

(Re)claiming the Body of the Somali Woman in Nuruddin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib*

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I. Introduction: Nuruddin Farah and the Reception of His Fiction

Nuruddin Farah was born in 1945 in Baidoa, west of Mogadishu. In 1976, he was declared a *persona non grata* by the Somali president and dictator Siad Barre, who banished Farah into exile because his writings were seen as a rigorous and harsh critique of Barre, especially four of his early eight novels, which attacked the dictatorship in Somalia. However, Farah's fiction not only attacks the dictatorship in Somalia, but it also criticizes the country's most cherished traditions, values, and beliefs. For example, in his first novel *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), he breaks the homosexuality taboo in Somalia by questioning the inability to think of sex outside of the paradigm of heterosexuality, and in some of his later novels, he brings in the issues of incest, pedophilia, bestiality, and murder. Farah is one prominent figure of Anglophone literature in Africa, along with Achebe, and Soyinka. He is also considered as the next most likely African Anglophone writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature after the Nigerian Wole Soyinka in 1986 and the South African Doris Lessing in 2007. Farah is described, among other things, as the "gift from Africa to contemporary world literature" (Bardolph, "On Nuruddin" 121).

Farah's fiction extends over more than eleven novels and other fictive and non-fictive writings. Most criticism of his fiction focuses mainly on four issues: the writing about Somalia in exile, the intertextuality between his fiction and other writers, the poetics of Farah's fiction, and the feminist aspects of his fiction and how it presents a new

image of Somalia. Indeed, one of the most interesting readings of Farah's fiction is a gender-based one; the authenticity, with which Farah tackles the issues of womanhood and gender has pushed some of his readers to think of him as a woman, even sending him letters addressing him as "she." In this respect, the Nigerian scholar J. I. Okonkwo has argued that Farah is one of few others who have "done the greatest justice to female existence in his writing" (217). In a comparison established by Okonkwo, Soyinka is seen as depicting women as either a disguised or undisguised prostitute, Achebe depicting women as an appendage to men, and Farah depicting women simply as women, with all the variations and at times contradictions (216).

Farah's feminist attitudes have given him the title of "Africa's first feminist male writer" by Kirsten Hoist Petersen (249). Indeed, Farah is well aware of his feminist attitudes; he states in his essay "A View of Home From the Outside" that he is interested in those denied their rights, be it women or men, and in the struggle behind it (qtd. in Okonkwo 217). Eventually, the women in Farah's fiction become instruments to reconstruct Somalia and to reshape society by giving a new meaning to womanhood. In his fiction, women's struggle for freedom and for the right to voice themselves become an allegory for a nation in search of its voice. New womanhood becomes interchangeable with a new Somalia, and eventually, Somalia becomes once more the mother, as opposed to its status as a father-land in a dictatorial system.

His first novel, *From a Crooked Rib*, seen by Richard Dowden as "a dazzling spark" of light in the dark tunnel of silencing women (Introduction, vii), could be regarded as a feminist manifesto. If we were to describe this novel, we would resort to a line from "The Rights of Women" a poem by Anna Laetitia Barbauld: "Injured Woman! Rise, assert thy right" (28). *From a Crooked Rib* is a third person omniscient narrative about the story of Ebla, a Somali woman defying her society and escaping her family, who were forcing her into an arranged marriage. This novel, with its genuine depiction and voicing of oppressed women, has been widely read and acclaimed, and studied as an authentic representation of the Somali society. This paper aims at reading *From a Crooked Rib* from a Foucauldian perspective in order to highlight the forces that shape the lives of Somali women. The emphasis will be on the relationship between the discourses used to contain the Somali woman and her body. We will try to set a link between the

different discourses and the body within the dialectics of writing/(un) writing and silencing/voicing.

Thus, this paper is divided into two major parts: first, a concise overview of the Foucauldian approach to discourse and power, and second, an examination of the different discourses that govern the body of the Somali woman. The second part will root the Foucauldian approach in a gender-related reading and will be divided into two sub-parts: the writing and the un-writing of the woman body.

II. Michel Foucault: A Network of Discourse, Power, Truth, and Knowledge

In his book *Archeology of Knowledge* (1969), Foucault defines discourse as “a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation” (130), a definition that highlights two different yet related matters. On the one hand, Foucault stresses the idea that there cannot be one discourse; there are different discourses each with its own paradigm. For instance, the clinical discourse, the historic discourse, and the psychoanalytical discourse are all unique in the sense that they study certain aspects of their fields; however, these apparent divergent discourses can be convergent when they share some of the same “statements,” which originally made them different. This point needs to be stressed because it allows us to both differentiate yet also associate different discourses in relation to a single matter. On the other hand, discursive formations are a set of configurations and discursive tools that generate and support at the same time a particular discourse. Foucault defines the study of discourse as undertaking the effort:

To describe statements, to describe the enunciative function of which they are the bearers, to analyze the conditions in which this function operates, to cover the different domains that this function presupposes and the way in which those domains are articulated. (129–30)

The stress here is put on the relationship between the verbal statements enunciated and the environment, in which such a statement was enunciated. As such, to perform an analysis of discourse, one has to excavate the systems of thoughts that govern the enunciation of the group of statements that constitute that particular discourse.

