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in Selected Novels by Nuruddin Farah”

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## **Abstract**

Die Arbeit untersucht, wie Nuruddin Farah, selbst gebürtiger Somali, in seinen Romanen Status und Position somalischer Frauen darstellt. Verschiedene Themengebiete werden dabei im Detail untersucht, darunter Ausbildung und Berufsmöglichkeiten für Frauen, ihr Status in der Ehe sowie alltägliche Aufgaben in Haushalt und Kindererziehung. Des Weiteren wird Einfluss von Gesetzen, Traditionen und der Religion auf das herrschende Frauenbild behandelt. Gerade in Somalia dürfen außerdem politische Entwicklungen keinesfalls außer Acht gelassen werden, weshalb jedes Thema von der Kolonialzeit, über das Siyad Barre Regime und den anschließenden Bürgerkrieg, bis hin zur gegenwärtigen radikal muslimischen Regierung verfolgt wird. Dabei wird deutlich, dass Frauen sehr häufig zusätzliche Hindernisse bewältigen müssen, die Männern oft gänzlich unbekannt sind. Dennoch beschreibt Farah Frauen grundsätzlich als selbstbewusst und betont ihre Bereitschaft, für Gleichberechtigung und persönliche Freiheiten zu kämpfen. In den letzten Jahrzehnten kann generell eine positive Entwicklung beobachtet werden, wobei Farah seine Besorgnis zur gegenwärtigen Lage ausdrückt, im Besonderen zu radikalen Auslegungen von Religion. Der Versuch, einen islamisch geführten Staat zu gründen, beschränkt offiziell die weibliche Freiheit und ordnet Frauen Männern unter. Zusammenfassend lässt sich sagen, dass sexuelle Diskriminierung in Somalia weit verbreitet ist, jedoch zeigt Nuruddin Farah, wie Frauen in verschiedenster Weise Hindernisse umgehen oder aber Wege finden, mit Unvermeidlichem zurechtzukommen. Obwohl offiziell nicht gleichberechtigt, tragen sie in der Realität oft den Großteil der Verantwortung. Farah zeigt die Frauen in seinen Büchern durchwegs als stark und selbstbewusst und zeichnet ein generell positives Bild.



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## **1. Introduction**

Nuruddin Farah, first Somali ever to publish a book and by now author of more than ten novels, provides first-hand knowledge and information about his native country in all of his books. This thesis focuses on Farah's depiction of Somali women and their status in society. It attempts to investigate whether women are portrayed as helpless and inferior, or rather as equal to males. Farah's first book, *From A Crooked Rib*, is set in the late 1950s, shortly before Somalia becomes independent of Italian colonial rule; his latest, *Crossbones*, takes place after the Union of Islamic Courts seizes power in 2006. The legal, traditional and actual status of women shall be traced through these sixty years and various different governments, regimes and lawless periods. The paper is structured according to topics; each chapter discusses one topic area, taking into account relevant material from all books. Subject areas range from clothing styles to education, marriage, childcare and the influence of religion. In the beginning, information about the author, book summaries as well as an overview of Somalia's history are provided, as especially the latter is considered especially crucial in order to understand events and developments described below. Due to limitations of time and space, a mere five of Farah's books have been included into this thesis; however, the primary aim is to provide a realistic picture of the situation and to acknowledge the author's genuine knowledge. Ideally, this thesis can assist to spread knowledge about the situation of women in Somalia.

## **2. Somalia – An Overview**

### **2. a. History of Somalia**

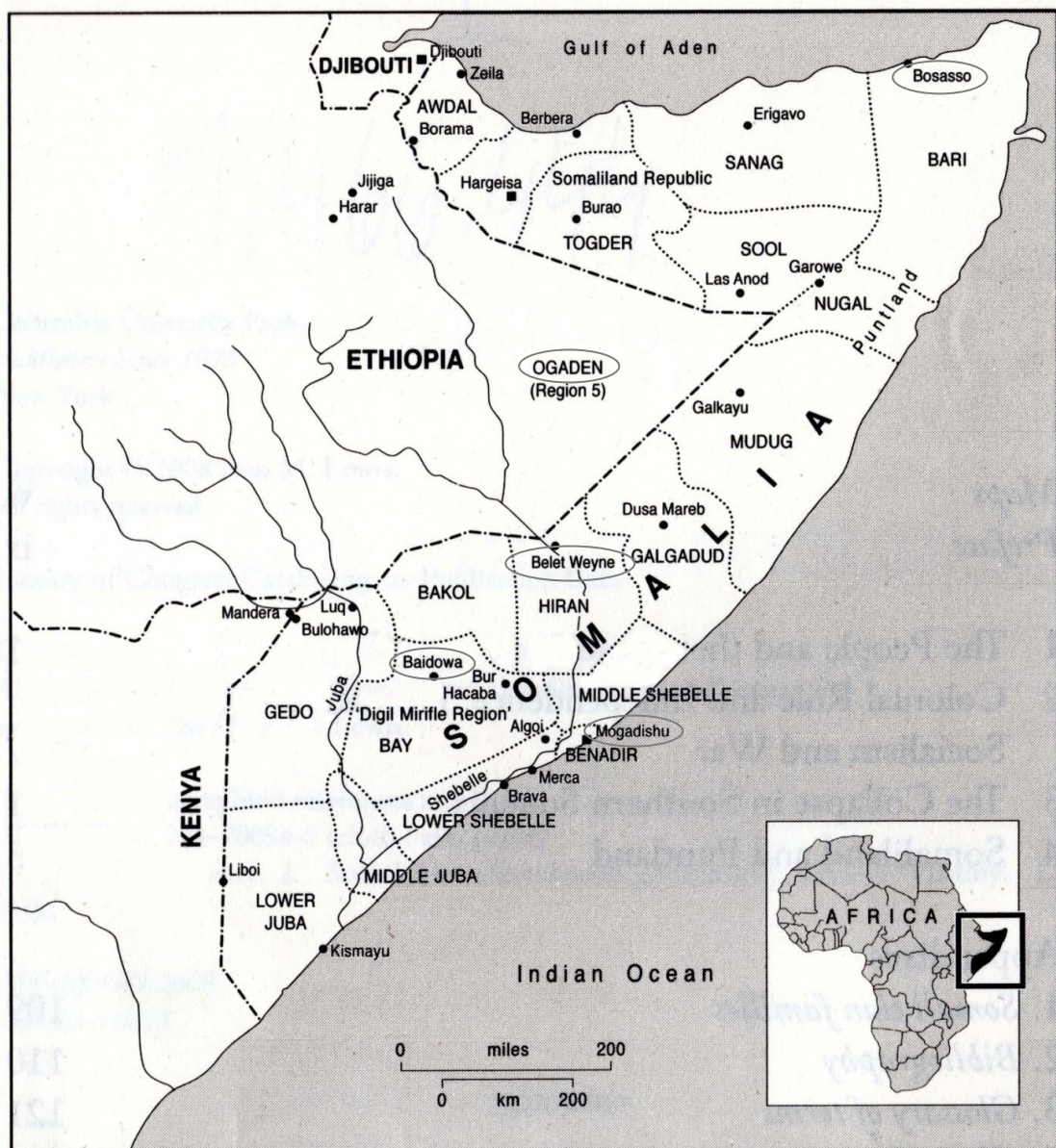
This chapter provides a short overview of Somalia's history, an attempt to give context information to Nuruddin Farah's novels, as the political and historical background is crucial to fully understand his books.

Up until the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Somalia – or rather the Arabs and Somali clans living in roughly that area – do not have any official contact with non-local people at all.

(Lewis 123f). The country is divided according to clan structure, and people do not perceive themselves as members of a state. However, in the late nineteenth century, European superpowers compete for the rule of the African continent. After the battle of Adowa in 1896, the region of the later Somalia is divided into five parts, governed by the French, the British, the likewise Britain-ruled Kenya, the Italian and Ethiopia, respectively. The five-pointed star on the flag of the later independent Somalia is based on this division. The first half of the twentieth century is marked by growing frictions between the colonial rulers and the power shifts caused by the two World Wars. Somalia's parts repeatedly change hands until the landmark year of 1960, when the country is reunited and granted independence. The Somali Republic is founded, and a joint government elects a provisional president and forms a cabinet representing all major clans. Organized in a centralized way, the new state is modeled on European countries, a situation not at all suited for the local setting. Further problems occur because of varying traditions imposed by the British and Italian in their respective former territories. Likewise, internal clan divisions do not help the development of a functioning state. These internal problems and the unexpected assassination of the president in 1969 pave the way for a military coup in which the army seizes power. General Mohammed Siyad Barre, Commander of the Army, begins to realize his ambitious plans to reform and improve the whole country. In the first years of his regime, Siyad Barre is successful in fighting corruption, tribalism, poverty and reforming the economy, continually assisted by the USSR. From 1974 onwards, however, nationalist groups call for the "liberation" of the Ogaden, one of the former five parts of the country, still populated by Somalis but now ruled by Ethiopia (Lewis 27-43). The Somali-Ethiopian war of 1977/78 is partly a proxy war of the Cold War, with the USSR, now in support of Ethiopia, fighting against the United States. Somalia is left defeated, and Siyad Barre's regime begins to crumble. The whole state is gradually militarized by the division into Barre's allies and oppositional groups, until the Major-General is finally ousted in 1991. Over the following two decades, various transitional governments are established and overthrown in rapid succession, while the country is ravaged by civil war and clan fighting. International aid, UN resolutions, and peace conferences, as well as permanent US involvement, cannot end the conflicts. Finally, in 1995, the US withdraws entirely; while the fighting continues and warlords strive to fill the power vacuum.

Finally, in 2006, the Union of Islamic Courts is founded from various clerical groups and succeeds in ousting warlords and restoring order for the first time since the end of Siyad Barre's regime. Everyday life is slowly returning to normal conditions (Lewis 125-128). However, the Union of Islamic Courts consists of traditionalists, demanding women to wear veils and introducing the Sharia law in Somalia. The civil war might be ended, but the situation is far from stable, and many problems are yet to be solved (Farah, *Crossbones 3*).

## 2. b. Geographical Overview



(Lewis vi)

The above map shows Somalia's position at the Horn of Africa, and provides an overview of where the areas relevant for this thesis are located. For better visibility, the respective names have been indicated.

- Ogaden, which is actually part of Ethiopia now, is the desert area where Ebla of *From A Crooked Rib* grows up in her nomad jes. Nuruddin Farah himself also grows up in this area.
- Belet Wene (in the map spelled Belet Weyne), the town Ebla flees to when leaving her jes, is to the south of Ogaden, but close to the Ethiopian border.
- Mogadiscio (in the map spelled Mogadishu) is the main setting of Nuruddin Farah's stories and appears in every one of his novels. *Gifts*, *Links* and *Knots* take place exclusively in this city. Mogadiscio is located south of Belet Wene, at the Indian Ocean.
- Bosaso (in the map spelled Bosasso), is where Warsame and Xalan of *Crossbones* live, at the Gulf of Aden in the far north-eastern part of Somalia. The nickname of Bosaaso of *Gifts* is derived from this city as well.
- Baidoa (in the map spelled Baidowa), in the south-western part of Somalia, is Nuruddin Farah's city of birth.

Concerning the different spelling varieties of proper names, it has to be mentioned that the language Somali has not existed in its written form until the 1970s. Therefore, different versions are used depending on who has written a text (Lewis 23).

### **3. Biography of Nuruddin Farah**

The author is born as Nuruddin Farah Hassan in Baidoa in 1945. At this time, the southern part of the later Somalia is administered by the colonial power Italy, and not connected to the later northern part, which is governed by Great Britain. Farah grows up in Kallafo in the Ogaden region, now part of Ethiopia. He attends secondary school first in Ethiopia and later in Mogadiscio, acquiring Amharic, Arabic and Italian in the process. After finishing school, he stays in Mogadiscio to work for the Ministry of Education for a short time, publishing his first novella in a newspaper in 1966 at the age of twenty. Farah

attends college in India to acquire a BA degree in literature and philosophy, marries and continues writing plays and revues as well as his first novel *From A Crooked Rib*. After finishing his studies in 1970, he returns to Somalia to work as a teacher and university professor in Mogadiscio. While initially supporting Siyad Barre's idealism and views and partaking in political activities, Farah soon distances himself from the prevalent violence and inhumanity. When the regime asks for a piece glorifying the revolution, Farah produces the first novel ever written in Somali in 1973, only to see it rejected by the authorities. In fact, Farah's entire work stays on the index throughout Siyad Barre's regime. However, Somalia is a country with a strong oral tradition, and his novels are said to be spread orally and to be known by a large audience. Farah himself follows the lead of many educated members of the privileged urban elite and immigrates to Great Britain in 1974, continuing his studies and literary efforts at British universities. His wife and young son stay in Mogadiscio, but Farah does not dare to return, being warned about a thirty-year jail sentence awaiting him. From the late 1970s onwards, he spends almost twenty years in Rome, Germany and a variety of African countries, with additional short visits to Europe and North America. All the while, Farah continually publishes novels, including *Gifts* in 1992, as part of the *Blood in the Sun* trilogy. He does not see himself as an exile; however, he is in no position to return to his native country, and therefore divides his time between Great Britain and Nigeria for several years. Even though Farah visits many other countries, including Italy and Germany, Canada and the United States, India, Nigeria, Gambia, Tunisia, Uganda and the Sudan in the course of his travels and studies, he concentrates exclusively on Somalia in his work. The stories focus on his native country and are set throughout the various regimes and governments, always including the respective political situation. Albeit fluent in many languages and scripts, Nuruddin Farah has chosen English as his main language of publishing, acknowledging its ability to reach a large audience all over the world (Wright 7-16). Over the years, his novels are translated into many other languages and win various awards, including the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1998, while Farah himself finally settles into Cape Town, South Africa, where he continues writing and publishes another trilogy, beginning with *Links* in 2004 (Farah, *Links* blurb).

## 4. The Books

### 4. a. *From A Crooked Rib*

Nuruddin Farah's first novel takes place in the late 1950s, shortly before Somalia becomes independent from Italian rule. It deals with a young woman in search of personal freedom and self-determination. Eighteen-year-old Ebla, born and raised in a nomad community, is to marry a man chosen by her grandfather and more than twice her own age. Subsequently, Ebla flees to the nearby town of Belet Wene, serving as a maid for her cousin and his pregnant wife in exchange for board and lodge. She is exploited by her cousin, who uses her as a midwife as well as a courier in his smuggling enterprises, but blames her when they are caught. Finally, her cousin sells her hand to a broker suffering from TB in order to settle his debts. Ebla's friend, an older widow, introduces her to her own nephew and persuades her to elope with him and relocate to Mogadiscio, which Ebla finally does. However, her future husband Awill is merely looking for a sexual companion, as he has had unpleasant experiences with prostitutes. Love is out of the question for Ebla, as the couple barely knows each other. After a violent wedding night and a surprisingly beautiful honeymoon week, Awill leaves for a business journey to Italy, the colonial power ruling Somalia at that time. When Ebla sees a photo of her husband together with a white woman, she wants to take revenge and, following the advice of her landlady Asha, marries a second man, Tiffo. Not realizing that Tiffo uses her as an alternative to prostitutes as well, Ebla believes she is finally her own master, able to live her life the way she wants. However, when Tiffo is told about Ebla's first husband, he makes clear that men are indeed allowed up to four wives, but women cannot have more than one husband. After calling her a whore, he hurriedly divorces her. Ebla is utterly confused as well as probably pregnant, but unable to learn from her experiences. In the end, Awill returns to Somalia and to Ebla, who decides to stay with him, partly because running away again would not take her anywhere.



#### **4. b. *Gifts***

Taking place during Major-General Mohammed Siyad Barre's regime, *Gifts* is predominantly a love story. The nurse Duniya, married twice and a single mother of three, encounters her old acquaintance Bosaaso, and is strongly drawn to him. While their relationship slowly unfolds, Duniya remembers her previous marriages, which have been devoid of actual love, and witnesses her family's everyday lives and problems. Her seventeen-year-old son Mataan has an older mistress, while his twin sister Nasiiba "finds" an abandoned new-born – the baby later turns out to be the illegitimate offspring of one of Nasiiba's friends and Duniya's brother-in-law, a married man. Before this is revealed, however, Duniya and Bosaaso both register as official guardians for the boy, an action that also further improves their own relationship. All the time, Duniya has to fight sexual discrimination from all sides, and continually struggles to prove that she as a woman is able to live independently and to care for her twins and youngest daughter Yarey. When the foundling dies, everyone is sad, but the story continues with a romantic dinner and private driving lessons for Duniya. When she, who lives virtually rent-free in an apartment owned by a relative, has a dispute with the owner's wife, she consequently resigns, loathing every possible form of dependency caused by unwanted charity. In the following, the whole family including Bosaaso search for and prepare a new place to live. In addition to driving, Duniya is also taught how to swim by Duniya and Fariida, in the course of this afternoon also confirming the girl's affair and secret pregnancy, as well as her being the mother of the foundling. In the end, Duniya's expatriate brother comes to visit after a long absence, and Bosaaso and Duniya are officially treated as a couple. Besides, throughout the story, power shortages and lack of fuel are omnipresent, announcing the nearing end of Barre's dictatorship.

#### **4. c. *Links***

*Links* is the first book of a trilogy, followed by and featuring partly the same characters as *Knots* and *Crossbones*. As all three novels predominantly take place in Mogadiscio, the trilogy follows the city's development throughout the civil war and beyond. *Links* is set in

the early time of the civil war, when the city is divided between two major warlords who Farah simply calls StrongmanNorth and StrongmanSouth. The returning expatriate Jeebleh, who has not seen his native city for twenty years, is shocked about this development as well as many others: Antagonizing warlords ruling their respective territories, gangs of armed youths idling away their time chewing qaat and destroyed buildings are entirely different from how he remembers Mogadiscio. Originally desiring to visit his mother's grave, Jeebleh stumbles upon a more complicated task: Raasta, a young girl and niece to Bile, his best friend from childhood, has been abducted together with her playmate Makka. Jeebleh promptly starts to investigate on his own, and in the course of the book actually manages to locate the girls, who are eventually reunited with their family. Likewise, he finds his mother's grave and shows his last respects. Besides, Jeebleh is reminded of his and Bile's past and the years both of them spent in solitary confinement for political crimes. His clan elders, who have not even attempted to help him during that time, now demand financial support and a share of the riches he is assumed to have acquired in the United States. However, Jeebleh has always preferred choosing his friends according to character rather than blood, and refuses. In contrast, Bile has never left the country. After the fall of the Siyad Barre regime, he has established The Refuge, both emergency aid center and permanent residence for the innumerable refugees fleeing to the capital from various parts of the country. Everyone is welcome as long as they abide to the rules, but children are cared for in particular, and even provided with elementary education. The Refuge is where a huge party takes place in the end of the book, honoring Jeebleh's dead mother and celebrating Raasta and Makka's safe return – in a way celebrating life in the midst of the war-induced chaos.

