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**“Narrative as Memory: A Reading of Nuruddin Farah’s Trilogy  
Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship”**

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## **Abstract**

The hallmark of the three novels forming Nuruddin Farah's trilogy *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship* is the fact that they share several tales of recurrent symbolic departure and return. This cyclical nature of Farah's narrative foregrounds the collective traumatic past that Farah's narrative embodies. In three chapters, the trilogy is analysed in the light of the writings of some Trauma Studies theorists such as Anne Whitehead, Cathy Caruth, Marianne Hirsch, and Dominick LaCapra. The first chapter examines the theoretical foundation of reading trauma in Farah's narrative. Even though the chapter relies on trauma theory that is exclusively influenced by Western traumas, it seeks to adapt this theory to the understanding of a non-Western collective trauma experience. Moreover, an emphasis is placed on deploying psychoanalytical and historical writings on trauma to achieve an understanding of its literary aspect rather than using fiction to develop the pre-existing psychoanalytical and historical readings of trauma. Chapter Two, on the other hand, provides an application of the theoretical views presented in the preceding chapter. The second chapter explores the deployment of two particular literary devices – intertextuality and repetition – in the context of trauma narrative and how they re-create trauma in their own distinct way. Chapter Three focuses primarily on Farah's characters and their problematic relationship with both the perception of time and memory-keeping. The chapter emphasizes that there is a complete identification between the teller of the memory and the memory told. This reading of *Sweet and Sour Milk*, *Sardines* and *Close Sesame* detangles the tension arising from the narrativisation of trauma from one end and the elements which engage in narrating it (language and characters) from the other.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Anglophone literature, Nuruddin Farah, Anne Whitehead, Cathy Caruth

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The choice of working simultaneously on the three novels of the *Variations on The Theme of an African Dictatorship* trilogy by Nuruddin Farah was sparked by observing how the three novels; *Sweet and Sour Milk*, *Sardines* and *Close Sesame* all thematically overlap. They all deal with protagonists who are involved in a clandestine activity against the General's regime and although Farah crafts different characters, these characters remain linked to one another by the commonality of the struggle they share. The novels also overlap through re-creating journeys of infinite departures and returns that characterize the dilemmas of Farah's characters.

This constant wavering between departure and return raises questions about the ability of the narrative to appropriate the characteristics of the memory it attempts to represent. The ability of narrative –with both its characters and language- to identify completely with the traumas presented might seem a somewhat abstract question; however, it heavily relies on the assemblage of a homogeneous construction of several theories in order to render the argument as concretely as possible. This identification, as shall be proven throughout this thesis, unravels the particularity of the nature of the collective trauma memory as presented in Farah's Somalia. Similarly, the mode of narrativizing this trauma memory justifies and explains the intensity of such identification.

In three chapters, the trilogy of Farah shall be thematically examined in the light of the writings of memory and Trauma Studies theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Anne Whitehead, Marianne Hirsch, Dominick LaCapra and Maeve McCusker. The first chapter functions as a rather extensive, more informative introduction to the reading that will be conducted of Farah's novels in the following two chapters. The first chapter answers the question: which memory is remembered by whom? The theoretical foundation of reading Nuruddin Farah's trilogy, as presented in chapter one, aims at exploring how the manifold oppressive political frameworks reconstruct the collective traumatized memory of Farah's

characters. Some of the concepts theorized by Caruth and Halbwachs -as presented by Anne Whitehead- shall explain what is meant by a collective trauma with regard to the novels under discussion. Moreover, it was inevitable, in such a political context, to discuss the controversial question of the relationship between memory and history. What is meant by memory and its relationship to history is explored in the light of two counter arguments that are not entirely appropriate for the reading of Farah's fiction as this thesis will argue. Their very inconvenience to the texts at hand foregrounds the particular nature of memory dealt within the texts. The views of Kerwin Lee Klein, a historian, and Tim Woods ,as a literary critic are juxtaposed in a way that fosters the particularity of the Somali Oral based tradition; a tradition that transcends the boundaries of both the authority of history and the fetishisation of memory. Chapter One makes it clear that it is not the psychoanalytical or the historical workings of trauma that are of concern here but rather how literature represents trauma in spite of its psychological and historical limitations. The second chapter concretizes the theoretical section that precedes it by examining how the concepts presented in chapter one were inspired by the application embedded in Farah's novels. Chapter Two detangles the tension arising from the linguistic inaccessibility of trauma from one end and the narrative's attempt to possess trauma by verbalizing it from another. Drawing on Whitehead's conceptions of trauma fiction, this chapter examines how trauma deploys common literary devices and narrative techniques in a way that is quite committed to the trauma it struggles against. Intertextuality and repetition are explored as literary devices which re-create the trauma that Farah's characters possess. The same way literary devices are possessed by the trauma inflicted upon the characters, those characters, in turn, get caught up in the webs of their trauma memories as will be shown in Chapter Three. The characters' consciousness and perceptions become the very webs of trauma memory. The argument points out that Farah's characters in the context of a nationalist, postcolonial, divided Somalia cease to exist as characters and become a memory; a memory of crisis. LaCapra's conceptions of traumatic acting out and working-through shall be the theoretical base upon which the two pillars of the argument in Chapter Three shall be raised: firstly, the characters'

relationship with time and how this gets into the heart of their total identification with trauma and secondly the figure of the memory keeper and the relationship between the act of telling and becoming synonymous with the memory told. *Sweet and Sour Milk*, *Sardines* and *Close Sesame* trigger many questions about the narrativisation of trauma and whether it is really possible for an intensely persistent occurrence such as trauma to be represented in a narrative without both its language and characters ending up becoming this very occurrence itself.

## Chapter One: Which Memory is Remembered by Whom?

Controversial as it sounds, an abstract, seemingly universal notion such as memory has proven over the course of history to be rather relative. Memory transforms and differs from a particular context to another. Memory is rather a series of memory types which could not be encapsulated in a single concept of *Memory*. A plurality of the notion could be, clearly, observed when tracing the radical development of the meaning of memory. Anne Whitehead suggests in her book *Memory*, in which she traces the history of the development of the concept, that memory transcends the boundaries of time in the sense that 'we might as well speak of "memories" than of memory'.<sup>1</sup> She starts from Plato, who first defined the term as a distinct notion, and emphasizes how the classical and the medieval conception of memory did not regard memory as a mere recollection of past events but rather a retrieval of knowledge innately stored in the mind. Whitehead then moves to the period of Enlightenment and Romanticism in which memory evolved into an individual practice that is inherent to the uniqueness of the individual self. The development of the concept, as associated with a sense of crisis in the nineteenth century, is of more relevance to memory as dealt within this paper. Whitehead explores the notion of 'memory crisis' as presented by Terdiman which developed, later on, to what is known as contemporary trauma theory. Whitehead states that:

For Terdiman, too, the Revolution marked a fundamental disruption of memory, so that it came to seem at once lost and overly present: "Beginning in the early nineteenth century, we could say that disquiet about memory crystallized around the perception of two principal disorders: too little memory, and too much".<sup>2</sup>

The late modern period is marked by an inevitable association between the concept of

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Whitehead, *Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Whitehead, *Memory*, p.85.

memory and the crisis of having to live with 'too much' memory and hence a 'memory crisis' emerges. The rise of the notion of memory as a one of trauma is closely related to the preoccupation of 'memory crisis' as well as the increasing migration. Technological revolutions along with the different waves of decolonisation in Africa and the middle East in the second half of the 20th century and the massive political shifts that succeeded them ,all culminated in a sense of having 'too much memory' or what is now known as trauma memory. What is of most relevance here is the effect of the radical political shifts in shaping and reconstructing the collective traumatized memory.

These political shifts are akin to Trauma Studies in general and to collective traumas in particular. However, it was quite challenging to find a body of trauma theory that does not construct its arguments on the ruins of Western individual traumas. This exclusively Western construction risks the marginalisation of collective, non-Western traumatic pasts which is the exact opposite scholarly goal of Trauma Studies. Stef Craps and Gert Buelens in their paper 'Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels' examine what they described as the 'blind spots' of trauma theory through discussing the works of several authors that conceptualize trauma in the light of non-Western experiences of suffering. They argue that:

Rather than assuming that Western theoretical and diagnostic models can be unproblematically exported to non-Western contexts, the authors investigate the extent to which these models are culture-bound, and ponder how they might be modified with a view to wider applicability.<sup>3</sup>

The modification presented here is adapting the existing foundational concepts of trauma theory - that mainly rely on the testimonies of Holocaust survivors - to the reading and the understanding of a non-Western trauma narrative. It is true that there is a reliance on theory that universalizes certain Western traumatic experiences as a foundational background for this thesis; however, the analyses of novels that represent the suffering

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<sup>3</sup> Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, 'Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels', *Studies in the Novel*, 40 (2008), 1–12 (p. 3).



inflicted by colonial or autocratic oppression partly deterritorialize the Eurocentric frame of Trauma Studies.

Even though the psychological or the psychiatric reading of trauma is not of direct relevance here, it is inevitable to touch upon the psychoanalytic dimension of trauma. No clear understanding of the socio-historical implications of the collective memory in Nuruddin Farah's Somalia could take place without understanding the workings of the particular individual traumas that form, together, a collective traumatized one. Cathy Caruth's definition of trauma is one of the most widely quoted ones as it associates trauma with the modern sense of dissociation. Caruth says in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*:

a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (or avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event.<sup>4</sup>

Being based on both medical and psychological theoretical background, Caruth's definition, in turn, triggers several significant questions in the field of Trauma Studies. It is quite tempting to take Caruth's definition further and explore Farah's trilogy from a broader psychoanalytical perspective that encompasses several other theories. However, in order to see a broader picture of the collective suffering that binds Farah's characters, more emphasis shall be made on the implications of Caruth's theory on all disciplines that currently attempt to understand and explain trauma. The preoccupation of trauma on the part of history, sociology and anthropology currently extends to include literary theory that examines the relation between narrative and the representation of trauma.

To understand why memory as represented in Farah's narrative is being identified as memory of trauma, a question has to be asked; what is being recollected? The following

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<sup>4</sup> *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 4.

lines from Farah's third volume *Close Sesame* are a good example of the nature of remembrance as presented in the trilogy:

My life is landmarked by absences I cannot account for: naps, day-dreams; and just before the seizures, there are the few seconds during which I cross into a world whose logic is unknown to any living soul. How else can I describe the hole in my memory tonight? <sup>5</sup>

Farah's trilogy *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship* depicts the struggle against the autocratic regime of the Somali dictator and his supporters as well as how oppression has been variedly projected on different aspects of the Somali social structure: tribalism, sexism, etc. Therefore, what is being recalled is closely related to an individual struggle that intertwines with an overarching collective one. The previous excerpt is a little window into the consciousness of Deeriye who is the main character in *Close Sesame* and who was imprisoned by the Italians for refusing to hand in a fugitive. Associating one's memory with 'absence', 'seizures' as well as describing it as a memory with a 'hole' entail a failure in verbalizing this memory or even making sense out of it. Of all human experiences trauma is one that when verbalized is not really possessed, but it rather possesses utterance. It is an experience that does not serve as a record of the past but rather records the intensity of its occurrence. This intensity shatters common sense to its very core and therefore no medium of communication could contain trauma and represent it without being, itself, affected if not possessed by the particulars of each traumatic experience. Deeriye is, clearly, overwhelmed by the 'too much' that could not be grasped and the 'too little' which is marked by absences and voids. Further elaboration on the sense of absence and the nonsense of voids in the traumatized memory will be explored in the next sections.

Most recollections convey a sense of *loss*; a loss of a dream, a loss of a past, a loss of Homeland or even a loss of a beloved one. One of the many mother figures in Farah's

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<sup>5</sup> Nuruddin Farah, *Close Sesame (Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship Series)* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, U.S., 1992), p. 127.

second volume *Sardines*: Idil, who belongs to a generation which believes in solid traditions and religious beliefs condemns her son and his generation for adopting western ideologies that are alien to the Somali society. She says:

What is more, your generation hasn't produced the genius who could work out and develop an alternative cultural philosophy acceptable to all the members of your rank and file; no genius to propose something with which you could replace what you've rejected.<sup>6</sup>

There is also the loss of the beloved ones as associated with political persecution. The first part of the trilogy *Sweet and Sour Milk* takes the incident of Soyaan's death who was involved in clandestine political movement as a center of its plot. The main protagonist, his brother Loyaan, tries throughout the novel to make sense out of his brother's sudden death as well as preventing the General and his regime from hijacking his brother's past and transforming his history into one of an ardent supporter of the General's rule.

