

**PEEKING BEHIND THE VEIL: MIGRATORY WOMEN IN AFRICA IN
NURUDDIN FARAH'S *FROM A CROOKED RIB* (1970), *A NAKED NEEDLE*
(1976) AND *KNOTS* (2007), AND NADINE GORDIMER'S *THE PICKUP* (2001)**

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ABSTRACT. *The experience of women moving across national frontiers and cultural, ethnic and religious divides in Africa is a major topic in Nuruddin Farah's From a Crooked Rib (1970), A Naked Needle (1976) and Knots (2007), and Nadine Gordimer's The Pickup (2001). In From a Crooked Rib and Knots, Nuruddin Farah presents the dilemmas faced by the protagonists – Ebla in From a Crooked Rib and Cambara in Knots (2007) – as they attempt to move back into Somalia in an effort to integrate into a society that is fractured by clan warfare, gender discrimination, religious fundamentalism and ethnic hatred. These characterisations are thrown into sharp relief by those of Nancy in Nuruddin Farah's A Naked Needle, and of Julie Summers in Nadine Gordimer's The Pickup who, departing from England and South Africa respectively, achieve controversially mixed success at crossing the cultural and religious divides. This study sets out to identify the factors that impede the integration of women migrants in Africa as depicted in the novels of these two African writers, and to demonstrate how these issues are treated aesthetically in the fictionalisations.*

Keywords: Africa, literature, English, migration, women, Muslim.

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**DESVELANDO EL ROSTRO: LAS MUJERES MIGRATORIAS EN
ÁFRICA EN *FROM A CROOKED RIB* (1970), *A NAKED NEEDLE*
(1976) Y *KNOTS* (2007) DE NURUDDIN FARAH, Y EN *THE*
PICKUP (2001) DE NADINE GORDIMER**

RESUMEN. *La experiencia de las mujeres que cruzan fronteras nacionales y barreras religiosas en África es un tema de gran importancia en From a Crooked Rib, A Naked Needle y Knots de Nuruddin Farah, y The Pickup de Nadine Gordimer. En From a Crooked Rib y Knots, Nuruddin Farah presenta los dilemas con los que se enfrentan las protagonistas – Ebla en From a Crooked Rib y Cambara en Knots – al intentar regresar a Somalia con la voluntad de integrarse en una sociedad quebrantada por las guerras de clanes, la discriminación de género, el fundamentalismo religioso y el odio entre etnias. Estas caracterizaciones se realizan de manera clara con los personajes de Nancy en A Naked Needle de Nuruddin Farah y de Julie Summers en The Pickup de Nadine Gordimer que se desplazan desde Inglaterra y África del Sur respectivamente, y alcanzan un cierto éxito rodeado de controversia al franquear las divisiones culturales y religiosas. El objetivo de este estudio es identificar los factores que impiden la integración de las mujeres migrantes en África tal como se representa en las novelas de este escritor y esta escritora africanos y demostrar de qué forma tratan estéticamente estas cuestiones en la ficción.*

Palabras clave: África, literatura, inglés, migración, mujeres, musulmán.

Received 28 February 2010

Revised version accepted 19 May 2010

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1997, in “The World and the Home,” Homi Bhabha perceptively observed that, in the postcolonial era, migration and the stories of migrants, accounts of what he termed those “freak displacements,” would come to be a major discourse topic in world literature. He wrote,

Where the transmission of “national” traditions was once the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that trans-national histories of migrants, the colonized or political refugees – these border and frontier conditions – may be the terrains of world literature. The center of such a study would neither be the “sovereignty” of national cultures nor the “universalism” of human culture but a focus on those “freak displacements” ... that have been caused within cultural lives of postcolonial societies. (McClintock, Mufti, and Shohat, eds. 1997: 449)

In respect of world literature, Bhabha's prediction has been validated. Today, emigration and immigration are not only high-profile issues in the political agendas of politicians and administrators across the world but, as Bhabha foresaw, the fictionalisation of migratory experience constitutes the core of a great number of contemporary works of literature. Among these works are two of Nuruddin Farah's latest novels, *Links* (2005)¹ and *Knots* (2007), and Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* (2001). Yet Nuruddin Farah had already written on the topic of human migration in Somalia some thirty years before Homi Bhabha's premonition was published. His first novel *From a Crooked Rib* was published in 1970 and his second novel, *A Naked Needle*, in 1976, in Heinemann's African Writers Series.² The reason for this is rooted undoubtedly in the writer's personal experience.