#### **4. d. *Knots***

*Knots* takes place in the early 2000s, after more than ten years of civil war, and begins with Cambara's arrival in Mogadiscio. After the tragic death of her young son and her being cheated by her husband, she decides to make a fresh start in her city of birth. Transitionally staying with her dirty, lazy cousin, Cambara plans to reclaim her family property, presently occupied by a minor warlord. In her continued effort to realize this

plan, Cambara attempts to help everyone she encounters in the war-ravaged city. She fosters a young orphan boy who is part of her cousin's hired "security", a gang of armed youths endlessly chewing qaat – at least until Cambara appears, confiscates the drug and puts everyone to work, having them clean the house and cook a decent meal for everyone. Meanwhile, the warlord is not the only one living at her property: When Cambara makes an incognito visit, she encounters his kept mistress, who in turn needs her help when left by herself and about to give birth to another one of his children. Finally, she meets another young boy, who has been separated from his parents in the course of the war, manages to locate his mother and reunite the two of them. In contrast, Cambara receives help from Kiin, hotel owner, single mother and active member of the Women for Peace network. The two women strike a fast friendship, and Kiin uses the network in order to provide Cambara with the means to help her own charges and persuades her to move into her hotel. Eventually, the family property is reclaimed and protected by armed security, and Cambara is able to move in. The book ends with celebrations: a women-only party sponsored by the Women for Peace network, and a play appealing for peace, directed by Cambara and staged for a selected audience only. Furthermore, a tender love story has developed between Cambara and Bile from *Links*, and the two of them presumably plan a common future.

#### **4. e. *Crossbones***

*Crossbones*, the final volume of the trilogy, takes place after 2006, when the Union of Islamic Courts has seized power. Between qaat, clan-based fighting, radical religionism, and the terror unit al-Shabaab, the novel features several parallel plots: A young recruit of Shabaab is sent to deliver arms, but fails to accomplish the job as he is sent to a wrong house by Cambara when happening to ask her for directions. Subsequently, the owners of the house are shot together with the boy. Meanwhile, Jeebleh once again returns to Mogadiscio for a visit, this time accompanied by his young son-in-law, the journalist Malik. The latter is at a loss when dealing with Somalia's self-declared journalists, who do not have any proper training, but daily risk their lives in the attempt to obtain information. When he is asked to lead interviews and publish a piece about

piracy, he cannot resist, but on his return from a meeting with an interview partner, his car is hit by a remote-controlled roadside bomb. Malik survives, and despite his critical condition presumably publishes his story from abroad. At the same time, Ahl visits Bosaso, now located in the independent Republic of Puntland, in the attempt to locate his stepson Taxliil, who has left the US in order to become a member of Shabaab. Ahl witnesses a strange variety of people in the coastal town of Bosaso, ranging from honest traders to pirates and criminals: Puntland's independent status guarantees peace, but lacks order everywhere. With the help of various shady characters, Ahl manages to locate Taxliil, who describes his experiences in a Shabaab boot camp. Trained as a human bomber, he has fled at the last opportunity, leaving behind his ID, which makes it tricky to leave Somalia and barely possible to reenter the US. His fate is left open, with a final remark that the Ethiopian authorities will at least treat him gentler than the FBI or US Homeland Security. *Crossbones* is packed with information about the failed state Somalia; Farah covers the UN's involvement in illegal fishing along the Somali coast as well as the alleged collaboration between piracy middlemen and Shabaab to enable the smuggling of illegal Jihaddis. Moreover, he allows glimpses of everyday life in Somalia, obviously worried about the developments towards radical Islam.

## **5. Female Life**

### **5. a. Clothing and Appearance**

The following chapter examines in closer detail Nuruddin Farah's description of female dressing habits and conventions. It attempts to differentiate between various Somali dress codes in different times and parts of the country, and to analyze the different reasons for them, including both male and female views. Overall, it shall be investigated why Farah displays his characters dressed in a specific manner, and what he attempts to convey with it.

As already described in previous chapters, the respective setting of the book has to be taken into account. The customs and conventions vary depending on whether a woman lives in a city or in the countryside, as well as whether the story takes place before,

during or after the Somali civil war. However, it can be observed that dress and appearance are equally important in all books; women's dresses are usually at least mentioned, and more often described in close detail, including an explanation of their meaning.

Ebla, the protagonist of *From A Crooked Rib*, grows up in a nomadic environment in the 1950s, when Somalia is still an Italian colony. The women in her community wear large sheets draped around their figures. These robes do not necessarily cover every part of the body, as Ebla is described feeling the wind on her naked stomach, and one of her breasts entirely showing, because the robe is open at one side of her body. When noticing the stares of a city-bred man, she tightens the robe in order to cover her body, but before this, she suspects the rural dressing style of being indecent (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 21-24). Ebla owns two sheet-dresses in total (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 14f), and is delighted when her cousin gives her another dress, made in the style of the city, "a new type of dress she had never worn, but had always wanted to own. On it, some animals were painted" (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 72). The dresses of most women in the cities are described as skirts, loose frocks and shawls (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 39), however, traditional Muslim dresses and face veils are mentioned as well. Ebla, who has never seen veils before, is afraid of seeing a ghost or spirit when meeting an Arab woman for the first time (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 45). The widow, whose husband was Arab, also used to wear black dresses and veils for him. She did not object, as Islam tells women to cover their bodies, but obviously returned to a different clothing style after her husband's death.

In this book, Nuruddin Farah compares the different clothing traditions in Somalia. He chooses to describe them through the eyes of Ebla, an illiterate nomad girl with limited experience of other parts of the world as well as her own country. Ebla has never owned a city dress, and not even seen an Arab veil before; in contrast, she does not realize her sheet is considered backward and indecent as well as seductive by others. With this, Farah emphasizes how Somalis – especially back in the 1950s – do not know about respective other traditions, and mentions different views and opinions concerning appearance. Hence, most people living in the so-called Western countries would hardly have sufficient knowledge to judge. The nomadic female dressing style probably does not come to a European mind when thinking of Somali women at all. Besides, there are

many reasons for women to dress the way they do, as can be seen in the case of the widow. She wears the veil on her husband's orders and ceases doing so after his death. She might have questioned his motivations, as she describes him as "jealous as a monkey" (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 50), however, she acknowledges the religious reasons behind, and does not see any need to object.

In contrast, *Gifts* takes place in an altogether urban setting in 1980, during Major-General Mohammed Siyad Barre's regime. The main character Duniya wears a uniform for her job as a nurse (Farah, *Gifts* 17f), and simple dresses or guntiino robes in her leisure time, and covers her hair with a scarf since she has been seventeen. However, when she is taken to dinner by her lover, Duniya's daughter lends her a more modern western-style dress, and advises her to wear her hair uncovered. Duniya refuses to wear her daughter's make-up, but accepts the pair of earrings she suggests, and which Duniya has never worn before (Farah, *Gifts* 141f). For Duniya, "[w]earing her hair uncovered [brings] along with it a change of dress style, in a sense a change of personality." Her family approves, but some of her female colleagues do not. Duniya recalls how her own opinion used to be different, considering a woman's bare head "narcissistic", needing mirrors and styling gadgets. Moreover, nobody, not even herself, would have noticed the grey hairs she already has (Farah, *Gifts* 152). In contrast, Duniya's daughters admire and wear western-style clothes given to them by their uncle, who lives in Italy (Farah, *Gifts* 237).

However, there are also older women not dressing as modestly as Islam requires. Duniya's former sister-in-law frequently visits a hairdresser as well as a tailor, providing the latter with extravagant dress samples from fashion magazines. Likewise, she purchases jewelry from silver- and goldsmiths (Farah, *Gifts* 107f). Waaberi, a relative of Duniya's lover, certainly does not dress modestly either: Farah describes her as "[...] heavily made up and wearing lipstick, hair singed, dress expensive and belonging to the season's fashion, with a zip in front, and showing her enormous breasts, like a film preview, [...] bare arms, [...] a belt with a pendant, a necklace of amber beads and bracelets for her wrists and anklets as well" (Farah, *Gifts* 222).

In *Gifts*, Farah shows a clash between old and new styles, between tradition and modernity. Duniya changes throughout the book, as she reflects on how she used to think about women showing their hair in public, while later, she does the same herself. There are no restrictions by males mentioned; Duniya's lover appreciates of her new appearance. However, it is her female colleagues commenting on the issues of custom and modesty, certainly influenced by their respective background and upbringing. Farah stresses how crucial a change in dressing style can be when Duniya realizes how the change in appearance triggers a change in her personality. She is not yet sure whether she wholly likes it, but her new clothing style helps her to see herself as free and desired. Certainly, age can matter in the case of clothes as well, as Duniya's daughters desire the western-style clothes from Italy, and the older one naturally wears make-up. The younger generation adapts to changes more easily, and recognizes the benefits of the Western influences. In turn, Duniya's daughter triggers her mother's change in style, even though Duniya resists at the beginning. However, as already mentioned, there is also criticism of new developments, for example the expensive and daring dressing style of the women described above. In *Gifts*, Farah shows different types of women in an environment of virtual freedom of dress. Besides, he draws attention to how appearance displays personality and world-view, and can even trigger and advance respective changes.

The third book discussed in this chapter is *Knots*, taking place in Mogadiscio in the early 2000s, after more than ten years of anarchy and civil war. Compared to before the civil war, many things have changed concerning women's clothes. Farah has chosen his main character Cambara to be an exile, returning to Somalia after living in Canada for many years and therefore not being familiar with the new developments. The first time she is out in public, she feels sad when she sees "the forlorn expressions of the women swathed from head to toe in cheap veils [...], on occasion only their eyes and hands showing." Cambara herself wears a caftan and a scarf covering her hair, but her cousin Zaak, who accompanies her, advises her to start wearing a veil. He offers to take her to one of the small stalls selling second-hand clothes to buy one, but Cambara refuses to veil herself because he wants or commands it. Nevertheless, she realizes that she is the only woman in a caftan, while the vast majority is veiled, others wear the traditional

guntiino-robos, and some are in threadbare rags (Farah, *Knots* 2-7). However, at the open-air market, the situation is different: The women selling spices and vegetables are wearing brightly colored guntiino-robos. These dresses are entirely different from chadors and face veils, but not even those women who “are past their prime [...] seem bothered about their exposed breasts.” In addition, they appear self-content and relaxed, and talk to each other freely (Farah, *Knots* 13f). Farah describes another market similarly, with few veiled women, one of them wearing a veil for convention, but underneath a tight-fitting frock (Farah, *Knots* 123-125).

Cambara’s attitude towards veils is ambivalent: She feels awkward and hindered by it when she wears one for the first time, but she uses it for her own purpose when she prefers to disguise her identity. Besides, she attracts less attention from the armed youths in the streets (Farah, *Knots* 107-109). The single mother Kiin wears a body tent when fighting for the custody of her daughters against her estranged husband’s patriarchal family. She is strongly adverse to these garments, but tries to convince her father-in-law that she educates her daughters in the traditional way. However, she secretly rebels by wearing a transparent dress and no bra underneath (Farah, *Knots* 242-244). Later, Kiin organizes a party for women only. The women arrive in chadors or veils, but take them off as soon as they enter. Everyone dances uninhibitedly, one girl is topless, another in a very tight dress (Farah, *Knots* 278-280).

Nuruddin Farah sets this book in the years of the civil war, when custom requires women to wear veils, presumably for their own protection. The traditional guntiino dress is still worn, but only by a minority of women. Farah wants to show that even though many women have no possibility to refuse openly, they have nevertheless found many ways to defy convention, for example a party with only women invited. Moreover, at places like the markets, with usually primarily women present, the former tradition of wearing brightly colored guntiino robes remains, and women show their self-confidence and pride in their appearance more openly. Cambara, who has never veiled herself before, refuses to do so when her male cousin advises it, but later uses the veil to her own advantage. She does not like it in itself, but sees the benefits she can draw from wearing it in this environment. Likewise, Kiin veils herself to a certain aim: to please her conservative in-laws and prove her point.



A European or North American person usually associates submission and weakness with a woman in a veil, however, Nuruddin Farah displays the women in *Knots* far from weak. They have to bend to certain rules and do so, but use the remaining freedom, find loopholes, and even use the hindering clothes for their own purpose.

The last book mentioned in this chapter is *Crossbones*, the sequel to *Knots*, which is set after the end of the civil war. In 2006, the Union of Islamic Courts seizes control of Somalia and makes veils compulsory, punishing women wearing less restrictive dresses or even trousers (Farah, *Crossbones* 2f). There is still a minority of women wearing guntiino robes, like the ones selling qaat in tiny stalls along the streets (Farah, *Crossbones* 138f). Cambara, who still lives in Mogadiscio, has begun wearing a scarf and then the veil to avoid harassment from the religionists. She has become wary of the unending quarrels concerning her appearance, and simply considers it easier to comply in public (Farah, *Crossbones* 77). In private, however, she wears western-style dresses and sometimes mounts some feeble resistance, if only for herself, like wearing “a tropical cotton dress and no bra, as if playing at Shabaab’s recent edict that Somali women should not wear such American-inspired, un-Islamic breast contraptions” (Farah, *Crossbones* 354f).

Again, Nuruddin Farah clarifies the difference between Somali tradition and the fanatic religionism declaring veils as a safety measure for women. Since the Union of Islamic Courts has taken over, however, public resistance has become difficult or even impossible. Many women have decided that it is simply unwise to rebel openly, and obey in public, but not in private. Besides, the veils certainly serve as protection from sexual harassment by the fanatic armed youths everywhere in the streets. Nevertheless, women are still displayed as strong: Cambara could leave the country, but has decided to stay. Farah wants to show how women know it is not wise to resist publicly, and cope as well as possible.

In conclusion, Nuruddin Farah explains the various clothing traditions and conventions of Somali women in considerable detail. He describes the different styles and draws attention to the flaws in the respective perceptions of the Western world. Farah also points out how appearance can change personality, if connected to tradition or a

deliberate change of one's style. If dress code is imposed upon women by male authority, Farah describes how women make the best of it: from finding loopholes and personal benefits to coping with what they cannot change.

## **5. b. Education and Work**

The following chapter looks into the subject of the education and job opportunities of women in Somalia. It describes differences in male and female education, both formal and at home. Moreover, respective job possibilities and working conditions shall be investigated.

Nomad children like Ebla do not receive any formal education, regardless of the child's sex. Hence, Ebla is illiterate and lacks knowledge about the world outside the desert, for example, she does not know the concepts of "police" or "government", and rather thinks they are tribe names (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 60). She knows the rudiments of Islam, but learned the suras by heart without understanding the Arabic words (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 16f). However, a boy of her age and background would not necessarily know any more, as life in the desert requires different skills. Nevertheless, the training Ebla has received is certainly gender-specific, as boys traditionally take care of the more prestigious camels, while girls tend the smaller goats (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 11). When she runs away to be independent, she is exploited by almost everyone she meets. Her cousin and his wife take her in as a maid and errand girl, but it would be impossible for Ebla to train for an actual job in order to earn money (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 22). She wants to help her cousin as best as she can, but "[s]he [is] a woman, and she ought not to interfere with the jobs of males" (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 54). When she has to flee from her cousin, the only way her friend the widow and her can think of is eloping. Naturally, she depends on her husband for everything, as she has no way of earning any money herself (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 85-89). Aowralla, her cousin's wife, presumably does not have an occupation outside the house either. She tends to the cows and cares for her child (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 31). Asha is the only woman in this book who has a job, she is landlady to Ebla's husband and various other tenants. This puts her in a position of

power, at least compared to Ebla, but she is accused of greed, and slyness when collecting the rent (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 93, 109). All in all, Farah describes Asha as independent, showing the importance of one's own income. He stresses that needing financial support from males leaves women powerless, regardless of their mental strength. Aowralla is content while Ebla seeks freedom, but is limited by her upbringing, leaving her dependent like most other women she knows.

Duniya, the single mother of *Gifts*, has more freedom, but she also experiences discrimination because of her sex. While her brother is given the possibility to study at a university in Italy, Duniya is promised to an older man when still a girl. Her own children, both her son and two daughters, will have the opportunity to study abroad, something Duniya can only offer because her brother wants to make amends, and pays for the children's education (Farah, *Gifts* 240-242). However, Duniya is trained as a nurse and midwife, and works at a maternity hospital. She is a senior nurse, and the foreign doctor Mire, who is principal obstetrician, depends on her skill and common sense. The job is comparatively good, however, there is clearly gender discrimination at the hospital as well, as all doctors are male and all nurses female (Farah, *Gifts* 14, 18). Besides the main story of Duniya, Farah tells the story of another strong, independent woman: the mother of Duniya's lover. Being a single mother as well, she is a gifted singer, cook and seamstress and is hired for weddings and other festivities and events. The women of the town prefer her to the male tailor and value her opinion concerning appearance and style. She is close to a celebrity in the small town, despite her vanished husband, a notorious gambler living on welfare. She has at least basic schooling, however, as she holds free reading and writing classes for older woman, and gives knitting lessons to the girls to show her gratitude. Later, when moving to a larger town with no need for her skills, she trains as a teacher and finds a job at a school (Farah, *Gifts* 42-46). In *Gifts*, Farah again describes the obstacles women face – especially single mothers. Duniya has to cope with being denied what her brother is given, and she accepts his gifts for her children. He can provide opportunities she cannot, presumably because she as a woman does not qualify for certain jobs. Despite these obstacles, Farah describes Duniya as a matriarch and a strong, independent woman, aware of her situation, but desperately trying to avoid gifts given out of sympathy. The other woman, whose name is never

mentioned, adapts to trying situations as well, using her skills in order to make a living and to improve the townswomen's lives. Unique as she is, she is described as a remarkable woman in a male-dominated society.

More remarkable women are described in *Links*: The childhood friends Jebleeh and Bile both do not know their fathers, but their mothers are also strong, independent women. After Jebleeh's mother divorces his father, a gambler, she sets up a small stall selling tomatoes, onions and matches. She agrees to look after Bile and his brother as well as her own son, because Bile's mother, a midwife, has to work odd hours. In exchange, the midwife pays for the household expenses (Farah, *Links* 93f). Farah also mentions the female Somali author Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, a housewife describing her life in Mogadiscio, and her exile in Italy caused by the civil war (Farah, *Links* 226). All of them are women in a community governed by males, but lead their lives according to their own ideas, either because they have to or because they want to. They make use of the few jobs open to their sex, working in order to support themselves and their children. Bile as a grown-up founds The Refuge, a refugee camp for civil war victims. The Refuge facilitates schools for the children as well, with primarily boys, but also girls attending. The teachers are female, like many other workers and helpers of The Refuge, again women trying to improve the lives of others (Farah, *Links* 155f).

In *Knots*, Farah also mentions women making a living from selling goods. They "dominat[e] an entire section of the marketplace" at an open air market, selling spices and vegetables produced locally, but also qaat. Even though Farah never mentions women chewing the stimulant themselves, they have obviously entered the qaat business to supply their incomes (Farah, *Knots* 13f). Certain jobs, usually of lower status, are considered women's domain entirely. One of them is certainly cleaning. Like in all of his books, Farah mentions maids (Farah, *Knots* 245), and writes about several armed youths, who are put to cleaning duty, and complain about being forced to do a "woman's job". However, they are reprimanded by their male boss, being told that if women have to do men's jobs, men must not complain doing so-called women's jobs. (Farah, *Knots* 100). Girls and women also tend to help their male relatives in their respective businesses. Cambara's mother was involved in her husband's printing press business, managing the contact with customers as well as the incomes, preventing her

husband from spending more than he could afford (Farah, *Knots* 111). Cambara's friend Kiin, however, manages her hotel by herself, and is acknowledged and respected for it (Farah, *Knots* 191f).

