

Woman and Nature: Reading Farah's *From a Crooked Rib* from an Ecofeminist Perspective

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine ecofeminism in an African context through a close reading of N. Farah's *From a Crooked Rib*. To achieve this goal, the framework of ecofeminism is utilized to investigate forms of patriarchal domination and exploitation of women and nature in the novel under scrutiny. *From a Crooked Rib* is written to deconstruct patriarchal dominance as the main catalyst for the damage to nature and the environment constituting a threat to human existence, particularly the existence of the African woman. The text explicitly highlights how women and nature are conceptualized in similar ways due to their fertility, reproduction and, also, vulnerability. It also examines the correlation between environmental degradation and the subordination of women by the African patriarchal system. The study, therefore, attempts to raise social awareness of the importance of protecting women and the environment in order to guarantee environmental sustainability and human survival.

Keywords: ecofeminism, feminism, environment, African woman, Nuruddin Farah, *From a Crooked Rib*

1. Introduction

Nuruddin Farah Hassan (1945), a Somali writer, is best known as a novelist and short-story writer. He is Somalia's best-acclaimed writer, having been awarded the prestigious 1998 Neustadt International Prize for Literature. His first published novel is *From a Crooked Rib*, published when he was a student at the University of Chandigarh in Punjab. The book reflects Farah's concerns with womanhood and feminist issues, these run so deep that he received an email from a book reviewer addressing him as "she" (Wright, 2004, p. 27). Due to his uncompromising feminist attitude, he is labelled "Africa's first feminist male writer" (Petersen, 2002, p. 249). *From a Crooked Rib* verifies his ardent commitment to the cause of women in general, and Somali women in particular, to liberate them from exploitation and suppression by the patriarchal system.

Therefore, most critical studies scrutinize *From a Crooked Rib* from a feminist perspective. Examples of prominent studies are "Nomads and Feminists: The Novels of Nuruddin Farah", an article written by G. H. Moore (1984); "Nuruddin Farah and the Changing Role of Women", by J. I. Okonkwo (1984); "Politics of Feminist Resistance in Nuruddin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*" (2017), by N. Helmi; "Violence against Girls: A Feminist Perspective on Nuruddin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib*" (2019), by Ifeoma Ezinne Odinye, and many other critical studies that focus on feminist resistance to forces of subjugation and oppression in African society.

However, a more careful reading of *From a Crooked Rib* demonstrates that Farah is an environmental activist who is deeply concerned with nature, animals and the environment. The text explicitly underlines the connection between women's rights and environmental justice. It highlights how women and nature are conceptualized in similar ways due to their fertility, reproduction, passivity and vulnerability. It also highlights the correlation between the subordination and subjugation of both women and nature by the patriarchal ideology. One may wonder if Farah wrote his novel with an ecofeminist agenda. However, the reader cannot help but notice that women, environment, nature and animals become integral elements of the novel. Due to highlighting feminist and ecological issues, *From a Crooked Rib* can be investigated from the perspective of ecofeminism.

However, to date, the literary analytical lens has not examined Farah's *From a Crooked Rib* from an ecofeminist perspective. Therefore, the main contribution of this study is to fill some gaps in existing literary studies of Farah's oeuvre by shedding light on ecofeminist concerns raised in *From a Crooked Rib*. Thus, the pivotal aim of this paper is to interpret *From a Crooked Rib* from an ecofeminist perspective by investigating various forms of patriarchal domination and exploitation of women and nature for the purpose of emancipating and liberating them.

The study will begin with a brief theoretical background of ecofeminism, followed by an analysis of the text, highlighting the correlation between the domination of women and exploitation of the environment in African society. It also examines illustrations of the association between women and nature as a means of defying the patriarchal structure of suppression. The study pinpoints some views related to

women and animal rights as integral parts of the environment in order to eliminate all forces of domination and oppression.

2. Theoretical Framework of Ecofeminism

As an interdisciplinary theory, Ecofeminism incorporates environmental concerns with women issues. It was first formulated by Françoise d'Eauboune in her book *Le Feminisme ou la mort* published in 1974. For theorists like Ynestra King (1983) and Karen J. Warren (1997), it was termed third-wave Feminism which examines the domination of women and exploitation of the environment by institutionalized patriarchal values. Estok (2005) opines that "[...] the hatred of women and the hatred of nature are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing" (p.22) by the patriarchal society which creates a system of hierarchies to subjugate, underestimate and relegate women and the environment to an inferior position.

