

When is OUR MILLENNIUM?



Interview with **NURUDDIN FARAH** By **Dapo Adeniyi**

Nuruddin Farah said, in response to a question, that he was originally heading back to Mogadishu, in anticipation of a restoration of civil society in Somalia. 'But I have waited long enough', he told Dapo Adeniyi in his first interview with a Nigerian journal since settling in Kaduna, Nigeria, six years back. He was shortly to relocate to South Africa with his family – wife, Amina Mama recently appointed director of the African Gender institute at the University of Cape Town, and two kid children. With Abyan the younger child of four bounding all over the house in high spirits, the work of a nursing father was more than a full-time preoccupation, but Farah proved that he was equal to it.

Interview recorded December 18, 1998 in the reservation area of Kaduna.

GR: We'll begin on a general note. We are actually meeting for the first time and it is a wonderful setting in which to meet. It is very easy to forget that a writer is flesh and blood, who eats and drinks and lives a normal life and as another writer once told me, who also creates a means for eating and drinking.

I've known some ardent enthusiasts of African literature who insisted that a writer must by all means not be reduced to a human being.

Farah: How do you mean by that?

GR: It takes a certain kind of context to see the other side of a writer as a nonpublic figure.

Farah: Well, there is generally the idea, and it is a very common idea, that writers don't live a normal life and there are writers who do not live the normal life: looking after their children, helping people, looking after themselves and so on and so forth and you find many of them who look quite helpless in running their own thing and I can think of one or two who thought of themselves as some kind of artist.... And artist in this sense means usually someone who is...

GR: Bohemian...?

Farah: Yes...

GR: Weird?

Farah: ... who is looked after, and who has many women followers. I am of a different view. I am of the view that a writer is just like another human being and he has a job, the hours may be different but he or she has the same needs as anyone else and also in addition to that, they take upon themselves more things, more pains; I think also because they have more time to think. If you were a clerk in a little office in Apapa and you lived with your cousin in Ikeja and had to go all the way and at the end of the month you received a meagre salary, the worries are too much for you to think about other things. Whereas writers specialise, they give special time to think not on their lives but on their place in society and the responsibilities that are laid on their heads.

GR: Of course we would be referring to certain categories of writers. Perhaps you are referring to the established category of writers.

Farah: Whether established or not. Even if nothing has ever been published. There are some people who feel responsible, not only for their lives but for the lives of other people. I would say in the context of Nigeria for example, journalists qualify for this self-sacrifice and this is because lots and lots of journalists have ended up in detention, far more journalists have ended up in detention than writers.

GR: I know some people who exist within the bracket that you initially described, who have to work maybe as clerks, or in some bank. In addition to the tedium of daily existence they also have the burden of being writers. They are denied the kind of freedom, in terms of time, which is available to other writers in different contexts.

Farah: Well I usually say too that you cannot be a serious thinking and working writer until you have the experience

of living like an ordinary person, in the sense that you can't be plucking all your ideas from the skies of your imagination. You have to be grounded in some experience, whether that experience is directly political, economic, social or cultural. They have to be directly affecting you and your life. And when you lose touch with the realities in which you must be grounded, your books would become you' know, uninteresting. What makes a book story interesting or a poem interesting is the groundedness in a very concretised idea. You can't be putting nouns together all the time, you can't put twenty beautiful phrases together, that doesn't make poetry. Poetry is part of that lived experience of waking up and not having water to bath, that would give it more meaning than if you just said... 'I woke up from my bed and didn't find a bird that come to my window to sing', because one, it is a lived experience, and also because writing is basically a communication between the reader and the person who wrote it. That experience of waking up in the morning and not finding water to bath is more easily understandable and appreciated, than to say, 'I woke up from my bed and I could not find my daffodil'.

GR: I would like to ask, are you writing full-time?

(He nods in affirmation)

and for how long, and how did it come about?

