

AMOGHVARTA

ISSN : 2583-3189



Nation, Power and Politics in Nuruddin Farah's *Sweet and Sour Milk*

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Authors

Rakesh Jana

Research Scholar

Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur

Dr. Savita Singh

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Govt. Nagarjuna PG College of Science

Raipur, Chhattisgarh, INDIA

&

Dr. Protibha Mukherjee Sahukar

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Durga Mahavidyalaya

Raipur, Chhattisgarh, INDIA

Abstract

Nuruddin Farah is one of the major Somali African writers. In his oeuvre Farah has tried to capture the colonial past and postcolonial reality of Somalia. His writings capture the oppression, torture, politics, dominance and violence on the nation by both colonial rulers and postcolonial natives. His novels deal with the social, political, cultural and economic issues of Somalia. He has tried to construct the nation by creating awareness through his writings. His writings are the voice of protest of the marginalized subaltern Somalis. Sweet and Sour Milk is the first novel of Farah's first trilogy "Variations on the theme of an African Dictatorship". The novel reveals atrocity, violence and oppression of Siad Barre's regime. It highlights how the dictator General has controlled the society and nation through its power, dominance and politics. This paper will explore how the youth has tried to raise voice against the oppressive regime to create an awareness and resistance in Somali society.

Key Words

Somalia, Power, Politics, Violence, Nation.

Pramod K Nayar in *Postcolonial Literature An Introduction* writes, "Life-writing documents atrocities and voices protest. It seeks to raise consciousness and bring about social change. It is a literature of protest and a literature of hope" (Nayar 109). Nuruddin Farah's early novels reveal the atrocity

and dominance of the dictatorial regime of Siad Barre in postcolonial Somalia. After the publication of two novels, *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), and *A Naked Needle* (1976), *Variations on the theme of an African Dictatorship* is Nuruddin Farah's first trilogy. The "Dictatorship" trilogy comprises *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979), *Sardines* (1981), and *Close Sesame* (1983). In the novels of this trilogy, Farah has criticized the dictator ruler of Somalia, Siad Barre. Throughout the novels of this trilogy, the dictator is mentioned as the General. The inclusion of the phrase "African Dictatorship", rather than "Somali dictatorship" in the title of the trilogy, has wider significance. It signifies Farah's wider vision of Africa. In the novels of this trilogy Farah has captured harsh realities of the African nations such as poverty, famine, hunger, lack of promotion of education,

unemployment, superstitions, lack of health infrastructure and doctors. Apart from these crises, the engagement of the warlords and dictators in political war games and their quest for power has led the continent towards destruction. The youth has tried to raise their voice against the oppressive power structure of the nation-state, for social transformation, for justice of the marginalized and the subalterns. Though, this voice of protest has been subdued, silenced by the atrocious power structure. Farah has captured the existence of power structure in every sphere of Somali society. Nuruddin Farah in an interview with Kwame Anthony Appiah says:

That's what I would challenge my fellow Somalis to do: to talk not about Siad Barre but about the regime. It is not the man, it is the system that creates the man – the two are symbiotic. "Study the structure of the Somali family," I would challenge, "and you will find mini-dictators imposing their will without regard to the sensitivities and sensibilities of the weaker members of the family unit." (Appiah)

Apart from the existence of power structure in the nation-state, Farah has captured the power and politics within the Somali family. The existence of power structure in every sphere of society is captured in the words of Michel Foucault. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault writes: "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 93). The writer has highlighted the marginalization of the female voice by the patriarchal society in the nation-state and also in the family. Though, the women have participated in the underground youth movement. They have struggled, fought to create awareness and to raise the postcolonial voice of protest against the postcolonial oppressive power. The novels highlight the suppression of postcolonial voice through power and politics and thus denote the decline of the nation. In this trilogy, Farah has dealt with the existence of different dimensions of dictatorial rules, different patterns of power structure in nation, society, and also in Somali patriarchal societal space.

The novel *Sweet and Sour Milk* opens with Soyaan's illness. The twin brother Soyaan and Keyaan's mother, Qumman shows her disbelief in modern medicine. She has "little faith in the miracles of modern medicines". Her disbelief in modern medical science signifies her belief in superstition, and her illiteracy. She encircles herself in the boundary of superstition. When Soyaan points out with his finger towards the modern medicine on the table, her mother Qumman denies giving him the "assortment of bottles of various groupings and dimensions". In spite of using the modern medicines she shows her belief in "medicinal concoction". This incident suggests on the one hand her deep belief in superstition, and on the other hand the helplessness of a mother.

