Articulable Humanity

Narrative Ethics in Nuruddin Farah’s Trilogies
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In loving memory of Brita Grönberg (1930-2007)
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Introduction

Articulable Humanity

“Where can we go? What can we do? What power can we exert over space and time and the forces of disorder and circumstance and still retain our humanness?”

William Lawson, *The Western Scar*

Few novelists have treated a country’s history of hope against hope more committedly than the Somali author Nuruddin Farah (1945–). For almost five decades he has returned to his country of birth in novels, essays, drama and non-fiction. Farah himself says that creating a fictional Somalia, “a "country of my imagination,” (Ruggiero 560) has been his way of dealing with his long period of exile which began in 1974 when his regime-critical texts made him *persona non grata* with the Siad Barre regime (1969-1991). Even though he has been able to visit Somalia since 1996, writing, research and teaching has since then led him to pay extended visits to India, the U.S, and several European countries. He has, however, maintained a permanent residency on the African continent, his latest home being located in Cape Town.

Farah’s novels have often explored themes related to the precariousness of human existence, both in a general sense, as a universally shared ontological condition articulated by Judith Butler in her work *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2003), and as specific expressions of vulnerability proceeding from unjust gendered, racialized, and geopolitical power structures. It is precariousness in this second sense that motivates my selection of corpus texts because although Farah’s sustained criticism of, for instance female circumcision, features in all of his novels, I am interested in how such vulnerabilities and others are exacerbated in extreme political settings of totalitarianism, war and civil strife. This means that although several of the arguments presented in the following chapters have bearing on Farah’s larger oeuvre, the novels that precede and follow Farah’s three trilogies only feature in the discussion as references.

The focus of this monograph is thus the nine novels published between 1979 and 2011 that together constitute the three trilogies *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*, including *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979), *Sardines* (1981), and *Close Sesame* (1983); *Blood in the Sun*, including *Maps* (1986), *Gifts* (1993), and *Secrets* (1998); and *Past Imperfect*, including
Links (2003), Knots (2007), and Crossbones (2011). For all that separates these trilogies and novels thematically and stylistically, they are remarkably consistent in their enquiry. Firmly rooted in the geo-political particulars of Somalia, they trace the country’s journey from communist rule, via dictatorship, through war, and civil war, arriving in a 2010 fictional version of Somalia featuring militant Islamism and coastal water piracy. Simultaneously, these novels stage human experience in ways that cut across time and place, inviting the reader to ponder a plethora of questions of profoundly ethical import: How can one remain human in the face of extreme adversities? How can one resist oppression in all its forms without becoming a perpetrator of that which one seeks to resist? What role may violence or non-violence have in seeking to see justice done? How far does responsibility for the other reach? How may dehumanizing forces be resisted in ways that preserve and even restore human dignity?

Farah’s double engagement with, on the one hand, the local, the specific and the particular, and on the other hand, universal themes and global phenomena has led critics to comment on the “generalizability” of themes such as gender inequality, the relationship between public and private corruption, the traumatizing effects of social injustice (Kelly 30), and how the questions raised in Farah’s fiction are “broad enough to apply to other times and places,” (Bardolph, "Brothers and Sisters” 727). For others, reading Farah lends a sense of recognition, such as noticed in Reed Way Dasenbrock’s contention that “[t]he problems of Somalia are the problems of California, if in different registers of intensity, if only because they are the problems of all of us” (“A Tale of Two Trilogies” 64). We might find Dasenbrock’s comparison between Farah’s Somalia and his own California somewhat far-fetched. At least to me, Farah’s Somalia is not the north of Sweden where the majority of this study is penned: it is something else, something singular, unique, and “other” to my world. At the same time, Dasenbrock’s comment alerts us to ways in which the beauties and struggles of Farah’s fictional world cannot be altogether unique and “other” when Farah’s renderings again and again speak to readers’ experiences of what it means to be human.

So how are we to understand the constant interplay between specifics and generals, between micro- and macrocosms, between ethics and politics in Farah’s writing? Is it reasonable to perceive the ethical and political dimensions of Farah’s fiction as inextricable and mutually reinforcing trajectories – indeed, as ethico-political – where the political edge of Farah’s writing depends on a profound concern with universal ethical themes, while its ethical force proceeds from a clear rootedness in geo-political specifics? If so, what is lost in a more unilateral political reading? Conversely, what is lost if the sole focus lies on ethical aspects? How do readers’ expectations – whether related to the work of fiction (genre, stylistics), to the field of
African postcolonial fiction, or even its author – determine what Farah’s trilogies are allowed to communicate, ethically and politically?

Before describing how the present study engages with these questions and related ones, I wish to briefly outline how ethico-political concerns have been understood in previous research.

**Literature Review**

**Political Conceptions of Ethics**

In the vast and varied critical reception of Farah’s fictional writing, to which I may in no way do justice in a sketchy overview of this kind, there is a clear tendency to focus on the works’ (postcolonial) political implications rather than their ethical ones. The reasons why this is the case may be connected both to the strong political nerve of Farah’s writing and his own responses in interviews and nonfictional writing. However, what I perceive as a privileging of the political over the ethical may be traced to more general perceptions of what African postcolonial fiction is and should be.

In their introduction to essays on the theme “the Writer, Writing, and Function” in African fiction, Tejumola Olanian and Ato Quayson delineate how the dominant conception of African literature as “a pathfinder for society” is explained partly by its emergence largely as “counter-discourse” to European racism during colonial rule, and partly by a common understanding that the task of African art and artists has always been “to be critical prods and guides of their societies.” (*African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* 101). Apart from revealing the inextricable bond between politics and ethics, Olanian’s and Quayson’s description implies just how political the function of the (African) writer and his/her writing has become, leaving the ethical to be defined primarily in terms of a duty to counter colonial discourse(s).¹

A quick glance at African literary history supports this view. As Anthony Chennells notes in his article on African realism of the 1960s and 1970s, there has been “a general expectation” that Africa, “heroic or flawed, but ultimately victorious, must be glimpsed in some character who can be read as an allegory of the continent” (50). It is in view of such expectations that we may understand Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) or Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* (1964), but also Ebla in Farah’s first novel *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), whose journey of female emancipation gestures far beyond her individual fate.

¹ Some of the titles of the essays included in Olanian’s and Quayson’s section on “the Writer, Writing, and Function” are particularly telling in their emphasis on function: Chinua Achebe’s “The Novelist as Teacher” (1965), Albie Sachs’ “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom” (1990), as are their suggestions for further reading, Ngugi wa Thiong’O’s *Writers in Politics: Essays* (1981) and Niyi Osundare’s *The Writer as Righter* (1986)
The relation between African fiction and colonialism cannot be overrated. In a comment on the cultural critic Frederic Jameson’s contested term ‘national allegories’ – proceeding from an assumption that “the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (“Third-World Literatures” 72, original emphasis)² – Apollo Amoko reminds us of how profoundly “[l]iterature has been at the forefront of documenting and attempting to transcend the crisis of colonialism in Africa” (“Autobiography and Bildungsroman in African Literature,” 196-197). At the same time, it would seem that a unilateral focus on African fiction as a counter-discourse to colonial discourse(s) strongly reduces its possibilities and actual accomplishments. Aijaz Ahmad gestures in this direction in his fierce critique of, among other things, Jameson’s notion of Third World Literature as an “internally coherent object of theoretical knowledge” (“Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory‘” 4). The productive tension between Jameson’s demonstration of how the private and public interacts in postcolonial fiction and Ahmad’s justified rejection of degrading (“othering”) categorizations is of particular interest to my discussion of political allegorical readings of the Blood in the Sun trilogy (Chapter Three), but also to the thesis’ general enquiry into the epistemologies of African fiction, with a specific emphasis on how these guide readers’ horizons of expectations.

An array of connotations are of course evoked when we broach the subject of politics, but rather than provide specific examples of politically oriented readings of Farah here (since my later discussions will do so), I wish to just name a few common features. Political understandings of Farah’s representations of responsibility and resistance (both of which exist as clearly political and ethical concepts) tend to draw on binary thinking (us/them, friend/foe, resistance/collaboration, etc.), but also expectations of (political) efficacy, strength and resolved commitments. In such a political scheme the main characters are expected to be what Medina, the protagonist of Farah’s Sardines (1981) describes as “strong, capable, unwavering” (6).

These expectations are not only limited to the individual works, but apply also to the author as a politically committed constructor of a fictional world. Even though these expectations are particularly pronounced in early reception of Farah, their longevity must not be underestimated, as my discussion of Farah’s later works in Chapter Four and Five demonstrates. An African postcolonial work of fiction is still expected to stage political concerns, and an African writer (albeit cosmopolitan and exiled, as is often noted with Farah) is still expected to communicate his/her political convictions – if not as overtly as in the 1970s and 1980s – nevertheless, as distinguishable.

² Henceforth, all emphases in references are original unless otherwise indicated.
Individualist Understandings of Ethics

Obviously, the inclination towards political readings of Farah’s fiction does not mean that critics have not been doing what in broad terms may be referred to as ethical criticism. How else are we to understand more than four decades of rich critical engagement with Farah’s writing on issues such as female circumcision, gender equality, political oppression, colonial, post-independence, and neo-colonial challenges? When Farah’s fiction has been read in more explicit ethical terms however, the tendency has been to read through the lens of Western philosophical frameworks focusing on the individual.

In an essay from 1984 for instance, Juliet Okonkwo reads Farah’s first four novels in Aristotelian terms, arguing that the recurrent theme that binds them into a single entity is the individual’s quest for self-fulfilment:

His major characters... are constantly struggling to acquire a more satisfying existence for themselves based on their conceptions of a full life. Their preoccupation with freedom and the self, conforms with philosophical concepts concerning the function and place of man in society. Man’s major role in life, according to the Aristotelian concept, is the attainment of the good life. (“Farah and the Individual’s Quest for Self-Fulfilment” 67)

The emphasis on freedom and the self also surfaces in Patricia Alden and Lois Tremaine’s monograph Nuruddin Farah (1999) where they use Okonkwo’s “quest of the individual for self-fulfilment” as the point of departure for their chapter-long discussion of Farah’s “ethical imagination.” In their view however, Farah does not locate the goal of that quest in “a generalized notion of ‘happiness’ and ‘the good life,’” but more precisely in “the principle of individual autonomy” expressed in acts of self-narration (158). Although characters’ acts of self-narration is a feature commonly acknowledged in critical reception, Alden and Tremaine clearly draw on ideals based on the concept of the liberal subject when they argue that

[the fundamental political challenge is to conduct this ongoing business of self-invention unfettered by the roles one is assigned in the stories that others tell and in a manner that does not constrain

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3 For further reading, see for instance the following monographs: Patricia Alden and Lois Tremaine’s Nuruddin Farah (1999) referred to below; Emerging Perspectives on Nuruddin Farah (2002, ed. Derek Wright); Derek Wright’s The Novels of Nuruddin Farah (1998, revised and expanded in 2004); and F. Fiona Moodla’s Reading Nuruddin Farah: The Individual, the Novel and the Idea of Home (2014), which is the only work to date that deals with all of Farah’s novels. Apart from these monographs, a vast number of articles have been published, see especially the critical interventions of Jaqueline Bardolph and Annie Gagiano.

4 Okonkwo’s readings are thus based on From a Crooked Rib (1970); A Naked Needle (1976); Sweet and Sour Milk (1979) and Sardines (1981), of which the last two novels are discussed in the present thesis.
the freedom of others to construct their own identities. This challenge constitutes the central problem in every one of Farah’s novels. (“Reinventing Family” 760)

By defining freedom as “individual autonomy,” Alden and Tremaine place personal and political struggle and conflict at the heart of Farah’s fiction, as indicated in their use of “unfettered” and “constrain” in the above quotation. It also means that, in spite of what Alden and Tremaine repeatedly refer to as the social nature of self-invention, the relation between self and other remains defined by negotiation. So much so that individuals that desire their own autonomy, must “be willing to examine all social relationships to determine what can be transformed and what must be resisted. . . . a difficult and lifelong process requiring that all relationships and identifications remain strategic” (Alden and Tremaine 82).

Although Alden and Tremaine’s monograph offers the most extensive engagement with Farah’s ethics available to date, the similarities between their use of language and the language employed in more politically oriented readings are striking, suggesting that terms like “transformation,” “resistance” and “strategies” have simply been transferred to the realm of ethics. It is therefore hardly surprising that one of the chapters that precede Alden and Tremaine’s discussion of “Language and the Ethical Imagination” (Chapter 6) is entitled “The politics of Autonomy” (Chapter 4), because no real distinction between ethics and politics is made. Alden and Tremaine’s reading thus reflects what James Meffan and Kim L. Worthington identify as the propensity to use the terms ethical and political “interchangeably; alternatively, and even more problematically, ethics is assumed to be secondary to and consequent on politics” (“Ethics Before Politics; J. M Coetzee’s Disgrace” 131). While Meffan and Worthington are concerned with a South African literary-critical context, their observations regarding the interchangeability of terms and/or pre-eminence of the political seem applicable also to ethical readings of Farah.

Although readings centred on Farah’s attention to individuals, individuality and individual responsibility have tended, as I will argue, to eclipse the profoundly relational ethics emerging in novel after novel, such a focus has of course also contributed invaluably to a general understanding of Farah’s contestations of collective means of identification as well as his insistence on individual moral responsibility. Indeed, as will be argued in this thesis, Farah’s strong emphasis on individual moral responsibility becomes the vehicle by which he is able to interrogate collective means of understanding the self, reflected not only in his persistent critique of the clan system and his contestations of notions like race and ethnicity, but also that of certain quixotic postcolonial understandings of hybridity (as shown in, for instance, Farah’s portrayal of the hybrid and multiply oppressed Misra in
Maps, discussed in Chapter Three). It is also by emphasizing the strength of the individual self that critics have brought attention to how Farah’s fiction overturns persistent conceptualizations of the African continent, as well as its people – not least as reflected in his portrayals of strong female characters.\textsuperscript{5}

\section*{Research Questions}

In view of the aforementioned tendencies to either privilege the political over the ethical, and/or to apply an individualist framework in reading Farah, the fundamental guiding question of this thesis may be formulated thus: How can we read Farah’s trilogies in ways that do equal justice to their ethical and political enquiries? The question is two-tiered. The first concern relates to issues raised in the previous section. What are the effects of privileging the political over the ethical in Farah’s fiction, apart from the sense that certain stories, voices and perspectives might go unnoticed? What readings are even possible? Do expectations that African/postcolonial fiction tell the story of the nation threaten to delimit what the fiction of an author like Farah actually conveys? Maybe Farah’s trilogies tell the story of the Somali nation (and they certainly do!), but do they tell other stories too? If so, what are the ethical and political implications of telling these other stories? How might readings starting from the trilogies’ staging of ethical themes affect how we understand their politics? What happens if we take the trilogies’ own constructions of what is fought \textit{for} as our point of departure, rather than the more common starting-point of what is \textit{resisted}? What ethical themes are brought into view? What do characters’ persistent concern with questions regarding the Other tell us about Farah’s fictional world, about human existence?

The second part of my question relates to what I will soon introduce as the thesis’ engagement with issues related to "ethical reading" and "ethical criticism." What are the ethical implications of different reading strategies? How does an ethical reading from the inside-out (readings grounded in the fictional work) differ from reading outside-in (readings starting from an ethical framework)? What are the ethical implications, if any, of reading in adherence to a heuristic model of knowledge, in contrast to reading with a more fully scripted agenda in hand? And finally, how may an exploration of the multiple ethical dimensions of Farah’s trilogies – content, form, the act of reading, and the act of writing – add to our understanding of Farah’s impact over the last four decades?

\textsuperscript{5} For a thorough treatment of Farah’s writing on women, see Chapter 6 in Alden and Tremaine, \textit{Nuruddin Farah}. For other perceptive readings of Farah’s female characters see Patricia Alden’s “New Women and Old Myths: Chinua Achebe’s \textit{Anthills of the Savannah} and Nuruddin Farah’s \textit{Sardines}” (1991); Annie Gagiano’s “Farah’s \textit{Sardines}: Women in a Context of Despotism” (2011).
"Gaining Expressive Articulable Humanity"

The aim of this thesis is to bring the ethical firmly into view, by analysing the trilogies’ own constructions of what is valued, guarded and protected: the integrity and dignity of human life. While this theme is expressed in manifold ways, I wish to begin with the passage from Sardines (1981) from where I have borrowed the title to this thesis. Medina, the protagonist, reflects on Scheherazade’s storytelling while reading the Arabian Nights to her daughter:

Why did Scheherazade spin these thousand and one nights of a tale? Was it simply to save herself from that monstrous authoritarian murderer of a king who would have dispatched her to her creator? Did she in any way gain expressive articulable humanity in the telling of the story nightly? Not only that, but she saved other lives, the lives of those many poor women whom he would surely have killed. (Sardines 25)

Apart from serving as an analogy to the Dictatorship trilogy’s representation of writing as a form of political resistance, this passage contains a number of features that I perceive as representative of Farah’s constructions of dignity. To begin with, looming large in Medina’s reflection is the Arabian Nights’ dangerous setting, reflected in references to “monstrous,” “authoritarian,” “murderer,” or the threat of being “dispatched” – “surely killed.” Although the correspondences between the king and the General opposed in the Dictatorship trilogy are evident here, the intertwining of immediate danger, vulnerability, and resistance signals the degree to which the ethical concerns staged in Farah’s fiction cannot be understood without paying careful attention to their precarious contexts, whether they involve war, terrorism, or, as here, the machinations of dictatorship. Secondly, Scheherazade’s storytelling serves as a metaphor for characters’ acts of self-narration, a feature widely recognized in critical reception. As reflected in Medina’s distinction between Scheherazade “[saving] herself” and “[gaining] expressive, articulable humanity,” such self-narration is never reduced to an issue of mere survival, even in the face of extreme adversity. There is often a sublime sense of stubborn hope, even beauty accompanying characters’ precarious attempts at remaining in touch with what Links articulates as their “inner selves” (70). Such beauty, however, is intimately connected to

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6 The most prominent examples of writing/resistence include Sweet and Sour Milk’s portrayal of how Soyaan dies under uncertain circumstances after having penned a secret memorandum for the resistance movement, and Sardines rendering of how Medina’s regime-critical writing leads to her dismissal as editor of Mogadisco’s leading news bulletin.

7 Apart from Alden and Tremaine’s writing on self-narration in Nuruddin Farah, discussed above, see Guillaume Cingal’s perceptive study, “Self and Identity in the Blood in the Sun Trilogy.” For references in passing, see for instance Ngaboh-Smart 10; Hawley 72; Moolla 165.
what I consider to be Farah’s irrevocably relational construction of dignity. Inasmuch as gaining “articulable humanity” consistently moves beyond a mere saving of one’s life, it also depends on the saving of “other lives”. Indeed, human dignity, as depicted by Farah, remains unthinkable outside of a relational framework.

In exploring the texts’ own constructions of the dignity of human life in the face of war and conflict, I will, as many critics before me, take my cue from the trilogies’ repeated references to acts of self-narration. However, and in contrast to earlier readings, that have tended to focus almost solely on characters’ concerns with questions like “Who am I?” and “What is my place in the world?”, I will argue that Farah’s protagonists exhibit an equally strong concern with the questions “Who are you?” and “How am I to relate to you?”. Significantly, as the following chapters will demonstrate, these are questions that only grow in relevance as the characters experience war, conflict and suffering.

In addressing the trilogies’ representations of human dignity I draw on the ethical writing of three thinkers: Adriana Cavarero, Emmanuel Lévinas, and Judith Butler. Even though there are notable differences in these philosophers’ traditions of thought, relations to the field of arts (especially literature), and conceptions of politics (or lack thereof, as with Lévinas), there are a number of converging interests that present themselves as compelling means for exploring the ethics displayed in Farah’s trilogies. The explication of my eclectic use of these philosophers’ ideas and concepts will be developed in Chapter One, but I will briefly describe the main areas that intersect.

The first area relates to Farah’s larger ethical enquiry into the nature and representation of "reality," an enquiry with epistemological and ontological ramifications: What is the nature of human dignity? How is the dignity of the Self related to that of the Other? What is knowledge/experience and whose knowledge/experience counts? How may other forms of knowledge/experience be made to apply? Whether reflected thematically, in characters’ conversations and inner reflections, or in Farah’s telling of hitherto unheard stories of “invisible Others,” the trilogies contest and complement the social and philosophical imaginary. While Farah’s interrogations of Western and masculinist meta-narratives are well represented in the rich critical responses of the trilogies (especially postcolonial, feminist interventions), the ethical underpinnings of Farah’s enquiries reveal strong affinities with the interrogation of Western philosophical traditions reflected in, for instance, Cavarero’s criticism of the Western sovereign subject and Lévinas’ description of Western epistemology and subjectivity as an imperialism of “the Same.” What unites Cavarero, Lévinas, and Butler is the profound ways in which their thinking seeks to reimagine Western ontology by insisting on the constitutive relation between
Self and Other: For Lévinas, this relation is defined in strictly philosophical terms, through the radical claim of the Self’s infinite responsibility for the Other, as a formulation of an “ethics of ethics”; whereas for Cavarero and, increasingly so, Butler, this relation is discussed both in its ethical and political dimensions, through considerations of the ethical charge of vulnerability. As I have already implied, Farah’s representations appear as wary of (Western) liberal perceptions of freedom and the Self as they are of (Somali) collective understandings of the Self manifested in clan loyalties.

The second area relates to the trilogies’ representations of dignity, such as revealed in characters’ encounters with the Other (as an embodied other), but also in less interpersonal experiences of vulnerability, suffering or violence. In theorizing dignity such as displayed in the trilogies’ ethical encounters between Self and Other, I draw on a combination of the concepts ‘singularity,’ such as articulated in Cavarero’s Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood (2000) and Lévinas’ writing on the ‘transcendence’/’alterity’ of the Other, introduced in Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority (1961) and especially as developed in Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence (1974). The constitutive understanding of the Self-Other relation postulated in the writing of these thinkers does not leave responsibility toward the other (however framed) as a subject open to choice; nor is it a matter of negotiation, as in liberal accounts, but ethical responsibility remains inextricably intertwined with being human. The constitutive Self-Other perspective is useful for understanding how ethical responsibility is evoked and maintained in Farah’s trilogies, as illustrated in the numerous instances where moral freedom and integrity is framed in terms of non-freedom, as an imperative to act on one’s inner convictions. As shown in my engagement with Butler’s and Cavarero’s writing on the ethical provocation of vulnerability in Butler’s Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence (2004), Frames of War: When is Life Grievable? (2009) and Cavarero’s Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence (2008), reading the Self-Other relation in constitutive terms allows for a more profound understanding of situations where characters, as a result of their encounters with suffering and violence, are portrayed as losing their sense of self as readable, rational, strong and independent. Paradoxically, such instances appear to both bring human dignity into relief, and to provide opportunities for the re-humanization of both Self and Other. Indeed, simple acts of care for the dignity of the Other prove to ground the Self, granting characters a sense of being human after all.

**Narrative Ethics**

Although the main thrust of this thesis has already been articulated via my delineation of previous research, research questions and introduction to the
theme of dignity, I have yet to define what ‘narrative ethics’ refers to in this study. As outlined in James Phelan’s mapping of the field of narrative ethics, scholars have tended to focus on one or more of four issues: (1) the ethics of the told (that is, thematic content) (2) the ethics of the telling (that is, narrative strategies); (3) the ethics of writing/production (concerns related to ideas regarding the author’s responsibility in representation); and (4) the ethics of reading/reception. In this thesis, all four aspects will be explored, together with a fifth aspect that has emerged in the process of writing, (5) the ethics of method, where I, among other things, engage with issues related to ethical literary criticism, and not least, my own research practices. In exploring these concerns in relation to Farah’s trilogies I will, following J. Hillis Miller’s terminology, refer to these aspects as different “ethical moments.” Although my readings depart in significant ways from the kind of ethical criticism delineated in Miller’s The Ethics of Reading (1987), I find his term useful both as a means of describing the different narrative “areas” or “levels” at which ethics is seen operating, and for emphasizing the understanding of reading as an event. Theoretical and methodological considerations will be further elaborated in Chapter One, “Narrative Ethics.”

Disposition and Chapter Foci

A few remarks must be made concerning the shifting and uneven distribution both as regards the different ethical moments explored and the treatment of the corpus texts. The study is, to begin with, thematically oriented rather than committed to the trilogies’ triptych constitution, which explains why two of the chapters (Chapter Three and Chapter Five) depart from the pattern of discussing entire trilogies. This thematic focus also means that I perceive the trilogies as one text which, in addition to allowing the disruption of the trilogy form, has encouraged me to make references across the larger oeuvre throughout. Furthermore, the thematic focus is what motivates the more extensive treatment of Crossbones (Chapter Five). A privileging of this kind should not be understood as an implication that Farah’s earlier production has lost its relevance and urgency. All discussions of Farah’s later works may, on the contrary, be traced back to my engagement with Farah’s first two trilogies. What the discussion of Crossbones reveals however, is what in the course of writing emerged as a

8 The definitions provided within parentheses are my own, adapted to fit how "narrative ethics" is used in this thesis. Phelan uses slightly different terms to explain the questions and queries that accompany each area. The differences between his explication and mine are inconsequential to a more general understanding of narrative ethics, however.

9 Gifts from the Blood in the Sun trilogy does not appear in the discussion of the other novels in the same trilogy in Chapter Three, but in the comparative discussion with Crossbones from the Past Imperfect trilogy in Chapter Five.
need to address the novel’s challenging narrative strategies in a more elaborate way.

The shifting emphasis in my discussion of different ethical moments is, by the same token, guided by what kind of treatment the individual novels and their reception have seemed to call for. This means that while each chapter takes its departure from close readings of the novels’ own rhetoric (“ethics of the told” and “ethics of telling”), there is an increased emphasis on theoretical aspects of readers’ engagements (“ethics of reading” and “ethics of method”) – my own and that of others.

In the first chapter, “Narrative Ethics,” I introduce the theoretical and methodological conceptualizations that underpin my readings, by handling the various ethical moments one at a time. Needless to say, such a separation is a pragmatic construction on my part for the sake of clarity, as the different ethical moments must be perceived of as inextricably entwined and mutually enabling.

In focusing on the resistant subject, Chapter Two, “Precarious Resistance in the Dictatorship Trilogy,” shows how Farah’s complex renderings of resistance to any form of authoritarian structures requires a move beyond an oppositional resistance-collaboration conceptualization towards one that perceives responsibility and complicity as interlinked. By focussing on what the characters are shown to fight for – human dignity – rather than the multiple evils they fight against, I am able to both unearth expressions of resistance that have been lost in the largely politically-oriented reception, as well as demonstrate how the dignity of the self may never be separated from a concern with the dignity of the other. In exploring the ethical moment of writing, the second part of Chapter Two responds to the question of how to write about the contagious nature of power and authoritarianism in ways that allow for the reader to interrogate, debate and even contest those very versions. As shown throughout, the thematic content of the trilogy is undergirded by Farah’s use of narrative strategies, where textual dissonance produced by contradictions, ambiguities and multiple perspectives become equally crucial to the novels’ representation. The implications of the openness that feature Farah’s first trilogy is thus ethical rather than hermeneutical because the reader is called to engage in deeper ways with texts elusive to interpretation.

Chapter Three, “Adoptive Relations in Maps and Secrets” proceeds from the assumption that a fuller understanding of what to date appears as Farah’s strongest rejection of reductive categorizations such as nation, lineage and clan, requires that attention be paid to the intersections of the novels’ staging of ethical relations (ethics of the told) and Farah’s deliberately ambiguous use of narrative strategies (ethics of telling). In exploring how the novels’ ubiquitous invitations to allegorical readings (amply adhered to in critical reception) correspond to the lure of
abstractions in Farah’s portrayal of the orphan child, this chapter demonstrates how Farah’s subversive use of metaphor, symbol and allegory consistently interrupts the very readings elicited by the works’ rhetoric, rendering any sense of hermeneutic mastery impossible.

In Chapter Four, “Diasporic Encounters in Links and Knots” I suggest that the two first novels in Farah’s third and latest trilogy, Past Imperfect, may be read as a fictional representation of renegotiated ethical perceptions of Self and Other. This manifests in how the protagonists returns from the diaspora to a Somalia ravaged by war brings Western-individualist, hybrid-diasporic and Somali-collective understandings of moral responsibility into relief, demanding a new ethical framework embracing vulnerability, fragility and interdependency. What begins in the characterization of the familiar predicament of diasporic existence – the split subject negotiating a double or multiple belonging in a state of being an insider and outsider simultaneously – soon moves into renderings of a deeper form of alienation in which the war plays an instrumental role. Not only does the war demand pragmatic responses, but the protagonists’ experiences of violence and war challenge their sense of the world as readable and dependable, an existential process in which the sense of self as a coherent, rational and independent agent is overthrown. However, rather than rendering the characters powerless, this experience of disorientation is presented as leading towards reoriented, more profound ethical engagement with the surrounding society. The novels’ concern with re-oriented perspectives is not limited to an ethics of the told however, but is also reflected in the novels’ ethical moment of telling. In discussing the different narrative strategies of Links and Knots, this chapter reveals how the multivocality and invitation to interpretation in Links may be equally effective in generating profound reflection as might the seemingly monolithic representation of Knots’ protagonist Cambara, provided that attention is paid to the interruptive function of narrative silences, contradictions and ironic elements.

Chapter Five, “Challenging the Single Story in Gifts and Crossbones” builds on previous chapters’ discussions of how Farah’s fiction consistently challenges, contests, and complements received notions of African and Somali reality. In engaging more closely with Farah’s philosophical exploration of “reality,” via a comparative discussion of Gifts (1990) and Crossbones (2011), this chapter engages with the profoundly ethical nature of this enquiry, suggesting that Farah is concerned with what Judith Butler describes as “a critical opening up of the questions: What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade?” (Frames of War 33). While the ethical themes dramatized in the novels remain foundational to the discussion, the chapter is primarily concerned with the conditions for imaginative engagement with Crossbones. In exploring more closely the experience of encounter with this novel – the triggers of intellectual and
emotive responses – the analysis will focus particularly on textual elements that seem to interrupt, disturb, and obstruct imaginative engagement. Rather than reading these elements in terms of, for instance, aesthetic flaws, the chapter shows that imaginative challenges are – on the contrary – indispensable to an understanding of how Farah’s fiction accomplishes what it does, politically and ethically.
Chapter One

Narrative Ethics

Theory and Method

It appears you never bother yourself about looking into the inside of things... and you never bother about studying, in detail, the inside of the statements others make. . . you’re almost always satisfied with the surface of things – a smooth surface being, to you, a mirror in which your features, your looks, may be reflected, and so you see nothing in mirrors save surfaces.” (Maps 136)

The accusative words directed at Askar, the protagonist of *Maps* (1983), come from a girl that he encounters in one of the novel’s many dream-sequences. Even though it is quoted without its context, this passage captures what seems to be at the heart of Nuruddin Farah’s fiction: its relentless interrogation of human existence and its call to engage with otherness/alterity in such a way as to experience more than “smooth surfaces”.

The passage can also be used as a means of understanding how the present thesis engages with the multiple ethical dimensions of Farah’s trilogies. By way of introducing how narrative ethics is understood and utilized in the chapters that follow, I will appropriate the above passage to pose a number of questions that guide my enquiry: How do our reading practices open or close for deeper engagements with “the insides” of a fictional text? What does it mean to study such “insides” in detail? How may a reading attentive to the uniqueness – the singularity – of a fictional work allow for us as readers to experience more than mere reflections of our own “features” and ideas?

Apart from providing an illustration of the act of reading, the above passage captures the elusive and enigmatic nature of Farah’s writing. Reading his trilogies will therefore, as the following chapters all demonstrate, soon render any expectation of “smooth surfaces” futile. Not only do critics’ attempts to position a stylistically sophisticated work like *Maps* as postmodern, magic realist, and/or psycho-political thriller signal the difficulty in categorizing Farah’s fiction, but seemingly more straightforward, realist novels like *Knots* may prove equally challenging, if
only in other ways. It seems moreover that the readings encouraged – whether cued by an implied author or suggested by Farah himself in interviews and essays – are consistently interrupted (often unexpectedly so) by ambivalences, ambiguities and subversive uses of metaphors and symbols.

So how are we to approach what I have – somewhat hyperbolically – portrayed here as consistently enigmatic texts, elusive to interpretation, virtually impossible to decipher? What is the ethical value of reading such fiction? Before I specify further the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the analyses in this book, I wish to provide an overview of how such questions have been understood in the larger field of narrative ethics, so as to provide a clearer sense of the context within which my readings are positioned.

**The Ethical (Re)Turn**

What has, since the late 1980s, been referred to as the ethical turn in narrative theory, is perhaps better described as a (re)turn rather than a shift towards ethical concerns, as it refers to a renewed interest in the intersections between moral philosophy and fictional narrative, reflected both within moral philosophy and narrative studies. Although reflections on the relation between ethics and fiction date back to Plato and Aristotle, the emergence of structuralism in the 1960s meant a radical decline in such interrogations, spurred partly by a new focus on formal aspects of fiction – including perceptions of the autonomy of the text – and partly by a growing suspicion of universal claims and values, most overtly articulated in poststructuralist and postmodern theory. As David Parker notes in his introduction to *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory* (1998), the silence surrounding ethics and fiction hardly meant an “absence of the ethical,” given the implicit ethical engagements entailed for instance in feminist and postcolonial literary criticisms (3-4). The growing critique of Western culture articulated within these circles, and others, still meant that the very notion of ethics was suspicious. In spite of this ambiguous relation to ethics, the growing concern with the world beyond the text demonstrated in these more politically oriented approaches becomes what James Phelan perceives as one of two main reasons for a renewed concern with ethics. ("Narrative Ethics" *The Living Handbook of Narratology*). The other development, traced by Phelan is what he describes as “the rise and fall of Anglo-American deconstruction,” where literary studies, in the wake of the de Man affair, abandoned much of their previous interest in ethical
undecidability, and pursued other intersections of ethics and literature (ibid).

In mapping the field of narrative ethics, theorists distinguish between at least two main orientations. James Phelan divides the field into (i) poststructuralist ethics, such as featured in Jacques Derrida’s work (and especially his engagements with Emmanuel Lévinas’ ethics), and (ii) humanist ethics, including Martha Nussbaum’s neo-Aristotelian approach in Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature (1990) as well as the rhetorical work of Wayne C. Booth in The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961), The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction (1988), and Phelan’s own Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology (1996) (ibid.). By contrast, Liesbeth Korthals Altes proposes three main tendencies (i) pragmatist and rhetorical ethics; (ii) ethics of alterity; and (iii) political approaches to ethics (“Ethical Turn” in the 2005 Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory 142). Although Phelan’s definition is more accurate in regard to differing philosophical traditions, Korthals Altes’ differentiation between deconstructive ethics (or what she terms ethics of alterity) and its more politically oriented counterparts, is preferable as a means of highlighting the profoundly ethical enterprise of, for instance, postcolonial and feminist enquiries. In fact, I would propose that a similar differentiation be made between pragmatist ethics and rhetorical ethics, firstly because the strong bias towards neo-Aristotelian ethical readings within the field call for a more accurate label, and secondly because of what I perceive as a need to reframe rhetorical ethics so as to encompass any ethical orientation presented in the fictional work studied. In such a scheme, the field of narrative ethics looks something like this: (i) pragmatic/neo-Aristotelian ethics; (ii) rhetorical ethics; (iii) ethics of alterity; (iii) political oriented ethics.

Narrative Ethics in Farah’s Trilogies

Having provided a short overview of the larger field of narrative ethics, I will now introduce the theoretical and methodological considerations informing my explorations of the different ethical moments one by one: (i) the ethics of the told; (ii) the ethics of the telling; (iii) the ethics of writing; (iv) the ethics of reading/reception, and (v) the ethics of method. The differentiation between these aspects are, as already stated in the introductory chapter, a construction made on my part for the sake of clarity, as these ethical moments must be understood as inextricably interlinked and mutually enabling.

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10 As noted by Phelan, J. Hillis Miller’s case for deconstructive ethics in The Ethics of Reading (1987) was eclipsed by the revelation that Paul de Man, one of Miller’s deconstructionist colleagues at Yale, had written several anti-Semitic articles for Le Soir, a Belgian newspaper that collaborated with the Nazis (ibid.).
An Ethics of the Told

The first ethical moment explored in relation to the trilogies’ narrative ethics is the ethics of the told, that is, representations of the texts’ thematic content, focussing on the ethical concerns staged in characters’ encounters with other characters, with war and suffering, but also with the beauty of human dignity.

The introduction delineated how individualist conceptions of ethics have been unable to account in any great depth for the self’s profound concern with ‘the Other’ in Farah’s fiction. Although characters’ acts of self-narration have been widely addressed, their equally precarious attempts at narrating the Other have received less attention. Furthermore, focussing on characters’ desire for ”freedom” has rendered the concept of ”dignity” virtually empty of relational meaning, given that freedom has been predicated on liberalist ideals of individual autonomy. In exploring the ways in which a more profound understanding of the trilogies’ ethical enquiry may be gained through a privileging of the texts’ own constructions of “articulable humanity,” I turn to ethical theories concerned with the dignity of both self and Other.

As an introduction of how I read Farah’s trilogies with and against ethical theories concerned with the dignity of both self and Other, I will begin by conceptualizing dignity as ”singularity” and ”alterity” respectively, such as articulated by Adriana Cavarero Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood (2000) and Emmanuel Lévinas’ phenomenological writing on ethics, particularly as developed in his Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence (1974).\(^{11}\) I will then move towards a discussion of how dignity relates to theories on vulnerability, drawing on Cavarero’s writing in Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence (2008), but also the thinking of Judith Butler as developed in her works Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence (2003) and Frames of War: When is Life Grievable? (2009). I conclude my delineation of the thesis’ main ethical concepts with a brief discussion of how the political implications of the concepts just defined may be used as a means of understanding Farah’s trilogies, while also noting where the gaps in the theoretical framework outlined call for more classical postcolonial theory to be applied, most notably post-colonial critiques of Western feminism(s).