It is observed that there is a sense of commonality between the individual stories of sufferings as told or embodied in Farah's characters. The shared suffering of many different characters throughout the narrative brings about a question of whether there is a broader symbolic significance in a suffering which transcends the boundaries of the self and if describing the trauma memory in Farah's texts as a collectively traumatized one is a possible argument. Farah's narratives, out of the assemblage of different individual traumas, foreground a commonality of a certain practice of remembrance. Whitehead refers several times to Halbwachs and his contribution of introducing the term 'Collective Memory'. His conception of a collective memory 'demonstrates the ways in which periods of apparent inactivity are filled with a variety of ritual and ceremonial acts of commemoration that not only help the recall of particular events but also serve to hold the community together'.<sup>7</sup> Halbwachs's distinct contribution to collective memory could be summed up in the previous definition. He places emphasis on the effect of collective

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<sup>6</sup> Nuruddin Farah, *Sardines* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, U.S., 2003), p. 88.

<sup>7</sup> Whitehead, *Memory*, p.128.

memory in making sense out of the present; it shapes the collective consciousness of a certain group of people; how they see themselves and what they expect of the future. Therefore, the act of recalling or repeating practices of the past is rather an act of reproducing the present. Halbwachs's theory can be applied to the dictatorship trilogy. It is noticeable that the recollection of memory as presented in Farah's characters is not one that is characterized by nostalgia. It is a memory that seeks an explanation for the nonsense of the present through re-living an enigmatic collective past. For example, in *Close Sesame* the line between the narrator's words and the main character Deeriye's stream of consciousness is, frequently, blurred, creating a long recollection of thoughts and memories:

History was a string of intolerable nonsense: of dominations that were called civilizing missions; of "pacifying" expeditionary forces which looted and raped and robbed while they misdescribed these "mass killings" as the ennoblement of the savage: turned countries into colonies, the colonies into (peaceful) commercial centres.<sup>8</sup>

The Somali colonised history being described as 'intolerable nonsense' history does not make Deeriye's reflections a mere manifestation of the trauma pertinent to a colonial past. As a matter of fact, Deeriye carries on in the next paragraph wondering if the General's regime has done any better for his country either.

Since statistics are what governments love and live for, what has the present regime given to Mogadiscio? Deeriye asked himself. "So many roads, so many buildings, so many revolutionary showpieces and so many modern architectural wonders".<sup>9</sup>

The absurdity of Deeriye's present stimulated a remembrance of a not very dissimilar absurd past. Those who remember in Farah's novels are those who neither relate to their present nor find in their past that which they can belong to. His recurrent mental

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<sup>8</sup> Farah, *Close Sesame*, p.96.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.96.

absence, his silence, the haziness between dream and reality for him all put Deeriye's very presence into question. He, himself, becomes as obscure and incomplete as the very memory he retains. It could be argued that Deeriye's very presence is an embodiment of this memory. What Deeriye remembers and embodies is not pertinent to his character as an independent one in a narrative but it rather tackles a collective concern with the past as well as the present.

The concern with a collective past and the quest for a 'truth' about its various versions makes a brief stop before the relation between memory and history compelling. So much has been said about the relation between history and memory. This relation has, as a matter of fact, been explored from every possible angle. Many historians see memory as just one aspect of the rather more inclusive frame of history. They also argue that the rise of memory as an alternative to history is merely a postmodern condition that yearns for a therapeutic effect instead of the secular, objective historical facts. On the other hand, the rise of memory studies in the past few decades is accompanied with the rise of many voices that assume an antithesis between history and memory. Both perspectives on the relation between history and memory shall be, briefly, juxtaposed not because any of them proposes a valid reading of the texts in hand but because of the crucial significance of their very inconvenience for the reading conducted of Farah's trauma subjects.

Tim Woods, in his study of several African literary works in the light of how they deal with the proposed dichotomy of memory and history, distinguishes between history as 'an aggressively exclusionary narrative'<sup>10</sup> and memory as 'a form of counter-history that subverts false generalisations by an exclusionary history'.<sup>11</sup> In his book *African Pasts*, Woods places emphasis on the exclusionary nature of history writing which is predominately coloured by power relations. Memory, on the other hand, he argues, is more of a borderless concept that has a capacity to accommodate and include that which different versions of history decided to do away with. He argues that memory subverts

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<sup>10</sup> Tim Woods, *African Pasts, Memory and history in African Literatures* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), p.13.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.,p.13.

the authoritative, oppressing discourses of history. Giving voice to memory, through the mere act of remembering, is an act of writing back against the exclusionary versions of history. Henceforth, the rise of memory narratives play a vital role in political resistance as it creates more space for the *marginalized* to penetrate through such exclusion. As a matter of fact, memory exercises an act of resistance in what Woods described as a 'detemporalisation' of history writing which 'by constructing narratives of the past as authoritative knowledge geared towards a predictable future'. Woods continues saying that: 'Memory "spatialises" time by seeing the past as yet another aspect of the present'.<sup>12</sup>

Kerwin Lee Klein, on the other hand, criticizes the contemporary conception of Memory – capital M- as a meta-historical agent that rose on the expense of History as a science. Despite his criticism to the absurd antithesis of Memory and History, Klein seems to posit one conception as superior to the other. History, he argues, encompasses all the notions that became now encapsulated in a single conception of Memory such as: 'folk history' 'oral history' 'popular history'. He sees the rise of memory as an alternative to history a regression to religious medieval forms of sciences that is devoid of objectivity and secularism. He also refers to the promise of a therapeutic effect memory as a concept entails. 'Memory appeals to us partly because it projects an immediacy we feel has been lost from history'.<sup>13</sup> He does not argue that Memory and History stand in opposition, yet he argues for a memory the boundaries of which are limited to 'sacralizing portions of the past out of respect to the worldviews and experiences of colonised peoples, or victims of child abuse, or the survivors of the holocaust'.<sup>14</sup> He points out, sarcastically, that memory became coloured with everything that is more 'human' and 'warm' while history became the exclusionary, told –from- above discourse of the past:

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.,p.23.

<sup>13</sup> Kerwin Lee Klein, 'On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse', *Representations*, 2000, 127–50 (p. 129).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.,p.144.

History is modernism, the state, science, imperialism, androcentrism, a tool of oppression; memory is the postmodernism, the “symbolically excluded”, “the ‘body”, “a healing device and a tool for redemption”.<sup>15</sup>

These two interpretations, through what they reject or embrace, shed light on the particularity of the Somali condition in the second half the twentieth century. As for Woods, the suggested binaries of memory and history do not reflect the Somali characters’ struggle between what they remember and what they are made to remember. Memory, in the case of the dictatorship trilogy, is the untold history and not the antonym of history. It is the one that is off records and official discourses. However, what supersedes is only the archived, documented history. Therefore, the past, as presented in the text will remain to be called *memory*; a memory that is rather an assemblage of *histories* as told from below. The incoherent, fragmented stories serve as a medium through which the lost or distorted chronicles of the past can be recovered. Memory becomes integrated to history when the keepers of those stories manage to make peace with what they remember and thus integrate it to their personal and collective histories. Consequently, and based on these very texts under study, the argument of memory as an opponent of history is refuted.

However, these reservations on the rise of memory as a counterpart for history do not mean embracing Klein’s views either. The marginalisation of the memory of those who have been marginalized by the official discourse of history fosters a Eurocentric perspective of history that neglects the societies which had several different factors that contributed to shaping their pasts. The Somali society had to deal with colonialism, the dictatorships which were accompanied by political persecution as well as tribalism. Moreover, it is a society whose traditions and culture are primarily *oral* which one more thing that cannot be overlooked. This society does not belong to the same hegemonic discourse of history that deals with Africa as a whole without a thorough distinction between the particularity of each society and the different groups of people that

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.,p.138.

constitute it. Both the Somali individual and collective histories have been wiped away by colonial powers, manipulated by totalitarian regimes and shattered in the maze of tribal orality. The collective memory of this nation as embedded in its oral tradition does not provide a linear or a unified accurate account of the past but is rather a consciousness of the correlation between the past and the present. Klein considered oral history as a type of an overarching more inclusive science of History – capital H-. For Farah's Somalia, this is the *History* these people recognize. This leaves to the Somali narratives nothing but either tracing what the collective memories have accumulated over time or trying to reconstruct a new past with a promise of a new present.

There is, however, a common emphasis in these two discourses which foreground the traumatic aspect of memory in the trilogy. The *immediacy* that Klein emphasizes on along with Woods reference to the memory's ability to 'spatialize' time are both pertinent to trauma memory rather than memory. Woods, for example, defines memory in terms of the effect it is set out to perform through its inherent transversality; a thing which history does not stimulate in people. Memory bridges the gap between the past and the present. It creates a sense of proximity to a past that has been marginalized. However, this is true of memory that resists integration into a coherent narrative and hence could be called a trauma memory. A traumatic memory is not bound by the boundaries of physical time that places it in the past. A traumatized subject fails in integrating trauma into their history and making any possible coherent narrative out of it. Trauma is horrifying in its incomprehensibility and hence its resistance to integration into prior knowledge or common sense. Therefore, reading the collective Somali memory as reflected in Farah's narrative requires acknowledging the particularity of a collective memory that is defined by its wounds and gaps rather than by coherence, linearity, and documentation. In other words, their wounds and gaps make their memory, inevitably, a one of trauma.

The previously tackled issues as related to the question of memory and history should make answering the following question easier; whose memory is told in the narrative? when we speak of a certain collective social memory, identifying the tellers and the



keepers of memory becomes integral to understanding the workings of the collective memory they retain. However, before answering this question in the light of Farah's characters, another reference to Halbwachs's collective memory should be made. Halbwachs repeatedly referred to the relativity of the collective memory and how it evolves and transforms along with the individuals who bear it. Whitehead in her long contribution on Halbwachs theory says that according to Halbwachs:

The interests of one or several members, a conflicting event, or external circumstances can impinge upon a group, causing it to give rise to another group with its own particular memory.<sup>16</sup>

Since Halbwachs emphasized the dynamic workings of the collective memory, the tension arising in a narrative which represents a particular collective memory could be attributed to the struggling voices within it as there are those who fear forgetfulness, those who are aware of forgetfulness, those who vividly remember and those who belong to a generation with a confused memory and who fail to weave their past into their fragile loom of the present. All of those, for the purposes of this paper shall be called the *symbolically excluded*.

The concept has been employed by Klein, as previously mentioned, in his criticism to the over-romanticisation of memory and associating it with the marginalized. However, the way this expression will be used throughout this thesis is meant to have the exact opposite effect Klein aimed at. If he found it an exaggeration to place memory as the voice of the symbolically excluded, then, here, it will indeed be proven as a justified description of the tellers of Farah's memory narrative. Memory of the symbolically excluded is embedded in the quotidian, the present; but is overtaken by the imposed and the powerful. It is a memory that is defined more by its fissures rather than by coherence and solidity. It is the one that is orally transmitted provided that its tellers do not cross the line between the orality of their memory and the literacy of history:

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<sup>16</sup> Whitehead, *Memory*, p.128.

For Halbwachs, the memory of social groups is usually transmitted orally and emphasizes continuity, while history takes up its stance outside of oral traditions, even though it may draw upon them for evidence, and focuses on change and inconsistency.<sup>17</sup>

The symbolically excluded is the rootless memory that, due to the absurdity of its details, could not be described as anything but a one in crisis. The symbolically excluded is Farah's very narrative that tries to give voice to the fragmented, untold stories. It is Deeriye's memory who was sent by Italian colonialists to decades of imprisonment. It is the memory of Loyaan who struggled to make sense out of Somalia's past; did it start with Rome or with the Arabs or was it reborn on the hands of the General. It is, also, the memory of Amina's symbolic rape which she was made to remain silent about for political reasons. However, there is more to be explored, in the coming sections, which may render the concept more concrete.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.,p.40.

