Entangled (Her)Stories
Gender Solidarity and Civil War in Nuruddin Farah’s *Knots*

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This paper focuses on the representation of gender solidarity in Nuruddin Farah’s *Knots* (2007). The novel is set during Somali civil war, which started in 1991 and is still ongoing. Its plot revolves around its female protagonist, Cambara, and her project of rescuing her family house from the hands of a local warlord, Gudcur, and staging there a theatrical version of a traditional African fable, *Fly, Eagle, Fly!*, in James Kweyir Aggrey’s version. Cambara’s plan involves a peculiar type of gender solidarity, based on storytelling and performativity, which points at the ontological combination of solidity and instability within any conception of “solidarity”. While facing a lot material and symbolic restraints, Cambara’s project appears nonetheless to be a positive, transnational example of Sarah Nuttall’s notion of “entanglement” (2009), which was first developed within South African Cultural Studies.

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Addressing the “Just War” paradigm as renewed during the First Gulf War (1990-1991), Jean Belthke Elshtain (1995) argued that this kind of conflict, like many others before, clearly reinforced gender division, according to the binary opposition between “Just Warrior” (invariably male) and “Beautiful Soul” (invariably female).¹ Being an advocate of just war herself, also supporting the global war on terror started by George W. Bush after 9/11, Elshtain nonetheless suggested that such a historical context reinforced the backlash on US feminism (Faludi 1991). According to Elshtain, any further recognition in the field should acknowledge the impact of this ideological discourse on gender division, while looking for alternative political stances and practices.²

These alternatives are often embodied by gender solidarity in situations of war, whose enactment directly challenges binary oppositions between male and female participation in conflicts. This challenge might be well considered as contingent and precarious, due to its fragile development in the context of a war: instability, after all, is a constitutive element of “solidarity”, despite the latter’s etymological proximity to “solidity” (Hubbard 1998, 11). On the other hand, gender solidarity in times of war can be also conceptualized by drawing from the general theoretical frameworks as regards feminist, gender and LGBTQIA solidarity. This puts emphasis on solidarity’s potential to refashion gender relationships as a whole, “given that solidarity is always an achievement, the result of active struggle to construct the universal on the basis of particulars/differences” (Mohanty 2003, 7).

This dialectics between the particular and the universal cannot be exclusively based on fixed and essentialist notions of “identity” and “difference”, as any enactment of solidarity, according to Judith Butler, also involves “the self-difference of movement itself, a constitutive rupture that makes movements possible on non-identitarian grounds, that installs a certain mobilizing conflict as the basis of politicization” (1998, 37, italics in the original). By activating “self-difference”, “[t]he only possible unity will not be the synthesis of a set of conflicts, but will be a mode of sustaining conflict in politically productive ways, a practice of contestation that demands that these movements articulate their goals under the pressure of each other without therefore exactly becoming each other” (ibid., italics in the original). The specific movement based on this kind of articulation is to “go beyond”, by individuating elsewhere ‘Difference’ as such: “We take ourselves seriously only when we go ’beyond’ ourselves, valuing not just the plurality of the differences among us but also the massive presence of the Difference that our recent planetary history has installed” (Mohanty 2003, 199). While Mohanty argued that this “Difference” [...] emerges in the presence of global capitalism at this time in history” (ibidem), being reflected, thus, also in the “Difference” fuelling armed conflicts.

This uneven combination of reinforced gender stereotypes and anti-essentialist solidarity in situations of conflict can be said to mark the following decades both from the cultural and political point of view, spreading worldwide due to the growing

¹ Elshtain borrowed the concept of “Beautiful Soul” from Hegel’s Phenomenology of the Spirit (1807), where this definition was coined to describe those instantiations of consciousness struggling to maintain purity of conscience face to mounting conflicts. She specifically applied it to the gendered taxonomy which is ideologically activated in war contexts.

