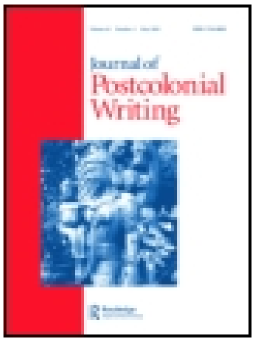

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Mahendran Thiruvarangan

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# Imagining against the nation state: radical singularity and transnationalism in Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*

Mahendran Thiruvarangan

The Graduate Center, City University of New York, New York, USA

**ABSTRACT**
Nuruddin Farah's *Maps* deploys cross-ethnic relationships in its imagination of a radical transnational singularity. This article argues that the thoughts and memories of Askar and Misra, the protagonists who form an unconventional family in the narrative, about their selves, corporeality and belonging contribute to the creation of a singular imagination that challenges the divisive nationalisms of the Somalis and Ethiopians.

**KEYWORDS**
Nuruddin Farah; singularity; nationalism; transnational; hybridity; corporeal

> We allow our ignorance to prevail upon us and make us think we can survive alone, alone in patches, alone in groups, alone in races, even alone in genders.
>
> (Angelou 1990)

Literary writers from the global south have produced some of the most compelling critiques of nationalist violence that their countries and regions witnessed. In their literary dissent, these writers highlight the exclusionary logic of nationalism, its atavistic desires, and the symbolic, material, legal and extra-legal processes, including genocide, ethnic cleansing and border surveillance, that nationalism sets in motion as part of its agenda of obliterating cultural, linguistic and religious diversity from its territories. Narrating the nation from the perspective of those who occupy its margins and outside, works like *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie 1981), *Shame* (Rushdie 1983), *Ice-Candy Man* (Sidhwa 1989), *When Memory Dies* (Sivanandan 1997) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (Adichie 2006) emphasize that it is important to nurture a healthy suspicion of nationalisms even as we recognize their historical role in mobilizing the masses under the banner of sovereignty and liberation during anti-colonial struggles in the 20th century. To this list of dissident writers, I would add Nuruddin Farah, who in his fiction and non-fiction warns against the dangers of nationalism: "the tense and arbitrary nationalities constructed by empires obscure crucial questions of agency and responsibility" (1995, 31). In *Maps* (Farah 1986), the first volume in his trilogy "Blood in the Sun", Farah dives into the question of ethnic coexistence in the Horn of Africa by chronicling the tensions and violence that are part and parcel of the lives of men and women caught in the nationalist conflict between the Ethiopian state and Somali freedom fighters.[1] But *Maps* also gives prominence to the cross-ethnic human ties among its characters, their hybrid

**CONTACT** Mahendran Thiruvarangan ✉ tmahendran@gradcenter.cuny.edu

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social lives and their ability to rise above, at least partially, the divisive nationalisms in the region and to act with a sense of responsibility towards one another.

Critics have already commented on the significance of Farah's critique in *Maps* of the polarizing impact of nationalism. In Charles Sugnet's words, "the sacred text that *Maps* most scandalously violates [ … ] is the sacred text of nationalism, with its mobilization of subjects for a triumphal linear progress toward national consolidation" (2002, 526–527). Francis Ngaboh-Smart (2001), who also examines Farah's treatment of nationalism in *Maps*, notes that his critique of nationalism should be "located in what could be called a new postcolonial discourse, namely, the emphasis on cultural diversity" (86). While these arguments are certainly indisputable, I argue that Farah's task in the novel is not limited to producing a critique of nationalism by foregrounding the demographic and cultural heterogeneity in the Horn of Africa; instead, the text also envisions an alternative singularity, in contradistinction to the singularity that competing nationalisms seek to impose on the Horn, as a way of re-envisioning the social and political lives of the communities and individuals in the region. What is remarkable about this radical singularity is that it accommodates the plural and hybrid character of the territory and its inhabitants without subsuming them under the banner of cultural homogeneity. This study examines the manner in which the novel delineates this singular consciousness through its representations of the corporeality and memory of its characters and semi-theoretical reflections on the formation of different nation states in the Horn and other parts of Africa; it makes the argument that these representations and reflections in toto offer a transnational political vision for coexistence in the Horn.

