

CONCEPTION, MISCARRIAGES AND ABORTIONS: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF MOTHERHOOD IN NURUDDIN FARAH'S *MAPS*

Smrithi M. Venugopal, *Research Scholar, Centre for Post Graduate Studies and Research in English, St. Joseph's College, Devagiri, Calicut, Kerala, India*

Abstract:

In the African context, motherhood can be considered both a boon and bane. While being a mother brings about respect and status in the conventional African societies, it also ties women to the never ending chain of conformation and negotiation of gender roles. Motherhood serves as a pedestal upon which women, since time immemorial has been placed, to be trampled upon. Idealisation of motherhood has been the key to controlling women's lives in the patriarchal world. Nurrudin Farah's Maps offer a different world of mothers. Farah's mothers are far from being ideal. Farah depicts how women become mothers out of compulsion in the sphere of the domestic, where fertility offer women more social status; due to state control, where single women who are seen a threat to the community, are assigned by the male authoritative powers to mother orphaned kids; widowed mothers who smother their babies at birth and issueless women who undergo successive abortions. The imagery of mother Somalia runs parallel to the rest. Farah's portrayal of motherhood is a break away from the African conventions. Farah expresses deep anguish towards the hypocrisy and vacuity of political freedom which turns a blind eye towards the on-going oppression of women.

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Motherhood and the biological, social and psychological notions encompassing it has always been the centre of debate in feminist discourse. Feminist critics reject the conventional patriarchal norms of motherhood, which defines the ways and means by which a woman qualifies to be an ideal mother. According to Rosemarie Tong, American feminist philosopher, radical feminism has attacked it as a patriarchal construct and believes that patriarchy would not survive without motherhood in its institutionalized form. However, it has also affirmed motherhood as a precious identity that must be protected from male domination. Adrienne Rich presents a compromise between African feminism that advocates motherhood as a means of women's liberation and radical feminism that understands motherhood as a means of oppression. She explains that women have the biological power to bear and nurture human life and that men fear women's reproductive power. Men are constantly under the fear of being controlled and overwhelmed by women. Motherhood becomes a weapon of control. Rich laid emphasis on the stratagem of patriarchy which instilled guilt in the psyche of mothers and transformed them into selfless beings rather than women with self-realisation, where maternal instinct outweighs intelligence. Many women across generations have fallen victims to the strategy of fitting into the mould and have relentlessly strived hard to meet the requirements of ideal motherhood. While the biological experiences of childbearing, natural birth, and breast feeding are attributed a halo and eulogised by patriarchy, the psychological pressure which most women undergo due to exhaustion and anxiety after becoming a mother is left unaddressed. It is in this respect Nuruddin Farah's *Maps* stand out.

Farah explores the age old traditions and conventions of Africa in the novel. The status of African women, who are doubly colonised in terms of colour and gender and whose identity is determined by their ability to reproduce is scrutinised in the novel. The most important factor with regard to the woman in

traditional society is her role as mother and the centrality of this role as a whole. Preoccupation with motherhood is evident in *Maps*. However Farah's mothers do not fit into the cluster of ideal mothers. His treatment of the misconceptions surrounding motherhood is commendable. There have been attempts to release women from the mystique of motherhood by presenting both its joys and pains. Various types of motherhood are projected. The issues of motherhood and child bearing are a focus for ambivalence about individualistic and communal values. Varieties of mothers pitch their tents in *Maps*. No mother is like the other.

Askar's biological mother is the first mother figure in the novel. She had been recently widowed and died during her unattended labour. She died possibly after breast feeding her baby, as assumed by Misra because Askar refused to drink her milk. However she left her finger prints on the child's neck suggestive of an attempt to kill the baby. Infanticides and abortions are on the reverse side of the coin of motherhood. Hence Askar's mother is far from being an 'ideal' mother as she seems to have tried to smother her baby.