Soyaan's mother, a Somali woman, a victim of patriarchal violence of her husband Keynaan, is worried about her son's health. As the patriarchal Somali society does not give her the scope and opportunity of education, she is unable to understand the use of modern medicines and health care systems. She even does not allow her ill son Soyaan to access to the modern medicines prescribed by Dr. Ahmed Wellie, one of Soyaan's friends. She tries to convince her son to consume the yogurt mixed with traditional herbs. She ignores the modern medicines and relies on the traditional herbs and the recitation of the Koran by the sheikh: "The Koran is all we know that cures without complications".

Soyaan switches on the radio, while lying on the bed. It broadcasts a song in the praise of the General by "Dulman, the country's most famous actress". The song in "ludicrous eulogies" describes and attributes the General the grand title: "The father of the nation. The carrier of wisdom. The provider of comforts. A demi-god". This glorified description of the General by one of the famous Somali actress suggests the control of the nation's voice by force and it is a process to control country's thought process. In contrast, Soyaan compares him with a "Grand Warden of a Gulag". By comparing the General with the warden of Gulag, Farah savagely criticizes the General and his regime. Gulag, a symbol of suppression of political revolution in Soviet Union, was a forced labor camp, which was established by Lenin and during the era of Joseph Stalin the number of victims in its prison increased.

Keynaan, Soyaan's father, continuously wants Soyaan to check his anti-Governmental ideologies. The novel captures thinking process of two generations. As a representative of youth, Soyaan challenges the farcical dictatorial rule of the General and shows the promise to work or make contribution to uproot the General's regime. He thinks his voice of protest will be his real contribution to the nation. Keynaan, whom Sooyan considers as a "powerless patriarch", in spite of knowing all the aspects of the oppressive regime, submissively works for the General's office. This humble submission signifies his fear of the dictatorial regime. He shows his humble loyalty to the regime for himself and for the protection of his family members. His loyalty is actually a protective encirclement, so that his family does not come under the dictatorial General's radar of suspicion.

The novel captures the harsh environmental conditions. For its geographic location, Somalia, Africa's easternmost nation, which looks like 'horn' faces famine again and again. The environmental crisis and continuous political conflict, violence, oppression and the dictatorial rule have led the nation towards hunger, poverty, and decay. The continuous presence of beggars on the streets and outside of the houses reveals the true reality of the nation. Farah gives the description of the beggars most of whom are youth. Here, the youth, the main working force of the nation is begging on the streets. The educated and intellectual youth who question against the dictatorial rule of the General are identified, questioned, sent to jail, tortured or sometimes silently murdered like the character Soyaan.

The nation-state does not promote education and knowledge. The dictatorial regime suppresses any kind of thought and ideology which is against the Government. Loyaan thinks about to do the postmortem of the dead body of his twin brother Soyaan, to find out the true cause of his death. Though, his parents especially his mother raised objection. Qumaan's reaction about the postmortem has two-dimensional significance. First of all, it signifies her lack of education which is a postcolonial reality of the nation Somalia where the nation-state does not promote any kind of education. Secondly, it suggests the clutch of the dictatorial Government where there is no hope of fare investigational outcome after the postmortem. So, the rejection of the postmortem of Soyaan's dead body by his parents is actually a defeated submission and acceptance of the death of their son. Soyaan's father Keynaan, the representative of the patriarchal Somali society, also express his views about God's supremacy. Loyaan's desire to make the postmortem of his brother's dead body is the argumentative mind of an intellectual Somali youth who feels the existence of conspiracy as his brother harbored the ideologies against the dictatorial Government and was engaged in writing articles, memorandums to make awareness in the society.