2. *FROM A CROOKED RIB* (1970)

Born in Baidoa, in Italian Somaliland, in 1945, Nuruddin Farah already had personal experience of migration when he came to write *From a Crooked Rib* (1970). He began his education in the Ogaden region, went on to the Institutio Magistrate in Mogadiscio, capital of the Somali Republic to complete his secondary education, studying in both English and Italian and, after leaving school and working at the Ministry of Education for a few years, he left Somalia to go and study in India. In 1966 he began reading for a degree in literature and philosophy at the Punjab University of Chandigarh, obtaining his BA degree in 1970. It was when he was at university in India, in just four weeks, between the 19th March and the 15th April 1968,³ that he wrote his first novel *From a Crooked Rib*. Following his marriage to an Indian woman, Nuruddin Farah returned with his wife to Somalia and, from 1970 until 1974, taught at a secondary school in Mogadiscio.

It is not surprising, therefore, that migration, and specifically the internal migration of a Somali woman in search of her emancipation, is the theme of Nuruddin Farah's first novel *From a Crooked Rib*. The novel tells the story of Ebla, a young Somali woman who defies tradition and seeks emancipation as she migrates

1. Nuruddin Farah's *Links* (2005) narrates the experiences of a Somali *man* who returns to Mogadiscio after living for twenty years in Canada.

2. *From a Crooked Rib* was published in 1970 as number 80 and *A Naked Needle* in 1976 as number 184 in Heinemann's African Writers Series.

3. In this respect, a work of great intensity and conciseness, Nuruddin Farah's writing of *From a Crooked Rib* can be compared with the achievement of Yoruba writer Amos Tutuola, who took only a few days to write his famous work, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952).

from the patriarchal tyranny of her extended family in the Ogaden desert, first to her cousin Gheddi's house in Belet Wene and then, as a newly-wed, with her husband Awill, to the relative modernity of the capital Mogadiscio.

Ebla achieves her freedom gradually during the process of her migration thanks to the assistance and advice of her female friends and acquaintances who help her to realise how to manage her life the way she wants to live it. Applying Herbert Blumer's concept of symbolic interactionism to the plot of *From a Crooked Rib*, we can see that Ebla's journey towards emancipation is a series of interactions with different people in different settings.⁴ Each person Ebla interacts with symbolises a social category, and the women she associates with especially reveal to her a way forward and an alternative to the patriarchal oppression of the Somali hinterland. In Gheddi's house, she experiences at first hand the birth of Gheddi's wife Aowralla's first child. Subsequently, Gheddi's neighbour, a middle-aged widow, introduces Ebla to the world of women married to Muslim, Arab men. Later, in Mogadiscio, Awill and Ebla's landlady Asha, an urban, cosmopolitan woman, advises Ebla on how to manage Awill's absence from her;⁵ how to cope with her marriage to a second husband, the middle-aged Tiffo; and how, as a woman who has been infibulated at a young age, she can decide on matters concerning her sexuality and the issue of her re-infibulation. Each interaction in each of the respective settings – the Ogaden desert, Belet Wene and Mogadiscio – is symbolic and, therefore, meaningful in terms of Ebla's quest for her emancipation. Each woman that Ebla interacts with represents a social type, and each individual provides interactional feedback that enables Ebla to make decisions about herself and about the world around her, so that she can take those decisions that lead her to greater emancipation.

4. The basic premise of Symbolic Interactionism is that all acts of communication are symbolic; therefore, all interactions are meaningful. In *Symbolic Interactionism Perspective and Method*, Herbert Blumer writes:

'Symbolic interactionism [. . .] sees meaning as arising in the process of interaction between people. The meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act towards the person with regard to the thing. Their actions operate to define the thing for the person. Thus, symbolic interactionism sees meanings as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact. (Blumer, H. 1998: 4-5)

5. As a state teacher, Awill goes to Italy for some months on a training course organised by the Somali Ministry of Education.