The relationship between Askar, the young protagonist, and his surrogate mother, Misra, occupies the heart of *Maps*. Misra and Askar belong by birth to the Amhara-Oromo and Somali ethnic communities, respectively. There emerges a psychologically deep-rooted, emotionally fulfilling, albeit not tenacious, bond between the two after the death of Askar's mother, who leaves Askar in Misra's care without her prior consent. The two members of this unconventional family, who came into each other's life purely by chance, conceive their being in and through the identity and existence of the other. Askar, for instance, says: "I was part of the shadow [Misra] cast – in a sense, I was her extended self" (Farah 1986, 78). However, the political conflict in the Ogaden jolts their relationship and urges them to scrutinize their identities and sense of belonging in territorial and national terms causing at times an emotional gap between the two. When Askar begins to regard himself as a man who no longer needs a mother-figure like Misra and searches for a replacement, the narrative reports: "In the process of looking for a substitute, he had found another – Somalia, his mother country" (100). The personal stories of the characters are thus linked to and shaped by the processes of post-independence state formation in Ethiopia/Somalia. They reveal the ways in which nationalism in the postcolonial era simultaneously makes and unmakes selfhood, communities and collectivities through acts of inclusion and exclusion.[2]

## The body as singular

The body functions in *Maps* as a site where Farah conceives a radical singularity as a way of circumventing through imagination the social divisions that nationalisms fuel in the Horn. In *Maps*, the bodies of the characters – while being prone to nationalist violence – give birth to alternative collectivities which bear the traces of this singular consciousness.

During Misra's disappearance in Mogadiscio, Askar revisits his childhood days spent in Misra's company in Kallafo with poignant nostalgia. His reflections on corporeality suggest the coming together of two subjects that nationalisms seek to separate from one another:

> My thoughts led me to a familiar territory – I was younger again, I was with Misra, and she was my universe, she was the one who determined the circumferences of my cosmos, her body was an extension of mine, my body her third leg as we slept and snored away time, my head her third breast as she rolled away from the sheet which had covered her earlier on. (Farah 1986, 244)

What is striking in this extract is that the two human bodies present here allow a portion of their distinctiveness to dissolve into one another and create a hybrid corporeal singularity. The physical duality that separates Askar and Misra gives way to a non-human unity that is simultaneously plural. Askar's ruminations take him back to a time when both he and Misra saw their identities as being interwoven and singular. Instead of conceiving their "selves" as autonomous, Askar sees them as being mutually dependent and semi-sovereign. Askar's act of remembering (and re-membering) the two bodies as singular and hybrid deconstructs the notion of a physically bounded, culturally unique, sovereign self. As acts that occurs at a time when nationalism has separated Askar from Misra, remembering the past and re-membering their bodies into a singularity need to be construed as a counter discourse. The singularity that inscribes itself in Askar's recollections is not an outcome of blood ties or traditional bonds of kinship or the fellow feeling existing among two people who share the same nationality. Instead, it springs from a set of relations and interactions that undermine nationalism's quest for the creation of cultural homogeneity.

The re-anatomization of the bodies described in the novel also indicates that *Maps* re-imagines the notions of humanity and humanness in a novel manner at a crucial moment in the storyline when nationalism is on a collision course with humanism. The humanism from which *Maps* moves away is one that celebrates diversity for its own sake and views the recognition of cultural specificity as a precondition for freedom. This alternative humanism revolves around the radically singular coexistence of the novel's characters and their bodies. It generates a consciousness of radical unfreedom, a state in which one is not free of one's obligations towards others yet experiences a sense of gratification and bliss. Built into this radical humanism is the queerization of the body and memories of Askar. The body with three breasts that Askar remembers escapes traditional gender identifications of male and female (Farah 1986, 244). Moreover, Askar's body appears as a mysterious site that can be explained by neither science nor culture in that neither Askar nor the reader knows the cause of the blood that he notices in his bed as he wakes up one day (111). Askar comes to the conclusion that he has menstruated, an impression that stays with him even in the latter sections of the narrative. "Has anybody known a man who menstruated?" Askar asks as the narrative reaches its culminating moments (234). The menstruating male body and the body with three breasts enable Farah to proffer the body as a queer, liminal and ambivalent site, a counterpoint to the discourses of corporeality in which Somali nationalists accuse Misra of being a traitor. It is worthwhile to remember that the poet among the young men who raped Misra describes her Otherness in bodily terms too: "the baboons smelt her traitor's identity underneath the human skin and went for it again and again" (195). The unified, post-human, queer body appears as an effect of a radical imagination that resists the attempts on the part of nationalism to fragment the body of the land and its people along national lines. Interestingly, in *Maps*, we see that nationalism, too, seeks an un-bordered, unfragmented space that encompasses what it claims as the territory of its nation: "such borders deny the Somali people who live on either side of it [ … ] their very existence as nation" (126). The borderlessness created by the bodies of Askar and Misra, who do not share a common ethnic origin, belongs to a different kind; the singularity envisioned through such body/bodies is not national but transnational.

