
The Idea of Education in *From a Crooked Rib*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the theme of education in Nuruddin Farah's novel, *From a Crooked Rib*, with a focus on the colonial context in which education is utilised as a means of suppression. The study explores the contrasting dynamics between traditional, indigenous knowledge and formal Western education, arguing that it is the former that imparts genuine values and wisdom for leading a meaningful life. Through an analysis of Farah's narrative, the paper highlights the detrimental effects of colonizer imposed education systems, which often undermine cultural heritage and indigenous ways of knowing. Furthermore, the paper discusses how despite lacking formal education, the villagers possess a strong sense of logic and rationality. By shedding light on the importance of indigenous knowledge, this study contributes to a broader discourse on decolonisation, advocating for a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to education that honours local wisdom and nurtures holistic development.

Keywords:African Literature, Colonial Education, Western culture, Assimilation, Inferiority, Superiority.

Introduction:

“But he will die ignorant. He will not have learnt anything before the earth eats away his bones. That will be the first lesson of life for him” (Farah 178).

One can find these lines in Nuruddin Farah's well-acclaimed novel *From a Crooked Rib*. First published in 1970, this novel has become a seminal part of the African literary canon. The idea of education is one of the many important themes presented in this work by Farah. However, unlike some other themes, one does not find it at the forefront. The story revolves around Ebla, a teenager who challenges

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the prevailing contemporary customs in her society. She subverts the patriarchal norms. Here, one may wonder where education comes into play. Or rather, why is it even being considered as an important theme? The answer to these questions is quite simple. One finds that it acts as a thread to the narrative and weaves it with a larger discourse of African history and reality.

Discussion:

Africa was home to several tribes, quite similar to Ebla's. For them, life was simple. Their needs were limited, and so were their wants. What was the need for formal education? They had to milk the cows, take care of their beasts, produce crops and live together harmoniously.

An individual in such a society was born, grew up, and spent most of his life in his village, which contained a small number of people. Much of his time was spent in the production of food. There was a simple division of labour based chiefly on sex and age. Men lived in close relationship with nature (the land, vegetation, and animals) because of limited technological development. They were related to each other by extended ties of kinship which bound them to such unilineal kinship groups as the lineage and the clan (Mazonde, 2).

What they needed was real-world knowledge and experience. For that, they had the older generation, just like Ebla's grandfather in the text. "The elders were teachers in the African settings such as in the training of regiments for mastery of survival skills" (Mosweunyane 52).

Knowledge, customs and laws through tribal institutions were passed on to the young by the elders using proverbs and myths, which were told with care and repetition. The young were informed of their past and their cultural heritage with the aim of stimulating pride in cultural institutions which formed the basis of community's survival. It becomes clear gathering from what the preceding authors promulgated, that learning did take place within African societies even before the continent was besieged by colonialists and missionaries (53).

Though pre-colonial Africa did not have schools in the modern sense, this did not mean that young people and children were not educated: they learnt by living and doing, which made their education essentially practical training (53).

These people were not familiar with the town and government, nor were they with the lifestyle associated with it. Why should they, therefore, go for formal education? More importantly, why should the need for it arise? The answer is as complex as it is simple- colonialism. It was the Europeans, the colonial powers, who came to their land and created the need for education.

“European colonialism was established in the belief that ‘superior races’ have the privilege and the duty to civilize the less fortunate, ‘inferior races’” (Serequeberhan 2010).

As noted by Margalit (2004) European ideas about politics were inevitably transmitted to the colonial subjects, along with science, religion, economics and literature (p. 38). The superimposition of colonial values on the African continent changed the lifestyle of Africans in many ways, which meant changes also in those things that Africans had to learn. The Africans received Western education which was meant to ‘civilise them’ (Mosweunyane 53).

Throughout the text, Farah highlights this conflict surrounding traditional, indigenous knowledge and Western, modern education.

Though this underlying idea of education is ever-present, yet Farah's Ebla does not care for it. For her, it holds no significance. For her, it has no practical use. However, she is still embarrassed when she does not know Western or modern ideas. Her ignorance of the same evokes a feeling of inferiority in her subconscious. “But all the same, she did not want to expose her ignorance to the others. She left those things with the hope that she would learn about them at a later date. She would do whatever the townspeople did. And by this process, she would learn” (Farah 57). These words are not only an indication of Ebla's response but of a larger populace. These words indicate how the European powers used the tool of education to subjugate them. By making the people feel inferior, they claimed their right to rule over them. They made people believe that through their education, they too could become modern.

