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**CHALLENGING PATRIARCHY AND OTHER POWER STRUCTURES:  
RECONCEPTUALISING GENDER IDENTITIES IN NURUDDIN FARAH'S *KNOTS***

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**ABSTRACT**

As sex stereotyping resisted women's power positions, there existed a difficult relationship between women and power. Consequently, woman's capacities were underused. Women's voices were hardly heard in public spheres. However women of freewill and respect perpetually created and transformed power structures by asserting their right to be taken seriously together as much as individually to make a difference in the world. Although power itself is not troubled who uses it, woman's acquisition of power changes the very nature of power as seen in Nuruddin Farah's *Knots*.

Key words: sex, gender, power, reconceptualising

**Introduction**

Sexually dimorphic differences between male and female based on biological and anatomic factors are natural. Though innate, these differences between the sexes have shaped the cultural, religious, social, economic and political arrangements of the world and every new kind of task in a way that threatened woman's power, dignity, mobility and identity. But women at all times and in all societies challenged such traditional gender arrangements and patriarchal power relations by leading a life of their choice which is so fundamental to human freedom.

**Theoretical Background**

It is a well known fact that women as a group lacked the same level of power as men since femininity was constructed through patriarchal ideas. Political, social institutions in societies have become so masculine that it gave a particular sex an advantage over the other to enjoy more power and freedoms based solely on biology.

Women who valued freewill and respect always challenged such inequalities and therefore it can be said that feminism is as ancient as it could be. The tremendous courage and psycho-dynamics of the women flouting every socially constructed traditional image startled and shocked the predominantly male profile world. These women who were power hungry challenged all existing masculine structures. They demonstrated that such binary concepts as male-female, masculine-feminine, or man-woman do not bind a woman. They established the difference between sex and gender. It is not a little known fact that sex is a biological concept which refers to the physical differences between male and female. Gender on the other hand is a socially constructed concept pertaining to the differences between masculinity and femininity.

History is galore with examples of women who revolted against the trauma of gender discrimination. For instance, the Book of *Judges* in *The Bible*, praises Deborah who prepares an ambush in a narrow gorge to take the enemy piece meal. In

the African context especially, the dominant Assyrian warrior queen, Sannuram stands tall during the ninth century BC. She extends her empire till Babylonia by marching with an army of two lakhs. Queen Merneith is another powerful woman worth mentioning. She ruled as regent for her son, Den in 3000 BCE. Queen Sobeknefru (1807-1802 BCE) took the throne during the Middle Kingdom of Egypt revolting against the tradition that only a male could reign in Egypt. Hatshepsut (1507- 1458 BCE) took Sobeknefru's example further and had crowned herself pharaoh. Cleopatra VII (69-30 BCE), the last queen of Egypt is among the best representatives of women's equality as she ruled the country unsurpassed in power and efficiency. For these women as Binod Mishra says, "their sufferings [became] their strength and weapon to fight out their predicaments" (Mishra and Kumar 101).

#### Western Perspective of African Women

But according to Western feminism, Islam in Africa discriminated against women and their position has been unequal to that of men. They have pictured African women's experiences mostly as labour force and relegated to domestic spheres while the men accessed the public life. Nevertheless African women of substance challenged the patriarchal ideal of male dominance and superiority especially in power positions as seen above.

#### The Impact of Political and Social Conditions on Women in Somalia

When Somalia in Africa embraced Islam in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, daughters did not ordinarily share in the inheritance of valued property which is contrary to Islamic law (Nelson 99). Commenting on the situation in Somalia, Forde says:

"Women cannot take part in the tribal or section assembly of the elders... while under the patriopotestas a woman cannot own substantial property or marry without her father's consent...Neither the birth of a daughter nor the death of a woman is an occasion for ceremonial. A husband has the right to enforce his authority by striking his wife with his horse-whip, and this is an essential gesture before the consummation

of marriage. Woman is a poor thing. She understands nothing. In a sense women are outside the agnatic lineage structure of Somali society. When they appear in social relations involving segmentary groups they do so as clients attached to agnatic units, never directly or sui juris (Forde 128-129).

The repressive measures taken against the people under Siad Barre's regime, Somalia's tangled and dangerous network of clan loyalties, its war with Ethiopia subjected ordinary citizens to unlimited terrorism. Those who protested against the government were not safe either inside or outside. Thus one can say that the social and historical realities of Somali women's lives were different. As a result, these women have evolved their own brand of feminism based on the realities of their lives. By doing so, they almost subverted the conventional gender norms which western feminists ignored to deal with.