Concerning schooling, the civil war has complicated matters. As there are no state facilities, there are no public schools either. Richer parents send their children abroad like Bile's niece (Farah, *Knots* 326), or to private schools like Cambara herself (Farah, *Knots* 112). Middle class parents like Kiin have organized themselves into schooling neighborhoods, providing home schooling facilities for their children. The education is excellent, but as the teachers are often overly qualified, this arrangement proves expensive. Poorer families only have the option of Koran schools for their children, where they presumably receive a less open-minded education (Farah, *Knots* 191f).

Once the Union of Islamic Courts rules the country, women's freedom is more restricted still, and sexes are strictly separated. In *Crossbones*, Cambara hints at upcoming difficulties, as Somalia lacks female nurses, and female doctors are almost nonexistent. Therefore, it is not feasible to restrict women to consulting female doctors and nurses only. The solution of this problem is left open, but Farah's opinion becomes clear: The ideas of the Islamic Courts are ridiculous, and impossible to carry out (Farah, *Crossbones* 172). There are ways for women to work, however, as the young flight attendant Wiila shows. She is unveiled at work, and the pilot of the plane is not Somali, suggesting that the airline might be foreign. Certainly, Wiila has found an occupation different from serving and cleaning, the only jobs that seem to remain women's domain always (Farah, *Crossbones* 90f).

Overall, Farah points out that there are certainly differences in male and female education, as well as job opportunities and working conditions. If parents are rich and modern enough, they can offer their daughters an education as well, but girls and women often experience inferior conditions and treatment. Farah indicates how important one's own income is to cease female dependency on men, but he also stresses how many women have found job possibilities and make their own living. Certainly, he describes women generally as compassionate, helping others and trying to

improve others' lives, while men rather appear idle or unable to economize and invest wisely.

## 5. c. Household and Children

This chapter elaborates on how Nuruddin Farah describes women's traditional duties: household chores and the rearing of children. It reflects on benefits and limitations of this assignment of roles and duties as well as both men's and women's attitudes towards it. Certainly, questions arise concerning the equal division of the overall workload in a family, which this chapter also attempts to answer.

Ebla of *From A Crooked Rib* lives at a time when women are often reduced to being housewives and mothers only, especially in her nomadic community. The title of the book is derived from a traditional Somali proverb: "God created Woman from a crooked rib; and any one who trieth to straighten it, breaketh it." (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 1) Derek Wright interprets the meaning as woman being created inferior, "destined to receive whatever burden is placed upon [her back]" and everyone attempt to make her "perfect" or equal has to fail (Wright, *Novels of Nuruddin Farah* 24). Ebla, who "[thinks] of many things a woman of her background would never think of", reflects on male and female everyday life. The larger part of the workload falls to the women, Fridays not being different from any other day. While men attend a mosque or praying-place, women only have more cooking, washing and other work to do. Besides, women need men in a different way than vice versa, as men give authority and protection, while women can only give work. A woman's status is solely improved by bearing sons, however, these sons "decide[...] to belittle [their] mother as soon as [they are] old enough to walk" and become a burden to them (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 7, 10-14). It is similar in the city. Aowralla, Ebla's cousin's wife, still tends to the cows while highly pregnant and despite her backache. She finally delivers her child without a doctor or midwife, because nobody sends for one, with Ebla performing the operation necessary for an infibulated woman to give birth (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 31-33). Afterwards, she lies in childbed for three days until her umbilical cord breaks, with only Ebla tending to her,

and her husband occasionally asking after her. Aowralla herself is unsure whether she wants more children, considering the pain (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 64f). Since her cousin's wife is not able to cook, Ebla is sent to buy and prepare spaghetti, a task requiring both the widow's and Aowralla's help, as Ebla does not know what spaghetti are.

Nevertheless, her cousin would never consider cooking himself (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 41-43). Later, when Ebla lives with her husband, she discovers that he has no access to cooking facilities at all, but rather buys cooked meals from his landlady (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 83f).

In this book, Nuruddin Farah clearly shows the inferior status of women, especially in nomadic communities, but also in the cities. Household chores are not equally distributed, and for women, especially those infibulated, bearing children means pain and risk of life. Describing this from the viewpoint of Ebla, Farah clearly criticizes, but also shows how women like Ebla or Aowralla have no possibility to change the status quo.

Concerning pregnancy and birth, the women of *Gifts* have the option of a maternity hospital, however, it is understaffed, and the patients, many of them living far away in the countryside, rise early in the morning and endure long walks to get there in time for their appointments (Farah, *Gifts* 10f). Like in *From A Crooked Rib*, women are still defined – and define themselves – through their fertility and the number of children they bear. The woman Yussur is described to develop depression because she does not have sufficient milk for her newborn boy, which hurts her “maternal ego” (Farah, *Gifts* 49f). A patient at the maternity clinic, who has been trying to conceive for years, shows a document proving her pregnancy, probably a testimonial for her co-wife stating that she is finally bearing their husband's child, implying she is doing her duty as a woman (Farah, *Gifts* 183f). However, only legitimate children of married couples are desired. Duniya's children, reared by a single mother, would be called “hooyo-koris” by traditionalists, a derogative term for children growing up in a woman-headed household (Farah, *Gifts* 33). The girl Fariida is pregnant from an illicit affair with a married man. She hides her pregnancy, as he would either pay for an abortion or marry her as his second wife, neither being an option for Fariida (Farah, *Gifts* 190-192). When Duniya adopts the baby, not knowing his parentage, her half-brother claims that “[b]ringing up a bastard is

sin, the wages of which are the fires of hell and Allah's anger." However, he considers a man at the head of the family even more important than the sound ancestry of the baby, as he is appeased when Duniya makes clear that both she and her lover are registered as guardians for the child. Her half-brother tells her that "[a] woman needs a man by her side, for people to take her seriously and for the world's doors to open so she may enter with her head raised and her person respected", a statement which leads Duniya to showing him the door (Farah, *Gifts* 81-83). This gives proof of how many men consider women unable to exist on their own, but Duniya herself is less than happy about her lover being her co-guardian. She suspects that the officer thinks she is not capable alone, or that custody of the child will be denied if the guardian is unmarried (Farah, *Gifts* 72f). Besides, no matter how much Duniya loves the foundling, she does not desire her life to be about childcare only. In fact, she has been looking forward to having of more personal freedom, time and physical space once her children are grown – the possibility to shape her life the way she wants it (Farah, *Gifts* 66). With these wishes in her mind, family planning is self-evident. Despite her devotion to her lover, Duniya is content with her three children and takes contraception measures (Farah, *Gifts* 203) – something Ebla of *From A Crooked Rib* probably would not even know. Duniya is certainly one of Farah's examples of women who do love children, but are not satisfied with the traditional role of mother allotted to Somali women. However, this does not mean she neglects her children in any way, on the contrary, Farah presents Duniya as a loving and loved mother. Her youngest daughter does not permanently live with Duniya because of the divorce of the girl's father, but visits her regularly, and desperately wants to move back in. When her foster mother, an aunt, learns about the child's wishes, she accuses her of being ungrateful, reminding her of all the material goods she has received, making plain that Duniya is too poor to offer her this standard of living. However, Duniya knows how to defend herself and states her opinion about providing worldly goods instead of genuine love and affection. Besides, it can be assumed that the aunt does not talk about her own money, as she does not work herself, but is dependent from her husband (Farah, *Gifts* 111-114). Duniya's own lover is comparatively modern, also concerning household chores: He is actively involved in preparing the new apartment Duniya has rented, and is once mentioned to prepare breakfast for Duniya,



even though “[i]n the Somali scheme of things, kitchens are associated with women and men are discouraged from setting foot in them”. (Farah, *Gifts* 203-216).

All in all, Nuruddin Farah again shows women’s obstacles and the problems they face concerning their independency. He stresses how women are still defined primarily as mothers, and how important being a mother therefore is for many of them. Tradition requires a male at the head of every family, and does not acknowledge illegitimate children at all. Here, Duniya is a crucial counterexample, a strong matriarch who has to accept certain limits, but always attempts to keep her self-esteem and her sound principles.

In *Knots*, both Cambara’s cousin and her divorced husband are described as the kind of man who never do any household chores, as these are considered women’s work. Her cousin is proud that he does not cook, and not even possesses the necessary utensils (Farah, *Knots* 42). Her former husband has Cambara wait him hand and foot, which she does at first, because she is in love (Farah, *Knots* 62). All in all, men are presented in a comparatively bad light, especially in *Knots*. However, Cambara’s parents are no typical Somali couple, in the way that her father adores Cambara, his only daughter, not wanting a more prestigious son – here Farah hints at the origins of Cambara’s strength of mind and character, implying that every girl could be raised like her (Farah, *Knots* 76). Actually, Cambara is described as a strong and self-confident mother figure, caring, loving and sympathetic. She takes an orphan boy into her care, and manages to reunite him with his mother, when she discovers that she is still alive (Farah, *Knots* 228-231, 395). Moreover, she defends the youngest boy of a group of armed youths when he soils himself with fear, and cares for him thereafter. (Farah, *Knots* 90-96). Later, she repeatedly cooks for the whole group of youths, “telling herself that feeding is one of the most ancient strategies women have employed to cope with the restlessness caused by men’s overabundance of testosterone; feeding them is one way of disempowering them, even if for a period of brief duration.” Farah also explains that in many languages, one of them Somali, the word for eating can be used to describe lovemaking as well (Farah, *Knots* 322f). This seems to perfectly describe Cambara: she uses female actions like cooking to her advantage, for example in order to persuade males to aid and assist her. Certainly, she does not shirk unpleasant work herself, but this makes her appear

stronger rather than weak. On one occasion, Cambara carries a suitcase one of the men is not even able to lift – Nuruddin Farah seems to be playing at the notion of strength here, proving her to be not only mentally but also physically stronger than a man who wields automatic weapons every day (Farah, *Gifts* 202). Cambara herself concludes that “only a corrupt society tolerates living in such filth, especially the men who put up with the muck they have made, as if dirt makes itself, reproduces itself. No woman with the means to do something about it will endure so much grunge. Her mother has always said that you are as clean as you make yourself” (Farah, *Knots* 143). Certainly, Cambara and her cousin seem to prove this quote: He chews qaat in his dirty apartment, not eating much himself, much less preparing food for the group of armed youths he employs as security. Cambara, on the other hand, takes the situation in hand, has the youths clean the house, buys cooking utensils and groceries and organizes a plumber and an electrician (Farah, *Knots* 98, 104, 147, 152). On other occasions, she helps the woman Jiiro with her housework (Farah, *Knots* 118f) and cares for Bile when he has soiled himself in a spell of depression and distress (Farah, *Knots* 313f). However, she does all this voluntarily, because she feels the need to help, not because she is forced to work. She does not help in order to get a reward, but rather to follow her principles and be at terms with herself and her actions. The woman Jiiro is in a less lucky position. She is a minor warlord’s concubine, dressed in virtual rags and living in the dirty house he has occupied. She already has several children and is highly pregnant with yet another baby (Farah, *Knots* 113-115). When there is civil war-related fighting around the house, her children are taken away by the warlord for protection, but Jiiro never learns where (Farah, *Knots* 205). The warlord does not care about her pregnancy either, it is Cambara and Kiin – other women – who organize a doctor and transportation to hospital for her to deliver her child (Farah, *Knots* 213). Jiiro is reduced to the roles of housewife and mother, actually, she is not even fully granted those, being treated more like a servant and not allowed to determine the fate of her own children. She is not happy, once she describes men as “worse than animals” (Farah, *Knots* 117), however, she has no possibility to escape. She is bound to the warlord because he is her children’s father, another disadvantage of mothers, many of whom would bear almost anything for their children’s sake. This shows her strength, even though she can do nothing except trying to cope with her situation.

Overall, it has to be said that many women in Somalia are still reduced to the traditional roles of housewife and mother, and that the workload is not equally distributed in many cases. Farah shows how insufficient medical care and little right to participate in decisions pose high disadvantages for women. Nevertheless, he describes Duniya as an extreme opposite, a strong matriarch always finding her way, who in turn has a lover very different from the dirty, lazy Somali males described elsewhere. In *Knots*, Nuruddin Farah takes another step and turns around everything: Officially, males are still superior, but the reality is very different, in fact, women are using their skills and strength to improve things and help people. Seemingly weak, they are stronger than most men, and give hope wherever they can. Even typically female, inferior tasks like cooking or cleaning are used to an end, and women reach their goals while men spend their days chewing qaat.

## **6. Social Aspects**

### **6. a. Family and Clan Structures**

The following chapter deals with Somali families and clan families. It identifies common family constructions and questions the importance of the clan, investigating whether clan identity still exists. Moreover, different opinions concerning families and clans and their possible reasons shall be illustrated.

Nomads usually live and travel in a *Jes*, a unit of several families. This is a necessary arrangement, because every hand is needed to tend to the beasts. Everyone has their certain duty, allotted according to sex and age, including the usually numerous children. Overall, obedience and respect for one's elders are very important (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 6, 12). In the cities, usually only the nuclear family lives together, like Ebla's cousin, his wife, and later their child. However, there are many distant relatives, including an unclear number of nephews, nieces and cousins. Ebla's cousin is once robbed by a fraud claiming to be a distant cousin of his, knowing the average Somali family structure is too large to be acquainted with every member. Nevertheless, it is common for people from the countryside to actually have relations in the city (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 26-28). Tribes

and clans are not directly mentioned in *From A Crooked Rib*, except when Ebla, not knowing the words “Police” and “Government”, confuses them for tribe names, however, this might show that for her as a country girl, they are simply unimportant.

In *From A Crooked Rib*, Nuruddin Farah describes the differences between country and city life. Ebla, who has to flee from an arranged marriage, knows that she has nowhere to go in the country, as she cannot survive outside her Jes in the desert. Fleeing to a different Jes is not possible either, therefore, she has to reach a city, where families are organized differently. Like many country people, she has relatives in the city, and, as frequent contact is of course impossible, they do not question her sudden arrival and allow her to stay, as they happen to need a maid anyway.

In *Gifts*, people living in the countryside are mentioned as well, namely the patients at the maternity clinic. Again, communities are described to be large, however, Farah includes more criticism now, hinting at how men and also older women decide everything for young girls. Farah mentions a young mother being re-infibulated every time she gives birth (Farah, *Gifts* 19). However, living in the city does not necessarily ensure girls’ and women’s self-determination. Duniya’s friend Hibo finds her youngest daughter infibulated without her knowledge, at the hands of her mother-in-law. She has the possibility to take the child to the hospital, but she has not been able to prevent the older woman’s doings (Farah, *Gifts* 118f). Duniya herself lives in the city as well; however, she is a single mother of three, without any other kin living with her. Nevertheless, she is still in contact with her second husband. Besides, her sister-in-law is frequently visiting her, partly because she has custody of Duniya’s youngest daughter. This is a compromise arrangement, resulting from Duniya and her ex-husband both wanting to care for the girl (Farah, *Gifts* 102-107). Nevertheless, in her community, being a single mother is still unusual, and she is secretly pitied by her colleagues and friends (Farah, *Gifts* 12f). Herself, Duniya has grown up in a larger family, as her father has had two wives and several children with either of them. However, Nuruddin Farah describes the wives quarreling and even striking each other, Duniya, then only a fetus in her mother’s womb, is hurt in the process (Farah, *Gifts* 82). The other urban families mentioned in *Gifts* are mostly nuclear families consisting of parents and one or several children, many with relatives calling frequently, for example Duniya’s lover, a widower,

whose mother-in-law and sister-in-law visit incessantly. Not only ignoring whether their company is desired or not, the two women also demand financial assistance, leading Duniya's lover to sponsoring their expensive habits entirely. However, when they bluntly ask for more and more money, he realizes that being part of the family – especially family-in-law – does not excuse financial dependence and greed, and ceases to donate his money for their expensive lifestyle (Farah, *Gifts* 221-224). Duniya's neighbors, parents of a teenage girl, have their grandmother living with them, who offers to care for the neighborhood's smaller children while the parents are working (Farah, *Gifts* 70f).

In *Gifts*, Nuruddin Farah again mentions customs of the countryside, criticizing traditions and power relations more openly here. He explains women's powerlessness in certain situations, also showing how older women are higher in status than younger ones, therefore being in a position to decide over the latter. Concerning family structures, Duniya's situation is presented as unusual, as she is a single mother of three children from two husbands, the youngest girl, who lives with her in-laws, regularly visiting both her and her ex-husband. Obviously, divorce is an option at this time and place, and Duniya is strong enough to actually execute this step as a woman in Mogadiscio. On the one hand, Farah shows how difficult a situation such as hers can be, and the problems she encounters, on the other hand, he proves that single mothers exist, depicting Duniya in an entirely positive light. The more typical structure of a nuclear family, possibly including a grandparent, is prominent in *Gifts* too, as well as the custom of relatives visiting frequently. The older, polygamous family model is also mentioned, but almost exclusively in order to point out the problems arising with this arrangement: rivalries, jealousy and quarrels between the women. Clans are not mentioned at all, neither among the rural communities nor in the city. There might be several reasons, however. As *Gifts* is written from Duniya's point of view, Farah might want to stress how women do not take clan identity into account as much as men would. Besides, Duniya as a nurse might be trained not to consider someone's clan identity when treating them. Possibly, during the time of Siyad Barre's dictatorship, urban communities simply did not contemplate clan membership as much as before.

In *Links*, single mothers are mentioned as well, as are many destroyed families, result of the civil war that has been raging for several years. The Refuge, an asylum and refugee

center, receives war victims, both children and adults, who have lost their homes and families (Farah, *Links* 93f, 154f). Nuclear families are mentioned as well as more traditional, polygamous structures. One minor warlord boasts about having been married five times, and having fathered twenty-two children. Currently, three of his wives are living, two of them and most of his children and grand-children in various European and North American countries. However, his latest “acquisition” is a girl he found in the attic of a destroyed building, at the time fifteen years old. He describes their meeting as a “blessing” for both of them, after looters have raided her house and killed her parents; however, considering age relations, he could be her grandfather (Farah, *Links* 53, 104-106). Clans are mentioned in *Links*: At the time, the city is divided among two warlords, who Farah simply calls “StrongmanNorth” and “StrongmanSouth”, with the “green line” demarcating the border between them. The two warlords are members of deeply antagonized clans, each relying on ancient territory claims of their respective family. Other people have adapted, and even though unarmed civilians are free to move about the city, many confine themselves to the part considered to belong to their own blood family. On the roads, there are checkpoints manned by clan-based militia. Not everyone feels loyalty towards their clan, though. The main character Jeebleh and his childhood friend Bile belong to different families, but have always chosen to ignore mythic bloodlines and ancestors. Clan identity is derived from the father, meaning that half-siblings do not necessarily belong to the same family. Bile is of StrongmanSouth’s clan, while his half-brother, fathered by a different man, is considered more closely related to Jeebleh and StrongmanNorth than his brother (Farah, *Links* 11-13). The mother’s family is usually not taken into account, however, there are exceptions and adaptations if necessary. Jeebleh’s mother’s subclan denies her all assistance when she has to raise her young boy by herself, blaming her for driving her husband to gambling and drinking in the first place. Jeebleh remembers the first time he is visited by members of his mother’s subclan: after he has accomplished a university degree in Italy. Later, when he is imprisoned during Siyad Barre’s regime, the clan refuses to come to aid once more. Now, during the civil war, a group of elders begs for financial assistance to repair and reinforce their militia, confirming Jeebleh’s suspicions of the subclan’s being utterly devoid of dignity. Besides, he himself has never changed

his attitude towards clan politics in general: Now, “[he has to do] his utmost not to display unease at the thought of privileging blood over ideology” (Farah, *Links* 127-129).