² However debatable, Elshtain’s focus on feminism – in terms of “feminist consciousness”, in particular – can be appreciated in her work at least since 1982, with the publication of her essay “On Beautiful Souls, Just Warriors and Feminist Consciousness” (see Elshtain 1982).
geopolitical influence of the US in the post-1989 world. It can be retraced, for instance, in the narrative and ideological texture of an apparently unrelated literary text such as *Knots* (2007), written by the Somali-born author Nuruddin Farah. This novel – included in the “Past Imperfect” trilogy, together with the previous *Links* (2003) and the subsequent *Crossbones* (2011) – is set during Somali civil war, which started in 1991 and is still ongoing. Historically coterminous with the re-enacting of the “Just War” paradigm in the United States, the conflict in Somalia has also been materially influenced by the US military intervention with the Operation Restore Hope (1992-1993) – actively contributing, thus, to the geopolitical changes after the end of Cold War (Rutherford 2008). In addition to this, Nuruddin Farah was living between South Africa and the United States when he wrote the novel, being thus completely immersed in that specific ideological context.

The main evidence for this interweaving of ideological discourses and material practices can be individuated in the title itself, with its reference to the various types of Muslim veil being later used by female characters in the novel. The only two direct quotations of the lexeme “knot-” in the novel, in fact, are linked to the veil that Cambara, its female protagonist, has to wear when she comes back to Mogadishu from Toronto, where she had grown up as a Somali Canadian woman, belonging, thus, to the global Somali diaspora. In a particularly vivid scene, Cambara is depicted as she “struggles to undo the knotted strings of her veil. […] Emboldened, she fiddles afresh with the knots of her head scarf, which now mysteriously slip off most easily” (Farah 2008, 197; subsequently in the text).

While this “slipping off” of the veil shows to be in an ambivalent complicity with the Western fantasia of colonial origins of unveiling Muslim women (Ahmed 1992), it is also in line with Cambara’s defiant attitude towards religious obligations on the female body. She explicitly argues that it is a “recent imposition, which stipulates that women should veil themselves. When she was young, it was uncommon for Somali women to wear one; mostly Arab women and a few of the city’s aboriginals did” (7). This “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm-Ranger 1983) brings about a radical change in Somali cultural history, shifting from the ancient cosmopolitanism – as depicted in Nuruddin Farah’s previous article “Of Tamarind & Cosmopolitanism” (2002) – and the subsequent secular regime led by Siyad Barre (1969-1991) to the present influence of religious and military groups such as the Union of Islamic Courts and al-Shabaab.² Besides, this is a gender-based imposition, reinforcing traditional gender roles: while women feel compelled to wear the veil in order to avoid random sexual abuse, men defend their control of the female body as a contingent necessity to protect women from violence. Cambara points out the ineffectiveness of this ideological defense of patriarchal normativity by ridiculing the ineptitude of her former husband Zaak (7-8). She also notices the underlying complicity of the veil imposition with gender violence, by catching the sexual voraciousness of the Somali taxi driver witnessing to her unveiling (198). At the same time, however, she ambivalently gives room to the Western Islamophobic gaze, in its mixture of phobic repulsion and pleasure: “She can’t remember where she has read or heard that Islam makes sex so exciting: all the veiling, all the hiding, all the seeking and searching for a momentary peek of that which is

² Nuruddin Farah does not seem to acknowledge the religious and political differences between the two groups: in his subsequent novel, *Crossbones*, he describes both organizations as “religionists” (2012, 349).
concealed; the gaze of the covered woman coy; her behavior come-hither coquettish” (242-3).

However, this partial complicity with the dominant patriarchal and colonial discourse – being later revitalized by the Islamophobic declination of the “Just War” paradigm, in the last decades – is also balanced by Cambara’s main goal in the novel, whose achievement fully shows her agency. Once landed in Mogadishu, in fact, she wants to rescue her family house from the hands of a local warlord, Gudcur, and she eventually achieves her aim. While this is frequently related to her strong personality and her action is invariably described in positive terms, she does not make it alone, resorting, instead, both to male and female solidarity.