Misra, who was decided upon by the community to 'mother' the orphaned child, Askar, is the most important mother figure in the novel. This is a move towards enforced motherhood. As Hema Chari points out, women are the property of the patriarch who has the exclusive right to arrange their marriages and settle their bride price. The situation of women is exacerbated by the constraints of the traditional Islamic law, which affords women limited status and few legal protections (Parekh, 2014). Misra is both an 'ideal' mother and its opposite. She is an outsider to the Somalis, a remarkable creation, warm, motherly but at the same time sexually submissive, devious and possibly a traitor to the Somali cause. It is the intense relationship between the foreign surrogate mother and the child that provides the underlying strength of the novel. Misra first menstruated at the sight of Askar as a baby, lying next to his dead mother, suggestive of fertility. Misra, an orphan herself was raised by a wealthy man. She was made wife by her adopted 'father' when she reached sexual maturity. Farah throws light upon the plight of women caught in positions of subservience as mere objects of male desire. She kills him during the act of copulation. She gives birth to a child who died eighteen weeks later. She continued to have a maternal odour and tried many a times to breast feed Askar who refused to be suckled. She takes care of him, washes him, feeds him and tucks him in between her breasts. Misra smelled of Askar's waste. She did not look at it as odious or disgusting. Even at the edge of losing her lover, Aw Adan, who resented her smell, she did not give up Askar. Misra who was impregnated by Aw Adan, goes through an unskilled abortion. Abortion is a matter of choice where in a woman, who has absolute autonomy over her body decides to or not to bring a new life into the world, that of suffering and dejection in Misra's case. Farah's blood stained picturisation of the scene is disturbing. She suffers excruciating pain as a metal rod with abortifacient herbs is inserted into her womb. Askar's observation of the abortion scene is one of the most outstanding moments in the novel, pungent and unforgettable. Misra's abortion can be read as the premature killing of an embryonic stranger to Somalia, as both Aw Adan and Misra were Ethiopians. Misra who conceived accidentally, one from her father and the other from her lover, is like many other women whose pregnancies end in failure, without a husband or partner to share the grief and guilt. She bears the pain and trauma alone. No man is involved over debates of illegitimate child bearing and no man is ever considered as a threat to the moral order if they engage in such practices. The unmarried mother was the most dangerous of all, not only to her infant but also to the social order. No society accepts a woman who bears a child out of wedlock. Hence she is forced to resort to the dangers of an illegal and unsafe abortion. Wanting approval and attention from the society, she caters to their demand to adopt Askar. She believes that her status would improve by being a mother. She acquires a more secure identity as motherhood defines womanhood in most African societies. Askar becomes the substitute of the child and the husband, as she calls him "my man". There is hence ambivalence in the nature of Misra's motherhood as she underwent selective abortions but also dedicated fully to Askar's needs. The mother who farms out her baby or takes an abortifacient is not an idealised mother either. *Maps*

also questions the futile purpose of a woman's life completely devoted to bringing up her children through the most agonising trials and tribulations, only to be abandoned by the very same children who must move on in pursuance of their individual talents and happiness. Towards the end of the novel, a helpless Misra turns up to Askar for protection and security, which he refuses to offer. It can be considered a brutal reminder of women's folly in devoting their whole life to either their husbands or children.

Askar's fixation with menstruation deserves some attention. Medical discourse and popular advertisements sought to construct women as unstable because of her menstrual cycles and reproductive capacities. Women's bodies become a metaphor of instability of the womb and mind and menstruation a metaphor for controlling forces of life and death. Menstruation is the resultant of the death of an ovum which goes unfertilised. It depicts a death, every woman gets accustomed to. Misra suffers unbearable pain while she is 'in season' leaving Askar under Karin's care as she grows bad tempered and irritable during those days. Menstruation here stands for frustrated motherhood. Askar wavers between the positive and negative connotations of menstruation. He at times envies Misra and also despises her. He wakes up in a pool of blood and believes to have menstruated himself, a subtle reminder of the observation of radical feminists that men envy women for their reproductive power.

The polygamous Uncle Qorrax's wives represent the next category of mothers in the novel. According to African realities, motherhood offers women a privileged social position (Anfred, 2003). Qorrax's wives are indulgent mothers in the first few years and later become ruthlessly rigid with their children. They show constant loss of temper with children. Punishment, deprivation and lack of love characterised African motherhood, while love and care illustrated European type mothering (Ichou, 2006). Qorrax's wives are indifferent to children born out of lust and not conjugal love. The need to prove one's fertility and the wish for larger families have historical and socio economic origins. Farah portrays the dictatorship in exercise, both in the political and domestic spheres. The community of men exert control over women's bodies and enforce social practices such as polygamy, female circumcision, and infibulations. Qorrax forces Misra to sleep with him, and Misra eventually become his mistress. As Carol Smart observes, non-legalised cohabiting or "visiting" conjugal unions in which families revolve around a mother and her children are regarded as African residuals; the heritage of slavery. Herskovits, the American anthropologist is a major exponent of the idea that the New World domestic system is based mainly on West Africa, where the family pattern was frequently polygamous. Motherhood, and the consequent glory conferred on it does not in the African context, spare the woman the pain and humiliation of being replaced by a younger wife in a society where polygamy still provides the male with the power and the choice to marry a number of women. Katherine Frank, noted American author and biographer, states that polygamy is the most glaring inequitable and sexist feature of traditional African society.

