

Otherness and Pathology: Parallels between Martyrdom and the Fragmented Self in Nuruddin Farah's *Close Sesame*

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Abstract

Dominant conversations hail sacrifice for one's nation or faith as one of the greatest virtues to be inculcated among the youth. Some political and religious scholars regard persons that lose their lives for such causes as heroes that opt to pay the ultimate prize for the good of society. Emerging voices are critical of this conversation and contend that aside from sacrifice, pathological conditions arising from otherness may be the real culprit. This article takes the second trajectory that some hyped cases of self-sacrifice are informed by mental illness rather than patriotism and religious devotion. Using the post-colonial and psychological theories, the article demonstrates how othering conditions result in pathological conditions that are misconstrued as patriotism and sainthood in Nuruddin Farah's *Close Sesame*. The ideas of Frantz Fanon and Ronald Laing will form a theoretical basis of interpretation. The article is a comprehensive qualitative library research that proceeds through close reading of the primary text and refereed journal articles. One major finding of the article is that some revered cases of heroism and martyrdom on the political and religious scene are the end results of psychiatric illness rather than sacrifice.

Keywords: African Literature, Madness, Martyrdom, the Fragmented Self, Patriotism

Introduction

When people engage in political actions on behalf of important social values...they gain a sense of personal significance and as result of these positive feelings, they are more willing to self-sacrifice for the cause in future. (Katarzyna Jasko, Marta Szastok, Joanna Grzymala)

Achievements of political and religious nature have been associated with sacrifice that is hailed as a pathway to true success in many communities. Political and religious writers encourage the individual to be prepared to part with their lives for the good of their faith or nation. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in *A Grain of Wheat* demonstrates how the *Mau Mau* fighters must die as the seed to germinate, grow and produce more fruit. In his perspective,

Africans that die in the struggle had to in order to inspire many others in the spirit of freedom. This is the argument that Jasko, Szatok and Grzymala uphold in their research. After investigating leaders in six studies including feminist activists, radical left-wing activists and pro-democratic social movement (1), they find that the positive self-esteem among leaders propels them to lay down their lives for the sake of others. Emerging conversations however question this perspective and contend that some religious and political heroes make fatal decisions because they are victims of the fragmented self-arising from strands of othering.

In the last chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* entitled, “The Colonial War and Mental Disorders,” Fanon summarises his views on colonialism as, “[a] systematised negation of the other, a frenzied attempt to deny the other any attribute of humanity... which if left unchallenged by armed resistance, the colonized’s defenses collapse and many of them end up in psychiatric institutions,” (250). Fanon adds that a stream of symptoms of madness ensues as “sequels of the oppression” (250). He gives examples of the colonized who lose their mental health after clashes with the colonizer. In other words, when individuals are subjected to racial and political othering as most political and religious heroes are, their psyche is likely to collapse.

Whereas Fanon limits the psychological impact to schizophrenia, Ronald Laing introduces the Fragmented self. Laing came up with the concept of the *unembodied* self in which he observed that people experience conflicts with themselves by having a split into a mind and a body (65). The individuals identify themselves exclusively with the mind and therefore feel *unembodied*. Laing refers to this state as the *unembodied self* as opposed to *embodied self* where the individual experiences himself bound up in the body (66). The *unembodied self* is detached from the body; the individual is disentangled from his body and achieves a desired state of disincarnate spirituality. The body is not the core self, it is the core of a false self, which a disembodied “inner self” looks on with tenderness or hatred. Such a divorce of self from body deprives the *unembodied self* from direct participation in any aspect of the life of the world. The *unembodied self* observes controls and criticizes anything in relation to what the body is experiencing. It only involves in operations that are purely mental. The person becomes hyperconscious, posits own images and develops relationship with himself. Laing’s theory is essential in analysing the fragmented self and madness in the hero of Farah’s *Close Sesame*.