## Chapter Two: Memory as Embodied in Literary Techniques

Arguing that language has the capacity to embody that which it represents is quite controversial. It is an argument that operates on a quite abstract level, yet relies on the concrete elements of language as a medium of expression in sustaining the abstractedness of its thesis. This very coupling between the abstractedness and the technicality is what makes the concept of trauma narrative very present but equally distant. Undoubtedly, language does not, always, end up becoming the object it represents. For instance, a language that describes a landscape in a poem by Wordsworth's does not end up *becoming* this very landscape. Wordsworth's recollection of his encounter with the daffodils does not strike anyone as an unusual, overwhelming remembrance. It is a remembrance that could be encompassed and communicated via language as a medium of expression. It is the kind of remembrance where both language and the object it represents are recognized as two distinct entities; the poem and the daffodils. This distinction is recognized due to the fact that language fulfills its mission in fully possessing and hence conveying a certain image.

However, the relation between language and trauma memory is quite complex. Trauma, as mentioned before, is characterized by its linguistic inaccessibility. There is a tension that arises from the narrativisation of an experience that, by default, resists representation. Anne Whitehead has another interesting contribution to the field of Trauma Studies which is conceptualizing and formulating many of the features that are pertinent to trauma literary narratives. In her book *Trauma fiction*, Whitehead argues that writers of trauma deploy certain literary devices and narrative techniques in a way that is only pertinent to the narrative of trauma. Although this section draws heavily on Whitehead theory, it extends her argument as far as arguing that the narrative that seeks to represent trauma becomes, itself, possessed by the very trauma it represents.

The narrative's appropriation of many of the features of the traumatic experience lies in the struggle over *possession*. The untold stories and the unuttered pain all contribute to creating a sense of tension between the text's attempt to verbalize trauma, from one end

and the inevitable resistance of trauma to lend itself to verbalisation from another. It becomes the dilemma of language attempting to possess trauma versus trauma enforcing its inherent inaccessibility via dwarfing the ability of language to accommodate it.

This possession, affecting the traumatized subjects who remain haunted by an overwhelming past, also affects the language that attempts to verbalize it. Trauma possesses both the traumatized and the language it seeks to express itself through. That is why it is a relation that is primarily characterized by tension. Thus, trauma becomes the 'too much and the too little' that resists integration into a narrative. A traumatized subject fails in integrating trauma into his/her history and making any possible coherent narrative out of it. Trauma is horrifying in its incomprehensibility and hence its resistance to integration into prior knowledge or common sense. The difficulty of uttering trauma has to do with the impossibility of placing it in the past and making a 'narrative memory' out of it. Van der Kolk and Van der Hart refer to Pierre Janet's distinction between his concept of 'narrative memory' and trauma memory in one of the essays assembled in the book of Cathy Caruth:

Ordinary or narrative memory, however, is a uniquely human capacity[...]Narrative memory consists of mental constructs, which people use to make sense out of experience (e.g Janet, 1928). Janet thought that the ease with which current experience is integrated into existing mental structures depends on the subjective assessment of what is happening.<sup>18</sup>

Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, in the rest of their essay, continue to draw on Janet's emphasis that trauma is not linguistically accessible due to the performativity inherent to its nature. The difficulty of putting a traumatic memory in words leaves it to be expressed through re-enactments in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, etc. Trauma, in its failure to find a medium of expression through language, allows for an iconic form of embodiment

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<sup>18</sup> Bessel A. Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart, 'The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory And the Engraving of Trauma', in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 160.

to take place. The resistance of trauma memory to integration into the past is, consequently, a resistance to becoming a coherent, comprehensible form; a narrative. Thus, fictive narratives that represent trauma stand as an antithesis to trauma since trauma in its powerfulness manages to possess the narrative rather than being possessed by it. Consequently, a narrative that seeks to express trauma becomes, more often than not, coloured by the incomprehensibility of this very trauma.

Interestingly, the features that Whitehead associates with trauma narrative are not distinguished from the literary features of other novels. Instead, 'trauma fiction relies on the intensification of conventional narrative modes and methods'.<sup>19</sup> It is not the specific techniques used that are significant but rather how these techniques are deployed and what kind of effect they bring about.

As Sue Vice observes, the features of trauma fiction are the same as in other novels: intertextuality, the narrator, plot and story. Because of the subject matter, all these standard features are brought to their limit, taken literally, defamiliarized or used self-consciously.<sup>20</sup>

Whitehead mentions two particular literary techniques that are of relevance to Farah's fiction: intertextuality and repetition. Both techniques foreground a need to invoke a 'forgotten or repressed memory'.<sup>21</sup> What makes intertextuality a quite peculiar feature in trauma narrative is the effect this it brings about when deployed in the context of a crisis as it gives voice to the symbolically excluded and reflects a sheer struggle to possess forgotten or 'hijacked' stories. Intertextuality in trauma narratives revises, repossesses, and questions the precedent narratives and discourses of the past.

Even though intertextuality certainly entails an act of repetition, repetition as a literary device has an autonomous presence in trauma narrative. Trauma is an experience which repetitions are inherent to its nature. It possesses the traumatized by its *repetitive*

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<sup>19</sup> Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 84.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

aftershock effects. Repetition takes many forms in trauma narrative. In the case of Farah's texts for instance, an act of re-creation takes place on both macro level- each one of the three novel marks a repetition of the other and the micro level- where repetitions take place within the same novel. 'Repetition mimics effects of trauma, for it suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression'.<sup>22</sup>

### **I) Intertextuality of Remembrance...Intertextuality of Oblivion**

Intertextuality, as coined by Kristeva, meant that: 'each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read; [...] any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another'.<sup>23</sup> Intertextuality as a literary device has been subject to various classifications, which are defined according to the way in which the foregrounded text blends in with the overall narrative body and the nature of their presentation. For the purposes of reading intertextuality as a key element of trauma narratives, intertexts will be examined in terms of what they manifest as well as how they affect the narrative in which they are used.

There are two modes of intertextuality of concern here. Firstly: the intertexts which reflect the desire to create a coherent construction out of the hegemonic discourse of history and seek to make sense out of past events which cuts across generations. These intertexts articulate many of the features which characterize a traumatic memory. *Close Sesame's* main protagonist Deeriye is an ageing man who fought against Italian colonisers and who eventually dies in an attempt upon the life of the General. Deeriye's thoughts, however, go far back in time. In the extract below, he goes over Somalia's history in the period between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first two or three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This excerpt from *Close Sesame* is one of many examples in the novel in which the narrator includes historical notes from the past that, in some cases, exceed two pages in length and which might not seem directly relevant to the plot. Deeriye begins his long stream of thoughts by speaking of time:

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<sup>22</sup> Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, p.86.

<sup>23</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1990, p. 36.

Time: a city within a city, with some roads paved, some walked, some so far unused; [...] uncollected donkey corpses, unclaimed children wrapped on towels which smelled of urine and vomit. Time was also the abyss with the open door[...]Time was history: and history consisted of these illuminated prints - not truths; history was the Sayyid's struggling movements; and Osman Mahmoud's refusal to accept de Vecchi's "pacification" policies aimed at bringing under Italian control the eastern portion of the country which was the last to fall; and the unpacifiable Omar Samatar, a Naayib who, almost single-handedly, recaptured the fort of Ceel-Buur that had been lost to Vecchi's men: history composed of betrayals and Omar Samatar's finally escaping to Shilaabo now as always in the Ogaden, now but not always under Ethiopian administration; history was as much about the movements of tribal peoples with no technological know-how as it was about the conquest of territories, of "protections", of "pacificatory" methods and of created famines whether in Vietnam or in the Ogaden.<sup>24</sup>

The names he mentions are of leaders associated either with religious movements such as Sayyid or with the Italian governor of Somalia back then, Vecchi. Sayyid's questionable struggle is glorified while Vecchi's rule is associated with *pacification*. Omar Samatar, on the other hand, who struggled against Vecchi's men, was 'unpacifiable'. Names of regions mentioned such as Shilaabo and Ogaden are no longer parts of the divided Somalia (Ogaden currently under Ethiopian rule). Deeriye, however, does not pass judgment on the glorification of this or the condemnation of that. As a matter of fact, the only certain thing about his discordant stream of thoughts is a real sense of confusion and disbelief about the 'illuminated prints' of history.

The significance of this passage arises from Deeriye's reflections on time and heightens with the historical references included in the narrative. The relationship that Deeriye's recollections have with time is problematic. For him, time is a concept that is inseparable

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<sup>24</sup> Farah, *Close Sesame*, p. 94.

from space. Time is the past with its major landmarks but it is also the streets of contemporary Mogadishu that are divided between the paved ones for the rich and the inhumane ones for the tremendously poor. It is 'a city within a city'; a life within a life; those who rule and those who are on the verge of falling into the abyss. The image of the abyss mirrors a sense of being stuck in time and place. Deeriye's consciousness foregrounds how time is perceived for those who have an irreconcilable past as well as unrealized presents. His perception of time is spatialized as he is, evidently, re-living the past through the present as well as living a present that is haunted by the demons of an absurd past. The historical intertexts that are explicitly referred to are quite diverse. Not only do they reference a sad colonial past which preceded the failure of nationalism but also a present that is still affected by the overpowering pain of the past; a present that is an extension of a past in its absurdity. The horrendousness of the image of the 'corpses of donkeys' – as Deeriye describes them – is as much a physical manifestation of an atemporal past as an incomprehensible present. The past is the present for Deeriye's consciousness but a past-present that he cannot recognize. It is, as he says, 'not truths'. It does not represent him but is rather the voice of the illuminated prints that registered Sayyid's struggle as patriotism and Omar Samater's as violence against the Italians. Deeriye not only refers to different historical studies of Somali history but also draws a parallel with another collective historical trauma in Vietnam. Time, as spatialized in the scattered bits and pieces in the sites of colonialism, nationalism, poverty and oppression, mirrors the tension between attempting to make sense out of the incomprehensibility of memory and voicing dissociation from the dominant narratives of history.

Traumatized subjects have a tendency to identify with other traumas no matter how remote the experience of the traumatized 'other' seems from their own. Sue Vice raises the question of the 'right' to represent a traumatic event that the author had no direct relation with. In her book *Holocaust Fiction*, Vice gives the example of Sylvia Plath, stating: 'Plath's lack of a biographical reason for using death-camp imagery in her work opened her to the charge of appropriation, or 'subtle larceny', in George Steiner's



phrase'.<sup>25</sup> The question in Farah's case is not really one of appropriation but of the significance in establishing a connection with a traumatized parallel. How much the Somali/Vietnamese experiences correspond will not add much to the effect. What matters is that sometimes the traumatized subject has the capacity to recognize his trauma through the 'other' who does not necessarily share a similar crisis but rather shares a similar position in history; the position of the *unheard*.

However while there can be a sense of proximity that makes it possible for trauma subjects from different backgrounds and experiences to identify with one another, this does not negate the possibility of having the opposite – a sense of remoteness between those subjects. As seen in the previous example, Farah's intertexts do not engage with the main narrative. In most cases, they foreground its very uncertainty. The text is full of historical jumps and overlaps here and there without a distinction between their contexts or establishing coherence out of the line that binds the causes of recalling them. Somali nationalist figures along with Italy, Ethiopia, Vietnam and Ogaden are geographically distant from one another; yet they are cramped in a collective consciousness that is in crisis.

There is another example which refers to the suffering of the 'other', or what could better be described as an 'inverse identification', in *Sardines*. Atta, the African-American, discusses with Medina, a Somali-born woman who has had Italian education, whether a race remembers suffering or not. Atta insists that the blacks will never forget what they had to go through – and still are going through – in the Caribbean, Africa and America, while Medina strongly disagrees with the idea of the collective memory of a race.

"My race remembers sufferance."

"Remembers? 'My race remembers'?"

"Yes. Remembers," Atta said.

[...]

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<sup>25</sup> Sue Vice, *Holocaust Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 4.

“Our race is still suffering today, in Africa, in America, in the Caribbean. One doesn’t remember the pain one is suffering: one *lives* it,” shouted Medina.