Nuruddin Farah paints a slightly bleaker picture of Somali families and clans in *Links*. There are civil war victims and, like in *Gifts*, there are single mothers, however, now Farah also includes how one of them seeks assistance from her subclan, only to be refused and told that her situation is her own fault. Once again, Farah utters his contempt of polygamy, telling the story of the young girl who hides in the ruins of her house, and who is taken to be a warlord’s fifth wife. The warlord himself is proud of his situation, but does not seem to perceive the women as equal human beings. Rather, he sees them as pretty and possibly useful adornments. *Links* describes the reality and importance of clan politics, dividing the city into two territories and impeding a functioning everyday life with road blockades and persecution of unwanted members of rivaling clans. Farah manages to make his point concerning both severity and ridiculousness of clan-based militia, complicated clan relationship structures and mythic ancestors, and exposes the clan elders’ egoism and hypocrisy. Jebleeh’s contempt of the elders of his subclan as well as the whole concept of clan-based thinking is evident, and probably mirrors Nuruddin Farah’s own opinion concerning these topics.

In *Knots*, once again the large family structures are mentioned. Like already stated above, many nomad families have more or less close relatives in the cities, and it is customary for rural families to send their children to the cities, so they can attend school (Farah, *Knots* 1). Once more, there is a single mother, managing to provide close to ideal living conditions for her two daughters. She raises her daughters to be self-confident, independent women, but nevertheless has to fear her estranged husband’s family, as the men have the power to remove custody of her daughters from her if they see her unfit to raise them as traditional, Islamic women (Farah, *Knots* 244f). Cambara herself is occasionally treated as inferior and in need of protection by her cousin, who, as her closest living male relative, feels responsible for her. This protectiveness is ridiculed by their respective personalities, Cambara herself being independent, self-determined, active and able to reach her aims, while Zaak is lazy and addicted to qaat, idling his days away without any goals in his life, unable even to organize the simplest projects (Farah, *Knots* 149-152). Besides, Cambara cherishes sympathy and affection more than kinship.

She fosters two young boys of no relation at all to her, providing them with food and clothing, but also with love and counsel (Farah, *Knots* 91f, 228f). She does not consider clan identity of any importance, but the two boys once quarrel over their respective clans. One of them thinks himself better than the other, boasting about his clan owning everything, “including the sky”, while his friend’s family are farmers, who he accuses of living “on other people’s leftovers” and of being “as cheap as the dirt at which they pick.” Cambara attempts to adjust this crooked view of the world, and later the boys are friends again. Maybe the boy, who is only in his pre-teens, is able to overcome the so-called education he has received in his first years of life; Cambara at least wants to give him a chance, and the opportunity to learn (Farah, *Knots* 375f). Like her, many progressive Somalis do not raise their children with the clan ethos any more. The continuous comparison of their own with other families, the instantaneous liking or hating a person based only on the other’s clan identity, and the endless complicated clan politics have proved more hindrance than help, leading some parents to refusing to pass their clan names on to their offspring at all. Especially city- or foreign-born Somalis do not necessarily know their clan identity any more (Farah, *Knots* 259). Even though there are still many others, who consider clans more important than people, and certainly teach their children the very same opinions, there seems to be progress, slow but evident. Farah describes two pre-teen boys of different clans fighting in the street, but a spectator considers the simple fight a positive development, claiming that some time earlier, boys their age would have shot each other over any small dispute (Farah, *Knots* 127). Parts of the clan ethos and family identities certainly resume, as Cambara experiences when she concludes that “[i]n Somalia, [...] one does not marry an individual; one marries a family” (Farah, *Knots* 389).

In *Knots*, Nuruddin Farah describes urban families to help their usually poorer rural relatives by fostering their children, enabling them to receive an education. Here, the large, loose-knit family structures certainly prove useful, as nomad communities cannot provide any formal education for their children. Once again, Farah also shows a strong single mother, possibly wishing to imply that mothers raising their children by themselves are more common than expected in a country like Somalia. However, he also explains how they have to fear their male relatives’ and in-laws’ authority to seize



custody of the children. Again, Farah allows his admiration for these women to show, stressing their everyday achievements. In contrast, Cambara's cousin's protective attitude towards her only serves to further ridicule him, his obvious weakness strikingly contrasting the ideal of a strong, protective male. Of the two cousins, Cambara is the stronger on virtually every level. Her sympathy towards the orphaned boys appears as strength as well, even though she frequently doubts herself regarding her relationship with the two boys, especially with the older one, who is generally considered "no one's son" and therefore no one's concern. Without relatives to provide for him, a child is lost in this community, and Cambara's spontaneous urge to help him is considered dangerous even by Kiin, one of the most sympathetic characters of the book (Farah, *Knots* 228, 243f). Farah's opinion concerning clan identity shows once more, when he describes a young orphan boy thinking himself superior of another only because of his family, and two others continuing the family feud in a street fight. The so-called progress from firearms to fists is certainly a step in the right direction, but is cannot hide Nuruddin Farah's underlying sadness. He knows that the protection a blood family can offer is disproportionate to the negative consequences originating from this way of thinking. However, Farah also mentions hope – for the boy, who is to receive proper formal and moral education, and for the country as a whole, with more and more parents deciding not to instill clan identities in their children.

In this chapter, Somali families and clan families have been looked at in closer detail. Throughout Nuruddin Farah's books, several family constructions appear, including nuclear families and single mothers, but also traditional polygamous structures and large nomad families. Overall, it can be said that many Somalis have an unclear number of distant relatives who they do not necessarily know even by sight. Clan identity still exists, even though perceived differently by different people, depending on where and when they live, their respective education and background as well as personal beliefs and opinions. Nuruddin Farah mentions and criticizes traditions and power relations disadvantaging females, but also stresses how many strong women manage difficult situations like widowhood, divorce and the life as a single mother. Polygamous structures are shown exclusively in a negative light, stressing the difficulties of the women concerned. All in all, the importance of family is never denied, it is self-evident

that relatives visit, but Farah also mentions limits, especially concerning financial support demanded by less well-educated kin. Besides, blood ties are not idealized, but rather clan elders are described as egoistic and hypocritical, and clan politics and feuds as hindrance to peace and civil life. Finally, in *Knots*, Farah apparently dares to hope, describing developments towards a different way of thinking, and uttering Cambara's wish to teach a young boy how character matters more than blood.

## **6. b. Female Friends and Communities**

The following chapter elaborates on relationships between Nuruddin Farah's female characters only. Different sorts of friendship among women appear in all books, partly one-sided, but also once described as "the sort of friendship only women are capable of forging" (Farah, *Knots* 144). The latter suggests that Farah grants these relationships a comparatively prominent status, which shall be examined in closer detail below. Besides, the chapter deals with occasions of women striving to help each other, as well as working together in order to improve society as a whole.

Ebla of *From A Crooked Rib* is mentioned to have a friend at her nomad Jes, another girl her age, but obviously, she does not trust her enough to tell her about her plans to escape and flee to Belet Wene. Besides, she does not care about how she might never see the girl again. Concerning the other women, Ebla disapproves of their gossiping, exaggerating and lying, not interested in what they have to say. She concludes that it is every man for himself, indifferent whether their actions harm others. Once Ebla has left her Jes, neither the girl nor any other of the women is ever mentioned again, Ebla evidently does not miss them (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 8f). In Belet Wene, however, she makes acquaintance of the widow, her cousin's neighbor. The older woman becomes her friend, guiding and helping her through the countless changes in her life, besides attempting to provide minimal general education. She gives practical advice, for example when Ebla has to buy and cook spaghetti, which she has never even seen before (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 41-43). The widow also explains terms and concepts Ebla has no notion of, and counsels her on men as well as life in general, sharing her own

experiences with the naïve Ebla (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 60, 78). In Mogadiscio, finally, Ebla meets Asha, her husband's landlady. During her husband's travels, Asha and Ebla cook and eat together, and eventually become close friends. Ebla "[cannot] help being fond of Asha, because she [is] the first person who ha[s] ever considered her her equal: she [makes] Ebla aware of what she [is]." When Ebla learns that her husband deceives her, she asks Asha what she should do, and the other woman takes the matter in hand. Afterwards, it becomes obvious that Asha is more interested in financial profit than Ebla's well-being, nevertheless, the two women remain friends (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 109-120).

In his first book, Nuruddin Farah describes two occasions of friendship between women. However, the widow is not an equal friend, but rather an older woman helping a younger girl in various ways, sometimes without Ebla realizing it. Nevertheless, the relationship is a positive one, the widow means well and cares about her young friend – enough to anger her neighbors by helping Ebla to elope with her nephew. The widow knows how her abilities to support Ebla are limited, as she is a woman herself, however, she has experience of life and enjoys passing it on to Ebla, in order to prepare her for her life in a male-dominated world. In her, Farah describes an older woman who has accepted her limitations and her place in society, but still tries to help her fellow women. In contrast, Asha always considers her personal benefits before anyone else's. For a woman of her position, this might be the only way to ensure her survival, but her egoism makes it impossible to call her a true friend of Ebla's. Even though she actually seems to like Ebla, and is said to be the only one who ever treats her as an equal, she exploits the girl's naïveté. It cannot be said that she assists the males either, she rather uses the first opportunity to gain money, regardless of who she helps or harms in the process, but Ebla certainly cannot rely on her for honest counsel. All in all, Farah certainly shows women in a positive light, but is careful not to leave the impression of all Somali females uniting against all males.

Duniya of *Gifts* is friends with her colleague Hibo, who supports her when she is too worried to concentrate on her work, and offers her transport home during a power shortage (Farah, *Gifts* 11, 20). Later, Hibo confides to Duniya how she has attempted to murder her husband, poisoning his food because he infected her with gonorrhea. Duniya

certainly does not approve of the deed, but nevertheless gives Hibo counsel on what to do, ultimately saving the husband's life (Farah, *Gifts* 226-228). Duniya's daughter Nasiiba has a good friend too, her school colleague Fariida, entangled in a secret relationship with an older, married man. When the girl discovers her pregnancy, Nasiiba finds her a hiding place and provides her with everything, including medical tests. She even donates blood, preparing for a case of emergency, as the girls share the same rare blood type. When Fariida delivers her baby, Nasiiba finds a way to install the newborn at her own home, convincing her mother she found him in a trash can. Eventually, Duniya and her lover apply for guardianship of the baby (Farah, *Gifts* 67-69). Fariida does not feel safe relying on her lover, but she certainly has her best friend's support, whatever may happen (Farah, *Gifts* 190-192).

In *Gifts*, Farah sketches women's friendships not only in everyday life, but also in trying situations. On very different levels, both Duniya and her daughter Nasiiba are confronted with a friend seeking counsel concerning a problem. Nasiiba's friend Fariida, still a schoolgirl, is pregnant from an illicit affair, Duniya's fellow nurse Hibo has attempted homicide as a revenge of what her husband has done to her. Especially Duniya certainly does not approve of her friend's actions, however, both she and her daughter offer assistance. Nasiiba could have deceived or betrayed her pregnant friend, and later refused to lie to her mother for her, she could have uttered her opinion concerning Fariida's carelessness as well as her affair with a married man. Duniya could have simply called the police. However, for both of them, friendship is more important than legal and moral obligations. Duniya attempts to minimize the harm that has come to the poisoned husband, her daughter protects and helps Fariida through her pregnancy, and later has her own mother become the newborn's guardian. This is not implying in any way that Nuruddin Farah approves of adultery or revenge through homicide, he simply strives to show how strong friendship can be.

In *Links*, the two friends described in most detail are the two girls Raasta and Makka. They are best friends despite their many differences: Raasta is called special, even a miracle child, because war-traumatized people feel an unexplainable safety around her. She is popular as well as talented, especially gifted for learning languages (Farah, *Links* 53f). Makka, in contrast, a foundling whose parentage is unknown, has Down's

syndrome, which leaves her in need of special care. Unlike Raasta, she does not speak much, but mostly communicates through touches and body language (Farah, *Links* 161f). It is clear that Makka needs Raasta, however, she returns as much as she receives, radiating optimism and trust. On a less superficial level, their friendship is more than equal, as unusual it might be. Another pair of female friends are the aforementioned mothers of the main characters Jebleeh and Bile. The midwife earns more money while her friend sells groceries and cares for the children – this mutual profit is continued for years, providing each woman not only with a livelihood, but also with a trustworthy, reliable friend (Farah, *Links* 93f).

Nuruddin Farah exemplifies unusual friendships and states his wish for peace and harmony in *Links*, stressing Somali women's commitment to help. Two girls are inseparable, even though one is highly talented and gifted, while the other has special needs – a sign of peace and harmony, contrasting the reality of the war-ravaged country. The children are not girls by coincidence: Imagining Raasta and Makka as boys wholly changes their characters as well as Farah's message. Throughout all his books, he often connects females with active work for peace, always implying that they have realized what society really needs – more so than many males. The other friendship pictures two women connected by a trying situation. Instead of blaming someone else for their fate, they work together to provide a livelihood for their children. Friendship and their children's well-being in the present is more important than the wrongs done to them in the past, again hinting at Farah's wish for peace.

Cambara of *Knots* befriends the hotel manager Kiin, who is most apprehensive and assists her in every possible way. Even when she does not yet know Cambara's plans, she offers to provide or organize whatever Cambara might need. When she assumes there might be a "man problem", she hints at her ability to solve any such problem, having already done so before (Farah, *Knots* 144-147). In time, she arranges a suite in her hotel for Cambara, and provides her with a mobile phone and transportation throughout the city, as well as everything Cambara has required, acting with "out-and-out kindness shown without obvious ulterior impulse" (Farah, *Knots* 187). Cambara once describes their friendship as "[o]ne woman counting on another, a woman yoked to another, a woman trusting another, a woman choosing to be truthful to another in the

service of a higher ideal: of peace, of communal harmony” (Farah, *Knots* 208). Even though she is indebted to Kiin in many ways, their friendship is equal, as both strive to reach the same ideal. It is Kiin who introduces Cambara to the Women for Peace network, an NGO set up by women throughout Somalia, and funded by the European Union. The network attempts to decrease gun violence, and in turn casualties and rape numbers in the cities. Besides, the women organize immediate rescue missions and long-term aid for women in need. Moreover, the network serves to connect women, for example by hosting an all-women party, and by funding and helping to stage a play Cambara is writing, seeing that it is a plea for peace and understanding (Farah, *Knots* 128, 194f, 211).

Cambara also befriends Jijjo, the kept wife of a minor warlord. When she learns how Jijjo is treated by the man, and of her advanced pregnancy, Cambara informs the women’s network, already seasoned in rescuing women from similar conditions. Kiin thinks fast and acts daring, but well-planned, contacting a female gynecologist and eventually sending a safe means of transport to a hospital (Farah, *Knots* 212-214). Once Jijjo delivers her daughter, the network organizes a place to stay for mother and child, as well as “deal[s] with the [man] concerned”, as Kiin puts it. When Cambara is worried, Kiin reassures her that “[i]n the end, the network always wins”. The women certainly prefer peaceful methods, but Kiin also relates how on one different occasion, the only possibility left was to poison the man’s food. The network’s priorities are always ensuring the woman’s safety, and, in case of children, rescuing them together with their mother. Cambara finally marvels at the network’s power as she is told that her property, seized and occupied by a minor warlord, is once again at her disposal, including changed locks at the doors and an armed security preparing for a confrontation with the warlord (Farah, *Knots* 249f). She realizes that she is not able to repay Kiin and the other women everything they have done for her, but the network’s members feel honored to help – as fellow women. Besides, Cambara is a capable woman herself, like them, she wants to “repair several of the wrongs to which the societies of men have subjected women through the ages” (Farah, *Knots* 267). It is not actually mentioned, but Farah implies that Cambara eventually joins the women’s network as an active member, and continues her friendship to Kiin.

In *Knots*, Nuruddin Farah shows women forming fast friendships, and from then on doing everything possible for one another. Kiin's unlimited generosity towards Cambara, as well as Cambara's towards Jijjo form a stark contrast to the friendships among males mentioned in the book. Cambara's cousin does not seem to have any friends at all. His hired security lives at his place, but never actually got acquainted with him, except when chewing qaat together. Their relationship is nothing close to a friendship of any sorts, let alone one like Cambara and Kiin's (Farah, *Knots* 151f). Nevertheless, the women treat each other as equals, even though Cambara is not in a position to repay Kiin for everything she has done, Jijjo even less so. However, they respect each other as fellow women, acknowledging that they themselves could easily be in the position of the respective other. They all leave the impression of being strong, but in a society dominated by males, strength cannot guarantee a free, self-dominated life, it only influences the way a woman copes with her fate. Aside of the mental strength all of them share, they also strive to reach the same ideals, namely peace, harmony, safety and acceptable living conditions for everyone. On the one hand, the women's network is a logical step in a world where males rule over women, but seem unable to keep peace and provide a functioning society. On the other hand, it is still more admirable to organize a network this powerful under exactly these conditions. Farah demonstrates the almost unlimited strength of women, once they unite their efforts and resources, another clear statement of his opinion concerning the female sex. *Knots* provides bountiful proof of Kiin's above quoted utterance that in the end, the network wins in any case. Besides, Farah hints at what emerges of (some) male-dominated societies: a self-help community or women attempting to save what can be saved, and bring to rights what men have ruined over centuries. The network does not act against males by definition, the primary aims are restoring a functioning society and limiting the use of weapons, however, if men attempt to oppose the women's work, the network has its ways of eliminating the nuisance. If possible, peaceful methods are applied, however, in a case of emergency, the women do not shirk violence either, and a female victim's safety has highest priority. Apart from the tragic cases, the network's members organize leisure time activities, primarily for fellow women, but also for selected men, like Cambara's play, probably highlights in the often bleak, wearisome reality of the civil war. Besides, the women may form and renew friendships on these occasions, mingling with

people who have come together through fate or because of their similar world view. Certainly, these women do and achieve a lot, and even though some of them used to be victims at some point in time, they do not remain helpless for long. Both Kiin and Cambara, the women described in closest detail, are women in charge of their lives, again displaying Farah's implications and his views concerning females.

Overall, Nuruddin Farah shows different forms of friendships throughout his books. In *From A Crooked Rib*, there is the widow, who, even though limited through her sex and status, decides to teach and assist, but also belittles Ebla. In contrast, the egoistic Asha is proof how not all women are interested in collaborating against male domination; some rather try to gain as many personal advantages as possible, utterly disregarding others' needs. In *Gifts*, Farah shows the strength of true friendships in trying situations. A friend seeks to help, no matter her opinion of the other's deeds. *Links* features unusual but equal friends, and women's commitment in the work for peace and harmony. *Knots*, finally, describes close friends displaying unlimited generosity and the striving to help each other whenever necessary. Aside from their remarkable mental strength, the women live to reach the same high ideals of peace, harmony and safety for everyone in Somalia. Farah illustrates the enormous power of the Women for Peace network, founded to work not against males, but against the use of weapons and any form of suppression towards women, its members tirelessly helping each other, as well as trying to improve Somali society as a whole.