\(^{11}\) Lévinas’ work, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, will henceforth be referred to as OBBE, which is the abbreviation commonly used.
Dignity, Singularity and Alterity

For Adriana Cavarero, following Hanna Arendt’s discussion of “uniqueness” in The Human Condition (1958), ethical responsibility is intimately connected to the question of who we are, as opposed to what we are. Even though uniqueness/difference in Cavarero’s thinking is perceived of as “absolute, because each human being is different from all those who have lived, who live, and who will live,” (Relating Narratives 89), such uniqueness is not atomistic but emerges only in and through relation with others:

Fragile and exposed, the existent belongs to a world-scene where interaction with other existents is unforeseeable and potentially infinite. As in The Arabian Nights, the stories intersect with each other. Never isolated in the chimerical, total completion of its sense, one cannot be there without the other. (Cavarero 87)

Cavarero’s understanding of responsibility for the Other is located in the acknowledgement of human uniqueness on the one hand, and the interrelatedness of stories, on the other. By claiming that we perceive ourselves as narratable, as protagonists of a story that we long to hear from others, Cavarero shows how identity is not possessed in advance, but rather the outcome of a relational practice, something given to us from another, in the form of a life-story, a biography.

Cavarero’s distinction between the self as narratable and not narrated, is similar to her differentiation between who/what, but proves particularly compelling as a means of exploring how Farah’s trilogies portray characters’ attempts at narrating the Other. In a useful introduction to Relating Narratives, Cavarero’s translator Paul A Kottman clarifies this relationship:

It is this sense of being narratable – quite apart from the content of the narration itself – and the accompanying sense that others are also narratable selves with unique stories, which is essential to the self, and which makes it possible to speak of a unique being that is not simply a ‘subject.’ (“Introduction” Relating Narratives xvi)

Although Kottman does not clarify why such a revelation is essential to the self in this specific context, which is what the chapters to follow are committed to explore, Cavarero’s own writing poses respect for the dignity of the Other (expressed in her unique story) as essential to the self because her own dignity depends on it.

Reading Farah’s representations of self-narration through the lens of Cavarero’s profoundly relational understanding of human uniqueness,
makes Patricia Alden and Lois Tremaine’s description of how “Farah’s characters question their relationships, determining whether their own autonomy is being sustained or constrained” (Nuruddin Farah 80) appear somewhat reductive. Indeed, as my discussion of acts of resistance in Chapter Two and re-negotiated ethical perspectives in Chapter Four will show, characters are shown throughout to do/be far more than merely negotiating their respective narratives in relation to others. In contrast to Alden and Tremaine’s perception, self-narration emerges as relational in ways which pose responsibility to the Other – indeed, for the Other – as non-negotiable.

There are significant resonances between Cavarero’s differentiations between who/what and narratable/narrated, and Lévinas’ ethical thinking, especially as articulated in his distinction between Saying and Said in Otherwise than Being (1974?). Lévinas’ central radical claim, that an ethical relation is premised on infinite responsibility for the Other, involves acknowledging that which exceeds the bounds of knowledge: the Other’s separateness, or what Lévinas calls transcendence of the Other. Significantly in Lévinas, alterity is never defined as a singular embodied Other, but is rather understood as an experience of that which exceeds the knowing self’s cognition, a sense of excess. The experience of alterity thus defined is simply the acknowledgement of the knowing self’s inability to fully know the Other. Given that the Other “overflows absolutely every idea I have of him,” (OBBE 87) the Other will always escape the totalizing violence of comprehension.

In what has been described as his linguistic or deconstructive turn, Lévinas describes how the ethical is manifested in language: as made up of the ‘transcendent’ Saying (le dire) and the ‘immanent’ Said (le dit). Wheras the ethical Saying signifies the irreducible, the performative – indeed, the experience of alterity – the ontological Said “designates instead of resounding,” (42) and creates fixed entities “in themes of statements or narratives” (38). Through such designation, the Said denies the transcendence of the Saying, granting it an inescapable and immobilizing hold over the Saying (5). Ethics thus defined, and here Simon Critchley’s gloss is useful, becomes “a question of exploring the ways in which the Said can be unsaid, or reduced, thereby letting the Saying reside as a residue, or interruption, within the Said” (The Ethics of Deconstruction 8).

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12 The echoes of Lévinas’ Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence are particularly striking in Paul A Kottman’s glossing of Cavarero’s unique self as “an existence that has not been reduced to an essence, a ‘who’ that has not been distilled into the ‘what.’” (“Introduction” Relating Narratives xii).
The above distinctions – who/what, narratable/narrated, and saying/said – will be used to explore the trilogies’ “ethics of the told”, albeit with shifting emphases. These distinctions appear especially significant as means of formulating what I in Chapter Three refer to as an ‘ethics of ongoing narration,’ where the lure to reduce the Other to its ontological Said is manifested both in the ethical moment of the told, the telling, and reading/reception (Lévinas distinction between Saying and Said will be further delineated under this chapter’s sections on “ethics of telling” and “ethics of reading”).

**Dignity, Corporeal Vulnerability and Horrorism**

The dignity and integrity of human life is, paradoxically, brought into clearer view in the trilogies’ representations of extreme human exposure and vulnerability, where characters’ struggles to remain human while faced with dehumanizing forces reflect in a heightening of responsibility for the Other. Representations of violence and violations of human integrity, however gruesome in their expressions, are thereby never allowed the final say in Farah’s trilogies, but are surpassed by representations of care for the dignity of the Other.

The usefulness of Cavarero’s and Butler’s relational understandings of vulnerability in this regard, lies partly in their emphasis on the ethical provocation of vulnerability, and partly in their implicit call for vulnerability to be reimagined so that violence no longer dominates the view. Cavarero is careful to point out that “vulnerable” and “helpless” are not synonymous terms; there is nothing “necessary about the vulnus (wound) embedded in the term ‘vulnerable,’ only a potential for a wound to occur at any time, in contingent circumstances” (Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence 30). This means that, “[a]s a body, the vulnerable one remains vulnerable as long as she lives, exposed at any instant to the vulnus. Yet the same potential also delivers her to healing and the relational ontology that decides its meaning” (30). The ambiguity featuring corporeal vulnerability is also central in Butler’s writing on precariousness:

As bodies, we are exposed to others, and while this may be the condition of our desire, it also raises the possibility of subjugation and cruelty. This follows from the fact that bodies are bound up with others through our material needs, through touch, through language, through a set of relations without which we cannot survive. To have one’s survival bound up in such a way is a constant risk of sociality – its promise and its threat. (Frames of War 61)

The promises, threats and risks entailed in such corporeal exposure come to a head in Farah’s representations of violations of the Other, which leads me
to engage more closely with Cavarero’s work in *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (2007).

In moving from an emphasis on word and deed (action) in *Relating Narratives*, Cavarero pinpoints the human body (being) as the locus of singularity in *Horrorism*. Cavarero’s emphasis on the integrity and dignity of the human body makes her perceive violence that compromises this integrity, or that even makes the body unrecognizable, as “ontological crime,” for “[w]hat is at stake is not the end of a human life, but the human condition itself, as incarnated in the singularity of vulnerable bodies (*Horrorism* 8). Although Cavarero’s neologism “horrorism” refers to a distinct sort of contemporary violence (distinguished, among other things, by features such as body dismemberment, suicide killings and female perpetrators), its primary emphasis on violence against the helpless makes it relevant not only to my readings of the terrorism of Al’Shabab featured in *Crossbones*, and especially how the young suicide bomber YoungThing is shown to care for the dignity of the old man Deeriye, but also as a means of expounding on how human dignity is manifested in the trilogies’ representations of other violations of the human body, such as torture, rape, or female circumcision:13

On the scene of horror, the body placed in question is not just a singular body, as every body obviously is; above all, it is a body in which human singularity, concentrating itself at its most expressive point of its own flesh, exposes itself intensely. (*Horrorism* 15)

Cavarero’s understanding of how human singularity is intensely exposed on the scene of horror is particularly important as a means for understanding the responses of characters who witness violations of the human body. While characters are often shown to guard the dignity of the Other in ways that include word and deed, as is particularly evident in the *Dictatorship* trilogy’s renderings of how Loyaan seeks to preserve the legacy of his dead brother, witnessing such ontological crimes repeatedly leads to characters expressing care for unknown others.

**Precarity and Postcolonial Critique**

In returning to the concern raised in the introductory chapter of how to do justice to both the ethical and political trajectories of Farah’s trilogies, I wish

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13 Farah’s professed resistance to female circumcision, well noticeable throughout his whole oeuvre, as well as my own attempts to do justice to the texts’ own constrictions and rhetoric leads me to include this phenomenon in this list. Farah’s own use of the term also guides my use of it, which is why I have refrained from using the more loaded term “female genital mutilation” (FGM), as well as the less loaded term, “female excision.”
to close my delineation of an “ethics of the told” by outlining some of the political implications of the ethical concepts just introduced, and particularly concerning perceptions of vulnerability and precariousness.\footnote{In doing so I will not engage with what I have described as Farah’s larger ethical enquiry, although the strong affinities between the postcolonial project of contesting grand narratives of the West, and the strong suspicion of Western ontological mastery expressed in the writing of the thinkers discussed above, certainly have political ramifications. Such issues will be treated in further detail in Chapter Five, where I discuss Farah’s philosophical and political explorations of “reality” in Crossbones and Gifts.}

As is often noted in philosophical studies on vulnerability, no normative ethics might be derived from an acknowledgement of our constitutive exposure to others, such as delineated by Butler and Cavarero.\footnote{For a general overview of Butler’s thinking in relation to other views on an ethics of vulnerability, see Catriona Mackenzie et al., Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy (2013). For a more specific discussion of Butler’s and Cavarero’s philosophy, see Ann V. Murphy’s chapter on “The Provocations of Vulnerability” in Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary (2012).} It would seem that the lack of normative content would also reflect a lack of political applicability; Martha C. Nussbaum’s discussion of Butler’s work in ”Professor of Parody” (1999) points in this direction. Kim Curtis’ critique of Cavarero’s lack of attention to ”central features of the political condition” in Relating Narratives, seems to corroborate this impression (“Review Essay” in Political Theory Dec. 2002:854). Although the reasons for Curtis’ reservations partly disappear when reading Cavarero’s later work on ‘horrorism,’ Curtis’ remark brings attention to aspects of the human condition that are missing in Cavarero’s account:

Our stories are always ineliminably our own and profoundly with those of others similarly situated. We are always a who profoundly marked by the whats of our group affinities, identifications, histories. These densities claim and enshrine themselves in us in ways we cannot hope (and may not wish) to quite undo. (854)

Needless to say, the underlying postcolonial logic of Farah’s trilogies call for attention to be paid to such ”densities.” Besides more classical postcolonial theory, I also draw on Butler’s work on precariousness, introduced in Precarious Life (2005) and developed in Frames of War (2009). Butler’s explorations of heightened forms of precariousness is useful in addressing issues ranging from ethnocentric and misogynist violence in Maps, to foreign intervention in Links, and suicide bombing in Crossbones.

As mentioned in the Introduction, precariousness has two meanings in my study, modelled on Butler’s differentiation between precariousness and precarity.\footnote{Butler’s own differentiation between the two terms is not always clear, which is why I do not differentiate between precariousness and precarity in the Introduction, but first here in my chapter on theory and method.} Butler defines precariousness as a universal ontological human condition that takes into account experiences of mortality, dependency, and susceptibility to violence, whereas the concept of precarity denotes concrete and specific expressions of unequal global distributions of vulnerability,
which are the product of gendered, racialized, and geopolitical power structures. The normative charge of Butler’s description lies in other words not in the concept of precariousness itself, but in its “unequal distribution” (*Frames of War* 25)

This double definition of precariousness is essential to the readings presented in this thesis. Apart from providing a framework for addressing the trilogies’ ethics of the told, it is of utmost importance that precariousness first be defined as a universally shared ontological condition, so as not to reinscribe old perceptions of “Africa” and “Africans” as primitive, poor, and dependent on the West, in every imaginable way. The second definition, precarity, is equally significant as a means of engaging with the trilogies’ context-specific representations of precariousness, reflected in situations of extreme exposure, such as that of the foreign woman Misra in *Maps*, as well as more privileged situations, like Cambara’s in *Knots*. The changing face of precariousness is particularly pronounced in the third trilogy, where Farah accentuates its unequal distribution by exploring how characters’ vulnerability, agency and dependency on others shift with the move to a different location.

### An Ethics of Telling

If the previous ethical moment of the told could be said to describe the “what?” of representation, the second ethical moment is concerned with the “how?” of representation, that is, the ways in which different narrative strategies enable and reinforce the texts’ ethical content. What are the ethical implications of for instance the use of ambiguity, multiple endings, or multivocality? How may a restricted narrative mode that focalizes a highly complex, and at times difficult character lead to a more profound ethical reflection? What are the ethical implications of placing “truth” in the mouth of characters otherwise presented as ethically dubious? What about the opposite scenario, when a character is presented as trustworthy but then articulate prejudices, without further comment? In short, how do difficult aspects of a text impede or enhance imaginative engagement – and what are their ethical ramifications?

By approaching the questions related to the ethics of telling from a rhetorical point of view, I am able to retain the critical aspect of ethical criticism that risks being lost in methodologies where the text is anthropomorphized and (almost) read as an ‘Other’ (For how can we criticize the Other? – a question, I will return to below under the section on “ethics of reading”). Although questions related to how readings may (and may not) do justice to the singularity of a given text are prominent in the chapters that follow, perceiving the text as a rhetorical exchange – involving
both the reader and author implied by the text – also allows me to evaluate the effectiveness of the (rhetorical) strategies employed.

The particular attention paid to the trilogies’ numerous instances of ambiguity and ambivalence in my close readings of the texts’ rhetorical exchanges, has meant that I have arrived at different conclusion than other critics. This is for instance the case in Chapter Three where I explore Farah’s ambiguous use of allegory and symbols in Maps and Secrets, in Chapter Four where I explore the interruptive function of irony, contradictions and narrative silences in Knots, and in Chapter Five where I explore how aspects of the text that may be perceived of as challenges to the reader’s imaginative engagement with Crossbones may paradoxically also spur the reader to a more profound engagement with its ethico-political enquiry. Such findings prove that critical readings of the rhetoric of a text may indeed be perceived of as ethical, given their meticulous attention to to singularity.

An Ethics of Writing

Although my readings are concerned with the author as a function within the text (the implied author) rather than the biographical person of Nuruddin Farah, a narrative-ethical approach to his trilogies demands a move beyond the concerns of a strictly rhetorical emphasis, that also takes into account Farah as the constructor of a fictional universe. My reasons for engaging with the (real) author, in spite of what I perceive as the risks accompanying such endeavours, are first of all related to the trilogies’ status as postcolonial fiction: ignoring the works’ contextual factors would seem downright unethical. But to disregard the author on the basis that “I work with text” also seems disingenuous for several reasons. To begin with, the openness to interpretation brought about by narrative strategies such as contradictions, ambivalences and ambiguities, is the result of a (real) author’s choices. As Wayne C. Booth reminds his readers by quoting Jean-Luis Curtis’ response to Sartre in “Sartre et le roman,” “If you destroy the notion of choice it is art that is annihilated” (The Company We Keep 53). Not only is the concept of art lost, but the whole concept of authorial responsibility is obliterated. In that regard, Edward Said’s discussion in Orientalism of how representation depends on both exclusion and inclusion is significant as a means of understanding how the writer is rendered responsible for his


17 Farah’s own responses in interviews and essays are widely referenced in critical reception. There is reason to take Farah’s accounts cum grano salis however, partly because Farah’s reluctance to own truth, reflected for instance in the ways he turns the questions back to the interviewer, and partly because of the prevalence of ambiguity in his works (as discussed in more detail with regard to allegory and symbols in Chapter Three).

18 My wariness regarding conceptualizations of the author stems primarily from the tendencies to confuse narrative voice with actual author, but also because emphases on the actual author often intersect with hopes of finding a work’s true meaning (authorially underwritten), a less productive (if not futile) project with regard to Farah’s fiction.
representations. The clear intertwining of representation and responsibility found in postcolonial theory has greatly influenced other fields of study, as reflected in Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard’s introduction to *Narrating Precariousness: Modes, Media, Ethics* (2014), where Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous discussion of agency over representation in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) is utilized as a means of understanding how “precarious and injured lives often depend on the ‘favour’ of people who do not live precariously themselves” (*Narrating Precariousness* 11). Giving voice to the silenced and marginalized has clear ethical and moral implications.

My interest in the ethical moment of writing relates to three areas: the implications of the author’s choices such as just described; the reader’s expectations; and the trilogies’ refusal to engage with simple categorizations. In exploring authorial responsibility in postcolonial and gendered terms, the thesis is concerned with the following questions: What are the ethical implications of choosing to tell one kind of story rather than another? By way of example, what does it mean for a writer like Farah – noted for his strong female characters and his outspoken criticism of for instance female circumcision – to every once in a while write a novel where female perspectives are conspicuously lacking? What are the ethical implications of such narrative gaps and silences? In a similar vein, what are the ethical implications of writing about oppression, violence and suffering in a postcolonial/African context? How may a writer address themes of vulnerability and precariousness in ways that do not reinforce old, sticky and vastly generalized assumptions of (real) Africa/Africans as poor and needy – even dependent on the West, materially and conceptually? And, if heeding Jameson’s claim that “all third-world literatures are to be read as national allegories” (“Third-World Literatures” 74, original italics), is it then the postcolonial writer’s obligation to always keep his/her pencil politically sharp, metaphorically speaking?

Secondly, my engagement with questions related to the ethics of writing engage with concerns articulated in the reception of Farah’s early works, but also surface in reviews of later works: the reader’s expectation for more overt portrayals of political commitments, and concomitant ideas regarding the author’s intentions. In the thesis introduction I delineated how political expectations have tended to dominate the reception of Farah’s writing, with responses varying from praise of his innovate use of postmodern stylistics in telling the predicaments of the postcolonial nation (see for instance Charles

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19 Booth argues a similar case when he contends that narrative “angle” is not “just technical, but moral” (*The Company We Keep* 265).

20 I am not referring here to Farah’s professed alternation between male and female protagonists, rendering women characters as protagonists in the middle of every trilogy (*Sardines, Gifts, Knots*), but rather to the instances where male perspectives dominate the representation in more profound ways, as discussed with reference to *Crossbones* in Chapter Five.
Sugnet referred to below), to worries about the novels’ lack of clarity and the corollary assumptions of an insufficiently committed writer. Such expectations will be addressed throughout this study, particularly as a means of understanding what takes place (and what is allowed to take place) in the text–reader encounter, based on the reader’s horizons of expectations.

The third, and final area of interest links responsibility back to an ethics of telling. I am particularly interested in how Farah’s fiction evades simple definition, categorization and expectations – be they related to genre or political commitments – often in unexpected and at times even undesired ways. In a lucid comment on Farah’s fiction from 1998, Charles Sugnet contends that

> [e]ven at this late date, there is still a widespread assumption that African novels are under a special obligation to be both realist and nationalist. . . . One part of Farah’s great contribution has been to break free of these limitations and invent another way for African writers to be responsible to the pains and pleasures they have witnessed. (“Deterritorialization and ‘The Postmodern’” 539)

Although Sugnet’s essay is limited to a discussion of Maps’ postmodern features, his observation does apply to Farah’s fictional writing on the whole. The multiple dimensions of what this entails remain to be shown in the chapters to follow.

Having acknowledged the need to engage with concepts dealing with the author, representation and responsibility, not least because of their prevalence in critical reception, my own readings of Farah are clearly distinguishable from the concepts of the author’s voice and intentions that underpin for instance Seán Burke’s theory of ‘authorial ethics’ in *The Ethics of Writing: Authorship and Legacy in Plato and Nietzsche* (2008). In contrast to Burke’s claim that “the ethical author” is obligated to present his or her intentions as transparently as possible (because of his/her responsibility for the interpretations made of his/her text), my readings suggest that it is in the novels’ lack of resolution that new opportunities for ethico-political debate are found. Indeed, by *refusing* simple interpretation, or transparent intentions, and by *allowing* what may be perceived as textual dissonance, Farah compels the reader to find new productive ways of engaging with the text – not least ethically.

**An Ethics of Reading**

Probing the ethical moment entailed in reading means, broadly speaking, paying attention to the consequences of readers’ engagements with texts. There are three aspects that need to be defined here: reader, text, and the
relation between the two. First of all, this study relies on two understandings of the reader. My firm belief in the power of textual constructions (as in the rhetoric of the text) informs my use of ‘the implied reader’ (as opposed to ideas of the ‘ideal reader’ appearing in for instance Martha Nussbaum’s *Love’s Knowledge*).

However, when combined with concept of the literary experience as a singular event (Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*), the ‘implied reader’ may not account for what happens in the text-reader encounter. As Terry Eagleton argues in his work *The Event of Literature* (2012), the “event” of literature consists of a continual transformative encounter, unique and endlessly repeatable. This perspective becomes increasingly important with the thesis’ gradual move towards a discussion of literary experience – my own as well as that reflected in critical response. Therefore, in the second part of the thesis, I will increasingly engage with real readers, while still retaining the notion of implied reader as part of my focus on the texts’ own rhetoric.

The perspective of reading as encounter and event also has bearings on the ways in which the reader perceives elements in the text that disturb, obstruct meaning, and/or remain elusive. If meaning is perceived as something that may be found and firmly fixed, the main purpose of reading becomes finding that meaning and ironing out any creases in the textual fabric. Admittedly, the quest for understanding and knowledge must be at the heart of any hermeneutic endeavour, and yet, if finding meaning remains the one goal of reading, several aspects run the risk of being lost, which brings us back to Lévinas’ understandings of alterity.

Furthermore, following from Lévinas’ understanding of alterity delineated in the “Ethics of the Told” section, I perceive the text not as an object to figure out, but as an Other to encounter. I use ‘Other’ in the Lévinasian sense here, not as an embodied Other, but as signifying the Self’s experience of alterity/singularity. This is a crucial distinction because an anthrophomorphist reading of the text as Other threatens to render all literary criticism unethical to the core (Whereas Booth’s reference to books as “friends” in *The Company We Keep*, is mainly charming, the connotations to the responsibility owed to an embodied Other are by far less innocent).

Drawing again on Lévinas’ concept of Saying and Said seems particularly conducive in this context, because the distinction imbues hermeneutics ethically by problematizing the text-reader encounter. Not only does the text’s alterity (defined as that which remains outside of the reading Self’s comprehension) imply that every attempt at interpretation is bound to fail in doing full justice to the work, but every act of comprehension will by

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21 As stated above, alterity is never defined as a singular embodied Other, but is rather understood as an experience of that which exceeds the knowing Self’s cognition, a sense of excess. The experience of alterity thus defined is simply the acknowledgement of the knowing Self’s inability to fully know the Other.
necessity reduce the work to its ontological Said, thus violating it. The text-reader relation thus perceived means that ethical reading becomes the process through which the reader seeks to engage responsibly with the alterity/singularity/Saying of the work.

However, an acknowledgement of every interpretation’s failure to do justice to the alterity of the work does not suggest that reading is a futile or even unethical enterprise, even though Lévinas’ own writing would seem to suggest so.22 What it does is to bring back curiosity, appreciation, and even wonder into the reading process, while simultaneously sharpening critical practice.

Engaging responsibly with the alterity of a work thus seems to bridge the gap between the ostensibly contentious hermeneutical approaches of suspicion and appreciation, the former implied in approaches such as “reading against the grain” and “contrapuntal reading”, and the latter reflected in Adam Zachary Newton’s evocative description in Narrative Ethics (1995):

> The desire to know everything... is a sign of love. It is also a sign of reading. And a sign of excess. And so, reading sometimes demands the contrary sign of looking away, of stopping short, of realizing that texts, like persons, cannot be entirely known, that they must keep some of their secrets. (285)

So, what does it mean to move towards an engagement with the ethical Saying of Farah’s representations? What does a responsible reading entail more precisely? What does it mean in practice to do justice to the text? Just how can one seek to remain open to the singularity of a fictional work? I will elaborate on how these concerns have guided my own readings in the closing section of this chapter, on the ethics of method.

**An Ethics of Method**

As a white, female academic, writing from within a western academic setting, many questions have surfaced over the years regarding my own research practice. I will limit myself to describing how such considerations have found their way into my research, with a particular bias towards close reading as ethical practice.

My strong belief in the intrinsic value of fiction, where its singularity insists that I – to the best of my ability – read the work on its own terms, and

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22 In *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Lévinas* (year), Robert Eaglestone offers a rich exploration of the ways in which Lévinas’ ethics might, in spite of its professed suspicion of art provide the framework of an ethical criticism.
not with a ready scripted agenda in hand, have over the years led me to reflect on what the act of close reading really entails.

Two considerations are particularly important in my definition and practice of the term close reading, one of which has just been delineated in terms of Saying and Said, and one that relates more specifically to the responses demanded by the text. As an example of how reading Farah has compelled me to reflect on, for instance, the experience of reading, I wish to turn to Isobel Armstrong’s pertinent question of “How Close is Close?” taken from a chapter title in *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000) where she discusses the ideology of close reading. Armstrong’s call for close reading to be redefined is premised on the need to “rethink the power of affect, feeling and emotion in a cognitive space” where “the power of affect needs to be included within a definition of thought and knowledge rather than theorized outside them, excluded from the rational” (87). As she develops her paradigm of reading she carefully refuses “that most fundamental of all post-enlightenment binaries, feeling and thought”:

> Critique supported by the feeling/thought dichotomy actually rests on an account of the text as outside, something external which has to be grasped – or warded off. Despite the anti-positivist language of so much modern criticism and theory, the text is seen as other. . . . This is distance reading, not close reading. (87)

While Armstrong’s understanding of the Self-Other relationship, modelled on a Kantian subject “who stands over against the world in a position of power,” is radically different from Lévinas’ notion of the Other as one to whom the Self owes infinite responsibility, her concern with distant and close reading nevertheless accentuates what I, in reading Farah, perceive as a need to rethink affect, feeling and emotion as cognitive phenomena.

The actual process of close-reading Farah’s trilogies quickly renders the thought-feeling distinction unfeasible, but such a conclusion may only be gained experientially. Although my interest in reading practice and readers’ response began early in my engagements with Farah’s fiction, through classical academic dialogue with previous research, my interest in reading as an ethical practice took a new turn in my own encounter with the later novels, *Knots* and *Crossbones*, in particular. Indeed, my interest in the challenges to imaginative engagement was sparked by my own reading experience – the way it felt to read, the sections where I found myself immersed in the fictional world, the things that bothered me, or made me turn back and re-read. The result of my close readings of *Crossbones* are found in Chapter Five where I discuss imaginative engagement as a highly intellectual and emotional enterprise. While the intellectual debates that feature so pervasively in all of Farah’s writing are intellectually demanding,
they also demand and generate emotional responses. Likewise, the empathetic responses generated by more emotionally charged sections of Crossbones, must be understood as cognitive responses to an emotionally charged text. Such conclusions could only be reached through an intense, and at times, cumbersome engagement with the novel.

My loyalty to the text (above author or theoretical framework) is also reflected in the thesis’ multiple readings of the texts, where my use of “reading” in the plural form emphasizes both the open-ended performance of reading, the need for multiple interpretations and the need to remain open to being affected by the alterity of the work in new ways each time it is encountered. My ultimate belief that the reading experience and the construction of meaning is best understood in terms of what Derek Attridge identifies as a “verb” as opposed to a “noun” (The Singularity of Literature 40) means that re-evaluation, moderation, and the continual process of finding new textual nuances are perceived as crucial components to an ethical reading.  

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23 In a footnote, Attridge connects his distinction between verb and noun to Lévinas’ contrast between Saying and Said (Singularity 40:fn20).
Chapter Two

“Expressive Articulable Humanity”

Precarious Resistance in the Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship Trilogy

In one of the Dictatorship trilogy’s recurring listings of the resistance movement’s casualties, Medina, the only female member of the once ten-headed clandestine movement, ponders her chances of survival, literally and figuratively:

There was no denying it: Medina had lost her finesse; her manners had become rough, her language aggressive. Had the systemic sabotage of the Security begun to work on her? Had the prolonged conflict started to make her weary? What about the deliberate postponement of the moment of the inevitable final confrontation? To get to them, to break them, the General’s Security took its time, choosing its victim. Soyaan was dead; Loyaan in forced exile; Siciliano and Koschin reduced to a vegetative state (rumour had it that Koschin was in a mental home; Nasser and Dulman in prison. It was like this: the roulette-wheel turned and every time the ball dropped into a numbered chamber one of the ten was gone. Would she hold out longer than any of the others? (Sardines 254)

Apart from complementing the portrayal of Sardines’ protagonist as particularly strong, capable and unwavering in her convictions, this passage provides a condensed version of the extreme challenges facing anyone opposing the regime in Sweet and Sour Milk (1979), Sardines (1981), and Close Sesame (1983): the wearying but also contagious nature of authoritarianism implied in Medina’s changing demeanour, the futility of

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resistance reflected in “inevitable final confrontation(s)” and reports of the
other members’ fates, the relentless machinations of terror suggested by the
allusion to (Russian) roulette, and the concluding contention that defeat is
just a matter of time.  

Although the risks and dangers facing anyone that opposes the regime
have been extensively addressed in critical reception, critics have tended to
either underestimate the regime’s ruthless efficiency, and/or to overestimate
individuals’ ability to choose their own destiny within such precarious
contexts, yielding readings in which a wide range of character responses
have tended to converge into either one of two options: resistance or
collaboration. Not only has this binary conceptualization ruled out other,
more subtle forms of both resistance and collaboration, but it has seemed to
generate less productive discussions regarding the rights and wrongs of
individual characters. Readers’ expectations of more clearly displayed
(political) commitments is not limited to characters however, but is also
reflected in negative assessments of Farah’s use of narrative strategies such
as ambiguity, contradictions, and hermeneutic openness. Even though these
responses may initially be seen as merely patterned on the resistance
movement’s binary friend or foe-perspective, they reflect a more pervasive
tendency in Farah’s critical reception to privilege political conceptions of
ethico-political phenomena, not seldom intertwined with a firm focus on the
individual.

My own readings of resistance in the Dictatorship trilogy differ from
previous ones on three counts. To begin with I argue that Farah’s complex
renderings of human survival under authoritarian rule, while being firmly
grounded in the political particularities of Somalia under the rule of Siyaad
Barre (1969–1991), provide an essentially ethical reflection on characters’
precarious attempts to be recognized as a “who” rather than the “what
postulated by the regime, to use Cavarero’s distinction. Apart from overt
engagements with moral issues such as the legitimacy of violent
action in resisting tyranny (lex talionis), or expressions of advocacy, this ethical stress
is suggested both by Farah’s careful delineation of the precarious context(s)
surrounding every subversive act, but also in his foregrounding of acts that
appear inadequate, inefficient and even inconsequential in a larger political
scheme. It is also in this light that Farah’s renderings of women’s conditions
calls to be understood, as a an ethical re-framing of Benedict Anderson’s
imagined community.

I suggest, moreover, that the tendency in previous readings to (i) focus on
what characters are shown to fight against (the political regime and its
concomitants, clan and family structures) rather than what they fight for,
and/or (ii) to pinpoint the aim of resistance as freedom, independence, and

25 All further references to the novels will be given within brackets in the text (SSM/Slu/CS + page).
individual autonomy, have tended to follow the lead of that which is opposed within the novel. This has reflected both in a preoccupation with concepts like power, violence, struggle and strength, as well as a reliance on binarisms such as strong/weak and efficient/feeble. Focussing instead on the manifold ways in which human dignity is guarded, protected, and even restored, allows me to disengage resistance from its usual connotations with violence and power – and by doing so – unravel expressions of resistance that have remained unnoticed in earlier critical accounts.

Finally, I argue that Farah’s trilogy offers a basis for collapsing binary perspectives on resistance, complicating the concept via representations of complicity. Although the concept of complicity has been widely addressed before, it has to my knowledge only been in relation to the trilogy’s exposure of intimate links between dictatorship and family structures (see for example, Stratton 141-142; Adam 337-338, and Wright, The Novels of Nuruddin Farah chapter 4-6). While these readings contribute significantly to an understanding of what I in the Introduction identified as the constant interplay between micro- and macrocosm in Farah’s writing, the concept of complicity has not been used in any exhaustive way to probe the trilogy’s wide range of resistant response, and especially not as a means for defining the multiple ways in which ethical responsibility is evoked and maintained. In exploring the trilogy’s intertwining of resistance, complicity and moral responsibility, I therefore draw on Mark Sanders’ double definition of complicity as delineated in his theoretical and literary-historical work Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid (2002). Complicity in its first meaning – as folded-together-ness in being – allows me to explore how resistance manifests itself in a duty to speak and act on behalf of the Other. The ethical provocation of vulnerability is particularly evident in instances of extreme violations of the Other, for which purpose I utilize Cavarero’s writing on dignity and ‘horrorism’ as defined in Chapter One. Complicity in its second, negative sense – the interrelation of resistance and collaboration (or what I will refer to as contaminated resistance), enables a less polarized view on characters presented as collaborators and traitors, as well as a more profound understanding of the ways in which responsibility is heightened in the trilogy’s accounts of “the enemy within,” referring to the risks inherent in any form of resistance to copy and perpetuate the very violence resisted.

The outline of Chapter Two is simple and divides my discussion into two major parts. The first and largest part, focuses on the trilogy’s ethics of the told (as intertwined with the ethics of telling) and contains my discussion of precarious context(s), followed by three sections on resistance as (i) relational and gendered, (ii) folded-together, and (iii) contaminated. In turning to the ethical moment of writing, the second part of the chapter responds to the question of how to write about the contagious nature of power and authoritarianism in ways that allow for the reader to interrogate,
debate and even contest those very versions. As my discussion shows, the thematic content of the trilogy is undergirded by Farah’s use of narrative strategies, where textual dissonance produced by contradictions, ambiguities and multiple perspectives become equally crucial to the novel’s representation. The implications of the openness featuring Farah’s first trilogy turns out to be ethical rather than hermeneutical as the reader is called to engage in deeper ways with texts elusive to interpretation.

The Precarious Context(s) of Resistance

Farah goes to great lengths in his delineations of the regime’s terror and repressiveness, to the degree of making resistance appear altogether futile. Read in this way, the contextualization of resistance gainsays previous political and individual-oriented accounts of resistance in its double emphasis on the lack of both success and freedom. The trilogies’ meticulous descriptions of the precarity faced by everyone (let alone, characters’ engaged in subversive activities) thus indicate Farah’s interest in depicting characters’ precarious attempts to protect and preserve human dignity within extremely limited parameters, rather than to present successful (political) resistance and/or to celebrate individual freedom.

The image of almost insurmountable difficulties is painted in the epigraphs that begin every chapter of the trilogy’s opening novel, *Sweet and Sour Milk*. A series of images – including for instance, a week-old baby thrown in a garbage bin (Chapter 3), a cat’s killing of a rat (Chapter 4), a butterfly smashed by a boy (Chapter 13) and children facing the danger of drowning, swallowing dangerous pills, or moving towards a scorpion (Chapter 7, 6, 12) – convey the precarious situation of all citizens. The sense of precariousness is reinforced by the outrageous differences in power and agency implied in Felix Mnthali’s comment on the epigraphs’ foci on “those little things and little people who have no way of defending themselves” (186).

Within the novels’ main body of text – apart from direct references to the vulnerability of for instance “the elderly, the weak, and the very small (CS 91) – three kinds of recurring images convey the anonymous mass’s responses to the terrors of the regime: the hiding of convictions, the shaping of bodies, and acts of disguising/clowning. To begin with, the effectiveness of the regime’s censorship apparatus means that characters are warned against wearing their “conscience on [their] forehead” (*SSM* 136) but “inside, pinned to their underthings. Private as one’s private parts” (*Sa* 32-33), since information – true or false – may at any time reach the National Security Service via informers, the “daily gatherer[s] of spoken indiscretions” (*SSM* 9). The repressiveness of the regime is further accentuated in the trilogy’s recurrent use of physical/bodily metaphors, such as when an anonymous
father contends that in order to feed the mouths of several children, “I need to close mine” (SSM 140) referring to his lack of means to protest, rather than his difficulties in providing food on the table. Another significant example is the cautioning to “[r]aise your children, but not your voice nor your head. To survive you must clown. You must hide in the convenience of a crowd and clap. Don’t put your neck out...” (SSM 34). In addition to the metaphoric representation of conformity reflected in the closing of one’s mouth, the lowered voice and head, the word “clown” in this passage (and in numerous Sweet and Sour Milk references) brings attention to a third aspect of narrative response – the disguising of one’s convictions. As the words “survive,” “hide,” and “clap” suggest, the act of clowning is described as a mere survival strategy rather than an act of resistance. This is clearly reflected in the opening lines of a secret memorandum, penned by Soyaan, the resistance movement member who is murdered in Sweet and Sour Milk:

Clowns, Cowards. And (tribal) upstarts... The top civil service in this country is composed of them. Men and women with no sense of dignity, nor integrity; men and women whose pride has been broken by the General’s Security; men and women who have succumbed and accepted to be humiliated. (SSM 33)

In its references to humiliation, broken pride, and moral capitulation, Soyaan’s regime-critical description of men and women in the civil service provides a key for understanding Farah’s larger enquiry into the nature of resistance. Without condoning their acts, Soyaan’s text problematizes collaboration by presenting dignity and integrity in relation to the relentless machinations of the regime, rendering the concept of choice anything but simple.

