

The Politics of Identity and Belonging in Somali Literature - A Critical Analysis of  
Nurrudin Farah's *Maps*

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ABSTRACT

Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*, the opening novel of his *Blood in the Sun* trilogy, delves into the complex interplay of identity, belonging, and nationalism against the backdrop of Somalia's turbulent history and the Ogaden War. The narrative centers on Askar, an orphan raised by Misra, an Ethiopian woman, in a small Somali village. As Askar matures and relocates to Mogadishu, he wrestles with his sense of self, torn between joining the resistance movement against Ethiopia or pursuing an academic path. Misra, marginalized due to her Ethiopian background, embodies the struggles of acceptance and exclusion in a divided society. Through their evolving relationship, Farah examines the effects of colonialism, conflict, and cultural disintegration on both individual and collective identity. The novel critiques the artificiality of imposed borders and the challenges of reconstructing a nation fragmented by war. Askar's internal

dilemma, whether to take up arms or seek knowledge, parallels Somalia's broader struggle to redefine itself in the face of external and internal pressures. Farah highlights how the personal journeys of his characters expose the fragile foundations of national identity and the deep-rooted consequences of colonialism. By intertwining Askar's personal journey with Somalia's political and social upheavals, *Maps* highlights the inseparability of individual and national identity. The novel ultimately serves as a poignant exploration of how history, politics, and cultural heritage shape the quest for self-definition and belonging in a postcolonial world. Farah's work underscores the resilience of individuals navigating fractured identities and the enduring human desire to find a place in a divided world.

Keywords: Identity, Belonging, Nationalism, Postcolonialism, Ogaden War

Nuruiddin Farah is widely regarded as one of Africa's most respected contemporary writers. Born in Somalia, he holds a prominent place in Somali Literature and is often recognized as the country's first feminist writer. Farah's literary works consistently engage with the political and social challenges confronting his homeland, particularly highlighting the struggles of Somali society. Somalia, known for having one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world, remains a central focus throughout his writing, which serves to keep the nation's culture and experiences alive. His novels offer a deeply perceptive portrayal of Somali cultural life, reflecting not only his profound sympathy for Somali society but also his strong commitment to advocating for women's rights. He also focuses on the history and politics of Somalia. Farah has written eight novels which include two trilogies. He has received honors for his works, the Kurt Tucholsky prize in Sweden, and the Neustadt International prize for literature.

*Maps* is the first novel of the *Blood in the Sun* trilogy. Farah's first major trilogy is focused on different thoughts. The novels *Gifts*, *Maps*, and *Secrets* are included in the trilogy *Blood in the Sun* (1986). The third trilogy is titled *Past Imperfect* (2007). Most of Farah's writing focuses on political issues, social

issues, nationalism, and colonization. *Maps* focuses on western Somalia's liberation war, also called Ogaden War, fought between Ethiopia and Somalia. *Maps* talks about the personal experience of two major characters, Askar and Misra. The novel is set in the author's native land. '*Ethiopia*' refers to the land of the dark race, with Farah pointing out that it is derived from a Greek word meaning a person with a black face. The novel addresses the constructed image of his nation by the third world. Farah, though having received foreign education, tries to bring out nationalist feeling through his work. Nationalism is a great contemporary theory. The concept of a nation is largely a constructed entity. This division was inflicted upon the world because of the domination of the first world and the suppression of the third world.

Askar, the central figure of the novel, enters the world in a small, remote Somali village named Kallafo, already marked by tragedy, for his father had lost his life in the violent conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia even before Askar's birth. His mother, too, passes away during childbirth, leaving him orphaned at the very moment of his arrival into the world. He is taken by Misra, a kind-hearted woman. He grows up in a small village. But as years pass by, he begins to feel the struggle for air and goes to live with his wealthy cosmopolitan aunt and uncle in the capital, Mogadishu. Somalia is struggling to recreate a national identity that has been destroyed by the modernity of the civil war. Askar thinks of Misra's life, murder and death. Askar's opinion of identity and Somalia's political border is challenged with a grimness he has never imagined. As always, he suspects the darkness surrounding his birth. This portrayal of Askar's journey highlights the fragile connection between personal identity and national belonging. As Kwame Anthony Appiah, in the article "*Nuruddin Farah's Crucible of the Imagination,*" points out, "Misra is not Askar's kinswoman, not even his countrywoman, and, as a foster parent to an orphan, she is and is not his mother: but her life is tied up with this young man whom she has raised, her love for him running against the loyalties to people and nation which are the source of so much bloodshed and division, but which are also at the heart of Askar's identity" (Appiah). Appiah's observation highlights how Askar's

upbringing with Misra complicates his sense of national belonging, illustrating the inevitable conflict between personal affection and political identity. Farah mentions the name, Misra “foundation of the earth.” This is metaphorically consistent with her role as Askar’s surrogate mother but it also suggests something more. She belongs Askar tells us about his none liberated past (185).

