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**UNDERSTANDING THE BARRIERS AND CHALLENGING THE  
TRADITIONAL NORMS FOR FEMALE FREEDOM IN SOMALIA**

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**Abstract:**

Somalia is a country situated in the horn of Africa. There are several reasons why studies on Somali women deserve our notice. Somali society is exorbitantly patriarchal in structure, therefore unjust in its dealings with women. A woman of Somalia is prohibited from having any involvement in the Somali society because they are considered having an inferior status than men. Somali women can neither have charge of their bodies in the matter of circumcision nor do they have any little authority over their lives. The writer, Nuruddin Farah presents a crystal clear image of Somali women. He is the one writer who does not dabble in stereotypes of African womanhood but presents women as autonomous individuals. He is described frequently as a feminist because of the emphasis in his novels which he places on the plight of African women. He highlights the distinctive part of female liberation while additionally mulling over the dialogue of change and a feeling of having a place. The present paper intends to show the oppression and inequality experienced by Somali women living in traditionally Islamic, patriarchal and nomadic society. The novel selected for the study, *From a Crooked Rib* analyzes the status of women and the inequality she faces because of her subordinate position in the society. The paper will throw light on the different problems which the female protagonist faces and how she seeks self-determination through her struggles to break away from her traditional society which regard women only as an object and no better than Adam's crooked rib. The paper will also focus on revealing enough female stereotypes that suggest a definite sexist bias against women who live in the community of Camel nomads where society pressurizes women to live according to their laws.

**Keywords:** Female Genital Mutilation, Oppression, Patriarchy. Inequality. Gender stereotyping, Somalia.

**Introduction**

Africa as a continent remained unexplored for quite a long time. African people, their life and their territories remained a mystery for the other world for centuries. Slowly and gradually the imperial powers penetrated the so called, 'dark continent'. The brief period of European imperial powers produced many great writers in this continent. Nuruddin Farah is one such name that belongs to a very small and disturbed country Somalia, which is located in the horn of Africa. In his works there is found brilliant portrayal of African womanhood. 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. Farah has been inspired by Somalia in spite of his exile from there for several decades. As it is clearly evident in his non-fictional study on Somali diaspora and numerous articles on it. His critical and satirical writings against Siyad Barre regime was the reason for his exile from Somalia.

'God created Woman from a  
crooked rib;

And any one who trieth to  
straighten it, breaketh it.'  
A Somali traditional proverb  
(2).

Published in 1970, Farah's novel *From a Crooked Rib*, takes its title from a Somali proverb which clearly indicates the Somali society's prejudice against women. In the male dominated Somali society, Woman and not the world in which she lives is believed to be bent. She is a flawed creature, born with a crooked back, destined to receive whatever burden is placed upon it and impossible to "straighten" or make perfect.

The novel chronicles a time in the life of Ebla, a young peasant girl living in a traditional Islamic society who struggles with the issues of female circumcision, arranged marriage, polygamy and male supremacy. Ebla the protagonist, seeks self-determination through her struggles to break away from her traditional society which regards woman only as an object and no better than 'Adam's crooked rib'.

The novel culminates into a powerful discussion of the African women craving for freedom, independence, self-reliance and the readiness to combat against discrimination, exploitation and victimization in patriarchal African societies. The novel with its genuine depiction and articulation of oppressed women has been widely praised and studied as an honest representation of the Somali society. While on the one hand the novel was widely appreciated as a realistic representation of Somali society, on the other hand Farah faced vehement criticism from the natives of Somalia.

A close analysis of the novel reveals a definite male bias which appears clearly in the thematic content and covertly in the language employed for the purpose. Rebelling against the suppression of woman in a male dominated society, which gives women only limited rights and pays no attention to their opinion, Ebla represents the positive image of women. According to Carole Boyce Davies "a positive image of women is the one that is in tune with African historical realities and does not stereotype or limit women into postures of dependence or submergence. Instead it searches for more accurate portrayals and one which suggests the

possibility of transcendence" (*Ngambika: Studies of women in African Literature* 15).