## **6. c. Contact with Unrelated Men**

The previous chapter has taken a look at the power arising from friendship and collaboration between women. In contrast, this chapter investigates the relationships between women and men not related to them. It attempts to find out whether closer contact is even wanted, if friendships between the sexes are possible, and also whether traditional customs are changing in this respect as well.

In *From A Crooked Rib*, Ebla meets a relative of her friend the widow's. When he begins to ask questions for the first time, she entirely refuses to answer, later explaining that



she only talks if necessary. She does not seem to know how to react to the situation at all, but the widow takes her leave, giving the two young people the opportunity to get acquainted with each other. Knowing that courting in the countryside is done in this manner as well, with the mother leaving her daughter alone with her suitor to talk, Ebla at least suspects what is happening. However, as a nomad girl, she feels inferior to the man from Mogadiscio, and does not dare to say anything for fear of embarrassing herself. However, he continues asking about her life, persuading her to answer, so she eventually feels prudent enough to actually pose a question herself (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 61-63). Later, when Ebla is married to him, a friend of his comes to visit. Her husband talks to him as if Ebla were deaf or absent, showing no intention of introducing her or including her in the discussion. Ebla herself does not have the wish to speak to a stranger either; rather, she hides under the covers of the bed, listening, but not showing her doing so. When the two men discuss her husband's impending journey to Italy, Awill even switches from Somali to Italian, in order to entirely exclude Ebla. Later, when she does not understand their talk about Somalia's independence, she begins doing something else – which appears especially strange as there is only the one room the young couple occupies, furnished with little else than the bed all of them are sitting on during the entire visit. Her husband's friend returns several times after that day, once bringing along another friend. Finally, Ebla is commanded to take part in the conversation by her husband, who feels embarrassed by her silent listening. He clarifies that she can choose the Arabs' way, hide beneath a veil and shun male visitors, or simply begin to speak to his friends. Hence, Ebla talks to the men, however "[feeling] a bit worried conversing with two strangers, two men, who [are] not courting her" (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 97-102).

In this book, Nuruddin Farah describes Ebla's difficulties to interact with males not related to her. She has obviously been raised in a very traditional way, being used to separation of the sexes. She appears confused and forlorn when confronted with her future husband's courting, even though she can guess his intentions. Despite the fact that she does not like it, she is used to letting others – usually males – take charge of every situation; hence she has no intention to speak, even if she had dared to do so. Besides, she grasps her ignorance concerning everyday matters of the city, another

reason for her to keep silent, as she is afraid of embarrassing herself. All in all, Ebla behaves like a frightened child, unable to cope with the situation. Later, when her husband's friends visit, Ebla's position is very similar. However, now there are several men who are obviously not courting her, which would provide no reason for conversation in her nomad Jes. Moreover, she is not treated as equal by any of the men; they utterly ignore her, and at times she is purposely excluded from the conversation. When she realizes that she does not know enough about their topic, she has no intention of asking for explanations, but rather occupies herself with something else. The awkward situation is not improved by the fact that she has no other room to withdraw to, her singular option being sitting close by and listening. All in all, this puts her in an inferior place compared to the men, which upsets her husband more than herself, as he finally tells her to either veil her face, or behave like a normal person. However, Ebla's behavior derives in part from fear, as everything is still strange and new to her, and she does not yet know the men. Partly, it can also be explained by the way she has been raised, and the traditions she is used to; Farah once again shows differences in rural and urban traditions. However, her husband and his friends are to blame as well: They might want her to join the conversation but treat her in an impolite and clearly inferior way.

Duniya of *Gifts* lives in a very different environment and is used to different traditions. She certainly has male friends and acquaintances, one of them her colleague Dr Mire. They know each other from work, but also through a mutual friend, the widower Bosaaso, who later begins to court Duniya and becomes her lover. Dr Mire is aware of the omnipresent sexual discrimination in Somalia, and takes care that he himself always treat Duniya as an equal, "believing that she ha[s] the strength of mind to do what her conscience [tells] her" (Farah, *Gifts* 14-17). They do not frequently meet outside their workplace, however, once both Duniya and Bosaaso are invited to dinner at Dr Mire's. Duniya is not sure how much Mire knows about her relationship to Bosaaso, and she is anxious that she as a woman might be taken for granted. Bosaaso senses her discomfort, but they do not have the opportunity to talk with Mire present. Overall, Duniya is treated courteously and respectfully during the visit. She is slightly nervous and self-conscious in the beginning, worrying she might say something ridiculous, as well

as anxious that the food might contain pork. She is embarrassed beyond measure when spilling her drink over her dress, withdrawing to the washroom for longer than necessary. Once the food is served, however, Duniya notices how the men are not completely at ease either. Hence, she provides an easy topic for talking, finally able to master this situation as well as in a position to make the others comfortable too. After the meal, Duniya retreats to the bathroom once more, giving the two men a short chance to talk among themselves, as she feels they have behaved differently because of her presence after all (Farah, *Gifts* 92-98). Apart from Dr Mire, another male doctor works at the maternity hospital. However, this man is arrogant and lets his personal dislike for Duniya influence his professional attitude towards her. She is treated unfairly and assigned pointless jobs, but has the strength of mind to ignore his behavior (Farah, *Gifts* 183). A more pleasant male acquaintance of Duniya's is the shopkeeper Aw-Cumar. Being one of his favorite customers, she receives special goods not available for others. When she once asks him why it is her he has chosen, he explains that he simply wants to repay her for her kindness towards others, knowing that she gives without having much herself. Despite the shopkeeper's friendliness, Duniya's son once discovers by chance that Aw-Cumar has swindled the family of a remarkable amount of money. The shopkeeper insists that everything has simply been a mistake and he has never charged too much on purpose, however, Duniya cannot entirely trust him anymore. From then on, it is agreed that the family keep the account book themselves, in order to ascertain that nobody feels deceived, and to be able to continue their being customers at the shop (Farah, *Gifts* 161-163).

In *Gifts*, Nuruddin Farah describes Mogadiscio during a different period of time. Duniya is used to conversing with males as well as to Dr Mire relying on her at work. At the dinner Duniya is invited to, however, the men are as nervous and self-conscious as she is. Spilling her drink makes the whole situation worse, leaving her physically and emotionally uncomfortable. It is obvious that both Mire and Bosaaso admire her, one as a competent nurse, the other in a more private way. However, none of that matters when to herself, she appears clumsy and unable to cope with a simple situation. Nevertheless, she manages to regain her inner balance, and in the end, it is her who ends the overall discomfort and relieves the men's tension as well as her own. She is

strong, which is once more revealed when her greatest fear is being taken for granted as a woman, as she strives to be as equal as possible in her environment and situation. When she later leaves the men to talk in their “masculine idiom”, as she puts it in her thoughts (Farah, *Gifts* 97), she acknowledges difference between the sexes, not superiority of one over the other. She shows respect, not submission. Farah once more describes Duniya mastering a situation in her own way as a self-confident woman. However, there is discrimination mentioned, namely the treatment she receives from the other doctor at the hospital. When Duniya has the strength to ignore his behavior, she does so in the knowledge that some men never change. She cannot make him like her, neither can she remove him from his position, therefore she chooses to make the best of the situation, and does not waste her time and energy on a person like him. Knowing who and what he is, she is able to dismiss his behavior instead of letting it hurt her. The shopkeeper Aw-Cumar is an entirely different case. Even though he has once wronged her family as well, purposefully or not, the two of them have found a solution for their dispute. With solely her and her children keeping the account book, and him merely controlling the numbers they enter, both show as much trust as they can, and are able to continue their otherwise very positive relationship. More than that, Duniya is still Aw-Cumar’s favorite customer and he provides her with delicacies he does not offer to anyone else. Being asked for the reason of his behavior, he simply says he admires her friendliness and generosity and wishes to repay her for what she does for others. Overall, it can be said that Duniya certainly knows how to deal with males. She has male friends, is able to settle disputes and also has the grace and dignity not to react to every provocation coming from a man.

In *Links*, Farah describes The Refuge, an orphanage and refugee center for civil war victims. The volunteers running the center are predominantly women, but the people living there are of every age and sex. Food is distributed in a large room, with everyone sitting on mats spread on the floor. The women have reintroduced the traditional way of eating from the same mayida, a large plate set in the center of a group of people. Partly a symbolic act, it serves to create trust and friendship among all who share the meal. When eating from the same plate, people have to look each other in the eye, and experience has proved that anyone meaning others ill does not want to do that.

Therefore, those who consider starting a fight rather stay away than share food with their enemies, granting continuous peace at The Refuge (Farah, *Links* 157f). One woman says this tradition has certainly been reintroduced by a fellow woman, as females have always eaten together, sharing the leftovers after serving their husbands. Hence, they easily recognize the benefits arising from this practice. Nevertheless, there is also another hint about how women have to pacify men, who are ready to fight after only a slight provocation. Besides, contenting themselves with leftovers shows their readiness to “compromise for the sake of peace”, in contrast to men. This woman’s own anger shows in this quote, but The Refuge’s intentions go beyond: men shall not only be kept from fighting, they need to embrace peace for its own sake – taught by women and their subtle methods (Farah, *Links* 211f). However, other traditions show in *Links* as well, when Jeebleh suspects that a warlord’s child-wife is veiled, and therefore presumably not even permitted to meet him (Farah, *Links* 107).

In *Links*, Nuruddin Farah describes the mixed community of The Refuge. Once again, males are blamed to start a fight at the slightest provocation, while females are connected with the restoration of peace. Women work as volunteers, attempting to teach boys and young men not to fight, using the traditional way of eating from the same mayida. This symbolic act obviously works, for children as well as adults, and helps to ensure peace and tranquility at The Refuge. In connection with this tradition, women are praised even more: they waste less food, are content with leftovers if this helps the common good, and are more social than men. The Refuge provides them with a way to make others share this experience. Farah once more shows how valuable he considers women’s traditions and ideas, implying that men tend to be far too ready to start a fight, while women continually strive for peace. In contrast to this, however, a very different tradition is mentioned as well. The warlord’s young wife, presumably a devout Muslim woman, does not come to meet her husband’s male visitor. It is not explicitly said that she is not allowed to converse with unrelated males, but she is described as a kept woman. Hence, Farah implies that she cannot decide for herself whether she wants to speak to men or not. However, the majority of women mentioned in *Links* have no intention of staying inside a house for their whole lives. Rather, they actively go about their business and also entertain male visitors if they desire to do so.

Cambara of *Knots* might be the first woman ever to give a command to her cousin's driver and armed security group. She confiscates their qaat and orders them out of the shack they live in, setting them to work. However, without a word of complaint, her orders are promptly carried out. Cambara concludes she might have taken them by surprise, or they have actually never been given orders by a female, and have no idea how to respond to the situation (Farah, *Knots* 96f). Later in the book, she surprises the youths once more, this time by greeting the Irishman Seamus, a friend of a friend. The boys stare, and she reflects that it might be "the first time for them [...] to see a Somali woman not in a veil welcoming a European man in view of so many of them. In broad daylight. Without a chaperone" (Farah, *Knots* 222). Another man is similarly surprised by Cambara's behavior. When they arrive at a hotel, a sentry insists on conducting a body search before admitting her onto the property. However, the driver who has taken her to the hotel defends her, stating that "[s]he is a lady and must be treated as such." He is prepared to vouch for her, and insists that if they demand to search her, a woman should do it instead of them. However, to everyone's surprise, Cambara does not wait until they have settled the dispute. Rather, she performs several dance moves – inwardly frightened but on the outside perfectly calm – then orders the sentry to inspect and help carry in her purchases, while she herself starts to walk off in the direction of the entry. All men are dumbstruck, watching and whispering, but finally submitting to her orders (Farah, *Knots* 139f). Certainly, Cambara's appearance and behavior are different from that of many other Somali women. Her way of walking and talking, veiled or not, sets her apart from them, and, along with the promise that she has money, suffices for many men to treat her like a lady. A local shopkeeper offers whatever service she requires, including sending his assistants to other shops to provide the goods he does not sell himself, or organizing a means of transport for her. He gives the impression of being honored by her presence, and wants to make sure she will return in the future (Farah, *Knots* 123-127). Nevertheless, her obvious difference from a demure Somali female does not always reward her with honorable treatment. While waiting for another driver to take her back to her cousin's house, she decides she feels safe enough to remove her veil. The driver seems to approve once he sees her, however, he takes to accidentally touching her each time he changes gear. Even though she decides to ignore it, she concludes he might consider her modern, and therefore easy-going, "game", so to

speak (Farah, *Crossbones* 197f). On another occasion, Cambara has fears because of another sort of disrespectful treatment: One of the men in charge of the security arrangements placed around her house demands to talk to another man, not her, when needing to discuss further actions. She wants to inquire after the latest news, however “hesitates [...] because she does not want him to speak to her in the belittling tone of voice adults employ with children; men with women; locals with foreigners to tell their addressee that there are certain life-and-death details with which she does not bother them [sic].” Brooding on the matter and men in general, she takes a secret wish: “If only we’d admit to being weaker than we think. Weak we are born; weak we’ll die.” Cambara as a woman admits her weaknesses, enabling her to turn them into strength, while many men feel the need to conceal every possible weakness in order to appear strong (Farah, *Knots* 360-366). However, Cambara encounters very different types of men in *Links*, some of whom neither treat her like a lady nor belittle her as a woman, but simply behave like her equal. She meets two of them, Bile and Dajaal, for the first time when she crows and unarms a group of armed boys trying to molest her in the street. The two men come to her aid; when realizing she has handled the situation easily on her own, they offer her a lift in their car. They continually treat her with gentle kindness, but as an equal human being, regardless of her gender, and acknowledge her treating them in the very same way (Farah, *Knots* 167f). At the end of the book, when Cambara stages the play she has directed, she does so for a selected audience only. Among many women, she has invited several males as well, namely Bile, Dajaal and the shopkeeper, all of whom have assisted her in various ways, and whom she counts by now among her friends (Farah, *Knots* 412f).

In *Knots*, Nuruddin Farah somehow seems to enjoy describing men surprised by Cambara’s unexpected actions. She surprises the armed youths and the driver by giving them orders to work, and later by her behavior towards a European man, uses an unexpected performance to avoid a body search as well as prevent a fight between two men, and uses her stately figure and proud way of walking in order to be treated with respect. Some of these males actually do not seem to know how to react to her actions, as they are not used to a woman behaving the way Cambara does, while others may realize that she would not simply do as she is told without questioning the order.

Nevertheless, she does not win every man's respect. Even though Cambara ignores the driver touching her, his intentions and his opinion of her are obvious. Besides, she realizes that she is excluded from the organization of the security arrangements because of her gender: A woman does not play a part in fighting, and nothing she is or does can change that. However, Farah is far from condemning men in general; *Links* features many strong and able men as well. Cambara knows that true friendship requires respect and equality, and chooses her friends thus.

In *Crossbones*, Cambara confines herself to her house due to the fact that the Union of Islamic Courts has seized power; this way she can avoid harassment in the streets. When Jeebleh comes to visit after a longer absence, she embraces him and kisses him on the cheek, revealing trust and friendship (Farah, *Crossbones* 71). Later, when Jeebleh's young relative Malik is wounded, Cambara uses her network, which is still functioning, in order to assure the best treatment available for the young man. Eventually, he is flown to a hospital in Nairobi, with Cambara accompanying him, preparing to do whatever will be necessary (Farah, *Crossbones* 374-381). Another woman prominent in *Crossbones* is Xalan, who continually dreams of family and friends being together in happiness. When a friend of a friend is visiting Mogadiscio for a short period of time, she instantly asks him to move out of his hotel and into her house, pampering him with a home-cooked meal (Farah, *Crossbones* 270-276). Xalan has other male friends as well, for example a college professor she once invites to dinner. They talk about politics and the role of women in Somalia, with her friend regretting the present situation. He remembers times when women have been better organized and taken a part in politics, in contrast, they are sadly submissive at present (Farah, *Crossbones* 309-313).

The rule of the Union of Islamic Courts restricts women's movements and mostly confines them to their homes. In private, however, many women entertain male visitors and continue their friendships with men like they have done before. Only when her new friend Malik is wounded, Cambara resumes a more active role again and uses her contacts and friends to ensure the young man's well-being. Most women have retreated to their private lives in a similar way, a development Xalan's friend the college professor deeply regrets. He is aware of the difficulties, but realizes the disadvantages arising from women's withdrawal from (unofficial) political participation, and the separation of the



sexes desired by the Courts. It is certainly no coincidence that a man utters these complaints, the professor voices Nuruddin Farah's own opinion. Farah describes how women cannot take part in official life any more, but he also stresses the immense loss society suffers from this development.

In this chapter, the relationship between women and unrelated men has been investigated. Depending on the women's upbringing, they are or are not used to close contact with males. As *From A Crooked Rib* shows, Ebla is utterly uncomfortable when she has to converse with men she does not know. In contrast, Duniya and Cambara, as well as other minor female characters, have male friends and acquaintances, and are treated as equals at least by some of them. Others, who belittle or insult them, are usually simply ignored. Besides, Farah once again shows women's ability to foster peace when given the opportunity to influence men. Traditional customs seem to recede during time, but they do not vanish entirely. Nevertheless, friendship between the sexes is certainly possible, whether in public or only in private depends again upon the time and political situation of Somalia.

## **6. d. Marriage**

The following chapter investigates the customs and conventions surrounding weddings and marriage. It elaborates on various reasons for marrying, male and female views concerning the institution of matrimony as such, as well as problems arising from it. Besides, the chapter attempts to identify and describe what has changed throughout time.