Farah: I have been living as a full-time writer from about 1976. And it came as a result of my not having been able to return to Somalia. After doing my graduate study in Theatre in England I was returning home when I published a novel called AMIKIMIDO and then unbeknownst to me it had been decided that the novel was inimical to the government of Siad Barre. So when I went to Rome on my way to Mogadishu and I rang my brother in Mogadishu and I said could, he send a car and pick me up from there, he advised me to wait, but first of all he advised me to forget about Somalia and the reason was I seemed to have done something of which I was foolishly unaware; I challenged the state or at least the representatives of the state and this was Siad Barre. So between one day and the next I became an exile, a writer in exile.

GR: The question that comes to my mind is – who does the reading for these people? Most African leaders that one knows don't appear to be very literate or very literary people...

Farah: Well they usually have their minions, who report on them. There was once this story I was told – and I am not justifying Siad Barre in this way or any other way – but there was an Ambassador who used to be a friend of mine and in fact at one time the president of the university of Somalia, who then was an Ambassador to

Italy, once he was in a meeting with many other Ambassadors, because he considered himself to be an intellectual, and he was the one who used to inform Siad Barre about the terrible things that someone like me had written. He said to Siad Barre in the presence of fourteen other Ambassadors that 'Nurudeen Farah is the enemy of Somalia, because Nurudeen Farah was always writing the most terrible things about Somalians, about dictatorship, and how authoritarian our society is. Nurudeen Farah therefore hates Somalians, he lives abroad and so on'. Siad Barre then said, 'the truth of the matter is that – Nurudeen Farah hates me! And he says it very, very openly'.

GR: Did he know you at that point personally?

Farah: No. He said 'I have been hearing about Nurudeen for many many years, I haven't even met the man but from what I have been told the man hates me and he says that he hates me and he writes about his hatred of me, but it is those of you who praise me, who brush my shoes, who lick my boots that as soon as my back is turned are going to be my greatest enemies.'

The summary of a story is the kernel of it,
that summary is what the ordinary people
who do not read books would also have
heard about the writers.

So, you see, even dictators know who their friends are. Someone like,... what's the name of the one who died?

GR: Abacha

Farah: Yaah, someone like Abacha also knew...

GR: ... that these are actually fair weather friends.

Farah: Well there you see!

GR: Now I want us to look at the predicaments, and it is related to what you were saying – the predicaments of the African writer in the hands of those who wield state power. I was going to suggest that the fiction and poetry ordinarily should be incapable of doing those who misrule their nations any real damage. And also, the notion that the short story or poetry can be quite devastating against those who misrule is a bit over-stated. And the reason is that a small percentage of African populations are literate for example, and a smaller percentage read the languages in which African writers write. It is related to what you were saying that these people we are

talking about don't read, and if they are worried about public perception, how much of the African populations actually read the writings?

Farah: I don't think it is the reading as such that matters as the opinions and the positions they combine. I don't think everyone who has a high respect for Achebe or Soyinka would have read anything they have written, or follow the logic behind what they have written. What follows is that when you have read a book of about two hundred pages, five years later when someone asks you what that was about, you can say what that book is about in one sentence. And that summary is what you remember of that book. The summary of a story is the kernel of it, that summary is what the ordinary people who do not read books would also have heard about the writers. They know Soyinka was in trouble, they know that he was being harassed, they know that he fled the country and therefore these are the things that matter. If you do not remember everything a writer has written, you remember the idea their writing has generated. It is the idea that is generated that becomes mythologised. It is through the myth of that writer, the creator of the myth of justice, the

myth of a dreamland that appeals to the people. Now for example, I went to Somalia in 1996, my books had been banned, my name could not be mentioned in public, could not be quoted in any of the newspapers for close to twenty years and the people had not read the things that I had written, not because they didn't read English and that the books were not available, even if they were available they wouldn't have read them. And yet when I went to Mogadishu literally everyone knew, not only the name but the ideas for which I stood. And this was because this was passed on in oral form, people heard the radio interviews that I gave, accepting the positions that I took.

GR: Did many of them know what you look like?

Farah: No, because I hadn't been home for more than twenty years. What I am saying is, people hold on to that idea.