“I still don’t see your point.”

“If the Jews remembered Auschwitz, then they would behave differently towards the Palestinians. I have my misgivings about this collective racial memory of which you speak”.<sup>26</sup>

There are many things that could be said about these few lines. Primarily, who is being identified with? There are a complex set of intertexts, here, that engage in a dilemma of remembrance versus forgetfulness, through identification or inverse identification with the trauma of the other. Farah’s narrative that gives a voice to the Somali suffering intertextualizes Atta’s black suffering as one of the many aspects of the Somali collective trauma. In addition, Auschwitz is intertextualized in the context of black suffering. However, it is an intertextuality that dissociates rather than creates affinity. The dissociation comes from whether a group of people are capable of collective remembrance or do they forget? Atta, as an intertext, creates a sense of identification, an affinity to the trauma of the other who is not really an *other* as much as s/he is ‘a black like me’.

Meanwhile, Auschwitz, as an intertext, is presented with a de-familiarizing effect that is associated with amnesia. Both tendencies – to identify with and dissociate from trauma – are, confusingly, combined in the same paragraph. This foregrounds the troubled consciousness that is overwhelmed with the too much that it remembers, as in the case of Atta, or with the inevitability of forgetfulness as Medina needs to believe. Farah’s intertexts, here, present an exception that illustrates the rule. Medina’s affirmation of the individualistic nature of suffering juxtaposed with Farah’s reference to a foreign experience of collective suffering such as that of Auschwitz proves that a collective suffering persists even if it is the suffering of the ‘other’ and even if it sometimes takes

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<sup>26</sup> Farah, *Sardines*, p. 210.

the form of inverse identification.

Secondly: there are few intertexts that signal a circular journey of departure and return – one of the many manifestations of ‘acting out’ trauma, particularly traumatic re-enactment. Whitehead describes how intertextuality functions in a mechanism that is akin to trauma in *Trauma Fiction* stating that:

Intertextuality is thus, like trauma, caught in a curious and undecidable wavering between departure and return. The intertextual novelist can enact through a return to the source text an attempt to grasp what was not fully known or realised in the first instance, and thereby to depart from it or pass beyond it.<sup>27</sup>

In several cases in Farah’s texts, the intertext does not really *do* something as much as it concretizes a particular state of perception. Re-enactment, as presented in the previous chapter, is a key concept here. It is the root of repetition as a literary device as will be shown in the next section. It is also a *raison d’être* of many of the intertexts in the novels. With Farah’s texts in mind, intertextuality that mirrors a lack of control by endless returns to the point of beginning or to enigmatic origins is, more often than not an expression of traumatic re-enactments. This cycle of repetition, as embodied in ‘intertexts’ that re-enact an incomprehensible past, does not necessarily re-enact in a mournful attitude through nightmares and hallucinations. The representation of collectively-inherited trauma at many points in the three texts under discussion is accompanied with a very peculiar state of re-enactment. It is the re-enactment that is peculiar to the generation of postmemory. Marianne Hirsch defined postmemory as:

The relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted

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<sup>27</sup> Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, p. 90.

to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.<sup>28</sup>

Bringing postmemory, as defined by Hirsch to the reading of Farah's intertexts, sheds light on the argument that some of Farah's intertexts are epitomes of a postmemory condition. There are two reasons to believe so. Firstly, the term 'post' in postmemory conveys the atemporality of the traumatic condition that was, evidently, passed on from one generation to the other. This atemporality is the hallmark of the intertexts which re-enact the past and trans-localize its effect by re-living its enigma in the present. Secondly, it is true that trauma, when re-enacted, takes forms of flashbacks, nightmares or even hallucinations. However, I do not believe that this form of iconic perception of past traumas is true of second or third generations who did not have a first-hand experience with trauma. A collective past memory, as will be shown in Farah's narrative, is re-enacted in a manner that may verbalize the problem better yet that fails to unravel the discordant elements of the past that this generation was meant to inherit.

Two examples, in particular, shall render this argument more concrete. *Sardines*, though dominated by the individual traumas of several oppressed female characters, manages to create a coherent body out of their uniqueness. The overarching frame of oppression becomes the thread that sows all the stories together. Medina, the main protagonist, has repeatedly been referred to as a guest in her own country. Her Marxist background, denouncing religions and refusing to circumcise her daughter as well as her clandestine activity against the General's regime all alienate her from her society. However, she is given a quite religious name; Medina. 'Madina' in the Arabic language means city. 'Medina' is probably the Somali pronunciation of it. However, if preceded with 'the' ('Al' in Arabic) it refers to Al-madina; a city in Saudi Arabia where prophet Mohamed is buried. It is a holy city in Islam that is visited quite often by Muslim pilgrims. Medina is also known by another name; Mina. The following extract explains something about the Medina-Mina story:

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<sup>28</sup> M. Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today*, 29 (2008), 103–28  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019>, p.103.

The story was that when Ibrahim was instructed to sacrifice his son to God, Satan offered to help little Ismael to escape. This happened three times, and each time Satan was hit with the stones of Ibrahim's faith in God. Mina, the place where this took place, is marked with pillars which the faithful pelt with stone. Mina is in Mecca. Her daughter's name was Medina, and she was born a Muslim although she had decided to die an infidel. Medina: the city of righteousness. Mina: the place where pillars are stoned, a symbol of Satan.

Note the distinction, if you please!<sup>29</sup>

A direct reference to two significant episodes of Islamic history is made here in order to explain the Medina-Mina story. Medina is the birth name which is meant to refer to the holy city; Madina. Mina, on the other hand, makes a reference to the Quranic version of the story of Ibrahim and his son Ismael, inevitably. Mina, in Islam, is the place in Mecca where pilgrims stoned a statue of Satan honouring the survival of Ismael and his resistance to the temptation of Satan. Even the reference to Mecca as juxtaposed with Medina sets Medina out as the more righteous city, since prophet Mohamed had to leave Mecca, suffering from persecution, and go to Medina to spread his message in a more peaceful community.

Three questions are interrelated and shall foreground the act of a collective traumatic re-enactment in the light of the above extract: how is the intertext intertextualized? What does it re-enact? And what makes this re-enactment significant in a postmemory context? Firstly, the intertextualization of Islamic references occurs in a quite conscious manner one on the part of the narrator. The narrator did not leave the significance of the names of his main protagonist (Medina and Mina) as implicit in his narrative. The narrator, instead, makes a direct intervention, in which the stories behind the names are explained and in which he clearly shows how the two names stand in antithesis. In addition, the voice of the narrator, for a moment is blurred with what could be thought to be Medina's voice. The voice that utters the command: 'Note the distinction, if you please', is

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<sup>29</sup> Farah, *Sardines*, p. 166.

unknown. It conveys a sense of both self-awareness as well as indignation. The manner in which this intertext is used portrays the postmemory subjects as ones who are affected by discordant histories yet capable of consciously juxtaposing such discordance. The distance that separates the postmemory subject from what he remembers is the same distance that separates the photographer of a war crime from the picture that is being taken. This distance is the lens of the camera. The postmemory subject is like this photographer who is still part of a horrendous experience; but manages to capture its horror whether a sense of coherence is to be made out of this horror or not.

Secondly, what is re-enacted here is one of the many elements that form the Somali culture. The Arab Muslim influence on Somalia is one that is received with mixed feelings of alienation and proximity. Somalis are not Arabs, yet Arabic is one of the two official languages in Somalia. Quran and Islamic teaching established strong ties between Somalia and the Arab world and hence, Islam is one of the dominant discourses of the Somali culture. They are not Italians but Italian was widely used before independence. Nor are they British, but a good knowledge of English is quite common. Their independence succeeded by the General's government that claimed Somalia to be a socialist country proved to be a fallacy. Medina repeatedly questioned whether she can call herself a Marxist if the oppression exercised on her people is done in the name of a Marxist ideology. All of these elements shape a pretty vague mode of remembrance and an impression of enigmatic roots. The name Medina is the re-production of an Arab Muslim influence that Medina is alienated from. Her name is Medina after the holy Muslim city, yet she denounces religion altogether. She does not recognize her Muslim heritage which is being de-familiarized in the reference to Mina; a place that is associated with Satan; disobedience, sinfulness, and rebellion. Therefore, the names, juxtaposed, suggest a contradiction that remains unresolved till the end of the novel. This contradiction could be summed up in one question: which past does a Somali belong to?

Thirdly, in a postmemory context, Medina did not fully experience the Arab-isation of Somalia nor is she a conformist; however, what is re-enacted in the problem of her name

is a wavering between the Medina and the Mina; the good and the bad; the familiar and the remote; the accepted and the rejected. The narrator, though having been direct and affirmative in the previous excerpt, does not really possess knowledge! The narrator stands incapable of passing judgement, confirming a fact or denouncing another. He brings both Medina and Mina into the picture and exits.

The same way the enigmatic Arab-Muslim-Somali memory manifested itself through the significance of holy Muslim cities, Loyaan also, in *Sweet and Sour Milk*, experiences a moment where his perception of a Somali past becomes referred to in metonymic forms. However, what is being referred to in Loyaan's recollections is not a postmemory that re-embodies what it 'remembers' but one that embodies what it was meant to forget. In the following passage Loyaan tries to collect, not 'recall' the scattered bits and pieces of his memory:

Of course, there was a cluster of mud huts which eroded and were eaten by the white ants which came out of the sand dunes surrounding this coastal city. What indiscretions! That voice again, the voice from within, Soyaan speaking through and to Loyaan: "Riding the powerful waves of the sea came the Daters, bringing with them a pharo of lighted visions, chanting a call of prayer, opening their throats singing the muezzin's dawn chant. The Daters. The Tyrants. The crescent. The cross. The Red Star of Blood and human sacrifice. What did they want? Monuments erected on the ruins, the country's rubble? Why did they so much want us caught in the wind of warring interests?"<sup>30</sup>

The re-embodiment of remote cultural memories manifests itself, sometimes, in symbolic forms. The generations which carry on remembering what they were made to remember resort to either a ritualistic or a symbolic form of perception of the past. This passage tries to search for a memory that is absent from the collective cultural memory of a society; the history of Somalia before various hegemonic foreign influences and political

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<sup>30</sup> Farah, *Sweet and Sour Milk*, p. 143.

nationalisms intervened. Loyaan's postmemory is one of oblivion. Oblivion is something generations inherit, exactly like remembrance.

This fissured past is being referred to in metonymic form. Somali past before documentation is mud huts in the middle of nowhere, described as being 'eaten' by ants: an image that conveys a consciousness of the voids of memory without being able to tell what it is a void of. However, this void is expressed through all the elements that obliterated it from the collective memory. The Arabs are the 'Daters'; the ones with whom came the first documented history. The choice of the word Dater, capitalized, conveys the sense of inequality that prevailed between Arabs and Somalis. Islam is also the 'muezzin' who chants the call for prayers and whose voice is heard but not often seen. The epithet 'tyrants' refers mainly to the General and his power and all the oppressive colonial regimes that preceded him. The 'crescent' is again Islam and the cross is the colonialism that came to the Somali land masked behind a religious missionary cause. The Marxist influence accompanied by growing ties with Soviet Russia is the 'red star of blood'. This image is quite confusing, especially when followed by 'human sacrifice'. Is it the blood of those who fought for freedom? Or the blood of the oppressed by the hands of the so-called freedom fighters? However, the Marxist-Soviet influence is rather ephemeral and affected Loyaan's consciousness more recently than the more distant Pre-Islamic and Islamic Somali history. All of these metonymic adjectives do not signify remembrance as much as they signify a schism that is beyond comprehension.

The different elements that shaped current Somali culture – the Crescent, the Cross as well as the Red Star – are all intertexts which attempt to overcome a rather more distant intertext: Somali Pre-Islamic history. What is of great significance in this text is how the line between different voices of the narrative is blurred. There is an overlap of the narrative's voices as it is also quite unclear whether it is Loyaan speaking to himself, Soyaan speaking through Loyaan, Soyaan recalling his brother's words or the narrator's commentary. All of these voices overlap to create a proximity to the voids of the memory where the different voices interweave a crisis that is not pertinent to one individual or



one particular story but that is shared by all; it is the crisis of *all* the voices. Moreover, these voices seem to speak directly to the readers and address them as sharers of the crisis of oblivion.