The reader is made acutely aware of how the lack of choice affects a character’s sense of self in the trilogy’s portrayal of Beydan, a badly abused woman who has been forced by the government to marry Keynaan – the policeman responsible for her husband’s torture and death – as salary/compensation for loyal service to the government. Beydan first appears in Sweet and Sour Milk where she keeps having a nightmare in which she, the central figure, is not present. “Like a ghost,” Beydan says, “whose shadow isn’t reflected in mirrors, I do not see myself in the dreams I dream” (SSM 10). Apart from signifying disoriented wandering, the use of “ghost” and “shadow” reinforce this sense of existing outside of present time, of not being present in one’s own life, as it were. Although this dream serves to presage her subsequent death, it is also a potent example of when the fight for dignity is a lost cause from the start. Sometimes, as Derek Wright notes in his introduction to the anthology Emerging Perspectives on Nuruddin Farah, there is “only a choice of inescapable humiliations” (xxii).
Although the examples discussed above strongly suggest that the citizens of Farah’s fictional Somalia are denied the kind of choice connoted with Western liberal ideals, critics have at times attempted to ascribe Farah’s characters such freedoms. Alden and Tremaine’s discussion of Sagal (Medina’s young protegé) is a telling example of where Western liberal-feminist framings – for all their merits – emerge deficient. In drawing on Sagal’s assertion that “I am a woman synonymous with subjugation and oppression” (Sa 62), Alden and Tremaine contend that “[t]he thrust of Farah’s work is to make us recognize that Sagal is ‘synonymous’ with nothing at all: she is, in principle, free to make of herself what she wants” (Nuruddin Farah 155). I fully agree with the first part of Alden and Tremaine’s observation: indeed, no-one in Farah’s fiction is synonymous with anything, but collective identifications are consistently interrogated and contested, not least ones that draw on perceptions of collective suffering (a question, I will return to in the next section). The second part is however more problematic, where they argue that Sagal, in principle, is free to make of herself what she wants. Even though this perspective, contrary to Alden and Tremaine’s suggestion, actually coincides with Sagal’s own – as illustrated by her (often naïve) responses throughout the novel – it must not be mistaken for Farah’s own. One such example is taken from Sardines, where Beydan’s nightmare resurfaces in Sagal’s discussion of the necessity to dream: “I will dream again and again. Medina told me that Beydan before she died saw a dream in which she wasn’t the central focus, and therefore she died. The focal point of the dream is always myself. I’m not Beydan” (Sa 43). Although Sagal’s (and Medina’s?) metaphorical use of Beydan’s actual death does reflect one form of guarding and preserving human dignity – that of the self – the manifold, tragic reasons for Beydan’s original nightmare prove freedom to be a much more complex issue than what Sagal’s youthful claim of a different future suggests.

The freedom of the self is further called into account in representations of how the dignity of the self is predicated on characters’ ability to remain true to their moral convictions, a relation often explicated in terms of un-freedom. For instance, in voicing her desire to take a more active part in the resistance movement, Sagal describes herself as “a prisoner of her own conscience, of a dream, a prisoner of a desire to write her name into history” (Sa 242). Sagal’s way of combining “conscience” and “dreams” with “prisoner” is echoed in a conversation between Medina and her mother, where Medina’s mother distinguishes between their different kinds of imprisonments:

You are a prisoner of your principles and your secret dreams, Medina; I am a prisoner of tradition, that I won’t deny. One is always
a prisoner of one thing or another: a prisoner of acquired habits or a prisoner of the hope which chains one’. (Sa 152)

Apart from conveying the power inherent to the commitments that form an individual’s sense of self – whether explicated in terms of “tradition,” “principles,” or “secret dreams” of a changed society – this passage makes an important distinction between being “a prisoner of acquired habits” (like the mother) or “a prisoner of the hope which chains one” (like Medina). Although the reference to “chain” in this passage might at first glance bring to mind only the negative connotations of constraint, Farah’s portrayal of Medina as a highly determined and energetic agent indicates that being a prisoner of hope brings the subject out of a more hazardous form of confinement – that of moral ennui and apathy. Thus the chain moves from being merely an image of imprisonment, and may instead be read as the ball-and-chain of moral responsibility, that is, as an indispensable component in the resistant subject’s sense of self. The “pull” of this chain is thereby presented as a means of liberation compelling Medina to act on both “the hope,” “the principles,” and “the secret dreams,” rather than to merely remain within “acquired habits.”

The metonymical links between principles, prisoner and/or chains in the above passages indicate that there is an element of un-freedom accompanying every attempt to guard and preserve dignity. This is a crucial distinction to make in order to understand what I will later discuss as the trilogy’s call to perceive freedom, dignity and responsibility for the Other in an interlinked way.

Relational and Gendered Resistance

A fuller understanding of Farah’s renderings of resistance requires that attention is paid to the trilogies’ gendered expressions, in which characters’ attempts to fight for “the right to exist and live in dignity” (Sa 259) are shown to consistently move beyond being an individual enterprise. Not only does this move beyond the individual reflect in women’s guarding of the Other’s dignity (and body) – instances where female forms of precarity are effectively brought into view, but it also manifests in women’s moves from the private into the public, where the latter form of resistance points towards the presence of a larger ethical project in Farah’s works, that of reimagining Benedict Anderson’s imagined community.

Farah’s double concern with female precarity and female expressions of political resistance is well illustrated in Sardines’ portrayal of how Medina packs her two suitcases and leaves her husband Samater together with their 8-year-old daughter Ubax. She leaves the house (uncommonly listed in her name instead of her husband’s) in order to acquire “[a] room of her own. A
life defined like the boundaries of a property,” with “Ubax and principles fought for” (Sa 7). Although critics have often focused on the metaphorical meaning(s) of Medina’s desire for a room of her own – a discussion to which I will return shortly – I wish to begin in what is presented as Medina’s most immediate concern: her daughter and the fear that Idil, Medina’s mother-in-law, will have Ubax circumcised.

Thus, moral responsibility is initially not explicated so much in terms of “hope” or “secret dreams,” as previously discussed, because it is a pragmatic response to the imminent dangers of tradition’s “acquired habits” (Sa 152). In a passage that has since the publication of Sardines been widely referenced as a prime example of Farah’s call against female circumcision, Medina ends a more detailed description of giving birth to Ubax with the note that, “Life for a circumcised woman is a series of deflowering pains, delivery pains and re-stitching pains. I want to spare my daughter these and many other pains. She will not be circumcised. Over my dead body. Ubax is my daughter, not Idil’s” (Sa 63). The passage from where this quotation is taken includes a less well-known, graphic, present tense re-telling of Medina’s experiences, that I will quote in its full length:

‘I fear the descending knives which re-trace the scarred wound, and it hurts every instant I think about it.’ She experienced the dolorous mixture of pleasure and pain at the age of twenty-four when she brought forth a flower of beauty – Ubax. What pain! What pleasure! There were infibulatory complications, she bled a lot, she had second, third and fourth labours. . . .’If they mutilate you at eight or nine, they open you up with a rusty knife the night they marry you off; then you are cut open and re-stitched.’ (Sa 62-63, emphases added)

The passage begins and ends with Medina addressing her young friend Sagal; the middle part (which I have italicized above, for the sake of clarity) is presented as inner reflections. Whether intended to convey Medina’s attempts to spare her young, childless friend from the specific details, or as an expression of Medina’s memories being too ugly, too painful, but also too beautiful to share, Farah’s intimate rendering of female precarity seems ethically motivated. The ethical impetus of Medina’s decisions, echoed in Farah’s choice as an author to tell these kinds of stories, is not only reinforced with the repeated references to the threats facing Ubax, but also through other stories in Sardines that deal with the question of female circumcision. Such stories include the rape of Amina, a story whose ethical and political implications I will return to in Chapter Three but also the brutal circumcision of a visiting sixteen-year-old Somali-American girl.

Medina’s second reason for leaving her home is explicated in her longing for “[a] room of one’s own. A country of one’s own. A century in which one
was *not* a guest. A room in which one was *not* a guest” (Sa 4). The allusion to Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* is obvious. In spite of Medina’s journalist vocation however, her quest for both liberal and figurative spaces moves beyond Woolf’s original argument regarding women writers within a male-dominated literary tradition. In fact, the above oscillation between spatial, geographical and temporal/historical terms – room, country, century, and then back to room again – signals that Medina’s desire for things to be different encompasses her whole being: private and public. So much so, that as Medina summarizes her experiences at the end of *Sardines* it is done with the affirmation that in having served “a cause greater than she,” she is “no longer a guest in her own country,” but “a full and active participant in the history of her country” (Sa 260, 263).

Female characters’ precarious processes of locating themselves in the larger narrative of the nation, while begun in the quest for “a room of one’s own,” consistently move beyond the private place into the public. Such entries into public spaces gets a literal representation in the young women Cadar and Hindiya’s production of anti-revolutionary graffiti, but reflects also in Sagal’s envious response when she hears that they have been caught and are now in detention.

It occurred to Sagal that she was the one in jail, not Cadar or Hindiya. She envied them their tranquillity in that state, she envied them their status, she saw them as heroines of a popular uprising. . . And what was she? She was a prisoner of her own conscience, of a dream, a prisoner of a desire to write her name into history. (Sa 242)

Sagal’s urgent question, “what was she?” and the allusion (again) to being imprisoned by her own convictions, dreams and desires, provide a significant example of Farah’s gendered interrogation of resistance, not least because of the naivety conveyed in her romanticized view of her friends’ jail experience. With Farah, there is room for the ambiguities and shortcomings of human response.

It is also by representing women characters like Medina and Sagal as “who” rather than “what,” to draw on Cavarero’s distinction, that Farah is able to carefully navigate beyond the iconic mother roles of older African fiction. In centre-staging women’s experience, dreams and desires – not least as enacted in their attempts to forge a place for themselves in the national narrative – Farah contravenes women’s traditional roles as symbols of fertility or symbols of the birth of a nation. Women in Farah’s works are thus, as Patricia Alden notes, “not just midwives to history but actors in their own drama, narrators of their own lives, interpreters of their own dreams” (“New Women and Old Myths” 377). This aspect of what might be described
as Farah’s feminist vision is significant to keep in mind, not least in relation to the discussion of female characters in Chapter Five.

It appears that the wider significance of women’s acts of resistance has often been missed in Sardines’ critical response, and negative assessments of especially Medina abound, targeting her as an individualist with an altogether selfish agenda. Gerald Moore is particularly fierce in his critique:

The trouble with this search for [a room of one’s own], as the reader perceives it, is that everyone and everything around Medina becomes the casualty of it. By abandoning her husband Samater for ill-defined reasons, she deprives her daughter Ubax of a father whom she desperately needs to counterbalance her mother’s voracious attention. By fleeing from her own house . . . she leaves Samater to the mercy of his implacable mother Idil . . . [and thus] causes him to deteriorate rapidly. ("Nomads and Feminists: The Novels of Nuruddin Farah 167-168)

Even though Moore’s strong reaction on behalf of Samater is interesting in its own right as an example of how an engaged reading blurs readers’ vision of characters as textual constructions, it ironically affirms Moore’s own concern that “the feminism of Sardines can be, and doubtless will be misconstrued” (172). In the above example, one of the more significant “misconstructions” – the “ill-defined [abandonment]” – proceeds from Moore’s omission of what I have defined as Medina’s most immediate reasons for leaving with her daughter: the threat of circumcision.

Derek Wright, one of Farah’s most prominent critics, appears similarly bothered by the novel’s strong formulation of Medina’s commitments when he argues that she “restructure[s] the world in the light of a few narrow, self-righteous ideological principles” (“Mapping Farah’s Fiction” 105). Although I think Wright misreads Medina, based on an individualist stance similar to Moore’s, Wright’s objection brings attention to the gender imbalance of the critical discussion regarding the “ideological principles” that he – correctly – points out as a strong motivational factor in the novel. What is conspicuously missing in the trilogy’s critical reception is namely similar critiques regarding the male members of the resistance movement. When the members of the resistance movement are indeed criticized, such as in Barbara Turfan’s “Opposing Dictatorship,” her judgment of Medina’s “extremism” is only part of a much longer comment on the resistance movement’s lack of purpose and plan (273).26

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26 This sense of an unequally gendered discussion is reinforced when taking Farah’s wider oeuvre into account, given the several occasions where male characters in Farah’s third trilogy, most significantly Jeebleh from Links and Crossbones, or Malik and Ahlukkhair (Ahl) from Crossbones, could – but are not – discussed in terms of what Wright perceives as Medina’s “compulsive ideologizing” (“Parents and Power in Nuruddin Farah’s Dictatorship Trilogy” 101). The role of the intellectual will be treated further in Chapter Five.
While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to further engage in discussions of critics’ negative assessments, the propensity to read Medina in individualist terms echoes what takes place on the level of character. In one of Sardines’ final scenes Medina gets in a heated discussion with her sister-in-law, Xaddia. In discussing Medina’s political convictions, and especially what Xaddia perceives as a selfish choice to destroy their family, Medina’s inner response captures her exasperation over having to defend her actions once more: “If only Xaddia could understand that I’m fighting for the survival of the woman in me, in her – while demolishing “families” like Idil’s and regimes like the General’s” (Sa 258-259). Although the pointed reference to Xaddia as her, meaning any woman, suggests that Medina’s political struggle is a fight for women’s rights primarily, the reference to families and regimes indicates what the rest of the trilogy emphasizes: Medina as a significant member of the resistance movement.

What is ultimately signified by Farah’s double concern with female forms of precarity and female expressions of resistance, is a serious attempt to reconstruct the social imaginary. Such re-imagination resonates well with what the literary critic Gilbert Doho describes as the “[insertion of] the invisible female in the collective “We” (“We Have Our Voice” 160). Doho claims that the colonial propensity to “create a national narrative based on a void, on emptiness, and on the deliberate erasure of the other” is repeated by the “male historian,” in his “[erasure of] the female freedom fighter, the female nation builder” (160). Although Doho discusses the poetry of the Eritrean author Reesom Haile, his keen observation on the historical and political importance of Haile’s writing is well applicable to Farah’s renderings of female political activists like Medina and Ebla. Indeed, by depicting women’ with national aspirations – in all their human complexity – Farah foregrounds the ethical imperative to include what Cavarero describes as the “necessary other” (Relating Narratives 81). In contrast to Doho, therefore, I suggest that the contributions of authors like Haile or Farah are not only historical and political, but profoundly ethical.

Folded-together Resistance

As argued in the previous section, the resistant subject’s pursuit of justice and dignity is presented both as morally imperative and as an enterprise that consistently moves beyond the individual. In order to grasp the trilogy’s profoundly relational understanding of resistance however, attention need to be paid to the multiple ways in which characters’ stories of the self are presented as inextricably intertwined with that of others. By drawing on

27 For lucid responses to Wright’s critique, see Alden, “New Women and Old Myths: Chinua Achebe’s Anthills of the Savannah and Nuruddin Farah’s Sardines”; and Gagiano, “Farah’s Sardines: Women in a Context of Despotism.”
Sanders (first) etymological definition of complicity as “folded-together-ness (com-plic-it-y) – in human being” (5) in reading instances where resistance takes the form of vindication, advocacy, or care for wounded Others, this section shows that the dignity of the self may never be separated from the dignity of the other.

I wish to begin my exploration of the relational constitution of dignity by turning again to the passage that opened my delineation of ‘Articulable Humanity’ in the Introduction Chapter. Without repeating earlier arguments on how Medina’s reflection on Scheherazade’s storytelling articulates key aspects in Farah’s writing, I would like to return to Medina’s emphasis on the wider significance of attempts to “gain expressive articulable humanity”

Why did Scheherazade spin these thousand and one nights of a tale? Was it simply to save herself from that monstrous authoritarian murderer of a king who would have dispatched her to her creator? Did she in any way gain expressive articulable humanity in the telling of the story nightly? Not only that, but she saved other lives, the lives of those many poor women whom he would surely have killed. (Sa 25)

The quotation is taken from a scene in which Medina uses Scheherazade’s storytelling as a mirror to reflect on her own telling of stories to Ubax. In describing her own stories as “a canopy” stitched from “patches of wordy threads” under which they might “tent to protect themselves from the wicked eyes of the vicious” (Sa 25), Medina reflects a desire to assume a role similar to Scheherazade. Although “the wicked eyes” relate to characters that oppose her decision to leave Samater rather than the regime’s secret service (as my introductory reading would have it), Medina’s literal and figurative use of storytelling invites further reflection. In adherence to my initial trail of thought, Medina’s intertwining of storytelling and protection suggests that the ethical imperative to gain “articulable humanity” hinges on a similar concern with the dignity of the Other.

Reading dignity in relational terms would not seem a particularly controversial perspective to apply in reading any of Farah’s works. For instance, Alden and Tremaine seem to make a similar case when they argue that the ”[political] work of self-definition. . . can take place only through negotiation with a social world shared with other individuals who possess and seek to exercise the same autonomy” (80). However, by defining the goal of this work as "individual autonomy,” Alden and Tremaine fail to address the profoundly relational constitution of subjectivity represented in the trilogy, exemplified by characters like the old freedom-fighter Deeriye in Close Sesame. In describing to his daughter “the thoughts of which I am made,” Deeriye declares that he is “a collage of many notions,” some of which belong to his children, his daughter in law, his wife and his best friend.
For, Deerije continues, “[we] are not only ourselves, we are others too, those whom we love, those who have influenced our lives, who have made us what we are” (CS 231). Not only is the actual integration – and even wilful admission of others into the story of the self – lost when the individual is seen as always striving to attain (and preserve) the right to define the self in terms of autonomy, but characters are repeatedly presented as doing/being far more than merely negotiating their narratives in relation to others.

The lack of means to address Deerije’s constitutive perspective is partly explained by Alden and Tremaine’s essentially political point of departure in Nuruddin Farah. As indicated both in the title to their chapter “The Politics of Autonomy” and their description above of the “[political] work of self-definition,” individual autonomy as “the fundamental value” in Farah’s works (80) is primarily political in conception. The continued use however, of “individual autonomy” in their chapter “Language and the Ethical Imagination” makes it reasonable to discuss the ethical implications further. Adriana Cavarero’s critical estimation of the self-other relation within a liberal framework is useful in this regard:

Within the individualist horizon, the other [is]... someone who is before us and with whom we must establish rules for living together. He or she never embodies the constitutive relationship of our insubstitutable identity. The other is rather someone who is also there and occupies, more or less peacefully, the same territory... Their greatest burden is that they must take account of others – they must negotiate rules, accept limits, make compromises. (Relating Narratives 88)

According to Cavarero, the problem with an individualist understanding, seems to be the reduction of the Other that renders the ethical relation as one of “residing together” rather than “being together” (88). The distinction here between residing and being together is significant, given their different implications. The first version, Cavarero claims, provokes political solutions. The other one evokes ethical response. As I move on to examples where resistance is expressed in acts of advocacy, it is this evocation of ethical response that interests me. How does the ethical imperative to speak out on behalf of another relate to the characters’ sense of being folded-together with the Other?

The duty to speak out against injustice is foregrounded in Sweet and Sour Milk’s portrayal of Loyaan. His enquiry into the violent death of his twin brother Soyaan (a member of the secret resistance movement) is described as entwining their narratives in ways that move beyond twin brotherhood and their shared experience of having grown up in the shadow of a tyrannical father. The beginning of the novel describes Loyaan as “a man of melodramatic scenes, mundanities and lost tempers” in contrast to his twin-
brother Soyaan, “a man of intrigue, rhetoric, polemic and politics” (SSM 14). In spite of his extrovert personality however, Loyaan is also described as a coward – as someone who is afraid to speak his own mind (SSM 25) or who even as an adult does not dare to stop his father from hitting his mother (SSM 21). Descriptions such as these make Loyaan’s later bravery stand out in relief.

Loyaan’s increasing sense of responsibility for the legacy of his dead brother is sharply contrasted with their father Keynaan’s response. Where the father is described as using the story of the murder of his son in order to acquire fame and a high governmental post, Loyaan remains determined to do away with the Government’s claim on his brother as their own martyr and “property” (SSM 106). Their contrasting views on Soyaan’s life and legacy are reflected and reinforced via their different uses of terminology, where “soul” is juxtaposed to “name”. Loyaan repeatedly refers to his father’s collaboration with the Government as a selling of Soyaan’s soul (SSM 231) since “Soyaan’s loyalty didn’t lie with this dictatorship but with ‘the humiliated,’ as he preferred to refer to the common man in this country. It is a fight over his soul” (SSM 75). The term soul is repeated in the scene where Loyaan confronts his father on what he perceives as his betrayal:

‘Have you no dignity... no sense of honour?’
‘Empty words’
‘What do you know of what these words meant to Soyaan?...
It is his soul they are after.’
‘Whose soul?’
‘Soyaan’s of course’ (SSM 90)

Their inability to connect in this conversation is striking, with concepts like “dignity,” “honour” and “soul” being dismissed by Keynaan as either empty words, or simply of no interest. Their different perceptions of what is of value is further reinforced in Keynaan’s use of name: “I make him honourable. I give him life again. A school will be named after him, perhaps a street. He will live longer than you or I. You hold me responsible for his death. I believe I am responsible for the revival of his name. We disagree” (SSM 93). In this context Cavarero’s perception of the self as ‘narratable’ and not ‘narrated’ is significant as a means of differentiating between Loyaan’s and Keynaan’s contending perspectives. As clarified by the translator Paul A. Kottman in his introduction to Cavarero’s work, “[the narratable self] is an existence that has not been reduced to an essence, a ‘who’ that has not been distilled into the ‘what’” (Relating Narratives xii). Keynaan’s reference to his son as a “name,” significantly understood as connected to his father’s name

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28 Keynaan is the same character that Beydan, discussed earlier, is forced to marry after he has tortured her husband to death – as compensation for his loyal service to the government.
and that of the clan, reduces Soyaan into a ‘what’ – a finite narrative product who may be used to collaborate with the regime. Loyaan’s concern with his brother’s soul on the other hand is better defined as an ethical responsibility for the principles, ideals, and commitments, indeed the ‘who’ behind the name. Perceiving the other as ‘who’ rather than ‘what’ (and especially a false one, as Keynaan) is ultimately what distinguishes Loyaan’s ethical response from that of his father.

In order to understand the strength of Loyaan’s moral imperative to convince Soyaan’s secret community that he died “faithful to his principles” (SSM 127), I draw on Sanders’ juxtaposition of advocacy and complicity, which links the duty to speak out on behalf of another with a will or desire not to be complicit in an injustice. “Responsibility,” Sanders argues, thus “emerges from a sense of complicity – not [a] criminal complicity. . ., but the actively assumed complicity of one whose silence could allow their crime to go undiscovered” (5).29 The repeated references to Loyaan’s frustrated concern with the question of what he can do and say to “right this wrong” (SSM 99) suggest a sense of responsibility so strong that it may only proceed from a sense of complicity. This sense is reinforced with Loyaan’s growing involvement with the resistance movement, a turn particularly striking in the light of the novel’s early reference to Soyaan’s suggestion that Loyaan “should avoid politics as should a patient unprescribed drugs” because of his inaptitude (SSM 14).

Loyaan’s radical responsibility for the legacy of his brother makes it reasonable to consider the degree to which acknowledged folded-togetherness may generate ethical responsibility. Are all narratives folded-together? And if so, is responsibility presented as endless in Farah’s fiction? I will respond to these questions by discussing what emerges as a differentiation between ethical and unethical forms of blurred narrative boundaries. The scene where Loyaan’s name and photo wrongly appear in the newspaper article about Soyaan’s “martyr” death (SSM 74) is illustrative in this respect. On one level, the symbolically charged detail of mixed-up photos and names communicates a sense of “substitutionality” – that the murdered person in the photo could have been anyone. As such it reinforces the precariousness of living in an authoritarian state where political purges mean that nobody is safe. On another level, it presages Loyaan’s actual replacement of his brother in the resistance movement, whereby he redeems and continues his brother’s legacy. However, there is also a third level that addresses the issue of being merged into a larger narrative in ways that are not endorsed in Farah’s fiction.

29 As noted by Sanders and others, this perspective is historically traced to Emile Zola, who in his open letter J’accuse during the Dreyfus affair in 1898 writes that “I shall tell the truth… It is my duty to speak up, I do not want to be accomplice” (Zola quoted in Firat, et al. 3).
As mentioned in the Introduction Chapter, the individual’s narrative is often juxtaposed to that of the collective in ways that call into account both individualist and collective understandings of the self. The questioning of boundaries and collective constructions is captured in Medina’s conversation with the Afro-American woman Atta who argues that “[m]y race remembers sufferance. . . . Therefore I am” (Sa 195). Medina responds with a forceful questioning of an identity based primarily on past suffering and racial collective memory, first of all on the basis that the suffering of black people worldwide is not a phenomenon of the past, and secondly because “[o]ne doesn’t remember the pain one is suffering: one lives it” (Sa 195). By focussing on the present tense of individual suffering, as opposed to the past of a collective experience, Medina argues for a narrative based on individual ownership that also engages with the future. This perspective is further conveyed in the comparison between pain and dreams: “No race has a monopoly over pain. . . .This is similar to dreams. There aren’t any collective dreams. Each of us has his or her own dream, each of us suffers in his or her own way” (Sa 196). While the emphasis here is on individual experience, what Farah does is in fact to elevate the concept of the collective, contesting the blurred boundaries of collective identifications, and instead expanding it into the notion of shared humanity. In Medina’s words:

‘You suffer because you are a human being, not because you are who you are, not because you are black. And if it were my own people making others suffer, I would suffer too. . . . It’s not racial. Suffering is human’. (Sa 196)

Ethnicity, (geo)politics, gender, nation or any kind of collective means of identification may in other words not account for the kind of folded-togetherness argued for by Medina in this passage. It is only by claiming that one’s narrative is folded-together with the narratives of any other, that a broader ethical responsibility can be acknowledged and embraced.

This broad understanding of responsibility emanating from acknowledged folded-togetherness is reflected in a second passage on the theme of suffering and pain. If the exchange between Medina and Atta in Sardines is an intellectually heated discussion, the scene from Sweet and Sour Milk is intense because of its graphic portrayal of violence and pain. The scene describes the medical doctor Ahmed-Wellie who, forced by the government to medically examine people after interrogation, tells Loyaan about one of his “patients” – a woman whose face is kept hidden from him. Believing that he might actually know that the woman is connected to the resistance movement, he anxiously begins to medically examine her naked and whip-lashed body. Hindered by the guard’s presence, Ahmed-Wellie is unable to ask anything other than standard medical questions, but the woman’s
breasts, black with torture-inflicted wounds, communicate part of her personal history. Finding out that she is a mother is described as providing Ahmed-Wellie with a sense of relief: she is not the woman he knows. But the relief does not last: “If she wasn’t Mulki... well, she was another, she was another person and had the same right as anybody else. She loved somebody, and somebody must have loved her” (SSM 161). Not only does this realization serve as the scene’s epiphany, but it stands out as a potent example of the ways in which even just a glimpse of the other’s story brings the subject into a position of interrelatedness. The references to body and face are of particular interest here as entries for understanding the kind of ethical responsibility from which the witnessing Ahmed-Wellie may not free himself.

To begin with, faceless suffering (in its figurative and literal sense) acquires a face in Ahmed-Wellie’s encounter with the woman, through a process steeped in paradoxes. Although her face remains hidden from him throughout, her naked body tells a story that in Ahmed-Wellie’s experience moves her from being yet another innocent victim of the regime’s abhorrent tactics, to becoming a unique person with a unique story. This revelation resonates in intriguing ways with Cavarero’s writing on the narratable self in Relating Narratives, related above, but also with Cavarero’s notion of the ethical provocation of the vulnerable, wounded body in Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence

On the scene of horror, the body placed in question is not just a singular body, as every body obviously is; above all, it is a body in which human singularity, concentrating itself at its most expressive point of its own flesh, exposes itself intensely. (15)

Cavarero’s claim that violations of the unique human body bring human dignity into view may seem radical, yet this is precisely what Ahmed-Wellie’s story intimates. Rather than violence and suffering – however repugnant their expressions – it is the revelation of this woman’s dignity that appear to impact him most. But it is also this combined experience of raging violence and insufferable beauty that compels him to respond: “But what could I do for her?” Ahmed-Wellie, asks (SSM 161). If not before, this is the moment in the story where frustration and hopelessness can be felt. His apparent difficulties in dealing with his lack of means to respond to the responsibility evoked in his encounter with the woman is reflected in how he interrupts his story abruptly with the words, “The ethics-syndrome again,” as if to create a mental distance between himself and the memories of the woman. In a reflection that covers several lines, Ahmed-Wellie rambles incoherently about which other doctors might or might not countersign a prescription for
“the best medicine there is,” before he returns to telling how he continues to examine her, soon after which he is blindfolded and taken back to his home. This is a significant example of the way that exposure to the precariously framed story of the other brings the self into a position of human folded-ness. When both told and listened to, it demands the very broad version of responsibility delineated above, but it is also a powerful illustration of just how heavy the burden of responsibility can be when enacted in characters’ responses to the evocations of human folded-togetherness. Freedom, ultimately, is more often than not articulated in terms of “un-freedom,” where the other’s vulnerability brings the self into a position of almost non-negotiable responsibility. Ultimately, preserving the dignity of the self may never be separated from preserving the dignity of the Other in Farah’s first trilogy.

**Contaminated Resistance**

It may seem as if the previous section on human folded-togetherness, responsibility and advocacy has removed the discussion from what must reasonably be part of any discussion on complicity: its ethically more problematic expressions. However, as will be argued in this section, understanding Farah’s representations of more problematic aspects of complicity is only possible against the background of complicity defined as folded-togetherness. In turning to complicity in its negative forms, I draw on Sanders’ second definition of complicity as interrelated resistance and collaboration (x) as a means of exploring what emerges as the inescapable contamination of all forms of resistance. This is reflected in the Dictatorship trilogy’s renderings of characters perceived as traitors and collaborators by the resistance movement, as well as the representations of what Deeriye in Close Sesame refers to as 'the enemy within'.

**Traitors and Collaborators**

The resistance movement’s rigid friend-or-foe distinctions are, for obvious reasons, presented as a matter of survival (literally and figuratively). In the words of the protagonist of *Close Sesame*, the old freedom fighter Deeriye, “[w]e cannot afford to harbour traitors, withdrawers at the last minute, non-finishers of projects begun and non-deliverers of promises made” (*CS* 217). In discussing what he perceives as characters’ confidence in the goodness of their cause, Reed Way Dasenbrock suggests that there is “an enormous psychic dividing line . . . between those [characters] who represent the problem and those who represent the solution” (“Nuruddin Farah: A Tale of Two Trilogies” 52-53). Although I am largely in agreement with Dasenbrock’s observations, it remains crucial that the responses of these
characters be differentiated from the implied author’s cues to more complex understandings, one involving concepts of choice and moral dilemmas, especially as illustrated by the trilogy’s minor characters.

A first significant example of the implied author’s invitation to alternative perspectives is found with Medina’s husband Samater. A minor character in *Sardines*, he is mainly described in relation to Medina’s unbending (and at times problematic) commitment to her principles, but he makes a brief appearance already in the trilogy’s opening novel *Sweet and Sour Milk*, where Loyaan is looking for “appellatives” stronger “bastard”: “a designation pregnant with generic contempt and universal hate. Traitor. Inhumane. Something like that, an adjective fat with ambiguity” (*SSM* 236). If it were only for Loyaan’s call for the strongest of terms to be used, the reader would probably be inclined to judge Samater equally hard, based on a combination of Loyaan’s privileged position as protagonist and Samater’s lack of voice in the novel. In *Sardines*, however, Samater maintains a similarly quiet position in relation to Medina, but our perspective of him will vary depending on how we respond to the implied author’s intervention of letting the (neutral) narrator tell Samater’s story. The first scenario is that we follow the lead of Medina, much in the same way as in the preceding example with Loyaan, in which case we are likely to describe Samater in terms of weakness, cowardice and/or co-dependency on his mother Idil. The second scenario is that we, possibly guided by a dislike for Medina, focus on the narrator’s references to the difficulties of Samater’s choice. Portrayed as a man left with only bad choices, Samater begins as a member of the resistance movement, but reluctantly allows his subversive narrative to be silenced when he (blackmailed by the government via open threats against his clan) accepts a cabinet position. Clearly torn between his loyalties towards his clan and his mother on the one hand, and his wife and the resistance movement on the other, he eventually resigns only to be jailed and put through torture. There is a third scenario however, which in my view is more faithful to the text’s own rhetoric, where the dilemmas and difficulties of both Medina and Samater are taken into account simultaneously. Such a reading demands that the precarious context(s) described earlier remain firmly in view, especially the regime’s virtual eradication of choice, but also that we retain the perspectives delineated in my previous discussion of complicity as folded-together-ness.

Complicity in both its definitions – as folded-together and as contaminated – is particularly well illustrated in the trilogy’s rendering of the alleged traitor Ahmed-Wellie, whose forced service of the Security I have already mentioned. I say alleged, because neither of the novels provide

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30 Moore’s “Nomad and Feminists,” discussed in the section on gendered resistance, provides an illustrative example of this second approach, as made clear, for example, in Moore’s (over)reading of how “Samater loves Medina deeply,” a perspective for which there is no textual evidence.
information regarding how, when or on what grounds Ahmed-Wellie betrays the cause of the resistance movement. As a matter of fact, there is no textual evidence at all regarding his status as an actual traitor other than references to Loyaan’s suspicions in *Sweet and Sour Milk* (162, 229) and the definite label “traitor” provided in Medina’s “casualty listings” in *Sardines* regarding the resistance movement (9). In the absence of a narrator, the only clue provided regarding this gap in the narrative is therefore Ahmed-Wellie’s own version of his interactions with the regime.

In the first of several scenes in *Sweet and Sour Milk* where Ahmed-Wellie relates his experiences of being taken away by the Security, he reflects on the moral dilemma entailed in caring for the victims of the regime – on the terms of the regime. He contends that his moral dilemma lies in whether or not he should perform “his civic duty” as a medical doctor, and not “whether I should prove to myself and those bullies from the Security that I had principle, that I was a man of dignity, et cetera” (*SSM* 37). The use of “et cetera” indicates that Ahmed-Wellie’s relation to concepts like “principle” and “dignity” is, if not more relaxed than that conveyed by other members of the movement, at least more pragmatic. As argued in the previous section, this does not exclude a very real concern with what Ahmed-Wellie repeatedly refers to as “the ethics-syndrome” (*SSM* 161). His actions however, are not as clearly ideologically motivated as that of other members, but revolve around a desire to alleviate suffering. He is therefore presented as “glad” to be chosen by the Security because he believes that, contrary to “those irresponsible” and “politically unaware” doctors (*SSM* 162), he might actually make a difference:

‘I consider it symbolic: that I wash the blood they shed; that I bandage the sores they open; that I nurse the wounds they inflict upon the innocent; that I cure those whom they make sick; that I end a chapter of pain which they start; that I close the hole they dig; that I mend the bones they break; and that I am the hope they do not promise’. (*SSM* 163)

The responsibility that proceeds from witnessing the “horrorism” of the Regime appears to eclipse all other (and earlier?) commitments. A political creed focused solely on mitigating the suffering of the other does not suffice in the larger political scheme however, and Felix Mnthali goes so far as to pronounce Ahmed-Wellie’s position as one “most likely to play into the hands of any repressive regime,” because by “choosing to ameliorate the wounds of repression Ahmed-Wellie is conceding to the regime the initiative for change” (“Autocracy and the Limits of Identity” 185-186). I agree with Mnthali regarding the political inefficiency of Ahmed-Wellie’s ethical stance. Certainly, in arguing that it is “while collaborating that strategies can be
studied” (SSM 162), Ahmed-Wellie is shown to overestimate both the revolutionary capacity of the collaborator and his own ability to escape the ruthless efficiency of the secret service. In contrast to Mnthali however, I do not read Ahmed-Wellie’s small gestures of kindness as futile “ameliorations,” however ephemeral the relief they offer, and certainly not as examples of how Farah’s “acknowledge[s] his intellectuals’ shortcomings” (Mnthali 185). What they represent is rather the ethically most viable positioning of a character faced with no real choice.

What I have offered here is one tentative reading of Ahmed-Wellie’s own account, an account whose validity cannot be proved given the narrator’s lack of judgment, as well as the gaps in the novels’ wider rendering of his story. A resolution regarding Ahmed-Wellie’s complicity with the workings of the regime is of secondary importance, however. Whatever its expression, complicity troubles binary conceptualizations of resistance, inviting the reader to reflect on the question posed by Close Sesame’s aged freedom-fighter Deeriye: ”What makes traitors betray?” (90). The stories of Ahmed-Wellie and Samater suggest that complicity in its negative forms is a conundrum of intersections between human fragility, moral dilemmas, and the contaminations of power. The trilogy’s lack of clearly defined answers to this question is however central in this context: as indicated by the lack of closure in Ahmed-Wellie’s case, the ethical complexity of Deeriye’s question demands that the question be kept alive.

**The ‘Enemy Within’**

The stories of Samater and Ahmed-Wellie, discussed in the previous section, suggest that complicity in its negative forms is a matter of scale, rather than the either-or perspective postulated in binary framings of resistance. The reasons for the resistance movement’s rigid boundaries are evident, but from an ethical perspective, if complicity takes place on a scale, where does one draw the line? At what point does resistance turn into collaboration? In this section I will argue that Farah’s solution is to not to draw a line, but instead to sharpen his account of responsibility via representations of what Deeriye in Close Sesame describes as ‘the enemy within’ (CS 166). Rather than engaging in reflection on the ethical implications of fighting tyranny with “counter-tyranny” (CS 117), this term refers to complicity in its subllest forms: the risk of exercising the very same forms of authoritarianism and violence – if only on a smaller scale – that one seeks to subvert and defeat in the political realm.

The trilogy’s clearest definitions of ‘the enemy within’ is found in Close Sesame, where Deeriye describes immanent tyranny as “the enemy ... within: a cankerous tumour” (CS 166). His reflection accentuates the trilogy’s concern not only with the socio-political reality of dictatorship in general and
the Somali experience in particular, but with the nature of power, and particularly what Florence Stratton identifies as each individual’s “propensity to misuse whatever power is invested in him” ("The Novels of Nuruddin Farah” 154). Deeriye’s reference to immanent tyranny as a spreading disease with deadly implications contrasts with his daughters’ understanding of the ‘enemy within,’ as articulated in the question posed to her father of whether he would not inevitably become a dictator if he were head of state (CS 94). The subtle difference between their descriptions is significant. Although Deeriye’s daughter seems to acknowledge a potential for authoritarianism in anyone (even in a father cast as anything but authoritarian), she addresses the effects of power in future-oriented terms, as something external, related to the power-structures of the regime. Deeriye, on the other hand, acknowledges the here-and-now of an always contaminated resistance, indeed, his very embeddedness in the structures resisted.

