

Reconfiguring Postwar Somali Identity: A Critical Study of Violence, Memory, and Social Fragmentation in *Links*

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Abstract

This article critically examines the complex interplay of memory, identity, and political violence in *Links* authored by Nuruddin Farah. Set in post civil war Mogadishu, the novel portrays the fractured psychological states of individuals and the disintegrating social structures of Somalia. This study highlights how Farah uses narrative fragmentation, psycho social tension, and political disorder to articulate trauma and nationhood. Drawing on postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and the article positions *Links* as a significant intervention into discourses of African identity, governance collapse, and moral responsibility. The article also evaluates the protagonist's psychological journey as a metaphorical mapping of contemporary Somali anxieties and collective suffering.

Keywords: Identity, Political Violence, Fragmentation, Responsibility, Social Disintegration

Links stands as one of the most profound explorations of post civil war Somali identity in contemporary African literature. Written after years of national devastation, the novel captures the moral confusion, psychological wounds, and social fragmentation that emerge from prolonged political collapse. Jeebleh's return to Mogadishu becomes the narrative device through which Farah interrogates memory, guilt, the ethics of justice, and the search for belonging in a broken society.

Farah constructs a narrative that is simultaneously political and personal. While the story foregrounds Jeebleh's internal conflicts, it also mirrors the larger socio political deterioration of Somalia, where clan loyalties, warlord domination, and moral uncertainty shape daily life. Through this dual movement inner reflection and outer observation Farah transforms Mogadishu into an emotional and symbolic territory where past and present collide.

As Lidwien Kapteijns argues, "Somali civil war literature must be read as a record of emotional ruin and national struggle" (Kapteijns 2013, p. 57). In *Links*, this emotional ruin becomes embodied through Jeebleh's memories, encounters, and fractured sense of identity. This article therefore positions *Links* not merely as a novel but as a literary intervention that reimagines the meaning of home, kinship, nationhood, and moral responsibility in a time of chaos.

Nuruddin Farah (born 1945) is one of Africa's most critically acclaimed novelists. His works prominently engage with themes such as dictatorship, gender inequality, exile, cultural identity, and the psychological scars of civil war. Educated in India and the United States, Farah brings international sensibilities to Somali narratives while retaining deep cultural insight. His celebrated trilogies *Variations of Tradition*, *Blood in the Sun*, and *Past Imperfect* examine the intersections of power, trauma, and moral conflict. *Links* is the first novel in the *Past Imperfect* Trilogy, followed by *Knots* (2007) and *Crossbones* (2011). His

fiction is deeply committed to exposing authoritarianism and the human cost of political violence. As Ahmed Samatar notes, “Farah’s artistic strength lies in his ability to turn political catastrophe into intimate psychological inquiry” (Samatar,p.91).

Farah’s prose style is marked by philosophical depth, narrative fragmentation, and emotional intensity. His works offer an unmistakable voice that speaks for displaced, silenced, and traumatized communities.

Memory, Trauma, and the Fragmented Self

Jeebleh’s emotional journey in *Links* centers on trauma and the broken nature of memory. His return to Mogadishu forces him not only to confront the ruins around him but also the ruins within him. As he walks through familiar streets that now feel hostile, he feels “as if he was walking into a scar that had never healed” (p. 18). Farah deepens this idea in an interview where he states, Somalis carry their country inside their memories because the physical Somalia they knew no longer exists. This statement perfectly captures Jeebleh’s inner fragmentation: memory becomes a survival mechanism replacing the homeland. Besteman reinforces this psychological reading, arguing that war turns memory into “a contested terrain where identities are reconstructed through fear and longing” (Besteman 1998, p. 44). Thus, Jeebleh’s emotional disorientation is not an isolated personal struggle; it symbolizes Somalia’s collective trauma, where the past can no longer offer stability and the present cannot offer peace.

Farah constructs Mogadishu as a place where morality dissolves under the weight of warlord politics. Jeebleh is horrified when he realizes that “every gun was a law unto itself” (p. 67), indicating that governance has been replaced by violence. His observation that “no one remembered justice anymore; they only remembered their fear” (p. 71) reveals the ethical collapse of the city. Farah clarifies this in his commentary: Somalia became a place where the state died but people continued to live among its bones. This insight enriches

Samatar's argument that Farah "refuses the comfort of moral binaries and shows violence as a systemic condition implicating everyone" (Samatar 2007, p. 103). Jeebleh's own moral dilemmas whether to forgive or retaliate reflect the ethical paralysis of a nation that has lost its moral compass. Political violence becomes the moral atmosphere of the city every person breathes it, absorbs it, and is shaped by it.

