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A Postcolonial Feminist Analysis of the Character of Ebla in Nuruddin Farah’s *From a Crooked Rib*

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Introduction

Escape! 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 and to be free and be herself. Ebla thought of all this, and much else. (N. Farah 10)

This passage is from Nuruddin Farah’s *From a Crooked Rib*, published first in 1970 and regarded as one of his most important novels, and the text that gave him international credibility (Moolla 48). These are words that assert the feminist nature of his novel and summarize the issue of patriarchy in Somalia where women, generally, are kept under control by their men as an old Somali proverb which says “your woman should be in the house or in the grave” (Hadjiyanni 16) indicates, a situation that Ebla, the protagonist of *From a Crooked Rib* tries to challenge throughout the story. It is worth mentioning here that the situation that Ebla challenges in the novel is still almost the same in Somalia, even though a long time has passed since the novel was authored. Some even claim that societal development in terms of women’s rights, among other things, has gone backwards during the civil war over the last three decades. This is due to the continual radicalization of the society in the Saudi style of religiosity, along with what that means in terms of restricting women’s liberty and imposing specific attire upon them (Mohamoud 258–259). However, through Ebla, Farah questions the cultural practices that rob women of their equal rights in respect to the privileges, status and rights that men retain in Somali society. He invites us to criticize the patriarchal ideology that allows heinous practices such as female genital mutilation, forced marriage and polygamous marriage, practices which destroy women’s lives and damage their dignity. According to Fatima Moolla, a specialist
in African literature and orature, *From a Crooked Rib* is considered the first African novel by a male author to highlight the experience of women from a woman’s perspective (Moolla 2), at a time when, according to Maya Jaggi, African fiction was more focused on colonial hegemony and the emerging nationhood in the continent (*The Guardian*).

The main setting of the novel is Somalia in the 1960s, when the absolute majority of the people lived in rural areas as nomads and in sedentary agricultural localities (Dahabo.Farah 337). The story revolves around a teenage girl, Ebla, who challenges the prevailing customs in Somali society. She escapes from an arranged marriage in the countryside to the city of Beled Weyne and, from there, for the same reason, to Mogadishu, the capital city of Somalia. During her journey, she becomes acquainted with a woman called Aowralla, who epitomizes, according to Cochrane as quoted by Moolla, “the traditional impotence and subjugation of Somali women” (65). She also encounters a nameless widow and a woman called Asha, both of whom are more enlightened than Aowralla, sharing with Ebla the “unwillingness to accept unquestioningly the subservient status imposed upon them by customary and Islamic law” (Mixon 95).

However, the customs that Ebla challenges regard girls as a curse and boys as a blessing. Accordingly, boys and girls are treated differently in the society. Dahabo Farah argues that when a boy is born to a nomadic Somali couple, they display their pleasure and pride in the newborn baby, while the opposite is true when it comes to the birth of a girl. The reason, she claims, is that a girl could dishonour the family at any moment if she, for instance, performs a sexual act before marriage, a judgement that is not applicable to boys (D. Farah 338). This means that women in Somali society are unfavourably treated from their very first
day in the world. As girls, they are confined to the home sphere throughout their childhood to be programmed in the patriarchal ideology by their own mothers. They learn from them how to behave well and how to become good wives for their future husbands; and, as adults, they become an unpaid workforce who own nothing but are owned themselves by their families before marriage and by their husbands after marriage (D. Farah 338).

It is also worth mentioning that some of the practices that deprive Somali women of equal rights are believed to be religiously motivated, and this is the reason why Farah derives his novel’s title from a Somali proverb that is believed to be inspired from a hadith, an Islamic tradition which claims that the prophet Mohammad said: “Treat women nicely, for a woman is created from a rib, and the most curved portion of the rib is its upper portion, so, if you should try to straighten it, it will break, but if you leave it as it is, it will remain crooked. So treat women nicely” (Bukhari 771). Thus Farah reveals in the title of the novel the bias the Somali culture has against women. More importantly, he takes inspiration for the title from religious scriptures and, by doing so, suggests that religious beliefs which are fundamental to the norms and values of the Somali society are actually biased against women (Keinänen 13–12).

However, despite Farah’s entrance into the literary world in those early years of postcolonial Africa, as pointed out before, his work has, until comparatively recently, received little critical attention (Stratton 131). Only a very few academic studies have examined From a Crooked Rib from a feminist perspective. Some of the studies that have been consulted in this regard are “Nomads and Feminists: The Novels of Nuruddin Farah”, an article authored by G. H. Moore, and The Social and Political Status of Women in the Novels of
Nuruddin Farah, a PhD dissertation written by Gloria A. Mixon. Neither of these studies focuses on a single book of Farah’s, as indicated in their titles. This implies that analyses that deal exclusively with From a Crooked Rib do not exceed a few lines in the article and few pages in the dissertation.

