p. 86). This is Somali traditional beliefs condoning and even maintaining gender-based violence, a form of brutality so harshly scoffed at by feminist activists as Farah. What is more, the world of women turns into hell when, the mutilated as Ebla, should have intimate relations. What should have an exquisite moment of mutual pleasure turns out to be a terribly painful experience, in which men are the sole to reach ecstasy. Ebla was very frightened, not of Awill, but because she was a virgin. She had heard lots of women talking about the pain they undergo during their first sexual intercourse. She had been circumcised when she was eight: the clitoris had been cut and stitched." (Farah, 1970, p. 87)

Such outdated and deleterious practices are harshly denounced by the author. They are unfortunately the fate of women in almost all African societies, societies which do not blink in shooting or knifing a girl, when found not virgin (Farah, 1970, p. 87). Like Quentin Miller's protagonist, who has moments of hopes and joys, in the midst of despair, Ebla is torn by a dilemma: coldly accepting her inclement life and regretting her condition of fugitive, with no family attachment, all dependent on a man who takes her as a sexual object. She is at moment in the pang of existential doubts, articulated into running monologues and other psycho-narrations, relayed to the reader by a detached narrator. This is an eloquent case:

Like everybody else, she wished she could be what she wasn't. She knew she was catching at a straw, wishing for the impossible. What she wished was that she could be somebody else, either an old woman, so that she could look

back on this day as one in a long forgotten past; or a man, so that she would not have to worry about it. (Farah, 1970, p. 94)

These bubbling interior discourses are esthetic options used by the author to unveil the deeply-felt impacts by women of the multifarious atrocities daily heaped on them. By letting loose the thoughts of Ebla, the text of Farah is an evocative testimony of physical and mental traumas and the subsequent social ennui stirred by patriarchal order. The narrative option to draw a bridge between the sad fate of her female characters, born from the Janus-faced conception of gender, and that of Miller's, the Somali writer does not only enhance the polyphonic allure of his story but also suggests a certain universality of Man's vulnerability when faced with systemic oppression and social injustices. The textual fragment borrowed from the literary bank of the American playwright can be read as another expression of the Somali author's to struggle against gender discrimination, "the systematic unfavourable treatment of individuals on the basis of their gender which denies them opportunities, rights and resources" (Abock, as cited in Odinye, 2019, p. 107). Farah is on the same wavelength with Kolawole who opines that "all over the continent, there are areas of women's marginalization that call for a re-ordering of the social order, and African women have peculiar needs in this area." (1997, p. 2)

In the last but not least part of his story, Nuruddin Farah turns to Italian cultural heritage to make a literary borrowing, so as to express in new colors the tribulations of female figures but also to zoom in on rebellious acts of the latter against a sustained exploitation.

### **3. 'YOU TAMPER WITH CAMARINA, I TAMPER WITH TIFFO': DEFYING PATRIARCHY THROUGH POLYANDRY**

The third sequence of *From a Crooked Rib* ends with Ebla's husband Awill, who travels to Italy for a new posting, without even saying goodbye to his "wife". This reveals the image Somali men have of the woman, who is nothing but a sexual object. Ebla is left all alone, adrift, with no attachment in an unknown place as Mogadicio. Had it not been Asha, the landlady, Ebla would have been bereft of hope, like a lost bird in the cloudy sky of her life. Asha is a business-minded woman, unmarried, with a certain autonomy, and who is decided to survive oppressive social structures. To further analyse and appreciate the influence she has on Ebla, let us first stop at the threshold of the last section and take a look at the epigraph. The citation is a Sicilian proverb stating this: "Don't tamper with Camarina." This reference to Italian culture is not only a hint at the historical colonial past of Somalia but it is a sly way for the author to scorn men's infidelity. Indeed, the proverb is a warning against sexual philandering, and by building a literary partnership with the

traditional wisdom of that part of the world, Farah's text is unbridged and becomes a composition of words and discourses shaping different worlds and yet implicitly interconnected. This hybrid aspect of the story is the gist of this argument of Foucault: "the unity of the book, even in the sense of a group of relations, cannot be regarded as identical in each case. The book is not the object that one holds in one's hands, and it cannot remain within the little parallelepiped that contains it: its unity is variable and relative" (Foucault, 1976, p. 23). For an accurate interpretation of the proverb within the context of the narrative, we will need to take *From a Crooked Rib* outside its "little parallelepiped".

Ebla receives a letter from Awill, brought to her by his friend Jama, who forgets to take out a picture of Awill and a semi-nude Italian girl. Ebla is infuriated because of what she takes as a betrayal of her husband who has 'tampered with Camarina.' These circumstances have triggered her radical decision to take a new and second husband. This is where lies the influence of Asha, the town woman and procurer, who brushes aside the objections of Ebla and talks the latter into accepting Tiffo's secret marriage proposal. The following exchange between the two women is telling enough of a radicalism in their reaction to Awill's betrayal:

'Do you think that will create any trouble for me afterwards?'