The imagery of Somalia as a mother runs parallel to the biological mothers of the novel as it was passed on in the oral poetry of national mythology. Farah celebrates Somalia as a beautiful and liberal woman who has affairs with five suitors. Three of the affairs end in miscarriages, a parable for the aborted dreams of "Great Somalia", reference to the three provinces which Somalia had to ultimately give up at the time of independence. Feminine principles are embodied in the land i.e. Mother Nation, contested upon for authority by males of different generations. The African writers have luxuriated in metaphors of motherhood, land and Africa. The love of a mother nation, unlike the ideal biological mothers, is not unconditional as she expects loyalty of her subject. Askar refers the reader to a Somali poet's fable which interestingly portrays Somalia as a sensuous woman, to be wooed and seduced and claimed by a hero or a leader. She accepts advances and then sleeps with five men and has three miscarriages. Mother turns into a whore, and motherhood is set against promiscuity. The prostitute or the fallen woman on the other hand, is constructed in terms of the immorality and frailty of feminist. The splitting of black woman's image into the mother and whore is sharply conditioned by the white patriarchal society and the system of slavery that existed in Africa. This division, as Puri suggests, allowed the white man to have a free sexual life without

being overwhelmed by anxiety or guilt. (Puri, 1989)

Bareness is perhaps the worst affliction a couple can endure in African cultures. It is also always attributed to women. In traditional society for a woman to lack reproductive power, is indeed to be deprived of her true identity. Askar's maternal aunt, Salaado had a number of miscarriages. The experience of several successive miscarriages creates new and painful emotions. More over the repeated trauma signaled the impossibility of future pregnancies. She failed to bear a child and eventually had to have her ovaries removed. This signifies sterility as opposed to fertility. Generally, when fate deprives women the ability to procreate, their anguish and loss is not shared by their husbands. In *Maps*, we see the opposite of the same. After having learnt that his wife would no longer be able to bear children, and also under the pressures from his family to consider another marriage, uncle Hilaal opts for vasectomy. Regulating one's fertility implies the capacity to perceive oneself as distant from the socio cultural context and its constraints. The conjugal relationship between Hilaal and Salaado is not conventional. It was objectionable for a man to love his wife who could not bear him a child and who also did not do household chores. Hilaal cooked meals while Salaado drove the car. Bank accounts, land deals etc. were in her name. We see a reversal of gender role in play here. The novel also engages with the new demands of the privileged African woman, who has moved into the professional middle class. Eventually Askar becomes the God send child to the issueless couple.

Farah also displays an image of amputation in motherhood. Misra suffers the amputation of one of her breasts due to a tumorous growth. Her breasts, the symbol of nurturing and motherhood, are removed. During the war, she fall victim to a gang rape and a nationalist motivated ritual murder.

In the African world view, contraception and abortions are antithetical, and even detestable for many. The natives tend to keep their traditions alive through a host of unwritten songs and unchoreographed dances, many of which are appropriate to birth, puberty and mostly to death. The importance of motherhood and childbearing capacity by African women is probably the most fundamental difference between the African women and her western counterpart in their common struggle to end discrimination against women. African literary texts dramatize a woman's struggle to conceive, her fear of being replaced, the consequent happiness at the conception and delivery or the agony in the denial of motherhood. Since time immemorial, women have been caught in the cobweb of conception and motherhood. In *Maps*, Farah shows how the powers of the state and religion control the lives of women. Farah empathises with the predicament of the subjected women of his continent and critiques the ways in which the liberatory goals of the Somali Nation exclude questions of women's rights, and also argues that a nation can be free only when its female citizens are emancipated.

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