As for Moore, he devotes the greater part of the section that is supposed to be dedicated to From a Crooked Rib to introducing the author, the Somalian nomadic society and their values, without offering any meaningful analysis of the text. He seems to be more interested in Farah’s narrative style and his sympathy and sensitivity towards womanhood (Moore 3) than in the character of Ebla. After quoting a few passages from the novel, Moore comments that Ebla is a pawn in the hands of those around her and that she is lucky to have been taken up by Awill after fleeing to the countryside (Moore 4). He seems to be blaming her for what she is going through without analysing the circumstances that force her to take all the risks she is willing to take.

However, Mixon’s dissertation provides more valuable material relevant to the topic of this thesis in comparison to Moore’s article. In the chapter “Farah’s Earliest Novels: Social Engagement and Revolution”, Mixon discusses the predicament of women in Somali society. In this context, she recounts Ebla’s search for self-determination and her struggle to break away from the traditional patriarchal society, while at the same time Mixon considers her a woman “whose thoughts and actions are very traditional” (84), especially in issues relating to premarital sexual relationships. However, Mixon does not analyse the text from a feminist point of view but deals with Farah’s novels in general.

In contrast to the above mentioned studies that engage with the representation of women in Farah’s novels in general, this thesis will exclusively
focus upon *From a Crooked Rib* in order to provide a more in-depth feminist analysis and will highlight aspects of Farah’s writing that can be considered feminist. The literary approach in the thesis will be about the arguments of postcolonial feminists in the debate about patriarchy. Therefore, the essay will examine the novel from a postcolonial feminist perspective to explore how the text acts as a form of criticism of the outcomes of the patriarchal system, as well as the notion of double or triple colonization of third world women. More specifically, the essay will demonstrate, through Ebla, how patriarchy in the Somali society works in order to keep women under the constant control of men as the novel presents, and how Ebla—who could be considered a personification of a postcolonial feminist—challenges that culture.

However, as the novel will be analysed from a postcolonial feminist perspective, the essay will begin with the theoretical background, followed by an analysis of the text, where Ebla’s journey will be followed.

**Postcolonial-Feminist Criticism and Theoretical Background**

Feminist literary criticism is a branch of literary criticism that closely examines how male dominance and female powerlessness manifest themselves in specific aspects of life. Its main concern is “the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” (Tyson 83). Its ultimate goal is to bring about a more equitable society where women acquire an equal share of opportunities, on the assumption that women are economically, politically, socially and psychologically oppressed in every domain where patriarchy reigns (Tyson 92).

However, postcolonial feminist criticism came into existence as a response to the fact that feminism seemed to be focusing exclusively on the experiences and
works of white women, without considering issues of racism and colonial imperialism that particularly affect women of colour. Postcolonial feminist criticism became an increasingly important part of a variety of disciplines, such as literary studies and cultural studies, over the last few decades of the twentieth century. During these decades, postcolonial feminist critics raised a number of conceptual, methodological and political problems with regard to the study of gender representations. Among these problems are “the issue of universal sisterhood and the so called first-world feminists’ right to speak for the so-called third world women” (McLeod 197).

In this regard, postcolonial feminists expressed their displeasure with the patronizing approach of first world feminists, who took for granted that they were speaking on behalf of all women, including those in the third world countries. According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “in the context of Western women writing/studying women in [the] Third World” the objectification of third world women by these Western Women writers needed to be challenged. She quotes Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, who write: “feminist theories which examine our cultural practices as 'feudal residues' or label us 'traditional' also portray us as politically immature women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of Western Feminism. They need to be continually challenged” (Mohanty 23–24). Postcolonial feminists even characterize those first world feminists who try to be assertive about being the only legitimate feminists as imperialists who must be defied exactly as the colonial powers were resisted in the twentieth century (Chrisman and Williams 217).

Furthermore, it is fundamental to postcolonial feminists to argue that Western society’s contemporary history has largely been one of exploiting non-
white others, regardless of their gender (Plain and Sellers 284). Thus, from the postcolonial feminist perspective, first world feminists are not in a position to claim a sisterhood with third world women whom they have colonized and regarded as inferior. According to Mohanty, “Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete, historical and political practice and analysis” (24). Thus third world feminists refuse to accept the first world feminists as their sisters and believe that the latter have no idea about their ordeal and thus cannot speak for them. According to Anne McClintock:

As the slaves, agricultural workers, house servants, mothers, prostitutes and concubines of the far-flung colonies of Europe, colonized women had to negotiate not only the imbalances of their relations with their own men but also the baroque and violent array of hierarchical rules and restrictions that structured their new relations with imperial men and women. (McClintock 6)

McClintock suggests here that colonized women suffered three forms of oppression during colonization. Firstly, they suffered under the patriarchal tyranny in their own societies; secondly, they were subjected to patriarchal imperial abuse; and thirdly, they suffered at the hands of the colonial women who served as wives of colonial officers or as medical personnel, shopkeepers or farmers and who helped the colonial hegemony in the colonized territories.