3. *A NAKED NEEDLE* (1976)

By the time he came to write *A Naked Needle*, Nuruddin Farah had deepened his personal experience of migration. In 1974, at the age of twenty-nine, he emigrated to England to study at the University of Essex and, therefore, it is highly probable that much of *A Naked Needle*, which was published in 1976, was written in England. Just as when he came to write *From a Crooked Rib* in Chandigarh, when he wrote *A Naked Needle* in England, Nuruddin Farah had even greater experience of the modalities of migration at first hand. Moreover, by this time, as the husband of an Indian woman, he was also in a position to understand the complexities involved for an immigrant woman who tries to adapt and integrate into a foreign country with an alien culture.

A Naked Needle tells the story of Koschin, a 40-year-old Somali man, who tries to see Somali culture and Mogadiscio society from a woman's perspective.⁶ The reason he needs to do this is that Koschin awaits the imminent arrival of Nancy, an English woman, who has sent him a telegram announcing that she is coming to see him in Mogadiscio. While in England, Koschin had met Nancy, they had become friends, and they had agreed that if neither of them had married within two years from the time they parted, then Nancy would come to Somalia, or Koschin would go to England, or they would meet elsewhere (18). The telegram arouses great anxiety in Koschin. He is worried that, once in Mogadiscio, Nancy will find the place unbearable and the culture entirely alien to her. What worries him especially is that he will be transformed unwillingly into "a naked needle,"⁷ that is, the protector of Nancy, and this worry is made even more extreme by the fact that the society into which Nancy is to settle is violent and unstable. Not only is Nancy a White, Christian, European woman wishing to integrate into an African culture, an essentially Arab society and a Muslim way-of-life, but at this time Somalia is torn apart by ethnic tensions; by ideological difference – Marxism and Capitalism; by religious dogmas – Islam, Christianity and traditional African belief systems; by racial frictions between Arabs and Africans; and by the struggle between the super-powers – the Russians and the Americans, a struggle super-imposed on the divisions of the colonial era when Italy and Britain, especially, fought for domination. At this time, in the early 1970s, Somalia is a country of clans – corruption runs deep, and political intrigue and in-fighting abound – all under the oppressive rule of Siyaad Barre's dictatorial regime.

6. It should be borne in mind that the novel is written by a Somali man.

7. "The needle that stitches the clothes of people remains naked itself" (*An Arabic Proverb*).

Yet the value of *A Naked Needle* as a novel about migration is not so much the cultural, religious and social iniquities and the unpleasantness of contemporary life in Mogadiscio forty years ago, but the concept of the “naked needle,” an image that constitutes a literary conceit and that is pertinent to all forms of migration at a personal level. A “naked needle” is an agent of migration, a facilitator, an enabler. In a sense, in *From a Crooked Rib*, Aowralla, the widow and Asha in their different ways are all “naked needles” who facilitate Ebla’s journey towards her emancipation. However, in *A Naked Needle* Koschin does not want this role for himself in his relationship with Nancy. The image that stands as the title of the novel points to the nature of the anxiety that invades Koschin when he finally meets Nancy in the house of his friends Barbara and Mohamed and thinks to himself, “I, Koschin, don’t wish to be the naked needle which clothes others while it remains naked” (70).

Koschin is all too aware of the subliminal danger inherent in the metaphor. The sewing needle must be very sharp and thin, that is, naked, in order to pass the thread through the cloth, but while the finished garment clothes the person, the needle must itself remain unclothed, that is, naked, otherwise it loses its functionality. Koschin, the “needle,” is preparing to “clothe” Nancy in a protective shield while he himself will necessarily remain unprotected and, therefore, vulnerable. The front cover of the African Writers Series edition depicts the dilemma exactly, Koschin providing shelter for Nancy with his wide, full, black cloak.