The manifold voices in Farah's novels are very committed to their own troubled pasts, but there is not one single way of interpreting the line that binds these stories together in a way that constructs a broader understanding of the underlying discourses behind a nation's collective suffering. The intertexts in Farah's narrative do not only highlight the relation of the individual to his/her traumatized past, but also establish a link with other traumas. The dilemma of a society that is torn between dominant as well as the dominated narratives of the past, the burden of remembrance and the maze of oblivion is articulated in a narrative that poses more questions than gives answers.

## **II) Tropes of Repetition as a Crafted Memory**

In the context of trauma fiction, repetition has a quite similar pattern to trauma as it brings about an act of re-living certain episodes of an unreconciled past. 'In its negative aspect, repetition replays the past as if it was fully present and remains caught within trauma's paralyzing influence'.<sup>31</sup> In other words, repetition seeks to retrieve a paralyzed past or an unlived one.

The sense of loss which dominates Farah's narrative is inevitable in a context where all his characters engage in representing a case of a collective trauma. Thematically, Farah's texts are linked by this overwhelming sense of loss; however, the text expresses this loss in many forms one of them is repetition. Repetition, in Farah's narratives, either trans-penetrates through the three different texts or occurs within the same text. Repetition that links the three novels manifests itself through the repetition of plot structures and storylines which run through the three narratives. Each novel marks a new departure followed by a return to the core theme that binds the three novels of the trilogy together. These departures and returns are embarked on by Farah's protagonists who share a clear

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<sup>31</sup> Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, p.86.

element of unity between them and who are being produced and re-produced in different ways throughout the trilogy.

As for thematic repetition, the struggle against Siad Barre, the Somali dictator, runs through the three novels. Political oppression, in all texts, is the frame within which other forms of oppression in the Somali community are criticized. Stemming from this concept, the figure of the patriarch becomes a focal point in the narrative be it the General, the Italian coloniser, the chieftain of a tribe or the father of the family. What makes one novel a re-production of the other is not just the quite similar themes they deal with, but also the way the three plots are crafted that makes them loosely connected to one another.

At a basic level, the novels have this connection to one another as there are references in the first novel *Sweet and Sour Milk* to characters that will appear only in the second one *Sardines*. There is also in *Sardines* a reference to characters from *Sweet and Sour Milk* and their struggle against the General. It is true that the characters of the three different texts do not interact with one another. However, there is evidence that all of them belong to the same circle and that they share certain characteristics.

Delving deeply into the three novels, it is noticeable that the texts follow a not very dissimilar plot structure. The exposition of Farah's characters and their dilemmas does not only occur at the beginning of the novel but happens throughout the novel. The expositions in the three novels start with a mystery taking place. There is Soyaan's murder in *Sweet and Sour Milk* that the novel commences with and which remains unresolved till the end. There is also the mysterious Medina's separation from her husband in *Sardines* which had an undeniable political aspect to it. With regard to *Close Sesame*, the text itself is written in an obscure style which is inevitably projected on the depiction of the main character; Deeriye. Moreover, Deeriye engages in deciphering the mystery of whether his son and his friends are involved in a clandestine action against the General or not.

The enigmatic beginnings characterizing Farah's texts are accompanied by several binaries that keep the momentum of the narratives going and which accentuate the

struggle in the story. It is always the memory of the Italian reign versus the growing Somali nationalist fervor; the silencing regime of the General versus the silenced; the Arab Somalia versus the Italian one; the General's tribe and its allies versus the less privileged tribes; tradition versus modernity; Italian language versus Somali; the oral indigenous culture versus the written; the silenced memory versus the dominant discourses of history; the symbolically excluded opposition versus the regime supporters; etc. These binaries are presented in a narrative in which the setting is not given much importance. The absence of a noticeable distinction between different settings in the three novels along with highlighting those binaries heightens a sense of claustrophobia in the narrative. The characters along with the readers become compelled to face the lack of choice. Finally, the ending always highlights the fact that the origin of all struggles against oppression -be it of gender, tribal or racial background- is rooted in the dictatorial regime of Somalia that strips people off their freedom. The endings of the three novels mark a return to the start point. Loyaan's fate becomes like his twin brother Soyaan; unknown. Medina realizes that the 'journey of the acceptance of roles is final'<sup>32</sup> and gets back with Samater in a silent reunion that is dominated by the non-verbalized political and personal tension between them rather than by a real reconciliation. Old Deeriye's death at the end of the last novel posits questions rather than being a finale. His death becomes an unresolved mystery; it is uncertain whether it has been a suicide or a murder. The death of Deeriye is, as a matter of fact, a return to the original trauma of oppression which Farah carries on working- through in the novels that succeeded the trilogy of Dictatorship. Farah's protagonists in the three novels- with a slight exception of Close Sesame's Deeriye - are all young Somalis who were products of European education. They either embody the manifold oppression imposed by Barre's dictatorship or engage in a struggle against the General's regime. Each one of the three main characters; Loyaan, Medina and Deeriye is, for various reasons, a re-production of an 'outcast' character. Loyaan is the only one who rejects the official version about the death of his brother and is antagonized by his

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<sup>32</sup> Farah, *Sardines*, p.285.

father as well as the General's regime. Medina is a quite strong Somali woman and is repeatedly criticized for refusing to circumcise her daughter and for breaking up with Samater. Deeriye, on the other hand, stands for a more traditional, Islamic, symbol. He speaks Italian and English but unlike Farah's other protagonists, Deeriye is more attached to his indigenous culture as well as religion. However, he dies at the end in an attempt at the General life signaling by that a major act of rebellion. The re-production of protagonists who are figures of dissidence in the novels highlights the inherited burden of a collectively oppressed memory or a troubling oblivion. Henceforth, Farah's characters are interwoven in the whole body of the narrative in a way that makes it inevitable for Farah's characters to swirl in the vortex of a narrative that keeps commencing from where it ended.

On the other hand, some elements of repetition are more localized within the very narrative body of a certain novel. I would like to focus on repetition as it manifests itself through the deployment of literary tropes that bring about an inevitable sense of re-creation. Some literary tropes such as photographs and dreams entail an act of repetition that is inherent to their nature. Farah crafts his narrative in a way that resembles the troubled memory of his subjects; full of frozen moments which are inevitably replayed over and over again. Whitehead refers to the trope of photograph as a manifold device; 'the photograph itself represents a reconstitution: it shows us reality in a past state and at the same time evidences that what we see has indeed existed'.<sup>33</sup>

I would like to put across two examples from both *Close Sesame* and *Sweet and Sour Milk* in which the trope of photograph is used in a way that conveys an endless cycle of departure and return. Firstly, Deeriye who spent long time in prison in *Close Sesame* mentions how he missed out on his children growing up and how he has been absent from their photos. The narrative also states how he can never forget when his picture was first taken in prison:

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<sup>33</sup>Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, p.130.

The man took a photograph of Deeriye. Deeriye never could forget that day. There was a thing the white man held up in his left hand, a thing which lit like a lamp, a thing which produced a flash whose life was brief. Then came darkness in its wake. And he took another photograph. Then another. And then another.<sup>34</sup>

The previous passage signals that one of Deeriye's most memorable moments was when his picture was taken in prison. Two images convey repetition: - Deeriye's memory recalling the act of having his picture taken as well as the picture itself as a means of bringing Deeriye's day of imprisonment to the present. The narrative itself captures a mental picture of the, clearly, repetitive action of photographing Deeriye. The very process of having one's picture taken is not, commonly, memorable; however, Deeriye seems to have an accurate recollection of each photo being taken of him in prison. The 'flash', the 'lamp' followed by 'darkness' seems to suggest an association between the moment while the picture is being captured and light. It also associates the action of photographing being over with darkness. Moreover, an emphasis is made on the short-lived nature of the flash as opposed to the timelessness of pictures. These associations juxtapose the awakening light of remembrance with the dark voids of oblivion and vagueness. Thus, Deeriye's prison photographs repeat the past through being framed in the consciousness of the present rendering by that the narrative's relationship with time problematic. This tension arises from the fact that the picture ceases to be a register of the past and infiltrates to the perception of one's present.

This enigmatic sense of time manifests itself in another photograph in the first volume *Sweet and Sour Milk*. Loyaan, in his visit to Margaritta, his late brother's secret lover and the mother of his child, encounters the knot that connects the brother to the son; a photograph of little Marco signed by Soyaan:

She had entered the house [...] and come carrying with her the framed photograph of her Marco a month old. [...]She dismantled the frame. She showed Loyaan the

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<sup>34</sup>Farah, *Close Sesame*, p. 39.

inscription Soyaan had scribbled on the back of the photograph [...]

“He will die, this cursed man. The first pursuer is here.”

He has, at most, a hundred breaths to draw....

But the parades have taught his uniform to march....

When they wrench his body to pieces, will they hear

A sigh as his spirit is sucked into the air

That *they* must breathe?<sup>35</sup>

This photograph of the little child Marco has more into it than merely being a photograph due to the ambiguous inscription that came with it. The ambiguity is unleashed by the act of dismantling the frame which signals liberation of the trapped memory of the past and allows it to trespass on the present. The picture is, evidently, one of a small child; however such an intimate thing like a photograph of a beloved one does not only symbolize a personal memory since it creates a link between the personal and the collective. This link indicates that an overarching, compelling collective concern managed to infiltrate the simplest, most intimate individual memories. The inscription that was written by Soyaan is the words of a possibly murdered man which make a static picture of a child gain a dynamic presence. Henceforth, like Deeriye’s prison picture, the little child’s picture problematizes its relationship with time by occupying a place between the living and the dead. The uncertainty surrounding the ontological status of the picture unfolds several acts of death and resurrection that the picture brings about. The picture resurrects Soyaan through his words which act as an active agent in the present. There is also the implied death of the General, in whose death there is a resurrection for the people who cannot breathe under his reign. Finally, Margaritta refers to the fact that the inscription was written in the day of the execution of ten Sheikhs whose deaths are reenacted in the poem of Soyaan. The transversal words of Soyaan make the death of the Sheikhs a prelude to the resurrecting death of the General. Their death, as a

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<sup>35</sup>Farah, *Sweet and Sour Milk*, p. 135,136.

manifestation of political oppression marks a countdown to the days of dictatorship. The problematized relationship with time is also embodied in the recurrent dreams as depicted in the narrative. Dreams in the three novels emerge from different contexts; yet they highlight the sameness of effect they bring about. In many cases, they iconically perform the unsaid in the narrative. The nature of dreams in the narrative is committed to the traumatic context it emerges from. Dream, as a trope in the narrative, has been repeatedly deployed in a manner that foregrounds the loop which both the characters and the plot are hung up on. There is at least one significant dream in each novel that triggers questions about the cyclical maze of the unsaid. At the beginning of each chapter of *Sweet and Sour Milk*, there are lines in Italics that precede the chapter and which are somewhat irrelevant to the plot. These lines, though not being clearly stated as dreams, resemble dreams in their nature and effect. For example one of the chapters starts with:

Like a baby born at the crack of the whip of dawn, ...with the cock crowing in the distance, calling the vanishing apparition of the night, calling the frogs in the marshes; and life at a standstill, the sand blind, and sharks grazing in the greenless weeds in the bottom of the sea [...] The baby looks at a stone house which he can see in the reflection of the water in the lagoon.<sup>36</sup>

These lines form a story in its own right, isolated from the main plot; yet, connected to it in a way. They resembles children's bedtime stories in their elements; the baby, the dawn, the cock, the frogs, the apparitions, the sea, the lagoon, etc. However, it is also dreamlike in its surrealistic atmosphere and phantasmagoric figures. These lines have the effect of invoked recollections or visions. In many ways, this prelude of the chapter engages in images of cyclical nature; the birth of a baby, the dawn, the reflection of the house as seen in the lagoon. The vision lacks a beginning, middle and end; it lacks a home and it brings about a sense of being unfitting in the overall body of the narrative. The house which is far and could only be seen as a reflection in the water triggers the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.,p.105.

question of a homeland which is out of reach; yet, the new dawn comes with the promise of a rebirth even with the sharks feasting over the sea weed.