The failure of the output result of the postmortem is again expressed in the voice Soyaan's sister Ladan: "Does it matter how you dispose of dead bodies? Does it matter whether or not you find out what has caused the death?". Here, she understands that no investigation, whether scientific or unscientific, whether fairly or unfairly, can return the life of her brother. It is significant to note that though Loyaan argues about the postmortem, at the end he also accepts the reality. This incident captures the injustice, and helplessness of the common people. The manipulation of the postmortem report is a brutal process of suppression of postcolonial voice, a postcolonial surveillance system, in Foucauldian term which is called "panopticone". It is an example of controlling the informational structure of the nation-state. John Masterson in his book *The Disorder of Things A Foucauldian Approach to the Work of Nuruddin Farah* writes:

The *Variations* trilogy has a necessarily nightmarish quality, as it presents us with an autocratic General imagined to have panoptical power. When *Sweet and Sour Milk*'s Soyaan refers to father Keynaan as 'a miniature creature in a flat world dominated by a God-figure high and huge as any mountain anyone has seen' (*S&SM*: 83), it is not clear whether he is referring to Allah, the General or both. The slippage is crucial. Once in this position, the General is able to survey all beneath him, watching his intellectual adversaries lose themselves in mazes of both his and, more peculiarly, their own making. (Masterson 31)

When Soyaan's mother Qumman finds an unsigned "A page and a half of neat double-spaced script", she gives it to Loyaan, as she cannot read. This script is actually one of the memorandums. The piece of memorandum severely criticizes the dictatorial regime of Siad Barre, mentioned in the novel as the 'General'. Through this memorandum, Farah has criticized the governance system which runs the country. The memorandum calls the top civil servants as "clowns", "cowards". It suggests the helpless condition of the people working inside the Government as they cannot raise their voice. The women, who work for the Government, are harassed and humiliated by the patriarchal system in the office. They face different types of humiliating questions. The people, who work inside the Government structure, cannot raise their voice against the Government, or criticize the Government, or take part in any anti-Governmental discussions, which might hurt the sentiment of the regime. If discovered, they are taken away in the midnight for interrogation without any warrant or any kind of notice. Here, the voice of the common people is compared with "dry weed". The search of the missing person by that person's family in the police stations suggests the helplessness of the common people. The guilt or crime conducted by that person leads to the imprisonment, and lengthy interrogations.

The common people cannot raise their voice against the dictatorial regime in spite of injustice and torture. Helplessly, they sing the praise song of the regime: "Raise 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". This quoted portion of Soyaan's memorandum echoes what exactly Keynaan says to his revolutionary son Soyaan when he was alive. This singing of the praise song of the regime and tolerating all the dictatorial violence, oppression is a kind of safe, protective humiliating encirclement for the family members; on the other hand it is a defeat of humanity, human dignity, and values. This situation signifies the disastrous societal structural pattern which will lead the nation into darkness. The novel captures how the people who raise their voice against the regime, face unwanted arrest, imprisonment, endless torture and even death. The people who are executed for their anti-Governmental ideologies are buried in the graves where there are no numbers or any identification mark.

The dictator General wants the glorification of his Government in every sphere of the nation-state. To strengthen his power structure and see that his ideology is followed generation after generation, the General controls the pillars of the society like newspaper and radio. Even the celebrities of the nation sing the praise song of the General. It is a process to implement his power structure by force and politics. The General stops promoting the education system of the forthcoming generation of the nation. It is a process to destroy the critical intellectual thought process of the nation-state. It is structural process to suppress the postcolonial voice, and convert the people into postcolonial subalterns. The Government of the dictator General sets up a network system, a surveillance system to identify the spark of revolution or protest in the society. The regime arrests the protesters, kidnaps them, and throws them into the prison for an unidentified period. Later, these protesters are tortured, harassed, and interrogated without any trial in court or any warrant.

Soyaan mysteriously falls ill for an unidentified cause and dies out of "complications" as stated by Loyaan. The General identifies Soyaan's revolutionary spark and activities and secretly kills him though the real cause of Soyaan's death remains a mystery which his brother Loyaan has tried to demystify throughout the novel. Further, the Government realizes that the sudden mysterious death of Soyaan may lead further spark of violence and agitation amongst his revolutionary group. So, the General takes a few steps to suppress further agitation among the mass. Firstly, the Government declares Soyaan as a martyr of the revolution and forcefully spreads the news about his last words as "*Labour is Honour and There is No General but our General*", and names schools and streets after on Soyaan's name. Secondly, the General and Ministers of the General identify the other members of the group and throw them into custody, interrogate them and torture them. Thirdly, the General's regime gives Soyaan's father Kenyaan a job in the Government. Here, the appointment of Keynaan even after his forceful voluntary retirement is a strategy to suppress the voice of the family members, as Keynaan is the head of the family and a representative of oppressive patriarchy. It is

important to note that Keynaan plays the role as assigned by the Government. He tries to make the family accept Soyaan's death. Before Soyaan's death he tried to convince Soyaan to change his anti-dictatorial approach. After Soyaan's death he tries to convince Loyaan to accept the offers provided by the Government and requests him not to raise his voice. Fourthly, the dictatorial Government of the General tries to hunt down all the memorandums written by Soyaan and finally sends Loyaan in exile by appointing him in a Government job which Loyaan helplessly accepts.