Deeriye’s active affirmation of a (present) complicity with the forces resisted, as opposed to a potential for (future) complicity, constitutes one of the trilogy’s sharpest accounts of responsibility and resistance. There are clear resonances here between Farah’s account of ‘the enemy within’ and the references to ‘the little perpetrator’ found in the post-apartheid South African Truth Commission’s report. Sanders’ glossing is again useful. By quoting the Truth and Reconciliation Report’s emphasis on the need to “recognize ‘the little perpetrator’ in each of us” for “it is only by recognizing the potential for evil in each of us that we can take full responsibility for ensuring that such evil will never be repeated” (quoted in Sanders 3), Sanders is able to show its clear linking of responsibility with complicity. The heightening of moral responsibility conveyed in the report is expressed in what Sanders’ notes as a “[paradoxical] . . . active [affirmation of] a complicity or potential complicity, in the ‘outrageous deeds’ of others. Once cultivated, this sense of responsibility would, in the best of possible worlds, make one act to stop or prevent those deeds” (3-4).

This heightening of moral responsibility clearly shows in Deeriye’s responses, and makes him a guiding moral conscience in Close Sesame. Widely held as one of Farah’s most sympathetic characters, critics have however often focused on Deeriye’s departure from stereotypical images of the patriarch (Dasenbrock, 52; Malak 47).

31 There are, as Sanders notes, echoes of Hanna Arendt’s notion of ‘the banality of evil’ in the Truth and Reconciliation Report’s framing of ‘the little perpetrator.’ A similar kind of reasoning is also found in Slavoj Zizek’s philosophical work, Violence: Six Sideways Reflections (2008), where he argues that “our subjective outrage at the facts of violence – ‘crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict’ – blinds us to the objective violence of the world, a violence where we are perpetrators and not just innocent bystanders (1).

32 Close Sesame depicts Deeriye as loving and considerate, an aging and bed-ridden man who, rather than reminiscence about his former days of glory within the national liberation movement, spends his days saying his prayers, longing for his diseased wife and regretting the many absences from his children in years gone by.
both as a national hero and as a father certainly supports such perspectives, I suggest that the power of his representation derives from his function within the novel (and the trilogy) as an embodiment of radical responsibility.

The primary site for Farah’s explorations of the ‘enemy within’ is the family. As has been widely noted, the Dictatorship trilogy traces the links between domestic and political forms of power relations (see for instance, Alden “New Women and Old Myths,” and Wright, Nuruddin Farah), but Farah’s interest in the family applies more generally to his works, as demonstrated in my discussion of adoptive relations in Chapter Three.

A prime example of how power and resistance is negotiated within the family is the relationship between Medina and her eight-year old daughter Ubax. By relocating homes Medina is portrayed as able to present her daughter with alternative narratives to both the tradition represented by her mother-in-law, Idil, and the political narratives of the regime taught in school. Her authority in Ubax’ life is however presented as highly complex since the resistance that Medina was unable to exercise in the public sphere is compensated for in the private sphere – only with a young daughter. In a situation similar to that of Deeriye and his daughter, the young Ebla asks Medina: “Mother-as-martyr or mother-as-the-all-knower. In the final analysis, what is the difference between yourself [and] Idil...?” (Sa 55). At the heart of Ebla’s conflation of authoritarianisms lies the conception of contaminated resistance, suggesting that other characters perceive Medina’s actions as reflective of a more serious form of authority than conveyed in Alden and Tremaine’s description of “the [temptation] to dominate” (108). A similar concern is namely expressed in Medina’s father’s cautioning, that she provide Ubax “enough room. . . to exercise her growing mind. You mustn’t indoctrinate, mustn’t brainwash her. Otherwise you become another dictator, trying to shape your child in your own image” (Sa 15-16). This example of demand for respect of the other – any other, not least, a child – is symptomatic for Farah. It means that although Medina’s attempts to save her daughter physically and intellectually are presented as both necessary and commendable in the larger scheme of the novel, Medina is simultaneously portrayed as under an obligation to be wary of the ethical implications of exercising her authority.

Respect for the Other is presented as predicated on characters’ ability for ethical self-reflection. This means that although Farah depicts Medina as a woman who needs to be made aware (by other characters) of the complicit aspects of resistance, there are also significant moments of self-revelation as reflected in her worry that “an overreaction to Idil’s tyrannical behaviour could influence her adversely, make her harsher towards herself, unfair to Samater, and obsessive about Ubax” (Sa 7). Not only is complicity in reacting
to “tyrannical behaviour” clearly articulated as affecting Medina’s closest relations expressed in unfairness and/or smothering love, but resistance and complicity also risk generating a harshness directed at Medina’s own self. It is as if unexamined resistance leads to “overreactions” that ethically violate both self and Other. Self-reflection is never presented as a protection in the trilogy, however. No matter the level of self-reflexivity, the resistant characters’ remain at risk of reproducing the power structures in which they will always be embedded.

Ultimately, it is the combination of understanding the contagious nature of violence and of acknowledging one’s own complicity that demarcates ethically responsible resistance from its counterparts. More often than not, such responses seem to result in resistance that appears all but effective in a political scheme, as reflected in Loyaan’s promise to his sister, not to resort to violence: “I will do nothing. I see. I wait. But while I see and wait, I also plot, struggle, wriggle, fight. . .” (SSM 212). Nevertheless, resistance is no resistance worth the name if it means “parting with one’s composure. . . the composure which defines a person” (SSM 195).

**Resistant Narrative Strategies**

Thus far, this chapter has focussed on how the *Dictatorship* trilogy’s representations of what is being fought for – the dignity of the Self – consistently moves beyond a political rhetoric predicated on strength and resolved commitments. What emerges from these readings is instead an ethics irrevocably concerned with responsibility for the dignity of the Other where acts of resistance certainly reflect the greatness of human love and resilience, but in ways that also leave room for the seemingly fickle and feeble. The remainder of this chapter will engage with the role of the author, as manifested both rhetorically, within the novels, and as expressed in previous critical reception.

Although the trilogy’s “labyrinthine narrative structures” (Wright xvii) have attracted wide scholarly attention (some of which has significantly contributed to the exploration of features such as those that will be discussed in this section), no real attention has been paid to the challenges that an author faces in writing a trilogy dealing with the complexities of resistance and complicity. Discussions about the trilogy’s narrative strategies have instead tended to either revolve around affinities and divergences from particular genres or literary traditions (postmodern literature, Wright “Introduction”; African feminist fiction, Alden “New Women and Old Myths”), or been concerned with finding the works’ true meaning (not seldom drawing on interviews with Farah). Not only does the first mode of reading run the risk of ending up in restricting analyses of where to “place” certain fiction, which seems a fairly futile project given the wide range and
mixture of narrative styles and strategies employed in Farah’s wider oeuvre, as later chapters of this thesis will show, but it also fails to capture the complexity of the trilogy’s representations of resistance. Whereas the second approach to Farah’s use of narrative strategies admits the link between author and literary product I discuss in this section, its preoccupation with authorial intention often leads to both hasty and speculative conclusions, not seldom reflecting the individual reader’s anticipations that a text should stage a certain politics. In contrast to such readings – and by taking the ethical moments of the told, the telling, writing, and reading into account – this chapter’s closing discussion focusses on questions related to the ethical implications of representing the contagious nature of power and authoritarianism: How to write in such a way as to allow for the reader to interrogate, debate, and even contest those very versions? How does ambiguity, residing contradictions, and open-endedness contribute to the novel’s interrogations of power? How do the reader’s ethical and political expectations guide his/her reading? How may Farah’s refusal to dictate the reader’s interpretation be perceived of as ethically responsible?

In exploring the author’s role as constructor of a fictional world I wish to begin in Farah’s use of the act of storytelling as a means to explore issues of authority and power. In doing so I focus on what may be perceived of as a contrastive foil to Farah’s own act of writing: the ethical complexities staged in Sardines’ dramatization of Medina’s storytelling.

On one level the portrayal of Medina’s translation and reading of world classics to her eight-year-old daughter Ubax echoes my previous discussion of the ethical imperative to narrate self – as a means to “gain expressive, articulable humanity” (Sa 25). Deprived of the right to speak her mind in public discourse (Medina’s refusal as editor to publish the speeches of the General has banned her from publishing her writing), these instances of storytelling become the means of voicing both her critique of the government and articulating her own experience as a woman and intellectual in a patriarchal and politically oppressive Somalia. This becomes particularly evident in Medina’s translation of The Book of One Thousand and One Nights, referred to earlier where her reading, as we have seen, clearly translates the act, the content, the context, and the aim of Scheherazade’s storytelling (saving others).

However, when reading Medina’s translation/storytelling act as echoing Scheherazade’s education of the king in moral matters, storytelling becomes ethically more complex. This complexity is already reflected in the conflation of audience – a “monstrous authoritarian murderer of a king” (Sa 25) – with Medina’s own daughter. Both versions of storytelling reflect the narrator’s position as a position of power and agency, highlighting the complicity at work when storytelling is in any sense used as either a means of resistance (the informative function Medina could not provide within her former job as
an editor, she can at least provide in educating her daughter) or as a means of protection. In telling her daughter stories, Medina displaces the stories heard elsewhere in society. For example, Ubax is not allowed to go to school where they teach “nothing but songs of sycophancy and the praise names of the General” (Sa 14); neither is she allowed to play with other children for fear they might ruin her language. In addition to protecting Ubax, storytelling is clearly portrayed as a means of hiding and escape for Medina herself. To begin with, it is a way to avoid her daughter’s queries, as reflected in Medina’s self-reflexive question, “why did she always tell Ubax tales whenever the two were alone and the little one was about to ask a difficult question like ‘Why did you and Father part?’” (Sa 25). Moreover, the world of stories is to Medina a place to hide from the outside world, where Medina “stitch[es] for Ubax of wordy threads a canopy under which the two would tent to protect themselves from the wicked eyes of the vicious, the evil tongues of the mean and the gossipy, the envious lot” (Sa 25). Read separately these aspects of storytelling may not seem very controversial. However, when several functions merge in this way – storytelling as pedagogical tool, act of resistance, means of protection, and site of refuge – the act of narration comes dangerously close to becoming an instrument of isolation and control, rather than a means towards expanding Ubax’ understanding and capacity to negotiate difficult matters of politics, gender issues and ethics in general.

This isolational aspect is reinforced in portrayals of Medina’s storytelling as an isolated, self-contained act, where stories are described as finished products served “like hot maize-cakes from the oven... nice, round and perfectly browned” (Sa 4). Just as stories divert Ubax’s questions about her father, Medina’s storytelling in general does not allow for Ubax’s questions or perspectives. Significantly, this does not mean that Ubax’s stories are silenced on a higher narrative level; instead she is depicted as moving beyond the translations of her mother in ways reminiscent of Medina’s own acts of resistance through translation/narration. This emancipatory aspect of storytelling is conveyed in a passage describing Ubax listening to her mother’s translation/adaptation of a folktale from Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart. Instead of focusing on her mother’s “concentrated” rendering of “the details, the incidents which gave life to the Igbo story,” Ubax is portrayed as formulating her own story when she – while contemplating an eagle’s “purposeful” ascension into the heavens – asks herself, “Could she draw that? . . . . Could she capture that? . . . . Could she?” (Sa 25-26). The metaphorical separation between mother and daughter indicated in Ubax finding her own artistic expression through drawing as opposed to written-verbal expression is broadened in the sentence following immediately after: “Whereas in Medina’s mind the world was reduced to a room” (Sa 25-26). The contrast between an open sky and a room implies that rather than
letting her imagination be reduced to the room imagined by her mother, Ubax is portrayed as capable of shaping both form and content into “stories” of her own. Even though this passage from Sardines may be perceived of as opening for a reading in which Medina’s translations/stories as emancipatory in their emphasis on female agency and resistance – an act by which translation becomes what Maria Tymoczko describes as a “[m]eans of subversion and emancipation” (155) – the overt lack of mother-daughter exchange places the focus on Ubax’ imaginary abilities rather than Medina’s role-modelling. Ultimately, Medina’s storytelling, oblivious to the interpretations of her daughter, takes the form of one-way communication, producing stories that become a self-contained, closed system, thus preventing Medina’s dialogue with the surrounding world – including her daughter.

The isolated and isolating features of Medina’s storytelling serve as a foil to the narrative style employed by Farah. In fact, the trilogy as a whole is instead markedly open in the way it is narrated, an openness that takes several forms. The atmosphere permeating the trilogy is a sense of ominous unknowingness, confusion and suspicion, where the workings of tyranny make it impossible to know who to trust, and how to interpret all the (mis)information of the regime. Significantly, this elusiveness is not limited to the level of the novels’ characters, but applies equally to the reader. Similarly to the characters who decipher what is said, not said, and/or implied, the reader is left groping for answers, much in the same way as when reading a detective story or a political thriller. This openness also takes the form of limited or delayed information regarding the trilogy’s partly overlapping ensemble of characters, where information regarding the members of the resistance movement may be provided in one or both of the other novels in the trilogy. Such information may, as we have already seen in the previous discussion of Ahmed-Wellie and Samater, bring significant and new perspectives on characters, but is equally important as a means of alerting the reader to the extreme precariousness of resistance, as Farah “shocks his reader into an acute awareness of the brutal nature of the General’s regime” (Stratton 138). The recurrent listings of the fates of the resistance movement members, such as the one that introduced this chapter, is pivotal in this sense.33

33 Other listings include, by order of appearance: “[Medina] crossed out the names of Soyaan (dead), Loyaan (forced into exile), Koschin (in prison), Siciliano (in prison), Dr Ahmed Wellie (traitor)” (Sa 9); “So Soyaan is dead? And nobody knows what has become of Loyaan? Someone saw him briefly in Rome in the back seat of an embassy car. He looked ill, this person said, and his cheeks were puffed up. The others are in prison; so is Siciliano; Koschin is broken and foams at the mouth, you say, unable to hold his saliva. And Samater is Minister of constructions” (Sa 24); “With Soyaan dead and Loyaan exiled; Koschin reduced to a vegetable; Samater in detention; with Mahad mysteriously held in one of those underground prisons, perhaps the same prison where Ibrahim Siciliano was being kept; with Mukhtaar killed; Mursal vanished and Jibriil” (CS 200). Farah’s use of these listings is immensely powerful as a means of conveying the extreme context(s) within which the resistance movement’s members operate, especially as reinforced by the matter-of-fact tone.
It is however in the trilogy’s *departure* from the detective story or political thriller that the most important example of “openness” is found. Examples of closures expected but not provided are found in *Sweet and Sour Milk* where the details and motives surrounding Soyaan’s death are never made explicit; neither are the circumstances surrounding the fates of the resistance movement members Mursal and Mukhtaar in *Close Sesame*. Although numerous literary critics have pointed out the fact that most questions are left unanswered, an expression of what Wright refers to as “the narrative’s refusal to clarify” (354) these narrative features have not been satisfactorily explored in relation to Farah’s abiding concern with themes of resistance to authority and tyranny.

Having said that, Ian Adam’s reading of *Sweet and Sour Milk* in relation to the detective genre does offer an opening for addressing the ways in which Farah’s lack of closure seems a deliberate authorial positioning following from, and undergirding, the trilogy’s thematic treatment of resistance. Farah’s fiction, Adam argues, goes against the grain of the classical detective story, in which “the journey ends with the illuminating order of truth: the labyrinth is mapped, signs direct you away from the wrong turn and blocked exit; deceitfulness is unmasked and mystery unveiled: from multiple possibilities, polygraphy of meaning, emerges meaning single and definitive” (342). Adam’s reference to an “ended journey,” to “truth,” and a “single and definitive” meaning is particularly significant, as it so clearly captures what is denied the reader of the trilogy. Instead of offering a sense of control and a sense of safe arrival, the trilogy leaves the reader in much the same position as the fictional characters: not knowing, but “left to grope and infer” (Bardolph 405). This scepticism and rejection of final answers may be discussed in relation to postmodern stylistics (Wright “Mapping Farah’s Fiction: the Postmodern Landscapes”), but more significantly, it speaks of the consistency with which Farah’s literary project of portraying resistance and tyranny is carried out. This is where Adam’s greatest contribution to my discussion of the author’s complicity lies. Even though Adam’s discussion of “an ethical principle [mistrusting] egocentric tyrannies” (343) is not explicated in terms of author or reader, but focuses on what occurs on a purely intratextual level, his observations raise concerns that are also applicable to my discussion of the author’s role:

The notion of a single superb deductive intelligence implied in the figure of the traditional detective... with all the answers, comes rather too close to the belief in one leader, one rescuer that the novel opposes. Against such authoritarianism it clearly sets the notion of collective activity, of collaboration and consensus.” (Adam 343)
Although this quotation refers to intratextual resolutions, such as the work of Loyaan and the resistance movement, Adam’s reference to a single superb intelligence and collective activity also matches what occurs on the level of reader-text encounter. Read from this perspective, the trilogy’s relative lack of closure points towards, on the one hand, Farah’s negotiation and contestation of his own power position as narrator, and, on the other hand, a narratively constructed invitation to “collective activity” and “collaboration” with the reader in interpretation, as the numerous plausible interpretations to be discussed now, is evidence of.

The openness and the dialogue thus engendered are brought a step further in a final area of non-closure: the residing ambivalences and contradictions pervading the trilogy. Not only are questions posed that are left unanswered by the time the novels end, but at times there are several versions of the same incident, “none of which is attested or refuted within the text” (Bardolph 405), which means that crucial moments are left “impossible to decipher” (Gorlier 421). The existence of, for instance the double ending in Close Sesame, is one such example of where the reader is left uncertain of the actual events. The protagonist Deeryie is killed in what seems to be an attempt on the life of the General, but based on his long-time commitment to non-violent activism against tyrannical regimes, the reader is left wondering if this is really his intention. Interpretation is obstructed by the fact that neither of the two quite different versions are clear even as versions on their own – and yet the wide range of interpretations exhibited in critics’ responses to the final pages speak of a sense in which readers do feel invited to produce (at times surprisingly clear-cut) readings. Interpretations range from Deeryie clearly avenging his son (Turfan 269), to Deeryie having changed his political opinion from one advocating non-violence into one that rationalizes the assassination of the leader (Schraeder 206, Hawley 76), to Deeryie opting for martyrdom to his cause (of non-violent resistance), not his son’s (Pajalich 316). Whereas my own inclination would be to emphasize Deeryie’s negotiation of complicity regarding his son’s regime-oppositional activities, further complicated because of his negotiation of the many years of absence in his children’s life, and read against the background of a lifelong commitment to non-violent activism, the fact remains: Deeryie’s ultimate choice and actual death remain open questions. My point here is however not to argue for this or that positioning, but to emphasize that the

34 One example of Deeryie’s acknowledged complicity is found in his interior monologue regarding “true knowledge” concerning his son’s activities: “Indeed it was he who didn’t really want to know, lest the weight of this knowledge lay a heavier responsibility on his conscience” (CS 189-190).

35 Although Deeryie claims that whatever he might do is done “not to avenge his son but to vindicate justice” (CS 218), Deeryie’s vindication of justice could potentially entail a pragmatic response to his son’s fate as a way of rewriting a narrative of absence in his children’s life. Having said that, Deeryie’s history of non-violent resistance suggest that Mnthali seems to drive his claim too far when he argues that Deeryie asserting his identity as father draws him into the plans of his son (CS 188-189). Again, there is simply no way of knowing.
m motives and object of Deeriye’s reiterated and central claim to “vindicate justice” (CS 180) remain open to interpretation and dialogue. I am in other words more concerned with the function than the hermeneutics of the double ending. Wright’s observations concerning the effect of the double-ending is partly compatible with my argument that the text invites the reader’s engagement: the double ending does produce both “a fertile polyvalency of meaning” and “an impenetrable aporia in which rival... options cancel each other out” (118), although Wright perceives it as an either-or situation. Ultimately, the text’s meaning(s) seem subordinate in relation to the productive tension created by uncertainty, contradictions, and possible interpretations.

Not only do the trilogy’s unresolved questions, ambivalences and contradictions underscore the impression that resistance may not be read in black-and-white terms, but it is via these narrative strategies that Farah moves beyond more conventional forms of political allegorizing towards a deeper engagement with underlying ethical concerns. The implications of this move might explain why the ambivalent features of the trilogy have been regarded as problematic, especially in early reception of the trilogy: political texts imply final resolutions of the kind that Farah’s ethico-political writing will not provide. Barbara Turfan, for instance, argues that it is in the ambivalences of interpretation that Farah’s main weakness lies. While Turfan sees Farah’s writing as thought-provoking beyond what “the subject matter might initially suggest,” she is doubtful regarding “the underlying aims” of the trilogy, concluding that “he cannot be putting over his message sufficiently clearly if the reader remains uncertain as to what that message actually is” (280). Turfan’s concern is echoed in Kirsten Holst Peterson’s contention that Farah’s style “suffers from [the flaw] of indecision” (247) where the fact that the novels are “not concluded, but simply fade out mid-plot, leaving the reader as bewildered as the characters,” speak of “the characters’ (and perhaps the author’s) inability or unwillingness to commit themselves to a final point” (244). Although Holst Peterson’s essay discusses Farah’s early novels From a Crooked Rib (1970), A Naked Needle (1976) and Sweet and Sour Milk (1979), and not the first trilogy per se, her criticism conveys the kind of concerns I perceive as reactions to Farah’s ethico-political writing. Should not a politically committed author be clearer in communicating his political views?

At the heart of objections such as those articulated by Turfan and Holst Peterson lies the larger issue of readers’ expectations. If approached as a manifesto or statement of political commitments (that is, a tangible message to relate to), the trilogy will undoubtedly confuse the reader (beyond the uncertainty presented on an intratextual level). Moving beyond reductive readings of Farah’s trilogy demands an awareness of the many pre-existing expectations – the reader’s own narratives as it were – that go into forming
the text-reader encounter. What is also built into (political) readings of political texts is the reader's temptation of wanting the text to perform a certain politics, which means, put bluntly, that what is there may not be what the reader hoped to find. Mnthali captures this tension when he argues for the importance of “distinguishing the novelist’s General from that of historians and social scientists as failure to do so has often resulted in reviewers and critics insisting on reading or wanting to write books which they feel Farah should have written” (176). Even though Mnthali is specifically referring to the trilogy’s portrayal of autocracy, his observations may well be applied in a general discussion of political readings. The hesitations regarding Farah’s ambivalence are namely not limited to early critical reception. Later discussions of especially Sardines’ Medina echo this tension, as reflected in Wright’s concern that “so much of the narrative is presented from the perspective of this intransigent idealism and coloured by Medina’s priggish self-righteousness that these... come to have a ring of doctoral finality and authorial approval” (quoted in Alden 360). Not only does this reading of Medina exemplify what I have previously discussed as a polarized and simplistic debate, but it highlights the desire for the texts to perform a certain politics. Clearly Wright acknowledges and values Farah’s ambivalent features (hence the concerned tone conveyed in expressions like “doctoral finality” and “authorial approval”) and yet his reading stops short of embracing the fullness of what this ambivalence produces in the trilogy – the forming of a space into which the reader is invited to reflect, interpret, and critique. This invitation is instead formulated well in Alden’s response to Wright’s critique, when she argues that while Medina’s political understanding is “authorially underwritten,” her life choices, “in light of that understanding, is open to criticism and interpretation” (369). The value placed on what Alden identifies as “criticism and interpretation” is so prominent in Farah’s writing that even if Medina (as Wright suggests) would pose a challenge to the trilogy’s overall portrayal of resistance, it is worth the risk of misinterpretation. Besides, a correct version seems both impossible to pinpoint given Farah’s “multiple” and “discordant perspectives” (370) and irrelevant to Farah’s larger project of providing “critical perspectives on salient contradictions” refusing to “foreclose prematurely the conflict they engender” (370). While largely in agreement with Alden’s keen observations regarding productive uses of multiple, discordant perspectives and salient contradictions, I would contest her implication regarding the eventual resolution of these conflicts. Indeed, my readings suggest that it is in the novel’s prevailing lack of resolution that new opportunities for ethico-political debate are found. Only in the author’s allowance of what may be perceived as textual dissonances may “conflicts” lead to new productive ways of engaging with the text.
Farah’s unwillingness to “own truth” or interfere with the reader’s interpretation implies an ethics of writing premised on trusting the reader – on handing over, as it were, hermeneutic responsibility. He thus refuses complicity with the role of a patriarch with a finalized world-view over-ruling that of others, such as depicted in the charged scene where the tyrannical father in Sweet and Sour Milk, Keynaan, tears his twin sons’ rubber ball in two, “the rubber ball upon which the twins had drawn a complete and an illustrated mini-atlas. A world with no frontiers. A world of their own fantasies” (SSM 131). In this sense, Farah never yields to iconoclasm, however strong his contestations of dehumanizing tyranny, but remains respectful of the “rubber-ball” of the reader, while simultaneously offering alternative ways of perceiving the world. Such respectfulness is, in view of this chapter’s focus on how resistance is reframed so that violence no longer dominates the view, one of the most important aspects of Farah’s writing. Rather than assuming one authorial interpretation, the reader is ultimately invited to do like Ubax – dream beyond the stories offered by Medina.

What emerges from the readings of resistance in this chapter is ultimately a precarious kind of resistance far removed from what is commonly connoted with regime-subversive criticism/activism: moral certainties, unwavering commitments – indeed, strength and power. Indeed, Farah’s meticulous delineation of the precarity faced by everyone (let alone, characters’ engaged in subversive activities) implies an interest in depicting characters’ precarious attempts to protect and preserve human dignity also within extremely limited parameters, rather than provide boisterous accounts of individual freedom or political success. That is, although moral conviction and dedication is widely illustrated in the Dictatorship trilogy, as we have seen, Farah’s rendering of resistance is capacious enough to also allow for the uncertain, ambivalent, modest and even unheroic. As underlined by Farah’s use of narrative strategies, real beauty and strength is not located in the fully articulated and absolute, but in the many precarious attempts to guard, protect, and even restore the dignity of the Other – in the face of insurmountable difficulties.
Chapter Three

‘Certainties’ and ‘Notional Truths’

Adoptive Relations in Maps and Secrets

Child soldiers with missing parents, foundlings found in waste bins, children born as the result of gang rape, new-born babies found next to their dead mothers... Nowhere in Farah’s fiction does the precariousness of human existence – its dependencies and reciprocal exposures – become more acutely felt than in Farah’s many variations of telling the orphan child, particularly against the background of the Ogaden war, clan rivalry, and civil unrest as in Maps (1986) and Secrets (1998) from the Blood in the Sun trilogy.36

The prevalence of political allegorical readings in critical reception of Maps and Secrets is hardly surprising, given the novels’ geopolitical setting, their magic realist elusiveness, the sense of hidden meanings evoked already in their titles, and not least, the literary trope of the orphan: a character whose lack of customary answers prompts larger questions of identity and belonging. When Farah’s own description of Somali society as “an orphaned baby” (Jussawala and Dasenbrock, “Interviews”) is added to this list, it would seem that what is offered in these two novels is a prime example of what Frederic Jameson describes as “national allegories” (“Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”).

My own entry into the critical discussion of these novels is guided by three main concerns, all of which engage with the ethics of the told, the ethics of telling, and the ethics of reading.

To begin with, my own encounter with these novels prompt me to ask whether Askar’s and Kalaman’s journeys of formation are essentially stories

36 All further references to the novels will be given within brackets in the text (M/S + page). Even though a variation of the orphan child also figures in other novels, these characters have no voice of their own but remain functions within the text, which is why they have not been included in the present chapter. In Gifts the foundling serves as a catalyst for uniting the two protagonists Duniya and Bosaaso; in Knots, SilkHair and Gacal serve as props in the protagonist Cambara’s attempts to re-build her life and family. The postcolonial implications of Cambara’s adoption will be discussed in Chapter Four.
of the Somali nation, as several critics imply (Colmer, Alidou, Wright). If so, why are Kalaman’s attempts to flee his childhood fears of not belonging so emotionally evocative? Why is the story of Askar’s attempts to reconcile his nationalist convictions with his love of a foreign foster-mother so heart-wrenching? Indeed, why do these novels appear constructed to move their readers’ emotionally if the primary purpose is to make the reader reflect intellectually on the postcolonial nation or the clan-system?

In a related vein, if Farah’s primary aim is to tell the story of the nation, which political allegorical readings might be said to imply, why make the story so elusive to interpretation? What are the narrative effects of Farah’s ambiguous use of symbols and allegory in these novels? Are the correspondences between Kalaman’s and Askar’s preoccupation with “certainties” and “notional truths” and readers’ propensity to abstract meaning purely coincidental, or are these novels deliberately constructed to make readers experience the “lure” of allegory and abstraction?

Finally, what are the ethical implications of going straight for allegorical correspondences between the personal and the political in these novels? Apart from the apparent risks entailed in connecting Farah’s fictional Somalia with its real counterpart, what aspects of Farah’s critical enquiry might be lost if/when the reader abstracts meaning(s), more or less, from the outset?

Although this chapter does not claim to provide exhaustive answers to these questions, they point in the direction of an unexplored potential in these works, something that eludes interpretation and simple definition, something that will just not be reduced to simple allegory. It is this “something else,” this experience of Lévinasian excess/alterity, that this chapter aims to explore.

The chapter’s discussion of the above issues is straightforward. In the first section, “Towards an Ethics of Ongoing Narration,” I discuss the novels’ ethics of the told. Rather than focus on the orphaned characters’ quest for understanding the self as previous readings have often done, I argue that these novels are at their most fundamental level concerned with the ethical relation between self and other, as displayed in Askar’s relationship with his Ethiopian foster-mother Misra, and Kalaman’s relation to his adoptive father Yaqut and grandfather Nonno. By drawing on Cavarero’s theory of the ‘narratable self’ and Lévinas’ distinction between Saying and Said, I am able to show how these relations – although featured by an initial coming-into-being – reflect the temptation of reducing the Other to Said. In Maps this temptation is soon made known in Askar’s troubled attempts to understand himself and Misra; in Secrets, the ethics of ongoing narration is reflected in Kalaman’s negotiations of “certainties” based on lineage and blood relations.
In probing the ways in which reading practices and hermeneutic models may open or close for a deeper engagement with fictional texts, the second section, “Allegorical Readings,” examines the ways in which allegorical readings of Maps and Secrets have tended to produce surprisingly lucid interpretations of texts that have also been praised for their postmodern narrative techniques. Without denying the value of an allegorical reading approach as such, several of these readings illustrate how the ethical is subsumed under the political, and in the process of doing so significant venues for more profound reflection are missed.

By building on the first section’s discussion of how Farah’s novels problematize abstracts and categorizations primarily via their representations of adoptive relations, the closing part of the chapter, “Ambiguous Narration,” shows how the novels’ debunking of categories is enhanced by Farah’s subversive uses of metaphor, symbol and allegory. By drawing on Lévinas’ distinction between Saying and Said, I argue that Farah’s representations invite the reader to follow the strong pull of the text to abstract meanings – to make do, as it were, with the strong sense of Said that features Askar’s narration of Misra. However, in the same way as Mira is presented as escaping Askar’s every attempt at comprehension and narrative mastery, the allegorical readings evoked are consistently interrupted in ways that challenge the reader to engage more fully with the novels’ ethical Saying.

Towards an Ethics of Ongoing Narration

In a challenging description of the ethical relation between Self and Other, Judith Butler claims that the “the ethical stance” consists in asking the question “Who are you?” and continuing to ask it without any expectation of a full or final answer because when we arrive at a place where we can say, “Oh, now I know who you are: at this moment, I cease to address you, or to be addressed by you” (Giving an Account of Oneself 43). Whereas critics have often focussed on the multiple ways in which Maps and Secrets center-stage their protagonists’ preoccupation with the question “Who am I?,” my discussion in this section suggests that the novels’ ‘ethics of the told’ is essentially a reflection on how to ask the question “Who are you?” in ways that do not hinder further exchange between Self and Other. It seems that the answer to both of these questions may only be found in processes featured by what emerges as the novels’ ethics of ongoing narration.

The journeys of Askar and Kalaman follow a similar pattern: their early years are featured by an excruciating intimacy between (adoptive) parent and child, brought about by what is best described as a mutual coming-into-being. However, as events unfold – Askar embraces the cause of the WSLF whose agenda is to reclaim the Ogaden from Ethiopia, and Kalaman flees his childhood fears of not belonging by moving to the city and burying himself in
work – both Askar and Kalaman struggle to reconcile their earliest experiences of unconditional love with their subsequent (intellectual) understanding of categories like ethnicity, clan, and fatherhood. Askar is ultimately unable to reconcile his two versions of Misra: the Misra of his childhood, and the Misra who has been accused of betraying his village to the Ethiopians. Kalaman, on the other hand, returns to “re-examine his beginnings” (S 111) and is ultimately able to re-assess his previous “certainties” in ways that allow for profound ethical exchange with his closest kin.

**Askar, Misra and the Lure of ‘Notional Truth’**

From the very moment that Misra finds Askar on the scene of his birth, almost dead in the arms of his biological mother, their lives are rendered inseparable. Even though Askar’s many variations of telling the same story illustrate his childhood fascination, verging on obsession, with the idea of his own origin and identity, his descriptions of their first encounter is essentially a reflection on how he owes his very life to this Oromo-woman: “From the instant she lifted me and held me to herself (thus dirtying the brown dress she was wearing), I was a living being and I began to exist. I was dirty, yes; I was nameless, yes; but I existed the second she touched me” (M 24-25). The bodily closeness that characterizes this primordial scene is striking. In Askar’s description, Misra’s actions not only save his life, but her embrace and touch are what brings him into existence, what makes him “a living being.” In her response to his extreme vulnerability, names and dirt are presented as irrelevant. However, in the larger context of Farah’s representation, the parenthetical reference to Misra’s dirtied dress is all but peripheral, as Misra’s indifference to Askar’s dirty state turns out to be symptomatic of her continued embrace of Askar – in all of his human imperfections.

As events unfold, it becomes obvious that it is not only Misra who saves Askar, but he also brings her into existence in other ways. To begin with, they are brought together by mutual loss. Askar replaces Misra’s baby who died a few months earlier, whereas Misra is described as “[replacing] your missing parents with her abundant self which she offered generously to you – her newly rediscovered child!” (M 6). However, Misra’s frustrated attempts to replace the marks of Askar’s biological mother (M 9), by breastfeeding her “newly rediscovered child” – an act that makes them equally miserable – signal that she is also negotiating a different kind of precarity. Indeed, while offering “her own milk, her soul” (M 9) is representative of the kind of selfless giving Misra displays throughout the novel, the emphasis on “her

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37 WSLF: Western Somalia Liberation Front.
own” milk reinforces the sense that her own life depends on her new role as foster mother. The many desires evoked by Askar’s precarious situation is captured in a passage where Askar’s description of their first encounter includes Misra’s response:

For me, life began in her hands and it was in her touch that I began to exist. Not in the savage stare which was so primitive it penetrated to the depth of her guilt, a savage stare which stirred in her soul a selfless desire to give and give and therefore be, exist only in the giving. (M 40)

On the one hand, this passage describes Askar’s and Misra’s encounter in terms of a mutual coming into existence, as indicated by how the word “exist” is used to first describe Askar and then Misra. The dialogic nature of this process, conveyed in the description of how Misra’s touch is met by Askar’s fixed gaze, resonates with the formation of what Cavarero describes as “an identity which, from beginning to end is intertwined with other lives – with reciprocal exposures and innumerable gazes – and needs the other’s tale” (Relating Narratives 88). I will discuss Askar’s “gazes” in more detail later on in this chapter. On the other hand, this passage signals how Misra’s process of coming into being is predicated on her ability to give; indeed, how she will “exist only in the giving.”

Misra’s force-feeding of Askar and her state of “exist[ing] only in the giving” must be understood against the background of Maps’ geo-political setting. For while mutual loss is what brings Askar and Misra together, Misra’s status as an Ethiopian woman living in the contested Ogaden area means that she needs the legitimacy provided by her surrogate motherhood (more so, in fact, than Askar needs a custodian). A key moment in her story is the description of how she only becomes a bona fide member of the Somali community when Askar chooses her in preference to all other women in the village (M 28). Not only does the reference to Askar choosing Misra imply a reversal of the adoptive process, with Misra being adopted into the community, but the power of Askar’s choice brings into relief an agency and a power that Misra is denied throughout the novel.

Misra’s precarity is further conveyed in a series of descriptions that juxtapose her agency with that of baby Askar. In describing his own life as being “in her hands. . . she could do what she wanted with it” (M 40), Askar immediately reverses their roles by stating that Misra’s life is “in the power of my mouth. . . I could do what I wanted with it” (M 41). Even though Askar’s life is literally and figuratively in the hands of his adoptive mother, the word “power” is ultimately reserved to describe his advantage, rendering Misra’s newfound status precarious enough to depend on a contented baby. Askar’s description of their first years together may also be read in this way:
I seem to have remained a mere extension of Misra’s body for years – you saw me when you set eyes on her. I was part of the shadow she cast – in a sense, I was her extended self. I was, you might even say, the space surrounding the geography of her body. (M 78)

Similarly to the ambiguity conveyed in a previous reference to how Misra exists only through her giving, Askar’s beautiful image of mother-child intimacy is disturbed by the added description of how he becomes a “space surrounding the geography of her body.” Not only does Misra’s role as Askar’s adoptive mother grant her legitimacy in Askar’s village, but when read in conjunction to Maps’ references to Misra’s charting of her “safe days,” to men’s nightly visits (especially Aw-Adan, but also Askar’s relative, the violent Uncle Qorrax), and to Misra’s abortions, the “space” provided by Askar’s presence in Misra’s life (and bed) takes a very literal meaning, that of alleviating Misra’s precarity as an unmarried, unclaimed, foreign woman in a society where women are essentially portrayed as men’s property.

