

PROBING THE PAST REALITIES IN NURUDDIN FARAH'S CLOSE SESAME

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Abstract: Historical literature is an amalgamation of historical incidents with the imaginary narration of an author with an accurate setting of fictional characters and events. The thematic motif of this genre is to recount the past experiences of the people who lived in a particular sect of time. This genre decodes the cultural evolution in a pragmatic approach and it attempts to portray a broader view of a past society in which great events are reflected by their impact on the private lives of fictional individuals. The true blend of historical facts the readers to probe into human experiences, individual perspectives, and cultural metamorphosis vividly. History is overviewed from the past and it is a collection of facts, however, this blended combination allows the reader to explore the human emotions from the past days. Nuruddin Farah has garnered acclaim as one of the greatest modern African literary writers from Somalia for his rich imagination and fortuitous use of language. Propagating the history of his native soil seems to be one of the sole purposes of his writings. This research paper attempts to decode the narrative strategies of Farah by blending the Somalian past in the novel *Close Sesame*.

(Keywords: History, Memories, Timeline, Tyranny, Colonization)

History as Literature: Probing the Past Realities in Nuruddin Farah's

Close Sesame

“History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce”- Karl Marx

Literature that recounts history which will offer a deeper insight into the lives of human existence in a particular period. An amalgamation of history with literature extends its wings and it has been a pervasive trend in the literary field for ages. When the historical incidents are reciprocated in a scholarly work, it will assist the reader to get extensive facts from the past. Historical fiction imparts the wisdom of cultural evolution and probes the contrastive ideologies from past to present. The genre of historical fiction is applauded for its testimonial references due to the insightful portrait created by the writers. William Shakespeare, Hilary Mantel, Ian McEwan, Toni Morrison, and Nuruddin Farah are some of the celebrated patrons who unify history with literature to the utmost level of perfection.

Farah is considered the most important African novelist who is also one of the most sophisticated voices of modern fiction. He makes a landmark through the *Variations on the theme of an African Dictatorship* trilogy comprised of the novels *Sweet and Sour Milk*, *Sardines*, and *Close Sesame*. The third book of the series *Close Sesame* offers an eloquent indictment of the tyrannies committed both under Islamic law and in the name of socialism which is the view of the observer.

Nuruddin Farah is a staunch critic of the Somalian power structure with a cosmopolitan vision. The political status and history of Somalia are traced in his works with proper vital commentaries. With his unique narrative strategies, the author tries to educate the readers about the rich cultural history of his native soil. Being a man from oral tradition, Farah is unable to resist his ancestor's method of narrating the past to the younger generation. The strong labeling of Somalia as a failed nation is also immersed with negative issues like illiterate citizens, famine, and poverty issues. However, before the dawn of colonization, they lead a serene life with a close association with nature. But the Siad Barre's tyrannical regime also creates an unerasable rupture in the minds of Somalians and paves the way for clan conflicts.

The art of orthography and dialect is alien to Somalians hence they are unable to document the major historical episodes from the past. Until the rule of Siad barre, the oral folklore and Somalian histories were not documented. Farah emerged as the propagator of Somalian history and utilized his writing skills to document the major historical incidents in his storyline. The author has to unveil the miseries of Somalian in the global arena and thus he chose one of the European languages that will draw attention on the world stage. This paper attempts to shed light on the historical narration of Farah at the core of his depiction and characters with a nostalgic outlook.

With an insightful portrait of his Somalian country imploding with furious and staunch beliefs with the motto History repeats itself because the brutality that happened in the period of dictatorship is similar to the tragedies that occurred in the colonizers' government previously. Hence, Farah needs to create a written document of Somalian history to portray the individual liberty, race, and culture of Somalians. He warns fellow Somalians to be aware of the history of pre-colonial and post-colonial times so that the people can avoid falling into the pit dug by the political vultures against them.

In the article, "Telling the Story Yet Again: Oral Traditions in Nuruddin Farah's Fiction" Fiona Moola opines that, "While history repeats itself, it does so, as Farah's overall title suggests, with variations. Colonialism and neo-colonialism may be related but they have different faces" (169). The novel *Close Sesame* provides a shred of textual evidence about the ruling strategies of Colonizers and the tyrannical regime of Siad Barre. Both the ruling systems provoke clan conflicts and serve as a weapon against the unity of people. The predominant difference is that Colonizers were outsiders, but General Siad Barre is one among the clan but his wild and hard-hearted nature creates political turmoil in Somalian society.