Here, one may wonder about the relevance of a study of discourse in relation to the study of womanhood in *From a Crooked Rib*. The study of discourse is important because it enables us to discover the ways in which language subjects women to the desires of those who enunciate, that is men. The unearthing of the discursive formations is valuable for gender and feminist studies because, as Sheila Rowbotham explains, “discourse is the instrument of patriarchal domination and...[the] struggle for power within discourses is an issue of political importance for women’s movement” (qtd. in Humm 60). An important element in the analysis of discourse is as such the dialectics of power. Indeed, discourse cannot be separated from power in the Foucauldian approach and in most approaches to discourse.

Power and discourse are two faces of the same coin; they stress each other: discourse of power and power of discourse. Discourse gives the enunciator the ability but most important the privilege of enunciating a statement. Such enunciation is in itself empowering to the enunciator, in the sense that to enunciate is to be advantaged and hence dominant. Foucault elaborates on this in a lecture delivered on 14 January 1976:

In a society such as ours, but basically in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of discourse. (*Power*, 93)

Foucault highlights here the mutual and continuous support that exists between discourse and power. Power is enforced through discourse; but discourse is enforced by the very power relations it reinforces. Thus, to question power relations one needs to question the discourse that sustains them.

We have mentioned earlier that the women’s movement needs to question the prevailing discourse in order to make the power relations more egalitarian. Discourse is an act of enunciation, that is, it bears the imprint of its enunciator; thus, discourse cannot be examined without examining the enunciator, the enunciation, and the enunciatee. In this respect, Bidy Martin argues that “for Foucault, representation and discourses are themselves acts of power, acts of division and exclusion” (9). Discourse is then essentially an exclusive act of power, both in the sense of being limited to and by the enunciator. Hence, dis-

course becomes the tool by which an agent proclaims its power over others, and claims them as inferiors.

Discourse is empowered by the very act of enunciation. The latter is an act of constructing an enunciatee that is an object subject to the knowledge, which is stated by discourse. Every discourse constructs its own objects, for discourse is related to specific fields. Therefore, the enunciatee becomes the object, on whom power relations are invested. The performance of power upon the enunciatee or the object is done on and through the body of this object. From the beginning, the body is imprinted by discursive acts, which not only shape the body but also reinforce each other. The body is thus the site where discourse is voiced, both as an enunciation claiming an enunciatee and an act claiming an object.

Discourse is then the exercise of power by a dominating enunciator upon a dominated enunciatee. As a matter of fact, "women's bodies were controlled through a set of discourses and practices governing both the individual's body and the health, education, and welfare of the population" (Sawicki 67). The body as such is the site, upon which discursive operations act and disempower that particular body. Actually, women were objects to a discourse enunciated by men; this discourse emphasized a highly significant division between men and women in terms of the division between mind and body. Men are seen as the site of intellectual powers but also of physical status. Women are seen as lacking the mental capacities and just reduced to their bodies. This is yet another denotation for the separation of the public and private spheres, in which women hold the latter. Moreover, the bodies of women were compared by men to the bodies of men, rendering them inferior; men's bodies were seen as the model by which the rest of bodies were judged.

Hence, an examination of a selection of discourses and their effects on the body of the woman is helpful in understanding the relationship that governs men and women in Somalia. For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on one discourse, that of patriarchy and examine it in terms of three of its discursive formations: family, society, and religion. Each formation can be seen as an independent discourse, but we will treat them as mere tools for a more inclusive discourse of patriarchy. Having said this, we need to stress a key point; this paper uses a western paradigm of thoughts to read an African context. This apparent discrepancy will be avoided by emphasizing the uniqueness

of the Somali situation and by being close to the dialectics that govern the relationships between men and women in this society.

In this respect, we need to address the question of the woman's body. This body, as Judith Butler says, is the "site where 'doing' and 'being done to' become equivocal" (21). This ambivalence of the body is the result of an external discourse enforcing itself on the body, and of an internal counter discourse of the body itself, two forces which are in constant battle to enforce themselves on the body in an action and a reaction dialectics. The doing/being nature is the result of the body being "produced through power and...therefore, a cultural rather than a natural entity" (McNay 3). This cultural construction is fought back by the body in favor of the body defining itself. Consequently, the cultural and the corporal constructions of the body are both claiming the body as the site for power, but in different manners: one as the site to exercise power, the other as the site to produce power. The cultural and corporal dialectics is what Foucault calls the corporeal reality of the body:

Deployments of power are directly connected to the body—to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures...the biological and the historical are not consecutive to one another...but are bound together in an increasingly complex fashion. (*Sexuality* 151–2)

It is clear that a study of the body cannot be made without the examination of both the biological and the historical/cultural formations. Each entity has its own discourse; thus to fully grasp the body, one needs to address the body in both its corporal reality and cultural reality. As such, the following pages will be dedicated to a reading of the construction of the body of the Somali woman in *From a Crooked Rib* in relation to the discourse of patriarchy and the discourse of the Somali woman's body. It will highlight the complex and at times tense nature that governs the relationship between the corporal and the cultural.