Home, Exile, and the Search for Belonging

Farah uses Jeebleh's homecoming to reveal the deep emotional rupture caused by displacement. Although Jeebleh was born in Mogadishu, he feels "like a visitor in the place that once held his childhood footsteps" (p.141). His emotional exile intensifies when he realizes that "home had become a memory outliving its own body" (p.147). Farah himself explains exile through a deeply moving line: "Exile is not a distance from home; it is the fear that home may no longer want you." This aligns with Kapteijns' idea that home becomes "an unstable cultural metaphor reconstructed through trauma" (Kapteijns 2013, p.202). Thus, Jeebleh's return home becomes a painful revelation: war has destroyed not only his city but his sense of belonging. Farah suggests that exile persists even after physical return because true home exists only when emotional security exists.

Women in *Links* represent the emotional backbone of a devastated society. Jeebleh recognizes that "their silence carried the stories no man dared to speak" (p. 179), suggesting that women preserve history when men are too broken to do so. When he sees they "remained like the last pillars of a fallen house" (p. 183), he understands that women uphold cultural and moral stability. Farah strengthens this theme in his statement: Somali women kept the country alive by carrying the stories men were too broken to tell.

This view aligns with Moon's reading that women in Farah's fiction are "moral centers whose survival strategies challenge the logic of war" (Moon 2010, p.74). Through their resilience, women resist moral collapse and protect what remains of Somali cultural

identity.

Ethics of Revenge and Forgiveness

The ethical heart of *Links* is Jeebleh's struggle between revenge and forgiveness. Although revenge initially seems appealing, he understands that "revenge tasted sweet only for a moment, then returned as poison" (p. 214). In a city where "forgiveness was a language the city had forgotten" (p. 219), Jeebleh realizes that violence reproduces itself endlessly. Farah himself says: Forgiveness is not weakness in my novels; it is the only way a shattered nation can refuse to repeat its tragedies.

Bahri echoes this point, arguing that forgiveness in post-war narratives becomes "a radical political act resisting inherited violence" (Bahri 2008, p.97). Through Jeebleh's internal conflict, Farah frames forgiveness not merely as a moral choice but as the foundation for rebuilding Somalia's future.

Links ultimately becomes a profound meditation on the psychological and moral crises of a nation destroyed by civil war. Jeebleh's journey through the streets of Mogadishu forces him to confront not only the physical ruin around him but the emotional devastation within himself. When he observes that "the city before him appeared like a corpse picked clean by years of war" (p. 12), he recognizes that the Somalia he once knew has collapsed into a vast emotional wound. This realization supports Nuruddin Farah's own statement that he wrote the novel to understand a country where memory, fear, and belonging collapsed into one.

The collapse of political order intensifies this crisis. Jeebleh's recognition that "every gun was a law unto itself" (p. 67) shows how violence has replaced governance. This reflects Farah's chilling description of Somalia as a place where the state died, but people continued to live among its bones. The absence of moral authority pushes Jeebleh into ethical confusion, mirroring the country's inability to distinguish justice from vengeance. Samatar's

argument that Farah exposes violence as a “systemic condition implicating everyone who survives within it” (Samatar 2007, p. 103) deepens the novel’s moral ambiguity.

Despite the brutality of war, Farah gives women a quiet but powerful moral authority. Jeebleh sees that “their silence carried the stories no man dared to speak” (p. 179), which aligns with Farah’s affirmation that Somali women kept the country alive by carrying the stories men were too broken to tell. They serve as emotional anchors in a society that has lost its ethical foundation, reinforcing Moon’s point that women in Farah’s fiction are “moral centers whose survival strategies challenge the logic of war” (Moon 2010, p. 74).

The central ethical dilemma of *Links* emerges through Jeebleh’s struggle with revenge. His realization that “revenge tasted sweet only for a moment, then returned as poison” (p. 214) reflects the destructive cycle of retaliatory violence. Farah deepens this when he asserts that “forgiveness is not weakness; it is the only way a shattered nation can refuse to repeat its tragedies.” Bahri expands this idea, arguing that forgiveness becomes a “radical political act” (Bahri 2008, p. 97).

Thus, the conclusion of *Links* offers not a solution but a moral direction: true healing for Somalia requires confronting trauma honestly, rejecting inherited cycles of violence, restoring communal memory, and choosing forgiveness as an act of national reconstruction. Farah presents this not as idealism, but as the only workable response to a nation living within the ruins of its past.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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