Ebla is a young nomadic pastoral girl from the Ogaden who tries to achieve independence by breaking away the traditional barriers of her tribal community named as Jes in the novel. She is not ready to accept that a woman is no better than 'Adam's crooked rib'. Her acts of defiance forms the most interesting part of the narrative woven by Farah. Ebla is not a conventional Somali woman who would serve her husband like Aowralla, her cousin's wife. She is a transitional Somali woman, she has to face dual challenges, the one posed by archaic Somali tribal culture and the other being Islamic practices adopted by her community. It includes patriarchy, painful circumcision and polygamy. While she carries certain old beliefs but at many times she is not ready to bow down to the decisions being forced on her by others. For instance she revolts against her grandfather's decision to marry her off to a forty-eight year old man, Giumaleh.

Ebla belonged to a poor tribal community where "the number of human beings was ten times less than that of the cattle and the huts were made of wattle, weaved into a mat-like thing with a cover on top" (7). Just like other women of her community, she was also illiterate but she was able to learn the verses of Koran by heart. To top it all, she had an independent mind which was usually unusual for the women of her community. "To her, a refusal did not matter. Neither would a positive answer make her pleased. But acceptance of her opinions, both by her relation, and her would-be husbands, did make her pleased. She thought of many things a woman of her background would never think of" (8). Most of the time she used to think of, 'leaving her home' for a better future. However, her filial gratitude towards her grandfather prevents her from taking such a drastic step, but when her grandfather takes a decision to engage her to "an old man of forty-eight, fit to be her father" (9) in exchange of few camels, she decides to desert her Jes. The value of women in African tribal societies is considered equivalent to donkeys and camels as in their marriage ceremonies they are exchanged in return of animals.

On receiving the news of her matrimonial arrangement, Ebla feels that she is no longer obliged to serve her grandfather. Ebla is uncomfortable with the idea of becoming a wife of Giumaleh and is also fed up of the duties expected from a Jes woman like fetching water from far off places and many other things.

Ebla is further exasperated with the idea that, “Even a moron-male cost twice as much as two women in terms of blood-compensation. As many as twenty or thirty camels are allotted to each son. The women, however, have to wait until their fates give them a new status in life: the status of marriage” (13). Thus, although belonging to a rural environment, Ebla is not ready to budge. Ignoring everything, Ebla chooses to step out of her nomadic background. This is Ebla’s first step in her fight against injustice: Not that she was intending to feel idle and do nothing, nor did she feel irresponsible, but a woman’s duty meant loading and unloading camels and donkeys after the destination has reached, and that life was routine” and the idea “goats for girls and camels for boys got on her nerves more than she could stand. To her, this allotment of assignments denoted the lower status of woman, that she was lower in status than a man, and that she was weak. She loathed this discrimination between the sexes: the idea that boys lift up the prestige of the family and keeps the family alive. (13)

The depiction of Somali tribal life can be considered as historical documentation by Farah. His powerful writings make the world aware of the archaic malpractices prevalent in Somali culture. Ebla’s grandfather represents the traditional patriarch in the novel. According to such men, women should accept whatever position given to them. These kind of men limit the circle of women to their household, they cage them up and want to control their life according to their own will. Blinded by patriarchy he is unable to realize the injustice he was meeting out to Ebla and in turn curses her, “May the Lord disperse your plans, Ebla. May he make you the mother of many a bastard. May he give you hell on this earth as a reward” (6). The incident is a clear reflection of Simone de Beauvoir’s central argument that:

Throughout history, woman has always occupied a secondary role in relation to man, being relegated to the position of the “Other,” i.e., that which is adjectival upon the substantial subjectivity and existential activity of man. Whereas man has been enabled to transcend and control his environment, always furthering the domain of his physical and intellectual conquest, woman has remained imprisoned within “immanence,” remaining a slave within the circle of duties imposed by her maternal and reproductive functions. (*A history of Literary Criticism and Theory* 682)

Describing this subordination, Simone explains in characteristic fashion how the so-called “essence” of woman was created – at many levels, economic, political, religious – by historical developments representing the interests of men.