In other words, postcolonial feminists desire that problems of racial discrimination, imperialism and prejudice against colonized communities be addressed first. They also prefer to fight patriarchal oppression in their own way

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1 In this context, it is very useful to watch a lecture delivered by Dr. Joy DeGuraj where she states that white women whipped to death black children, boys and girls, and were protected from persecution under the law. With this in mind, it is not difficult to understand how hard it is to accept as your sister someone who whips your children to death.
under the assumption that first world feminists could never genuinely comprehend their ordeal as triply oppressed women.

However, emphasizing issues of racial discrimination and imperialism does not mean that the first world and third world women have nothing in common. The disagreement here rather concerns priorities and grievances that the third world women have against their counterparts in the first world. When it comes to patriarchal oppression and the fight for alleviation of that oppression, they have a common enemy, which is the patriarchal ideology, wherever it is.

According to Tyson, all feminists, including postcolonial feminists, share a belief that patriarchal ideology works to keep women and men in traditional gender roles and thereby to sustain male dominance in every aspect of life (91). She mentions several points on which these feminists agree. First of all, they share a belief that patriarchy oppresses women wherever patriarchy reigns. Secondly, the history of Western civilization, which shaped the world as we know it today through colonization, is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology. Thirdly, the biological differences between men and women do not determine their traditional gender roles, as this is something that culture determines. Finally, the ultimate goal of all feminists, regardless of their ideological background, is to promote women’s equality in a world where “gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production” (Tyson 91–93). This means, in short, that despite the differences in opinion around issues such as class and race, all feminists, including postcolonial feminists, agree on the core issue, which is fighting patriarchy wherever it exists.

According to McLeod, “the term ‘patriarchy’ refers to those systems—political, material and imaginative—which invest power in men and marginalize women” (199). In other words, patriarchy is a sexist ideology that considers
women to be inferior creatures on the basis of assigned gender roles which basically favour men, endowing them with all positive characteristics, while projecting women as their opposites in terms of quality and characteristics. It is an ideology that believes that women are inferior to men based upon biological differences, assuming that men are physically superior to women and consequently more intelligent, confident and logical—qualities that are indispensable in leadership, for instance, where women are generally denied an equal footing (Tyson 85). In this context, de Beauvoir claimed that biological privilege enabled men from the origins of humanity to affirm themselves exclusively as sovereign subjects while women are condemned to play the role of the Other, and thereby “possess no more than precarious power: slave or idol” (111). This is what feminists want to change, regardless of their ideological affiliations.

Consequently, according to Dahabo Farah (338), women in many patriarchal societies like that in Somalia are largely denied the rights of acquiring educational and occupational means to enjoy in their societies what their male counterparts enjoy. They are denied these rights because men in power assume that women are inherently irrational and weak, and consequently not eligible to attain leadership and decision-making positions (Tyson 86). By denying women the opportunity of educational and occupational empowerment, patriarchy promotes women’s failure and then uses it to justify its prejudices about women, ignoring the fact that “the general feeble of women, both in body and mind”, in Wollstonecraft’s words, arises less from nature than from education (42; Tyson 87). This means that the alleged weakness of women is an issue of patriarchal creation, and this is what feminists seek to challenge, even though they do not
deny the biological differences between men and women, but instead celebrate these differences.

Furthermore, feminists argue that in some patriarchal societies, like the one depicted in the novel, women are considered to be men’s property rather than equal human beings with their own wills and needs. Fathers own their female children, and thus, without their consent, they can marry them whenever and to whomever they like. In the absence of a father, the nearest male relative controls the girls and, when girls finally marry, they become the husband’s property. In this context, de Beauvoir claims that a woman in a patriarchal society “spends her whole life as a minor; she is under the control of her guardian: either her father, or her husband, or her husband’s heir or, by default, the state, represented by public officials” and so on (123).

Moreover, one could regard the suppression of female sexuality as the most important infringement of women’s human rights. This suppression takes different forms and shapes. It includes controlling women’s sexual desire by demonizing those women who are sexually forward in behaviour or in appearance and deeming them bad women and girls. It also includes marrying them off to older men who force them into having sex. Even surgical procedures are used in some cases to prevent women from enjoying sex, something that deprives many women of their natural capacity to enjoy multiple orgasms and sexual satisfaction (Carlbnom 42–43). This means that patriarchal oppression is not limited to the psychological sphere of the woman, but it steps over to agonizing bodily procedures such as female genital mutilation, a phenomenon that is widespread in Somalia.