III. Patriarchy Writes the Body of Somali Women: Creation of the "Docile Body"

Patriarchy, as a notion, is highly examined within feminist and gender studies. The origin of this notion comes from the Old Testament, with the patriarch as the head of the family or tribe or the church (Andermahr 193). This notion has witnessed a shift from the original

understanding of it, to a more complex one with the emergence of feminism. Indeed, one of the common definitions of patriarchy is, as given by feminist sociologist Sylvia Walby, “a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (qtd. in Andermahr 194). Thus a study of patriarchy is to some extent an examination of the ways in which men’s oppression over women is concretized. This should not lead us to an essentialist reading of patriarchy—that is, the false assumption that patriarchy is the same in every culture. There are similarities but also differences; for each culture develops a conceptualization of patriarchy, which is appropriate to its own environment. Patriarchy is then a set of structures and practices, which could be exemplified in the family, marriage, society, and religion. To unveil its discourse is equal to dissecting patriarchy into its constitutive elements, or using Foucault’s terminology, its discursive formation.

A. The Somali Woman’s Body as Familial Docile Body

The first discursive element of patriarchy to be studied in our examination of *From a Crooked Rib* is the Somali family, in particular the issue of marriage and sexuality. We witness the story of Ebla, who is about to turn twenty and who escapes the family house fearing an unwanted marriage deal. Ebla’s body is seen to be the property of her family, which consists of her grandfather and her sixteen-year-old brother. Her story revolves around the attempts by her family to not only own but most importantly to sell her body. Ebla’s body becomes the thing that her grandfather is “exchanging...for camels” (*Rib* 9). Ebla’s body, just like many of the other bodies of Somali women, is a commodity that can be sold, bought, re-sold, and re-bought. The Somali family does not perceive the body of the woman as a free entity; it is rather seen as part of the material and physical components of the house that can be traded for goods and money.

Moreover, the body of Ebla is perceived as not only by her own family but also by other families in her own community. As a matter of fact, Ebla’s failed arranged marriage to Giumaleh comes after “two of his sons had alternately courted her” (*Rib* 9). Her body was seen by Giumaleh’s family as an asset that needs to be appropriated; thus the continuous attempts to marry her. This highlights that the body of the woman in Somalia is considered as a potential future transaction, which explains the refusal of Ebla’s family to give her to the two sons.

Her grandfather, who saw in Ebla a transaction, needed to make sure that he benefited from it as much as possible. Giumaleh's sons did not pay the right 'price' for the body of Ebla; but Giumaleh paid camels for her, one of the most precious commodities in the countryside of Somalia. In Somali poetry, camels are celebrated as being the most valuable animals to be owned; an example is found in the following lines by the Somali poet Omaar Hussein: "Mind you men/ who as property take ewes/ in camels real wealth lies" (qtd. in. Abokor 25). Indeed, the fact that Ebla was traded for camels is symbolic of her physical worth—beauty—that made Giumaleh exchange camels for her. Camels in Somalia are not just means of survival but also approaches to acquire women otherwise hard to get; this is highlighted in two lines by the Somali poet Ahmed Aynosh: "Woman costly whom man of most means could not attain/ the camel procures with facility" (qtd. in Abokor 44). This shows how women and camels become two elements in a transaction based on financial worth.

Indeed, and throughout the novel, we notice an emphasis by Ebla on the unique and symbolic relationship with animals in general. In a strikingly strange passage, Ebla hears at the same time the voice of a relative asking for help to deliver her child, and the voice of cows and goats demanding food; she ignores her relative and feeds the cattle. She explains the reason behind this action as follows: "I know I am just as much as a beast as they are" (*Rib* 36). This statement is highly symbolic for it reveals the extent to which the discourses of family and culture have penetrated the life of Ebla. She thinks of herself as a beast, just like the other beasts; she equates her body with the bodies of the cattle and so feels an association of fellowship and empathy with them. This is indeed the result of the discourse of the family that has been directed towards the body of Ebla and forced on her body. This body has been written for her as synonymous with the property of the family that needs to be protected for future trades. She has unconsciously identified with the very image of her body constructed by her family.

This identification with the oppressor's image of the woman is indicative of the power invested by the discourse of the family in the shaping and writing of Ebla's body; it is also indicative of the power gained from the writing of Ebla's body for her. To elaborate on this, using Foucauldian terminology, we argue that the writing of Ebla's body resulted in a docile and passive body. Ebla's body is similar to Foucault's image of the soldier of the eighteenth century; like the soldier, she "can be made out of formless clay" (*Prison* 135). The soldier

does not exist initially; he is rather made by certain discursive and non-discursive strategies. Ebla is similar to that in the sense that her body was only (de)formed by the discourse of her family; the physical body was there from the beginning, but it was also not there at the same time. For the body to be, it needs to be formed as part of a larger entity, in this case the family, and so this very entity, which the body will join, is the one that shapes it. The body only becomes visible in the act of discursive—and non-discursive—writing. What matters here is the question of docility or resistance.