Cambara’s solidarity with men, on the one hand, is quite anecdotal and marginal. Cambara’s allies are almost exclusively represented by young armed combatants: their relationship is always marked by its power imbalance, as it happens with the small militia paid by Zaak to protect his house, which Cambara employs to do housework (55). Although it may seem a radical inversion, this reversal of gender roles is only temporary, leaving them, all in all, unquestioned.

Cambara’s solidarity with women, on the other hand, takes different directions, according to the women or groups of women she meets. Among them, the woman to whom Cambara feels most “knotted” is Kiin, an epitome of solidarity herself, being part of an association called Women for Peace Network. This organization eventually helps Cambara to rescue her family house, but this material achievement is not the only benefit emerging from Cambara and Kiin’s solidarity bond. Their friendship, in fact, is very strong since the beginning, taking some erotic nuances – “Cambara’s instant adoration of Kiin has the quality of an intense infatuation, the conditions for which are propitiously ripe” (145) – which, however, are sublimated in the following pages. The possibility of a subplot based on a supposed lesbian romance is carefully avoided, stressing in an ostensible – as well as arguable – way the need of a de-sexualized friendship as a basis for gender solidarity: “[Cambara] feels Kiin’s closeness has nothing of a come-on to it. If anything, it is that of a woman who has lived a cloistered life showing her appreciation of an innocent friendship that will mean a great deal to her” (190).

By virtue of this friendship, Kiin is also the only person with whom Cambara feels free to talk about herself:

Cambara senses an onrush of unease when she imagines the woebegone scenario in which, having uncovered Cambara’s untruths, Kiin shows her out: out of her hotel, out of her life, all contacts severed. How weak the legs of untruths; how sturdy the legs of truth, how much faster they run into falsehood, which never gains in them. This projection results in her decision to confide in Kiin, to tell her what is all about, why she is in the country, […] and so on. One woman counting on another, a woman yoked to another, a woman trusting another, a

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Nuruddin Farah’s novels often include female characters endowed with different forms of agency, according to the politics of the time. The critical debate about Nuruddin Farah’s works, with regards to their closeness to “feminist” concerns and claims, has been lively at least since 1984, when two radically different arguments were made by Kirsten Holst Petersen and Gerald Moore about the author’s first five novels.

The name of the association appears to be invented, but it strongly recalls the names of existing networks such as the Somali Women’s Circle Network, Puntland’s Women’s Peace Initiative, as well as many others.
woman choosing to be truthful to another in the service of a higher ideal: of peace, of communal harmony. (208)

This solidarity is forged upon an individual, one-to-one relationship, transcending the political action of the Women for Peace Network, an organization Cambara never gets to be directly involved in. In addition to this, Kiin’s own political position is also portrayed as utterly ambivalent, as she reinforces the dichotomy “male-as-warrior” versus “female-as-peacemaker” when she claims:

Right now, Somali society is at its most disintegrated. There are so many fault lines that no two Somalis think alike, or are even likely to share a common concern for the nation’s well-being. The men prefer starting wars to talking things over; they prefer going their different ways to coming together and sorting out their differences; they help provoke more fighting and begin shooting, despite the fact their disagreements are about matters of little or no significance. Men are prone to escalating all minor differences until they become armed confrontations in which many lives are lost, every shoot-out boiling over into unstoppable battles and the battles exploding into wars. I would say my husband and I might not have upgraded our disagreements into a serious falling-out were it not for the uncivil conditions in which we find ourselves. We love each other, my husband and I, but we cannot see our way out of the positions we take. I am a woman and am for peace at all costs; my husband is not for peace at all costs. Living under such a stressful situation day in and day out for years has taken toll on the way we relate. (193-94)

When Kiin deals with those “fault lines” making “no two Somalis think alike”, she clearly adds gender-based fault lines to the clan-based ones, which are generally considered as fuelling civil war (Lewis 1994). According to these fault lines, Somali men and women think and act in starkly different ways, with men enforcing their differences (or, rather, their several differences being later hypostatized into the main “Difference” which Mohanty refers to) through “armed confrontations”. In this way, instead of seeking ways of gender and national reconciliation, Kiin ends up insisting on divisive issues.

