"Articulable Humanity"
Narrative Ethics in Nuruddin Farah’s Trilogies

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Akademisk avhandling

som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Dekanus vid Humanistisk fakultet för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen framläggs till offentligt försvar i Hörsal E, Humanisthuset
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This study explores the multiple ethical dimensions of the nine novels published between 1979 and 2011 that together constitute Nuruddin Farah’s 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 separate these trilogies and novels thematically and stylistically, they are remarkably consistent in their enquiry. While firmly rooted in the geo-political particulars of Somalia, 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?

By privileging the ethical in Farah’s ethico-political writing, the study draws attention to voices and perspectives that have gone unnoticed in previous readings, where political perspectives have dominated. Not only does a sustained analytical focus on how human dignity is valued, protected, preserved and even restored call for re-assessments of concepts such as ‘freedom,’ ‘resistance,’ and ‘moral responsibility.’ but the thesis’ 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 and narrative strategies. The use of a model in which five ‘ethical moments’ are explored thus allows for more extensive conclusions to be drawn, both regarding the ethics emerging in the trilogies themselves (‘ethics of the told,’ ‘ethics of telling’ and ‘ethics of writing’), in reading practices and critical reception (‘ethics of reading’), and my own research practice (‘ethics of method’).

Ultimately, the study’s explorations of themes, narrative strategies, author’s responsibilities and critical response elucidate how Farah’s trilogies escape any narrow definition of what (African) (postcolonial) 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 surface that are no less political in their outlook than more conventional readings of “resistance writing.”

By drawing on continental philosophy (Lévinas, Cavarero and Butler), narrative theory and postcolonial studies, this study brings fresh perspectives to bear on both familiar and less well-known material, while also contributing to new methodological frameworks within narrative ethics and new theoretical perspectives within narrative theory, not least as reflected in the final chapter’s discussion of imaginative challenges.

Keywords
Nuruddin Farah, African literature, postcolonial literature, narrative ethics, ethical criticism, feminism, precariousness, vulnerability, Emmanuel Lévinas, Adriana Cavarero, Judith Butler.