



Manhood in Crisis: A Reading of Gender Fluidity in Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*

Sehnaz Rofique Saikia*

Abstract

Viewing masculinity as a construct, the paper underscores the presence of malleability and fluidity within the concept of masculinity through a detailed analysis of Nuruddin Farah's novel *Maps* (1986). I have discussed how the presence of fluidity in the protagonist Askar's identity—defined by the presence of a woman within him and the influence of Misra in his life—prevents him from attaining a hegemonic masculine identity. The paper also examines the psychological crisis of Askar induced by the patriarchal panopticon as he fails to perform the normative masculinity which will place him in a privileged position within the power structure. Thus, the paper highlights the fact that patriarchy has a detrimental effect not only on women, but men are also its victims.

Keywords: masculinity, gender fluidity, *Maps*, patriarchy

All is illusion — the words written, the mind at which they are aimed, the truth they are intended to express, the hands that will hold the paper, the eyes that will glance at the lines. Every image floats vaguely in a sea of doubt — and the doubt itself is lost in an unexplored universe of uncertainty.

— Joseph Conrad

The second part of Nuruddin Farah's *Maps* opens with this quote from Conrad's letter to Edward Garnett dated September 16, 1899. These lines are significant in discerning the presence of fluidity in

* Senior Research Fellow in the Department of English, Gauhati University, India.

Askar's identity. In context of the instability connoted in the above statement, I would explore the presence of 'aporia' in the protagonist's manifestation of a stable sexual and national identity. The novel *Maps* exhibits certain postmodern characteristics like uncertainty and fluidity in its exploration of the question of identity. The novel's refusal to privilege a stable identity is strongly influenced by postmodernist claims of a fluid subjectivity. The novel represents Askar's quest to stabilise his subjectivity by affirming his Somali roots. However, he maps his identity through ambiguous trajectories, which in turn foregrounds the presence of 'aporia' within the Somali cultural roots. In this context, the paper explores the representation of fluidity in Askar's masculine identity and the perpetual crisis by foregrounding three key strands in the novel: his relation with Misra; the Dream motif; and the patriarchal panopticon. The paper will also study how the shifting nature of Askar's identity induces within him a social concern ingrained by the patriarchal panopticon leading to a psychological crisis. *Maps*, the first book of the "Blood in the Sun" trilogy, was published in 1986. With the background of Ogaden War between Somalia and Ethiopia, it depicts the story of Askar, a Somali orphan, and charts his yearning for a homogenised identity, both at micro and macro levels. Askar's boyhood in Kallafo with his foster mother Misra is the main thrust of his story. It follows him from the beginning of the Ogaden War (1977–1978) when he leaves for the home of his maternal uncle and aunt Hilaal and Salaado in the Somali capital Mogadiscio, all the way to his ten-year reunion with Misra there, where Misra is being treated as a traitor by the Somali Liberation War Front. As a result, it portrays Askar's conflict of having to choose between his attachment to his Ethiopian foster mother Misra and his expected commitment to his ethnic Somali identity.

The central thematic concern in the novel is Askar's formulation of a Somali identity in its essentialised form. Askar hopes to construct this identity through his allegiance to Somali cultural nationalism that attempts to reterritorialise all Somali-speaking territories into one. But the novel destabilises the notions of essentialism by manifesting the impossibility of such re-integration through the enhancement of incertitude and indeterminacy in the protagonist's perception of gender and national identity. According to Todd Reeser, " ...

nationality and gender are often put in dialogue with each other since one can help prop up the other" because both are considered as "key ideologically defined aspects of subjectivity" (177). The manifestation of masculinity is crucial to make nationalism appear as a natural phenomenon. Masculinity and nationality are represented as dialogic, as each influences the other. In the novel, Askar wishes to join the military to manifest allegiance to the Somali community, wants to fight for the reunification of Somali territories and thereby endorse Somali cultural homogeneity. But as observed by Charles Sugnet, Farah in the novel "was never willing to grant the exclusive masculinity of the national subject, and perhaps his gender politics made it inevitable from the start that [Askar] would not or could not perform a nationalist reterritorialisation" (745). Thus, the protagonist is unable to foreground his masculine identity as the authentic identity because of his unsolidified gender identity.

