



A Stiwaniist study of Nuruddin Farah's novel *Sardines*

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Abstract:

This paper intends to explore the complexity of African feminist issues which have always been taken for granted under the bed of patriarchy, religion and tradition. For the purpose of this study the discourse is set within the framework of “Stiwaniism” which is another variant or model of African feminism that has been introduced by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie in her book *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (1994). The novel *Sardines* taken up for the study is written by Nuruddin Farah and is set in Somalia. The women in Farah's fiction become instruments to reconstruct Somalia and to reshape society by giving a new meaning to womanhood. This research paper focuses on different categories of women, especially on those women who are not willing to compromise, to be subjugated or to be disobeyed. They actively participate in the political struggle of their country, by resisting the dictatorial regime which imposes its severity on people. A major emphasis is also placed on those women who are willing to tolerate the tyranny without any objection. These women not only accept their subordination without any complaint but they also want to assist in moulding and shaping other women to compromise with the unfair norms of the society.

Keywords: Stiwaniism, Patriarchy, Inequality, Oppression, Dictatorship, Women.

Introduction:

Nuruddin Farah Hassan was born in 1945 in Baidoa which lies in the southern region of Somalia. Farah is known in literary circles as a novelist, a dramatist, a short story writer and a teacher. He studied philosophy and literature for four years from Punjab university of Chandigarh. Regardless of his diverse experience and rather prolific output, Farah's works are extensively acclaimed only in Britain they are mostly unknown in America and nearly ignored in Africa. Farah has always been a difficult figure to absorb into the emerging categories of literary discourse. He is the one writer who does not dabble in stereotypes of African womanhood but presents women as autonomous individuals. He is undoubtedly unequalled as an African male writer who elevates women from secondary roles and makes them the major focus of his concern. As compared to the other male African writers Farah does not overplay the role of female sexuality in his novels. He has the ability to see Somali women beyond their existence as female bodies only. He has successfully broken the female stereotypes romanticized by other African male writers.

The novel *Sardines* published in 1981 is the second book of the trilogy with the title ‘*Variation on the theme of an African Dictatorship*’ and subtitle *Truth versus Untruth*. As Farah's novels aims to explore the complexity of African feminist issues, this novel also tried to do the same by its multifaceted assessment of numerous issues

concerning women. *Sardines* is a novel about the higher socio-professional categories of women in Somalia, their struggles. It also focuses on the impact of the tyranny women and even the society faces under the dictatorship of a cruel, oppressive and a patriarch General. Life for these women who live in such despotic and patriarchal societies is very difficult as they never enjoy their life as free human beings and they keep facing different kinds of oppression which terrify them and limit their struggle. The struggle to create a space of their own, is very well illustrated in these lines from the novel, “What is not tabooed by religion is forbidden by tradition” (*Sardines* 104).

The narrative of *Sardines* revolves around Medina, the most powerful woman character of Farah. It is shown that she has left her marital house along with her eight-year-old daughter, Uba on the contentions that her husband is not leaving the ministerial position in the regime. Medina is also against her tyrannical mother-in-law, Idil. She is against a husband who has compromised with the dictatorial regime and the oppressive patriarchal mindset of her mother-in-law. With a desire to live independently without anyone's supervision and enjoy her freedom, she wants a place where she can think the way she wants and do whatever her heart pleases, a place where her thoughts are not imprisoned. The voice inside Medina wants a personal place of her own where she could explore her ideas, can imagine living her life as she wants, where there are no interruptions of the external

agents into her private space and much more. She wants “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...” (4). Analyzing the idea of one’s own room in the context of Medina, F. Fiona Moolla observes, “In *Sardines* the room more fundamentally represents the freedom of the already independent, autonomous self to construct a new world. Medina’s object is to have not just a room, but a room of her own, which constructs to her own design” (83).

Medina wants her daughter Ubx to live with self-esteem and enjoy her freedom, she doesn’t want her to go to any of the government run schools, because she believes that they only teach students songs of flattery and the praise names of the General. Instead of sending Ubx to such schools she teaches her herself at home. She wants to give Ubx a life full of comfort where she may not have the fear of the wicked patriarchal figures telling her what to do and what not to do. The present dictatorship reminds Medina of her unhappy childhood, and that, “the General reminded her of her grandfather who was a monstrosity and an unchallengeable patriarch who decreed what was to be done, when and by whom”, she desires a free world for her daughter. She says, “I want Ubx to be free of all that, . ‘I want her to live like a dream. I want her to decide when to wake up, how to interpret her dreams ...” (17). Medina envisions Ubx to be self-regulating and powerful enough to face the patriarchal figures. She has tolerated the pain of being a woman and as such does not want it to pass down to her daughter. Her desire to give Ubx the best of everything shows the courage and compassion of Medina to enhance the better future of her daughter.