Docile bodies are the bodies that accept the external discursive act of writing enforced on them by more powerful discourses, which aim—using the words of the Foucauldian feminist critic Jana Sawicki—at “render[ing] the individual more powerful, productive, useful, and docile... at the microlevel of society in everyday activities and habits” (67). The Foucauldian association between powerfulness and docility of the body might seem contradictory, but being powerful is directly linked to efficiency and usefulness. As argued earlier, the woman is set within the realm of the body ignoring her intellectual abilities. The family discourse does not challenge that; rather it emphasizes it by investing more exploitive powers in that body, for the sake of function. Empowering the body of the woman is in fact disempowering for the woman, because it results in demands by the family for more effectiveness in doing physical activities, and of course in a total blurring of the woman’s mind. The family’s emphasis on the body, as the only component of the woman’s identity, results in the division between the mind and the body, in which the latter is situated solely and exclusively within the realm of men.

The writing of the body as such is equivalent to the un-writing of the mind. Ebla’s first husband asks her if she could ask her brother to come to Mogadishu to study and become a teacher or a civil servant like him. What is strange about this is that the husband himself only started studying at the age of sixteen, which corresponds to the age of Ebla’s brother; but Ebla is only eighteen at the time of the conversation. There is a clear implicit discursive strategy implemented in the discourse of the husband: women are not supposed to have an education. What is even stranger is that Ebla herself does not seem to question this fact; she has internalized the assumptions made about her that she is only a docile body. The docility of Ebla’s body is the ultimate result of “creating desires, attaching individuals to specific identities, and establishing norms against which individuals and their behav-

iors and bodies are judged and against which they police themselves” (Sawicki 68). Ebla’s docility of the body is because she has accepted the conception that her family has attributed to her body—as a commodity and labor force. The family discourse creates for Ebla precise and well-defined channels of and for the body; then, her body is judged by its adherence to them. This is an external discursive writing that results in identification with the oppressor’s discourse. Ebla eventually starts to police her own body, as when she does not ask—though she wants to—her cousin about the pistol because “she ought not to interfere with the jobs of males” (*Rib* 60). The self-policing pinpoints to two things: first, how the discourse of the family is so powerful that Ebla cannot escape it, and second, how the more the body is docile the more the mind is tamed.

B. The Somali Woman’s Body as Social Docile Body

Ebla’s identity has been created for her as a breeder, a tool and a receptacle for the cultivation of her husband’s name and beliefs. In this respect, Ebla’s body, like any other Somali woman’s body and that of women in other cultures, is the site of honor. Here, we need to focus on the very title of the novel, *From a Crooked Rib*, which sums up the Somali man’s understanding of the body of women. According to a Somali proverb, the woman is created from the body of man (*Rib* 1); the body of the woman is but a continuation of the body of the man. Thus, to preserve the honor of the body of the woman is synonymous with preserving the honor of the man and his body. Ebla’s body is sacred not because of Ebla herself, but rather because of what her body signifies for the male.

Moreover, when Awill—Ebla’s husband—marries her, he makes love to her, not with her, for seven days in the one-room house. She thinks of this period as an “imprisonment in the house” (*Rib* 114); Awill, contrary to that, thinks that he is exercising and enjoying his rights, even when Ebla refuses. This sort of management of the body is the result of the construction of the woman’s body as being part of the man’s body and his possession; thus it allows men to claim it and to own it in all manners. “She [Ebla] had bled and he [Awill] rejoiced seeing her blood, as his manhood depended upon breaking his chastity” (*Rib* 150). This emphasizes the link that Somali men establish between being the first man, a woman has sex with, and their perception of manhood and strength. Even though the act of breaking the

chastity is short in time, it nevertheless indicates a timeless belief in the link between the honor of men and the virginity of the woman. In an event after the marriage with Awill, the second man Ebla marries gets disturbed realizing that she is not a virgin. In other words, the honor and the pleasure of men get interwoven in the vagina of the woman; the whole body is summed up in that area. Indeed, Ebla internalizes the stress that is put on the act of preserving the virginity and purity of the body. After escaping her grandfather's house and meeting Awill, she goes with him to Mogadishu, where he attempts in vain to have sex with her outside of wedlock. Ebla's refusal can be related to her acceptance of the association between honor and her body. Later in this scene, we witness the emergence of the discourse of society and how it constructs the body of Ebla.

In this respect, we need to differentiate between the body as a site of pleasure for men and the body as a site of social predictability. The body of the Somali woman is constructed to adhere to certain perceptions about it, which write the public body of the woman, similar to the family writing the private body of the woman. This social discursive writing of the body is related to a variety of matters: sexuality, violence, and rape, etc. The aim of such a writing of the body is to control the body in its private and public scopes, by constructing the female body as a site of enforcing the power of both the family and society.

For instance, the woman should always be in control of her body's sexual needs, making sure that they are not exhibited for the public. Society targets the body of the woman as the site of life that needs to be controlled. As Foucault argues: "Their [women] bodies and their sex w[ere] carried out in the name of the responsibility they owed the health of their children, the solidity of the family institution, and the safeguarding of society" (*Sexuality* 146–7). The body of the woman is centered on certain obligations that revolve around the idea of the survival of society and the continuation of the institutions that constitute it. In other words, the body of the woman is thought of as asexualized for the woman; she cannot experience any sexual pleasure with it. This is in sharp contradiction to man, who can find his sexual pleasure within and through the body of the woman and with his own body. Thus, the body of the woman is written both as totally asexual in the public sphere and only sexual with the husband in the private sphere.