In fact, his fluid gender identity also reflects the fragmentation in his Somali identity because no matter how much he tries, he can never succeed in attaining an essentialised Somali identity. One core reason for the impossibility of attaining such an identity is that the self, which Askar wants to stabilise through his attempt to reintegrate Ogaden to its Somali roots on the grounds of cultural homogeneity, is itself shifting. The shifting nature of the Ogaden is a prominent example of the aftermath of colonialism. The Ogaden, which is inhabited by the Somalis, was handed to Ethiopia by the British colonisers in 1948, sowing the seeds of incessant conflict between Ethiopia and the Somali Republic for the occupation of the Ogaden region. The Somali nationalistic fervour, ignited by the Western Somali Liberation Front for the reunification of Ogaden to Somalia, was successful in seizing the Ogaden in 1977 from Ethiopia. However, the victory of the Somalis was short-lived, as Ethiopian forces aided by Russia regained control of Ogaden in 1978. The identity of the disputed Ogaden is itself marked with ambiguity and indeterminacy. This fluid identity of Ogaden is specified in the novel when Hilaal remarks that "the Ogaden as Somali is truth. To the Ethiopian map-maker, the Ogaden, as Somali, is untruth" (229). This remark by Hilaal is crucial as it foregrounds the discursive nature of truth itself. The truth that Askar perceives by naming Ogaden as Western Somalia is notional and is subject to change. Ogaden may

have cultural domination of Somalis, but nationally it belongs to Ethiopia. Seen from this perspective, Askar, being born as an Ogadenese Somali can never fully attain an authentic Somali identity because he cannot detach himself from his Ethiopian traces. In this regard, when Askar asks Hilaal about the difference between Somali in Somalia and other nations, Hilaal's response that "the Somali in the Ogaden, the Somali in Kenya both, because they lack what makes the self strong and whole, are *unpersons*" justifies the hybrid nature of Askar's identity (167).

This statement in the narrative foils Askar's efforts to essentialise his authentic Somali identity. He cannot attain the inclusive identity of a Somali, and hence will remain an "*unperson*" for the Somalis in the Somali Republic. Hence, in the novel, Farah refuses to privilege a stable national or ethnic identity by withholding Askar's desires to attain it to emphasise "the need to break with the belief in a univocal Somali identity" (Smart 77) in a postcolonial world. Rather, through the manifestation of Askar's shifting identity, he reveals the impossibility of reinserting primordial values and highlights the ambivalence in the identity discourses. The fluidity in Askar's identity has been engendered in the novel through his relationship with his Ethiopian foster-mother Misra. She is the centrifugal force in the novel that destabilises his quest to attain a stable self. Her peripheral life in the Somali community of Ogaden changed from the moment she discovered Askar and became his caretaker. Misra's presence in his life developed an inseparable bond that pervaded Askar's subconscious mind and restrained his attempt to mould himself in the Somali cultural rhetoric. In the novel, Askar himself confessed that Misra's hands were life to him as he described that the moment she lifted and held him, he began to exist: "I was nameless, yes; but I existed the second she touched me" (25). It is interesting to note that Askar, even after coming to terms with his Somali roots acknowledges the significance of Misra as witnessed in the retrospective narration of his childhood. His confession of being in the world the moment she touched him also signifies that Askar can never formulate a separate Somali identity because his very existence is determined by his Ethiopian foster mother. There are frequent references in the novel which emphasise the perpetual experience of Askar's tactile sensation provided by Misra which helped him to