Medina’s solid foundation is laid by her father in her formative years. Unlike her grandfather, Barkhadle has an international and liberal outlook towards basic issues like women, religion, culture and politics. He is responsible for nurturing and shaping her in an open, unprejudiced and unbiased manner. She visits many countries like Rome, Paris and London. Despite being exposed to western culture; she does not dislike or discard her African identity. Medina is well versed in four European languages and is equally good at Somali and Arabic language. She is a true modern and liberated Somali woman, “In Europe, whether in Stockholm or London or Rome or Paris, she was the beautiful black goddess; in Africa, whether in Mogadiscio or Ouagadougou or Dakar, she was envied for her cosmopolitan ease, her African pride and open-mindedness” (62). As an intellectual, she has the power to stand for values. Her brother, Nasser, is a representative of the modern, international intellectual Somali man. He is sensitized enough towards gender equality.

Sardines, stands out as a different novel, in the sense, that majority of the male characters are supportive of their women. Medina’s father, brother and her husband play a positive role in letting her grow as an independent thinker. She exercises her rights because she gets unconditional support from the three men in her life. The reason behind their liberal support is their cosmopolitan upbringing. While Barkhadle, was an African Ambassador to UN, Nasser had been brought up in Europe and Samater had also studied in Europe.

Although Samater is an open-minded, liberal, intellectual modern Somali man, he is not as assertive, powerful and decisive as Medina. He is even criticized by his mother for pampering his wife. Samater does not believe in fixed gender roles and helps Medina in household chores. Especially when the maid does not come he does not shy away from doing the kitchen work like preparing meals and doing the dishes. He lets Medina manage the overall accounts because he feels it to be an uninteresting work and has no objection to having the bank account in the name of his wife Medina. In fact, the house is also legally, in the name of Medina. Majority of the decisions regarding the running of the house used to be taken by Medina. Samater lends all his support to Medina but Samater’s mother highly dislikes this reversal of roles. She thinks that her son does not have guts to keep a wife at a subordinate position.

Idil, is a typical Somali mother-in-law who believes in the traditional roles of a woman in the family. She is a staunch matriarch and believes women are inferior to men. She cannot tolerate the power, control and authority that Medina enjoys within and outside the family. She bitterly criticizes her son and rebukes him by saying, “What kind of a son have I ended up with? A man dependent on woman? And what are you a minister for? How many more months will you hold this important position, occupy the throne of power? Why don’t you use it? ...Look at your colleagues. They’ve changed house and wife and mistress” (70). She wants him to behave like the other men and wants him to have an upper hand on his wife. This aspect of subordinate position of women has been addressed by Molara in her book. She asserts:

The Heritage of Tradition: the Second Mountain that is on the African woman’s back is built of structures and attitudes inherited from indigenous history and sociological realities. . . In most African societies, whether patrilineal or matrilineal, gender hierarchy, male supremacy or sex asymmetry (or whatever term we choose to use) was known and taken for granted. Even in matrilineal societies, women were still subordinate to men, considered as second in place to men; the only difference being that inheritance and authority pass through the women to the male of the line men are still dominant in private

and public life. The ideology that men are naturally superior to women in essence and in all areas, affects the modern day organization of societal structures. This ideology prolongs the attitudes of negative discrimination against women. (*Recreating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations* 33-34)

The lives of such traditional Somali women show the influence of patrilineal culture into which they are born. Being girls, they are not highly valued; they receive that kind of training which deprives them from their freedom and restricts their world view. Idil interferes a lot in the modern lifestyle of Samatar and Medina. Through Idil and Medina, Farah shows the conflict between the traditional and the modern within the Somali society. A psychological tug of war takes place between the two polar ideologies. The conflict between Idil and Medina is not individual but it represents the clash of new and old patterns of living. Medina's pursuit of her career is looked down upon in traditional societies. Idil crosses all her limits in order to exorcise Medina's devil of career by torturing her in every possible way. Her only aim is to make Medina sacrifice her dreams, freedom and happiness to feed the patriarchal values promoted by a woman like her. She interferes in everything like circumcision of Ubx, her upbringing, her overpriced toys, her way of talking, her way of dressing. She objects to Samatar and Medina's drinking alcohol, eating pork which according to her is completely un-Islamic. She doesn't like Medina because of her dominating nature and when Medina leaves the house she becomes the queen of the residence and soon brings one of Samatar's cousin to the house in order to marry her to Samatar. According to Chris Dunton, "Idil is characterized convincingly, as an unquestioning servant of patriarchy a role that requires her to insist forcefully on the need to have Ubx circumcised. She too, is an unquestioning servant of the regime, pressing Samatar into service as political crony of the General, outraged when he resists this" ("This Rape is Political" 18).