Now if you go to Ireland where there is a reading population of let's say, eighty-five or ninety-five percent and you mention the name of James Joyce, how many

would have read James Joyce? Question one. Question two, how many of them would appreciate James Joyce the way he wrote those books and how great he is in the literary world. They do not read him but they know James Joyce because it is through oral mythology that the name has been transferred. The same is true of every tribe; even the English people and Shakespeare. Therefore forget about statistics. And forget about this paranoia, this Western European and half-baked educated Africans who continue to say, 'but you write in another language, and people do not...', no, what matter is, people know whether you stand for justice or whether you stand against it.

Now take this to be the political scene. This dialogue about the current situation. If APP (All People's Party) is associated with Abacha, and they rejected it, that's good enough. The newspapers, if you open every newspaper in Lagos or Kaduna, Kano or anywhere they will tell you that these are the things. People do not pick them up from the newspapers, there is a certain knowledge that is in the air, and they know when there is injustice and they say, 'is this person for justice?' And the same is true of writers wherever in the world you go. Not everyone reads them, even when they are put on the schools syllabus system. People read and forget and if I ask you today to tell me the story of *Things Fall Apart* which you may have read in school, you won't be able to remember much, but you'll remember the kernel of it and that is what matters.

GR: I'd ask you, for how long have you been living in - the emphasis is on the word, living - in Nigeria?

Farah: Now for six years. I came here, my wife and I, in 1992 and there were some restrictions. It was my understanding that I was not allowed to talk to the press, the Nigerian press, or say anything about Nigeria, and having at that time accepted that restrictive...

GR: It was communicated to you officially?

Farah: It was communicated to me by the deputy immigration officer who said to me, 'you will be given the right to live in this country, as a spouse', something that wasn't done quite often. Perhaps I was the first to be given as a spouse, as a male spouse because in Nigeria if a Nigerian should bring in a female spouse, a foreigner, then there is no problem at all, she could live in the country without any problem. But when a Nigerian female does that, then there is a problem.

So, I accepted it, my view being, well, there was very little that I, Nurudeen Farah can say about Nigeria that other Nigerian writers cannot say, or Nigerian journalists. Therefore I calculated this and I said I could live in Nigeria as a witness, bearing testimony to the situation

and sooner or later I would have to leave Nigeria,...

GR: Do you have an idea what underlay that demand on your residency status?

Farah: The man who did this was actually doing me a favour at the time and the reason is I was not allowed to live in this country on the basis that I had to have a job; they insisted that nobody was allowed to live in this country unless he or she had a job. And the immigration officer insisted that I did not even look African, that I was Pakistani or you know, ... insisting that I had to start a business, a restaurant anything. I showed him evidence that I had enough money to live in this country. I said to him - this was the immigration chief in Kaduna State - but he said he would not grant me the right of abode. I had to travel out of this country every three, four months to have my visa renewed and it took a very, very long time. So I went to see the deputy-general of immigration of Nigeria in Abuja and by the time he suggested, 'we will grant you the right of residence only if you accept that condition' I said, fine. And I knew I would break it if I wanted to, but I saw no reason. So I have lived here as a witness.

GR: Would you tell me what your impressions

of the country are? The people, the geography...

Farah: I should tell you that this is not my first visit. I was first here in 1977 for Festac. I was again here teaching, as a professor at the University of Jos from 1981 to 1983 and then I am here and I came in between several times. You can give impression about countries which you do not know very well. In other words, if you said to me, 'what are your impressions about Finland?', which country I have been to only about once or twice, I can give you my impressions but if you say to me what are your impressions about Somalia or about Nigeria, I cannot and the reason is because these are countries I know a great deal about. You take it the way it is. I am not like a native because I am not. But I know enough to set a novel in it if I wished to.

GR: I was going to ask if you would not be tempted to...