The asexualization of the body of the woman for the woman has been a main notion in feminist studies related to the body. For instance, Lois McNay argues that "sexual pleasure in women was seen as per-

vasive and, correspondingly, good women were not passionate and had no sexual desires" (31). Indeed, Ebla has been circumcised at an early age; she describes the act as "not only painful but a barbarous act" (*Rib* 149). The act of "slic[ing] out her clitoris and stich[ing] the lips together" (*Rib* 149) makes any solo sexual enjoyment impossible—it is an asexualization intended to tame the body and restrict its natural powers. Indeed, the act of circumcision is aimed at prohibiting the "woman's autoeroticism" (Irigaray 363); Luce Irigaray argues in her article "The Sex Which Is Not One" that:

In order to touch himself, man needs an instrument: his hand, a woman's body, language...As for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need of mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity...Her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. (363)

The lips of Ebla's vagina, when they are in their natural status, would move and touch each other, resulting in an ecstasy for Ebla. The stitching of Ebla's lips of the vagina results in the loss of autoeroticism; the lips are no longer free to touch, but rather sewed together. This act prohibits Ebla from indulging herself in a self-centered corporal sexual activity; she is thus asexualized in relation to her own body. Only when a man as a mediation is involved, can she experience a form of sexual pleasure; thus, the active nature of the female genitals is abandoned in favor of a total sexual passivity.

We have argued earlier that the woman is reduced to the body; as such, there seems to be an understanding by patriarchy and its discursive strategies that in and through the body lies the only escape for a woman. Even when the body is physically tortured as is the case with Ebla, when she was beaten by Awill (*Rib* 96–7), the woman cannot react because her body is thought of as both docile and the property of men. In an earlier passage, Ebla refuses to admit that she wants to marry Awill; she even refuses to let him know that the thought crossed her mind (*Rib* 87). This insistence on silencing the body is a social construction that has been imposed on the body of women. The body needs to be kept under careful scrutiny by the woman herself in an act of self-policing. In the same passage, Ebla murmurs: "To refuse as women do, even if they want it" (*Rib* 87). "As women do" is the key element here; the discourse of patriarchy has made women a one and simple entity. To be a Somali woman is to act like other Somali women;

it is simply to lose one's individuality in the midst of being a member of a group. Ebla refuses to admit she wants to marry Awill, because a woman cannot be active in the act of marriage proposal. Thus, the masking of the want in Ebla is indicative of the acceptance of the definition of women by others: a woman cannot want; she can only be wanted. It is another passive/active dialectics similar to the passivity/activity in relation to the sexual act, explained earlier.

This discursive social construction is even more present at the level of rape, with which Ebla is faced at one point. Rape, as a notion within the Foucauldian approach, is an asexualized form of violence, as he expressed in his interview *The Confession of the Flesh*. Foucault treats the rape of women as an attack not on the sexual being of the woman, but rather on the woman herself. In his reading of rape, the woman is only attacked because she is a woman; in other words, rape is not a crime of sex but rather of power (Woodhull 170). Rape becomes a question of who is powerful and who is not, rather than of sexual differentiations; this is indeed a common thought in the feminist understanding of rape. It is for this reason that the body of the woman is violated not because of its tempting nature, but because of its powerlessness. When Ebla tries to protect her body against Awill's attempts, he becomes violent, "shower[ing] hard blows upon Ebla—in the mouth, at her head, on her belly" (*Rib* 96). His violence is not caused by Ebla's rejection of him, but rather by the fact that Ebla's body is manifesting signs of rejection. A woman's body, in a patriarchal society as is the case in Somali, is thought of as docile by men. The moment a woman's body is starting to become active, in the sense of positive negativity—refusal to be part of a sexual experience—a man is weakened. This weakening is the result of the woman's body castrating the man's body in the act of denying him access to what is thought of as his. The body as such is doubly understood: as the site of exhibition of man's power and the site of man's potential weakness.

When Awill is rejected by Ebla's body, which he thought he owned and controlled, he tries to manipulate Ebla discursively by manipulating the notion of marriage. He puts the whole institution of marriage in jeopardy, just so that he can have access to her body, which should have been docile. Awill says that "it is a matter of hours...so it comes to the same thing" (*Rib* 67). Here we should restate the fact that the body of the woman is the site where the man is most likely to enforce his powers. Thus, the control of the woman's body is the affirmation of his manhood and the powers invested in him by patriarchy. Any failed

act of appropriation of this body should be corrected, even if it meant the destruction of values cherished by patriarchy.

The marriage institution that Awill and Ebla are debating can be seen as an instrument of Somali society's control of its members, by organizing them in certain units that are easy to be kept under check. Marriage has been deeply criticized by feminists as early as 1899, as is the case with Arabella Dennehy who describes marriage as "a mere piece of social mechanism for subjugating women" (qtd. in Jeffreys 43). Marriage as such becomes a tool for the enslavement of women; actually, Christine Delphy—another feminist—describes it as an "the furnishing of unpaid labor within the framework of a total and personal relationship (marriage) constitutes precisely a relationship of slavery" (35). Despite the aforementioned, Ebla, who is constructed by Somali society, "was quite delighted to think of herself as a wife. It did not matter whose wife, because it all came to one thing: that she has got married" (*Rib* 108). Marriage becomes the only outlet for Ebla; here, we need to emphasize the fact that in Somalia, the notion of marriage is deeply related to the notion of family and kinship. Marriage is the manner through which society keeps the clans separated and thus avoids tribal clashes. The stress put on the purity of the clans is but a manifestation of an emphasis put on the purity of society itself. The body of the woman is eventually the body of Somalia, thus blurring the line between the individual woman and the larger national body. Society controls women through defining them and one major definition is the religious one.

