

NATIONALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS IN NURUDDIN FARAH'S VARIATIONS AND BLOOD IN THE SUN TRILOGIES

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Abstract

Nationalism, as a political ideology, has played a crucial role in shaping modern history, identity, and state formation. Nuruddin Farah's *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship* trilogy and *Blood in the Sun* trilogy provide a profound critique of nationalism's potential for unity and its susceptibility to political manipulation. This paper examines how Farah portrays nationalism as both a unifying force and a mechanism of exclusion, oppression, and political control. Through the lens of characters such as Loyaan, Medina, Deeriye, Askar, and Duniya, Farah dissects different forms of nationalism civic, ethnic, cultural, and expansionist and their impact on Somali identity, statehood, and resistance. His novels highlight the paradoxical nature of nationalism: while it fosters solidarity, it also exacerbates tribalism, gender inequality, and authoritarianism. By juxtaposing revolutionary ideals with the oppressive realities of post-independence governance, Farah critiques the distortion of nationalist ideals and underscores the need for nationalism to be rooted in genuine unity and individual freedoms rather than authoritarian control.

Keywords: Nationalism, Somalia, Nuruddin Farah, postcolonialism, identity, authoritarianism, literature, political ideology

Nationalism is a complex political ideology that emphasizes the interests, culture, and identity of a particular nation or group. Gellner defines nationalism as “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity, and identity for a population defined by its nationality” (131). Historically, nationalism has played a significant role in the formation of nation-states, often emerging in response to colonialism and imperialism. Understanding nationalism requires examining its historical context, as different socio-political and economic conditions influence how nationalism is interpreted and implemented.

In Somalia, nationalism has evolved through phases of anti-colonial struggles, aspirations for Pan-Somalism, post-independence nation-building, and contemporary political fragmentation. This paper explores how Nuruddin Farah critiques nationalism in his *Variations* and *Blood in the Sun* trilogies, illustrating its role in both unifying and dividing society. By analyzing the manipulation of nationalist sentiments in his novels, this paper highlights Farah’s critique of nationalism as an instrument of authoritarian control, exclusion, and social fragmentation.

Forms of Nationalism in Farah’s Novels: Farah engages with different types of nationalism, each of which shapes the political and social fabric of Somalia.

- **Civic Nationalism:** Based on shared political beliefs, rather than ethnicity, civic nationalism is depicted in Farah’s novels as an ideal that is often undermined by authoritarianism. In *Sweet and Sour Milk*, the regime demands absolute loyalty, presenting itself as the guardian of Somali unity. “The state’s voice spoke of unity, of

loyalty to the soil, yet under that guise, it tightened its grip, squeezing out voices that dared to differ” (24).

- **Ethnic Nationalism:** Defined by common ancestry and culture, ethnic nationalism is scrutinized in *Maps* through Askar’s internal conflict over his Ethiopian caretaker, Misra. “Askar often felt torn between his love for Misra and the pull of his people’s call for unity against Ethiopia. He wondered whether one could truly belong to a nation that defined itself by whom it opposed” (57). This tension reflects the dangers of ethnic nationalism in enforcing exclusionary identities.
- **Cultural Nationalism:** *Sardines* critiques how nationalism enforces gender roles, particularly in its portrayal of Medina’s resistance against state-imposed domesticity. “The state told women to be mothers first, soldiers of the home, to bear sons for the nation’s future and daughters to carry its traditions, but never to ask who defined that future or what they fought for” (67). This illustrates how nationalism can reinforce patriarchal structures under the guise of preserving national identity.
- **Expansionist Nationalism:** Farah also critiques nationalist aspirations that drive territorial expansion and conflict, particularly in Somalia’s historical tensions with Ethiopia. His works expose how nationalist rhetoric justifies territorial ambitions while deepening internal divisions.

Farah’s novels portray nationalism as a tool of dictatorship, used to suppress opposition and justify repression. In *Close Sesame*, Deeriye a former anti-colonial freedom fighter—witnesses the betrayal of nationalist ideals by a corrupt regime: “Once, Deeriye had known a Somalia that dreamed of unity, that fought to stand on its own. Now, the nation was a fractured mirror, each shard reflecting a different tribe, a different fear” (113). This statement

underscores how nationalism, when co-opted by authoritarian leaders, fosters division rather than unity. Farah critiques how nationalist regimes rely on propaganda, censorship, and the persecution of dissidents to maintain power. *Sweet and Sour Milk* illustrates this through Loyaan's investigation into his brother's mysterious death, revealing how the government exploits nationalism to silence dissent: "The government's nationalism was a brand of fear, not pride; it made people whisper instead of sing" (89).

In *Gifts*, Farah critiques how reliance on international aid undermines national sovereignty and pride. Duniya, the protagonist, laments Somalia's economic dependency: "What good is a nation that cannot stand on its own two feet? Somalia's soul has been sold for gifts that come with strings attached, gifts that make us less of a nation" (82). This illustrates Farah's concern that nationalism is hollow without economic self-sufficiency.

Farah's novels highlight how nationalism, when rooted in tribal loyalties, fosters division rather than unity. In *Close Sesame*, Deeriye mourns the disintegration of Somali unity: "Once, we had fought for freedom as a single people. Now, we fight among ourselves, as though Somalia was not one land but a battleground for tribes" (145). This reflects how nationalism, when hijacked by clan-based politics, leads to fragmentation rather than cohesion. Nuruddin Farah's *Variations* and *Blood in the Sun* trilogies provide a nuanced critique of nationalism in Somalia, demonstrating how it can be both a unifying force and a tool of oppression. His works expose the dangers of nationalism when manipulated for political gain, leading to authoritarian control, gender oppression, and ethnic divisions. Farah suggests that for nationalism to be meaningful, it must be rooted in genuine unity, self-determination, and respect for individual freedoms. His novels serve as a cautionary tale against the perversion of nationalism into a mechanism of control and division, urging a reimagining of national identity that embraces diversity and democratic values.

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