In the rural setting of *From A Crooked Rib*, arranged marriages are the norm. Men court women, but parents or guardians finally decide about the future spouse. Age differences are no hindrance for a match: Ebla is promised to a man much older than her, whose sons have alternately courted her as well. Naturally, young people are not always content with their elders' decisions. Ebla's grandfather, who has chosen her future husband for her, remembers the many young people he has known to elope, including his own wife (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 5-8). Ebla herself experiences the situation as a trap;

she feels imprisoned by conventions and wants to escape in order to be herself (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 10). However, after she succeeds in fleeing from her nomadic encampment to town, she finds herself in a similar situation once again: Her cousin, who needs to settle some debts, promises her to another man she does not know. Ebla is not sure what to do, but this time, she considers eloping. Reflecting on her options, she knows that a marriage out of love is impossible. Besides, she does not know any married couples who actually love each other; the more common relationship is one of enslavement. Nevertheless, she prefers being a wife to being a spinster, and the prospect of having children is another reason for marriage. Legally, girls can be bought and sold like cattle, as they always belong to a male relative, and while Ebla cannot see the reasons for women's inferiority, she knows that eloping with her young acquaintance is her only way to end continually being offered and sold (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 72-75). Her cousin himself is not described as a loving husband either. Aowralla, his wife, is highly pregnant, but he is never mentioned to help her. As a man, he is the breadwinner, and as such spends his days at his shop. At the time of birth, he is likewise away, without having bothered to send for a midwife. It is Ebla who happens to be present and delivers the baby. She performs the necessary operation, so that the circumcised Aowralla is able to give birth. Aowralla's husband asks about her the following day, but does not appear to be worried or anxious at all. Again, Ebla nurses the young mother while he returns to his shop (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 31-37). Another marriage is described in *From A Crooked Rib*, that of the widow and the husband she divorced. She offers her own point of view, stating her husband's jealousy: Being an Arab but having lived in Somalia for his whole life, he has never learned to speak Somali, and therefore reacts with suspicion whenever he hears her speaking her mother tongue, perpetually anxious she is arranging a rendezvous with another man. Moreover, he has her adopt the Arab clothing style and wear dark veils whenever she leaves the house (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 50f). When Ebla herself finally elopes with Awill and moves into his single rented room in Mogadiscio, she does not know how to behave towards him at all. Realizing that he smokes, she reflects how for her, this would have been a reason not to elope with him. Likewise, she cannot consent to sharing his bed, as they are not yet legally married. Feelings of any sort are not involved, neither on Ebla's nor Awill's part (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 81f). Later that day, Awill insists on having sex. When Ebla refuses,

he beats her. She thinks that “a woman never [fights] with a man, she should be submissive and never return his blows. A good woman should not even cry aloud when her husband beat[s] her. ‘But this is not my husband – not yet.’” As Ebla is circumcised and a virgin, she is afraid of the inevitable pain of her first sexual intercourse; she has heard women talk about it. Nevertheless, she finally consents, after Awill’s repeated promise to summon a sheikh and have their marriage legitimized the following day (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 85-89). Afterwards, Ebla considers sex as a means to conceive children, but nothing else. To her, everything connected with womanhood appears to be connected with pain as well. She desires being a man, but at the same time feels anger and hatred towards the whole male sex, comparing men to animals. Like them, men “prefer [sex] to anything else. But even these animals prefer some seasons to others. Men should consider that the existence of a woman is not just a means to an end, but that she can be an indispensable companion for life” (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 92-95). In the course of the following days, however, Ebla enjoys being a wife, even though “[i]t really [does] not matter whose wife”. During the seven days of their honeymoon, Ebla feels like a queen, not having to leave their bed for the whole time. Since Awill does not have any cooking facilities in his room, she is not required to cook, but they are served their food by the landlady. Ebla has never had seven whole days in a row without having to work or do anything, and she cannot believe what is happening. She enjoys being Awill’s wife, but still, there is no notion of any stronger feelings towards him (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 97, 101-104). These feelings never develop, and when Awill returns from a several weeks’ journey to Italy, she welcomes him smiling, but only thinking “‘Poor fellow, he needs me, [...] He is sex-starved.’” During his absence, she has not missed him at all (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 163). Therefore, it already becomes clear that a wedding is not necessarily preceded by love or even liking. There are other reasons to marry: Awill has frequently visited prostitutes in the past, but has been tricked by one of them, and subsequently decided not to pay for sexual intercourse anymore. Hence, the remaining option is marriage (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 88). Ebla’s second marriage with Tiffo is only a means to an end for both of them. Ebla herself wants to take revenge on Awill, who has deceived her on his journey to Italy, while Tiffo simply desires a young, beautiful girl, but attempts to avoid open prostitution (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 110-115). Ebla herself does not realize how their relationship is rather one of a procurer and prostitute than a husband

and wife. When she is told that there is obviously something wrong with their so-called marriage and the fact that he leaves money every time he comes to visit, she repeatedly says that she is no “harlot”, believing that this settles the matter. Eventually, she asks about Tiffo’s first wife and mentions that she has another husband as well, a reason for Tiffo to call her a prostitute on his part, and tell her how she is “divorced” (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 129-133). However, there are virtually no alternatives to marriage, especially for women. Ebla is nineteen or twenty; in a year’s turn, she will be considered a spinster. Even now, a neighbor once remarks how she is very beautiful, but already looks like one. He does not mind though, as spinsters “come in handy when one needs a woman to marry.” Anxious they will never receive another chance, they usually accept any proposal in order to end their loneliness. In a society where unmarried women are pitied at best, girls come to prefer any man to being left alone (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 45, 71).

As it has already been concluded, Ebla and the other women of *From A Crooked Rib* do not have many possibilities. Their marriages are arranged, and their husbands are chosen for them, their own opinion being entirely unimportant. Even though eloping is comparatively common, it is not accepted by a woman’s family. Moreover, Nuruddin Farah stresses how marriages are arranged both in rural and urban communities, as Ebla’s cousin in Belet Wene attempts to sell her to his creditor. Farah describes Ebla’s desire for love, even though she is not certain whether deeper feelings can exist between married couples; so far, everything she has experienced is enslavement. Consequently, she has no idea how to behave towards her husband Awill, as she only experiences fear and uncertainty, but no positive feelings towards the man. Actually, she does not really know him at all. The first time she honestly enjoys being married is during their honeymoon, when she revels in being lazy and not having to work. Ebla’s subsequent second marriage to Tiffo is followed by a rushed divorce when he learns about her previous wedding, and Ebla is left more confused than experienced. Derek Wright goes as far as to remark that the word “marriage” itself is “problematic” in connection with *From A Crooked Rib*, as neither the formal wedding ceremonies nor Ebla’s and both her husbands’ behavior justify the term. Ebla might feel happy to be a wife, but “she is not a wife in any meaningful sense of the word” (Wright 23-25). Farah

describes various characters' reasons to marry, ranging from sex to revenge and, in Ebla's case, probably also a lack of other options. Wright also notices the negative connotation of the word spinster: The two spinsters mentioned in the book are the widow, who is seen as easy-going, and the landlady Asha, who is accused of being greedy (Wright 25f). Concerning sexual intercourse, Ebla's reflections are entirely negative as well. For a circumcised woman, sex is more or less a necessary step to conceive a child, but having witnessed Aowralla's pain in childbed, Ebla is not sure whether she even wants offspring.

Duniya of *Gifts* has had similar experiences concerning marriage. She thinks about her past, and realizes how she has been married twice, but has never loved (Farah, *Gifts* 78). Her first marriage is arranged: Her dying father promises Duniya's hand to a friend of his, and her mother, the only witness, later pleads with Duniya to abide her father's will, "for one cannot argue with the wishes of the dead and the elderly." Other friends discourage her from marrying a man her father's age, especially her half-brother, who agitatedly attempts to end this ridiculous engagement. However, he suddenly changes his mind, and only several years later does he admit to accepting a bribe from Duniya's husband-to-be (Farah, *Gifts* 37f). After the old man's death, Duniya marries a man her own age, who turns out to be depressive and an alcoholic. She remembers how he has offered liquor to her eight-year-old son, the final reason for her to show him the door and consequently divorce him. (Farah, *Gifts* 28f). In contrast to her past experiences, however, Duniya's developing relationship to Bosaaso is certainly one of love and mutual respect. Duniya is – or has become throughout her life – a rebel, and she rebels against the authority of men because "they tend to make decisions affecting women's lives at meetings at which women are not present". However, Bosaaso does no such thing. After several casual meetings, he asks her out to dinner, taking her to a restaurant famous for the undisturbed privacy of seats concealed between trees and bushes, and they have their first kiss. Naturally, Bosaaso understands her hesitance and does not attempt anything else (Farah, *Gifts* 140-143). Duniya herself fears that her reluctance to accept gifts in general might cause trouble and clarifies the reasons for her behavior, but he fully respects her attempts to stay independent (Farah, *Gifts* 149f). When he finally confesses his feelings for her, she remains silent, still wanting to find out more about

him and being sure about her feelings. She realizes how he would do everything for her, and they finally stay overnight at his place and make love. When he begins to plan their future, she refuses half-heartedly, but their eventual marriage is a given by then (Farah, *Gifts* 205-213). Apart from Duniya and her husbands, other couples are mentioned as well. Her first husband is already married long before Duniya herself is even born. At that time, polygamy is the norm rather than an exception, and he begins looking for a younger second wife when his first wife grows old. She has no right to object because Islam allows a man as many as four wives if he is able to provide for them. Subsequently, however, rumors spread that she has fallen in love with a jinn, a spirit. Once, she is even witnessed to converse with this ghost – at least, nobody else can see who she is talking to. The husband's young bride dies in their wedding night, before the marriage can be consummated. What has actually happened is left open, but the logical explanation for the jinn is simple pretense of the woman. If a society does not allow women to object to co-wives openly, but fosters a widespread belief in the supernatural, a jealous wife may certainly invent a spirit lover to win back her husband (Farah, *Gifts* 36). Duniya's own father has more than one wife as well, and the relationship between these women is strained at best. At one incident, Duniya's mother, then pregnant with her, quarrels with her co-wife, and is hit so hard that the fetus in her womb is hurt. Her father, ranked in status above both women, instructs them to shake hands and reconcile, but he can command the gesture only, not the feelings, especially when he himself is the cause of the fight. Many years later, Duniya is still suspicious of men pretending at being the wise counselor and attempting to end a fight among women, as she once tells her divorced husband (Farah, *Gifts* 82120f). In contrast to *From A Crooked Rib*, illicit affairs are possible without the farce of a marriage now: The seventeen-year-old Fariida is in a relationship with a married man many years her senior. Nevertheless, when she gets pregnant, he offers to marry her as his second wife, obviously still a lawful arrangement, but the girl declines, assisted throughout her pregnancy by a close female friend (Farah, *Gifts* 190). A marriage of a very different sort is that of Duniya's colleague Hibo. The woman, being from the northern part of Somalia, clings to the traditional ways and to "northerly honor", preferring homicide to divorce when she is infected with gonorrhea by her husband. Having always said she would kill him if he gives her that disease, she obviously feels obliged to actually do so, and poisons his food. Afterwards, she is utterly

lost, and asks Duniya for advice on what to do. The latter urges her to call an ambulance and save her husband's life, and Hibo openly envies Duniya for being a strong woman (Farah, *Gifts* 226-228).

In *Gifts*, Nuruddin Farah describes Somalia during Siyad Barre's regime, when traditions and modern developments coexist and influence each other. Duniya's first marriage is arranged, and her husband, even though a pleasant man, is several times her age. Some of her friends and family object to the match, but, being raised to obey her elders, Duniya married the man, a close friend of her father. Her second marriage begins happily, but eventually develops to be a disaster. After coping with her husband's drinking problems, depressive moods and questionable behavior towards her children for some time, she finally divorces him, an action that earns her respect from some, but pity and resentment from others. Undoubtedly, it requires her strong mind and dedication and conveys the author's own admiration for her actions. At the beginning of *Gifts*, however, Duniya's relationship with Bosaaso is starting to develop, and provides a stark contrast to her previous experiences. Bosaaso respects her as a woman as well as a person, acknowledges her strive for independence and supports her in every possible way. They slowly grow closer, with Bosaaso giving her the time to explore her feelings and adjust to their new relationship; her final decision to accept his marriage proposal being exclusively her own. The other couples mentioned include polygamous as well as monogamous constellations, but Nuruddin Farah notably stresses the problems arising from the former. Jealousy and hatred between co-wives cannot be ordered to an end by the patriarch, but endanger everyone involved. Likewise, Farah advocates divorce in case a couple has severe problems, showing the extreme alternative in Hibo's case, and voicing his opinion through Duniya, who "[says] to herself that when husbands are reduced to 'him' [...], then it is high time the marriage is dissolved" (Farah, *Gifts* 227). Overall, Farah certainly shows his approval of women's equal rights in *Gifts*, and expresses his modern views concerning marriage.

In *Links*, which takes place during the civil war, very different types of relationships are presented as well. On the one hand, the aforementioned warlord brags about the five wives he has had over the years, his twenty-two children now spread all over the so-called first-world countries, and especially his "latest acquisition", a girl in her teens

(Farah, *Links* 103-105). On the other hand, Faahiye and Shanta live in a comparatively modern relationship, even though their marriage is far from perfect (Farah, *Knots* 194). Shanta is described as tough, but at the same time very emotional and ready to talk about her concerns and feelings. In contrast, Faahiye clings to old morals, honor and dignity, but hides his feelings and therefore does not know how to react to Shanta's emotional outbursts (Farah, *Knots* 175). Despite her readiness to show her emotions, however, Shanta prefers to settle quarrels with her husband in private. She explains how women generally keep marriage problems hidden as long as possible, and only speak once the tension becomes unbearable, first to female friends, then to their spouse. When a woman opens up and publicly admits that something is amiss, the marriage usually cannot be saved anymore. Hence, Shanta on her part does not know how to deal with Faahiye's actions when he leaves and makes their issues known to other people (Farah, *Links* 227f).

Somalia at the time of the civil war does not provide any legal instructions concerning marriage. Therefore, once again traditional concepts of marriage occur alongside modern relationships. With Faahiye and Shanta, Farah also describes the clash between the old and the new world inside a marriage: The husband, Faahiye, values the old concepts of moral and honor, but encounters huge difficulties talking about feelings. Shanta represents the modern, more emotional ways, and is given to tempers and public outbursts over trivia. Concerning grave marital disputes, however, she takes a typically female stance, attempting to cope by herself as long as possible. This contrast further enhances the whole problem, as neither knows how to deal with the other's behavior. Here, Farah probably generalizes, but certainly seems to capture a general trend, possibly fostered by upbringing, that complicates matters also in a modern marriage.

Cambara of *Knots* has spent some time in a marriage of convenience; however, the overall situation is different here. It is she who is in the superior position; she has the Canadian citizenship and enables her cousin to legally immigrate by marrying him on paper. Besides, it is clear from the beginning that the marriage will never be consummated. Nevertheless, she does this for her mother only, who has fostered her cousin since his childhood. In order to convince the authorities the marriage is not on



paper only, Cambara and her cousin have to live together, and openly pretend to be husband and wife. Cambara sets the terms, and makes her stance clear, ignoring her cousin for most of the time, except when a certain behavior on her part is required. Her mother teases her how being married is not too bad, especially when she does not have to do household chores and childcare all by herself, “without the husband ever lifting a finger.” However, the truth is that Cambara’s cousin is no agreeable flat-mate, as he actually never offers his help with the daily work, and Cambara comes to experience some of the bleak aspects of everyday married life, even without actually being married (Farah, *Knots* 21-34). Cambara’s officially second husband, Wardi, likewise immigrates to Canada only through his wedding to Cambara, however, she marries him out of love. Throughout their marriage, however, he turns out to be no improvement compared to Cambara’s cousin. Their little son drowns in an outdoor pool while Wardi is in bed with his mistress, a blow of fate that leads Cambara to leave Canada and return to Mogadiscio (Farah, *Knots* 4). Herself, she might be able to stay independent in Somalia, but traditions expecting wives to serve their husbands are not yet extinct there. The streets are filled with busy women wearing veils and carrying the goods they have bought, while the men appear casual and relaxed. At this time, the early 2000s, the stimulant qaat is already omnipresent in Mogadiscio, with many men highly addicted to the substance (Farah, *Knots* 6). In the lawless situation of the city, many women suffer almost unnoticed blows of fate. The woman Jiijo explains how she attends high school, actually as the only one in her family, but unfortunately becomes pregnant before her finals, and subsequently has to marry a distant cousin. Since she has aborted her first pregnancy, the couple remains childless, but otherwise happy. When the state collapses, however, she is captured and raped repeatedly, kept in a small dark room. When a warlord chooses her as his mistress, she sees him as her protector, even though he beats her on various occasions and again confines her to his house (Farah, *Knots* 177-179). In contrast to Jiijo’s story, however, Farah also tells tales of happier marriages. Cambara’s own parents, “a very atypical Somali couple”, are devoted to each other at a time when polygamy is not an exception but the norm, and her father is both a faithful husband and a caring, loving father, adoring an only daughter. In this family, Cambara is raised in a way not to become a traditional Somali female (Farah, *Knots* 75f). Furthermore, the couple of Qaali and Omar are described to be devoted to each other. Omar is five years

younger than his wife, in itself an unusual constellation, besides, Qaali is ambitious and wants to make use of her life, resuming her university studies in order to take her Ph.D. Even though Omar is the momentary breadwinner, other Somalis do not approve of the gap in their ages and possible incomes (Farah, *Knots* 346-348). In *Knots*, Farah becomes very clear about which side is usually to blame in case of disputes, having his opinion voiced by Kiin, who is legally married, but does not live together with her husband anymore. While she is for peace at all costs, her husband is not, and Kiin regrets how many Somali men prefer fighting to quiet talking – a tendency leading to both domestic violence and large-scale wars (Farah, *Knots* 193f).

In *Knots*, Nuruddin Farah continues describing hardships arising out of marriage; however, in some ways the focus seems to be shifting. Now, Cambara is the one giving, and even though she marries her cousin as a favor to her mother, she does so deliberately, setting the terms and conditions of everyday life with her cousin. She cannot change her cousin's laziness or his unclean habits, but refuses to alter her personal habits and ends their marriage at the first possible opportunity. Even though cheated by her second husband, whom she also blames for her son's fatal accident, Cambara does not despair, but opens a fresh chapter of her life in Mogadiscio. However, Farah does not pretend the many less fortunate wives have vanished. Even in lawless conditions, tradition still decrees women serve their husbands. The frequent use of qaat does not help the situation either, as it is consumed predominantly by men, who spend hours chewing, and precious money buying the stimulant. The case of Jiiho is proof that many women have suffered tremendously from the fall of the government, captured and gang-raped by drugged youths reveling in petty victories over hostile clans, and finally kept as a minor warlord's constantly available mistress. Apart from Jiiho, however, the couples of *Knots* mostly live in western-style, monogamous relationships and are described as happy, adoring their children and ignoring traditional hindrances. The women are shown as equal or even slyly pulling the strings like Cambara's mother Arda, who is said to continually save her prosperous but lavish husband from bankruptcy (Farah, *Knots* 111). Throughout the whole story, Arda remains this figure in the background, silently influencing the events from afar, without ever actually taking part.

She has taught her daughter well, however, passing on her experience concerning female power:

Arda [...] is fond of comparing the strength of omen to that of an elephant, which seldom makes full use of it, either because it does not know the extent of it and what it can achieve employing it or because its generous heart requires that it give more than it will ever receive in return (Farah, *Knots* 44).

This strength is obviously also what Nuruddin Farah admires. Kiin, who is likewise described as strong-minded and dedicated in everything she does, rather lives separated from her husband than ignores his contrasting views on war and peace, and is certainly able to do so.

Several years later, in *Crossbones*, traditional marriages still take place. The brothers Ahl and Malik have lost regular contact to their father, who has gone “totally native”, as his sons put it, by acquiring large herds of camels and marrying a girl in her late teens in order to ensure the continuing of his bloodline. His adult sons obviously disapprove of his new life, but are unable to change his decision (Farah, *Crossbones* 38). Cambara has been happily living together with her lover Bile for many years, but has purposely refused to marry, not trusting the institution anymore after her earlier experiences. She openly stands by her love for him, and patiently nurses him once he falls ill, but despite various decrees and threats issued by the Union of Islamic Courts, the two of them never marry (Farah, *Crossbones* 117-123). Other couples are not as fortunate: Xalan has apparently resigned to the omnipresence of qaat and her husband’s way of living, even though she is disappointed and feels lonely while he chews the stimulant with friends and acquaintances in order to forget his own and the country’s problems. Nevertheless, Xalan appears sure of herself, elegant, and able to “cope with all kinds of difficulties: impossible children, an impossible husband” (Farah, *Crossbones* 145-147).