The novel tells the story of an old man Derriye who has been jailed and tortured by both the Italians and the postcolonial Somali dictator by various acts of non-violent dissidence. By tracing the history, his son follows in his footsteps, with his involvement in constructing a plot

to assassinate the general. Being a pro-democratic nationalist, he is also a devout Muslim and against violence thus he disapproves of his idea of violence. At a historical moment when the struggle against the colonizers in an era of dictatorship, faith in revolutionaries is at a low ebb. The novel examines the world of politics against domestic life and spirituality, thus the prayers, visions, and dreams of the old man are a kind of memory of the universe. But on the other hand, Farah puts an end to the full anatomy of the African dictatorship.

Derriye seems to be the connecting tool and bondage between pre-colonial and post-colonial history. The neighbor's sinister grandson Yassin pelts Derriye with pebbles who symbolically represents a threat to the culprits who destroy Somalia. The author's outstanding narration proves the fact that the ignorance of the Somali populace will be eradicated by raising awareness of political issues. In the urge to inculcate the historical incidents of Somalia, the author strategizes the history from the past and correlates it with the incidents of his storyline. He tries to create a fusion with knowledge about the nation's prominent freedom fighter Sayyid Abdulle Hasan with the year of the protagonist Derriye in *Close Sesame*. The lines from the text state that, "Derriye was reared to revere Sayyid Mohamed Abdulle Hasan as the most important figure the Somali nation had ever produced; he was encouraged to learn all the Sayyid's poems by heart, which he did. His favourite was "Death of Corfield", composed and recited in 1912: the year Derriye was born" (CS 32).

In the novel *Close Sesame* protagonist Derriye is symbolized as a person who lives in the past. Reciting history is the prime duty in the old days of his life. In the article, "History's Illuminated Prints: Negative Power in Nuruddin Farah's *Close Sesame*" the author gives a critical perception of the protagonist Derriye, He says that,

Derriye uses as a historical metaphor – as an image of energy and power generated from darkness and negation – is also a telling trope for an inevitable process of cultural transition: namely, the transition of breath into image, the spoken word into "illuminated print," the oral testament into recorded history. (738)

The character presentation of Derriye represents the author himself because he too loves to share stories about historical figures and his past experiences with the next generation. The internal politics in Somalia ranks a prominent place in their chitchat conversation with his son which also turns into a customary habit of Derriye. "Mursal and Derriye took great delight in each other: they found each other's company stimulating, enlightening, the son teaching or learning from the father, the father likewise" (CS 8). As an effective storyteller, the protagonist narrates the stories with moral values and principles for the liberation of his country. While conversing with his grandson he chose to discourse about King Wiil-Waal, who once ruled Somalia before colonization. He recited the insightful poetry collection of Sayyid, the revolutionary who fought against colonizers.

Farah's novels are not just ordinary writings, it is a thriller for the readers with a deep insight. The concept of the modernist maxim is the emphasis given by the novelist to understand the rich historical background. In the article, "Linkages of History in the Narrative

of *Close Sesame*”, the author Raymond Ntalindwa opines her valuable thoughts about the fusion of history in Nuruddin Farah’s novel *Close Sesame*, she says that,

As an effective link between the past and the present, Derriye takes it upon himself to teach his people – represented at family level by his children and grandchildren – the history of their country, Somalia. He adopts two pedagogic methods: the anecdotal method and the dialogue method. He tells stories to his grandchildren and holds discussions with his children. In so doing, Derriye becomes an effective teacher on one hand and a willing learner on the other. (189)

As a pan-African, he fought against the atrocities of Italian police officers and went to jail for decades. This prison life isolates the protagonist from his family and his absence is marked by the author by symbolizing a photograph taken during his daughter Zeinab’s marriage. After his release from prison, Derriye found no positive outcomes in the development of Somalian politics. The impact of psychological trauma occupied Derriye which is shifted to his son Mursal who fighting against the dictatorship of Siad Barre like Derriye during colonialism. In *Close Sesame*, Derriye says that,

They spoke of the fact that the first threats to the democratic institutions came from the colonial governments which imposed unconstitutional and untraditional governments on the African or the non-European peoples. With informed tolerance and scientific detachment, they talked of the two forms of government the colonial powers employed: one for their own people, the other for the sub-human African. And when Africa attained its political independence, black apes took over and aped the monkeys who trained them. (93)

In the novel, *Close Sesame*, the author’s imagination is completely ignited with the recollection of the memories from the past. Being a banned author for decades, Nuruddin Farah analyzes the reasons for Somalia’s ongoing disasters. To acquire an innate knowledge of the Somalian hazard, the author digs out the past realities, believing it will help him uproot the crisis. Farah’s narration is an amalgamation of representing Somali culture, traditions, politics, and history. His writings reflect his practical wisdom on his mother nation and he never retrenches the quality of truth in his works.

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