So who is Misra? Misra is a liminal figure whose mixed heritage and foreign status makes her impossible to pinpoint in Askar’s world. All Askar knows during their first years of unbroken intimacy is that Misra is his ‘cosmos’ (M 6) and that her definitions of him, expressed in the endearments she whispers in his ear, provide sufficient answers to his often repeated question, “Who am I?” (M 97). However, when Askar is circumcised at the age of four he is for the first time separated from her. Not only does his description of this momentous event in his life describe his physical pain in vivid detail, but the pain is also existential, and he keeps repeating: “Who am I…Where am I? Misra was not there. I was alone. And no one told me where I was, no one told me who I was” (M 97). Prevented from focussing his gaze on her, he begins to look elsewhere for answers to his questions – answers that he soon finds with the men of his village. Thus, Askar’s circumcision marks a natural separation between mother–child, and Askar describes the event as the moment “I took hold of a different ‘self,’ one that had no room and no space for Misra and no longer cared for her. I let go of Misra and, with self-abandon, roamed about in the newly discovered land” (M 96). However, Askar’s “newly discovered land” contains only one alternative identity, one that with the upcoming Ogaden war opposes Misra’s foreign presence. Soon after the circumcision, the precocious Askar boldly states, “now he was at last a man… totally detached from his mother-figure Misra… In the process of looking for a substitute, he had found another – Somalia, his mother-country” (M 100).

Askar’s rejection of (mother) Misra in favour of (mother-country) Somalia marks the beginning of a journey in which his relation with Misra is perceived as an encumberment. His friends begin to be suspicious of her, commenting on her Oromo-Ethiopian ancestry, and the risks that
accompany her foreign presence. While Askar admits to be “greatly bothered] that he couldn’t share with her the joy of his secrets” and “pained” by having to be distrustful of her motive when she asks her where and with whom he has been (M 114), her presence in his life is nonetheless described in terms of “a deformity that you had to carry with you everywhere you went” (M 114). Their reversal of roles is significant. From Askar having been part of Misra’s shadow while being carried on her back, Misra is now projected as part of his shadow, the only difference being that her presence constitutes a deformity.

Whether defined as desired or detested, their inseparability remains, and Askar is unable to free himself from Misra even when the war makes it necessary for him to move to his aunt and uncle in Mogadiscio. The desire to keep Misra in his life is illustrated in the evocative question that he asks his new guardians as they arrange for new identity papers: “Is there any room for Misra in my identity papers?” . . . I see that in identity papers there is a space allotted to biological parents and to guardians but none to somebody like Misra” (M 169-170). At the same time, Askar’s growing political awareness and his preoccupation with maps and what he describes as their “notional truth” (M 288) tear at his memory of her, and he finds himself asking, “Did she exist as I remember?” (M 243). By eventually embracing the cause of the pro-Somali WSLF, Askar’s struggle to reconcile his love for Misra with his love for Somalia becomes increasingly more difficult.

The pain of conflicting loyalties comes to a head when rumours reach Askar that Misra is guilty of treason, and that a hundred Kallafo warriors have lost their lives as a result of it (in common Farah-style, no evidence to either support or refute this rumour is provided). The two versions of Misra – the mother figure and the betrayer – live on inside of him, and it is not until Misra flees the Ogaden and the two of them meet in Mogadiscio, that their former status of being inseparable is put to a final test. In meeting Misra after years of separation, Askar reflects on how he has outgrown her, and how she has aged: “And yet he couldn’t stop wondering if her other half was hiding inside her and would somehow re-emerge and take over eventually” (M 190). Their meeting is complex because Askar’s old and new maps of Misra lie, figuratively speaking, side by side. Confused and uncertain about Misra’s status, or, more precisely, as pointed out by Rhonda Cobham, “the status of that part of himself which is inseparable from Misra (“Misgendering the Nation” 53), Askar is still painfully aware of her effect on him. After a brief hug he takes his distance from her: “It was enough that they had embraced, that was as far as he was willing to go. He had felt something run through his body as they hugged” (M 190). There is good reason to perceive this scene as Maps climax, where Askar’s unwillingness to embrace Misra becomes a point of no return. By refusing to embrace her fully, he rejects her present foreignness to him, their shared past
(represented by “her other half”) and her continued effect on him in the present (reflected in that “something” which runs through his body as they hug). Soon after this encounter, they are forever separated through Misra’s final abduction and death at the hands of the organisation of which Askar is himself a member. Although no details regarding Askar’s exact involvement are provided in the novel, this is, as Reed Way Dasenbrock points out, of little importance given that the logic of his political commitments supports her murder (750). Indeed, Misra is already dead to him and relations have ceased due to Askar’s refusal to continue their ongoing narration.

‘Certainties’ Re-Defined: Kalaman, Yaqt and Nonno

Similarly to Askar, Kalaman in Secrets is portrayed as preoccupied with the question “Who am I?” as expressed in his childhood fascination with the birth of rivers, birds and animals, but most of all – his own beginnings. However, in contrast to Askar, Kalaman does not tell the story of his birth himself, but turns to his grandfather Nonno to have it told again and again. Kalaman’s questions about the origin of things prompt the old man to tell, and Kalaman is invited into his grandfather’s world of myths, stories and magic. The young Kalaman describes it as a delight to experience these “contacts I made with his mind. I kept him company, and sat on his lap as he gazed at the stars, repeating to me myths of old . . . He explained I was meant to be an orator when I became a man” (S 95). To Kalaman, the importance of these moments is manifold. The stories become like shared secrets that provide Kalaman with a sense of belonging, secrets that in Nonno’s words, “define us, . . . mark us, . . . set us apart from all the others. The secrets which we preserve provide a key to who we are, deep down“ (S 144). Moreover, by referring to Kalaman as a future orator, Nonno’s stories also empower his grandson to perceive himself as destined for greater things. This is particularly important given Kalaman’s strong desire to be of the same bloodline as his father and grandfather, and Kalaman is quick to see his own fascination with the origin of things as such a link (S 73).

It is also Nonno who gives Kalaman his name, and in doing so Nonno moves away from traditional names that need to be spoken in conjunction with a father’s or a grandfather’s name: “I named you Kalaman because it is a cul-de-sac of a name. . . . because I knew it could stand on its own, independent of your father’s name or mine” (S 4, 5). Because Nonno himself refuses to be part of the clan system, which he refers to as a “lineage obsession of begats” (S 106-7), the choice of name points toward a desire to build into his grandson a sense of independence, strength and value outside of traditional family bonds. However, this name is portrayed as a source of great worry to the young Kalaman, because it marks a distance to the father and grandfather he so dearly wishes to be in close relation with. His worry is
aggravated with the discovery that his penis is not the size of his father or grandfather, and leads him to ask the question that will follow him into adulthood: “Was I or was I not of that line, the son of my father, Nonno’s grandson?” (S 5).

If Nonno is the one who gives Kalaman his name, the reverse is also true, as Kalaman’s birth leads Nonno to leave all his other names for the Italian word for grandfather. This expression of a mutual coming-into-being is further conveyed in the scene where Yaqut is reached by the news that his wife has given birth to a son.

Described as an artist and a dreamer, Yaqut makes a living by mending broken items for people, and taking care of those who have had no one to take care of their burial. His love of life, respect for the dead, and passion for “prolonging the lives of objects” (S 78) carry over into his relationship with people, and find their most clear expression in his negotiation of the losses of his immediate family. His wife Damac, who has lost all desire to live after the traumatic experience of a gang rape in which Kalaman is conceived, describes Yaqut as “a healer of wounds, a mender of my shattered self-reflections, a bringer together of my fragmented selves. . . never failing in his determination to make me whole again” (S 263). In his role as (re)constructor of Damac’s broken and fragmented narrative Yaqut not only compensates Damac’s inability to take care of Kalaman, but via his (secret) adoption of Kalaman he also resolves the issue of illegitimacy and protects Kalaman from clannish predators who may claim him as theirs. However, what begins as a narrative (re)construction of Damac’s and Kalaman’s fragmented narratives affects Yaqut’s own narrative in ways that resemble Misra’s and Askar’s mutual coming into existence. So much so that the news of Kalaman’s birth leads to what may best be described in terms of a father being born:

His bubble began with a mere hint of a sound, something between a truncated grunt and a full-bodied syllable of a much longer word. Yaqut turned these into a tributary of sounds, an unintelligible river of noises breaking at the banks. What a joy to hear him, drowned as he was with the delight of being a father. He couldn’t contain it. People deciphered the drift of his rejoicing as he kept saying ‘I am! I am!’ (S 161)

Not only do the references to water, rivers, and drowning allude to both birth and baptism, but the life-transforming experience of becoming a father concerned with the living (rather than a workman concerned with the dead) is reinforced via the increasing linguistic intelligibility that culminates in the chanting of “I am!” However, in order to understand the profound transformation conveyed in this passage, references to Yaqut’s linguistic limitations must be taken into account. Indeed, via this experience he moves
from having had an “active vocabulary... consisting of grunts, a plain yes, or a head-shaking no,” to “speak[ing] not in bubbles but in words easily understood by everyone” (S 159, 163). The social implications of Yaqut’s arrival at “I am!” reflected in his new and literal access to language, thus resemble the social effects experienced by Misra in having become Askar’s “mother.”

Even though Yaqut does not share any of Misra’s precarity, his experience of having become a father enables him to move outside of socially defined constrictions. Thus, Yaqut is portrayed as being completely unconcerned with gendered expectations regarding his role as father, as illustrated in Kalaman’s description of his early childhood:

As an infant I was physically inseparable from my father. I would fall asleep with his finger in the tight clasp of my fist. . . . He would strap me to his back. . . . He fed me, washed me. . . . When I couldn’t breathe because my nasal passages were clogged, my father took my nose in his mouth and, at a single drag, sucked the unease out of me, phlegm and mucus and all. (S 78)

By feeding, washing and carrying Kalaman strapped to his back, Yaqut takes on what is described as a role traditionally reserved for mothers. Apart from staging Yaqut’s unconcern with gendered norms for childcare, this passage also echoes the scenes from Maps that describe the intimacy of Askar’s early years with Misra. Just as Misra’s dirtied dress literally and figuratively represents her full embrace of Askar, so does the graphic description of Yaqut’s handling of Kalaman’s secretion. Ultimately, both Maps and Secrets imply that responding to the Other means to also embrace less desirable aspects of his alterity – metaphorically represented by dirt and phlegm.

In spite of Yaqut’s and Nonno’s powerful stories of love and belonging, Kalaman’s desire for a biological bond is portrayed as stronger. Indeed, his fear of not being biologically linked to father and grandfather makes him escape into a notion that his maternal bonds need to suffice, as illustrated in Kalaman’s reiterated variations of the Somali proverb that “mothers are a certainty” (S 196): “Fathers matter not, mothers matter a lot!” (S 66). However, Kalaman’s fears may not be suppressed and questions regarding his origin follow him into adulthood. By moving to the city, starting up a computer business, becoming a “professional” (S 26), and leaving his past behind, the adult Kalaman seeks to build an identity outside of family bonds. Like Nonno, he seeks to stay outside of the clan system and the obligations connected to it, perceiving the system as just another sort of “self-definition” (S 218). Paradoxically, Kalaman’s concern with abstracts, or what Cingal describes as an “allegiance to lineage” (Cingal 436) remains his main means of identification as long as he does not face the secrets and the fears of his
childhood. His attempt to adopt a new identity is thus outruled by his perceptions of blood-related ‘certainties’.

It is only when Kalaman is confronted with people and secrets from the past, that he decides “to re-examine his beginnings” (S 111). In doing so Kalaman enters a process in which many constructions of the past come undone. In this process of existential fragmentation Kalaman realises that “I wasn’t what I had always believed myself to be, a man able to locate his truth in half truth, and able to live with the contradictions” (S 250), and when Kalaman finally gets to hear the truth he struggles to take it in. In finding out that he is the issue of a gang-rape (a revenge on his mother for refusing to comply with a forged marriage) he is described to experience “a form of death” (S 242). He wonders about the need for this “ugliness . . . Is it because true knowledge is gained through a kind of death. Or because true self-definition is attained through a total overhaul of one’s identity? . . . Where am I in all this?”(S 153-4). The intertwining of death and identity in these passages is significant, as the unravelling of Kalaman’s origin (known only to Damac and Yaqut) also has very real political implications. The danger is conveyed in the question that Nonno asks even before the truth of Kalaman’s origin has been unravelled:

Will you be upset if you learn that you are somebody else’s child, not Yaqut’s? Will doubts shatter your certainties? What will become of your relationships with us, your kith and kin all your life? Will you kill me or your father if it turns out that your family is at war with ours, in the current struggle for political power? (S 203)

Not only does Nonno’s question illustrate the socio-political setting of Secrets, but the reference to “certainties” emphasize their shared understanding of what truly matters, at the same time as the precariousness of any certainty – apart from lineage – is reinforced.

The power of Kalaman’s former perceptions of certainty explains why Secrets is filled with questions focussing Kalaman’s relation to Yaqut and Nonno: “whose son am I? If I am not Nonno’s grandson, who is Nonno to me?” (S 204). Initially, these questions tend to arrive in the contention that being “the offspring of a gang rape,” means “I had nothing of certainty linking me, as his blood, to him” (S 236). However, the place of “death” (S 242) is also a place where a new life may be begun.

In a central scene where Kalaman is portrayed as having just woken up after hours of “sleep and nightmares and uncertainties” (S 204), he is greeted by his fiancée Talaado. Her words, “Welcome back to the world of the living” (S 204) becomes symbolic of Kalaman’s passage from a reality based on fears and abstract notions, to a reality where Uncle Hillal’s words from Maps define Kalaman’s relations: “Body is truth” (M 236). The legacy
of Yaqut’s and Nonno’s stories, reflected in years of carrying and caring for Kalaman, is ultimately what enables Kalaman to redefine his “certainties”:

The idea of [Yaqut], my love for him, grew in the tall tree of my imagination. . . . In place of sperm, I thought it was the river of his humanity which flowed into my blood, a more precious thing, everlasting in my memory. . . . what he meant to me as a child [was] a shaper of life and an artist, coaxing things into being. . . . How I loved him, the certainty that was Yaqut! (S 254)

By embracing what was there all along, Kalaman is finally able to enter the world of the living.

‘Certainties’ and ‘Notional Truths’

As my discussion of Maps’ and Secrets’ ethics of the told has shown, a central theme is that of representing the epistemological violence inherent to any attempt of categorizing the other. With Askar such categorization is clearly presented as dangerous, given that it is his abstract notions that legitimize Misra’s extinction. Even though Secrets only refers to death and killing as a possible outcome of Kalaman’s clan belonging being different, the danger of categorizations is still very present, if only in subtler ways, as illustrated by what I have described as Kalaman’s move from death to life.

Having said that, Farah’s representations of these themes also resist intellectual abstraction. The pain of separation, the existential angst, the incompatability of stories, indeed, the detrimental effects of delimiting descriptions of Self and Other, suggest that the text is constructed so as to make the reader experience, as it were, the effects of ‘certainties’ and ‘notional truths’. Charles Sugnet’s evocative description of his own reading experience of Maps points in this direction:

Maps is certainly a complex book, an intellectual book, but what I find striking about it is how emotionally moving it is to read – so much bodily closeness, so much pain, so much loss, is detailed and felt in its prose. Over and over in its pages, the ideas of the nation and masculinity cause bodies to be rent, often by the very people who love those bodies. As Partha Chatterjee and others have pointed out in the debates over Anderson’s Imagined Communities, the nation may well be imaginary, but it manifests itself in practices and institutions which have a heavy weight.” (539)

Even though Sugnet’s description is limited to his reading of Maps, his addressing of the novel’s elicitation of both emotive and intellectual response brings attention to an essential rhetorical aspect of Farah’s representations of adoptive relations. Indeed, as will be argued later in this chapter,
understanding the force of Farah’s ethical enquiry of categories such as nation, ethnicity, clan, or even gender, requires that the reader responds to the texts’ invitations to feel the “heavy weight” of abstractions.

As I now turn to a discussion of allegorical readings of Maps and Secrets, I do so with this emotive-intellectual rhetoric in mind. Is it feasible to suggest that allegorical readings emphasize the intellectual over the emotive? If so, what are the ethical implications of such a reading mode? What aspects are brought into view? What aspects might be lost?

**Allegorical Readings**

How are we to understand the strong tendency to read novels like Maps and Secrets allegorically? As noted in the chapter introduction, the novels contain numerous invitations to allegorical reading, such as reflected in their geo-political situatedness, the staging of the troubled relation between national and ethnic identity, and the characters’ own reflections; for example, Askar’s description of Somalia as “a nation with split personalities” (M 126); Nonno’s allegorizations of Kalaman’s name. Equally important however, are the interpretative challenges proceeding from the novels’ lack of specificity with magic realist elements such as dreams, myths and premonitions. This elusiveness is further accentuated by the fact that especially Maps’ refractory first, second and third person narrative mode, but also Secrets’ polyphonic narrative perspectives, make these novels difficult to read.38 Most fundamentally, reading allegorically may be said to reflect readers’ attempts to come to grips with texts that are elusive to interpretation.

However, some of the allegorical readings of these novels have clearly problematic applications, because they conflate Farah’s fictional Somalia with its real equivalent, the real Somalia. For instance, Dasenbrock claims that “One of the central problems with Somali society is the strong us-them difference instantiated in the clan structure of Somali society and which sustains the Somali nationalism on display in Maps (Dasenbrook 62). In a similar vein, Ousseina Alidou’s reading of fatherhood in Secrets discusses “Somalis’ deliberate amnesia about the gang-rape of their motherland,” arriving in the rhetorical question regarding whether or not “the Somalis themselves are ready for [the] challenge” of reconstructing “the politics of lineage and gender relations” (676). Such assumptions that clearly move outside Farah’s fictional world into the realm of the real become more common fare when popular book reviews are taken into consideration. As

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38 For cogent readings of the three person narrative mode in Maps, see especially Rhonda Cobham, “Boundaries of the Nation: Boundaries of the Self: African Nationalist Fictions and Nuruddin Farah’s Maps” (1991) but also Brian Richardson’s Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction (2006)
Michael Eldridge’s article on *Secrets* shows, national allegorical readings dominate among reviewers. While an allegorical reading may not be problematic in itself, the over-emphasis on clan that Eldridge keenly observes in these reviews produces a disturbing sense of (the real) Somalia being not only backward and primitive, but unique (“Out of the Closet” 652). In contrast to the critics referred to in his article, Eldridge contends that Farah asserts the concept of clan as being “merely a fig leaf... covering over naked opportunism and egomaniacal thuggery,” making clan a notion “no more intrinsic to Somalia than to the rest of the world” (652). While Farah’s reiterated contestations of clan logic partly call this claim into question, Eldridge’s concern with the portrayal of the Somali political situation as unique is significant, and will be discussed further in relation to Seamus’ and Malik’s narrative functions in Chapter Four.

But even when allegorical readings do not end up “othering” the real Somalia and/or Somalis, there seems to be a danger that allegorical readings, by emphasizing the political aspects of Farah’s writing, end up in reductive readings of his novels. In a lucid comment on Farah’s use of the family, Peter Hitchcock suggests that “Farah’s searing investigations of family disfunction can appear like blaming the victims in colonialism’s aftermath” (Hitchcock 91). Hitchcock’s concern is echoed in Michael Elderidge’s wry remark: “If, according to the insistent allegory, family indeed stands for nation, and nation is forever degenerating into chaos, then does this family just have bad genes?” (“Out of the Closet: Farah’s ‘Secrets’” 644).

What concerns me in the critical readings exemplified above, is not primarily whether there is enough textual evidence to support the parallels, correspondences and allegorical readings exemplified (oftentimes, but not always, there is), but what the ethical implications are of making do, as it were, with such correspondences. What happens when the moving story of Misra and Askar is displaced by demands that we read their story as simple political allegory? Is it feasible to claim that allegorical readings may end up closing doors for a more profound reader-text encounter – via processes not unlike the othering that takes place on the level of the told.

My own understanding of the implications of allegorical reading owes a great deal to Derek Attridge’s discussion in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004). In an evocative description of allegory as reading mode, Attridge claims that “allegory, one might say, deals with the *already known*, whereas literature opens a space for the other. Allegory announces a moral code, literature invites an ethical response” (64). Attridge’s explication is useful as a means of understanding the difference between focussing on what we already know (more of the Same, in the Lévinasian sense) – as opposed to allowing ourselves to be affected in (possibly) unexpected ways by the alterity of the fictional work.
What I aim to show in the next section is the ways that Farah’s novels consistently invite a wider response – that is, not only political application, not only ethical signification, and not just concerned with the geo-political specifics – but all of them at the same time. In Maps and Secrets this ethical enquiry is constructed specifically to interrogate the existence and production of abstractions, and their effect on human’s close relations.

**Ambiguous Narration**

While the centrality of ambiguity in Farah’s fiction has been widely noted, few critics have discussed Farah’s ambiguous use of allegory (notable exceptions are Hitchcock, Elderidge, and Alden & Tremaine on women and analogies). By building on the readings in the first part of this chapter, which explore how Farah’s novels problematize abstracts and categorizations primarily via their representations of the relation between the orphan figure and their adoptive parent, the third part of the chapter demonstrates how Farah’s subversive uses of metaphor, symbol and allegory serve as an indispensable part in the novels’ larger enquiry into reductive understandings of Self and Other.

In exploring how the narrative strategies in Maps and Secrets open for a larger ethical enquiry by interrupting the very readings evoked, I will particularly focus on how the female figure and acts of violence are narrated.

**Narrating the Female Figure**

As seen in the previous chapter’s discussion of the female freedom fighter, Farah challenges the objectification of women throughout, most overtly through intimate portrayals of female experience whereby women are clearly cast as “who” rather than a “what”. But what about female figures like Misra in Maps or Kalaman’s mother Damac in Secrets, characters whose stories are so overtly stories of both subjection and objectification? What happens when we read their representations allegorically? What aspects of their stories might get lost if/when transferred into the realm of politics?

A significant example of how Misra both invites and resists interpretation is found in Derek Wright’s discussion in “Fabling the Feminine in Nuruddin Farah’s Novels”:

Misra, as the woman Somalia, is the abused, enslaved victim of a brutal patriarchal tyranny, and Farah’s point is clearly that this is the most fitting form for the image to take in the modern context. If Misra fails as an image of a free Somalia, it is not because she is a foreigner of mixed Oromo and Amhara descent, but because no woman in the Horn of Africa can serve in a signifying system which
indulges in the clichéd gendering of national freedom in falsely heroic and idealised terms. (72)

Reading Misra in emblematic terms is certainly Askar’s battle writ large, but is the above image really Farah’s own perspective? Is Farah’s “point” not rather to interrogate the emblematic use of woman, question the reduction of the other – indeed, to challenge the act of making the Other serve in a signifying system at all?

Although the ambiguous nature of Farah’s metaphoricity noted in Wright’s response has occasionally been discussed, it is rarely, if ever, perceived of as an asset. In an early response to *Maps*, for instance, Hilarie Kelly regrets that Farah’s “characteristic ambiguity could allow some potentially objectionable interpretations” of metaphoric characters like Misra (“A Somali Tragedy of Political and Sexual Confusion: A Critical Analysis of Nuruddin Farah’s *Maps*” 34). Similarly, Jaqueline Bardolph wonders whether Damac in *Secrets* is “a possible reading of the nation figure, *once more* an abused woman?” (“Brothers and Sisters” 731, emphasis added). Both Kelly’s warning regarding the limitations of ambiguity, and Bardolph’s fatigue with yet another victimized woman serving as a metaphor for the nation give us insight into some of the crucial critical questions that feminist scholars have asked over the years. In a more recent but similar reading, Peter Hitchcock notes that: “Despite the heartfelt nuances in Farah’s representations of women... metaphorizing their condition can easily be misread as reproducing the very masculinist discourse their characterization is meant to question.” (*The Long Space: Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form* 90). In my view, all of the above responses demonstrate the careful assessment with which I believe we need to approach Farah’s metaphoricity. However, what is missing from these accounts is how the reproduction of contested discourses (in this case masculinist/nationalist discourse) is in fact indispensable to Farah’s larger ethical enquiry.

In order to understand the ethical momentum created by Farah’s ambiguous use of metaphors, we need to acknowledge the presence of what the above critics note as difficult aspects of Farah’s works, while also probing further how Farah’s texts consistently interrupt the very readings evoked. What emerges is several compelling expressions of how the texts’ Said is interrupted by their ethical Saying.

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39 For a thorough treatment of Farah’s writing about women, including its ambiguities, see Chapter Five of Alden and Tremaine’s *Nuruddin Farah* (1999).

40 This double activity in Farah’s trilogies of reproducing and contesting discourse is not limited to masculinist discourse however, but applies to other hegemonic framework, as demonstrated in Chapter Four, where I discuss the rich and Westernized female protagonist in Knots.
In its simplest form, this interruption emerges in a differentiation between the text’s different voices. It might seem like an obvious claim to make, but if we distinguish between Farah as the constructor of a fictional story, and Askar as a narrator of that story, new readings become possible. For instance, *Maps*’ extensive references to the female body, to menstrual blood and menstrual cycles, do not automatically mean that Farah fetishizes women, as Kelly suggests (31) but it could certainly be argued that the young Askar does. Even more important to the present discussion however, is what the distinction between author and narrator means for our interpretation of Askar’s frequent linking of Misra and the nation. Does Farah intend his readers to understand Misra as a symbol for Somalia, or does he – as I suggest – invite us to reflect on the ethical implications of such discourse?

The ethical Saying is further manifested in Misra’s interruption of Askar’s story. As noted in the chapter’s opening discussion, *Maps* is told in three conflicting voices, all of which belong to Askar. The strong sense of Said that follows from Askar’s mastery over the story is only interrupted on one occasion (the second time Misra’s story is told is when Askar tells it to his Aunt and Uncle). The story of Misra’s life before Askar was born, how she came to settle in Askar’s village, and how her life unfolds after he has left her to live with his uncle and aunt in Mogadiscio is given little more than a page, and is full of tragic details of abduction, incest, and rape (M 71-73). Francesca Kazan offers a keen reading of the story’s narrative effects:

> The hasty rendition interrupts the primary narrative, the narrative of Askar, in a way that jars. And perhaps this is the point... both stories (of Misra) are somehow elided, are almost parenthetical to the elegiac enterprise of *Maps*.... So that which seems overwritten (both in terms of style and event) is also, paradoxically, underwritten, minimized. (“The Other Third World” 263)

Kazan makes several salient points. In spite of being “elided,” “almost parenthetical,” “underwritten” and “minimized,” Misra’s story is there – in a way that jars. Not only does the interruption created by her presence in Askar’s masculinist story of the nation create a significant dissonance, but Misra’s narrative significance surpasses the limited space assigned to her in ways that remind the reader of how she consistently escapes Askar’s every attempt of narrating her. Indeed, although the metaphorical correspondences between Misra and the nation may be numerous, her story may not be reduced to its metaphorical meaning. Throughout the novel, Misra escapes Askar’s every attempt of definition, and by extension, the reader’s. The reader’s attention is instead drawn to her precarity as a foreign woman – utterly exposed and at the mercy of the men she encounters. As Hitchcock remarks, “[Misra] is not oppressed as a metaphor but as a
woman” (101). Ultimately, the dignity of her life is brought into relief by the “horrorism” that surrounds her story.

**Narrating Rape**

The need to acknowledge the inviolable dignity of characters like Misra before extracting any kind of meaning becomes particularly important in readers’ encounters with Farah’s representations of “horrorisms” such as rape. A familiar trope of colonial aggression, there is little wonder that the rape of both Misra and Damac has been symbolically read as representing the “colonial gang-rape of Somaliland by foreign imperial patriarchal powers” (Alidou 676). However, extracting the wider significance has the disadvantage of eclipsing Farah’s very real concern with the predicaments of womanhood. Indeed, even though he uses instances like rape to explore, among other themes, the impact of colonization, it is not done via what Christopher L. Miller’s describes as the “[e]xploitation of woman as an allegorical commodity” (*Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa* 191). On the contrary, Farah’ novels keep the (corpo)reality of female precarity – including rape, female genital excision, and infibulation-related complications – firmly in view. Not only that, but, as seen in the above discussion of Misra, human dignity is always part of the representation, no matter how limited its narrative space.

So how to do justice to the novels’ both sensitive, intimate and horrendous representations of women’s suffering, in ways that retain Farah’s firm focus on human dignity? Apart from listening to what is not narrated – the gaps, the understatements, and the elisions seen at work in Maps’ renderings of Misra’s story – I suggest that the reader is consistently invited to “experience” the horrors and the dignity of these women, so as not to reduce their stories to mere political allegory.

The story from *Sardines* of how Amina is raped provides an illuminating intertextual example of how Farah’s fiction both problematizes reductive political applications, and invites the reader’s wider response. The contrasting responses of the actors in the story are of particular importance here. As Amina pleads with her rapists – all of whom are known to her – the youngest one of them repeats that they are not doing it to her, but to her father who is a government minister (and by extension, to the General). Among the villagers that find Amina hours later, the men refuse to have anything to do with her, based on whose daughter she is, whereas the women disobey their husbands and care for her. Amina’s father, finally, agrees with her rapists by arguing that “[this] rape is political” and must therefore (following the General’s instructions) be “isolated” and treated as though it were “devoid of any political significance” (Sa 127). As a result of her father’s betrayal of her, the young men escape prosecution according to the logic of
“no publicity, no scandal” in the hope that “people” will soon have forgotten “the disgrace that has befallen [her]” (Sa 127).

Amina’s own response is symptomatic of how Farah sharpens the political applications via ethical reflection on human dignity. To begin with, Amina begins by carefully pointing out that it is her body suffering the effects of rape, not just any human body. Ann V. Murphy’s reading of Cavarero’s “ontological crime” offers a compelling means of understanding the significance of Amina’s first response. Murphy argues that Cavarero “seems intent on isolating a kind of violence that is ontological, which certainly does not forbid the possibility of subsequent ethical response, but that holds it in abeyance in order to think the specificity of the experience of horror.” (Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary 98) This is not to suggest that Cavarero would be unconcerned with ethics (her concepts of “ontological crime” and “ontological altruism” keep the ethical in clear view), but the suggestion here, that the violation of human uniqueness need to be carefully assessed before any meaning may be extracted is compelling as a means of understanding Farah’s representations of the horrors of rape.

Secondly, Amina asks for dehumanizing machinations of terror and masculinist political discourse to be publicly exposed: “I accept nothing short of you bringing all three rapists here for a public trial. I want everyone to know. I want every Somali to see the political significance. I want everybody to know that every rape is political; that the powerful rape the weak” (Sa 129). Significantly, Amina herself is in charge of the signifying work when she pinpoints that the violation of her body is representative of what is enacted on a larger scale. Even though Amina’s repetition of “political” might seem to suggest an internalization of the perspective conveyed by her rapists, the male villagers, her father, and the General, her perception of political is not defined in relation to clan politics or the Regime, but explicated in clearly ethical terms: “the powerful rape the weak”. By deciding the symbolic meaning of the rape herself, reflected in her ethical framing, she subverts the political significance of her “disgrace” where she is merely a pawn in the game. However, a sharpening of political implications – including clan politics, the workings of the Regime, and even gender politics (as addressed in the differing male and female responses of the villagers) – is only possible when the violation of her corporeal dignity has first been acknowledged.

The story of Amina has wider resonances, and reflects what I perceive as Farah’s call for the reader to fully acknowledge the novels’ representations of human dignity before extracting any symbolic meaning. An interesting parallel to my argument is found in Derek Wright’s critique of Medina’s intellectual response to Amina’s rape:

The danger of this intellectual extrapolation of abstract or symbolic meanings from acts like rape and circumcision . . . is that the
metaphoric correlative of the outrage – moral violation, political coercion – is liable to blunt the edge of the barbarity itself. A thing must first be itself before it can be made a symbol of something; it must be felt for what it is before Medina can abstract its ‘significance’. (“Parents and Power” 102-103)

Although Derek Wright is discussing Medina’s propensity to abstract meanings, his cautioning appears equally pertinent to the context of reader’s response(s) to representations of violence. However, apart from “[blunting] the edge” of “barbarity,” rash extractions of meaning also prevent the reader from experiencing the inviolable dignity of these characters, a dignity that, following Cavarero, is paradoxically brought into view by the violations on the scene of horror.

In concluding this chapter on adoptive relations in Maps and Secrets, my readings reveal that the ethical charge of Farah’s enquiry into abstract notions – whether explicated in terms of nation, clan, or lineage – derives from its multiple invitations to experience the effects of the “notional truth” and the “certainties” that haunt the protagonists’ relations to their closest ones. However, in order to experience this dimension of Maps and Secrets, the reader needs to be willing to postpone his/her extraction of the wider significance, in order to first feel the “heavy weight” of abstract notions.
Chapter Four

“If only we’d admit to being weaker than we think...”

Diasporic Encounters in *Links* and *Knots*

In an epiphanic moment in *Knots* (2007), the protagonist Cambara summarizes her encounter with extreme human vulnerability. Cambara has been caring for her new friend Bile, after having found him in a delirious and a soiled state, caused by extreme mental and physical exhaustion, and states: “What else is there to say? What else is there to do? . . . If only we’d admit to being weaker than we think. Weak we are born; weak we’ll die” (K 366). Even though Cambara’s statement refers to a specific moment in the novel, her words epitomize the (re)negotiated ethical perceptions widely featured in Farah’s *Past Present* trilogy. For the protagonists in all three novels – Jeebleh in *Links* (2003), Cambara in *Knots* (2007), and Malik in *Crossbones* (2011) – the encounters with a Mogadiscio ravaged by clan-related war and conflict call them to move beyond the moral certainties of the outside observer towards profound engagement with their multiple Others.\(^{41}\)

The double aim of this chapter is to explore how the reassessments of ethical perceptions in *Links* and *Knots* are manifested in the novels’ ethics of the told as well as their ethics of telling, and how these reassessments engage with Farah’s larger postcolonial enquiry.\(^{42}\) In the first of the chapter’s two parts, concerned with the novels’ ethics of the told, the analysis is divided into three closely related areas of concern, following what might be perceived (but not necessarily so) as stages in the diasporic journey: (i) narratives interrogated, (ii) narratives disoriented, and (iii) narratives re-oriented?

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\(^{41}\) I will use Farah’s Italian spelling of Somalia’s capital, not only as an expression of faithfulness to the fictional texts, but for its significance as a fictional marker, reminding the reader that Farah’s Mogadiscio is indeed a fictionalized version of the “real” Mogadishu.

\(^{42}\) The reason why Malik from *Crossbones* does not figure in the present chapter’s main discussion is that his first-time visit to his father’s homeland Somalia does not engage with some of this chapter’s key questions on culpability and diasporic recompense, widely addressed in Farah’s portrayal of the other protagonists’ returns to the country of their birth.
(where the questionmark emphasises the novels’ lack of arrival in this regard).

Firstly, I explore the ways in which the protagonists’ returns to Somalia bring different ethical frameworks into relief, particularly Western/individualist and Somali/collective understandings of moral agency and responsibility. Even though the titles of the novels already evoke allusions to ties, affiliations and loyalties, the war aggravates and brings into sharp relief all expressions of competing claims and commitments, in ways that also raise questions regarding culpability and diasporic repatriation/recompense. The novels’ enquiry into the postcolonial ramifications of Jeebleh’s and Cambara’s’ attempts to locate their stories “in the context of the bigger national narrative” (L 29) is facilitated by penetrating representations of what Butler describes as “the unequal distribution of precariousness” (Framed of War 25). By exploring how (especially) Cambara’s vulnerability, agency, and dependency on others shift with her geographical relocation, I suggest that Knots offers a much more critical view of postcolonial legacies than might at first appear to be the case.

Secondly, I focus on how the protagonists’ sense of Self, their stories as it were, are portrayed as relentlessly interrupted by the realities of the civil war and the stories of the Other. That is, what begins in the characterization of the familiar predicament of diasporic existence – the split subject negotiating a double or multiple belonging in a state of being an insider and outsider simultaneously – soon moves into renderings of a deeper form of alienation in which the clan-related civil war plays an instrumental role. Not only do these interruptions overthrow their sense of Self as a coherent, rational and independent agent, but these interruptions paradoxically become the very means by which to ethically engage with the Other. By drawing on the notion of ‘address’, meant both as an ‘interruption of narrative’ (Butler, Giving and Account of Oneself 63) and as that to which the subject must be ‘sensibly responsive’ in order for an ethical relation with the other to be established or maintained (Critchley The Ethics of Deconstruction 62), my discussion reveals that the interruption of one’s narrative is indeed presented as a moral necessity.

The protagonists’ experiences of disorientation are then what lead to what I discuss as the narratives re-oriented in the third section. As the closing discussion of Cambara’s and Jeebleh’s encounters show, it is only through having their narratives interrupted by the address of the Other that the mastery of their story can be challenged, disoriented and ethically reoriented to consider new frameworks predicated on an acknowledgment of vulnerability, fragility and interdependency.

The second part of this chapter, ‘The Ethics of Telling Links and Knots,’ focusses on the ethical implications of the two novels’ narrative strategies. Following from my previous discussion of the characters’ re-oriented
perspectives I argue that the novels’ narrative strategies invite the reader in both explicit and implicit ways to make similar reassessments of themes ranging from post-/neo-colonial phenomena (in a global as well as Somali context) to the predicaments of human existence in its widest sense.

In exploring the novels’ ethics of telling I begin by discussing how Links’ use of multiple perspectives serves to provide not only a counter-image to popular media accounts such as Ridley Scott’s film Black Hawk Down (2003), based on the journalist Mark Bowden’s Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War (1999), but a space in which multiple and contradicting perspectives on larger philosophical concerns may be heard in polyphonic dialogue. Links’ lack of clear ethical resolutions, reflected both in what I discuss as an ethics of multivocality and the novel’s lack of denouement, is ultimately what invites the reader to a more profound ethical reflection on violence, justice and retribution.

In turning to Knots, my readings reveal how the challenges facing the reader are not related to complex narrative structures, but rather to the novel’s strong sense of ontological Said, reflected primarily in the seemingly monolithic representation of Cambara. In revisiting some of the instances discussed in the first part of the chapter I discuss how the narrator’s lack of judgment regarding Cambara’s western expressions of benevolence, requires the reader to be attentive to other cues in the text. As my readings demonstrate, a fuller understanding of Knots’ ethical saying may be reached by probing the interruptive function of narrative silences, contradictions and ironic elements.