The ambiguous status of dream and reality continues to manifest itself in *Sardines*. Sagal, the wretched young woman torn between finding her own identity and dreams from one end bringing about a change in her country from another was asked by her mother, about how she could achieve her dream of traveling abroad if she does not win the swimming competition. Sagal replies saying:

I will dream again and again. Medina told me that Beydan before she died saw a dream in which she wasn't the central focus, and therefore she died. The focal point of the dream is myself. [...]The dialectics of my dream are such that I see the contradiction in the future I invent and what life's reality has in store for me'.<sup>37</sup>

Here, the status of dream is quite complex. It is less ontologically obscure than the example from *Sweet and Sour milk* as it explicitly speaks of dreams and does not merely enact them. However, it blurs the distinction between dreams as a phenomenon pertinent to sleep and dreams as aspirations for the future. Sagal expresses readiness to enter a cycle of repetition but a repetition of wishes for finding her own path in life. She rejects not being the centre of her dream; her life. Beydan, the character referred in Sagal's words belongs to the part the first novel; *Sweet and Sour Milk*. Beydan, in many ways, stands in antithesis to Sagal. Beydan re-enacted the suffering she experiences in real life in her night dreams while Sagal clearly tries to work through a troubled heritage that she was meant to inherit. In that sense, Sagal in *Sardines* acknowledges that dream is a choice, while Beydan's is overpowered by her uncontrollable night dreams. The dichotomous dreams of Sagal and Beydan reflect a sense of inherited passivity which is continuously lived and re-lived.

The ambiguity of time frames persists and reaches its peak in *Close Sesame*, a text with a

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<sup>37</sup>Farah, *Sardines*, p.46.



narrative that reveals several layers of complexity. Old Deeriye's fragmented consciousness interweaves with the narrative - colouring it with certainties. An epitome of this is when the boundaries between Deeriye's wakefulness and sleep dissolve creating an uncertainty about Mukhtaar's death:

Hedged in with soft whispers and the weak, reassuring light from the lamp, Deeriye woke. He saw Mursal and Zeinab; the setting had changed (they were in Mursal's house) and Yakuub was not there. Was he dreaming? Had he seen it all in a dream? Had his nap turned into a long sleep in which he had dreamt about Mukhtaar's death? What was real? and what time was it? Was it dusk? or Dawn? What day was it? What date? <sup>38</sup>

The narrative does not really reveal whether Deeriye was napping or not. The reader shares the same place of uncertainty as the characters about the reality of the incidents taking place. The cycle of sleep and wakefulness does not place emphasis on actions of the plot as much as it emphasizes the cryptic air that possesses the narrative. In the previous example, the death of Mukhtar is not placed in the centre of this passage but rather foregrounds Deeriye's vague perception of this death which consequently leaves the reader dubious. Henceforth, the whole plot is not as affected by the politically loaded significance of the death of a major character but rather by the recurrent departure and return that characterizes the narrative. Thus, the lines overlap between events taking place in the past, events taking place in the present and events not taking place at all. The narrative, as exemplified in *Close Sesame*, is devoid of time, static in place and indifferent to incidents and hence becomes itself a journey in a paralyzed consciousness.

This chapter discussed how language as a medium of expression becomes affected by the memory it tries to accommodate. Trauma memory is primarily characterized by its

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<sup>38</sup>Farah, *Close Sesame*, p.126.

capacity to possess those it inflicts. As reflected in Farah's three novels, trauma memory proves to be capable of possessing the literary devices as presented in the narratives. Drawing on Whitehead's writings on trauma fiction, intertextuality and repetition were explored as literary techniques that attempt to express trauma but end up becoming embodiments of this trauma. Intertextuality, in the light of Hirsch's concept of postmemory, illustrates that when it is deployed in the context of a memory crisis, it stands for the voices of the symbolically excluded. Trying to possess, comprehend or invoke a past that was not directly experienced haunts the pages of the narrative through both conscious and an unconscious allusion to previous discourses. As for repetition, as shown in the second section of this chapter, it manages to trans-penetrate through different elements of the narrative mimicking by that the traumatic re-enactments. There is a repetition that occurs within the same text and repetition that binds the three novels together through the re-production of some elements of the three plots as well as recurrent literary tropes. Having ended this chapter analysing repetition as an embodiment of traumatic re-enactment, the following chapter will commence with extending the argument as far as questioning if Farah's characters are also concretisations of these very traumatic re-enactments.

### Chapter Three: Characters as a Corporeal Enactment of Memory

#### I) Characters as memory: Where Does the Argument Come From?

Memory -any memory- contributes to burdening the consciousness as well as the identity of its keepers. Ordinary memories tend to be perceived by their keepers as distinct entities from their very existence. However, humans' consciousness perishes in the maze of the traumatic memory which resists making coherent sense. The main argument posited in this chapter is that characters, in the light of Farah's texts, have the capacity to become they very memory they keep and/ or tell. This argument was inspired by few lines mentioned briefly by Maeve McCusker in her book *Recovering Memory*. McCusker presents a crucial point in the following few lines while examining trauma memory in the works of Patrick Chamoiseau . The Antillean memory as represented in the fiction of Chamoiseau is one that McCusker believes to be re-experienced rather than remembered. She argues that:

The effect on the community is described in primarily corporeal terms, a kind of reflex action which transcends the cognitive or the intellectual...Characters do not so much remember as embody memory, just as trauma cannot be remembered as re-experienced.<sup>39</sup>

This corporeal expression of memory chimes with LaCapra's distinction between two modes of dealing with trauma; acting out and working- through. Acting out is re-living the traumatic experience in which the perception of different time frames (past, present and future) becomes blurry. 'In acting-out, the past is performatively regenerated or re-lived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the repressed.'<sup>40</sup>

Trauma in its corporeal expression is re-enacted in the form of dreams or flashbacks. Traumatic re-enactments indicate the debility of language as a medium of expression in

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<sup>39</sup> Maeve McCusker, *Patrick Chamoiseau: Recovering Memory*, 1st edn (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p. 43.

<sup>40</sup> Dominick LaCapra, 'Trauma, Absence, Loss', *Critical Inquiry*, 25 (1999), 696–727 (p. 716)

conveying a sense of entrapment. The traumatized subject is unable to engage in an interactive communication as experiences of re-enactments are, clearly, *solitary* ones. However, with reference to Farah's characters, the corporeal re-enactment of trauma happens through the very characters upon whom a collective trauma has been inflicted. The characters become the very corporeal expression of their traumas.

Working-through trauma, on the other hand, has been primarily described by LaCapra as an 'articulatory practice' that allows a further distinction between the past and the present to take place. Working-through, via speech, mourning, or critical thinking, etc, functions as a counteractive process to the compelling repetition of acting out. 'Through memory-work, especially the socially engaged memory work involved in working-through, one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recognize something as having happened to one (or one's people) back then that is related to, but not identical with, here and now'<sup>41</sup>. Henceforth, adapting LaCapra's conceptions of 'acting out' and 'working-through' to our understanding of the observation of McCusker about the works of Chamoiseau lays bare a rather general theoretical base for the particulars of Farah's narratives which will follow. In the case of the dictatorship trilogy, the characters engage in acting out or working-through either a memory that has been transmitted to them and to which they have never been witnesses, or memories that were formed through a direct experience, or both. This evokes again Hirsch's postmemory which has been discussed in the previous chapter. Many characters recall that 'which cannot possibly have been remembered or which have been so successfully repressed as to require significant memory work'<sup>42</sup>. Therefore, characters do not merely embody the trauma they remember, but more often than not a collective trauma that has never been experienced. Trauma memory which haunts second or third generations has been formed without a direct contact with what inflicted this trauma. Angela Connolly is a psychiatrist and Jungian analyst who is preoccupied with the issue of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.,p. 713.

<sup>42</sup> Maeve McCusker, *Patrick Chamoiseau: Recovering Memory*, 1st edn (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p. 134.

‘intergenerational trauma’ and has lately published a paper in which she refers to the previously established idea. She says:

These memories of the non-experienced consist initially not of images but of transmitted sensations and emotions and that it is exactly because these ‘memories’ are not experienced that they acquire their repetitive, static and coercive character.<sup>43</sup>

The generations which follow the generation of the survivors act out emotions and sensations as there is no recollection of a visual experience to be re-enacted. This creates a sense of a shared traumatized consciousness that deals with the enigmatic origins of trauma. These generations do not only struggle with recovering from an inherited traumatized past but also struggle to trace the root of this trauma. They struggle to fill in the gaps of the unremembered or the unknown. Therefore, it is noticeable that many individual recollections in Farah’s narrative combine several aspects of a Somali traumatic past in a fragmentary manner that signals confusion about the origin of the traumatized heritage.

Having referred to this heritage, the characters of Farah becoming the site of their memories manifests itself in mimicking two effects that are pertinent to trauma memory. Firstly, characters act out their trauma memory by appropriating the nature of their traumas relationship with time. Blurring the boundaries between past and present in the process of acting out trauma differs from a rather more coherent perception that is achieved through the counter process of memory-work. The following section shall examine how Farah’s characters’ relationship with time resembles the manner through which their very traumas process time. Secondly, characters also become a memory that tries to recover from its suffering by trying to fill in the gaps and make peace with its fissures through the recurrent figure of memory keepers in Farah’s narratives. Memory keepers are associated with the oral, symbolically excluded memory which tells scattered

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<sup>43</sup> Angela Connolly, ‘Healing the Wounds of Our Fathers: Intergenerational Trauma, Memory, Symbolization and Narrative’, *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 56 (2011), 607–26 (p. 612)

bits and pieces of what is remembered, as well as engaging in the act of expressing the emotions that has been passed on through inherited collective suffering. Two particular memory keepers from Farah's trilogy shall be analyzed in this light: Soyaan and Deeriye.

## **II) The Characters of Farah and Time**

Like trauma memory, individuals remain in a time frame that is stuck between the present and the past. Along these lines, the characters of Farah tend to perceive themselves and are perceived by others in a way that blurs the nature of their time contexts. They act out their trauma memories by embodying the very *absence* that infects their perception of the past. Absence does not 'happen' but rather mirrors the trans-historical aspect of trauma. A memory that is characterized by absence indicates that the traumatic experience continues to be re-lived without the ability to make sense out of it or place it in a narrative memory. Narrative memory has been referred to already as a concept introduced by Pierre Janet to distinguish between trauma and memory. Janet argues that we call trauma 'trauma memory' out of convenience and that there exists a clear distinction between trauma and a narrative memory. Janet observes that memory is an action of storytelling while trauma resists integration into language. If the person experiencing or re-experiencing trauma could not recount this very experience in a linear, coherent, narrative memory, then this rests indicative of a problematic perception of time. The perception of time loses its linearity and becomes perceived not by its continuity but rather by its haunting, cyclical absence. When characters are possessed by the intense absence of a traumatic past their existence is reconstructed in a way that mimics this non-linear nature of absence.

The memory of Farah's symbolically excluded characters is a memory of what has been forgotten or repressed. It could also be a mere deficiency rather than a memory; a state of unknowing. To possess the memory of what has been done away with by the official discourses of politically oppressive frameworks ultimately means having a memory that has no place in time. Failing to distinguish between the past and the present - as well as re-living the past in the present- reinforces this sense of 'being' stuck and hence the

cyclical perception of time continues. Consequently, the past that the symbolically excluded seems to possess rather possesses them.

Three characters from the three novels best exemplify the narrativisation of the problematic relationship with time trauma memory bearers have. The main focus in this section, apart from old Deeriye from *Close Sesame*, is placed on two secondary characters and the way they perceive themselves. Amina from *Sardines* as well as Beydan from *Sweet and Sour Milk*, with their few appearances, both intertwine in their individual traumas with the overarching political oppression, so that the two things form together a bigger narrative in which time is unrecognizable and in which characters do not recognize themselves. The analysis will start from the second novel *Sardines* to establish a link between the female protagonist; Amina of the second novel and Beydan from the first. Then ideas will be further developed in the light of the most complex characters in the third novel: Deeriye.