Koschin is aware that he must try to protect Nancy against the masculinist and patriarchal mindset of Somali men – men whose aggression towards their wives he perceives as being inbred, instinctive, and as deriving from their upbringing in traditional Somali families, “an environment where violence between husband and wife was an everyday affair” (66). Yet it is not the Somali man’s potential for domestic violence, for wife-beating, that most worries Koschin in his preoccupation for Nancy’s welfare, for which he sees himself responsible. More than anything else, he is anxious about how Nancy will be received by other *women* in this Muslim society. He worries in particular that the Somali women, “the poverty-stricken people in Somalia would offer her [...] their hate in abundance” (34) and, on the morning of her arrival, he thinks to himself that he must warn Nancy,

- Never face to face with women, Nancy, no confrontation, if you can help it. They are wild, they are untamable [*sic*] here. [...] Be very discreet! [...]
- Believe it on trust from me, Nancy, your religion is more repulsive to them than your skin. Seeing your repellent hide, the Somalis will immediately ask me if you are a Muslim. If you are not (which you are not, to the best of my knowledge), they will enquire further if there is any likelihood of your ever embracing the Islamic faith. (10)

Koschin worries that it is with these women and their children that Nancy will have to learn to cohabit and to interact. However, in spite of these aspects of Somali culture and society that Koschin perceives as obstacles to Nancy's integration, by the end of the novel both Nancy and Koschin still wish to remain in Mogadiscio and give their personal relationship a try.

4. *KNOTS* (2007)

Both *From a Crooked Rib* and *A Naked Needle* were written during the period of Siyaad Barre's dictatorship in Somalia and well before Homi Bhabha's prediction in 1997. As has been posited already, Farah's observations regarding migration in these early novels were based on his personal experience of living in India and England. By the time he came to write *Links* (2005) and *Knots* (2007), Siyaad Barre had been supplanted and had fled into exile, the United States marines had failed in their attempts to control the Somali warlords and their militias, and Nuruddin Farah himself had travelled very widely and had acquired a much broader vision of the world. His ninth novel *Links* relates the experiences of a Somali man who returns to Mogadiscio after spending twenty-years in Canada only to find that, due to the endemic feuding, he cannot resettle in his home country and is forced back into exile. This narrative has parallels in *Knots* which relates the experience of Cambara, a Somali woman who returns to Mogadiscio from Canada in order to try to reclaim her family's property and to re-establish herself in the city, something she manages to achieve with some success. Unlike Jeebleh, the male protagonist in *Links*, Cambara, the female protagonist in *Knots*, though faced with the same anarchic and violent social situation, *does* succeed in staying.

The reason Cambara succeeds where Jeebleh fails is down to the support the Somali woman receives from other Somali women, initially from Raxma in Canada and subsequently, and crucially, from Kiin in Mogadiscio. Kiin serves as Cambara's "naked needle" in Mogadiscio in her attempt to re-accommodate herself in the strife-torn city. Kiin is the leader of Women for Peace, an NGO in Somalia funded by the European Union. Moreover, as the owner-manager of the five-star Maanta Hotel, Kiin commands a network of persons she can call on at any time for her protection. On meeting Kiin for the first time, Cambara "prays that she and Kiin will share the sort of friendship only women are capable of forging" (144), because "[t]he Lord knows how badly a woman needs the friendship of other women in a civil war repugnant with the trigger-happy degeneracy of its militiamen" (144).

Cambara is not disappointed. Kiin is a rich, impressive and powerful Somali woman who can pull strings in the city that enable Cambara to succeed in her aims. Kiin introduces herself: "I am Kiin," the woman in all-black chador and white

bandanna says, “come to welcome you to Mogadiscio” (144). Soon after their first meeting, Kiin suggests that Cambara move into her hotel, where she will be able to enjoy first-world comforts:

At Maanta, there is running water, the toilets are clean, the kitchen functions twenty-four hours a day, and we have power all day and all night. It is very secure too. We'll provide you with rides to and from any part of the city you require to get to; we'll do your shopping and your laundry; and we'll get you connected: e-mail, mobile, you name it. (146)