Farah: No I have not. I am not being tempted and the reason is one has to know a lot more about a place and her people before one writes creatively about it. And this is sometimes the mistake that European writers who set their books in other countries make. I am not referring specifically to writers who write about foreigners, foreigners who write about foreigners living somewhere else like Graham Green writes about an English man in Sierra Leone or Naipaul writing about East African Indians living in Congo or something like that. I am talking about writing which is grounded in the lived



Maggie Steber art director: Mark Michaelson director of photography © American Photography

experience of people in those places. No, it takes a very long time.

GR: Your previous reflections tend to suggest that national problems, that is problems with national politics in any given African state, is ultimately a clone of what obtains in most other national contexts in Africa. Have you been able to get to the bottom of why this is often the case?

Farah: I don't quite understand the question

GR: Maybe the problem with despots, to take that example, they easily replicate themselves.

Farah: Well because there is, as in my dictatorship trilogy as I call them, - and these are three novels about African dictatorships in general, but more specifically about Somalian dictatorship in the time of Siad Barre. The idea of the dictatorship is that, African societies - speaking about Africa south of the Sahara and also north - African societies are authoritarian societies...

GR: By nature?

Farah: By nature. And because African societies are authoritarian, it follows that our leaders would also become authoritarian. Let me give a specific example.

My view has always been that the head of the family in Africa, the generality of fathers in Africa are authoritarian. My view has been that, very little time, fruitful time,

is spent between parents and children together, talking about things. The law is laid down by the father all the time, and the child must always follow. If he or she does not, then that child is considered to be rebel and therefore unredeemable. There is very little communication in the family, between not only parents and children but also between mother and father. In other words there is hardly any sitting down and talking to each other about problems, sorting them out, allowing the children to disagree with his or her parents, allowing the wife to disagree with her husband, in public.

This is not the position that I take. Because of this the authoritarianism is replicated on the political level. Now when there is a hierarchy of violence that's meting out constantly to the weaker person every time there is a weak person, then naturally the weaker person will have to find someone who is weaker than them and so you have a hierarchy of violence, of aggression. So that children when they are beaten at home by their parents they go out and hold their brothers and sisters and beat them, and this continues and makes them stone dogs or stone puppies or stone and become unkind to anyone who is weaker than them. So there is this hierarchy and it continues reproducing this hierarchy.

How many people do you know, when there is a problem, who sit down between a father and a son and say let's talk?

GR: Obviously this is why the democratic principle

appears jinxed.

Farah: Yes, well you see when people talk of Nigerian democracy coming after, what's his name, Abubakar, goes away, I usually say to them oh God, bless them. And the reason is because until there is a change in the psyche of the Nigerian, until there is a change in every Nigerian man, until everyone is reconstructed, you see restructured, the mind of the person, the persona, the way they look at themselves, the way they look at their partners, the way they look at their work, until this happens, I doubt it very much if there would be democracy.

GR: How do you propose that the country can actually begin, at least begin the process?

Farah: There can be what you call political democracy, political in the sense of elections for which you would be praised, everybody will praise you and you will say 'democratic', every four years some corrupt person would come from one area of the country or the other and then rob the country blind and then you would say, 'now is our turn!'. The people in the South-West are now saying, 'now is our turn!' It is a problem to which I have given a

The idea of the dictatorship is that, African societies – speaking about Africa south of the Sahara and also north – African societies are authoritarian societies...

lot of time and if you read the trilogy of dictatorship and these are *Sweet and Sour Milk*, *Sardines* is the second one and then *Close Secame*, it takes different families and experiences from what happens within the families, the authoritarian nature of each of these families. I am not only saying this about Nigeria, I could say or give you a personal example: I saw my father when I was... how old was I? 1991, which was about seven years ago. I was in my forties when I saw my father...

GR: Last?

Farah: Yes,... well, he's now dead. I saw him in an hospital. We hadn't known each other, seen each other for many many years. And my father was not prepared to hear me start and finish and the reason is, he knew what he wanted me to do. Now I said to him, 'father you know, I'm now in my middle forties and I am your fourth son' – we are ten in the family, five boys, five girls – '...what I want you to do is to hear me but, let me finish' and then he said, 'why should I?' It is symptomatic. I mean they may not use the same words but it is symp-

tomatic of that relationship.