*Crossbones* only very briefly mentions one traditional marriage, and others’ disapproval thereof. Cambara, who is still her own woman and lives her life the way she wants to, refuses to marry only to please traditionalists or the Union of Islamic Courts. She is in a relationship with Bile, and does not shrink from the duty of nursing him, but has never accepted a marriage proposal from him. However, *Crossbones* also shows the destruction of society through the stimulant qaat. Xalan, married to a qaat addict, has

accepted his lifestyle, knowing she does not have the power to change it. There might still be love, but Xalan experiences loneliness as well, and sadness caused by her bleak life in the war-torn city. In her, Farah once again describes a woman who knows she cannot change a situation, but has to cope and make the best of it, which she does.

In conclusion, this chapter has attempted to illustrate marriage customs and conventions. It gives reasons for marrying as well as describes married life itself, including both male and female views. Problems arising from matrimony are mentioned as well as changes that have taken place over time. The women of *From A Crooked Rib* are not given many possibilities. The matches are often made against their own will, or the girls have to elope in order to marry the man they want. Deep feelings are not necessary for a wedding, and a woman's best option is often coping with her fate. *Gifts* describes many similar marriages, but also shifts from surrounding conditions to a woman's personal strength: The novel tells Duniya's love story, a development of tender feelings between herself and an old friend. She gradually allows herself to trust him, and his appreciative behavior helps her to open up and show her own feelings. *Links* describes the clash between old and new world as well as male and female views and behaviors, while *Knots* shifts the focus even more away from outward conditions and towards personal reasons. In the marriage to her cousin, Cambara gives much more than she receives; in other couples described, the woman is placed above the man in some way or another as well. However, Farah never forgets other, less fortunate cases of imprisoned women. The situation only partly changes in *Crossbones*, with Cambara still opposing conventions – now mostly in private – but other women, like Xalan, again left unable to do anything but cope with their situation.

## **7. The Legal and Economical Position of Women**

### **7. a. Women and (Official) Authorities**

The following chapter examines the legal status of women in Somalia as well as their relationship with authorities. However, it is crucial to consider the respective authority in charge, as they are not the same throughout the books, but include local clan elders,

the dictator general Siyad Barre, warlords, religionist leaders and others. Therefore, women's official status and their rights and obligations change; however, this chapter attempts to follow the developments.

*From A Crooked Rib* takes place shortly before Somalia gains independence from her colonial power Italy. Hence, the officials in charge are Italians, at least in the cities. In rural areas, however, clan chiefs and family elders rule over their respective kin. On the countryside, a girl is worth less than a boy in every respect. In terms of blood compensation, the price for a male is twice the amount of a female, even if the man is mentally deficient. Besides, men are always in charge. As Ebla's parents are dead, responsibility falls upon her brother, even though he is several years younger than her (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 3, 11). Later, when she is in Mogadiscio, however, Ebla uses this tradition to her advantage, ordering her brother back to his community, as he is the one responsible (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 126). Even though her brother obliges, Ebla never actually reaches a position of power. Legally speaking, a woman is property, and can be bought and sold as such, both in cities and in rural areas. Until she marries, she belongs to her father, after the wedding to her husband. Ebla herself reflects on her position:

From experience she [knows] that girls [are] materials, just like objects, or items on the shelf of a shop. They [are] sold and bought as shepherds [sell] their goats at market-places, or shop-owners [sell] the goods to their customers. To a shopkeeper what [is] the difference between a girl and his goods? Nothing, absolutely nothing (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 75).

If a girl marries, her parents receive a dowry from her future husband. In contrast, a family has to provide nuptial money for every son, as he has to pay the parents of his bride. In case a woman states an official complaint about her husband or a male relative, she always has to see a man, as women do not work at offices. Ebla realizes that men rule the world as she knows it, however, she cannot see the reason why women are inferior. (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 71-75). Weddings themselves are conducted by a sheikh and two male witnesses. The sheikh asks the ritual questions and proclaims the couple husband and wife. The whole ceremony is oral, and a written contract is not required. Therefore, when Ebla marries a second man, Tiffo, to revenge her husband deceiving her, this is easily possible. Nobody inquires about previous marriages or other impediments (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 95f, 115). For a man, being already married is no

hindrance anyway, as Islam permits four wives at the same time. In contrast, a woman cannot marry more than once; otherwise she is considered a prostitute. In vain, Ebla tries to insist upon their equality, as each of them shares the other with someone else, but Tiffo is enraged, shouting that he will divorce her as soon as possible (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 131-133). In time, Ebla realizes how many limitations a woman has to face. Her husband could marry three more girls, bring them to their home to live with Ebla and him, and Ebla would have no possibility to object. Besides, “[t]he concessions given to men are far too great”, and it is not easy for a woman to be granted a divorce (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 140-142). However, not all women abide by these laws. Tiffo’s other wife is furious when she realizes that he has married Ebla in secret. She has no way of legally punishing her husband or Ebla, but instead threatens to murder her herself – presumably bribing a police officer to remain unharmed herself. Tiffo hints how this has already happened before, when one of his wife’s female friends has been deceived by her husband. Moreover, this group of women assists each other in beating their husbands when ill-treated by them, but this practice is not approved of by most others. (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 155-158).

The Italian colonial power officially rules Somalia at this time, and has established offices, a police force and other official institution; however, the Somalis themselves are organized around different authorities, especially in rural areas. The traditional laws decree a boy worth more than a girl, and leave males in charge of everything. Ebla is once able to use this tradition in order to command her brother, but she cannot leave the widely accepted discrimination of females behind. Throughout the book, she realizes that she is seen and treated as property, and there is no way she can ever reach equality with males, because it is them who rule the country and set the laws. Islam favors men in terms of marriage, divorce and adultery, while women can do little else than accept their fate and attempt to cope with it. One exception is Tiffo’s wife with her group of female friends, who have established their own way of executing justice. Apparently, some of their husbands live in perpetual fear of their wife and her friends; moreover, the group does not shun homicide. Therefore, after elaborating on the fact that women have no legal way of reaching equality, Nuruddin Farah confirms that there are females who attempt to right the wrongs done to them in their own fashion. They have maybe

discovered the only options left to them, namely violence and bribes, however, none of the other characters in the book approves of their methods.

*Gifts* takes place during the regime of Major-General Mohammed Siyad Barre. He rules as a dictator, however provides something close to a functioning state with departments and offices, at least in the beginning. Towards the end, the structure is crumbling, but *Gifts* still mentions authorities that have to be consulted and can apparently be trusted. When Duniya's daughter encounters a newborn baby in a rubbish bin, Duniya's lover demands the foundling be registered with the authorities immediately. Both Duniya and her daughter would rather postpone any bureaucracy and consider it more important to ensure the baby's well-being. However, her lover points out that without being registered, the baby cannot even be taken to the hospital for a health check-up. Eventually, both Duniya and Bosaaso are registered as co-guardians of the boy, dividing custody among them. Duniya is not content because she suspects the official considers her not capable alone because she is female. Besides, she fears they might only be given responsibility on the condition that they are married (Farah, *Gifts* 66-73). There is another case of a dispute over child custody, this one concerning Duniya's youngest daughter. When Duniya divorces her husband, they cannot agree on who is to keep her, therefore the child's aunt and uncle are chosen as compromise guardians (Farah, *Gifts* 102). Hence, it can be concluded that marriage, divorce and child custody are organized by state officials. However, an official driver's license does not seem to exist. Duniya receives private driving lessons from Bosaaso, practicing in his car, first in an unoccupied open space, later throughout Mogadiscio (Farah, *Gifts* 156f, 204f). Renting flats appears to be a largely private business as well. At the beginning of the book, Duniya lives in an apartment belonging to her brother-in-law, but she moves out after a dispute (Farah, *Gifts* 115). Vacant apartments are advertised verbally only, but Duniya is fortunate when a friend knows of a place to let. Women are allowed to rent apartments, but it is more common for them to live at a place owned by a male relative. Duniya discusses her situation with her children, reflecting that in an ideal Islamic society, the homeless seek aid at a mosque. However, this does not include homeless women. Duniya takes the ill-humored guess that in an ideal Islamic society, homeless women do not exist, as every female would be wife, co-wife or concubine to a man. Her son mentions the concept of

xabs, meaning the right of obedience. A woman is only allowed to leave her husband's home when he permits it, and any violence of this law can be described as rebellion. Women are to obey these laws in order to be provided shelter, thence a homeless female is one who does not have a husband or male relative offering her a home. Following this traditional definition, Duniya would be homeless, no matter if she rents or owns an apartment, as she is not provided for by a male (Farah, *Gifts* 172-178).

During Siyad Barre's regime, state authorities have a certain power in Mogadiscio, for example demanding the registration of every newborn baby. Duniya suspects discrimination because of her position as an unmarried mother, nevertheless, there are clearly laws concerning matters like marriage, divorce and child custody, and executive powers ensuring they are carried out. Other areas of life are privately organized, for example renting and letting apartments. The Islamic concept of xabs, the right of obedience, is technically known, however not executed in daily life. Duniya herself has rented several times in her life, and two girls are mentioned to share an apartment as well (Farah, *Gifts* 178). There might still be Somalis, both male and female, who consider the religious traditions obligatory, but the everyday course of action differs tremendously.

Both *Links* and *Knots* take place during the civil war, at a time where Somalia does not have a government and therefore there are no officially acknowledged authorities. The arising power vacuum is filled by a myriad of self-declared institutions of varying reputation. There are unofficial authorities like warlords or clan elders, ruling a certain territory or a group of people, for example an extended clan family (Farah, *Links* 11, 126). Like already explained above, many clan elders are known to support women when beneficial for themselves, but do not treat females as equals (Farah, *Links* 127-129). Warlords usually live in an entirely male-dominated world because women are not involved in the fighting. Hence, females are considered little more than chattel, and treated accordingly (Farah, *Knots* 173f). In these times, closest to an executing power are the omnipresent gun-bearing youths and so-called security units, some of whom hired by civilians, others loyal to clans or warlords (Farah, *Links* 20). If a security force is needed, the youths and men provide protection to anyone as long as they are paid. When Cambara manages to regain her property from a warlord, a security unit is put in



place – in reality little more than youngsters yielding machine guns, however, the measure is thoroughly effective. These hired young men are loyal also to her as a woman, but many others take perverse pleasure in harassing any female they meet in the streets (Farah, *Knots* 163, 250). The developments surrounding Cambara's property also exemplify how there is no execution of laws or justice whatsoever. The only possibility to have someone punished for a deed is to take the matter into one's own hand and repay an injustice in kind. However, there are entirely different organizations as well: The aforementioned women's network attempts to establish a functioning aid network for women, and actually wields a considerable amount of power (Farah, *Knots* 249f). Another haven of peace and order is The Refuge, accepting everyone in need, as long as they abide the rules, including equality between the sexes (Farah, *Links* 154-158). As there is no government, women have more freedom in some ways, as discriminating laws are not enforced by any official authority. However, chaos and violence are omnipresent. Cambara of *Knots* once reflects on the changes caused by the civil war:

Of course, it isn't that she has a wistful desire to return to a hierarchical, male-run taxonomy in which women occupied [sic] the lowest rung in the ladder. God forbid, no. It is just that she is nostalgic for a past in which your house was yours and you did not involve armed escorts to get it back or to get to it in the first place, and to live and sleep in it without having to park a battlewagon in several of its access points just to protect it (Farah, *Knots* 361f).

The time of the civil war features a large variety of different authority-like institutions and persons, even though it is in fact a lawless, chaotic period. There is virtual anarchy, without any power recognized by a majority of Somalis. Clan authorities rule their respective families as they have always done, while warlords establish violent but usually short-lived regimes over territories of various sizes. Neither clan elders nor warlords consider women equal, and the young boys hired for security often prefer harassment to protection. To a certain extent, everything is possible in this lawless environment, and there are women who know how to use it. Without an executive and judicial power, women are able to demand and operate punishments themselves. Other organizations like The Refuge propagate peace and equality, living after their own rules and providing a small orderly paradise in the chaotic city. Maybe Cambara exemplifies the wish for peace and equality of many Somali women of the time, neither wishing to return to an orderly but male-dominated society nor enjoying the violent, lawless

present, where she is free to do as she pleases, but only as long as she is not murdered in a skirmish.

Finally, *Crossbones* takes place after the civil war, when the Union of Islamic Courts has seized control of Somalia. The religionists do not form an official government, but change and shape the country in order to rule after their own fashion. One of their laws concerns women's appearance: veils are compulsory, while anyone wearing less concealing garments is punished (Farah, *Crossbones* 2f). The religionists show their traditional beliefs on other occasions as well. For example, Cambara and Bile as an unmarried couple have to face harassment for living in sin, according to the Sharia punishable by public stoning (Farah, *Crossbones* 23). Cambara admits she has already lied about the matter in order to avoid being questioned. The religionists seem to prefer being lied to, they are happier with a pleasant falsehood than an unpleasant truth (Farah, *Crossbones* 172). However, there are also different actions taken by the minions of the Islamic Courts. Malik, who is a journalist, is forced to allow his laptop being inspected. When the gadget is returned, the religionists have deleted his screensaver, a photo of a naked girl, considered pornographic material. In reality, the girl depicted is Malik's one-year-old daughter, photographed in the bathtub, and presumably not feeling embarrassed by the fact that her father uses this picture as his screensaver (Farah, *Crossbones* 32).

When the religionists impose their rules upon Somalia, attempting to introduce the Sharia in the country, women once again face hardships and hindrances concerning their freedom. There are laws regulating their appearance in public or contact between the sexes. Using the pretext of protecting females, women's moves are restricted to a minimum, leading many to staying at home as much as possible in order to avoid harassment. Some situations are solely ridiculous, like deleting a so-called pornographic image of a one-year-old in order to protect the girl's modesty, however, there are also much more disquieting developments, like the threatening of a public stoning for adultery.

Overall, it can be said that the legal status of women in Somalia changes throughout time. The Italians introduce a hierarchical system modeled upon their own country,

while many Somalis follow their traditional sexually discriminating laws. Some women have found violent ways to enforce their opinions; however, the majority accepts the status quo, being left virtually powerless. In contrast, during Barre's dictatorship, some parts of the Islamic traditions still exist, but women enjoy more freedom. Men and women are not treated equal, but there are certainly possibilities for women to demand justice and to live more independent lives. In the time of the civil war, without any official institutions, justice lies in everyone's own hands, regardless of their gender. Despite this so-called freedom, many women dream of an orderly society, however probably not a male-dominated one. Finally, the religionist's Sharia laws restrict women once again, leaving them retreating to private areas where they are able to avoid some of the hindrances. Throughout his books, Nuruddin Farah describes women's options and restrictions, as well as their ways to cope with them. Regardless of the authority, however, Farah shows that women face sexual discrimination compared to men, and are forced to cope with problems that do not exist for males.

## **7. b. Money and Property**

The following chapter investigates women's possession of money and property, as these provide an important basis for independence. Some conclusions about women being supported by their husband or another male relative have already been drawn when examining women's job situation. However, this chapter attempts to take a slightly closer look into the matter.

In *From A Crooked Rib*, many of the women mentioned do not own anything, neither the house they live in, nor any money, except what they receive from their husbands. Aowralla, married to Ebla's cousin, has moved into her husband's house and lives on the money he earns with his shop (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 28). When eloping, Ebla herself naturally moves into her new husband's room, later receiving money from him while he is away on business (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 81, 103). In contrast, the widow apparently owns the house she lives in, and obviously has money at her disposal as well. However, she is said to have been saved by her nephew from problems involving her Arab

husband. It is not clear how she has obtained the house she lives in, but presumably with the assistance of her nephew, either financially or otherwise (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 66). Asha is the only woman mentioned who is entirely independent. She owns the house she rents to several families as well as the money she charges them. Whether she may be considered wealthy remains to be questioned; on the one hand she appears rich to Ebla, but on the other hand she suggests sharing meals in order to save money (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 93, 109). However, the situation is complicated by the fact that women themselves are actually property, as Ebla comes to realize throughout her experiences. They can be sold and bought at will, always owned by a male relative (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 71). When Ebla marries Tiffo to spite her first husband, he gives her the waji fur, the bride money. In the following weeks, he comes to visit frequently, but irregularly, always leaving some money behind, hidden somewhere in the room. Ebla “attempt[s] to tell him what she [thinks] about their ‘secret marriage’, which ha[s] nothing behind it except sharing a bed and earning some money from him, she hesitate[s]”, not knowing what exactly it is she wants to tell him. She loathes the way he treats her, but does not grasp the obvious fact that she has become a prostitute without realizing it (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 115, 129f). It remains open whether she ever entirely understands her relationship to Tiffo. Later, she reflects that their “divorce” is unimportant because she is not interested in his money and riches, without realizing that she has been provided for by someone else throughout her entire life (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 145).

The situation of women in *From A Crooked Rib* is comparatively bleak in the respect of their owning money or property. As women are in fact property themselves, they cannot legally own anything, their only reputable option being marriage in order to have a man offering a place to stay and providing money to live upon. Asha may have discovered a different path as a landlady, but the question arises how she acquired the house she is letting. Ebla herself certainly does not have the means to do the same. As Derek White illustrates, in her attempts to become independent, she has moved on to one of the few other possibilities open to women always and everywhere. After being sold to men first by her grandfather and later by her cousin, she acts herself, beginning with the waji fur, which is normally a dowry presented to the bride’s parents. Ebla is selling the only thing

she has, herself, to Tiffo, albeit having no idea of the meaning of her actions. Her naïveté seldom shows as plain as when Asha states how Tiffo treats her like a prostitute, paying for sex, with nothing else between him and Ebla (Wright 23-25). Moreover, her statement about not wanting wealth shows a tremendous lack of world knowledge, leaving her as much a property as before.

The single mother Duniya is aware of the dangers of being dependent on men. She works in order to earn her own money and is especially particular about accepting gifts of every form from anyone, knowing the dangers of dependency. Likewise, her children have never been allowed to accept food gifts from friends or relatives; she has taught them from an early age that supposedly well-meant gifts often hide traps, the giver demanding some sort of compensation afterwards (Farah, *Gifts* 3, 26). However, Duniya receives a monthly allowance from her expatriate brother Abshir, despite being unsure herself why she accepts money coming from him. During his visit, she dares to touch the topic, and realizes that he in fact considers himself in need of compensation, as she would have received more from their father had she been a boy. Therefore, his money originates from his striving to treat her as equal instead of belittling her for her gender, enabling Duniya to accept the money in good conscience. In contrast, her feelings towards her lover's gifts and presents differ tremendously. She fears being "bought", albeit in a symbolic way, and giving her love in exchange for various forms of compensation, financial or otherwise (Farah, *Gifts* 149-156). Furthermore, she is painfully aware of the fact that all her previous homes have been "owned by men, run and dominated by men". She moves from her father's house right into her first husband's, after her latter's death moving in with her half-brother. For a short period of time, she is independent as her later second husband's tenant, but only until their wedding. Finally, she occupies an apartment owned by her brother-in-law, paying only a symbolic rent. Therefore, it is crucial for her not to move into her lover's house at the first opportunity. Instead, she prefers to rent again, even though the new apartment is expensive. During Siyad Barre's regime, it has become comparatively more common for women to live by themselves, but Duniya remembers the ancient concept of xabs, which demands absolute obedience in exchange for shelter, labeling a female person as homeless unless provided for by a man (Farah, *Gifts* 172-176). In contrast, other women

do not loath their dependency as much as Duniya. Her sister-in-law Muraayo boasts of her wealth, her large property and modern electronic gadgets; however, it may be concluded that everything is financed by her husband. Muraayo herself does not seem to provide anything (Farah, *Gifts* 107-115). Likewise, Bosaaso's sister-in-law Waaberi more or less begs him for money, not only to pay her bills but also in order to acquire expensive clothes and jewelry (Farah, *Gifts* 222-224). While Muraayo and Waaberi might have the opportunity to earn money themselves, women living in rural areas still have no possibility to be independent. The patients of the maternity clinic are presumably treated for free, as the doctors accept no payment, but merely receive an apartment financed by the government (Farah, *Gifts* 17).