The pivotal goal of ecofeminism is to display the intricate relationship between the exploitation of nature and the domination of women to achieve the liberation of both women and nature. Distinguished from liberal feminism which calls for equality between man and woman, Ecofeminism seeks to liberate woman as someone who is, in essence, cooperative, peaceful, nurturing and closer to nature than a man. Vandana Shiva (1988) affirms that one of the aims of Ecofeminism "is to redefine how societies look at [the] productivity and activity of both women and nature, how they have been mistaken as passive, allowing them to be both ill-used" (p. 9). Shiva also maintains that a woman's daily productive activities affirm her strong connection to the environment. In this sense, a woman is more qualified than a man to manage the environment because women who produce "wealth in partnership with nature, have been experts in their own right of holistic and ecological knowledge of nature's processes"(p. 3). Thus, Ecofeminism aims at strengthening the bond between women and nature and closely evaluates this association as a means of interdependence and co-existence. In her book *Gyni/Ecology*, Mary Daly focuses on the significance of "putting women back in touch with women's original 'wild' and 'lusty' natural world and freeing them from men's 'domesticating' and 'dispiriting' cultural world" (Tong, 1998, p. 256) to improve women's relationship with nature, which is undervalued by patriarchy. Like all ecofeminists, Daly maintains that man's destruction of nature relates to woman's domination, and the only way for women to liberate themselves and nature from patriarchy is to associate themselves with nature, embracing its qualities while at the same time maintaining their active roles as creative and resourceful beings. (Tong, 1998, p.257).

Ecofeminist thinkers recognize the significance of language in constructing gender differences and social order through using some expressions that demonstrate the position of women and nature. Murkjee (2013) examines the symbolic association between women and the environment through some metaphorical representations which either feminize nature, such as "Mother nature", or naturalize women in the form of animal imagery, such as "cows", "pigs" and "cats" (p.4). Nature is also given some female attributes, such as 'nature is raped', 'mastered', 'conquered', 'explored', 'controlled', 'her secret penetrated', 'her womb is put into the services of man' etc. (p. 4). The novel under scrutiny highlights examples of such metaphorical associations between women and the environment for the purpose of deconstructing the hegemonic culture of oppression.

"Ebla was nature, nature had become personified in her": Woman and Environment in *From a Crooked Rib*:

As a feminist with ecological interests, Farah estimates women, nature and passion highly in order to deconstruct the degrading image of nature that prevails in some feminist studies which portray nature thus:

...the excluded and devalued contract of reason, includes the emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive or uncivilised, the non-human world, matter, physicality and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and of madness. In other words, nature includes everything that reason excludes. (Plumwood, 1993, p.19)

In a sense, Farah in *From a Crooked Rib* attempts to dismantle the culture of hierarchy that emphasizes the binarisms of culture/nature, man/woman, reason/emotion, rationality/animality etc. by developing a close relationship between women and nature and eliminating institutionalized oppression practices based on race, class, gender and sexuality.

To accentuate the close affinity and interconnectedness of women and nature in the novel, Farah (2006) affirms: "Ebla was nature, nature had become personified in her" (p.16). Throughout the novel, the reader can explore many examples of the association of Ebla with the natural world. Arriving in the town of Belet Wene, Ebla admits that she "felt more at home being near the cow than she would with the townspeople" (p. 25). In the town, life, according to Ebla, is "miserable" since she feels aloof and detached from city people. She feels safe and at home only in nature, and with the company of animals, as she contemplates the idea that "she wanted to befriend the cow" (p. 34). When she runs away from her people, she seeks protection from nature and its creatures by hiding herself "under a big tree, near the detour" (p. 15). For Ebla, nature is a space that promotes her emotional and physical well-being. Moreover, nature is a powerful agent that has healing power over the body and soul. Ebla decides to "eat guavas" (p.143) as a traditional practice to heal her bitter soul after being disappointed by her husband, Awil. Dejected and helpless, Ebla is in dire need of the "milk [emphasis added] of human kindness" (p. 59), an image that affirms how the non-human world succeeds in demonstrating friendly and compassionate feelings to Ebla, which the human world fails to extend. Thus, nature in the novel motivates Ebla in her search for liberation and independence. Nature is a powerful source of peace, security, healing and hope for the human world.