Have you ever spent any time with your own father?

GR: I have. But he was not very typical in certain respects... and he would even be criticised for it. I was going to say something about you having not been living in Somalia for so long, I would have thought that living in Somalia would provide you with a stronger impetus to write.

Farah: Well I don't know, you see, what kinds of books I would have written if I had returned...

GR: You would have taken to writing all the same...

Farah: I would continue writing but you see I don't know what kind of writing I would have done. You see I once wrote an article in which I argued that because I have been away from my parents, and from the authoritarianism of our society, I was able to develop the democratic ideals. If I were in Somalia I doubt it very much if my parents would have been very happy my writing the way that I did. And the reason is because they would have used all kinds of social blackmail to make me shut up. We are all family something in Somalia and

so you are in Nigeria. And therefore people will say to you, 'why do you want to ruin our house? Why do you want to ruin the chances of your brother getting a government job, or promotion? Why? What makes you do what you are doing? You're a foolish young boy. You shut up!'

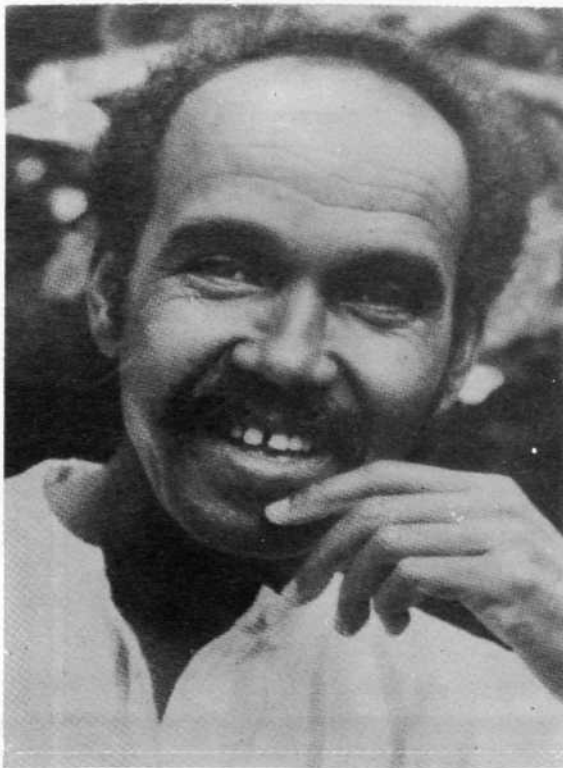
This authoritarianism would have come downward and therefore, not only would I have earned my parent's wrath but I would have earned the wrath of the dictatorship, and therefore would have been locked up.

GR: With little or no sympathy from...

Farah: With little or no sympathy from my own direct family.

GR: But you would have gained a kind of wider sympathy from the society at large perhaps.

Farah: Perhaps. Perhaps. What I am saying is maybe they would have understood it later, but the point that I am making is that I would have made less,... would have written less and reason is because I would have been



locked up immediately.

GR: If you had to make a choice between writing a good story and presenting a stark or disturbing reality, which side would you choose?

Farah: Well, I will hope to have both of them.

I don't know what disturbing means. The truth can be disturbing, falsehood can also be disturbing. And of course when one writes one writes one's best and therefore one writes a good story as best as one can. I would hope to do both of them in one story if I can.

GR: Suppose in the process of writing what is disturbing it weighs down on the aesthetic finish or something like that?

Farah: If I knew that, then I wouldn't publish a story.

GR: Also I want to suggest that fiction losses much of its bite because as Nadine Gordimer was quoted as saying recently, its message must of necessity be veiled...

Farah: You're quoting something from Gordimer which may have been longer and therefore it's a very risky thing to comment on her statement. I would take for example my novel, *Secrets* which was published about six months ago. It's about the beginning of the Somali civil war and yet whenever you read every single page and every word, there may not be any mention of the many terrible things that are happening offstage so that you could tell a story through metaphors and through images and through the

poetic rendering of the truth. So I would accept in that sense veiled, in that sense not obviously glaring, straight in your face.