In this regard, Kiin considers men to be basically noxious agents, frequently causing a “man problem” to their female partners:

“Is there a man hereabouts that you’ve come to see and from whom you do not wish to be separated? Put another way, do you have a man problem?” Kiin asks [...]. “That is a very interesting way of putting it: a ‘man problem.’” Cambara looks amused, nods her head, and repeats the phrase a couple of times, grinning. Kiin says, “Tell me what you got yourself into and we can solve any man problem or any other difficulty, whatever its nature. [...] We deal easily with men problems in civil war Mogadiscio.” (146-7)

Kiin’s position – explicitly contradicted by her longstanding relationship with her husband – leaves Cambara perplexed but also “amused”. Kiin’s personal attitude is also reflected by the actions of the Women for Peace Network itself, threatening men to end up abuses on women and, in one specific case, getting to kill one of these violent

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6 For a radically different understanding of Somali civil war, displacing the ‘clan factor’ from the crucial role in the conflict previously accorded by Lewis, see Lidwien Kapteijns’ *Clan Cleansing in Somalia. The Ruinous Legacy of 1991* (2012).
However allied with her and her network, Cambara never fully adopts Kiin’s stance. On an abstract level, she rejects any form of violence, but, by doing so, she also reinforces the stereotype of the female Beautiful Soul in a situation of conflict.

If Cambara is both helped and challenged by Kiin and her Women for Peace Network, she enacts another type of solidarity with another woman, Jiijo. Gudcur’s wife, Jiijo should be an obvious antagonist to Cambara’s desire to rescue her family house. When the two women meet, however, they leave aside their rivalry – representing, thus, the necessity to build connections with the enemy’s side as a vital step to national reconciliation.

By virtue of this mutual bond, Jiijo feels like telling her own story to Cambara; by doing so, Jiijo is able to “reinvent herself right there and then” (179). As argued by John Masterson, “[t]he improvisatory and thus liberating capacity to ‘[lay] herself bare’ through storytelling emboldens Jiijo. The implication is that this may be one of the few elements of her life she can claim in such a way” (2013, 292). As already mentioned in the case of Cambara and Kiin, recovering one’s own story is one of the most effective outcomes of these solidarity bonds enacted by Cambara, whose role in the novel is that of weaving people’s stories – adding, thus, another meaning to the title, Knots.

In addition to this, Cambara’s relationship with Jiijo is based on their common experience of being mothers as a traumatic experience; while Cambara’s son died for his father’s negligence, Gudcur forced Jiijo to abortion. As a result,

the two of them no longer dwell in distinctly autonomous sphere, marked off by their known differences in terms of class, provenance, and experience or by an invisible boundary of mistrust. She sees in this context that, as women, they share the communality of male violence, both having suffered in their different ways at the hands of their partners. (175)

Differently from Jiijo, however, Cambara is also charged with a peculiar ideological task, as her mothering also refers to the colonial/postcolonial image of women “mothering the nation” (McClintock 1993). This becomes evident through Cambara’s choice to host and protect two young boys, SilkHair and Gacal, becoming a temporary adoptive mother for them. After a harsh confrontation, SilkHair attacks Gacal on the grounds of their different clan and class origin: “[…] where I come from, my clan family owns everything, including the sky. Gacal comes from a family of farmers, lowly people who, like chickens, live on scraps, on other people’s leftovers. They are as cheap as the dirt at which they pick” (375-6). The addressee of this speech, however, is Cambara, whose role as temporary adoptive mother is that of reconciling the two “sons” as the (new) Somali nation should reconcile what SilkHair and Gacal stand for – respectively, a clan identity struggling for hegemony and a subaltern peasant identity, further marginalized by the conflict.