Derek Wright analyses the conditions of gifts and counter-gifts at length, concluding that Duniya, in contrast to Ebla, fully recognizes the connection between gifts – whether they are money or goods – and a lurking dependency. Most men give in the expectation of some sort of compensation, and many women do not have anything to give but their love and their bodies. The situation is different with Duniya's brother, because he sees himself as the one compensating, while she can be sure she is not required to offer a counter-gift. The same considerations lead her to desiring her own apartment, despite it being more expensive than the almost rent-free flat she is offered by her brother-in-law (Wright 130-134). While females of rural areas actually have no way to obtain and possess their own money, other women from Mogadiscio are described as more or less comfortable being provided for, some even demanding additional money from their male relations, a behavior Duniya would never even consider. Being aware that she as a female will always be limited in certain ways, but nevertheless desperately attempting to stay independent, Duniya has to avoid the traps of the many gifts presented to her. Nevertheless, she manages to follow her own ideas throughout the book, and never loses herself in any sort of convenient dependency.

In contrast, Cambara of *Knots* is in a very different situation. Her family property, a large estate including a private beach and an immense garden, rightfully belongs to both herself and her mother, even though at the beginning seized by a warlord. Moreover, she has to be considered wealthy; money does not seem to be an issue at all. Without further consideration, she shops at length at a local market and uses taxis as a means of

transport, but also provides her friend Jiijo with food and household utensils and hires a plumber for her cousin's house (Farah, *Knots* 111, 125, 170, 201). Kiin likewise has money at her disposal, using it freely to provide Cambara with every kind of support. Owner of her own hotel, Kiin certainly belongs to the upper class, a small elite able to offer private schooling to their children (Farah, *Knots* 187, 192). In contrast, Jiijo is utterly dependent from the father of her children. She is not allowed to leave the house and has no way to earn money, and, concluding from her ragged clothes, she is not given any either (Farah, *Knots* 113f). Nevertheless, the civil war situation seems to have delivered at least some women from their traditional dependencies. The women's network as an organization obviously owns considerable money as well, at least enough to fund leisure time activities like a play, and provide every sort of assistance to women in need (Farah, *Knots* 211, 250).

In *Knots*, women's situations are described very differently. Cambara and Kiin are both as wealthy as they are generous, delivering gifts to fellow women and occasionally also to men, without expecting any compensation. Both possess their own properties as well as a comparatively large amount of money. Certainly, they are simply fortunate in some ways and their independence can be partly derived from their comfortable financial situation. However, both of them have also known blows of fate, proofing they possess determination and an indomitable will, and their continued generosity leaves them very likeable characters. Meanwhile, other women's dependency continues, as shows the case of Jiijo, who is left virtually helpless. However, Farah enjoys showing how women have now found ways to help those less fortunate than themselves. Many traditions and restrictions have loopholes now, and the women's network wields enough money and influence to further improve the situation.

In *Crossbones*, not much is said about women's possessions. It can be concluded that Cambara still lives at her property – interestingly, Bile has decided to relocate to her place, not vice versa – and they appear wealthy, as they are mentioned to employ a maid. Moreover, as Bile has fallen ill, it is probably Cambara who provides the family money (Farah, *Crossbones* 117-121). Xalan, who lives with her husband, has a maid as well, and the house is described as spacious and lovingly furnished. Nevertheless, her husband has taken to chewing qaat daily, a habit both expensive and time-consuming. It

is not mentioned specifically, but maybe Xalan provides part of the household income, given that her husband spends hours chewing with his friends (Farah, *Crossbones* 143f, 303). Zaituun, the devout Muslim, lives in her own house as well. Being widowed, she may have inherited the property from her late husband; however, it is unclear how she pays her servant and various everyday expenses. Being devoted to prayer, it seems unlikely for her to have an occupation, leaving only the possibility of being supported by relatives (Farah, *Crossbones* 306f).

*Crossbones* leaves many open questions concerning women's possession of money and property. The females mentioned appear wealthy, but the sources of their money are not contemplated. Zaituun may rely on relatives; however, a woman like Cambara is not easily imagined as dependent from males. Regardless of the present situation, Nuruddin Farah's main concern in *Crossbones* is the future anyway. As the religionists attempt to continue restricting women's freedom, they force them back into a dependency barely managed to overcome.

Overall, it can be affirmed that possession of money and property are a means of reaching and retaining independence. *From A Crooked Rib* describes a situation of women being property, not able to legally own anything. There are virtually only two options: being sold into marriage, or selling oneself as a prostitute. Only very few, like the landlady Asha, have found another way to survive independently, while Ebla, who strives for freedom despite her utter naïveté, has no way to actually reach it. Duniya has more options, but is nevertheless familiar with the danger of gifts and the subsequent expectations of compensation. She struggles to avoid the traps installed by men, and manages despite all obstacles to keep as much of her independence as possible. In *Knots*, Farah describes women possessing properties as well as money, but also mentions others, who still remain dependent on males. However, those more fortunate use their mental strength as well as their wealth to provide assistance to others less lucky than themselves. Finally, *Crossbones* shows Farah's concerns about the future. At present, women might still possess properties and wield money, however, with the religionists' discriminating laws, the situation might change soon.



## 8. The Influence of Religion

This chapter focuses on the influence of religion on Somalis, including both Islam and beliefs originating from traditional Somali mythology. The following pages attempt to illustrate the presence of religion in daily life, and interpret the benefits and drawbacks arising from faith and religious beliefs.

In the rural communities of *From A Crooked Rib*, religious rituals are a fixed part of everyday life. People regularly say their prayers and males attend a mosque or praying-place on Fridays. Many men, like Elba's grandfather, perpetually repeat Arab words of praise, letting the beads of their rosaries slide through their fingers (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 5, 12-14). Elba is devout as well: she says her prayers five times every day, even though the Arab words do not mean anything to her, and naturally refers to God in her thoughts no matter what she does, like thanking for a development in her life or laying her faith in God's hands, asking for strength (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 35, 101, 142). In the city, there are Islamic rituals, for example Asha has Sheikhs come to her house on Fridays to recite the Koran. Neither Asha nor Ebla actually knows much about Islam and its laws, but Ebla nevertheless attempts to understand God's will. She wonders why God should prefer men to women and why men are permitted four wives and women but one husband. Besides, she questions whether God actually decrees a husband "a woman's prophet and second-to-God" (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 11, 112, 139f). Naturally, she is not able to find satisfactory answers to her questions. However, her thoughts often prove certain doubts concerning Islamic laws if they are actually reflecting God's will. Sometimes, she simply cannot imagine that God created her only to live in misery, serving the men of her family. On other occasions, however, she seems defeated by her fate, observing that being a woman is simply a fault, as she is tempted easier than men, and that God must have had a reason to make her inferior (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 141f). Apart from these deep insights, Ebla also utters commonly believed superstitions, for example that Arabs are related to the prophet and closer to him than other Muslims, or that Awill has lost weight because of his eating pork (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 50, 160). Besides, older, not necessarily Islamic superstitions are mixed into the Muslim beliefs. When Ebla is not feeling well, Asha takes her to a savant, who diagnoses a curse, "[s]omebody sent an

evil-eye on her.” The suggested cure is Muslim again: a Sheikh is to read the Koran over her (Farah, *Crooked Rib* 136, 148).

In this book, Nuruddin Farah describes the importance of faith and religious rituals in everyday life. He mentions the fixed prayer routines everyone follows regularly, and elaborates on Ebla trusting in God, as well as describes her thoughts on Islam. Despite the omnipresence of religion, Ebla barely knows the rudiments of the Muslim faith. Nevertheless, she seems to grasp the distinction between simple faith in God and the following of every Islamic doctrine. Once again, Farah hints at his own opinion here: Ebla’s faith and trust in God are depicted as sources of strength, while Islam is shown in a comparatively negative light, especially from a woman’s point of view. Nevertheless, Ebla has no possibility to escape, regardless of her suspecting many devout men’s aims. Derek Wright describes the Sheikhs’ part in the story using very blunt words: They are virtually Ebla’s “pimps”, as they are paid for legitimizing her marriages and later her divorce, ensuring that everyone abides by Islam’s laws. He also confirms that Farah shows Islam in a very negative light, accusing devout (male) Muslims of using the faith to suppress and imprison women (Wright 25, 31). Apart from this abuse of Islam, Farah also mentions superstitious beliefs and other, non-Muslim concepts, for example the curse of the evil-eye. Derek Wright furthermore clarifies the origins of the Somali proverb about women’s crooked rib. The concept of Adam and Eve as first men is “Biblical but in fact unKoranic” (Wright 24), while the idea that the rib is crooked stems from yet another origin.

In *Gifts*, Farah includes many stories and beliefs originating from old Somali mythology. Duniya admires her daughter’s burchi-power, “a mystical term for the overwhelming hold one individual has over another, regardless of their respective status – child over adult, offspring over parent, wife over husband” (Farah, *Knots* 25). Duniya’s first husband has been much older than her, already married before her birth. His first wife is said to have fallen in love with a jinn, a spirit, and to have carried his children. Both she and her human husband are growing old, and the man has begun to court a young girl, intending to marry her as his second wife. The first wife occasionally returns to her husband, but leaves whenever she pleases and returns without explanations; once she is seen in the desert, preparing a meal while talking to invisible spirits. On his wedding

night, her husband hears queer voices, and is unable to consummate the marriage. At dawn, his young wife dies, still a virgin. When his first wife returns, she admits her love to the jinn, but clarifies that she would have never even looked at him had her husband stayed faithful. He blames the jinn for the girl's death, but his wife accuses him of killing the virgin himself, in order to hide his shame. Shortly after, the man loses his eyesight, again accusing the jinn (Farah, *Knots* 36f). Obviously, jinns can be blamed for anything, even tripping over one's own feet. On another occasion, Duniya herself senses a spirit in her house, and it turns out that her daughter has found a newborn baby (Farah, *Knots* 63). Later, Duniya remembers another story of Somali mythology. The world is said to rest upon the horns of a bull, positioned opposite to his love, a cow. Whenever the cow moves her head to avert her eyes, the bull's body loses balance, causing earthquakes. However, Duniya abides by Muslim laws, for example when ensuring every dish she eats is halal (Farah, *Gifts* 94). Her family and friends are devout Muslims as well. When they keep vigil for the dead baby boy, some say verses from the Koran, others tell stories and myths (Farah, *Gifts* 129f). However, *Gifts* also elaborates on several instances that leave women inferior to men. Once at Aw-Cumar's shop, the shopkeeper is praying. Duniya has to wait, as "Islamic etiquette demand[s] that a woman not come into bodily contact with a man currently in communication with his Creator, women being impure" (Farah, *Knots* 159). Besides, the aforementioned traditional concept of xabs, the right of obedience, is little more than a profound way to confine women to their homes and bend them to their husbands' will (Farah, *Knots* 175). Other beliefs appear cruel: Duniya's half-brother does not approve of her decision to foster the baby boy and threatens that "the wages [of raising a bastard] are the fires of hell and Allah's anger." It may be questioned how much truth this threat contains, as he is immediately appeased by the fact that her lover is involved as well. All in all, it seems to be more crucial to have a male able to take charge than to ensure the legitimate birth of the child (Farah, *Knots* 81-83).

*Gifts* includes Muslim laws and beliefs as well as Somalia's own mythology. It is interesting to see how in the myths and tales, women are depicted as strong, possibly strong enough to defeat men. Someone otherwise low in status can possess the burchi-power as well, for example a young woman. The tale about the jinn is in some ways a

woman's success story, as she does not accept the young girl as her co-wife. She reaches freedom to leave and return at her pleasure. Whether the jinn arises from her husband's nagging conscience or the wife herself has used the widespread belief in jinns and has simply arranged the whole ploy is left open. However, she makes it clear that she would have stayed with him, had he only been faithful. Derek Wright also comments on the Somali belief of the bull balancing the cosmos on his horns and causing earthquakes when his love the cow shuns him. He examines how it parallels Duniya's own story. Her name literally means "cosmos", so she loses her equilibrium when shaken by love, starting to spill and knock over things. Finally, she remembers this legend, accepts her feelings towards Bosaaso and regains her balance (Wright 130). Farah obviously likes the myth and maybe wants to show that legends are a metaphorical way of describing events of human life. In every legend lies at least some truth. However, Islam is at least as present as jinns in Somalis' thoughts. Muslim laws and prayers are part of everyday life, including also some sexually discriminating traditions and rituals. Many men, like Duniya's half-brother, still attempt to use Allah's presumed will to enforce their own; in contrast, Duniya herself would not even consider fearing God's wrath for saving a baby's life, bastard or not. Even if Allah's word may be interpreted like that, she draws her own conclusions in order to act in good conscience.

In the civil war environment of *Links* and *Knots*, active religious rituals seem to have receded almost entirely from everyday life. Men use Islamic laws when they suit them, for example to justify marrying four wives (Farah, *Links* 103f), and children are sent to Koran schools, as they are the only ones not yet closed (Farah, *Knots* 192). Some traditionalists remain, for example clan elders who are perfectly content with the situation of women being inferior. They use their whole available power to ensure that young girls are raised in the traditional fashion, insuring they know their proper place in society (Farah, *Knots* 244). However, when Cambara attempts to stage her play and explains that it involves wooden masks, one of her friends is worried as well. Pictures or sculptures of Allah's living creation are forbidden, which is why he cannot support her idea. However, he cannot be considered devout himself; neither praying regularly, nor shunning to deliver justice by murdering an enemy. Cambara is certainly surprised when

he tells her, and at first not sure she comprehends his problem, as she is not clear about what is forbidden in Islam herself (Farah, *Gifts* 305f).

The civil war has apparently robbed many people of religious manners of thinking, leaving behind only empty shells and convenient traditions like marriage laws.

Traditionalists attempting to enforce Islam seem to mainly desire the continued inferiority of women, using Muslim laws as a pretext. Worries about Cambara's masks seem devout at first, providing no personal benefit for her friend himself, but once a closer look is taken, he proves pretentious and hypocritical and does not follow other Muslim laws at all. Presumably, Farah once more shows his mixed opinion concerning Islam, especially when Cambara, one of the most likeable characters of *Knots*, admits to not being familiar with Muslim laws herself.

In *Crossbones*, religion is moved to another level entirely, as the Unions of Islamic Courts has seized power and poses an impending threat of enforcing the Islamic Sharia laws upon the country. Cambara is worried, knowing that the religionists will not end after public separation of the sexes, but eventually move onto banning women from driving cars or limiting them to consulting female doctors and nurses only, while simultaneously restraining females from training for these very professions. Besides, she is aware that illiterate, uneducated women are easy prey, hinting at the logical next step of banning girls from attending school (Farah, *Crossbones* 172). Other women, like Xalan's sister Zaituun, dedicate their lives to prayer. Zaituun uses all her energy on worship, her house sporting a large assortment of prayer rugs. She fosters dangerously radical and narrow-minded thoughts, parroting doctrines and refusing to acknowledge reality. When her sister Xalan is raped, she is unable to show sympathy, instead blames Xalan's lax attitude towards Islam, concluding that rape has been a just punishment. In truth, the rape occurred inside a mosque, with imams watching and none of them coming to help. Moreover, Zaituun's adolescent son has been recruited by the notorious terror unit Al-Shabaab. Family and friends attempt to locate and rescue the boy, but his mother approves of his so-called self-sacrifice (Farah, *Crossbones* 305-308).

In *Crossbones*, Nuruddin Farah describes the situation of a state ruled by religionists. Radical laws are enforced, covering the topics of discrimination of the sexes and so-

called protection of females, and suspicions arise that many changes are yet to come. Some women adapt to the demure, devout lifestyle of an ideal Muslim female, but this path leads dangerously close to radical religionism, including the approval of violence towards so-called infidels.

Overall, this chapter shows that the influence of religion on Somalia is a strong one. Muslim laws and regular praying are present in everyday life, but seem to be weakened in the violence of the civil war. Nuruddin Farah shows benefits of faith and trust in God, which can be a source of strength in trying situations, even if a person lacks profound knowledge. However, Islam itself is shown in an extremely negative light, from the Sheikhs acting as Ebla's pimps in *From A Crooked Rib* to the imams watching a woman being raped in a mosque. Sexual discrimination masked as Allah's will is omnipresent. In contrast, Somali myths as told in *Gifts* speak a different language, rather portraying women's possible strength in an adverse society, but these seem to vanish during the civil war as well. Finally, *Crossbones* shows the effects of a radically religionist rule that places absolute devotion above charity and sympathy. At this point, it shall be made clear that Nuruddin Farah does not condemn Islam in itself. However, actions weigh more than beliefs, and certain actions conducted in the name of Islam cannot be endorsed in good conscience.

## **9. Conclusion**

To cut a long matter short, this thesis investigates the status of women in Somalia, as presented by the first Somali author Nuruddin Farah. It examines in close detail various topic areas, while always taking into account Somalia's different governments and political developments. For example, clothing styles vary, reaching from simple sheets in nomad communities to face veils and body tents during the rule of the Union of Islamic Courts. Regardless of the topic, however, Farah illustrates and disapproves of the many ways used to discriminate women: Lack of education and job opportunities leave them financially dependent on men, and various laws and traditions, often enforced by clan authorities, reduce women to the role of housewife and mother. In some respects, a

positive development can be traced throughout time; however, Farah displays worry about the radical Union of Islamic Courts presently ruling the country. In general, he is aware of how Islam is often used to suppress females and proclaim their subordinate status God's will. However, Farah's overall portrayal of Somali women is not one of demure, shy or helpless creatures, but rather shows strong, self-determined characters striving for freedom and attempting to overcome obstacles put in their way. Sometimes, males are only officially superior, while in reality, women pull the strings, stronger than most men, and ambitious to reach their goals. Besides, Farah establishes a very positive connotation with females, depicting Somali women as ready to give hope, improve society, help other people and work for peace whenever they can. He describes the enormous power of the Women for Peace network, but also mentions simple everyday loopholes used to avoid restrictions. Likewise, Farah also shows women in tragic situations, who have no possibility to determine their own fate. However, even they are strong, namely in finding ways to cope with what cannot be changed. Farah's overall opinion of women is certainly a very positive one, and he especially focuses on their amazing power – maybe adequately described by the comparison made in *Knots*, when Cambara's mother compares women's strength to that of an elephant, who usually does not use all of it, either because it does not realize its power itself, or because it wants to give more than what will ever be received in return. This power is what Nuruddin Farah seems to recognize and describe throughout all his novels, regardless of women's official status in Somalia.





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