GR: She (Gordimer) was just saying that fiction offers a lot of freedom which writing facts doesn't give and that there are experiences with which she is able to flow better in the fictive format.

Farah: Is that negative or positive for you?

GR: Not necessarily negative but I am just thinking that if a message is directed at an idea... to take Soyinka's example. There have been times he had to take his theatre to the streets and I have seen some of the ideas at a later date, because I have read some of the scripts, being congealed into some longer, more formal kinds of plays...

Farah: The thing is, you see, I will repeat myself by saying the very big ideas are reducible to small ideas and therefore if you can communicate the simple idea to people so that they get the message that is very well. If Soyinka takes a play to the street and the people can understand what is happening and follow the story then that is a beautiful idea. Even a film can have a preview so this is the preview for the play that would become more sophisticated.

GR: I don't know of any African writer who has lived – and not just visited now – but who has lived in as many countries of the world as you have. Doesn't it happen that after a while, as you get more intimate with other environments, you lose touch with Somalia?

Farah: No I in fact become more Somali in the places that I have been. Every place that I have lived in have served as a background for my understanding of Somalia. I mean, everywhere that I have been to, even the people who do not mean to do so. People in Nigeria have constantly reminded me that I come from Somalia. When I come through the immigration they remind me of it, going on the street they remind me of it. And these constant reminders keep Somalia alive in me. And not only in me but in other people. There are a number of people who live in Kaduna, who live in Uganda – I used to live in Uganda, Ethiopia, Italy, other places – who when they turn on their radio and hear anything about Uganda, my name comes to them.

GR: You don't feel that the time might come when if you do not go back to Somalia you might actually exhaust your memory of Somalia?

Farah: Memories are like springs. The more water comes out the more it continues. Obviously there are defective memories, but the memory that has been developed and artistically cloned, continually revisited,

that type of memory is very enriching. It allows you to live in a world of imagination.

GR: Are you able to reread some of your own writings, maybe years afterwards?

Farah: No I do not. The only times when I read any of my fiction is when I am on a reading tour but I don't normally reread my work. Thank God there are many other books that I haven't read myself and therefore I would rather read someone else than read my own.

I don't read reviews about my books, I don't read books about my books. Well because these are commentaries, these are opinions that people hold and therefore what is the point of my knowing the opinion that someone has about my work?

GR: I would have thought, something like a feedback, to see how someone else responds...

Farah: What would that do for me?

GR: Even as a teacher. Did you ever confront a situation in which the syllabus had been designed and your own

would say however that for a writer to be considered among the great ones, among the important ones, they would have to publish two or three or four, great, inverted commas, works and the reason is because if you have done only one book and the book becomes very very successful, it's doubtful if one can be considered a great one.

GR: And suppose one actually towers above the others both in terms of volume and substance?

Farah: It's comparable to having ten children, one of them becoming a professor and all the others are something else. It happens.

GR: Do you consider sales very important?

Farah: No, I don't. For example my novel *Secrets* is now doing far better than any of my previous novels. But then I don't know, maybe after several years one of the other novels would pick up and then *Secrets* would drop.

GR: How are you preparing for the next century? And what are your anticipations for African peoples and for African literatures?

Memories are like springs. The more water comes out the more it continues. Obviously there are defective memories, but the memory that has been developed and artistically cloned, continually revisited, that type of memory is very enriching. It allows you to live in a world of imagination.

work was actually enlisted...

Farah: I would drop them! I would drop my own books and teach someone else. And this happened more than once. I seldom comment on what I meant by doing this work. Let the books take care of themselves.