discover himself. The narrator states that Askar feels lost "unless his outstretched hands bring back to his acute senses the reassuring message that" Misra is "*touchably*" there (12). It is stated that Askar ensures his corporeal reality in the world with her "reassuring self." The narrator further manifests Misra's corporeal presence in Askar's life by referring to Misra's hand while describing Askar's biological parents and what they bequeathed to him. The narrator foregrounds the impact of Misra's body on Askar by describing her hand as "a hand to touch, a hand to help and to give assurances" (9). Misra could not provide her maternal milk to Askar, but "...there was plenty of her and she gave it" (10). Misra gave her body to Askar by holding him in proximity to her body, keeping him warm with her cuddles. In fact, we are told that upon Askar's body "were printed impressions of her" (10). There were many instances when Askar felt that he was Misra's "third breast" or "third leg". Moreover, it is stated that Askar may be nourished by the food that the Somali community provided him, but his mind was nourished on "a body of opinion totally her own" (12). It is noteworthy that the Enlightenment idea of distinguishing between mind and body as two separate entities and associating the mind to men and body to women has been questioned in the novel. The enhancement of the body in the novel has moved the body from its peripheral position to a more viable one where mind and body are not two separate entities as forwarded by Descartes's philosophy of mind/body dualism. Rather, as noted by Elizabeth Grosz, there is "inflection of mind into body and body into mind" (Introduction xii). Through Misra's body and its encompassing presence in Askar's life, the novel emphasises the significance of the body because Askar could discern his presence in the world through his somatic interconnection with Misra. Misra's corporeal presence in Askar's life has signified the necessity of forming a balance between mind and body to achieve wholeness. The novel's depiction of the somatic interconnection between Askar and Misra undermines the former's identity as a Somali man who is expected to manifest rationality. In fact, the novel's emphasis that "truth is the body" implicates the prominence of the body in the novel. Farah's enhancement of the functionality of the body is a way to challenge the ideology of man as a rational being, as witnessed in Askar's failed attempts to constitute himself exclusively as one because he cannot detach his corporeal experiences from his mind.

Again, the ritual of circumcision that marks his formal transformation into manhood is agreed upon by him because he desires to be a man. But the novel's reflection on his inner thoughts before and after circumcision also engenders his intrinsic bond with Misra and raises scepticism about his desire to be a man. Undoubtedly, after stepping into manhood, he is entrenched with the idea of proving his manhood through his nationalism, as it is synonymous with valour, courage, honour, and respect. However, he also confesses his concern following the ramifications of circumcision as it will lead to separation from Misra. A series of questions entangled his mind as he contemplated, "Could he undo all the ties which held them together? Could he, like time, sever all their links?" (58) The narrator here describes that Askar's response to these questions manifests his repressed emotions to delay such rituals that separate him from Misra. This is revealed in his utmost wish to hold time like a wet cloth and even wishes that there should be incessant rain so that the cloth never dries. He wishes to suspend time so that "he would not grow up to be a man", only then could he be with Misra. Circumcision is a rite performed by the social institution to virilise men "by stripping them of everything female which may remain in them" (Bourdieu 27). But the novel's meticulous representation of questions that preoccupy Askar's mind related to his separation from Misra and his desires to prevent it raises doubts about his compliance with the traditional norms of masculinity. He may agree to such rituals as it will determine his position in the gender hierarchy, but his compliance is partial because his inner thoughts are in contradiction with his outward action. He fails to perform the ritual accordingly because in this ritual he is supposed to remain untouched even by a female shadow; on the contrary, he breaks the taboo by compelling them to make arrangements for Misra's presence by his side. Even after his circumcision, he confesses to being divided into two—a world with Misra and a world without her. Askar stated that he was able to bear the pain following his circumcision, but the problem arose when pain defined Askar's "state of mind" and his "movements" as well. The societal expectation of manhood makes men compromise with their psychological and physical health as they are born in a world where they are not expected to involve in "sissy stuff" by being affective and sensitive like women, rather they should be stronger, less fragile, and risk-taking. Askar too is conscious of his

masculine image, so he demonstrates his ability to "dwell in the territory of pain" as it will place him in the category of dominant masculinity. However, it is interesting to note that in reality, he hides his pain when people ask him about it by lying that pain has adjusted in his body. He confessed that he hid the truth that the effect of circumcision divided him into two persons. One half belonged to his "vague past" of which Misra was part and he associates it with painlessness. The other half was "represented by the pain which inhabited the groin" (93). Askar's use of the term 'pain' to identify with masculinity brings to light that the attainment of a masculine identity is an arduous task. And the men despite being burdened by the expectations to perform the dominant masculinity strive for it because they are driven by the urge for social acceptance and power. However, Askar's association of Misra with painlessness that formulates his other half connotes his "proximity to Misra, his 'feminine self'" under whose shadow he lived a peaceful life (Cobham 91). Hence, Rhonda Cobham's remark that "Askar's sense of a separate identity is constantly undermined by the long history of his intimacy with Misra which makes it impossible for him to remain untouched by her" is appropriate in this regard (93). As such, Askar, after his socialisation as a Somali man, engages in relentless endeavours to achieve a stable sexual and national identity as rationalised by the Somali society but fails to attain it because he cannot separate Misra from his identity.

