

RECLAIMING IDENTITY AMIDST RUINS: GENDER, SPACE, AND POSTCOLONIAL NEGOTIATION IN *KNOTS*

Soni Jebamalar S

Research Scholar, RegNo: (21113154012016) Department of English

S. T. Hindu College, Nagercoil

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University), Tirunelveli

Dr. Mangaiyarkarasi S

Associate Professor, Department of English

S. T. Hindu College, Nagercoil

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University), Tirunelveli

Paper received: 11-11-2023

Accepted: 23-11-2023

Published: 21-12-2023

ABSTRACT

Knots present a nuanced portrayal of return in a society destabilized by prolonged civil conflict. This paper argues that Nuruddin Farah reconceptualizes postcolonial reconstruction through the politics of domestic space and gendered agency. By tracing Cambara's return from Canada to Mogadiscio and her determination to reclaim her family home, the novel reframes sovereignty as a practice enacted within intimate spaces rather than state institutions. Through close textual analysis supported by postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks, this study demonstrates that *Knots* challenges reductive narratives of Somali state failure and instead proposes renewal through negotiation, endurance, and embodied presence. The metaphor of *knots* encapsulates the entangled realities of exile, identity, and national belonging.

Keywords: postcolonialism; exile; diaspora; gender; spatial politics; sovereignty; reconstruction.

Introduction

Nuruddin Farah has consistently examined the intersection of power, identity, and political fragmentation across his fiction. In *Knots*, he turns to the aftermath of Somalia's civil war and interrogates what it means to return to a homeland that has undergone violent transformation. Rather than centering his narrative on institutional collapse or military confrontation, Farah situates the drama of reconstruction within domestic space. The protagonist Cambara, raised abroad, arrives in Mogadiscio seeking to reclaim her father's house. This act of reclamation forms the structural and symbolic core of the novel.

Early in the narrative, Mogadiscio appears to Cambara as a city suspended between familiarity and estrangement (Farah 23). Memory collides with material reality. The homeland she once imagined no longer corresponds to the physical city before her. This rupture establishes exile as an ongoing condition rather than a closed chapter. The novel thus poses a central question: can identity be restored in a space marked by loss and fragmentation? Farah's answer is neither nostalgic nor fatalistic. Instead, he presents return as negotiation an incremental process through which belonging is reconstituted.

About the Author

Nuruddin Farah was born in 1945 in Baidoa, Somalia, and emerged as one of Africa's most intellectually rigorous novelists during the 1970s. His early works critiqued authoritarian governance and exposed the mechanisms of surveillance and repression. Political hostility toward his writing led to prolonged exile, a biographical reality that profoundly shaped his thematic concerns.

Farah's fiction repeatedly interrogates patriarchal structures and centralized power. Fiona Moolla observes that his narratives destabilize both political and domestic hierarchies, foregrounding marginalized voices (5). His international recognition including the Neustadt International Prize for Literature reflects the global significance of his engagement with postcolonial modernity. Exile did not distance him from Somalia; rather, it intensified his literary commitment to examining its historical and social complexities.

About His Works

Farah's novels are often grouped into trilogies that trace shifting political landscapes. The *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship trilogy* critiques authoritarian regimes and the erosion of civil liberties. The Blood in the Sun trilogy explores nationalism, personal identity, and the psychological consequences of conflict. The Past Imperfect trilogy, which includes *Links*, *Knots*, and *Crossbones*, addresses exile and return in a post-collapse Somalia. Amanda Ruth Waugh Lagji argues that these later works revise dominant discourses of state failure by focusing on everyday practices of survival (34). Within this trilogy, *Knots* occupies a central position by foregrounding domestic space as a site of political intervention.

Exile and Fragmented Consciousness

Cambara's return dramatizes the psychological complexity of exile. Her memories of Mogadiscio preserve an earlier temporal frame, yet the city she encounters bears the scars of militia occupation and infrastructural decay. She confronts a homeland that resists recognition (Farah 89). Edward Said's description of exile as producing a contrapuntal awareness clarifies Cambara's predicament (173). She perceives Somalia simultaneously through memory and displacement. This divided perception destabilizes simplistic binaries of insider and outsider. Cambara's diasporic formation complicates her legitimacy within

Mogadiscio. Yet Farah resists portraying her as permanently alien. Instead, hybridity becomes a lens through which the fractured nation may be reinterpreted. Exile generates distance, but it also provides critical insight.