By paying close attention to Farah’s use of very different narrative strategies in Links and Knots, I am able to show that these novels are able to produce equally rich grounds for ethical reflection, thus contesting common critical assumptions that postmodern openendedness would be more conducive to ethical reflection than a seemingly more closed realist mode of narration.

**Narratives Interrogated**

Two excerpts from Links and Knots respectively serve as entry points for the themes discussed in this section: the novels’ complex renderings of guilt, blame, and diasporic recompense as brought to the fore in Jeebleh’s and Cambara’s returns. The first quotation is the very opening sentence of Knots, "Who do you blame?” (K 1). Apart from thematically introducing the queries of moral responsibility that figure prominently in both Knots and Links, Farah’s use of a question rather than a statement signifies his explorations of ethical concerns. The sense of an open-ended enquiry is further conveyed in the lack of a clear context. Although clearly addressed to the protagonist Cambara, the “who” and the “you” of the question remain unspecified in the
dialogue that follows, thereby rendering the specific concern of the question – the blame and guilt – open to multiple interpretations. Depending on whether “you” is interpreted generically as “who does one blame,” or as referring specifically to Cambara, the “what” of the question may range from Cambara’s failed marriage, the drowning of her son, or the acquisition of her property – all of which are reasons for her return – but also the civil war situation in general. The dialogue simply resists a final interpretation. Furthermore, the text’s refusal to clarify the subject and object of this question broadens the area of enquiry in ways which suggests that blaming is intrinsic to life in Mogadiscio at this time of civil war. Finally, it also signifies the ways in which both Jeebleh’s and Cambara’s returns may be read as processes of locating one’s narrative, asking them to respond to the question, “Who do you blame?”.

The second query is formulated in Jeebleh’s hope that in coming to Mogadiscio he “might be able to locate his mother’s story in the context of the bigger national narrative” (L 29). Whereas this wish refers to Jeebleh’s explicit concern to honour his diseased mother, while also seeking to understand the Somalia he left 20 years previously, it also reflects the ways in which the novels’ diasporic encounters bring different ethical frameworks into relief. The novels’ clear emphasis on Jeebleh and Cambara as moral agents, allows Farah to interrogate larger narratives and understandings of the ethical relation between Self and Other, especially as regards moral responsibility. Even though Links and Knots both depict the stories of Self and Other as inextricably intertwined, much in the same way as discussed in Chapter Two under the heading ‘Folded-together Resistance’, this understanding is consistently juxtaposed to other versions, especially collective and individualist accounts.

So what ethical perceptions, what narratives do Jeebleh and Cambara arrive with? The story that Jeebleh seeks to locate within the larger narrative is presented as clearly alternative in ways that serve to interrogate the collective that he encounters. Jeebleh’s overt expressions of resistance to the clan-based Somali version of blood community, seen for instance in his refusal to financially support his clan’s war machinery upon return to Mogadiscio (L 95) is undergirded by what may be described as a hybrid counter-narrative.

An important feature of Jeebleh’s counter-narrative is its emphasis on moral responsibility as belonging to the individual rather than the collective. The tension between collective and individual perceptions of moral responsibility is captured in the scene where Jeebleh reacts strongly when a man with an epileptic seizure is denied help on the basis that “[w]e do not bother with people we do not know!” (L 199). Jeebleh’s responds, “[b]ut he’s a human being just like you and me! . . . Why do you need to know his clan family before you help him? ... You make me sick, all of you!” (L 199) As so
often in Farah’s texts, pronouns are used to make a point; in this word exchange the “we” is juxtaposed with the “you and me” in Jeebleh’s response. Even though the “you” may be read as both directed to the man speaking and to the whole crowd, Jeebleh’s emphasis on second person “you” and “me” captures the novel’s main perspective on moral responsibility. Only via individual ownership and responsibility may the collective (blood-based or otherwise) be contested and transformed into a much larger collective of shared humanity.

*Links*’ portrayal of moral responsibility does not end with an extension beyond clan, family, or friendship, but the ‘collective’ is further expanded in the scene where Jeebleh prevents a boy from beating an Alsatian in labour, an intervention that clearly challenges the surrounding. Not only does Jeebleh make himself ‘unclean’ from a Moslem perspective by touching the dog and puppies, but by explaining to the boy beating the dog that “[w]hen you hurt the dog, I hurt” (*L* 130) the emphasis on individual responsibility is repeated via his use of “you” and “I.” This scene is preceded by Jeebleh having refused to co-operate with his clan’s wishes, and as he leaves the scene of the dog he hears a whisper: “What manner of a man chases away the elders of his clan, and in the same afternoon risks his life to save a bitch?” (*L* 131). The answer is provided in Farah’s characterizations of how Jeebleh – in order not “to lose touch with [his] own humanity” (*L* 201) – is compelled to respect the sanctity of life to the degree of caring even for the lowest of the low: a dog.

Farah’s emphasis on an individual rather than collective understanding of moral responsibility, reflected in Jeebleh’s use of ‘me’ as opposed to ‘us,’ explains why the notion of ‘blame’ is so opposed in Farah’s texts. Apart from the possibility of escape from moral responsibility enabled by the protective anonymity of the collective, blame places moral responsibility with someone else altogether, which, in the words of Jeebleh’s friend Bile may only be “unproductive” (*L* 167). To be morally responsible as an individual however, postulates moral agency. That is, the location of one’s story within the larger narrative, including larger questions of culpability or diasporic recompense, is predicated on the possibility of there being an individual story to locate. An important component in Farah’s interrogation of the collective is therefore the delineation of Cambara’s journey as a process of recovering her story.

For Cambara, the narrative to be located in a Somali context is largely formed in response to her experience of the collective while in diaspora, and contrasts with Jeebleh’s narrative by being ethically committed to individual and independent acting. This means that even though Cambara’s journey is

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43 Farah is adamant in opposing the blaming of others, as reflected for instance in his coinage of the derogatory term “blamocrats” alluding to autocrat, in his non-fictional work *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (2000).
presented as multiply motivated by a need to grieve the loss of her son while at the same time “repairing her relationship with the country” (K 212), her return also projects ethical commitments derived from Cambara’s attempts to break free from her dominant mother Arda. As illustrated in references such as Cambara’s “resolve to recover her dignity” (K 45), Cambara “conducting her life alone, which is the noble thing to do” (K 362), or Cambara’s “honourable intentions” and “high ideals” (K 201), words like “resolve,” “dignity,” “noble,” “honourable intentions,” and “high ideals” signal that Cambara’s individualist efforts are not merely responses to the civil war reality (where every relation must for reasons of security be carefully assessed), but proceed from an individualist ethical orientation.

Cambara’s ethics of independent acting is, on the one hand, part of what makes her one of Farah’s strong female characters, on par with Medina in Sardines (discussed in Chapter Two) and Duniya in Gifts (to be discussed in Chapter Five). As suggested by references to how Cambara seeks to put “some kind of life together” (K 230), to become “a woman in charge of her life” (K 220), and to do so “on [her] own terms and under [her] own steam” (K 82), Knots may indeed be read as an example of what Florence Stratton defines as a female bildungsroman, because of its conceptualization of women “not as the Other but as self-defining,” as “active and dynamic” (Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender 107). On the other hand, Cambara’s western(ized) expressions of being “active and dynamic” are also what the novel examines throughout, by problematizing her ‘successes’ as a female agent and rich returnee.

Cambara’s geographical relocation allows Farah to explore the changing face of precarity in ways that accentuate the western-feminist and postcolonial ramifications of Cambara’s individualist commitments. Out of these two, the feminist aspects are more overtly discussed as Cambara herself is portrayed to reflect on her need to learn from the women she encounters, most notably Kiin, the leader of the Women’s Network with whom Cambara starts to co-operate in her attempts to reclaim her property from one of Mogadiscio’s warlords. Cambara’s changing precarity is significant in this regard: although the war makes her more vulnerable than ever, she is at the same time portrayed becoming less vulnerable because of her new connections. In fact, the dominating structures Cambara was unable to break free from while in diaspora, she is able to counteract when re-entering a supposedly more patriarchal society – due to the strong women she encounters. Thus, Cambara’s growing dependency on the Women’s Network does not only signal how “the project of individualism fails in the material and cultural contexts of Somalia” (Moolla, Reading Nuruddin Farah 176), but her new agency, proceding from her liasons with the local feminist movement implies that Somali women need not be rescued by Western feminisms; there is already a strong local alternative. Ultimately, it
is not until joining efforts with the women’s network, but also in cooperating with “reconstructed men” (K 287), among them the peaceful Bile from *Links*, that Cambara is able to achieve her goal of reclaiming her property.

However, Cambara’s increased agency is not as innocent as a reading focussed solely on the feminist aspects of her endeavours might suggest (especially if *Knots*’ subtle critique of Western feminisms is not noted). Another significant factor behind Cambara’s recovered agency is namely her status and financial advantage as a rich ‘been-to.’ Waving her dollars and tipping generously, the newly arrived Cambara is immediately established as a rich western(ized) woman. In a way Cambara exhibits what Rosemary Marangoly describes as “the kind of authoritative self associated with the modern female subject” acquired by early female colonial settlers in colonial travel (*The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-century Fiction* 6). However, Cambara’s new “authoritative self” is not represented as an end in itself, but is entangled with her longing to “[repair] her relationship with the country” through caring for its citizens (K 212).

Similarly to Jeebleh in *Links*, Cambara is thus portrayed as negotiating her place as a rich returnee, only with more explicit references to guilt and what might be described as diasporic recompense. Depicted as strongly motivated by guilt for not having “endured the physical and mental pain of the strife” (K 298), Cambara’s return comes to display what Katharina Schramm describes as negotiating homecoming in terms of repatriation and reparations (243). Cambara states that mourning her losses will make clement sense only if she “involves herself at the same time in repairing her relationship with the country, to whose well-being she has never contributed in any direct way” (K 212). This means that apart from recovering and moving into the family property to demonstrate “her commitment to the country” (K 355), a second side of her endeavor is reflected in seeking to “help make the world that she finds a better place, in memory of her son” (K 136) and devoting herself “to the service of peace” (K 189). These expressions of good will and high ideals prove increasingly problematic however, as Cambara’s concern with concepts like “country,” “world” and “peace,” only appear to distance her from the lived reality of her multiple “Others.”

The lack of interpersonal connection is reinforced by Cambara’s internalization of the self-image of aidee/helper so typical in western discourses on Africa (Palmberg, *Encounter Images: in the Meetings between Africa and Europe*). This becomes particularly evident in the scene that describes Cambara’s first encounter with a group of young paramilitaries. Cambara’s version of contribution (apart from feeding them) is to confiscate the boys’ quaat and make them work in Zaak’s house to the background of her CD-player playing her own composition – to which they all respond by stopping to work and “star[ing] at her in doe-eyed fascination” (K 97-98).
The change from being young rascals high on narcotics, to industrious young boys, depicts Cambara’s (western) presence as bringing out their most innocent and feminized selves, as reflected in their ‘doe-like’ expressions. When some of the older youngsters want to rebel, the adult driver responds by stating that he looks at “this lady [as] a godsend,” arguing that what she has accomplished during only a couple of hours by organizing them to work instead of chewing quaat and carrying guns means that “there is still time for us to save ourselves. There is hope yet for us to regain peace” (K 100). The man’s almost religious lingo with words like ‘save,’ ‘hope,’ and ‘peace’ (addressed to an undefined large collective, ‘us’) reinforces the overall impression that Cambara truly is ‘godsend’ – a perspective she is not reported to ever disclaim. And yet, Cambara is depicted as hoping that “she will have become a person to befriend, not the new boss on the block” (K 102). This proves impossible: as she has bestowed her graces from above, she may only remain a heroine to whom all the youths in Zaak’s employ will later “[form] a line to pay their admiring respect” (K 268). As Cambara has made herself the focus of agency – not the boys she encounters – she remains in a position of privilege and superiority in which she is far from asking the question always posed by Kiin and the Women’s Network: “What do you need? What do you want? ‘Be specific. . . How can I be of help?” (K 214, emphasis added).

The lack of dialogue that feature in Cambara’s handling of the young paramilitaries comes to a head in her encounter with the supposedly orphaned boy, SilkHair. There are echoes here of Misra in Maps. Similarly to Misra’s initial response of finding a replacement child in Askar to compensate for the one she has just lost, Cambara’s replacement of her 8-year old son Dalmar she has just lost in a drowning accident may be read in terms of appropriation of the Other. By calling him SilkHair, a name referring to his exterior attributes rather than his personality or personal history, Cambara disregards the boy’s singularity completely. Cambara’s failure to respect, let alone appreciate SilkHair’s singularity is reinforced by the complete lack of dialogue: on no occasion is he asked about his past or about what led him to live as a child soldier in the streets. Not only is SilkHair’s history reduced to a minimum, but the lack of dialogue, together with the fact that Cambara addresses him with her chosen nickname throughout the novel – also when his real name Agoon is made known to her (K 100) – indicates that he may join her only as her silk-haired version of him.

This reduction of Saying into Said is further conveyed in a series of transformative acts, beginning with Cambara’s dressing of Agoon. The opening of the suitcase containing Dalmar’s clothes represents, on one level, Cambara’s acknowledgement of her pained memories, her grief, and also her determination to actively work through her trauma. However, the dressing of
Agoon also lends itself to a different metaphorical reading, where Agoon is transformed into the much-missed Dalmar when offered his clothes. The dressing only marks the beginning of Cambara’s adoptive process as explicated in her plans to “turn Agoon into a cause: clothe him, pamper him with bountiful love, given that she has plenty of it. She imagines that she has as much untaken love as a breast-feeding mother whose baby has died has milk” (K 92). Not only does this statement declare Cambara’s self-appointed role as mother, but the combination of a highly intimate use of vocabulary with references to infancy, breast-feeding and milk, disharmonize with Agoon being “turn[ed]... into a cause”. The dissonance conveyed in Cambara’s use of conflicting registers becomes representative of her relation to the boy. In reducing Agoon to an abstraction like “cause” the intimate relation hoped for is prevented from taking shape.

The reduction of the other into an abstraction is also reflected in the way that Cambara’s transformative acts link to larger projects such as her “abiding commitment” to “the construction of peace” (K 214, 184). The emphasis on “commitment” and “construction” is keenly sensed in Cambara’s explication of her plan to “take care of [SilkHair], disarm him, school him, and turn him into a fine boy, peace-loving, caring” (K 92), a statement where all action (as reflected in the verbal phrases “disarm,” “school,” and “turn into a fine boy”) is attributed to Cambara, whereas the adjectives “fine,” “peace-loving,” and “caring” are all ascribed to Agoon. Not only does this clear division between agent and recipient strengthen the impression of unilateral exchange, but it ties in with the feminist aspects of Cambara’s commitment to “make the world... a better place [by] repair[ing] several of the wrongs to which the societies of men have subjected women throughout the ages” (K 136, 287). Thus, fostering young boys into what Cambara refers to as “reconstructed men, able to express their humanness in a way that is beneficial to all” (K 287), contributes to a reconstructed society. However beautifully framed, Cambara’s appeals to feminist endeavours of changing the world may not change the fact that she uses Agoon’s precarious situation for her own purposes, and in doing so, she re-enacts the hegemonical violence she has sought to escape in leaving her mother.

The interlinking of Cambara’s different projects of transformation (Agoon), construction (peace), reparation and reconstruction (society) is firmly established when a fourth project is added: the reclaiming of Cambara’s family property occupied by a warlord. The reclaiming of property would not seem particularly problematic had it not been for the ambiguity of meaning conveyed in Cambara’s statement of purpose: “I want my own property back, and I want to put my life together the best way I can, on my own terms and under my own steam” (K 82). While “property” clearly refers to house in this context, the subsequent reference to the owning of her life suggests a more polyvalent and ambiguous meaning of the term, resulting in
a problematic metonomy between property as house and property as child. This sense is reinforced when reading Cambara’s plans against her history of other losses – that of her apartment in Canada, and that of her son – acts attributed to her former husband’s greed and neglect. The finding of a child to replace Cambara’s lost one fits only too nicely in the overall project of reclaiming property and putting “[her] life together” (K 230). Ironically, the civil war enables this expression of narrative (re)construction, and the unclaimed orphan Agoon may be appropriated just like Cambara’s family property – in their absence – was claimed by a warlord.

Narratives Disoriented

While the diasporic condition may be perceived of as already ‘disoriented’ in terms of dislocated or reconfigured subjectivities, I will in this section explore the various ways in which the protagonists’ narratives of subjectivities, moral agency and responsibility are portrayed as inevitably and relentlessly interrupted by first the civil war reality and secondly the stories of the other. Not only are these interruptions shown to lay bare the characters’ ethical reflection on just action in a traumatic existence, but they become the very means by which to ethically engage with the other. In paying particular attention to moments of alienation or uncertainty my readings show that the disorientation of one’s story is in fact presented as a moral necessity.

One of Jeebleh’s reasons for returning to Somalia is articulated as the aim to “listen...learn [and] assess the extent of my culpability as a Somali” (L 32). Simultaneously however, and quite similar to Cambara, Jeebleh is presented as arriving in Mogadiscio with perfected versions of right and wrong (L 201), including perceptions of how justice is to best be accomplished. Although less inclined than Cambara to “put other people’s lives in some order” (K 118), Jeebleh is also largely motivated by a wish to exact vengeance on Caloosha, the man responsible for the torture and imprisonment of him and his friend Bile during the Siyad Barre regime. By doing so, Jebleh hopes to make amends for not having suffered like his friend Bile, and for not having more directly contributed to the struggle for a just society. In doing so he will not only prove his loyalty to Bile – settle accounts on behalf of Bile and himself – but also “rid this society of vermin like Caloosha, a canker in the soul of his years of imprisonment and exile” (L 89). Jeebleh’s mission to “rid society of vermin” is portrayed as initially overshadowing the aim to “listen” and “learn,” and is also presented by Farah as fairly easily accomplished. For the latter to be realised, the narrative Jeebleh has arrived with must be interrupted, beginning with his encounter with civil war atrocities that generate questions never previously considered.
Beyond demanding a pragmatic response, the war-torn city haunted by “a nightmare of loyalties” (L 64) sets the scene for Farah’s renderings of Jeebleh’s more existential negotiations of loyalties and selves. He is for instance described as “becoming two people, one leading a familiar life, the other a life that was unfamiliar; one looking in from the outside, the other looking out from inside” (L 152). However, what begins as a characterization of the familiar predicament of diasporic existence, where the split subject negotiates a double or multiple belonging, soon moves into renderings of a deeper form of alienation, in which the civil war plays an instrumental role.

In one of *Links*’ opening scenes Jeebleh witnesses how a young boy becomes the target in a killing game played by bored armed youths. Apart from confronting Jeebleh with societal decay in revealing both pervading apathy and powerlessness, this incident marks the beginning of a journey in which Jeebleh is described to feel like “a changed man” (L 19), “paranoid,” (L 150) and even “alienated from himself, as though he had become another person” (L 42). Jeebleh’s experience of alienation when faced with violence clearly goes beyond the kind of disorientation that may be accredited to an unfixed condition of diaspora, and renders his position on high moral ground impossible: “Perhaps he wasn’t as exempt as he had believed from the contagion that was of a piece with civil wars as he had believed; perhaps he was beginning to catch the madness” (L 69). This soul-searching aspect of disorientation, a crack in Jeebleh’s moral framework as it were, is presented as a necessary step towards more viable ethical positionings, as it suggests that it is only via interruptions in which the mastery of one’s story is contested that one’s story may be opened to that of Others.

What distinguishes Jeebleh’s experience of existential narrative disorientation from the kind of moral confusion displayed in the random killing of a young boy is its social dimension, its ethical provocation to engage with the Other. Contrary to engendering moral response, Jeebleh’s interferences on behalf of (unknown) others (as discussed above) reveal how disorientation may instead be utilized to counter the “incurable apathy” of civil war (L 237). Jeebleh’s disorientation may thus be read as an example of what Butler describes as the “opacity” that render us incapable of “offering narrative closure for our lives” while also constituting our very ethical resource, because it reveals a kind of incoherence that indicates the way in which we are “constituted in relationality” (*Giving an Account* 64).

The relational constitution of the Self is illustrated in Jeebleh’s reference to how he and his friends are being “forever linked through the chains of the stories they shared” (L 334). Even though this quotation refers to friendship, it also illustrates the kind of moral responsibility evoked by Jeebleh’s exposure to the vulnerability of unknown others – whether a young boy, a man in an epileptic seizure, or an Alsatian in labour. Jeebleh’s chain of stories has also been read in other ways. Fiona F. Moolla perceives this
chain as an example of a “shift in the nature of subjectivity,” where *Links*’ foregrounding of the individual’s “capacity to form associational bonds with other autonomous, self-narrating subjects” contrasts with earlier novels’ presentation of “the self-generating, perfectly self-sufficient subject. . . as a utopian ideal” (*Reading Nuruddin Farah* 165, 164). I believe that Moolla is right to the degree that there is a dynamic interrogation of subjectivities in Farah’s trilogies. However, as should be clear from the discussions so far in this study, I do not perceive Moolla’s essentially individualist understanding of the Self to ever be presented as an “utopian ideal” in Farah’s fiction. In fact, even a more relational version of the liberal subject, such as implied in Moolla’s description of how the individual in *Links* “now needs to connect” (165) fails to account for the relational constitution conveyed in Jeebleh’s conviction that he and his friends will continue to “visit one another, welcome one another into their homes, and into their stories” (*L* 334, emphasis added). A reading much closer to my own is presented in Kerry Bystrom’s “Humanitarianism, Responsibility, *Links, Knots*.” By reading Jeebleh’s “chain of stories” through the lense of Derridean ‘foldedness’ and responsibility, Bystrom claims that the Self emerging in *Links* is “an unfinished story,” a story which is “incomplete without the other” (414–415). In view of the examples where Jeebleh is compelled to act on behalf of unknown Others, this foldedness is moral and existential in ways that links the dignity of the Self with any Other. The answer to *Links*’ pivotal question of how to remain in touch with one’s humanity in the face of civil war, is thus bound to engage with the story of the Other.

If Jeebleh’s ambivalence is presented as related to facing the realities of civil war, Cambara’s ambivalence is initially expressed primarily in terms of struggling to reconcile her growing need for others with her commitment to independent acting. Initially, these “changes taking place in her” cause her to feel a “deep sense of alienation taking root,” being “presently a stranger to her everyday self” and asking herself: “What will her life be like in her altered circumstances?” (*K* 354-355). However, what begins as pragmatic challenges to independent acting demands a kind of exchange beyond just the pragmatics, and in the process of determining people’s trustworthiness and forming strategic relationships, Cambara is inevitably faced with the stories of others.

The disorientation of Cambara’s narrative is illustrated in the scene where she is depicted leaving Bile’s apartment and boldly stating: “Don’t bother. I’ll see my way out” (*K* 332). Not only does Cambara’s response reflect her

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44 Even though the ‘foldedness’ that Bystrom refers to here is more overtly displayed in some of Farah’s other novels (see especially my discussion of ‘folded-together resistance’ in Chapter Two), Bystrom’s remark reinforces the sense that Farah’s representations of the Self as relationally constituted are remarkably coherent over time, especially considering the fact that Farah’s trilogies have been written over a period of more than three decades.
commitment to do everything “under her own steam” (K 82), but the story of how she gets lost on her way out and ends up in the dark basement also lends itself to a metaphorical reading that illustrates how a narrative lacking in address leads her to nowhere but obscurity, confusion and isolation. This scene is paralleled by Links’ description of Jeebleh who, alienated and losing strength, describes himself mentally “in a corridor as narrow as tunnels are dark” (L 217). In trying to locate the arrows that might point to one exit Jeebleh finds that there are none. The coupling of narrowness and darkness is significant here as the spatial reference reinforces a sense of disorientation as confinement. In contrast to Jeebleh’s experience of confinement, Cambara’s lostness is presented as temporary because she hears her name being called by her company waiting outside the building. This example of address and disorientation seems to be each others’ very prerequisites: only in being addressed from the outside may Cambara find her way out, and only in that state of disorientation is she in a position to open up for the address of the Other. In this context Lévinas offers important complementary terminology for describing what takes place in regard to address and the other. For Lévinas an encounter with alterity requires the self to “respond to another” (Otherwise than Being 47). Farah’s characterization of Cambara’s literal and figurative experience of disorientation thus indicates that she must first be disoriented and confronted with her interior alterity, or what Butler refers to as ‘opacity’ before she can come into contact with the alterity of others. As Butler argues, “my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others” (Account 84). The act of being addressed, as having one’s name called, is thus what opens the door for addressing the other.

In Farah’s texts important representations of address are also found in the characters’ invitation to narrate, often formulated in the simple request “Let’s hear your story” (K 177). When the sharing of stories turns into more than an exchange of information, when it involves what Huttunen et al. define as “the speaking subject’s acceptance of its own exposure to the other’s presence” (Seeking the Self – Encountering the Other: Diasporic Narrative and the Ethics of Representation xii) – something profound takes place. An important example of this is found in Cambara’s meeting with Jijo, the woman described as the wife (or rather, property) of the warlord that has occupied Cambara’s family property. The act of listening to Jijo’s story, not only as a means of finding out how to reclaim the property, but in order to just hear the other’s story, brings a recognition of shared predicaments: “The two of them no longer dwell in distinctly autonomous spheres, marked off by their known differences in terms of class, provenance, and experience or by an invisible boundary of mistrust” (K 175). Not only does the realisation of the interrelatedness of their stories challenge Cambara’s superiority as
diasporic returnee, but in the process of listening, linkages are formed that shake the foundations of her belief in individual autonomy. Apart from challenging Jeebleh’s and Cambara’s narratives as the only valid ones, sharing in the stories of the Other is presented as leading to more profound realizations of guilt. For Cambara, the acknowledgement of having dragged others into her mission (K 212, 214), risking that others may be harmed (K 365), thereby constituting a cost, and affecting lives (K 282), stands in sharp contrast to her endeavours of alleviating vague forms of diasporic culpability, discussed earlier.

*Links* representations of Jeebleh are less explicit in regard to this sense of a moral debt, and Jeebleh clearly struggles to find his bearings in a society ravaged by injustice. Jeebleh’s frustration is particularly striking in the scene where Jeebleh visits his friend’s five-year-old granddaughter who is traumatized and mute from having experienced an American helicopter attack as a baby. The mother’s intense story serves to put Jeebleh’s narrative of moral response in sharp relief: “Without thinking,” he gives her a large sum of money in local currency, as if to compensate for the injustice done (L 277). As the mother looks up, as if to ask “What am I to do with this?” Jeebleh’s words fail him, caused by embarrassment and feelings of guilt (L 277). The ethical force of this scene, contrary to what may initially seem to be the case, derives from the scene’s lack of moral resolution – indeed, its lack of consolation. The atrocities of civil war may not be fully articulated or resolved – the only reasonable response therefore is to “listen,” “learn” and “assess” one’s own place in the larger narrative (L 32).

**Narratives Reoriented?**

Having discussed *Links*’ and *Knots*’ representations of interrupted and disoriented narratives, this section explores the possibilities presented for these narratives and ethical frameworks to be reoriented. While the idea of reorientation might suggest a more clean-cut resolution of ethical perspectives than is ever provided in Farah’s novels, my more tentative use of reorientation seeks to encompass the ethical pragmatism demanded by Farah’s representations of injustice, violence and war while simultaneously taking into consideration the abiding ambivalences of his novels. The question mark in the subheading is thus meant to lead away from connoting a hermeneutic arrival of any kind, but seeks to embrace the questions generated in representations of the protagonists’ encounters with the stories of the Other.

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45 The historical context of the woman’s story is the American military intervention, ironically titled ‘Operation Restore Hope’, that lasted from December 1992 to May 1993.
I wish to begin this section’s discussion by asking what kind of ethical framework is called for by the novels’ civil war context. Is it possible to perceive Farah’s diaspora figure as postmodern, decentred and unstable, and yet as a subject with moral agency? Or posed differently in Judith Butler’s more existential framing of the same concern: “If it is really true that we are, as it were, divided, ungrounded, or incoherent from the start, will it be impossible to ground a notion of personal or social responsibility?” (Giving an Account of Oneself 19). Farah’s strong emphasis on the diasporic character as moral agent, noted earlier, together with the pragmatism called for by the characters’ civil war reality suggest that ambivalence and incoherence are not perceived of as ethical values in and of themselves.  

Even though characters that adopt hybrid identities in Farah’s fiction often illustrate significant acts of postcolonial resistance to homogeneous identity constructions, Farah’s fictional writing can hardly be said to celebrate postmodern perceptions of the Self. Such wariness is reflected not least in Links’ references to how the civil war context renders the idea of people “constantly reinventing themselves” (L 23) a highly ambiguous and even dangerous enterprise. Although the civil war as disruptive force challenges the self’s narrative in ways that may indirectly and paradoxically call for new ways of relating ethically to the other, civil war-related disorientation may just as well have the opposite effect, where people’s “inability to remain in touch with their inner selves or to remember who they were before the slaughter began” (L 70), is presented as an utterly frustrating condition. An example of the resulting relational confusion is taken from a scene in Links where Jeebleh discusses the war with one of Mogadiscio’s inhabitants:

[A]ll of us who’ve lived in this civil war have become someone other than ourselves for brief periods of time. . . Have you too become someone other, in spite of yourself? . . . . “I know I am someone other than myself,” Faahiye said. “At times it’s pretty hard to figure out who I am, especially when I am by myself. This gets a lot more

46 The discussion around agency and power has been central in the wake of the postmodern “dissolution of the subject,” and critics have voiced a concern with the ethical (and political) implications of seeing subjectivities as either fragmented and in flux, or as inexorably discursively or symbolically shaped (Lois McNay 79, 4). Many critics would, along with Donald R. Wehrs, argue that “the undermining of unified subjectivity and rationality threatens to make theoretically impossible any account of agency” (21). Although I will not go as far as to exchange the term “subject” for “agent” altogether, as Paul Smith suggested in Discerning the Subject (1988), Smith’s demand for a terminology that reinstalls agency resonates with this study’s readings of the trilogies’ representations of power relations and precarity, not least as illustrated in Links’ and Knots’ renderings of moral responses in a civil war context.

47 Nonno in Secrets is one such character whose refusal to be bound by the definitions of the Italian colonial powers is reflected in his refusal to have his clanname in his identitycard, requesting instead to be referred to in political terms – as British (which he is not).
challenging when I am with others, who are themselves others! (L 247)

The condition of ‘being someone else’ is presented as causing a kind of collective confusion that frustrates opportunities for trust foundational to a functioning society. Apart from its political consequences however, the ‘reinvention of self’ is also presented as ethically equivocal.

A viable alternative is presented in Links’ portrayal of Bile’s experience of being released from jail after years of detention and solitary confinement:

I decided to think of myself as a free man. Then I realized I didn’t have to hide in one of the city’s shadowy corners, or reinvent myself by changing the history of my loyalties. It was then that I finally decided to celebrate my freedom! (L 117)

Bile’s commitment to come out of hiding literally and figuratively – in terms of mind, will and emotions – is reflected in an open expression of himself and his convictions. Only as Bile stops hiding from his past or refuses to be caught in a constant shifting of subject positions and loyalties, does he report on having recovered the sense of moral integrity that later leads him to build ‘The Refuge,’ a shelter that caters to the needs of others.

The relational framing of ‘freedom’ is particularly relevant to readings of Cambara’s narrative, where her reoriented perspectives concerning the ‘reinvention of self’ take multiple shapes and forms. Cambara’s reorientation is first of all presented via a changing attitude towards wearing various disguises. Following in natural progression from the ‘masks’ she has worn while in diaspora (including for instance her pretend circumcision, and marriage-on-paper to her cousin Zaak, both of which are instigated by her mother), Cambara is portrayed as using various disguises, primarily in the form of the veil she is required to use in public. The use of this masking proves ambiguous though: on the one hand the “bodily boundary around a veiled woman, whom a man must not approach in an irreverent way” (K 163) serves as a means of protection; on the other hand, the veil does not hide her “elsewhere look” (K 121) which makes Cambara fearful of having her “disloyalty” discovered (K 110). Disloyalty in this context may of course be read in terms of Cambara’s cultural and religious diversion from traditional uses of a veil, but also as an example of counter-narration as a means of resistance. In a similar vein, she unzips her veil on the sides in order to defend herself from attackers (K 167) – a metaphoric breaking out of and enlarging of the veil to accommodate her own needs. But even so, Cambara is portrayed as finding “the requirements of her veil-wearing identity not only too demanding but exhausting, burdensome, too hot to lug along, and too cumbersome to accommodate” (K 130), where adjectives like “exhausting,”
“burdensome,” and “cumbersome” open for a metaphorical reading that reflects a growing ambivalence towards ‘reinvention of self’ as a way of life.

Cambara’s reoriented perspectives are illustrated in one of Knots’ central scenes where Cambara visits Bile, her love at first sight, for the first time. The scene’s centrality stems from two sources. First of all it effectively brings out the ambivalences in Farah’s portrayal of Cambara, where some of the problems discussed in relation to colonial legacies remains to be acknowledged. Bile is depressed and seriously ill from the medication he has taken, and Cambara is portrayed as caring for him with the greatest of tenderness – washing him, changing his clothes, feeding him – not being overwhelmed by the state he is in. Although Bile is ascribed strength elsewhere in Farah’s portrayal of him (related to his integrity and work as a doctor and peace-activist), this scene again puts Cambara in a position of helper and heroine. Particularly troubling is the frequent references to a child-mother relationship with words like “infancy,” “babyhood,” “tucks him in,” “offers food like a mother” (K 315), or Bile holding Cambara’s hand “as a child might a teddy bear in his sleep: hogging, hugging, squeezing it” (K 315). The paternalistic impression is reinforced with the striking parallels to Cambara’s first encounter with Agoon, where she decides to take care of him after he had soiled himself after a gunshot scared him as they were travelling in the car. (K 92)

Having noted several problematic aspects of this scene, I still wish to argue for its centrality in conveying not just problematic ambivalences, but also for the ways that it suggests an opening towards reoriented ethical perspectives – again via a discussion of Cambara’s previous use of the veil. A second important feature is thus formulated in the question that the delirious Bile asks regarding “the elsewhere veil” (K 313) she wore the one time they met: “Doesn’t it feel lonely? ... Doesn’t a veil make the wearer feel lonely?” (K 319). In moving beyond any cultural, religious or political implications of this question, Bile’s question pinpoints the ethical effects of Cambara’s veil-wearing as acting/pretending/hiding. From this perspective it is significant that in this second encounter Cambara is described as entering unveiled, literally and figuratively. The sense of a more equal ethical vulnerability is reinforced by the fact that Cambara’s gift-giving is different this time. No longer does she enact the kind of generosity that left her a celebrated international star with SilkHair and the newly-fed young crowd. This time Cambara brings no gifts apart from her own two hands.

Ultimately, it is Cambara’s willingness to be profoundly affected by the vulnerability of Bile that opens for a reframing of her ethical commitments. Her experience of being what Butler defines as “impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others” (Frames of War 14), is thus what brings about Cambara’s epiphanic sense of ‘ethical connection’ that ends with her reflection: “If only we’d admit to being weaker than we think. Weak we are
born; weak we’ll die” (K 366). By embracing “precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure” (Frames of War 2) as a shared human predicament, Cambara embraces a kind of “we” that returns us to Farah’s depiction of Jeebleh’s insistence on shared humanity as the basis for ethical responsibility.

The Ethics of Telling *Links* and *Knots*

For all that binds Farah’s *Past Perfect* trilogy together – thematically speaking but also through its overlapping cast – *Links*, *Knots* and *Crossbones* are quite different in the ways they are narrated. Whereas the ethical implications of Jeebleh’s return in *Links* is mediated primarily via interior monologues and conversations between characters, *Knots*’ portrayal of Cambara builds on Cambara’s self-reflection and practical interaction with other characters, rather than conversations. Furthermore, even though the trilogy’s third novel *Crossbones*, shares many similarities with *Links*, several of the narrative strategies are brought to their extreme, in ways that call for a separate discussion (the ethical moments of telling and reading *Crossbones* is thus the main focus in Chapter Five). Not only do these differences accentuate Farah’s wide stylistic register, but, as will be argued in the closing discussion of this chapter, they highlight the ways in which quite different narrative strategies may be utilized in producing equally rich ground for ethical reflection.

‘*Links* and an Ethics of Multivocality

In turning first to *Links*, several affinities may be noted with the openness to interpretation featuring Farah’s first trilogy, discussed in Chapter Two. The lack of closure, however, is taken a step further with *Links*, given that several significant details regarding Jeebleh’s actions and ethical motivations are withheld from the reader. Moreover, *Links* relies largely on the use of complementary and multiple perspectives as means towards readerly engagement and ethical reflection. By way of introducing the novel’s various uses of multiple perspectives I wish to begin with a quotation taken from the end of *Links* where Jeebleh seeks to understand the circumstances surrounding his mother’s last days:

As things stood, his own story lay in a tarry of other people’s tales, each with its own Dantean complexity. His story was not an exemplar to represent or serve in place of the others: it wouldn’t do to separate his from those informing it, or to rely solely on it for moral and political edification. Only when gathering the fragments together would he hold his mother’s tale in awkward deference, separating it from the others, giving it its deserved honor. (L 331)
Although this passage reflects on one of Jeebleh’s main reasons for returning to Mogadiscio, it may also be used to illustrate the emergence of an ethics of multivocality – reflected both in the ethics of the told and the telling.

To begin with, Jeebleh’s description of how his story lies “in a tarry of other people’s tales” reinforces the sense that Jeebleh’s personal ethics hinges on an acknowledgement of being folded-together with the stories of unspecified Others. Although this perspective is articulated already at the beginning of the novel as Jeebleh’s aim “to learn and to listen” (L 32), the ethical impetus to do so is significantly sharpened in his encounters with violence, suffering, and the stories of the Other. However, in spite of this initial ethical resolution, Jeebleh is portrayed as having to lose his bearings existentially and morally before he might actually embrace the idea that each person’s story has its own “Dantean complexity” – its own hierarchies of moral virtues and vices – and demands respect.

However, Jeebleh’s resolve to “gather the fragments together” before making a final careful assessment is not limited to the level of character, but also becomes representative of the text’s demands on the reader. As will be argued, the lack of clear ethical resolutions together with a kind of Bakhtinian polyphony is ultimately what allows for readers to draw very different ethical conclusions, as the critical discussion of especially Links’ lack of denouement is evidence of.