In the second novel *Sardines*, Amina, one of the female protagonists, is depicted with recurrent recollections of her gang rape incident and her subsequent impregnation. Being the daughter of one of the regime's generals, her rape is described as a political one. The trauma of her rape as associated with an overarching, oppressive political framework is reflected in the following excerpt in which the words of the narrator overlap with those of Amina, creating in this way a recollection that brims with uncertainty.

Amina was now immersed in the waters of her flooded brain and was saying to herself: I am come from yesterday; I've broken a barrier and have arrived in a land of no return. Yes. I am come from yesterday. Her tongue did not stumble on the illogicality of the statement. Her past was a large holdall into which anything she could not carry was thrown.<sup>44</sup>

The image of being immersed in water does not confirm an act of drowning. It creates an uncertain zone where drowning and survival intersect. The flooded brain tries to

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<sup>44</sup> Farah, *Sardines*, p.134.

articulate the inarticulatable- the recollections that overwhelm the memory. This flood of recollections, in the previous extract, colors the perception of time frames as presented in the tenses used in the narrative. The inconsistent tenses signal a fragmented consciousness and suggest the paradox (of the past and the present) that is capable of bringing about a homogenous state of absence. Amina says 'am' followed by the infinitive 'come' and followed by 'yesterday'. In repeating 'I am come from yesterday' Amina becomes her very trauma. Rape, as an experience with evidently deferred aftershock effects takes over Amina to the extent that her self-awareness becomes synonymous with the memory of the pain of the rape, the rapists and the futile resistance she tried to make. She 'breaks the barrier' that separates the past from the present creating by that a status of neither remembrance nor oblivion but absence; absence of a comprehensible past that blurs the dividing borders of time. The image of a holdhall denotes a heavy weight; repressed thoughts; a burden that is dragged from the past to the present without ever being unpacked and hence never comprehended.

The recollections that into which Amina delves in the lines that follow the quotation above, in the following lines, are more of a fragmented flashback:

Now out of the hole rose the ghosts of the three men who had raped her, although in actual fact, whenever she thought about them their three faces were moulded into one whose eyes stared at the wound he and the others had inflicted upon her..."We're doing this not to you but your father," one of them had said to her...The rest of the sad story is stained with blood, Dracula red, blood on her legs, a knife by her side, and pain, what pain.<sup>45</sup>

Here, imagery runs throughout Amina's reflections. The memory of Amina is explicitly referred to as 'the hole' – the same reference was made to Deeriye by himself in describing his memory - the rapists are ghosts; an image that suggests a surreal perception of the memory of the rape. The image of ghosts along with the image of the faces that have been moulded in one sheds light on this experience happening in a non-

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.,p.135



time and non-place vacuum. It is as if the entire experience, as recalled, does not belong to the real world. The flashback of memories is described by Caruth as one of significant relationship with time:

The history that a flashback tells ... is therefore, a history that literally has no place, neither in the past, in which it was fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise image and enactments are not fully understood.<sup>46</sup>

Hence, the rape could not be integrated in a narrative memory and the only utterance associated with it is: 'We're doing this not to you but your father'. This sentence changes the nature of the rape incident and expands it from a personal trauma to a collective, political one. Medina even later says to Amina that every rape is political. Paying the price as a woman by being raped in an attempt to avenge her father is not divorced from the oligarchical regime of the General that has transformed Somalia into the setting for the systematic rape of its people. In her fragmented perception of the final scene of her rape - as she only perceives it as blood stains and a knife without her physical presence in it - Amina announces the moment that she ceases to exist as person and the beginning of her existence as a trauma memory.

The absence of a formal narrative memory and substituting it with experiences of re-enactment of an iconic nature also manifests itself in the experience of another female character in *Sweet and Sour Milk*. Beydan was Loyaan's father young second wife; Keynaan, whom he married against her will after killing her husband of torture. Beydan was more of Keynaan's trophy for serving the General's regime than a wife. There is another metaphorical - and may be an unnarrated physical - rape of Beydan. The consciousness of Beydan is rarely ever present till the end of the narrative, though she is assumed to have a lot to say with the politically loaded murder of her husband, her forced marriage to his killer, and her impregnation by him. Towards the end of the novel, Beydan dreams a dream that unravels the manifolds of traumatic experiences that

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<sup>46</sup> Caruth, p.153.

inhabits her consciousness. Beydan, who was pregnant, dreamt that she had a boy. She was telling Loyaan about her dream:

“I wasn’t there. Interesting, isn’t it? I wasn’t there in this dream myself. I wasn’t there in my own dream. But I dreamt it all the same. I dreamt I had a boy. But unlike in dreams I usually have, I wasn’t the centre-point, I wasn’t even there.”

[...]

“Soyaan. Soyaan was the name bestowed on the child.”

[...]

“You don’t want him called Soyaan?”

“No,no,no.”

“I wasn’t the one who gave it,” she said.

“Who then?”

“I wasn’t there, remember. I wasn’t in *my* dream.”

[...]

“Do you know why I wasn’t there in my own dream?”

“I ‘ll believe you if you tell me”

[...]

“I am bewitched. I am dead. I am not here. The voice you are hearing is not mine. That is why I wasn’t in my dream. It explains. I am dead. I am not here with you.”<sup>47</sup>

This dream is the most complex one in the dictatorship trilogy. Its symbolic significance makes it the most inclusive of all trauma experiences as embodied in the three texts. Two important things should be closely looked at here; the nature of trauma experience narrativised and how it is being re-enacted.

There is, evidently, a direct experience of trauma to which Beydan has been a witness and a traumatized subject at the same time. Her husband's murder and her forced marriage to Keynaan have definitely geared towards an alienation from oneself. Beydan, in dreaming that she was not there and in identifying with a dream and considering it indicative of the subjective reality of her non-existence unravels a complete loss of the self to trauma memory and traumatic present. She is absent exactly like her traumatized past. Dream and reality overlap and problematize the relationship of Beydan with time. Her dream, the unreal world, is her future and her reality is the dream which she dreamt in the past.

However, it is hard to say that this dream, on a symbolic level, does not denote more than Beydan's personal trauma experience. She is a guest in her own skin as mirrored in the details of her dream. As the narrator of *Sardines* says: 'the African is a guest whether in Africa or elsewhere', and hence a collective sense of alienation is implied in the dream of a woman alienated from her own self. The years of oppression exercised on a collective level (colonisation and nationalist autocratic regimes combined) has left their print on the consciousness of an individual who is a woman in an African society; also an African in a country previously ruled by white colonisers and at the same time a widow of a man who the regime of the general wanted dead. This transmitted feeling of alienation is firstly given physicality through the act of dreaming and then given a humanly dimension through Beydan's complete identification with her trauma memory. The performativity of trauma is evident in both cases.

This performativity triggers the second aspect of significance of this dream: how does Beydan as a trauma memory herself engage in re-enactment. Dreams are obvious manifestations of re-enactment as discussed before in the section dealing with repetition in the previous chapter. However, with Beydan, her dream does not only repeat her trauma but re-produces her as an individual who embodies her very trauma. The dream of Beydan re-produces her as an invisible, silent, passive observer. It re-produces her

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<sup>47</sup> Farah, *Sweet and Sour Milk*, p.239.

absence. This sheds light on another element of re-enactment in the experience of Beydan which is the re-enactment of trauma memory through doubleness. Whilst Beydan is re-produced in a way that foregrounds her absence, Soyaan, whose murder disguised as a natural death has shocked everybody was re-created through Beydan who, in her dream, gave birth to a new Soyaan to only highlight the complexity between her individual trauma and the overarching collective one. Soyaan himself is a memory of struggle and heroism that the regimes has constantly tried to wipe off and which was re-created by Beydan in a world that is out of time and place; the world of dreams.

Thirdly and lastly, Deeriye from *Close Sesame* is an epitome of the problematic bond between the traumatized subject and the perception of time. The presence of Deeriye in the novel is rather symbolic. He is a character that stands for many ideals and not a character that, conventionally, accelerates the plot of the novel. Deeriye has been a matter of discussion by many of Farah's critics and has been considered as the best crafted of his characters.

Deeriye, however, is more of a state of mind, a symbol and an idea rather than a character of flesh and blood. It is quite difficult to pinpoint incidents in which Deeriye embodies his fragmented memory and that is because he is the exception that illustrates the rule. Deeriye does not exist as a character in the first place. He has always been interspersed with the overall spirit of the narrative. He haunts the narrative as a memory that has long been infected by oblivion, absence and absurdity. He is the trauma memory that is inflicted upon the narrative. Deeriye is 'not so much a physical person so much as an abstraction ... *He was an idea; he was a national notion ... an image ... a kaleidoscope*<sup>48</sup>

Deeriye stands for religion and tradition in a novel that is pre-occupied with history more than literariness. The way Deeriye is depicted in the novel foregrounds all the discordant elements of Somali history; the Arabs, the European colonisers, the General's dictatorship. All these different fragments of Somali history are embodied in Deeriye who best exemplifies the cyclical nature of such history. Being an abstraction, Deeriye does

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<sup>48</sup> Farah, *Close Sesame*, p.12.

not belong to a certain time frame and his relationship with the present seems quite questionable. His consciousness of the voids of his memory has been referred to in the previous chapter and is worth tackling from one more angle in the light of the following excerpt:

Deeriye felt his chest prepare to explode: he held his breath and waited, anxious, his face pained. He was becoming more or less certain that he hadn't dreamt the death of Mukhtaar, and that somehow he had a few hours whose 'absence' would perhaps dominate this eventful night. But he dared not ask anyone to account for the 'hole' in the sieve of his memory. What had happened? Had he suffered a severe attack? <sup>49</sup>

The racing heart beats, the breathlessness and the anxiety possessing Deeriye at this point are not separable from the absence he delves into. More often, he loses himself in a state between dream and reality, unable to tell after his recovery from it whether he was dreaming or witnessing a reality. His memory is described as one of holes; a sieve in which things are neither forgotten nor remembered but are rather absent. He is quite uncertain about things going on around him and fails to locate them in a place in his memory or establish coherence out of their occurrence. The previous passage illustrates the way Deeriye himself functions in a way that is not different from both his individual and collective memory. He is an idea with no place or a linear time and he is also a combination of all the fragmented uncertainties he tries to grasp. He is not sure whether the death of Mukhtaar took place or not nor can he, overpowered by absence, recognize his very existence.

### **III) The Characters of Farah as Memory Keepers**

The notion of the individual emerging as a site of memory does not only emerge from how the characters perceive themselves as shown in the previous section, but is also created by how these characters are perceived by their surroundings. The figures of the memory keepers in the novels are socio-cultural constructions that embody a particular

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.,p.127.

memory due to the contexts that associate either their deaths or survival with the memory they represent. In the light of Farah's characters, it is not how characters interact in the text that makes them memory keepers but rather the punishment bestowed upon them which highlights their roles as such.

The unrecognized history within oppressive political frames (colonisation, autocratic nationalisms) usually retains a feature of immediacy. Whether this unrecognized past is remembered or forgotten does not change much about its persistence in the present. The immediacy of both remembrance and forgetfulness emerge from the fact that there is an imposed hegemonic discourse of history that alienates. This immediacy is also accentuated by the very particular nature of the Somali society that is a primarily oral one. The oral tradition reproduces the symbolically excluded past by the very action of orally transmitting it.

The marginalized remembrance as reflected in this trilogy oscillates between attempting to make peace with the fissures of the past and repeating the voids that are beyond comprehension. Although Farah's memory keepers could be associated with what LaCapra identifies as the process of working-through, these characters are quite overpowered by the incomprehensibility of the fissured memory they keep. The emphasis placed on the role of memory keepers in working-through a collectively traumatized memory is not devoid of the shocks and absences trauma brings about. Working-through a memory is closely related to the act of telling or at least possessing the capacity to tell. The burden of wavering between the absurdity of what is being remembered and the cryptic voids of oblivion manifests itself in the fact that all Farah's characters are persecuted for being memory keepers. Two characters epitomizes the symbolic –and in some cases literal- death of the memory keeper. Focusing on the first and the last novel in which the figures of memory keepers were main protagonists: Soyaan and Deeriye shall be re-visited as memory keepers whose memories doomed their fates.