Askar's body triggers a liminal, transnational imagination of selfhood in Misra. It does not have a fixed signification in Misra's eyes; instead, she recognizes multiple images in it, including an image of her father, whom she last saw when she was 5, and an image of the child that lives in her mind (Farah 1986, 7). In Askar's body, Misra also sees "a different terrain of land" and hears "a different language spoken" (7). As a site of uninterpretable liminality and inexplicable hybridity, Askar's body on its own, too, unifies the gendered, ethnic, linguistic and age-wise multiplicities around him into a singularity. In so doing, it unravels the binary of the past and the present and carves a political landscape that constantly escapes fixed identifications and spatial and temporal labels. Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) writes that on the US–Mexican border "the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" and that "the lifeblood of two worlds merg[es] to form a third country – a border culture" (25). In *Maps*, one witnesses the contours of a borderland and border culture not only in the multi-ethnic Ogaden, but also in the bodies/body of Askar and Misra. The borderland represented by the Ogaden and the body of the novel's protagonists speak about a community where liminality, as opposed to cultural specificity, functions as its organizing principle and resists the separatist, pluralizing and atomizing narratives of nationalism.

## Somali nationalism: history and narration

The territorial-corporeal discourse of transnationalism and singularity that one notices in *Maps* disrupts the nationalist desires that shape the processes of state-building in the Horn of Africa. The ruptures that are brought to the forefront through the re-presentation of the bodies offer a critique of Somali nationalism, which is sometimes celebrated as anti-colonial and revolutionary by scholars.[3] The beginnings of modern-day Somali nationalism and its political conflict with Ethiopia over the status of the Ogaden can be traced as far back as to the heyday of European colonialism in Africa. Unlike many other regions in the continent that were facing massive colonial onslaught, Ethiopia, at the turn of the 20th century, emerged as an indigenous empire (Lata 2004, 97). The European powers stationed in the Horn of Africa at the time, including the British and the French, deemed Ethiopia a force to reckon with and signed land cession treaties (Sheik-Abdi 1977, 658). Abdi Sheik-Abdi notes that whenever these treaties were signed "the disorganized and stateless Somali pastoralists were to be the main losers" (658). The Ogaden, where a significant portion of Farah's novel is set, and the Haud, another traditionally Somali region, were transferred to Ethiopia in 1948 and 1954, respectively, by the British "against the known wishes of the Somali inhabitants of these regions" under the Anglo-Ethiopian treaty of 1897 (Sheik-Abdi 1977, 658). Thus, the modern nationalist conflict in the Ogaden portrayed in Farah's novel and the identities that are at its center should be seen as legacies of European imperialism in Africa and of the strategies adopted by various European powers in order to retain their control over large parts of that continent. Somali lands that existed as Italy's colonies gained home rule in 1960, and British Somali lands were later annexed to the new Republic (Sheik-Abdi 1977, 658). However, the creation of a Greater Somalia, which includes the historical grazing lands of the Somalis, conquered and fragmented by colonial rulers and neighboring powers, continued to be the dream of the nationalists in the new Republic as well as many other Somalis who lived under the states of Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya. As Leenco Lata (2004, 125) suggests, after the Second World War the Somali people in the Ogaden found this dream increasingly meaningful in the wake of the Ethiopian rulers' imposition on them of tax collection and the Amharic language.[4] These colonial and postcolonial happenings formed the larger context for the rise of Somali nationalism in the Ogaden that we see in Farah's novel.