Yet in spite of Kiin's power and influence, Cambara is all too aware of the risk Kiin is taking on her behalf as her “naked needle.” Given the danger she faces, “She can only pray that it will be without detriment to Kiin or any other person who has given her a hand in achieving her aims. Not that she minds facing the consequences of her actions herself, but she would feel terrible if something were to happen to any of her well-wishers. (266) Towards the end of the novel, as she prepares to move into her house that she has succeeded in re-possessing and before she is eventually reunited in Mogadiscio with Raxma and her mother Arda who have flown to Somalia from Canada, Cambara acknowledges her debt to Kiin without whose support and friendship she would not have been able to achieve her aims – “It's all been wonderful staying here (in the Maanta Hotel) and enjoying all your lavish kindness. Thank you very much; you've been all sweet and a boon to me, better than manna from any heaven, considering.” (356)

5. *THE PICKUP* (2001)

It has been shown how, in *From a Crooked Rib* and *Knots*, Nuruddin Farah presents Somali women who migrate to Mogadiscio, Ebla from the Ogaden via Belet Wene and Cambara from Canada. In *A Naked Needle*, Farah reveals the obstacles and cultural barriers that Nancy, a Westernised, Christian woman, will face when trying to integrate into the Muslim world of war-torn Mogadiscio. In *The Pickup*, however, Nadine Gordimer turns much of Koschin's perception of his own Muslim, Somali society on its head, implicitly denying the religious and cultural constraints on the kind of cultural integration that Koschin is so anxious about.

In some respects, *The Pickup* presents a mirror-image of *A Naked Needle*. Whereas the author of *A Naked Needle* is a Somali man, the author of *The Pickup* is a White South African woman. While Koschin, the protagonist of *A Naked Needle*, is a Somali man, the protagonist of *The Pickup* is Julie Summers, a twenty-nine year old White South African woman from the leafy suburbs of Johannesburg. But similarities are also apparent. In both *A Naked Needle* and *The Pickup*, the immigrants are White women who move from their Western cultures into African/

Arab, Muslim cultures in northern Africa. In *A Naked Needle*, Nancy migrates from London to Mogadiscio; in *The Pickup*, Julie migrates from Johannesburg to an unnamed Muslim country in Africa, probably Morocco.⁸ But whereas in *A Naked Needle*, Koschin tries to build a protective wall around Nancy by identifying those aspects of Somali society he thinks she will find impossible to accept and become reconciled with, in *The Pickup*, it is Abdu—Ibrahim ibn Musa—Julie's husband, who, desperate to emigrate from the poverty of his own rural home to a Western city, finds it inconceivable that his Westernised wife should find anything attractive about living in his home village.

The power and strangeness of Nadine Gordimer's narrative lies in Julie's decision, when Abdu eventually obtains a visa to reside in the USA, not to accompany him there, but to stay on, living with her husband's family in his village in the desert. When Julie tells him, "I am not going – coming to America" (248), Abdu is taken completely by surprise and, when Julie goes on to say that she is not returning to her home in Johannesburg either and that she is going to stay in his home with his mother and sisters, Abdu is shocked beyond belief:

What are you talking? What is it. You are not going to America. That's what you say. You are not going to your home. That is what you say. (253)
Or was that true then, and now – I don't know, out of the sky something somebody has changed your mind, driven you crazy? Where did you get the idea from, how, where? (262)

Julie's answer to her husband is unutterable, "And while his anguish batters them both she now knows where. The desert" (262).

But in fact there are really two aspects of life in Abdu's home that lie at the root of Julie's decision to stay. One aspect, as Julie herself admits, is the desert. The second, equally powerful aspect is the warm camaraderie and the company of the women in her husband's family household. In his collection of essays *Inner Workings. Literary Essays 2000-2005*, J.M. Coetzee has an essay on Nadine Gordimer in which he devotes most of the space to an account and analysis of the plot of *The Pickup*.⁹ Coetzee finds *The Pickup* "not just an interesting book, in fact, but an astonishing one" (251). Some of Coetzee's astonishment must lie in the reason

8. Evidence that Abdu, Julie Summer's husband, comes from Morocco is presented here:

Tourists don't come here, what for. The tomb of Sidi Yusuf, the holy man from long ago, supposed to be why this place grew. Not much of a shrine, only people from round about in the desert come to it. (125)

The tomb of Sidi Yusuf, one of the so-called "Seven Men" of Marrakech, is located in Marrakech, Morocco.