Finally, feminists argue that, mostly, men in patriarchal societies like the one depicted in the novel are not just allowed to do almost everything from which
women are prohibited, but they are even encouraged to do so. To be sexually forward, for instance, is something desirable for men while it is condemned for women in these societies. In this context, Sara Johnsdotter Carlbom states that “Sex outside marriage is ideologically forbidden for both men and women, but in reality the girls are the ones who have to face the consequences if sex leads to conception. This is a double standard of morality admitted by most Somalis and criticised by many” (116). She quotes also a Somali interviewee, who says that “it’s more accepted if unmarried men have sex. They say ‘well, he is a boy’ and things like that. It’s different for the girls” (116). More importantly, however, men benefit from everything of which women are deprived, economically, socially and politically. In their childhood, boys are allowed to attend schools to be educated for their upcoming responsibilities while girls are forced to take care of their siblings or to help their mother in unpaid, tedious domestic work. At best, girls are allowed to attend schools, but they are sometimes not allowed to finish their education or go beyond elementary or secondary levels, with few exceptions (D. Farah 337–338).

Thus, all feminists, irrespective of their ideological association, agree on the fundamental problems in patriarchal ideology. The differences are in priorities. In other words, “the power of sisterhood stops at the point at which hard political decisions need to be made and political priorities decided” (Amos and Parmar 4). They agree that women in patriarchal societies are oppressed economically, socially and politically and are deprived of their human rights and dignities, but many of these women defy such oppression at all cost. Ebla in Farah’s *From a Crooked Rib* constitutes a personification of such defiant women who challenge patriarchy throughout their lives.
Ebla: A Defiant Lady

Ebla’s defiance, or journey for emancipation from patriarchy, starts when she realizes that her hand has been given to a 48 year old man called Giumaleh in exchange for camels. Terrified about being in bed with such an old man, she makes up her mind to flee this dreadful destiny. She realizes that she is no longer bound by her perceived obligation to remain and take care of her grandfather and abandons her original idea of leaving the countryside (Mixon 76). She comes to a conclusion after much deliberation with herself. “But should I 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” (N. Farah 7). She reflects on her situation in a very rational way, contrary to the traditional gender roles which cast women as emotional, irrational and submissive (Tyson 85). Despite her strong feelings and gratitude towards her grandfather, who brought her up in the absence of parents, she sets aside these emotions and convinces herself that she has “to get free from all restraints, from being the wife of Giumaleh. To get away from unpleasantries” (N. Farah 10). After all, in her own words, “One came out of one’s mother’s womb alone. One tried to solve one’s problem alone” (N. Farah 8). She realizes that there is no one else to solve her problems after her nearest and dearest individual, her grandfather, betrays her.

On the one hand, Ebla invalidates here the patriarchal notion that women lack the quality of being rational; on the other hand, she proves wrong those first world women who believe that women in the third world are immature and incapable of reflecting on their situation and therefore need to be versed in feminism. In a long soliloquy, Ebla speaks critically to herself, questioning patriarchal values:
Why is a woman, a woman? …Surely a woman is indispensable to man, but do men realize it? A man needs a woman. A woman needs a man. Not to the same degree? A man needs a woman to cheat, to tell lies to, to sleep with. In this way a baby is born, weak and forlorn. He decides to belittle his mother as soon as he is old enough to walk. (N. Farah 11)

Here, Ebla is clearly aware of how patriarchy works and how male characters try to subdue their female counterparts since childhood. This also suggests that third world women are in a position to speak for themselves. If an uneducated 19-year-old woman can understand patriarchal problems in this way, it would be absurd to believe that educated women in the third world are unable to deal adequately with their problems. Ebla’s awareness of gender inequality is very well expressed when Farah reveals her loathing of “discrimination between the sexes: the idea that boys lift up the prestige of the family and keep the family’s name alive. Even a moron-male cost twice as much as two women in terms of blood-compensation” (N. Farah 11) ². Furthermore, Ebla adds: “as many as twenty or thirty camels are allotted to each son. The women, however, have to wait until their fates give them a new status in life: the status of marriage” (N. Farah 11). Ebla indicates that, in contrast to men, women in traditional Somali society are deprived of economic empowerment. They are never permitted to own property or anything else. On the contrary, they are owned by their male counterparts and the only hope for them to gain some respect is to marry a man and to become “his other ‘half’” and integrate into “his world” (de Beauvoir 506), something that Ebla resists.