#### Nuruiddin Farah's Works

Nuruiddin Farah (1945- ), a Somali novelist, story writer, playwright and also a teacher depicts such women in many of his novels like *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), *Sardines* (1981), *Gifts* (1993), *Secrets* (1998), *Knots* (2007) etc. Although Farah lived in exile, all his novels center on Somalia to keep it alive. He addresses social evils plaguing Somalia with a particular concern for women's issues. Many consider him a feminist as he prominently depicts the plight of Somali women in his novels. He portrays vividly the horrors of civil war, rampant corruption, and repressive measures of the dictatorial regime that battered the already bludgeoned women of Somalia. Farah's *Knots* explores women who defied male supremacy and traditional norms. It is also about women who challenged the patriarchal power constructions to lead a life that is liberating and uplifting and not confining and degrading.

#### Challenging Patriarchy and Other Power Structures in Knots

Farah's heroine in *Knots*, Cambara is six feet tall and striking. She is a martial arts expert twice married in her adopted Toronto to Somali

men. Cambara's mother, Aarda gets her daughter married to Zaak to enable him to acquire Canadian citizenship and as such her marriage with her cousin just remains on paper. This reveals how Aarda takes advantage of the structural deficiencies in power moving beyond the repressive spaces of women.

Zaak is too contemptible for Cambara to match her civility, she doesn't allow him have free access to her private affairs. As Zaak puts it, Cambara is "a woman's woman, not a man's woman" (Farha 38). Cambara, later files divorce papers and marries Wardi to become a victim of violence like the type commonly found behind closed Western doors.

After experiencing physical and emotional abuse; coercion and threats in the marital relationship, Cambara loses her capacity to endure him any longer. The day her only child, Dalmar is drowned in a swimming pool while Wardi was enjoying a tumble with his legal Canadian paramour in the main bedroom, she decides she is no push-over. Cambara goes berserk like a kungfu master and "for a moment behaved wildly, striking him fast, fiercely, and with compound interest" (58) when Wardi informs her of his weekend trip with his legal paramour. That is when she decides that the relationship with Wardi is over.

This is the sad plight of many women in the face of polygyny prevalent in Islamic nations. Violence towards women and children can be potentiated by polygyny enhancing male control. When such cultural practices like Polygyny and social structures often go hand-in-hand, it not only enhances male control but suppresses the basic rights over women and children as seen in Somalia.

A grieving mother, Cambara now decides to embark on her mission to lethal Somalia all alone and unprepared to reclaim her family's home from the warlords much against the wishes of her mother. Although inheritance laws and practices have always been against women in Somalia, Cambara goes undeterred against such customary laws. Her friend, Raxma assures her at the airport in Toronto, "We are here for you, our darling, you can rely on us" (49). Raxma represents the women who broke the glass ceiling of power positions.

Landing in Somalia, she repudiates the Islamic veil and claims her right to be visible. Later, with much revulsion veils herself in accordance with the civil war conditions that existed in the Islamic Mogadiscio purely to accomplish her task. When a nostalgic Cambara arrives in her country, shock and grief greet her secular world view in a similar manner that welcomes Farah revisiting Mogadiscio in 1996 after being away for two decades. Her feeling of alienation in the face of Somalia's religious absolutism and brutal clan-based militia and war lords taking over the country is every secular Somali's feeling of alienation.

In a country where men feel that power is an aspiration that fits only a masculine paradigm and the strength of a woman has no value, Cambara and a group of Somali women activists in whom she finds emotional refuge and practical support alter all these. Much of *Knots* is about strong women and the feats they can achieve when they are united. Shrewd, prudent, confident, brave and bestowed with a feminine heart, Cambara contemplates that war lords are cowards and fools and shall not be difficult to battle them out. She brings along a knife, "her weapon of choice, if it comes to self defence"(2). She has all the qualities to make a table for herself in the male controlled toxic politics. Zaak's pleas to Cambara from going aboard with her "foolish adventure into the dark unknown of Mogadiscio's dangers" do not deter her (48).

The pathetic situation in Somalia comes to the fore when Cambara takes an armed escort during her travels to ensure safety from frequent carjacking. Cambara is not in "awe of any of the warlords" (80). This in contrast to Zaak's cowardly talk, "you are on your own if you decide to visit the property...I am making it clear for the last time. I'll come nowhere near the place" (82).The source of Cambara's courage and rage is traced to Dalmar's unfortunate death. The violence inflicted on her by her husband,Wardi turns Cambara into a fearless woman, she revels in the strength that hit Wardi hard. To put it in her own words, "For years, I have lived with an unarticulated rage that has since become part of me and that has taken a more murderous turn after my son, Dalmar's drowning" (79). It is commendable to listen to a woman who

says, "I don't stand in awe of any of the warlords..." "I feel certain deep within me that I will wrench it from his clutch", referring to Gudcur, a ring leader of a ruthless clan-based militia who occupied her property(79-80).