As the evolution of Somali nationalism in the Ogaden presented in the above accounts indicates, inter-imperial rivalries among Europeans during the colonial era resulted in a disjuncture between nations and nation states in postcolonial Africa. In other words, the nation state was not coterminous with the nation idea in many cases. Looked at from a nationalist point of view, many new nation states had populations that nationalists deemed cultural excess or cultural Others. The names that figure in the atlas of colonial Africa that Askar studies show that colonial rulers gave these splintered territories European identities in addition to their native/African ones: "Somalia Italiana, British Somaliland, French Somaliland, the Northern Frontier District (which was then a protectorate, administered separately from the rest of Kenya)" (Farah 1986, 228). Though the new ruling classes of the post-independence era tried to cleanse these regions of their European identifications as part of their agenda of decolonizing Africa, the native ethnic labels that they retained and the nationalist wave that swept these regions continued to draw a line between insiders and outsiders including among Africans in so far as territory and citizenship in the new states were concerned. As we see in the Somali militants' struggle for the merger of the Ogaden with Somalia and the support extended to their militancy by Somali nationalists in the "motherland", Somali nationalism, as portrayed in Farah's novel, aims at territorializing and institutionalizing the ethnic identity of the Somali people. Although this nationalism seeks to bring together Somali people of a shared ethnic or cultural origin scattered across territories that come under different states, it is blind to the cultural and linguistic diversity and the cross-pollination that shapes the demographic character of those territories. One of Farah's central tasks in *Maps* is to foreground these cross-ethnic interactions through representations of the interconnected lives of his two central characters of different ethnic origins. Juxtaposed to the history and memory that Askar and Misra share in the text, the Somali nationalists' desire to make Ogaden a part of Somalia appears exclusionary and parochial.

Farah's critique of Somali nationalism should also be read as a critique of the debilitating processes of decolonization that resort to the logic of purity and cultural singularity in their attempts to recover the pre-colonial past without paying attention to the changes that took place in territories over time due to colonialism, people's mobility and interactions across cultures and ethnicities. In laying out this critique, Farah does not limit the textuality of his work to a fictional rendering of the alternative modes of social existence that his characters embody; he also lets his characters assume the role of political commentators and intellectuals who delve theoretically into the formation of ethnic identities and nation states. Uncle Hilaal, for instance, explicates the processes of nationalism and identity politics in Somalia/Ethiopia. His speech and narration, resembling an academic discourse, form a distinct component of the heteroglossia of the novel.[5] Derek Wright (1994) notes that Farah's novel gives importance to the "relationship between national and ethnic identity" (105). It is Uncle Hilaal in his role as commentator, nationalist intellectual and mentor to Askar who best explains this relationship in his commentary on the strengths and limitations of Somali nationalism.

Hilaal distinguishes between Somalia and Ethiopia as two different kinds of states, the former having a specific Somali identity at its heart and the latter a more general, amalgamated Ethiopian identity at its center. Somali nationalism in the Ogaden, therefore, appears to be a force that seeks to rescue and restore the uniqueness of Somalis:

> Hilaal said, "Ethiopia is the generic name of an unclassified mass of different peoples, professing different religions, claiming to have descended from different ancestors. Therefore, 'Ethiopia' becomes that generic notion, expansive, inclusive. Somali, if we come to it, is specific. That is, you are either Somali or you aren't. Not so with 'Ethiopian', or for that matter not so with 'Nigerian', 'Kenyan', 'Sudanese', or 'Zairoise'. The name Ethiopia means the land of the dark race." (Farah 1986, 155)

Even though Hilaal's appears to be a detached commentator in this extract, his reflections on the Somali identity show that Somali nationalism is a narrow, essentialist and alienating ideology even as it attempts to redress the injustice done to the Somali people in the Ogaden by the British in collaboration with Ethiopian rulers. This nationalism does not permit those who are not Somali by birth, culture, kinship and blood ties to become members of the Somali nation. It initiates the Othering of non-Somali populations and ejects them from territories historically associated with the Somali nation symbolically and violently. Farah advances his critique of Somali nationalism from the point of view of one such non-Somali, namely Misra. It is the violence to which Misra is subjected in a territory claimed as Somali by nationalists that exposes the alienating and annihilating character of Somali nationalism.

The emphasis the Somali nationalists place on the cultural and ethnic uniqueness of their people and their pursuit of an exclusive singularity inspire many Somalis in the Ogaden to join the uprising against the Ethiopian empire-state. But the novel exposes the underbelly of this stifling ideology by narrating how Misra was branded as a traitor by Somali nationalists solely for the reason that she is not a person of Somali origin. Even though she has been in the Ogaden for many years, Somali nationalism does not consider her an insider since she is not Somali by birth. Moreover, Misra's inability to read Somali, despite having the ability to speak the language fluently, furthers her alienation from the Somali community in the Ogaden. The novel thus shows the manner in which nationalism deploys language, birth and culture as tools to distinguish between insiders and outsiders and produces the nation as a vertical site.