In this regard, Nuruddin Farah’s novel also seems to acknowledge the limitations which are related to the stereotypical image of a woman “mothering the nation”. As a matter of fact, there is another character in the novel, the Irish-born volunteer Seamus, who is said to have “adopted the entire country and survived it” (218) – shifting away, thus, from the patriarchal stereotype of women “mothering the nation” and resorting to a more general “parenting the nation”, as already deployed in Nuruddin Farah’s 1986 novel Maps (Wright 1992).
In addition to this, Cambara’s involvement in this process is temporary and always changing, as the reunion of Gacal with his biological mother Qaali, at the end of the story, aptly shows (394–5). This strengthens her position as actor in a “mothering” process, rather than crystallizing her role through the achievement of the status of “motherhood”. In this regard, Mielle Chandler, quoting from Judith Butler’s work on gender performativity, argued: “To be a mother is to enact mothering” (1998, 273). Mothering is clearly marked by performativity, which is also a decisive feature for the definition of Cambara’s own identity as a dynamic and open-ended process.

For Cambara, as well as for Jiijo, the emphasis on performativity corresponds with the need to tell and re-tell one’s own story, reinventing oneself each time. For Cambara, however, the celebration of performativity comes at the end of the novel: animated by her desire to become a playwright, she succeeds in staging a theatrical version of the traditional Ghanaian fable Fly, Eagle, Fly! in her recently regained house. This narrativization of a theatrical performance directly recalls the tight relationship between performativity and Theatre Studies, as perhaps symbolized at best by Judith Butler’s work on gender performativity, starting from the reflection on the fact that “[…] the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts” (1988, 521).

In Knots, however, the staging of Fly, Eagle, Fly! is not specifically related to the constitution of gender as performance; rather, it is a myse en abîme of the performative aspects of solidarity, starting from and going beyond gender solidarity. The show, in fact, puts together nearly all the characters “knotted” by Cambara until that moment, making them participate into it either as actors or as audience. The staging of Fly, Eagle, Fly!, therefore, represents that moment of instability, produced by the enactment of solidarity, in which, according to Wendy Hubbard, “a commonality is recognized, essayed, asserted or practiced” (1998, 11), as opposed on a concrete and material level to the permanent ethical commitment that solidarity abstractly implies. While acting makes the “self-difference” process visible, the experience of commonality shared by all the participants works as an image of a new and reconciled nation, mothered by the playwright and director Cambara.7

This experience of solidarity is not even limited to the national frame, as the text being dramatized calls for a transnational assessment. Cambara writes her play starting from the rewriting of this traditional Ghanaian fable provided by “Aggrey of Africa”, alias James Kwegyir Aggrey (1875–1927), at the beginning of the 20th century. In the “Acknowledgments” at the end of the novel (2008, 422), Nuruddin Farah also quotes its rewriting by Christopher Gregorowski, published in 2000 in Cape Town, Sudafrika, with a preface by Desmond Tutu. The transnational circulation of this fable supports, therefore, a renewed Pan-African attitude, implicitly positing the post-apartheid reconciliation process in South Africa (symbolized by the reference to Desmond Tutu) as a model for future reconciliation in Somalia.

At the same time, this transnational level is partially contradicted by the material conditions in which the play is staged. While Cambara has been successful in the rescue of her family house thanks to the help of the Women for Peace Network, the fact that this house becomes the stage itself is a paradoxical limitation to the

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7 Cambara’s bodily reaction immediately before the show (“Hers is the joy of an animal reuniting with its own kindred, and Cambara assumes her body into that of a tigress, keen-eyed, fast of pace”; Farah 2008, 418) is also in line with a recent theorization of solidarity as “a site of collective joy” (Gilbert 2014, xii).
pedagogical and political implications of the play. Such a choice, in fact, implies a limitation to the domestic sphere, reinforcing once again the gender stereotypes associated to the colonial/postcolonial image of women “mothering the nation”. Besides, Cambara’s house needs to be protected by a small armed militia led by her friend Dajaal, showing the difficulties of her cultural and political enterprise, being undertaken in a war-ravaged Mogadishu at the time of the Union of Islamic Courts. While this does not undermine Cambara’s agency, it indirectly confirms her belonging to those Beautiful (female) Souls, whose attempts to “peace-making” are often based on an idealized conception of moral goodness, or, in this case, of cultural production.