9. J.M. Coetzee (2007: 244-256).

for Julie's decision to live amongst her Muslim in-laws rather than accompany her husband to the United States of America or return to Johannesburg. Coetzee detects a spiritual dimension to her decision. He writes, "Her spiritual development is effected [...] by what one can only call the spirit of the place. A few blocks away from the family home starts the desert. It becomes Julie's habit to rise before dawn and sit at the edge of the desert, allowing the desert to enter her" (249).

Coetzee's sexual innuendo is misplaced here. It is the desert's timelessness – its infinity, and its immutability – that penetrates Julie's Westernised consciousness. For Julie, being alone in the desert, with only the minaret visible on the distant horizon, provides a glimpse of eternity. The desert is minimalist – sand, horizon, sky – and it is so powerful, so immense that it minimises everything in it. In the desert community, individual human beings and human interactions are reduced to their barest essentials. This minimalism and the attraction of minimalism catch Julie by surprise. She had come completely unprepared for the fatal attraction of the desert – the power of space and time, the fourth dimension, not the time that flows as in the developed world of capitalism with its futures and hedge funds, but real time, the dimension through which we pass in consciousness for the duration of our life-times. She is overwhelmed by the mystical power of nothingness, a feeling that gives rise to an inexplicable sense of enlightenment and a deep awareness of one's own mortality:

The desert. No seasons of bloom and decay. Just the endless turn of night and day. Out of time: and she is gazing – not over it, for it has no measure of space, features that mark distance from here to there. In a film of haze there is no horizon, the pallor of sand, pink-traced, lilac-luminous with its own colour of faint light, has no demarcation from land to air. Sky-haze is indistinguishable from sand-haze. All drifts together, and there is no onlooker; the desert is eternity. (172)

But for Julie, on a par with the overwhelming attraction of the desert, and perhaps equally surprising to the Western reader, is the attraction she feels for the company of women. Like Ebla in *From a Crooked Rib* and Cambara in *Knots*, Julie Summers finds a deep-rooted affinity with those women from other African cultures with whom she interacts. While Julie is drawn by the minimalism of the desert, of life in the desert village, she is especially enamoured of the close, spontaneous, sincere relationships that she establishes with her sisters-in-law Maryam and Amina. Although not explicitly categorised as such, Maryam and Amina are the "naked needles" who ease Julie into the Muslim women's society. From the moment Julie arrives in Abdu's home in the desert village, she is made welcome by the women of the house. The child of a broken home in Johannesburg, Julie had lived on her own, occasionally visiting her father and

his second wife, Danielle. Julie's own mother lives in California with her second husband, a casino owner. Here in Abdu's household, for the first time in her life, Julie experiences the love of family members – "I've never lived in a family before, just made substitutes out of other people, ties, I suppose – though I didn't realize that, either, then. There are ... things ... between people here, that are important, no, necessary to them ..." (187).

Julie quickly develops an especially close relationship with Abdu's sisters, Maryam and Amina, and with a small girl, Leila, and she empathises deeply with Khadija, Abdu's sister-in-law, whose husband is away working on an oil-field. In a world in which there is a strict division of labour, in which men have their own room and the women have the kitchen and a smaller living space, where the men eat together, and the women – the cooks – eat later on by themselves, it is the physicality, affectivity and sensuousness of Julie's relationship with the women that endears them to her. Julie finds the touch of a young girl's hand, and the simplicity and elemental quality of the women's space powerful ties – "For the meal after midday prayers the child put her hand, a delicate frond of fingers, in Julie's and led her along with Maryam to where in a room with no defined purpose the women of the house cooked food for everyone on two spirit burners ..." (136). But she is also attracted to the double-life led by the women in their world. When the men are out of the house, there is a deep tranquillity in the house – "It was a quiet time in this house that reverberated with many lives; the small children in bed, the women waiting for the men. [...] Sometimes Maryam came hesitantly after her, and settled with legs crossed under her garment on the floor beside the bed where she lounged" (165).