Traditional masculinity prevents men from expressing the emotional side of their subjectivity as rationality is considered the cultural ideal of manliness. Victor Siedler, in his book *Man Enough: Embodying Masculinities* discusses how men are brought up in a cultural discourse where they are supposed to "hide and conceal" their emotional wounds and harden themselves as part of "proving their masculinity" (60). According to Siedler, men's social role compels them to repress their emotions and feelings. Undoubtedly, for men to bring an affirmative change in their identity, it is necessary to acknowledge and express the emotional aspect of their subjectivity as it will stimulate the deconstruction of gender hierarchies. However, man's dominant demeanour cannot be exclusively framed as a result of the psychological deficit because the reformulation of men's identities in an affirmative way requires both structural and

psychological change. In the novel, the structural change in Askar's identity comes with his migration to Mogadiscio and his stay with Hilaal and Salaado, that enlightened him about the inauthenticity of the ideologies of gender certitude. Simultaneously, the psychological changes in Askar that affected his perception of dominant masculinity are engendered in the novel through his bond with Misra. It is his emotional bond with Misra that has affected his personality and evoked an existential crisis in him because he can neither detach himself from Misra nor acquire any form of so-called "essentialised" national or gender identity. His childhood intimacies with Misra make his inner self reiterate doubts about his desired subjectivity. This change in Askar made him realise the condition and subjugation of women in the society which even if he wants to overlook to demonstrate his traditional masculinity, he can't because he gets affected by it. Though Askar tried to formulate an image in conformity with the pastoral Somali cultural norms, in reality, he couldn't because he was raised by Misra's body of ideas and lived in the 'inclusive' world of Hilaal and Salaado that made him rethink the position and treatment of women in society. Askar's gender perspectives are in contradiction with the ideals of a traditional Somali patriarchal society that restricts women to the private sphere or normalises sexual and gender-based violence by men or treats women as sexual objects. This transformation in his masculine identity places him in a new kind of masculinity that is not in correspondence with the existing masculine norms. Hence, the novel's depiction of the influence of Misra in his life is a strategy to provoke change in man's perception of gender ideologies and reconstitute their subjectivity through a positive approach. Moreover, the transformation in Askar justifies that masculinity is fluid and not an ontological category, as such allowing subversion of normative gender discourses. Apart from the representation of Misra as an intrinsic force that constrains Askar's endeavour to portray dominant masculinity, the fluid nature of Askar's masculinity is enhanced in the novel by projecting the presence of a woman in Askar. Farah deploys dreams as an instrumental narrative device in manifesting the gender incertitude in the protagonist to implicate the shifting nature of his identity.

One interesting detail about *Maps* is that dreams comprise a major portion of the novel's narrative structure, with three sections portraying a vivid discussion of Askar's dreams and dreaming while six sections consist of dream sequences. The narrative represents swift movements from the conscious to the unconscious realm leading to disjuncture in narrative linearity. This is because the dreams in the narrative open abruptly without any introduction and the scene shifts to the real world without any closure. According to Derek Wright, dreams serve as a postmodern narrative strategy as they "allow very many different competing views to be heard" (qtd. in Mwabu 49). Wright opines that Farah's use of dream motif in the novel is a strategy to issue truth "from the collision of opposing ideas; for truth in Farah's fiction is relative, ambiguous and open-ended" (ibid). Modern-day psychoanalysts like Freud and Jung have also made their observations on the function and content of dreams. They consider dreams to be pivotal as they give insights into the workings of the unconscious. Sigmund Freud emphasised "the interpretation of dreams as the royal road to knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind" (emphasis added 647). Freud argued that dreams are a person's repressed desires and consider them to be the language of the unconscious. He argued that dreams are not a chaotic psychic phenomenon, but are distorted and coded expressions of desires that have to be decoded. While Freud stated that dreams manifest prohibited desires of a person, Jung believed that dreams expressed everything openly. He said that "they do not deceive, they do not lie, they do not distort or disguise...they express something that the ego does not know and does not understand" (103). Jung, in *Civilization in Transition*, defines dream as "impartial, spontaneous products of the unconscious psyche" and produces before us the "unvarnished, natural truth" (149). He considered dreams as a form of compensation for the imbalance created due to the straying of consciousness. Drawing on the above discussion on dreams, this will analyse the significance of dreams in the novel and their relation to Askar's gender identity.

