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Literary Representation of Racism and Civil War in Somalia: A Textual Study of Nuruddin Farah's *Cross Bones*

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Abstract

Somalia, a country in the Horn of Africa; is wrought with multiplex conflictive issues like dictatorship, clan conflagrations, tribal animosity, and racial altercations. The menace of racism, dictatorship, tribalism and other aligned issues have rendered Somalia economically hollow, politically unstable, and volatile in the context of overall conditions. Racism in the shape of clannish skirmishes and communal confrontations in Somalia is one of the obnoxious and detrimental issues that have made it a failed state. Many writers have depicted this issue of racism through their writings. Nuruddin Farah is one of the outspoken Somalian novelists who dauntlessly denigrate racism in Somalia through his novels. Nuruddin Farah is a very prolific novelist. He has many novels to his credit that contain issues of patriarchal oppression, gender inequality, and racism. The paper attempts to show through the textual study of the novel how Nuruddin Farah projects racism and civil war in Somalia through his much acclaimed and polemical novel *Cross Bones*.

Keywords- *Somalia, Conflictive, Failed State, Clan, Racism, Issues, Oppression, Cross Bones*

Somalis are people in a fix; a nation with a trapped nerve; a country in a terrible mess. The entire nation is caught up in a spiralling degeneracy that a near stranger like me cannot make full sense. It is all a fib, that is what it is, just a fib. (*Cross Bones* 297).

Cross Bones is one of the critically acclaimed novels that provide a relook at Farah's Somalia that is blighted by the scourge of dictatorship, racism, and civil war. *Cross Bones* is considered as the representative novel of Nuruddin Farah in which he audaciously condemns

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the horribleness and negative repercussions of civil war. The novelist depicts the horribleness of civil war and racism in the following words:

The great tragedy about civil wars, famines, and other disasters in the world's poor regions... is that the rubble seldom divulges the secret sorrow it contains. The technology, the forensics to determine what is what, scientifically, is not available; the dead are rarely identified or exhumed. Often no one knows how many have perished in mudslide of tsunami. One never gets to hear the last words that passed their lips, or what, in the end, caused their death: a falling beam, a falling heart, a spear bullet- shattered glass? Or sheer exhaustion with living in such horrid circumstances day in and day out. (*Cross Bones* 26)

Nuruddin Farah openly lashes at the racial, tribal, and communal ideologies that perpetuate crime and bolster the ideologies of persecution and exploitation of others. Farah tries to provide a clear photography of racism like issues in Somalia in order to rehabilitate and rejuvenate this failed state into a peaceful and prosperous country. He manifests Mark Twainian knack and bravura in exposing the different wrongs that are ingrained in Somalia. He exhibits an inborn empathy with the sorry and sad spectacle of Somalia. Farah very lucidly gives us a peep at racism in Somalia in the form of civil war and border conflicts through his novel, *Cross Bones*. This is the most political and polemical novels that out rightly lashes at many menacing issues prevalent in Somalia. Writing in *The New York Times Book Review*, Hirsh Sawhney maintains that "politically courageous and often gripping... *Cross Bones* provides a sophisticated introduction to present-day Somalia, and to the circle of poverty and violence that continues to blight the country. (Sawhney)

To begin with, *Cross Bones* chronicles the pain undergone by the minorities. Alongside the horrendous portrayal of the persecution undergone by the minorities, the novel documents the effects of border conflicts with Ethiopia, and also shows the fallout of the rise of Al Shabab, a fanatic youth wing fighting for the cause of religion. The story line of the novel is highly engaging and at the same time emotionally chilling and nightmarish. In the novel, the novelist narrates the sad saga of an ageing Jeebleh, his friends, and relatives. Jeebleh, his friends, and relatives belong to the much marginal and disadvantaged race called Jeerer. Jeebleh is the focal character of the novel. In a retrospective narrative, we come to know that a Jeebleh and his friends belonging to his race had been ousted from Somalia by the race conscious dictator, Said Barre. Jeebleh after a long absence from his motherland and friends clandestinely comes to visit them. Jeebleh expects calm and peace but his expectations get deserted when he meets a very harrowing and cringing spectacle of civil war and other despondent events. In the very opening pages of the novel, the novelist tries to tell us with an added emphasis how in Somalia clans are insensibly engaged in the melee with each other. The protagonist, Jeebleh remembers his wife's refrain about Somalia: "That unfortunate country, cursed with those dreadful clans people, forever killing one another