The dominance of patriarchy is also seen in the character of Fatima bint Thabit, the mother of Medina. She is a woman who tries to make everyone happy in her husband's family and never reacts against male chauvinism in her family. Fatima's loyal commitment towards her culturally designated role is due to her patriarchal conditioning and it plays a fundamental role in the determination of man's domination and women's subordination. She "lived as though inside a whale which hardly came ashore: she was Yemeni, a woman weighed down with the contradictions of tradition: she was chained ankle and wrist and foot to the permanence of her homestead" (8). She comes out of the four

walls of her house only when it is absolutely compulsory.

Fatima bint Thabit wants to remain chained in the old traditions and customs, she has never received any recognition neither does she yearn for it. She could have voiced her opinions in the very beginning if she ever had valued her rights in the domestic and other spheres. She is a woman who believes that one is always a prisoner and as such keeps herself caged within the sayings of her father who used to say, "A woman mustn't be sure of anything ever. A woman, like any other inferior being, must be kept guessing, mustn't be given reason to believe that she is certain about anything" (144). Her actions and perceptions are governed by the male chauvinistic society as she says, "The tradition of my people engages me in a four walled prison and makes me the exclusive property of man" (144). Molaria in her book has extensively shared her views about such women. She states:

One of the greatest opponent to the feminist movement in Africa is the women I will call 'The Married Women Incorporated.' These married women are afraid to shake the status quo; they are afraid and want security through men; they are harsher on other women than men are; they cling to the vanishing respectability of being married. (211)

Fatima bint Thabit represents one among this "Married Women Incorporated" as she doesn't want to shake the status-quo in the family. These women maintain women's dependence on men enforcing outdated stereotypes about the inferior status of women who require care, rather than mature adults who can inherit and manage property. The fault with Fatima is that she is not ready to choose the path of modernity and is in favor of carrying on the erroneous traditions. She believes herself to be a superior woman if she wears a veil. The purdah system will help her to remain in her boundaries. According to Fatima, since Idil is a nomad and not a veiled woman, she always reacts as if a street dog who is left to do anything it wants. Fatima's final estimation of the situation of women comes to the fore in her conversation with Medina when she tells Medina, "You are a prisoner of your principles and your secret dreams, Medina; I am a prisoner of a 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" (152).

Medina has to face many challenges while dealing with orthodox women like Fatima (her mother) and Idil (her mother-in-law). Both the mother and mother-in-law not only interfere in the life of Medina but also interfere in her style of upbringing of her daughter. Ubx represents the latest generation of Somali girls. She is only eight years and Medina wants to bring her up in a very open and unprejudiced environment, she wants to

give her the best. She also objects to the tribal practice of circumcision and infibulation of girls when they reach a particular age. Having herself felt the circumcision as a child, then on her first night and again at the time of childbirth, she regards it as a cruel practice. Ubx is a privileged girl because she has Medina to fight for her rights. Medina cannot dream about her daughter facing the same pain again and again in her life, she says:

...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. Life for a circumcised woman is a series of de-flowering 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. Ubx is my daughter, not Idil's. (62-63)

Medina representing proud modern international intellectual African is the mouthpiece of Farah. She is aware of her political rights as Somali citizen. She is not ready to bow down to the Somali dictator even if it means incurring the wrath of the state head. Through Medina, Farah is trying to make the people aware of the repercussions of blindly following a dictator. Although Medina belongs to a privileged class, she does not escape from her original roots. She could have easily settled in Europe but she wants to see a new progressive Somalia that gives equal rights to both men and women and to erase the misconceived image of Somalia as a backward, tribal and malnourished nation. This backward image of Somalia is popularized by the General's corrupt regime and she is ready to fight with it tooth and nail. Through Medina, Farah wants to continue his fight against the despotic regime and bring an awareness about the deplorable condition of his country's women. No other author has been able to present all the nuances of African feminism like Farah. Farah himself confesses that he has no personal qualms of fighting against dictators because he believes, "No dictator is born out of a vacuum. A dictatorship comes out of a society and therefore one must stand in that society and one must see it as part of an authoritarian program" ("Women in a Context of Despotism" 8).

Medina has qualities of a strong person, "she was almost always a woman among men, sharing things with them, drinks, reading the same books as they, borrowing or lending them ideas" (8). She is strongly against the also the despotic politics because it marginalizes women tremendously. She bears the responsibility to protect her people and for that she uses her knowledge and creativity to change the situations that affect women.

Professor Maslow analyzing the strong women writes, "Our high dominance women feel more akin to men than to women in tastes, attitudes, prejudices, aptitudes, philosophy, and inner

personality in general...Many of the qualities that are considered in our culture to be 'manly' are seen in them in high degree, e.g, leadership strength of character, strong social purpose, emancipation from trivialities, lack of fear, shyness etc" (308). Medina represents this high-dominance woman, she is the one who is not afraid of the General, his repressive dictatorship which humiliates, degrades and stigmatizes people. She fights audaciously for her self-respect and is the only active woman member of the underground organization against the General. She is one of his strongest opponents who criticizes him time and again without any fear.

