

No. 6: Truth in Maps

Commentary

Nuruddin Farah's sixth novel, *Maps*, which takes place during the 1977 Somalia-Ethiopia war over the Ogaden, is about betrayal and the shifting identities of nations, territories, and individuals. Farah, born in 1945 in Baidoa, grew up in the Ogaden, home to many nomadic societies and, ironically, a region whose boundaries were frequently redefined during the first half of the twentieth century by foreign forces. During one such border war, Farah's family fled to Mogadishu where Farah finished his early education learning Somali, Amharic, English, Italian, and Arabic.

In *Maps*, Farah's characters represent political territories and their simultaneous struggles to define themselves as nationals and as legitimate nations. The novel centers on the relationship between Askar and his adoptive mother Misra. Askar, born of revolutionary parents, is orphaned—like the post-colonial Ogaden—and adopted by Misra, an Oromo woman who, also orphaned and displaced, occupies the margins of Ethiopian, Oromo, and Somali cultures. Misra, whose name refers to a non-partisan piece of ground,¹ has uncertain citizenship—living at different times in Somalia, Ethiopia, and the Ogaden. Farah makes clear that Misra's identity, like the Somali and Oromo cultures portrayed in the novel, cannot be definitively mapped. In Misra's case, this confusion leads to her ultimate demise.

The problem of establishing personal boundaries is ultimately entangled with political ones, and the difficulty is not as simple as the imposition of the boundary by some on others. Farah shows that any boundary is problematic where a hybridized multicultural, multilingual population exists. In a 1986 interview discussing the Gambian and Senegalese situation Farah says:

The people as people are one. The Gambian and Senegalese leaderships are divided. . . . We shouldn't even have these borders. We should eliminate them. We should redraw the maps according to our economic and psychological and social needs, and not accept the nonsensical frontiers carved out of our regions.²

In our broadside passage, Askar's Uncle Hilaal has just spied a map on the wall, made by Askar, that has "Ogaden" crossed out and replaced with "Western Somalia." Askar explains that his maps copy a given reality and identify a notional or theoretical truth. Uncle Hilaal is not satisfied and continues:

'The question is, does truth change?'

'Or do we? Do we, men and women and children, change? Or does truth?'

He ends his discussion with Askar by concluding:

'There is truth in maps. The Ogaden, as Somali, is truth. To the Ethiopian map-maker, the Ogaden, as Somali, is untruth.'³

Farah shows that the map, once the unquestioned arbiter of reality, is now to be viewed as an interpretive tool, the key to which may lie with the intent of map creator.

¹Derek Wright, *The Novels of Nuruddin Farah* (Bayreuth, Germany: Bayreuth University, 1994), 114.

²*Africa Events*, September 1986, 54-55.

³Nuruddin Farah, *Maps* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 217 and 218.

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