Farah’s *Close Sesame* is the story of Deeriye, a patriot who leads his clan against an Italian invasion. A neighbouring sultan defies the Italian orders to appoint paramount chiefs and when the Italian administrator storms the sultan’s home to demand answers, a young man wrestles with the officer’s white bodyguard and a stray bullet kills him.

Deeriye's clan gives the young man asylum, but a Somali traitor informs the Italian administration. Incensed by this, the Italian administrator storms Deeriye's home and demands the surrender of the young man or face the consequences. Deeriye is not given time to explain (39), the Italians flounce away and an evening later, they poison the wells. As the animals die, the Italians use bazookas to shoot the rest of the animals to cripple Deeriye's clan economically (41). Shocked by the colonialist's callousness and military superiority, Deeriye's psyche collapses and he starts hallucinating. The narrator writes, "[t]his was the first time Deeriye had crossed the known tactile world into one in which he could have visions [...] hear prophecies (41). With other elders like Rooble, Deeriye is detained, and his psychological condition deteriorates. His late wife, Nadiifa, visits him in prison to tell him the state of his children at home. Soon after independence, a high-handed general overthrows the government and perpetuates the cruelty and ethnocentric policies of the Italian administration. Deeriye and his clan are relegated and his son, Mursal decides to lead an underground movement to overthrow the regime. Although Mursal and many other young men like Mahad (the son of the man who killed the Italian police officer) look at Deeriye for guidance, his psychological illness and preoccupation with religion are a barrier to effective leadership. He criticizes healthy persons and normal human milestones such as marriage and only values prayer and visions. Deeriye is so vulnerable to fear, which hinders his ability to lead. When his son Mursal is killed, he now realizes the importance of fighting the regime and plans a lone wolf attempt at the General's life. He is brutally murdered.

This article takes the trajectory that some hyped cases of self-sacrifice (like Deeriye's) are informed by the fragmented self rather than patriotism and religious devotion. Using the post-colonial and psychological theories, the article demonstrates how othering conditions result in pathological conditions that are misconstrued as sainthood in Nuruddin Farah's *Close Sesame*. The ideas of Frantz Fanon and Ronald Laing will form a theoretical basis of interpretation. The article is a comprehensive qualitative library research that proceeds through close reading of the primary text and refereed journal articles. One major finding of the article is that some revered cases of heroism and martyrdom on the political and religious scene are the end results of psychiatric illness rather than sacrifice.

Otherness and the Fragmented Self: Suicide as Martyrdom

Deeriye's death is ambiguous in its significance. Is it suicide of failed assassination attempt? Does it suggest the inadequacy of religion in the face of political oppression or triumph of religion in resisting evil? (Wright, 189)

Critics have grappled with Deeriye's death as indicated in the epitaph without reaching definite conclusion as to whether it is suicide or religious martyrdom. This study responds to Wright's concerns by suggesting that Deeriye's demise is a suicidal act owing to his fragmented self that began since the Italian's crude invasion of his community. This section will begin by demonstrating the political and othering context that Deeriye confronts and how it results in mental illness that drives him to his suicidal end.

Political otherness in Farah's *Close Sesame* takes the trajectory of Fanon's otherness and the colonial subject in *The Wretched of the Earth*. The French's systematic negation of the Africans in Algeria (250) and the frenzied attempt to deny them all attributes of humanity, which for a while is left unchallenged leading to psychic collapse and madness is a replica of the Somali experience in *Close Sesame*. It begins in 1934 during the Italian incursion of Deeriye's clan when the new Italian administrator orders a neighbouring Sultan to appoint stipended chieftains that will be answerable to the Italian but he does not comply (35). The Italians try to force their way into one of the Sultan's houses and a Somali young man wrestles with the Italian soldier to usurp the gun in his grip. A stray bullet is released during the hustle and hits the Italian soldier who dies within thirty minutes. The young man seeks asylum in Deeriye's community. The Italian administrator goes to demand for the young man who killed the Italian from Deeriye and he declines.