Ebla abhors the menial status given to Jes women. She feels dejected when her opinion, her choice, and her desires are ignored by her own loved ones. She strongly believes that her choices should be considered by her elders. She is actually aware of her smothered and fettered existence in an orthodox male dominated society but instead of submitting quietly to the regular norms set for women, she does not hesitate to question these norms. She openly voices her feelings against the ills of the society and realizes that the only way to get rid of these injustices was to escape to some other place where she could enjoy her freedom, “To escape. To be free. To be free. To escape. These were inter-related” (14). She runs away from her community to Belet Wene, a small far away town.

When Ebla reaches Belet Wene she tries to explore a new life, a new identity and a new sense of independence for herself. Soon she realizes that a new set of hardships are awaiting for her and she will have to pay the price for her freedom. She roams like a penniless and powerless woman in an alien town. Fortunately, she finds a man who directs her towards the house of a distant cousin, named Gheddi. Ebla has to work hard round the clock in Gheddi’s house and she even develops blisters on her feet. Her exploitation at the hands of Gheddi worsens when he tries to use her for smuggling. Farah has rightly exposed a common evil

that is smuggling, in his novels which has been plaguing the African society for the past many decades. Smuggling of valuable goods, minerals and precious gemstones is also responsible for the political and social instability of Somalia as a nation.

Gheddi is the epitome of deeply rooted patriarchy. In patriarchal societies such as Africa, gender inequality is rooted in the economic, social, religious, political and educational structure of the society. Gheddi is the one who is responsible for making Ebla work like a slave in the house and he never appreciates her hard work. To compensate for the loss as a result of the fine imposed by the police on him for smuggling he gives Ebla's hand in exchange of money to the sick cattle broker, Dirir. This news comes as a shock to Ebla, she feels betrayed for the second time. Ebla had never ever dreamt about such a thing in her worst dreams. She doesn't want to marry a sick man. More importantly she does not want to marry a man of someone else's choice. She clearly mentions, "I don't want to be sold like cattle" (79). Simone also writes against this treatment of men towards woman "...he buys her like a head of a cattle or a slave, he imposes his domestic divinities on her..." (117).

A widow friend of Ebla agrees with her, that women are treated as scapegoats and prisoners but are unable to revolt because their own people do not support them. She tells Ebla:

'But that is what we women are- just like cattle, properties of someone or other, either your parents or husbands.' 'We are human beings.' 'But our people don't realize it. What is the difference between a cow and yourself now? Your hand has been sold to a broker'. (80)

In order to get rid of Gheddi's conniving plan to sell her off, Ebla agrees to the solution offered by the widow. She clearly understands by now that if she has to survive in the of conventional Somali society, she has to accept to, "get married to Awill or whosoever falls into the ditch of matrimony" (84). But in her marriage she is victimized by the cultural and social sanction granted to husbands to use physical force against wives. Such behavior on the part of an educated man like Awill, (her would be husband)

highlights how patriarchy is deeply rooted in every strata of the society and how men regard women only as their possession. A Somali woman's body is never a free body, it is rather seen as part of the material and physical components of the house that can be exported for goods and money or can be beaten ruthlessly by the man who owns her like a personal possession. Ebla is physically abused by Awill because she dares to say no. She tries to convince Awill in every possible way, by saying, "When I have become your wife, I will accept everything. But this is rape. Do you want to rape me?" (97). She fails to convince Awill who is filled with the intense sexual desire. Derek Wright asserts, "It transpires, however, that Awill, though promising marriage, is merely seeking a permanent sexual partner as an alternative to prostitutes" (*The Novels of Nuruddin Farah* 23).

The first sexual intercourse is very painful for Ebla because of circumcision. In the tribal Somali society female circumcision is a compulsory ritual which involves clitorization and infibulation. The psychological and physical trauma that every little Somali girl has to face is highly disdainful. Ebla is scared of having sex with Awill because of the fear of the impending pain due to circumcision followed by the stitching clitoral region that is broken during the first sexual intercourse. In the male dominated hegemonic society such arrangements are made to ensure the virginity of a girl before marriage. Thus, the cultural traditions convert women as a physical object of pleasure that too properly sealed, unused and untouched. This cultural tribal tradition of ensuring female virginity is similar to a packed, sealed, fresh and new product/commodity. Ebla is unable to forget the frightening experience of circumcision when she was only eight years old. She clearly remembers how her clitoris had been cut and stitched.