Farah as an ecofeminist accentuates the idea of the interconnectedness of all life elements advocating a non-hierarchical relationship. He continuously delineates portraits of the strong relationship between women and nature in the novel. For example, when Ebla plans her escape from her enforced marriage, she contemplates the idea of being as free as a cock. The analogy between Ebla and the cock is portrayed to demonstrate Ebla's inner free spirit seeking to dismantle patriarchal domination:

She desired, more than anything, to fly away; like a cock, which has unknotted itself from the string tying its leg to the wall. She wanted to fly away from the dependence on the seasons, the seasons which determine the life or death of the nomads. And she wanted to fly away from the squabbles over water, squabbles caused by lack of water, which meant that the season was bad. She wanted to fly away from the duty of women. Not that she was intending to feel idle and do nothing, nor did she feel irresponsible, but a woman's duty means loading and unloading camels and donkeys after the destination had been reached, and that life was routine. (Farah, 2006, p.11)

It is important to note that the cock is a bird that symbolizes light, freedom, new life and guidance. As a cock, Ebla stands as an example to be followed by all exploited and suppressed women seeking to take the initiative of fighting for freedom and independence from patriarchal cultural constraints. It is only through her connection with nature that Ebla attains security, empowerment and freedom.

Farah presents women and nature positively by highlighting their intrinsic roles in the sustenance of society. Therefore, women and nature are not united in passivity but in maintenance, sustenance and creativity (Shiva, 1988). African society is in dire need of the productivity and fertility of both women and nature to guarantee its sustainability and continuity. The novel highlights illustrations of the nurturing and productive roles of women and nature. Female characters in *From a Crooked Rib* are culturally assigned to perform domestic jobs of running the household, looking after children and aged people, and supporting other members of the family. Ebla, as a nomad girl, is responsible for fetching water, cooking food and looking after her grandfather. When she runs away to be independent, she stays with her cousin, to serve him and look after his pregnant wife. Another female character is Aowralla, the wife of Ebla's cousin, who cares for her new-born baby and tends the cows before Ebla's arrival.

In *From a Crooked Rib*, nature is feminized for its productivity and fertility to enhance the stability of the community. In the nomadic society of the novel, the close association between human beings and the environment is clearly established from the very beginning of the novel. For example, the coming of spring for nomads means rebirth, a new life of bounty, green pastures, good grazing and fat livestock:

The three months of spring meant everything: for human beings as well as animals. Weddings are arranged in spring; wars were undertaken; blessings of the saints were sought; tribal fights were either started or ended. Spring, therefore, meant everything. It meant happiness; it meant green pasture for the cattle; it meant a great quantity of milk from the cattle, which also meant agricultural prosperity for some. (Farah, 2006, p. 3)

Therefore, the life of nomadic people depends on "their herds. The lives of the herds also depended upon the plentifulness or scarcity of green grass" (p. 6). Thus, nature and its elements are utilized to sustain the stability of human existence.

The significance of the environment is not only presented for its physical beauty but also for its basic functional role in the life of nomads. Women and nature's creatures are essentially valued in nomadic families for their nurturing aspects and equated with women in status: "the central family consisted of women, children, the invalid, goats, and a few camels to provide them with milk" (p.12). The environment looks after people to guarantee their survival, as it provides them with shelters which are:

...made of wattle, weaved into a mat-like thing with a cover on top. They were supported by sticks, acting as pillars. Each had one door-all of four feet high. It was a portable home, to be put on the hump-back of a camel when the time came for moving to a pastoral area... (Farah, 2006, p.6)

The Domination of Women and Nature:

As an interdisciplinary field that involves gender, race, sexuality and socioeconomic concerns and how they affect the environment, Ecofeminism, according to Legler (1997):

...is a combination of ecological or environmental criticism and feminist literary criticism. It offers a unique combination of literary and philosophical perspectives that gives literary cultural critics a special lens through which they can investigate the ways in which nature is represented in literature and the way representation of nature is linked with representations of gender, race, class and sexuality. One of the primary projects of ecofeminists literary critics is analysis of the cultural construction of nature, which includes an analysis of language, desire, knowledge and power. (p. 227)

Therefore, Ecofeminists maintain that there are distinct "connections between the unjustified dominations of women, people of colour, children, and the poor and the unjustified domination of nature" (Warren, 2000, p.1). Accentuating the previous claim, Salleh (2001) resolves that "the keystone of this destructive patriarchalism is identified in the everyday notion that men represent the sphere of humanity and culture, while women, indigenes, children, animals, and plants are part of nature" (p. 109). Therefore, women, animals, specific races, classes and the environment are perceived as the "other" or inferior to the superior dominating male culture.