The declaration of Soyaan as a hero, a martyr of the revolution is actually part of the system to suppress the revolt. It depicts the suppression of postcolonial voice of protest. It is a process of molding the anti-dictatorial voice and represents it in a different way so that the spark of anti-Governmental ethos does not reach the masses. Though, it creates anger amongst Soyaan's family members and close friends like Ahmed Wellie, everyone fails to prove the truth and reveal the true cause of Soyaan's death. On the other hand, in a radio broadcast, the Government shows condolences and declares Soyaan as a martyr, a hero of the revolution. The family is surprised and shows inexpressible anger for the declaration of Soyaan's "revolutionary status".

Sweet and Sour Milk repeatedly highlights the issue of famine, hunger, lack of healthcare and infrastructure in Somalia. When Loyaan declares to his mother that he is not doctor, but only a dentist; his mother Qumman criticizes him severely. She shows her disappointment when Loyaan is unable to write a prescription, "a chit" for his sister who is suffering the "monthly pain of a circumcised woman's sufferance". Here, the issue of female genital mutilation refers to a larger forceful reality in Africa where women are forced to go through this inhumane, barbaric, unscientific process. It also suggests the lack of education and medical awareness. Firstly, Qumman had hoped that earning a doctor's degree would certainly uplift their status from poverty and economic independence would come to the family. Secondly, she thought that when Loyaan becomes a doctor, the family would get free from the patriarchal dependency and dominance of Keynaan. She declares that Africa does not want a dentist, rather it needs a doctor to deal with infectious disease as the helpless common people use local herbs to cure these diseases: "Africa's teeth are healthy; it is Africa's viscera that crawl with the fleas of insanitation. For local diseases there are no cures but local herbs. We have healthy teeth. See mine". Qumman tells her son Loyaan that like his twin brother Soyaan and his sister, he should have registered his name in the National Service. It will guarantee a monthly stipend and after undergoing the military training and a secure job will be offered to him by the Government. This is another postcolonial reality and the hegemony of the nation-state. The youth of the nation are controlled, operated, and brain washed to get favors from the Government. This is a harsh reality of Somalia as the novel suggests. Here, though the children of the family are educated; Soyaan is an economist and Loyaan is a dentist and both had studied abroad still they register their names in the Government list. After filling the application form for a job in the Ministry of Health and after undergoing the military training, finally Loyaan is "appointed as Regional Health Officer to the plague stricken region of Baidoa". The reference of "Africa's viscera that crawl with the fleas of insanitation" and the reference of "plague stricken region" captures the pictures of the health crisis in poverty stricken regions.

Though Loyaan knows that the General and the ministers of the General are responsible for the death of his brother, helplessly he tells Ahmed Wellie and everyone that Soyaan died for "stomach upset and inherent complication of blood poisoning". It suggests the helplessness of a brother, who is unable to prove the real fact of his brother's death, nor is he able to stop the Government from declaring him a martyr, a hero of the revolution. The regime controls all type of media available in the nation during 70's: radio, the broadcast media; and the newspaper, the print media. The regime controls the nation's voice and thought by controlling the media. Throughout the novel Loyaan has tried to reveal the true cause of Soyaan's death. He has tried to prove that Soyaan's last words were not "Labour is Honour". He struggles throughout the novel to prove the real ideology of his brother. Loyaan's attempt to find out the real cause of his brother's death, and to prove the real ideology of his brother's thinking, is also a process to expose the dictator General's regime. Loyaan's

parents and his sister try to convince him, and request him not to further investigate, as they do not want to lose him too.