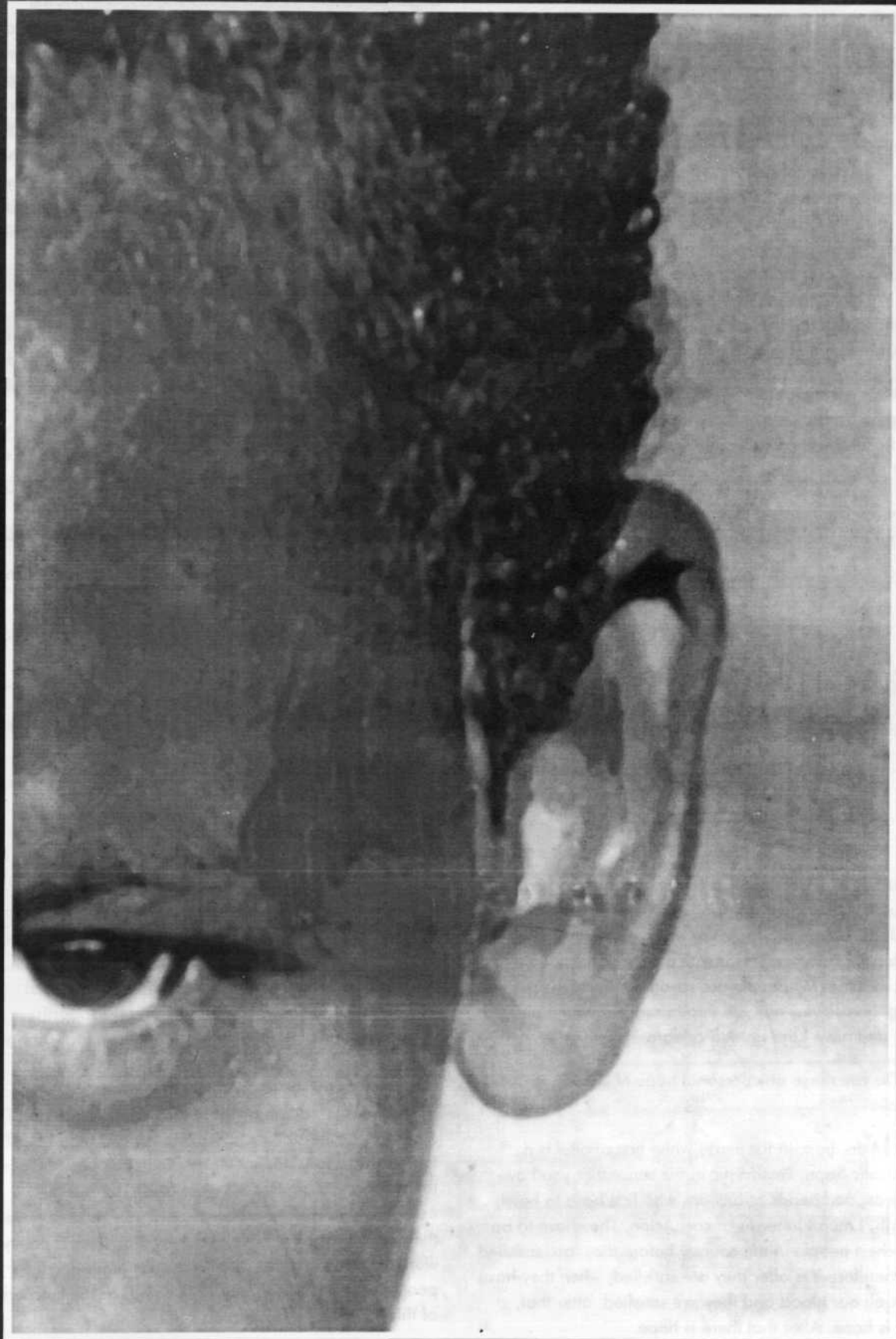
GR: Would you at this point in your career say that you have produced your best, or your greatest work?

Farah: No I don't think so. You see, there is no work that can be considered a writer's best work. Everything a writer does forms part of the orb of the writing, and taken together after the writer has ceased writing anything, only then would you be able to see the entirety of the work. Each one is a piece complementing, supplementing, making you understand the other pieces, the logic of the other pieces. It is possible that some pieces will be better refined, it is possible that some areas of the work would function better, it is better that some works may be more appreciated by more people now. It is also possible that several years on other works would gain prominence. I

Farah: Well, I am not preparing myself for the next millennium for the simple reason that my people are not preparing for it. And if my people, the Africans, are not preparing for it, what's the point in being alone in it? I am not preparing for it and the reason is because the calculation of the millennium is one in which I do not figure. The year 1999 is not an African year.