In *From a Crooked Rib*, male figures dominate society. Men and boys are privileged and attributed roles that maintain their authority over women. According to African native custom, women are assigned specific roles that restrict them to a certain private domain which impedes their socio-economic growth. In this respect, Theresa Abok (2018) decides: "girls and women do not enjoy the power, opportunity, recognition, and privilege given to boys and men. They are inhibited by the restrictions imposed on them by tradition and culture" (p.121). Ebla is aware of her inferiority as a woman, and she loathes the unequal gender roles that discriminate between the sexes prescribed by culture, as the narrator explains:

...a woman's duty meant loading and unloading camels and donkeys after destination had been reached, and that life was a routine: goats for girls and camels for boys got on her nerves more than she could stand ... this allotment of assignments denoted the status of a woman, that she was lower in status than a man, and that she was weak. (Farah, 2006, p. 21)

From the above quote, it is pertinent that women and the environment are subordinated to man's will and advantage. Man is more elevated and valued than other creatures, a practice that perpetuates the inferior status of women and nature. Furthermore, in a patriarchal society, women and nature are relegated to objects for purchase. They are viewed as mere commodities for the benefit of men. Examples of the objectification and commodification of women and nature are portrayed as Ebla contemplates:

From experience she knew that girls were materials, just like objects, or items on the shelf of a shop. They were sold and bought as shepherds sold their goats at market-places, or shop-owners sold the goods to their customers. To a shopkeeper what was the difference between a girl and his goods? Nothing, absolutely nothing. (Farah, 2006, p. 75)

Another form of female marginalization and suppression by male authority emanates from the practice of forced marriage which is undertaken without the "valid consent of one or more parties usually through physical violence or psychological pressure" (Sharp, 2017, p. 6). Ebla's grandfather decides to give her in marriage to an old man for a few camels without her acceptance. Underscoring Ebla's plight, Bilal Ahmad Dar (2017) claims that "the most inhuman and humiliating treatment meted out to girls in Somalia is forced marriage or what we call wife-barter. This is exemplified in a situation whereby a girl is coercively given out in marriage without her due consultation" (p.267). Ebla's realization of her suffering inflames her desire to rebel against the discriminatory culture represented by her grandfather, as she asserts not to: "think of someone who does not think of me ... It is he who has given my hand to the old man, exchanging me for camels" (Farah, 2006, p.15). Thus, Ebla and camels are equally commodified and objectified for man's advantage. Consequently, Ebla decides to run away from home, "to get free from all restraints, from being the wife of Giumaleh. To get away from unpleasantries. To break the ropes society had wrapped around her neck and to be free and be herself" (Farah, 2006, p. 19).

Unfortunately, Ebla's escape to the town does not relieve her from patriarchal oppression. For a second time, she escapes from a forced marriage which is arranged by her capitalist cousin Gheddi to secure a loan to a sick broker without her consent. Ebla forcefully claims that "I don't like this sort of marriage. But that is what women are – just like cattle, properties of someone or other" (p.116). The previous quote accentuates how women and animals are oppressed by patriarchal culture. Women and animals are sold, bought, oppressed, dominated and treated as mere objects or property. Ebla challenges the patriarchal domination that subordinates women and nature and refuses to be forcefully married.

Domestic violence is another practice of patriarchal oppression that afflicts African women. After escaping her cousin's forced marriage, Ebla elopes to Mogadiscio with Awill, whom she trusts and loves. Awill has violently exploited and raped her: "Awill stood up straight and showered hand blows upon Ebla – in the mouth at her head on her belly..." (Farah, 2006, p. 96). Awill's violent and brutal rape of Ebla accentuates the sexual abuse of the Somali nation by patriarchal western ideology. The rape of Ebla by Awill, who represents western education, runs in parallel to the occupation and control of Somali land by the white man. Therefore, Ebla's body symbolizes native Somali land that is abused and raped by colonialism.

Integral to ecofeminist thinking is the issue of animal rights. In patriarchal societies, animal rights are violated. It is believed that the oppression of women and animals is attributed to the idea that "both a woman and an animal were ... depicted as the source of all evil in the world. And man above all other forms of life, was claimed to have a special relation to the divine" (Kheel, 1993, p. 5). Consequently, the claim that "the specific function of women [and] animals ... was to serve as instruments for the attainment of the highest happiness of free, adult men" (Kheel, 1993, p. 6) justifies the patriarchal oppression of women and elements of nature. Due to the parallel suppression and abuse of women and animals, ecofeminists struggle to raise people's consciousness of animal rights. Animals, in *From a Crooked Rib*, are brutally victimized to satisfy people's needs.