'It is a man's trouble. They will jump at each other's throats, but nobody will dare touch you'

'Tell Tiffo that I am willing to marry him secretly. May be he will also want that. And if Awill comes back and doesn't want to return to me, then I will say with him. I love life, and I love to be a wife. I don't care whose.' (Farah, 1970, p. 112)

Therefore, polyandry, the extreme expression of scandal and outrage in the conservative Somali world, is the action taken by Ebla to defy male domination. It can be read as counter discursive statement debunking the discourse of patriarchal authority; it is as well a pronounced signal of the feminist stance of the author. Ifeoma Odinye's words further insist on the idea: "Farah adopts both radical and womanist feminist ideologies that have communal tenets which are hinged on the African philosophy of thoughts" (Odinye, 2019, p. 133). This position of the critic is well-grounded, because, if read in the light of the defiant act of Ebla towards social order, and her ambivalent stance concerning her life on the one hand, and her status as a married woman, on the other hand, one can feel an impulsive radical reaction which is soon superseded by naivety and remorse that Odinye correctly takes as a womanist position of Farah. Ebla doubts about her moral strength to question and even challenge the superstructural tenets ruling the pre-ordained Somali society.

Those doubts and regrets are at the heart of the sustained monologues of the character in the last part of the story. In spite of her rebellious behavior, Ebla, after the break with Tiffo, is torn with regrets; she meditates about the trajectory of her life,

the meaning of life itself, but more about the unjust existence of women like her, the widow, Asha, and others weighing under patriarchal structures endorsed by a male oriented interpretation of the Islamic Scriptures. In spite of all the misfortunes that have punctuated her existence, Ebla loves life, hankers for happiness, fair treatment, social justice and equity, and yet, that same life in the Somali traditional society made her bear most atrocious and traumatic experiences as infibulation:

“Oh, my God. What a painful thing it was,” she recalled. There were only two times that she wished she had not been born, and one of the them was when she was circumcised. It was not only painful but a barbarous act, she thought. ‘Are there people in the world who are not circumcised?’ She wondered. (...) she also recalled that other night of pain-the first time she had ever had sexual contact. It was with Awill, and it was painful, indescribably painful. She had bled and he rejoice seeing the bleeding as his manhood depended upon breaking her chastity.” (Farah, 1970, p. 137)

Such an appalling and traumatic experiences bearing life effects is here commented by Ben Meriem in his insightful analysis of the control of the female body in patriarchal ideology

The lips of Ebla’s vagina, when they are in their natural status, would move and touch each other, resulting in an ecstasy for Ebla. The stitching of Ebla’s lips of the vagina results in the loss of autoeroticism; the lips are no longer free to touch, but rather sewed together. This act prohibits Ebla from indulging herself in a self-centered corporal sexual activity; she is thus asexualized in relation to her own body. (Ben Meriem, 2016, p.94)

Notwithstanding the confusion at this stage of her life, one thing she is sure of and ready to fight for she is adamant in her will to become more assertive and take her life in hand. Conscious that “challenging the filiative bonds of society is not enough to break from the hold of tradition” (Ben Meriem, 2016, p. 82), knowing that as an individual female she is too crooked under social norms to have the required power to *uncrook* her society, she comes to this resolution:

Eventually, she did manage to tell Asha to keep out of her own affairs. Then Ebla was happy. ‘I am master of myself. The widow is not here. My cousin is not here. My brother has gone home and will never come back to give me orders. Tiffo is not here, so nobody can give me orders-at least not until Awill comes home. And when he comes home, (...) I will tell him what he deserves. I am master of myself.’ (Farah, 1970, p. 130)

What is more, this quest for freedom has prompted this straight affirmation of Farah, in an interview: “society could not be considered free, democratic, developed, let alone “civilized” when a large segment is kept out of the mainstream of politics and life” (Samatar, n.d., p. 95). These words of the author echo Ebla’s to her former second husband, who felt outraged by the idea of having a “co-husband”:

‘My other husband’s name is Awill,’ Ebla replied.

‘you are telling me a lie’

‘No. I am not telling you a lie. Why should I? You have another wife and I have another

husband. We are even; you are a man and I am a woman, so we are equal. You need me and I need you. We are equal.’