GR: I don't get you?

Farah: The year is not an African one in the sense that all this business is a foreign business. We have nothing to do with it. Our millennium would come when we are sufficiently self-dignifying, when we are sufficiently able to run our own business. We are guests in this century. We were slaves in the previous one, and we are guests in this. And there are areas of Africa still carrying, still asking for food. So what do we prepare ourselves for? It's no point having a party and then inviting only yourself. The coming of the millennium you see is a party. How many people are invited? How many Africans are truly a part of the twenty-first century? Very few.



GR: Does that overflow to the area of publishing?

Farah: Sure. I have known academics and journalists who talk lamenting the publishing crises or the newspaper crises, and in the university they complain, they complain all the time – there is no Nepa (power supply), and so on. I would say you cannot expect the body to be healthy or a person to be healthy if the fingers cannot pick up something, if the eyes cannot see. There is something terribly wrong with all of us. So I would say that really we have a lot of work to do and we cannot, at least I am not prepared to welcome the century the way that other people may and the reason is because we have nothing to show for it. We have nothing to show for independence. Nigeria became independent in 1960, politically independent in 1960, now what else does Nigeria have to show for it?

GR: It is interesting that this is coming from you, that this is coming from a writer of your calibre. A lot of people would consider it racist if someone else had said these about us.

Farah: But I am saying these about myself. I am saying to you that my success as Nurudeen, as a Somali, as

Farah: There is right to hope now in Nigeria. This is the beginning, there is plenty of work to do. There is the foundation to build. There are the structures of democracy to build. There has to be harmony between members of the same immediate family and then of the larger family. You remember that yesterday evening we were talking about the South-West. If the people of the South-West were left to themselves, they'd finish off each other. If the people in the North were left to one another they'd finish off one another. What needs to be done right now is the balancing out, is for this balancing out to continue, and this dialogue to continue. If there is in inverted commas, democracy, there can't be any democracy where there is so much corruption. There can be no democracy where there is no accountability. There can't be democracy until every member of the family feels that they have a stake in the continued survival of the family. So there's plenty of work to be done.

GR: Supposing it happens suddenly and it catches us all unawares as it did in the case of South Africa, what happens to the authors, particularly those whose art seems to depend on the themes of social change?

Farah: Well first of all I don't see writers separate from

I in fact become more Somali in the places that I have been. Every place that I have lived in have served as a background for my understanding of Somalia.

somebody who has written a few novels and won prizes, my success is alone in comparison to the other things and therefore I do not celebrate the way I might have celebrated if the continent was with me too, if my people were with me. My people are savaging themselves, killing themselves, not listening to reason, eating up each other and have I the right to celebrate anything?

GR: Do you nurse any personal hope of change in Somalia?

Farah: I do, I do, in the sense when first of all it is a pessimistic hope. Pessimistic in the sense that you have warlords and heads of factions who first have to have enough, I mean in terms of corruption. They have to be the richest people in the country before they are satisfied and therefore it is after they are satisfied, when they have drunk all our blood and they are satisfied, after that, there is hope. After that there is hope.

GR: How about the rest of the continent?

other people and writers are affected the same way other people are affected. You know what happened in the Soviet Union, Somalia is another example, the crisis in Somalia. Most people were not prepared for the sudden eruption of violence, the sudden eruption of enthusiasm in South Africa and so on and so forth. Nigeria is on the verge of change but even that change is the beginning of further changes and if you do not take the other steps to complete the process of democratisation, then all these would be for nought. The society in South Africa you see, the African – and I call the black person African – the African has been given the authority to dignity, but what else? There is the authority, but with the authority of dignity there is poverty, there is illiteracy. We have to accept that there is plenty of work for us as writers, as citizens, as neighbours of people who have been unjustly treated, as the catchers of thieves; and we have to do it.