Through Misra's experiences in the novel, Farah signals the dangerous consequences that may follow the institutionalization of a single ethnic identity in the structures of a state that governs a multi-ethnic polity. Like colonialism, which fragmented Africa and drew arbitrary administrative boundaries over the continent, neo-nationalist initiatives like the one spearheaded by the Somali militants, albeit driven by an anti-colonial impulse, create fissures within African territories as they exist today along cultural and ethnic lines. By sharpening the political character of ethnic identities, nationalism generates ethnic divisions structurally and institutionally. The nation state, the very institution which the Somali rebels think could liberate the Somalis in the Ogaden from national oppression, does not allow the Somalis to rise above the parochial distinctions promoted in the name of nation and ethnicity. Even though Hilaal approvingly notes that "the Somali-speaking peoples have a case in wanting to form a state of their own nation", he is justifiably wary of the consequences such a political process may trigger in the rest of Africa: "if Somalis were allowed to get what they are after, then the Biafrans will want to try it again, the Masai will want their own republic, and the people of southern Sudan their own 'generic' state" (Farah 1986, 156). *Maps*, therefore, reminds us of the importance of moving beyond the divisive orthodoxies of nationalism and identitarianism towards a transnational politics that pushes aside the specific and foregrounds the singular in an inclusive and pluralist manner.

Scholars invoke the idea of transnationalism today to situate and explain the various forms of movement that occur across the political boundaries of nation states. The movement of labor, capital and culture, the flight of those who face political persecution, the migration of the elite from the global south to North America, Europe, the UK and Australia in search of better lives and opportunities are some of the many scenarios explained by this broad term. What needs to be emphasized is that each of these movements is different from the other in that they stand for specific ways in which mobility is inflected by such factors as class, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, geography and political ideology, to name a few. Neil Lazarus (1997) elucidates this point astutely when he observes that the free movement of capital contributes to the "dissolution of the nation-state", while the restrictions imposed by the developed world on the mobility of laboring people harden and rigidify its borders (33). In another discussion on transnationalism, Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton, and Jed Esty (2005) draw a distinction between two different forms of transnationalism. They note that neo-liberalism in the context of globalization creates "facile and tendentious visions of a world without borders", which they distinguish from "genuine and progressive forms of transnationalism which echo Fanon's rhetoric of liberation" (16). Foregrounding the migration of the Chinese workers inside their own country, Bill Ashcroft (2010) argues that "no nation is synonymous with the state, – and before national borders have been crossed, the national subjects is already the subject of a transnation" (72). Even though Ashcroft's framing of the relationships between the nation, nation state and transnation fails to clarify sufficiently what each of these terms denotes to him, his claim "the nation is not the state – it is transnation" is quite provocative (72). While transnation, for Ashcroft, is "the fluid, migrating *outside* of the state that begins *within* the nation" (73; emphases in original), the multicultural character of the Ogaden portrayed in Farah's text indicates that the inside of the nation and nation state is always already transnational. As a phenomenon inside what nationalists claim as the nation (and by extension the nation state), the transnational in *Maps* points to the impossibility of imagining the state in the image of the nation without violence and ethnic cleansing.

One should be cautious in naming Farah's vision transnational, as the liberal and neo-liberal uses of the term often obscure the inequalities and exploitation on the ground along lines of ethnicity, culture, class and nation. *Maps* shows that Farah certainly does not promote a transnationalism that is blind to the workings of power. Even as it brings out the potential the singular has in creating a transnational community, *Maps* wants us to think about the pitfalls of the singular or the universal, especially in places like Ethiopia, where as a means of resisting state-sanctioned discrimination cultural communities often use the very identities that render their existence precarious as rallying points. When Hilaal discusses Somali nationalism, he rightly underlines the marginalization that the Somali people face within Ethiopia and Kenya. He acknowledges that Somalis as ethnic Others and outsiders are treated as second-class citizens by the Ethiopian state, which he describes as "the Amharic-speaking people's Empire" (Farah 1986, 157). As the singular or generic Ethiopian identity may mask the forms of discrimination that Somalis face in Ethiopia, one cannot reject the significance of specific identities like the nation altogether. Our response to the popularity that the particular enjoys under nationalism, especially nationalisms or nations that are yet to become sovereign states, therefore should be informed by the reasons why the particular seems to be politically meaningful to a population in a given historical moment.