The women of the village are also kind and hospitable. The women hold regular get-togethers in the house of one of them. During Ramadan, a month of day-time fasting and abstinence from sexual acts, "[s]ometimes the women visited one another, gathered at this neighbouring house or that" (154), and Julie remarks on the liveliness of these gatherings – "They're sweet, but the chatter – it gets to be like being caught in an aviary" (155). In their gatherings the women form virtual sororities. It is during their soirées that women discuss their shared problems, gossip, and generally socialise. But the gatherings are also times for the exchange of information about the latest fashions and for buying and selling clothes and fashion accessories.¹⁰ In a culture of arranged marriages, the chador, burka, hijab and galabiah, and strict adherence to traditional interpretations of the Koran, it is surprising to learn that the women are so fashion-conscious and enthusiastic about

10. Cf. Tupperware and Avon "parties" in the Western world.

fashion accessories. Julie notes that the wife of Abdu's wealthy uncle was "bound about with gold jewellery on wrists and ox-blood-fingernailed hands" (128), and that, in the women's quarters of the house, where the daughters remained during the visit – "what seemed in contradiction of orthodox modesty, while one of the young women was dressed in flowing tradition like the mother, the other daughter wore jeans and the latest in high platform-soled boots" (128).

Apart from the women of her own age and the young girls, Julie finds Abdu's mother particularly admirable. She develops a great respect, even reverence, for the elderly woman who complies rigorously with her religion's obligation to pray five times-a-day. Eventually, after becoming accustomed to Julie's presence among them, her mother-in-law allows Julie to participate in preparing the meals, even "to take part in the cooking preparations for the feast of *Eid al-fitr*" (161). What impresses Julie most is the natural dignity of the woman and the order and stability that her Muslim code allows her to sustain in her life in the face of great difficulties. And even in the desert, Julie finds some deep, primitive affinity with a lone Bedouin girl:

The goats with the Bedouin woman appeared before her in the desert as if conjured up.

There was one morning when they were discovered close; close enough to be advanced to. The woman turned out to be hardly more than a child – perhaps twelve years old. For a few moments the desert opened, the two saw each other, the woman under her bushveld hat, the girl-child a pair of keen eyes from a small figure swathed against the sun.

She smiled but the other responded only by the eyes' acknowledgement of a presence. (199)

This is a kind of epiphany for Julie – eye-contact with the Bedouin girl, the hidden, the secretive, the mysterious, the unknowable. In many ways, Nadine Gordimer's descriptions of Julie's feeling for the desert and her descriptions of the desert itself and the camaraderie amongst the women constitute some of her finest prose and it is, perhaps, the sensitivity of Gordimer's narrative that takes J.M. Coetzee by surprise and leads him to comment that, "it is hard to conceive of a more sympathetic, more intimate introduction to the lives of ordinary Muslims than we are given here, and from the hand of a Jewish writer too" (251).

6. CONCLUSIONS

In *From a Crooked Rib*, *A Naked Needle* and *Knots*, Nuruddin Farah gives an insight into the world of Muslim women, a world about which most Western readers have little knowledge because it is concealed not only from non-Muslim

citizens, but also from many Muslim men, the men who cohabit with their wives but turn their back on the day-to-day existence of their womenfolk. Nadine Gordimer also writes perceptively about the desert and the women who live there.¹¹ In *Naked Needle*, Nuruddin Farah presents the reasons why, from a male viewpoint, a woman from the West might not like to settle in Somalia; in *The Pickup*, Nadine Gordimer presents reasons why a Westernised woman from South Africa might like to settle in a Muslim, desert society. Both novels underscore the importance of personal perception, aspirations and expectancy in acts of migration. Both Nuruddin Farah and Nadine Gordimer, perhaps surprisingly, come to the same conclusion; that, despite the cultural and religious differences, it *is* viable and comprehensible that a Westernised, non-Muslim woman should wish to and effectively *does* settle in a Muslim society in North Africa.