The insolence and arrogance typical of otherness are quite evident throughout the episode. First, the territory in question is Somali land and we expect the Italian foreigner to approach the Sultan with decorum and request for a place to lease or lodge. However, because he is white and deluded in the myth of racial superiority, the Italian orders the Sultan to appoint chiefs to be answerable to Italians. The decision to force their way into the Sultan's house is a terrible act of otherness. To the Italians, there are no people in that house (Somalis are not people), but in Fanon's words, "the natural environment." Italians are taken aback when the young man wrestles the soldier and it results in his death. The Italian administrator, while asking for the young man who killed the Italian, does it arrogantly. It is grilling rather than enquiry. The narrator says that he uses "yes or no questions" and Deeriye is not given room to explain. The Italian is the "self" and Deeriye the "other" to be treated like a misbehaved child before a responsible father. Following this, the Italians send a punitive expedition to Deeriye's community; they poison the wells and using bazookas, shoot cattle to cripple it economically. The narrator writes:

An evening later, Deeriye heard a pandemonium of shouts and cries. Before this died down, there came voices of appeal; then the painful moaning of cattle struggling with departing life. This made sense when he heard shots, then the thud of a target struck, a target of heads of cattle. (41)

Given that Deeriye has not coordinated with other Somali clans to resist the incursion, he feels lonely and hopeless. His self is fractured and all he can do is pray. The narrator asserts, “[h]e prayed and prayed and prayed” (41). Deeriye and twelve elders of the clan are rounded up and detained, which isolates him from his new wife, Nadiifa. His social life goes to shambles as he spends many years alone in the cells. Deeriye can only meet his wife in the mind. He thinks:

Love came later in detention, when she (Nadiifa) visited him in his visionary dreams; love came much later when both passed the test of endurance; a woman who was also a friend; to make all this richer, he had friends with whom he had grown up and of whom he was very fond. (35)

The Italian colonial administration rewards Somali collaborators by paying them monthly allowances and segregates those who resist its policies. There is therefore an ideological difference based on resistance and collaboration, which enhances political otherness in the Somali society. Deeriye’s clansman, Haj Omer supports the Italians right from their first appearance in Somali land. He betrays the clan by informing on the young man who kills the Italian and the clan suffers the painful consequences. The colonialists reward him; he is crowned a stipended chief, which sows stigma between his followers and Deeriye’s. The narrator says, “Haj Omer was a traitor, resolved to excommunicate him, but the Italians and subsequent national governments kept him on the payroll,” (183). During the clan meeting, Waris drives his son away for their history of collaboration and betrayal.

Post-independence Somali governments perpetuate Italian totalitarianism and highhandedness that are at variance to Deeriye’s ideology of humility and service to the people. A general overthrows the government and like Jaballa Matar in *The Return*, Deeriye and his family disapprove his style of leadership. Paul Zeleza observes, “[i]n Farah’s Trilogy, the ruthless General is not an arbitrary superficial presence...but an embodiment of the articulation between traditional despotism and modern state terror,” (18). Zeleza suggests that the General’s dictatorship is terribly severe because it is entrenched in the traditional “patriarchal family” and clan system. Stipended chiefs like Haj Omer and Cigaal support the dictatorship thereby dividing the Somali community ideologically. There is Deeriye, his son Mursal, Mahad, Mukhtaar, Ahmed, Jibril, Koschin,

Medina, Samater, Sicilian and Willie, (222) on one hand and Cigaal, Sheikh Ibrahim, Yassin, Haj Omer's son and the General on the other hand. Mukhtaar is Sheikh Ibrahim's son who differs with his father and takes Mursal's and Mahad's ideology. Cigaal is Deeriye's neighbour, described as, "[a] collaborator of Italians, a betrayer of friends, some of whom were said to have died under torture later," (75), hails from the General's clan and thereby supports the regime. Mahad is the son of the man who killed the Italian soldier in 1934 and he continues with his father's resistance against political oppression (36). With Mursal, they lead an underground revolutionary movement against the General's dictatorship.