The dreams in *Maps* serve as voices of the protagonist's feelings and experiences and his suppressed sensibilities. Most of the dreams in the novel are centred on the protagonist's quest for identity and the indeterminacy surrounding it. The function of dreams in the novel is

of immense importance as it foregrounds Askar's inner thoughts which manifest the presence of a woman within him. The dream narratives in the novel emphasise the fact that his dreams dressed him up "one day as a woman, another as a man" (66), accentuating gender fluidity. One such dream that reflects Askar's confusion regarding his gender identity is depicted in the third chapter which opens with a dream of Askar running uncertainly without the knowledge or purpose of his run. In the dream, he suddenly stops and turns back when he hears a woman's voice. To Askar, the woman resembled Misra, but she introduced herself as Ummat. Askar, however, was unable to introduce himself as he left the sentence unfinished as "I am" During the journey, he met many people whose bodies were tattooed with identity markers like "their name, nationality, and address" (43). When Askar turned his back to question Misra about these people, he did not find her. She was not even in his memory. And he contemplated that the words "I am ..." which he felt he left unfinished while addressing the woman Ummat maybe was not an incomplete sentence. He then questioned himself if he was Misra. In response to the question, he "heard himself say 'I am'" (44). Askar's identification of himself as a woman—Misra here—can be interpreted as Farah's way of challenging fixities regarding Askar's gender identity. It signifies that Askar cannot form a stable masculine identity in conformity to the existing Somali gender norms. There is another dream in which he envisions that his body has been transformed into a young woman's body. In the dream, Askar contemplated his lost identity through his remarks that he was once a young man but had lost his identity as he had transformed into a young woman. The narrator here comments on the ambiguity concerning Askar's identity as he "becomes now a man, now a woman" (63). The dream reflects Askar's fragmented identity and his affliction to attain wholeness. The above dreams are a reflection of the complexity of formulating an authentic masculine identity as it denotes the mutable nature of identity itself. Askar's dreams of transforming into a woman or his confusion if he is Misra signifies that he does not have an authentic masculine self because his dreams frequently implicate the presence of an unconscious feminine self. The presence of a feminine self in his unconscious realm denotes that masculine identity is not stable or given. According to Jung, dream is a "self-reflection," and can be perceived as a "communication or

message from the unconscious" (149). Keeping in with Jung's view, Askar's dreams are a reflection of his inner turmoil as it depicts his inability to stabilise his identity. It is not only in dreams that Askar feels the presence of a woman in him, even in his conscious state he senses the female self in him. This is witnessed in the episode when Askar tells Hilaal about Misra. During the conversation, he told Hilaal that:

Although, now and again, I have a strange feeling that there is *another* in me,
one older than I—a woman. I have the conscious feeling of being spoken through, if you know what I mean. I feel as if I have allowed a woman older than
I live inside of me, and I speak not my words, my ideas, but hers. And during
the time I am spoken through, as it were, I am she—not I.
(Farah 151)