‘We are equal. You are a woman and you are inferior to me. And if you have another husband, you are a harlot’, said Tiffo, standing up, his lips and hands quivering.’ (Farah, 1970, p. 132)

Thus, Farah’s novel fundamentally indicts the patriarchal oppressive discourse, its stifling norms of female subjugation. This explains why the Somali writer “imbues his girl character with radical feminist traits to assert herself irrespective of some cultural norms and old-fashioned traditions that have denied her access to her human rights.” (Odinye, 2019, p. 122)

But, however daring Ebla is, however pronounced her balking at the discourse of patriarchal power is, one should acknowledge with Ali Jimale Ahmed, that “by challenging the structures of tradition one is only able to call attention to the institutions. To effectively and dialectically supersede existing negative structures, one has to challenge tradition ideologically, for it is in ideology that a structure is nurtured, justified, legitimized” (1996, 82). Farah and her girl protagonist are aware that the road to gender equality is thorny. They are as well convinced that superstructural beliefs are ingrained in society. But, however biased tradition is, they still believe that some basic values should be kept. This ambivalent position is what justifies the character’s mitigated ideas: “Ebla’s radicalism is seen in her journey of escape from patriarchal oppression, while her reunion with Awill depicts Farah’s womanist stance. Farah’s feminist ideology is black centered and accommodationist as a result of Somalia’s Islamic religious background. Though Farah believes in the freedom and independence of the female gender, he also supports meaningful union between men and women for peaceful coexistence.” (Odinye, 2019, p. 133)

Consequently, we have a female figure, though lost, because of the stifling chains of oppressions around her neck, and who, by reclaiming her body and using it outside patriarchal dictates, defies the system. In so doing, she manipulates her husbands, and becomes master of her life, albeit temporary. Polyandry, then, is her way of showing her discontent towards the system. It is her “third space” (Obiodima, 1990), more, her space of enunciation (Bhabha, 1994) of statements going against the grain of patriarchal ideology.

The epigraph to the fourth part constitutes, therefore, a textual piece adding to the polyphonic nature of Farah’s novel. It justifies, comments on the action of Awill and the reaction of Ebla. Also, it bears a touch of irony because the proverb, under the form of a command, is used by the crafty writer to refer to men’s sexual philandering. The epigraph comments on that episode of the story, makes the characterization of Awill more accented, and placed the book, in a final analysis, in a network of literary cooperation, the rationale behind the technique of intertextuality.

Through a multidimensional use of the epigraph, *From a Crooked Rib* is a momentous contribution to world literary archives.

## CONCLUSION

Nuruiddin Farah's debut novel *From a Crooked Rib* has sparked a sustained indictment of the lamentable condition of women in Somali traditional society and culture, covering all his literary production. The committed writer makes a poignant discussion of the varied aspects of gender-based violence, which is a way for him to denounce and warn about the need for his country people to reconsider gender roles, should they want to be an advanced society.

In his treatment of the predicament of women, the author has not hesitated to open the frontiers of his book to international literary world, because he is convinced that texts are endlessly being repeated, re-written and that links exist in human sufferings. In this way, the analysis of one aspect of the transtextual design of *From a Crooked Rib*, based on French theorist Gerard Genette's postulates, has allowed to affirm that violence and violation of women rights are common to almost all societies and that the intertextual procedure has highlighted differences in expression, a commonality in subject.

The analysis of the epigraph foregrounds the idea that Farah is a universal writer as he made literary borrowings from anterior texts to further express patriarchal shackles stifling female citizens but also sporadic defiant acts of the latter faced to the multiple stratagems, backed up by a powerful ideological discourse, invented by men, to keep them in bondage.

By scoffing at social categorizations and crude gender distinction, by quoting the narrative discourses of *ancient* texts into his own narrative, Nuruiddin Farah has enriched the world literary tradition with a story which is not only a painstaking expression of social injustices and barbarous cultural practices but is an expression of his womanist stance. The Somali writer's black centered feminism somehow justifies the attitude of her rebellious girl character who, in spite of the hectic events she went through, still believes in marriage which, if based on mutual understanding and respect, is a unique opportunity for individual and social development.

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Notes de fin

<?> Used here to refer to gender-based violence, that is, as pointed out by Murungi and Muruki, an umbrella term for any harm perpetrated against a person's will and it could be physical, sexual, psychological, economic, socio-cultural. Violence is thus a means of control

<?> Both within the book, what is called *peritext*, and outside it, he designates by *epitext*. These are titles, subtitles, pseudonyms, forewords, dedication, epigraphs, prefaces, epilogues, afterwords, etc.

<?> L'épigraphe est le plus souvent allographique, c'est-à-dire, selon nos conventions, attribuée à un auteur qui n'est pas celui de l'œuvre]

<?> According to Genette, this is the second function of the epigraph which consists in commenting on the text; it is an implicit expression of the text.

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