Communities under majoritarian oppression and colonial and neocolonial violence view the nation as the locus of their sovereignty in advancing their struggle for self-determination and emancipation. For thinkers like Neil Lazarus (1999, 48) and Timothy Brennan (1997, 25–26), the nation and nation state function as sites of resistance to neo-liberal globalization and forms of cosmopolitanism that privilege the USA culturally. Going back in time, Partha Chatterjee (1993), in his reflections on anti-colonial nationalisms of the 20th century, observes that the sovereignty of the colonized resided in the spiritual rather than material domain of the nation (6). Cultural difference thus distinguished the identity of the subjugated population from that of the colonizing force. When the postcolonial nation state was firmly predicated on notions of cultural difference, Chatterjee notes that within that state "autonomous forms of imagination of the community were, and continue to be, overwhelmed and swarmed by the history of the postcolonial state" (11). Chatterjee's thoughts on the formation of nation states in the postcolony capture a disjuncture between the notions of community, nation and the state. He locates the ethnic and cultural conflicts that postcolonial communities face after independence within this disjuncture (11). If in Chatterjee's view the trinity that leads to exclusions and conflicts in the postcolony is made up of the community, nation and state, in Hannah Arendt's (1951) reflections on the figure of the refugee in 20th-century Europe and South Asia, the ruptured trinity that gave rise to statelessness comprised the territory, nation and state (281–282). The refugee, the nation's Other that inhabits the nation's territory, creates a fissure in the trinity of the territory-nation-state which forms the core of nationalism in not only Europe, but also many African and Asian locations.

From the perspective of Somali nationalists, Misra is a refugee-like stateless figure in the Ogaden who threatens their attempts to build a culturally and linguistically homogenous nation state in territories that are considered traditional homelands of the Somalis. Even though Somali nationalism seeks to protect the rights and freedoms of the Somalis in the Ogaden from the Ethiopian state's tyrannical rule, its treatment of the non-Somalis in the Ogaden, as revealed through the trials and tribulations of Misra, is a replication of what Ethiopia does to Somalis with a difference. The powerful political statement that *Maps* makes is that nationalism and the nation state even when they are deployed in pursuit of freedom for a group of people can only cause unfreedom and bondage in the lives of ethnic Others like Misra.

## Institutions and imagination: the nation state and transnationalism

*Maps* is critical of the Somali nationalist attempts to rebrand the Ogaden as Somali. The politics of counter-institutionalization in this instance, however, produces a new group of victims, the Amharic-speaking people and Oromos in the Ogaden represented by Misra. The novel posits Askar's thoughts on his relationship with Misra as a counter-hegemonic imagination to the mission undertaken by Somali nationalism to sever the Ogaden from Ethiopia and annex it to Somalia. Their relationship, though disrupted and undermined by the nationalist forces, is one that poses a challenge to the nationalists' efforts to territorialize and institutionalize ethnic identities. For instance, in cultural terms, the Somali identity card given to Askar in Mogadiscio by the Somali state (Farah 1986, 169–170), albeit uniting him with his motherland, fails to offer him any emotional gratification. Instead, it makes him question how it was possible for anyone to eject Misra from his identity, as she had shaped his existence in decisive ways since his childhood. In sharp contrast to Hilaal's claim that personal identities have no meaning without state patronage (175), for Askar, a personal identity without Misra is not just meaningless but also unjust, even if it was conferred upon him by the nationalism that he identifies with and the state that he desires to live under: "It is unfair, I thought to myself, that Misra wasn't even given a mention on my identity card" (172). The identity given to Askar by the state, Farah shows us, speaks about Askar's past in a selective manner. The past that he shared with Misra and the past that became part of his being due to his life in Kallafo have been excised from Askar when he is officially declared a Somali citizen. Askar's critique of the identity card reveals the inadequacies of institutionalized nationalism and its failure to represent a people's hybrid past in a holistic manner.

*Maps* also shows how the nationalist violence directed towards Misra eventually destabilizes Askar's sense of his own self. When the narrative comes to a close, Askar asks: "Who is Askar?" (Farah 1986, 258). It is a question that arises in Askar's mind as a result of the vacuum created by the tragic death of Misra. The question marks an explosion in the unity of I-we, within which Askar had understood his subjectivity while Misra was alive. This metaphysical question also shows that the violence of Somali nationalism, while claiming the life of Misra, the Other, has also turned inwards and damaged one of its own "natural" subjects.