Medina is passionate about her social responsibilities in her country. She keeps on bringing revolutionary changes through all sorts of support to the young Somali woman Sagal, Amina and her own daughter, Ubx, even if it means earning hostility from the elderly in the family or the dictator of the state. Along with her social responsibilities she keeps on continuing her intellectual activities like translations of original Somali oral literature and other Somali writings. She plays a crucial role in making women aware of their 'caged existence', her parenting practices are also commendable, her relations are based on mutual respect, equality and trust. Her domestic role as well as her political role are based on compassion, loyalty, love and care.

Medina, in the very beginning of the novel, had left her house where she was surrounded by the patriarchs and matriarchs as, she did not want to remain confined to the stereotypical feminine roles where one is supposed to be a secondary person:

She left to dwell peacefully in a notion, find a home in it, a home in it, a home in which she could bring her life's treasures like a bower-bird brings other birds' feathers, a room that she could call her own and in which she was not a guest; a home in which her thoughts might freely wander without inhibition, without fear; a home in which patriarchs like Gad Thabit and matriarchs like Idil (whom she saw as representing the authoritarian state) were not allowed to set foot. (255)

Towards the end of the novel, Medina returns to her own house along with her daughter Ubx. By this time Samatar had also resigned and was likely to be sent to jail for his going against the present power and disrespecting his mother who represents the General's generation. Medina, however, is the woman who till the end does not lose the hope of liberation and continues her freedom struggle. Refusing to compromise with the imposition of autocracy and opposing the dictatorial regime, she exhibits bravery and determination when she boldly says, "Insert another bullet, have the General in person come within shooting range of me and we'll see who falls" (250).

Medina's sister-in-law, Xaddia, is very angry with Medina for the chaos she has created in order to fight with the General's dictatorship. Xaddia feels Medina is unnecessarily fighting against a powerful regime. Xaddia raises allegations against Medina regarding her struggle. Xaddia is indifferent to the enormous pain her country people are undergoing, Medina tries to make Xaddia realize, "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" (259). Patricia Alden while commenting upon Medina's responses to Xaddia observes, Medina's first priority is the battle for the survival of woman against tyrannical domestic and political regimes like Idil's and the General's, which causes her to put the feminist cause before family loyalties" (*Nuruddin Farah* 69).

Medina who regards herself as the "the sole survivor of the journey" (261) a woman who is hopeful no matter what she may face, although all her struggles have not brought about any big change. A strong willed woman, Medina knows the importance of freedom. For Medina, the fight must go on, "Others have lost their lives in this struggle against this fascist regime. Others have been imprisoned unjustly. Others have been humiliated and broken. As for my point: I say the struggle must continue" (260). She knows that established authorities will go to any extreme to terrorize people so as to stop their liberation struggle.

Medina who is more determined and optimistic than before has not lost hope yet. She is ready to fight for Nasser and Dulman's release and for the whole of Somalia. Referring to her determination Jacqueline Bardolph writes, "Medina, the protagonist is the fire.... She is the life-giving force, the Promethean fire which purifies and helps create a new world" ("Women and Metaphors in Nuruddin Farah's Sweet and Sour Milk and Sardines" 439). So intense is the power ascribed to Medina that she is associated with Promethean fire. She was at last happy at the end of the novel, she knows one thing for sure that at least she is not a guest anymore in her own country, she can do anything what so ever her heart pleases. Medina proves to be firm, unbending and tough on the issue of abuse either by men, women or the state.

Conclusion:

This novel has focused on the pitiable plight of women as well as the resistance shown by some characters which clearly shows women are able enough to fight back the patriarchal crime, cultural wrongs and mistreatments that have been illegally established in Somalia. There are women on one side who are the victims of dictatorial regime and male dominance and on other hand there are strong, independent women who are a direct challenge to patriarchy who fight without any fear

for their emancipation. The series of female characters portrayed in Farah's *Sardines* establishes important aspects of the lives of African women vigorously active in the public sphere, and something of the range of roles they fulfill, registering opportunities and choices, rather than conveying instructions or prescriptions.

Medina thus represents the liberated modern Somali women, who challenges the social, structure which supports male dominance, forced polygamous marriage and female circumcision. Such a woman is respected by her father, and brother. She is the kind of woman who dares to challenge the political structure through her participation in political organizations. She is also committed to training of those persons who would maintain and extend the concept of sexual equality while participating in the formation of a just Somali society. She is not willing to compromise with the traditional society or even the oppressive dictatorial regime. Thus, she is willing to make every possible sacrifice in order to destroy the established authority which hinders the social and political growth of Somali people.

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