Whereas Cigaal and Sheikh Ibrahim support the dictator, Deeriye has an organic spite for dictatorship. Felix Mnthali observes that dictatorship in the family and state and the individual's search for identity constitutes Farah's vision in *Close Sesame* (53). Indeed, Deeriye wonders why the General renames Somalia as Somalia Democratic Republic and renders the "democratic" portion of the name a mere decoration, "an embellishment of the worst kind" (100-101). The General makes a mockery of the democratic ideology during elections by painting one ballot box with colours of the national flag and then label the other box, "only the enemy of the nation need use this," (101). In a soliloquy, Farah brings to the fore Deeriye's spite for authoritarian system of leadership:

Keep the populace underinformed so you can rule them; keep them apart by informing them separately; build bars of ignorance around them, imprison them with shackles of uninformedness [sic] and they are easy to govern; feed them with wrong information, give them poisonous bits of what does not count, a piece of gossip here, a rumour there, an unconfirmed report.
(82)

Mnthali expounds that in his oppressive tactics over the people in *Close Sesame*, the General has joined the conventional African dictators that no one is able to dislodge him from power (53).

As a result of political othering, Deeriye's self is eroded, and he suffers psychologically. The psychological suffering occurs in mild and severe forms as the fragmented self as madness, respectively. As soon as the Italians invade his community and massacre the livestock by poisoning the wells, Deeriye retreats from the real to mental world. After the violent encounter with the Italian forces, Deeriye began to hear voices from another world (41). This is severe mental illness that Islamic scholars refer to as *majinuun* (Ahmed Okasha and Tare Okaasha, 74b) to signify possession by a *jinni*. Michael Dols avers that conservative Muslims believe that "madness was caused by the *jinn*, evil eye, or one's failure to observe rituals and taboos or physical and emotional

trauma,” (10). It follows that Italian incursion on Deeriye’s community and subsequent massacre triggers emotional trauma that exposes him to madness. In an internal monologue, Deeriye thinks, “[s]he came only when he was alone or lonely or when he called her; she came to keep him company or give him warmth,” (147). This thought refers to the spirit of Deeriye’s late wife who communicates to him. This episode confirms Okashas’ claims that a *jinni* in Islam is good or bad spirit hence “torture of mental patients was never practiced,” (74b). The family members recognize that Deeriye is has *majinooon*. When he comes from prison, the spirit of Nadiifa has informed him everything including the gossip his son Mursal and Daughter Zeinab said about him while in prison. He even tells Mursal that he will fall from a tree and it happens (24-25). Citing Alice Bailey, Laura Harrison refers to Deeriye’s condition as dissociative identity disorder caused by the creative response to trauma. The victim’s psyche collapses and allows other persons to possess the host’s body (4). Psychologists aver that dissociation may be caused by sudden shock, disaster, unemployment or lack of support for close members of the family (Spira, 96). The foreign persons may be those the person hated or loved most in their lifetime. This is also evident in Kenzabure Oye’s *Silent Cry* when Takashi’s shock after his sister’s suicide after their incestuous affair results in the presence of his late Grandfather and elder brother in his body.

It is unnecessary to pit possession against dissociation in the examination of Deeriye’s condition because either of the two paradigms attests to psychic collapse and presence of other persons that influence Deeriye’s decisions. Sometimes, Deeriye’s hallucinations are quite external, hence suggesting that contrary to dissociation, he is possessed. After he argues with Mursal over his decision to plan violence, Nadiifa says, “I plead with you: please let them make their own choices. But guide them” (173). As Keener observes, these spirits sometimes give Deeriye hypnotic trances and he cannot distinguish between reality and the abstract. He complains to Nadiifa about the frequent cat-naps, which makes it difficult for him to live in both worlds of reality and imagination (175). Deeriye is therefore sick and his decisions cannot be same as those made by rational human beings to fight for the rights of their citizens. Michael Lumbek in his exposition of possession underscores the ability of spirits to influence “patterns of thinking and behaviour,” (5). Throughout the novel, Deeriye has always criticized Mursal and Mahad for resolving to use violent methods. He interrogates Mursal (28) and condemns Mahad’s attempt to take a bodyguard’s gun to shoot the General (90). Suddenly, the very peace loving Deeriye picks Mohamed Somali’s revolver to go and kill the General alone.