## Misra as transnational

While the nationalisms and the nation states that we come across in Farah's novel exclude the Other institutionally and discursively, Misra does not lose faith in her transnational connections. Without embracing an Ethiopian or Oromo nationalism as a reaction to the Othering and violence that she has encountered from the Somali characters and the rebels in the text, she re-figures her belonging in inclusive, hybrid terms without alienating or ejecting from her life Askar and the bonds that she forged with the other members of the Somali community in Kallafo:

> For me, my people are Askar's people; my people are my former husband's people, the people I am most attached to. Those who were looking for a traitor and found one in me, rationalize that because I wasn't born one of them, I must be the one who betrayed. Besides, it is easier to suspect the foreigner amongst a community than one's own cousin or brother. (Farah 1986, 193)

Edward Said (1983) uses the terms "filiation" and "affiliation" to explain two different forms of bondage (20). Filiative relations, according to Said, are those that are "held together by natural bonds and natural forms of authority [which] involv[e] obedience, fear, love, respect, and instinctual conflict", while in an affiliative relationship these bonds take on "transpersonal forms such as guild consciousness, consensus, collegiality, professional respect, class and the hegemony of a dominant culture" (20). Said frames these two notions in a binary manner: "the filiative scheme belongs to the realms of nature and of 'life,' whereas affiliation belongs exclusively to culture and society" (20). In Misra's reflections, on the contrary, the binary breaks down because she frames her transnational bonds, especially through the notion of "people", in both personal and social terms concurrently. Thus, Misra offers a political character to her personal bonds and invites us to read her relationships as forming a contrariety to the links that are created among people in the name of nationalism. Misra's reflections also uncover a contradiction between the way the self articulates its identity and nationalists' efforts to re-present people's subjectivities in ways that suit their political agenda. Farah channels the idea that one's identity is not fixed but contingent upon perception. By drawing our attention to nationalists' desire to "look [ … ] for a traitor" in Misra, the novelist demonstrates that the traitor is not a natural identification, but one that is constructed actively by others and in the context of the novel by those who subscribe to an exclusivist Somali nationalism that aims to purge the community of cultural diversity.

Othering along lines of culture, religion and language is inherent in the formation of nation states. It is an effect of the discursive processes that attempt to make the state mirror the nation. In some instances, it can be violent and destructive in material and corporeal terms. Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2007) write that "if the state binds in the name of the nation, [ … ] then it also unbinds, releases, expels [and] banishes" (4–5). They note that the process of unbinding does not always happen through "emancipatory means". Sometimes, the state "expels [the Other] precisely through an exercise of power that depends upon barriers and prisons and, so, in the mode of a certain containment" (5). These authoritarian rites to which states resort in their quest for cultural and ethnic purity are noticeable in the discourses and apparatuses of the nations or stateless nations as well. The nation, too, binds and excludes the Other violently in the name of ethnicity, language and culture. The dominant perception among the Somalis in *Maps* is that Misra is a traitor. The sexual violence inflicted on her body and the brutal manner in which she is killed in the end underscore Misra's violent ejection from the Somali nation. Although Askar's role in Misra's death is not revealed till the end of the book, the novel makes it clear that Askar feels complicit in the crime. Farah captures the pangs of guilt that visit Askar through powerful visual and gustatory images: "His back straight, appearing in great discomfort, his Adam's apple moving up and down, gulping, sending down his throat the taste of blood, the saliva of his guilt" (1986, 254). This unexplained guilt that engulfs Askar does not find closure in the novel. It stems from his sense of responsibility towards Misra, the Other, a responsibility that cannot be explained by theories of nationalism. Misra's death foretells the predicament of the non-Somali inhabitants of the Ogaden if and when the region becomes part of an ethnically defined pan-Somalia. The gendered act of rape performed upon the body of the Other woman by Somali rebels in the name of their nation is a means by which Somali nationalism inscribes its claim over the land. This nationalist-patriarchal discourse analogizes the body of the land with the body of the female Other. The gendered violence to which this masculine nationalism gives birth is observed in many nationalist contexts where multiple groups make competing ownership claims over territory.[6]