Through *Sweet and Sour Milk*, Farah deconstructs the deep inbuilt power and politics inside the nation Somalia. The Government was fearful about the rebellious voice of Soyaan and the dictatorial regime also feared about the downfall of his power. Even, after his death, which was an unrevealed planned murder, he was awarded with posthumous honor, just to handle post-death situation. Later, to suppress the voice of his family his father Keynaan is used as an instrument. Keynaan, the patriarchal voice of the family, a miniature version of the oppressive General, tries to suppress the voice of his son Loyaan, his wife Qumaan, and his daughter Ladan. This is a hierarchical surveillance system. This pattern of surveillance system is captured in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*:

The power in the hierarchized surveillance of the disciplines is not possessed as a thing, or transferred as a property; it functions like a piece of machinery. And, although it is true that its pyramidal organization gives it a 'head', it is the apparatus as a whole that produces 'power' and distributes individuals in this permanent and continuous field. . . Thanks to the techniques of surveillance, the 'physics' of power, the hold over the body, operate according to the laws of optics and mechanics, according to a whole play of spaces, lines, screens, beams, degrees and without recourse, in principle at least, to excess, force or violence. It is a power that seems all the less 'corporal' in that it is more subtly 'physical'. (Foucault 176-177)

In the novel, Qumaan and Ladan do not raise their voice against Keynaan, the patriarchy. Through Loyaan, the two women find their voice. The novel captures an incident when Keynaan was humiliated in the office. When he returned home he displaced that anger by beating the twins and his wife. This incident proves the harsh treatment of the power, the patriarchy over the innocent. It represents the picture of harsh patriarchal violence in Somali society. On the other hand the twin brothers Soyaan and Loyaan became the voice of the oppressed when they grew up, got the school education, and after winning scholarships went abroad for higher studies: "She would wait until the twins grew up, she confided to a neighbour. She would wait. Patience, patience". Throughout the novel, the twin brothers raise their voice against patriarchy. Soyaan, an Economist, becomes one of the major voices against the dictatorial regime. Loyaan tries to prove the General's hand in Soyaan's death and also raises his voice against the patriarchal approach of his father.

Another harsh picture of General's dictatorial regime is revealed when Loyaan remembers one of Soyaan's letters about the dictatorial rule of the regime. In the letter, Soyaan describes the existence of Oriental centre in Mogadiscio. He writes that entire city is divided into thirteen cells and every house is numbered and all the residents are counted. It suggests the surveillance system of the Government. It signifies how the society, cities, colonies, and people are monitored, and under constant surveillance and control: "The General has the master-key to all cells, whether numbered or unnumbered. He is the Grand Warder, remember". In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault writes,

There is no risk, therefore, that the increase of power created by the panoptic machine may degenerate into tyranny; the disciplinary mechanism will be democratically controlled, since it will be constantly accessible 'to the great tribunal committee of the world' . . . The seeing machine was once a sort of dark room into which individuals spied; it has become a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole. (Foucault 207)

Apart from that, the General has made it mandatory for all the civil servants and their family members to register with the nearest orientation centre. Thrice in a week, in the morning, it is mandatory for all civil servants to "attend a programme of orientation organised by the Revolutionary Council for all Ministries" otherwise their job will be in crisis. It is also significant that Loyaan is followed by a one-armed man all the time throughout the novel. This surveillance system of the regime is very much similar to Foucault's concept of "panopticon" which he describes in his book *Discipline and Punish*.

Conclusion

Nuruddin Farah's novel helps to understand the structure of Somali society. It gives a deep insight to understand the existence of power structure within the family and also in the nation-state. The novel depicts the crisis of the nation-state under the governance of General Siad Barre. It highlights the initiative of the youth to construct the nation. Apart from the issues of Somalia, Farah has also highlighted the crisis and violence in African continent. Through the characters, the novel *Sweet and Sour Milk* captures Farah's voice and also his vision for the nation and for the continent.

References

1. Appiah, Kwame Anthony. (2004) "Nuruddin Farah by Kwame Anthony Appiah." BOMB: The Author Interviews, Issue 87, *Spring*, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/nuruddin-farah/>. Accessed 9 Oct. 2023.
2. Farah, Nuruddin. (1979) *Sweet and Sour Milk*, Graywolf Press, United States of America.
3. Foucault, Michel. (1976) *The History of Sexuality Volume 1 The Will to Knowledge*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Penguin eBooks, Kindle ed., 2019.
4. Foucault, Michel. (1975) *Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Penguin eBooks, Kindle ed., 2019.
5. Masterson, John. (2013) *The Disorder of Things A Foucauldian Approach to the Work of Nuruddin Farah*. Wits University Press, Johannesburg, South Africa.
6. Nayar, Pramod K. (2008) *Postcolonial Literature An Introduction*. Pearson Longman, New Delhi, India.

---==00==---