A quick overview of Links’ critical reception shows that the novel has often been read in terms of producing a counter-image to representations of the American intervention such as Mark Bowden’s Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War, the book which serves as the basis of Ridley Scott’s film from 2003. Bystrom, for instance, sees Links as providing “a sensitive counter-balance” to “popular media portrayals,” for “even an anti-interventionist film like Ridley Scott’s Black Hawk Down . . . represents the affair through the Savages-Victim-Saviours paradigm” (412-413). Even though a counter-image to Black Hawk Down is certainly provided, a more careful reading of Links reveals that what the novel has to offer is indeed several accounts. To this end, Inez Mzali’s “Wars of Representations: Metonymy and Nuruddin Farah’s Links” is closer to the mark. Mzali argues that Links “counters the sensationalist media representation of Somalia” by offering a “representation in which the direct spectacle of violence is often mediated and deferred rather than exposed” (85). By thus evading the “overwhelming and often decontextualized spectacle of violence,” Mzali continues, “the novel rather gives space to contiguous perspectives on the situation in Mogadishu” (86). The decentering of violence noted in Mzali’s lucid reading, contributes significantly to an understanding of what makes Farah’s interrogations of media representations so powerful. However, for all its merits, reading Links in relation to media representations as Mzali does, runs the same risk as Bystrom’s discussion of popular media accounts, to
reduce *Links’* broader ethical enquiry to the narrower function of counter-image. In order to understand how *Links’* explorations of especially the role of violence and non-violence – while firmly rooted in a Somali context – also provide opportunities for more universal philosophical reflection, I argue that *Links’ first* needs to be read on its own, as an exposé of multiple and often contradictory perspectives.

Farah’s way of letting multiple and conflicting voices be heard has been widely addressed in critical reception, and often in relation to Farah’s own comment in an interview from 1993:

> What I like to do, in telling a story, is . . . to allow very many different competing views to be heard, which in a sense points to the democratic drift of my writing, the drift of tolerance. Tolerating the views of other people and co-existing with the contradictions . . . means to me what democracy is. (Farah, quoted in Pajalich 63)

Derek Wright, for example describes Farah’s aesthetic as “many-voiced discourse” characterized by “a spirit of democratic pluralism” (“Introduction” xix), and Alden and Tremaine use Farah’s own references to “tolerance” and “democracy” to describe the prevalent intellectual debates in Farah’s fiction (*Nuruddin Farah* 176, 178). The peaceful co-existence of contradictory perspectives implied in all of the above descriptions – including Farah’s own – resonates well with *Links’* representations of multivocality, not least because of the fact that these multiple perspectives surface in conversations between friends (As my discussion of *Crossbones*’ representations of democracy in Chapter Five shows, Farah’s multiple perspective may also be utilized to paint a very grim picture of the Somali political situation).

In order to capture the ethical openness entailed in Farah’s use of multiple perspectives, I wish to complement the above accounts with references to what Mikhail Bakhtin, in his famous delineation of Dostoyevsky, describes as polyphony. The main thrust of Bakthin’s argument is that each character in Dostoevsky’s work represents a voice that speaks for an individual self, distinct from others. This rejection of the “monologic world of the author’s consciousness” means in Bakhtin’s view that “that which had been all of reality here becomes only one of the aspects of reality” (*Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics* 43). The decentering of the author’s voice, from having represented the one central account, to being just one voice among other voices captures an essential aspect of Farah’s fiction, as the discussion of the first trilogy’s resistant narrative strategies in Chapter Two has already implied. Furthermore, Bakhtin’s linking of the concept of polyphony with an ethical stance on the unfinalizability of the Self provides a compelling means
of understanding both Jeebleh’s “chain of stories,” discussed above, and the open-ended enquiry in *Links*.\(^{48}\)

Farah’s multivocality entails the co-existence of unresolved tensions and contradictory perspectives, most clearly expressed in *Links’* representations of how the exchange between Jeebleh and his friends of old, his ‘brother’ Bile and their mutual Irish friend Seamus opens for several ethical positions. In juxtaposing their various definitions of justice and the interrelated questions of the moral imperative to see justice done, Farah makes the reader ponder two of the novel’s main questions, familiar from the first trilogy: How is justice best pursued? How to achieve justice without becoming like your perpetrator? Both Bile and Seamus are presented as men of peace that have taken a non-violent stand regarding the use of violence in general and the Somali situation in particular. Well aware of the ‘contagious’ nature of civil war (*L* 69), they warn Jeebleh on more than one occasion: “Let no madness hurt you into bearing a gun” (*L* 264).

Significantly, Bile’s and Seamus’ moral positioning does in no way serve to cast them as less pragmatic than Jeebleh who has arrived with a clear mission to see justice done with Caloosha: Bile, apart from taking no part in the clan-business, spends all his energy as a medical doctor at the Refuge caring for children and widows whereas Seamus’ resistance and contribution to peace is similarly expressed in his practical and artistic skills employed at the shelter. Apart from modelling a non-violent ethical stand, Seamus’ narrative function also involves providing a larger perspective on war and conflict. Portrayed as having grown up in Belfast and having lost loved ones in the sectarian fighting of The Troubles, Seamus facilitates the mirroring of Somali (African) conditions with Irish (European) ones, thereby challenging old paradigms of clan/tribal wars as ‘third world’ phenomena.\(^{49}\)

In order to capture the ethical impetus created by *Links* use of multivocality, attention must also be paid to a largely neglected feature accompanying its use: the confusion generated by these various perspectives. Crucial for understanding the ethical momentum created by *Links*, is the sense of confusion (and disorientation) following from the lack of clear answers. As illustrated in one of the novel’s very first scenes where Jeebleh poses question after question to the mysterious go-between character Af-Laawe that has come to pick him up from the airport, the answers do not provide clarity, but only add to Jeebleh’s confusion. Apart from the evasiveness featuring several of Af-Laawe’s responses, one of his answers, “It

\(^{48}\) Bakhtin’s philosophical perception of how the individual cannot be finalized, completely understood, known, or labelled intersects in significant ways with the philosophical accounts of Lévinas, Cavarò, and Butler, as delineated in Chapter One.

\(^{49}\) Malik in *Crossbones* has a narrative function similar to Seamus’. Portrayed as a seasoned war correspondent, the recurring references to his experience from the Congo, Afghanistan, Iraq, “and other of the world’s hotspots” (*C* 14) serve to put the particularities of the Somali context into a global perspective, and make the atrocities seem less unique to the Somali situation.
depends on who you talk to” (L 5), becomes representative of the novel on the whole.

On the one hand, the sense of confusion accompanying the characters’ exposure to several perspectives follows the discussion from the earlier section on narrative disorientation. However, the phenomenon that Alden and Tremaine refers to as Farah’s “determined indeterminacy” (99) may not be isolated to describe the characters alone. When Mzali reads *Links* as “a series of scenes, or pieces of stories that interact and relate to one another but do not form a coherent exclusive and conclusive narrative” (100), her observation must be perceived of as also affecting the reader. It would seem that this is where the reader is made to imaginatively experience the difficulties faced by Jeebleh’s in his process of “locating stor[ies]” (L 32) into larger frameworks.

The ending is particularly significant in this regard, as its lack of denouement means a lack of resolution regarding the novel’s ethical enquiry into the relation between justice and violence. The reader is likely to already having experienced certain difficulties in assessing Jeebleh’s shift from “oppo[sing] all forms of violence” to being “all for justice, by any means possible” (L 332), a change portrayed as greatly disturbing not only to Bile and Seamus, but to Jeebleh himself: “Did it mean – and this was very worrying to him – that Caloosa had won him over to his way of doing things, crudely and cruelly?” (L 320-321). In other words, has Jeebleh’s change of moral positioning served to form him into the image of the very perpetrator he seeks to rid society of – even in the name of justice? Before Jeebleh decides to take matters into his own hands and arrange for Caloosa’s murder, he poses a series of questions: “[W]hat is one to do when there is no other way to rid society of vermin? Which would he rather be, someone who advocates for peace, or someone who does what he can – despite the risks – to improve the lives of many others?” (L 332). Jeebleh’s questions remain significantly unanswered, leaving the reader to interpret a protagonist who ultimately rejects the highly pragmatic alternative ethical perspectives forwarded by Bile and Seamus for his own pragmatism.

The novel’s ending offers no further clarification as how to interpret Jeebleh’s shift in perspective, and critical responses span from quite clear interpretations, perceiving the novel’s presentation of Jeebleh’s orientation as “laudable” (Bystrom 11), and even “redeem[ing] Jeebleh in the community and in his own eyes (Brady, Review) to emphasizing the novel’s indeterminacy in the matter (Mzali 96). What all these critics do however is to point out also the tension entailed. Bystrom, for instance sees this shift as “inspiring unease, echoing as it does the reasoning used by the US military” (Bystrom 11). In similar vein, Heather Brady contends that Jeebleh’s final “rushed and clandestine” departure from Somalia “intensifies the moral danger of his decision which, while born of a sense of fierce responsibility,
nevertheless perpetuates violence” (83). In my view, it is this very tension, this lack of a “final” interpretation of Jeebleh’s changed perceptions that ultimately keeps the ethical enquiry alive well beyond the closing of the book cover.

**Knots and the Implied Counter-Story**

If *Links*’ ethical momentum hinges on its combined use of multivocality and lack of clarity, *Knots*’ more straightforward renderings of a Mogadiscio ravaged by war may be said to instead provide the counter-image discussed in relation to *Links*, provided that closer attention is paid to the novel’s rhetoric. Although a first reading may suggest otherwise, considering my earlier discussion of for instance the novel’s postcolonial legacies, a reading slightly against the grain suggests that Cambara may indeed provide an important counter-image to media representations. Not only does *Knots* present, as noted by Jennifer Reese, a more slow-paced, mundane version of Somali life (1), but a focus on Cambara’s journey of emancipation opens for more profound reflection on simplified perceptions in western discourses on Africa, not least an elitist gaze fitting into a biased media view of the Somalian civil war.

However, for such concerns to be brought into view, a more careful reading is called for. In what follows I argue that *Knots* offers a more demanding read than might at first seem to be the case, especially when compared to the multivocality in *Links*. In fact, I would even suggest that reading Cambara’s actions almost solely via ‘her’ interpretative lens constitutes one of the more challenging projects – all trilogies included – as the reader must beware of limiting his/her understanding of the character, and rather seek to read against the grain, to read ‘responsibly’ as Simon Critchley argues (*The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Lévinas*). By not including other characters’ perspectives and instead privilege Cambara’s voice, Farah invites the reader to an ethical reading beyond the issues that immediately meet the eye. This is a risky project as two diametrically opposed scenarios seem available for interpretation. A vastly over-simplified first version is to celebrate Cambara’s feminist successes by adhering to what Florence Stratton identifies as ”the prevailing trend in feminist criticism” to assimilate African women’s texts “into a white feminist problematic (12), while also perceiving ‘the west’ as “the source of liberating values and modalities (110). A second interpretative scenario is one where Farah’s characterizations of the complexity of the returning Cambara serve to evoke

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50 Works on African feminist writing has tended to focus only on women’s writing even though an author like Nuruddin Farah engages with the very same concerns. See for instance, Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (2005); Donald R. Wehrs, *African Feminist Fiction and Indigenous Values* (2001).
questions of power and moral agency connected to colonial legacies and perceptions of Somalia/Africa.

In proposing alternative entries for reading *Knots*, I suggest that several of the challenges in reading *Knots*, many of which surface in critical reception, are related to the ways in which a strong sense of ontological Said is conveyed both thematically and stylistically. Indeed, Cambara’s lack of address and failure to acknowledge the alterity of the other discussed in the first part of this chapter is undergirded by a number of formal aspects that together establish what appears as quite a monolithic representation of Cambara. As my discussion of *Knots*’ critical response will show, readings content with the novel’s Said run the risk of missing the novel’s ethical subtext, or even closing ethical engagement with the text. By paying attention instead to the ways in which Said is consistently undermined by its Saying, as seen operating in the novel’s instances of excess, contradictions, silences and irony, my readings claim that *Knots* offers much more than what may at first seem to be the case.

Several of the challenges articulated in critical response may be traced to the tension produced by the novel’s combination of Bildungsroman genre conventions with war realism. That is, readers find it hard to engage with renderings of Cambara’s incredible journey of formation and notable feats—while in a Mogadiscio ravaged by civil war. Admittedly, the combination of narrating civil war while simultaneously staging what Apollo Amoko describes as a “story of spectacular individual triumph” (“Autobiography and Bildungsroman in African Literature” 198), is no easy task. Several critics refer to a certain dissonance in Farah’s representation of Cambara. The anonymous writer in *Kirkus Reviews* for instance contends that Farah offers “a powerful, unpleasantly convincing picture of a society in ruins, while lucidly portraying the efficacy of courage and ingenuity marshaled against chaotic forces of exploitation and violence”. The novel’s protagonist however, is described as an “unconvincing superwoman, physically imposing, brilliant, indomitable earth mother, creative artist—a veritable African Joan of Arc” (*Kirkus Reviews*). Other critics, such as Jim Coan, are unwilling to differentiate between the novel’s overall presentation of war, and its heroine, but perceives Cambara’s “unrealistic mission” and “unlikely success” as producing a novel that is “almost disconcerting in its optimism” (*Kirkus Reviews* 2). If Coan finds the novel’s optimistic leitmotif altogether disconcerting, Megan Harlan takes a more moderate perspective in expressing a concern with the ways in which darker themes are limited to the novel’s overture:

Unfortunately, the story veers away from the harsh challenges posed by the warlords, the religious fundamentalists and others who initially stood in Cambara’s way to retrieve her sense of home in
Mogadishu. Instead of letting these conflicts fully play themselves out, Farah introduces a rather softer plotline, one involving Cambara’s spontaneous plan to stage—rather unexpectedly—a puppet show for peace. Given the real dangers Farah so carefully placed in Cambara’s path, the tidy finale seems more idealized than realistic. (“A Woman Caught in the Crossfire,” review in SFGate, January 28, 2007)

At the heart of Harlan’s concern lies the idea that the novel contains themes of conflict not fully played out, which in her view leaves the novel the lesser. While I fully agree with Harlan’s contention that Knots refrains from overtly problematizing the challenges of civil war survival by focusing on Cambara’s artistic and personal journey, the fact that several themes remain unsaid does not render them obliterated. On the contrary, they remain part of the novel’s ethical Saying, as Harlan’s keen observation is itself evidence of. Can it be that the silences surrounding certain features of the novel do indeed signpost the presence of something else, an alterity unexplored?

A significant way in which otherness is made itself known in the text is via the silences proceeding from Farah’s use of a limited third person narrative perspective, focalizing Cambara. Obviously, this privileging of Cambara’s voice means that the room allocated to other characters’ voices is bound to be limited to dialogue in various forms, and Knots contains few other openings for other characters’ perspectives (which is why Cambara’s actual sharing of stories, previously discussed, is presented as radical in ethical terms). While this kind of filtering may initially seem to only add to the production of Cambara’s monolithic representation, the prolonged inside view means that the reader may begin to miss alternative perspectives.

This sense is aggravated by the novel’s reiterated references to Cambara’s self-reflection, primarily related to ethical dilemmas regarding the role of violence in resisting and redeeming a past of violent abuse, but also occasionally including her dealings with Agoon, such as when she asks herself whether “she ought to have a re-think; maybe she ought not to try to impose her will on him” (K 271). While these elements may seem to moderate elements of moral pretentiousness, self-sufficiency, and success, the reader is more likely to perceive references to Cambara’s fearfulness that “her honourable right-minded actions. . . these respectable intentions” may have been misunderstood by another character as excess (K 321). The narrative silence surrounding Cambara’s frequent self-reflections are significant as re-directing focus from the protagonist’s moral excellence to underlying issues of inner struggles and self-deception.

The prevalence of uncommented self-reflexive gestures in combination with the lack of alternative perspectives is likely to produce a sense of unease, leading the reader to wonder whether Cambara is truly a reliable narrator. In this context, James Meffan’s and Kim L. Worthington’s
discussion of Coetzee’s use of limited narrative perspectives in *Disgrace* is useful. They argue that the “effect of the close alignment of narrator and protagonist” operating in the limited third person is not unlike a first person narrative in terms of limitation. However,

in a first-person narrative we accept, as part of the convention, the limitation to the narrator’s point of view; [in a third person narrative] we ask why we are denied access to and knowledge of the thoughts and motivations of other characters. And it is a question we reflect back on the protagonist: why does [Coetzee’s protagonist] disregard or fail to recognize the thoughts and motivations of the others with whom he interacts? (“Ethics Before Politics: J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*” 139)

As implied in Meffan and Worthington’s comment, the lack of other voices following this use of limited narrative perspectives, makes us feel that as readers we are not made privy to all that is going on. The silence of the other begins to make itself heard, as it were, and make us want to know what it is that is not told, thus opening for a reading more attentive to the novel’s Saying; in the case of *Knots*, the contradictions and ironies entailed in Farah’s portrayal of Cambara.

If the silences – perceived as a combination of Cambara’s “strong voice” and the lack of alternative perspectives – serve to signal the presence of otherness in the text, instances of contradiction and irony constitute a more hands-on formulation of that voice – the Saying. Examples of contradictions are primarily found in connection with Cambara’s reported self-reflection. In writing her play Cambara is for instance described to have altered the original folktale from Ghana from giving “a moral message” to being “intense, provocative, complex, and a touch modernist” (*K* 387). Later references to the play however contradicts this verdict, and reveal that it is indeed driven by a very obvious moral message, thus bringing attention to what seems to be a lack of self-awareness rather than to Cambara’s skills as a playwright. A similar discrepancy is produced in the reference to how “Cambara remembers how often she has run into Somalis who are in the habit of trespassing on her generous disposition when she inquires how they have fared in the civil war, many of whom have spoken of war-related trauma” (*K* 297 emphasis added). Not only does this passage generate a sense of excess, but given that representations of Cambara’s listening acts are so conspicuously few, the reader is rather likely to perceive Cambara as impervious – if not unreliable, in which case another voice might be heard.

The texts’ double-edged operations with contradictory elements is taken a step further in *Knots’* use of ironic elements, defined here as incongruity between Cambara’s evaluations of a certain situation, and its actual
outcome. The discrepancy between Cambara’s version and the reader’s becomes evident in a re-reading of the allusions to theatre that runs as a leitmotif in the novel’s portrayal of Cambara. Irony is well illustrated in the metonymic relations established between concepts like marionette – puppet, strings – threads, and directing – acting, terms that are used in the novel to describe both Cambara’s experience of her mother’s control, Cambara’s dreams of forming a life on her own, and her understanding of Agoon and Gacal (another boy that Cambara hopes to adopt). The unexplored links between Cambara’s actions and that of her mother render Knots’ recurring references to Carlo Collodi’s The Adventures of Pinocchio of particular interest. Not only is Pinocchio explicitly used to describe Cambara’s wonderings regarding “her own adventure” (K 335), but it is extended to embrace Cambara’s descriptions of Agoon and Gacal: “Of the two boys, which of them will be Lucifer, for that is presumably from where the name Lucignolo is derived, and which the star pupil, no longer a puppet whose strings are in the hands of someone who controls their actions” (K 240). On the one hand, references to Cambara’s plan to “foster” SilkHair and Gacal “to high ambitions” (K 287), “pamper [SilkHair] with love, [and] turn him into a fine, peace-loving boy” (K 92), clearly link Cambara to Collodi’s maternal figure, The Fairy With Turquoise Hair, who protects, rescues and adopts Pinocchio and eventually transforms him into a real boy. Read in this view, Cambara hopes for to see her “Pinocchios” move beyond a life of puppethood, strings and control. On the other hand, the desperation of her own attempts to break free from her mother’s control seem to elude Cambara. Finally, Cambara wonders whether Pinocchio may also be read in a Somali context, where “small boys – the majority of them parentless and innocent [are] hoodwinked into joining armed militias as fighters and made to commit crimes in the names of ideals they do not fully comprehend or support” (K 241). The metonymic links between violence, precarity and innocence, is all but innocent, but never reach Cambara’s reported reflections.

The irony operating in the metonymic relation established between ties, strings and threads is brought to its head in the final scene where Cambara is portrayed as nervously expressing her concern regarding the staging of her play: “After all she has woven nearly every thread of her private, professional, and public life into the play that is about to be presented, with

51 My definition, while closely related to common definitions of dramatic irony, relies on Ian Watt’s work on Moll Flanders discussed by Swales as “an irony that results from a discrepancy between the experiences narrated and the kinds of values which the successful Moll, as recollecting narrator, espouses; arguing that the irony is there for us, the readers, but not for the characters” (Swales 21).

52 Lampwick (Lucignolo) refuses Pinocchio’s invitation to a party celebrating his upcoming transformation into a real boy, and persuades the puppet to instead come with him to the Land of Toys, where education and study are nonexistent.
her directing it; Bile, ... Gacal and SilkHair acting in it” (K 417, emphasis added). With the premier performance of the play all lose ends of Cambara’s journey are neatly tied up into what may at first seem an unequivocal celebration of the completion of Cambara’s mission. Not only has she managed to accomplish her life-long dream of writing and staging a play (on a theme clearly reflecting her own journey), but the success is symbolically conveyed in additional ways: the site of the performance is her newly (and miraculously!) recovered property; the male actors performing in the play – Agoon, Gacal, and Bile – are all what might in Cambara’s own wording, be perceived of as “reconstructed men” (K 287), suggesting the success of her feminist project “to repair several of the wrongs to which the societies of men have subjected women through the ages” (K 287).

However, the sense of neat closure is interrupted by the irony operating in the novel’s end, reflected in the surprise (and to the reader surprising) arrival of Cambara’s mother Arda. In spite of Arda’s apparent change – reflected in expressions of regret for earlier mistakes in arranging Cambara’s first forged marriage (K 410), admiration of her daughter’s accomplishments (K 411) and complete trust in Cambara’s sound judgment (K 413) – the ending is almost exclusively centered on Arda’s responses, in ways which contradict the novel’s message on women’s (and daughter’s) emancipation. Indeed, Cambara’s briefing of how Arda gets on with Cambara’s new friends portrays her as truly dependent on her mother’s blessing, as it were. This means that although Arda is described as “stay[ing] decidedly in the margins” (K 413), suggesting a radical shift in positions, her arrival proves a resumed, or rather, retained position of “occupying central stage” (K 47) in Cambara’s life.

Ultimately, even though the novel may seem to arrive in a (feminist) hooray – a sense of arrival underscored by the completion of Cambara’s play, her recovery of property, and her love relationship with Bile to be formalized – the ironic elements connected to Arda’s arrival serve to keep the novel’s ethical enquiry of Cambara’s journey alive. The sense of arrival that the end of the novel appears to offer is thus thwarted. Indeed, as this chapter has argued success is not as innocent as a first reading might suggest.

As the readings of Links’ and Knots’ very different narrative strategies have sought to demonstrate, Farah’s ethical enquiries escape simple definitions also in stylistic terms, given that the seemingly straightforward realism of Knots proves equally capable of facilitating ethical reflection, as the more postmodern rendition of Links. My readings thus problematize the “critical elevation” of experimental genres that Laura Moss identifies in her lucid discussion of postcolonial criticism (“Can Rohinton Mistry’s Realism Rescue the Novel” 158). Not only does Knots essentially realist narrative mode challenge the assumption that non-realist forms are, as Moss notes, “inherently conducive to political subversion because of their capacity for
presenting multiplicity,” but its complex portrayal of Cambara’s diasporic encounters prove that the realist novel may certainly “hold disruptive content” – in spite its apparent lack of “radical form” (158).
Chapter Five

Telling ‘Secret Sorrows’

Challenging the Single Story in *Gifts* and *Crossbones*

“Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person”

Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story”

Although the preceding chapters have all engaged in different ways with Farah’s ethical enquiry into the nature and representation of ‘reality,’ one aspect remains to be explored more fully: the multiple ways in which Farah’s fiction complements the social and political imaginary by telling hitherto unheard stories. When Jeebleh reflects on how “[t]he great tragedy about civil wars, famines, and other disasters in the world’s poor parts” is that “the rubble seldom divulges the secret sorrows it contains” (*Crossbones* 26), his statement captures what emerges as Farah’s profound concern with stories “lost in the rubble.” Even though such stories certainly describe human suffering and grief, as implied in Jeebleh’s reference to “secret sorrows” above, these stories are often equally concerned with conveying the sublime beauty of human dignity. In fact, these stories often feature minor characters acting as guards of human dignity, in ways that ethically decentre other seemingly more central parts of the plot.

In exploring how such stories and alternative perceptions of reality are conveyed in *Gifts* (1993) and *Crossbones* (2011), my discussion is not concerned so much with the novels’ alternative media representations – in spite of their significance in decentering what the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie in a famous TED-talk has referred to as the ‘Single Story.’ I will instead argue that these novels are profoundly concerned with challenging the ‘Single Story’ by “breaking open” what Judith Butler defines as “the question of reality” (*Precarious Life* 33). According to

53 *Gifts* is the middle novel of Farah’s second trilogy, *Blood in the Sun; Crossbones* is the closing novel of Farah’s third trilogy, *Past Imperfect*. All further references to the novels will be given within brackets in the text (*G/C + page*).
Butler, this is “not a matter of a simple entry of the excluded into an established ontology, but an insurrection at the level of ontology, a critical opening up of the questions, What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade?” (Precarious Life 33).

In exploring how these questions are implicated both in an ethics of the told, an ethics of telling, and an ethics of reading, this chapter differs from previous chapters in its increased emphasis on the “how” rather than the “what” of Farah’s fictional representations. For this reason, I will focus primarily on Crossbones (even though Gifts continues to figure as a significant point of reference throughout), since Crossbones’ ethics of telling demands a fuller discussion than any of the other novels.

The slightly different emphasis of this chapter is reflected in the order that I explore the various ethical moments. Under the heading of “Imaginative Engagement” I first discuss how Gifts’ and Crossbones’ different uses of similar narrative strategies have been understood in critical reception, with a particular emphasis on readings of dreams, readings of genre, readings of what I will refer to as ‘expository’ writing (that is, writing that explains issues ranging from foreign politics to Somali folklore), and readings of multiple characters and perspectives. In exploring the triggers of intellectual and emotive responses such as manifested in my own reading experience and that of other critics, the analysis is particularly concerned with textual elements that appear to interrupt, disturb, and obstruct imaginative engagement. The comparative discussion shows that several of the narrative strategies noted in earlier chapters are taken to their extreme in Crossbones, in ways that challenge readers’ engagement with the novel. Such challenges include, for instance, guardedness (regarding what level an argument is meant to work at – character or reader?), confusion (caused by the extraordinarily large cast), suspicion (related to which characters may or may not be trusted), and repletion/fatigue (caused by long sections of expository writing and frequent intellectual conversations).

What remains largely unexplored in narrative theory, and what is thus the focus of the second section, “Imaginative Challenges,” is the ways in which challenges to engage imaginatively with fiction may be a source of deeper engagement with the text. Could it be that elements that disturb the reading, obstruct meaning, or remain elusive to interpretation may prove absolutely crucial to the reader’s deeper engagement with the text? Can challenges such as those briefly outlined above even be perceived of as an ethical resource? By arguing that readers’ responses to the features described

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54 My readings thus complement the field of narrative empathy where the analytical focus, broadly speaking, lies on how empathy is enhanced or impeded through the use of different narrative strategies. While empathy is a central aspect of narrative response, my claim that seemingly negative responses may be equally conducive to ethical reflection suggests that broader interpretative frameworks are required if we are to grasp the ethical and political force of novels like Crossbones.
in the previous section mirror characters’ confusion, suspicion and fatigue with war and conflict, I show how Crossbones’ imaginative challenges prove indispensable to Farah’s larger enquiry into the complexity of Somali reality. This perspective seems particularly fruitful to adopt in regard to how Crossbones’ use of multiple perspectives serve as a means to problematize the concept of ‘democracy.’

In the chapter’s third and final section, “Telling ‘Secret Sorrows’” I engage more closely with Crossbones’ ethics of the told, and what I initially described as Gifts’ and Crossbones’ ‘unheard stories.’ By showing how these stories form the novels’ ethical centre, I argue that the two novels locate hope for the nation in characters’ precarious attempts to guard, protect and even restore human dignity, rather than in any ideological or political creed. This is particularly evident in Crossbones’ poignant opening story of YoungThing, a young suicide bomber on a fatal mission. Not only does this story reflect Crossbones’ concern with Butler’s questions of “whose lives are real?” and “what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?” (Precarious life? 33, xiv-xv), but it dramatizes the re-humanization of a character, even when all hope seems gone.

Ultimately, Crossbones provides a compelling example of how the ethical dimensions of Farah’s fiction invite the reader’s wider response – ethically, politically, intellectually and emotionally. The readings presented in this chapter are in other words not to be perceived of as examples of texts that engage the reader versus texts that struggle to do so. Rather, and this is crucial for understanding the narrative force of Crossbones, these examples are perceived as complementary forms of communication where all examples – challenges included – prove indispensable to the novel’s larger enquiry. Indeed, it is only by reading the exposé of dehumanization, vulnerability and exposure offered in the story of YoungThing against the intellectual (and emotional!) challenges following from the many ideological discussions and political explanations, that the novel’s ontological, political and ethical breaking open of the question of reality may be fully grasped.

**Imaginative Engagement**

At first glance, Gifts and Crossbones may seem to challenge the ‘Single Story’ primarily through their representations of alternative media accounts. A good example of how Farah plays with Western binarisms such as center/periphery, rich/poor, and First/Third World is the reference in Gifts to how the number of homeless people in New York surpasses the number of Mogadiscio’s inhabitants. Another example is the humorous story in Gifts that describes the interactions between the Polish and the US government in the wake of the Chernobyl Disaster. In response to President Reagan’s aid in the form of spoiled tinned milk, the Polish Government sends blankets to the
homeless people of New York City, c/o the White House (G 174). Western perceptions of Somalia are similarly decentered in Crossbones, primarily via the journalist Malik’s interviews and conversations with a wide range of characters, including pirates, go-betweens, warlords and religionists. The Somali pirates’ own accounts of how their waters are being plundered by foreign fishing vessels are particularly challenging.

However, as will be argued in this section’s comparative discussion of Gifts and Crossbones, Farah’s philosophical interrogation into the nature of reality hinges on his use of a number of narrative strategies, all of which aim to challenge the reader’s ‘Single Stories.’

**Reading Dreams**

Dreams feature widely in Farah’s fiction, and typically function both as interpretations of events that have taken place and as a means of bringing alternative levels of consciousness into play. In Gifts, dreams often begin a chapter without any kind of introduction. It may in other words take quite a while before the reader realizes that what is being described takes place in a dream. Sometimes this does not become clear until the dream passage is ended with a sentence of the kind, “and then X woke.” Farah’s refusal to clearly differentiate between dream and reality dissolves the hierarchy of consciousness levels; the dream is as important in mirroring reality as the “awake” experience. On a smaller scale this process is also reflected in the use of daydreams. In her lucid reading of dreams and identity constructions in Farah’s works, Jaqueline Bardolph brings attention to how the “mental world represented in Farah’s stories” does not consider the dream as “opposed to reality,” but rather as a “key experience that can help to construct meaning and give shape to the essential reality – or paradoxically, the only reality of the fiction” (“Dreams and Identity in the Novels of Nuruddin Farah” 170). Bardolph does not describe the function of dreams in magic realist terms, as others have often done, but links what she describes as the narrative’s “intermediary space” to medieval Islam philosophy where dreams were “a third mode of knowledge half-way between abstract thinking and sensory perception” (169). This conception does not “oppose reality and dream as mutually exclusive,” but “uses the visions of the night as a key to a better understanding of personal and collective destiny, as a gift, whether from djinns or angels, that demands interpretation” (169). Although examples of these kinds of dreams and visitations may be found in Crossbones, they feature widely in Gifts, in ways that indicate that reality demands a different interpretative framework than the Cartesian logic of the West.

In comparison to Gifts, the switches in Crossbones between dialogue, daydreams and memories are quicker and therefore more difficult to discern.
Whereas the reader is likely to quickly adhere to *Gifts*’ mode of narration, similar shifts in *Crossbones* often result in a sense of confusion: What is dream and what is reality? On what level of reality are we to understand what is being described? While this kind of confusion may possibly interrupt the reader’s imaginative engagement with the text, these passages are indispensable to *Crossbones*’ overall portrayal of civil war reality. Its “messy” and at times confusing account of reality mirrors the complex workings of the human psyche in general, but particularly the challenges facing *Crossbones*’ characters.

In order to better understand how the novels’ overlapping uses of narrative devices may have different narrative effects we need to look closer at the novels’ genre-based differences, with a particular emphasis on how reality perceptions are dealt with.

**Reading Genre**

*Gifts* displays several features connected with the genre of magic realism. In *Magic Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence* (2009) Christopher Warnes defines the genre as a mode in which “real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence. On the level of the text neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality” (3). Warnes’ emphasis on equivalence is taken a step further in Ato Quayson’s claim that (African) magic realist texts “[oscillate] constantly between the real and the magical [thus seeking] to obliterate the boundary between them” (“Magic Realism and the African Novel” 162). *Gifts*’ magic realist approach to reality accommodates both the creation of equivalence and the obliteration of boundaries. And this would be one reason why the specific references to historical reality as well as the fact-fiction distinction that we find in *Crossbones* are missing altogether in *Gifts*; they are of no consequence to a literary project that has already, borrowing Warnes’ words, “expand[ed] existing categories of the real” or “ruptured them altogether” (151).

In *Gifts*, hierarchies of real and supernatural are soon collapsed, and this is reflected in Farah’s construction of a stylistically disparate text in which media accounts clearly represent only one perspective among many. Journalistic accounts such as Somali and international radio, TV or newspaper reports are both weaved into the fiction via the writings of Duniya’s journalist ex-husband, and given a prominent position by being placed at the end of several chapters. Other chapters end with a story or myth. As noted by Bardolph, “[t]here is no binary opposition between the two modes of perception of the world, the poetic, analogical mode of dreams and the prosaic factual newspaper cuttings, but continuity.” (“Dreams and Identity” 171). Indeed, by including narrative elements such as dreams,
myths, proverbs and concepts such as “a mythical child” – on equal terms with journalistic accounts – the ontological foundation of reality is dislodged.

Although *Crossbones*’ depiction of reality is occasionally broken up by magic realist elements such as premonitions and omens, with for instance birds heralding the arrival of a loved one, nightmares foreboding somebody’s death, or a character’s ability to pick up scents of fear and rage, these elements operate within a realist framework and must be understood as subordinated to *Crossbones*’ primary narrative mode – that of the detective story and/or political thriller. This means for instance that *Crossbones*’ magic realist elements are often accompanied by an ominous feeling, significantly lacking from *Gifts*’ magic realist accounts.

Critics familiar with Farah’s earlier works, often regret the fact that *Crossbones* does not rely on its magical elements to challenge the reader’s experience. Michele Levy, for instance, regrets that “the nuanced style, rich characterizations, and allegorical power of *Maps*. . . yields to workmanlike prose, a plot-driven structure,” which in turn leads her to conclude that *Crossbones*, being “[no] aesthetic masterpiece. . . fits more the category ‘thriller’ than ‘literary novel’” (56-7). Whereas Levy’s concerns exemplify readers’ expectations (and hopes) for the author to keep writing in familiar and appreciated ways, this criticism is not unique to *Crossbones*, but also surfaces in for instance Christopher de Bellaigue’s review of *Knots*: “Farah’s characterization sometimes appears facile and repetitive; the core of his best work, flickering with magic and menace, seems to have been replaced with a wordy literalness” (“Return to Mogadishu,” Review of *Knots* in the *New York Times* April 8, 2007).

On one level, the interrogation of reality is performed in *Crossbones*’ adherence to detective genre conventions: a sense of uncertainty, a lack of control, and at times, a lack of resolution, are produced much in the same ways as in the first trilogy, discussed in Chapter Two. However, what makes *Crossbones*’ rendition of Mogadiscio so intense are the risks accompanying both Ahl’s mission to recover his lost stepson and Malik’s journalist project. The pervasive question of “Who to trust?” has clear life-and-death implications, producing a sense of unease that is characteristic of the political thriller genre. The novel’s tone of impending danger is further reinforced by the disappearance of characters, such as Malik’s mentor and father-in-law Jeebleh who leaves Somalia halfway through the novel. The killing of Dajaal, Malik’s guide and security expert, reinforces *Crossbones*’ overall mood of uncertainty and lack of control, particularly for the reader who has read *Links* where Dajaal has a fairly central role. The echoes of the casualty listings in the first trilogy are obvious, and the unexpected killing of Dajaal is undoubtedly a very effective means of keeping the reader’s sense of impending danger alive. This impression is likely to also affect the reader’s
engagement with Malik: Is he going to be killed too? Beyond the creation of suspense, however, Dajaal’s death is crucial for the novel’s overall dramatization of vulnerability and human exposure. The reader’s (possible) frustration with the disappearance of what has — for whatever reasons — been perceived of as a central character, must be read as connected to the general frustration caused by a life ended too soon. For the reader who has engaged deeply with Farah’s characterization of Dajaal, Malik’s frustration is easy to relate to. This means that although conceptualizations of reality are not dissolved according to magic realist conventions, detective and political thriller genre conventions engender a guardedness that in combination with other narrative aspects serve to render reality incomprehensible and beyond the reader’s control.

While the guardedness entailed in reading a political thriller is likely to be both an anticipated and desired aspect of the reader’s experience, elements from a second genre referred to as documentary fiction (Hinken) or documentary realism (Sauerberg) appear to make the reading more demanding. While prevalent media representations are effectively dislocated via the provision of new and complementing ones, the recurring references to actual events (with exact time and place indications) together with the many formal and informal interviews conducted on a character level, result in an “authenticity – illusion interplay” (Hinken) that seems to both interrupt and cause a certain guardedness.