² She refers here to the so-called Diyah, which is a traditional compensation for the shedding of blood in Somali society. In pre-Islamic times, the compensation required for taking a life was ten she-camels. The figure was increased to 100 in the area where Islam originated, and this regulation was subsequently endorsed by Muhammad (Encyclopædia Britannica)
Ebla’s defiance of patriarchal values takes her to Beled Weyne, where she finds herself in a similar situation to that from which she fled. Her uncle, Gheddi, gives her hand to a very sick broker in exchange for money to pay the fines that he received for smuggling and for illegal activities (N. Farah 70). This means that there is no escape from patriarchy, whether it be in countryside or in the town. There, in the countryside, her grandfather gave her hand to a man without her consent and here, in the town, the same thing happens to her again. The difference, however, is that the first attempt to marry her off was probably due to custom, with some economic interest, while the economic benefit is the main motivation now when her uncle attempts to marry off her. Uncle Gheddi is indebted to the colonial authority and therefore is compelled to marry off Ebla to get some money to pay off his debts; he sells a cow for the same reason. This means that colonialism exacerbates Ebla’s situation. It is in fact the colonial authority that forces Uncle Gheddi to sell Ebla by making him indebted to the authority for smuggling goods. As Patrick Colm Hogan writes, “At least in this way, colonialism does not improve but worsen[s] the situation of women” (174). Gheddi would probably not be in a hurry to marry off Ebla had he not been indebted to the authorities, and this would have given Ebla a breathing space to recollect herself and plan carefully for her next step.

However, in response to the rumour about Gheddi giving Ebla’s hand to a broker, Ebla refuses to be sold like cattle. She declares that she is a human being and does not deserve to be treated in such a way:

But that is what we women are—just like cattle, properties of someone or other, either your parents or your husband. We are human beings. But our people don’t realize it. What is the difference between a cow and yourself
now? Your hand has been sold to a broker, just like Bafto [a cow]. He has sold it too [...] I won’t marry a broker. Unless I choose him, I cannot think of anything else to do. (N. Farah 71–72)

These are the arguments she has with herself in response to the news about her arranged marriage. What is very important here is that Ebla, once again, invalidates the idea that third world women are too immature to recognize the element of patriarchal oppression in patriarchal societies when she says “that is what we women are—just like cattle, properties of someone or other, either your parents or your husband” (N. Farah 71). On the contrary, she proves that she is fully aware that women in such societies are considered property, like cattle, and that a patriarchal man does not comprehend that a woman is a human being exactly like him. In addition, she challenges patriarchy by once again refusing an arranged marriage and confirming that she will never accept a man as a husband unless she chooses him.

Nevertheless, after the second attempt at being married off, Ebla adopts a new strategy. She decides to be proactive rather than reactionary and to handle issues more pragmatically. She therefore acts rapidly and decisively to approach a man called Awill to elope with him. This initiative-taking contradicts Moore’s claim that she is “remarkably lucky to have been taken up by the personable young man Awill” (Moore 4), as if she does not have any active role in the whole issue. According to Mixon, Ebla even assumes “an active role in making Awill a suitable husband. She will ‘try to reform him, to teach him, to break his pride, to turn him into a human being’” (83). Unfortunately, he, too, turns out to be part of the very patriarchy she is challenging, where the woman’s body is considered the property
of whichever man claims her. After all, as she says, “he is a man—like any other” (N. Farah 75).

Sadly, Awill takes advantage of Ebla’s dependency and forces her to sleep with him before marrying her. By doing so, he not only violates her dignity and pride, but he also exposes her to physical strain and agony due to the circumcision that she was subjected to in her childhood, which usually causes such women face unbearable pain. The pain in this case frightens Ebla:

Ebla was very frightened, not of Awill, but because she was a virgin. She had heard lots of women talking about the pain one undergoes when one has one’s first sexual intercourse. She had been circumcised when she was eight: the clitoris had been cut and stitched. She wished more than anything else that she was not a woman. She remembered Aowralla’s painful child-delivery when she was in Belet Wene. That was a recent occurrence, but she recalled many other incidents, both similar and dissimilar, and all this scared her out of her wits. (N. Farah 87)

This quotation clearly indicates how female genital mutilation in the Somali society is meant effectively to control women’s sexual desires. Firstly, it is painful for a woman to have sex for the first time when she is circumcised, which usually frightens the individual away from having sex at all. Secondly, many believe that circumcised women do not enjoy the same sexual pleasure as uncircumcised women would enjoy when having sex, which discourages circumcised woman from having sex if it is not for the purpose of reproduction. It has at least a stifling effect, as many of the societies that exercise this customary procedure acknowledge (World Health Organization 2). Thirdly, according to the World Health Organization, “All types of female genital mutilation involve removal or
damage to the normal functioning of the external female genitalia and can give rise to a range of well documented physical complications”, such as complications during childbirth that can sometimes cause “moderate-to-severe damage for the mother and the child” (25–30). Fear of such complications could also be an effective deterrent against woman seeking sexual pleasure, something that also makes Ebla hesitant about sexual intercourse with Awill.