C. The Somali Woman's Body as Religious Docile Body

Ebla in many instances questions the authority of religion over women. This questioning of religion is in itself an attack on society, Ebla is not able to criticize what is tangible—society—but she is capable of criticizing the intangible—God. She professes that her situation is the result of "God...who had fixed the status of human beings. He made me cost half a man" (*Rib* 155). This is an acknowledgment of the religious dimension of patriarchy, that religion sanctions the enslavement of women by men. But, in another instance, Ebla says "Oh, my God, I don't actually mean this...I repent to Thee. Nothing is wrong with our religion" (*Rib* 154). This highlights that patriarchy's use of religion is functional; women, who are defined as being driven by their bodies, are more emotional and sentimental resulting in their inability

to transcend religious teachings. Patriarchy defines women in many ways and the religious definition is one of the ones mostly used. Here we need to return back to the title of the novel—*From a Crooked Rib*—which although it is a Somali proverb it is also and most importantly a hadith by the prophet. The line between the religious and the cultural is blurred, resulting in the fact that fighting society equals fighting religion.

In this respect, Islam—the religion that Elba professes to adhere to (*Rib* 154)—treats the question of the creation of the woman as purposeful: “He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest in them” (Koran, Al-Rum 21). The woman was created to fulfill a need in the man for othering, in other words, for the possibility to be the subject. This creation was done for the man and in the man, through constructing the woman from one of the man’s ribs. Thus, the woman is the sign of the existence of man; for there is no self without an other from which to be differentiated. This complex and self-defining discourse entraps women and forces them either to accept the status-quo as the natural order of things or to renounce the faith and thus reject being inferior to men. In the case of Ebla, and most Somali women, the second choice is hard because they were constructed to fear society, but mainly to fear God. Patriarchy uses the religious discourse to promote, defend, divide, and sustain its own discourse through writing the body of the woman as being but a part of the man’s, as a sort of continuation both in time and in space.

In brief, patriarchy defines the Somali woman in three manners: the obedient daughter and wife, the site of the honor of society, and God’s tamed creation. The Somali woman is defined in an extrinsic manner on the abovementioned levels, and any attempt to escape this definition comes only in resisting the three levels. Here we may recall Oscar Wilde’s words in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that: “to define is to limit” (135). Thus, if the Somali woman in general, and Ebla in particular, desires to be free, a new definition—one that is intrinsic, needs to emerge. This intrinsic self-definition is the means to escape the extrinsic limitations.

IV. Women Write Their Bodies for Themselves: Creation of the Rebellious Body 10–13

As a matter of fact, throughout the novel, we notice signs of rebellion in Ebla against everything that is hindering her freedom. Her rebellion,

even though it is brief and unsuccessful, represents the other side of the Foucauldian understanding about the body. The body is not just docile; there is another layer to it—resistance. Resistance should be understood as the natural result of controlling the body; it is actually a presupposition of control. In this respect, Ebla's resistance is directed against what Foucault calls "immediate struggles [in which] people criticize instances of power which are the closest to them" ("Subject" 780). Instances of these immediate struggles are the struggle against the family, the brother, the husband, and the neighbors.

A. The Body Rebellion against Family

In the case of Ebla, she starts by questioning the processes by which the familial discourse defines her. From the beginning of the novel, Ebla puts into question the very meaning of being a daughter and a sister. She "toy[ed] with the idea of leaving home" (*Rib* 8). The house, as a space, is synonymous with imprisonment, because it is within this space that patriarchy is first displayed. One major element of patriarchy, to which Ebla manifests resistance is the division of labor in the house. "Goats for girls and camels for boys" (*Rib* 13) is the supposedly natural labor division in the Somali family; indeed, the goat-herder is characterized as a non-man (Abokor 46). Ebla rejects this division and employs the very thing that she is denied—intellect; she states: "but it is only because camels are stupid beasts that boys can manage to handle them" (*Rib* 13). Ebla tries, even if it is to some extent simplistic, to exhibit some mental capacities in her discourse. Her statement reveals how she, as a constrained Somali woman, perceives the other side of the issue. It is not because a woman lacks the ability to tend camels that she is assigned to tending goats; it is rather because men cannot tend to goats—who are wild—that they are given the camels. She, in one statement, whether aware or unaware, subverts the basis of patriarchy. She assigns to herself the superior position over men, and she reveals the woman's ability to form a coherent and different perspective on matters.