Further, “She symbolizes the shared Cushitic heritage of both the Oromo and Somalia” (Hilarie Kelly 23). Misra has forgotten her native Oromo language, and apart from Somali, the only other language she understands is Amharic. In Ogaden, people speak both languages. That community never fully accepts or treats Misra nicely. That is the village in which Misra and her mother are abandoned. She is kidnapped by a Somali warrior. Later, after her mother’s death she is adopted by a wealthy man. When she reaches sexual maturity, the man is murdered to gather many people to get involved in sex and drinking. When she adopts Askar she becomes sympathetic towards him. She gives him a more secure identity. Askar, in turn, finds comfort and happiness in her affection and attention but at the same time reflects the implications of her calling him my man. This complex emotional dynamic is further explained by Patricia Alden, who notes that Askar becomes consumed by “the question of his birth,” fixated on the unsettling possibility that he may have been responsible for his mother’s death simply by being born (121). Alden highlights how this internal struggle fosters Askar’s conflicting emotions towards Misra, oscillating between affection and latent hostility. Askar’s emotional turmoil escalates as he grows older; by the time he is eighteen and living in Mogadishu, he is summoned by state authorities to account for Misra’s actual death (Alden 121). This fraught relationship is encapsulated in Askar’s cold-hearted words: “To live I will have to kill you ... just like I killed my mother to live” (Farah 59). Simultaneously, Misra assumes the role of a nurturing mother figure, and in retrospect, Askar himself symbolically takes on the role of a ‘feeder mother.’ Due to her non-Somali background, Misra faces suspicion and shares her concern about that anxiety: “One day you will identify yourself with your people and identify me out of your community who knows you might even kill me to make

your people dream to become a tangible reality” (Farah 99). Despite this, Misra ultimately shows her willingness to let Askar transition into adulthood.

To pursue his studies, Askar relocates to Mogadishu, where he resides with his uncle Hilaal and aunt Salaado. There, he faces an internal conflict—whether to join the Ogaden resistance and follow his father’s legacy or pursue higher education and become a teacher. Farah uses symbolic names for his characters, such as Hilaal, meaning “moon,” and Salaado, meaning “prayer.” Hilaal and Shalaado take care of his adulthood stage. Both encourage him. Somali gender norms are not followed by either of them. “So would he take the gun? Or would he resort to, and invest his powers in, the pen?” (Farah 57). Then the Ogaden war starts. Though Askar lives in Mogadishu, he always dreams of joining the western Somali liberation. Somalis struggle to recreate a national identity. He hopes to become of service to his people. Askar involves himself in political activity. He imagines himself to be an epic child. He longs for Misra’s return, but his hopes are overshadowed as war erupts once more in the Ogaden region. Somalia is disappointed by a crushing defeat. Misra becomes the lover of a young and brave person, but a cruel Ethiopian officer. Askar keeps hearing such bad news. When the war comes to an end, hundreds have lost their lives. So, he is disappointed with his life. Then come many allegations of murder towards Misra. Askar’s sense of identity and Somalia’s political border are once more challenged.

When he is seventeen years old, he decides between applying to the Somali National University and joining the war against Ethiopia. Askar continues to struggle with his decision between the university and the military. After his return to Mogadishu, he frequently speaks with Hilaal about the war. Hilaal says that a large number of Somalia people would have to flee from Ogaden territory to Somalia. A few months later there are many Somali refugees in Mogadishu. Many refugees are poor and have no place to go. Then he asks for information about his parents. Then he thinks about when he can help a Somalian. He often feels that he has grown into a highly nationalistic individual. He has always wanted to help the

Somalian people. When Askar leaves homeland, sometimes he asks the question about himself as to if he is a Somalian or an Ethiopian. Farah's relationship with Askar and his nation cannot be separated. When Askar stays with his uncle and aunt, he is always taught to live independently. Askar lives in a very protective environment and is pampered by his aunt. This conflict reappears as Askar's identity crisis reflects broader national divides. Misra, though born Ethiopian and raised in the Somali village of Kallafo, carries the burden of unresolved identity, always torn between the culture she was born into and the one she inhabits. Askar feels bad about the identity and says, "You also know that when you tell the credits, not mine but your people that is your (Somalia and nation) whose identity I do not share. Why must you make my life a misery" (Farah 42). Askar ponders much about Misra's life, her murder and death which occurs at the end of the novel.

Many details about Somalian traditional habits are mentioned in the novel. Farah explains about relationships using Askar and Misra. He asks why certain countries are referred to as the motherland and others as the fatherland. They are used as the birthplace of people, the heart and others by the people of the head. Askar continues to try to shape his identity in the novel. Finally, he and the nation do not have separate lives on their own. The concept of the novel is drawn from political maps based on the imagination and thinking of the people.

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