Deeriye’s sudden change is influenced by the persistent psychological problems rather than heroism. The spirit of Nadiifa reveals to him that Mursal has been killed and

“you are not sure of anything anymore...if you as my opinion I say, why not do it, why not finish the job your son couldn’t?... the come and join me,” (249). Whereas heroes consciously sacrifice their lives for the good of society, Deeriye’s decision is influenced by the unconscious. As he whips out his pistol to shoot the General, he accidentally picks prayer beads and the “General’s bodyguards empty into him cartridges of machine-gun fire until his body was cut nearly in half,” (260). Deeriye’s decision to singly confront the General surrounded by thousands of soldiers without any training in military skills is suicidal. The beads represent his religious devotion as opposed to military prowess.

Aside from dissociation and possession, Deeriye’s self is adversely affected by the unembodied self and self-otherness. After the massacre and imprisonment, he shifts immediately from the embodied to unembodied self; the split that Frank Johnston attributes to frightening experiences from the mother because of imbibing negative experiences (383). Deeriye therefore fears any human interaction which raises questions about his brand of Islam. Fatima Moolla writes:

In spite of Deeriye’s spiritual and religious leanings, he is physically unable to participate in the collective dimension of the expression of the Islamic Faith. In the course of the entire novel, Deeriye is only on one occasion able to perform prayers in a mosque even though Islam highly encourages congregational prayers five times a day everyday...the mosque does not come into focus of the novel in any specific way. (191)

Moolla suggests that Deeriye’s brand of Islam is so individualistic that it falls short of the ideal Islam in which the faithful maintains touch with fellow Muslims. This leads to the possibility that Deeriye is a victim of the fragmented self that Laing associates with a kind of omnipotence that deludes the victim to develop society with themselves (74). Citing Annemarie Schimmel, Moolla contends that it is through “imitation of Mohammad’s actions” of interaction with fellow Muslims that “assumed a unique uniformity in social behavior,” which attracted many other non-Muslims to convert to Islam (196). While Muslims show forth their virtues to society, “Deeriye appears to draw his moral strength from within” (196) and conceals the self from the world.

To caution itself from destruction, the self secludes itself from society and this is evident when Deeriye goes to prison and his abstract self is magnified. Separated from his wife for more than twelve years, he could only love her as an image on his mind (35). After leaving prison, Deeriye has lost the boldness and courage he had at the advent of Italians. He is frightened at any thought of confronting realities in the external world. He would rather enjoy listening to his strange voices than lead the underground movement to overthrow the General.

Deeriye gets frightened at anything practical that can solve problems. When Zeinab and Samawade say they would assault Yassin for stoning him, he asks them, “[w]hy can’t you think of anything than that...why can’t you use your head? Instead of employing coercion?” (67-68). The head in this context represents the abstract mental and spiritual world that Deeriye has always lived. Any confrontation even with Yassin scares him a lot. Johnson observes that although the psychologically alienated person avoids anxiety for a while, the patient rediscovers this disharmony in himself. The individual ponders over trivial ideas because the mental world is overactive (371), and this is true of Deeriye. While the General, his opponent, is planning the most practical way of subjugating dissent, Deeriye is not extending his tentacles among the populace to overthrow the regime, but is instead scared of Yassin, an eleven year-old boy carrying stones. He tells Zeinab, “I am afraid of the known... and the known in this particular case consists of the stone in Yassin’s hand, which can be activated at will by the devils that are,” (68). It is confounding how the hero that Mursal, Mahad, Jibril and other revolutionaries look up to can so easily be scared of a teenager with a stone when he should be preparing to confront the General who is armed with guns and grenades. Deeriye’s absorption in the inner, abstract self is the cause of this. While alone, he retreats to his mental world and his “inner machinery” projects images of Yassin brandishing a knife at Khaliif in one hand and clutching pebbles in another. Khaliif then treads past in his tattered clothes, his eyes haggard. Deeriye wakes up and is surprised to have seen a “vision” in the broad daylight” (64-65). When Zeinab asks him to go out for a walk, he refuses and confesses that he is frightened.