Askar also confessed to Hilaal that he could not part with the woman in him as it would cause him pain. This is because he has allowed her to dwell in him. The confusion regarding his gender identity and national identity leads to the recurrence of the pertinent question "Who is Askar?" till the end of the novel. In the novel, the psychological burden that Askar experiences concerning his performance of dominant masculinity are the recurring feeling of the presence of a woman within him. It is this inner voice that enhances the fluid nature of his identity that pervades his attempt to configure a stable masculine identity. Despite being unable to perform the dominant Somali masculinity, Askar tries to reinforce it so that he can attain power, respect, and acceptance in the community. He does not want to accept his alternative masculinity due to fear of acceptance in his society which leads to inner turmoil in him. He constantly attempts to live up to the ideals and norms set for being a 'real man' to receive the approval of his community. He feels that if he acknowledges the changing masculinity in him, it will lead to the betrayal of his Somali identity that fosters essentialism rather than hybridity. However, with new experiences, he cannot formulate his identity in existing images of masculinity because the new experiences threaten his prior social underpinnings of gender

hierarchy. Askar's emphasis on being a man or his rigorous attempt to discard the presence of a woman within him or to get rid of Misra's influence from the deep recesses of his mind is due to the "wretched fear of not being male enough, which is identical with the fear of 'femininity—and hence of weakness, dependence, intimacy and closeness" (Segal 260). The fear of not being seen as a man is related to power because the patriarchal structure makes power synonymous with masculine identity. Askar too is trapped in this power politics as he does not want to be identified as a 'lack.' This is because the traditional Somali society terms those men who are incapable of performing their roles correctly as fragile and feminine.

One of the reasons for men's concern with their social appearance is the panoptic effect of patriarchy that gets deeply entrenched in an individual's mind. The panoptic effect of patriarchy can be perceived by understanding Jeremy Bentham's concept of the panopticon. Bentham, in the eighteenth century, designed the panopticon as a penitentiary model to regulate and control the prisoners. The core idea of the panopticon was to allow the prisoners of an institution to be under the surveillance of a single security guard positioned at the central tower. The cellmates are put in individual cells, and with the effect of backlighting, they are constantly observed by the eye of the supervisor. Foucault further adds that in the panopticon the supervisor can observe each individual but the cellmates cannot see each other. He says that "the individual is seen but he does not see", the individual is the "object of information", not the "subject in communication" (200). According to Foucault, one of the core effects of the Panopticon is to "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that ensures the automatic functioning of power" (201). As the cellmates are confused about the position of the watcher and their monitoring, they begin to self-regulate themselves, leading to the desired effect of the model. Hence, the panopticon was successful in observing and regulating the behaviour of the cellmates through involuntary surveillance. David Buchbinder draws similarities between the working of the panopticon model to the functioning of patriarchy as he identifies patriarchy as a form of the panopticon. According to him, a man's position in the patriarchal order is not identified by a woman but by determining his position alongside other men because within the order, "it follows that his

attempt to do so is both monitored and evaluated by other men, which in turn affords them considerable power over him" (Farah 79). Thus, a man's criteria of fulfilling his masculinity requirements depend on other men's judgment of him as masculine or not masculine. This leads to constant pressure among men to monitor their performance of masculinity as there is fear of rejection for not performing one's gender correctly. The omnipresent power of patriarchy that burdens the individual to regulate and monitor their own gender identity can be found in *Maps* as well. In the novel, this is determined through Askar's behaviour as he self-monitors his manhood by a certain culturally identified marker of masculinity.

One such instance in the novel is when Askar's mirror serves as an instrument for observing Askar's manhood. Askar notes that the mirrors "reflect *his* visage, showing *him* whether or not *he has* grown a beard" (emphasis added 19). The narrator recalls how Askar thinks that his beard is the indicator of his manliness, and he wants to ensure whether "Karin's menopausal hair is manlier" than his, and if her hair is manlier, "then it is high time *to do* something about it" (emphasis added 19). The cultural discourse of different cultures constructs certain markers of the body as indicators of one's masculinity or femininity. In many cultures, the beard is validated as a marker of one's masculinity. This marker of masculinity is ingrained in Askar's mind and he becomes the observer of his manliness and the mirror becomes instrumental in monitoring his masculinity. Thus, in this regard, the imagery of the mirror here is significant as it foregrounds the dynamics of the watcher and the watched "as a way of keeping male behaviour in line with the current norms of masculinity and accepted gender standards" (Buchbinder 81). Somali ethnocentric nationalism too has a panoptic effect in Askar's mind because in the novel, no one pressurises him to join the Somali Liberation War Front but he convinces himself that this is the only way to reinforce his identity as a Somali man. He feels that only through his nationalism he can prove his masculinity and he measures his masculine nationalism alongside Armadio and his father. Askar's behaviour can be read in the light of Michael Kimmel's statement that the way "gender shapes sexuality, sexuality confirms gender" (19). Askar's constant reminder to himself that he needs to recruit himself as a soldier to reintegrate his Somali identity is one such way to stabilise