It is inevitable to discuss Soyaan from *Sweet and Sour Milk* when dealing with the figure of memory keeper. Loyaan, who had no particular interest in politics, learns that Soyaan,

his twin brother, has been involved in a clandestine movement that opposed the General and that one of the memorandums he wrote might have been the reason for his death. In his quest to find out the truth, Loyaan is subjected to a conspiracy set by the General and his followers in order to rewrite Soyaan's history as a faithful supporter of the General's regime which tries to obscure the somewhat suspicious circumstances of his death. On the other hand, the parents settle for the government's story and do not allow themselves to even suspect the reasons for their son's death, especially the father, who is an ardent supporter of the government and had a quite dysfunctional relationship with the twins.

The death of Soyaan in the first few pages of the novel is what accelerates the entire incidents of the plot. Soyaan dies for trying to document his memory of the General's political prisoners and list their names in a memorandum. Undoubtedly, memory in this case is associated with the truth. Soyaan as a site of memory is constructed by how he is perceived as synonymous with the memory he keeps by the state from one end and his family from another. Soyaan is spoken of throughout the narrative in a way that suggests that he is more than a person with a clandestine political activity; he is an idea. Soyaan ceasing to exist as an individual and becoming more of an idea jeopardizes the General's rule. He had to be rewritten in a way that makes the memory he represents one that sustains the General's regime and does not subvert it. He was a keeper of an unwanted memory and hence had to be punished. Loyaan says:

I have documents. I have his writings. Not proof that they killed him. But there is a good reason why they could have wanted him removed, taken out of circulation like a banned book.<sup>50</sup>

Soyaan here is synonymous with his writings. His banned text exactly like the documents he possessed and the General's regime wanted him as well as his writings out of circulation. This suggests that crossing the line between the oral and the written is Soyaan's original sin; a zone of danger which eventually results in the death of Soyaan

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<sup>50</sup> Farah, *Sweet and Sour Milk*, p.101.

and the disappearance of his typist Mulki. The characters are metaphorically and literally punished for crossing that line and attempting to document orality.

Soyaan is from this day onwards state property and will be treated as such.

They've come for and have taken his file. I worked on the file last night.

Soyaan: a property of the state.<sup>51</sup>

The struggle over Soyaan's memory between his brother and comrades from one end and the General's regime from another draws attention to the fact that the state is not only resisting figures of resistance but the memory people create of those figures.

Soyaan is perceived as a memory by the state which was threatened by him as a memory keeper. However, what also makes Soyaan an embodiment of this memory is his brother Loyaan, his comrades and family who felt that their struggle with the state is over a memory and not just the death of the person. For them Soyaan is the memory of the struggle rather than a memory of submission and this memory has to be told. Loyaan insisted on unraveling the mystery of his brother's death and regarded it as a struggle over Soyaan's memory as well:

We should concede nothing which would dishonor his name. He lives in us; he lives on in you and me. If we sell his memory cheaply, his soul will belong to the highest bidder, to the General.<sup>52</sup>

Loyaan, here, is an example of many characters who are conscious, of their attempt to keep their memory alive. His memory is one that struggles to survive by resisting forgetfulness or forced forgetfulness. Loyaan tries throughout the novel to work through the trauma of the death of his brother and the distortion of his history by getting the truth about his brother's past told and acknowledged. He equates giving up on the truth about Soyaan's memory with selling off his soul.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.115

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.,p.88.



Deeriye is another figure that is not confined to the boundaries of human as an individual existence. The symbolic lines through which the character of Deeriye is presented take him out of the frame of a character and create an idea out of him. One of the things that makes *Close Sesame* the most challenging to read out of the three novels is the fact that it superimposes historical material with fictive narrative. This creates a novel that overflows with fragments of history interspersed with a plot that is dominated by Deeriye's inner monologues rather than actions. History is constantly being recalled in his long reminiscences that sometimes span several pages:

By using such large extracts, in the way other African writers like Ngugi or Achebe have done within their novels, Farah lets the collective memory speak and inserts his written work in the continuity of a long genealogy of oral texts. History does not start with the nineteenth-century fights for power nor with written scholarly works; it is kept active and works for the present every time an old man speaks to his grandson.<sup>53</sup>

In many ways history is told by Deeriye as a figure symbolizing history and memory keeping in a way that does not historicize but questions historical accounts and tries to make sense out of them. Deeriye through 'telling' wavers between accepting the fissures of the past and resisting oblivion. However the attempts of Deeriye to pass on what he remembers to the new generations in his family does not always resist their oblivion but rather deepen their uncertainty about the past. The following question posited to Deeriye by his daughter questions the different versions of history she receives; the one told by Deeriye and the one told by those whom he struggled against.

Which is the history of great men; which is your own history, dear Father, when the massacre occurred and everybody defined your defiance of Italian colonial power as madness; or when the British described the Sayyid as mad.

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<sup>53</sup> J. Bardolph, '4. Time and History in Nuruddin Farah's *Close Sesame*', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 24 (1989), 193–206(p.199).

But if and when one succeeds, if Mahad were to achieve what he set out to do: then he would become a hero.<sup>54</sup>

What Deeriye tells represents what the symbolically excluded would have to say of history. In the Somali context, it is the oral stories passed on from Deeriye as a person who directly and indirectly experienced a history that does not represent him. In these few lines, the struggle of Deeriye's son Mahad against the General is seen as an extension to old Deeriye's struggle against colonialism. The act of repetition of this struggle indicates that Deeriye is a keeper of a memory of special nature; an immediate one. Deeriye, as a rebel against the Italian colonial power, is a corporeal manifestation of a past that characterized by doubts and uncertainties.

The memory-work the action of retelling brings about, sometimes, seeks to abandon the incomprehensible of the past by reconciling with its voids. The years of imprisonment liberated him from being stuck in the sieve of a past he is alienated from. Deeriye, with all his monologues and dreams, belongs to a different, parallel world than the world of the rest of the characters. He did not find answer for a past that poses more questions than provides answers. Instead, he managed through his imprisonment to comprehend the symbolically excluded world he belongs to in the light of a broader body of symbolic exclusion.

They hadn't the sensitivity to understand the subtlety of this statement- that confinement to prison opened to Deeriye a vista of a wider larger world: detention compelled him to think of the history and contradictions which the neocolonial person lives in; detention forced him to see himself not only as a spokesman of a clan, but made it obvious to him that he was a member of the world's oppressed. .. You found the likes of them all over Africa, the Middle East and Asia.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Farah, *Close Sesame*, p.130.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.103.

His years of imprisonment announced his birth as a new memory keeper; one who keeps memory of the 'world of the oppressed'. The fissures of the collective past he belongs to do not make sense in isolation but are rather understandable in a context in which most of the world belongs to the marginalized history. Deeriye is metaphorically and literally punished for achieving this realisation as well as telling it. His constant sense of alienation and being disconnected from the real world around him is the price he pays for remembering what he should not remember. His enigmatic death at the end of the novel signals his possession by the memory he tried to tell. Death was his punishment for identifying with a memory that is not allowed to be kept or circulated exactly like a banned book.

From a memory that announces rebirth to one that brings about death, the characters of Farah become possessed by their memories to the extent that these very memories cease to become distinct from their existence. Drawing on laCapra's conceptions of acting out and working -through, I argued that the characters that engage in a process of a collective traumatic re-enactment as presented in Farah's narrative are the very corporeal embodiment of the memory they represent. Whether the collective traumatic memory has been directly experienced or passed on from one generation to another, it persists to manifest itself through Farah's personified memory. In the ebb and flow of the question of possession between trauma memory and those it inflicts, there lies some features that make the characters remain an embodiment of their memory. The two features as explored in the light of Farah's characters lie in the characters' appropriation of the trauma's problematic relationship with time as well as an embodiment that results from the fate some characters meet for being memory keepers. It has been shown through Beydan, Amina and Deeriye how the characters fail to associate their very existence with certain time frames as a result of being possessed by their traumas. On the other hand, Keepers of memory were either murdered or tortured; Soyaan with his documented memorandum and Deeriye with him orally telling the untold of history. The fate of memory keepers is noticeably quite fatal. These fatal endings for all memory keepers

unravel the struggle over memory in which characters are punished for the mere act of telling. The very repetition of the figure of the memory keeper indicates that Farah's characters retell and are themselves retold as both: political beings that engage with the crisis of the collective and individuals with an irreconcilable personal memory to retell.

## Conclusion

The views I have presented in this thesis do not necessarily revolutionize trauma theory but certainly express the need for a scholarly revision. The absence of theoretical foundational bases that are not coloured by Western trauma experiences was the main challenge for producing this work. Adapting theories that have been born out of the holocaust – for example - to the works of Nuruddin Farah was triggered by a real desire to re-construct trauma theory in a way that allows it to encompass the experience of other nations - whether this is an experience of colonisation, an experience related to a specific religious or socio-political norms, etc. This issue of documentation is a serious one as the absence of documentation that characterizes some non-Western societies has been overlooked in favour of louder Western, documented trauma. The marginalisation of those who belong to an oral tradition makes the field of trauma studies one that runs the risk of over-homogenisation even though it is a discipline that attempts to give voice to the voiceless or at least explain their inability to express their traumas through language. In Chapter One, different theorists with different ideas have been selectively assembled to construct a body of theory that fits to the reading of Farah's texts. Caruth's concern with individual trauma was extended in order to explain the inevitable collective nature of Farah's characters. The political and the historical landscape of Somalia, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century bring into question whether the boundaries of individual trauma really begin and end within the individual. Halbwachs theory of collective memory was also compelling to mention. Halbwachs, as Whitehead discussed, demonstrates how power relations influenced the rise and the demise of certain collective memories. However, no sacralisation of the concept (of Memory) is intended. I am not concerned with memory that replaces history nor do I refer to memory as a tool that is at the service of history especially when the collective memory as reflected in Farah's novels is one that has been symbolically excluded from dominant discourses of history. Thus, Chapter One intertwines trauma theory as it is now and the Somali situation as reflected in Farah's fiction in order to have a more accommodating theoretical background for the novels of Farah.

Chapters Two and Three complement each other in the sense that they deal with the concept of 'narrative' as two main elements: literary techniques and characters which are discussed in the second and the third chapters respectively. The literary techniques that were explored here are intertextuality and repetition. Both chapters demonstrated how Farah's novels interact with trauma in a way that shows where history, memory and language all overlap creating a sense of inescapability. Replicating the effect of trauma theory through the inherently cyclical nature of intertextuality and repetition foregrounds the claustrophobic atmosphere with which Farah's narrative overflows. Similarly, the characters are caught up in inescapable burdens of remembrance and oblivion which sometimes defeat them and other times are defeated by them. The characters of Farah in their interaction with trauma prove that their human boundaries dissolve in the ideas that the narrative presents. In other words, the murder of Soyaan, the rape of Amina, and the dream-like reality of Deeriye show that the mortal fates of the memory keepers are only physical endings as the memory crisis does not end with the death of its bearers. The characters are themselves narratives that embody a fissured memory. Farah's characters stand for collective memory that is in crisis that not only forget and remember but also become a site for the ruins of this memory.

Some of the questions triggered by a close reading of the common thematic lines in Farah's novels remain challenging and are indeed suggestive of further research. For example, the arguments in the second and the third chapters of this thesis lead to the understanding that narratives possess the capacity to become less simply a relation of experience, less simply representative while maintaining a distinct existence as a mode of expression; and more an object of experience itself through appropriating the features of what it presents. Future research should give more attention to the aesthetics of trauma fiction as commenced by Sue Vice and Anne Whitehead in order to understand the special workings of the narrativisation of trauma. As has been presented here, the particularity of trauma experience distorts its conventional literary representation as trauma fiction does not represent but acquires the features of the object it represents. Moreover, the inquiry into revolutionizing the field of trauma studies should be given

more attention so that the universalization of Western experience can be rectified. Farah's trilogy *Variation on The Theme of An African Dictatorship* is capable of accompanying its readers through the maze of the problematized representation of trauma fiction as well as challenging the Eurocentrism of trauma theory by fictionalizing the very particular case of the Somali collective suffering.

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