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around them” (*Cross* 12). Through these lines the novelist highlights the racial and clannish animosity and animus in Somalia. These lines completely highlight the clan based rivalry and hatred. In the novel, Farah tries to show us how in Somalia people butt their heads against each other on the basis of clan, race, region, religion, and ethnicity. Farah lampoons at the people who buttress the racist and clannish attitude and ideology. Farah is one of the fiercest social critics. In the novel under study, he plunges deep into the social gossamer of Somalia and lays bare the social ills that have blemished and disfigured its social front. While going through the novel, we come to know that Jeebleh, his friends and relatives who belong to the very underprivileged race of Somalia are criminalised and persecuted. In the very opening of the novel we meet a very serious, tense and harrowing spectacle. As Jeebleh along with his son-in-law, Malik reaches Mogadiscio to visit his erstwhile friends, from whom he had been separated with the emergence of racial and communal violence; are stopped by the white men in the white robes, holding whips in their hands. As we know that one of the unjust dimensions of racist attitude and ideology is to look with suspicion and contempt at other people, so are Jeebleh and his son-in-law by the white robed men. The men in the white robes treat Jeebleh and his son-in-law in a much racialized attitude and gesture. They ask them for their individual passports in their own country. Here Farah highlights the colonial aspect of racism. Farah shows the racial and colonial manner of one of the white robed man with which he treated Jeebleh in the following words:

A man, seemingly in authority, even, though he is not in uniform-he is one of those wearing a white robe, Arab style, and a purple kefiyeh, Arafat style. . . He approaches with the consummate confidence of the powerful, his hand stretched towards Jeebleh. “Your passport (*Cross Bones* 12)

The manner and tone of the white robed man is highly indelicate and racialized. His language betrays a haughty and racialized tone when he asks Jeebleh: “Your passport.” As the plot of the novel moves forward, we see how unjustly and badly Jeebleh and his ilk are treated. Jeebleh’s friend, Dajall is murdered in the communal violence for no reasons. He is liquidated because he belongs to the very lower race. The murder of Dajall implies that there is a hair-raising fighting going on in Somalia between the people belonging to different races and clans. Somalia is facing an acute problem of racial and ethnic violence. This is attested by Nur Ali Qabobe in the following words:

The tragic problem that faces Somalia today and allows the situation to continue unrelieved is that certain tribe or clan claims to be born noble and supremacy over others, while others claim to possess a natural mandate to rule Somalia and yet others claim possession of land which is logically a common national property from the point of view of civilized, organised and modern thinking, interest and ownership as organised society’s collective asset.

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Anything less than that level of thinking must trace its origin to parochialism and backwardness. (68)

Farah gives us many instances in the novel that clearly point towards the racial behaviour and mind set of the Somali society. Farah in the course of the novel tells us how minorities are commented on in Somalia. Name calling is one of the facets of racism. Farah meticulously highlights this nasty aspect of racism in the novel under study. In the novel one of the close friends of Jeebleh, is derogatorily called as; Gap-in the-Teeth. Stereotyping the other races, as we know is one of the closely associated aspects of racism, clannishism and tribalism, so this novel meticulously shows us how the people belonging to the other races are negatively essentialised and pigeonholed.

Farah in the novel highlights the point that not only Jareer race to which the focal character Jeebleh belongs is pejoratively commented; but the people belonging to other regions like Ethiopia are also dubbed with the names that are highly demeaning, degrading, and above all depreciatory. Gumaad one of the characters in the novel who himself belongs to the top race that is Somalis, derogatorily terms Ethiopians as *Injirray* (*Cross Bones* 110). Injirray, in Somali language means lice. Malik asks, “Why do Somalis allude to lice, when it comes to Ethiopia?” (*Cross Bones* 111). Jeebleh answers him in the following word:

You see, the only Ethiopians that Somalis have met in large numbers are ill-paid, ill-clad barefoot soldiers in the outposts of the Empire, extending down to Somalia speaking Ogaden. Unwashed and wearing the same uniforms for weeks on end, they itched and scratched. Ancient contacts between Somalis and Abyssians shaped the terms each had for the other . . . (*Cross Bones* 111).

Apart from highlighting the victimization of the marginal races through derogatory comments, the novelist addresses the sorry plight of the fringe races and ethnicities at the onslaught of civil war. Farah graphically shows us what has been done to these marginal races during the civil war that took place during the reign of Said Barre. The novelist writes:

Jeebleh has the feeling that he is not in a city but in a village somewhere in the hinterland. But he is not sure; Mogadiscio has lost whatever shape it used to have and is now as featureless as ground cog in a broken machine. He is deeply disturbed that it is no longer the metropolis with which he is familiar, its current residents imported to raise a fighting force. Everywhere he looks, destitute men, women, and children in near rags wearily trudge by, many of them emaciated, their bellies swollen with undiagnosed illness, their eyes hosts to swarms of roaming flies. They seem exhausted, inarticulate with fear and vigilance, which imposes a further formlessness. (*Cross Bones* 165)

From the textual analysis of the novel *Cross Bones*, it becomes manifest that it is a highly polemical text that typically highlights the menace of racism, ethnic persecution, and

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civil war in Somalia. Farah's stance of looking at the scourge of racism and civil war in Somalia is exceptionally penetrative and reformative.

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