Ebla, as a woman, is passionately attached to nature and its creatures. She is very compassionate and generous to animals, as reflected in the following scene:

She looked in the direction of the cow and went towards it. The beast could not reach the grass ... It dug its feet into the ground as it knelt down on its hind legs, then put out its tongue to pull the grass so that it could eat. But instead of coming nearer, the grass went farther away ... Ebla walked over and pushed the grass nearer and nearer. The cow at last got hold of a bundle and bit into it, hard and properly. Ebla gave a happy smile ... Then the calf bleated. 'Maybe it's hungry too,' she speculated ... she picked up a handful of grass and headed towards the calf. She placed it just under the nose of the beast, and walked away feeling contented. (Farah, 2006, pp. 25-6)

In a society characterized by violence and cruelty, women show their compassionate attitude and moral consideration towards animals. For example, Gheddi's wife complains about the ruthless treatment of the cowherd towards the beasts when she informs Ebla that "The bastard cowherd doesn't keep them at the grazing fields, even if there *is* [sic] lots for them to eat" (p. 29). The novel sheds light on the violation of animal rights by examining some nomadic styles of life shown in the excessive use of milk to the extent that "The milk which they had drunk before they started their trip shook inside their bellies" (p.17), preventing little calves milking their mothers. Ebla is dissatisfied with the brutal killing of little calves as a common practice to keep the milk of cows for people to drink: "as is usual, the calf had been killed and eaten only five days after it was born. The cow had given birth for the first time and this was done to teach it that, in case its future calf died, it could be milked with ease" (p.30).

One of the environmental disasters indicated in *From a Crooked Rib* is drought which is caused by climatic change and a shortage of rain. Somali women are the most vulnerable members of society and severely impacted by drought. Being responsible for fetching water, women must make more effort and travel long distances to collect clean water for the family. The scarcity of water and green pastures threatens the life of pastoralists whose life "depended upon that of their herds. The lives of the herds also depended upon the plentiness or the scarcity of green grass" (p. 6). When Ebla decides to run away, she expresses her frustration at tribal conflicts over water resources as she declares that she wants "to fly away from the squabbles over water, squabbles caused by the lack of water" (p.11). A Somali woman is put under pressure and suffers male abuse and violence if water is not secured.

Contamination of rivers is another environmental problem that is figuratively alluded to in the text. A folk tale about the "sugar-incident" (p.83) is mentioned by the narrator as an indirect warning against the environmental problem of water pollution when people spill bags of sugar in the river to emphasize the danger of spilling all kinds of liquid or solid waste into rivers and contaminating the water. Besides water pollution, the novel under scrutiny refers to air pollution as another serious environmental issue caused by the male system. Ebla as a friend of the environment declares her denunciation when she discovers that Awill is a smoker. She argues: "'Why didn't you tell me you smoked?' 'Why?' ' Because I would never have accepted to marry you'" (p.82). Ebla's overt disdain for smoking stems from her awareness of the degrading and negative consequences of tobacco for the sustainability of the environment. Besides health effects, smoking causes air pollution, deforestation and contamination of the soil and water that harms wildlife.

3. Conclusion

Although Farah wrote *From a Crooked Rib* before the emergence of the environmental movement, his novel provides a basis to analyse gender and environmental issues which are the bases of ecofeminism. The novel raises awareness of the unjustified violation of nature and the exploitation of women. The study, therefore, utilizes the framework of ecofeminism to investigate forms of patriarchal domination and exploitation of women and nature in *From a Crooked Rib*.

In *From a Crooked Rib*, Farah analyses the domination of women and nature by the patriarchal ideology. Through the fictional implementation of man/woman and nature/culture dichotomies, Farah explores how African society discriminates and segregates individuals. Women and nature are equated in processes of victimization and oppression by African society.

The study highlights the strong connection between the environment and people's livelihoods. For this relationship to be nurtured, the study recommends that men and women should collaborate to protect and preserve the environment. This can only be achieved if women and nature are treated as integral parts of a man's life, and not mere objects of commodity and property to be owned by men. Women and nature should be free from all forms of violation and subordination to guarantee human survival and environmental sustainability.

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