Moreover, the first act in her rebellion is to ban her body from others. She escapes from the house just before she is forced to marry an older man; she denies her family what they thought of as their right to sell her body. This is the beginning of Ebla's un-writing of the image given to her body by patriarchy; thus, the act of un-writing amounts in itself to a new act of writing. The writer of the body shifts from an

external to an internal one; the result is that the body voices itself in a more genuine manner. In this respect, we need to emphasize that the act of un-writing/rewriting is equivalent to countering, what Foucault calls, the “dividing practices,” in which “the subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others” (“Subject” 777–8). Patriarchy’s writing of the body of Ebla has estranged her from that body; on occasions, she expresses her desire to be a man: “She wished she were not a woman” (*Rib* 11), and “she wished that she could be...a man” (*Rib* 105). This desire to be a man is the result of her body being inscribed within and by patriarchy; only later, when she escapes, does she get back in touch with her body.

The reattachment between Ebla and her body is done in relation to the same discursive formations of patriarchy, which have been discussed earlier. She targets the discourse of the family, society, and religion; she only connects to her body by disconnecting the body from the general patriarchal body. We need to stress the fact that Ebla’s reconnection with her body is not about a recovery of the body, but rather about the recovery of the image of the body. Foucault argues that there is no “recuperation. What is taking place is the usual strategic development of a struggle” (*Power* 56). The body cannot be recuperated, because it was never really lost. What is lost is the image of the body, which is the result of the struggle between the body and the external discourses defining it. Thus, Ebla has not lost the body; she has only lost the right of self-definition. This right will be exercised by her, when she escapes Ogaden, resulting in the emergence of both a new definition of her body and of the Somali woman.

B. The Body Rebellion against Society

The struggle to self-define her body starts when Ebla refuses to surrender it in an auction-like marriage. The escape is not the result of fear of marriage but rather the appropriation of her body by the husband chosen for her. The escape is the only means by which Ebla is able “to break the ropes of society...wrapped around her and to be free and be herself” (*Rib* 12). To be herself, Ebla had to challenge one of the most fundamental institutions of patriarchy—the family. She exhibits indications of a refusal to surrender the body to others, and of keenness to communicate with her own body. The freeing of her body from marriage equals the breaking of the first ring in the chain that has been restricting her. By escaping the family, “the divine emancipation of the

body" (*Rib* 13) occurs. Divine should be understood her not as 'heavenly' but as 'great,' because Ebla is going to reject the religious definition of her body altogether in the subsequent stages.

Ebla's next move to write her body is to break the dual division to which women were subjected. This dual division is centered on the mind/body division and the public/private allotment. The Somali woman was defined as both being a mere body—lacking intellect, and as belonging to the private sphere—because she is just a body. These two divisions support and more importantly presuppose each other. The Somali woman is defined as just a body, making her unfit for the public sphere, where matters are solved using reason and intellect. Thus, when, for instance, Ebla "th[inks] of many things a woman of her background would never think of" (*Rib* 8), she transcends her image as solely a body. She develops herself intellectually, questioning the gender system, the alleged passivity in the woman, and the restrictions inflicted both on the body and the mind of the Somali woman.

Hence, Ebla starts to be more active in shaping her life; first by escaping and finally by refusing to escape and facing her previous oppressors. She starts to be wlier telling lies to everyone around her who try to know her secrets. Telling lies, for instance to the caravan people when she is escaping her arranged marriage—"I am sick, I need some injections. And I want to buy some clothes... [for my] wedding" (*Rib* 20), is the result of Ebla's realization that knowledge implies power. Not telling everything keeps her safe, and allows her to use the former oppressors—men. The woman is silenced by men; she is defined as equivalent to silence. Thus, Ebla's silence over some facts about her life is doubly constructed. First, she presents herself as abiding to man's image and conceptualization of her, and second, she uses the sheen of being silent to fulfill her own ends. In other words, Ebla uses men's definition of her against them. One of the most interesting instances of this new attitude of Ebla's is when she hides that she is already married from a man courting her. She even marries him, despite being the wife of Awill. She declares that, in case her lie was found out, then "it is a man's trouble" (*Rib* 125). This statement might seem to contradict the new way of thinking of Ebla, but indeed it does not. It clear here that Ebla is using the notion men hold of the woman's body against men themselves. Is not the woman's body the property of men? Does not that exempt women from any control over it? Thus how can Ebla be punished for something that she is not able to do: be in command of her body? It is her new husband who is to be blamed, not her, for only men hold power over women's bodies. In

other words, Ebla understands the discourse that is imposed on her body and she uses it for her own advantage: claiming and disclaiming control over the body becomes a strategic move for her.

This attack on the sacredness of the institution of marriage can be read as an attack on the desire by men to appropriate the lost rib, from which the woman was made. Ebla's manipulation of marriage enables her to marry two men at the same time; she reveals to her second husband the truth and declares: "You have another wife, and I have another husband. We are even" (*Rib* 145). Instead of a man acquiring the lost rib, Ebla marries two men, and is willing to marry more, refusing the myth that situates her as a mere possession to be re-seized. As a matter of fact, Ebla's attack on the institution of marriage is followed by a refusal of the religious definition of women.

C. The Body Rebellion against Religion

Ebla declares that: "our religion is very strict towards women...The concessions given to men are far too great" (*Rib* 154). This statement reveals the unsatisfactory relationship between religion and women. Religion is seen as the domain of man, made by a superior He—God—to support minor 'hees'—men. She rejects also the Islamic notion that "a woman's prophet and second-to-God is her husband" (*Rib* 151). This very notion gives the man a superior position compared to the woman, making her a mere believer in the message carried by man. The relationship is structured around the idea of a quasi-God man and the worshipping woman, which makes the woman doubly enslaved: first to God and then to God's self-appointed agents.