Likewise Kiin, Raxma's friend in Somalia is yet another valiant woman for whom no feat is impossible. Kiin through her well connected network of informers keeps track of Cambara's movements in Somalia assisting her and protecting her in all her plans. It was an emotional moment for Cambara when Kiin could locate her in Somalia. In response Cambara's heart is filled with gratitude and she bursts out, "The Lord knows how badly a woman needs the friendship of other women in a civil war city repugnant with the trigger happy degeneracy of its militiamen"(144).

Kiin, separated from her husband with two daughters is a symbol of resistance in the face of violence, intimidation and threats that women face in Somalia. She wears veil not because she likes it but because she may lose the custody of her daughters to their stepmother if found unfit without a veil. Kiin and other women of substance organize themselves in to schooling neighbourhoods. As a rebel against the political establishment which made the educational system almost dysfunctional in the war ravaged Somalia, these educationally conscious women run home-schooling facilities by hiring foreign teachers for their children. When violence and intimidation prevent women from participating in the power system, Kiin activates female participation through her organisation, Women for Peace, an NGO funded by EU. Through her organization, she prioritizes consensus-building to withstand the male counterparts. She is equipped with all the tools to respond to threats that come from patriarchal power structures.

Cambara is overpowered by surprise when Kiin says, "We spirit away women from the men posing the gravest danger to them or their children. In the interim, we deal with the men concerned. On one occasion, we have had to poison his food - end of the nuisance" (250). Her disbelief is further stretched when Cambara saw a large woman of the same organization throwing a boy involved in a combat like a "greasy dish cloth" (127). These

women liberate themselves from patriarchal control and create an alternate reality thereby reinventing a new concept of woman and gender.

Intent on achieving her goal, Cambara visits her property alone on the ruse of getting drinking water from the occupant. Despondency descends on her at the damage and stench that emanates from her house. During her next visit to the property, Cambara karate-kicks herself out of a mugging. Looking at the youth about to outrage her modesty with impunity, fearless Cambara assumes that she can "karate-kick him in the balls and for good measure boot him on his bum too" (184). It reveals the life-threatening complications a woman faces in a war ravaged country ruled by fundamentalists. Although she is respectably veiled from top to toe, the difference in her veil bought from Canada is the cause of assuming her to be a city whore!

When Gudcur and his men are away to take "control of the checkpoint close to the main intersection to bridge" in Mogadiscio, Cambara befriends Jijo, his wife not with any ulterior intentions but out of genuine sympathy a woman can develop for another woman. She is shaken to the core of her being listening to Jijo's traumatising story of mass rape (203). The compassionate and emotional qualities of Cambara's feminine nature come to the fore when she also helps Jijo clear her domestic chores left alone by Gudcur. It is the same nature which also develops fondness for two young boys – Silk Hair and Gacal whom she adopts later on. Her sensitive heart goes out for Bile too, who came to rescue her during mugging. Unmindful of "the awfulness of the stench", his "vomit- and waste-stained cheek and his smudged trousers" (313), Cambara nurses Bile during his illness. Cambara is a perfect balance of power and femininity. When the intuitive nature and emotions are cut off from the feminine personality, a part of her intelligence too will be cut off which is well proven by Cambara.

Though Gudcur's triumph over his opponents may spell a doom for Cambara, she nevertheless proceeds fearlessly with her plans. She moves Jijo left alone in her advanced pregnancy to Farxia's hospital with the help of Kiin. Farxia, a friend of Kiin is another bold lady who defies the male

power structures to provide humanitarian and medical assistance to women in the war ravaged country. With Gudcur almost taken for dead in the war, his children away and Jijo in the hospital, Cambara takes control of the house. The highlight of the story is when Kiin tells Cambara:

“Your house is at your disposal, you know that? We’ve had the locks changed, and have serviced the back entrance, away from the prying eyes of the neighbors and the curious, to make it operational...In addition, we’ve engaged an armed security outfit with the aim of closely monitoring the movements in the entire neighborhood.... If he [ Gudcur] survives, then we will factor in the possibility of a fierce confrontation with him. We are [preparing for the worst scenario. And we are confident that we will be able to hold onto the property” (250).

As a rebel against the political power structures that erased all entertainment for people, Cambara stages a play to packed audience in her house and wakes up the city that has forgotten the meaning of artistic culture. Towards the end, when Aardi, Raxma, Kiin, Cambara and other women meet for the play, women’s power comes full circle.

Farah’s physical repulsiveness for men like Zaak, Wardi, Gudcur and his misandry for Somali regime that curbs women’s rights intensifies his staunch feminist tone which is only softened towards the end when Cambara discovers a handful of decent men like Bile who she falls in love with. *Knots* revokes the assumptions that take for granted the dominant structures of power bound by traditions. It restates that sex does not determine an individual’s behavior or roles. It represents a model of how new and different roles can be created when women confront patriarchal power which ensures the creation of a more equitable society.

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