If this might be interpreted as an ideological concession to the “Just Warrior/Beautiful Soul” paradigm enabled by “Just Wars” in the last decades, Knots cannot be considered as a mere product of the dominant geopolitical discourses and ideologies. Its emphasis on female agency and gender solidarity – however ambivalent and contradictory they might be, in their re-enactment of the figure of the “Beautiful Soul” or of the colonial/postcolonial image of women “mothering the nation” – is meant to provide an alternative understanding of Somali civil war.

As it concerns female agency, the already quoted scene in which Cambara struggles to unveil herself certainly reenacts a Western fantasia of colonial origins about unveiling Muslim women; at the same time, however, it also derives from Cambara’s individual choice of a strategic adoption of the veil. Stressing Cambara’s own agency, this scene is directly opposed to the colonial image of non-Western women as passive subjects needing the colonial “white man” as “savior” (Spivak 1988, Mutua 2001).

However individualized, such an attitude cannot be either separated from the enactment of gender solidarity which Cambara benefits from, starting from the rescue of her house, favored by the Women for Peace Network. On the macropolitical level, gender solidarity contradicts the necessity of colonial/neocolonial intervention to save the Third-World-Other, producing, instead, grassroots political alternatives (Bystrom 2013), such as the Women for Peace Network. Local networks do not exclude transnational connections, as the cultural and political reference to Pan-Africanism and post-apartheid reconciliation process (through Fly, Eagle, Fly!, mainly) makes clear.

On the micropolitical level, the reflection on gender solidarity in a war context also implies an analysis of gender solidarity as such. As mentioned, if solidarity is based on “self-difference”, it avoids essentialist understandings of identity and difference, focusing on a mode of sustaining conflict in politically productive ways”, rather than on a possible “synthesis of a set of conflicts” (Butler 1998, 37). Self-difference is made visible in the novel through the narrativization of a theatrical performance, whose realization celebrates the solidarity bonds “knotted” by Cambara throughout the novel.

In this regard, gender solidarity appears to be a decisive factor: while Cambara’s alliance with men is limited to contingent reasons – such as the need to protect her house during the performance with a small armed militia (producing politically ambivalent outcomes) – her solidarity with women is a structural motif in the novel. Despite the differences between Cambara’s friendship with Kiin and her relationship with Jiijo, in fact, these solidarity bonds share the same emphasis on performativity, giving the possibility to women to tell and re-tell their own stories and reinvent themselves. As mentioned, Nuruddin Farah explicitly quotes “reinvention”; at the same time, however, he does not provide the stories told by these female characters in
full detail. Rather than focusing on “herstories” – whose purpose would be “to emphasize that women’s lives, deeds, and participation in human affairs have been neglected or undervalued in standard histories” (Miller and Swift 1991, 146), rewriting, thus, “his-story” – Nuruddin Farah simply thematizes solidarity as a performative act. While this choice adds to the ambivalence in his depiction of female characters and their agency, solidarity as a performative act is confirmed in its crucial role by precarious but successful staging, at the end of the novel, of Fly, Eagle, Fly!

In the context of deep instability related to a civil war, gender solidarity is thus presented in a continuous oscillation with its “stable”, normative meaning of ethical commitment and its “unstable” living practices. The “knots” constituting solidarity bonds can be either fastened – highlighting the etymological reference of “solidarity” to “solidity” – or loosened – whenever a shared commonality is enacted under precarious conditions. This alternation can be read according to the theoretical model suggested by Sarah Nuttall (2009) about post-apartheid, which the author might have got in touch with during his stay in South Africa, in combination with the ideological influence of the US about “Just War”. It is an oscillation which is directly related to the ambivalence in Nuruddin Farah’s treatment of gender solidarity, underlining, at the same time, that what needs to be preserved, at the core of solidarity and grassroots political action, is a dynamic and transformative process leaving aside the “overemphasis on difference” and “enabling us to begin the work of thinking at the limits of apartness” (Nuttall 2009, 7-8).

Works Cited