Interpellating and subjugating the Ogaden and its people to their authority, Somali and Ethiopian nationalisms aim to enshrine their own ethnic identities in the states that they seek to build. The relationship of these two nationalisms to their respective states is paradigmatically similar. The nationalist violence performed by the Somali rebels does not foresee the creation of an inclusive multicultural community; instead, they want the Ogaden to be a part of Somalia so that the Ogaden would be able to retain its Somaliness. Mahmood Mamdani (2002) terms violence that cannot produce "[a] story of progress" or cannot lead to progressive paradigmatic changes in the state "non-revolutionary" (132). The brutal killing of Misra, the supposed traitor, represents a form of non-revolutionary violence for this deplorable act was committed, presumably, by Somali nationalists whose aim is to create an identitarian political body which, they fail to recognize, would mirror the oppressive Ethiopian nation state paradigmatically. Francis Ngaboh-Smart concludes that one of the major concerns of *Maps* is to fashion "an alternative subjectivity or mode of identification" which is "neither the universal nor the communal subject of modernist [and] nationalist discourse[s] respectively" (2004, 27). Farah's repudiation of the universal identity of modernism does not necessarily mean that he abandons the singular altogether or that this postmodern narrative treats the plural as static and mutually exclusive. The transnational thrust of the text relies on the text's recognition of differences and hybrid experiences as the basis for the creation of an alternative community. As cultural experience and social life, the singular and the plural exist in the text as dynamic processes that nourish one another. The radical singularity that one notices in the political framework of the text embraces the plural and hybrid forms of social life in the Ogaden as its constitutive elements while the specific cultural and linguistic identifications that create the plural are always undermined from within by mutual interactions leading to hybrid experiences as observed in the lives and memories of Askar and Misra. The singular, as represented in the corporeal descriptions of the characters, their memories and self-identifications, is therefore an integral part of the transnational vision that Farah offers in *Maps*. The transnational vision of *Maps* should be seen as an oppositional consciousness that challenges the institutionality of the nation and the nation state that partitions people into groups and identities. Mamdani writes that "the single uniting feature of a political community is the commitment to build a common political future under a single political roof" (2002, 149). While the young boy Askar's loyalty is torn between his surrogate mother Misra and Somalia, which he regards as his motherland, Misra's transnational voice in the novel persistently brings together the fractured plurality of the Ogaden resulting from competing nationalisms, under a common human umbrella.[7] It is the emphasis on this inclusive singularity or commonality – which includes not only Misra's own self, her father and her community, but also Askar, his people, her former husband and the deviant bodies of Askar and Misra – that makes of Farah's framing of the transnational a revolutionary alternative to the nation state which divides and hierarchizes its populations along ethnic and cultural lines.

## Notes

1. Farah's novel is set against the backdrop of the war that took place between July 1977 and March 1978 between Ethiopia and Somalia over the political status of the Ogaden, the Somali-inhabited region in the Horn of Africa, which was officially a part of Ethiopia. Somali forces attempted to annex the Ogaden but were unsuccessful; see also Lewis (1989) and Tareke (2000).
2. In his review of Manuka Wijesinghe's (2006) *Monsoons and Potholes*, Nihal Fernando (2006) makes reference to a novelistic tradition within South Asian anglophone literature that maps the connections, mirrorings and ruptures that occur between individual selves and their nations. In thinking about the personal/political in Farah's *Maps*, one is also reminded of Fredric Jameson's (1986) much-debated essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" where he makes the point that "Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory" (69).

3. See Abdi Sheik-Abdi's (1977) academic account of Somali nationalism, where one observes a romantic longing for the creation of the Somali nation state, which would include the entire Somali lands fragmented by colonial rulers.
4. Donald Donham (1999) has also written about the politics of language and religion in Ethiopia.
5. Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) uses the term "heteroglossia" to denote the various "social speech types" and "compositional-stylistic unities" that form the language of the novel (262).
6. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (1998) argue that masculine violence on women belonging to the Other community during the partition of colonial India "treat[s] women's bodies as territory to be conquered, claimed or marked by the assailant" (43). Robert Hayden (2000) notes in his analysis of rape during ethno-nationalist conflicts in South Asia and Bosnia that "mass rape is actually a corollary of the liminality of the state when a heterogeneous territory is being sundered into homogeneous parts" (36).
7. For a stimulating critical psychoanalytic reading of the politics of motherhood and motherland in *Maps* and the figuration of Askar in this politics, see Brown (2010).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Mahendran Thiruvarangan* is a PhD candidate in English at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. He is currently writing his dissertation, which focuses on the representations of sovereignty and cosmopolitanism in South Asian literature and human rights narratives. His research interests include nationalism, subaltern studies and radical democracy.

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