*Crossbones*’ combination of detective story/thriller and documentary fiction appears to trouble critics. To begin with, several critics articulate concerns that may be related to what I refer to as the interruptive function of “factual” elements (by which I mean the novel’s own representations of what is fact). Although several critics explicitly welcome alternative accounts to *Black Hawk Down* (much in the same way as was discussed in Chapter Four), critics such as Ellen Akins also complain about the ways in which Farah “[stops] his narrative. . . again and again” to give background information and tell the reader what the Somalis are like (Ellen Akins, Review in *StarTribune*). Not only do “such overviews, asides and generalizations . . . lend themselves to clichés and flat language” according to Akins, “but the flatness does tend to detract from what should be a compelling, even harrowing tale.” In a similar vein, Mark Sarvas finds *Crossbones*’ parallel stories “fascinating, often chilling, sometimes moving, but Farah has devoted long tracts of both narrative and dialogue to these explorations, which end up feeling more like reportage than lived experience” (Sarvas *The Barnes and Noble Review*). For readers who expect *Crossbones* to be a political thriller, Farah’s style of explaining the context and background may indeed seem superfluous.

Skepticism and suspicion, or at least a sense of guarded reading related more specifically to the political and ideological underpinnings of Farah’s
representations, are conveyed in several reviews of *Crossbones*. While readers express in positive terms what they have learnt, they do not wish to be taught. This sense of guardedness is most clearly reflected in reviewers’ use of the term “tract” to describe sections of the novel, such as when Sarvas regrets that Farah has “devoted long tracts of both narrative and dialogue to” exploring political aspects related to the plot, or when Hirsch Sawhney refers to characters interrogating the politics of piracy; “[t]racts like this can feel didactic, but they are also provocative” (“A Novel of Pirates, Zealots and the Somali Crisis.” Review in *The New York Times*, Sep. 9, 2011). Even though Sawhney’s differentiation of “didactic” as negative and “provocative” as positive delimits the value of expository writing as delineated here, his positive understanding of “provocative” resonates with the overall argument of this section, which is that that challenges of this kind may indeed prove ethically conducive because of the ways in which they compel the reader to engage more closely with the text.

**Reading Expository Writing**

So how are we to understand experiences of interruption, suspicion and guardedness noted in the above critical responses? Lars Ole Sauerberg suggests that the reason why documentary realism may interrupt the reader’s sense of flow is because factual elements prevent the reader from a “[full] immersion in the microcosm of a traditional, realistic novel” (10). Although used slightly out of context here, Suzanne Keen’s discussion of ‘protective fictionality’ in *Empathy and the Novel* provides a complementary means of understanding the experience of interruption conveyed in several reviews of *Crossbones*. Keen argues that “readers’ perception of a text’s fictionality plays a role in subsequent empathic response, by releasing readers from the obligations of self-protection through skepticism and suspicion” (xiii-xiv, emphasis added). Read in this way, the lack of protective fictionality would seem to bring a certain skepticism and suspicion into play again: At what level is the representation to be understood? Is this fact or fiction? Keen’s concept of ‘protective fictionality’ also helps clarify why similar fact-oriented narrative elements in *Gifts* do not bring the fact-fiction illusion into play. Guided by clear section headings, and even short summaries introducing every chapter, the reader is constantly reminded that *Gifts* is a work of fiction.

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55 Keen’s work on narrative empathy explores the ways in which empathic response may lead to “[internalization of] the experience of empathy in a way that promotes later real-world responsiveness to others’ needs” (*Empathy and the Novel* xiii-xiv). The main reason I do not engage more closely with Keen’s compelling work here is that her understandings of decreased empathy often coincide with my perception of a potential for increased ethical response.
The troubled distinction between fact and fiction that operates in Crossbones is upheld throughout the whole work, the acknowledgement included. Even though Farah begins by stating that the text just read is a work of fiction, the detailed descriptions of his thorough research uphold the elusive fact-fiction distinction that fuel the interplay between authenticity and illusion in Crossbones. Not only does the list of very specific references to articles in newspapers and magazines such as The New York Times, The Guardian, and Newsweek, or reports from BBC and CNN along with references to “interviews conducted in Puntland and Mogadiscio over a two-year-period” lend credibility to Farah’s particular rendition of political events, but the concluding sentence of the acknowledgement adds to the fact-fiction illusion. Farah’s addendum, “I alone am responsible for the opinions expressed in this novel and for any infelicities or misinterpretations?” (C 389), implies the existence of an objective truth.

**Reading Multiple Characters and Perspectives**

In probing guardedness as a significant aspect of the reader’s experience, I will now turn to the imaginative challenges proceeding from Crossbones’ large number of highly disparate characters. While the opportunity to perceive reality from several angles may certainly result in a fuller and more realistic portrayal of civil war reality, as was discussed in relation to Links in Chapter Four, the use of this strategy requires balance, so as not to confuse the reader.

While the use of multiple perspectives is familiar from earlier novels, the extraordinarily large cast of characters is not, and with Crossbones it seems reasonable to argue that Farah pushes the boundary of how many characters a reader may possibly engage with. As a point of comparison, it is worth noting that Jaqueline Bardolph raises a similar concern in regard to Gifts when she writes that “[t]he cast is numerous and the reader must memorize the connections among a host of secondary characters“ (“Brothers and Sisters” 730). Not only is the number of minor characters in Gifts nowhere near the size of the cast in Crossbones, but Crossbones’ narrative is further complicated by the parallel stories of Ahl and Malik. Engaging with such a large number of characters means that apart from the intellectual challenge of keeping track of everyone, the reader must also choose which characters to engage more deeply with. Following the rhetoric of Crossbones, it is not entirely clear who these characters are.

In addition to being faced with an ever-growing cast of characters, the reader’s engagement is further challenged by the often quick and unclear shifts between perspectives. It is not uncommon that a passage requires re-reading in order to clarify which character is speaking, acting, or thinking. The muddle (and possible frustration) caused firstly by the multiplicity of
perspectives and secondly by the shifts in perspective, forces the reader to engage with the novel in ways that mirror the process of the characters themselves: Who to listen to? Who to trust? Who to engage with?

The sense of confusion and frustration is taken a step further via the inclusion of characters cast as rascals and rogues. While the reasons for including characters like pirates, middle-men and terrorists are obvious in a work that, among other things, calls into question media perceptions of piracy along the Somali coastline, it nevertheless keeps the reader on his/her toes. This increased challenge to careful reading is particularly important to note, because the novel’s handling of issues related to democracy, voice and truth does not remain limited to themes and metaphors, but makes itself known in the reader’s experience, given that the question of which character(s) to engage with soon turns into which character(s) to trust. It is not uncommon that ‘truth’ (or what is presented as truth in the larger context of Farah’s fiction) is placed in the mouth of characters portrayed as notorious liars, go-betweens or characters with much blood on their hands, in ways which make the reader contemplate the nature of truth. Such examples include Crossbones’ villain BigBeard, whose comment that “we are not as backward as you may think” (C 22) reveals the prejudices of the newly arrived Malik. The delineation of the poverty and piracy business in Somalia’s coastal area, presented by the go-between and former pirate Ma-Gabadeh is another example (C 187-188). These truths (or what is represented as truth within the novel) are often intermingled with prejudices, lies and pretense, which makes the differentiation between truths, half-truths and lies seem a futile project. Ultimately, the inclusion of “truth”-speaking rascals and rogues reinforces the effect derived from the use of multiple perspectives, that a true account of ‘reality’ may not be monopolized, but is precipitated by the many perspectives.

The problematization of truth (that is, what is constructed as true within Farah’s fictional world) and the ensuing difficulties that the reader has in deciding which characters to trust is aggravated by the several instances where characters portrayed as trustworthy articulate controversial and, at times, both biased and derogatory opinions. Jeebleh, for instance, attributes political instability to a particular area in Somalia (C 17). In a similar vein, Malik seems to agree with the broadcasts’ description of Eritrea as “quarrelsome” – “picking fights serially with all her neighbours” for no apparent reason at all C 224). Not only do these controversial statements add to the reader’s difficulty in deciding which voices to trust, but they also trouble distinctions between “good” and “evil” characters in ways that have not been done in Farah’s earlier works. This lack of clear differentiation between good and evil causes certain controversy in reviews of Crossbones. Zoe Norridge, for instance, describes Malik as “a particularly disturbing figure” whose dismissal of the work of Somali journalist colleagues combined
with “the arrogant demands he makes of his sympathetically intelligent fixer Quasiir” leads the reader to “question his respect for Somalis who remain in the country” (Independent, 7 July 2012). This hesitation, according to Norridge, leads to the question of “how realistic” the account of Mogadiscio is that the reader receives via Malik’s viewpoint. Although Norridge does not make explicit references to an authorial responsibility as such, her concern with the novel’s portrayal of reality hints in that direction.

Imaginative Challenges as Ethical Resource

Even though Crossbones’ philosophical interrogation of reality is clearly constructed to engage the reader in what the character Fidno calls “meaningful dialogue” (C 213), the establishment of such a dialogue is not a straightforward matter, as my discussions of narrative strategies have shown. Indeed, features such as an extraordinarily large number of characters, the sudden death of what seemed a major character, or expository descriptions of Somalia’s history and politics, make reading Crossbones an increasingly challenging process. Several of the concerns articulated in critical responses are also traceable to Crossbones’ particular genre-combination of political thriller, detective story, and fictional documentary, where for instance the novel’s pervasive discussions and debates cause confusion regarding which level the representations are to be understood.

But is it possible that imaginative challenges of this kind may serve as an ethical resource? It seems that responses to imaginative challenges of the kind just discussed seem to lead in either one of two directions. One response is to seek to alleviate the experience of confusion by securing a sense of the work’s true meaning. In doing so the reader may concern him/herself with the author as producer of the fictional world just encountered. This perspective is, as preceding chapters have shown, more common in early critical reception of Farah’s fiction, especially with novels where political statements of various kinds abound, such as in Gifts. One such example is where Kirsten Holst Peterson, in regard to Gifts, discusses the necessity of “establish[ing] the credibility given to [a] character” in order “to assess the degree to which [a certain section] accords with the author’s views” (603). Perhaps this approach is particularly tempting to adopt in the reading of fiction so overtly concerned with political issues, and increasingly so if and when the author does not shy away from discussing the politics dramatized in his novels.56 A second possible response when encountering Farah’s text, is to perceive Crossbones’ residing ambivalences, the lack of

56 As is often the case in early reception of Farah, Holst Peterson incorporates such interview material in her essay.
comment and the enforced guarded reading as indispensable means towards the reader’s further reflection.

Crossbones’ potential to engage the reader in more profound reflection is particularly evident in its use of multiple voices and perspectives. On the one hand, Crossbones multivocality constitutes a prime example of what was discussed in terms of “democracy” in Chapter Four, not least given the inclusion of rascals and rogues. On the other hand, democracy is no longer surrounded by the idealism of earlier novels, but is problematized in two major ways.

To begin with, the democracy on display in Crossbones features in the novel’s frequent intellectual debates. However, it is not the kind of lively (and even humorous) discussions and debates familiar from especially Gifts, but also novels like Links and Sardines. Instead it appears to reflect political fatigue. In a cogent comment on what he perceives as the discrepancy between the talk and action of Crossbones’ “intellectuals,” Pico Iyer claims that even though it is “unclear how much Farah means to be satirizing his exiles for their abstract temporizing, . . . the effect is to underline their impotence in this violent mayhem.” (“Somalia: ‘Diving Into the Wreck’” in The New York Review of Books, 8 Nov, 2012). Iyer’s response is an intriguing example of how the critical appraisal of intellectuals, discussed in relation to Farah’s Dictatorship Trilogy in Chapter Two, is now read in relation to the characters’ precarious contexts. In fact, this lack of “ineffectiveness” is precisely what brings Crossbones beyond political commentary into the realm of ethical enquiry, much in the same way as Farah’s portrayals of resistance in the Dictatorship Trilogy.

Furthermore, as anyone familiar with Farah’s wider oeuvre soon notices, there is (at least) one perspective missing from Crossbones’ account of “democracy” – that of women. There are very few women characters in Crossbones, and the few that are included are more or less only read in relation to men: women as wives, women as cooks, women as sexual partners, and women as nurturers of men. Crossbones’ lack of female voices is particularly noticeable when read against Gifts’ portrayal of Duniya, whose journey of emancipation clearly redeems her previous experience of having been a gift, passed on between men: fathers, brothers, and husbands.

So, how are we to interpret Crossbones’ marginalization of female characters? As I argue in ”What About Us Women?: Feminist Vision in Nuruddin Farah’s Crossbones” (forthcoming article), Crossbones’ renderings of women show how the reader must ‘read responsibly’ and attentively, so as to notice the effects of narrative silences, sexist comments, and ironies (much in the same way as Knots’ portrayal of Cambara, discussed in the final section of Chapter Four, demands a reading sensitive to ironies and gaps in the narrative). Having said that, Crossbones’ problematization of masculinist perceptions of women remain subtle and on the verge of being elusive, and a
reader familiar with Farah’s wider oeuvre is likely to agree with Zoe Norridge’s conclusion that, although Farah is “known for his sensitive and resolutely feminist depictions of Somali women, this is a male-centered novel, exploring the nuances of relationships between fathers and sons, brothers and colleagues” (Review in The Independent, 7 July 2012). Not only does Crossbones explore the nuances of male relationships, but its conspicuous lack of female voices serves to explore the complexities of democracy. Indeed, read in this way, Crossbones serves as a negative illustration of Farah’s often cited creed that “when the women are free, then and only then can we talk about a free Somalia” (Farah quoted in Stratton 144).

What is ultimately conveyed via Crossbones’ challenging narrative strategies is a much darker vision than in any of Farah’s earlier novels. Characters coming and leaving, even dying midway through the novel, bring danger and uncertainty to a new level. The political and ideological idealism that pervade especially Farah’s first trilogy seems to offer little consolation. And rather than mirror a lively, democratic conversation, as earlier novels do, not least Gifts, political discussions reflect political fatigue. Indeed, everyone appears to break under the strains of constant pressure – even women. Moreover, Crossbones lacks representations of good forces that are actively at work, such as for instance the medical doctor Bile from Links or the woman peace activist in Knots, Kiin. Finally, when characters that had shown moral stamina earlier in the trilogy – Cambara, Bile and others – are portrayed as wavering under the strains of constant stress, what hope is there?

Responding to this question requires a move towards what I perceive as Crossbones’ ethical centre, the novel’s opening story of YoungThing. Contrary to perceiving this story as part of a plot that Levy describes as “[mere] scaffolding on which hang the layered political intrigues that Crossbones reveals” (62) this story is one of few occasions in the novel that dramatize the re-humanization of a character.

**Telling “Secret Sorrows”**

While the alternative stories referred to at the beginning of this chapter contribute invaluably to Farah’s problematization of Western perceptions, a second type of narrative is equally indispensable to the novels’ larger project of challenging ‘Single Stories.’ These stories are often situated in the periphery of the novels’ main plot, and often feature characters whose names remain unknown. The story in Gifts describing an old woman who puts a blanket on the drunk Taariq, and keeps watch all night to protect him from stray dogs and thieves, may be perceived as such a story. In spite of its brevity, it articulates key aspects of Farah’s interrogations of political and
personal dimensions of gifts and giving by demonstrating that the purest of gift is that of guarding the dignity of the Other (Härgestam-Strandberg, “ Förord/preface” ix). A similar kind of story is presented in Crossbones’ renderings of YoungThing’s last hours.

**YoungThing: Humanity Restored**

This section will focus on the narrative significance of Crossbones’ opening story that features the killing of YoungThing, a young adolescent on his first mission with the Al-Shabaab, the militant wing of the Islamic Union Courts. Contrary to what may first appear to be the case, given its brevity, this story proves indispensable to Crossbones’ larger project of breaking open the question of reality, particularly its dramatizations of Butler’s pertinent questions: “whose lives are real?” and “what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?” (*Precarious life?* 33, xiv-xv).

Several aspects suggest that Crossbones’ rendering of YoungThing’s fate is more central than would at first seem the case for a story where the main character both remains anonymous (he is referred to as YoungThing throughout) and is killed within the first seventy pages of the novel. Apart from providing a thrilling opening and setting the tone of Crossbones’ renderings of terror and human exposure, structural aspects reinforce its narrative significance. The fact that the story is spread over three chapters, separated by the introductions of the protagonists Ahl’s and Malik’s stories, creates an initial impression that the story of YoungThing constitutes the novel’s third parallel story. Its narrative significance is further reinforced by the fact that YoungThing’s story keeps returning throughout the novel via Ahl’s and Malik’s encounters with YoungThing’s grieving sibling, thus preventing the reader from disengaging with his fate. Most importantly however, the story’s dramatization of YoungThing’s death is constructed to evoke narrative empathy in ways that decenter the novel’s main stories: Ahl’s and Malik’s missions. As will be argued, the opening story engages with Crossbones’ main themes in ways that allow the reader to emotively experience human exposure and vulnerability, the dehumanizing effects of war and violence, as well as the opportunities to regain “articulable humanity” even in the face of death.

The extreme exposure of YoungThing’s situation is conveyed in multiple ways. To begin with, the story begins with the portrayal of his utter dependence on his cell’s commanders. Even though he is shown nothing but “obvious disdain,” YoungThing is portrayed as “nodding his thanks” to his superiors, “smiling” bravely and “betraying none of his trepidation” (C 1) as he leaves on his mission to confiscate a house to be used by the Al-Shabaab. Not only does the combination of contempt and gratitude project a disconcerting unevenness in power and agency, but YoungThing’s inferiority
is reinforced by the repeated references to his small stature combined with his readiness to “do anything to impress” the commanders of his cell (C'3). The oscillation between binaries such as powerful-powerless and big-small adds to the overall impression that YoungThing’s mission will not end well. Ultimately, by referring to YoungThing’s “small stature” in conjunction with his being “huge in ambition” and “rich in heavenly vision” (C 1, 2), the omniscient narrator sets the scene for impending disaster.

YoungThing’s precarity becomes more pronounced via the different meanings of his name. On the one hand, the impersonal nature of YoungThing’s indeterminate age and name conveys a kind of universal human exposure shared by young people in all societies ravaged by war. On the other hand, his lack of a real name signals the ways in which the Al-Shabaab has stripped him of his singularity, thus appropriating him for their own purposes. However, even though YoungThing is an epithet he has acquired as a draftee into the Al-Shabaab, his objectification is not confined to the Al-Shabaab context, but reflects in other characters’ references to “young” and “thing.”

This objectification is first reflected in YoungThing’s encounter with Cambara, familiar from Knots – a scene in which the narrative perspective is shifted to account for Cambara’s detailed reflections. In “studying the young thing” (C 2), she is unsure of what to make of him, and first takes this “small-boned, four-and-a-half-foot-tall figure . . . hoisting a carryall bigger and heavier than he is” for “a dwarf,” “a grown man with the voice of a boy, or a boy in the body of a man” (C 2). It is obvious from her assessment and subsequent response that their mutual acts of “sizing each other up” (C 2) are motivated by a need to make informed choices for security reasons. Judged by his “slight stutter” (C 2), his hair being “the color of ash . . . cursed with kinks that no comb can smooth out” (C 3), and his enquiries concerning directions, YoungThing is without further ado sent away in the wrong direction – “well away” from the part of the city where Cambara lives (C 3). Cambara’s response may pass unnoticed because the reader is not yet aware of the implications of YoungThing’s adherence to her instructions: his own death and that of the old man who lives in the house that YoungThing will wrongly confiscate. Her overt lack of compassion, however, may well disturb a reader familiar with the preceding novel Knots, where Cambara is cast as a particularly idealistic protagonist. However, when read in relation to Crossbones’ renderings of moral fatigue and idealism long gone, Cambara’s response is only logical, and serves as a poignant example of Farah’s concern with the complexities of human response, including the compromised choices enforced by moral and political chaos. What is different from earlier novels, however, is the ways in which Crossbones consistently points beyond the acts of strong individuals to the circumstances and responses of the most
exposed. This is done to such an extent that hope appears to be located in the seemingly insignificant gestures of nameless ones.

A central aspect of Crossbones’ decentering of political and moral idealism is conveyed by the story’s increasing focus on YoungThing’s consciousness. The majority of YoungThing’s story is narrated by an omniscient narrator who shifts between YoungThing’s thoughts, speech and actions, and that of the other characters he encounters. However, there are also instances where a more privileged access to YoungThing’s inner life allows the reader to imaginatively experience with him mental states of confusion, frustration, fear and anger, but also hunger and fatigue. As YoungThing proceeds on his mission, his responses become increasingly intimate, with the interspersed use of free indirect speech: “Thank God he is small and as agile as a cat on the prowl. Of course, no instructions can prepare one for every contingency. There are decisions one must make on the job, without help” (C9). However, the privileged insight into YoungThing’s consciousness – his resolve, and his attempts to cheer himself up – only serve to make his exposure even more tangible.

In the same way as YoungThing is introduced via an omniscient narrator that gradually moves closer, the second part of the story begins with a detailed exterior description of Dhoorre, the old man who lives in the house that YoungThing wrongly confiscates. A man of seventy-plus, Dhoorre is described as “blessed with a sharp mind,” but with a body “bent as the young branch of a eucalyptus tree” (C47). Having accidently been locked out, he has just woken up from a nap, and muses about how his family will be amused to “find him in the garden, unshaven, unwashed, in his pajamas and his dressing gown” (C47). The combination of references to declining physical strength, and yet retained incisiveness, dignity and humour are important means for establishing Dhoorre’s reliability as a witness to YoungThing’s acts, while simultaneously infusing the story with additional dimensions of exposure and vulnerability.

Dhoorre’s physical vulnerability is accentuated in several references and increases the story’s strong element of tension. His reported thoughts are effectively interrupted by sounds coming from inside the house, and the sounds are soon complemented by the sight of “a young thing bearing a gun bigger than himself” (C47). The absurdity of the ensuing power negotiations is conveyed via Dhoorre’s mixed responses: his initial sense of danger is mixed with references to him feeling “befuddled” because he does not know how to respond (C47); “amused, because he can’t imagine such a young thing frightening him” (C47-48), while simultaneously experiencing an “uncertainty” that leads him to respond in a “voice laced with genuine tremor” (C48). It is only by going through these contradictory emotions that Dhoorre is depicted as arriving at a place where he is described as “no longer afraid” (C49). YoungThing on the other hand is described as “aghast” as he
receives a call on his cell phone. Dhoorre witnesses the abrupt change in the boy’s body language as he, in a voice that keeps breaking, answers “Yes, Sheik” several times and bows “in deference to his absent commander” (C 50). Even though Dhoorre is portrayed as sympathizing with YoungThing, his repetition of YoungThing’s fearful deference, and the double reference to “young” and “thing” reinforces YoungThing’s precarity as inescapable.

The second part of YoungThing’s story features the story’s only real human exchange. Although the scene begins with a sense of danger, with Dhoorre and YoungThing sizing each other up, it moves on to a wordless mutual recognition of the other’s vulnerability and exposure. This is shown to dissolve any notion of hierarchy: “Looking at the two of them and listening to them, you would not be able to tell who is the guest and who is the host” (C 47). It is in the light of this mutual recognition that we must understand YoungThing’s subsequent response: “I will do anything to spare your life” (C 51).

The third and final part of the story begins with an almost cinematic description of how members of YoungThing’s cell, BigBeard, FootSoldier and TruthTeller, approach the house from different vantage points, at the same time. While this procedure is obviously performed to secure the confiscation of a different house than anticipated, the reader is nevertheless left with the sense that they are closing in on their prey, in adherence to thriller genre conventions. The scene describes Dhoorre hiding in the bathroom, as a result of YoungThing having told him to do so, while also reassuring him that he will do anything to spare his life. Given the multiple ways in which YoungThing has been described in terms of precarity and insufficiency, the ending seems inevitable: we just know that Dhoorre will be found and YoungThing punished. The question is only when and how.

The story’s tension between forces of dehumanization and attempts to guard the dignity of the Other comes to a head in the final scene where Dhoorre – having been found hiding in the bathroom – pleads with the squad leaders to spare YoungThing’s life. However, Dhoorre’s pleading is followed by BigBeard’s instruction that YoungThing get his gun and shoot the old man. Without any show of emotion YoungThing obeys orders.

Not only do utter hopelessness and radical human exposure render this part of YoungThing’s story particularly emotively charged, but references to time passing, “as slow as death” (C 67) and the “eerie silence” (C 67) that follows YoungThing’s shooting, adds to our expectation that the killing will soon be followed by another. However, it is in this moment of silence pregnant with fear that the unexpected takes place. In a radical overturn of power positions, the dehumanization process that has dominated YoungThing’s story up till now is reversed. This shift is represented in the contrasting responses of YoungThing and the other men in his cell. Whereas YoungThing’s older comrades are described as immobile, “each an island of
disturbed tranquillity,” YoungThing’s realization of his own imminent death is described to instead “[concentrate] his mind” (C 68) in ways that result in a “fearless” (C 68) and openly defiant defence of the old man’s dignity. In sharp contrast to the immobile isolation of the older men’s response, YoungThing’s realization of vulnerability – Dhoorre’s and his own – brings him out of his confinement of fear and shame. YoungThing’s earlier acknowledgement of Dhoorre’s vulnerability (illustrated in his reflections on the old man in slippers and pajamas) is thus taken a step further. The detailed description of Dhoorre’s disfigured body is particularly important here, as it is presented as provoking an ethical response. YoungThing walks over to where the old man “lies sprawled, his legs splayed, his neck crooked, his hands spread out by his side, his nakedness embarrassing” (C 68). Not only do words like “sprawled,” “splayed,” “crooked” and “spread out” illustrate the disorder created by death, but the alliteration of the plosives [sp] convey a sense of moral outrage with the unrighteous ending of Dhoorre’s life. Finally, the metaphorical stripping of dignity is displayed in the description of how Dhoorre’s fall has caused his clothing to become untidy so as to reveal his embarrassing nakedness. However, for all its metaphorical resonances, the corporeality of the scene remains crucial as a means of understanding the ethical provocation of the scene. Adriana Cavarero’s early delineation in Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood (2000) of how singularity manifests in speech and acts (drawing on Hanna Arendt) together with her later writing on corporeal vulnerability in Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence (2008) is helpful in describing YoungThing’s responses. Whereas his decision to risk his life by hiding Dhoorre begins as a response to the vulnerability communicated by an old man in slippers and pajamas, the dignity of Dhoore, as laid bare in the violation of his body, gives rise to an unprecedented moral courage. What happens next is that YoungThing “straightens the man’s legs and places his hands together across his chest, in the gesture of a man praying” (C 68). YoungThing’s act of guarding and restoring Dhoorre’s dignity in this way, illustrated in the reversal of disorder, as well as the praying hands, is ultimately what restores his own dignity. Indeed, it is only by him doing so that he is portrayed as able to “[move] back a pace . . . pleased” with what he has done (C 68).

YoungThing’s expression of personal satisfaction affects the reader’s understanding of the next pause in the text, produced by the short sentence, “Then he waits.” (C 68). Although we know that YoungThing will be severely punished for what he has done, the waiting does not produce the same ominous discomfort as in the earlier example. Although the men of his squad continue in their attempts to dehumanize YoungThing by referring to him as “thing” and “vermin” (C 68) YoungThing’s act of honouring the old man in death speaks of a dignity that resists every form of reduction. The men’s
ultimate failure to dehumanize YoungThing is the reason why his story does not end on an entirely hopeless note. Although YoungThing’s assumption of ethical responsibility for the dignity of the Other is immediately followed by his own death, dehumanizing violence does not have the final say in this passage. It is not vermin, not a thing that dies. It is a young man called Kaahin.

The return of YoungThing’s story via representations of Malik’s and Ahl’s encounters with his siblings prevent the reader from disengaging with his fate, but the novel’s reversal of dehumanization is continued in crucial ways. To begin with, the siblings’ accounts provide the reader with YoungThing’s real name. As already noted, by initially withholding his name Farah conveys the universality of his fate, while also reflecting how his singularity is treated (as illustrated in the differing responses of Cambara, Dhoorre, and the comrades). When YoungThing returns however, via the stories of his siblings, the name is important as a means of metaphorically bringing him home – from the realm of the military collective and human universal to the realm where his singularity is acknowledged. In acquiring a name, in becoming part of a family, in reclaiming a personal history, the dehumanization process portrayed earlier is further reversed.

It is worth noting that Kaahin’s re-humanization happens in the context of him being mourned. When Butler calls for the “critical opening up of the questions, What is real? Whose lives are real?” (*Frames of War* 33) this includes her posing the question “what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?” (*Frames of War* xiv-xv). While the opening story of Kaahin portrays an existence far from “a livable life,” the siblings’ pain, anger and memories of him speaks of the value of his life. Even though nothing can be done to save their younger brother, the fear, shame and dehumanization he has endured does not render his life worthless. On the contrary, in grieving their brother, in investigating the circumstances of him being drafted into the Al-Shabaab, in telling his story and in mourning, Kaahin’s brother and sister demonstrate that his life is grievable and invaluable.

In concluding this section, I wish to suggest that the narrative significance of Kaahin’s story is underscored by the ways in which narrative empathy is rhetorically constructed to gravitate towards the fates of minor characters rather than the many intricate reflections and discussions of major characters. Furthermore, the reader’s engagement with Kaahin’s story is related to the ways in which political statements and ideological convictions give the reader something to accept or refute whereas the portrayal of human exposure and vulnerability is less easily dismissed. With the story of Kaahin the reader need not engage intellectually with social, political, ideological, or historical particularities *per se*, but may emotively *experience* rather than *explain* the “reality” of precarity and human exposure. Read in this way, the portrayal of how dehumanization is reversed in Kaahin’s life constitutes
Crossbones’ ethically most important contribution. This is partly because the story makes human precariousness real, while also unravelling the dangerous and contagious nature of power discussed throughout this thesis, but mainly because it shows the ways in which acknowledged vulnerability becomes the means by which to subvert those very forces.
Concluding remarks

When Ikem in Chinua Achebe’s novel *Anthills of the Savannah* exclaims “Writers don’t give prescriptions. . . They give headaches!” (148), his words capture an essential feature of the narrative ethics in Nuruddin Farah’s trilogies, such as it has emerged in my study. Whether reflected thematically or stylistically, the ethical concerns staged in these nine novels simply refuse to be bound by any expectations of what an African, postcolonial novel should be.

The study’s contribution to existing research on Farah, as well as to the larger fields of (African) (Postcolonial) studies, narrative theory, but also the emerging field of a vulnerability studies, is ultimately decided by its aim, scope and theoretical-methodological approach.

The most obvious area of contribution is, needless to say, the critical reception of Farah’s fiction, where no other study – apart from F. Fiona Moolla’s monograph *Reading Nuruddin Farah: The Individual, the Novel and the Idea of Home* – has until now engaged in a discussion of all Farah’s trilogies.

By privileging the ethical in Farah’s ethico-political writing, I am able to draw attention to voices and perspectives that have gone unnoticed in previous readings, where political perspectives have tended to dominate. However, the thesis’ foregrounding of the ethical trajectory in Farah’s ethico-political writing should not be perceived of as an implicit critique, or worse, a rejection of earlier more politically oriented critical interventions. On the contrary, by bringing fresh perspectives to bear on both familiar and less known material, this study complements and deepens our understanding of how and why Farah’s writing has continued to impact generations of readers worldwide, in both political and ethical ways.

Having said that, the ethical readings presented in this thesis do destabilize earlier perceptions of Farah’s fiction, via its firm focus on what characters are shown to fight for – rather than the multiple evils they resist. Indeed, as my analyses have shown, a sustained analytical focus on how human dignity is valued, protected, preserved and even restored calls for reassessments of concepts such as ‘freedom,’ ‘resistance,’ and ‘moral responsibility.’ These concepts have often been taken for granted in previous research on Farah, but also in postcolonial literary studies more generally. Indeed, as has been argued throughout, the tendency within more political oriented readings towards binary thinking and a privileging of the strong liberal Self, has left little room for the profoundly relational moral strength intimated in my readings.

My highly text-centered approach has in the process of writing proved that Farah’s trilogies generate questions that demand a fuller exploration
than what has hitherto been possible with a more limited emphasis on themes, narrative strategies (often in combination with Farah’s own comments in non-fictional writing and interviews). The use of a model in which five ‘ethical moments’ are explored has thus allowed for more extensive conclusions regarding the ways in which ethical themes are brought to the fore in the trilogies themselves (‘ethics of the told,’ ‘ethics of telling’ and ‘ethics of writing’), in reading practices and critical reception (‘ethics of reading’) but also in my own research practice (‘ethics of method’). As my readings show there are plenty of good observations in previous research regarding for instance the novel’s themes and rhetoric (‘ethics of the told’ and ‘ethics of telling’) that may be taken a step further via the inclusion of perspectives such as the ethical implications of different readings strategies (ethics of reading).

Secondly, the study’s exploration of themes, narrative strategies, author’s responsibilities and critical response elucidates how Farah’s trilogies escape any narrow definition of what African literature is or should be. By privileging the ethical trajectory – without losing sight of the strong political impetus of Farah’s writing – significant stories and perspectives emerge that are no less political in their outlook than more conventional readings of “resistance writing” and writings that “write back.”

Thirdly, beyond contributing to existing discussions of ethics in Farah’s fiction or in the larger field of African fiction, this study’s holistic approach to narrative ethics, with five different yet interrelated perspectives, contributes to the wider field of narrative ethics. Part of this contribution proceeds from the demand posed by these five foci for multiple hermeneutic models to be used: in my case, narratological approaches to reading and reception, continental philosophy (Lévinas, Cavarero and Butler), but also postcolonial theory. This interdisciplinary model of approaching narrative ethics does not depend on my particular choice of theorists however, but could, I believe, prove useful with other combinations of thinkers and theories.

Fourthly, the study contributes philosophically to the formulation of an ethics of vulnerability. Indeed, what began as a turn to philosophy for a language in which to express what I saw in Farah’s texts, gradually moved from a mere borrowing of concepts, into a dialogue, given that the particularities of Farah’s fiction speaks back to philosophy. By taking the trilogies’ representations of dignity as my point of departure, definitions of vulnerability are made possible where violence, however important, no longer dominates the view.

In closing I would like to mention a final area where I believe that my research, while having merely scratched the surface, might contribute further: the field of narrative theory, and especially the idea of imaginative challenges as an ethical resource.
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Sammanfattning


Trots det tydligt etiska anslaget så har dessa trilogier nästan uteslutande lästs utifrån sina politiska implikationer. Utan att undervärdera decennier av rikt och varierande kritiskt mottagande så har denna tendens till politiska läsningar ofta genererat förvånansvärt entydiga läsningar av verk kända för sin mångtydighet och komplexitet. Avhandlingen avser därför att påvisa djupet och bredden i Farah’s gestaltningar genom att tydligt belysa hur det etiska gestaltar sig på flera nivåer – tematiskt, berättartekniskt, i mötet mellan läsare och text, samt i föreställningar om författarens moraliska ansvar. Därutöver diskuteras även de etiska dimensionerna av litteraturkritik: vad innebär en etiskt hållen läsemетодik?


entiteter. Trots att anledningarna till politiska läsningar av Farah’s trilogier kan härledas såväl till verkens starkt politiska nerv som författarens egna uttalanden i intervjuer och artiklar, så pekar privilegieringen av det politiska framför det etiska på en mer generell tendens inom postkolonial kritik att inrymma det etiska under det politiska. Trots att kopplingen mellan fiktion, politik och författaransvar inte kan avfärdas, hävdar jag i denna avhandling att ett ensidigt politisk angreppssätt hotar att såväl underskatta komplexiteten i romanernas gestaltningar, som att reducera konceptuellt vad författare som Farah faktiskt åstadkommer.

För det andra så vidgar avhandlingen befintlig forskning kring det etiska i Farah’s romaner genom att inte endast fokusera på tematik och berättartekniska grepp, men också diskutera läsanded och skrivandet – det som i avhandlingen beskriver som fyra sammanlänkande ”ethical moments of the told, the telling, the act of writing, the act of reading.” Utan att undervärdera tidgare kritiska läsningar så tycks många diskussioner kring Farah’s trilogier fokusera författarens centralitet på ett vis som emellanåt tar fokus från i övrigt tankevackerande läsningar av tematik och narrativa strategier. Min högst textcenterade utgångspunkt visar som kontrast att läsningen av Farah’s trilogier genererar spörmål som kräver ett mer holistiskt perspektiv, inte minst tydliga diskussioner kring den etiska dialog som uppstår i mötet mellan läsare och text.

Förutom att bidra till befintlig forskning på Farah’s författarskap, så bidrar avhandlingens holistiska inställning till narrativ etik med fem sammanlänkade perspektiv till det vidare fältet av etisk litteraturkritik. Dels beror detta på det faktum att en sådan modell förutsätter användandet av multipla tolkningsmodeller; i mitt fall kontinental filosofi, postkolonial teori, samt narratologiska teorier kring läsande och mottagande. Denna interdisciplinära modell för narrativ etik är dock inte begränsad till min specifika sammansättning utan kan fungera som modell även för andra litteraturforskare, med alternativa kombinationer av tänkare och teoretiker.

Till sist; trots att det inte varit ett uttalat mål från projektets början så har arbetet med det etiska i Farah’s trilogier genererat många funderingar kring den egna läsningen som efterhand lett till formulering av nya narratologiska perspektiv. Här utgör mötet mellan text och läsare en central del i avhandlingen. Genom att betona de etiska elementen i mötet mellan text och läsare närmar jag mig spörmål som i förlängningen kan ses som byggstenar i en mera etiskt hållen läsemetodik. I stället för att tolka ”störande” element som exempel på estetiska brister, alternativt brister i författarens moraliska ansvarsstagnande (!) så menar jag att de aspekter som irriterar läsaren, försvårar eller rent av omöjliggör förståelse mycket väl kan vara de ting i texten som tvingar läsaren till en mera engagerad och därmed etiskt mer välgrundad läsning. Att läsa textens ”krux” i termer av ”ethical resource” utgör ett viktigt bidrag till såväl litteratur-filosofisk som narratologisk
litteraturforskning, eftersom man ofta hamnat i endera värderande samtal kring "god litteratur" eller i resonemang kring vilka narrativa element/strategier som väcker läsarens engagemang, empati, etc – och vilka som inte gör det.


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