Eventually, Ebla targets what Foucault calls "the chief enemy" ("Subject" 780), that is any instance of power that is not enforced through an immediate agent. In the case of Ebla, the chief enemy is God, and thus she points her resistance towards Him. Ebla's first resistive discursive move against God is when she utters: "The prophets say that everybody's fate is written on God's slate" (*Rib* 154). Here, she is elaborating on a question that has long captured the minds of Muslims: are humans active or passive in their doings and thinking? Ebla's reflection on the question of predestination enables her to put the blame for everything wrong that she has done on religion, on God in particular. He has written her fate—her 'ayan' Somali for fate—even before her birth, and so everything she did is the result of that writing. Eventually, Ebla moves from a mere rejection of the quasi-God to a rejection of God, from the immediate to the implied struggle.

As she frees herself from all the constraints put on her body by patriarchy, Ebla declares, "I am master of myself" (*Rib* 142). This mastery of the body is the outcome of the un-writing of the patriarchal image in favor for a self-writing of the body. She states: "This is my treasure, my only treasure, my bank, my money, my existence" (*Rib* 160). This interpretation of the body as an asset is a reaction to a previous rendition of the body. Now the body is an asset for Ebla, not for her family or husband; she owns the body, and she can use it to achieve her goals. As such, Ebla moves her body from the status of unpaid to paid labor; she redefines the body in terms that empower rather than disempower her.

The construction of the body as a personal asset is accompanied with an intensification of the importance of woman-woman bonding. Throughout the novel, Ebla was either rescued, given pieces of advice, or guided by women; there seems to be an obliteration of men as possible prophet. Indeed, women become the prophets and protectors of other women; bodies are set in a continuum, rather than separated. At one point, Ebla was asking for help from Asha—a woman friend of hers; Asha poured a cup of tea for Ebla:

She [Ebla] took a mouthful of tea. It seemed to taste like a man to her.
'I have another suggestion.' [said Asha.]
'Say it.' She [Ebla] took another mouthful of tea. It seemed to taste better;
like a woman. (*Rib* 123)

The tasting of tea is linked to the developing of ideas by Asha, which is doubly symbolic. On the one hand, to link tea and ideas made by women to each other is a rejection of a Somali proverb that states "men for tea, women for talk" ("Somali proverbs"); talk here should be understood as gossip that is insignificant discourse. Asha drinks tea and reflects, which results in the eradication of the mind/body and man/woman dichotomy. On the other hand, this passage reveals the extent of closeness that the Somali women experience; tea tastes better when it is thought of as a woman. In fact, corporeal feminism "emphasizes fluid boundaries, connection rather than separation, interdependence rather than autonomy" (Andermahr 26). Moreover, this fluidity of the bodies of women can be read as an instance of female homosociality, one that stresses the mutual interests and goals of women. As such, Ebla's writing of her body becomes synonymous with the writing of the woman's body, understood as the central ring in the chain of fluidity of bodies.

The woman's body, as written by women themselves, is experienced in a striking scene, when: "With her [Ebla] hand she felt down her body, naked under the sheet; she scratched her sex, then chuckled...She looked into herself and found something new about herself. She looked into herself literally" (*Rib* 160–1). As is clear from this passage, Ebla has managed to truly relate to her body. The nakedness of the body reflects the coming back to the initial state of being, when she was born. She is stripped of all the clothes, symbolic of layers of familial, social, and religious writing of her body. She writes her body using the body itself as a pen; and ultimately, she finds herself in her body, when she gazes into it.

To sum up, the female body in *From a Crooked Rib*, which previously was written by patriarchy, has been rewritten by Ebla. This rewriting of the body is doubly constructed: firstly, the body as unwritten by Ebla, and secondly, it was written by Ebla. This double act on the body was aimed at discovering the body as it is written by patriarchy, in order to better grasp the struggle over the body. To facilitate the act of self-writing of the body, Ebla, using Foucault's words, "need[ed] a historical awareness of [her] present circumstances" ("Subject" 778). This historical awareness is only achieved through an excavation of, within, and for the body. It results in the body being stripped from the patriarchal histo-textuality—that is the writing of the body as a text over a long period of history, and being given a new corporeal textuality.

V. Conclusion: In-Between, Somali Women's Bodies from Docility to Rebellion

In brief, the body of Ebla is both the site of docility and resistance; it keeps moving between these two opposite poles. The body, which was written for Ebla, makes it often hard for Ebla to escape the limitations put on it. She wants to be a woman with a free body; but she also wants to be part of the community. Thus, Ebla's fear, of being termed as deviant, results in a return to the state of docility. We may argue here that Ebla represents an example of the self-aware Somali woman, who is both able to transcend the restrictions on the body, but who also finds it difficult to be banished from society. Ebla and other Somali women, in the novels by Nuruddin Farah following *From a Crooked Rib*, reach the point of feminist development, where they realize that the body of either women or men is both written by oneself and on behalf of oneself.

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