Deeriye is a victim of fright such that he cannot make a decision to do simple acts like going for a walk or visiting a friend. Just to follow Zeinab for a walk is so frightening that sometimes he has seizures because of the panic. The probable cause of this is his getting used to what Laing refers to as “imagos;” he loves the society of ghosts and so finds it frightening to interact with real human beings. Laing avers that the self’s main functions become “observation, control and criticism” (69), which Deeriye exhibits in the manner in which he criticizes Mursal, Mahad, Rooble and supposed friends yet does nothing but sits in the house. As a leader of the underground movement, Deeriye should be arranging meetings and contributing ideas on how to overthrow the dictatorial regime. However, he idly waits for impractical messages from what Bailey refers to as “foreign dwellers” and then criticizes anything that Mursal and Mahad are doing.

When Deeriye gets hint of Mursal’s intention to overthrow the General, he tells Rooble, “[t]hey are up to no good,” (48), but does not contribute any practical idea to improve the political situation in the country. When Rooble is arrested, Deeriye is prepared to negotiate with the General for his release in spite of the many human rights violations

of the regime. Mursal wonders why Deeriye would do that even with the denial of the right to freedom of assembly. (193). Mursal strongly rejects Deeriye's decision to negotiate with the dictatorial regime, having detected his father's fear for the reality. Sarcastically, he tells him that he is tired and is bound to make a terrible mistake.

Earlier on, Deeriye always refused to compromise, including the refusal to bow to the Italians. Mursal asks, "[y]ou used to say that you would not negotiate with a tyrant like him" (194), but what Mursal does not understand is Deeriye's vulnerability to fear as consequence of his false self in the world of ghosts. For Johnson, self-alienated individuals like Deeriye even get frightened of the decision to eat, part one's hair or take a walk (390). Does Mursal expect such a person to fight the dictator? Prufrock in Thomas Elliot's collection of poetry illustrates this: "[s]hall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach? I shall wear white flannel trousers/ and walk upon the beach." The persona is such alienated that deciding to eat or wear clothes is like making a resolution to divorce or kill. As much as people revere his history of resistance, Deeriye admits that his fragmented self has turned him into a "pitiable person" (66). He is astonished that as famous as he is, he is even scared of Yassin, an eleven year old boy.

Finally, Deeriye's plight takes the form of self-otherness, defined as spite for the other in one's self. Jacques Lacan suggests that the infant learns that there is an outside something at the morror state; an Other on whom it is dependent. The awareness of separation or the fact of otherness creates an anxiety; a sense of loss- an alienation. The baby's attempt to revert to the original sense of fullness with the mother is impossible because it is now consciously aware that an Other exists. In other words, the awareness of Otherness by marginal groups creates an anxiety, a sense of loss and hence suicide. Like other revolutionaries, Deeriye hates the 'inferior and cowardly other' within that the highhanded colonial and the General regimes have nurtured in him. His religious self and Nadiifa condemn cowardice and praise Mursal and Mohamed Somali and heroes that have confronted evil to their graves. His death affirms Karl Menninger assertion that suicide is not the killing of oneself, but an attempt to destroy "the significant other" (79) within.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that othering conditions similar to Covid-19 restrictions affect the self of characters and decisions made thereafter can only be heroic if the psychological condition of such characters is ignored. Deeriye's psyche collapses through a combination of brutal incursion on his community and many years of imprisonment that result in *majinuun* and the fragmented self. As much as the public, which is unaware of his condition views him as a martyr and patriot, those close to him understand

that he has other selves within that have to be eradicated to free the self. Death becomes the sole means by which to eradicate the cowardly and inferior self that highhanded colonial and post-independent Somalia regimes.

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