Western education in African conditions was a process of psychological de-ruralisation. The educated African became ... a misfit in his own village... when he graduated ... his parents did not expect him to continue living with them, tending the cattle or cultivating the land (Woolman).

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The process annihilates people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves (Thiong'o).

The primary idea behind the need for education is to elevate society. It is a tool for providing a better quality of thought, and everyone knows how the quality of one's thoughts dictates the quality of one's life. Therefore, where the life of townspeople should be envious, Ebla pities them. Ebla's brother detests it so much that he wants to go back to his country as soon as possible. To Ebla, their way of living seems illogical. "Why do they build houses everywhere? Houses! Mud-houses, stone houses, houses of dung, houses of nothing but sticks. Growing grass around the area would be much more beneficial to everyone" (Farah 40). Not just this, to Ebla, they seem to lack real wisdom too. "The townspeople thought that the country-people had done an unwise thing. 'But,' she thought to herself, 'the old man only wanted to bring the squabble to an end: he was wise. But they are only townspeople, and they don't understand'" (98). The act of throwing sugar in the water would indubitably seem irrational to any profit-minded people, but the country people. To them, it was just a sack of greed, something that would unbalance the harmony. Education must have taught them the ills of greediness; then what makes the decision unwise?

The only possible reason would be that this education puts profit over everything else.

It emphasised and encouraged the individualistic instincts of mankind. It led to the possession of individual material wealth being the major criterion of social merit and worth. This meant that colonial education induced attitudes of human inequality, and in practice underpinned the domination of the weak by the strong (Mosweunyane 54).

The contrast between indigenous knowledge and Western education is heavily put in the open here.

Ebla's brother finds the place is just as deplorable:

'You don't fancy this place, is that the case?' she asked.

'I loathe it.'

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'Why?'

'Because they don't have any self-respect in them'

(Farah 141).

To him, these people lost all their dignity and self-respect once they accepted the ways and education of the West. They undermined and disrespected their values and knowledge when they started to move away from it. They helped the Western powers in colonising themselves. Therefore it comes as no shock when he denies going to school and becoming a teacher so vehemently.

...the negro's mind has been brought under the control of his oppressor. The problem of holding the negro down, therefore, is easily solved. When you control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary (Falola).

Ebla understands the sentiment, but others do not. They find it hard to believe that some would detest it. Awill, for one, describes Ebla letting him go back to the country as a punishment. When Awill does not agree, Ebla says:

People here in Mogadiscio and in towns don't have the slightest idea how to take care of beasts, how to milk them, how to love them, how to sacrifice their own lives to make the beasts happy and fat and healthy. They know how to eat meat and drink milk, but that is all they know. How ignorant and proud they are! A white man's language is no knowledge (Farah 178).

These words of Ebla sums up the entire argument regarding knowledge and education that Africa witnessed. Western education only taught people selfishness. It narrowed their minds and placed the idea of profit over everything. Their education is no knowledge. It does not give the knowledge that is essential for one to live. It does not teach peace; it does not teach harmony. It does not know how to give with open arms. It does not know how to welcome people. The people in town hate those who bring a guest to them; on the other hand, country people call each

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other cousins.

Western education was considered 'too European,' and therefore, ill-suited and irrelevant to African needs, and that in the process, the indigenous values of love, community relationships, and profound spirituality were being lost (Omolewa).

Conclusion:

It is important to note that Ebla has no formal education, yet her reflections seem far more logical and rational. With the knowledge she has acquired, she can reflect on the way of the world. She questions and challenges the misogyny inherent in society. Where she fled to the town to escape, she became more and more entangled there. Where education could have provided economic freedom to women, it does no such thing. The social standing still remains the same. Here, one is forced to ponder whether there is any benefit to this education.

Finally, it would be remiss on one's part if one fails to note the times when this work was written and the times it is situated. The 1960s was the decade when Somalia became independent. It was vital to reflect on the institutions that the country would retain as it moved ahead. Education was one of them. It was necessary to decide whether the colonial system should be adopted or the traditional knowledge. It is also important to note that Farah highlighted that whatever the country chose; one half of the populace would still have no benefits. Women shall still be born from the crooked rib and not from the clay.

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