She recalled everything. They had sliced out her clitoris and stitched the lips together, thus blocking the passageway, but also leaving a small inlet for urinating through. They had tied her legs together, and she had been laid flat on the ground without any mattress or anything underneath her, for she would bleed on it. They had beaten the drums when the girls cried, so that the

beating of the drums would drown the crying. If a girl cried too much, they tucked a piece of cloth into her mouth. The wound would not heal they had said, if a boy saw it or a woman who had just committed adultery. So the girls had been confined in a hut for a period of between ten and twelve days. (149-150)

Wherever Ebla sees a small girl going through circumcision she shivers out of fear. During her first sexual intercourse with Awill she sweats profusely in pain and "bled a great deal" (99). Ebla feels that her existence is demeaned by the sexual mutilation of circumcision and physical abuse. She imagines that she should have been either an old woman or a man so as to be spared of such ugly relationships. At this point Ebla remembered that she had never been grateful to her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother as all these women may have faced brutal manhandling too. She also regretted for never having paid tribute to her mother who is dead now. Ebla wants men to respect women and give equal importance to them because they also deserve to be acknowledged and loved:

I could be bought, I could be sold, just in the way that my cousin tried to sell me – or my first husband bought me. But one thing they could not pay for is my indispensability. I am a woman. And I am indispensable to man. (105-106)

The loss of her virginity further weakens her self-confidence and her status as an unmarried woman without virginity. The narrative takes a new turn when Ebla receives a letter of Awill through his friend, Jama. While delivering the letter Jama accidentally drops the photographs of Awill along with a white woman of Italy. Ebla experiences bitter betrayal for the third time, again from someone who was closely related to her. Her Grandfather, her cousin, Gheddi and her husband, Awill all turn out to be murderers of innocence that a woman of independent will like Ebla carries. She ponders about her beautiful seven days' honeymoon which she thinks "flew like a beautiful bird that one knows will never return" (113). Ebla had given permission to Awill to proceed to Italy because of her tribal

belief that, "To travel is to learn, we Somalis say" (116). She hardly understands the grand plans of the Somali government which is sending Awill to Italy to study the school system of that country. She is also unaware how such a trip is going to help Somalia after its independence from the colonial powers.

Ebla is shocked and utterly dismayed on seeing the half-naked white woman alongside Awill in the photograph. She understands clearly how her legal husband had used her as a plaything and is now enjoying with a white woman in an alien land. She thinks her race has been disgraced by Awill because of his preference for a white skinned woman. She realizes that the importance which she had given to her virginity has no value to a hypocrite like Awill. This new found realization moves her to take revenge on Awill and to pay him back in the same coin. She is now ready to follow the Islamic tenet, "A nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, that is what the Koran says" (133).

#### **Conclusion:**

Ebla has finally evolved. Her evolution as a new woman helps her to stay, fight back and conquer the situation. She now becomes conscious and decides that her female body that has seen so many onslaughts like circumcision; being sold as some cattle; offering of her body as an exchange of penalty and finally her rejection over a white skinned woman, the same body would be used as a weapon of revenge against the unjust patriarchal society. Her body, her sexuality, her youth have been turned into a lethal weapon against the same prejudiced patriarchy. Ebla comes to realize that the true love for which Ebla had always searched for is not outside her physical boundaries; it does not lie somewhere in the body of a man - young or old, handsome or ugly, educated or uneducated, rural or urban. Her realization gives her strength to finally recognize her own self as an enlightened woman. When Awill returns from Italy Ebla accepts him as by now all her spitefulness has melted away. Awill's mind however, is still entrenched deep into patriarchy as he tells Ebla, "Women has been created from Adam's crooked rib. And if anyone tries to straighten it, he will have to break it" (179).

Ebla on her part has made peace with herself.

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