However, it is worth mentioning that some of the Somali female writers like Dahabo Farah praise this practice as something that helps a woman to keep her virginity until marriage and to preserve her chastity throughout the adolescent period of her life (D. Farah 339). That Farah, herself a woman, praises this practice indirectly without asking herself why keeping virginity is necessary only for women but not for men means that this culture is sadly well rooted in the Somali society and the novel highlights the harmfulness of this practice through Ebla’s experience.

In addition to circumcision, patriarchy employs another mechanism to further control women’s sexual desire in the form of punishment for sexual intercourse out of wedlock and adultery. It is not only a dishonourable act for a woman to become sexually involved with a man outside marriage, but such involvement is severely punished when it is discovered. According to N. Farah, “If a woman slept with a man, her relations either shot her or knifed her to death. It had happened quite a number of times in the dwellings where she grew up” (87). In other words, patriarchy uses the concept of honour and shame in combination with fear of severe punishment to control women’s sexual desire, which Ebla has to think about before surrendering to Awill’s animal desire. She thus contemplates the issue before concluding that no one in Mogadishu would discover her if she
yielded to Awill’s demands. Ebla thinks that no one “would be able to know where one slept and whether a woman slept with a man” (N. Farah 87). Consequently, Ebla lets him do what he wants without resistance. According to Mixon, Ebla acts very traditionally here: “On the one hand she insists that she will marry a man of her own choosing; on the other, she insists that sex with Awill be delayed until after the marriage”, something that Mixon regards as contradictory (84). However, what could be argued is that there is no contradiction here, as it is still all about freedom of choice. She does not want to do something that she has not herself chosen to do. To marry him is her choice, but to have premarital sex with him is not of her choice, and that is what the issue here is essentially about.

Paradoxically, however, this premarital sexual intercourse that she is forced to engage in with Awill opens a new door for her to challenge patriarchy. She learns that no one will discover if she acquires multiple sexual partners or extramarital sexual relationships. More importantly, the religious obstacle that would dissuade her from having sex outside marriage is removed with this premarital sexual intercourse. Accordingly, she conquers areas that were mainly preserved for men in patriarchal societies, becoming exactly what some men are in her society—polygamous and adulterous at the same time.

Shortly after their sexual encounter, Awill employs a Sheikh, an Islamic wedding officiant, and, after due procedures, he pronounces them husband and wife. Now Ebla is “delighted to think of herself as a wife”. It really does not matter whose wife, because, as the narrator explains, it all comes to one thing: that she has married (N. Farah 97). However, this time, the husband, Awill, is the man of her choice. Unfortunately, however, this delight is cut short by an emissary from the Ministry of Education who comes to tell Awill that he will soon leave the
country for an overseas assignment. Awill and the emissary exchange some words in Italian, wherein Awill learns that he will go to Italy on a study tour to visit some schools and get an idea about how to run them, as he is bound to be appointed as a head of schools in the Ministry of Education when he comes back from Italy one month before independence (Farah 98–99). Awill accepts the proposal without consulting his new wife. According to Farah, “he knew what to do about Ebla with regard to this departure. He had decided even before he arrived in Mogadishu” (N. Farah 100). She also affects ignorance and never discusses his departure for Italy with him. It is part of a man’s life to travel for the benefit of the family, she imagines (N. Farah 101). She knows that she has to behave as a submissive woman who never interferes with her husband’s manly affairs if she is to succeed with her family life. This is, after all, part of the new strategy that she adopted since her second escape from an arranged marriage.

Consequently, Awill travels to Italy, leaving Ebla with Asha, an urban woman whom Ebla “found was the most interesting character she had met since she left the county” (N. Farah 109). This woman has a great impact on Ebla due to the position she comes to occupy in her heart, as she is the first person who considers Ebla to be her equal (N. Farah 109). Nonetheless, the turning point comes when Awill’s friend Jama mistakenly hands Ebla a photo where Awill’s hands rest on the breasts of a white woman wearing a swimsuit. Ebla becomes furious and disappointed, but she still thinks that if someone had told her that this is the way things are “in the white man’s land she would have believed it” (N. Farah 110). Nevertheless, when Ebla asks Asha for advice, Ebla’s rebelliousness against patriarchy becomes more pronounced. Instead of calming her down, Asha advises Ebla to take revenge on Awill by doing exactly what he does—that is to
say, be unfaithful to him. Asha even assures her that she will help her to find out the best way to cheat on him without being detected or noticed by anyone:

What should I do? Ebla asked and her voice was so serious that anyone could see that she needed help. I know what you should do, said Asha. Tell me, then. ‘I will make us some tea. After that I will tell you what to do…. You see I have a suggestion to make,’ Asha began. She gulped. ‘I want to hear. Ebla sipped the insipid tea. But you will listen? Asha gulped again. Yes, I want to listen…. Say it. She took another mouthful of tea…. I swear upon Allah. And my God kill my brother if I don’t do it. (N. Farah 110–111)

Here, before giving her advice on such an important issue, Asha makes sure that Ebla will listen to her attentively. She makes them some tea first in order to create a relaxed atmosphere where they can deliberate together comfortably. In the meantime, while drinking the tea, she examines whether Ebla is only emotional and does not mean what she says. However, what is more important here is that Asha and Ebla use drinking tea as a random check in Ebla’s commitment to challenging patriarchy, because drinking tea in Somali tradition is associated with masculinity, according to a famous Somali proverb that says, ‘Rag Waa Shaah, Dumarna Waa Sheeko’ (men drink tea, while women gossip) (Kusow XV). Ladan Affi, in Kusow, discusses this proverb, writing:

One of the principal narratives that organize gender relations, and therefore, the ultimate subordination of womenfolk is derived from the popular Somali proverb *men drink tea while women gossip*. The way in which this narrative subordinates women is based on the distinction between drinking tea and gossiping. Drinking tea, according to the
narrative, is understood as a masculine activity and denotes hardiness, rationality, and pragmatic thinking. Gossiping, on the other hand, is culturally interpreted as softness, emotionality, and lack of pragmatic thinking. (Kusow 92)

Thus, because drinking tea is associated with masculinity, Asha and Ebla here try to challenge patriarchal ideology. By drinking tea and thinking carefully before being advised, Ebla demonstrates that, exactly like tea-drinking, men do not have a monopoly on rationality and pragmatic thinking. She shows Asha how committed she is not only to listen to her, but also to challenge patriarchal ideology by drinking tea with her, and she thereby gains Asha’s confidence.

Accordingly, Asha continues her relaxed discourse with Ebla, telling her that she knows a rich man who is very interested in her and is ready to accept whatever she suggests. Subsequently, Ebla expresses her readiness to marry him and even insinuates that she is already married to two men—to the man to whom her grandfather gave her hand and to Awill. This provides more assurances to Asha with regard to her defiance of patriarchal values. “Tell him that I am willing to marry him secretly,” Ebla says. “I love life, and I love to be a wife. I don’t care whose,” she adds. Asha assures her by saying, “Yes, I will” before finishing their tea (N. Farah 112–113). This shows that Ebla’s determination to challenge patriarchy started when her hand was given to Giumaleh, something that indicates that seeing her husband’s photo constitutes only a pretext to justify her deeds in front of Asha before discovering that they are of the same opinion with regard to patriarchy. Thus, Asha happily arranges Ebla’s marriage with Tiffo, the rich man about whom she told Ebla.
It is worth mentioning that ‘life’ to Ebla means “freedom, freedom of every sort”, as the narrator later explains, writing, “One should do whatever one wants to—that is life. That is what I love.’ Freedom: that was what she worshipped.” This includes the freedom that sexuality in marriage ironically affords her. “Marriage was a sound refuge,” writes Farah, though the key word is ‘secretly’: “I am willing to marry him secretly,” as Ebla said (113, 114). Being able to marry secretly allows Ebla the opportunity to marry Tiffo and two other men at the same time: by doing so, she becomes polygamous and thus undermines patriarchal values by engaging in a practice that is restricted to men.

Remarkably enough, though, Ebla benefits from a practice that is actually meant to benefit men in the patriarchal Somali society. Marrying secretly in Somalia is in fact intended to provide men with multiple wives without being detected by their official wives. But here, in the absence of her official partner, Ebla benefits from that practice, turning the whole idea of secret marriage upside down. As a consequence, Ebla becomes polygamous, believing “that if Awill can be unfaithful to her with impunity, she can be unfaithful to him” (90). She, thus, takes Tiffo as a second husband of choice while she is still married to Awill and probably to Giumaleh. According to Mixon, “Ebla’s decision to take a second husband while yet married to the first is a direct challenge to the polygamous marriages which men traditionally are allowed” (90). Hence she undermines patriarchy by breaking the rules in terms of sexual partnerships.