his sexuality as a male. Askar construed that nationalism may help him boost his masculinity and hide his female side. The involuntary power exercised by patriarchal society is such that Askar becomes his own moral police because he believes that he is betraying his community by not conforming to the ideals laid by it. He wants to join the Front so that "he would wash clean his conscience—and live at peace with it" (Farah 56).

Moreover, it is the desired effect of the patriarchal panopticon that he does not want to acknowledge the presence of a woman in him or publicly acknowledge Misra's presence in his life as it will obstruct his "ways of gaining and keeping respect and power" (Berg 224). He is obsessed with being a man and constantly strives to perform his masculinity as per the prescribed norms because he fears loss of power and respect if he accepts his subordinate masculinity. Michael Kimmel observes that this "fear of failing" should be the core concern of masculinity studies as it has a prolonged psychological effect on men. The psychological effect of living up to the ideals of normative masculinity is such that Askar tells Misra that he has to kill her to live in this world as a man. He tells her, "When I grow up and I become a man... 'I will kill you'...to live I have to kill you" (Farah 58). This sentence has been interpreted to connote Misra's Ethiopian identity which can never be infused with Askar's Somali identity. But the sentence's emphasis on "as a man" can be interpreted from the perspective of Askar's gender identity. He has to get rid of everything that is not in conjunction with existing norms of masculinity. After all, Misra's presence in his life will enhance his female side. To achieve mastery over his masculine self and display it as his authentic identity, he undertakes self-vigilance, as reflected in the episode when Askar was shocked that he allowed his other selves to "study the activities, thoughts of his primary self" (Farah 70). Askar's concern for social appearance is highlighted in one of his dreams as well. On his journey to Mogadiscio, Askar dreams of meeting a girl who has no name or country to identify herself with. When Askar inquires her if she has anything that belongs to her, she answers that her shadow is the only thing she claims to be her own. During the conversation, the girl criticises Askar for being concerned only about his social image. She says that he never introspects and characterises him as a "smooth surface being" who is "almost always

satisfied with the surface of things" (Farah 132). Askar prefers to mark his identity only by the reflection of his physical appearance in the mirror because his external image reflects his masculinity. On the other hand, his inner self frequently resonates with a feminine presence in him which disrupts his performance of dominant masculinity. The novel's continuous manifestation of Askar's inner self is to present the fragmentation of his identity.

In the novel, Askar relentlessly attempts to get rid of the "abject" (feminine) within him to conform to dominant Somali masculinity. However, the narrative impedes Askar's attempt by representing the feminine as an intrinsic part of his identity. He fails to perform dominant masculinity because he cannot discard the female presence in him manifested by his inner thoughts and feelings. Though Askar tries to reinforce his masculine identity the representation of his inner conflict also foregrounds his longing for a fluid identity rather than rigid markers of identity. This is witnessed in the narrator's expression of Askar's suppressed feelings, "If only there were no mirror to divulge the secrets of your inner torments; if the two of you could touch each other in the dark; ... if each could fabricate a story which would go well with the identity you wished to assume" (Farah 62). These thoughts express Askar's desire to lead a life that does not restrict one to transgress boundaries and exercise their free will. However, he fails to acknowledge the fluidity in his identity as he keeps working to reinforce the norms that govern his masculinity and fails to see that the "hegemony *he* is upholding is an illusion" (emphasis added, Berg 251). The novel portrays Askar as a torn self who remains preoccupied with an existential dilemma. This can be interpreted as Farah's opposition to supporting any form of essentialist discourse. Thus, the novel, by precluding Askar from attaining any form of exclusive identity, illuminates the unstable and discursive nature of identity: gender and national, respectively.

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