Yet it is the Horn of Africa, the setting of Nuruddin Farah's *A Naked Needle*, where Arabia and Africa meet, where Islam brushes up against traditional African religions, where Arab custom sits side by side with African rites and ceremony, fusing partially. It is also the space in which the burka, with its veil, exists side by side with female genital mutilation, each custom 'protecting' women while at the same time violating their sexuality. Within a wide band stretching from the Atlantic coast to the Indian Ocean, in the southern regions of Saharan Africa and in the Horn of Africa, the practice of infibulation and re-infibulation conditions the lives of most African girls and young women.¹² On the other hand, in Morocco, the North African setting of Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup*, it is the full headcovering afforded by the veil and niqab that saves girls and young women from mutilation and the fear of mutilation. As Fatima bint Thabit, an Arab mother, points out in Nuruddin Farah's novel *Sardines*,

The tradition of my people encages me in a four-walled prison and makes me the exclusive property of a man. The same tradition, or an abstracted borrowing from similar ones, **exempts me from being circumcised in the same way as the African woman**, whether she is Somali or Kenyan or Togolese. (Nuruddin Farah. *Sardines*. 1992: 144)

In *A Naked Needle*, therefore, Nancy will be eased into Somali society only to find herself living among women, some of whom wear the burka and some of

11. On a page at the end of the book, she thanks her 'mentor,' Philip J. Stewart of the University of Oxford, a student of Arabic and Hebrew, and a forestry engineer who has spent time in Egypt and Algeria carrying out research into the relationship between animal husbandry, Islam and the ecology of desert regions.

12. The subject of female genital mutilation (FGM), specifically infibulation and re-infibulation as practised in Somalia, is touched on in *From a Crooked Rib*, *Knots*, and other novels by Nuruddin Farah.

whom have been infibulated and re-infibulated.¹³ In *The Pickup*, however, while Nadine Gordimer implies that Julie Summers adapts easily to the traditions and lifestyles of the Muslim women with whom she cohabits, in the Moroccan desert she must grow accustomed to women who choose to – and who are forced to – wear the burka in all social interactions beyond the confines of their domestic space. As Western, migratory women, therefore, both Nancy in Mogadiscio and Julie Summers in the Moroccan village will find their sexuality challenged. In *Inner Workings. Literary Essays 2000-2005*, J.M. Coetzee observes ominously that, for Julie Summers, “in her lone daily confrontation with the desert, this young woman, who has already turned her back in most ways that matter on the allure of the materialistic West, is learning to face her own death” (250). The specific reference here is to the spiritual power of the desert, but Coetzee also infers that, in her interaction with female companions in the Moroccan desert, Julie Summers will be confronted with death, the death, that is, of her own sexuality. A similar consequence may be the outcome of Nancy’s experience as a migrant woman in Somalia.

The underlying meaning of Nuruddin Farah’s *From a Crooked Rib*, *A Naked Needle*, and *Knots*, and Nadine Gordimer’s *The Pickup* derives from the experiences of women who move within or to North Africa, with the aim of settling in a different cultural and religious space. However, while there can be no doubt that varieties and modalities of the acculturated practices of wearing the burka and female genital mutilation constitute major constraints in respect of the cultural and social integration of migratory women within the host societies in Morocco and Somalia, the novels discussed here do not focus specifically on either of these customs. Notwithstanding, these novels by Nuruddin Farah and Nadine Gordimer do provide rare glimpses into the world of women who live with the burka or with the dread of mutilation, revealing, from behind the veil of ignorance and inaccessibility, the human face of women in North Africa.

13 The practices of infibulation and re-infibulation are widespread in Somalia and other parts of northern Africa. In Somalia, over 90 percent of girls are subjected to diverse forms of infibulation. As a result, many girls and young women die or suffer from serious physical and psychological damage, some for the rest of their lives. (See Korn 2006: 41-2)

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