The House as Political Allegory

The most potent symbol in *Knots* is the contested house. Cambara's insistence that the house remains her rightful inheritance transforms private property into political assertion (Farah 112). The structure functions as a microcosm of Somalia itself: occupied, divided, yet not devoid of historical continuity. Lagji contends that Farah shifts analytical focus away from macro-level institutional failure toward domestic endurance (33). This interpretive move is essential. The novel does not deny national fragmentation; it reframes reconstruction as a localized and embodied process. Sovereignty emerges through habitation rather than decree. The house is not reclaimed through force. Cambara negotiates with occupants, builds alliances, and persists in her claim. In doing so, she models an alternative conception of power one grounded in relational engagement rather than domination.

Gendered Spatial Resistance

Cambara's resistance disrupts militarized masculinities that dominate the post-war environment. She neither commands militia nor seeks political office. Instead, her authority derives from persistence and negotiation. Moolla argues that Farah's women often destabilize patriarchal structures by occupying moral and strategic centers within the narrative (78). In *Knots*, this destabilization is spatially enacted.

By reclaiming domestic territory, Cambara redefines sovereignty. The home traditionally feminized and privatized becomes a locus of public contestation. Her efforts to repair, clean, and reoccupy the house signify incremental reconstruction. These gestures may appear

minor against the scale of national collapse, yet Farah elevates them as foundational acts of renewal.

Negotiation and the Ethics of Reconstruction

Unlike narratives driven by dramatic confrontation, *Knots* privileges conversation and incremental progress. The metaphor of the knot suggests entanglement that resists abrupt severance. Problems must be untied carefully rather than violently cut. Frantz Fanon warns that postcolonial reconstruction can replicate authoritarian patterns if it merely substitutes one ruling elite for another (154). Farah's narrative seems alert to this danger. Cambara's method avoids reproducing coercive power. Her negotiations signal a model of reconstruction grounded in ethical presence. The pacing of the novel reinforces this thematic emphasis. Dialogue replaces spectacle. Reflection outweighs combat. Farah's structural choices mirror his ideological stance: rebuilding requires patience.

Diaspora and Legitimacy

Cambara's return also raises questions of diasporic authority. Can those who left legitimately claim space within the homeland? The novel refuses a definitive answer. Suspicion and tension surround her arrival. Yet through sustained engagement, she gradually reestablishes belonging. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity illuminates this dynamic. Identity, Bhabha suggests, emerges in a third space of negotiation (56). Cambara inhabits precisely such a space. Her diasporic experience does not disqualify her from Somali identity; it complicates and enriches it. Farah thereby proposes that diaspora may contribute to reconstruction rather than remain peripheral.

Reframing State Failure

Western discourse frequently characterizes Somalia as emblematic of state failure. *Knots*

contests this reduction. By centering everyday negotiations and relational networks, Farah reveals forms of order persisting beneath institutional collapse. Lagji observes that Farah resists framing Somalia as a political void, instead highlighting adaptive survival strategies (40). The novel thus decentralizes the state as the sole measure of legitimacy. Sovereignty migrates into lived spaces homes, relationships, and negotiated boundaries. This shift has significant implications. It challenges the assumption that nationhood depends exclusively on centralized authority. In *Knots*, national identity survives through habitation and relational continuity.

The Symbolism of “Knots”

The title encapsulates the novel’s thematic architecture. *Knots* signify entanglement, constraint, and connection simultaneously. They cannot be undone through violent rupture. Cambara’s journey mirrors this metaphor. She does not attempt radical transformation; she works patiently through complexity. The image of *knots* also reflects the intertwining of gender, exile, and sovereignty. Each thread intersects with others. Identity emerges not from isolated strands but from entangled histories.

Conclusion

Knots reimagines postcolonial reconstruction as a gendered and spatial practice. Through Cambara’s return and her reclamation of domestic space, Farah relocates sovereignty from state institutions to lived environments. The novel challenges reductive narratives of Somali collapse and instead portrays renewal as incremental and relational. The metaphor of knots captures the entangled realities of exile and belonging. Reconstruction requires patience rather than spectacle. By foregrounding negotiation over violence, Farah proposes a model of

10.48047/jocaaa.2023.31.04.74

sovereignty grounded in presence, endurance, and ethical engagement. Even within ruins, identity remains recoverable through the persistent occupation of space.

Reference

- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2004. Farah, Nuruddin. *Knots*. Penguin, 2007. *Links*. Penguin, 2003.
- Lagji, Amanda Ruth Waugh. "Revising the Narrative of Failure: Reconsidering State Failure in Nuruddin Farah's *Knots*". *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2014, pp. 31–57.
- Moolla, Fiona. *Reading Nuruddin Farah*. Cambridge UP, 2014.
- Said, Edward W. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard UP, 2000.