Unfortunately, Ebla’s secret marriage is a disappointment because Tiffo ends up treating her like a harlot, and she decides to put an end to the marriage “which had nothing behind it except sharing a bed and earning some money from him” (Farah 129–130). She decides to terminate the relationship with this man in a
way that demonstrates her strong personality and her eye-for-an-eye and tooth-for-
a-tooth approach of returning any humiliation or repressive behaviour against her.
The following passage explains that approach:

‘I am also married.’ She thought, ‘How does that hit you? ‘To me. You are
married to me. Ah! Ah!’ he said, […]. No. To another one. You see, you
two take turns. […] My other husband’s name is Awill,’ Ebla replied. ‘You
are telling me a lie.’ No. I am not telling you a lie. Why should I? You
have another wife and I have another husband. We are even: you are a man
and I am a woman, so we are equal. You need me and I need you. We are
equal’. (N. Farah 132)

Ebla tells Tiffo the reality about her relationships in a way that gets “his lips and
hands quivering” from anger and disbelief, which was actually her intention here
even though she could have managed a gentle way to get rid of him (N. Farah
132). She chooses this brutal way for two reasons. Firstly, she wants to torment
him, to take revenge on him for treating her like a harlot. Secondly, she wants to
remove him decisively from her life as quickly as possible as her ordinary
husband, Awill, is expected back home very soon.

The way Ebla speaks to Tiffo here demonstrates how self-confident she is
and how she asserts her equality with him, which hurts his pride as a man in a
patriarchal society and challenges his perception of women. He responds by
saying, “Look, I am not going to be questioned by my wife, so don’t speak to me
like that”, expressing his frustration with the challenge she is posing not only to
him, but to patriarchal values as a whole (N. Farah 132). Women, for him, are
supposed to be submissive and obedient, accepting “without argument the truths
and laws that other men gave them” (de Beauvoir 725). Ebla not only defies his
perceptions, but also demolishes the whole idea of secret marriage by proving that she, a woman, was polygamous—something that patriarchal men would never accept. Additionally, she makes Tiffo taste the sense of bitterness that a woman experiences when her husband takes another woman while he is still married to her. Ebla wants to send a message to all men here in order to make them think twice before marrying other women.

Soon after this encounter, Awill comes back from Italy, and again Ebla’s feelings of equality to men are manifested. Instead of feeling regretful and trying to hide what she has done in Awill’s absence, she asks him “if she would tell him everything she had done during his absence.... We will tell each other everything, tomorrow. You’ll tell me everything, and I shall tell you everything”, he says moving towards her to quell his desire for sex, as “he is sex-starved,” in Ebla’s words (N. Farah 163). She seems to be confident in herself to the point that she asks him if he is interested in hearing what she has to say about what has happened in his absence. She knows that he himself is not innocent and that he has to explain himself about the white woman she saw him with in the photograph and what else he may have done with other women overseas.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, the essay has demonstrated the importance of Nuruddin Farah’s *From a Crooked Rib* in terms of highlighting the ordeal of Somali women and the multiple problems that they face because of the patriarchal system that reigned in their society in the 1960s and which still reigns, as the civil war erased the development that had been made during the 1970s and 1980s in terms of gender equality. This is made possible thanks to the postcolonial feminist approach that has been adopted to analyse the text from a feminist point of view.
The main point that has been made throughout the text is that Farah asserts through Ebla that patriarchy is a problem in Somalia, where women are regarded as inferior creatures. He shows that women in Somalia are not only deprived of the economic empowerment that men have but are also treated like property, owned either by their husbands or by their male relatives. Farah shows that the patriarchal oppression of women in Somalia even involves physical torture to control women’s sexuality. Because of this, Ebla—who could be considered a prototype of Somali women—is sold like cattle and offered to a man in marriage in exchange for camels. She is also subjected to female genital mutilation, which is intended to hamper a woman’s sexual drive and is, consequently, another form of exerting control over women’s liberties. All this is in line with theoretical criticism that assumes that all women in patriarchal societies are oppressed and deprived of their own rights to be treated equally and to be offered the same opportunities that are offered to men.

On the other hand, Farah, through Ebla again, indicates that third world women have the same intellectual capability as women in first world countries in terms of understanding patriarchy and how it works. He shows how these women are capable of speaking for themselves and dealing with their patriarchal problems without being versed by first world women. This is in line with postcolonial feminist complaints against first world feminists, whom they assume do not understand their ordeal well enough to speak for them, aside from their assumption about these women being guilty of the same atrocities that men in the first world committed against colonized women.
The essay has also pointed out the fact that this novel, with all its importance, has not earned enough attention as yet, and so more studies on the novel would be recommended.

**Works Cited**


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